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Re-locating Media Production

Helen Morgan Parmett

University of Vermont

Scott Rodgers

Birkbeck, University of London

Correspondence for this article should be addressed to:

Dr Scott Rodgers, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, 43 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury, London, WC1H 0PD, United Kingdom, Tel: +44 (0) 2030 738 370, Email: s.rodgers@bbk.ac.uk

and

Dr Helen Morgan Parmett, Department of Theatre, University of Vermont, 475-479 Main St., Burlington, VT 05405, USA, Tel: +1 802 233 8726, Email: hxmorgan@uvm.edu

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Abstract:

It was arguably easier in the past to pin down media production in medium- or content-specific locales, such as the studio, the newsroom or the set. Contemporary processes of media convergence have dramatically opened up the 'what' and 'where' of media production to include all manner of quotidian practices and ephemeral places. This special issue however pushes back against the idea that contemporary landscapes of media production have been flattened. Each of the articles collected here accounts for significant transformations in media practices nearer to those which we would conventionally associate with media production, yet which are also potentially left behind in the rush to describe, theorize, celebrate and critique trends such as 'produsage', 'prosumption' and participatory media culture. Taken together, the papers in this special issue provide new insights into the locations and re-locations of contemporary media production across new and under-researched liminal and peripheral geographies, and around new and unexpected objects.

Introduction

It was arguably easier in the past to pin down the locations of media production. Musicologists, for example, might have found their subjects and objects in the recording studio or at the live venue; journalism researchers in the newsroom or on the beat; film theorists at the film set or in the cutting room; and so on. This was the case because media production spaces and places have traditionally been understood as relatively medium- as well as content-specific. The material and technical qualities of a given medium were seen to tie production practices to specific sites. And the content or products of such practical sites – albums, news and films, to follow the above examples – were relatively easy to identify. Our contemporary moment, however, is defined by a series of processes, often grouped under the heading of media convergence, which put into question such certainties about the what and where of media production. For one, the technical means of media creation and distribution – e.g. recording equipment, editing software, online networks and platforms – have become cheaper, easier to use, and, in principle, more available to a wider range of potential contributors. These trends have, to an extent, eroded the technical and industrial specificity of previously-distinct mediums. At a more general level, the longer-term economic restructuring of advanced capitalist economies has seen the scope of media and cultural production expand. While media production might have once been near-synonymous with the making of traditional media forms such as films, news, music or advertising, today it can also include creative labor around a wide range of material and immaterial commodities and environments, especially as they cohere around practices of branding (see Lash and Lury, 2007). The spaces of media production have in other words been re-located: across new and as yet under-researched liminal and peripheral geographies but, also, around new and unexpected objects.

This special issue considers the locations and re-locations of contemporary media production, both in terms of its geographies and objects. There has been a range of work focused on the emergence of new media practices and locations taken on by what have traditionally been understood as audiences or consumers. In this rich extant literature, the rise of new productive media practices has been described in terms such as participatory media culture (Jenkins, 2006), 'mass cultural production' (Manovich, 2009), 'produsage' (Bruns, 2008) and 'prosumption' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Encouragingly, this research has directed overdue attention to distinctly quotidian and sometimes ephemeral forms and locales of media production. Less encouragingly, they have sometimes implicitly subscribed to what Couldry (2015) has termed the myth of 'us' alongside the predicted decline of 'the media' (see also Couldry, 2009). The problem with subscribing to such views is not just that they seem to posit a naïve vision of future media production unfolding across a flat space in which all are equal contributors. It is also that the prominence of such themes sidelines significant parallel transformations in media practices nearer to those which we would associate with more conventional media production – even if we update and expand our definition of media production to reflect current technological and industrial conditions. It is the spatialities of this latter sense of media production – in all its multiplicities, amorphousness and dispersion – that this special issue puts front and center.

The contributions to this special issue all have a shared orientation to the inherent and perhaps growing interrelationships of media production and spatial production. On one level, this is simply to say that they all share an 'environmental' view of media (e.g. see: McQuire, 2008; Morgan-Parmett and Rodgers, forthcoming; Rodgers et al., 2014): that is, where media emerge

in and through environments, situated in place and extending across space, and recursively constituting those places and spaces in the process. Pointedly, the contributors steer clear of seeing media as an exterior representation of, or technological influence on, such geographies. Yet on another level, speaking of spatialized interrelationships of *production* points more specifically to processes of making, assembling, creating, designing and building; and, in conjunction, forms of expertise, specialization, organization, inclusion and exclusion. It is on this level that contributions to this special issue go beyond analyzing the spatial dynamics of media production imagined discretely, as more-or-less directly anchored to a defined media product or locale, towards more radically and broadly contextualized accounts of the media-spatial production interface (cf. Pratt, 2004). In important ways, this sense of 'production' aligns with Stuart Hall's (1980) well-known encoding/decoding model, and, in particular its critique of linear models of communication. Following Hall, media production locales are not sites from which messages depart on a unidirectional journey from sender to receiver, but, rather, are 'moments' in the circulation of media forms embedded in the conditions of complex, situated practical and material milieus (see also Lee and LiPuma, 2002). In this way, the special issue lays the groundwork for both more practical as well as theoretical ways in which we might study, conceptualize, and parse out the stakes of contemporary media production spaces.

In this editorial introduction, we present three intersecting themes that the articles in this issue address. First, the articles in this special issue point to the importance of doubly displacing media production. That is, displacing media production from its traditionally-assumed geographical centers, and at the same time, from a narrowly-cast image of media production spaces anchored directly to specific mediums, content or industrial conditions. On the basis of this double

displacement, the articles in this special issue secondly provide us with contrasting local contextualizations of media production, which at the same time can be seen as partaking in what Appadurai (1995) calls the production of locality. This relational sense of locality in turn calls attention to a final theme: the ways in which the production of media localities also involves interfacing with, and helping bring about, translocal spaces of media production and their concomitant circuits of expertise, institutions, finance and digital and networked infrastructures.

Doubly displacing media production spaces

A key theme in the television- and film-focused 'production studies' literature (e.g. Banks et al., 2015; Mayer et al., 2009) is the multifaceted dispersal of media production through the transnationalizing media industries. Many of the articles in this special issue also draw attention to the dispersal of media production, across what might be seen as more 'peripheral' sites or locales. However, the contributions here go beyond familiar accounts of 'runaway production' (e.g. Miller, 2001). Rather than presuming a particular center or 'media capital' (Curtin, 2003) from which production runs away, such as Hollywood, the contributions here bear a closer resemblance to what McNutt (2015) describes as 'mobile production': an analysis of the contingent, localized labor conditions of media production, and more broadly, the encounters or negotiations between professionalized media practices and particular places (see also Landman, 2009). Doris Posch's article, for example, provides a revealing analysis of Haitian filmmaking cultures, little known even within literatures focused on Caribbean cinema. Her close account of the Ciné Institute in Jacamèl details a local filmic culture emerging not from offshored production, but somewhat paradoxically, from the destruction and upheaval of Haiti's 2010

earthquake (as well as more recently Hurricane Matthew in 2016), the subsequent international media attention, and intervention of transnational humanitarian aid. Here – and in Donatella Della Ratta's analysis of the remixed and remediated Damascene Village, and Fabien Cante's account of proximity radio *animateurs* in Abidjan – not only do we see the geographical dispersal of contemporary media production on display, but also its attendant, and largely under-theorized, spatial complexities and diversities. What emerges is a picture of how and why seemingly 'peripheral' production locales emerge in ways that exceed any simple industrial rationalization.

The contributions to this special issue also, however, speak to a displacement of media production spaces at a finer grain than the global periphery. They also involve a displacement from an image of media production spaces as relatively confined to specific mediums, content or industrial conditions. As Fabien Cante suggests in his article, if we want understand media production in all its complexity, we need to 'step outside' of the preconceived categories and taken-for-granted locations in which we tend to place it. His ethnographic study emphasizes the wider context of proximity radio broadcasters' working practices in and around Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. He at once steps outside of the limiting normative expectations placed on 'community radio' (by researchers and international agencies alike), and at the same time, the limiting expectations that these practitioners should primarily realize their work within the studio. Here, the use of the name *animateur* for proximate radio practitioners in Abidjan becomes clearer: these practitioners perform media work both in and outside the studio, on and off the job; they animate in the sense of enlivening social situations. Media production in this case is not just the creation of radio programs within a fixed production locale, but, rather, it is a series of embodied

encounters and sociable involvements in everyday urban life. A similar set of themes is evident in Helen Morgan Parmett's article on the US television series *Portlandia*. The increasingly common practice of on-location filming involves interfacing with urban locations not only via industrial practices, but also through becoming more deeply ensconced and embedded in the particular neighborhoods in which filming takes place, off as well as on the job. These examples help us open up what we mean when we speak of the spaces of media production: that it might include activities, sociabilities and emotional involvements that operate around the edges of those directly related to the production of particular contents or forms.

Producing media locality

If the contributions to this special issue see media production as bound up with the production of space, one of the clearest ways in which this unfolds is via what we might call the production of media locality. Here we draw inspiration from Appadurai's (1995) conceptualization of locality as a socially-produced space through which action is made meaningful. Media production practices can be seen as interrelated with the production of locality not only in how these practices become attuned to localized conditions, but also in how production can define and even bound places, however temporarily, *for* media production – as spaces distinct from non-production settings (cf. Couldry, 2000). This is important since, after a long history of associating media with the erosion of the local (e.g. Harvey, 1989) or a declining sense of place (e.g. Meyrowitz, 1986), contemporary media and cultural production is increasingly seen as interwoven with, and even revalorizing, the making of locations – for example, in the ties between creative industries and particular places (Pratt, 2004), the infrastructures of global

television (Parks, 2005), or new 'locational' functionalities in Internet-based services (Wilson, 2012).

Each contribution to this special issue draws attention to media production through specific locations, places or contexts. Yet in so doing, the articles are not so much concerned with how production practices encounter or adapt to a pre-given or fixed locale. Rather, they attend to how media production helps constitute the local and vice versa. This is clear in Alexander Gutzmer's conceptual discussion of the new Axel Springer publishing house in Berlin. Here, architecture itself becomes a medium through which a media firm can at once spatially order transformations in its own work processes, particularly those emerging through digitalization, and at the same time, display these changing media productivities to the urban public via architectural aesthetics. Scott Rodgers touches on the spatialized production of media locality from a different angle, via a case study of UK charity Nesta's 'Destination Local' program. As Rodgers argues, this program partook in the production of locality not only in funding the localized experiments of hyperlocal media practitioners, but also in helping cultivate a hyperlocal field 'space' in which such practitioners could take up positions, and towards which they could orient themselves. Here, we find the production of media locality less in the direct production of hyperlocal content, but rather more in how such media practices are enabled at a distance.

In this way, analyzing the production of media locality demands that we think through the interrelationships between media and other institutionalized practices also trained on the local. More specifically, in emphasizing media locality, the articles here suggest a need to address the particular ways in which media intervenes into struggles over locality itself. As Helen Morgan

Parmett points out, the production of the US television series *Portlandia* is implicated in more than just making representations of Portland, Oregon. It is also an example of how on-location filming practices converge with practices of urban regeneration, rebranding and entrepreneurial competition in the city. Not only are localities like Portland attractive to television producers seeking affordable and 'authentic' places to film; but, also, in an era of urbanism that privileges 'creativity' and the creative industries, various local institutions and communities are actively competing to attract, or sometimes repel, these productions. Doris Posch's article observes a similar media-institutional interface, albeit one emerging from a radically divergent locale with altogether different social, political and cultural stakes. Her examination of the Ciné Institute in Jacamèl throws focus onto a case in which specific networks of humanitarian aid, expertise and international film distribution posited filmmaking as a localized solution to post-disaster recovery in Haiti, not unproblematically. Fabien Cante's paper similarly highlights the importance of international aid, alongside municipal subsidies, for community radio in Abidjan; while Scott Rodgers' discussion of Nesta's Destination Local program emphasizes the growing role of 'informational philanthropy' in funding digital media innovation. The authors in this issue therefore effectively localize media production in-situ, or, in other words, in and through other localizations emanating from cultural politics, institutions, regulation and circuits of funding.

Producing media translocality

The production of media locality, if we follow Appadurai (1995), means conceptualizing the local as relationally produced, rather than something existing a priori. Local places – as Massey (1994) famously argued – are inherently assemblages of *translocal* trajectories and forces. Thus,

the production of media locality will always already involve extensions towards, and circulations through, other locales. The third central theme in this special issue might then be described as the production of media translocality. This is especially evident in the articles conceptualizing the production spatialities that emerge through computational and networked media cultures. Donatella Della Ratta's article provides a rich account of the digital remix and remediation of a specific, analogue site of media production: a purpose-built, theme park Damascene Village, used as a set for *Bab al hara*, a Syrian TV series. After this Damascene Village briefly changed hands in 2012 between anti-al Asad rebels and the Syrian army, both documented their occupations with fan-fiction-style YouTube videos that reenacted themes from *Bab al hara*. In so doing, this specific site of media production, previously seen as a point of origin for unidirectional television transmission, took on a newly 'expanded' existence. Della Ratta describes this expansion as an online after-life, or 'onlife', made possible by the intersection of an event of disruptive violence, and the translocal and networked spaces of web 2.0.

Scott Rodgers' article points to a somewhat different kind of expanded media production space. His study of hyperlocal media in the UK context suggests that, although such media production practices all focus to some degree on the 'very local' (usually via emergent digital technologies and networked platforms), it is not primarily this shared local orientation which affords hyperlocal media legibility and coherence. Rather, it is a shared orientation towards a hyperlocal field space. Perhaps counter-intuitively, at least in the UK context, hyperlocal media are constituted as much by translocality as locality: the term hyperlocal primarily acts as an anchoring concept for a translocal space of converging social fields (and associated technical ecologies) all implicitly committed to ideals of localism. Doris Posch's account of the Ciné

Institute also stresses its inherent translocality. As a film school, its conditions of possibility rest on both international philanthropic benefaction and expertise, and at the same time, the relatively novel technical possibility for filmic content, animating a very particular local context and culture, to be circulated across global networks of distribution and exhibition. Likewise, Alexander Gutzmer provides an account of recent developments in major media production facilities and offices that have emerged through the socio-technical interstices of globalized architectural knowledge, computationally-enabled design, media change, and celebrity architects and firms (cf. Ericson and Riegert, 2010). This kind of translocal duality, of the social and technical, is present to varied degrees in all of the articles in this special issue.

Conclusion

Fabien Cante's appeal for media and cultural studies to 'step outside' of the categories and locations in which media production is assumed to take place encapsulates the spirit of this special issue aptly. Once this move is made, we can begin to think more critically about *what* we might count as media production, and at the same time *where* we might locate such media practices. Contemporary media and cultural studies has in some senses already dramatically opened up such 'what' and 'where' questions. To a perhaps unprecedented extent, 'media production' broadly defined takes place today through a wide range of quotidian practices and ephemeral locales. Our focus in this special issue, however, is more so directed towards that which is potentially left behind in the rush to describe, theorize, celebrate and critique trends such as 'produsage', 'prosumption' and participatory media culture. To repeat a point made at the outset: the contributions here are inclined towards a relatively conventional sense of media

production, albeit through case studies, examples or phenomena that testify to the significant technological and industrial transformations affecting all media-related practices today.

By at least partially anchoring ourselves onto fields that could be described as conventional media production – e.g. television and filmmaking, radio and digital journalism – this special issue pushes back against the implication that contemporary landscapes of media production have simply been flattened. Instead, the contributions here encourage us to direct more attention to the reshaping of media production locales and to the implications this has for how we think of media power. While the articles as a whole largely focus on present conditions, that is, on various instances of new or emergent media production spaces, the insights they offer also enjoin media scholars to revisit how we study more 'traditional' sites of media production as well. They provide practical and theoretical ways into rethinking locations of media production that once seemed relatively easy to pin down, such as the studio or the newsroom. By displacing media production from its traditionally-assumed geographical centers, mediums, content or industrial conditions, and at the same time radically contextualizing such practices in local and translocal contexts, more traditional production spaces such as the newsroom and studio can be rethought as complex and perhaps relatively temporary accomplishments in time and space. It should be underscored that historical analyses in this spirit are already underway. Mark Shiel's (2012) work, for example, suggests that what we call 'Hollywood' is a highly contingent production milieu that was cultivated and continues to be animated through the interactions of industrialized filmmaking and the particular and now globalized urban context of Los Angeles. It is our intent and hope that the articles collected here contribute, too, to such historical analyses. But above all, the contributions here help parse out some of the conditions, stakes and possibilities of

contemporary media production spaces and their increasing dispersion and denaturalization. By refusing to take media production for granted, or treat it as any less relevant, we hope the papers here provide practical and conceptual ways of mapping its contemporary locations and re-locations.

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