

THESIS

“THE DIRT BELOW THE BARREL”: COVID COMPLIANCE, MEDIA  
FINANCIALIZATION, AND POST-PANDEMIC PRECARITY

Submitted by

Isaac Burton Robinson

Department of Communication Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2025

Master's Committee

Advisor: Nick Marx

Kit Hughes  
Rosa Martey

Copyright of Isaac Burton Robinson 2025

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### “THE DIRT BELOW THE BARREL”: COVID COMPLIANCE, MEDIA FINANCIALIZATION, AND POST-PANDEMIC PRECARIETY

This thesis utilizes qualitative interviews with former COVID Compliance workers in film and television production to draw larger conclusions about the state of labor relations in the film industry. In framing these interviews and larger, I trace the historical development of deregulation and financialized media production, consider the direct effects that these practices have on media labor, and establish how they set the stage for the exploitation of these workers. COVID Compliance departments were brought onto productions in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to enforce safety protocols during day-to-day operations, but were often met with verbal and emotional abuse, with their departments phased out as soon as possible. Due to their temporary status on set, these workers also were not provided any sort of protections for their jobs and were underpaid compared to other production assistants. The example set by these workers, largely viewed as a means to an end in returning to production after the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrates a larger attitude of disposability that the media industry holds toward below-the-line labor. Ultimately this thesis argues for a refocus in on-set organizational culture away from content generation to a person-focused approach, in which artifacts are still completed, but workers—particularly aspirant workers trying to establish themselves—have an easier path in trying to begin their careers in the industry.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Production and Labor in the Hollywood Studio System.....	4
<i>Standardizing Culture in Classical Hollywood</i> .....	9
Neoliberalism and Deregulation.....	10
<i>Mobile Production Practices</i> .....	13
<i>Neoliberal Competition and Gatekeeping</i> .....	16
<i>Streaming, Financialization, and ‘Content Culture’</i> .....	20
Industry Fractures, COVID-19, and the Post-Pandemic Era.....	24
<i>Understanding COVID-19’s Impact on Media Industries</i> .....	30
Methodology.....	35
Chapter Preview.....	38
Chapter 1 – Returning to Work: Industrial vs Personal Narratives.....	46
Industrial Narratives Around COVID-era Production.....	49
<i>Mobile Production in Texas</i> .....	54
Individual Worker Experiences.....	60
Conclusion.....	73
Chapter 2 – Financialized Gatekeeping and Organizational Culture.....	80
Deregulation and Media Financialization.....	81
<i>Historical Deregulation and Corporate Conglomeration</i> .....	88
<i>Modern-Day Financialization and Streaming</i> .....	93
Production-Specific Gatekeeping (or Lack Thereof).....	97
<i>Show A: Financialized production and the Problems with ‘Content Culture’</i> ...	98
<i>Show B and Effective Organizational Culture</i> .....	109
Conclusion.....	116
Conclusion – COVID-19: An Unfortunate Footnote.....	122
Appendix A: List of Participants.....	134
Appendix B: Interview Guide.....	136

## INTRODUCTION

In 2021, during her third-ever job in the film industry, and first on a scripted program for a major studio, Carrie was offered a promotion early in production as a Key Advanced COVID PA. This job, working on a prestige miniseries for a well-established streamer, would entail going on location to set up and manage COVID safety protocols and infrastructure as production moved to different sets. Coming from her previous jobs in COVID departments—both on reality TV productions—this was a big step up. The position came with a sizeable raise and valuable on-set experience for someone trying to break into the industry, not to mention six months of guaranteed employment when jobs were hard to find. One week later, she quit.

The first week of filming saw Carrie working 75 hours, not including the hour-long commute both ways to set. As her department was generally on set long before most other crew members arrived, the days started early. In the case of the Key Advanced position, she was among the first on set, even among the rest of the COVID department. For Carrie, this meant starting her commute around 3:00 A.M., driving an hour to set, working for 12+ hours until production wrapped, then driving the hour back home for whatever rest she could afford, before turning around and starting all over again the next day. One of the nights, while heading home in the early hours of the morning, she drove the whole way home with windows down and music blasting to avoid falling asleep at the wheel. The weekend was also no longer a time to recover, only a time to think about and dread returning to set on Monday. After one week of this, she quit with no notice, even though it meant she would lose her health insurance and a healthy

paycheck—the workload that she’d been subjected to in a single week was not worth continuing.<sup>1</sup>

COVID Compliance departments were created on most major film and TV productions in 2020 as part of the industry-wide push to resume productions after everything initially shut down. They were established as a result of months of intense negotiation between the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) and the industry’s trade unions. Depending on the production, department members would handle testing, symptom checking, and essentially ensuring everyone was following the production’s safety protocols.<sup>2</sup> They were, in essence, the only way that any movies or TV programs could be made between 2020 and 2022. Carrie’s story is not unique in the film industry—workers across the industry have similar experiences with unreasonable hours and unsustainable workloads, to the point of putting their lives at risk.<sup>3</sup> Below-the-line workers—that is, anyone below the producers, director, and top-line talent in the production hierarchy—keep the wheels turning on a production but are in-turn treated as disposable. Without the crew to build the sets, gaffers to light them, and production assistants to handle minutiae, movies and TV are simply not made in the first place. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, COVID Compliance departments were added to productions across the industry. The main difference with the COVID department, however, is that it was never meant to be permanent. Rather than the bottom of the barrel in the production hierarchy, as production assistants (PAs) typically are, COVID PAs were, as Carrie said in her interview, “the dirt below the barrel.” Despite being crucial to the survival of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Carrie did quickly reach a compromise with her department head to stay on in a lower position, working on the sound stage for the remainder of the shoot.

<sup>2</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Christian and Peterson-Salahuddin, “Rage against the Streaming Studio System.”

entertainment industry, the workers in these departments were still treated as entirely disposable, only in this case they did not have the union protections afforded to many other below-the-line positions.

This thesis uses COVID Compliance departments as a lens through which to examine both the precarity of below-the-line labor in the modern entertainment industry and labor's role in the entertainment industry's transition to streaming. I approach this primarily through qualitative interviews with those workers belonging to COVID departments between 2020 and 2022. Based off these workers' experiences and informed by industry trade discourse, I draw larger conclusions regarding on-set production cultures in the United States. Key to this analysis is a consideration of the larger historical moments that have placed the industry in its current situation—one which largely prioritizes profits and churning out content over the well-being of its workers. I argue that the historical structures of financialization, decreased labor power, and unregulated corporate media production and conglomeration set the table for these unsustainable and precarious labor practices. COVID departments serve as the prime example of this issue, as they were created to fill a specific role, largely kept productions running during the pandemic, and yet would be cut as soon as possible with few future opportunities for their workers. These departments also provided a way into the industry for many workers—in a space as historically difficult to break into as film, the creation of COVID departments potentially served as an effective foot in the door to start establishing the social networks critical to long-term industry work. The creation and subsequent elimination of these departments illustrate the critical but largely overlooked and underappreciated labor that below-the-line workers undertake on a daily basis, in the face of an uncaring industry simply pushing to maximize profits. The attitude of disposability shown toward these COVID department workers also serves to illustrate a larger

trend toward disposability for below-the-line workers writ large—with roots in the early days of Hollywood, which hit its peak in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to effectively frame the current moment in film and television production in the United States, I first present a brief primer on the history of labor relations in Hollywood—which I use as a shorthand for the mainstream American film and television production writ large. This is necessary as it provides a clearer understanding of how the landscape of production has evolved over the past century. The historical overview provides a clear contrast between how production *was*, and how it currently is. In essence, the “Golden Age” of Hollywood provided a degree of stability for production workers,<sup>4</sup> compared to the precarity inherent in industry work today.<sup>5</sup> A historical viewpoint also contextualizes key economic shifts that have led to the current moment of disposability for below-the-line workers, namely mobile production practices<sup>6</sup> and financialization,<sup>7</sup> which I subsequently introduce. These sections work together to frame the larger project undertaken, as precarious labor, mobile production, and financialization have all coalesced to create the conditions for the creation, abuse, and disposal of, COVID Compliance departments and their workers.

### ***Production and Labor in the Hollywood Studio System***

Hollywood has always been in a state of tension between labor and producers. When studios first began moving production from the East Coast, Los Angeles was chosen in part for its staunchly anti-union culture. In 1896, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce began a

---

<sup>4</sup> Sullivan, “Leo C. Rosten’s Hollywood”; Rosten, *Hollywood: The Move Colony, the Movie Makers*.

<sup>5</sup> Curtin and Sanson, *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*.

<sup>6</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production”; McNutt, *Television’s Spatial Capital: Location, Relocation, Dislocation*.

<sup>7</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*; deWaard, “Financialized Hollywood.”

campaign of anti-union activity, designed to entice businesses to relocate to the city.<sup>8</sup> As productions moved to L.A., the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE)—the union which, to this day, still represents most below-the-line workers in the industry—worked to gain a foothold when union power had long been diluted by local government. As well, competing unions like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were willing to step into IATSE roles in the event of a strike. The studios specifically wanted to avoid IATSE having any bargaining power, for fear of actors and writers following suit and unionizing. Despite harsh resistance, IATSE negotiated roles with IBEW, and subsequently agreed to the industry’s first Studio Basic Agreement in 1926, which was, “not so much a contract but an agreement to negotiate wages, benefits, hours and working conditions, as well as grievances.”<sup>9</sup> Producers’ fears were also not unfounded, as in 1933 the Screen Actors Guild (now SAG-AFTRA) and the Screen Writer’s Guild (now the WGA) both voted to officially unionize.<sup>10</sup> Organized labor in Hollywood had significant bargaining power for the first time, and the studios had to work *with* their employees, rather than holding all the cards themselves. Yet even though organized labor had power in Hollywood, the Great Depression and the structure of the studio system in Hollywood created considerable tension between the studios and unions.

The tension between media producers and labor has been present since the foundation of the industry as we know it, though the structure of productions looked vastly different. This tension was most manifest during the pre-1948 era of Hollywood, when major studios held total control of all three levers of media production—production, distribution, and exhibition, a practice known as “vertical integration.” With power consolidated in the hands of the studios,

---

<sup>8</sup> IATSE, “125 Years of IATSE,” 17–18.

<sup>9</sup> IATSE, 25.

<sup>10</sup> SAG-AFTRA, “The History of the Unions during the 1930s”; Swett, “SWG History.”

they were free to play unions against each other for their own gain. A strike against the studios by IATSE in 1933 illustrates this effectively. During another dispute between IATSE and the IBEW, 400 IATSE workers walked off sets, which allowed the studio to ‘void’ the union’s Studio Basic Agreement, cut pay, and bring in scab workers to replace IATSE members. Because this strike happened during the Great Depression, “producers were using the New Deal as an excuse to ‘keep operating at all costs.’ They shamelessly declared it their ‘patriotic duty’ to do whatever was necessary to keep the studios running.”<sup>11</sup> The economic conditions at the time, considered with the outsized power that studios held in all areas of production, made an ideal moment for the studios to try and erode any power that the unions had previously won.

In the early days of the studio system, movies were made in essentially the same way: A writer would prepare a script, which was then sold to a studio. The studio would then finance the production of the film, manage the distribution or hand it off to an independent distribution company, then move to exhibition—the theaters where publics would view the finished product. In classical Hollywood, the same company would often control the production of a film, the distribution, and crucially, exhibition. Through distribution, studios could control which cities received their films, and through exhibition they dictated which films were shown alongside the big-ticket ones. This structure placed immense power in the hands of major studios and carried on until the Paramount Decrees in 1948. The decrees ended vertical integration and forced studios to divest from their exhibition companies, ending the monopoly on film production that studios held to that point. Breaking up these monopolies then forced the studios to compete with one another, leading to an increase in risk taking and independent production.<sup>12</sup> The decades

---

<sup>11</sup> IATSE, “125 Years of IATSE,” 30.

<sup>12</sup> Yogerst, “The Long Shadow of Antitrust Targets From Hollywood’s Golden Age.”

following the Paramount Decrees also coincided with a peak in both union membership in the United States, as well as public approval for unions.<sup>13</sup> Notably for this era, workers were employed by the studios themselves, as opposed to the current “freelance” nature of media work.

Though the industry was well-established by the time of the Paramount Decrees, there exists relatively little scholarship from that era that accounts for production cultures of that time. Leo Rosten’s *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* represents a peek behind the curtain for how film was made in classical Hollywood.<sup>14</sup> His work was, essentially, a study of production culture half a century before John Thornton Caldwell would properly establish the concept.<sup>15</sup> Though his book is not primarily focused on workers, Rosten’s work does delineate the difference between “movie workers” and “movie makers.” In his view, “movie workers” were those we now call below-the-line, who, “lead ordinary lives ... they are no more or less attractive, secure, or neurotic than America at large.”<sup>16</sup> This is opposed to the “movie colony”—the producers, directors, and others who “shape Hollywood’s profile and set its values.”<sup>17</sup> The story that Carrie shared, which framed the beginning of this thesis, contrasts with Rosten’s conceptions of “movie workers.” Even though on paper, Carrie still got to go home at the end of the day and could live an ostensibly normal life, the unreasonable and unsustainable working conditions bled into her off-time, as any time *not* on set was spent recovering and mentally preparing to go back the next day.

The relative stability provided by the studio system contrasts with the unreasonable and unsustainable workload put on below-the-line workers today. With the freelance nature of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Rosten, *Hollywood: The Move Colony, the Movie Makers*.

<sup>15</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

<sup>16</sup> Rosten, *Hollywood: The Move Colony, the Movie Makers*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> Rosten, 33.

work today, workers constantly hunt for the next gig, even before their current job wraps up, and are subjected to wholly unsustainable conditions in the day-to-day. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, in their volume *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*, found that work in the media industry, “constitutes a regime of excessive labor.”<sup>18</sup> They posit, “Productions are bigger, responsibilities are burgeoning, and workdays are longer, yet budgets are tighter and deadlines are shorter ... At the same time, workplace protections are weaker, jobs are scarcer, and frustrations are more visible.”<sup>19</sup> These conditions also translate to negative physical and emotional outcomes for these workers, as Aymar Jean Christian and Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin establish.<sup>20</sup> Their study analyzed online posts from below-the-line workers navigating industry work in the months leading up to IATSE’s near-strike in 2021. Many people shared stories similar to Carrie’s, with narrowly avoided car accidents due to lack of sleep. One worker posted that she developed consistent UTIs from lack of bathroom breaks, and another developed a myriad of mental illnesses, saying, “I worked 80-100 + hour weeks as a script coordinator and experienced: anxiety, racing heart rate, depression, alcohol/sleeping pill dependence, blurrier vision, first time suicidal thoughts, hair falling out, insomnia, burn out – all for \$18/hour. For one of the wealthiest networks in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Stories like these are, unfortunately, all too common among below-the-line workers, and are spurred and reified in large part by structures of deregulation and corporate media conglomeration, which I explore in the next section.

---

<sup>18</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6.

<sup>19</sup> Curtin and Sanson, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Christian and Peterson-Salahuddin, “Rage against the Streaming Studio System.”

<sup>21</sup> Christian and Peterson-Salahuddin, 931.

## *Standardizing Culture in Classical Hollywood*

Returning briefly to Rosten's work, he effectively draws out the inherent tension between art and commerce, which has always been present in film production but has swung massively toward commerce in recent decades. At the end of the day, the film industry is a money-making endeavor and has worked since the early days to maximize its profit. However, in working to maximize profit the industry needs to appeal to as many varied audiences as possible. Per

Rosten:

Hollywood must continue to satisfy and aim at an audience, in the United States alone, of more than 50,000,000 people a week ... An audience of this gigantic size means that, unlike book publishers or magazine editors or play producers, Hollywood must appeal to mentalities ranging from six to sixty, from stevedores to seminary students, from barmaids to dowagers.<sup>22</sup>

The desire to standardize culture was present from the beginning—in a somewhat oblique way, Rosten's analysis predicted the current streaming media environment. In the past, productions had to work to appeal to everyone's unique tastes and sensibilities and did so to great effect. Early cultural theorists like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer picked up on this upon seeing the uniformity of cultural production coming out of Hollywood. They claim that consumers essentially have to take what they are given, with entertaining mass media products serving to keep people "satisfied," by keeping them distracted and ignorant of their own commodification.<sup>23</sup> With the easy production and dissemination of content via streaming, however, mass audiences are boiled down to data points, and the content viewers see is driven by algorithms.<sup>24</sup> Rather than tailoring content to appeal to a mass audience, the audience is no

---

<sup>22</sup> Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*, 27–28.

<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 111.

<sup>24</sup> Burroughs, "House of Netflix."

longer ‘mass,’ and can instead be tailored to fit the content. Though the methods have essentially flipped, the goals of maximizing production and eyes on the screen have been fulfilled.

The biggest difference between Rosten’s era and the current day was the *need* for skilled labor in the 1940s. Labor had more power and workers had more rights, especially in the years immediately following Rosten’s book.<sup>25</sup> As technology has advanced in the intervening decades, and with the weakening of labor power in the latter half of the twentieth century, producers are more able to employ the methods of mass production, reifying the tension present between labor and the studios since the beginning. When the Hollywood guilds have struck in the decades since, it’s more often than not been to secure their rights in the face of advancing technology. In 1960, both SAG (led by then-union president Ronald Reagan) and the WGA called a “double strike” to secure compensation for content shown over television.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the WGA’s strike in 2007 was spurred in part by conflict around compensation for home video sales and online streaming.<sup>27</sup> However, this tension between labor and advancing technology is most clearly manifest in the current day, where producers are now partnering with generative AI companies for content creation.<sup>28</sup> Concerns over AI usage have been sticking points for negotiations among all three major Hollywood guilds—IATSE, the WGA, and SAG-AFTRA, even leading (in part) to the 2023 strikes from the latter two unions.<sup>29</sup> These developments, and their full-throated industrial acceptance, speak to the intertwining of Hollywood and big tech. This collaboration is

---

<sup>25</sup> Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do*.

<sup>26</sup> Doherty, “The Last Time Actors and Writers Both Went on Strike.”

<sup>27</sup> Littleton, “Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production.”

<sup>28</sup> Weprin, “Lionsgate Inks Deal With AI Firm to Mine Its Massive Film and TV Library.”

<sup>29</sup> Coyle, “In Hollywood Writers’ Battle against AI, Humans Win (for Now)”; Giardina and Maddaus, “IATSE Ratifies New Three-Year Deal, Despite AI Worries.”

in itself a result of decades of deregulation and the rise of financialized production, which as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, contributed to an environment ripe for the creation, exploitation, and disposal of, COVID Compliance departments.

### ***Neoliberalism and Deregulation***

The tricky balance between art and commerce that has been present from Hollywood's inception has, in recent years, swung heavily toward the side of commerce. Decades of deregulation, the weakening of organized labor, and an emphasis on corporate welfare have allowed massive media conglomerates to build and maintain power over all levels of production, essentially returning to a pre-Paramount form of vertical integration. With the onset of financialization, companies are far more invested in creating value for their shareholders and private equity owners than in protecting the safety and rights of workers. In addition, with the emergence of new technologies such as generative AI, these media conglomerates push to replace workers with far cheaper technology. This speaks to the disposability of below-the-line workers in the eyes of organizations like the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), despite their essential nature in media production.

Key to the larger project here is an examination of how decades of deregulation, spurred on by neoliberal economic policies, allowed for the wholesale expansion of corporate influence in the United States. This represented a sea change in Hollywood, where companies had to worry far less about government regulation in pursuing their goals, which often resulted in corporate mergers meant to consolidate power in the hands of a few, much larger, companies. As a result of that deregulation also came financialization—when private equity (PE) began buying up larger shares in media companies and shifting their priority wholly to creating value for shareholders. These structures have worked together to create a precarious environment focused

on endless growth and the protection of corporate interests over the longevity of its workers' careers. As I will discuss further in Chapter 1, the AMPTP tried to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a chance to cut below-the-line jobs in the interest of efficiency,<sup>30</sup> but the industry unions leveraged their influence to protect their workers' jobs in the midst of the uncertainty that came with the outbreak.

The years following the Paramount Decrees coincided with a peak in union membership in the United States. Bolstered by FDR's New Deal policies, both workers' rights and the economic outlook writ large boomed in the decades following The Great Depression. Having real political power for the first time, unions flexed their collective influence to elect lawmakers who could "counterbalance corporate interests at the bargaining table, while acting as a powerful normative voice for the welfare of non-elites."<sup>31</sup> The decades in the middle of the twentieth century represented the height of union power in the United States, when more than one-third of non-agricultural workers belonged to a union.<sup>32</sup> However, with the Reagan administration's neoliberal politics, the federal government largely stopped antitrust enforcement, allowing for big business to consolidate their power.<sup>33</sup> Under neoliberalism, the distinctions between citizens and corporations are effectively blurred, with an extra emphasis on protecting the rights of corporations.<sup>34</sup>

Under neoliberalism, national economic policies of deregulation and privatization allowed production companies to realign their sights on pure profit.<sup>35</sup> Film had always been a

---

<sup>30</sup> Littleton, "Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production."

<sup>31</sup> Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do*, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenfeld, 186.

<sup>33</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*.

<sup>34</sup> Hardin, "Finding the 'Neo' in Neoliberalism."

<sup>35</sup> Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor," 8.

tool of profit generation, and with the weakening of labor power, further protections for corporate welfare, and the expansion of free trade policies, studios could effectively move productions around to whichever cities could offer them the best deal. Per Curtin and Sanson, “Producers sought out localities across North America and Europe, attracted by favorable exchange rates, lower labor costs, untapped infrastructure, and, most significantly, government subsidies and tax rebates.”<sup>36</sup> In addition, legislation like the Telecommunications Act of 1996, allowed corporations to conglomerate and expand their influence in creative industries.<sup>37</sup> Though this act was meant to incentivize competition in the telecommunications industry by removing regulations and lowering the barrier for entry, it only ended up allowing for high-profile mergers between already massive companies.<sup>38</sup> This deregulation also let studios skirt labor regulations, which when combined with Reagan-era neoliberal economics, exacerbated precarity in the creative industries. This push minimized labor power and protections, stripping power from workers and placing it firmly in the hands of corporations. The decreased influence of organized labor gave creatives very little opportunity to course correct, as the structure of many industry jobs don’t allow for any “rocking the boat.”

### *Mobile Production Practices*

Most below-the-line workers today work on a job-to-job basis, and holding steady employment requires constantly maintaining a network of producers, assistants, and other workers.<sup>39</sup> In the early days of Hollywood, industry jobs were largely in Los Angeles, so

---

<sup>36</sup> Curtin and Sanson, 9.

<sup>37</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*; Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*.

<sup>38</sup> Kimmelman, Cooper, and Herra, “The Failure of Competition Under the 1996 Telecommunications Act.”

<sup>39</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6; Blair, ““You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job.””

workers could maintain employment without constantly moving between states and cities, and with the consolidation in one city they could easily maintain the professional networks needed to keep jobs in the industry. However, with deregulation and big business-friendly economic policies, different states and even countries now compete to draw productions. Generally, this is done through state governments offering generous tax breaks that incentivize productions to shoot in their state, resulting in the proliferation of “mobile production.”<sup>40</sup>

Throughout this thesis, I utilize Myles McNutt’s term “mobile production” rather than the more common “runaway production” used in other media industry scholarship when referring to the practice of moving productions around to follow the best incentives.<sup>41</sup> As media production has become more diluted between states and countries vying to offer the best incentives, Los Angeles has become decentered as the focal point for those productions. McNutt asserts, “Within a contemporary context, runaway production presumes a center where one does not exist. Its use as a theoretical framework for considering flows of television production reinforces an outdated understanding of where television—and media more broadly—is produced both in North America and globally.”<sup>42</sup> Mobile production represents a win-win for production companies and the localities trying to lure them in. Producers can shop around to find the location that provides the most advantageous benefit for a given production, and the states themselves greatly benefit from the number of jobs created for their local economy, as well as the money spent with local businesses. However, mobile production also adversely affects below-the-line workers, who often cannot afford to relocate for whatever their next job ends up being. This is especially the case for aspirant workers trying to get their feet under them in an unforgiving industry, as most

---

<sup>40</sup> Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*; McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

<sup>41</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

<sup>42</sup> McNutt, 63.

of my interview participants were. Additionally, those who *can* move for their next job still have to compete with laborers who are already established in a given area, further disadvantaging below-the-line workers by forcing them into competition with each other.

The participants interviewed for this project were all based in or around Austin, Texas, which despite not a popularly understood hub for media production, has a state legislature that has massively boosted tax incentives in recent years, hoping to draw productions to their state.<sup>43</sup> These cases being based in Texas provide an example of the utility, and clear issues around, mobile production practices, which I further explore in Chapter 1. The constant movement of these mobile productions furthers the precarity of below-the-line work.<sup>44</sup> Now, not only do workers have to keep a constant network of connections to find their next job,<sup>45</sup> but they also have the added concern of whether another job will be available in the first place. This precarity is also well illustrated by COVID departments—they served a vital purpose during the pandemic and offered new workers a chance to begin establishing the networks needed for long-term employment in the industry. However, their day-to-day duties gave their workers no time to establish those connections, nor did COVID workers gain skills that could translate into future employment. Not only that, but their example shows the issues around mobile productions in its highest form. For my participants, the lack of permanent studio spaces also meant that sets could have no long-term COVID infrastructure. This resulted in situations like the story at the beginning of this thesis, where COVID departments were forced into unsustainable commute times, arriving hours before the rest of the crew just to ensure protocols were being followed. Where the concern for other workers is whether they’ll need to relocate for their next job,

---

<sup>43</sup> Solomon, “The Future of Texas Film Is \$200 Million Brighter.”

<sup>44</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

<sup>45</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor.”

COVID workers had to question whether their department would even exist after their current project concluded.

### *Neoliberal Competition and Gatekeeping*

Another key aspect of neoliberalism concerns competition as a key facet of economic life. In classical liberalism, economic activity is focused largely on exchange of goods and services—this was largely seen as natural, following laws of supply and demand and eliciting a degree of cooperation between people. Neoliberalism, in comparison, redefines humans from, “an exchanging creature to a competitive creature.”<sup>46</sup> This ideological shift moved workers from being “workers” to being “human capital,” with their salary becoming, “the revenue that is earned on an initial investment.”<sup>47</sup> Workers are thus constantly selling themselves to get an edge, even at the lowest run of the production hierarchy. A handful of interview participants commented on a dog-eat-dog dynamic that cropped up between set PAs (the general bottom of the production barrel) and COVID PAs (the dirt *below* the barrel). With the competition fostered by neoliberal ideology, those at the lowest level of the production hierarchy—who *should* have more solidarity, or at least empathy—end up competing with each other. In the stories shared with me as well, the competition was not zero-sum—COVID department members weren’t generally trying to promote to assistant director-adjacent positions (a track that usually begins as a set PA), but the set PAs still put down COVID PAs for a perceived competitive edge.

Below-the-line workers in media production are essential and are a worthy investment—studios ought to see that investing in their workers’ longevity would pay off in the long run. However, the constantly changing and adapting “shape” of cultural production disincentivizes

---

<sup>46</sup> Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,” 28.

<sup>47</sup> Read, 28.

investment in workers. Per Curtin and Sanson, “The system functions not because it grows the value of its existing human capital but because it constantly harvests an influx of eager aspirants, replenishing its labor ranks with those amenable to a mobile and excessive regime of production.”<sup>48</sup> The structures at play in the media industry, informed by the competitive ethos of neoliberalism, incentivize gatekeeping practices in the industry. Gatekeepers, in cultural production, “[control] the mobility of cultural producers through either promotion and recognition or exclusion and rejection.”<sup>49</sup> The system works based on the assumption that workers will either stick with its unsustainable labor practices or burn out and make room for new workers who are hopefully more willing to play the game.

COVID Compliance work represented, at best, an opportunity for aspirant workers to get a foot in the door—at worst, it represented a subtle, exploitative form of gatekeeping. Because of the temporary nature of these positions, management had very little incentive to invest in these workers’ long-term aspirations. Following Hamann and Beljean’s conception, this lack of investment constitutes career gatekeeping—COVID PAs were rarely recognized and were often treated as an out-group on set, despite their essential nature.<sup>50</sup> These sorts of gatekeeping practices are also highly contingent on, and reflexive of, organizational culture. For the purpose of this thesis, I follow Edgar Schein’s conception of organizational culture, which looks primarily at the on-the-ground patterns and rituals that define a group.<sup>51</sup> This bottom-up approach to cultural analysis unpacks the underlying ideologies that inform an organization’s day-to-day function. For example, if COVID PAs situated entirely below the production

---

<sup>48</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 7.

<sup>49</sup> Hamann and Beljean, “Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields,” 45.

<sup>50</sup> Hamann and Beljean, “Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields.”

<sup>51</sup> Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 18.

hierarchy are berated and abused by the rest of the crew, including set PAs, it betrays an underlying ideology of disposability.

John Thornton Caldwell's *Production Culture* serves as an effective foray into the study of media production and how specific on-set cultures are produced. With a focus on "industry reflexivity" as his motivating principle, Caldwell sets out to examine how workers in media industries construct their own individual and collective identities through discourse.<sup>52</sup> *Production Culture* was written shortly before the 2008 WGA strike, and Caldwell in the conclusion draws attention to the precarious and largely unsustainable labor practices that would, in part, be responsible for the strike. Undergirding his conclusions is what he refers to as "the new uber-fantasy and goal of Hollywood: to acquire content for as little or no cost and to get everyone to work for free."<sup>53</sup> This "uber goal" was the same during Rosten's era, as it is in the current day. With the weakening of labor protections via neoliberal economic policies, production companies have moved closer to that goal. Companies now ship their productions to the state or country with the most favorable tax incentives, and offload manufacturing to countries with weak unions to cut costs where they can.<sup>54</sup>

Caldwell draws attention to the principle of "unruly workworlds," which is key to understanding the dynamics within the below-the-line crew, as well as the dynamics between the COVID Compliance department and the rest of the crew.<sup>55</sup> Unruly workworlds concern the flattening of the production hierarchy, keeping workers on their toes constantly to try and remove the collective power that workers hold—however, power relations cut both ways; Per

---

<sup>52</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

<sup>53</sup> Caldwell, 324.

<sup>54</sup> Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*; Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor"; McNutt, *Television's Spatial Capital: Location, Relocation, Dislocation*.

<sup>55</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 325.

Caldwell, “there is as much ground-up worker agency and resistance via self-referencing as there is top-down corporate control and acquiescence.”<sup>56</sup> As producers and corporations work to exert control over workers, the workers themselves also engage in a degree of identity negotiation. While labor unions in the United States don’t have the same power that they once did, on-the-ground resistance between workers still remains a viable path to have their rights represented.<sup>57</sup> The example provided by Caldwell concerns how reality TV production often uses non-union talent and crews in their productions. Concerned that this tactic could be used to circumvent union protections in the case of a strike, the WGA and IATSE appealed to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on behalf of those nonunion workers. When the NLRB sided with the unions, it both illustrated the solidarity between workers as productions tried to blur the lines between union and nonunion labor. Per Caldwell:

This was a warning shot across the bow to networks everywhere against collapsing job descriptions. It succeeded by critically challenging the industry’s genre theory that had made spurious aesthetic/labor distinctions between fiction and reality screen content. From labor’s perspective, the reflexive principle of unruly work worlds means that the histories, hierarchies, and cultural rhetoric of crafts increase in prominence and intensity as the oversupply of labor increases. Distinctions between workers do in fact matter.<sup>58</sup>

As demonstrated, industry unions have historically gone to bat for non-union workers in the face of industrial chicanery. However, the case of COVID Compliance draws out some hypocrisy within industrial labor relations. Despite the fact that COVID departments existed as a result of the negotiations between the unions and the AMPTP, they were treated as “other” by much of the rest of the crew and were seen in some cases as essentially the protocol enforcement wing of the studios, sent to police the rest of the set. This, of course, was not the reality—most of

---

<sup>56</sup> Caldwell, 325.

<sup>57</sup> Christian and Peterson-Salahuddin, “Rage against the Streaming Studio System.”

<sup>58</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 326.

the workers I spoke to were simply trying to establish themselves in the local industry through their COVID Compliance work. They were also not afforded any sort of union protections, due to their temporary status—this opened the door for rampant mistreatment, which I account for in the following chapters.

Exacerbated precarity for industry workers started in the 1970s with the United States' slide toward neoliberalism but really began its acceleration following the turn of the century. While production carried on, the conditions for workers deteriorated as corporations took advantage of business-friendly economic policies. Still though, the passion that film workers bring to their craft can push through the larger issues. When interviewing below-the-line workers, Curtin and Sanson found that, “pride in a job well done remains an enduring source of pleasure for craft workers, perhaps an even more powerful point of satisfaction because it has been realized under such trying circumstances.”<sup>59</sup> Although conditions have continued to deteriorate over the decades, the love for their work has kept workers engaged in an industry that's become progressively more apathetic toward their well-being.

### *Streaming, Financialization, and 'Content Culture'*

The streaming era—which I am defining roughly as the years between 2007 (when Netflix launched its streaming platform) and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—saw the largest rise in worker precarity. The deregulation that began in the 1980s really hit its stride in the mid-2000s, when private equity became more involved in the entertainment industry. In 2004, a group of investors bought MGM, which was struggling financially at the time, essentially giving the green light for other firms and consortiums to invest in or buy out major

---

<sup>59</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6.

studios.<sup>60</sup> The beginning of this financialization in Hollywood also happened to coincide with the advent of at-home streaming. Beginning with Netflix, streaming brought “big data” into the media industry.<sup>61</sup> Their usage of algorithms to drive viewership untethered viewers from scheduled programming and upended all previous work toward understanding viewer behavior.

Benjamin Burroughs sums this up well:

The heart of media industries has always been predicting audiences and their viewing habits. In the broadcast era, this type of guesswork was less difficult, with only three main channels for content distribution. However, in the post-network era of intense fragmentation and digital pathways the algorithm is a method to justify what Gitlin (1983), in the book *Inside Prime Time*, described as industry leaders relying on their guts and ultimately cherry-picking data to make decisions.”<sup>62</sup>

Curtin has claimed that the 2007-08 TV season was a “tipping point” in the media industry.<sup>63</sup> Where previously networks would have to set programming around what they believed everyday viewers would tune in for, the content flow now moved in the opposite direction—streamers could simply make content, and the algorithms would drive viewers to watch it. Essentially, this ushered in an era of “quantity over quality” in the industry.

Work in the creative industries was a precarious enterprise long before the advent of streaming. However, while streaming became more and more widespread and popular in the mid-to-late 2010’s, the financialization of Hollywood reached its endgame. As streaming gained momentum through big players like Netflix and Hulu, smaller studios rushed to play catch up, with many launching their own platforms and hosting exclusive content. What began with Netflix streaming in 2007 spun off into a massive web of different streaming services—today we have Disney+, MGM+, Paramount+, Amazon Prime, and Hulu (which is notably also owned by

---

<sup>60</sup> deWaard, “Financialized Hollywood.”

<sup>61</sup> Burroughs, “House of Netflix.”

<sup>62</sup> Burroughs, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Curtin, “Matrix Media,” 12.

the Walt Disney Corporation) just to name a few. By producing content in-house and releasing directly to their own streaming platforms, studios can now focus all their efforts on getting eyes on screens, regardless of quality. The advent and spread of streaming technology represented the perfect opportunity for financialized media production to explode, and arguably a return to the vertical integration of studio-era Hollywood. The key difference now, however, is that decades of deregulation and corporate consolidation have made producers effectively able to ignore workers' well-being in the pursuit of profit, where previously they would have to account for the strong position the unions held.

Financialization—or, succinctly, the encroachment of private equity (PE) investment into media production represents a sea change in the priorities of the industry. Andrew deWaard uses the term to, “suggest a critical perspective on the destructive proves of finance capital that produces inequality, precarity, and instability.”<sup>64</sup> Asset management firms like BlackRock, Vanguard, and State Street, now own significant shares in all of the “Big 5” media companies—Comcast, Disney, Paramount, Sony, and Warner Bros Discovery.<sup>65</sup> In a sense, this means that these massive companies aren't actually competing with each other, but have instead become vehicles for enriching investors and executives. Rather than reinvesting profits into improving conditions for workers, or producing interesting pieces of media, “culture” has now become “content,” as these companies' primary concern now is outpacing one another to see who give Wall Street the best return on their investment.<sup>66</sup> When massive conglomerates all answer to the same handful of PE firms, the goal stops being one company outflanking another, and instead becomes how they can get the most subscribers in front of their streaming platforms. This, of

---

<sup>64</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> deWaard, 47–48.

<sup>66</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

course, is a cinch with the help of big tech, as algorithmic recommendations are incredibly effective at keeping people watching.<sup>67</sup> On top of that, mobile production practices work to make production cheaper through tax incentives, which allows for the creation of more *content*. With the help of big tech and generous tax incentives, financialization has become, as deWaard argues, “a key structural force—perhaps *the* key structural force—shaping cultural production and circulation today.”<sup>68</sup>

Financialized media production and government deregulation are, in large part, responsible for exacerbated precarity for media workers. Deregulation allowed already massive corporations to grow even further through conglomeration, but the element that separates this era from previous ones is primarily the investments of private equity. Private equity funds have, over the past two decades, been dumping money into acquiring and growing media companies.<sup>69</sup> This post-2007 era places the almighty dollar above all else, to a degree never seen before in the industry. It is a fulfillment of Leo Rosten’s 1941 contention, “Hollywood was forced—more or less—to shift its attention from the Arabian Nights to Dun and Bradstreet. The search for pleasure gave priority, if not way, to the pursuit of box-office receipts.”<sup>70</sup> As focus shifted from creative expression to fulfilling the wishes of Wall Street, productions realigned their pursuits to make productions cheaper and more efficient. With this shift, media has become more textually derivative, with fewer and fewer original works drawing high viewership numbers—instead Hollywood churns out franchises, remakes, and spinoffs ad nauseum.<sup>71</sup> Returning briefly to Adorno and Horkheimer, they claim, “that the difference between the models of Chrysler and

---

<sup>67</sup> Burroughs, “House of Netflix.”

<sup>68</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> deWaard, “Financialized Hollywood.”

<sup>70</sup> Rosten, *Hollywood: The Move Colony, the Movie Makers*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 7.

General Motors is fundamentally illusory is known by any child ... It is no different with the offerings of Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer.”<sup>72</sup> With the same PE firms holding shares in all of the major studios, this early contention has come to fruition. There’s no need to distinguish oneself from the rest of the pack through original content, as the media industry has a myriad of proven examples of what is effective in generating box office receipts.

As production further consolidates into the hands of huge firms like Netflix and Disney, concerns about sustainability for workers moved further to the wayside. As I illustrate in the next section, this push showed itself through the cutting of positions and downsizing departments wherever possible. Encouraged by neoliberal economic policies which value competition among those who ought to have solidarity with each other, throughout the streaming era and into the “post-pandemic”<sup>73</sup> era, workers in the media industries became less people, and more “human capital” to be exploited. Work in the media industry was already not sustainable—with the constant movement of productions to tax-friendly locations, increases in corporate influence, and overall focus on financial gain over creativity, below-the-line workers were burned out in the face of constant change and pressure.<sup>74</sup> All these issues reached a boiling point in 2020 with the outbreak of the pandemic.

### ***Industry Fractures, COVID-19, and the Post-Pandemic Era***

Over the last five decades in the United States, deregulation has allowed for unprecedented power consolidation in the hands of a few massive media conglomerates. This consolidation, egged on by asset management funds trying to maximize shareholder returns,

---

<sup>72</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 97.

<sup>73</sup> I use “post-pandemic” here, recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic never really ended. Instead, I utilize it as a simple way to delineate the moment when the world “returned to normal” around 2022 or 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Curtin and Sanson, *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*.

results in a watering down of “culture” into “content,”<sup>75</sup> wherein these companies work to create *more* content, rather than dedicating resources to more creative expression. This constant churn results in a “regime of excessive labor” for workers,<sup>76</sup> wherein companies *can* push workers—especially aspirant workers—to their limits with the knowledge that there will always be more trying to break in, who will put up with the unsustainable conditions. These structural shifts coincide with a decrease in labor power in the United States,<sup>77</sup> a larger proliferation of mobile production increasing precarity especially for below-the-line workers.<sup>78</sup> The societal shock of COVID-19 brought many of these issues to the public consciousness, both in media production, and in our late capitalist economic system.

The onset of COVID-19 is an example of what Caldwell terms a “fracture” in the media industry. These are moments of profound structural disruption, when the inner workings—and weaknesses—of the industry are laid bare for the world to see, and for scholars to examine.<sup>79</sup> The companies in question do not typically want the world to know how the proverbial sausage is made, so by definition these fractures happen, “without the willingness or consent of the media companies or networks being fractured.”<sup>80</sup> A historical pre-COVID example of an industry fracture is the 2014 Sony hack—in which press coverage exposed not only inter- and intrapersonal drama, but also a look into the quotidian practices of a major film studio.<sup>81</sup> In addition, tragedies like the on-set death of Sarah Jones draw critical attention to the health and

---

<sup>75</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

<sup>76</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6.

<sup>77</sup> Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do*.

<sup>78</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

<sup>79</sup> Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*.

<sup>80</sup> Caldwell, 222–23.

<sup>81</sup> Caldwell, 223–24.

safety of crew members and the safety practices that can fall through the cracks with the frantic pace of production in a financialized system.<sup>82</sup>

In comparison to other fractures, COVID-19 represented a far wider disruption for the day-to-day operations of the industry. The wholesale shutdown of productions around the world was a phenomenon never before seen on that scale and drew attention to the inherent precarity of media work. When productions shut down seemingly overnight, all sectors of the industry (except for programming, management, and streaming) halted work. Workers were left out to dry, in part because of the gig-like nature of production work, while executives stayed afloat thanks to the flexibility afforded by their top-level positions. Because they were not considered “employees” or “corporations,” below-the-line workers weren’t qualified to receive federal CARES act support or payroll protection subsidies.<sup>83</sup> As well, the shutdown of society writ large meant that the day-to-day jobs that many industry workers go to between gigs weren’t available,<sup>84</sup> leaving film workers out in the cold in more ways than one. Additionally, when the United States entirely botched its response to the pandemic, “reopened” countries in Europe and Asia moved to lure in American productions.<sup>85</sup> With a fracture like the COVID-19 pandemic, and the chaos that ensued following the initial shutdown and tenuous return to production, the AMPTP tried to take the opportunity to reduce costs and downsize crews, essentially shifting into “indie mode.”<sup>86</sup> With workers simply trying to stay afloat, crew sizes being cut, and

---

<sup>82</sup> Caldwell, 224–27.

<sup>83</sup> Caldwell, 228.

<sup>84</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*.

<sup>85</sup> Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*, 228.

<sup>86</sup> Caldwell, 228.

productions shipping overseas, the pandemic created conditions for potential structural change in the industry, yet the industry seems to have taken all the wrong lessons from this period.

Labor power in the United States has waned over the years, and industry priorities have shifted toward maximizing profits with little regard for workers. This principle is well illustrated through the example of COVID departments. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, productions established COVID departments in accordance with guidelines established through negotiations between the industry unions and the AMPTP. These departments were vital to keeping productions running during 2020 through 2023 but were largely eliminated when studios could afford to do so—according to participants, departments were generally phased out shortly before the SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes in 2023. COVID departments represent the push toward further precarity, serving as an example of the invaluable role that below-the-line workers play in media production, while also being seen as totally disposable.

In his original book on production cultures, Caldwell draws attention to the practices employed by the industry in pursuit of cheap content, largely at the expense of below-the-line workers.<sup>87</sup> 16 years, three strikes, and one narrowly avoided strike later, and Caldwell’s 2008 prognostication has proven prophetic.<sup>88</sup> As the industry has continued its endless push toward maximizing profits and cutting expenses at all costs, writers and actors have won hard-fought victories to ensure job protections.<sup>89</sup> Below-the-line workers, in contrast, have been continually pressed into agreeing to sub-optimal union contracts, for fear of calling a strike and thus losing

---

<sup>87</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

<sup>88</sup> Sen and Farrar, “This Isn’t the First Time Hollywood’s Been on Strike. Here’s How Past Strikes Turned Out”; Maddaus, “IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat.”

<sup>89</sup> Maddaus, “SAG-AFTRA Approves Deal to End Historic Strike”; Patten, “It’s Official.”

out on work that is already largely unstable. In 2021, IATSE, which currently represents over 168,000 below-the-line workers in the United States and Canada, agreed to a new contract with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) to avert a potentially catastrophic strike.<sup>90</sup> The deal, however, was unsatisfactory for a large subset of union members, with 50.4% of individual voters rejecting the plan, as many of the concessions won by the union either would not make a substantial difference, or did not go far enough in ensuring the well-being of craft laborers.<sup>91</sup>

The pandemic certainly played a role in IATSE members having to accept a sub-optimal contract in 2021. Below-the-line work is never as stable as workers would like it to be, and the widespread shutdowns in March 2020 only served as a reminder of that instability. Generally, unions provide resources to support their workers in between gigs, or when job opportunities are scarce—however, when COVID-19 began to spread globally, the unions were overwhelmed by requests for support. Along with the sweeping production shutdowns, innumerable other businesses that workers could generally rely on between gigs were also shuttered by the pandemic. Thus, the fallbacks that below-the-line workers could consistently rely on were also taken off the table. Much of the work that below-the-line workers do cannot be done remotely, as it often deals in physical building, wiring, or design. While writers, producers, and some postproduction workers were still able to work under shelter-in-place orders, craft laborers could not.<sup>92</sup> As the pandemic continued its spread, below-the-line workers were left with more

---

<sup>90</sup> IATSE, “By a Nearly Unanimous Margin, IATSE Members in TV and Film Production Vote to Authorize a Nationwide Strike”; IATSE, “About Us.”

<sup>91</sup> Maddaus, “IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat.” Per Maddaus, voting for IATSE union contracts is done through a delegate system, rather than a straight popular vote, thus even though more voters rejected the 2021 contract, it was still approved by the delegates from each local.

<sup>92</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 13–16.

insecurity in an already-unstable field, no jobs to fall back on, and insufficient support from their union.

Projects around the world returned to production gradually throughout the remainder of 2020 into 2021, under drastically different circumstances. Studios, unions, and health officials in the United States worked together to establish protocols for curbing the spread of COVID-19 as productions started back up. During the establishment of these return-to-work protocols, the AMPTP reportedly pushed to cut down on crew sizes and eliminate jobs, which the unions pushed back on to protect their members' jobs.<sup>93</sup> Although the unions in this case “won” the negotiation, the AMPTP’s push to further cut costs—and by extension, jobs—when more than 120,000 industry workers in Los Angeles alone were unemployed, perfectly illustrates the tension between studio heads and the workers who produce their content.<sup>94</sup> One of the key justifications for the AMPTP to eliminate jobs was the advancement of technology that makes content creation easier—a key sticking point when the Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) called their strike in 2023.<sup>95</sup>

In the years since production returned to “normal,” post-COVID, conditions in the entertainment industry have not gotten any better. Labor action by SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) once again shut down productions nationwide during 2023, and the jobs have in large part not returned. Studios are still focused on maximizing the bottom line, even if it means moving productions overseas or to state and cities with more business-friendly tax incentives. When workers are paid adequately by productions, service to the bottom line

---

<sup>93</sup> Littleton, “Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production.”

<sup>94</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 14.

<sup>95</sup> Rice, “SAG-AFTRA’s Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Says Studio Talks Are ‘Productive’ But Cautions, ‘We’re Not There Yet’ As AI Emerges As Latest Focus.”

means cutting costs elsewhere—in the case of Hollywood in 2024, it means cutting series productions by roughly 20% compared to the previous year.<sup>96</sup> Certainly, the volume of content studios produced following the pandemic was unsustainable in the long term, but this is only an illustration of the larger precarity at work in media industries.<sup>97</sup>

I argue that COVID departments are the clearest illustration of this precarity. They were created with the express purpose to keep productions running during perhaps the most precarious historical moment in Hollywood but were seen only as a necessary inconvenience. These workers, many of whom were in their first industry positions, were mistreated and subjected to the unsustainable conditions of other below-the-line workers, only without the protections afforded by union membership. The mistreatment and later elimination of these workers from productions illustrate a larger shift in the attitudes of the AMPTP following the pandemic—while below-the-line workers play an undoubtedly crucial role in media production, they are still seen as disposable to the decision makers. The industry took all the wrong lessons from the pandemic: It could have served a course correction, drawing attention to the unsustainable conditions inherent in film and TV production. Instead, they saw the example of COVID departments and their disposability and opted to apply that view to below-the-line workers writ large.

#### *Understanding COVID-19's Impact on Media Industries*

This thesis uses the example of the COVID Compliance department on set to draw larger conclusion around the disposability of below-the-line workers. These departments were created

---

<sup>96</sup> James, Lee, and Carras, “The SAG-AFTRA Strike Is over. Few Expect Hollywood to Quickly Bounce Back.”

<sup>97</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*; Curtin and Sanson, *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*.

with the express purpose of keeping productions moving during the pandemic and were largely pared down or eliminated altogether once production returned to “normal.” As such, the experiences of COVID Compliance workers are also emblematic of larger issues around below-the-line work, in that productions simply *could not* run without them, per the return-to-production guidelines set out by the Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force (ILSC).<sup>98</sup> They also were framed to serve as an effective entry point into the industry for workers trying to get a foot in the door. The creation of COVID departments gave workers an opportunity, who otherwise would have to navigate the landscape of internships and unpaid labor that many below-the-line workers generally must start out with. Of course, as soon as testing and mask guidelines were loosened and the departments could be reasonably pared down, studios did so. It is also notable that COVID departments did not exist in a consistent form long enough for their workers to qualify for union membership, lending further evidence to the precarity that this project is concerned with.

The white paper released by the ILSC in June 2020 laid out clearly the conditions for productions returning after the initial outbreak.<sup>99</sup> Though the document only calls for the creation of a COVID-19 Compliance Officer (CCO) on set, this responsibility was designated to whole departments under the supervision of a COVID Production Manager or Production Health Supervisor.<sup>100</sup> Per the industry guidelines, “Specific duties and responsibilities of the COVID-19 Compliance Officer(s) may include, but are not limited to, overseeing and monitoring physical

---

<sup>98</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 22–23.

<sup>99</sup> Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force, “Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

<sup>100</sup> The ILSC document only accounted for the role of the CCO, I am using that role as representative of COVID departments in general, as responsibility was delegated to lower department members during production.

distancing, testing, symptom monitoring, disinfecting protocols, and PPE education, protocols and adherence and such other duties as may be determined by the employer.”<sup>101</sup> Following a traditional department hierarchy, the COVID department designated most day-to-day enforcement to COVID PAs, who were at the lowest level of what was, essentially, the lowest department on the production hierarchy. Most of the day-to-day duties of COVID PAs were enforcing masking and distancing protocols, as well as checking people in on set each day and screening them for COVID-19 symptoms.

Though I use COVID departments as illustrative of the issues pervading below-the-line industry work, their specific placement is better described as across-the-line, existing outside of established hierarchies (see fig. 1). Where typically jobs on a set can be defined as either below-the-line or above-the-line based on things like duties and pay structure, across-the-line positions don’t sit cleanly in either camp. Per Kiah Bennett:

As industry shifted from an understanding of quasi-Fordist vertically integrated production to post-Fordist modes of production, largely dependent on contract and gig work, drawn from various production companies, studios, and independent contractors, the need for across-the-line labor increased yielding the position we currently understand as assistants.<sup>102</sup>

Borrowing from Bennett’s definition above, I argue that COVID departments represent perfectly the dynamic of across-the-line work. They embody the post-Fordist precarity of an industry focused more on production of content for profit than concern for its workers. Additionally, their position outside of the production hierarchy allowed for the changing of duties as needed—where on one production the COVID department had integral jobs such as

---

<sup>101</sup> Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force, “Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 13.

<sup>102</sup> Bennett, “Overworked and Underpaid,” 11.

handling testing, on others they may simply be relegated to standing around watching for protocol violations. All of this is also without the benefits of the union protections afforded to below-the-line workers.

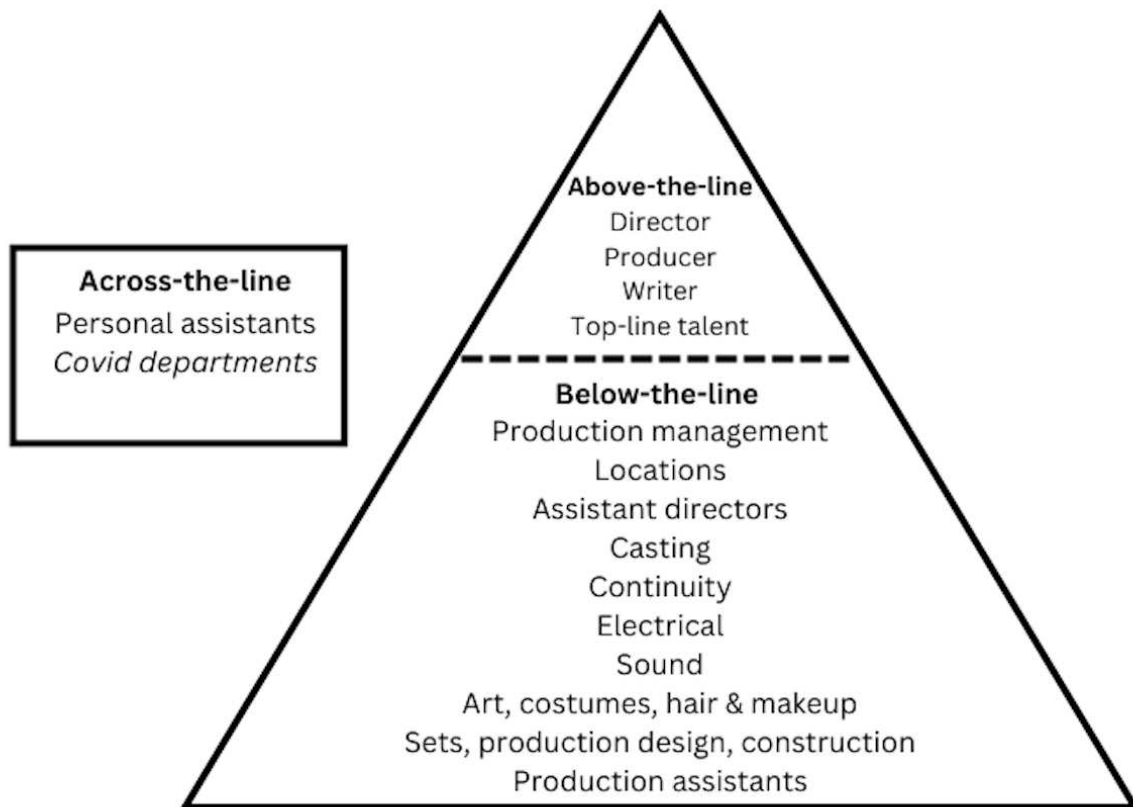


Figure 1. The traditional above- and below-the-line hierarchy on a film set, including across-the-line positions. Graphic created by author.

As the COVID-19 pandemic is still an ongoing event, there is still a dearth of scholarship within media industry studies regarding production during this time, which this project contributes to. Aside from Caldwell's consideration of COVID-19 as an industry fracture, there are really two pieces of scholarship that unpack media production during the pandemic. Most germane is Vicki Mayer and Noa Lavie's examination, based on interviews with COVID-era

film and television workers in New Orleans, Louisiana and Tel Aviv, Israel.<sup>103</sup> Their piece focuses in part on the idea that film workers were considered “essential” during the pandemic—an outlook that varied heavily by location. In Tel Aviv, “coronavirus was posed as a threat to be fought with the hard power of public health policy and the soft power of media industries.”<sup>104</sup> As such, production workers bought into the “wartime narrative,” seeing their own work as essential in providing comfort and entertainment with the uncertainty that COVID-19 brought about. In contrast, workers in New Orleans more often rejected their “essential” classification, seeing it more as a lip-service classification by California-based studio executives used as an excuse to keep productions running.<sup>105</sup> As all of my interview participants were based in the greater Austin area, this project extends the regional focus that Mayer and Lavie concern themselves with. Politically, Austin and New Orleans are blue cities in deeply red states,<sup>106</sup> which created cultural/political clashes that I unpack further in Chapter 1.

In addition, Kate Fortmueller’s book *Hollywood Shutdown* provides much-needed context for this project.<sup>107</sup> She traces how the pandemic upended production practices and how the industry adapted to the shutdown and gradual return to production over the course of 2020 into 2021. Her work, however, primarily gives an industrial viewpoint, looking at the “jet plane” view of the response, which according to Havens et al., “offers a more expansive view, but many details are obscured.”<sup>108</sup> My interest in this project lies with the workers who were caught up in the mad dash to return to production, who filled an inarguably essential role in keeping the

---

<sup>103</sup> Mayer and Lavie, “Emplacement and Emplotment.”

<sup>104</sup> Mayer and Lavie, 8.

<sup>105</sup> Mayer and Lavie, 10.

<sup>106</sup> AP News, “2024 Louisiana Election Results”; Adams, “These Are the Reddest and Bluest Counties in Texas, Based on Recent Election Results.”

<sup>107</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*.

<sup>108</sup> Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 239.

wheels of media production turning during the chaos of the pandemic, but were essentially left behind when production returned to “normal” in 2022-23.<sup>109</sup>

While Fortmueller’s work provides crucial context to the larger industrial moment represented by the pandemic, the “jet plane” view is not my goal with this undertaking.<sup>110</sup> By digging into the day-to-day lives of these COVID Compliance workers, contrasted with trade discourse, I draw out the material impacts of the industry’s response to the pandemic on those who were trying to establish themselves during a particularly precarious time. Additionally, I narrow the scope from Mayer and Lavie’s piece to focus only on COVID Compliance, which makes the project more manageable (they held 70 interviews over three years<sup>111</sup>) and provides more insight into one very specific role created in response to an industrial fracture. Through the figure of the COVID PA, and the COVID Compliance department in general, this work provides further research into precarious media labor, as many of the participants I interviewed were seen as a temporary inconvenience to be mistreated, overworked, and excised.

### ***Methodology***

The primary research for this thesis takes the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews specifically with former COVID Compliance workers. Because these were semi-structured, they were not a simple series of questions and answers, but rather a conversation between the two of us about their experiences. Questions focused on their experience working in COVID Compliance and their opportunities, or lack thereof, following their COVID gigs. As part of the interview procedure, I also asked what they viewed to be the biggest issues in the film industry

---

<sup>109</sup> Kilkenny, “Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low.”

<sup>110</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*.

<sup>111</sup> Mayer and Lavie, “Emplacement and Emplotment,” 3.

today—these answers provided a perspective on the priorities of media production companies, as told by those on the lowest part of the production hierarchy. In that regard, John Caldwell’s “inverse credibility law” applies.<sup>112</sup> By this, I mean to say that those on the lowest end of the production were the most likely to provide unfiltered, non-corporate answers. Since these participants were, again to quote Carrie, “the dirt below the barrel,” there were no institutions that they were protecting, and they thus provided the unfiltered, on-the-ground perspectives that I aimed to hear about through these interviews.

Carrie still maintained connections with colleagues from her time working in COVID departments during 2021 and 2022 and was willing to put me in contact. I then used those connections to begin reaching out and setting up interviews, and to utilize snowball sampling to reach more potential participants by asking each interviewee if they know anyone who may be willing to speak to me. Through her contacts I began snowball sampling, instead of gathering participants online—this made recruitment significantly easier. I also assured participants of the anonymity of their responses; all names, productions, and employers were anonymized. This is especially important given how all participants worked in the greater Austin, Texas area.

Throughout the data collection, I held 13 interviews with seven participants—two for each participant, except for Carrie, as her pilot interview lasted nearly two hours on its own. Each interview lasted between 30—60 minutes, depending on how the conversation progressed. Interviews were held over Microsoft Teams and were transcribed using Teams’ in-built transcription software. The first interview was blocked out for one hour, during which we primarily discussed their experiences working in the industry writ large, and more specific questions about their time in COVID Compliance. Toward the end of the first interview, I asked

---

<sup>112</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 3.

if we could set a time to follow up in the coming weeks, to give participants time to reflect since we are now a few years removed from the broad shuttering of COVID departments across the industry. The second interview focused on the intervening years and is intended to draw larger conclusions regarding the state of labor in the entertainment industry. With that focus, the second interview also worked to draw out the ways in which employment within COVID departments opened doors to further employment in the industry, as film and television jobs are infamous for their reliance on social and professional networks for continued employment.

After concluding the interviews, I went through each transcript and pulled out certain quotes and stories that spoke to two overarching themes yielded by my pilot interview with Carrie. First was the mistreatment and overwork of COVID PAs, illustrating the precarity of their department despite how crucial it was to the production process mid-pandemic. This theme is explored in Chapter 1. Second, COVID Compliance represented a potential foot in the door of the industry, where these aspirant workers could begin establishing their names and building the networks necessary for long-term success. This was not the reality for some participants, while others did find opportunities for networking. These outcomes were split between the two main productions we discussed in the interviews and hold larger implications for the organizational culture of film and television sets. These outcomes are explored further in Chapter 2.

Most of the conversation during these interviews focused on three specific productions. *Show A* was a prestige miniseries for a major streaming platform, with A-List talent attached. *Show B* was a network reboot of a classic drama series, which has since been cancelled. *Show C* is a network spinoff series which shot in Austin for a time but eventually relocated back to Atlanta. Other productions are mentioned throughout, namely a handful of anonymized reality programs and one very small indie film that Liz worked COVID Compliance for, but most of the

interviews and analysis focused on these three productions (see Appendix A for a list of participants and their respective productions).

As this project seeks to unpack the precarity inherent in media industries, it is crucial to take a “helicopter view” of industry operations.<sup>113</sup> That is, taking a wide perspective and viewing the industry as a complex network of social relations and institutions, rather than a simplistic entity. Each of the institutions at play carry with them different amounts of power, and each have their own priorities to negotiate within the media production. Producers will generally focus on maximizing content output while minimizing costs, and as such the well-being of its employees may go by the wayside. Unions, on the other hand, are primarily focused on ensuring the well-being of workers when producers will not. COVID Compliance departments, however, existed outside of this dichotomy—while their existence was due to negotiations between the unions and the AMPTP, neither party really went to bat for them. The complex navigation of these power dynamics is a primary concern of this thesis—as such it is necessary to look at the bigger picture, take that helicopter view, and look specifically at how the lived experiences of below-the-line workers fit into the larger cultural moment the industry finds itself in. That is, one of increased precarity for below-the-line workers, still reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged strikes in 2023.

In order to further flesh out this helicopter view, I also consider trade discourse, specifically to examine the disconnects between the industrial perspective on COVID-19, and the lived experiences of COVID Compliance workers. Trade sources provide a stronger industrial view, while the interviews provide an on-the-ground angle to the larger issues. These two fields work together, building from the themes and stories garnered from my interviews. Together, they

---

<sup>113</sup> Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 246.

serve to form a coherent thread of the industry's response to the COVID outbreak, and the (often negative, as I will show) outcomes from that response. Using the COVID department as a jumping-off point to frame my larger conclusions creates an effective bottom-up approach to examining the precarity in the industry writ large.

### *Chapter Preview*

This thesis proceeds with a multi-level examination of COVID Compliance work. I first analyze trade discourse surrounding the initial production shutdowns in March 2020 and the return to production months later. Trade sources covering the negotiations between the AMPTP and the industry unions painted a rosy picture of cooperation for everyone's benefit yet largely ignored the role, or existence of, COVID Compliance departments. I then contrast this industrial perspective with the on-the-ground, lived experiences of my participants. The treatment that these workers received, in large part from the rest of the crew, illustrates an attitude of disposability for below-the-line labor. These workers, despite being essential for the continuity of production during the early pandemic, were not treated as such—they were, in fact, often treated as pariahs sent by the studio to police the behavior of the rest of the crew.

The second chapter takes a broader perspective, zooming out to consider the industrial structures that set the stage for the exploitation and disposability of COVID Compliance workers. I also consider the success (or lack thereof) that my participants have found in the industry following their work in COVID Compliance. I first consider the broad structures of deregulation in the United States that have led to the current industrial moment—that is, one of unchecked corporate profiteering largely at the expense of its workers. In doing so, I also present an overview on how financial systems have encroached on media production, incentivizing a quantity-over-quality, *content*-centered approach. I then present contrasting case studies garnered

from my participants. The first, from *Show A*, demonstrates the issues created by financialized media production for below-the-line workers. The second, from *Show B*, exemplifies a person-centered approach to production that, even in a financialized system, still led to productive outcomes, only without the incredibly detrimental effects on its workers.

Following these two chapters, I conclude with a consideration of *The Bubble*, a 2022 COVID-centric comedy movie, which illustrates the industry's own unwillingness to grapple with its unsustainable labor practices. The conclusion also considers the example of independent streaming platform Dropout, as an example of how a person-centered approach such as the one I consider in Chapter 2 can lead to long-term success, and a more sustainable path forward for the media industry.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Christopher. "These Are the Reddest and Bluest Counties in Texas, Based on Recent Election Results." *KXAN Austin*, November 27, 2024. <https://www.kxan.com/news/your-local-election-hq/these-are-the-reddest-and-bluest-counties-in-texas-based-on-recent-election-results/>.
- AP News. "2024 Louisiana Election Results." Accessed June 5, 2025. <https://apnews.com/projects/election-results-2024/louisiana/>.
- Bennett, Kiah E. "Overworked and Underpaid: Hollywood Gatekeeping in Assistant Labor and Discourse." Doctoral Dissertation, Colorado State University, 2022. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/overworked-underpaid-hollywood-gatekeeping/docview/2706252205/se-2?accountid=10223>.
- Blair, Helen. "'You're Only as Good as Your Last Job': The Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry." *Work, Employment and Society* 15, no. 1 (March 2001): 149–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170122118814>.
- Burroughs, Benjamin. "House of Netflix: Streaming Media and Digital Lore." *Popular Communication* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948>.
- Caldwell, John T. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Caldwell, John T. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.
- Christian, Aymar Jean, and Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin. "Rage against the Streaming Studio System: Worker Resistance to Hollywood's Networked Era." *Information, Communication & Society* 26, no. 5 (April 4, 2023): 923–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2166363>.
- Coyle, Jake. "In Hollywood Writers' Battle against AI, Humans Win (for Now)." *AP News*, September 27, 2023, sec. U.S. News. <https://apnews.com/article/hollywood-ai-strike-wga-artificial-intelligence-39ab72582c3a15f77510c9c30a45ffc8>.
- Curtin, Michael. "Matrix Media." In *Television Studies after TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, edited by Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay. New York: Routledge, 2009.

- Curtin, Michael, and Kevin Sanson. "Listening to Labor." In *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f.4>.
- , eds. *Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ffjn40>.
- deWaard, Andrew. *Derivative Media: How Wall Street Devours Culture*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2024.
- . "Financialized Hollywood: Institutional Investment, Venture Capital, and Private Equity in the Film and Television Industry." *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 54–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2020.0041>.
- Doherty, Thomas. "The Last Time Actors and Writers Both Went on Strike: How Hollywood Ended the 1960 Crisis." *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 18, 2023. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/sag-wga-1960-hollywood-strike-reagan-history-1235538551/>.
- Fortmueller, Kate. *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID*. University of Texas Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7560/324608>.
- Giardina, Carolyn, and Gene Maddaus. "IATSE Ratifies New Three-Year Deal, Despite AI Worries." *Variety*, July 18, 2024. <https://variety.com/2024/film/news/iatse-ratifies-contract-amtp-1236068940/>.
- Hamann, Julian, and Stefan Beljean. "Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1 (March 2021): 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-019-00078-7>.
- Hardin, Carolyn. "Finding the 'Neo' in Neoliberalism." *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 199–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.748815>.
- Havens, Timothy, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic. "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (June 2009): 234–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x>.
- Holt, Jennifer. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. First published 1947.
- IATSE. "125 Years of IATSE." *The Official IATSE Bulletin*, 2018. [https://iatse.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IATSE-2nd2018\\_web.pdf](https://iatse.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IATSE-2nd2018_web.pdf).

- . “About Us.” IATSE. Accessed September 21, 2024. <https://iatse.net/about/>.
- . “By a Nearly Unanimous Margin, IATSE Members in TV and Film Production Vote to Authorize a Nationwide Strike.” IATSE, October 4, 2021. <https://iatse.net/by-a-nearly-unanimous-margin-iatse-members-in-tv-and-film-production-vote-to-authorize-a-nationwide-strike/>.
- Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force. “Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, June 1, 2020. <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/iwlmsc-task-force-white-paper-6-1-20.pdf>.
- James, Meg, Wendy Lee, and Christy Carras. “The SAG-AFTRA Strike Is over. Few Expect Hollywood to Quickly Bounce Back.” *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 2023. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-11-09/actors-strike-sag-aftra-strike-ends-amtp-hollywood>.
- Kilkenny, Katie. “Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 27, 2023. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywood-covid-safety-agreement-rules-loosened-1235311846/>.
- Kimmelman, Gene, Mark Cooper, and Magda Herra. “The Failure of Competition Under the 1996 Telecommunications Act.” *Federal Communications Law Journal* 58, no. 3 (June 2006): 511–18.
- Littleton, Cynthia. “Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production.” *Variety*, September 17, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/covid-19-safety-production-restart-1234773389/>.
- Maddaus, Gene. “IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat.” *Variety*, November 15, 2021. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/iatse-members-ratify-contract-1235112300/>.
- . “SAG-AFTRA Approves Deal to End Historic Strike.” *Variety*, November 9, 2023. <https://variety.com/2023/biz/news/sag-aftra-tentative-deal-historic-strike-1235771894/>.
- Mayer, Vicki. *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.63430>.
- Mayer, Vicki, and Noa Lavie. “Emplacement and Emplotment: Media Production in Pandemic Times.” *Television & New Media*, March 27, 2024, 15274764241236942. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764241236942>.

- McNutt, Myles. "Mobile Production: Spatialized Labor, Location Professionals, and the Expanding Geography of Television Production." *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0002.104>.
- . *Television's Spatial Capital: Location, Relocation, Dislocation*. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- Patten, Peter White, Dominic. "It's Official: WGA Members Overwhelmingly Ratify New Three-Year Deal With Studios." *Deadline*, October 9, 2023. <https://deadline.com/2023/10/writers-strike-deal-approved-ratification-vote-1235567930/>.
- Read, Jason. "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity." *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (February 2009): 25–36.
- Rice, Lynette. "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Says Studio Talks Are 'Productive' But Cautions, 'We're Not There Yet' As AI Emerges As Latest Focus." *Deadline*, October 30, 2023. <https://deadline.com/2023/10/duncan-crabtree-ireland-talks-productive-1235587405/>.
- Rosenfeld, Jake. *What Unions No Longer Do*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard university press, 2014.
- Rosten, Leo C. *Hollywood: The Move Colony, the Movie Makers*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941.
- SAG-AFTRA. "The History of the Unions during the 1930s." SAG-AFTRA. Accessed October 13, 2024. <https://www.sagaftra.org/about/our-history/1930s>.
- Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 4th ed. Jossey-Bass Business and Management Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Sen, Mallika, and Jennifer Farrar. "This Isn't the First Time Hollywood's Been on Strike. Here's How Past Strikes Turned Out." *AP News*, July 18, 2023, sec. Entertainment. <https://apnews.com/article/past-hollywood-strikes-62de005f62e38dd09b38cd591ea26123>.
- Solomon, Dan. "The Future of Texas Film Is \$200 Million Brighter." *Texas Monthly*, June 22, 2023. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/texas-film-incentives-200-million/>.
- Sullivan, John L. "Leo C. Rosten's Hollywood: Power, Status, and the Primacy of Economic and Social Networks in Cultural Production." In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 1st ed., 39–53. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

Swett, Hilary. "The Screen Writers' Guild: An Early History of the Writers Guild of America." The Writers Guild Foundation. Accessed October 13, 2024.  
<https://www.wgfoundation.org/screenwritersguild-history>.

Weprin, Alex. "Lionsgate Inks Deal With AI Firm to Mine Its Massive Film and TV Library." *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 18, 2024.  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/lionsgate-deal-ai-firm-runway-1236005554/>.

Yogerst, Chris. "The Long Shadow of Antitrust Targets From Hollywood's Golden Age." *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 4, 2023.  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/paramount-decrees-antitrust-hollywood-1235581215/>.

## Chapter 1 – Returning to Work: Industrial Narratives vs Personal Experiences

After film production worldwide shut down with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hollywood studios and labor unions spent months negotiating protocols to safely return to work. Among those protocols were the creation of COVID Compliance departments, who would oversee day-to-day protocol enforcement. For some, these departments represented a way to begin work in a historically difficult field to break into. For others, COVID Compliance work was simply a job opportunity at a time when finding steady employment was a tall order. Regardless of the motivations that drove workers to work in these departments, the reality of this work stands in stark contrast to the way that the industry spoke of them and treated them—namely that the industry trades, producers, and union bosses largely did not speak about them. At its best, COVID Compliance served as an unpleasant, but necessary, steppingstone for workers to start establishing themselves—at worst, which is the case for most of the interviewees I spoke to for this project, the department was treated as a pariah, babysitting the crew throughout production and serving as a punching bag for their frustrations about the virus itself. These departments, while absolutely crucial to production continuing, were also treated so poorly that some workers who came into the position with high aspirations, never worked in film again—all with the industry barely acknowledging their existence.

This chapter explores the tensions between the industry’s labor representatives, the trade press, producers, and workers at the lowest level of the production hierarchy. First, I consider the ways that higher-ups in the industry spoke about returning to production after the initial shutdown in early 2020. To this end, I analyze trade discourse surrounding industry negotiations and the final return-to-work (RWT) agreement, which include perspectives of parties from the

various industry unions as well as representatives from production companies and studios. This trade discourse analysis serves to establish the industry's narrative around their return to production, which largely leaves out the COVID Compliance department in charge of protocol enforcement. Following that narrative, I then consider how the industry, in the face of a threat like the COVID-19 pandemic, still focused on growth, as its workers simply focused on short-term survival. This shift in industrial priorities also led to an even greater proliferation of "mobile production,"<sup>114</sup> where productions move to whichever locality can offer them the most effective incentives, resulting in heightened precarity for the workers in each area. Mobile productions are by no means a new phenomenon, and are no doubt profitable for studios, but they do make labor more precarious for low-level industry workers.

After considering the macro-level effects of mobile productions, I then account for the experiences of a group of Texas-based participants who worked in COVID Compliance between 2020 and 2023. As these participants were all based in Austin, a city with a relatively established film industry, and with the state of Texas currently trying to incentivize productions to choose their state, these interviews also illustrate the adverse effects of mobile production on new workers in the industry. Producers pitched COVID Compliance as a way for aspirant film workers to begin establishing themselves in the industry, but the reality of these positions for the most part did not allow for any networking or the building of marketable skills for further employment. This tension between industrial discourses and worker experiences demonstrates an expansion of the existing problems of precarity, creating a new bottom line for new film and television workers who could be effectively exploited for a time, with their departments excised as soon as was feasible.

---

<sup>114</sup> McNutt, "Mobile Production."

Industry sources, mostly representatives from the various unions and producers speaking through trade press outlets, lauded their return-to-work agreement, with Gabrielle Carteris, president of the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Film and Television Artists (SAG-AFTRA) saying it was, “the single most important agreement we’ve signed in decades.”<sup>115</sup> While the agreement was undoubtedly an achievement, having balanced each union’s concerns and the exorbitant costs that came with enforcing those safety protocols, industry discourse included no consideration of the enforcement itself. While the accepted guidelines allowed for the use of union labor in COVID-19 protocol enforcement, the productions in question for this thesis opted to recruit either new college graduates, or those who were desperate to find work during a moment of increased precarity. For aspirant industry workers, there were few other entry-level options in Austin at the time. The use of non-union labor to fill COVID Compliance roles meant that these workers could be, to borrow Kiah Bennett’s descriptor, “overworked and underpaid,”<sup>116</sup> in the tradition of the lowest of below-the-line film workers.

Through contrasting accounts of the return-to-work protocols from the unions and producers, against their execution on set and the treatment of COVID Compliance workers, I draw out larger conclusions around the state of labor in the film and television industry. Industry work has long been defined by its inherent precarity, the workers forced to bounce from job to job with little to no long-term security.<sup>117</sup> The creation, on-set treatment, and later dissolution of COVID Compliance departments illustrates this larger issue of precarity. Workers were brought in to fill a very specific, crucial role within production, but the crew treated them, at best, as a

---

<sup>115</sup> Robb, “SAG-AFTRA President Gabrielle Carteris Says Back-To-Work Deal With AMPTP Is ‘Single Most Important Agreement We’ve Signed In Decades.’”

<sup>116</sup> Bennett, “Overworked and Underpaid.”

<sup>117</sup> Curtin and Sanson, *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*.

temporary inconvenience, at worst with outright hostility and verbal abuse. This treatment reflects the larger industrial attitude toward below-the-line labor—these positions are completely crucial to the success of a given production but are largely invisible to anyone outside of the industry. For most below-the-line workers, their interests are represented through a union contract, but COVID Compliance workers, by virtue of their temporary status, had no chance to collectively bargain for better treatment. Producers knew that because these departments were temporary, they had a new, exploitable workforce to keep the wheels turning as the pandemic raged on.

### ***Industrial Narratives Around COVID-era Production***

The COVID-19 pandemic started accelerating in early 2020, with the United States “shutting down” in March. On March 19, California governor Gavin Newsom issued a stay-at-home order for the entire state, essentially shutting down the state, and the film industry along with it. The United States was behind the rest of the world in responding to COVID-19’s initial outbreak—some productions abroad had already paused shooting as the virus steadily became a larger concern.<sup>118</sup> Many workers abroad had already been sent back to the United States as European countries began enforcing protocols, and major studios began assembling teams to address the potential impact of the pandemic, were it to continue spreading. These teams, per *Variety*, consisted of members from “production, marketing, finance, and human resources,”<sup>119</sup> notably lacking any health experts who could help inform a potential response. The selection of these team members betrayed the priorities of the industry at the outset—rather than asking how

---

<sup>118</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*.

<sup>119</sup> Lang, “Hollywood Studios Assembling Coronavirus Strategy Teams.”

productions could come back safely, the question was how the pandemic affected the bottom line.

Nowhere are these industrial priorities more evident than the fact that when negotiating a return-to-work agreement, studios wanted to take the opportunity to downsize production, citing new technology which could make some below-the-line positions obsolete.<sup>120</sup> Unsurprisingly, this served as a major sticking point in reaching an agreement with the unions to return to production. With media work being inherently precarious, industry unions have resources to keep members afloat during lean times, but with everything shut down worldwide, any help that the unions could provide was stretched thin.<sup>121</sup> Thus, when the studios proposed cutting jobs under the guise of having fewer people on set, it was a non-starter for negotiations. The precarity of film work also created another problem as the pandemic picked up steam: the outside-the-industry jobs that workers could maintain between gigs were also shut down, leaving them with no options. Compounding this issue is the fact that film work is, essentially, freelance, thus workers aren't often entitled to unemployment benefits, as they would in a regular job.<sup>122</sup> When productions worldwide shut down, there were no jobs for film workers to move to—usually the unions could help to sustain their workers, but in this case, they did not have the resources to sustain the sheer number of out-of-work members. Employees furloughed in other industries could apply for unemployment benefits, but the freelance nature of industry work foreclosed that opportunity, leaving members with no government or union assistance in the early days of the pandemic. All these elements set a fire under the guilds to establish a set of protocols that would

---

<sup>120</sup> Littleton, “Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production.”

<sup>121</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*.

<sup>122</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*; Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*, 228.

keep crew members safe, while also protecting their jobs in the long-term. Resuming production as quickly as possible was the only way to alleviate the financial and logistical threats posed by the pandemic’s onset.

An initial plan for safe reopening was presented to the governors of New York and California in a white paper on June 1, 2020, serving as a starting point for these negotiations. These guidelines included broad protocols that could be applied to all productions, with certain special considerations for specific groups, such as performers and crew members who cannot socially distance, e.g. makeup and hairstyling.<sup>123</sup> Notably, the ILSC presented this document to the state governors with the consultation of only one medical professional—Daniel Uslan, Co-Chief Infection Prevention Officer for UCLA Health. The document is very broad, establishing general ground rules for avoiding transmission and not providing many specifics for how protocols would be executed logistically. Around that same time, on June 12, a joint committee from the DGA, SAG-AFTRA, IATSE, and the Teamsters’ unions—who represent directors, actors, technical workers and stagehands, and transportation drivers, respectively—released “The Safe Way Forward,” a far more comprehensive set of guidelines built in part on the ILSC guidelines. Contrasting the ILSC document, with only one health consultant, each union had been consulting with multiple public health professionals and pooled their knowledge/resources to produce this document. As a result, the Safe Way Forward protocol is much more focused on specific guidelines that would help against virus transmission. These included a massive emphasis on testing, saying in the intro that shooting without comprehensive testing, “could potentially lead to shooting delays, and—should that person be a key actor/performer or

---

<sup>123</sup> Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force, “Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

director—to production shutdowns, not to mention the real possibility of illness and death.”<sup>124</sup>

The framing used by the unions in proposing their guidelines effectively portrayed the question of testing guidelines as a practical issue—nobody *wanted* to shut down production because of an outbreak, and consistent testing was the way to avoid that happening.

The Safe Way Forward was also the document to propose the zone system, which would become standard practice in productions during the pandemic. Though the specifics of who belonged in which zone varied from production to production, any given set would be divided into three distinct zones, each with their own testing and/or vaccination requirements.

Generally—as was the case with *Show A* and *Show B*—Zone A consisted of people who were actively on the set and in close contact with performers, who couldn’t wear PPE while shooting.

The only people in this zone were those with jobs that necessitated unprotected close contact with talent and thus could not maintain social distancing. Most everyone else on set were considered Zone B—below-the-line workers who could generally do their jobs without close contact with others and while regularly wearing PPE. Zone C, in the Safe Way Forward, consisted of everyone and everything not on set, where protocols couldn’t be enforced. Each of these zones also had their own testing and vaccination requirements—as was the case for *Show A*, which began shooting in the fall of 2021 after vaccines were available nationwide. On *Show A*, for example, everyone in Zone A was required to be fully vaccinated and boosted with documentation on file, whereas Zone B employees were only required to have their initial vaccinations and no booster to continue working.

The industry unions, as well as the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP)—the organization which represents powerful film and TV executives, and public

---

<sup>124</sup> DGA et al., “The Safe Way Forward,” 2.

health professionals, spent the months between June and September of 2020 negotiating a specific set of guidelines for a broad return to production. Eventually, the sides did reach an agreement, finalized on September 21, 2020, which established broad protocols for running productions as the pandemic continued.<sup>125</sup> One notable point when considering the finalized RTW agreement is that because the negotiations were between the unions and the AMPTP, COVID Compliance departments—made up primarily of new workers in the industry and thus had no union representation—weren’t subject to the agreement. Per Carol Lombardini, AMPTP president:

The hallmark of the agreement makes employee safety paramount, by introducing protocols for strict testing, cleaning and use of protective equipment ... As a consequence of the agreement, the studios will be making a substantial investment in testing, redesigned workplaces, COVID-19 sick leave, quarantine pay and other safeguards designed to facilitate the safe resumption of production and enable the industry to recover and grow.<sup>126</sup>

The inclusion by Lombardini of “growth” at the end of the above quote speaks to industrial priorities, which began long before the pandemic and have continued in the intervening years. While unions were primarily concerned for the survival of their craft and the financial stability of their workers, producers involved in the negotiation were still concerned with the continued growth of the industry as a profit-making endeavor. An emphasis on perpetual growth in the industry only serves to exacerbate precarity for below-the-line workers. Studios now ship their productions to whichever state or country can offer them the most enticing incentives, which only removes any security that came with a centralized production hub (as Los Angeles has historically been for film).<sup>127</sup> Cities, states, and countries now offer variable incentives to

---

<sup>125</sup> “COVID-19 Return to Work Agreement.”

<sup>126</sup> McNary, “Hollywood Unions Reach Deal With Studios on Safety Protocols for Restarting Production.”

<sup>127</sup> Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*; McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

production companies, which can take the form of grants, rebates, or tax credits. Grants in this case are straightforward—the locality offers a company a tax-free payment to shoot in or around their area. Rebates function similarly but are taxed by the state. Localities offer productions tax credits that can function in a few different ways. Refundable credits give a percentage of the money spent in-state back to the production after they file their taxes. Transferrable credits, on the other hand, aren't directly paid to the production—rather, the company's state tax liability is lowered by a set percentage. Companies with no state tax liability can, however, sell these tax credits to local companies to make a profit. The final credit type is non-refundable, non-transferrable, and only gives companies a basic break on their tax liability in-state.<sup>128</sup> In offering these incentives, localities try to balance the money paid to productions with the influx of money and jobs that a major production injects into the local economy. While these tactics are a win-win for both the production companies and localities, workers are the ones who lose out. Where previously film workers could have ostensibly normal lives due to production being centered in one or a handful of cities, the proliferation of “mobile productions” have made work all the more precarious.<sup>129</sup> Workers now must question not only what their next job will be, but also whether or not a next job will exist at all.

### *Mobile Production in Texas*

Austin, Texas, where this research is based, is a prime example of this. The city has never been a media production hub on the level of Los Angeles or New York but has still had a successful independent film since the 1970s.<sup>130</sup> In recent years, however, Texas filmmakers have lobbied for more incentives from the state to entice productions away from other states, which

---

<sup>128</sup> “Film Industry Tax Incentives.”

<sup>129</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

<sup>130</sup> “Austin Film Commission.”

the state legislature approved in 2023.<sup>131</sup> Through the Texas Moving Image Industry Incentive Program (TMIIP), the state now offers grants to production companies for up to 22.5 percent of their eligible spending in the state. These funds are contingent on companies completing at least 60 percent of the production in-state and having the cast and crew made up of at least 55 percent Texas residents.<sup>132</sup> The state also offers sales tax exemptions for rentals and purchases for production, refunds on the State Occupancy Tax for long-term hotel stays, and refunds for taxes paid toward fuel costs for things like boats and generators, but not regular vehicles.<sup>133</sup> In addition to the state incentives, Austin also offers awards up to .50 percent of wages paid to residents of the Austin metro area, and a bonus up to .25 percent if the project serves to promote the city.<sup>134</sup>

Though which incentives appeal to a given production obviously vary, the tax-free grants offered through TMIIP are an effective incentive compared to other burgeoning film hubs. Neighboring New Mexico has had incentives in place for years that have, thanks to similar geography, taken productions from Texas—the 2006 film *No Country for Old Men*, set in West Texas, was mostly shot in New Mexico for the favorable tax incentives.<sup>135</sup> New Mexico’s incentive package, as of 2023, offers productions a refundable tax credit varying between 25 and 40 percent for in-state production spending.<sup>136</sup> On the other side of Texas, Louisiana began providing “temporary” tax incentives in 2002, which quickly became permanent when the state government saw the economic benefits that came with productions moving to the state.<sup>137</sup> Like New Mexico, Louisiana’s incentives come in the form of tax credits ranging from 25 to 40

---

<sup>131</sup> Solomon, “The Future of Texas Film Is \$200 Million Brighter.”

<sup>132</sup> Texas Film Commission, “Film & Television Projects.”

<sup>133</sup> Texas Film Commission, “Production Incentives Overview.”

<sup>134</sup> “Creative Content Incentive Program.”

<sup>135</sup> Solomon, “The Future of Texas Film Is \$200 Million Brighter.”

<sup>136</sup> New Mexico Film Office, “Incentives.”

<sup>137</sup> Mayer, *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*.

percent, depending on the shooting location within the state and whether the screenplay was written by a Louisiana resident.<sup>138</sup> In contrast to the tax incentives offered by its neighbors to the east and west, Texas' straightforward grants can be seen as the state trying edge out those states, who have historically profited from Texas' lack of significant production incentives. While the success of these incentives is clearly a net positive for Texas' local economy, it also serves as an illustration of how these different states are now in a constant horse race to lure the most profitable productions to their area.

Austin's reputation as an up-and-coming area for film production, spurred in part by the incentives offered by the city and state, was what drew a few of my participants to the city in the first place. Carrie had moved from Utah in 2019 to pursue a career in the industry, and COVID Compliance served as her first position—first on a handful of reality TV productions, then on *Show A*. Steven as well had previously worked in various production assistant in Oregon before moving to Texas, where he was able to continue doing freelance production work. In the fall of 2019 he, “wasn't enjoying it the same way I was enjoying it in Portland,” so he found a new full-time job outside of the industry, only to come back and work in COVID Compliance after being furloughed after the initial outbreak. Marie, prior to working in COVID Compliance, had studied and worked at the Austin School of Film, a nonprofit production campus. Culturally, the city of Austin effectively drew people wanting to start working in the industry, a trend that has continued after the pandemic's initial outbreak.

The proliferation of mobile productions is also a result of production companies pushing to produce far more content with a cheaper price tag. Where previously productions would be relegated to a handful of cities, having production hubs all over the United States allows studios

---

<sup>138</sup> Louisiana Entertainment, “Motion Picture Production Program.”

to spread out their operations and have more productions running at a given time. Where this “quantity over quality” ideal fails is for the workers making the content—when all a studio focuses on is how to make the most content for the cheapest price tag, they are incentivized to cut corners. A prime example of this dynamic at work is the explicit use of non-union labor by reality TV producers, allowing them to produce their shows faster and cheaper. Generally, labor unions work to protect against this exploitation through collective bargaining and even going to bat for non-unionized workers being exploited by reality TV productions.<sup>139</sup> While the trade unions in the film industry are an effective bulwark against the greed exhibited by the studios, they can still leave behind those workers at the bottom of the production hierarchy. Nowhere is this better illustrated than with the creation of COVID departments—they were essential to productions for more than two years, required by the unions themselves per the return-to-work agreement, but also didn’t exist anywhere in the traditional hierarchy and had no union backing them up. These departments were at the mercy of major studios intent on making content cheaply and thus were ripe for exploitation throughout the run of production.

The final return-to-work (RTW) agreement was covered as an absolute win for the industry—the result of “unprecedented inter-union solidarity,” according to IATSE President Matthew Loeb.<sup>140</sup> This is not to say that the return-to-work agreement between the unions and the AMPTP was not an achievement in and of itself; managing to account for the interests of all of the competing parties and reach an agreement on protocols was a massive undertaking with four solid months of negotiation before reaching a consensus. Coverage included a myriad of voices from the different unions, each one a degree of self-aggrandizing. The rosy outlook on

---

<sup>139</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 326.

<sup>140</sup> McNary, “Hollywood Unions Reach Deal With Studios on Safety Protocols for Restarting Production.”

returning to work was covered by *Deadline* months later, as union leaders called the return to production “a remarkable success.”<sup>141</sup> SAG-AFTRA President Gabrielle Carteris, in addressing union members, said of the protocols, “As I reflect on these past months and look forward to the new year, three things come to mind that have sustained us in 2020 and which will help move us forward in 2021: resilience, solidarity and concern for each other.”<sup>142</sup> The final return-to-work agreement received plentiful coverage in the trade press, accounting for specific changes made for each union contract, which is part of the reason negotiation took months to finalize.<sup>143</sup> The RTW agreement also included protections for union members who tested positive for COVID, but did not consider the compliance department, whose workers were not ensured protection by the unions.

In returning to production, the unions were explicit about their members sticking with the protocols as agreed upon. Shortly after the agreement was signed between all parties, IATSE adopted a “zero tolerance” policy toward safety protocols—the first of its kind among the guilds who signed on. The union essential put all its members on notice, clearly warning them that they could be disciplined or fired if they refuse to comply with the safety protocols on set.<sup>144</sup> Along with IATSE, SAG-AFTRA also immediately wrote in a new rule for union members, clearly requiring them to follow protocols at all times, and creating a process for reporting and investigating protocol violations. Outside of a couple instances that participants mentioned, as I consider below, very few crew members seemed interested in helping hold each other

---

<sup>141</sup> Robb, “SAG-AFTRA Says Industry’s Return-To-Work Protocols Have Been ‘A Remarkable Success.’”

<sup>142</sup> Robb.

<sup>143</sup> Robb, “Industry’s New Return-To-Work Protocols Were Months In The Making Because Large Swaths Of Unions’ Contracts Had To Be Rewritten.”

<sup>144</sup> Robb, “IATSE Adopts ‘Zero Tolerance’ Policy For Members Who Don’t Follow COVID-19 Prevention Protocols.”

accountable, instead viewing the compliance department as the “bad guys” on set. This feeling also was not relegated only to the productions considered here—COVID Compliance efforts were regularly ignored or minimized by both crew members and executives.<sup>145</sup>

Trade coverage of the RTW agreement largely did not account for the establishment of COVID Compliance departments, who would be in charge of enforcing safety protocols day-to-day. The final document did account for the creation of COVID Compliance departments, and specifically included language aimed at producers, saying that they were allowed to use union labor for these positions without being in breach of contract. Of course, saying that producers *could* utilize union workers for these roles also gave leeway to opt out and bring in newcomers or other non-unionized workers to fill these roles, whom they could pay less and treat worse. What little trade coverage did exist around the creation of COVID Compliance departments painted a much different picture than the reality for these workers. Michelle Sneed from Tyler Perry Studios said, of the positions:

You have to look for someone with general employee safety and/or even plant manufacturing experience. Someone who understands this specific type of workflow in terms of movement of numerous people, hourly time shifts and schedules, use of heavy equipment. They should also have a complete understanding of OSHA guidelines and have an extensive network of resources to keep them informed and updated.<sup>146</sup>

The agreement also gives broad power to the COVID-19 Compliance Supervisor and their team, explicitly saying that they may pause production for health and safety concerns, and that members of the team were required to be physically present on set at all times.<sup>147</sup> The RTW agreement uses the term ‘COVID-19 Compliance Supervisor’ when referring to protocol

---

<sup>145</sup> Johnson, “Hollywood COVID Compliance Officers Say Cutting Corners Is Common.”

<sup>146</sup> Turchiano, “COVID Compliance Officers.”

<sup>147</sup> “COVID-19 Return to Work Agreement,” 15–18.

enforcement, but my interview participants all used ‘COVID-19 Compliance Officer (CCO)’ instead, thus CCO is the term I’ll use throughout this analysis. (The jobs are the same, this is only a semantic difference to try and use the same terminology as my participants.) COVID Compliance departments were generally run by a CCO, who would have a team of COVID production assistants (PAs) that handled the minutiae of protocol enforcement on set. Most of the jobs my participants did were COVID PA positions. If any problems arose or crew members were breaking protocol, the PAs would correct the behaviors and report to the CCO if issues persisted. Productions under these new guidelines could not continue without the presence of a COVID department, and those productions took the opportunity to bring in new workers who were unprotected by union contracts, to serve as a scapegoat for everyone’s frustrations with these protocols. In the section that follows I detail the individual experiences of COVID Compliance workers on three productions. The conditions and treatment that these workers experiences on set stand in stark contrast to the industry’s narratives around the return to production and illustrate the tension between producers, union leadership, and unprotected industry workers.

### ***Individual Worker Experiences***

In the process of returning to production after initially shutting down from COVID-19, industry players—the labor unions and the AMPTP—spent months working to balance competing demands and setting the stage for a safe return. Industry trades and sources within the respective unions pitched the finalized RTW agreement as an all-around win, and to a degree that is accurate. However, industry sources also largely did not consider the people who would be tasked with enforcing protocols as production wore on, and the treatment they would endure.

This section considers the individual experiences of a group of COVID PAs<sup>148</sup> tasked with day-to-day protocol enforcement on set. The contrast between the rosy outlook by industry sources and the exploitative reality of working in COVID Compliance serves to illustrate a new form of precarity in the industry. The productions in question hired new workers with no union protections and paid them less than other production assistants, where they were emotionally abused by the rest of the crew and, in the case of *Show A*, given no opportunity for building skills to maintain employment in the long term. The struggles of these COVID PAs effectively illustrate current industrial attitudes toward disposable labor, using them as a means to an end to keep productions running, without recognizing the key role that these workers played in the continued survival of the industry as the pandemic wore on.

All of the interviews for this project were with people located in and around Austin, Texas, and the time frames for their work in COVID Compliance vary from as early as October 2020 to as late as May 2023, when the industry largely had phased out COVID Compliance departments.<sup>149</sup> Four of the seven participants spoke primarily about working on a prestige limited series for a major streaming platform, while the other three worked on two different pre-established network TV programs. Most of the productions in question took place between early 2021 and late 2022, when the initial shock of the pandemic's outbreak had largely worn off. People in Texas largely still considered the pandemic to be major issue in 2021, with 85 percent describing it as either "a significant crisis" or "a serious problem but not a crisis" according to

---

<sup>148</sup> One participant, Erica, was eventually promoted to COVID testing coordinator on *Show B*.

<sup>149</sup> Kilkenny, "Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low."

polling from the University of Texas.<sup>150</sup> However, people were experiencing “pandemic fatigue” after a year of masks and social distancing,<sup>151</sup> and frustrations with these guidelines were front-and-center during these productions, where crew members consistently took out their frustration on the COVID department.

The producers on *Show A* knew that people needed jobs, and at that point could not afford to be picky with their options. One participant, Nicole, had just graduated college with a minor in film prior to beginning work in COVID Compliance. To her and her graduating cohort, the opportunity to work on a prestige miniseries was too good to pass up, especially given the relative lack of opportunities for new graduates trying to break into the industry. She and a group of her fellow graduates jumped at the chance, taking whatever was available at the time in the area. Nicole and her cohort perceived the position as a way for new workers to establish themselves in the industry, as *Show A* was one of only a few productions underway at the time, outside of reality programs which had been back for some months, albeit with fewer protections for their workers and less long-term security. A COVID Compliance position also ensured relatively secure employment in an uncertain moment, as the shoot was slated to run for eight months, between August 2021 and April 2022. The relative security of these positions, along with the lack of other options, made the decision a no-brainer.

However, upon beginning production, the conditions turned out to be untenable in the long run, especially for new workers in the industry who may have been unfamiliar with the

---

<sup>150</sup> University of Texas and Texas Politics Project, “Texas Trend Data on Attitudes toward the COVID-19 Pandemic and Efforts to Curb Its Impact (August 2022 UT/Texas Politics Project Poll Update).”

<sup>151</sup> Taylor, Rachor, and Asmundson, “Who Develops Pandemic Fatigue?”

unsustainable nature of industry work. Speaking on the conditions early in production for *Show A*, Nicole said:

It was a bit difficult, especially for the first couple weeks we were pulling anywhere from 14 to 18-hour work days and our call times would be anywhere from 2:00 AM to 4:00 AM, and then we would be getting off at like 7:00 to 8:00 PM. And that was because for COVID, we had to be there at least 30 minutes before the first people that arrived on set.

The COVID PAs on *Show A* consistently worked longer hours than most everyone else—with the exception of the teamsters. The key difference with the COVID department, however, was that they were not protected by any union membership, nor did they have any chance to, as their department was always intended to be a temporary measure as the pandemic wore on. In *The Safe Way Forward*—the set of guidelines proposed by the industry unions—one of the key guidelines was a reduction in shooting hours, to “to allow time for monitoring, cleaning and protocols that reduce transmission risk, and to keep the cast and crew well rested.”<sup>152</sup> Though this particular stipulation did not make it into the final agreement, it is clear that the unions had long working hours for their members as a primary concern in order to, effectively, give the compliance department enough time to do their jobs. This meant, however, that the COVID department would be forced to work longer hours than most everyone else.

Though the departments in question for this project are focused on COVID Compliance, these conditions do resonate with the larger treatment of below-the-line labor in the film industry. Work in the industry is known for long days and difficult conditions, where people essentially never stop moving—however, this is usually done with the understanding that good work leads to further opportunities,<sup>153</sup> which was not the case for the COVID department. Because these departments were framed, according to those I spoke to, as being a temporary

---

<sup>152</sup> DGA et al., “The Safe Way Forward,” 10.

<sup>153</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor.”

means to getting back to work, productions could further subject workers to unsustainable conditions with little chance of resistance. Everyone needed a job, and with COVID Compliance being the only game in town for aspirant workers, the studios had an opportunity for further exploitation, leaning on their departments' status as temporary as an excuse for abuse.

The temporary status of the COVID department meant that they could be viewed by both management, and their fellow production assistants, as the absolute bottom rung of the production hierarchy. One experience from *Show A* serves to clearly illustrate this dynamic. At one point during the 8-month shoot, the set PAs came together and asked management for raises, which were granted, moving their hourly pay from \$15 to \$18. Seeing this, the COVID PAs asked for a matching raise and were dismissed out of hand. This, despite the fact that the set PAs were doing largely the same job that COVID PAs were, only without having to enforce COVID protocols—essentially, set PAs were being paid more to do less work. According to Nicole, the higher-ups never gave a clear explanation as to why their request was denied, only that it was because of their temporary status. Despite the fact that the COVID department was one of the only reasons productions could continue, and their presence was explicitly mandated in the industry's RTW agreement, management still viewed them as wholly temporary and not even worthy of equal treatment to other production assistants.

Two other participants, Carrie and Liz, had previously worked in COVID Compliance on reality TV programs for a major streamer and a network, respectively. While for Carrie those gigs were largely uneventful, for Liz, working on a reality show shined a light on the unsustainable labor practices in the industry. Reality TV productions have an established reputation for hiring non-Union workers,<sup>154</sup> and as such were not beholden to the guidelines set

---

<sup>154</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 325–26.

out by the ILSC. Liz’s specific production also focused on an immunocompromised population and shot in a hospital as the pandemic wore on, yet did not have standardized protocols for protecting its workers. Instead, per Liz, “they would just kind of take their own precautions, like if you wanted to wear a mask, you could.” The risk that this production put on its workers is a direct consequence of skirting union-mandated protections in the name of cutting costs.

By contrast, the producers on *Show A* did take a proactive approach to COVID safety protocols, and as it was produced for and by a big-name streamer with A-list talent, did have to abide by the RTW guidelines. While this made for a safer set overall, it was also one of the first major scripted productions to return to the Austin area, and as such it was many crew members’ first job working under these protocols. The timing of the shoot, especially considering the pandemic fatigue that had set in by fall 2021, created a sense of antipathy between the COVID department and the rest of the crew. By the time *Show A* began production, the pandemic had already gone through multiple waves, which complicated both public perception and industrial reactions to the repeated outbreak. Though the unions and producers had agreed on set protocols in September 2020, they were also subject to change as the situation progressed. With the onset of the Delta variant in the summer of 2021, any potential “return to normal” was put on hold as productions and industry events maintained or reintroduced safety protocols.<sup>155</sup> As a result, weariness over COVID protocols had set in, and the frustration that workers had with the continued measures was placed on those in charge of maintaining said measures—the COVID Compliance department. Per Liz:

People were putting their opinions and their thoughts on COVID onto us and there was a lot of ignorance about why we were there. And people were kind of like, “you’re taking other people’s jobs or you’re taking up the budget on this project,” but really, we were

---

<sup>155</sup> Malkin and Lang, “Hollywood Wanted to Go Back to Business as Usual. The Delta Variant Had Other Plans.”

there because of the unions. *The unions had to hold the studios accountable to include COVID into their budget.* [emphasis added]

This excerpt illustrates a clear disconnect between the studios and the AMPTP, Hollywood's unions, and the COVID departments themselves. The industrial discourse around the RTW agreement didn't effectively communicate *how* these protocols would be enforced, crew members came back to work after this hiatus only to have a production assistant constantly telling them put their masks back on. According to Steven's interview, crew members also assumed that if someone was working in the COVID Compliance department, that it was their first job in the industry, giving the PAs far less credibility to the rest of the crew. This perception didn't necessarily reflect reality for everyone—Steven, for example, had worked in the industry for six years before joining as a COVID PA, and the rest of the COVID department on *Show C* was made up almost entirely of veteran film workers. Still, this perception only created further tension between the COVID department and the rest of the crew—in their eyes, this was some 25-year-old PA with no authority, ordering them around. The lack of communication about the role of these departments bred antipathy throughout the set, leaving the COVID department as an easy fall guy for people to vent their existing frustration with the pandemic.

Another instance that demonstrates this disconnect between the producers and the COVID department also comes from Steven's work on *Show C*. Partway through the shoot, the production began using contact tracking fobs, which crew members were asked to carry on their person and would ping when they came within six feet of another fob. When introducing these devices on set though, the producer doing the announcement referred to them as "COVID trackers," which, to an already skeptical crew, set off alarm bells. Rather than their actual purpose—simply letting the compliance department know that people had been in close contact—the crew took it to mean that they would have their location tracked at all times.

Steven, as the point person who made sure all the trackers were working correctly, had to take the brunt of the crew's suspicion about the devices. Because the producers took it upon themselves to introduce these devices, rather than letting someone from the COVID team do so, it created unnecessary tension between the crew and the COVID department. The disconnect between producers, the crew, and the COVID department, only worked to further tension day-to-day, since the higher-ups didn't let the department members handle the protocols on set themselves. Talking about this tension, Steven said:

I think like you know, there was heightened tension with COVID ... you have people on the crew who don't believe in it, and you have people who don't believe in the vaccine, don't believe in masks. And so just to give them another thing of like, "oh, they're tracking us now." It's just another thing that made our job harder, like, "look, man, we don't like babysitting you guys any more than you've liked being babysat. Like, in theory, we wouldn't be here if you guys knew how to just like go by your union's rules, but here we are."

The narratives around returning to work and the industry's safety protocols left out the day-to-day enforcement, creating a department outside of the traditional hierarchy that could be exploited. As a result, COVID Compliance departments were systemically dehumanized and used as a fall guy for everyone else's grievances, bearing most of the crew's frustrations but receiving none of the credit for the success of the protocols industry wide. Instead, producers and union leaders speaking about the protocols credited themselves, framing the RTW protocols as all the result of the unions and the unions alone. Rhetoric from union representatives, studio executives and the trade press all leave out consideration of enforcement on the ground. COVID Compliance teams were brought in specifically because the return-to-work guidelines mandated their presence on set but were not offered any of the same protections as unionized crew members. The industry unions demanded their presence on the set in order to stay compliant with their guidelines, yet the cultural attitudes toward both the virus and the protocols placed these

PAs in an unwinnable situation. Even though they were simply trying to do the jobs that they were hired for, the rest of crew oftentimes refused to comply, or worse, verbally abused the compliance team. Crew members largely did not recognize why exactly they were present and adopted a dismissive attitude toward any enforcement. Every PA that I interviewed for this project shared similar experiences, and some compliance efforts were met with outright hostility.

Carrie shared another example from her time working in COVID Compliance which illustrates the disconnect between the crew, producers, and the COVID department. The first time a cast member tested positive during the shoot for *Show A*, according to Carrie, there was, “No communication, none whatsoever. Nothing in the daily group chat, nothing in a call sheet e-mail. Nothing in a department-wide email, no communication at all, formal or informal.” Instead, crew members heard through the grapevine about the positive test, and naturally came to the COVID department for answers, to which they had none. Production hadn’t provided any sort of FAQ sheet or specific protocol for when cast members tested positive, resulting in the crew and the Compliance department essentially flying blind during a new situation without any sort of support from their supervisors. Production did not end up shutting down and shooting continued largely as scheduled, with some slight modifications to the call sheet, but not before the crew essentially turned on the COVID department. In this case, the department wasn’t even given the necessary information for them to do their jobs and were instead positioned, albeit incidentally, as a scapegoat. This experience only served to dishearten the COVID department on *Show A*, even after handling the set-wide antipathy up to that point.

One of the only wholly positive instances handling compliance for the crew came from Erica, who held multiple positions within the COVID Compliance departments between *Show B* and *Show C*. After being promoted to COVID Testing Coordinator for *Show B*, she came in with

the understanding that many people had held that position in the past and had burned out from it. In Erica's case, however, she opted to, in her words, "make it her own." In doing so, she took the initiative to go around to all the different departments on set, introducing herself and letting them know that she was the one to contact with any concerns about testing and compliance protocols. As she told it, this simple act of making herself available and known to the rest of the crew went a long way in fostering a more positive environment regarding COVID protocols. She positioned herself as Testing Coordinator as a spokesperson for the department who could advocate for the other PAs and for the safety protocols writ large. This example serves as not only an effective counterpoint to other examples from COVID Compliance workers but also speaks to the larger issues of communication in staying compliant. Prior to Erica taking the Testing Coordinator position, the lack of communication between COVID Compliance and the other departments only worked to further the antipathy every other participant spoke about. By proactively opting to change the communicative practices on set, she was able to shift the cultural attitudes on set toward one of communication, rather than tension.

Working as a COVID PA was primarily monitoring the production to ensure people were following protocols. Members of the department were generally positioned at a table near the entrance to the sound stage in the morning, where they would check in cast and crew members at the beginning of the day and take them through the standard COVID symptom questionnaire as established by the ILSC document and RTW protocols.<sup>156</sup> Outside of checking people in, the rest of the job consisted of being posted around the set, monitoring crew members to ensure compliance with safety measures. Since they were the only ones concerned with protocols, any

---

<sup>156</sup> Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force, "Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic," 14.

frustration with the virus or protocols were placed squarely on the shoulders of the COVID department. In the face of this frustration, COVID PAs still had to greet everyone with a smile, since they were the first point of contact each day, and essentially the “face” of the COVID protocols. This resonates with Erin Hill’s description of ‘emotional labor’ in the context of film production. Rather than on the skills that workers bring, success in emotional work depends on, “non-objectifiable skills as tact, charm, and interpersonal sensitivity, all of which they applied to defuse or manage the emotions of the workers around them, absorbing the anger of high-status employers.”<sup>157</sup> This conception of emotional labor applies, in Hill’s work, to feminized labor in the early days of the industry, but also maps cleanly onto the sorts of labor expected from these COVID PAs. Production didn’t value them for their skills, rather for the face that they could present in the face of such antipathy from the rest of the crew.

Everyone I interviewed remarked on this tension between the crew and their department, despite that fact that COVID PAs were, by all accounts, only doing their jobs as mandated by the unions and the AMPTP. This did vary between productions, with *Show A* being far and away the most toxic—*Show C* was fine most of the time, according to Steven and Erica, though there would be the occasional hot moment. *Show B* seemed mostly positive, since the show’s producers and supervisors in the COVID department itself would stick up for the PAs and recognized the essential nature of these positions.

Being relegated to the check-in desk for such long period provides time for introspection, opening these new workers eyes to the reality of work in the industry. According to Carrie:

It became a struggle of feeling like I had to prove that I deserved to be there. While also trying to reconcile with the nature of the industry at large ... it was hard for me to see that my dream industry was operating so unsustainably for everybody across the board. I was

---

<sup>157</sup> Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production*, 7.

lucky to only get 12 hours a day because I know that the transportation guys, they would work 16–18-hour days on the regular.

Again, a key difference between the rest of the crew and the COVID department came down to union protection. Even though the transportation crew would work longer days than COVID, they were also doing so with the security that union membership provides. By contrast, COVID PAs weren't afforded these protections, so they were paid far less to work these long days. In the first few weeks shooting *Show A*, the hours for the COVID department would often vary between 14 and 18 hours—the 12-hour days were only implemented later, when management brought on more COVID PAs.

The lack of other substantive options meant that the producers could effectively exploit COVID PAs. Even though many participants saw the position as a way to get a foot in the door and begin making connections, the day-to-day duties of the COVID department on *Show A* did not provide any opportunity for workers to gain marketable skills, which could translate into new opportunities down the line. As COVID PAs didn't necessarily exist in the above-the-line/below-the-line hierarchy of a standard production, their role is best described as being 'across-the-line.'<sup>158</sup> Though most of the PAs I spoke to initially had larger career aspirations at the outset of their projects, their work in COVID Compliance did not open any further doors within the industry. To keep working in the industry after a position in the COVID department, PAs essentially had to restart at the bottom, moving from the 'across-the-line' positioning of the COVID department back to the very bottom of the 'below-the-line' hierarchy. This meant going back to work as a PA in whichever department would take them, but the general antipathy

---

<sup>158</sup> Bennett, "Overworked and Underpaid."

toward the COVID department made many crew members unwilling to give COVID PAs the chance to make necessary connections after a project wrapped.

Two examples from Liz and Nicole effectively illustrate the below-the-bottom-of-the-barrel position that COVID Compliance held on set. In her capacity as a COVID PA on *Show A*, Nicole decided to stick around the sound department while monitoring crew compliance, since she had the education and aspirations to work in sound. Because there were only three sound people on set, there was also less hostility from them than from other departments. During a freeze that winter, a couple of the regular sound technicians couldn't make it to set, and the department asked Nicole to fill in, since she had previous experience in the field. Even though it was only one day in the sound department instead of COVID Compliance, the treatment was drastically different. The rest of the crew treated her with much more respect than previously, despite knowing that she was a COVID PA every other day.

Liz also shared a similar experience—at the end of shooting *Show A*, she had the opportunity to wrap out with the wardrobe department—helping pack everything up at the conclusion of the shoot. Even though she was still a PA—generally considered the lowest rung of the production hierarchy—the rest of the crew treated her much better than they had as a COVID PA. The differences in attitude toward PAs in other departments and COVID PAs, despite their relatively similar positioning on the production hierarchy, demonstrates the disdain from the industry writ large toward those at the lowest rung of the ladder.

Though COVID departments were created as a result of negotiation between the industry unions and the AMPTP, the treatment that these workers received from fellow crew members didn't reflect their essential nature. At best, these PAs were ignored, at worst they were verbally abused and seen as nothing more than the “COVID police” sent by the studios to monitor

everyone's every move. Though exceptions exist, particularly Erica's success as COVID Testing Coordinator, they are few and far between. The cultures of *Show A* and *Show C* created a tension-filled environment that served to wake up many of these aspirant workers to the realities of working in production. The key difference for COVID Compliance, however, is that these workers were temporary, with no promise of an improvement in conditions if they could only slog through the grind required of new industry workers.

### ***Conclusion***

Throughout this chapter, I have accounted for the tensions between the industry's narratives in returning to work after the initial COVID-19 outbreak and the lived experiences of COVID PAs enforcing protocols on set. Through careful reading of trade coverage surrounding to RTW agreement, I have established who industrial voices were concerned with in returning to work. Trade press accounts of the return-to-work privileged union voices in framing the success of COVID safety protocols but entirely ignored the COVID Compliance workers who handled enforcement day-to-day. In doing so, this coverage rendered the labor of COVID Compliance departments invisible, with a focus on the success of the protocols being framed only as the result of cooperation between unionized crew members. This perception does not square with reality—on set, crew members expressed overt distaste for the protocols and consistently either ignored these PA's attempts at enforcement or met them with outright hostility.

In returning to work, the AMPTP continued with a focus on industrial growth in the face of an existential threat like the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter also considered the effects that this industrial growth mindset has on the security of work in television and film. A wholesale emphasis on financial growth has historically resulted in more precarity for workers—particularly below-the-line workers who may not be able to move across the country for their

next job. These priorities have resulted in the further proliferation of mobile productions across the United States, where studios will move productions between states, and even countries, depending on which localities can offer the best financial incentives. These practices have compounded the existing precarity in industry work, as they result in less stability in a given area if another state can offer better incentives.

The chapter then concludes with an accounting of the perceptions and lived experiences of COVID Compliance PAs. Though they viewed the position as a way to get a foot in the door of the industry and begin making the necessary connections for long-term success, the reality was much less favorable. The PAs I spoke to all shared accounts of long hours, relatively low pay, and a general air of hostility from the rest of the crew toward COVID safety protocols, even though COVID Compliance departments were a direct result of union demands while negotiating a return to production. These departments were also seen as disposable, as they were afforded none of the protection that unionized crew members had, and their departments were excised as soon as the unions agreed they could feasibly do so. The cultural attitudes toward the virus in Texas, compounded by an overall sense of pandemic fatigue in the years following the initial outbreak, led to clear antipathy between the COVID department and the rest of the crew. Higher-ups in production also did not seem particularly interested in having these PAs backs in the face of this abuse, instead leaving them largely to deal with the consistent issues on their own. This disconnect presented the COVID Compliance department as a scapegoat for all of the crew's frustrations, which, for a group primarily made up of new members of the industry, proved disheartening in the long term.

This thesis now considers the ways in which the experiences of these COVID PAs reflect larger attitudes toward below-the-line labor. I posit that the treatment these workers received on

set was not an aberration, but instead reflexive of a larger attitude of gatekeeping in which institutional structures work to foreclose opportunities for new workers. By subjecting these brand-new workers to such mistreatment, COVID departments essentially functioned as a sieve, pushing workers out before they even had a chance to establish themselves. All of these serve the larger industrial profit-making priorities through trimming the proverbial fat. Compounding this issue is the often prohibitively high standard for union membership—workers must slog through hundreds of hours of unsustainable labor practices to have any guaranteed pay and benefits. While these COVID PAs were charged with enforcing safety protocols, they also largely weren't afforded opportunities to network and establish the necessary connections for long-term, albeit still precarious, industry work.

## Works Cited

- “Austin Film Commission.” Accessed March 19, 2025. <https://www.austintexas.org/film-commission/>.
- austintexas.gov. “Creative Content Incentive Program.” Accessed March 29, 2025. <https://www.austintexas.gov/department/creative-content-incentive-program>.
- Bennett, Kiah E. “Overworked and Underpaid: Hollywood Gatekeeping in Assistant Labor and Discourse.” Doctoral Dissertation, Colorado State University, 2022. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/overworked-underpaid-hollywood-gatekeeping/docview/2706252205/se-2?accountid=10223>.
- Caldwell, John T. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Caldwell, John T. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.
- “COVID-19 Return to Work Agreement,” September 21, 2020.
- Curtin, Michael, and Kevin Sanson, eds. *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f>.
- Curtin, Michael, and Kevin Sanson. “Listening to Labor.” In *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f.4>.
- DGA, SAG-AFTRA, WGA, and IATSE. “The Safe Way Forward,” June 12, 2020.
- Fortmueller, Kate. *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID*. University of Texas Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7560/324608>.
- Hill, Erin. *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force. “Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming Productions During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, June 1,

2020. <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/iwlmsc-task-force-white-paper-6-1-20.pdf>.

Johnson, Scott. "Hollywood COVID Compliance Officers Say Cutting Corners Is Common." *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 6, 2022.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywood-covid-compliance-officers-productions-1235233115/>.

Kilkenny, Katie. "Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low." *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 27, 2023.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywood-covid-safety-agreement-rules-loosened-1235311846/>.

Lang, Brent. "Hollywood Studios Assembling Coronavirus Strategy Teams." *Variety*, February 28, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/hollywood-coronavirus-no-time-to-die-mulan-1203518001/>.

Littleton, Cynthia. "Hollywood Studios and Unions Near Agreement on Safety Protocols to Restart Production." *Variety*, September 17, 2020.

<https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/covid-19-safety-production-restart-1234773389/>.

Louisiana Entertainment. "Motion Picture Production Program." Louisiana Entertainment. Accessed March 29, 2025. <https://www.louisianaentertainment.gov/film/motion-picture-production-program>.

Malkin, Brent, and Marc Lang. "Hollywood Wanted to Go Back to Business as Usual. The Delta Variant Had Other Plans." *Variety*, July 28, 2021.

<https://variety.com/2021/film/news/hollywood-box-office-delta-variant-premieres-venice-festival-toronto-1235028431/>.

Mayer, Vicki. *Almost Hollywood, Nearly New Orleans*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.63430>.

McNary, Dave. "Hollywood Unions Reach Deal With Studios on Safety Protocols for Restarting Production." *Variety*, September 21, 2020.

<https://variety.com/2020/film/news/hollywood-unions-studios-safety-protocols-restart-1234778179/>.

McNutt, Myles. "Mobile Production: Spatialized Labor, Location Professionals, and the Expanding Geography of Television Production." *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0002.104>.

New Mexico Film Office. "Incentives." New Mexico Film Office. Accessed March 29, 2025. <https://nmfilm.com/incentives-2>.

- Robb, David. "IATSE Adopts 'Zero Tolerance' Policy For Members Who Don't Follow COVID-19 Prevention Protocols." *Deadline*, September 24, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/09/iatse-adopts-zero-tolerance-policy-for-members-who-dont-follow-covid-19-prevention-protocols-1234583527/>.
- . "Industry's New Return-To-Work Protocols Were Months In The Making Because Large Swaths Of Unions' Contracts Had To Be Rewritten." *Deadline*, September 24, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/09/industrys-new-return-to-work-protocols-were-months-in-the-making-because-large-swaths-of-unions-contracts-had-to-be-rewritten-1234583722/>.
- . "SAG-AFTRA President Gabrielle Carteris Says Back-To-Work Deal With AMPTP Is 'Single Most Important Agreement We've Signed In Decades.'" *Deadline*, September 25, 2020. <https://deadline.com/2020/09/sag-aftra-return-to-work-deal-webinars-1234585449/>.
- . "SAG-AFTRA Says Industry's Return-To-Work Protocols Have Been 'A Remarkable Success.'" *Deadline*, January 13, 2021. <https://deadline.com/2021/01/film-tv-industry-covid-protocols-remarkable-success-sag-aftra-says-1234672927/>.
- Solomon, Dan. "The Future of Texas Film Is \$200 Million Brighter." *Texas Monthly*, June 22, 2023. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/texas-film-incentives-200-million/>.
- Taylor, Steven, Geoffrey S. Rachor, and Gordon J. G. Asmundson. "Who Develops Pandemic Fatigue? Insights from Latent Class Analysis." Edited by Sergio A. Useche. *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 11 (November 10, 2022): e0276791. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276791>.
- Texas Film Commission. "Film & Television Projects." Office of the Texas Governor. Accessed March 29, 2025. [https://gov.texas.gov/film/page/tmiiip\\_filmtv](https://gov.texas.gov/film/page/tmiiip_filmtv).
- . "Production Incentives Overview." Office of the Texas Governor. Accessed March 29, 2025. [https://gov.texas.gov/film/page/incentives\\_overview](https://gov.texas.gov/film/page/incentives_overview).
- Turchiano, Danielle. "COVID Compliance Officers: Inside the Pivotal New Production Position." *Variety*, August 13, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/tv/features/covid-compliance-officers-production-position-pandemic-1234729303/>.
- University of Texas and Texas Politics Project. "Texas Trend Data on Attitudes toward the COVID-19 Pandemic and Efforts to Curb Its Impact (August 2022 UT/Texas Politics Project Poll Update)." The Texas Politics Project, October 21, 2022. <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/blog/texas-trend-data-attitudes-toward-covid-19-pandemic-and-efforts-curb-its-impact-august-2022>.

Wrapbook. "Film Industry Tax Incentives: State-by-State," September 30, 2024.  
<https://www.wrapbook.com/blog/film-industry-tax-incentives>.

## Chapter 2 –Financialized Gatekeeping and Organizational Culture

Fresh out of college, working on her first job as a COVID PA on *Show A*, Nicole found an air of jaded seriousness permeating the set. Industry veterans asked why she wanted to work in film and advised her to either move to post-production work or to find a new career field entirely. For seasoned professionals to tell brand new workers to get out of the industry early, because of the unsustainable conditions of production, reflects a much larger decline in production cultures writ large—to echo a quote shared by Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, “no one seems to be having fun anymore.”<sup>159</sup> Film and television work has always been precarious—that much is not a new development. But the conditions of production have deteriorated to a degree that represents an existential threat to the continuity of the industry. One key part of this, I argue, is due to the encroachment of financial structures that have swung the existing balancing act between art and commerce far toward the side of commerce. This has resulted in a change in organizational cultures, which prioritize the production of content over the well-being and long-term success of workers, in some cases burning them out before they ever had any chance to start having fun.

Of the seven participants I interviewed for this project, only four were still working in the industry at the time of our meeting. This chapter accounts for what I term “post-pandemic precarity” and considers the experiences of my participants in the intervening years, and how they have navigated the industry’s precarious labor landscape after their time in COVID Compliance. Though some participants—namely Nicole, Liz, Erica, and Amy—have been able to maintain work in the industry after COVID, and even after the WGA and SAG-AFTRA

---

<sup>159</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 7.

strikes in 2023, this success was not attained without overcoming systemic barriers placed by industrial structures. In this chapter, I argue that the creation, on-set treatment, and subsequent dissolution of COVID Compliance departments between 2020 and 2023 represent a form of gatekeeping. The nature of these positions put COVID PAs in an unwinnable situation, in which their labor—despite being crucial to the continuity of production during the pandemic—would not amount to anything in the long-term. Their job duties, and the antipathy that enforcement fomented, denied opportunities for networking, which is crucial to success in the long run.

Though COVID Compliance wasn't necessarily a dead end for new workers, the job itself entailed a unique set of challenges as the industry essentially tested the limits of what it could get away with. For some, these barriers proved too much—the unsustainability and precarity of industry work were not worth the *potential* payoff years down the road. For others who stayed in the industry after concluding their work in COVID Compliance, it was either through a willingness to play the game spurred by their love of the art form, or through the assistance of a few exceptional supervisors who took interest in the long-term aspirations of their COVID PAs. These are the exception that prove the rule—for every Production Office Coordinator on *Show B*, who took the time and made the effort for PAs to set off on their desired trajectory, there were those managers on *Show A*, who only saw these COVID PAs as a means to an end in keeping productions moving during a precarious moment. These sorts of dichotomies also speak in part to larger industrial priorities as focus has shifted to streaming. As streaming platforms have become the dominant medium for movies and television, many studios have shifted to a quantity-over-quality philosophy, constantly churning out new content to drive subscribers, and by extension, profits. This approach has recently become profitable for some

companies,<sup>160</sup> but these practices have proven detrimental to the relative job security for below-the-line workers, as well as to the conditions of production.

In framing this chapter, I don't intend to cast any sort of judgement on those who opted out of the industry after their work in COVID Compliance, nor on those who stuck around in this system without any guarantees of stability in the long term. Instead, I draw out the ways in which the pandemic, and the formation (and subsequent dissolution) of COVID Compliance departments functioned as, essentially, gatekeeping for new generation of workers.<sup>161</sup> These positions constituted an extreme form of dues paying. Under normal circumstances, aspirant film workers—generally starting out as production assistants—have opportunities for networking through their day-to-day interactions with other department members. Though PAs are the traditional bottom rung of the production ladder, they are still afforded networking opportunities, which can translate to upward mobility in the future. For personal assistants as well, though they are more overworked working under above-the-line professionals, there still exist inherent ways of networking by virtue of the position. The structures of Hollywood tend to gatekeep advancement opportunities, especially from those who don't fit the idealized white, able-bodied, masculine identities that the industry is built around.<sup>162</sup> However, by virtue of working for someone with *potential* career-making power, assistants still have avenues for success, however obfuscated.

By contrast, COVID PAs received none of these affordances. Their jobs, in large part, were to enforce COVID safety protocols on set by being stationed everywhere looking for violations. This dynamic bred the antipathy established in Chapter 1, which made the rest of the

---

<sup>160</sup> Szalai, "Streaming Profit Report," April 11, 2025.

<sup>161</sup> Bennett, "Overworked and Underpaid."

<sup>162</sup> Bennett, 19.

crew less willing to engage in the networking practices so crucial to long-term industry work. Any social connections that could be established by PAs in other departments were foreclosed because, as Liz remarked, “all of the [other] departments hated us.” The very nature of COVID Compliance work placed a barrier in the path of these new workers, which some were able to navigate successfully, but many others were not. These positions on *Show A*, upended the career aspirations of two participants, along with other department members alluded to in other interviews.

This chapter proceeds with a consideration of financialization practices in the media industry and how they have laid the groundwork for this moment of exacerbated precarity. These practices represent a refocus of industrial priorities during recent decades that set the table for the wholesale exploitation of COVID Compliance workers. The post-pandemic push to produce original streaming content resulted in, per *Variety*'s Tyler Aquilina, an “unsustainable glut of content that far exceeded consumers’ demand for new titles to watch.”<sup>163</sup> The rush for content was followed by a massive contraction in the industry, with studios slashing production budgets, pulling content from their services for tax write-offs, and production numbers falling dramatically since their peak in 2022.<sup>164</sup> This austerity has resulted in fewer productions and thus fewer jobs for below-the-line workers, compounding the existing precarity for industry workers. This increased precarity has also only been compounded by the practices of mobile production that I considered in the previous chapter, resulting in an unstable production environment, particularly for below-the-line workers.<sup>165</sup> These financial motivations contributed to the disposability of COVID Compliance departments, as they were essential to production during the

---

<sup>163</sup> Aquilina, “The Death of Peak TV.”

<sup>164</sup> Aquilina, “How Austerity Is Shaping the New Streaming Content Strategy.”

<sup>165</sup> Cho, “The New Normal?”; Morris, “Hollywood’s Big Boom Has Gone Bust.”

pandemic, but studios had an incentive to gatekeep these workers from further opportunities in the interest of long-term cost cutting.

Following this overview of financialized production, this chapter considers the contrasting case studies from *Show A* and *Show B*. As *A* was produced for a streaming platform and *B* was a network series that began production shortly after the pandemic began, and these case studies expose how shifting priorities in media production trickle down to those at the bottom of the hierarchy. The participants that I spoke to had various career trajectories after finishing their time in COVID Compliance—some are no longer in the industry, while others are still working any available production gigs in and around Austin. These outcomes also correlate between the two main productions my participants spoke about. Workers from *Show A* had far fewer opportunities, especially those who were trying to first establish themselves at the time. By contrast, those from *Show B* had more future opportunities, in part thanks to differences in organizational culture between these two sets. The treatment that these workers received on their respective productions during the pandemic reflects the impacts of financialized, quantity-over-quality production practices on long-term career aspirations. The differences between *Show A* and *Show B* illustrate the problematic nature of financialized production, which foreclose future industry aspirations for new workers. In these case studies, however, there exists a potentially better way to do media production in the age of financialization, which I demonstrate through an analysis of the organizational culture on *Show B*, contrasted with *Show A*.

### ***Deregulation and Media Financialization***

This section charts the practices of deregulation over time, and how they have led to a massive concentration of power in a handful of media conglomerates over the past 50 years. This trend of deregulation for big business began in the 1980's under President Reagan and was

properly solidified through legislation like the Telecommunications Act of 1996. These acts, which I will elaborate on further in this section, opened the door for media companies to refocus their productions entirely as a tool of profit generation, and in doing so made industry work far more precarious. This refocus reached its zenith as institutional investments began buying larger shares in existing studios, resulting in the current climate of financialized media production.

When referring to financialization and financialized media production throughout this section, I refer to the relatively new developments in the industry that have redefined film and TV production as a wholly profit-generating endeavor. Previously, studios had to strike a balance between artistic license and serving the financial bottom line. However, private equity (PE) institutions now hold large investments in multiple major companies—these investments mean that the focus of these companies are on generating returns for investors with little concern for diverse perspectives. The Walt Disney Company, for example, at time of writing has 71.72 percent of their stock held by institutional investors.<sup>166</sup> The top institutional investor in Disney—Vanguard Group—is also the top investor in Disney’s supposed rival, Warner Bros Discovery, and the two share many of the same top investors.<sup>167</sup> Having the same investment groups hold large stakes in competing companies means that these media producers are no longer competing with each other, but are instead focused on what product will generate the largest return-on-investment.

The media industry is not an aberration in terms of this profiteering—any industry is inherently focused on profit, especially with the full backing of a federal government more dedicated to corporate welfare than personal well-being.<sup>168</sup> This is certainly the case with the

---

<sup>166</sup> “The Walt Disney Company (DIS) Stock Major Holders.”

<sup>167</sup> “Warner Bros. Discovery, Inc. (WBD) Stock Major Holders.”

<sup>168</sup> Hardin, “Finding the ‘Neo’ in Neoliberalism.”

United States under late capitalism. However, the possibilities for creative expression and satisfying work drive people working in media more than in other industries. The long days, low pay (at least for non-unionized workers), and difficult grind to establish themselves are a given for production workers. Yet, despite all the difficulties that come along with work in media production, “pride in a job well done remains an enduring source of pleasure for craft workers, perhaps an even more powerful point of satisfaction because it has been realized under such trying circumstances.”<sup>169</sup> Liz also made a similar point in her interview—despite the abuse that the COVID department suffered on *Show A*, she still viewed the experience as largely positive, because it was another opportunity to be on a set, particularly for such a high-profile production. The experience alone made the struggle worth it for her.

As Andrew deWaard has argued, “financialization is a key structural force—perhaps the key structural force—shaping cultural production and circulation today.”<sup>170</sup> His definition of financialization, “the destructive process of finance capital that produces inequality, precarity, and instability,”<sup>171</sup> is applicable here. In other words, deWaard is gesturing to media companies being owned by non-media entities and operated like any other business—but film and television production have never been like ‘any other business.’ From the earliest days of Hollywood, there has existed a tension between art and commerce—the difference between now and then, however, is that the studio heads during the Golden Age of Hollywood had, at the very least, a passing interest in making art.<sup>172</sup> Now, we still have writers and directors who are dedicated to making interesting, creative art, but profit-focused studio executives are the ones who make the

---

<sup>169</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6.

<sup>170</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 14.

<sup>171</sup> deWaard, 42.

<sup>172</sup> Regev, “Hollywood Works”; Sullivan, “Leo C. Rosten’s Hollywood”; Cherneff, “Dreams Are Made like This.”

calls on what gets funded. The encroachments of private equity and institutional investment into media production, and the ensuing shift in priority, have watered down creative expression into a question of which intellectual property (IP) can make the most money. They have also resulted in massively increased consolidation by the “Big 5” media companies—Comcast, Paramount, Sony, Disney, and Warner Bros. Discovery.<sup>173</sup> Currently, six of the top ten highest-grossing films of all time are from existing IP (James Cameron’s *Avatar* is number one, but wasn’t included as it was an original property at release and has since become a franchise).<sup>174</sup> Of those, eight are Disney properties and one—2015’s *Jurassic World*—is from NBC Universal. The only non-Big 5 property on the list is *Ne Zha 2*, a 2025 Chinese production that grossed nearly \$2 billion, mostly overseas.<sup>175</sup>

Private equity investments in the media industry have changed cultural production over the last 50 years. These practices of financialization, incentivized by decades of corporate deregulation, have resulted in a shift in industrial priorities. Following the influx of cash through deregulatory actions by multiple administrations, the media industry has become more focused than ever on profit generation, where previously producers had to balance the bottom line with artistic expression. The structures of financialization that have shaped the media industry over recent decades are key to examining the moment that COVID Compliance existed in, and the industrial lessons learned from that moment. This is not to say that the industry was not already a profit-making endeavor—it always has been—but deregulation beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the 1990s set the table for the industry as we see it now; that is to say, one focused solely on growth and profit at the expense of its workers.

---

<sup>173</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 47–48.

<sup>174</sup> “Top Lifetime Grosses.”

<sup>175</sup> “Ne Zha 2.”

These deregulatory and financial structures, over the decades, have furthered the already precarious systems of media production at the expense of its workers. The interplay of systems such as financialization and mobile production have resulted in an unstable production ecosystem in which new workers have few opportunities, and those opportunities they do have are locked behind work unpleasant enough to disillusion even the most passionate workers. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson's volume *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Conflict, and Craft in Global Hollywood* explores the direct impact that financial incentives and corporate conglomeration have had on below-the-line workers.<sup>176</sup> The workers who Curtin and Sanson interviewed expressed concerns about the impact of conglomeration on media production, seeing the practices as creating a disconnect between the workers on set and the "'suits' who make life harder for the workers on set."<sup>177</sup> This disconnect was also brought up by most of my interview participants. Steven's story, recounted in the previous chapter, about the producers introducing 'COVID Trackers' for contact tracing, where their phrasing misrepresented the purpose and subsequently made the jobs much harder for the COVID Compliance department, illustrates this disconnect well.

#### *Historical Deregulation and Corporate Conglomeration*

In *Derivative Media*, deWaard traces the development of financialization to the Nixon administration unlinking American dollar from the gold standard, making global exchange rates fluid and incentivizing unchecked investments, including risky ones.<sup>178</sup> Later, the Reagan administration slashed tax rates for the wealthy and corporations, further cutting regulations

---

<sup>176</sup> Curtin and Sanson, *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*.

<sup>177</sup> Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor," 13.

<sup>178</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

around investment, providing, “corporations, financial institutions, and the wealthy with nearly unrestricted freedom of enterprise and little tax burden.”<sup>179</sup> During Reagan’s administration, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) went all-in on corporate deregulation. In the preceding decades, courts had largely handled questions of antitrust regulation through a perspective based on “Harvard School” economic theory, which came about in the New Deal era and looked at antitrust regulation differently for different industries. Inspired by neoliberal “Chicago School” economics, the FCC under Reagan viewed antitrust regulation as necessary only for increasing efficiency in the market.<sup>180</sup> Compared to the regulatory ideology of previous decades, Chicago School economic policies essentially view the market as a monolithic entity, with regulation writ large being antithetical to the competition that’s supposedly vital to a flourishing economy. According to Jennifer Holt, “the expanded scope of acceptable business practices and the narrowing parameters of anti-trust ... created a political and business climate in the 1980s that enabled the industry to once again assume the form of a vertically integrated oligopoly.”<sup>181</sup> The hands-off approach by Reagan’s FCC, “promot[ed] economic efficiency as opposed to encouraging anti-competitive behavior or restraint of trade.”<sup>182</sup> As a result, Reagan’s Department of Justice only challenged 28 corporate mergers between 1981 and 1985 and essentially led to a return to pre-Paramount vertical integration.

Reagan’s DOJ and its lack of antitrust challenges opened the door for further conglomeration after President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. According to a summary from the Clinton White House, the act “stimulates private investment, promotes

---

<sup>179</sup> deWaard, 31.

<sup>180</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*.

<sup>181</sup> Holt, “In Deregulation We Trust,” 26.

<sup>182</sup> Holt, 11.

competition, protects diversity of viewpoints and voices among the media.”<sup>183</sup> Though the intention in stripping out regulations for phone and cable companies was to allow anyone to compete in the market, in execution the act led to further consolidation by top communications companies. Rather than spurring competition in the communications market, the 1996 Telecom Act led to the big players in the field merging to create a handful of massive companies pulling the telecommunications strings nationwide. By lowering the barrier to entry into the telecom industry, the act loosened antitrust guidelines and allowed for already established companies to merge and expand their market share nationwide.<sup>184</sup> Prices for cable and phone services nationally skyrocketed, as fewer competitors in the market meant that companies could raise prices with abandon.

Between the 1980’s, when Reagan’s FCC instigated broad deregulation, and the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, all the groundwork had been laid for further mergers between massive entertainment companies. The best example of these mergers in the entertainment industry comes from General Electric Co.’s 2004 purchase of 80 percent of Vivendi Universal.<sup>185</sup> GE already owned NBC, and the purchase of Universal meant that GE could enact proper ‘economic synergy,’ defined very basically by Nathan Vaughan as a, “process that brings together the various divisions/departments of a corporation to maximize profits.”<sup>186</sup> The conglomeration of NBC and Universal under the larger GE umbrella brought film properties, cable programs, and even theme parks together to maximize profits for the parent company. This strategy of horizontal integration—one company acquiring other companies in

---

<sup>183</sup> “Summary of Telecommunications Act.”

<sup>184</sup> Kimmelman, Cooper, and Herra, “The Failure of Competition Under the 1996 Telecommunications Act.”

<sup>185</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 170.

<sup>186</sup> Vaughan, “Maximizing Value,” 172.

the same industry, usually a direct competitor—paid off, as the company brought in over \$1 billion in advertising revenue from the *Law & Order* franchise alone.<sup>187</sup>

These practices appeared in the popular texts produced by NBC Universal, most notably in the 2006 sitcom *30 Rock*. The show, which premiered only three years after GE's majority purchase of Vivendi, is largely a self-aware sendup of corporate conglomeration. It primarily follows Liz Lemon—played by series creator Tina Fey—the head writer of *TGS*, a clear *Saturday Night Live* analogue, as she navigates the environment at NBC in the aftermath of the GE/Vivendi merger. The show constantly satirizes corporate culture through over-the-top product placement and Lemon's manager, Jack Donaghy, a caricatured businessman obsessed with synergy and plugging GE's new products on air. *30 Rock* ran from 2006 to 2013 and throughout had to walk a line between taking shots at its parent company and implicitly supporting the practices of horizontal integration that brought it to air in the first place. *30 Rock* is an effective sendup not only of the post-Telecom '96 corporate landscape but also reflected popular sentiments around corporate synergy. Per Jennifer Gillan, “[Tina] Fey is perceived by fans as a crusader against media conglomerate synergy, when both the sitcom and the character she plays don't really put up much of a fight.”<sup>188</sup> Although the character of Liz Lemon more-or-less goes along with all the synergy, viewers were able to see their own feelings reflected in Fey's supposed persona—one willing to take the fight to this corporation on its own show. However, this textual “fight” happened at almost the highest level of the production hierarchy, and these sorts of reflexive media products tend to gloss over the actual conditions of production. It is much easier to poke fun at the lunacy of late capitalism and have the audience laugh along

---

<sup>187</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*, 170.

<sup>188</sup> Gillan, *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*, 265.

than it is to turn a mirror on the unsustainable conditions under which most film and TV artifacts are made.

Though far from an exhaustive list of deregulatory actions by various administrations, Reagan's ultimate free-market ethos, which allowed massive corporations to start merging unchecked, and the 1996 Telecommunications Act, began the incursion of financialization into the media industries. As the United States government largely stopped enforcing antitrust legislation in service of 'economic efficiency,' corporate mergers continued unchallenged.<sup>189</sup> The passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act led to further conglomeration, specifically in the media industry. Though not all these mergers were successful—CBS/Viacom in 1999, and Time Warner/AOL in 2000 were both massive failures<sup>190</sup>—the success of deals like GE's takeover of Vivendi Universal showed corporations that not only could these mergers work but could also be massively profitable. The lack of regulation leading into the new millennium led to greater control by financial entities, resulting in the oligopoly we currently have in media production.

The 80's and 90's represented a tipping point for labor relations in the United States—deregulation by various administrations made it so that productions could seek out the most favorable conditions for their shoots. Essentially, this era served as the precursor to the hyper-mobile productions we see today. In the hunt for greater production as a cheaper cost, producers began shipping their manufacturing needs overseas, particularly to countries with weaker union power.<sup>191</sup> By seeking out the most favorable conditions, productions in this era started the film industry on path toward the inherent precarity we have today. Undercutting union power

---

<sup>189</sup> Holt, "In Deregulation We Trust."

<sup>190</sup> Holt, *Empires of Entertainment*.

<sup>191</sup> Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor."

domestically by shipping production overseas or to regions with weaker representation,<sup>192</sup> served to increase the relative power of media conglomerates in serving their interest over the needs and demands of their workers.

### *Modern-Day Financialization and Streaming*

The current financialization model really took off in 2004, when a private equity (PE) group bought the struggling MGM studios. When undertaking a leveraged buyout such as this one, a group of investors buys out a company primarily using borrowed money, making the initial investment far riskier than it would be otherwise. If the acquisition proves profitable, investors stand to make a lot of money in the form of dividends—payments to shareholders in the form of cash or stock as a ‘reward’ for the company turning a profit. However, because these acquisitions are financed through borrowed capital, if the new owners are unable to turn a profit they stand to lose massive amount of money. In the case of MGM, their catalog of intellectual property did not prove as profitable as the investors had hoped, which compounded with the massive layoffs emblematic of leveraged buyouts and rendered the studio essentially inoperable and bankrupt.<sup>193</sup> The initial PE group lost their \$4.85 billion investment and had to be rescued by J.P. Morgan Chase and two other hedge funds, who assumed control of MGM and proceeded to lay off even more of the already-bare staff.<sup>194</sup>

Though the MGM ‘experiment’ by private equity was an overt failure, it did set a precedent for the industry. In the intervening years, institutional investments from consortiums like Silver Lake Partners and TPG Capital have worked to consolidate all aspects of film and

---

<sup>192</sup> Storper and Christopherson, “Flexible Specialization and Regional Industrial Agglomerations.”

<sup>193</sup> deWaard, “Financialized Hollywood.”

<sup>194</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

television production under one financial umbrella. These investments have worked to shift Hollywood into an industry that values growth above all else, serving the bottom line at the expense of its workers. Now, the decisions around what productions are greenlit are made based on which properties can turn a profit. The emphasis placed on financial gains mean that even with a fracture as existentially threatening as the COVID-19 pandemic, studios are still focused on perpetual growth, while workers are more concerned with where their next paycheck is coming from.

Since 1996, media corporations have been systematically buying up competitors, concentrating the majority of American media production within the “Big 5” companies—Disney, Warner Bros Discovery, Comcast, Sony, and Paramount. Disney, for example, now owns not only popular firms like Pixar, Lucasfilm, and Marvel Studios, but also Fox—formerly one of Disney’s top competitors. Likewise, Paramount now owns CBS and Viacom—both former competitors. This horizontal integrations within the media industry have resulted in a massive concentration of wealth for these companies, and a watering down of the content being produced to focus on profit generation.

In addition to these major media companies subsuming their competition through financial maneuvering, there is also another form of horizontal integration happening on a macro level through private equity investments. As alluded to at the beginning of this section, private equity has enacted a macro-level form of horizontal integration. Companies acquiring their competition is a way to consolidate their power in the marketplace, but with PE groups owning large shares in *every* major media company, these corporations are no longer competing against each other. Instead, institutional investors are pulling the strings—*they* are the ones being served by these anticompetitive practices. If, for example, Warner Bros Discovery has a particularly

profitable quarter and Disney does not—the real winners are Vanguard Group, Blackrock, and State Street, the top three institutional investors in *both* companies.

Media financialization, being inextricably tied to big business investments, also means that those same consortiums pulling the strings of media production also have vested interest in the tech sector. As on-demand streaming began to take off in 2007 when Netflix launched their online platform, the industry shifted further toward financialized production. The incursion of big tech and their algorithms for content suggestion meant that media production and viewership could now be siloed, with each user of a platform being fed suggestions based on their viewing habits.<sup>195</sup> These emergence of these algorithms moved the goalposts for media producers to a quantity-over-quality model—with streaming, profit is based on the number of subscriptions, rather than ticket purchases or cable airtime. If there is *something* for people to watch, they will stick around, and the algorithmic suggestions employed by services like Netflix ensure that there will always be something to watch.

A prime example of collusion between media conglomerates and Silicon Valley led, in part, to the Writers Guild of America (WGA) going on strike in 2007. As Apple was launching its iTunes video platform, they signed a deal with Disney (who owns ABC) to make new episodes of *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* available for purchase on iTunes within an hour after airing.<sup>196</sup> When determining how residuals for paid-video-on-demand (PVOD) would be paid to writers, Disney decided that these episodes would be treated the same way that home video would. Because digital video and streaming represented a sea change in media production and distribution, WGA leadership found the existing “80/20” model—where 80 percent of the

---

<sup>195</sup> Burroughs, “House of Netflix.”

<sup>196</sup> Littleton, *TV on Strike*.

revenue from home video would go to producers, and 20 percent being pooled and paid out as residuals—to be insufficient.<sup>197</sup> This, combined with the fact that Disney and Apple had hidden this deal from the writers beforehand (guild leaders only found out through trade coverage) led, in part, to guild leadership calling a strike that would end up lasting 100 days.

This quantity-over-quality model employed by streamers has only grown in the years since Netflix’s launch—previously Netflix is the only service turning a profit, but during the drafting process for this thesis, Disney (Disney+ and Hulu) and Warner Bros. Discovery (Max) have reached profitability through their streaming services.<sup>198</sup> Streaming as the default for media production and consumption has, unsurprisingly, made work in the industry more precarious. Whereas a studio previously may have had a few films or shows in production at a given time, the decentralized nature of production in a streaming environment means that a company can essentially have infinite programs in development, with innumerable cities, states, and countries vying to draw productions to their area.

Financialized media production represents an industrial refocus committed to financial gain above all else, which with the cooperation of Silicon Valley led to a system asking which company can produce the *most* content rather than who can produce the *best*. These financial motivations lead to the proliferation of mobile/runaway productions around the world. As I established in the previous chapter, states and countries now compete to see which can provide the best financial incentives to lure productions to their areas. This geographic instability, in turn, results in more precarity, especially for below-the-line workers. Per Myles McNutt, “For below-the-line television industry workers, mobile production means being willing to move to find

---

<sup>197</sup> Littleton, 39.

<sup>198</sup> Szalai, “Streaming Profit Report.”

work, understanding that one may be moving to a location to compete against other contingent laborers who have more experience working in that geographic area.”<sup>199</sup> For workers trying to properly establish themselves in the industry, as most of my participants were, moving to another state for a job simply isn’t an option. The furthest relocation I heard during my interviews was from Carrie, who stayed in Dallas for a month while working in COVID Compliance for a reality TV show. Even then, the only way she could afford to do that was by staying with a family friend in the area.

### ***Production-Specific Gatekeeping (or Lack Thereof)***

Having established the main industrial and historical levers driving financialized media production, I now explore how these structures manifested in the lives of my participants, through both their day-to-day interactions on set, as well as how their experiences affected their career aspirations following these productions. Six of the seven workers interviewed for this thesis spoke primarily about their experiences on one of two shows. One, *Show A*, was a prestige miniseries for a well-established streaming platform, which shot between August 2021 and April 2022. *Show B* was (as it has since been cancelled) a network production, and those I interviewed worked on the show beginning in 2021, up until 2023 when production was shut down by the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. The remainder of this chapter presents contrasting case studies between these two productions.

The first chapter focused on the mistreatment my participants received, primarily from fellow crew members, contrasted with the industrial discourse around returning to production. Having accounted for the interpersonal struggles of these workers in Chapter 1, I will now zoom out to examine the “helicopter view” of industry operations. This framework, posited by

---

<sup>199</sup> McNutt, “Mobile Production,” 66.

Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic, seeks to gauge how, “contradictions [between artistic expression and profit maximization] work within actual practice.”<sup>200</sup> Having established how financial deregulation and conglomeration have built to the moment media production finds itself in, the remainder of this chapter breaks down into two parts. The first accounts for how structural barriers, informed by financialized production practices, functioned to foreclose further opportunities for participants from *Show A*. The second section considers the far healthier production on *Show B*, and how its on-set culture opened doors for their COVID PAs to find more work following wrap. In the years since finishing work in COVID Compliance, my participants have gone a myriad of different directions in their careers, and their respective trajectories correlate with differences in the culture of each production discussed in the interviews. The cultural juxtaposition between these two sets illustrates the dangers of financialized ‘quantity-over-quality’ production practices, and prescribes a healthier, people-centered approach to production culture that can provide more opportunity for aspirant workers, and longevity for those already established in the industry.

*Show A, Financialized Production, and the Problems with ‘Content Culture’*

The first case study, *Show A*, serves as an encapsulation of some of the major issues that stem from financialized production and subsequent streaming practices. *Show A* was a miniseries, produced by and for one of the Big 5 streaming platforms during the rush to produce content that followed the initial return to work. As such, financial incentives drove the production to minimize costs at the expense of their COVID department—evidenced by them being denied raises that other PAs received, which I accounted for in Chapter 1. The miniseries format also plays a role here—since there were no plans in the works for later seasons, (as was

---

<sup>200</sup> Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 249.

the case for *Show B*) the supervisors in charge had no incentive to make the work itself better in the day-to-day. In the context of this production, producers would have had little motivation to invest in the long-term success of these aspirant workers. Because *Show A* was only a miniseries with no chance for further seasons, the set took on a notably rushed pace, with everyone pulling the typical 12+-hour days. Because everything was so frantic, the COVID Compliance Supervisors weren't necessarily reachable much of the time, leaving the PAs, like those I interviewed, to bear the brunt of the crew's frustrations.

Financialized production incentivizes the wholesale production of content to maximize profit generation. Because all the major studios now have their own streaming platforms, the conglomerates I discussed earlier in this chapter have doubled down on John Caldwell's 'uber goal' of Hollywood: "To acquire content for little to no cost and to get everyone to work for free."<sup>201</sup> The key now for streaming networks prioritizing their libraries and content growth is that there's no need to *acquire* content when everything can be made in-house. The rush to produce as much as possible for as cheaply as possible exposes a disconnect between the financial incentives of media conglomerates and the personal and material motivations of workers—participants brought up this tension multiple times during interviews. That disconnect results in less oversight ensuring the well-being of workers on set—in this case, a lack of oversight and advocacy for COVID PAs in the face of constant mistreatment.

The department heads on *Show A* were clear, according to Carrie, about most of their job enforcing COVID protocols being about optics. Outside of time spent at the check-in desk, the rest of a given shooting day only saw the COVID PAs posted at different position around set, watching for and correcting any protocol violations they saw. It was important for the crew on

---

<sup>201</sup> Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 324.

this production to feel like they were constantly being monitored, or else nobody would follow the safety protocols as established by the studio. The COVID Compliance department was perceived as representative of the studio on *Show A*, which reasonably made the rest of the crew less friendly toward them. Liz spoke about this constant oversight, and the impression that it left on the rest of the crew:

I will say too, I thought in general it kind of seemed like a lot of people didn't realize that we were just production workers. A lot of people kind of seemed like we were sent in from the studios or that we were like, just kind of like, you know, kind of the bad guy behind the wall. But like, they don't actually know that we're your neighbors, and we also work on productions and we're still here.

What should have been an opportunity for these aspirant industry workers to start the process of 'dues paying'<sup>202</sup> quickly turned into an attitude of "not wanted, not needed," as Marie said. Because the department heads were so transparent about COVID Compliance being mostly for optics, and because nobody likes being constantly monitored, *Show A* provided very little opportunity for networking. One would think that the long shooting days spent mostly patrolling the set would provide time to make connections and build vital professional networks, but the culture of the set itself undercut that opportunity. The rushed environment and lack of transparency about the role of COVID Compliance (that they were essential to production continuity and mandated to be present by the industry unions) bred the antipathy toward these PAs and made the rest of the crew far less willing to make space for these new workers. Nicole confirmed this attitude on set:

Yeah, it was very dehumanizing in various moments where you're just you're trying to network with these people also be like, friendly with them, but they don't wanna give you the time of day because they're like, "oh, well, you're gonna police me." And that's kinda how I felt. They felt we were just like health and safety police, which may be in a sense, the job description. That's kind of what it was, but also it probably it felt that way more so because people just weren't abiding by that [protocol].

---

<sup>202</sup> Bennett, "Overworked and Underpaid"; Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

The COVID Compliance department on *Show A* were set up to fail. Because of an overwhelming lack of transparency about their role, the crew was left with an impression that they were essentially heavies sent by the studio (despite being largely very young and very green in the industry) and refused to engage. As a result, the time spent enforcing the union-mandated protocols on set was a time of exclusion by the rest of the crew. The day-to-day duties didn't provide these workers with any marketable skills to move them toward any position closer to their ultimate goals. They were brought in to serve as, in the crew's perception, the eyes of the studio, constantly watching for the smallest violation, and thus were implicitly framed as outsiders to the rest of the crew. The crew, in turn, saw this as an overreach preventing them from effectively doing their jobs. Though COVID departments were a result of negotiations between the industry unions and the studios (via the AMPTP), financial incentives on the part of the studios motivated them to keep costs as low as possible. This manifested in a lack of communication or real oversight to ensure a functional relationship between the COVID department and the rest of the crew, contributing to the overall feeling of policing and breeding the antipathy that *Show A* was so rife with.

The overall lack of investment from producers on *Show A* put into their COVID Compliance workers correlated clearly with their success, or lack thereof, after production wrapped. As I alluded to at the outset of this chapter, two of the *Show A* workers I spoke with—Carrie and Marie—were left so disillusioned with the industry that they have not worked on a production since, even when they came into the production hoping for an opportunity to get their names out there. As I will elaborate further in this chapter, Liz and Nicole are still working in the industry, but not thanks to any skills or connections related to *Show A*—the culture of *Show A*

functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism.<sup>203</sup> The COVID department on *Show A* was forever framed as an out-group on the set, not accepted as part of the below-the-line crew, and certainly not as an above-the-line position. In this sense, they fit into Kiah Bennett's conception of an across-the-line positions, which are "adjacent to existing hierarchies in Hollywood."<sup>204</sup> Through this out-group conception, the COVID PAs on *Show A* were never afforded any opportunity to network or build marketable skills, essentially foreclosing any real chances at further industry work. Bennett argues that assistants in the industry, "must navigate various production subcultures, they also are working to get promoted *across* into above-the-line positions and are frequently gatekept out [through subjective organizational cultures]."<sup>205</sup> I, in turn, argue that the experience of these COVID PAs takes this gatekeeping to another level. Those I spoke with were not trying to promote into an above-the-line position, they simply wanted to establish themselves at the traditional lowest rung of the hierarchy as non-COVID production assistants. The distrust from the rest of the crew, spurred by rushed production priorities and financial incentives, kept COVID PAs as a consistent out-group on the set, barring most opportunity for advancement.

Carrie spent about two months in 'recovery mode' following wrap because the grind of working on *Show A*, put simply, took too much out of her. After production wrapped, she had to make sure that she had enough time to fully rest from the eight months spent in that COVID department. Per Carrie, "when you're working that many hours a day, you work, shower, eat, and sleep however many hours you get to sleep, whether it be a full night's rest or not. And then you get up and do it again. So yeah, there's a lot of physical catching up that I had to do." This isn't even considering the mental toll that the work had taken on her throughout production, with the

---

<sup>203</sup> Hamann and Beljean, "Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields."

<sup>204</sup> Bennett, "Overworked and Underpaid," 11.

<sup>205</sup> Bennett, 18.

time for introspection provided by being chained to the check-in table for hours at a time. Spending eight months on set, working incredibly long days for relatively little pay—even compared to other, non-COVID PAs—and dealing with constant hate from the rest of the crew, understandably, wore on Carrie over time, resulting in an extended recovery period after wrap.

Carrie wasn't able to find another gig to jump to—which she attributed primarily to the lack of networking opportunities that came with COVID Compliance. Eventually she left Texas entirely, since living in Austin had become too expensive and no real prospects had appeared in the months following *Show A*'s conclusion. Returning to McNutt's theorizing around mobile production and the effects that these practices have on below-the-line (or in this case, across-the-line) labor, once production on *Show A* wrapped up, there were few other opportunities for aspirant workers like Carrie.<sup>206</sup> As I gestured to in Chapter 1, mobile production takes already precarious media labor and further dials up that precarity. These practices remove any semblance of stability in a given area and leave workers wondering if their next job will even exist. Additionally, the jobs that were available in Austin at the time were often going to those workers with “real,” non-COVID experience, demonstrating another way that COVID Compliance on *Show A* kneecapped new workers, despite being framed as a potential foot in the door.

The final insult for Carrie, on top of the constant abuse she and the other PAs had dealt with on set, came a year later, as the show was airing. When the pilot episode dropped, one of her fellow PAs pointed out that only their department head was credited, and no one else. Still, Carrie held out hope with each new episode that the rest of the COVID department would receive *some* sort of credit for the work they did, given how essential they were to production

---

<sup>206</sup> McNutt, *Television's Spatial Capital: Location, Relocation, Dislocation*; McNutt, “Mobile Production.”

continuing during the pandemic. She shared her reaction when the finale aired and still only their managers were credited:

I cried when I found out that we weren't credited. I was on my way to work, nearly had to pull over, but thankfully I was at a stoplight. And I cried, because it felt just like one last slap in the face. Because of course, the vast majority of us COVID PAs were very young, fresh out of college. This was, you know, one of our first gigs in the industry, if not the first ... The work that we had to do, and the lack of recognition that we got, even just during the course of the production, it felt like the crew forgot that we were the reason that they could even have a job in the first place.<sup>207</sup>

The work that these PAs put in over eight months, and the subsequent lack of recognition they received, demonstrates the larger attitudes of disposability by the industry toward those at the bottom of the production hierarchy. This is also demonstrative of the apathy that the industry shows toward its workers, spurred by financialized production. Production on *Show A* was so rushed as part of a focus on content following the initial COVID-19 shutdown that producers wouldn't bother making sure the COVID department was recognized for their essential work. That would be an indication that this production cared for and valued these workers, rather than seeing them as the means to resuming production as all the big studios rushed to generate content after returning to work post-shutdown.

The treatment that COVID PAs received on *Show A* served to, in her words, “radicalize” Marie. Having only worked on a handful of local projects and student films around Austin prior to joining COVID Compliance, the environment on *Show A* opened her eyes to the reality of working as a PA for a major production, and to working in the industry writ large. Marie joined in pre-production, but only stayed on until December, about midway through the shoot—which

---

<sup>207</sup> This also gestures the lack of recognition that production assistants receive in the industry writ large. COVID PAs are one example of a much larger trend – PAs across the industry are rarely recognized for the work that they do, despite being essential to the day-to-day functions of a set.

wouldn't officially wrap production until the following April. After leaving the production for personal reasons and being out of Texas for six months, she would day play on small jobs to pay the bills, rather than trying to further her own career in the industry. In the years since leaving *Show A*, Marie has been heavily involved with the Texas wing of Production Assistants United, an organization working to unionize PAs nationwide.<sup>208</sup> When talking about the systemic exploitation of PAs, she commented:

A lot of people that are part of the Union campaign, because of injuries that they sustained on set they can never work in the industry again because of how ableist the industry is and how that's just like they would need too many accommodations that productions just would not give them ... these accommodations aren't much to ask for either, they're just, you know, like being able to sit or being able to, you know, take minimum breaks.

Marie highlights an historic issue within the film industry, that has only been exacerbated by financialized production. Her experience brings to mind Curtin and Sanson's conception of "eager aspirants," whom the industry relies on to continue, even as the conditions continue to deteriorate for workers.<sup>209</sup> The studios know that there will always be more workers trying to make their names in the industry, and thus there will always be more workers to exploit. COVID Compliance is a prime example of this—the producers in charge had their eyes fixed firmly on the bottom line, while also knowing they were required to have compliance protocols in place. They knew that they needed bodies to fill these COVID PA roles, and would have to pay them, but that there was also no practical need to invest in their long-term success, so they could pay less than other PAs and let them be a punching bag for the rest of the crew. When the prime motivation for production is profit, the people making the product—who were completely

---

<sup>208</sup> Kilkenny, "Production Assistants Launch Ambitious Bid for Unionization With LiUNA"; Kilkenny, "Production Assistants, Seeing Work Dwindle, View a Union as Their Future."

<sup>209</sup> Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor," 7.

essential, in the case of COVID PAs—are seen as disposable, and can be weeded out if they can't, or won't, deal with the terrible conditions of production.

The day-to-day duties in COVID Compliance served to burn more people out than it did to help with long-term success. The negative experience of working in COVID Compliance on *Show A* was also not only relegated to those I spoke with. When discussing the long-term impacts of this position, Liz said that many other PAs from the production also became so disillusioned with the industry that they did not go on to another production:

A lot of the people that I PAed with, it left them so dissatisfied with the industry and everything ... it destroyed a lot of friends who were pretty passionate about the film industry. You know, they just kind of saw how we were treated and everything ... We were kind of like people's punching bag and people put their feelings of COVID [out] on us as PAs who had never done anything.

The baseline experience working in this COVID Compliance department was so unpleasant that many of the PAs that my participants worked with—despite having high hopes going into the production—burned out afterward after being exposed to the conditions of production on *Show A*. For the department heads to pitch this—even implicitly—as an opportunity to start getting your name out there, and then to have the rug so violently ripped out from underneath, reaffirms the issues forwarded by Curtin and Sanson regarding the “harvesting” of industry aspirants.<sup>210</sup> The culture of *Show A* served as a form of gatekeeping, weeding out those could/would not take the constant vitriol from the crew in favor of those more willing to play the game. Still, for those willing to grin and bear this treatment, the regular, optics-focused job duties of a COVID PA did nothing to build skills or experience for their future careers. Having to put on a face of acceptance in the face of this abuse, in the hopes of moving *across* to a “real” (below-the-line) position exemplifies dues paying without any

---

<sup>210</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 7.

potential assurances for stable employment. Even for those who were able to move into another department after working in COVID Compliance, they would still have to start at the bottom. In essence, COVID PAs tried going through the processes of dues paying as an out-group on the set, to be afforded the privilege of doing the *actual* dues paying required of workers in the industry.

Of the interview participants from *Show A*, Nicole and Liz are still working in the industry, but not because of their experience in COVID Compliance. When *Show A* started production, Nicole had recently graduated and aspired to work in audio production, which she has since been able to find a niche in. While on *Show A*, she did step in within the sound department for one day because they were shorthanded, because they knew her background and that she could pinch hit for the day. Though that brief stint did help her network to a degree, she hasn't worked consistently on set since. Aside from the odd PA job to supplement her income, her main focus now is working in post-production sound, where there is no strict hierarchy. Instead, the environment is one where, "the power dynamics are more leveled out because everyone's doing their own thing ... everybody's staying in their own lane and respects each other's craft." This work, despite being more stable and less arduous than working in production, is still precarious. When she's working on one project, she's still actively trying to find another to jump into after finishing—additionally, she also teaches as an adjunct professor at a local university to supplement her income. Even with multiple income streams, Nicole is still only making enough money to survive. For those who have found a niche, media work is still inherently precarious, especially for those without union protections.

Liz, on the other hand, has continued working as a PA since production wrapped on *Show A*, but again, not necessarily because of the structures at play on that production. In her own words:

I just got really lucky personally and that people liked me within COVID, and I was able to move up through that avenue. There was another COVID PA, that we did have named Taylor, and he was able to become a set PA through being in COVID, but that is really, really rare. I would say that rarely happened to anyone that I've ever met or seen before.

Mobility from the COVID department was largely based on one's ability to play the game and take the abuse, or by having previous experience, both of which Liz had. Even though in this case, COVID Compliance afforded Liz *some* opportunity for mobility, the ambiguous nature of the position still means that she had to start at the bottom and “schlep it back.” Additionally, she commented that just because they were COVID PAs, it didn't mean that they would inherently make bad PAs in other departments. Culturally, the crew of *Show A* had a negative impression of not only COVID Compliance as a concept, but also of the people who did it. This antipathy exacerbated the already dismal treatment that PAs receive writ large—as the traditional bottom rung of the production ladder—but the crew also projected their feelings onto the COVID PAs *as people*, thinking that because they were doing a job that much of the crew didn't think should exist, they were inherently “less than” and didn't deserve opportunities for mobility.

The culture on the set of *Show A* reflects the rushed, content-focused ethos of financialized media production. Because the COVID Compliance supervisors weren't available to assuage concerns with compliance, crew members took out their frustrations on the PAs in charge of day-to-day enforcement, leading to a toxic environment toward the entire department. While some viewed as a potential way to break into the industry and find later work, this toxicity early on in their careers burned them out of the industry in general. Those who were able to find

further work in media after *Show A* wrapped production did so largely in spite of their experience, since the on-set culture certainly did not help to build skills or professional networks in the short term. The culture of this set served to gatekeep further opportunities behind a wall of constant abuse—those who couldn't take it were drummed out of the industry, but even those who did go back still didn't have any real opportunities from this production.

*Show A* serves as an exemplar of the dangers that come with financialized production cultures. I now consider the case of *Show B*, whose on-set culture contrasts dramatically with *Show A*. Although both were produced under the modern financialized system, the case of *Show B* provides an antidote to the abuse and dehumanization spurred by the financial incentives behind *Show A*'s production. As part of this analysis, I also briefly examine the organizational culture of *Show B* through an application of Edgar Schein's three levels of culture.<sup>211</sup> This establishes how a more person-centered ideology at the higher levels of the production hierarchy trickles down to those at the bottom, creating more opportunity for below- and across-the-line workers in the long-term. This case study serves to illustrate a better way forward in media production, where the workers are taken care of, and the final outcomes are largely the same.

#### *Show B and Effective Organizational Cultures*

Relative to *A*, the production culture on *B* was infinitely more positive and encouraging, which resulted in more future prospects for those I spoke to. The show began filming in 2020 after the industry had largely returned from the initial shutdown, and producers seemed to know that the pandemic was something that couldn't be ignored, especially if they wanted the show to run for multiple seasons. Because of the long-term aspirations that the producers had for *Show B*, it created far more incentive to invest in their workers. Erica and Amy both began work in the

---

<sup>211</sup> Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

COVID safety department in 2021 and were asked from the beginning what their aspirations were. Per Erica, when talking about the specifically positive culture on the set of *Show B*:

The Production Office Coordinator that I work for now and previously worked with on *Show B*, she kind of has a tendency to ask people when they're first starting in the industry, like, “where do you want to go because I can help you get there?” She has always been somebody that will put you in contact with departments that you want to work with and will try to get you in when she can, so they do try to help you branch out if you're kind of new in the industry, which is great.

From the beginning, the culture permeating *Show B* was far more encouraging—the supervisors for these workers took an active interest in their aspirations and worked with the COVID PAs to get them there. The key difference between *Show A* and *Show B*, I argue, lies in the organizational culture of these productions. It's not as though *Show B* was lax with their enforcement of the industry-mandated protocols—by all accounts, things ran very smoothly. They still made the show they wanted to make and were not shutting down constantly and thus the end result of these two productions were the same. However, the Production Office Coordinator took an interest early on in the careers of workers like Erica and Amy, which reflects a larger commitment to the people making the show, rather than the long-term financial payoffs for the studio.

The contrasting on-set cultures between *Show A* and *Show B*, illustrate key ideological differences between these two sets. Edgar Schein, a leading scholar of organizational culture, provides an effective framework for analyzing the organizational cultures of *Show A* and *Show B*. Schein has posited a “three level” approach to analyzing culture. On the first level are the artifacts of a culture—the observable behaviors, texts, and structures of an organization and its members. One of the artifacts that is particularly relevant to this study is the ‘climate,’ or the social behaviors, of a group. Schein argues that “Observed behavior is also an artifact as are the

organizational processes by which such behavior is made routine.”<sup>212</sup> The ways that the crew members on *Show A* and *Show B* treated their COVID PAs reflect the second level of cultural analysis: the espoused beliefs and values of an organization.<sup>213</sup> The artifact that we see in the case of *Show A* is a deeply hostile climate toward these COVID PAs, which reflects the beliefs and values of that set—that these workers are, in fact, disposable, and can be exploited effectively in order to keep production going. In contrast, the collaborative climate of *Show B*, in which the COVID Compliance department was, essentially treated as just another crew department instead of an out-group brought in by the studios to police everyone’s actions.

In the third level we find the basic underlying assumptions—the taken for granted beliefs and ideologies that inform the first and second levels of organizational culture. Schein says, of basic assumptions, “What was once a hypothesis, supported only by a hunch or a value, gradually comes to be treated as a reality. We come to believe that nature really works this way.”<sup>214</sup> The basic underlying assumptions of media production seem clear—you have to grind through unsustainable hours, coming back to work after four hours of rest, and do that for months at a time in the hopes of one day getting the protections afforded by union membership. This ethos is just “the way it is” in the industry—everyone has to pay their dues and suffer the abuse in order to move up.<sup>215</sup> In the case of COVID Compliance, they were only trying to move *across* to the bottom rung, only then could they move up. But *Show B* illustrates that production does not have to be this way. The hypermobile, ever-changing, unsustainable labor practices that

---

<sup>212</sup> Schein, 24.

<sup>213</sup> Schein, 25.

<sup>214</sup> Schein, 27–28.

<sup>215</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor”; Bennett, “Overworked and Underpaid”; Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*.

define the modern film industry, has not been the reality for most of Hollywood's history,<sup>216</sup> and does not have to be now. The culture of an organization is established by those at the top, and the time and investment that supervisors like the Production Office Coordinator mentioned before reflects a people-centered approach to organizational culture that can serve as a better way forward for the industry.

*Show B* essentially subverted the unsustainable labor practices inherent in the industry today. They invested in these COVID PAs from the beginning, making them feel like a part of the crew, rather than as an outside group simply brought in to do the parent company's dirty work. As such, it created more a sense of community, where crew members would casually enforce protocols. At one point while Amy was working in the production office and a delivery driver came in without a mask, a construction worker who happened to be in the room asked the driver to put a mask on, since that was just the policy. Rather than consistent begrudging acceptance, crew members actually went to bat for each other, creating a collaborative—not a competitive—environment on set. Rather than being in a rush and pushing incredibly long days, simply trying to turn out content, the production schedule was far more relaxed, with producers making a point to keep workdays around 10 hours. Though Erica did say that the 10-hour days were primarily for the benefit of older crew members who couldn't necessarily work the 12+-hour days endemic to industry work, this does indicate a level of care for below-the-line workers not seen in *Show A*. As well, these shorter days meant that most of the crew was generally pleasant, especially as *B* got into the second and third seasons. Outside of the odd hot moment when enforcing protocols, most everyone seemed understanding based on these interviews. Shorter days led to more pleasant interactions, and less angst for crew members to take out on

---

<sup>216</sup> Sullivan, "Leo C. Rosten's Hollywood."

the COVID department. Other crew members would actively express appreciation for the work that COVID Compliance did or would occasionally bring them donuts as a show of gratitude.

Erica serves as a clear example of the need for professional networks in the film industry, in large part because her supervisors on *Show B* took an interest in her development early on. When considering her career in the years since, she has been largely successful. Although her background is in psychology and her first COVID gig was initially a job taken out of necessity during the first year of the pandemic, the culture on set led her to stay in the industry for the long-term. By having supervisors invested in her aspirations—even though she didn't come in with any specific goals—the culture of *Show B* set her up for long-term success. This played out further for Erica in the two years since finishing her COVID Compliance work on *Show B*. Thanks to the connections made on the show, she was able to land an accounting job on another production after the 2023 strikes. Through the entry-level accounting job, she was able to make connections with that accounting team, which led to a gig working on a major streamer-produced series in the area. On that job, through those connections, she got back in contact with her original Unit Production Coordinator on *Show B*, who she is still in contact with and has recommended her for other production jobs.

Despite the difficult work schedule inherent in the media industry, the variety of different experiences she's had make the work worth it for Erica. She's found a niche in her area of Texas and has a much larger network of people that move from show to show together. Even when one production is unpleasant, the network around her serves as a source of support, where they can get together and say, "wow, that show sucked. OK. Let's go on to the next one." Even though the conditions may not be perfect, with media work being inherently precarious, the investment that

her managers took in her long-term success on *Show B* set her up for, to this point, a healthy career.

The same sort of experience also applied to Amy and her career. After graduating from film school at the University of Texas—Austin early in 2020 and being unemployed for most of that year, a friend in the industry mentioned that *Show B* was looking for COVID safety PAs. In the first conversation, that friend mentioned that the job could potentially serve as a way to break into the industry properly and put Amy in contact with their manager. When interviewing both COVID safety managers mentioned that even though she'd be in COVID Compliance, she would have opportunities to meet and work with other departments. They also said they could put in a good word for her with these other departments, if they felt she was worth the investment. Amy's managers made good on their word—after working in the COVID department for the second and most of the third season of *Show B*, the production office needed a substitute Office PA, which she did for about a week. The production office then asked for her to come back for the fourth season, after the COVID department was shuttered.

Amy's supervisors saw the good work that she was doing and rewarded it, even though they could have written off her COVID PA experience as being outside the rest of the crew and not applicable to further work in the industry. *Show A* did exactly that—they viewed the COVID department as an out-group whose work experience couldn't translate to other PA positions and thus weren't worthy of the investment that *Show B* made. This, again, reflects the underlying ideologies on these sets. By investing in and valuing the workers at the lowest rung of the production hierarchy—in this case through direct advancement opportunities—*Show B* illustrated a better way of doing media production in the modern age. This case serves as an antidote to the quantity-over-quality attitudes that comes with streaming productions. Early on,

producers seemed to realize that if the show was going to be successful and run for multiple seasons—which it ended up doing—they would need to invest in their workers. Because COVID Compliance was essential for production continuing, those were the workers that needed the investment. Were they to treat their COVID department as a means to an end, as *Show A* did, they would be far less likely to come back for subsequent seasons. The producers on *Show B* recognized the utility that came with treating these workers as humans, rather than interchangeable cogs to keep productions running. This investment led to loyalty among the COVID PAs—who on other shows would be seen as more disposable. As a result, Erica and Amy were still in the industry at the time of their interviews and seemed largely satisfied with their current career situations.

The network model that *Show B* was produced under also creates more stability for workers. Essentially, it undercuts issues of mobile production and the resulting precarity for below-the-line workers.<sup>217</sup> While streaming and incentive chasing by media conglomerates create an environment untenable for aspirant workers—who can't afford to relocate chasing new gigs—basing a long-running production in the same place creates the loyalty that I've demonstrated in this consideration of *Show B*. In Erica's case, the tension between mobile and semi-permanent, stable production actually gave her an opportunity for advancement. When *Show C*, which Erica had previously worked on, relocated to Georgia, *Show B*'s COVID Testing Coordinator went with them, leaving an opening for that position. Having worked under this coordinator before as a PA, and because the culture on the set allowed for growth for COVID PAs, Erica was able to easily advance into the open position. In that position she was then able to

---

<sup>217</sup> McNutt, "Mobile Production."

further improve the environment on set by opening real lines of communication between the crew and the COVID department—as accounted for in Chapter 1.

Both *Show A* and *Show B* were produced in a financialized system—there is no real way to avoid that context. However, they illustrate incredibly different ideologies in their respective organizational cultures. *Show A* viewed COVID Compliance as a means to an end in the rush for content following the pandemic’s outbreak—essentially seeing the department as a temporary inconvenience, one that had to be there to keep the wheels turning but not worthy of any further investment. In turn, this attitude resulted in those COVID PAs I spoke with staying in the industry, but off the set, as it is for Liz and Nicole, or burning out entirely despite having high aspirations going into the job, as were the cases for Carrie and Marie. *Show B* did not have the same ‘means to an end’ attitude toward the COVID department, instead treating them as equivalent to any other department and investing in the long-term goals of their COVID PAs. This, in turn, translated to far more medium- to long-term success for my participants.

### ***Conclusion***

While discussing the larger issues in the industry, particularly around below-the-line work, Nicole brought up a cycle that in part led to such a toxic environment on *Show A*. Per Nicole:

[The set] it’s a pressure cooker. People shit on us. Why? Because they go to work and their grouchy and they’re frustrated because they’re just trying to do their work.

Why are they feeling that way? Because they’re tired.

Why are they tired? Because they're coming to work more hours in the day than they should, and they're not having proper lunch time because we're given rolling lunches, which means that they're like, instead of a designated lunch time, they're saying, hey, you go get lunch, and then when you come back, *you* go get lunch, and then when you come back... there's a structure, but are we gonna follow it?

Why are we only gonna follow it sometimes? Well, because the production's not giving a proper amount of time for us to get [done] what we need to get done. So then we cram everything, and then it makes it makes people overwork and then overworked people are not happy. And then the environment is just going to cycle like that.

The modern media industry is in a perpetual cycle. Structures of financialization inform all levels of cultural production, which in a financialized system incentives making *more* content<sup>218</sup>—as much as possible, in fact, as with streaming and algorithmic recommendations there will always be something for everyone to watch.<sup>219</sup> This quantity-over-quality model results in rushed productions, with extra-long days and workers being perpetually tired. With the added wrinkles of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the testing and safety protocols that went along with, it's frankly no wonder that workers were upset. However, on *Show A* the workers took that frustration out on the PAs—the dirt below the barrel, at the lowest level of the hierarchy, who had no power to actually change anything, because the supervisors and producers knew that the COVID PAs could be the whipping boys. In contrast, *Show B* undercut this vicious cycle by slowing things down, investing in their workers success, and in turn created a much healthier that set their COVID PAs up well for success in the future.

Andrew deWaard claims that all media produced today is, to some degree, financialized, which has resulted in a watering-down of cultural production in the pursuit of short-term financial returns.<sup>220</sup> While I do believe that deWaard is largely correct, especially when considering the conglomeration of media production in the United States, there remain some vestiges of “the old way” of production that can provide a way forward. If the industry wants longevity—to have workers that actually want to be there, to replace the old guard reaching the

---

<sup>218</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*, 9.

<sup>219</sup> Burroughs, “House of Netflix.”

<sup>220</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

ends of their careers, it will require a cultural shift in production practices. The case studies of *Show A* and *Show B* do well to illustrate this contrast and the shortfalls of wholly financialized production practices. While both exist within a financialized system—*A* being produced for a streaming platform, *B* for a network co-owned by two of the Big 5 companies—the on-set culture of *Show B* is one that harkens back to the industry pre-financialization. The producers on *Show B* invested in these COVID PAs and built an environment that people enjoyed working in and wanted to come back to shoot the next season—consequently, the COVID PAs I spoke to have found success in the industry.

Longevity requires investment, and time, and sustainable working conditions. I recognize the idealism in this proposition—The media conglomerates making these calls, and their private equity investors, aren't likely to make the necessary investment in reforming the standard culture of a film set. But although there is a moral case to be made regarding the baseline treatment of workers and the greed of corporations, this is also a deeply practical issue. Eventually the current productions workers are going to retire or burn out under the conditions of financialized production,<sup>221</sup> and if the industry continues to operate the way it has in recent decades, there won't be anyone to replace them. The tide has shifted toward streaming and content culture, and the network model that produced multi-season serial dramas like *Show B* is indeed dying, but for the film industry to survive, studios need to take lessons from the pre-financialization model. By making a relatively small investment to provide a modicum of stability for new workers, even though it may cut into profit margins, the industry can ensure survival not only for its workers, but for itself.

---

<sup>221</sup> Curtin and Sanson, "Listening to Labor."

## Works Cited

- Aquilina, Tyler. "How Austerity Is Shaping the New Streaming Content Strategy." *Variety*, May 30, 2023. <https://variety.com/vip/streaming-content-strategy-austerity-1235619458/>.
- . "The Death of Peak TV: A Special Report." *Variety*, March 4, 2024. <https://variety.com/vip-special-reports/the-death-of-peak-tv-special-report-1235921131/>.
- Bennett, Kiah E. "Overworked and Underpaid: Hollywood Gatekeeping in Assistant Labor and Discourse." Doctoral Dissertation, Colorado State University, 2022. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. <https://ezproxy2.library.colostate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/overworked-underpaid-hollywood-gatekeeping/docview/2706252205/se-2?accountid=10223>.
- Box Office Mojo. "Ne Zha 2." Accessed April 17, 2025. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt34956443/>.
- Box Office Mojo. "Top Lifetime Grosses." Accessed April 17, 2025. [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top\\_lifetime\\_gross/?area=XWW](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW).
- Burroughs, Benjamin. "House of Netflix: Streaming Media and Digital Lore." *Popular Communication* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948>.
- Caldwell, John T. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Caldwell, John T. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.
- Cherneff, Jill B. R. "Dreams Are Made like This: Hortense Powdermaker and the Hollywood Film Industry." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 47, no. 4 (December 1991): 429–40. <https://doi.org/10.1086/jar.47.4.3630352>.
- Cho, Winston. "The New Normal? California Entertainment Industry Work Sees Modest Growth as Production Levels Lag." *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 27, 2025. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/the-new-normal-california-entertainment-industry-work-1236174571/>.
- Curtin, Michael, and Kevin Sanson. "Listening to Labor." In *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f.4>.

- , eds. *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f>.
- deWaard, Andrew. *Derivative Media: How Wall Street Devours Culture*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2024.
- . “Financialized Hollywood: Institutional Investment, Venture Capital, and Private Equity in the Film and Television Industry.” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 59, no. 4 (2020): 54–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2020.0041>.
- Gillan, Jennifer. *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Hamann, Julian, and Stefan Beljean. “Career Gatekeeping in Cultural Fields.” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 9, no. 1 (March 2021): 43–69. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-019-00078-7>.
- Hardin, Carolyn. “Finding the ‘Neo’ in Neoliberalism.” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (March 4, 2014): 199–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.748815>.
- Havens, Timothy, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic. “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach.” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (June 2009): 234–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01037.x>.
- Holt, Jennifer. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- . “In Deregulation We Trust: The Synergy of Politics and Industry in Reagan-Era Hollywood.” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (December 1, 2001): 22–29. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2001.55.2.22>.
- Kilkenny, Katie. “Production Assistants Launch Ambitious Bid for Unionization With LiUNA.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 3, 2024. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/production-assistant-union-effort-launches-with-liuna-1235989752/>.
- . “Production Assistants, Seeing Work Dwindle, View a Union as Their Future.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 2, 2025. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/production-assistants-union-1236205712/>.
- Kimmelman, Gene, Mark Cooper, and Magda Herra. “The Failure of Competition Under the 1996 Telecommunications Act.” *Federal Communications Law Journal* 58, no. 3 (June 2006): 511–18.
- Littleton, Cynthia. *TV on Strike: Why Hollywood Went to War over the Internet*. Television and Popular Culture. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013.

- McNutt, Myles. "Mobile Production: Spatialized Labor, Location Professionals, and the Expanding Geography of Television Production." *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 2015). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.15031809.0002.104>.
- . *Television's Spatial Capital: Location, Relocation, Dislocation*. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- Morris, Regan. "Hollywood's Big Boom Has Gone Bust." *BBC News*, September 28, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj6er83ene6o>.
- Regev, Ronny. "Hollywood Works: How Creativity Became Labor in the Studio System." *Enterprise & Society* 17, no. 3 (September 2016): 591–617. <https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2015.89>.
- Schein, Edgar H. *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 4th ed. Jossey-Bass Business and Management Series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Storper, Michael, and Susan Christopherson. "Flexible Specialization and Regional Industrial Agglomerations: The Case of the U.S. Motion Picture Industry." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 77, no. 1 (March 1987): 104–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1987.tb00148.x>.
- Sullivan, John L. "Leo C. Rosten's Hollywood: Power, Status, and the Primacy of Economic and Social Networks in Cultural Production." In *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, edited by Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, 1st ed., 39–53. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.
- Szalai, Georg. "Streaming Profit Report: Netflix Leads, Disney Rises, Warner Grows. Is Consolidation Next?" *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 11, 2025. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/streaming-profit-report-netflix-leads-disney-warner-bros-1236184451/>.
- The Clinton White House. "Summary of Telecommunications Act." Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://clintonwhitehouse4.archives.gov/WH/EOP/OP/telecom/summary.html>.
- Vaughan, Nathan. "Maximizing Value: Economic and Cultural Synergies." In *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, edited by Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa, 1st ed., 169–86. Wiley, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444395402.ch8>.
- Yahoo Finance. "The Walt Disney Company (DIS) Stock Major Holders." Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/DIS/holders/>.
- Yahoo Finance. "Warner Bros. Discovery, Inc. (WBD) Stock Major Holders." Accessed April 21, 2025. <https://finance.yahoo.com/quote/WBD/holders/>.

## Conclusion – COVID-19: An Unfortunate Footnote

This thesis has considered the role of COVID Compliance workers during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in relation to the larger industrial shifts that have happened over the past five decades. Deregulatory actions by various presidential administrations opened the door for unchecked power consolidation and conglomeration in media production. This has led to a refocus of industrial priorities toward the speedy generation of “content” in order to draw subscribers to any of the myriad streaming services, fed by financialized production that focuses on the bottom line at the expense of workers. These structures created a pervasive culture of “more”<sup>222</sup> in the American film industry, which would not be stopped even in the face of a massive industry fracture—to use Caldwell’s term<sup>223</sup>—like the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the primary research for this thesis has been inductive, looking at industry operations from the level of “the dirt below the barrel.” Yet, the question remains as to how the creative products of the media industry—films, television shows, etc., have grappled with their own response to the pandemic, which exposed so many of the unsustainable labor practices endemic to industry operations? The short answer: It hasn’t. While some shows like *Superstore* and *Grey’s Anatomy* worked the pandemic into their narratives,<sup>224</sup> very few artifacts have addressed the *industrial* reality of the pandemic and how media production responded. Essentially the only artifacts that try to grapple with the pandemic from an industrial standpoint are 2021’s remake of *Scenes from*

---

<sup>222</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6.

<sup>223</sup> Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*.

<sup>224</sup> Kirkland, “How ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ Navigated the Very Real Stakes of Bringing COVID-19 to Television”; VanArendonk, “How Superstore Leaned Into a Pandemic It Couldn’t Ignore.”

*a Marriage*—which Vicki Mayer and Noa Lavie have unpacked,<sup>225</sup> and Judd Apatow’s 2022 Netflix comedy *The Bubble*.<sup>226</sup>

*The Bubble* follows a group of actors sequestered in an upscale hotel during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they slowly lose their minds over the course of an increasingly long, demanding shoot. The movie attempts to satirize both the pandemic and the franchise-obsessed industry, riffing on the *Jurassic Park/World* franchise by having the sequestered actors shoot *Cliff Beasts 6*, the sixth entry into the “23rd biggest action franchise of all time.”<sup>227</sup> In an interview with Netflix, which distributed the film, Apatow cites the production of *Jurassic World: Dominion* as an inspiration,<sup>228</sup> as it was the first major franchise film to resume production after the initial outbreak.<sup>229</sup> It’s meant, by Apatow’s own assertion, to be a chance to “commiserate about how bizarre and troubling and hard [the pandemic’s] been,”<sup>230</sup> yet on a metatextual level betrays industrial priorities surrounding production in the time of COVID.

The film focuses almost entirely on above-the-line actors, producers, and the director, aside from one egregious stunt-casting of John Cena as a stunt coordinator. From a practical standpoint, this viewpoint makes sense—above-the-line workers are the ones that the general public are aware of, and below-the-line are often ignored or unknown. The bigger issue at play with *The Bubble*, however, is that it is simply Apatow complaining about the inconvenience of production under COVID protocols for above-the-line talent, while ignoring below-the-line labor

---

<sup>225</sup> Mayer and Lavie, “Emplacement and Emplotment.”

<sup>226</sup> *The Bubble*.

<sup>227</sup> *The Bubble*, 0:00:10.

<sup>228</sup> Netflix Staff, “How Judd Apatow Mined Quarantine for Comedy to Make ‘The Bubble.’”

<sup>229</sup> Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 30–31.

<sup>230</sup> Netflix Staff, “How Judd Apatow Mined Quarantine for Comedy to Make ‘The Bubble.’”

and the COVID workers caught up in the return to production. As the movie is pitched as a satire of pandemic-era production practices, protocols are necessarily blown out of proportion. Within the first ten minutes, a character is dragged away by hazmat-suited workers for trying to give someone a hug. In another, more disturbing instance, Mr. Best—a skeezy manager brought in by the studio to brutally enforce safety protocols—forcibly attaches RFID trackers to all the actors so that production knows where everyone is at all times. This reflects Steven’s experience managing the contact tracing devices on *Show C*, where producers, by calling them “COVID trackers,” made the crew believe all of their movements were being tracked. The reality was that those trackers only pinged if two people were within six feet of each other, in case someone on set tested positive for the virus. Protocol enforcement in *The Bubble* is played as a draconian control tactic by the studio, even resulting in the character of Lauren (played by Apatow’s actual wife Leslie Mann) having her hand shot off as she tries to escape the hotel grounds. While these bits are played for comedy, they still reinforce the attitudes that pervaded COVID-era sets—that the compliance department was basically an enforcement arm of the studio, sent to monitor the cast and crew’s every move. Undoubtedly Apatow knew that these attitudes were already present, but making a joke out of them illustrates the overall lack of care for COVID Compliance workers.

One consistent theme in all of my interviews for this project was the overall *lack* of enforcement for above-the-line workers, which is not unique to the productions discussed in this thesis.<sup>231</sup> Compliance workers were told not to enforce masks or social distancing for leads and directors—in one instance from Marie, this was simply because the director “didn’t like masks.”

---

<sup>231</sup> Johnson, “Hollywood COVID Compliance Officers Say Cutting Corners Is Common.”

Throughout all of the productions that we spoke about, above-the-line cast and crew received entirely different treatment than below-the-line departments, driving home the stark differences in social strata on set. Though none of my participants explicitly said so, these differences in protocol enforcement certainly fed some of the antipathy between the COVID department and the rest of the crew. For a director with the notoriety of Judd Apatow to make a movie about the *inconvenience* of making a movie during the pandemic betrays the underlying attitudes many seemed to bring to COVID Compliance. In this view, the protocols are a temporary inconvenience to be done away with as soon as is feasible, entirely ignoring the very real people brought in to keep the wheels turning. This is seen as well through Mr. Best and his *Matrix*-esque squad of nameless, black-suited henchmen. There's no face to protocol enforcement—these departments are just an amorphous entity sent in by the studios. Outside of Mr. Best and his goon squad, the closest thing *The Bubble* has to a COVID Compliance Officer is the character of Gunther, who does basically no enforcement throughout. In fact, we find out at the very end that he had never actually sent out the COVID test swabs to be tested, portraying gross incompetence from the one compliance member who is even *slightly* developed.

To its credit, *The Bubble* does do a better, or perhaps just less infuriating, job at lampooning corporate culture. Throughout the runtime, Gavin—one of the executive producers—periodically Zooms with “Paula the Studio Head” (this is how Kate McKinnon is actually credited), as she travels around the world while everyone else is stuck in the production bubble. In most every call, she doubles down on the need to finish the movie as soon as possible, regardless of the toll that the environment has taken on the actors. After Gavin tells her they need to shut down production, she adamantly denies his request, only to immediately Zoom with the studio chairman to see about halting production, who immediately shoots her down. The studio

chairman then opens a Zoom call with the executive chairman to make the same request and is shot down in turn. In every one of these conversations, the request to shut down production is met with something along the lines of, “Great, get it done and we’ll be in touch.”<sup>232</sup> This reflects industrial priorities, albeit in a more critical, reflexive way. To the heads of these studios—at least in Apatow’s conception—the early-COVID conditions of production didn’t matter, all that mattered was the bottom line, as is often the case in a financialized production landscape.<sup>233</sup> It also reflects another thread that came up in many interviews—that is, the disconnect between studio executives and producers, and the people on the ground making media itself. In this way, *The Bubble* is a nearly effective, if deeply frustrating, commentary on the early pandemic. It’s at once reflexive in sending up unhealthy and unsustainable production practices created by financialized production and reified by the onset of COVID-19. Yet it is also self-aggrandizing, with Apatow and Netflix using a bullhorn to complain about the inconvenience of COVID safety protocols for above-the-line production workers, while ignoring the toothless reality of day-to-day enforcement.<sup>234</sup>

Outside of *The Bubble* and the metacontextual portrayal of on-set COVID Compliance in *Scenes*,<sup>235</sup> the industry has all but moved on. Shortly before SAG-AFTRA and the WGA went on strike in 2023, the unions and the AMPTP phased out the requirement for COVID Compliance supervisors, and scaled back on vaccination requirements.<sup>236</sup> Yet, an industrial fracture like the

---

<sup>232</sup> *The Bubble*, 1:10:30.

<sup>233</sup> deWaard, *Derivative Media*.

<sup>234</sup> Johnson, “Hollywood COVID Compliance Officers Say Cutting Corners Is Common.”

<sup>235</sup> Mayer and Lavie, “Emplacement and Emplotment.”

<sup>236</sup> Kilkenney, “Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low”; Sakoui, “Hollywood to Drop COVID Safety Measures as Federal Emergency Declaration Ends.”

COVID-19 pandemic exposed the unsustainability of production practices,<sup>237</sup> which the industry has not grappled with in any meaningful way. Instead, the rush back to production only led to more exploitation through the creation and subsequent dissolution of COVID Compliance departments, which were in large part staffed by workers who were early in their careers trying to establish themselves. These departments received nearly no recognition despite their essential nature during a particularly precarious time, even being omitted from the credits.

Carrie, an avid awards show viewer, remarked that the only recognition that the COVID department she'd heard was from Jason Sudeikis accepting the lead actor Emmy for *Ted Lasso*. Sudeikis' simple, quick acknowledgement was: "I want to thank our COVID crew from this season."<sup>238</sup> This does fit with the "kindness-first" ethos of *Ted Lasso*, but even then, to have the only industrial acknowledgement of COVID Compliance departments being one sentence in an acceptance speech highlights the attitudes I accounted for in Chapter 1. Industry players, be they producers or union representatives, frame the continued success of productions during the pandemic as a perfect collaboration between everyone, at all levels of production. This narrative, much like the trade press and industry spokespeople did at the outset of COVID-era productions, conveniently ignores the COVID Compliance officers and COVID PAs that truly kept the wheels turning. Film and television *could not* have been made during the pandemic without these workers, yet they were underpaid, overworked, subject to severe verbal and emotional abuse from fellow crew members, and often were given no investment in their future, post-COVID careers, all with nearly no recognition for the work they did.

---

<sup>237</sup> Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*, 228–29.

<sup>238</sup> Brown, "Read Jason Sudeikis' Full Emmy Acceptance Speech."

Clearly Hollywood wants to move on from the pandemic, viewing it as an unfortunate footnote in the larger history of the industry. This outlook entirely ignores the invisible labor that made production possible during this time and speaks to the larger disregard for below-the-line labor in the popular understanding of production. Labor actions like the 2023 SAG-AFTRA and WGA strikes gain notoriety because the average person know the actors who led the charge, but below-the-line labor is often unacknowledged—people don't want to know how the proverbial sausage is made, they only want to enjoy it. Labor actions by craft unions like IATSE receive far less attention because these unsexy jobs don't live in the popular imaginations of viewers. This disparity further exacerbates the precarity of media production, as IATSE would never receive the popular support that the other guilds did, giving them less leverage in negotiations with the AMPTP and resulting in contracts that leave the majority of union members unsatisfied, as happened in 2021.<sup>239</sup>

In her interview, Carrie talked about the potential 2021 IATSE strike, which coincided with the beginning of production on *Show A*. By that point, she was aware of the unsustainable grind that she and other COVID PAs would be subjected to and saw the potential labor action as a beacon of hope. If IATSE, whose labor is perhaps the most essential (yet unappreciated) on a set, called a strike and won concessions that led to a more sustainable workplace, that would represent a structural change in the on-set workday that would trickle down to COVID Compliance. But they didn't—IATSE reached an unsatisfactory deal, which the majority of union members voted against<sup>240</sup>—right before members would have walked off on strike. That

---

<sup>239</sup> IATSE, “By a Nearly Unanimous Margin, IATSE Members in TV and Film Production Vote to Authorize a Nationwide Strike”; Maddaus, “IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat.”

<sup>240</sup> Maddaus, “IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat.”

hope never paid off, the culture of production never changed, and as a result COVID PAs like Carrie and Marie burned out of the industry following wrap on *Show A*.

The COVID-19 pandemic could have represented a turning point for media production. Fractures, per Caldwell, “spur almost all levels of production to speak out, to self-justify, and to rationalize their very reason that they are, arguably, integral to the complex system.”<sup>241</sup> They lead to an increase in reflexive theorizing by industry workers, which can lead to structural changes in the methods of production. However, the economic impact of the pandemic, exacerbated by the precarious employment inherent in the media industry and lack of support by government bodies cut the legs out from under the industry’s below-the-line workers, leaving them with little to no leverage. Thus, for below-the-line workers, things have remained largely the same—the methods of media production remain highly precarious and nearly unsustainable. Rather than course correct and make the cultural changes needed for the survival of the industry, the austerity measures that followed the return to production have stayed in place. Los Angeles as a production hub has not recovered from the pandemic and subsequent strikes and mobile production remain the norm, reifying the precarity in media work.<sup>242</sup>

As illustrated through the contrasting case studies in Chapter 2, a people-focused approach to production can serve to create longevity for the industry. As things are now, the relentless grind that aspirant production workers are subject to has created an industry that will hit a point of no return. Industry veterans are burning out under the constant pressure of production in the financialized system,<sup>243</sup> and the new workers trying to establish themselves are

---

<sup>241</sup> Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*, 229.

<sup>242</sup> Bessner, “The Life and Death of Hollywood”; Cho, “Los Angeles Film and TV Production Approaches Historically Low Levels.”

<sup>243</sup> Curtin and Sanson, “Listening to Labor,” 6–7.

forced to subject themselves to years of unsustainable work on the off chance of getting the stability that comes with union membership down the road. The modern methods of media production, “favor a particular kind of worker: young, single, and mobile.”<sup>244</sup> But what happens when those young, single, and mobile workers aren’t willing to subject themselves to years of dues paying for the far-delayed potential payoff? These practices result in, frankly, a dying industry, which cannot replenish its labor ranks fast enough to maintain its standing.

The case of *Show B* illustrates the effects of investing in the careers of those workers at the lowest level of production, as does the case of Dropout, an independent streaming service founded in 2019. After scraping through the pandemic, the platform has found success through a focus on independent, employee-led comedy programs. Every show hosted on Dropout is created and produced by employees, and as of 2023 the company shares profits with everybody they employ, which per CEO Sam Reich, is 80 percent meant to create loyalty, and 20 percent, “fuck you, David Zaslav.”<sup>245</sup> Through a people-centered approach that deliberately bucks the profit-hungry ethos of modern Hollywood, the platform has consistently grown, doubling their subscriber count to mid-six-figures between 2022 and 2023, clearing 1 million since then. This is not to say that a niche independent streaming service is going to unseat behemoths like Netflix or HBO Max, but it does nevertheless demonstrate the utility of prioritizing the people in production over the bottom line. In a financialized production landscape dominated by an ethos of quantity-over-quality, Dropout, and examples like *Show B* demonstrate a better path forward, one which creates loyalty among employees, leaves room for creative expression, and still results in consistent growth and profit.

---

<sup>244</sup> Curtin and Sanson, 7.

<sup>245</sup> Fox, “Dropout: How Is an Improv Streaming Service a Surprise Hit?”

Through a series of interviews, I have unpacked the precarious role that the COVID Compliance department played in the media industry, during and after the initial outbreak of COVID-19. Though a small sample size based in one geographical location, these interviews have still shed light on the unsustainable practices and ideology of disposability for below-the-line workers in film and television production. COVID Compliance workers were brought in during a tenuous time for the American media industry and served a vital role in keeping the wheels of production turning yet were not credited for their work and largely not recognized by the industry writ large. These practices are unfortunately the norm, as the industry places such stock on having a constant stream of aspirant workers trying to “make it,” which allows for consistently unsustainable conditions. This does not have to be the reality, though—a refocus on the well-being of the workers who produce media can lead to a more sustainable future for the media industry, one that can lead to more loyalty, longevity, and (most importantly for these conglomerates) profit.

## Works Cited

- Apatow, Judd, director. *The Bubble*. Netflix, 2022.
- Bessner, Daniel. "The Life and Death of Hollywood: Film and Television Writers Face an Existential Threat." *Harper's Magazine*. Accessed September 18, 2024. <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/05/the-life-and-death-of-hollywood-daniel-bessner/>.
- Brown, Tracy. "Read Jason Sudeikis' Full Emmy Acceptance Speech: 'Heck of a Year.'" *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 2021, sec. Television. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2021-09-19/jason-sudeikis-2021-emmys-lead-comedy-actor-winners-speech>.
- Caldwell, John T. *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.
- Cho, Winston. "Los Angeles Film and TV Production Approaches Historically Low Levels." *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 16, 2024. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/los-angeles-film-tv-production-sees-historically-low-production-1236033411/>.
- Curtin, Michael, and Kevin Sanson. "Listening to Labor." In *Voices of Labor: Creativity, Craft, and Conflict in Global Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pq347f.4>.
- deWaard, Andrew. *Derivative Media: How Wall Street Devours Culture*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2024.
- Fortmueller, Kate. *Hollywood Shutdown: Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID*. University of Texas Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7560/324608>.
- Fox, Jesse David. "Dropout: How Is an Improv Streaming Service a Surprise Hit?" *Vulture*, June 2, 2025. <https://www.vulture.com/article/dropout-improv-streaming-service-collegehumor-sam-reich.html>.
- IATSE. "By a Nearly Unanimous Margin, IATSE Members in TV and Film Production Vote to Authorize a Nationwide Strike." IATSE, October 4, 2021. <https://iatse.net/by-a-nearly-unanimous-margin-iatse-members-in-tv-and-film-production-vote-to-authorize-a-nationwide-strike/>.
- Johnson, Scott. "Hollywood COVID Compliance Officers Say Cutting Corners Is Common." *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 6, 2022. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywood-covid-compliance-officers-productions-1235233115/>.

- Kilkenny, Katie. "Latest COVID Safety Agreement Extension Loosens Rules When Hospital Admissions Low." *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 27, 2023. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hollywood-covid-safety-agreement-rules-loosened-1235311846/>.
- Kirkland, Justin. "How 'Grey's Anatomy' Navigated the Very Real Stakes of Bringing COVID-19 to Television." *Esquire*, November 12, 2020. <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a34632500/greys-anatomy-season-17-premiere-covid-19-pandemic-behind-the-scenes/>.
- Maddaus, Gene. "IATSE Members Vote to Ratify Contract, Ending Strike Threat." *Variety*, November 15, 2021. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/iatse-members-ratify-contract-1235112300/>.
- Mayer, Vicki, and Noa Lavie. "Emplacement and Emplotment: Media Production in Pandemic Times." *Television & New Media*, March 27, 2024, 15274764241236942. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764241236942>.
- Netflix Staff. "How Judd Apatow Mined Quarantine for Comedy to Make 'The Bubble.'" About Netflix, March 30, 2022. <https://about.netflix.com/news/judd-apatow-making-the-bubble>.
- Sakoui, Anousha. "Hollywood to Drop COVID Safety Measures as Federal Emergency Declaration Ends." *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 2023, sec. Hollywood Inc. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-03-30/hollywood-to-drop-covid-safety-measures-as-federal-local-restrictions-end>.
- VanArendonk, Kathryn. "How Superstore Leaned Into a Pandemic It Couldn't Ignore." *Vulture*, January 22, 2021. <https://www.vulture.com/article/superstore-season-6-covid-storyline-coronavirus-sitcom-storytelling.html>.

## Appendix A: List of Participants

**Amy** – *Show B* – A recent film student in 2020, COVID Compliance for *Show B* was her first industry work. She stayed on for two seasons and was able to find more work in the industry through the networking opportunities provided by *Show B* and was still actively working at the time of our interviews.

**Carrie** – *Show A* – Carrie started industry work as a COVID Compliance officer on a handful of reality programs, but our interview focused entirely on *Show A*, which was her last PA job prior to leaving Texas and, to date, the industry.

**Erica** – *Show B, Show C* – Erica started working on *Show C* through her partner, Steven, out of necessity. She was then able to establish herself on *Show B* through that position and was still actively working during our interviews, with plans to continue to do so, having found her niche and an effective professional network.

**Liz** – *Show A* – Liz held PA positions prior to COVID, worked in COVID Compliance in reality TV production prior to *Show A*, and as the solitary CCO on a small independent film following *Show A*. Liz was still working in the industry at the time of our interviews.

**Marie** – *Show A* – Marie fairly well established in the Austin area prior to COVID Compliance, but the conditions on *Show A* “radicalized her.” Since wrap, she’s been heavily involved with Production Assistants United, the fledgling union for film and TV PAs.

**Nicole** – *Show A* – A recent college graduate with a minor in film, Nicole saw *Show A* as a way to get a foot in the door in the local industry. Since wrapping that production, Nicole shifted her focus to working in post-production sound, in addition to working part-time for a local university.

**Steven** – *Show C* – Had previously worked in production prior to moving to Texas but wanted more stability from a 9-5 job. Steven had to come back to the industry out of necessity during 2020 but was “not stoked” to do so, he stayed on for 1.5 seasons before finding another stable job.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Background

- Tell me about your entry into the industry?
  - Was the COVID department your first job in production?
- What made you want to work in film?
- How long have you tried to break into the industry?
- Did you view the COVID department as a way in?

### COVID-specific production

- Where did you work during the pandemic?
- What productions did you work on?
  - Was that run through a company or in-studio?
- Tell me a little about the social dynamics of the set?
- What were the general feelings toward your department from the rest of the crew?
  - Did those feelings vary based on position? How did the talent interact with the COVID department versus below-the-line workers?
- What were your positions and your primary responsibilities?
- Was there any indication that working in the COVID department would potentially open the door to further industry work?
- Did your department ever have to shut things down because of a positive test?
  - What was that reaction like? What happened there?
- Can you share one story or experience that still sticks out from this era?

## Post-COVID

- When did your last COVID department production wrap?
- Have you been able to stay in the industry since then?
- What would you say the biggest issue in the industry is today?