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ORGANIZING CREATIVITY: A DESCRIPTION AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

OF COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION ON THE SET OF A

PRIME-TIME TELEVISION DRAMA

by

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a dissertation submitted by

Kara Jolliff Gould

This dissertation has been read by each member of the following supervisory committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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FINAL READING APPROVAL

To the Graduate Council of the University of Utah:

I have read the dissertation of _____Kara Jolliff Gould_____ in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographic style are consistent and acceptable; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the supervisory committee and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

October 3, 2006
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ABSTRACT

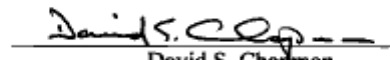This dissertation examines communication and collaboration among members of a film production crew producing a U.S. prime-time television series. It employs a social action approach to studying the daily collaborations of lower-level production workers engaged in the production process. It is a response to existing scholarly work on the production process, which typically has been approached through interviews with those in the upper echelons of the hierarchy, such as producers and directors.

The study focuses on the collaborative efforts of ordinary film production workers, despise scientific management's role in deemphasizing the significance of their everyday creative contributions. It also documents the typical shooting day for a film crew shooting episodic television at the turn of the 21st century.

The project provides empirical evidence that despite the hierarchical, scientifically managed structure of contemporary film production crews in the U.S., crew members at lower levels of the hierarchy can and do make substantial creative contributions to the final product produced. As importantly, it also shows *how* crew members are able to accomplish this work given the constraints and structure of management. Through the use of inter- and intradepartmental creative collaborative circles, some with fixed and some with flexible memberships, workers are able to collaborate with others throughout the hierarchy to improve the final product, increase production efficiency, or both.

This study has a number of implications for the television and film industries, as well as media production education, and any scientifically managed creative organization. Experienced lower-level production workers often have a wealth of knowledge and expertise beyond their own crafts from which the entire production can benefit. A clear understanding of how collaborative circles work in production settings can facilitate increased collaboration regardless of position and can encourage innovation in production.

Educators in television and film production can use this study to help students learn how some film production workers collaborate creatively with one another despite a strict organizational hierarchy. Future research may compare the practices of other media production crews to the one studied here, and may also explore potential differences in collaboration between union and nonunion crews.

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ACRONYMS AND TERMS USED

Acronyms

AC	Assistant camera
AD	Assistant director
CGI	Computer-generated images
DGA	Director's Guild of America
DP	Director of photography
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
HDTV	High definition television
HMI	Hydrargyrum medium arc iodide; a flicker-free light source balanced to match daylight color temperature
MOW	Movie(s) of the week
MPPC	Motion Picture Patents Company
OS	Over-the-shoulder shot
PA	Production assistant
POV	Point-of-view: a shot as though seeing through the eyes of a character.
SFX	Special effects; for example rocking an airplane to simulate turbulence; a device for clouds, etc.
UPM	Unit production manager

Terms Used

Best boy: Assistant to gaffer (head electrician).

Boom operator: Holds the boom microphone at the end of a large pole; the microphone is held above actors' heads and out of camera range.

Call sheet(s): See Appendix F.

Closed set: A set that is closed to visitors.

Craft worker: a worker skilled in a specific task in filmmaking such as working with props, electric, etc.

Day players: Workers hired for a single day at a time.

Departments: (See separate listings, chapter 4.)
        Art department
        Camera department
        Electric department
        Grip department
        Hair/makeup department
        Locations department
        Operations department
        Production department
        Props department
        Sound department
        Special effects (SFX) department
        Transportation department
        Wardrobe department
        Other departments

Gaffer: "A lighting electrician on a motion-picture or television set" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 2003). Typically, the gaffer is the head electrician on the set.

Green screen: refers to the electronic chroma key process in which a particular background color (such as green or blue) is used during shooting, then electronically replaced by another background image in post production.

Grip: "Stagehand" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 2003).

Key grip: The head of the grip department.

Mic grip: Microphone stagehand.

Props: Short for properties. If an actor handles an item in a scene, it is a prop; things that are not handled are set dressing(s).

Second second assistant director (AD). Assists the second AD. See Figure 1 (page 73 herein) showing the hierarchy in the production department.

Set dresser: A person who "dresses" the set (pictures on the walls, flowers on the mantel, etc.). This is different from the props person.

Setup: "[4]a. A camera position from which a scene is filmed; also the footage taken from one camera position; [4]b. The final arrangement of the scenery and properties for a scene of a theatrical or cinematic production" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 2003).

Sides: See Appendix F.

Sitcom: Situation comedy (such as *I Love Lucy)*.

Steadicam™: A portable camera support device that has a large mechanical arm
attached to a brace. Allows the camera operator free movement while providing
a steady shot. For example, the camera operator may need to walk backwards
while shooting in order to face the actors.

Take: "(Noun): A scene filmed or televised at one time without stopping the camera"
(*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 2003).

"Wrap": Completion of shooting.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The light is low. The clamoring of production equipment accompanies the commencement of a new "setup"[1]— film and lighting equipment must be rapidly moved from one set to another. The second-story sound stage is a virtual obstacle course, with cables snaking across the black wooden floor. There are four different sets on this stage today, and at least one more in another building south of town. All were constructed for this single episode of a weekly dramatic television series. It will take 12 days to shoot.

Supervisors speak quiet commands to the gaffers (electricians) and grips (stagehands) through short-range radios, who listen through earpieces as they work. They're working to light a male "extra" sitting in what looks to be a 10-foot rectangular box with a small cut-out window on either side. Upon closer inspection, a faux aircraft instrument panel may be seen inside, along with two low wooden benches, one near the instrument panel, another further back. A child's picture book lays open nearby; clearly visible are drawings and photos of a 1920s aircraft. The crew is preparing to reenact portions of Charles Lindbergh's first transatlantic flight.

The 35mm film camera is moved into position, as electricians, grips, camera operator and assistants discuss the setup with the director and director of photography

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[1] For a definition of this and other terms used throughout, see Acronyms and Terms Used.

(DP). The control panel must work! It must show the correct time and altitude. Additional crew members are assigned to monitor correct settings as the first assistant director (AD) tries to figure what time the clock should read. New York time? Paris? What time was it when Lindbergh said he grew tired, hallucinated? How many miles had he traveled? What time did he start? How fast was the plane? The AD hastily does the math aloud.

A special effects supervisor discusses with the grips how the rectangular box may be rocked to simulate aeronautic turbulence as the actor playing the pilot lurches inside. A large fan blows dry ice, cloudlike, past one side of the box as the grips practice and refine their virtual turbulence. They take turns, some moving the box, others standing back to see how it looks. The director walks over and silently nods his approval.

The camera is ready now, the lights are set, all is quiet as the guest star appears for a final, brief rehearsal before shooting. The actors, camera operator, and his assistants rehearse as the grips violently rock the "aircraft." The camera is positioned to capture the actor's right profile through the "aircraft window," and painted flats on the opposite side of the plane evidence blue skies behind the "clouds." The rehearsal is finished, and shooting begins. The grips rock the box more violently than ever. "Not so much! Cut the turbulence!" The director shouts, and the rocking lessens in the next take as the clouds continue to stream by. The film is cut, the camera readied for a reverse angle on the other side of the aircraft, and shooting begins again. After 2½ hours, the aircraft shots are finally finished, ahead of schedule. All seem satisfied as the company begins setup in a small, completely fabricated but strikingly realistic set dressed as an opulent hotel room of the 1920s.

What they don't know is that they will be shooting all of those airplane sequences again. One of the producers doesn't like the clouds. The clouds must go. The director is irritated with the absentee producer. But with actors and crew, he is patient. They will all stay late to finish.

Statement of the Problem

The film and television production process involves the creative and collaborative efforts of professionals performing a variety of creative, organizational, and technical duties. "There are so many different people involved in actual production," write Lindheim and Blum (1991), "that their roles are often confused or overlooked" (p. 40).

The most popular video and film production textbooks (Burrows, Gross, Foust, & Wood, 2000; Compesi & Gomez, 2006; Mamer, 2005; Zettl, 2004, 2006) explain the individual function of each video or film production position, but their major focus is on equipment—how each piece of equipment works, and how to use it. As an educator teaching television production to college students, I have realized that one of the greatest challenges for students involves learning about these roles, and how to work together creatively on a production. Students report, and often complain, that the collaborative aspects of production are the most challenging (Gould, 1998). In textbooks, the topic of how crew members collaborate creatively on a production is typically addressed in just a few pages if at all (Mamer, 2005, and Zettl, 2004, make the best efforts, at two and 4½ pages, respectively).

To complicate matters, television programs in the U.S. not broadcast live are shot on either film or video; the shooting styles and crew structures from each medium

are different, since they grew from different industrial traditions. Thus, different production textbooks favor different traditions, and offer descriptions based upon those traditions. None of the textbooks cited above offer detailed explanations of both traditions, or how the traditions have begun to converge, even though job titles and crew positions traditionally used in film production (such as grip) have crossed over into the lexicon of video production.

The shooting style of video production grew from that used to create early live, and later (after 1955) taped television programs. This studio-based style had evolved from radio production when the major radio broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) moved their entertainment programming to television in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Thus, crew structure and management for such productions resembled radio crews, and this tradition lives on television today in live-produced news, sports, special programming (such as awards programs, comedic and musical specials) and taped programs such as game shows and reality-based entertainment programming, daytime drama, and, until recently, situation comedies.

Programs for television shot on film, however, utilize production techniques of a different tradition—one developed and perfected by the U.S. motion picture industry prior to and during that industry's famed "studio era," traditionally taught in film schools but not in radio/TV or broadcasting departments of U.S. colleges and universities.

Since the development of high definition television (HDTV) and video in Japan in the 1980s, the film and television industries have been moving toward a technological convergence; many professionals today find high definition video comparable in quality to film. The development of digital nonlinear editing, pioneered

by George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic and later sold to the founders of Avid Technologies, Inc., began impacting the broadcast and video production industries in the early 1990s, and soon was adopted by many the film production industry as well as film schools.

The program I observed for this study was shot on film, but was edited digitally on the Avid Film Composer to allow for easier insertion of visual effects. Video equipment known as "video assist" was used to provide instant playback capabilities, so recently-shot scenes could be evaluated before film stock was developed and digitized. It should be made clear, however, that the production process I observed and analyzed for this study was a film production process utilizing video for instant playback and postproduction. The film production process was one adapted for television in the 1950s by film studios looking to profit from the new medium of television (Hawes, 2002).

Textbooks are not alone in giving the collaborative aspects of the film and television production process short shrift. Academics have largely ignored the media production process as an object of humanistic and scientific study (although see Lynch, 1973; Nielsen, 1985; Pekurny, 1980; Saferstein, 1991).

Why this dearth of inquiry into the daily collaborations of film production workers? It may have to do with a management style popular in the early 20th century known as scientific management (Taylor, 1911). With its focus on efficiency and a division of labor, this approach de-emphasizes the creative roles of lower-level workers, while glorifying the contributions of producers and directors. Once this management style was applied to filmmaking, producers became "managers," and directors, "supervisors." Creative decisions were attributed to those in management positions. This trend is reflected in the scope and focus of much of the journalist and academic

literature related to creative aspects of film and television production. Such works tend to focus not on the contributions of lower level workers, but on creative decision making by producers, directors, and occasionally cinematographers. This lack of regard for the contributions of lower level production workers was reflected in the puzzlement of the publicity director of the production I observed for this study, when she wondered aloud why I needed to continue observing on-set week after week. "Doesn't everyone just do the same thing every day?" she asked.

This study will answer her question with a clear-cut "No." On set, an observer is faced with a myriad of activities. Production team members work together simultaneously to create solutions to problems while working to complete their particular assigned duties. Routine tasks must often be performed in new ways to fit changing circumstances in scripts, weather, talent, available equipment, and so forth. This organizational complexity provides an extraordinary opportunity for studying creativity in a cooperative endeavor. While producers, directors, and writers often fight over the right to "authorship" of television programs and films, I argue that such works are authored not just jointly between producers, writers, and directors, but *collectively* among the production crew members. As Mamer (2005) writes:

> The major tenet . . . that the director is the "author" of the film . . . has led to a significant misunderstanding about the role of the supporting crew members. It would seem unnecessary to repeat the cliché that filmmaking is a collaborative art, except that few people truly understand what it means: Every crew member is faced with decisions large and small that contribute many elements to a film. If they do not bring some measure of creativity to these decisions, the project as a whole will suffer. (p. 309)

Purpose of the Study

This is a qualitative study of the daily workings of a film production crew shooting a popular weekly drama for network television. How is it that film crews for television and motion pictures work? How do crew members work together creatively within a hierarchical crew structure? As noted above, media production textbooks offer much technical information, but very little instruction as to how crew members actually work together to accomplish the production of a film or television program. The purpose of this study is to help fill the void of scholarly works which address such questions, and to do so through the observation and analysis of the daily workings of a production crew shooting film for television.

It intends to contribute to existing theories of collaboration and organizational work groups by examining what creative collaboration means for a film production company, and to do so in three significant ways.

First, the study looks at the film production process from a historical perspective and considers the early history of current work practices. With whom did the earliest filmmakers work? When and how did film crews evolve from the cameraman and director/camera approaches, to a full, scientifically managed division of labor? While Staiger (1985d) points out that the "assembly line" approach to production could not be applied strictly to filmmaking (as it was to the production of a mechanical product such as Henry Ford's Model "T"), the process was conducted and approached in that management tradition to the greatest extent possible. How was scientific management implemented in the film industry in the early days?

Next, the study describes the typical workday in the shooting phase of production for a popular weekly television drama shot in the U.S. around the turn of the

21st century, and includes a description of departments and crew positions. This description includes episodic writings that provide insight into crew members' everyday work and sensemaking activities, and sets the stage for the presentation of data and data analysis.

How *do* crew members work collaboratively to manage the creative process and achieve production goals? What does the term "creativity" mean for this film production company, and who is expected (and allowed) to engage in the creative collaborative process? What meanings do crew members have for their jobs, and how do they make sense of their work as they endeavor to produce a television drama as a team (while still within a traditional, hierarchical management model)? What are the work performances that are expected of them, and that they expect from one another? How *do* crew members work collaboratively to manage the creative process and achieve production goals?

The study draws from field note data to answer these questions through the analysis of observed film crew interactions and collaborations on set. The analysis of film crew communication includes a description and analysis of basic rules and practices with the group's organizational communicative processes, and also considers the role that the hierarchical, scientifically-managed film crew structure plays in the collaborative process. It maintains that despite the traditional hierarchical crew structure, production workers at all levels contribute to the creative process during shooting, and it posits the notion that these contributions occur through creative, collaborative groups or "work circles" which are described in detail.

Results will offer insights into crew member creativity, collaboration, work team, and management issues in media production organizations. They may aid in the

development of teaching techniques that will help students learn to function creatively and collaboratively within their own student work groups, and eventually, media production organizations. The study will also have implications for any organizations in which members regularly engage in collaborative creative work

Project Overview

From its inception, the main goal of this project has been to study the communicative, creative, and collaborative organizational practices of a film production crew. To accomplish those ends, as background preparation, I attended a week-long seminar at the Maine Film Workshops on unit production management and first assistant directing. Knowledge gained was critical to my fieldwork experience, because it allowed me to gain information and knowledge related specifically to film production crews. As a former video freelancer and college instructor of television production, I was already familiar with production techniques and approaches specific to shooting video for television. My time in Maine allowed me to broaden my perspective to include the management processes, skills, and crafts traditionally used in shooting film-for-television.

Following my actual fieldwork, however, I felt the need to explore the organizational history of the film crew as a way to inform my own sensemaking activities about film crew members and what they do. After an exhaustive search, I found that while many books have been written describing the typical responsibilities of various film crew members, fewer focused on the study of how motion picture production crews developed and evolved over time. Those that do, however (Bordwell, Thompson, & Staiger, 1985; Kindem, 1982), offer significant insight into this evolution,