The Showrunner: Creative, Economic, and Transmedia Coordination of Production in the North American Television Industry

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What’s a Showrunner?

- Ultimate creative decision-maker on all aspects of a TV series - vision
  ...subject to network approval
Showrunners must be “spectacular managers” and have the trust of the network.
-- US showrunner

TV series expensive and complicated to produce / coordinate

Transmedia – added, growing dimension
Expensive

- US - $3.5 million US per hour
- Canada - $1.8 million CDN per hour *Flashpoint*
- Canada – 1.5 million CDN average drama
- Canada – Kids single camera $800,000 CDN per hour
Complicated

- Producers Guild of America lists **32 key functions** for Executive Producer / showrunner

- Generate and pitch ideas; secure development deals and production orders; write "bibles", pilots and episodes; assemble key creative players including the writing team; run the writing room; and supervise pre-production, production and post-production.

- Transmedia – coordinate storyline across platforms
Three conflicting definitions

- **US model** – showrunner as writer first
  - (Creative control can be shared)

- **Canadian model(s)**
  1. Head writer - title not true function
  2. Non-writing Executive Producer
Serling’s – *Twilight Zone*

- Cayuga ownership of show
  - CBS part owner
- On screen narrator (star)
- Writes 80 to 90% of episodes
  - By contract
Twilight Zone – Season I

CBS

Serling S/R

Writers

Houghton

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Writers become uber-showrunners

- High rate of US failure
  - 95%

- Aaron Spelling, Quinn Martin
- Salesmen / managers (Elsbach, 2003)
- Manage/ deliver the creative
The cult of the showrunner

- JJ Abrams
- Joss Whedon (his Joss-ness)

- Fan access – Internet & Comicon
  - Extend storylines / brand to other media
Test: Showrunner

- Controls the communication (notes) with the buyers (networks)

- US – talk directly to writers/showrunners

- Canada – networks complain they don’t have access to the writers
Canada
Lost

ABC (60%) First run US
Touchstone (40%) World ex US first run
Family Biz (Canada)
Family Biz
Financing Sources

- Quebec Tax Credit (3%)
- Ontario Tax Credit (14%)
- Federal Tax Credit (8%)
- Canadian Broadcaster (YTV) - License (20%)
- Quebec Broadcaster (TBD) - License Fee (1%)
- CTF (License Fee Top-Up) (16%)
- Shaw Rocket Fund (4%)
- Independent Production Fund (IPF) (1.5%)
- Bell New Media Fund (0-1%)
- France 2 – License (13%)
- French Cable (Canal +) - License Fee (3%)
- French CNC & French Distribution (3%)
- International Distribution (12%)
- Producer Deferrals (4%)
Complicated financing structures

- Lead to non-writers controlling the creative

- Necessary skill sets – not necessarily in same person
  1. organizing the financing / business affairs
  2. Managing the creative vision
  3. Managing the production process
1990s Alliance, Atlantis & others

- Lawyers as Executive Producers / showrunners

- In-house Executive Producers to oversee production OR...

- Production company owner herself
  - **Owner** holds creative vision for show
  - Talks to network
  - *DeGrassi, The Listener, Flashpoint*
Flashpoint

Mustos & LaTraverse

- Two former lawyers
- Take notes directly from network
- Different Head Writers for each season
- No showrunner in US terms (Carver and Dubois, 2009)
- Successful entry into US market
Conclusions

- Simpler financing, more likely the showrunner is a writer

- More complicated financing, non-writing showrunner
  - Transmedia, another level of complication
US - Transmedia as marketing

- Disney tent pole (*Hannah Montana*)
  - Coordinated world marketing approach

- PGA – transmedia producer reports to TV showrunner (e.g. Abrams/Whedon)
  - Writer/showrunner holds vision of “storyworld”
Canada - CMF – Convergent Stream

- Transmedia in from the start
- In-house digital media companies
- More control to non-writing execs
- OR
- Lonely interns reporting to showrunners
- Transmedia without the resources
Thank you

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