The compilation of this issue of *Spectator* coincided with the 100-day Writers Guide of America strike, which ran from November 5, 2007 to February 12, 2008. The strike brought to the foreground the importance of perceptions about the work required to produce television, the centrality of television’s prevailing aesthetic and narrative structures in audience expectations, and the everydayness of the television product in lives in contact with TV, both directly with the industry and indirectly through viewing practices and daily routines structured by television. As the full effects of the strike are not immediately felt in the world of filmmaking—at least not for audiences, who will not feel the consequences of the strike for some months—the immediacy of television, yet again, defined the medium for viewers and workers alike.

When discussing the strike during a Fall 2008 Critical Studies seminar at USC, one of my students complained about tuning in to his much-beloved *The Colbert Report* and seeing host Stephen Colbert eating Chinese food on-air. It was at this point that he vowed not to watch the program until the strike was over.

While the rhetorical and representational strategies of newspaper accounts, interviews, and campaigning on the part of the striking writers bear examination, the strike also significantly played out in the everyday presence or absence
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(as the case may be) of TV production. Onscreen, the lack of professional writers and the effect this had upon programming often manifested itself in personal, emotional, and physical expression on the part of onscreen talent. This personalization of television production provoked responses ranging from bemusement to perplexion to—as in the case of my student—annoyance. This anecdotal piece of evidence neither exhaustively nor even authoritatively explains the significance of the WGA strike and audience perceptions of television labor and production, but it does point to a larger anxiety and dissatisfaction about the state of television during a crisis of production.

One of the many ways to understand this particular response is not to simply see it as a case of “boring” TV—after all, Stephen Colbert has eaten on-camera before. Rather, this moment of on-air eating emphasizes the sight of spontaneous television production and the embodiment and feminization of the male television professional.

Apart from the perceived on-air shift in Colbert’s persona, his off-screen behaviors also became feminized at the very moment he no longer successfully played the role of on-air professional. Colbert’s appearance at a Woman of the Year awards event sponsored by Glamour one day into the strike prompted news coverage that concretized the connection between the de-professionalization of the male TV worker and femininity. As one news headline reads, “Stephen Colbert Goes Glam, Writers’ Strike Be Damned.” According to the accompanying article, the awards show serves as a new “venue for his work” for Colbert during the strike and that, as the keynote speaker, Colbert possessed a “suspiciously comprehensive knowledge of current women’s fashion.” In his speech honoring House Speaker Woman of the Year Nancy Pelosi, Colbert expressed his love of Glamour and recounted his “fashion do’s and don’ts.”

While the tone of the article and Colbert’s speech is intended to convey humor, it underscores larger and more serious strike-time connections among anxieties about masculinity, (in)appropriate ways that labor would be redirected, and appropriate venues for media workers’ talents. As Colbert indicates in his speech at the awards ceremony, he’s “not allowed to write anything for TV,” and therefore is constricted to new modes of and venues for his labor—in the case of the Glamour awards, in the world of feminized and, therefore, frivolous pursuits and interests.

The uncertainty of Colbert’s on- and off-air professional status was mirrored in other TV hosts’ behaviors during the strike. For those on-air talents who bore the burden of carrying on their programs without the support of writers and scripted programs, the labor strife within the ranks of professional television workers became personalized and configured through the emotions and physical states of the on-air male burdened with the task of keeping TV going.

As on-air talent became the primary producers of their respective television program’s content, the male body became the site that expressed this burden of labor. On The Daily Show, Jon Stewart’s physicality indicated to the viewing audience the unmoored nature of the show. Gesturing with his hands to indicate the lack of the blue pages of his script, which he traditionally shuffles, restacks, and scribbles on at the show’s opening, Stewart body and expression conveyed conspicuous absence of television’s professional structures and routines. Throughout the strike, Stewart also expressed an emotional, psychological state of unrest, identifying the decline of the show’s quality not only through the dearth of material and failed ad-libs, but also through his on-going insomnia and ever-present anxiety at work and at home.

In the midst of this emotional unrest and professional uncertainty, the male body under duress also reasserted its masculinity, even within comic moments. In a perfect storm of on-air talent, Conan O’Brien, Colbert, and Stewart appeared

Re-establishing masculinity: Jon Stewart, Conan O’Brien, and Stephen Colbert’s strike-time “feud.”
on each other programs to fill airtime under the guise of staging a violent fight among the three of them to settle the debate of who “launched” then-Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee. Their escalating fight culminates in a sketch in which they attack each other by throwing their obvious body doubles down stairs; hitting each other with a recycling bin, ice-skates, and a baseball bat; and, in the case of Colbert, Russian dancing over felled bodies. Even as they ridicule their own physical capabilities, the reassertion of masculinity, no matter how comical, serves as an important indicator of TV’s continued production and the role that the male media worker plays in maintaining television during a strike.

Perhaps no other image solidified this relationship of masculinity and TV production during the strike than David Letterman’s and Conan O’Brien’s “strike beards.” In growing facial hair, the male TV professional acknowledges the unsettled state of TV, indicating how things are “different.” It also indicates how, in the midst of a TV labor crisis, the visible evidence of masculinity becomes reassuring and perhaps crucial to television’s fortunes. The association of maleness to television production via the television media worker serves a significant function in professionalizing television or, as Vicki Mayer asserts, “Not all television professionals are men, but the discourses of being a professional conjures competing masculinities in their articulations.”6 In the case of the on-air comedy talent during the WGA strike, this masculinity became threatened as the professional nature of TV programs became tenuous and therefore masculine “articulations” became necessary to convey professionalism within the ranks of television production. As a result masculinity on display asserted not only male control of TV during chaotic times, but also substituted for the professionalism associated with seamless performance and scripted programs largely absent during the strike.

Barbara Walters, Feminine Threat to TV Professionalism

Certainly, the 2007-08 strike was not the first and only moment in U.S. television that raised the alarm and/or disgust of the viewing public when the “unprofessional” on-air media worker threatened the values associated with television’s product. The ways in which Colbert and other male hosts of late-night TV responded to the breakdown of his new program have connections to earlier moments in television production that were also perceived as harmful to the state of TV’s professionalism and productivity. In 1976, Barbara Walters brokered a ground-breaking contract with ABC as the first female TV nighttime news anchor.7 Charged with bringing an unwanted femininity to TV journalism, Walters was linked to the outcomes of feminizing/“de-professionalizing” television: drawing attention to the personality and physicality of the newscaster. With this new focus on the news media worker, the masculine professionalization of the media worker was under threat. Walters’s presence confused the conventions of television’s generic representations and the bodies—or, in the case of male news anchors, the fantasy of disembodiment—that inhabit them. Washington Post journalist Charles Seib cites Walters as an example of the growing power of the entertainment-styled news anchor over the professional, in-the-field reporter. To Seib, this pivotal sea change, inaugurated by Walters’s presence and her style of reporting, demonstrates that the “line between the news business and show business has been erased forever.”8 The joining of the oppositional styles of news business and show business in TV content and production values result in the corruption of newscasting. This concern can be interpreted as an issue of gender within the privileged domain of the television industry.
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workplace. Show business, a feminized aspect of the media, depends upon entertaining audiences and openly catering to them. The goal of appealing to audiences, ushered in by a female anchor, privileges the likeability of the newscaster over the objective integrity of the masculinized values of conventional, professional news reporting. By drawing attention to the pleasing nature of the newscaster, entertaining news also announces the presence of the newscaster’s (female) body (the smiling face, the hairstyle, the outfit), raising concerns of how effectively it will engage the audience and promote pleasurable viewing.

As an influential female TV worker, Walters threatened the masculine “professionalism” of TV news. Walters’s presence confuses the conventions of television’s generic representations and the bodies—or, in the case of male news anchors, the fantasy of disembodiment—that inhabit them. Richard Salant, then-head of CBS News, addresses this confusion when he sarcastically wonders, “Is Barbara a journalist or is she Cher?”

Once the news has been feminized by the presence of women, entertainment news would bring about the demise of authentic, important journalism and television with it.

When seen alongside each other, the peculiar exertion of TV workers’ masculinity during the recent WGA strike and the case of Barbara Walters within the context of the gender upheavals and redefinitions of TV news in the 1970s underscore the ongoing gendering of television production. As both moments in television’s “crisis” of production reveal, gender anxieties and desires become intensified in these moments, revealing the foundational nature of gender within TV’s labor and economics, on-air aesthetics, negative and positive promotional publicity, and larger cultural fantasies that television both mines and represents.

Issues in Television Production

The call for papers for this issue of Spectator was deliberately broad in order to bring together unexpected modes of analysis, theorization, and objects of study and to deliberately understand the growing parameters of television studies and conceptions of what constitutes the “making of” television. Clearly, both terms of the title (“production” as multitude of meaning-making activities and “television” as an aesthetic, industrial, cultural, and technological object, and mode of address) offer multiple modes of inquiry and research. Moving beyond strict economic analyses, the contributors to this issue represent new complexity in television studies approaches to understanding television production in its most nuanced terms.

In her study of star Robert Cummings, Margo Miller interrogates the production of queer meaning surrounding television stardom, promotional materials, and program aesthetics. Not only does her work uncover an underexplored texts and publicity—a key contribution to TV history—but also formulates a new methodology of understanding television’s queerness at the point of production. Andrea Kelley’s exploration of PBS’s struggle to brand itself while remaining a non-commercial network situates network policies within a post-network era and suggests the racial and gendered implications of formulating PBS audience outreach. Kathleen Hladky considers the development of televised Christian ministry
through the re-imagining of satellite technology. Her analysis of founding members of TV evangelism illuminates the ways in which TV technologies and the problematic links of Christianity and television are resolved within a rhetorical and ideological frame constructed to coincide with Biblical prophecies. Christopher Hanson traces the history of sports video games and the co-dependence of the aesthetics of TV and gaming as both develop the “look” of sporting events. Scott Ruston considers a similar convergence of technologies between television and the cell phone. In addition to defining the “mobisode” and tracing its history, Ruston examines the ways in which the mobisode re-structures narrative and space for the viewer, linking it to televisuality as well as a new sense of mobility promised by the advent of an arguably “new” technology of the cell phone. Through her study of soap fans and their editing of original TV texts, Mary Jeanne Wilson locates TV production in viewership and control of soap opera plots lines through compilation tapes and DVDs. She suggests how the re-assemblage of soap opera narratives changes conventional soap opera viewing—and, thus, feminist scholarship on soap operas—and suggests that these fan practices promise to influence the future of production, planning, and writing of soaps. In his review of Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’s Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond, Robert Dunks recounts his experience using the text in an undergraduate seminar on Quality Television. Phyllis Zrzavy reviews Amanda D. Lotz, The Television Will Be Revolutionized, a text that defines the recent shift in television production to a “post-network” industry.

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Notes
1 For example, his various political aspirations are fictionally funded through Doritos, which he frequently eats in support of his “sponsor.” In the past year alone, Colbert has consumed, among other things, Doritos, Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, and prescription drugs.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Letterman’s beard literally took on a life of its own. New York City mayor, Michael Bloomberg, welcomed the return of the writers (which pre-dated the end of the strike, but was worked out according to an agreement between Letterman’s show and the WGA) to television by presenting David Letterman’s beard (not Letterman himself) a key to the city on the January 3, 2008 broadcast of The Late Show.
7 Walters co-anchored the ABC Nightly News with Harry Reasoner from 1976 to 1978 and brokered a widely reported million-dollar salary in her contract.
9 Ibid.