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Submitted

October 20, 2017

Approved

January 17, 2018

© 2018

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.31.1.91-106

www.communication-society.com

2018 – Vol. 31(1)

pp. 91-106

How to cite this article:

Higuera-Ruiz, M. J.; Gómez-Pérez,
F. J. & Alberich-Pascual, J. (2018).
Historical Review and
Contemporary Characterization of
Showrunner as Professional Profile
in TV Series Production: Traits,
Skills, Competences, and Style.
Communication & Society 31(1),
91-106.

This study is supported by a grant from
the Spanish Ministerio de Educación,
Cultura y Deporte (FPU15/00737) to
María José Higuera Ruiz.

Historical Review and Contemporary Characterization of Showrunner as Professional Profile in TV Series Production: Traits, Skills, Competences, and Style

Abstract

This article reviews the professional profile of the showrunner in the audiovisual industry, from a historical and conceptual perspective: the background, the features that define it, and the TV media position. To do so, qualitative methodology has been used to conduct a thorough bibliographic review, and examine the emergence and development of the “showrunner” concept in television history, and the term used to describe it. We then analysed the “executive producer” and “creative producer” categories, both of which are associated with the objective of the study, to determine a generalized definition of the audiovisual showrunner. We have also examined the characteristics associated with this professional producer and writer position, the skill set required for the same, the roles and responsibilities to be managed during the production process, and the creative hallmark of authorship over the TV series. Finally, the results obtained suggest that this writer-producer position has existed since the onset of the television industry; however, the use of the term “showrunner” is more recent. Today, we see a revaluation of this profile in TV series production thanks to the generalized use of the concept “showrunner”, and due to several historical, cultural, and technological factors that contribute to this situation.

Keywords

Showrunner, executive production, creative production, TV series, audiovisual authorship.

1. Introduction

The audiovisual producer profile is so complex that it is difficult to find an accurate and specific definition of the same. Furthermore, this situation increases in practice, since sometimes there is no coincidence of the titles that the organization chart of the production company uses

to refer to the same roles, their functions and competences. Usually, it depends on the audiovisual work being carried out, the size of the enterprise, or specific country regulations.

On the other hand, even though this professional position has not received the same attention as others within the audiovisual field, a consensus has been reached across media communication studies with regards to its relevance. Therefore, its key responsibility in both economic and creative aspects for the development of audiovisual work, has been highlighted (Fernández-Díez & Martínez-Abadía, 1994, 2010; Zettl, 1996; Schihl, 1997; Barroso, 2002; Jacoste, 2004; Cury, 2007; Millerson, 2009).

Furthermore, the notoriety of the audiovisual producer as a creative force, took on a special meaning in the television industry starting in the 1980s, with this field being typically referred to as *The Producer's Medium* (Newcomb & Alley, 1983). Therefore, the individual leading fiction TV projects is simultaneously in charge of various tasks: the hiring of the technical and artistic team, the bargaining with channel managers, the overseeing and re-writing of the script, and the creation of content and characters (Gervich, 2008). Thus, there is a clear influence over the audiovisual work from a creative perspective. This allows us to identify a set of authorship signs at narrative, aesthetic and thematic levels (Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Thompson & Burns, 1990; Kubey, 2009).

More often than not producer prominence has remained in the background of the academic field, especially with regards to audience recognition. This circumstance has gradually begun to change since the 1990s, with the emergence of Quality Television (Thompson, 1996). Within this context, the concept of "showrunner" has arisen, intended to designate the new executive-creative producer having the greatest responsibility during the creative, and production process in most contemporary TV series (Cascajosa, 2016a).

2. Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to offer a historical and conceptual review of the term "showrunner" in fiction TV series production. With this goal in mind, we have utilised qualitative methodology to examine a specialized bibliography on this topic: general texts on audiovisual production, and books focusing on the theory and history of contemporary television. We have used the American framework as our reference because the subject matter emerged and gained significance in this industry. However, the finding could be extended and applied to other countries if we consider the industrial structure as well as the particularities of each ones.

Therefore, this article has been divided into two parts to develop the proposed research. Firstly, we offer a historical overview of the "showrunner" concept throughout the Golden Ages of Television (Thompson, 1996). In order to determine the reasons behind the emergence of this profile and the term used to describe it, we have considered the vast literature regarding the history of the American TV series written by Concepción Cascajosa (2005, 2006, 2007, 2016), interviews with the TV series creators conducted by Longworth (2000, 2002), Priggé (2005) Kubey (2009) and Kallas (2014), as well as references to Quality Television proposed by Thompson (1996).

Secondly, the study focuses on the emerging profile of the showrunner, using the following terminology: "executive producer" and "creative producer" as a starting point. Here, we have referred to national and international handbooks on audiovisual production and filmmaking by Sainz (1990, 1994, 1999), Chion (1992), Fernández-Díez & Martínez-Abadía (1994, 2010), Zettl (1996), Schihl (1997), Cuevas (1999), Augros (2000), Pardo (2000, 2001, 2003, 2009, 2014), Barroso (2002), Jacoste (2004), Cury (2007), Gervich (2008), Fernández-Díez & Barco (2009), Millerson (2009) and Lee & Gillen (2011). It is also necessary to configure the theoretical framework in order to view the specific contributions connected with television

production (García de Castro, 2002; Clements, 2004; Diego, 2005, 2010; Kellison, 2009; Guerrero, 2010, 2012, 2013). Furthermore, we have considered those authors that describe the defining features of the audiovisual showrunner (Lotz, 2007; Gervich, 2008; Douglas, 2011, 2015; Landau, 2014; Martin, 2013; De Rosendo & Gatell, 2015), the books *Writing for Episodic TV. From Freelance to Showrunner* by Wirth & Melvoin (2004) and *The Art of Running a TV Show* by Bennett (2014), as well as the analysis conducted by the Cultural Human Resources Council (*Training Gap Analysis. Showrunners in Canadian Television*, 2009) regarding the showrunner in the Canadian context, whose finding was compiled by the Writers Guild of Canada in *The WGC Showrunner Code* (2013).

Findings from this section are presented in five content areas: 1) we expose and examine the definitions of “executive producer” and “creative producer” in the film and television industry, 2) we look into possible definitions of “showrunner” across the double profile of writer-producer, 3) we point out the training and skill set required to become a showrunner in a television production company, 4) we focus on some of the functions and responsibilities that this professional carries out in each phase of TV series creation, and 5) we address the issue of creativity that the showrunner applies, using a narrative, aesthetic, and thematic style, in order to configure his personal imprint or creative hallmark as a TV series author, taking into account the balance between individual and collective authorship in the television industry (Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Thompson & Burns, 1990; Newman & Levine, 2012; Steiner, 2015).

3. Historical Context and Precedent for the Audiovisual Showrunner

Within the framework of the notoriety obtained by the fiction TV series, the concept “showrunner” arose in the mid-1990s in order to describe producer-writers in the American television industry. Although initially the term was poorly used, it has served to highlight the renown and popularity that this audiovisual profile has acquired during the twenty-first century (Newman & Levine, 2012), thanks to an increasing recognition in both television, business, and academic fields (Cascajosa: 2016a, 2016b).

The creative component of the audiovisual producer is considered essential in order to understand the role being played by the showrunner and his/her importance over the last decade. Therefore, we shall consider the key moments that have facilitated and promoted creative freedom and innovation in the TV series production process; since it is within these causes and contexts in which the showrunner emerges.

To do this, we shall now provide a brief overview of the audiovisual producers and their more representative works in the television industry using the Golden Ages of Television time classification (Thompson, 1996).

3.1. The First Golden Age of Television

The period between the late 1940s and the 1950s is known as the First Golden Age of Television. Firstly, this time is characterised by the live broadcast of the New York anthology series —a TV series consisting of independent episodes based on novels or theatre plays— such as *Kraft Television Theatre* (Ed Herlihy, NBC: 1947-1958), the first to be regularly broadcast. However, original projects were also produced, for instance *The Goodyear Television Playhouse* (Robert Alan Aurthur & Fred Coe, NBC: 1948-1957), in which writers began to take on a relevant profile in the TV series production process, being considered the first authors of the TV media (Cascajosa, 2005, 2016b).

Nevertheless, in the midst of this period, one of the most decisive moments took place. The transfer of the studios to Los Angeles, California, impacted the shift in TV media. Here, TV series were recorded, making it possible to play them repeatedly. This served to increase production incomes thanks to the potential for exploitation (Copeland, 2007; Gervich, 2008).

At this time, the most representative show was the comedy *I Love Lucy* (Jess Oppenheimer, CBS: 1951–1957), which set the stage for changes that would take place over the coming years with regards to production, filmmaking, and theme of the TV series. *I Love Lucy* was recorded before a live studio audience thanks to the multi-camera method, which was an authentic creative revolution in the television industry (Gervich, 2008; Banks, 2013).

However, the most important aspect of this new production model was the emergence of the “writer-producer” profile and concept. Miranda J. Banks has examined this fact in the chapter, *I Love Lucy: The Writer-Producer*, from the book *How to Watch Television* (Thompson & Mittell, 2013). She reveals that this title was initially created by Gertrude Berg in *The Boldberg* (CBS: 1949–1951). Here we have “the first and foremost example of what a television showrunner would become in the contemporary era. Berg embodied the hyphenate as a television pioneer: she was a writer, producer, and actor, and true show-woman. She was, unquestionably, a showrunner forty years before the term was ever conceived” (Banks, 2013: 249–250).

Regardless of this, during the mid-1950s, *I Love Lucy* creator, Jess Oppenheimer, became the first producer to be given this title. Oppenheimer exported his work method from the radio programme and the subsequent TV series: *My Favorite Husband* (CBS: 1948–1951). His job was to focus on providing staff with personal visions regarding the show. This was of great service to the writers and directors, permitting continuity and regular narrative between different chapters and seasons. Because of this, Oppenheimer is considered to be a visionary in the creation and production of the fiction TV series (Banks, 2013).

During the following decade, creator and writer of *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–1963) Rod Serling emerged, earning special relevance. With this project, Serling combined financial profitability with artistic quality. This ambition, along with the original narrative structure and contents of the TV series, has been his legacy to future generations (Kompere, 2013).

On the other hand, we should also point out that in the early 1970s, several production companies dominated the business, contributing to the current scenario as we know it. Two such companies were Spelling-Goldberg Productions and Aaron Spelling Productions, both founded by Aaron Spelling; and MTM Enterprises, directed by Grant Tinker (Gitlin, 2000).

Aaron Spelling is the type of producer who may be viewed from the two cited perspectives: executive and creative. He was responsible for all of the essential elements needed to create and produce a TV series, such as the development of the idea and the hiring and oversight of the technical crew. As for his works, even though he began in the television industry with various police series such as *The Mod Squad* (ABC: 1968–1973) and *The Rookies* (ABC: 1972–1976), his biggest hits included *Charlie’s Angels* (ABC: 1976–1981) and *The Love Boat* (ABC: 1977–1986) (Villagrasa, 1992; Cascajosa, 2005).

As for MTM Enterprises, it was founded in 1970 by Grant Tinker, Norman Lear and Mary Tyler Moore. The first TV series produced by this company, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (James L. Brooks & Allan Burns, CBS: 1970–1977), introduced a production model that was based on the hiring of top professionals of the time and preventing channel executives from restricting creativity. Grant Tinker is not recognised as the creator or writer of any of the MTM shows, but he advocated for the recognition of this professional position (Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Feuer, 1984; Pearson, 2005; Gitlin, 2000). According to these ideas, Jeff Melvoin, co-founder of the Showrunning Training Program, in the book *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show* (Bennett, 2014: 56), asserts the following: “I think that MTM Enterprises was largely responsible for the rise of the showrunner as an individual [although] The term wasn’t in use until the late ‘80s or early ‘90s”.

3.2. The Second Golden Age of Television

The triumph of MTM Enterprises was part of the turning point from the creative production point of view, giving way to the so-called Second Golden Age of Television. During this phase, we highlight the TV series produced by that company, and the notoriety of cable channels that had emerged over the previous decade —HBO (1971), Showtime (1976), CNN (1981) and AMC (1984)—, which threatened the monopoly consisting of the traditional networks —ABC, NBC and CBS— ever since the 1950s.

Grant Tinker's company continued to produce fictional TV series of great renown and popularity, creating a new, more sophisticated and artistic type of programme. This notion was called Quality Television (Thompson, 1996), an idea closely linked to this time: "With the emergence of this new genre, made possible by major changes in the entertainment industry in the 1980s, American TV has truly entered a second Golden Age" (16).

Thompson (1996) details a number of requirements that the fiction TV series must fulfil in order to be included in this genre. Here, we find it interesting to note those features that imply a creative revolution in the production process. Thus, Quality Television revolves around controversial issues, breaking the rules and mixing comic and dramatic elements. Furthermore, this supports the idea of the writer as a creator, promoting complex narrative structures and cultural references. It is a new way of writing and producing television that, although began with several TV series in the 1970s —*The White Shadow* (Bruce Paltrow, CBS: 1978-1981) or *St. Elsewhere* (Joshua Brand & John Falsey, NBC: 1982-1988) — was fully established thanks to Steven Bochco's creation: *Hill Street Blues* (NBC: 1981-1987).

Bochco is considered to be one of the most outstanding individuals of the decade, contributing greatly to its coming to "rank as one of the most creative periods in traditional broadcasting, with producer-auteurs able to exercise a greater degree of creative control over the programs than they had before" (Hilmes 2002; cited by Pearson, 2005: 17). He was a producer with a great creative capacity and claimed his autonomy against the demands of the channel executives. Thus, he was able to implement his personal style on his TV series (Longworth, 2000). He was a model to follow for future showrunners, and created the subsequent so-called writers' room (Martin, 2013), referring to "a team of writers who brainstorm, outline, write, and rewrite all the stories of a show" (Gervich, 2008: 189-190).

However, Bochco shared his prominence with others, including the producer of *Ally McBeal* (FOX: 1997-2002) and *The Practice* (ABC: 1997-2004), David E. Kelley; writer Aaron Sorkin, known for the John Wells' work: *The West Wing* (NBC: 1999-2006); and Joss Whedon, in charge of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB: 1997-2003) and the spin-off series *Angel* (WB: 1999-2004). Also significant was the work performed in *Twin Peaks* (ABC: 1990-1991) by its creator David Lynch, whose film experience allowed him to implement a complex aesthetic and narrative according to the new criteria of Quality Television production (Jancovich & Lyons, 2003; Bourdaa, 2011). All of these professionals carried out their projects using a producer-author profile and, unlike the prevailing network system, they were responsible for all of the creative aspects of the TV series production (Pearson, 2005).

On the other hand, we should also note the article published by *The New York Times* journal, *The Man Who Keeps "E.R."s Heart Beating* (Meisler, 1995), referring to John Wells, executive producer of the above mentioned TV series and serving as "the guiding force behind the biggest network hit in several years". Here we have one of the first appearances of the "showrunner" concept (Newman & Levine, 2012; Perren & Schatz, 2015), an unofficial and frequently unknown title (by the audience), which referred to "the true auteur of series television". We consider this text to be an assertion of this profile and the job performed by John Wells in *E.R.* (Meisler, 1995).

Finally, the 1990s were characterised by the success of cable channels, which applied the production model initiated by the MTM Enterprises. *The Sopranos* (David Chase, HBO:

1999–2007) or *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, HBO: 1998–2004) are prime examples of TV series that fulfil the requirements that define the previously identified Quality Television (Feuer, 2005; Bourdaa, 2011, Blakey, 2017).

Overall, “showrunners and producers have more freedom to create complex narratives and engaging story arcs” (Bourdaa, 2011:34) in cable channels. This is due to the fact that these are not advertiser-supported spaces, so they can establish a representative mark and adapt to subscriber demands (Kallas, 2014; Douglas, 2015). The same idea is outlined by Steiner:

Although it [HBO] did not invent putting the focus of attention on one showrunner-auteur, the network has made it an art form in itself to build a public image of a creative haven promising quality, where writers are provided with a maximum of support and a minimum of interference (Steiner, 2015: 183).

3.3. The Third Golden Age of Television

The third stage of television history spans the period from the early twenty-first century to the present. As stated previously, cable channels, led by HBO, encourage the TV drama revolution (Kallas, 2014). In this way, “HBO has been identified as the wellspring of a new ‘Golden Age’ in America television” (DeFino, 2014: 2) thanks to the first fiction TV series that it produced: *Oz* (Tom Fontana, HBO: 1997–2003), *Sex and The City* (Darren Star, HBO: 1998–2004), *Six Feet Under* (Allan Ball, HBO: 2001–2005) or *The Wire* (David Simon, HBO, 2002–2008). Nevertheless, the TV series created and produced by David Chase, *The Sopranos* (HBO: 1999–2007) is commonly considered to be the starting point of this new era (Sepinwall, 2012).

The previously mentioned TV series are characterised by their amoral characters, complex stories and controversial issues —sex, violence, death, drugs—. These issues have been favoured by creative writers who have been given such freedoms, as a result of the appreciation for this professional showrunner position (Martin, 2013).

Along the same vein, Alberich-Pascual asserts:

If something characterises this Third Golden Age of Television as a whole, it is the central importance of writers and their definition: their narrative research and experimentation, and their firm intent in order to look for a new manner of telling (2011: 344).

At the same time, the success of these projects has led the traditional networks to join the television (re)evolution and begin implementing new parameters (Kallas, 2014; Sepinwall, 2012). Thus we have the TV drama —*Lost* (J.J.Abrams & Damon Lindelof, ABC: 2004–2010)—, dramedy —*Desperate Housewives* (Marc Cherry, ABC: 2004–2012)—, and sitcoms such as *The Big Bang Theory* (Chuck Lorre & Bill Prady, CBS: 2007–) or *My Name Is Earl* (Gregory Thomas Garcia, NBC: 2005–2009).

Contemporary TV series, of which the following are of special note: *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff & D. B. Weiss, HBO: 2011–), *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, AMC: 2008–2013) or *American Horror Story* (Ryan Murphy, FX: 2011–) (Sepinwall, 2012) have primarily been created, and produced by audiovisual professionals born during the television era.

Finally, several factors related to the development of new technologies are worth noting. These elements, in addition to the previous ones, have contributed to the notoriety achieved by the audiovisual producer in this context. Here, we examine the opportunities offered by the Internet as a platform for the distribution of content and as a meeting place for showrunners and viewers (Perren & Schatz, 2015; Bennett, 2014; Cascajosa, 2016b).

First, the increase of Video on Demand platforms provides users with independence to select the device and viewing time for the audiovisual content. Here, we highlight Netflix (1997), whose popularity came to a head in 2013 thanks to *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon,

2013-) and *Orange is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan, 2013-). This “has radically altered both the manner in which people watch individual shows and the way they pay to access them” (Sepinwall, 2012: 430). We are living a remarkable creative innovation, in which “Netflix represents the revolution, when quality serialized shows were first produced directly for Internet” (Douglas, 2015: 96).

On the other hand, the sale of DVDs, web pages and multimedia opportunities, provide audiences with an experience that goes beyond mere viewing (Scott, 2013). Thus, the extra content contributes to the popularization and renown of the showrunner, allowing them “to interpret parts of the production and explain their intentions and motivations behind certain aspects of the show” (Steiner, 2015: 187). Furthermore, over the past decade, social networks have become a reference for the public. These kinds of applications permit the creation of forums and fan sites where it is possible to share opinions and contact TV series showrunners. These professionals may use these tools in order to disseminate and promote their work (Newman & Levine, 2012).

4. Audiovisual Showrunner Emergence and Contemporary Characterisation

According to the previous historical overview, the audiovisual role played by the showrunner has been evident since virtually the onset of the TV media. Likewise, it is remarkable that this executive-creative duality has gradually gained in prominence and appreciation. Therefore, by conducting a relevant terminological review, we can focus on the defining features of the current audiovisual showrunner, as well as know his/her skill set and how it is applied during the production process, as well as the creative style as a result of this way of working.

4.1. Audiovisual Showrunner Terminological Background

Currently, the professional profile associated with the emergent concept of showrunner has its closest precedent in the title of executive producer. Here, it is necessary to consider this term –interchangeably, using “executive producer” and “producer”– as the starting point when focusing on research regarding the terminological background of the showrunner.

According to the general characterisation made by Sainz, the executive producer:

[...] is in charge of concept, development, coordination and management of audiovisual works. Besides, he promotes the cooperation, gathers human team and specifies the technical needs in each project. He is responsible for establishing the appropriate formula in order to get the necessary finance. In addition, he looks for sponsorship and manages the options to commercialize his products effectively (1990: 19–20).

Following up on this idea, most of the analysed references (Schihl, 1997; Diego, 2005; Fernández-Díez & Barco, 2009; Guerrero, 2012; Pardo, 2014b; Lee & Gillen, 2011) agree upon stressing the importance of both the economic and creative management and responsibility that this professional develops during the project production: from the initiative to put it into operation to its commercial exploitation. Thus, he has become a key figure in the audiovisual industry. Furthermore, the examined bibliography reveals that the profile and closed title of “creative producer” is, in most cases, considered to be an executive producer feature, rather than an independent position.

The producer, the “person trained to lead, control and manage the audiovisual project from a creative, organizational and executive perspective” (Pardo, 2000: 229), is considered to have both professional skills such as organization and finance management, as well as creative skills. Along these lines, Lee & Gillen designed their study *Producer's Business Handbook: The Roadmap for the Balanced Film Producer* (2011) around the premise that, in order to ensure successful audiovisual work, the producer's goals should considerer three

interrelated components: a creative objective, the audience, and the relationship between expenses and profits.

This repeated executive-creative duality takes on a special meaning in the television industry. Thus, many references can be found to the creative control that the executive producer must implement. Based on this consideration, Kellison has considered this professional position, claiming the following:

Your team may be small or large, but it's a vital creative component. This team brings together the writers, actors, directors, crew, and production designers whose visions are aligned with yours. You're creating and building a team of talented people who share your passion, reflect it in their work, and bring positive creativity and energy into the process (2009: 8).

Therefore, this individual "is in charge of suggesting and developing ideas inside a specific area of programming" (Guerrero, 2012: 270). He is trained to hire the technical and artistic crew, to create or order the script, and to oversee project finances (Douglas, 2011). Hence, he is considered to be a "leader in creative management and production plan" (García de Castro, 2002: 147). In essence, as Villagrasa (1992: 102) proclaims, "he is the true creative father of TV series", an assertion that is clearly connected with the features that have subsequently been assigned to the showrunner in the contemporary television industry.

4.2. Audiovisual Showrunner Defining Features

Today, the concept and position of the showrunner is still emerging and is mainly confined to the American context. Nevertheless, it is beginning to be used by professionals inside and outside of the TV media industry. Therefore, we can outline a range of skill sets, functions, and competences that define it. With this in mind, we examine the biography that studies the TV executive producer profile. Here, we can recognize this role in several texts, like the one by Newcomb & Alley (1983), although this precise term is not used. In *The Producer's Medium* (1983), the authors point out the features of the TV series producer's job:

First, given the structures of the industry's economic organization the producer is often assigned legal and financial responsibility for the final television product [...] Second, in series television, several episodes or even several series are under production at any given moment, and the producer is the person who must oversee entire projects [...] The producer, involved with the project from beginning to end, sees to it that continuity is maintained, that peace is kept among other members of the team, and, most importantly, that the series concept remains secure (Newcomb & Alley, 1983: xii).

These ideas may be connected to the term "showrunner" and to the job that he/she currently carries out. In fact, remarkable similarities arise when examining the definitions and references in the twenty-first century bibliography. Thus, we should point out that several titles have been used to designate this individual: "showrunner-auteur", "writer-producer" and "hyphenate" (Steiner, 2015: 183). Even so, the majority of the experts—Landau (2014), Gervich (2008) and Kallas (2014), among others—agree that the showrunner holds a position of great responsibility in the production company, with both executive and creative functions. Along the same vein, Perren (2011) notes that "the showrunner remains the most powerful creative and administrative figure on most fictional series" (138).

Des Doyle (2014) gathers a highlighted group of showrunners, producers and writers from the American TV industry, whose ideas and opinions are included in the documentary: *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show*. This information was collected and expanded by Bennett (2014) in a book having the same title. The text situates the origin of the showrunner within the notoriety achieved by this professional in the contemporary era, and

offers the *Oxford Dictionary* definition to explain the concept: “The person who has overall creative authority and management responsibility of a television program” (18). Then, the author focuses on the characteristics of the showrunner, stressing the great pressure placed on them to constantly conciliate creative and financial issues (Bennett, 2014).

The TV series credits review reveals how the executive-creative profile is presented in the showrunner position. As we noted earlier, this is an unofficial title and, for this reason, the individual carrying it out has the “executive producer” credit (Gervich, 2008: 43; Landau, 2014: xviii). Moreover, if he/she is also the creator of the original idea, it is common for his/her name to appear in the “created by” section at the end of the chapter’s introduction (De Rosendo & Gatell, 2015: 202). As for the script, usually in television, the original writer retains this recognition, even though the showrunner may be the head writer, this assignment is paid for and recognised as a part of their job (Jane Espenso, interviewed by Kallas, 2014: 105; De Rosendo & Gatell, 2015: 51). However, this practice depends on the specific dynamics that each professional chooses to apply.

4.3. Audiovisual Showrunner Skill Set

Based on these definitions, it is possible to discover the sector within the audiovisual company where the showrunner position appears. Here, two options are possible, referring to the double profile cited above: production and writing. So, “the convergence-era showrunner is active in both writing and non-writing tasks on an ongoing basis, integrating two distinctly different sets of skills and concerns” (Newman & Levine, 2012: 39).

Many authors think of the writing department as the most common origin of the audiovisual showrunner. Kallas (2014) underlines the importance of the writer profile in order to produce a creatively and commercially successful American TV series. Similarly, showrunner James Duff (interviewed by Bennett, 2014) proclaims, “[I think] the one attribute you must have to be a good showrunner is a creative vision” (26), typically attributed to writers. Likewise, in the book by Newcomb & Alley (1983), *The Producer Medium*, the television producer Quinn Martin brings to light this idea when asserting the following: “I decided that I wanted to produce. The only way that I could produce, prove that I was creative, was to write” (57). Accordingly, this profile contributes to promote the artistic side of TV series (Rochant, 2017).

Therefore, although financial management qualities should not be excluded, the internal dynamics within the TV media industry are based on writing experience. Thus, the showrunner may begin their career as a writer and, from this department, be promoted up the organizational chart of the production company (Douglas, 2011).

Together with the learning that comes from the experience, the Writers Guild of America has been organizing the Showrunners Training Program since 2005. Jeff Melvoine, co-founder of the course, stresses “quality scripts, on time” as being the most important lesson, making patent that both writer and executive producer skill sets are essential in order to become a successful showrunner (Wirth & Melvoine, 2004: 41).

In addition to professional skills, showrunners must also develop certain personal and social skills in order to be able to lead a broad and complex group of individuals. Thus, “a showrunner is not simply a manager. He or she is a leader” (*Training Gap Analysis. Showrunners in Canadian Television*, 2009: 7).

So, there are a number of required qualities connected with leadership: communicating objectives and assignments in a clear and proper way, delegating and trusting department directors, or maintaining control during crisis situations. The showrunner should be a humble leader, prepared to listen to his/her team’s suggestions. They should rely on their employees’ work and demand the same, based on their responsibilities. In whole, it is about creating a climate of trust (Grillo-Marxuach, 2016). This is a skill set that is connected with

diplomacy and good communication, decision-making ability, and optimum labour relationship building (*Training Gap Analysis. Showrunners in Canadian Television* 2009). Thanks to these skills, the showrunner becomes a role model to be followed by the other workers (Landau, 2014).

4.4. Audiovisual Showrunner Competences

Being the leading manager of the audiovisual creation process, the showrunner's functions and competences are to be present in every working phase: pre-production, production and post-production (Wirth & Melvoin, 2004). Therefore, his/her job includes oversight and decision making throughout the entire process as an orchestra conductor (Rochant, 2017), which helps to create a quality and unified audiovisual work. However, given the aim and extent of this paper, we shall focus on three aspects in which the showrunner expresses clear authority: writing, as well as translating writing into the visual medium of television, and organizational management (*Training Gap Analysis. Showrunners in Canadian Television*, 2009).

The showrunner's presence and functions in the writer department are essential to reach a unitary and coherent TV series according to its sense, that is, what the project says and shows (García Noblejas, 1982). At this point, it would be interesting to apply the notions about the narrative identity as a cultural phenomenon (Ricoer, 1995). His/her responsibilities, with regards to this phase, begin with the hiring and creation of the writers' room: a wide and experimented group with whom this producer works in order to create plots and characters based on several ideas (Wirth & Melvoin, 2004). Moreover, the showrunner oversees and rewrites scripts when he/she considers it necessary, based on the creative freedom offered to the writers (Gervich, 2008; Kallas, 2014).

As for the second issue, we should note that "running a show is a technical operation, too, not just creative" (Robert King, interviewed by Bennett, 2014: 30). Therefore, the showrunner must have considerable technical and practical knowledge in order to make coherent decisions in line with the creative needs. Thus, even though the producer usually does not direct the TV series, it is typical for him to be present on the film set and in the postproduction room. This strategy is indispensable during TV series production since the director position may change. In this case, the showrunner is the person with full knowledge of the plot and characters, and is the one who provides the continuity that is demanded for this type of audiovisual work (Warren Leight, interviewed by Kallas, 2014: 45-46). Furthermore, the showrunner may decide to direct certain episodes, especially during specific moments, like the end of the season (Cascajosa, 2016a: 33).

Thirdly, this audiovisual profile fulfils several functions connected with the management and organization of the production company and its employees. Thus, it is essential to establish a production schedule in order to assist the different department directors in visualising and achieving the established targets (Clements, 2004; Gervich, 2008). Based on this planning, the work within the production process depends on the budget and specified time. Regarding this, Wirth & Melvoin (2004) proclaim that "effective showrunners constantly perform production triage: who or what needs attention most, what can be put off, what can be saved, what must be sacrificed?" (46).

On the other hand, the showrunner also supervises and decides on the distribution, advertising, and operation of the final project (Lotz, 2007). Thus, his duties do not end with the editing of the final episode, since he/she must also examine audience feedback and results, in order to change the business strategy if necessary (Clements, 2004). Furthermore, the showrunner must respond to the TV channel executives that hire and pay for the TV series, and who have the final decision regarding its emission (Gitlin, 2000).

4.5. Audiovisual Showrunner Style

The showrunner functions are linked to a group of creative abilities: control, view, and identity. This matter is connected to a component of authorship in the professional's actions, which is a hallmark of prestige and promotion inside the television market (Cascajosa, 2016a; Blakey, 2017). This audiovisual producer establishes and chooses the "look, feel, tone, sound and pace of the series" (*Training Gap Analysis. Showrunners in Canadian Television*, 2009: 28). Thus, they create a personal stamp which, according to Kubey (2009: 2), "is the expression of a creator's feeling, vision, and thought". Along these lines, Newman & Levine (2012: 51) claim that "contemporary showrunner-auteurs cultivate individual styles as marks of their authorial identity".

The audience can notice this creative imprint thanks to a particular cinematic style which, among other levels, refers to the narrative, aesthetic, and theme (Bordwell & Thompson, 2012). They are elements interlinked with each other and the showrunner's actions over these three areas should be guided by the essence of the TV series. Thus, this profile has to keep the original concept over all the levels in a coherent and recognisable manner, together with the other actors' contributions.

Kubey (2009) quotes Newcomb & Alley (1983) in order to explain this hypothesis: "They demonstrated that one could discern the hallmarks of authorism in television. There were distinctive similarities in each producer's television series, in the content and issues and in the tone and style of the storytelling" (Newcomb & Alley, 1983; cited by Kubey, 2009: 2).

Therefore, the showrunner competences extend to the establishment of a project template: "the style, tone, subject, theme and characters" (Kubey, 2009: 122), in order to define the so-called showrunner's voice (Perren, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2015; Rosendo & Gatell, 2015; Bennett, 2014). Cascajosa (2007) calls it a fiction universe. In other words, it is the author's hallmark: the space, characters, time, the initial and final situation, and some events in the middle in order to develop the main plot.

Here we find two apparently opposing ideas that should come together in the audiovisual work creation: the showrunner as author *versus* the TV production as collaborative art. According to this proposal, Martin (2013) points out that every showrunner must find a balance between both options, since the TV series is the author's work as the result of a collaborative process.

Firstly, with regards to the authorship notion in the audiovisual industry, the concept has its source in the *politique des auteurs* which considers the film director as the film author. The members of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* journal debated these ideas, which were applied to the American industry, thanks to the studies of Sarris (2004) and Wollen (1972), having the title of the auteur theory. Among other criteria, it stresses the personal stamp of the filmmaking over their films, so that "a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (Sarris, 2004: 562). In the TV industry, this responsibility belongs to the TV series writer who acts as executive producer (García Martínez, 2014), or in other words, the showrunner. Following this statement, Steiner (2015: 183) proclaims that "nowadays, authorship in television is often intrinsically tied to the showrunner". Furthermore, Newman & Levine (2012) define this professional as a potential author, emphasising the need to be the original creator of the show and to be regarded as such.

However, within the audiovisual production process, in order to exercise the said authorship, the showrunner transmits writing guidelines to the other writers. In this way, they contribute to the collaborative creation taking place within the writers' room:

The writers' room, a room full of writers who work as a team to write and rewrite [...] this is a key fact about TV writing, and one that many people outside the industry don't know: it is a highly collaborative medium, not the domain of the individual artist (Venis, 2013: xi).

Therefore, the creation of the contemporary TV series is a collaborative process guided by the showrunner's creative vision. So, "it's a mistake to think of television authorship solely in terms of the expression of an individual's artistic vision" (Campbell & Reeves, 1990: 8). Although the showrunner's authorship constitutes a mark used by the TV channel to promote the project to the audience and critics, from a practical perspective, the functions developed by the showrunner are shared by many producers, writers, editors, or other showrunners (Rochant, 2017). All of these professionals must follow their guidelines in order to maintain the consistency of the TV series (Priggé, 2005; Newman & Levine, 2012).

5. Conclusions

Research findings regarding executive producers in the television industry, from a historical and conceptual perspective allow us to draw a series of conclusions. In this sense, we may connect these results with the contemporary profile of the audiovisual showrunner.

The examined biographic review which reveals the notion of the "showrunner" as an executive and creative producer has existed since practically the beginnings of the audiovisual industry. Although, this individual is commonly considered to be more of a businessperson than a creative talent, we can find a model associated with the artistic skills in Jess Oppenheimer or Rod Serling, who are excellent examples of this statement.

Despite this, we are currently experiencing a revaluation of this profile, thanks to the emergence of the specific term: "showrunner". The concept is used in an extended form in order to designate the TV series writer-producer in the American context. Likewise, the development of Quality Television, along with a number of other factors resulting from the new technologies in the Third Golden Age of Television, plays a part in this circumstance. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that production companies and TV channels use the showrunners' names as a mark of distinction and prestige in order to promote their audiovisual products and to involve the audience in an experience that goes beyond mere viewing.

The outlined context permits a special consideration of this professional from the perspective of communication scholars, who recognize and appreciate it. Nevertheless, the novelty and complexity of the concept may still cause certain unknowns with regards to the showrunner's position.

This is a production model that is based on an individual serving as the project's leading manager. This individual supervises and makes decisions regarding each department and production phase. Therefore, we can infer that the showrunner performs a long and complex task, requiring extensive knowledge of all audiovisual matters, as well as personal and social skills, in order to lead and organize a varied group of individuals.

Finally, as a result of this actuation, the showrunner is trained to imprint a cinematic style on TV series. It is a creative personal hallmark that characterises them. Through this stamp, the audience can recognise their works thanks to several recurring labels in the narrative, aesthetic and thematic levels. This showrunner's voice guides the rest of the TV series professionals' duties within this collaborative art. The showrunner is the leading manager, who has the best knowledge about the essence of the TV series and applies it during all the process. Thus, it should be highlighted that this profile's capacity to create a consistent, unified, and a higher quality audiovisual product based on these parameters. This authorship concept applies to TV media, leading to an interesting discussion regarding these notions, as well as the possibility of focusing on specific cases in order to evaluate the revised theoretical conceptions.

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