COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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The showrunner's skills and responsibilities in the creation and production process of fiction series in the contemporary North American television industry

Abstract

Contemporary fiction TV series production in North America is characterized by the showrunner figure's importance. This paper aims to study the concept of "showrunner" as executive-creative producer, analyze the competencies and responsibilities carried out by them during the production process of TV shows according to personal and professional factors, and examine their position within the current television market. For this purpose, a literature review on fiction TV series production and television authorship has been conducted. After this, adopting the focus of media production studies, a qualitative methodology based on in-depth personal interviews has been used, which was carried out with a selection of thirty-six significant executive producers and writers of contemporary American TV series. The findings indicate the relevance of this profile from a historical perspective, and particularly in recent years. Although there is a basic scheme of tasks developed by the showrunner in each phase of the production process, we find differences in this actuation due to personal –sex and nationality– and professional –format/gender and channel– characteristics in this industrial context. The showrunner develops an executive-creative dual profile to maintain the project's coherence according to the established vision. Their influence over the TV series' creative features contributes to reflection on television authorship and its attribution to this figure.

Keywords
Showrunner, TV series, media production studies, television industry, television authorship, North America.

1. Introduction

The North American contemporary television industry is characterized by the showrunner profile's importance: it is the executive producer who has the ultimate creative and production responsibility for the project (Cascajosa-Virino, 2016, 2018). In most cases, the aforementioned professional is a writer-producer, who is instrumental in highlighting their

work and involvement in creating the TV series, the scriptwriting, and the organization of the writers' room (Gervich, 2008; Phalen, 2018).

The showrunner is in charge of supervising all production process aspects and approving different heads of department. For this reason, they should know about production management, audiovisual filmmaking, editing, and promotion (Kellison, 2009). This professional must have a range of personal skill sets to manage and organize a broad and diverse group of people throughout the audiovisual production process (Landau, 2014).

The different tasks assigned to this figure allow us to assert that they have an executive-creative dual profile. In this respect, there are two critical issues to be able to conduct this job: a "creative talent" and a "managerial component" (Bennett, 2014). Although both the production process and the showrunner's behavior vary based on various criteria, which are further discussed below, most authors agree with a set of "creative, financial, technical, and interpersonal skills required" (Kellison, 2009, p. 4).

On the other hand, the creative implications associated with this professional allow us to assess the notion of authorship applied to TV fiction production (Blakey, 2017; Newman & Levine, 2012). Despite the highly collaborative nature of this process, "in recent years, a potential new authorial instance has emerged on the televisual landscape with the arrival of so-called showrunners" (Junke, 2020, p. 80). The showrunner is responsible for defining the project's vision and taking all the decisions according to this vision (Mittell, 2015).

The success of the showrunner figure in the North American TV fiction industry revalues and redefines the writer's role inside the television production process. For this reason, the *Writers Guild of America* has organized the *Showrunners Training Program* since 2005 to improve the writers' and executive producers' training, who will go on to run a TV series, and to teach them to get "quality scripts on time" (Wirth & Melvoin, 2004). Furthermore, "TV writers from other countries are looking to the Hollywood writing process, and the role of the showrunner in particular, as a model to improve their own modes of production" (Phalen, 2018, p. 104).

This research is motivated by the qualitative and quantitative increase in TV series during the last decade and their innovations in production, filmmaking, and aesthetic features. The media studies academics have demonstrated a growing interest in the showrunner profile and its characteristics. However, updated information is required in this permanently evolving area. This paper addresses this gap by focusing on the personal and professional features of current showrunners.

We have examined previous television professionals' interviews, which are considered a valuable guide for our research. Nevertheless, most of these texts follow an informative and journalist approach. Nowadays, the reputation and popularity of showrunners encourage their investigation from a media production studies perspective. We propose looking into the relationship between personal and professional features of television workers and how these factors influence the TV series. From this angle, we examine the authorship dynamics developed in the television market by showrunners and how they maintain the project's coherence according to a specific vision, contributing to reflection on the television authorship.

2. Objectives and methodology

This paper aims to research the set skill of showrunners from a creative-executive perspective which sheds lights on the personal implication of this figure along the TV series production process. With this goal in mind, particular attention is given to different personal and professional characteristics of these profiles, consequences over the TV series production process, and narrative, aesthetic, and thematic hallmarks.

We study the concept of "showrunner" as executive-creative producers, analyze their competencies during the production process of TV shows according to personal and

professional factors, and examine their position within the contemporary television market. To do so, a qualitative methodology has been used following Caldwell's (2008, p. 81) focus:

> Taking this [media production studies] approach means considering how film/television creators function as industrial actors in a larger ensemble of creative workers. Films and programs are not simply authored "texts." "Industrial actors," choreographed through tried and tested modes of institutional interaction, create film and television.

This paper centers on the North American context, where the television industry has been pioneering internationally. Moreover, the showrunner and their production model were established in this context, thus enabling them to gain greater prominence. In this respect, regardless of the nationality of the professionals interviewed, we emphasize their roles within the North American television market.

We draw on media production studies from a television perspective to establish our research framework. This theory attends to audiovisual professionals, practices, and workplaces to understand the final audiovisual project (Butler, 2012, p. 403).

Following this vein, a bibliographic review of international texts specialized in fiction TV series production has been undertaken. We examine the conceptualization of the showrunner, and their competencies (Landau, 2014; Newcomb & Alley, 1983; Wild, 1999), the contributions to the audiovisual production phases (De Valle, 2008; Kellison, 2009), and the references to the structure of the television industry, and its agents (Collie, 2007; Levine, 2001). Additionally, it is essential to take several books (Mittell, 2015; Newman & Levine, 2012) and scientific papers (Blakey, 2017; Heuman, 2017) into account, which theorize the authorial figure of the showrunner.

This framework has provided the theoretical basis upon which the core of this work is constructed: testimonies taken from a collection of in-depth interviews conducted with executive producers and writers of North American TV series. In this context, the professionals interviewed are considered *exclusive informants*: "They are interviewed as a means to gain insight into a research question related to the terms of the production of the media products in a broad sense" (Bruun, 2016, p. 134).

The selection of thirty-six respondents[1] was made to configure a representative sample both from a personal perspective –nationality and sex of the interviewee–, and a professional perspective –format and channel of the last TV series where professionals have worked. Figures 1 and 2 present the personal and professional representation of the sample. Although it allows us to get sufficiently varied responses, we can see most US men working in drama TV series.

Figure 1: Personal perspective representation of the sample.
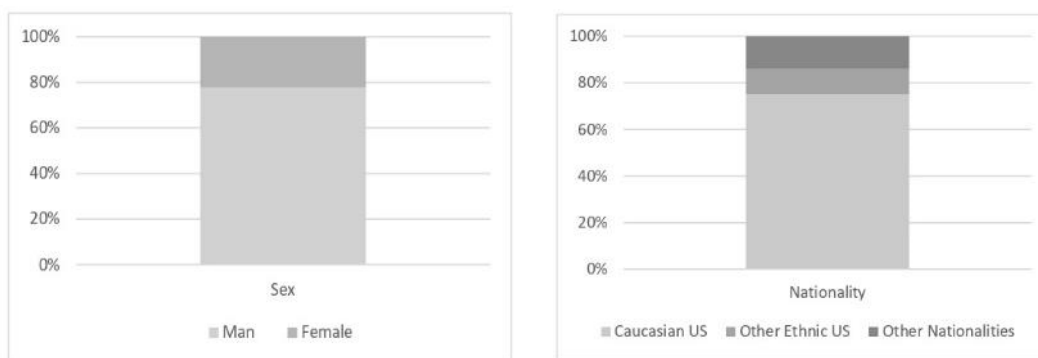
Source: Own elaboration.

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[1] Figure 1 synthesizes professionals interviewed: https://bit.ly/3xQglvu.

Figure 2: Professional perspective representation of the sample.

Source: Own elaboration.

As a qualitative research technique, the interview is often used to obtain data in media production studies (Bruun, 2016). In this case, we have applied in-depth semi-structured interviews in English or Spanish: following an essential guide[2] with flexible questions, which were previously established from the theoretical review, and accepting new topics depending on the interviewed professional. The semi-structured interview is a particularly appropriate method to collect high-quality data quickly because "the data from open-ended interviews consists of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" (Patton, 1988, p. 7).

The development of this process has three phases following a qualitative research design: preparation, fieldwork, and data analysis. Firstly, we contacted professionals' agents via e-mails thanks to an Internet Movie Database (IMDb) Premium Membership, and we proposed the collaboration to them. They signed informed consent to record the interview's audio and use their answers in this research.

The course of the interviews was determined by questions that were asked based on the background of television workers. Questions were classified into six categories: *showrunner*, *writers' room*, *shooting*, *edition*, *promotion*, and *studio-network*. Besides, preliminary and final questions with a more personal approach were raised. During these meetings, the topics were dealt from a professional and personal view: the professionals' tasks in each production phase, and how their ideas could influence over this performance.

Following this objective, we took personal features into account to determine production particularities depending on sex (*From a woman perspective, could you explain to me how is the process to become a writer-producer? Do you think that the showrunner is a glass ceiling position?*), or nationality (*How important is a Latino writers' room in* Vida?) of the respondents. We also focused on questions that allow us to know the production modes developed in different formats (*How does the sitcom writers' room in* Modern Family *work? How does* The Handmaid's Tale *writers' room work?*), and types of channels (*How has your experience in the streaming platforms been? Which are the main differences working with linear, and streaming channels?*).

Then, the analysis of interviews consists of transcribing the recorded audios and classifying the answers according to the categories of questions. Files are compared to examine the similarities and differences between personal and professional factors of respondents. Data are also studied based on the theoretical framework to look into results from a media production studies approach and value showrunners' creative and executive influences during the television production.

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[2] Figure 2 synthesizes the topics and concepts which determined the course of the interviews: https://bit.ly/3daqUBG.

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The findings are presented in two content areas. Firstly, the showrunner figure in the television industry is examined. The second section analyzes the showrunners' performance during the TV series production process, and their relationship with studios and networks.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. *The showrunner in the North American television industry*

3.1.1. Showrunner: Background and conceptualization

Television has been considered the *producer's medium* since the 1980s (Newcomb & Alley, 1983), highlighting the writer-producer's actuation during TV fiction's creation and production process. Therefore, although the term "showrunner" arose in the 1990s and was generalized in the XXI century, this executive and creative producer profile has previously existed (Higueras-Ruiz, Gómez-Pérez & Alberich-Pascual, 2018).

However, during the *Third Golden Age of Television* (Thompson, 1996), the attention given to this profession is evident. According to Ben Karlin[3] –co-executive producer of *Modern Family*–, "television is more popular and dominated, and people ask who the people behind this process are." Likewise, Jeff Melvoin[4] –co-founder of the *Writers Guild of America's Showrunner Training Program* and showrunner of *Army Wives*– adds that "with that word, people begin to realize how the show is run well by an individual who is even doing the job of creating that show."

In the 21st century, the consolidation of cable channels in the United States fostered creative innovations led by the showrunner in the TV series production (Steiner, 2015). Additionally, the one-hundred-day strike by the *Writers Guild of America* in Los Angeles (2007) stressed the importance of this professional, because "as industry leaders with much at stake, the response of prominent showrunners would set the tone for how many other WGA members viewed the strike effort" (Littleton, 2013, p. 88).

On the other hand, changes in the creation and distribution of TV fiction through OTT (over-the-top) services have also contributed to the showrunner's popularity and power. Moreover, "this celebritization is bolstered by their presence on social media, and by their interviews on DVD special features" (Phalen, 2018, p. 10), highlighting the social network Twitter as a direct line of communication between the audience and the producer (Navar-Gill, 2018). Following this idea, Jeffrey Paul King[5] –producer of *Elementary*– expresses that "before Twitter, nobody knew who makes TV shows, so this is when celebrities-showrunners have gained more prominence."

In American TV fiction production, it is fundamental to consider the writer-producer role. In this sense, "the showrunner typically rises through the ranks of the writers," from writer's assistant to executive producer (Maier & Branzei, 2014, p. 1126). The theoretical study of television production hierarchy includes several nomenclatures, and its practical application could be flexible between different cases. Nevertheless, most classifications follow a similar diagram where the highest level is the executive producer or showrunner (Clements, 2004; Cury, 2007).

The showrunner has the top position in the organization, so it is a process of being promoted. In a related vein, Jake Fogelnest[6] –executive producer of *Corporate*– adds: "I could not do the showrunner job if I had not done all the other jobs before it […] I think that it is just experience. It is time spent doing that."

Thus, most showrunners are veteran writers who are mature and confident enough to create and run their projects after working on some successful TV series. However, the

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[3] All quotes from Ben Karlin come from Ben Karlin, interview by the author, 06 November 2018.
[4] All quotes from Jeff Melvoin come from Jeff Melvoin, interview by the author, 04 September 2018.
[5] All quotes from Jeffrey Paul King come from Jeffrey Paul King, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[6] All quotes from Jake Fogelnest come from Jake Fogelnest, interview by the author, 22 October 2018.

showrunner could not be the creator of the TV show. In this case, they are hired to join an already existing television program or to help inexperienced creators who have sold a new idea to a network (Wirth & Melvoin, 2004). In the latter, there are two co-showrunners, when "the most important thing is that the showrunner supports and defends the creator's vision," expresses Tanya Saracho[7] –showrunner of *Vida* and co-producer of *How to Get Away with Murder*.

Following this idea, we have highlighted Gabe Liedman's experience as showrunner of *PEN 15*:

> I was the showrunner, but not the creator. So, I had to make sure that the creator's vision was coming through every decision. The creators are actors, so they are not writing experience. So, the network [...] did not trust them to write ten scripts on time. So, they needed to hire someone with more experience; that is me.

Similarly, there can be two co-showrunners when both are the creators of the original idea for the TV show. If we take the full range of tasks and responsibilities that this professional carry out, this collaboration is particularly beneficial. Ben Karlin declares that "the most successful showrunner has a partner and collaboration relationship," considering the projects he has worked on.

The term "showrunner" has always been connected with the "executive producer" since "showrunner" is an unofficial title (Bennett, 2014). From the practical perspective offered by the professionals interviewed, the showrunner is a TV show corporation's boss, leader, or CEO. They oversee every decision in episodes during the production process, from the initial idea to the delivery of the end product to the studio and network. Thus, according to Erik Oleson[8] –showrunner of *Daredevil* and executive producer of *The Man in the High Castle*–, "there are not any details too small for the showrunner to have overseen."

In the same vein, Dave Krinsky[9] –co-showrunner of *Silicon Valley* and *Lopez*– states that:

> The showrunner is the person who is responsible for everything involved in delivering the show: writing, overseeing directing, overseeing editing, overseeing the music. You have to deal with writers, the production staff, the network, and the studio. So, you have the final word on the screen.

Although the showrunner is usually a scriptwriter, these roles do not always coincide, and some non-writer producers carry out this work. In fact, "with showrunning the ability to write does not mean that the ability to manage will be inherent as well" (Bennett, 2014, p. 22). However, this professional must be trained to oversee the job of writing the scripts in the writers' room (Meyers, 2010). Supporting this idea, Ronald D. Moore[10] –showrunner of *Outlander* and *Battlestar Galactica*– expresses: "I think that it is very important because so much about running the show is about running the writers' room."

The showrunner determines the concept for the TV series, the so-called showrunner's voice (Perren, 2011), and maintains its consistency and continuity during the entire production. Tanya Saracho shares this idea when she affirms: "The showrunner, whether a creator or not, is responsible for the world that has been created."

Mike Royce[11] –co-showrunner of *Once Day at a Time* and showrunner of *Men of a Certain Age*– also points out the importance of this vision: "The most important thing is that the showrunner has a vision and is able to execute it efficiently," as well as by Barry M. Schkolnick[12] –executive producer of *Sequestered* and co-executive producer of *In Plain Sight*–: "[They have]

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to make sure that all of the decisions fit with the entire vision of the show, that everything is consistent."

We can also note particular cases in respect to this, such as working for a comic star. Kevin Hench[13] –showrunner of *Mr. Iglesias* and executive producer of *Last Man Standing*–, referring to his experience on *Mr. Iglesias* –sitcom starring Gabriel Iglesias–, acknowledges:

> When you have a stand-up comic, you have a clear voice, which the showrunner and writers must follow. When you work for a very popular stand-up comic, it is your job to learn his voice. There are many characters in the show, but his voice is the most important one.

Different conditions influence the TV series' voice, such as an actor's personality, requirements of networks, or the original concept of another creator. Reinforcing this idea, Michael Green[14] –showrunner of *American Gods* and executive producer of *The River*– claims:

> Being a showrunner is very different in different things. It depends on the kind of show: drama or comedy. It is a completely different job. You also have to take the number of episodes into consideration, and if there is a network, cable, or streaming.

However, in all of these cases, showrunners have the responsibility of understanding and keeping this voice. Therefore, the personal implications of this profile could vary depending on each project and its particularities.

3.1.2. Television authorship connected with showrunners, their abilities, and functions

The professionals interviewed agree with a skill set that showrunners must apply to perform their job. Robert Hewitt Wolfe[15] –showrunner of *Andromeda* and executive producer of *Elementary*– stresses two broad notions, including the rest of the abilities: "creative vision" and "managerial skill." Tanya Saracho explains this idea when she notes that, as a showrunner, "you are responsible for the macro-level concepts, but you also have to implement them. Furthermore, that is where the administrative manager factor comes in."

Regarding creative talent, Javier Grillo-Marxuach[16] –showrunner of *The Middleman* and co-executive producer of *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*– states that "it is essential to know how to communicate the project vision clearly, and precisely to all other professionals." On the other hand, the showrunner must be open to other ideas too. For this reason, Megan Martin[17] –executive producer of *Animal Kingdom*– thinks that "a really good show comes from a showrunner who listens to really good writers."

From a management perspective, the showrunner should have good organizational abilities because, as Bob Goodman[18] –executive producer of *Elementary* and supervising producer of *Warehouse 13*– asserts, "there are hundreds of questions that the showrunner decides every day, so they need to be decisive and answer all these questions quickly." In addition, this executive producer has to prioritize and know the most urgent thing to do at every moment. They also have to be patient during this process because, as Peter Mehlman[19] –showrunner of *It's Like, You Know...*, and co-producer of *Seinfeld*– says, "everybody can make suggestions, but they cannot exactly do anything. You are the only one that can control everything, and it is very important to be a calm person all the time."

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[13] All quotes from Kevin Hench come from Kevin Hench, interview by the author, 05 November 2018.
[14] All quotes from Michael Green come from Michael Green, interview by the author, 12 November 2018.
[15] All quotes from Robert Hewitt Wolfe come from Robert Hewitt Wolfe, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[16] All quotes from Javier Grillo-Marxuach come from Javier Grillo-Marxuach, interview by the author, 29 August 2018.
[17] All quotes from Megan Martin come from Megan Martin, interview by the author, 22 October 2018.
[18] All quotes from Bod Goodman come from Bod Goodman, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[19] All quotes from Peter Mehlman come from Peter Mehlman, interview by the author, 19 October 2018.

However, the most noted ability is to delegate and trust other people involved in the production. Following this idea, Mike Royce claims:

> I think that a big lesson in showrunning is to realize that you do not have all the answers and it is okay to ask somebody else for these [...] All those people are there to help you, there is no reason to do everything by yourself.

On the other hand, there is a range of personal features which also characterize an excellent showrunner. According to Peter Dunne[20] –producer of *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation*, and *Nowhere Man*–, "in television, you work with so many people that you have to be very good with that; it is a people job." Following the words from Gabe Liedman[21] –showrunner of *PEN 15* and supervising producer of *Broad City* and *Transparent*–, "you have to be able to manage each decision and keep everyone happy and engaged."

Regarding creative responsibilities, the figure of the showrunner implies a review of media television authorship, giving visibility to several studies which value the consideration of the showrunner-author (Heuman, 2017). Some of the professionals interviewed, such as Michael Brandt[22] –co-showrunner of *Chicago*'s saga–, thinks that "if the showrunner created the show, he is the author of the show."

Mittell (2015) proposes two types of authorship: (1) authorship by responsibility for including each particular image in an audiovisual project; and (2) authorship by management of the whole final work. In this point, the author claims that "most showrunners earn their authorship by both responsibility and management for countless leadership decisions and thus are regarded as the primary authorial figures within an intensely collaborative medium" (Mittell, 2015, p. 92).

We are dealing with a highly collaborative process, where actors and directors also have creative influence over the final result of the audiovisual work (Cavallero, 2017; Hunter, 2016). Following this idea, Rob Pearlstein[23] –co-executive producer of *McGyver*, and *Scorpion*– states: "I think that the best show is a group effort, where everyone collaborates. A good idea could come from anywhere."

The showrunner oversees the management of contributions made by other workers coherently and harmoniously, coinciding with the original idea of the TV series (Collie, 2007). In this case, Brendan Kelly[24] –supervising producer of *How to Get Away with Murder* and co-producer of *Weeds*– affirms:

> The showrunner is the person who gives more imprint on a show, a lot of different voices go into it (different writers, the producer, the studio, networks push in some direction). So, it is not sole authorship, but if I have to say that somebody is the author, it's the showrunner. I think that it is reasonable.

Showrunners find inspiration from their personal experiences and motivations in order to create an original story. Brendan Kelly remembers his job with Jenji Kohan, showrunner of *Weeds*, and he claims: "My boss, Jenji Kohan, is a very strong woman [...] it was easy to write about a very strong woman[25] because we were working with one." The nationality of creators also influences the original idea of a TV show, and we observe how professionals from other ethnics often write regarding these minorities. Tanya Saracho, showrunner of the queer Latinx drama *Vida*, is an excellent example of this circumstance.

The imputation of authorship in the television industry leads us to recognize recurrent elements –narrative, thematic, and aesthetic– present in several television projects created

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[20] All quotes from Peter Dunne come from Peter Dunne, interview by the author, 21 October 2018.
[21] All quotes from Gabe Liedman come from Gabe Liedman, interview by the author, 26 September 2018.
[22] All quotes from Michael Brandt come from Michael Brandt, interview by the author, 07 September 2018.
[23] All quotes from Rob Pearlstein come from Rob Pearlstein, interview by the author, 13 October 2018.
[24] All quotes from Brendan Kelly come from Brendan Kelly, interview by the author, 08 October 2018.
[25] Nancy Botwin is the main character in *Weeds*.

by the same showrunner. These features shape a personal hallmark which "is the expression of a creator's feeling, vision, and thought" (Kubey, 2009, p. 2). Vera Santamaria[26] –co-executive producer of *Orange is the New Black*– points out that "when you are a really experienced and successful showrunner you have that imprint."

In this way, associating a style, tone, or genre with a showrunner allows us to establish several audience expectations about their future projects. The name of this executive producer is also utilized during the television marketing strategy because "identifying the creators of a new series can serve [...] functions of creating common audiences and branding" (Mittell, 2015, p. 97).

On the other hand, Wendy Straker Hauser[27] –producer of *The Bold Type* and co-producer of *The Handmaid's Tale*– states: "I also think that a good showrunner is probably able to change the style depending on the show," and Sara Lohman[28] –co-showrunner of *Sunday Brunch* and writer-producer of *Grace and Frankie*– adds: "I think that some people have a brand, but I think that it is not a requisite or requirement to be a good showrunner."

3.2. *The showrunner during the production process*

3.2.1. Showrunner's competencies in pre-production: The script

One of the most critical factors of the showrunner's role is the work carried out with the writers. For this reason, showrunning is considered "a full-time job as the head writer, figuring out what the story is, and working with the writers to design the story of the season" (Oleson interview).

During the hiring of writers, the showrunner looks for variety from a professional and personal perspective (Venis, 2013). Ronald D. Moore highlights the importance of hiring "writers good on the page (delivering really good first draft), and writers good in the room (being in the room and pitching ideas)." Specifically, for a sitcom writers' room, "you need people who are good jokes writers, who are funny," adds Ben Karlin.

In this regard, Kevin Hench states that "you do not want every writer to have the same requirements [because] you do not need everyone to be able to do everything." However, "you have to hire writers that really understand the vision, and the essence about what the show is," affirms Melora Rivera[29] –co-producer of *Black Lightning* and *Love Is*–. Showrunners choose writers with similar life experiences to their own. Although it also depends on the channel: "In networks, with so long TV shows, you try to find writers who can replicate your voice. In cable shows, with fewer episodes, you try to find writers who are nothing like you," expresses Michael Green.

Regarding the writing process of scripts, it is different based on the showrunner's personality and abilities: "Some showrunners spend most of their time in the room with the writers; others [...] assign head writers to manage the process" (Press, 2018, p. 10). Nevertheless, most professionals interviewed agree with Brendan Kelly that in both sitcom, and drama "the showrunner will be in the room as much as possible, especially during the beginning, when it is just writing." So that, even when the showrunner delegates in a number two, both people are present during this process. It is the case of the writers' room of *Mr. Iglesias*. Its *number two*, Peter Murrieta[30] –executive producer of *Wizards of Waverly Place*– expresses: "It is easier when there are two voices in the room to support anybody on some point."

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[26] All quotes from Vera Santamaria come from Vera Santamaria, interview by the author, 15 November 2018.
[27] All quotes from Wendy Straker Hauser come from Wendy Straker Hauser, interview by the author, 22 October 2018.
[28] All quotes from Sara Lohman come from Sara Lohman, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[29] All quotes from Melora Rivera come from Melora Rivera, interview by the author, 09 November 2018.
[30] All quotes from Peter Murrieta come from Peter Murrieta, interview by the author, 05 November 2018.

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Furthermore, the degree to which the showrunner participates in reviewing and rewriting scripts can vary according to different factors. Robert Doherty[31] –showrunner of *Elementary* and executive producer of *Medium*– asserts that "in the first season there was much rewriting" until the writers know and understand the dynamic and the vision of the project. Then, "it is like a machine [...] because we know exactly what we are doing," states V. J. Boyd[32] –co-executive producer of *S.W.A.T.* and producer of *Justified*–. In any case, as William J. MacDonald[33] –co-showrunner of *Rome*– indicates, the showrunner is in charge of "making sure that all the episodes have continuity," attending to the concept established by the pilot's script, which is a reference document for other writers.

On the other hand, scriptwriting depends on the TV series' genre and format because the "writers' room for comedies are very different from those for dramas" (Phalen, 2018, p. 46). However, the whole process –pitching story ideas, breaking stories, writing outlines, drafts, and scripts, and giving notes from the showrunner, studio, and network– is similar in both cases (Landau, 2014).

Multi-camera sitcoms are always written and shot at the same studio. So, it is easier for a showrunner to stay at the writers' room writing and move quickly to the set during rehearsals and shootings. Such would be the case of Mike Royce and *One day at a time* or Lee Aronsohn and *Two and a Half Men*. Sitcom production often follows a strict weekly schedule –writing and rehearsing from Monday to Thursday, filming before a live audience on Friday, and post-producing on Saturday– and showrunners can be involved in all phases.

For its part, usually, drama production is cinematographic. It means that shooting stars when the script has been wholly written. So, it is possible to film the scenes according to the locations, like a film. In this case, it will be easy for showrunners, such as Michael Brand or Ronald D. Moore, to leave the writers' room and stay on set during the shooting; if they decide it, and there are not logistical difficulties, as we will see below.

Writing is a very long, intensive, and personal process. For this reason, it is also crucial that there is a climate of confidence in the writers' room, where showrunners trust their writers, and they can work without intimidation (Melvoin interview). In this sense, Ben Karlin mentions the sitcom *Modern Family* to convey that "[it] is very personal, so people really talk about their life: if they have a relationship, if they have kids, a husband, a wife... You can build a good idea from these personal stories in that environment." This factor is vital in drama too, mainly when plots include personal and complex stories. Rob Pearlstein indicates that "it is essential to listen to the creative direction where we have to go. Easing to work is crucial in the writers' room because we work too many hours together." Following this idea, Ronald D. Moore adds: "I try listening to a lot and looking for the best idea. It is about to manage a group of people and not tell what to do, but try to get the best of all of them."

On the other hand, in parallel with scriptwriting, the showrunner must work on issues concerning the production of texts. For this reason, Hossein Amini[34] –executive producer of *The Alienist*– considers that this figure is the "bridge between the writing and the production." It involves supervising so that each aspect of the production schedule is fulfilled following the plan developed with the line producer. He/she "is the person really in charge of the crew – hiring, scheduling, pays–, the budget, the real producing" (Royce interview).

3.2.2. Showrunner's competencies in the production: The shooting

Before starting the production phase, it is recommendable to have finished writing scripts of an entire season because "the late delivery of shooting scripts can limit everyone's preparation time, and slow down the production itself" (Kellison, 2009, p. 121). However, this

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[31] All quotes from Robert Doherty come from Robert Doherty, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[32] All quotes from VJ Boyd come from VJ Boyd, interview by the author, 30 October 2018.
[33] All quotes from William J. MacDonald come from William J. MacDonald, interview by the author, 10 October 2018.
[34] All quotes from Hossein Amini come from Hossein Amini, interview by the author, 19 September 2018.

does not always happen and depends on different factors associated with the production process and the network type. Concerning traditional networks, Zach Craley[35] –supervising producer of *Heroes Reborn: Dark Matters*– notices that "usually we try to have four or five episodes before the shooting starts."

On the other hand, cable channels and streaming platforms finance and broadcast TV series with fewer episodes, facilitating the complete writing previous to the production (Dunne interview). By way of example, Wendy Straker Hauser expresses that "in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we had almost everything written before the production began, which is perfect because you can just focus on the writing, and then spend all the time managing the production."

We highlight the Netflix service, which develops a production system called *straight-to-series*. It means that showrunners are hired to produce an entire season at once with an accurate budget for all episodes, which will not be canceled ahead of time. Besides, a pilot chapter is not necessary, and production time is quicker than on linear channels.

During the shooting phase, the showrunner will ideally be present on set, ensuring that the project filmmaking maintains the parameters defined in the script and solving some problems that could arise (Kellison, 2009). Nevertheless, this does not always happen because "it could be difficult when you are in Los Angeles, but the show is produced in New York, so physically you cannot be in both places at the same time" (Doherty interview).

Moreover, it also depends on the relationship with the director, so that, as Hossein Amini expresses, "if you really trust the director, you do not need to be on set." In this respect, unlike the film industry, in fiction TV series production, the showrunner is the boss in charge of deciding which professional will shoot each episode. Directors "have to do basically what the showrunner wants, but they are also creative because showrunners hire them to bring their vision to the show" (Krinsky interview).

In all cases, the writer in charge of writing and producing a particular episode will be present on set during the shooting of that episode. Following this vein, Jessica Sharzer[36] –co-executive producer of *American Horror Story*– stresses that, although the showrunner is not on set, "it is important that the writer is accessible […] in case something comes up." Similarly, Lee Aronsohn[37] –co-showrunner of *Two and a Half Men* and executive producer of *The Big Bang Theory*– asserts: "During the shooting of the show if there is something that is not working, we [Chuck Lorre and Lee Aronsohn] go with the other writers and come out with a new line." This situation occurs because a TV series, mainly in traditional networks, is often directed by several directors throughout the season so that "only the showrunner knows the entire logic of the script" (Schkolnick interview).

It is particularly important that both sitcom and drama showrunners are on set during the shooting of the pilot or first episode to establish the style which other directors must follow in the rest ones (Del Valle, 2008). Besides, together with visiting directors, many TV series have producer-directors: "They are persons on the set that help directors every week, it is a kind of head director of the show" (Goodman interview). On the other hand, Brendan Kelly adds that "for each episode, before the shooting, there are meetings between the showrunner, director and writers," with the aim of "say[ing] to the director what you are looking for, and what the tone of the episode is" (Brandt interview).

3.2.3. Showrunner's competencies in post-production: Editing

During the post-production phase, "the producer's role with the editor is highly collaborative. You want to give the editor specific targets for the project, and you also want to create an environment in which the work can get done" (Kellison, 2009, p. 179).

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[35] All quotes from Zach Craley come from Zach Craley, interview by the author, 12 October 2018.
[36] All quotes from Jessica Sharzer come from Jessica Sharzer, interview by the author, 02 November 2018.
[37] All quotes from Lee Aronsohn come from Lee Aronsohn, interview by the author, 30 August 2018.

The showrunner's intervention has great relevance if we consider that "editing is part of the writing process; it is the last draft for writing the script" (Amini interview). In a related vein, Ronald D. Moore declares: "I really like post-production. I like being with the editors. I find that it is a really important part of the job because you really create the final product in the editing room."

The editor elaborates the initial editing, which is supervised, and reviewed by the director. Subsequently, the showrunner re-edits this material with the editor, taking the notes from the studio and network into account (Del Valle, 2008). Likewise, the post-production job includes "work[ing] with the visual effects department, sound department, the composer, the music people…," recalls Erik Oleson.

When showrunners present the final cut to the studio and network, they receive notes from their executives. For this reason, "technically the network has the final cut" (Martin interview). However, Mike Royce asserts that "[the showrunner] has the final cut, assuming that network and studio like what [he/she] is doing."

Drama showrunners interviewed indicate a greater degree of involvement during this phase than those leading a sitcom. This difference is due to the personal influence of showrunners over drama aesthetic features, which usually present a cinematographic look. On the other hand, aesthetic possibilities in the sitcom are more limited and preset.

3.2.4. Showrunner's competencies in the promotion of TV series

The showrunner's tasks also include supervising the promotion and advertising of the final audiovisual product before and during its release. The network's marketing department is in charge of creating and publishing advertising campaigns aimed at the national and international market (Gervich, 2008).

This executive producer attends festivals and conventions, is interviewed by the press, participates in awards ceremonies, and checks the material on websites and DVD editions (Collie, 2007). Therefore, "there's so much more than just writing great stories for a showrunner to think about now" (Bennett, 2014, p. 50).

In this context, the presence of showrunners, executive producers, and writers on social media implies a beneficial strategy for promoting TV shows. Firstly, "it is part of promoting your show, part of selling your show" (Sharzer interview), which provides a "great opportunity to engage with the audience" (Kelly interview). Additionally, it is a new way of connecting the public with the producers, allowing for smooth communication and showing the TV series popularity (Phalen, 2018). In this respect, "if something is really popular on social media, the network is going to value whether to cancel it or not" (Craley interview).

The participation of OTT services and cable channels in social media is dominant. These outlets take advantage of the showrunner's name and the slogan "created by" to promote the TV show. Although this profile often delegates marketing tasks to respective departments, its presence in this area contributes positively to its recognition and personal connection with the TV series.

3.2.5. Showrunner's competencies concerning studios and networks

The production of fiction TV series is developed inside an industrial context composed of three agents: production companies, studios, and networks. In this sense, "part of your job [as showrunner] is to navigate, negotiate, and work with those entities: your benefactors, in a word," adds Michael Green. Showrunners have to respond to the studio and network, which finance and broadcast TV series. The relationship between these actors is crucial for the creative and economic success of the TV show. For this reason, Ben Karlin asserts that "one of the skills that you have to have as showrunner is to know how to talk to people from the network and studio," to explain and protect the creative decisions.

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Showrunners are in charge of pitching a personal project idea to these agents, although "there are also a lot of showrunners who pitch ideas according to what the networks want," stresses Peter Mehlman. After that, if the TV series concept is purchased, executive producers must "work closely with their network and studio, who have millions of dollars invested in each series" (Gervich, 2008, p. 90). For this reason, the showrunner receives changes and notes from the studio and network throughout the production process, from the first drafts of scripts until the final cut (Meyers, 2010).

The studio and network executives "have the ultimate power. They can fire you. They can tell you at any moment *you cannot do your show anymore, you cannot do that*," expresses Thomas Schlamme[38] –(non-writer) executive producer of *Snowfall*, *Manhattan*, and *The West Wing*–. During these negotiations, the ideal situation is when the studio and network "trust your vision, trust that you can create that vision, and let you do that job," states Evangeline Ordaz[39] –supervising producer of *Vida* and producer of *East Los High*–. These agents allow more or less freedom to showrunners according to their previous experiences. In this vein, Lee Aronsohn claims that "when you are a very successful showrunner, like Chuck [Lorre], the network's executives do not give you a lot of notes, they don't make a lot of changes."

In addition, we must notice the features of cable channels and streaming services regarding their production strategies and the content of their projects. These platforms provide a new way of producing, distributing, and consuming television in the digital era. Furthermore, their contents are usually associated with more outstanding creative quality and freedom (Perren, 2011), which is agreed on by most professionals interviewed: "The freedom that you get is terrific. I have great experiences in Amazon, and Netflix" (Oleson interview). Hence these platforms have become ideal outlets to produce more provocative, original, and personal stories due to a bigger budget, globalization, and a financing system based on payments from subscribers. Expanding these ideas, Mike Royce adds: "There is definitely more freedom. Probably because streaming platforms don not have as a strict brand, Netflix makes a lot of different kinds of shows."

4. Conclusions

Adopting the methodology and focus of media production studies, this paper draws on data from interviews with TV series professionals. The main concern is to understand the showrunner figure in the media and provide insight into production differences and similarities according to showrunner personal and professional factors. In our conclusions, we argue the importance of showrunners' practical perspective as an original contribution to reinforce the aforementioned theoretical framework.

The showrunner is the leading manager of creating the TV series, who must control all the phases and apply a set of creative, management, and personal abilities to organize the television production. The showrunner's vision relates to a personal creative style on a narrative, thematic, and aesthetic level. It is connected with the authorial identity and allows us to value the imputation of television authorship to the showrunner profile from a management and responsibility perspective.

In a general sense, the showrunner's work is essential during the entire production process, but professionals interviewed emphasize the role of showrunners in creating and writing scripts. The presence of showrunners in the writer's room is vital, especially during the writing of the first texts. The showrunner has to coordinate a group of writers with varied abilities and personal characteristics. It is also essential to create a climate of confidence, where everybody feels comfortable and integrated into the team. During the shooting phase, the showrunner –or the writer in charge of writing a particular episode– must verify that the

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[38] All quotes from Thomas Schlamme come from Thomas Schlamme, interview by the author, 02 September 2018.
[39] All quotes from Evangeline Ordaz come from Evangeline Ordaz, interview by the author, 24 September 2018.

job developed by several directors maintains the continuity of the TV series since this executive producer is the only person who knows the global logic of the project. On the other hand, the executive producers interviewed stress the post-production phase because it is considered the last stage of the script's development. Furthermore, they point out the work with the editor, especially regarding the visual and sound effects, to obtain the final cut, which will be reviewed by network executives. It is also interesting to note the showrunner's presence in social media to promote and market TV series, enabling direct communication with the audience.

Although it is the basic scheme of competencies and responsibilities of a showrunner during the TV show production process, it is also noteworthy that there is a range of particularities regarding this figure's tasks based on personal and professional features.

In this paper, we focus on the thirty-six respondents of our sample, which is reasonably representative to achieve our objectives in a novel way. On the one hand, personal features of showrunners, such as sex and nationality, influence the narrative and theme of TV series since these professionals write plots according to their personal conditions and motivations. In this case, some showrunners have a creative hallmark, and they are as close as possible to the television authorship.

On the other hand, interviewees pay attention to differences between sitcom and drama regarding the production context and strategies. They point out the production calendar and its influence over the presence and implication of showrunners in each production process phase. However, it will also depend on the personal preferences, ambitions, and experiences of this profile. Professionals attach more importance to the creative freedom allowed by cable channels and streaming platforms, especially in drama production, where several changes in production and distribution models have considerably contributed to the recognition of showrunners. Moreover, their motivations in the creation process are prominent in these outlets, where executives look for new and risky stories, which are more attractive for the audience.

The TV series production model associated with the showrunner figure is consolidated in the United States, emphasizing the benefits of this role. In this context, we propose to analyze particular showrunners during the production of specific TV shows, broaden and reinforce the results obtained, and encourage interest in further research with future applications. In addition, we argue for more attention to our object of study due to digital innovations in this constantly developing media.

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