

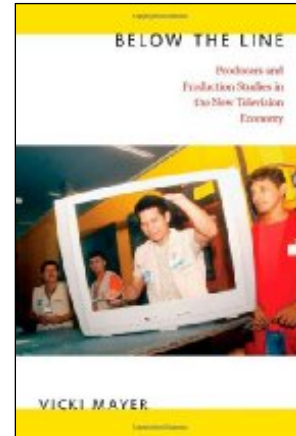
Vicki Mayer, **Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 241 pp., \$19.88 (paperback).

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Vicki Mayer's most recent contribution to television production studies consists of four case studies that problematize the received definition of the producer that has long structured the discourse of labor in studies of media production (think Jerry Bruckheimer, Aaron Spelling, and Joss Whedon). In *Below the Line*, Mayer traces the definition of the media producer to the postwar privilege assigned to creative and professional work, persuasively situating the definition of the film producer as a creative professional within the broader context of postwar neoliberalism. In the introductory chapter, Mayer draws on seminal studies of the film industry from the 1920s through the 1950s, such as those by Rosten and Powdermaker, to illustrate the explicit hierarchy of labor among the film industry's stars, executives, technicians, and crew, and which is embodied in "the line," a budgeting convention that distinguishes between creative/professional and other roles. To be "above the line" is to be a creative professional, as well as the traditional object of media production studies. With the emergence of television and studies of the television industry in the 1960s and 1970s, film studies' focus on the creative professional was carried over. Likewise, managerial approaches to the industry that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s dovetailed with—and served to exacerbate—distinctions between types of labor that could be classed as intellectual, creative, or managerial, and types of labor that could not.



This entrenched labor hierarchy, Mayer argues, remains relevant in the "new" media economy, with its "propensity to generate new work spaces and times; its disappearing boundaries between subjectivities and commodities; and its continual incorporation of new people who will work freely on its behalf" (p. 3). The entry of nonprofessional creative participants in the television economy in the form of consumer-producers, reality stars, do-it-yourselfers, fans, and others does little to upset the hierarchy in which the creative professional remains the referent of value. Mayer's project in *Below the Line* is to "deconstruct the monopolies of creativity and professionalism that have structured the producer as ontologically different from all the other people who serve the television industry's symbolic and material economies" (p. 3).

Mayer's studies of television-set assemblers, soft-core cameramen, reality-program casters, and volunteers on television regulatory committees not only draw critical attention to the individuals whose roles, creativities, and values are frequently overlooked, but argues that their contributions to the industry can, and ought to be, viewed as creative and professional. In the studies that follow, Mayer explores the emotional and creative labors of television workers, as well as the process through which their labor has been rendered invisible to the industry and to the academy.

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The first study in the collection explores the labor of male and female television-set assemblers in Manaus, Brazil. It is a provocative start that establishes Mayer's ethnographic approach (participant-observation, with a healthy attention to her own role as a creative producer in the context of the academy), as well as her terms: creativity, identity work, invisible labor. Drawing on Joas' theory of creative action, Mayer interrogates common-sense ideas of creativity and reminds the reader that what is considered creative often has more to do with social and economic value than authenticity, artfulness, or imagination. Among the television-set assemblers with whom Mayer interacts, creative action is evident in both the physical labor of the body—which must contend with repetitive stress, physical discomfort, premiums on speed, and complex coordination—and the invisible labor through which the assemblers negotiate surveillance, boredom, social relations and hierarchies. By examining the ways in which some forms of creativity are sanctioned and privileged, Mayer lays bare the mechanisms through which other forms of labor are made invisible, stripped of their social and economic value. By highlighting the invisible intellectual labor of these workers, performing assembly tasks far from Hollywood, Mayer establishes the merits of her case in its most extreme context.

In subsequent chapters, Mayer applies the same critical lens to workers whose roles in the industry are undermined by their inability to inhabit the title "producer." In the second of four studies, Mayer revisits the work of mostly male, soft-core video producers, which was the subject of her 2005 article in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*: "Soft core in TV time: The political economy of a cultural trend." In this chapter, Mayer attends to the casualization of work in the television industry and the various discourses and practices of identity and professionalism that define videographers in the world of soft-core video production of the *Girls Gone Wild* variety.

The third case study examines the role of individuals who work to cast reality programs. The exploration of the caster's role in creating the reified commodity that is a reality star, as well as the assessment of this portion of the industry as an "interactive economy that puts consumers to work in their own commodification," is articulate and convincing (p. 108). The caster's role as a market researcher and demographic analyst is contrasted with the gendered emotional labor required to exact the required emotional personality and performance from reality-program participants. Mayer does a revealing job of exploring the subtleties of reality casting, and its convergence with advertising and marketing. However, the claim that casters serve directly as sponsors is less persuasive. In fact, Mayer's insistence on referring to these workers as program sponsors somewhat interrupts the otherwise elegant articulation of casters' work as complex, creative, and professional.

The final case study investigates regulatory labor, particularly that of citizen regulators at the local level, whose volunteer efforts are both uncompensated and largely unrecognized. The study draws on the author's own experiences as a regulator in two cities. It is in this chapter that a full appreciation of Mayer's ethnographic methodology comes into view, as she details her overlapping regulatory roles as an academic, a woman, a Caucasian, a consumer, and a citizen. The chapter deftly intertwines a history of television regulation, the emergence of local regulators, and representational politics as local regulators in the 1990s began to be charged with the responsibility of serving as "the visible proxies of an invisible public" (p. 149).

In each of the book's chapters, the question of whose labor should count in studies of television production is addressed from a unique angle, but taken together the overall text provides a clear and consistent response: a definition of creative production that attends carefully to invisible labor, to emotional labor, and to the hierarchies that structure their value permits, even requires, television studies to reconsider what it means to be a producer. Mayer's redefinition of the producer as "someone whose labor, however small, contributes to [television] production," invites scholars to acknowledge and address more and different producers, and promotes opportunities to advance the cause of social justice for workers in television and other media industries (p. 179). The case studies also provide useful templates for how such work might be undertaken. Mayer's great contribution to television-production studies is in nudging the field toward a more inclusive and coherent definition of its objects of study. *Below the Line* provides a thoughtful example of just what stands to be gained by such a move.