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In Conversation: Creativity in the Contemporary Cable Industry

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A range of scholarly publications has surveyed the emergent practices and products of the cable industry. But far less attention has been paid to why writers themselves are finding cable an increasingly hospitable venue in which to develop and produce hour-long series. In part, the paucity of literature is due to the rapid pace of change in the cable industry.

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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6 Alisa Perren, telephone interview with Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, March 10, 2010.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This year, [showrunner] Matt [Nix] will have at least twenty-seven hours of TV on the air between his shows. [Nix is also the showrunner for the Fox series *The Good Guys*, 2010–.] I think there might be more. That is opposed to if you were doing features—with features, maybe you have one feature a year and that would be a crazy, crazy, prolific career. Yes, maybe TV is not going to be as polished, maybe you’re not going to have as much time to shoot stuff, and maybe there are more things where you think, “Oh, I wish I could fix that.” But I kind of think the net result after all, is that you kinda gotta vote for TV.¹²

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

The reason so many people come to television [is that] in TV, you’re the boss. The showrunner is the boss, with most shows. The perfect story I have involves when we were shooting a pilot of [an unaired] show I wrote called *Red Skies* for USA... We were shooting a pilot in San Diego at the same time we were shooting [the feature film he wrote called] *The Core* (Jon Amiel, 2003). I am on the set of the *Red Sky* pilot and I said to the director, “I really don’t like it. The whole point is that the bed is supposed to be in a different place, that she’s isolated, huddled up against the wall.” So we have to re-move the bed, redo the shot. He says, “Of course. No problem.” Because his job is to bring the writer’s vision to fruition. At that moment, my cell phone rings and it’s my director from *The Core*. He says, “John. We had to drop a line, we had to change things during the shooting, I need to change something tomorrow. Let me run it by you.” So he runs it by me, I give him the change. “Just have them say this. Oh, and I’m thinking of flying up and visiting the set.” And he says, “Oh, John. Writers on the set. Never a good idea. Never a good idea.” And by the way, this was standard, this is why in one of the negotiations of the strike they have to let us on the set! That was a negotiating point! We had to ask for it, fight for it! That’s one of the attractions of cable for television writers: control. And I find in cable, because the giant corporate machine is at least blunted by cable, though not eliminated, but blunted, you still have that feeling you’re the person who runs that show—that you are the creative voice.¹³

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

¹² Horowitz, interview.
¹³ Rogers, interview. Italics indicate original emphasis.
among my interviewees: in cable there is less creative interference. Simply put, fewer executives offer fewer notes. Yet this is not the only way that cable remains distinct from broadcast. As Cowen and Lipman remarked, the business model for cable—especially pay cable—demands more explicit content. This ability to “test the limits” contributes to a greater sense of autonomy on the part of the writers. This, in turn, fuels the rhetoric of quality that circulates in media coverage of networks such as HBO, Showtime, AMC, and FX. This feeling of greater creative latitude makes cable writers willing to shoot on lower budgets, on faster schedules, with smaller staffs, and at distant locations.

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

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

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

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14 Variations in content derive in part from the regulatory requirements placed on broadcasters.