Television is a business; the more savvy that you are about that business—about the structure and the way things work and the politics—then the better equipped you’re going to be to get your stories told.

Noreen Halpern,
President of Scripted Programming for E1 Entertainment

Critics have long described television as a writer’s medium, and television writing is indeed unique in its use of collaboration to unwind stories and characters over extended periods of time. My previous research has focused on the impact of the Internet on how writers and producers create their stories for TV, and I continue to be interested in what many have called the “post-network” era of television in terms of how the roles and experiences of TV writers and producers have changed. What is it like to create stories for TV—whatever that is, exactly—in the unstable environment of the early twenty-first century? How can we understand the stories viewers are told? Are there old universal assumptions that have carried over into this era, or do we see a new set of universals emerging? Are there new opportunities, or new obstacles to writers’ voices? This In Focus aims to address such questions.

Opportunities in a Changed Industry. A primary theme in any current examination of television is constant change, and the need for writers to be able to adapt. As Noreen Halpern, President of Scripted Programming for E1 Entertainment, notes above, one significant area for writers to be informed about is the business itself. E1 Entertainment is a prime example of today’s changed industrial setting: the company—in terms of TV—operates as a boutique independent

1 Sharon Marie Ross, telephone interview with Noreen Halpern, January 29, 2010.
studio even as it exists within a horizontally integrated business structure that includes divisions in film and music.

One of Halpern’s jobs is to help writers navigate the terrain of this environment, protecting them creatively while also ensuring profit for them and for any companies involved. On the one hand, Ms. Halpern’s division within E1 operates in a manner akin to NBC in the 1980s, when Brandon Tartikoff and Grant Tinker ushered in risky TV stories by shielding writers from network interference. On the other hand, her daily duties include striking deals with other independent studios, co-funding initiatives with other countries, finding ways to “cross-pollinate” within E1’s larger bank of media holdings, and negotiating whether or not projects are best suited to broadcast networks, pay cable stations, or basic cable stations.

It is a challenge to protect creative vision in such a setting—though it must be noted that it has always been a challenge to protect the voice of writers in a profit-driven business such as US television. One avenue of respite has been cable, and Alisa Perren examines the experiences of writers in this domain in her essay “In Conversation: Creativity in the Contemporary Cable Industry.” Perren reveals the considerable freedoms of both pay and basic cable, focusing predominantly on the smaller scope of cable. Her subjects also focus on how cable stations’ need to be easily identified or branded as cable creates an imperative to distribute content different in kind from broadcast TV. Here, “different” is understood to mean riskier, more adult, and more complex fare.

HBO’s promotional campaigns notwithstanding, cable is very much “TV,” and broadcast TV has been very much influenced by cable. Mark Alton Brown who, with Dee LaDuke, has written for and produced broadcast hits such as Designing Women (CBS, 1986–1993) and Girlfriends (UPN, 2000–2008), echoes TV Studies scholars in observing that “[c]able has been fundamental to raising the quality of broadcast television.”

Editing this In Focus during a year in which ABC’s Lost (2004–2010) left the airwaves amid as much media and fan frenzy as HBO’s The Sopranos (1999–2007), it was certainly impossible to ignore the connected worlds of cable and broadcast. (The social and cultural relevance of Designing Women also belies the idea that quality TV scarcely existed before cable “drove broadcast to it.”) Yet, as Alton Brown also notes, more creative freedom does not guarantee diversity of voice and vision, on either broadcast or cable—a fact that bridges the pre-cable and post-network eras of TV.

**Diversity and Difference in Television Today**

It’s a little bit more than lip service now being paid to diversity. But the fact of the matter, in terms of African Americans, is that the African American audience is undervalued completely. And UPN was not the first and probably won’t be the last network to build an audience with African Americans and then dump the African American audience.

Mark Alton Brown, writer/producer

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3 Ibid.
The era of cable and now the era of the Internet have both been lauded as times when television storytelling stood on thresholds of important change. Viewers would have infinite choices, a multiplicity of new voices would be heard—and a general diversity would emerge in the stories showing up on TV screens (and elsewhere). However, as numerous historians and critics have observed, the status of women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals, and racial and ethnic minorities—both in front of and behind the cameras—continues to be problematic. While numbers have improved, the content remains vexed.

Yet, as surely as the world of television has changed, so have expectations of viewers with regard to diversity. As LaDuke notes regarding her experience writing for Designing Women, “we could say things back then that we’re not allowed to say now.” On broadcast TV at least, executives are more skittish than ever about offending viewers, potentially curtailing television’s potential to address diversity in meaningful ways. Complicating matters is the ironic trend discussed by Kelly Kessler in her essay “They Should Suffer Like the Rest of Us: Queer Equality in Narrative Mediocrity.” Much of television still offers simplified representations of majority characters, so “equality” might not be the goal to strive for. Further, trying to determine what equality via diversity might look like in a world some have labeled “post-racial” has become exceedingly difficult.

An additional oft-neglected consideration is the world that exists behind the scenes of television, where distinct cultures of production create barriers to diversity. Felicia D. Henderson addresses such concerns in “The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers’ Room,” describing processes of decision making and social interactions that serve to “other”—and silence—writers who do not fit within the dominant social order of the writers’ room on sitcoms. Sitcoms have historically been the domain within which diversity emerges on US TV, but as Brown notes, “‘urban shows’ [i.e., shows featuring lead characters who are ethnic or racial minorities] are still considered ‘less than’ on TV.” This stance on urban shows naively ignores the changing demographics of this country.

Still, television has an amazing way of fighting through this morass of awkward tensions to offer stories that give us pause about social issues. Perhaps because such narratives are rare in the media landscape, the tag of “quality” is most often ascribed to those series that dare to give voice to under- and misrepresented groups in complex and novel ways.

**Stories That Matter**

The best writing is personal. . . . We like to invest ourselves, politically and in every other way, in our work.

Mark Alton Brown, writer/producer

We had the world’s biggest soap box.

Dee LaDuke, writer/producer

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Among the creative professionals I have spoken with over the years, a clear and constant universal emerges: a good TV story is a story that matters, that serves some purpose. Quality television and social relevance were themes at the SCMS 2010 workshop “The More Things Change . . . Writing for Television in the Twenty-First Century,” and participants agreed that the best of TV seeks to educate in an entertaining way.8

But where we find quality and how we define it have changed over TV’s history. In part this is due to tremendous changes we have seen in the industry, but this is also due to changing social norms and values. A genre that exemplifies such changes is daytime soap opera. As Lisa Seidman, a writer for NBC’s Days of Our Lives (1965–), points out, soaps in the 1960s and 1970s “talked about things that we were nervous about. . . . But now we live in a culture in which we talk about everything. So there isn’t any story we can tell that we haven’t talked about.”9 What, then, emerges as “quality” in a world where few topics seem to be taboo?

Perhaps “riskiness” need not be a marker of quality, an idea that Jonathan Nichols-Pethick explores in “Nobody with a Good Script Needs to Be Justified.” Nichols-Pethick’s interviews reveal ways in which creative professionals work to tell good stories, with each genre, show, network, or era creating a different set of circumstances with which writers must engage. In the end, it becomes difficult to see “quality” television as in any way separate from “regular” television, in spite of scholars’ and media critics’ tendencies to make just that distinction.

Lindsay H. Garrison’s “Defining Television Excellence ‘On Its Own Terms’: The Peabody Awards and Negotiating Discourses of Quality” examines similar complexities at work with the Peabody Awards. Drawing on conversations with the directors of the Peabody Awards and the Peabody archives, Garrison argues that the Awards offer a unique determination of excellence owing to the process’s commitment to flexibility in defining quality television. This seems telling, as the TV programs that seem to resonate with viewers on either side of the post-network divide are those that exhibit flexibility as well, growing with the industry, society, and culture.

Regardless of what we might think about quality and relevance, about what diversity should look like, or about whether or not cable is TV, one thing seems to be certain: TV is important, both when we love it and when we hate it. Writers and producers who work in this medium are, for the most part, passionate about their work. As but one of millions who sits down to see the stories they deliver night after night and year after year, I am awed by their abilities. (Try to write a good script, and you’ll see what I mean.)

The world of TV professionals must still be held accountable for the stories it does (and does not) offer us, and we must continue to unravel the ways in which industrial and societal changes contribute to storytelling. This series of essays is best read as a conversation starter in this regard; it is the authors’ collective hope that we provide some insight into, provoke questions about, and point to new directions for studying television writing and producing in the post-network era and beyond.


9 Sharon Marie Ross, telephone interview with Lisa Seidman, February 12, 2010.
A range of scholarly publications has surveyed the emergent practices and products of the cable industry.¹ But far less attention has been paid to why writers themselves are finding cable an increasingly hospitable venue in which to develop and produce hour-long series.² In part, the paucity of literature is due to the rapid pace of change in the cable industry.

Prior to the late 1990s, few hour-long dramas were produced for either basic or pay cable outlets. Those that did air tended to have modest budgets and low production values. Then, as cable penetration increased, first pay and then basic cable outlets developed signature original series as a way of branding themselves and attracting critical attention.³ Though costly, a popular and/or critically acclaimed original series provides cable networks with a means by which to recruit viewers and differentiate themselves in a competitive multimedia landscape.

An oft-cited turning point for original cable programming is HBO’s move into original programming with *Oz* (1997–2003), followed by *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005). Showtime’s subsequent entry into the fray with *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009) confirmed that pay cable had become a place where writers could work with competitive budgets, greater creative autonomy, and minimal executive interference.⁴ Shortly thereafter,

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² Here I am drawing from a production cultures approach as developed by John Thornton Caldwell in *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).


⁴ As Lindsay H. Garrison notes in her essay in this In Focus, the term “quality” is a contentious one. For a discussion of the industry’s exploitation of the rhetoric of quality, see Deborah Jaramillo, “The Family Racket: AOL, Time Warner, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2002): 59–75.
basic cable outlets began to take on both the broadcast networks and premium cable services. FX (*The Shield*, 2002–2008), the Sci-Fi Channel (*Battlestar Galactica*, 2004–2009), USA (*Monk*, 2002–2009), TNT (*The Closer*, 2005–), and AMC (*Mad Men*, 2007–) have been among the most aggressive in developing hour-long series.

Cumulatively, these industry shifts have established the conditions within which a growing number of writers have been able to thrive. Yet, though cable has increasingly matched the broadcast networks in talent and production values, a number of distinctions remain. The business models, production practices, and creative possibilities for cable are substantially different from those of broadcast television. As a means of better understanding what writing for cable entails, and how it differs from writing for broadcast, I interviewed Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, showrunners for *Queer as Folk*; John Rogers, showrunner for *Leverage* (TNT, 2008–); Michael Horowitz, staff writer for *Burn Notice* (USA, 2007–); and Jimmy Palmiotti, cocreator of the *Painkiller Jane* comic on which the series was based (Sci-Fi, 2007). With diverse experiences writing for theater, broadcast television, film, comics, and games, these writers can speak with authority about what sets cable apart. Because of their unique backgrounds and varying levels of power, their observations provide an expansive snapshot of the opportunities and constraints associated with writing and producing contemporary hour-long cable series.

**Relearning What You Know.** For Cowen and Lipman, it was both daunting and liberating to work with a pay cable network after years of interacting with broadcast network Standards and Practices while showrunners for *Sisters* (NBC, 1991–1996). Since it is not advertiser supported, Showtime encouraged Cowen and Lipman to push the boundaries of sexual situations and language. Indeed, the network’s slogan when the producers began working on *Queer as Folk* was “No Limits.”

It took some time for Cowen and Lipman to adjust to this new institutional context. As they explain:

Daniel Lipman: We were all brought up with television and [familiar with] what was allowed on television, what we expected on television. Then we were put in this situation on Showtime where we could go beyond that. We realized that we [writers, actors, and directors] had to take off all of our sensors, our blinders. We could say whatever we wanted to say, we could do whatever we wanted to do, show whatever we wanted to show. Now, we didn’t have any full frontal nudity or anything like that. But it wasn’t just in terms of sexual things. It was emotionally, it was verbally. It was whatever we wanted. We all had to break this lifelong knowledge of what we accepted on television because that was what was fed to us. “You cannot see this, you cannot say that, you cannot do this.” But here someone was saying you can do all of this.

Ron Cowen: In network TV we were so used to Standards and Practices telling us what we couldn’t do and censoring us that we would censor ourselves

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5 *Painkiller Jane* was initially produced as a made-for-television movie (Sci-Fi Channel, 2005) before being rebooted as a series.
before we wrote. We knew we couldn’t say “fuck.” We knew we couldn’t show this [or that]. And after a while . . .

DL: These characters can’t kiss, these characters can’t undress and have sex in bed.

RC: After a while, you don’t even think about it anymore. It’s automatic. Then when you go to cable and somebody tells you, you can do whatever you want . . .

DL: You can have dessert before you eat. Whatever you want! We had to relearn. That was very exciting. And also, as we, as Ron and I relearned, we became the leaders of that. We had to lead everyone that came onto the show to look at things in that same view.

RC: People were thrilled. Everybody said, “It’s going to be so hard to go back to network television.” It would be very difficult to go back to network TV [now]. It’s like after you’ve been liberated and then you are told to go put the handcuffs back on again.

DL: And to have things done by committee. As you see everyone on broadcast TV, it seems to me that they’re so terrified. They’re always terrified at what’s gonna work, what isn’t gonna work. When you’ve done a show like Queer as Folk, that stretches the limit, how can you go back? Especially on broadcast.6

After years of dealing with extensive input from broadcast network executives, it took Cowen and Lipman time to adjust to the noncensorious environment of pay cable. During their five seasons on Queer as Folk, only one executive regularly interacted with them. On the rare instances when Showtime sought alterations in content, Cowen and Lipman fondly recalled the executive fighting on their behalf and running interference.

Less Bureaucracy, More Branding. Both John Rogers of Leverage and Michael Horowitz of Burn Notice likewise underscored the minimal creative interventions made by either their shows’ production companies or network distributors. Rogers, who had previously written for Cosby (CBS, 1996–2000) and Jackie Chan Adventures (WB, 2000–2005), viewed this as the major difference between cable and broadcast:

I joke [that producer Dean Devlin] is the only television studio that fits into one pair of pants. As a result, there’s not a bunch of studio wingnuts to deal with. It is Dean. And then at TNT, it is [executive vice president of programming] Michael Wright. There’s not the infrastructure of when you get onto many other broadcast or even cable programs. They know the show they bought. They wouldn’t have put it on the air if they didn’t want this show.7

6 Alisa Perren, telephone interview with Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, March 10, 2010.
The idea of knowing “the show they bought” was a recurring theme in my conversations with Cowen, Lipman, Rogers, and Horowitz. To a large extent, this idea connects to cable networks’ efforts to cultivate brand identities that appeal to distinct demographic groups. As emphasized by Rogers, the networks “wouldn’t have brought us in if they didn’t think we were the brand.” Yet even though *Leverage* initially may have been acquired because it conformed to TNT’s brand identity, Rogers emphasized that the network has allowed it to evolve from season to season:

There are times we get into the discussion that you don’t want to drift too far off of what *Leverage* was sold as and became. [Yet] it’s also the fact that your brand can expand. You watch the promos for our first year, and they’re very dark, they’re very gritty, they’re very “action coming up!” When they promoted the second season, [instead] they [promoted] it as “our light action mood show.” The brand is big enough to have all this range. I think networks and shows coevolve, or good ones do. What’s interesting to me is how, with narrowcasting of all things, branding is changing. Syfy is a really recognizable brand, but what is it? Is it light science fiction? Hard science fiction? Is it genre, reality? They have a very wide purview. They’re able to do this because the brand is a catch-all. While TNT—we know what that is. It’s cool thirteen-episode dramas. USA: that’s blue skies. Blue sky characters. They’ll do cool stuff and there’s jokes. It’s very light and fun entertainment. I don’t know what the NBC brand is now. The network was an assembly of broadcasters, not one creative force, and it hasn’t been [a unified creative force] for a while.8

Horowitz echoed Rogers’s view that writers have the ability to reformulate shows over time. In the process, the network’s brand may shift as well, especially in the case of a successful show such as *Burn Notice*. Though Horowitz joined the staff at the start of its second season, “they were still trying to figure out the rules of what ‘burn notices’ were. They realized that there were episodes that were more successful, and there were episodes in the first season that I don’t think we would make now [in the third season] because they just don’t fit exactly what we do now.”9

**In Spite of the Constraints, You Kinda’ Gotta’ Vote for (Cable) TV.** The *Burn Notice* writers may still have been in the process of finding out what worked best when Horowitz joined the staff, but ultimately they did so with great success; by the time its second season concluded, the show had become a full-fledged hit for USA. Conversely, *Painkiller Jane* could not find its creative footing or build a sufficient fan base before Sci-Fi canceled it. According to Palmiotti, the *Painkiller Jane* television series never took off for two reasons: it deviated too far from the source material and, unlike *Queer as Folk, Leverage, or Burn Notice*, it became the victim of corporate battles. Given that this was his first involvement with a television series, Palmiotti proceeded cautiously in

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8 Ibid.
both the amount and type of creative advice he offered. Yet he did offer some input during the preproduction process:

In the first couple of episodes, I worked in the writers’ room in Los Angeles. We worked up at Universal, fleshing out the idea of the series, and getting notes from different places, [including coproducers] Insight, Starz, and Sci-Fi. Everyone wanted something a little different and of course, back then, they buy something and they spend a lot of time changing it. Though the name stayed the same—so there you go, that’s one thing. I did get to write one episode, 13, called “The League,” and out of all the episodes, that’s probably the most like the character that I created with Joe Quesada. I did have an advantage because I was one of the creators. I probably wouldn’t have had that opportunity if I didn’t create it. And again, I don’t live in Los Angeles, and they really want you right there. Not that I have a problem being there, but I noticed that when one guy gets hired that’s in charge, pretty much everyone he knows gets pulled into the room. So I noticed that—like every business—it involves a lot of politics, a lot of being in the right place at the right time. But it was a great experience for me, and I’ve been able to roll it into a lot of other things since [including reselling the option for Painkiller Jane to be turned into a feature film].

Palmiotti’s comments here are revealing, as they highlight the centrality of the showrunner in shaping both the creative direction of individual shows and a show’s staff. Cowen, Lipman, and Rogers illustrate how significant the showrunner is in cultivating a show’s “consistent voice.” Palmiotti’s comments also demonstrate that the actual production methods for cable and broadcast programs are strikingly similar. Though breaking a story, delegating writing duties, and designing a shooting schedule diverge somewhat from show to show, in general these differences are minimal. The greatest discrepancies between broadcast and cable can be found in cable’s smaller writing staffs, shooting on location to save money, and shorter season length.

The writers I interviewed saw this last point, in particular, as an almost entirely positive development. For example, Rogers remarked:

Cable really does treat you like a partner. And I’ll tell you, the idea of doing only thirteen or fifteen episodes is exciting. You can maintain quality over thirteen or fifteen. Once you hit twenty, you’re just going to have a few that suck. You are. It’s the nature of the beast. Even fifteen episodes, which we did, we average fifty pages a script [which translates to] 750 pages that we produce in three months. That is roughly six movies we write in the time that you are contractually obligated to write one under a feature contract. And we do fifty pages every single week. You can’t miss a week. You’re not allowed to have writer’s block, you’re not allowed to be late.

11 Rogers, interview.
On a similar note, Horowitz observed:

This year, [showrunner] Matt [Nix] will have at least twenty-seven hours of TV on the air between his shows. [Nix is also the showrunner for the Fox series The Good Guys, 2010–.] I think there might be more. That is opposed to if you were doing features—with features, maybe you have one feature a year and that would be a crazy, crazy, prolific career. Yes, maybe TV is not going to be as polished, maybe you’re not going to have as much time to shoot stuff, and maybe there are more things where you think, “Oh, I wish I could fix that.” But I kind of think the net result after all, is that you kinda gotta vote for TV.  

These writers have adjusted the tone, content, and narrative strategies of their programs to suit the imperatives of their respective cable networks. In spite of the various economic and creative constraints each continues to face, they presented a rosy assessment of the contemporary cable landscape and the opportunities available for writers. Rogers had a particularly telling anecdote about the different status and creative authority writers hold in film versus television.

The reason so many people come to television [is that] in TV, you’re the boss. The showrunner is the boss, with most shows. The perfect story I have involves when we were shooting a pilot of [an unaired] show I wrote called Red Skies for USA. . . . We were shooting a pilot in San Diego at the same time we were shooting [the feature film he wrote called] The Core (Jon Amiel, 2003). I am on the set of the Red Sky pilot and I said to the director, “I really don’t like it. The whole point is that the bed is supposed to be in a different place, that she’s isolated, huddled up against the wall.” So we have to re-move the bed, redo the shot. He says, “Of course. No problem.” Because his job is to bring the writer’s vision to fruition. At that moment, my cell phone rings and it’s my director from The Core. He says, “John. We had to drop a line, we had to change things during the shooting, I need to change something tomorrow. Let me run it by you.” So he runs it by me, I give him the change. “Just have them say this. Oh, and I’m thinking of flying up and visiting the set.” And he says, “Oh, John. Writers on the set. Never a good idea. Never a good idea.” And by the way, this was standard, this is why in one of the negotiations of the strike they have to let us on the set! That was a negotiating point! We had to ask for it, fight for it! That’s one of the attractions of cable for television writers: control. And I find in cable, because the giant corporate machine is at least blunted by cable, though not eliminated, but blunted, you still have that feeling you’re the person who runs that show—that you are the creative voice.  

“The main thing is, they know what they want. In cable, there are not a lot of voices.” Rogers’s comment reflects one of the strongest points of agreement

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12 Horowitz, interview.

13 Rogers, interview. Italics indicate original emphasis.
among my interviewees: in cable there is less creative interference. Simply put, fewer executives offer fewer notes. Yet this is not the only way that cable remains distinct from broadcast. As Cowen and Lipman remarked, the business model for cable—especially pay cable—demands more explicit content. This ability to “test the limits” contributes to a greater sense of autonomy on the part of the writers. This, in turn, fuels the rhetoric of quality that circulates in media coverage of networks such as HBO, Showtime, AMC, and FX. This feeling of greater creative latitude makes cable writers willing to shoot on lower budgets, on faster schedules, with smaller staffs, and at distant locations.

While the writers I interviewed drew attention to the ways that cable and broadcast differ, there are points of similarity as well. Most important, the showrunner remains the most powerful creative and administrative figure on most fictional series. The writing staff, the production crew, and the shows’ directors answer to them. But even if showrunners may have fewer voices to answer to in cable, they still must negotiate with the entities that finance, distribute, and market their programs. In other words, even though cable networks typically have smaller development slates and place larger episode orders up front, if a show fails to click with the desired audiences it will be canceled. Painkiller Jane vividly illustrates this point.

As lines between cable and broadcast continue to blur, the distinctions that seem relatively clear now are less likely to be so in a few years. For example, while cable networks historically have focused on narrowcasting, broad-based cable networks such as USA, TBS, TNT, and FX increasingly are pursuing the same 18- to 49-year-old demographic long sought by broadcasters. They also persist in pushing for parity in compensation by advertisers. In order to accomplish these objectives, several cable networks are developing broader-based content. Burn Notice, for example, would easily fit into Fox’s current schedule. In addition, cable networks are acquiring a growing number of series that have been dropped by broadcast networks (e.g., Southland [NBC, 2009; TNT, 2010–]). Meanwhile, the broadcast networks are emulating many strategies long employed by cable, including premiering programming throughout the year and ordering shorter seasons. And, of course, the long-term viability of the business models for both cable and broadcast remains in question as television and the Internet further converge.

Regardless of what the future holds, all the writers interviewed for this article made it clear that working in cable is preferable to working in broadcast, and that working in television is preferable to working in film. While motion pictures may offer greater prestige, unless the writer is also the director of a given project, he or she can offer only minimal input. Thus, at present, these writers believe industrial conditions to be such that the possibilities for developing complex characters, dealing with serious themes, and exploring new modes of storytelling work in favor of those writing and producing for cable.

*Thanks to Noel Kirkpatrick, Heather Mason, and Shane Toepfer for their assistance in transcribing the interviews.

14 Variations in content derive in part from the regulatory requirements placed on broadcasters.
As I prepared to write this piece, I found myself so biased and jaded by decades of personal kvetching, soapboxing, and writing about the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals (GLBTs) have been systematically omitted, vilified, marginalized, and/or homogenized on mainstream television, that my knee-jerk reactions took over my thought process. I decided that 2010 was the time for me to reapproach the issue, perhaps with a bit of distance. I determined to put the soapbox away for this project, step back, glance across the dial, and assess what was occurring with regard to the writing of GLBT characters in American television.

Just how does American television write the millennial queer? I found the answer to be most aptly summed up by a magnet hanging on my refrigerator: “Let gay people marry. They should suffer like the rest of us.” In short, I think TV writers are writing just as preposterously, wonderfully, formulaically, and at times just plain badly for GLBTs as they are for everyone else. Stereotyped gays, overrepresented young and white gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and feuding queer couples abound, but check out the straights on the tube and you’ll find that they look pretty similar.

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has been declaring for the last fourteen years exactly who has found their way onto the television lineup and who is still missing. Wholly dedicated to the statistics, GLAAD continues to delineate the percentages of GLBTs on network, cable, and premium cable channels. They break down numbers with regard to gender, sexual identification, and race and ethnicity. The commentary in their study of the 2009–2010 primetime season celebrates new characters and laments a drop in numbers.\footnote{With regard to race and ethnicity, GLAAD’s report illustrates the equal mistreatment of GLBTs and straights. Statistics are similarly lopsided when comparing percentages of white, African American, Latino, and Pacific Islander characters in recurring television roles in 2009–2010 (78, 11, 5, and 4 percent, respectively) and those categories when looking just at GLBT characters (75, 6, 9, and 6 percent, respectively) in the same time period. See GLAAD, “Where We Are on TV: GLAAD’s 14th Annual Diversity Study Previews the 2009–2010 Primetime Television Season,” http://www.glaad.org/Document.Doc?id=92 (accessed May 1, 2010).}
What it does not overtly address is that things are rough all over. The fact is that despite an evolving televisual landscape, an increase in generic hybridity, and a surge in winding and complex narratives, much of television remains relatively static and predictable. Established character types abound: gay, straight, white, African American, Asian, young hottie, ancient sage, and so on. More often than not, television writing gives the viewer what he or she expects, and this kind of predictability is not very different in the case of GLBTs.

Although shows such as *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004–2009), *Dirty Sexy Money* (ABC, 2007–2009), and *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006–2010) momentarily provided bright lights of trans representation on TV, for one reason or another each dropped the ball. On both a positive and negative note, “we are everywhere.” In today’s American television landscape, GLB characters are cropping up across the dial and across genres. Writers are presenting queer characters outside the bounds of premium cable and the “very special” episode. Indeed, it appears that the powers that be have recognized the economic value of queer characters across the dial.

GLBs have surely flourished on premium cable, but have managed to avoid isolation in specialty venues targeting only GLBTs with culturally edgy fare. In fact, at times the expected specialty venues are exactly where writers fall short of developing nuanced GLB characters. Perhaps to the benefit of television writers and viewers, Logo has failed to emerge as the promised utopia for television’s gays. With shortcomings similar to BET, Logo relies largely on off-network programming for its fictional, scripted content. Aside from its original African American dramedy *Noah’s Arc* (2005–2006), lesbian comedy *Exes and Ohs* (2007, 2010), and single-season sitcom *Sordid Lives: The Series* (2008), the network relies on reruns of shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2002–2003), *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000–2005), and *Wonderfalls* (Fox, 2004) for its queer-themed content. Dynamic and original queer writing, strike one.

In light of Logo’s failings, one might expect the other “quality” networks to step up to the plate. This has not necessarily been the case. Many consider HBO the hot spot for edgy sexualized content. Regardless, the network with a history of priding itself on what Jeffrey P. Jones refers to as the ability to shock through erotica, has merely flirted with queer fictional content, including *True Blood*’s (2008–) and *The Wire*’s (HBO, 2002–2004, 2006–2008) popular recurring gay vampires and cops and robbers, *Sex and the City*’s (1998–2004) experimentation and gay pals, and *Californication*’s (2007–) anything goes mantra. One-upping HBO in the GLB category, Showtime made its mark as the home of narratively central queer characters. Between *Queer as Folk, The L Word, The United States of Tara* (2009–), *Nurse Jackie* (2009–), and *Weeds* (2005–), the network has provided nearly a decade of integral (not peripheral) GLB characters. Rejecting GLAAD’s numbers game, however, I would argue that the


“all-gay-all-the-time” Showtime series often reflect the problems of presenting queer material on television (especially content deemed shocking and sexy). Problematic notions of gender stereotyping and a sex, sex, sex attitude from the writers of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* produced characters erotically polarized from the desexualized gays of the 1980s and 1990s, but similarly one-dimensional. Dynamic and original queer writing, strike two.

Shaking off dismay over the problematic writing and unfulfilled promises of premium cable, one might find solace in an array of other offerings. More surprising than the number—and at times questionable quality—of GLBs on Showtime, HBO, or Logo has been the increase in gayness across networks and genres. AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007–) hit the ground running with Sal (Bryan Batt) attempting to negotiate his job and a struggle with his own sexual identity in an early 1960s New York City. ABC Family appears to be casting aside fears of bringing gay-themed controversy to its Disney-owned network as youth-targeted shows such as *Greek* (2007–2010), *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008–) embrace their gay characters (*Greek* with one of television’s handful of queers of color). Although we perhaps cheer in private (or public) when a network show such as *Brothers and Sisters* (ABC, 2006–2010), *Southland* (NBC, 2009; TNT, 2010–), *Glee* (Fox, 2009–), or *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–) introduces a gay character, the fact is that queers on TV are business as usual.

Over the last several years, high-profile and central characters have made their marks across genres: comedy (*Modern Family, Glee, The Office* [NBC, 2005–]), family melodrama (*Brothers and Sisters, Friday Night Lights* [NBC, 2006–]), action-oriented (*Southland, FlashForward* [ABC, 2009–2010]), flat-out soap opera (*The L Word, Grey’s Anatomy* [ABC, 2005–]), dramedy (*United States of Tara*), and teen- and young-adult-targeted shows (*Greek, Melrose Place* [CW, 2009–2010], *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*). Further, because of contemporary television’s increasing inclination toward seriality, characters often avoid falling prey to the generic traps of the “old days” (the 1980s or 1990s). Comedic characters need not adhere to the static characterizations once common to episodic television, and cross-genre seriality produces characters who can more fully develop while escaping the soapy woes of *Dynasty’s* (ABC, 1981–1989) Steven Carrington (Al Corley, Jack Coleman).

Despite the aforementioned wins for GLB representation and writing, I reject any notion that we have entered some kind of queer televisual utopia. What we have begun to take, however, are steps toward mutual mediocrity. Thus, part of the irritation projected by GLAAD results from something akin to equal treatment of gays and straights by television writers. Two shows that have sent the bloggers, press, and (fully admitted) me into a blinding rage over the past season or so have been *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Mad Men*. When *Grey’s Anatomy* began to develop its first nonstraight relationship—between cold-as-ice cardiologist Erica Hahn (Brooke Smith) and bone-cracker Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez), it looked as if an unexpected relationship between two strong female

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professionals—one of color, no less—was going to blossom on one of America’s most emotionally dysfunctional nighttime dramas. From the season four finale climax that crosscut between a Callie-Erica kiss and the four other romancing straight couples, *Grey’s* truly treated Callie as an equal. Did that mean that she and Erica rode off into the sunset? No, it meant that Callie’s nonstraight relationships took narrative forms reflective of the dysfunction common to the show and the genre. *Grey’s* thrives on the doctors’ inability to commit and their continual search for some kind of relationship stasis in the overwrought world of surgery. Erica and Callie lasted not even halfway into the next season, but all relationships are fair game for disaster on *Grey’s Anatomy*. Within that handful of episodes, however, the writers provided a rich emotional continuum of discovery, nervousness, jealousy, frustration, betrayal, and rage.

Even if short-lived and highly melodramatic, Erica and Callie managed to coexist as bisexuals in a lesbian relationship and as surgeons. The writers never reduced them to token lesbians or used them simply to titillate. The arc that climax in Erica’s disappearance treated the relationship with the sense of gravity, levity, and luridness common to the show’s other narrative threads. Between Erica’s highly emotional self-discovery and Callie’s subsequent breakdown and roll in the hay with McSteamy (Eric Dane), these women officially acted as imbalanced as Meredith (Ellen Pompeo), Cristina (Sandra Oh), and Izzie (Katherine Heigl). Win!

This turn of events—self-discovery to neurosis to sex to cheating to committing to abruptly leaving—really only seems oppressive because of the historical dearth of GLBT characters on television. I would argue that current popular response to axed GLBT characters and the quality of contemporary GLBT characters reflect Kobena Mercer’s concept of the “burden of representation.” The mutual mediocrity experienced by both GLBT and straight characters appears more egregious when examined in terms of the overall scope of such characters. The historical and to some extent continuing dearth of GLBT characters makes each poorly developed character or well-developed exiting character that much more painful. Callie and Erica’s relationship is disastrous, as is typical for nighttime dramas. Somewhat predictably, Callie almost immediately dove into a new relationship with a decidedly hotter and younger character, blonde pediatrician Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw). Again, shame on the producers and writers for ditching Plain Jane Erica for hot Arizona, but is it unusual for a central character to be dating the “hot chick”? While perhaps problematic, this is not unique to gay characters—especially soapy ones.

*Mad Men* brought a similar sting of loss last season with the axing of Sal (and, apparently, of actor Bryan Batt), who had provided fans hope of a glimpse into

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6 Shortly after Erica Hahn disappeared from *Grey’s*, show producer Shonda Rhimes defended the decision and insisted that Callie would feel the loss of Erica and not just run to another lover. Perhaps this was before a new hot chick had been conceived. She stated, “Brooke Smith was obviously not fired for playing a lesbian. Clearly it’s not an issue as we have a lesbian character on the show—Calliope Torres. . . . I believe it belittles the relationship to simply replace Erica with ‘another lesbian.’ If you’ll remember, Cristina mourned the loss of Burke for a full season.” Kristin Dos Santos, “Grey’s De-Gayed: Brooke Smith Axed; Melissa George’s Role Rewritten,” *E Online*, November 3, 2008, http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/watch_with_kristin/b66996_greys_de-gayd_brooke_smith_axed.html
the pre-Stonewall New York gay scene. After flirting with acknowledging the character’s gayness, Sal was written out of the series after declining a pass made by one of the bigwigs of Sterling Cooper’s hot client Lucky Strike. This plot twist ran through the blogosphere as fans and journalists decried the loss of the much beloved character.\(^7\) That said, were the same tears cried for Mad Men’s Freddy Rumsen (Joel Murray) after he found himself unemployed when he missed a meeting after drunkenly urinating on himself?

I believe the gay double standard leads us (okay, me) to be indignant. Sal and Erica were treated like “normal” characters. They each enjoyed an integral narrative role, some great dialogue, moments of levity, soul-searching drama—and then, like many of their straight cast members, an ultimate untimely departure at the mercy of narrative change.

It has been devastating to see engaging and well-rounded GLB characters appear only to be torn away. Perhaps refreshing generic complexity and the occasional high caliber of writing for today’s GLB characters makes their disappearances so painful. The quality of their character development and storylines seems to promise more to come just as they become subsumed by the well-developed or generically logical narratives around them. A knee-jerk reaction from past pains of poorly written, quickly discarded, and flat-out offensive characters makes each narrative loss cut deep.

Perhaps viewers should try to forgive and forget and look clearly at today’s writing and forward toward hopes of a future more reflective of the quality characters of late. The Wire and Modern Family provide two starkly different contemporary models for success. David Simon created The Wire’s African American lesbian cop as both complex and less than ideal. Resisting a guilty need to idealize queer relationships, writers constructed a hard-drinking, hard-working lesbian who struggled through her personal relationship and job. Actress Sonja Sohn and interviewer Briony Hanson aptly express the character’s development in an article in the lesbian publication Diva:

“At a time when many of us are playing happy families with marriage and kids, I suggest it’s brave to place Kima so outside of that world. [Sohn] defers to Wire creator David Simon: ‘I just show up for the job—David’s admitted that writing for women is difficult for him but I thought what he did with Kima was realistic. I don’t think she’s a cookie-cutter lesbian—I don’t think she’s a cookie-cutter woman. That’s what made her interesting.’”\(^8\)

In a related—but very different—manner, Modern Family gives its gay adoptive fathers license both to develop and transcend stereotypes. They garner similar narrative time as their straight counterparts and project simultaneous images of stereotype and surprise: tough/tender, bat-wielding/scrapbooking, ex–ice skater / ex–football player. Like Kima, Cameron and Mitchell avoid being written into “super queers”


who apologize for years of invisibility, and instead they emerge as both complex and problematic. (Placing Cameron and Mitchell opposite actor Ed O’Neill of chauvinistic *Married . . . with Children* [Fox, 1987–1997] fame makes their narrative development and punch even more intertextually gratifying.)

Compounding advancements resulting from such complex and nuanced queer characterizations, writers are developing these characters earlier—at times in season one, episode one. While I do not think one should put too much stock in numbers of GLBTs leading in, recurring on, or appearing on television shows, the fact that GLBs are appearing early and often is telling. Rather than merely popping up for a “very special episode,” appearing as the quirky new gay friend, or making his or her way into an already developed straight narrative, characters are making their way alongside their straight counterparts. (Even transgender characters are making slight inroads via “very special episodes” in shows such as *Bones* [FOX, 2005–] and *The Closer* [TNT, 2005–], both of which also include subtly queer recurring characters.)

Shows such as *Glee, Modern Family, The United States of Tara, Greek, Mad Men, Brothers and Sisters,* and *FlashForward* brought their gay characters—whether these characters were ready to act on their feelings or not—out immediately. This trend of introducing GLBs in the early episodes of almost universally serial narratives (alongside equally new straight characters) minimizes their exoticization. Such characters have a better chance both to take the narrative reins and to become part of the very fiber of the show instead of performing their gayness through a very special season three outing. *Glee’s* Kurt struggles with his sexual identity and gender performance in season one as he dreams of singing numbers from *Wicked* and opens up to his friends and his dad. At the same time, his all-around fabulousness existed from day one—often as a marker of his sexuality and personality, rather than as a catalyst for specifically gay-themed narrative action or as a trigger to mock his sexuality. *Greek’s* African American frat bro Calvin emerges suave, smart, sensitive, queer, and sexually active from the first night of rush. His sexuality exists as a fact but not as his sole narrative function. I would argue that the increasing “fact of gayness”—here meaning the acknowledged presence of GLBT characters without a constant attendance to the specificity of a “gay lifestyle”—liberates today’s well-developed and integrated characters from the pressures of tokenism or exoticization. This contrasts with Herman Gray’s more pejorative use of Frantz Fanon’s “fact of blackness” to describe the cultural whitewashing or cultural amnesia associated with civil rights–era shows such as *I Spy* (NBC, 1965–1968) or *Julia* (NBC, 1968–1971). 9

The numbers still show an underrepresentation of GLBTs, but who can truly be faulted for the overrepresentation of youth and whiteness in GLBT fare? We wanted equality. In many ways we are now as disproportionately represented as the straight folks. Luckily, however, writers are continually writing us in—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and just as with the straight characters, occasionally hitting a home run. Perhaps I am shooting low, but I am okay with that—at least for now.

The Culture Behind Closed Doors:
Issues of Gender and Race in the
Writers’ Room

by Felicia D. Henderson

I was torn between preserving my femininity and preserving my career. . . . Too combative and I would lose my femininity, a little too much delicacy and I could lose my career.

Lucille Kallen, writer, Your Show of Shows (NBC, 1950–1954)

The room doesn’t care if you’re Black, White, male or female. The best joke makes it into the script. The writer who pitches the best joke most often, suddenly finds himself with a big show, making big money, living in a big house, driving a big car. It’s really that simple.


The writers I hire have to keep their personal issues out of the writers’ room. You don’t get to make your problems everybody else’s problems. When you walk into that room, I should have no idea what’s going on in your personal life. If it doesn’t help make the script better, it doesn’t belong in the room.

Joel Wyman, head writer/executive producer, Fringe (FOX, 2009–)

According to television comedy writer Daley Haggar, “if you’re not comfortable with sexual humor or with crudeness or with all sorts of people being really honest about certain emotions, then yeah, this job is not for you.” As a scholar who is also a television writer, I concur with Haggar’s assessment. I have been employed

on the writing staffs of six prime-time sitcoms and three one-hour dramas. By the time I embarked on my doctoral study at UCLA, I had been writing and producing television shows for thirteen years. In fact, I was a consulting producer on the CW’s Chris Rock co-created sitcom, *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN/The CW, 2005–2009), when I began the first year of the PhD program.

No experience I have had on a writing staff has been exactly like any other experience I have had. Every show’s culture is unique. On one of the most wholesome family sitcoms, I encountered daily ribbing by the all-male writing staff for not laughing at every joke about male genitalia. On my first one-hour drama I found myself in a political power struggle with an executive producer who did not believe I should have input equal to his regarding the show’s creative direction. (The fact that I was responsible for the creative development of the show and had written its pilot script was not reason enough to value my input.)

Because I have been writing, directing, and producing television for so many years, my critical perspective on production culture, specifically the writing of prime-time television comedy, is deeply reflexive and autoethnographic. Anthropologist Deborah E. Reed-Danahay defines autoethnography as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text.”5 Further, she contends that “one of the main characteristics of an autoethnographic perspective is that the autoethnographer is a boundary-crosser, and the role can be characterized as that of a dual identity.”6

It is as a “boundary-crosser” that I approach this essay. My goal is to use my dual identity as a veteran television writer and scholar to give writers and producers a critical voice in production studies. I approach the topic of writing for prime-time television through an analysis of archival data, ethnographic study, and my own experiences in writers’ rooms to investigate the rules, roles, and rituals that exist in the writers’ workspace. This workspace is commonly known as the writers’ room, or simply “the room.”

**The Writers’ Workspace.** The writers’ room has long been a source of fascination for both media scholars and the popular press. In an effort to explain the relevance of this sixty-year-old private and protected workspace tradition, I explore here some of the cultural activities and social relationships of these spaces. The writers’ room is half-hour comedy’s creative ground zero. It is here that a process of collective decision making that I call “situational authorship” exists. Inside this ground zero, quasi-familial and organizational rules structure conventionalized socioprofessional activities that overdetermine the manner by which television’s on-screen texts are authored. In this space, ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed, and issues of gender, race, and class identities play out and complicate the on-screen narratives that eventually air on network and cable television.

This essay aims to unpack the sociocultural rituals that are integral to situational authorship. In particular, I will examine the ritual of othering writers based on gender

6 Ibid., 9.

146
and race. Categorization based on difference, according to Stuart Hall, “is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant,’ the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological,’ the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable,’ what ‘belongs,’ and what does not or is ‘Other.’”

Othering becomes particularly significant when one considers how personal backgrounds and beliefs of writers influence on-screen narrative. When othering becomes a method of silencing points of view, the ideas of those who are othered effectively die on the vine. If the other wishes to survive, she or he quickly learns to present ideas that are acceptable to the more powerful writers in the room. It is this process that leads to the homogenization of ideas.

This is nearly always the process for half-hour comedies. On a daily basis, the writing staff gathers in the room and brainstorms about what the next episode will be. Once a story area is “broken,” or agreed upon and approved by the head writer (who is usually also the executive producer), one of the writers on the writing staff is assigned the task of outlining and writing the script. However, before that writer is released to write the script, she or he has heard many individual writers’ perspectives on the story.

For example, perhaps the assigned writer had a notion to name the guest-starring character Tammy, but then he learns that the executive producer’s ex-wife (to whom he grudgingly pays alimony) is named Tammy. The writer would be well advised to change his character’s name. Or perhaps the writer wants to give his main character a Toyota Prius, but the senior writer who sits next to him in the room has a Prius that was just recalled and is not keen on the idea of giving Toyota free publicity unless it is bad publicity. The executive producer assures both writers that the studio’s legal department would never allow the latter. Quickly, the car is changed to a Honda Civic Hybrid.

Or, as I witnessed while observing the writers’ room at the CW sitcom The Game (2006–2009), a Jewish writer suggested a joke dependent on poking fun at a Jewish character based on his religious identity. The black writer assigned to the script commented that the joke might make it into the Jewish writer’s script—but it absolutely would not be in any script with the black writer’s name on the title page because it would make her look anti-Semitic. “I can’t get away with what you can get away with,” she added. The ethnically insensitive joke did not find its way into the script, as is often the case when the bias in the joke offends the sensibility of a senior writer in the room, or when the writer of the episode can make a strong case for a particular story or joke causing harm to his or her reputation as a writer.

8 Most one-hour-drama writing staffs gather in the same way, but there are exceptions. Because dramatic stories do not rely on the group humor dynamics prevalent in sitcoms, some one-hour dramas do not utilize the traditional writers’ room. Instead, they rely on one-on-one meetings between the writer who has an idea for an episode and the head writer/executive producer, who helps the writer shape the idea before assigning him/her the script to write.
9 During the 2008–2009 season, Mara Brock Akil, the creator and executive producer of The Game, a spin-off of the UPN/CW show Girlfriends, agreed to allow the author to observe the writers’ room, with no rules, every day for two weeks. During this time, the author was allowed access to the entire writing staff, cast readings of new scripts, and production rehearsals on the stage. It is also worth noting that, as the photograph of the writers demonstrates, this writing staff was equally split between black and nonblack writers. While this is common with black-themed shows, the dynamic is never repeated on mainstream shows, which tend to have one writer of color on a writing staff (Figure 1).
Gender and Ethnic Bias: A Brief Historical Perspective. From 1951 to 1954, Sid Caesar’s *Your Show of Shows* won multiple Emmy Awards for acting and writing. The much-honored writers included head writer Mel Tolkin, Lucille Kallen (the only woman on the writing staff), Howard Morris, and others who would go on to become comedy luminaries—Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, and Mel Brooks (Figure 2). The idea for the series came from Sylvester “Pat” Weaver, president of NBC from 1949 to 1956, and Max Liebman, a Broadway theater entrepreneur who started his television career with *The Admiral Broadway Revue* (1949) on NBC before expanding that canceled show’s concept for a new variety show, *Your Show of Shows*.

Weaver and Liebman are rarely mentioned as integral to the success of the ground-breaking comedy-variety show. Instead, it is what happened in the writing of the show’s many classic sketches that continues to hold interest. The mythic stories mostly center around the writers’ conference room, a small, cigar-smoke-filled office where boisterous men and one woman created comedy by committee and invoked humor that spoke to a broad audience.

Over fifty years after *Your Show of Shows* helped define the writers’ room as a space where popular and critically praised comedy was mysteriously produced, the approach to television comedy writing has undergone little fundamental change. Yet critical study of the television writers’ workspace is still lacking. In large measure, the dearth of scholarly address is attributable to the barriers of accessing a space where privacy is fiercely protected by those employed behind the closed doors. With the exception of

Figure 1. The writing staff of the CW’s *The Game* (2006–2009). Photograph taken by author as part of ethnographic observation of the show’s writers’ room, February 9, 2009.
public relations media visits, requests to observe this environment are usually rejected. During such visits, as John Caldwell points out, the information disseminated is “usually highly coded, managed, and infected.”

Institutional studies of prime-time television tend to focus on the relationship between the showrunner/executive producer and the rest of the production crew, or on the relationship between the showrunner/executive producer and the network and/or studio. Thus, the protected culture of the writers’ room has been neglected as a topic of study in favor of textual analysis, audience reception, and genre study. Yet the words that make it to the page necessarily inform these three areas of research. Clearly, then, the working conditions under which scripted stories are developed and the process of how writers are included or excluded are worth investigating.

Membership in the clique of the “included” is highly dependent on a writer’s ability to assimilate with the senior writers who run (lead or supervise) the room. Larry Gelbart characterized the experience of writing for Caesar’s follow-up to *Your Show of Shows, Caesar’s Hour* (1954–1957) in this way: “We were just a very, very, gifted bunch of neurotic, young Jews.”

“It was highly competitive, but not in the way that you were going to lose your job. It was just competitive for the fun of it,” added Neil Simon


about his experience on the same show. This description of the workspace indicates both the comedy room’s approach to stereotypes (self-stereotyping as “neurotic Jews”) and its tacit identity as ethnically homogenous.

Cultural privileging of this type creates a clique of the Included—“gifted bunch of neurotic, young Jews”—and the Excluded—those othered writers who are not members of this group. The exclusion of any writer who wasn’t Jewish (two writers on Your Show of Shows) illuminates the rules of the liminal space in which writers functioned—a space characterized by social ambiguity and openness where set roles and identities dissolve and “normal” limits and behaviors are relaxed. In Gelbart’s anecdote, the exclusion of the non-Jews he was working with effectively erases their contributions in favor of privileging the contributions of Jews.

For Lucille Kallen, the lone woman on the Your Show of Shows writing staff, the 1950s writers’ room was more than a workspace where a gifted bunch of “neurotic Jews” had competitive fun. It was also a workspace filled with cigar smoke where a pregnant Kallen asked for a moratorium on smoking. The male writers responded with a series of jokes about Kallen needing to make more of an effort to be “one of the boys.” A one-day reprieve followed and then the men resumed smoking, suggesting Kallen work in the hallway if the smoke continued to bother her. Cigar smoke became the means by which the early writers’ room was gendered and a female writer was othered and marginalized. Kallen continued to work in the writers’ workspace (where she reported not being able to breathe) because she valued her place among what critics still consider one of the most talented comedy writing staffs ever assembled.

The Sanctity of Trash Talking. While it is now illegal to smoke in the workplace, the off-color or inappropriate joke has taken the place of cigar smoke as a means of marking certain workers as other, based on their gender, race, or socioeconomic class. In 2006, the “creative necessity” of off-color jokes in the sanctity of the writers’ room was upheld by the California Superior Court in its decision to dismiss the lawsuit brought by a black woman employed as a writer’s assistant on the NBC comedy Friends. Although the show’s studio, Warner Bros. Television, acknowledged that some of the sexually explicit talk took place, the studio argued that such talk was vital to the chemistry of the show (Figure 3).

Amaani Lyle accused the highly rated comedy of fostering an environment of sexual harassment and racial discrimination. California’s Supreme Court justices, ruling 7-0, agreed with Warner Bros. Television Productions that “trash talk” was part of the creative process, and that the studio and its writers could therefore not be sued for raunchy writers’ meetings. Warner Bros. and the Friends writers successfully argued to protect the room and the creative necessity of sexually coarse and vulgar language

12 Ibid.
14 Lucille Kallen, oral history.
16 Ibid.
by claiming that their workspace was one “focused on generating scripts for an adult-oriented comic show featuring sexual themes.”

Of course, “sexually coarse and vulgar language” was not invented by the writing staff of *Friends*. Nor was other behavior that in most work environments would be considered actionable. The two examples of writers’ room gender politics given here—one from the early 1950s and the other from the late 1990s—illustrate how situational authorship functions and how durable its dynamics are. Through the othering that takes place in both examples, methods of homogenizing the cultural dynamics of the writers’ room emerge. Humor is generated within this space through a process of inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and othering, and humor is derived from social categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, which become the means by which the performative space is homogenized.

**Others with Opportunities.** The cultural and structural stability of the writers’ room over the last half century is also illuminated by how the othered are forced to function if they desire continued employment. Often, familiarity breeds opportunity in this workspace. However, for marginalized writers it is not always “who you know,” as the old adage suggests. It is instead what you pretend not to know that determines success in highly competitive writing positions.

For example, when a series with a predominantly white cast decides to introduce a black character, and there is a black writer on the writing staff, he or she is usually assigned to write that particular script in a political dance in which the head writer/executive producer avoids discussion of why such an assignment was made. For the black writer, the dance is more complicated. If the writer refuses the assignment, she/

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17 Ibid.
he risks being labeled someone who is not a team player or a writer who is too sensitive about race. However, if she/he accepts the assignment, the black writer must be concerned with being pigeonholed as a writer who can only write black characters. The dilemma is a complex one. The writer becomes othered regardless of how she/he responds to the request. Agreeing to the writing assignment others the writer as being only capable of writing “black material.” Refusing the assignment others this same writer as someone who racializes all encounters.

Gender is also used to other women in writers’ rooms. Whereas the black writer’s silence in addressing the race-related story assignment is a common strategy for combating marginalization, women writers must often let their laughter be heard as a strategy to combat being othered. A female writer who does not laugh along with off-color jokes about penis size may be labeled incapable of being “one of the guys” and therefore “not a good fit” with a predominantly male staff. This writer, if she is unable to feign a level of comfort with such jokes, will not last more than a year or two in the male-dominated world of television comedy writers.

“Uni-Culturalism”: The By-Product of Situational Authorship. In her foundational 1950 text, Hollywood, the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers, Hortense Powdermaker hypothesized that the social dynamics of the filmmaking community exercised an important influence on the production of movies and that, ultimately, the production processes and actions “behind the scenes” influenced the content and form of films.¹⁸ This argument can be applied to television comedy writing. The behind-the-scenes actions or rituals in the writers’ room, and the roles writers play within this space, not only influence but also author the content and form of television comedy’s humor and narrative. When othered writers assimilate in order to be included, what is then left out of creative discussions also affects authorship.

In a post-network era dominated by “color-blind” and “multicultural” hiring, attempts at inclusion are based more on visual difference than on cultural difference. Without consideration of cultural differences in the creative process, color-blind and multicultural casting of both the writers’ room and on-screen characters becomes a means of instituting “uni-culturalism.” In other words, the more race, gender, and class are used to other writers, the less comfortable these writers are with expressing creative and cultural difference. In a uni-cultural world that limits its definition of multiculturalism to visual difference, all writers and all characters may not look alike, but they all mimic the dominant group because there is little acceptance of actual difference. Moreover, in an attempt to mainstream a variety of cultural and racial differences, difference itself is treated as the antithesis of multicultural inclusion. Yet I would argue that multiculturalism should be a celebration of cultural difference on-screen, in the writers’ room, and, ultimately, in storytelling. By analyzing how content is authored, we can better understand how images are created and how the process of creating such images can lead to the exclusion of gender, race, class, and cultural difference in favor of a hegemonic, uni-cultural perspective.

In a 2008 interview with Powells Books, novelist Richard Price was asked if his work writing for HBO’s *The Wire* (2002–2008) had influenced his approach to his latest novel, *Lush Life*. “No, not at all. TV does not influence novels—at least with me, it doesn’t.”¹ Sixteen years earlier, on an episode of *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–1998) titled “The Virgin,” George tries to pick up a woman in a bar by suggesting that he writes for television:

George: What do I do? Well actually, I’m a writer. In fact, I’m writing a comedy pilot for NBC right now.

Woman: A sitcom? How can you write that crap? Carol, this guy’s writing a sitcom.

Carol: A sitcom? Come on, let’s go. (They leave.)

Woman: A sitcom. Can you imagine? And he actually tried to use it to hit on me!

**It’s Not TV?** What these two examples have in common is a commitment to understanding television fiction writing—whether comedy or drama—as a lesser endeavor. Even when the writing on a series is deemed to be extraordinarily good, as it was on *The Wire*, it is often appreciated in terms not specific to television. A particularly suggestive trope of many critics is to describe a well-written program as “novelistic.” Most illustrative of this trend is an essay Charles McGrath wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* celebrating the string of quality hour-long dramas on network television in the mid-1990s (a group which he categorized as “prime-time novels”):

> [O]n television these days, if you listen hard enough, you can often hear dialogue of *writerly* quality—dialogue, that is, that’s *good enough to be in a book*. And there are ways in which TV has actually taken over some of the roles that books used to fill.

A few of the more inventive TV series, for example, have

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become for our era the equivalent of the serial novel, unfolding epic stories installment by installment, and sweeping all of us up in shared anxiety and in a lot of group sighing and head shaking over what fate or (it's the same thing) the author has in store.²

By highlighting the extraordinariness of these “writerly” stories that are “good enough to be in a book,” McGrath diminishes the majority of television fiction writing by highlighting the surprising quality of a small handful of series capable of rising above the fray. And even then, they do so only by approximating more prestigious cultural forms.³

In this essay, I want to explore what television fiction writing—as a particular and ordinary set of activities—can tell us about what John Corner has called the “cultural dynamics” specific to television.⁴ Corner describes these “cultural dynamics” as a matter of both centrifugal and centripetal forces at work. Corner ascribes the centripetal nature of television to the medium’s ability to process “a wide range of established and emerging cultural features manifest in other areas,” while the medium’s centrifugal nature accounts for its reach—its ability to interpret these features and then project them “to the widest boundaries of the culture.”⁵ In what follows I focus on two areas that make television writing a distinct set of cultural practices: the series structure of television storytelling, and television writing as a particular kind of negotiated activity. To investigate the nature of this negotiated activity, I have interviewed several working television writers, who have tried to help me understand the contexts within which they do the work they do.⁶

Well, Actually, It Is TV: Series Structure, Familiar Characters, and Drama. In contrast to the view that quality television must be understood or justified in relation to other media, I offer examples of “ordinary” elements of commercial television writing and producing shared by all series regardless of quality. As a way of illustrating how these elements help shape the particular cultural dynamics of television, I focus on the question of how writers and producers approach cultural politics in their series. Each of the writers I interviewed has worked on critically acclaimed series, several of which have been held up as exceptional work. But while it is true that every individual writer’s experience is unique, and every series has its own complex internal dynamics, the guiding principle of my thinking here is that the differences between series of varied critical prestige are of degree, not kind.

While television is most certainly not the only cultural form to embrace serialization, the episodic/serial form is the dominant structure of virtually all television

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³ This distinction between television and its more prestigious other was famously picked up by HBO’s marketing of its original series such as The Sopranos, Sex and the City, and The Wire: “It’s Not Television. It’s HBO.”
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ I would like to express my gratitude to Julie Martin, Tom Fontana, David Chambers, and Julie Chambers for their generosity, patience, and insight.
fiction. This structure varies with regard to the level of serialization, but whether the narrative structure is episodic or highly serialized, the most basic appeal of a television series for an audience is watching familiar characters deal with new situations each week. These situations might be deeply controversial (e.g., abortion) or seemingly frivolous (e.g., minor marital spats). In every case, though, the writers I talked to underscored that storytelling in television is mostly a matter of locating the human elements that can be mined over time with recurring characters. When dealing with social issues, the challenge for the writer of a series narrative is to “find a way to tell the story through how it affects these characters emotionally” rather than to treat the narrative as a political tract. Each writer spoke of the need to strike a balance between the issue and the characters involved. David and Julie Chambers spoke of the “inherent drama” of social issues at any particular moment in time “which both heightens the audiences’ interest in them and makes the storytelling easier,” but warned that any social or political themes “must be in service to the [human] story, and not the other way around.”

This challenge confronts the writer on two levels. On one level, having familiar characters confront new crises each week runs the risk of exhausting the characters’ emotional capacities (and trying the audience’s willingness to suspend disbelief), which goes a long way toward explaining the continuing overrepresentation of “crisis careers” in television drama (doctors, cops, lawyers). On another level, the writer needs to locate a balance within the issue in order to create dramatic tension. “You can have a point of view, but if the opposing point of view is weaker than your point of view, then you are asking the audience to watch a one-sided football game. You want to watch two evenly matched teams.” Sometimes these points of view need to be constructed arbitrarily. As Julie Martin told me, “to get that other point of view you say, ‘Well, maybe this character is against or for that . . .’” Regardless of how individual writers approach these problems, a central concern with finding compelling emotional frameworks for familiar and recurring characters, coupled with a clear sense of what constitutes series-based drama, guides writers’ approaches to social issues and cultural politics.

Different series, of course, present these problems in different ways, depending on the structure of the narrative (serial or episodic), the size of the cast, or the general subject matter of the series. Comparing *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1992–1999) and *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990–2010), for instance, Julie Martin points to the main difference as “the amount of screen time that characters are allowed to explore their own perspectives and feelings about [an] issue. *Law & Order* involves a lot of procedure. There was more room to breath in *Homicide.*” Similarly, asked to speak to the differences between *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (NBC, 2001–), another show she wrote for, Martin pointed out that “[o]n *Law & Order* it’s probably easier to formally articulate social/political issues, since the lawyers are in court, questioning

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8 David and Julie Chambers, e-mail message to author, December 28, 2009.
11 Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, telephone interview with Martin, September 14, 2009.
witnesses, making closing arguments, etc.—all opportunities to raise issues/questions. On Criminal Intent the social/political commentary is looser, less formal, just between the characters themselves, or possibly between the detectives and the criminals, in an interrogation scene, for example.”

And, of course, hour-long dramas typically differ in their approach to social issues from situation comedies, which often rely on satire and offer “explicit or implied criticism of the society and/or characters you’re depicting.” Regardless of the form, each of the writers I spoke with highlighted the beliefs that everything must be in the service of the story, and that television stories are driven by characters that audiences have come to know with some degree of intimacy.

Finally, regardless of the differences between series, every series is overseen by a showrunner (usually the head writer and/or executive producer) who is responsible for managing the series over time. The sheer scale of television production dictates that no one person can write (or direct) all the episodes in a single season. Tom Fontana explains his job of showrunner on Oz (HBO, 1997–2003) and Homicide as keeping an eye on the big picture of the series: “The showrunner’s job is to look at the whole mosaic and say, ‘OK this fits here in the mosaic of Homicide or the mosaic of Oz.’ You have to keep an eye on the overall rhythm and tone and spirit of the series but you have to be able to . . . if you’re going to hire talented writers . . . you have to be able to let them run free.”

The point of view of a series, and of any particular social issue, then, is achieved through a delicate balancing act of nurturing individual writers through an engagement with a particular world and a set of characters that needs to remain somewhat consistent over time.

In all of these examples, the dynamics of the issue at hand are guided by the structure of the series, the centrality of familiar characters in the engagement of audiences, and the belief, held by all the writers I interviewed, that the role of the television writer—whether in comedy or drama—is to confront cultural issues without a didactic purpose but, rather, with a clear sense of the human stakes involved.

**Television Writing as a Negotiated Activity.** Television writing is always a “negotiated” activity. By “negotiated” I mean two things. First, unlike our general conception of how novels are written, television scripts are created largely in groups. While all series assign episodes differently, most series are comprised of a writing staff headed up by a show runner/executive producer who oversees the operation of the writing team. Julie Martin describes the process on Law & Order: “The episodes are always written by a team of two. Your team is assigned specific slots, then has to pitch story ideas to the showrunner. Once an idea is approved, you and the other writer on the team will work out the beats (story) of the episode in a room together, then divide up the actual scene writing (usually one writer doing the first two acts, and the other doing the second two acts, etc.).”

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12 Martin, e-mail message to author, October 1, 2009.
13 David and Julie Chambers, e-mail, December 28, 2009.
14 Fontana, interview, December 2, 2009.
15 Martin, e-mail, October 1, 2009.
Even when series accept freelance scripts from writers outside of the production staff, the writers involved must pitch ideas to the series producers. An idea may be rejected, accepted in full, or (most likely) reworked and handed back to the writers whose idea it originally had been. David and Julie Chambers provide an example of a script they pitched to *The Simpsons* (FOX, 1989–) involving Bart acting as a “pimp” for beggars. “In the end, the staff at *The Simpsons* decided they wanted us to write a different story for Bart, but liked the begging idea so much that we used it as the basis of a story in which Homer starts working as a beggar.” What the Chambers’s example points to is the fact that the regular series writer/producers are most attuned to what kinds of perspectives, attitudes, and actions fit the recurring characters of the series. Whether it’s a matter of compiling teams of writers who share the workload, or working with freelance writers outside the day-to-day world of the series production routines, one of the showrunner’s primary responsibilities is negotiating ideas for stories and characters’ responses to situations.

The second way that television writing is a negotiated activity rests at the level of studio and/or network feedback and regulatory response. First, depending on the success of a given series, or the track record of the executive producer(s), the network can take an array of positions with regard to series content. As David and Julie Chambers point out, “writers on a show must get the basics of each story approved by the network,” and new or struggling series will receive a great deal of network oversight.

These negotiations with the networks can be tense and confusing for writers and showrunners. Tom Fontana gave the example of the network comments on the earliest drafts of his series, *The Philanthropist* (NBC, June 2009–October 2009): “[T]hey were ‘too controversial, too dark, and anti-American.’” When I asked how he responds to such a concern, he replied:

> You try to see what it is they are talking about. And usually there are a series of weird negotiations. And you get to a point and what you hope is that you don’t compromise it to the point where it has no purpose whatsoever. But it’s very easy to get to the point, depending on how you are feeling, to just say: “Fine, I’ll change it. Don’t worry about it.” Because it’s the nature of the beast that they are trying to reach as many people as possible and therefore to be as inoffensive as possible.

The most established and successful series, however, sometimes receive no feedback, even on the most potentially controversial ideas. With regard to her recent *Law & Order* script on the killing of an abortion doctor (“Dignity”), Julie Martin described the network’s approach as virtually hands-off: “We didn’t get any feedback from the

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16 David and Julie Chambers, e-mail, December 28, 2009. The episode that the Chambers are referring to is “Milt-house Doesn’t Live Here Anymore,” for which they received a nomination for best animated TV episode from the Writers Guild of America.

17 David and Julie Chambers, e-mail, December 28, 2009.

18 Fontana, interview, December 2, 2009.

19 Ibid.
studio or network regarding content,” though there was some discussion among the production staff as to whether they had skewed the episode too far toward a pro-life perspective. She adds, “We were concerned that we weren’t sending out any kind of message that would seem to say that we were advocating any sort of violence against abortion providers.”

The concerns of the networks to attract a valuable audience on the one hand, and to avoid offending powerful political groups and raising the ire of regulators on the other, requires negotiations that often lead away from the initial spirit of an idea and to unintended consequences. An example of this element of negotiation can be seen in *The Bedford Diaries* (WB, March 2006–May 2006), a short-lived series on the WB cocreated by Fontana and Martin. According to Martin, the initial idea for the series involved a group of at-risk teens attending a reform school. The WB considered that a bit too rough and edgy for their audience. Martin and Fontana then suggested that it be set in a more traditional high school. Executives at the network felt that there had already been enough high school shows and suggested instead a show about college students. Already, we can see the needs of the network with regard to their perceived audience driving the negotiations, and writers attempting to accommodate these needs while retaining something of their original vision—the thing that made them want to tell the story in the first place.

With a new setting, the trick for Fontana and Martin was to figure out the narrative device that would allow them access to the characters’ internal lives. What they settled on was video diaries and a course in human sexuality. In the wake of FCC fines against CBS stations for airing a controversial episode of *Without a Trace* (CBS, 2002–2009), however, the WB asked the producers to reedit some episodes to avoid controversy and possible fines. According to Martin, these concerns missed the larger point: “Sex was a way in. But really it was about how these people on the cusp of adulthood define themselves through their romantic relationships.” Fontana echoed this perspective: “It was more about the way a community deals with each other—the responsibility we have to one another. . . . [I]t couldn’t have been more about family values if we’d raised the American flag at the beginning of every episode.”

**Conclusion.** What I’ve tried to suggest here, on the most basic level, is the way in which all television writing, regardless of perceived quality, is a product of particular storytelling strategies, institutional practices, and creative negotiations within a specific (if changing) structure. What John Corner calls television’s “particular cultural dynamics”—that heightened process of ingestion and projection—is common to all

20 Martin, e-mail message to author, February 19, 2010.
22 Ibid.
television fiction, the differences between series a matter of degree rather than kind. More specifically, I’ve offered a brief picture of these dynamics at work, illustrated by the insights of a handful of successful television writers asked to think about the process of engaging with social issues in their work.

Celebrating specific series and writers and producers for the high quality or socially critical/political edge of their work—as the Peabody Awards do—is a valuable activity. But suggesting that excellent television writing is somehow not really like television serves both to miss a larger point about television writing as a cultural practice, and to erase the writer of more “ordinary” television fiction from the cultural landscape. As Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley eloquently and convincingly demonstrated almost thirty years ago, “[m]uch television is mundane. All of it is grist for the mill of cultural analysis, but little of it draws a mass audience over extended periods of time or attracts special attention to itself. Its very transparency is one of its virtues.”

I want to end, perhaps ironically, with a literary reference. In Flannery O’Connor’s 1952 novel, Wise Blood, protagonist Hazel Motes holds a firm belief that “nobody with a good car needs to be justified.” Motes’s Essex automobile is (despite his insistence that it is a “good car”) run down and unreliable, incapable of delivering Motes to the redemption he so desires. Criticism has treated the majority of television fiction like the Essex: a vehicle with a lot of potential that frequently fails to get us anywhere truly meaningful. Which is why, as Todd Gitlin has pointed out, the system’s “little accomplishments” seem “so miraculous.” Perhaps we justify our interest and pleasure in television by attending to the very best it has to offer, and placing ourselves above the worst. But at the end of the day, it’s all television.

Introduction. Contemporary television’s artistic achievements seem to be an increasingly popular topic among reviewers and critics, pointing to growing appreciation for seriality and the small screen. As Australian critic Kenneth Nguyen has bluntly stated, “The idiot box has gotten smarter. . . . [T]he on-screen evidence shows that television can tell stories with intelligence, depth, and verve.”1 Indeed, shows like The Sopranos (HBO, 1999–2007), Mad Men (AMC, 2007–), The Wire (HBO, 2002–2008), Lost (ABC, 2004–2010), 30 Rock (NBC, 2006–), and Friday Night Lights (NBC, 2006–) have elicited celebration from viewers, fans, critics, and academics alike, all of whom point to writer/producers David Chase, David Simon, Tina Fey, Damon Lindelof, and Carlton Cuse as television “ auteurs.” Film stars are even “jumping back into television,” declared New Yorker film critic Anthony Lane. “And who can blame them, since that is where you can find the better scripts these days,” he wrote in 2008.2 While there may be some consensus that contemporary television affords new creative opportunities, these notions of quality, value, and “smarter” storytelling in television are of course complex and contentious. Scholars have long labored to understand just what makes “quality television,” from aesthetic qualities and production values to authorial intent and encouragement of audience engagement.3 In the 1980s and early 1990s, an era that he terms

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“television’s second golden age,” Robert Thompson identifies twelve characteristics that form a “profile” of quality television as a category, including notions of pedigree, “blue chip” audiences, controversial subject matter, and a self-conscious awareness of popular culture. Quality television is also marked, according to Thompson, by receiving critical acclaim and numerous awards.

Awards ceremonies are a significant component of the television industry, offering annual displays of self-affirmation and celebration that mobilize discourses of quality and excellence in the medium. Millions tune in every year for the Primetime Emmy Awards and red-carpet regalia of the Golden Globe Awards, watching the most “outstanding” programs, writers, directors, and on-screen talent vie for statues. Determined by votes from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, respectively, the Emmys and the Golden Globes represent an important site of industry notions of who and what are important. Often, there is significant overlap between what the industry awards as “excellent” and what academia considers noteworthy in television. However, the specificities of this overlap remain largely underanalyzed. John Caldwell calls for a closer look at the “curious affinity” between scholarly media studies and industry “theorizing,” pointing out that whether through peer-reviewed publishing or trade habits like pitch sessions, academia and industry both engage in similar activities of “close critical analyses, aesthetic speculation, screen technology assessment, reception study, historical debate, and general formal and cultural theorization.”

As one of the only award programs for television and electronic media that includes deliberation among academics, critics, and industry practitioners, the Peabody Awards represent a nexus of scholarly and industrial definitions of “excellence,” and thus serve as a critical site to analyze the intersections and tensions between these discourses of quality in television and television writing and producing. Established in 1940, the George Foster Peabody Awards annually recognize excellence in television, radio, and websites. There are no set categories or specific number of awards given each year; rather, the sixteen-member Peabody Board determines each year’s winners based on submissions from local, national, and international broadcasters, cable networks, and production companies (often numbering over 1,000 entries). Winners include a wide array of programs, with recent honorees ranging from Modern Family (ABC, 2009–), Glee (Fox, 2009–), and In Treatment (HBO, 2008–), to news segments from 60 Minutes (CBS, 1968–) and FOX Chicago affiliate WFLD-TV, to radio documentaries like The Great Textbook War (2009) from West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

In addition to bestowing annual honors, the Peabody Awards, administered by the University of Georgia’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, have amassed a significant archival collection that contains not only every winner and award citation since 1940, but also almost every entry in the program’s history. In association with the Walter J. Brown Media Archives at the University of Georgia, the

4 Robert Thompson, Television’s Second Golden Age: From “Hill Street Blues” to “ER” (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

Peabody Awards Collection contains a significant number of television broadcasts and sound recordings, with many of the kinescopes, film prints, tapes, and radio transcription discs held by the Library existing as the sole surviving copies of the work.

I spoke with Horace Newcomb, Director and Lambdin Kay Chair for the Peabodys in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia, and Ruta Abolins, Director of the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, about the Peabody Awards, the archiving process, and notions of quality, value, and importance in television. Newcomb and Abolins provide a glimpse into the way that the Peabody Awards negotiate both academic and industrial discourses to seek out excellence in media in a way that both recognizes and respects the tenuous yet important relationship between media industries and cultural experience.

The Interview

Lindsay Garrison: Beginning with the basic structures of the awards process, what does the submission process entail? And, generally speaking, who is entering the programs or segments? Studios? Public Relations personnel?

Horace Newcomb: Each year we receive about 1,000 entries. These are all “self-nominations.” Anyone can enter the process. Television entries require a $250 fee, radio $150, Web $250. Most of the entries come from stations, station groups, studios, or networks. The legacy nets and the cable premium groups have Awards Coordinators. We put out our “Call for Entries” in the fall, with ads in the trades, direct mail, etc. My guess is that most of those who enter have done so before or know who won before and decide they can do the same. I also suspect that local stations have to decide if they have something “good enough” to enter. We get far fewer local station entries, for example, than the Radio/TV News Directors Murrow Award competition. But they break theirs down by market size, topic, etc. For Peabody, the local stations probably decide they have something extra special. We do get a few entries from strictly independent producers or organizations. But for “umbrella” programs such as Frontline (PBS, 1983–) or American Masters (PBS, 1986–), we get what they decide to enter and what they can afford. We worry a bit that we get lots of material from the same organizations year in, year out. But we see new things, too, such as entries from the Retirement Channel. Entries require completion of an online entry form, submission of five viewing copies, an archival copy, and a hard copy of the entry form. Any entry is free to include ancillary or supporting materials—letters, news clips, etc. Some of the materials we receive include novelty items, T-shirts, and so on. Everything is kept for inclusion in the Peabody Archive.

Ruta Abolins: We in the archive get the viewing copies and a master, but that could be one item or twenty-two items, like an entire season or complete series run, in addition to whatever the entrants choose to submit, such as artifact items, PDFs, promotional materials, or screenshots of associated websites. People self-select what they choose to submit. Most of the record information in the archive is based on the descriptions
written and provided by those who entered the show or segment, so our collection gives a good picture through history as to what the industry thought was best and why they entered it.

LG: After the entries are processed, they go to campus committees of students and faculty, who write recommendations. How does the board, then, come together and determine the winners? As a group of scholars, television critics, and industry professionals, how do you negotiate differences of opinion in what deserves recognition?

HN: As many Board members as can arrange the travel meet twice in preliminary meetings in mid- and late February. The full Board meets on campus in Athens in late March. At these meetings we consider the entries recommended by campus committees, which are selected through an application process. But—importantly—we are not bound by those recommendations. We often reject items recommended and frequently move forward items rejected by the campus committees. The Peabody Board has full and final responsibility for all decisions.

Those decisions are all made in face-to-face deliberations. Our meetings are long and intense. But the greatest feature of the Peabody, in my view, is that the sixteen Board members truly listen to a range of perspectives. It is not uncommon for a board member to change his or her mind after hearing strong arguments that counter their perspective. The meetings are one of the few places where strong rational discourse is the norm. In the end, every recipient must be approved by unanimous vote. People are voting for things they may not have preferred because of the persuasive power of their colleagues’ perspectives.

LG: I’m fascinated by the discussion and interaction of the Board, an important process that differs greatly from just a tally of votes by an academy or group of reporters. There seem to be several cases in which the main points for recognition in the winner citation differ from [the] points of excellence brought up in the entry form [submitted] by the studio. For example, the entry form for the *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006–2010) pilot highlights the “fish out of water” narrative and the notion of “beauty on the inside” as qualities that make the show special. The winner’s citation mentions these in passing, but instead focuses on its innovation in genre hybridity, the flexibility of its writing style and cast, and its “wit and humanity.” So, how much does the industry rhetoric on the entry forms matter, per se, and how much of the “quality” or “excellence” of a show is determined by the discussion of the committees and the boards, and what factors seem to come up the most in those discussions? There seems to be a diverse mix of reasons for recognition for entertainment media winners in particular, ranging from notions of audience engagement/pleasure to formal/aesthetic innovations. Recognizing there’s no easy, single answer, what do you think are the most significant markers of excellence in entertainment electronic media?

HN: We say we have one criterion: “Excellence.” But we recognize many different versions of excellence. As one British recipient once put it, the distinctive thing about the Peabody is that it “recognizes excellence on its own terms.” Some awards . . . may be for life- or community-changing journalism, some for sheer aesthetic beauty. The
entry form is the way the producer or the studio or the PR firm or the awards coordinator describes the program. The formal Peabody Citation is a capsule of what the Board recognized. A lovely little study in audience response theory if you will. The mix of reasons for the Award is one of the things that make our rigorous discussion so rich.

LG: In assessing and debating quality and value in television, what can the Peabodys tell us about what attributes might be “timeless,” and what might be more contingent on genre, format, or historical moment? How might the Peabodys differ from other awards . . . in terms of discerning quality?

HN: The award is still recognized in many circles as the most prestigious for electronic media. You’ll often see a press release or an obit in which there’s a note about “received ten Emmys” and “one Peabody.” Much harder to get. As one young local journalist said on one occasion when I called to inform them of the award, “You’ve made my day—and probably my career.” The other awards are often considered “peer awards.” I refer to the Peabody as a “citizens’ award.” True enough, this holds more sway for journalism and documentary than entertainment, though the entertainment people are often humbled and made more grateful when they’re at the presentation ceremony and see the contexts in which they’ve reached this level.

RA: The Peabody Award is also really important because it recognizes not only national television and radio, but also local broadcasting. Some of the smaller market material we have is the only copy or one of very few copies that exists at all. Also, the Peabody Awards Collection is made of every entry to the awards, not just the winners. And it’s not a ballot that others can nominate to or vote for whomever they want. So, even with the important role of the Board for the actual awards, the Peabody Collection is important in that it represents such a sizable archive of what the industry thinks is the best—whether that’s big production companies, local radio and TV stations, or international producers. So, along with news and documentaries, The Real Housewives of Orange County (Bravo, 2006–) was entered—it’s a cross section of the best of what these folks think they’ve done—not us, not anyone else, but what they think is the best.

HN: Yes, the annual submissions do exhibit a cross section of the media record for that year. Through sixty-eight years, there have never been more than thirty-six awards presented in a given year. We are often first to recognize distinguished work, but we are perfectly comfortable waiting years to recognize a program of long-standing presence. I often describe the Archive as containing the social and cultural history of the US (and increasingly the world) from mid-twentieth century forward.

Conclusion. From the in-depth entry forms to the intense debate among scholars, critics, and industrial professionals of the Board, the Peabody Awards’ quest to recognize “excellence” is clearly a complex process that goes beyond thinking in categorical terms of genre, medium, or aesthetics to instead seek out multiple, more flexible notions of quality that each entry establishes in its own forms and contexts.
In this process, the Peabody Awards and the Peabody Awards Collection serve as a crucial site where the “curious affinity,” to use Caldwell’s terms, between scholarly media studies and industry “theorizing” is exposed in important ways via discourses of value, history, and culture. These are crucial issues that deserve continued critical attention, for, as Charlotte Brunsdon writes, “there are always issues of power at stake in notions of quality and judgment—quality for whom? Judgment by whom? On whose behalf?”

The questions raised by Brunsdon remain important not only in discussing “quality television” or determining award winners, but also in maintaining archives. Even in their notable efforts to document and preserve the vast array of entries and winners in the Peabody Awards Collection, Abolins and her team can only do so much with their resources, and like most archives, must make decisions in prioritizing the backlog of cataloging and restoration needs. According to Abolins, much of what gets cataloged is often determined by grants or funding from other sources, such as the National Endowment for the Humanities grant to preserve television programs on African American history and the Save America’s Treasures grant that helped fund digitization of local television shows in the collection. But even with certain material limitations, the collection remains a valuable resource in offering such a wide variety of self-selected, self-described entries alongside actual award winners and winning citations, thus expanding even further the Peabody goal of “recognizing excellence on its own terms.”

Writing about television drama in 2007, Robin Nelson echoed a similar expectation of defining quality, stating, “[N]otions of quality are an open narrative of the broad cultural and institutional context of the evaluation and the valuer, rather than a closed resolution answering the question of worth for all time.” The Peabody Awards and Archives serve a crucial function in collecting and documenting parts of our cultural history and preserving those elements for future researchers and fans, all of whom may find his or her own idea of just what counts as “quality.”

Contributors

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