EXAMINING TELEVISION OUTSIDE THE BOX

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication Studies

By
Elizabeth G. Minarik

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The thesis of Elizabeth G. Minarik is approved:

Dr. Bernardo Attias

Date

Dr. Aimee Carrillo-Rowe

Date

Dr. Gina Giotta, Chair

Date

California State University, Northridge
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Abstract

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This study looks at the intersection of new technology and storytelling in television by exploring television writers’ content creation process. While a great deal of contemporary popular discourse (and some scholarly discourse) about television presumes that new digital technology is radically transforming television content, this study seeks to understand the question of change from the television writer’s perspective. For this qualitative study, 10 television writers were interviewed and asked about their experiences writing for the medium. The interviews with the writers were coded and then grouped into three broad thematic concerns: television technology, the industry, and content creation. Results showed that while writers recognize new technology as having some impact on television content creation (for example, non-network production outlets’ willingness to take bigger risks on content) and a significant impact on their own personal viewing behaviors, they overwhelmingly see new technology as only minimally or indirectly affecting their writing. This lack of consideration of new technology in their creative process is supported by a number of shared narratives within the writing community about the role of the writer and the essence of the medium. In particular, narratives about prioritizing story and character, collaboration among writers, and respect for the past help facilitate the uneasy separation between technology and the creative process within the writing community. Moreover, such narratives suggest some of the
mechanisms by which supposedly runaway technological change is tempered and negotiated within this particular phase of the content creation process.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Forbes 1/28/14: “Why Television is Dead” (Rosenbaum)

Politico 2/27/14: “TV is Dead. Now What?” (Shirky)

Business Insider 11/24/13: “TV Is Dying and Here are the Stats that Prove It” (Edwards)


CNN 5/6/13: “The new, new TV golden age” (Leopold)

NY Times 5/9/14: “Barely Keeping up in TV’s New Golden Age” (Carr)

For the past few years, there has been an inundation of headlines declaring that television is at once dead and thriving. The medium as we know it is being forever changed by technology. The content is flourishing as it has never flourished before. We are being told the story of television today, and the narrative is one of rapid and significant change, both in television technology and content. Television, such discourse claims, is a medium that no longer is what it was thanks to new technology. However, looking carefully into what is changing reveals a more nuanced perspective. The distribution model of television is changing rapidly. We can now watch TV on a variety of devices and from a broader array of sources. Yet television still remains a focal point of living rooms across America. The television box is changing—bigger and slimmer as well as more portable options, but the shift in the content is not changing at the same speed. Thirty and 60-minute programming units, for example, still dominate the schedule.
Television content by its nature is never static. There is a variety of new programming on at any given time. The quality of programming varies greatly. The quantity of programming has remained on an expanding trajectory. But within the television box, what is happening to content in the current era? Even with an increase in quality programming, content is not being overhauled in step with technology and distribution changes. While much research has been done on the technological changes in the medium of television, limited research balances the understanding of new technology with an industry professionals’ perspective on the process of content creation. Looking both at new technologies and the content creation process allows us to understand both how technology does and does not impact television content.

Discussion of television today often implies that the medium is being overhauled and that new technology is a dominating force of that change. Television Studies scholar Jennifer Gillian insists that the writers have no choice but to bend to technology: “Given that content is also transformed as it moves across those new channels, writers must adjust it to new formats, screen sizes, and delivery systems” (16). In introducing their book Distribution Revolution, Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson forward a similar claim, noting “the digital distribution revolution is […] a dynamic and multifaceted process, affecting almost every aspect of the film and television industries” (4). Like popular discourse about television and new technology, such scholarly discourse suggests technology is a guiding, transformative force within the medium.

Some of television’s most recent developments are contradictory. At the spring 2014 Upfront events (where television networks unveil their falls schedules), executives from both Fox and NBC spoke of “eventizing” their line-up, with NBC Entertainment
Chairman Bob Greenblatt saying, “You’re going to here the word ‘event’ a lot this week… We’re trying to eventize everything” (qtd. in Rose and Guthrie). Yet in an Entertainment Weekly recap of True Blood, a scene is praised as being so good you want to watch it again: “The way the sequence is shot is so cinematic—dark, suspenseful, with interesting angles— it's rewind-worthy” (Bierly). These two quotes are emblematic of the tensions of the convergence era of TV—where a variety of screens and media outlets interconnect as a new version of television (Jenkins 2). They suggest that television is now both something to watch live with the rest of the nation and something to record and savor over and over. Television is rebranding itself, but it is not moving forward along a single path that takes us to a distinctly new version of the medium. The old and new of television continue to co-exist. There are more outlets producing and “airing” television than ever before. Yet the product offered retains some familiarity. Often what is new in television is a reincarnation of past developments.

Television often keeps some aspects of the past alive while navigating the future. Greenblatt wants to make sure people are enticed to watch live, with no delays. If every show, every episode, is an event, we must watch it tonight. Network television is still trying to force immediate viewing, working to save their financial system that relies on advertising dollars. And on the other side of the fence there are cable, pay TV, and streaming channels and venues wanting to make something so valuable you will pay for it on its own because you want to savor it, perhaps even rewinding and re-watching it again. However, that division is not as neat as it seems. Even within new television technology is an echo of the past. Netflix offers a season of House of Cards all at once, in a sense, upping the ante on eventizing its television offering. But in the same
movement, a whole season offered at once and available as one wants to consume it invites different viewing speeds and endless re-watching opportunities. Watching live versus watching later intertwines to include the hyper-immediate viewing practice of binge-watching. Television holds a spectrum of variations in all of its elements—screen sizes, production outlets, programming genres, distribution methods. Even with change, one variation does not drown out all of the others, which implies multiple sets of forces at work in the industry.

Television is a contradictory medium. It is at one time both its future and its past. It is driven both by technology and human creativity. It is a cinematic boob tube, serialized procedurals, ongoing miniseries, giant and miniscule screens, home and travel entertainment, live and delayed viewing, streamed and wired, free and subscription. The tropes of the past still exist despite the new technology. They are not falling away in this new age of television. The DVR came after the DVD, which came after the VCR. Henry Jenkins explains that “convergence is, in that sense, an old concept taking on new meanings” (6). There is a foundation of what television has been that remains unchanging. An examination of new technologies should take the continuity of the medium into account.

One gradual shift in television that has established itself firmly is that television is a writer’s medium. A few decades back it was called a producer’s medium (Newcomb and Levine). Over the years more writers have gained producer credits- not just for the creator of the show, but often most of the staff writers are given credit as producers on a television series. The logistics of television production lends itself to being writer-centric. The stories are created in a writer’s room over the course of the entire season and
life of the series, while a director (the helm of a film production) is a position that rotates by episode on television. The writers remain the consistent creative presence in the process in television. In order to understand the dynamics in current television that are both pushing it into a new future and holding onto the past, we must include the writers.

When television technology and content creation are examined together, books such as *Distribution Revolution* interview television and film professionals asking them to discuss how technology IS affecting the medium. Other Television Studies researchers like Lotz claim that what is new in television technology today—an expansion of production outlets that allow for non-ad-based television and variation in season and episode lengths—is reshaping content creation, and certainly there is truth to that as the medium continues to evolve (*Revolutionized* 187). But the evolution is not so clear. What is new does not cast aside everything that is old, and that older foundation remains influential. Lotz admits that traditional formats, for example *Law & Order*, can remain successful, but she implies that this is due to industry choices, not creative ones (106). Scholarship has left open a door to examine content creation’s relationship to technological change—not just how technology is changing it, but also a reflective look at the ways in which the new is a part of the past. The writers I spoke with addressed the changes they see in the industry and content today, but they also offered commentary that rejects the influence of technology and insists on examining the continuity of the content creation process. Looking specifically at the writers’ discussion of their process of content creation, we see a counterforce that keeps television content from moving at the same speed as technology. This research looks at the step preceding content, the process of content creation, with a focus on the writers’ perspective.
Storytelling on television is made possible by both the writers and technology. Inherent in television is a tension between technological determinism and human creativity, a relevant struggle present in aspects of today’s society beyond Television Studies and beyond the field of Communication. This research looks at the intersection of television technology and content from an unexamined perspective. Much of the research on television content today looks at the content itself (Lotz; Pearson; Polan; Thompson). Some Television Studies research uses interviews with industry professionals (Caldwell; Kubey; Curtin, Holt and Sanson), but does not focus specifically on the writer. This research attempts to expand the existing literature on new technology and television by considering the how television is created specifically from the writers’ perspective.

In the following chapters I will review the literature on television technology and the modern “quality TV” era. I will discuss scholarship that explores the rise of the writer in the medium and evaluates the relationship between technology and content, as well as technology’s influence on industry practices. Then I will discuss my choice of methods for this research. For my research, I am interviewing television writers to gain their perspective on the shifts in television, particularly the relationship between technology and the process of content creation. A qualitative analysis of this research hopes to answer the following research questions:

R1: What is the impact of technology on the writers’ process of content creation?
R2: What forces prevent aspects of the medium of television from being radically altered by technology? Why?
Finally I will report my findings and offer an analysis of the writers’ views on the intersection of technological innovation and the process of content creation for television. I will examine the ways in which the writers both value technological innovations and discard them. Television writers have developed a culture of shared practices in their content creation process including prioritizing story and character, collaboration, respect for the past, and an understanding of the parameters of the medium. As audience members, television writers regularly engage with new technology. They see new technologies beginning to affect the structures of industry. And they see some industry shifts having an effect on television content. However, a separation remains in the content creation process as television writers do not actively consider new technology when writing. This gap between the technology and content creation allows the writers to become a counterweight to technology’s influence allowing the medium’s contradictory nature to flourish.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Television Studies starts with the uphill battle of defining what ‘television’ is—a definition made all the more difficult by current technological changes that have introduced a plethora of new industrial terms like ‘platforming,’ ‘networking,’ ‘tracking,’ ‘timeshifting,’ ‘placeshifting,’ ‘schedule-shifting,’ ‘micro-segmenting,’ and ‘channel branding’ (Gillian i). But this lack of clarity as regards what television is also makes for a vibrant field of study surrounding the medium. Our understanding of television now embraces more than the screen in one’s family room. “As Bruce Rosenblum, chairman of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, recently said, whether people watch on a mobile device, a tablet, or a flat screen, ‘It’s all television.’” (qtd. in Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 13). Amanda Lotz says television “functions both as a technology and a tool for cultural storytelling” (Revolutionized 3). A big umbrella is needed to hold all of what television is, and some of the most useful definitions break down the concept into multiple components. Newman and Levine explain these distinctions, “Depending on context it may refer to programs, to the institutions that produce and distribute them, and to the devices we use to access this content. It can be used to mean culture, industry, or technology” (Newman and Levine 101).

There is no one perfect way of encapsulating what television is, particularly in its current disjointed form. Bennett examines the “hybridity” of the current era of television and looks into the relationships between traditional television and newer technologies. Variations of the modern television experience such as screen size and production outlets blend the television experience into outlying technologies such as social media and file
sharing (Bennett 7). The concept of television grows ever expansive as media
technologies develop. Lotz argues that Television scholars need new ways of comparing
the vast landscape of everything television encompasses (“Not TV” 86-87). Scholars
have developed different ways of organizing the medium into examinable elements.
Jason Mittell suggests breaking television into 6 interwoven parts: commercial industry,
democratic institution, technological medium, everyday practice, cultural representation,
and textual form (9). I see television much like Newman and Levine’s definition, as three
parts—the box (technology), the business (industry), and the content (programming)
(101). These parts overlap, reflect, and affect the others, with new technology driving the
change in our perception of television as a concept.

   Within Television Studies, Industry Studies/Research has been prolific in
exploring technology’s impact on the medium. “An area of clear growth involves the
intersection of television, technology, and industry. Although ‘convergence’ appears the
buzzword du jour, the changing technological realm of television and video content
cannot be avoided” (Gray and Lotz 113). Television Studies scholarship has moved
beyond the early work in the field that could be defined as television criticism to studies
that consider the content, audience and/or industry. More recent Television Studies
scholarship often looks at the interwoven elements of television in order to contextualize
the work in our current cultural landscape. Television’s parts cannot be analyzed as
individual entities or as separate from the cultural climate in which they developed, and
scholarship examines overlapping elements of television from a variety of perspectives.
Today scholars like John T. Caldwell look at technology’s impact on both television
content and workers in the industry. Lotz looks at technology and industry’s impact on
content. Lynn Spigel has looked at the representation of television in other media- and the subsequent impact of that representation on our perception of television.

This analysis of the overlapping elements of television is more necessary than ever in the current multimedia environment, as a narrow focus would offer an insufficient point of view to understand television. However still missing from much of the discussion is a direct line of communication with those in the industry. Much of the scholarship on technology examines the technology itself or as an evaluation of the content that comes to be in the same timeframe. Some scholarship on technology looks at its effect on the industry. Additional analysis on television technology interprets the effect of technology on audiences. The general agreement on the rise of the writers in television and their growing influence within the medium indicates a need for a deeper examination of their agency in the medium. However, the scholarship often remains on the periphery of their perspective. The recent book Distribution Revolution by Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt and Kevin Sanson comes close to addressing this link between the writers and technology. The book is a series of interviews with TV and film professionals, not just writers, but the book seeks to understand the impact of new digital delivery systems on the business. This book privileges the power of the technology over the agency of creators and only looks at one side of the equation.

Looking at the scholarship on the areas of technology, the industry, and the writers and content, an opening exists for a direct look at the human forces that are shaping television within a technologically diverse age. While Television Studies does not promote absolute technological determinism, the absence of human voices within the industry leaves a void in understanding the other forces at play. This chapter reviews
current Television Studies scholarship on technology and the writers’ role in the medium. It starts with an examination of Television Scholarship on technological innovations. Then it looks at scholarship that explores the relationship of new technology and the business of television. Finally, it looks at scholarship on “quality television,” and the rising role of the writers in the industry.

Technological Innovations

Television cannot be separated from its technology. It is a storytelling medium that was made possible by technology that continues to evolve. Current Television Studies scholarship cannot avoid some discussion of technological innovations in its analysis of the medium, often presuming an impact of technology on the medium. Television today is an aggregate of intertwined technologies working together—“antennae or satellite dishes or cable, by iPods or computer screens, by high-definition sets with surround sound systems” (Gray and Lotz 139). Television Studies has examined technology from multiple perspectives, including analyses of individual technologies, of multiple technologies, and of those technology’s impact on industry or content—though often from a perspective of analysis on the medium based on observation rather than discussion with its players. While much of the scholarship on technology looks at how technology causes change, there are also some pieces of acknowledging a continuity to the television medium.

Scholars track how individual technologies can impact both industry and content, though rarely is the focus of analysis based on industry professionals’ perspectives, instead pointing out consequences of technological changes on the industry. In her 2007 book The Television Will be Revolutionized, Lotz offers an extensive look at the
technological changes of television from the television set itself to the VCR, remote control, analog cable, DVR, VOD, portable devices, and now digital cable. Nearly a decade ago, she anticipated “the integration of television and computers in the post-network era” (17). Other scholars take a more narrow focus. Thompson chronicles the changes brought on by the advent of the remote control (10). Thomas, also looking at the remote, called it a “disruptive technology” (53). Suddenly viewers were in the driver’s seat of the viewing experience, actively participating. The remote made the explosion of channels offered by cable a navigable commodity (Thompson 11). The remote individualized the viewer experience disrupting programming flow. Technology transformed the audience’s experience of television and gave the audience more options in the medium both in expanding content choices and in choosing how and when to view.

Scholarship does not claim all technological changes are overhauls of the system. There are limits to the changes brought about by technology. Lotz looks at the parallel of both remotes and cable. In 1980 19.9% of households had cable, in 1990 and 56.4%, and in 2000 68% have cable (Revolutionized 53). Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas also noted the rise of cable infiltration in American households, “In 1980, 17.6 million television-owning homes in the United States, or 23% of the market, subscribed to cable TV. By June 2005, some 94.2 million households (86 percent of TV households) had come to subscribe to some form of multichannel video programming distribution” (2). Yet, it is also important to note that not all changes in technology reshape the entire landscape. For example, “a Household with 31 to 40 channels viewed an average of 10.2 [channels], while those with 51 to 90 viewed just over 15.2.” (Lotz, Revolutionized 57). While audiences have a world of programming options opened up to
them, they will still settle on a limited number. Noting these limitations of technology’s reach opens up room to question what other forces remain in play impacting the trajectory of the medium.

We are now in a “Convergence Era.” Every electronic device can become a TV. Content is available in a variety of forms, and the lines between mediums are blurred. “Movies are watched most often on television sets, television shows are frequently screened on personal computers and mobile devices, and all of the electronic media have become digital.” (Newman and Levine 4). Henry Jenkins defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (2). However, in the convergence era television is no longer a mass media in the way it once was. Networks’ piece of the television audience has been in decline since the 1970s (Boddy, “Last Format War” 80). In the past, a single television, no remote, and no VCR meant everyone watched the same programming (Lotz, Revolutionized 51). “Implicit in these [previously held] assumptions [about television] is a view of television as a mass medium… television’s live schedule no longer orders and structures daily life on a mass level” (Bennett 4). Both the growing number of devices available to audiences as well as the ability to record television have shifted the medium away from one dominated by networks and mass appeal to smaller, more numerous television outlets. Television remains a mass medium in its reach, but the expanse of the medium today disperses the masses among many different television outlets.

Viewers are not spending LESS time watching television, rather they are watching television while also engaged with other technologies (Lotz, Revolutionized
There is a generational divide between new and old technologies. A 2006 study by Disney Media Networks reported that “40% of millennials went home each evening and used five to eight technologies (many simultaneously), while 40% of their Boomer parents returned home and watched only television” (Lotz, *Revolutionized* 18). But television remains a dominant part of a culture. A 2007 study by the Leichtman Research Group presented at a 2008 industry conference showed 3.5 hours per day to be the average time that US consumers spend watching television (versus 6 minutes per day of watching online videos) (Turner 34). Yet the overall draw of the networks continues to wane. “Non-broadcast networks now [2006] draw a greater share of the television audience than broadcast networks (for the 2004-2005 season, non-broadcast audiences outpaced broadcasting’s declining viewership, at 53% to 47%, respectively, in prime time, and an even greater share, 59 versus 41, for ‘all-day’ viewing, over the 24-hour period)” (Banet-Weiser, Chris and Freitas 2). While perhaps the most significant shift in television has been the decline of the networks’ reach, television as a whole remains a powerful cultural tool.

What the recent decades of technology are doing to television as a whole and what it predicts for the future is debated and discussed in scholarship. But much scholarship begins with the acceptance of technology as a determining force. For example, Francois Bar and Jonathan Taplin argue that “Internet Television will be the foundation of the next phase [of television]” (82). And while some scholarship on technological innovations investigates its overlap with other elements of television, those studies do not often include a perspective from within the industry. The collection of interviews in *Distribution Revolution* is unique in that it is direct engagement with media
professionals (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson). While in this book we actually hear the voice of film and television industry executives, including television writers, once again the focus of the scholarship is on what technology is doing to the industry and responses of industry and writers TO technology, not an examination of any other forces at play in shaping the medium.

Today we have both more channels and television outlets as well as more media concentration and conglomeration. The television industry landscape is a different shape than it was in the 1950’s. “The American media environment is now being shaped by two seemingly contradictory trends… Some fear that media is out of control, others that it is too controlled. Some see a world without gatekeepers, others in a world where gatekeepers have unprecedented power…” (Jenkins 18). Multiple scholars see audience fragmentation from cable and other outlets as leading to more opportunities for narrow and niche audiences and programming (Lotz, Revolutionized 27; Gillian 2). While some see more audience control, Mittell argues that the industry still decides what is on the screen—the viewers cannot see what is outside the box(6). Hesmondhalgh (The Cultural Industries) and Caldwell (Production Culture) remind us to view television and their media corporations as power brokers. The television industry is being reshaped by new technologies, and the industry looks to find profit in these innovations.

Corporations and Technology

The television industry is an overlaps the other elements of the medium of television as both a purveyor of technology and a producer of content. As seen in their multimedia endeavors, corporations find ways to build on technological innovations in
order to make their content profitable. The industry feels a push to evolve from emerging technologies, as the status quo seems a less secure and less lucrative path. Boddy points out that the International Broadcasting Convention renamed itself “IBC” in order to discontinue the perceived dated term “broadcasting” (“Is It TV” 78). But there is a debate over whether technology drives these changes or if industry drives new technology. Often industry is taking its lead from their audience, particularly imitating how grassroots fan groups interact with brands and programs (Jenkins 22). Yet Graeme Turner, reminds us of “the undeniable fact that it will be the currently existing commercial and regulatory structures that will exercise the most influence on how all of these developments play out” (35). The television industry is a huge business, and though it can be moved by technology, it also pulls newer business models and technologies into its fold.

Media corporations have been known to bend new technological advantages in their favor, taking down the established fin-syn rules in the 1990s, which Jenkins calls “the first phase of a longer process of media concentration” (11). “The new media conglomerates have controlling interests across the entire entertainment industry. Warner Bros. produces film, television, popular music, computer games, Web sites, toys, amusement park rides, books, newspapers, magazines, and comics” (Jenkins 16). Deregulation contributed to the growth of media conglomerates (Lotz, Revolutionized 47). Five major media corporations control the bulk of the industry (Mittell 44). Multimedia business patterns have become more common as all aspects of media are controlled by concentrated media corporations such as Time-Warner/AOL/Turner/HBO or Viacom/CBS/MTV/Paramount (Caldwell, Production Culture 9).
Cable carries the perception of something new, but in many ways cable networks are not so different from the networks. Writer-Producer Patric Verrone explains, “It’s the same four or five companies that own those five hundred channels” (qtd. in Curtin, Holt and Sanson, 219). The business of cable television cannot be distinguished as different from network television since cable is “controlled by the same powerful conglomerates that dominate other media markets; it has repeated and recycled broadcast programming concepts…” (Banet-Weiser, Chris, and Freitas 4) which means the number of companies that purchase productions is not as great as the number of cable channels (Curtin, Holt and Sanson, 186).

Some recent scholarship discusses the newer outlets for television. There are multiple books and articles discussing the rise of HBO, both its innovations and its appropriation of established television norms. HBO successfully branded itself as better than standard television (Lotz, “Not TV”; Polan; Santo). Lotz reminds us that the station’s reach still has a smaller footprint than network TV or basic cable (“Not TV” 94). And Avi Santo discusses the differences in HBO’s subscription-based income revenue. While Dana Polan clarifies that “It’s not TV” is a marketing tool, not a cultural guide” (266). They are driven by profits, just as the rest of the TV industry is. They still rely on some traditional tools like syndication and international sales to bring in revenue (Lotz, “Not TV” 97).

Other new television outlets are also pushing the definition of “network” by offering programs available by streaming. Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix all began by offering already-aired programming, and now like Netflix, Amazon and Hulu have begun to create their own content. “For now, these new shows look much like their broadcast
and cable peers, but the programmers at the major SVOD services say they don’t need to play the ratings game…” (Curtin, Holt and Sanson 1). These new outlets are both new and old in their practices. They are not looking for a complete reinvention of television. Even as television outlets change, much of our television vocabulary stays the same.

Netflix’s “own website now describes itself as ‘the world’s leading Internet television network’” (Curtin, Holt and Sanson 13). Their shows are in a similar mold as other “primetime” television, but like HBO, some of their revenue sources are non-traditional which some argue can allow them different flexibilities in programming (Lotz, “Not TV” 96). While “the trades marvel at the vast new avenues for content development, the new fluidity of traditional barriers,” what the future might bring is unclear (Caldwell, Production Culture 340).

But the content itself is not completely lost in the quest for profits. Good (in quality or popularity) television also makes money. Distribution Revolution explores how the importance of story drives the international market. “Given a greater range of choices, audiences are drawn to the products by textual elements—characters, story lines, special effects—rather than by the technological and regulatory constraints formerly imposed on the delivery system” (Curtin, Holt and Sanson 281). With technology changing and profits as a driving factor for the industry, the content produced will not remain static. “We might rarely consider the business of television, but production practices inordinately affect the stories, images, and ideas that project into our homes” (Lotz, Revolutionized 3). In evaluating the television medium today, some scholars see new and “better” content as a reflection of the changes in the industry and technology. Some see these changes coming from the increasing power of the writers.
Quality Television

When technology and content are discussed in relation to each other, scholars vary in their perception of the impact of the technological forces on content. Network television is no longer the only option. Mass appeal is no longer a necessity. Cable television has offered a variation to the creative process—season lengths, episode lengths, and act lengths are all more malleable on cable television. But are factors like these what has led us to an era of quality television? Is television really better?

Television’s best offerings are now considered art. Some scholars argue that audience sensibilities, not television quality, have changed—that television has shifted in status and begun to move from low culture to high culture, much like Shakespeare or opera did in the past, making it seem of higher quality than before (Newman and Levine, 7-8). Whether it is our perception or the nature of the content itself, television is moving from low brow to high brow status within our culture as evidenced by repeated claims of television’s new Golden Age (Carr; Leopald). But the shift has been slow. As recently as 2003, researchers were almost apologizing for valuing TV as art: “I simply assume that any medium produces both bad art and good art. You may be of the opinion that television has produced few if any masterpieces, but after all, the vast majority of works created in any medium are not masterpieces and are soon forgotten” (Thompson 2). But it is more confidently stated now. “Television has achieved the status of great art… disturbing long-standing hierarchies that placed the medium far below literature, theater, and cinema” (Newman and Levine 2).
Multiple scholars directly link the rise of quality television to specific technological innovations. Both high definition television and the rise of DVDs added to the “aura of quality”. The DVD made television a collectible, curate-able object, offering consumers “the thrill of acquisition” that accompanies more traditional works of art (Bennett and Brown 5). DVD packaging is often made to emulate books (Bennett and Brown 3). But more than just using the DVD as an art object, both the DVD and DVR technologies allow viewers to “curate, pause, and reflect.” (Newman and Levine 142). Offering the viewer increased engagement is “the exact opposite of the traditional conception of the television audience as passive victims of commercialized, mind numbing ‘entertainment.’” (Newman and Levine 142). The DVD is also an enabler of the audience’s shift from passive to active. Boddy traces the rise of both HDTV and DVD’s from the early to late 2000’s (“Last Format War” 183). Lotz claims HD TV is “…the single most important advance in the enhancement of television quality—high definition (HD)” (Revolutionized 71). Taken as a whole, these new technologies, such as high definition capabilities, flat panel TV’s, and DVD’s have transformed our concept of TV into one of “a sophisticated, high-tech gadget” (Newman and Levine ii) that is no longer the medium of the passive viewer on the couch as technology has helped remove spatial and temporal limitations (Lotz, Revolutionized 66). TV has shifted from a home device with an established schedule to a one that can be actively adjusted by users. However arguing that these new technologies have increased the value or quality of television by promoting them to artistic status, gives less credit to the creators of television. Content also seems to have had a linear, gradual shift over
time, so factors beyond technology must be examined as contributors to this era of quality television.

One of the most significant shifts in content has been the slow change across television from the episodic narrative to the serialized narrative (Jenkins 118-9). In the 1970s *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was one of the first to push that boundary. Early television primarily consisted of stand-alone episodes. Any individual episode did not affect subsequent episodes (Thompson 59). But on *The Mary Tyler Moore show*, while there were contained plots in each episode, “Mary was allowed to mature as a character” (Thomson 59). Television today has a “new standard of sophistication” which counters “the old linear and simple way of telling stories” found in series from decades past such as *Dragnet* or *Joanie loves Chachi* (Newman and Levine 140). Today’s narratives are often more sophisticated. Even “procedural” shows might have a longer running narrative arc that runs throughout the season (Mittell 2010). Current television in this quality TV era follows a newer model of “narrative and formal complexity, often represented through ensemble casts, extended story arcs, and a constant intensification and deferral of narrative enigmas” (Jenkins 122). This move towards more serialization of the story is discussed in Lotz, Newman, Curtin, Gillian, and Jenkins. But it is not absolute as strictly episodic shows like *Law & Order* remain successful (Curtin, Holt and Sanson 224). Gillian is skeptical that network television can adequately accomplish the complex narrative of a long-arc narrative (22). But by the 1990’s, this new mode of “cumulative narrative, referring to the form’s ability to ‘accumulate’ nuances of plot and character as a series matures over several seasons” had become present throughout primetime television and television narratives had increased in complexity (Sconce 98).
There are standout shows that are continually referenced as examples of early excellent television that broke the ground for a bigger wave of quality programming—particularly by bending genre traditions. *Hill Street Blues* used multiple complex and interwoven stories, as well as an ensemble cast, and was helmed by Steven Bochco (Thompson 55). *Hill Street Blues* mixed genres—melodrama and “gritty vision of urban crime” (Mittell 238). And *Hill Street Blues’* success arguably paved the way for greater power for writer-creators of television series (Newman and Levine 41). *Hill Street Blues* also began the trend on NBC of ‘signature dramas’ which continued with programs like *ER* (Gillian 1).

A number of scholars working on the topic of quality television also cite *Twin Peaks* as influential to the rise modern quality television. The show, they argue, both innovated and reinvigorated established genres. *Twin Peaks* offered surprising twists, but it did not completely throw away genre conventions, “but rather plays with the assumptions and conventions of soap operas, detective dramas, and supernatural horror to highlight the limits of formulas, while still embracing some of their conventional pleasures” (Mittell 237). Thompson sees Twin Peaks as a blend of the soap opera and detective genres (Thompson 129). “Central to the hype around the series [*Twin Peaks*] was the involvement of the ‘auteur’ Lynch, a filmmaker for his bizarrely erotic and violent features, in the conservative and corporate-managed world of network television” (Newman and Levine 26). Television is a balancing act. Innovative shows walk a fine line between managing expectations and surprise, playing with genre formulations but not breaking them altogether. Yet while the success of both *Twin Peaks’* and *Hill Street Blues*...
Blues’ innovations are seen by scholars to be driven by their creators, the proliferation of quality programming today is often argued to be a product of technological advances.

The growth of cable seemingly allowed for more room to push the envelope. Cable channels have different regulations in place and are able to offer more “risqué” content (Mittell 33). Yet networks remain more risk-averse (Lotz). Scholarship insists that this cable network distinction remains distinct, and see networks as far more limiting than non-network television outlets. Cable television’s audiences are expected to be smaller than networks’, so the push to appeal to the masses is not the same on cable.

“[Network] television executives often feel pressure to provide an ‘advertising friendly’ environment that, while building ratings, does not threaten revenue by alienating sponsors.” (Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 14). As producer Paris Barclay says, “Networks are afraid of anything that might startle, surprise, irritate, or challenge their viewers. They don’t want to do that” (qtd. in Curtin, Sanson, and Holt, 2014, p. 186). Cable networks also only need one hit to find relevance, “as Trading Spaces did for TLC, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy did for Bravo, and The Shield did for FX. And once a cable network achieves substantial cultural awareness, it is much easier to secure the advertising dollars necessary to maximize its niche status through additional programming” (Lotz, Revolutionized 183). Cable television needs a smaller footprint in the media landscape than networks do to thrive which offers room for more flexibility and often more experimentation.

“Quality” programming thrived off network, especially on HBO, with critically acclaimed hits such as The Sopranos, Sex and the City, and Six Feet Under. “Today [2006], pay television (and HBO in particular) is positioned as an alternative to network
offerings, consistently regarded as the premier site for what has come to be called ‘quality television’ and hailed critically as well as by audiences.” (Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 1). Cable is happy to be seen as a more refined, less broad, alternative to the networks. “Subscription services such as HBO and Showtime have cultivated a production culture that prioritizes aesthetic excellence and originality in a manner that distinguishes their shows from those of conventional television” (Lotz, Revolutionized 74). HBO and other premium cable outlets are aided by less rigidity in their scheduling. “[On HBO], climactic events can occur at almost any place in the narrative as, for example, when an assassination attempt on Tony Soprano, a plot that had been developing for several episodes, unceremoniously occurs two-thirds of the way through a first season episode of The Sopranos” (Santo 28). HBO led the way, and others followed in their footsteps as imitation always follows success in television (Mittell 46). “Critics appropriately hailed the series [The Shield] as the most HBO-influenced show to air outside of a subscription network” (Lotz, Revolutionized 184). Technology, such as cable and DVDs, has some impact on the current era of quality television. But so do the writers of television creating this new content.

Recent scholarship seems to give more of the credit for the current era of quality television to the technology, with only a nod to the foundational groundbreaking series in the history of television. Whether the argument is that the increase in quality is due to the ability to curate television shows with DVD collections or the increase in risk-taking off network, these perspectives take the creators out of the equation implying that technology not its creators drives the change in the medium. Yet over the few decades there has been a rise in the strength of the writer in television.
The Rise of the Writer

While technology and corporate interests continue to shape television, so do the authors of the content, the writers. Television was called a producer’s medium in the early decades of television. Indeed Newcomb and Alley’s 1983 book *The Producer’s Medium* declared “the producer is central in the creative process of television” (17). But in recent decades a hyphenate title of the writer-producer began to arise. Unlike film, which has historically been considered a director’s medium, television is increasingly being seen as a writer’s medium. “The majority of television producers for scripted programming are part of a show’s writing staff, leading many critics to note that fictional television is a writer’s medium” (Mittell 22). The ‘auteur’ of primetime television is the head writer, who is often an executive producer as well (Caldwell, *Production Culture* 16). This acknowledged power of the writer in the medium should encourage more research that directly engages their role in the industry. However, often their role is seen through the lens of their produced content rather than their choices in the process of creation.

Television writers did not immediately gain authority in the medium. There was some initial pushback to the idea of writers in charge. As producer David Victor told Newcomb, “Directors come and go. Writers come and go. Actors come and go” (Newcomb and Alley 83). Television shows from the 1960’s to the 1980’s were headed by an executive producer who often came from a writing background but was not called a “writer.” Individual episode scripts would be assigned to freelance writers just as episodes were assigned to freelance directors (Newcomb and Alley 83). Story editors
and the producers would edit or re-write those scripts for filming, with the executive producer of the show getting the final say, guiding the overall tone of the series. But in the 1970’s and 1980’s, many of these producers from writing backgrounds wanted to take on the task of writing themselves to give the show their own voice (Newcomb and Alley 43). They believed in the primacy of the writer in the television medium. Rod Serling of The Twilight Zone was one of the earliest writer-producers, setting the stage for television auteurs to come (Kubey 121). Writer-producers Levinson and Link told Newcomb that “Some of the old line producers resent the advent of the hyphenate [writer-producer]… we’ve discovered that producing is an extension of writing… We created that person as a character. We’re also interested in how it’s extended” (qtd. in Newcomb and Alley 145).

The power that the writer now has in television attracts talented as the conditions of the medium make television an enticing place for creative work. “Many screenwriters have migrated from film to television, drawn by the success of shows with complex narratives and mature themes, shows where writers exercise greater authority” (Curtin, Holt and Sanson 160). Television writers have moved from being freelance to staffed, with shows now having a “Writers’ room” of full-time writers responsible for collaborating on the entire series (Newman and Levine 53). Writers often write individual episodes, but they map out the narrative arcs as a team and edit script drafts together collaborating in the process (Newman and Levine 41). Many of the writers on staff for a show also get a producing credit on the show (Kubey 19). Television directors are still usually only contracted per episode. “Group writing and conceptualization processes over several months or years are kept extremely close to the executive, while directors and crews mostly just render these schemes at arms-length in frantic shooting
schedules of six to seven days (per hour long episode)” (Caldwell, *Production Culture* 201).

The scholarship interviews with television writers that have been done in books such as *Creating Television* (Kubey, 2004) and *The Producer’s Medium* (Newcomb and Alley, 1983) speak of the importance of the writer’s hand as the guiding force in television. They fight to tell the story the way they see best and feel more successful when there is less interference from networks or corporate interests. They acknowledge the need for compromise and the importance of collaboration in the medium of television, particularly given the time constraints of the production process and the sheer volume of work to accomplish. Writer Garry Marshall said in an interview with Newcomb, “Since you have to do it every week, you can’t perfect it as much as you would like to” (qtd. in Newcomb and Alley 239). An entire television series necessitates the production of vast amounts of creative content, “Over the course of 9 seasons, the producers of the sitcom *Everybody loves Raymond* created 210 original half-hours, or the rough equivalent of 52 feature films” (Mittell 20). A head writer must depend on a team of people to make each episode happen, though within this collaborative effort there is still the voice who dominates.

We have seen a recent increase in the idea of the showrunner or headwriter as the dominant creative force in television. “Central to television’s rising status through the figure of the showrunner writer-producer whose agency is constructed in ways analogous to the film director’s” (Newman and Levine 9). Early cult TV like *Star Trek* and *Twin Peaks* helped start the making of the auteur (Newman and Levine 44). “[Gene] Roddenberry [of Star Trek] championing of artistic innovation and social conscience in
television was a legacy to his spiritual heirs, the hyphenate auteurs of TVII and TVIII” (Pearson 113). Some television auteurs have become brands of their own. “Audiences pay less attention to distributors and more attention to content. J.J. Abrams, Chris Carter, Steven Bochco, David E. Kelley, Aaron Sorkin and other writer-producers associated with quality/cult television have become household names” (Pearson 107-8). HBO has attempted to position itself as facilitator for the best television auteurs—Alan Ball, David Chase, David Simon, and David Milch (Leverette 141). But showrunners as brands are not exclusive to HBO—Joss Whedon has amassed a strong fan following starting with Buffy the Vampire Slayer and continuing to his most recent show, Agents of SHIELD. But these showrunners did not start as brands. They had to work for their status by creating quality shows that enticed audiences to follow them from series to series.

The writers are the creative forces in television. They create the series that unfold on our screens. While scholarship acknowledges their rise in power in the industry, the recent era of quality television is often argued to have been made possible by technological advancements. While some technology may benefit the creative process, a closer examination of the writers’ process of creation and an understanding of their perception of technology would be useful in understanding how powerful the force of technology really is. Examinations of intersecting components of television such as technology and content and industry rarely begin with the writers’ perspective. Merely evaluating the final product cannot fully assess the force of technology on content. Understanding the process of creation is equally important.
Conclusion

What the future holds for television is unclear. Content and content-creation are not isolated from technology, and their changing courses are interconnected. New technology helped allow for rise of quality TV because the consumer of art appreciates an “author” and “Quality TV has been routinely distinguished by what Derek Kompare calls its ‘conspicuous authorship.’” New media such as DVD commentary features and web promotions have helped to make the showrunner into a public role akin to the novelist or film director…” (Newman and Levine 40). Scholarship continues to examine the role of technology in the media industries and the issues surrounding technology’s impact on television.

But technology is not the only force of change in television. Jeffrey Sconce raises a counterpoint that is less addressed in recent scholarship, “So much of the discourse on television and new media has emphasized the fate and futures of the hardware itself… These are all important questions, to be sure. But at the heart… it would seem, remains the ability of narrative arts to capture the imagination of audiences, no matter how splintered, self-selected, and interactive they may become in the next century” (Sconce 110-111). Indeed Gray and Lotz contend that countering the notion of technological determinism “contextual work [within Television Studies] insists on the medium being socially produced,” but that scholarship is not often reflective of the professionals within the industry (115).

Technology, industry, and content are fundamental elements of television that affect and take on change in varying ways and degrees. But the intersection of these elements is unclear. What drives change in this medium? Has technology spurred a rise
in content quality? Have the auteurs of television been able to push artistic boundaries having gained substantive power in the industry? Is there a core to television that remains unchanged? The serialized narrative remains the backbone of television. Thirty minute comedies and sixty minute dramas remain the norm, though not the absolute. What are the limitations and parameters of the technological determinism of television?

While there may be ways that technology is helping to change the content of television, those questions should be asked of the writers, the content producers. And in discussing technology and content with the writers, there should not be a presumption of technology as the dominant force. The writers are a powerful force in the industry, but current research allows technological changes seem to overshadow them. While some scholarship does take the writers into account, examination of the medium often excludes them, so more studies that include their perspective serves to balance the analysis of the medium. This study will look to the content creators—the writers for answers. Understanding the intersection of technology and content is best explored by direct conversations with them.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to examine the intersection of television content and technology, this Industry Research study uses ethnographic methods with primary data gathered from in-depth interviews with television writers and secondary data gathered from articles on television and technology from both trade and consumer publications. In order to better understand the experience of television writers, I had one-on-one conversations with them. Often Television Studies research is done without hearing the voices of professionals in the industry which can exclude a valuable perspective.

Ethnography is widely used in qualitative research. In the 1920s anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski laid the groundwork for modern ethnographic research by immersing himself in the world of his subject, “being with the people… in their time and space” (qtd. in Madden 32). Malinowski used direct observation to avoid losing the context of the experiences he was studying (Wolcott 28). Malinowski believed that knowledge could come from experiencing and observing the world of other groups of people. Ethnography today remains committed to face-to-face encounters and research that represents the research participants’ perspective (Madden 19). While participant observation is most often the method employed in ethnographic research, a variety of qualitative methods are employed for ethnographic research (Lindlof and Taylor 134). An ethnography can also be done through interviews or data collection when those methods better serve the subject.
Interviews employing ethnographic methods can be conducted at a research site during participant observation or scheduled as separate events. Interviews allow researchers to gain knowledge about a site or a process that could not be discovered by other methods (Lindlof and Taylor 175). The ethnographic researcher must follow the model of ethnography by staying true to the experience of the interviewee and allowing for the interviewees’ voices to come through. Semi-structured or loosely structured interviews allow for the interview to be more of a conversation that is gently guided by the researcher. Earl Babbie, in his handbooks for social research, explains that such interviews offer the interviewee the most room to share his or her story (306). While staying on the research topic, the researcher should be willing to change the direction of the interview or specific questions in response to the interviewees’ responses (Fife 95). Researchers need to take care to choose interviewees who are knowledgeable about the culture or space that they inhabit with the quality of the informant being more important than the quantity of interviews (Schensul 122).

Interviews as a method of data collection have been used for decades in Television Studies, with both industry professionals and audiences being interviewed. In the 1980’s audience research became a mainstay of Television Studies research (Gary and Lotz 63). As more questions on the concept of active audiences and industry power arose, we have begun to see more critical analyses that look into the culture of the institutions of the industry (Gray and Lotz 102). Researchers’ use of interviews to study those who produce television stretches back to Todd Gitlin’s 1983 *Inside Primetime*, which combined interviews and observation to examine industry practices (Gray and Lotz 101). Subsequent works such as Newcomb and Alley’s *The Producer’s Medium*,
Kubey’s *Creating Television*, and, most recently, [authors’] *Distribution Revolution* all interview upper-level television industry personnel (often writers) using in-depth interviews as their primary data.

However, interviews are just one of a variety of research methods that Television Studies uses, and often not the dominant one. There is some Television Studies scholarship based on firsthand interviews is presented as a transcription of interviews, often with little analysis other than a brief introduction and conclusion. Many studies rely on observation of the industry without direct conversations with industry professionals. Some studies blend limited use of interviews with additional material from published interviews and trade publications as well as available industry data. Some television studies scholars, like Caldwell, undertake even more expansive studies of the industry by mixing ethnographic interviews and observation with critical analyses of television texts and popular discourse. However, research with a primary focus on interviews with industry professionals remains less common in the field, possibly because direct access to industry personnel is limited. Often a critical analysis is done without firsthand interviews, by looking at content and industry practices such as Newman and Levine’s *Legitimating Television*. There remains a need for more scholarship that includes firsthand accounts of industry practices that goes beyond a transcription of the interview, particularly in the discussion of the changing landscape of television today. What is the television worker’s perspective on current industry practices and technologies and how does that affect their work practices? To gain that insight, the workers voices should be heard directly.
The Study

This study seeks to understand the relationship between emerging technology and content creation. The primary data comes from in-depth interviews with television writers, who, along with producers, directors, and actors, have a primary role in creating television content. Supplementary data includes published interviews of television writers from both popular media and scholarly sources, as well as trade and popular press articles that offer insight into current trends and shifts in the industry. Trade and popular press sources used include *Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, Deadline.com, Entertainment Weekly, The New York Times*, and *Slate.com*.

As discussed in my literature review, the television industry is often considered a writer’s medium, so I chose to reach out to writers for this research study since they are principle players in crafting television content. The television writer’s realm is not limited to writing stories for others to turn into television. Writers are creative forces on television shows who, as writer-producers, are active participants in all aspects of the television production process. They are involved in the process from the beginning to the end—the initial creation and sale of the story, giving notes on set during shooting, sitting in on the final edit, and giving interviews to promote the premiere. Television writers are uniquely suited to offer a perspective on current trends in the industry.
Participants and Recruitment

Having worked in the television industry for 15 years, I reached out to writers I personally knew—and, in many cases, had previously worked with—to serve as my research participants. Though there are limitations attached to knowing one’s interview subjects, I anticipated that having an established relationship with my interview subjects would allow for a more open and honest dialogue since they would see me as a colleague, rather than an academic they might seek to impress. Lindhof and Taylor believe that qualitative interviews should “emulate the form and feel of a talk between friends” in terms of finding a connection and creating an intimate conversation (171). Heyl defines ethnographic interviews as ones in which “researchers have established respectful, ongoing relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views” (369). I believe that the prior relationship with my research participants led to more openness in our conversations and therefore more in-depth and fruitful discussions.

I reached out by email to 15 television writers as potential participants in this study. I told them I was working on a master’s degree, explained my project, and asked if they would be willing to sit down with me for a recorded interview. Twelve writers agreed to participate, and I interviewed 10 of them. (Two did not work out due to scheduling conflicts). My only parameter for participants was that they had written for scripted primetime television at some point in their career. I sought to include a variety of perspectives and work experience (See Figure 3.1). The overall group of participants varied in age (30s-60s), gender (5 men and 5 women), and work experience, with most
having written for both network and non-network television shows (6 have written for both, 2 for only network, and 2 for only non-network television). All but one writer is currently working as a television writer. The one writer not currently working in television is actively writing for film, and wrote for television as recently as three years ago. All interview subjects have been in the television industry for at least ten years (though not necessarily as a writer the entire time), with their years working as television writers spanning 4 to 12 years experience.

Figure 3.1 – Breakdown of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Years as writer</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Non-Network</th>
<th>Comedy or Drama</th>
<th>Alias</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Y- Steve Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Woo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Oliver</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raelle Tucker</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb Bacon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous 2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Y- Beth Baker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Barnow</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Spitzer</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Cackowski</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Wenner</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

I offered each of my 10 interview subjects the opportunity to remain anonymous if they preferred. Eight of the 10 writers agreed to having their names used. All agreed to being recorded. All were accustomed to giving interviews and speaking to media on the record, having worked for years in the television industry where interviews are common, and all seemed comfortable speaking openly and honestly. Despite their familiarity with interviews, I reviewed the approved HSRB forms with them and told
them that at the conclusion of the interview they could once again reconsider their inclusion in my research. All participants were comfortable continuing as a part of the project at the completion of our interview. No remuneration was given for participation in the project.

Eight of the interviews were in person, and two were conducted over email due to limited schedules. For the in person interviews, I spent approximately 60-90 minutes with each writer. I recorded each interview and took notes during the interviews. For several of these in-person interviews I also asked a few follow-up questions by email several months after our initial correspondence. For the two email interviews, I started the correspondence with two questions about the writers’ backgrounds, and I used their responses to lead into additional questions. The email correspondences spanned approximately five-to-seven emails each, with two-to-three questions answered in each email.

Although I told all of the participants in advance that I was writing a Master’s thesis on the changing landscape of television, I did not go into detail beyond that before the interview. My first two interviews were the longest and the broadest of my interviews. I did not begin my interviews with a specific narrow focus, but rather, sought to find out what insights I could begin to uncover without preconceptions while discussing the process of creating television content with writers. I chose my first two interview subjects purposefully as I knew they were people I could go back to multiple times if my focus changed, and I wanted to follow up with more questions. For all of my interviews I used mostly nondirective questions, but I also included some directive questions in order to have some specific comparisons between interview subjects. I
began each conversation by asking the participant to discuss their entry into the field of television writing, and then allowed the conversation to develop naturally in order to capture insights I might not have considered prior to embarking on the study. While my interviews were largely unstructured, I did try to cover several specific themes in each interview: the writer’s background, views on current television, thoughts on the future of television, perspective on television as compared to other media, personal perspective on storytelling, and the relationship of technology to their own work. My guiding questions included—but were not limited to—the following:

- How long have you been a TV writer?
- What shows did you watch before you were a TV writer?
- Did you have/watch cable growing up?
- What shows have you written for?
- How did you get started writing for TV?
- What element is most important to you when writing?
- How do you want viewers to watch your show in terms of screen size, with or without commercials, binge watching, or parceled out?
- Do different those viewing styles affect your writing?
- How has TV changed in your time as a writer?
- What are the differences between film and TV? Are those differences changing?
- What is “good” TV?
- What TV do you watch now? Do you watch TV live?
- How would you define “television” today?
What do you see for the future of television?

Data Analysis

My process after completing the interviews was transcribing and coding each interview. I transcribed each interview according to my HSRB requirements. My next step was coding each interview. I used an inductive method of analysis to draw out overlapping themes among interviews (Lindhof and Taylor, 2011). I went through each interview transcription coding individual moments in the interviews into narrow concepts (e.g., creativity, storytelling, collaboration, voice, network, cable, buzz, ratings, success, limitations, quality, and career). I then categorized those specific codes into broader thematic categories (writers and the technological devices of television, writers and the business of the television industry, and writers and television content).

In reviewing the recordings and transcripts of the interviews, I looked for common themes, particularly those relating to how the writers’ current work has been impacted by technology as well as their perspective on current trends in television. I was looking for data on the influence of technology on content. But I also wanted to uncover the ways a technological medium such as television could remain un-impacted by technological change. I did not want to assume that there is always an impact of technology on content creation. I was careful to look for both positive and negative cases. I used the broader thematic categories as the basis for my analysis of the intersection of technology and content creation in television. The Results section will discuss these themes discovered in the level of individual writers’ perspective and relate
them to the other writers’ experiences in order to look for a broader understanding of the intersection of television and content.
Chapter 4: Results

I interviewed 10 television writers about their perspective of the state of television today,¹ and I got 10 different perspectives. There was not one perfect unifying explanation that made itself clear at the end of all the interviews. But I did find several recurring themes and ideas that most of the writers shared, as well as several interesting disagreements. Through these interviews I wanted to examine the effect (or lack of effect) of technology on television content. In order to understand that, I needed to start with a broader focus than just the content. One way of dissecting what television is, is to divide it into the physical technology/the devices, the industry, and the content. These are not perfect distinctions, and the impact of technology within one component also overlaps with the other components. But each of these three elements of television also push television in different directions, so understanding them separately is important to understanding technology’s often conflicting impact on the current television landscape.

In this section I will discuss my findings of the writers’ perception of these areas of television, with a focus on the writers’ perspective on creating content for television. In the discussion section to follow I will consider how these three areas overlap and come together to affect content in different ways.

As I looked at the topics covered in my interviews, many small themes started to emerge: television device use, technology of modern devices, viewing practices, binge-watching, network television, non-network television, buzz vs. ratings, broad vs. narrow appeal, the future of television, the limitations of television, writers’ control, storytelling.

¹ Television writers quoted or referred to in this section were personal interviews conducted for this research project. Interview dates are listed in the Works Cited Section.
character development, creative practices, personal career history, influential television, and art/craft/commodification. After using these topics to code the interviews, I began to group these themes into the three broader categories of writers and the technological devices of television, writers and the business of the television industry, and writers and television content. There are literal ways that technology impacts the first two categories, for example, screen size and streaming services, but content creation intersects with technology in a more figurative manner as content is created in an artistic process that is not as obviously intertwined with technology. So all three meta-categories need to be looked at together to assess the current impact of technology on content.

The conflicting and uncertain definitions of television offered by the writers I interviewed drive the need for understanding television through its dissected. “How would you define television today?” is a complicated question, and most of the writers I interviewed paused before answering or needed to reassess their answer midstream. Nancy Oliver, for example, did not give a final answer, “Gosh [long pause]. I don’t know… It’s in the process of changing in so many ways… I mean, you can watch on your phone… It’s changed so quickly that I don’t think we’ve caught up yet.” But there was agreement among the writers, that the traditional television set in the family room is not a requirement of television today, that Netflix and streaming platforms are indeed television provided that it is serialized storytelling (Wenner, Bacon, Spitzer, Tucker). As Caleb Bacon put it, to be television it is something “produced with enough quality to look like it should be on TV.” Examining these pieces of definitions given by the writers obligates us to look at the components of how we watch it, how it is made available to an audience and what we are watching—the devices, the industry, and the content.
The Writers and the Devices

Perhaps the most obvious impact of technology on television can be seen in the mechanics of television viewing—the television set and its expanding array of electronic accessories. Television began as a box, and now we find ourselves viewing on giant high definition television sets as well as on tiny portable screens. We can view curated television collections on DVDs or stream television from seemingly limitless electronic collections. We can watch now through our cable connection or watch at a later time and date of our choosing with our DVRs and streaming subscriptions. Given this, perhaps it is not surprising that the most overt impact of new technology on television writers is not on their content creation, but on their experience as an audience. For writers as consumers of television, technology has changed the medium drastically.

All of the writers I spoke to watch very little to no scripted television programming live, but they watch a lot of scripted television. The four writers (Smith, Woo, Wenner, Bacon) who still watch live TV, primarily only watch sports live. A few will watch some television shows on the night it originally airs. They particularly do this if they are worried about spoilers. If they think something will be talked about the next day at work or on their Facebook feed, they will watch it that night (Spitzer and Tucker). But if commercials are involved, they are likely to delay their viewing by a few minutes in order to fast forward commercials as they go. Bacon told me, “I’ll delay a program 10 minutes so I can fast forward through commercials.” Oliver does the same, “I record it… I can’t take the commercials.” They will also watch a program on the night it airs or soon

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2 “Steve Smith” is an alias used for one of the writers interviewed, see Figure 3.1
after if it is good, if they really like it, and if they find it compelling (Spitzer, Tucker, Baker\(^3\)).

The television these writers watch is on a variety of screen sizes, not any particular device—from screening rooms to home HD television sets to iPads. One screen format did not dominate their viewing habits. None of the writers I spoke to have cut the cable cord yet, though a few have considered it, actually doing the math and believing that they could individually buy their monthly television viewing for less than they spend now (Tucker, Woo). Overall, they see the industry moving away from subscription cable services and towards more individualized purchases and streaming services.

How the writers view television varies. They watch some shows week to week, and they watch some shows in a binge, and they go back to older shows. Multiple writers use new technology as an opportunity to go back to older shows they missed or remember enjoying. “Steve Smith” is currently making his way through all the past episodes of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Bacon recently caught up on *The Sopranos*. Six of the writers I spoke to had told me they binge-watch shows. They recognize binge-watching as an emerging trend. Adrian Wenner argued that America seems addicted to “this new exciting toy” of binge-watching and felt that binge-watching is like a great book that the reader cannot put down. Alex Woo said binge-watching felt parallel to the release of new *Harry Potter* books because of the build of excitement that leads up to the release of shows like *House of Cards*.

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\(^3\) “Beth Baker” is an alias used for one of the writers interviewed. See Figure 3.1
Among the writers were varying ideas of the differences that binge-watching brings to a show. Bacon thought it was interesting that while he watched the whole season of House of Cards, because he watched in a binge, he forgets to think of it as a show he is “watching” when asked. Oliver said she binged on The Wire and “It turned me into somebody else for a while.” Woo believes that it is an entirely different experience to take in a show all at once or in weekly installments and “for me there is something I enjoy about modulating something over a period of months in a season that binge watching doesn’t quite analogous to.” While Raelle Tucker believes that binge-watching and the ability to catch up on a show easily has enabled more complicated and serialized storytelling, she also notes that serialization has been happening on television long before DVR’s.

This embrace of technology by the writers as audience members did not directly translate into changes in their writing to accommodate the technology. The writers all saw the impact of this technology in their personal lives as viewers, but for the most part when actually writing they did not directly consider the recent changes to the mechanics of television viewing. None of the writers I spoke to considered screen size when I asked if they felt if they needed to accommodate different sizes of screens available to their audiences. A few writers were caught off guard when asked if they considered it. Not only did they not consider screen size when writing, they had not thought to think about it. Justin Spitzer paused for a while when I asked about screen size and finally said he guessed if you had a visual joke you would have to be more careful about how it would read on a small screen, but that he would not let that dictate his choices. Though Wenner jokingly admitted that the director of photography would likely have a different answer.
When I asked writers how they would prefer their shows to be watched, only in the context of ratings would they have a preference—immediate gets them better ratings. That aside, they just want an audience to watch. Woo held fast that he would prefer that his story is slowly parsed out over time like a perfectly coursed meal where “there’s time taken between rather than a giant buffet where you can just go in and stuff your face.” He would rather curate that experience for the audience. But it does not change how he tells stories, and he does not think it is less valuable if it is binge watched because ultimately will still see something good as good and will not even know what they are missing (Woo). With the five writers with whom I discussed binge-watching in depth (Woo, Spitzer, Tucker, Wenner, and Cackowski), there was an agreement that there is a difference for the audience in how they respond to a show in relation to the pace at which they watch that show. However, the writers I questioned about this would circle back to the simple notion of wanting people to watch their show above all else and understanding that this aspect of viewing was beyond their control. Liz Cackowski told me “I don’t care how people watch a show I am writing for,” and Tucker bluntly stated, “I don’t think about how it is viewed at all… I don’t give a crap how people watch it. All I want is that they’re watching the show.” While they know these viewing differences are out there, in terms of screen size and live or recorded or weekly or binge, the goal remains to reach the audience.

There is a separation between the writers as content creators and as audience members. All of the writers I spoke to watched more non-network than network programming, which might also be a result of the explosion of non-network options available now. Several writers made a point of acknowledging the sheer volume of
content available today (Wenner and Tucker). And even the writers I spoke with who write for network television admitted that they tended to watch more cable than network (Cackowski, Spitzer, Barnow). Cackowski finds herself watching more cable than network. Spitzer told me he “still think[s] HBO has some of the best shows.” And Kate Barnow realized she mostly watches non-network, in particular a lot of British television. When discussing their dealings with and understanding of the business of television, the allure of non-network programming once again comes to light.

The Writers and the Industry

In the current landscape of television, there are more television outlets than ever before. Up until just a few years ago the television outlets were traditional networks, basic cable, and premium/pay cable channels. All of these outlets came to our television sets, located in homes, via cable wires or satellites. Each outlet was a channel assigned a number, and on their given channel an audience could find their programming offered at specific times. DVR’s have seeped into the mainstream in the last decade allowing audiences more ease in controlling the when of their viewing. But the most recent evolution of the industry has been the explosion of non-networks or non-channels offering their own independent programming. The industry is more than the NBC’s, ABC’s, and HBO’s. Now it includes Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, Yahoo, and more.

We choose to use the semantics of the past when calling these serialized narratives television. As Spitzer observed, look at the camera apps on our phones, “You can change it from photo to video, and it’s not video tape, and it’s not a photograph, it’s a still versus a moving image. But it doesn’t say that, so those words mean something else. So we
keep calling YouTube videos television even though they’re not technically on a television.” The television industry is now comprised of four types of outlets for programming:

1. The traditional networks
2. Traditional cable channels such as USA and AMC that are broadcast to our television sets and also are often streamable online
3. Pay television cable channels, premium channels, subscriber channels such as HBO and Showtime
4. Streaming services that are subscriber and a la carte based like Netflix, Amazon, Yahoo, and Hulu

**Network vs. Non-network**

The writers I spoke to believed that this plethora of outlets is good for creativity. But there are so many outlets that overall quality is likely to falter and great shows that would have been standouts of the past sometimes get overlooked. Tucker believes that in another age, a quality show like *The Americans* would be a blockbuster, but in the current landscape it is overlooked, “even with really quality work—to create a ripple [is so hard] because there’s just so much and a lot of it’s really amazing.” For years there had been a network versus cable divide, which has now grown to include these new subscription based outlets. More shows are finding homes, and a larger variety of shows with less popular themes are being produced. While it is not an absolute dichotomy, there are tendencies in the network business model that non-network companies not only often do
not follow, but rather, they operate in an opposing manner. Network television tend to be geared towards a more broad audience base, with more concern for immediate audience viewing while non-network television often seeks to find more narrowly appealing shows that will generate buzz in the cultural conversation and help create a distinctive brand that an audience is enticed to seek out. Between these two positions is a host of intermediate positions as well with basic cable stations often occupying a middle position between the traditional networks and streaming platforms. But each company’s business practices ultimately have an effect on the content creation, and the writers I spoke with shared their experiences and perceptions of the varying business models.

While the writers I spoke to do see some quality television, dramas such as *The Good Wife* (Tucker and Barnow) or *Scandal* (Baker) and comedies such as *Modern Family* (Wenner and Smith), on traditional networks, they think more of the best television is off network- on basic cable, premium cable, and new streaming services. The writers see the Networks as looking for ways to retain a strong share of the audience, but there is not a clear picture from the writers I spoke with of the Networks’ strategies or future.

Networks tend to push the plot forward faster, to recoup the rewards as quickly as possible. Woo called this the pilot fever, where a network wants to put an entire season worth of story arc into the pilot to get people hooked. One writer (Baker) told me that this erodes the emotionality of the story because “Network forces you to do shit before you actually have any kind of investment in the characters.” And multiple writers (Tucker, Spitzer, Baker, and Smith) had the experience of working on a show that got pulled from the air quickly, without the show getting enough time to find its footing.
This does not mean Network television cannot be successful. Spitzer thinks Shonda Rhimes success is in playing with the parameters of Network television. She does not hold back the plot points to use as season cliffhangers, and she is willing to do “the crazy stuff up front.” Networks come with some limitations—longer seasons, more ratings driven, often more creative notes. A 22 episode network season is draining in terms of coming up with that many story ideas (Wenner and Smith), but too short of a season can also be limiting (Baker and Smith). And even if the Networks have a general wish for a broader appeal, they are finding ways to accomplish that. Multiple writers talked about the success of The Big Bang Theory, a seemingly formulaic, traditional multicam comedy. One writer explained that while the show does not impress him creatively, it is “successful for what they want it to be,” and that should not be dismissed. The Big Bang Theory is not only one of the highest rated television shows on the networks, its reruns are often in the top ten of cable programming ratings (Bacon). Interestingly, TBS has built their original programming around their rights to The Big Bang Theory reruns, using it as an anchor for their own comedy Sullivan and Sons (Bacon).

Multiple writers told me the same thing, Network television can survive if they make their shows better, and make people want to watch the show. Non-network outlets seem to be playing a different game. And one writer ultimately feels more interesting things can be done when proof of ad dollars is not needed which is how unique shows like Orange is the New Black or Transparent end up getting made and thriving (Smith).
Buzz vs. ratings

One of the more significant differences between the priorities of network television and non-network television, particularly the new streaming services, can be seen in the rise of the value of “buzz” or cultural conversation about a television show over the value of traditional ratings. As one writer told me, we listen to trendsetters, so a hit can come from the buzz of trendsetters (Smith). The Netflix business model is built on buzz—they do not tell us how many people watch House of Cards (Smith). They do not have to because they do not have to sell that number to advertisers (Smith).

Buzz does seduce viewers. Tucker watches the one hour dramas with buzz first because they will be talked about at work the next day. She told me that watching The Americans got pushed to the side even though it is good, and she watched Under the Dome, which is not as good, because of the buzz. The industry believes that buzz reaches those with cultural influence. As Woo put it, “That younger sector has more purchasing power and has more cultural power. They write about it. So even, even though Mad Men had in its first few seasons, had like a million viewers a week, those million viewers had a lot of influence.” Smith jokingly reminded me that “NOBODY watches Girls. Nobody… VEEP won the best comedy right? Nobody watches VEEP.” Baker echoed this telling me that “People talk about it [Girls] for the wrong reason. Nobody’s talking about how great Girls is. People are talking about, ‘Lena Dunham’s overweight and naked.’” But at the extreme end of buzz, solely focusing on buzz can also be the opposite of entering the cultural consciousness. As Wenner and I discussed, when you look at hits for a Funny or Die sketch, you might see a huge number, but that number is not about not about retention as it is about immediate buzz, so it might be seen and still not enter the
cultural consciousness. A sketch may be talked about for a few days, but it does not have cultural staying power. Television series have more staying power in the cultural landscape.

Networks ratings are lower than ever and they are trying to compete with this non-ratings based competition (Smith). Networks often try to create buzz in a different way, ones that they also hope will also create ratings. Several writers talked to me about networks’ focus on recruiting stars for shows and prioritizing those shows with stars over shows with better content. Both anonymous writers I spoke with had real criticisms of the networks on this issue (Smith and Baker), with Baker reiterating that networks could choose to prioritize the good, but they do not, they prioritize stars and will often spend more money to do so. Baker sees the opposite in Netflix, believing that with *House of Cards*, Netflix is prioritizing the good over the stars in order to build their brand which might be the more valuable business model moving forward as nearly all the writers I spoke with noted the demise of television ratings and the “mass audience” in the last decade. Wenner described the idea of *Friends*’ 25 share or *MASH*’s 190 million people viewing the finale as “insane” in comparison to what qualifies as a ratings success today. Wenner believes that ratings as a metric is losing value as the ability to record means a television show no longer has a given night anymore diluting the value of ratings even though alternative metrics such as “live +3” (when an audience member watches within three days of the initial airing) is now a standard that networks are using to measure the success of their shows (Spitzer).
Broad vs. narrow

The broad versus narrow appeal dichotomy in television runs parallel to buzz versus ratings. Networks are often still looking for bigger ratings and broader appeal, and non-network outlets, while not opposed to finding a show with mass appeal, are often satisfied with a loyal but narrow audience (Spitzer and Smith). The writers I spoke with see this in their interaction with the industry. Spitzer told me that he does not believe the networks are seeking out those “very specific ‘cable-y things.’” Networks are satisfied with broader shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, which multiple writers (Smith, Bacon and Wenner) pointed to as a show that is emblematic of networks choices—multicam, traditional sitcom, with some long-running story arcs, but also able to be watched as individual episodes. Smith restrained from calling it good and instead said it is “successful for what they want it to be.” Wenner described the networks’ bigger hits of today as “blockbustery ½ hours” that are more modular and less serialized.

But multiple writers (Woo and Tucker) see a slowing of those traditional procedurals of television even on network schedules. Wenner reasoned that more platforms are increasing the overall room for out of the box programming. Though it is unclear if the networks will follow the narrower path or keep casting a wide net. To some writers the wide net seems like a bad strategy. While there are still some big ratings to be had on network television, those are from shows like *The Big Bang Theory* whose viewer numbers do not match the numbers of the past are fewer and which require less engaged viewers (Smith). Tucker argued that the network audience for more traditional programming is older and that “the new television, the revolution of television isn’t accessible [to them].” Woo agreed believing that the audience for procedurals is
aging, and more and more the priority will be shows with “cultural cache” that draw younger audiences. Some writers think that continuing to reach for only broad appeal is a losing endgame for the networks which will be stuck with only sports and live events in the end (Smith and Woo). Some writers see the networks trying to play the “cable” game. And there is a more general feeling among the writers I spoke with that often the networks get in the way of their own creativity.

**Industry oversight of shows**

With the criticisms that some of the writers had for network programming, it was not surprising that many of the writers were critical of the interference by traditional networks in a show’s development. Five of the writers with network experience specifically spoke with me about having faced frustrations due to the limits and constraints of a network. Those concerns included, shifting episode order to prioritize funny over story (Spitzer), prioritizing slapstick over character (Baker), excessive and at times conflicting notes on scripts (Smith and Baker), buying mediocre programming from known creators/writers rather than buying the best scripts (Baker), and pushing shows to be more procedural in nature rather than serialized (Baker and Tucker). Networks are more risk averse (Smith and Baker). Needing that numerical rating is a hindrance to risk taking and creativity. “In cable there’s a lot more freedom all the way around… they trust the creators they’ve hired and the products they buy” (Baker). Off network outlets are more likely to give shows an entire first or second season to find footing – like *VEEP* was given (Baker).
However, this is not to say that all network oversight is bad or that non-network oversight of shows is ideal. Baker told me that she has often gotten great notes from network and that by no means do cable or non-network outlets consistently give better notes. Spitzer told me that while it is not his choice to have episodes order rearranged by a network, he does not see it as a big problem. He thinks audiences can sort it out in the end. Smith believes that while there maybe some creative advantages to non-network, it remains less financially secure which can be its own limitation. Wenner goes back to the Arrested Development example explaining that he understood that there was less oversight in the remount of the show, but it ultimately felt like the same show. And multiple writers do not see non-network as necessarily more hands off in terms of creative freedom for the creators. More than one writer told me that pilots developed for non-network outlets are often ultimately passed on because they do not fit with the outlet’s sensibility even though the pilots may be well-received (Baker, Wenner and Woo).

Length of season and pilot only versus full season

A key distinction between network and non-network television series is series length and episode orders (the number of episodes purchased by the television outlet). Network seasons are traditionally 22 episodes, which multiple writers agree can be draining (Smith and Baker). Networks traditionally order a pilot, then order some of their pilots to series with the potential threat of cancellation any given week. Non-network series tend to have shorter runs, as few as 6 episodes in a series, but not often many more than 12. Several of the writers I spoke with acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining a
high level of creativity and story-telling in a 22 episode season. Production often stretches 8 or 9 months, and it can be tiring (Smith and Oliver). With a shorter season, there is more non-production time to develop the story. Smith contended that *Breaking Bad* had the “luxury of time” between seasons to develop its complex story. And more than the time off to develop the story, knowing the season length ahead of time allows for a more meticulously paced story.

A network typically orders a show to series off of a pilot with a loose guarantee of episode that could be pulled off the air at any point in the season if the show is not doing well. Often a show is not given a chance to find an audience on network television, a trend that is worsening. Baker explained to me, “Network television, they don’t give it [a show] the time to make any mistakes… *Seinfeld* was a piece of shit [first season]… Today it would’ve been cancelled within 2 episodes.” In opposition to this model, cable, premium, and streaming outlets often order a full season with a commitment to air the entire episode, often shooting the entire season before airing the first episode. Spitzer, Tucker, and Woo all believed there was a benefit to the writer and the story to know the season length in advance. An added benefit of this is the ability to avoid the pressure to put as much as possible into the pilot. The writers I spoke to with network pilot experience agreed that there was often a network push to put more story in the pilot, often to the detriment of developing the longer arc of a season or series (Spitzer, Baker, Woo, and Smith). Baker explained, “Network forces you to do shit before you actually have any kind of investment in the characters.” However, the writers I spoke with also felt that these distinctions they brought up between network and non-network television were not absolutes.
Similarities between network and non-network

Despite some distinctions seen by the writers between network and non-network television, “good” television is not just on non-network outlets. While most writers tended towards a preference in cable for viewing, there was an insistence that network television was just as able to be good. Baker explained that the networks are blurring that distinction between network and non-network that is often seen as broad procedurals and niche complex serialized programming. She told me that shows like NBC’s *The Blacklist* work because, “They’ve given a little bit of story to the characters, [and] the fact that they actually let it breathe.” Spitzer who was worked most of his career in network television clarified that networks are looking for acclaim and awards too. He felt that examples like *Community* and *Arrested Development* are examples of critically acclaimed shows that networks kept around longer than they would have if the ratings trumped all else. Baker told me that cable is not necessarily better, “It’s almost case by case.” Writers like Oliver, Smith, and Baker believe that networks just have to prioritize quality a bit more, and they can make equally good television.

The parameters of network television do not have to preclude quality because network and non-network television can be quite similar. Oliver noted that *Mad Men* has a short per episode shooting schedule. Wenner and another Smith talked about *Arrested Development* as an example of a show that did not become an altogether different or better entity when it left the networks and went to Netflix- even though it is understood that the creators were given more artistic freedom in creating the show for Netflix. Wenner believes a writer can remold a show a bit for a different outlet with only slight
changes—perhaps “make it a little more enticing to just keep going” on a platform that is conducive to binge-watching, but the story stays the same. Tucker was careful to remind me that complete artistic freedom, no network notes, no creative parameters is not a guarantee to yield the best shows, and in fact sometimes you just end up with more sex and violence. Parameters can yield their own creativity. Tucker specifically talked about the difference between being on a network that allows nudity and one that does not, and how being able to show nudity can lead to forgetting that you do not have to prioritize showing nudity over story or creativity. And Oliver maintained that in spite of the claims of new niche programming, overall diversity is still lacking on television, “That’s where pay TV, cable AND network are missing the boat in a lot of ways... they’re still locked into non-diverse.” Not everything is changing.

Status Quo of the Industry

With all of the discussion on what is new in the industry and how the industry is shifting, the writers I spoke to also noted ways in which the television industry is maintaining some of its traditional business practices. Several writers (Smith and Spitzer) pointed out that timeslots still matter. As much as live television has lost ground, the shows that air immediately following hit shows do better, and those slots are still coveted. Tucker counters the notion that networks are shifting to reality and sports because she believes that the networks are producing more original programming than ever before. Not only is there a place for them as original content, but syndication is still a profitable sought-after goal for television series (Smith). Cable networks still build their audiences by buying other networks’ previously aired original programming. TBS is now making
original programming, but they are making an incredibly traditional show, *Sullivan and Sons*, a non-serialized multi-camera half hour comedy (Bacon). Wenner believes that comedy remains a strength of network television. He thinks that a breakout comedy on one of these “other” outlets will come soon, and while it will have some differences in its form, it also will not break from “the original idea” of TV comedy.

The future of the industry

Many of the television writers I spoke to brought up the quantity of television today. Oliver said, “It’s a sea change in the business… I feel like it’s exploded and particularly in the last few years” whereas just a decade ago she was working on *Six Feet Under* and did not feel like pay TV had that many subscribers. While the increase in outlets creates more opportunities for writers, as Tucker told me, “There’s no better time to be doing what we’re doing right now,” the quantity produced may not be sustainable in terms of audience and money (Tucker and Smith). Tucker believes that “the bubble is going to burst… [because] there are not going to be enough people to watch those things to make it profitable.” She thinks that shows that would have been standouts in years past, such as *The Americans* or *Fargo*, are overlooked in today’s television landscape.

There is so much television today that it is almost overwhelming and confusing to an audience. Baker reminded me that while there are more outlets than ever before she also believes there is worse television on than ever before. Oliver also noted, “You don’t know when anything is starting. You don’t know when anything is premiering, what’s going off the air—is it ten episodes or is it 13 episodes?” Familiar patterns of the industry are being dismantled. Smith talked about the changing production calendar.
Pilot season used to be in the spring for all the networks, non-networks have made their own schedule for pilots in recent years—cable channels do not have traditional fall seasons, so they have more flexibility in terms of allowing shows to sit. And now FOX has also started to produce pilots year round (Smith). The writers I spoke with did not offer a consensus on how this surge in television production will be resolved. The writers I spoke to did not have a clear consensus of what the future of television would be, except that it would continue to evolve from what it was and what it is today.

Several writers had modest predictions for new types of promotions and commercials modeled on the emerging trends they are seeing today. Spitzer told me that he sees all showrunners and stars tweeting as a means of promo. Bacon sees tweeting as a particularly powerful means of reaching the fans because the fans have a sense of directly interacting with the stars of the show. And on Bacon’s current show, Sullivan and Sons, the stars are all stand-up comedians, and tweeting is parallel to their more traditional means of promotion where they would to a local radio station on their stand-up tour. They are used to having to build their audiences personally, “[As a comedian] you’ve gotta call into shows, you have the have a presence to say to people, ‘Hey I’m here… Join me.’ And I think it’s kind of like the same thing.” Woo also sees the value of twitter, particularly live-tweeting, in reaching an audience, “It’s true- expanding the experience to the internet and creating this sort of communal feeling is actually what going to the movies is like.” Bacon reminded me that it is not that twitter, or these other devices are causing the audience to turn away from their TV, but rather that the audience is often engaging with the show on multiple devices at once while watching.
While twitter is a way of growing an audience, and live-tweeting can help draw in the live audience, the traditional ad-driven model of network television is still seen by the writers I spoke with to be on uneasy footing—especially given that none of them tuned in to shows live, even same-night viewing was delayed to avoid commercials. Spitzer told me that product placement is definitely a part of producing television today. Both Spitzer and Bacon told me that banner ads on the bottom of a screen, or in-show graphics during the television program itself are regularly used. And in response to the prediction of the demise of ad-driven television, Bacon was quick to point out to me that even though there are fewer ad dollars, there are more commercials on than ever before—a “half hour” show is now as short as 21.5 minutes, down from 24 minutes 15 years ago.

But the broader vision of the future of the networks and the old model of live broadcast television were not unanimous. While several writers (Spitzer and Smith) believe that sports and live events might come to dominate the traditional networks primetime schedule, the writers did not have a willingness to count out the networks altogether in the long-term. Woo predicted that the networks will still exist, but in a different form than we understand them now. “Must see TV on Thursday night at 8 is not going to exist. NBC as an organization, as a means of, of broadcasting television will still exist.” And Tucker echoed that sentiment in telling me that while she believes appointment television is dead, she doesn’t “see network television abandoning their scripted programming.” Smith thought there was a possibility that the traditional networks would disappear altogether, but at the very least he believed that the cable model of shorter seasons and more targeted or niche programming will take hold on the traditional networks. There is a sense among the writers that the networks will have to
change in some ways to keep up. There will never be a return to the days of a 25 share that *Friends* got (Wenner). Woo sees the broad procedurals remaining on traditional networks but believes that they cannot stay locked into only that. Smith saw the future of the networks and of television analogous to music, maybe there will never again be anyone as popular as the Beatles, but like the music industry today, there is going to be a lot more options available to audiences than there was in the past.

Tucker offered the most dramatic outline for the future. While several writers predicted massive but unknown change in the industry (Oliver, Smith, and Woo), Tucker declared that the future is in streaming believing that “it’s all going to come through a computer” and loyalties to networks will shift as the business model becomes one of a pay per show system, like Netflix and Amazon are doing today. Tucker sees the industry moving further than streaming, she believes a viewer will be able to watch on a platform like Amazon and click on a link to buy the shirt the character on screen is wearing taking product placement to a new level.

However the future of television presents itself, the youth will be a part of it. Multiple writers (Oliver, Tucker, and Woo) I spoke to pointed out how much they see the ease of the next generation’s interaction with modern technology. Woo predicts the future will come from that next generation. Someone born in the late 80’s of early 90’s who grew up with the internet is going to “come up with something that will break all the molds that have been created now. I don’t know what that’s going to be.” The writers I spoke with were taking note of the way the younger people around them use technology. As Wenner told me, he did not use Netflix streaming for the first year he had it because
“I’m like, ‘I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how that works.’ But the kids today, as they say, that’s nothing, that’s simple to them.”

**Hierarchy in the industry and Writers control in TV**

A final important distinction of the television industry is the importance and power given to the writer. In film the director wields the highest level of control (Baker and Tucker), but in television the industry has moved over the years to position the writer as the central creative figure. All of the writers I spoke with agreed that this is a significant draw for a writer. Both Bacon and Smith confirmed that the writers are producers in television. Woo explained to me that writers are drawn to TV because, “It’s a writer’s medium. The person in charge of a TV show is the person who’s in charge of the writing.” Being a valued part of the process is enticing to the writers I spoke to. As Tucker told me, “I want to be on my set… I want to be part of picking the actors. I don’t need to do that alone, but I feel like I’ve been living with this shit longer than most people, so why should’ve I have a voice in that and why would anyone not want me to?” Wenner appreciates that as a writer in television, he is part of all aspects of creating the television show, “You kind of get soup to nuts, like the run of it… You’re in everything, you’re in editing, you’re in the physical production of it.” Woo adds that by valuing writers, television quality improves, “It’s more attractive to writers and it’s probably not surprising that the writing has been better.” And Smith believes that on shorter seasons of television, as found off network, a showrunner can have an even stronger hand in the final product.
The Writer and Television Content

When the writers talked to me about WHY they wrote for television, a theme that came up over and over was the appeal they found in creating a world, particularly one that endures over time, not just a story told and completed in one telling. Spitzer explained that while film is just one story, television is in the “relationships and things that unfold over time in little stories.” Woo expanded on this movie versus television distinction describing it as the difference between like a one-night stand and a long term relationship… TV doesn’t let you off the hook, you’re still engaged, you’re wondering what’s going to happen.” Television writers enjoy dreaming up a story and seeing it take shape over the course of production and repeating the process to continue shaping that world of their show. Barnow described this process to me, “It always feels extremely satisfying to lock an episode and to take everything you’ve learned with you to the computer the next time you sit down in those same sweat pants and try to make something magical up in your mind.” Wenner noted the distinction that television is about creating a world that can sustain 100 stories, not just one story. For Woo, there is an enticing aspect to the television world, “There is sometime this feeling of the Arabian nights tale, that you just tell it- you don’t know when it’s going to end.” Baker told me that the best television keeps her excited, “I used to watch television and go ‘Holy shit I can’t wait until next week.’ I don’t want closed-ended stories.” The writers I spoke to are passionate about the world they are creating. They care about their characters and the stories they put forward.

The process of creating that world is not strictly creative, and unlike writers in other mediums, the task is not taken up in isolation. The writers I spoke to do not see
them as creative absolutists. Woo clarified that in any art, you do not have total control, “even your composers—someone’s going to play it and no two people are going to play it the exact same way.” Art is a balance. Television is a business, and there are practical concerns. One writer told me “If it’s an art or a craft, I think I’m more on the craft side.” Bacon was quick to note that he does not see himself as an artist. Spitzer made clear that television is a business, so you must balance creativity with the understanding that money needs to be made and that advertiser support is necessary. Beyond the advertisers and the network executives, there is also an entire crew of people working on the show. A television episode requires multiple departments working together to bring the script to life. Woo reminded me that as a television writer he is writing the plans for something, not the final product as a novelist would be, and “the art part of it is knowing what parts of that [others’ ideas] to use and what parts not to use.” Smith described his role as “laying the track” for the rest of the team to follow. Tucker explained, “You collaborate with every single department on the whole show.” Barnow mapped out the process, “so much of being a television writer now is about the collaboration that goes into producing your episode” clarifying that it begins in the pre-production meetings with department heads to the on-set collaboration with the actors and director, continuing into post production with the editors and music.

Writers must balance the interests of many, starting with the other writers in the writers’ room. The showrunner will take charge by determining “the kind of stories we’re telling” for the writers’ room, and the group works together on how to accomplish that (Smith). Tucker told me that “a good showrunner is extreme collaboration.” Smith explained that his goal as a showrunner is “to be on the spot, to be like how did I
facilitate this group moving through the wilderness together… I like the collaboration.”

Often there is a head writer or showrunner, but there is still value to collaboration, as Woo clarified, “Even if you are in charge, there’s a value in a lot of other people who are living through this and have uh, and have something to bring.” Writers in television do not work alone, and they get used to it, and learn to benefit from the collaborative effort. Oliver admitted that coming from the world of playwriting, “I had to get used to a writers’ room. I had never written by committee.” But mostly the writers I spoke with spoke positively of the collaborative process of television. Spitzer said, “I like all coming around, a group of people coming together and coming up with ideas together, because you get to funnier stuff that way.” Cackowski agreed, “I love working in a writers room. It reminds me of improv groups which is how I got my start doing comedy. It is so collaborative. It feels like a team.” Bacon likes that television is “a bunch of people working on the same thing.” Tucker fell in love with the writers’ room, “The minute I walked into a writers room and realized what the job was, I was like this is exactly what I’m meant to do… it’s my favorite thing in the world to be in a writers room with a group of people breaking stories.” A branch of this collaborative process, is learning from those around you. Working in a group forces you to see others’ experiences.

The collaborative nature of television goes beyond the collaborative present of the writers’ room, and encompasses the past experiences that writers bring into the writers’ room. Each writer joins the room with a different set of experiences, and the writers I spoke with commented on learning from those around them as part of their development and continuing growth as writers. Baker told me that she learned working with showrunner David Milch that the most important thing she could do as a writer was to
“take care of your characters.” Tucker said Alan Ball taught her “that what you have in
your head is a fluid thing… you start from that place and then you build upon it, and what
your first instinct is isn’t always the end all be all,” and even in her position as a
showrunner on her current show, she is still learning from her co-showrunner, Carlton
Cuse. Bacon explained that as a younger writer in his writers’ room, he feels lucky to
work with “old school” writers who know the craft (CB p.2). One of the writers on
Bacon’s current show worked on Cheers, which Bacon considers “my favorite show of
all time,” and, Bacon continued, “Not only am I working with some of like the best,
smart fun people, but they really know how to do it, so I really like the chance to learn
from them.”

Apart from the direct contact with television history in the writers’ rooms, the
writers are influenced by their viewing choices. What they watched as they grew up and
were young adults has stayed with them. Most of the writers I spoke were television
watchers growing up, most having cable. Oliver was the outlier explaining that her
family only had one TV, and jokingly told me they not had no VCR, “not even a
Betamax” so viewing was limited. Most of the writers have clear memories of the shows
from their pasts. Barnow said among other shows, she loved Magnum PI, and she still
remembers the episode “in which he was caught in the ocean for two days.” Cackowski
enthused that not only did she watch cable growing up, but that the television “was
always on, and I watched everything!” Tucker told me she used to watch soap operas, in
particular All My Children, and Tucker is quick to point out that unfolding stories using
heavy serialization may be new to primetime but soap operas have been doing it for
decades. Woo told me a story of studying television unexpectedly in college. In 1991 his
Aesthetics in Philosophy class was taught using television, particularly the show *St. Elsewhere*. His professor believed some TV was comparable to literature and that *St. Elsewhere* was “one of the first shows to understand that the unit of measure for the television medium isn’t the individual episode… [but] the entire season, and sometimes the entire series was the arc… seems so obvious sitting here now.” Three other writers also mentioned *St. Elsewhere* as an influence. Other past dramas multiple writers brought up included *NYPD Blue, Hill Street Blues, Thirtysomething, The Wire, Deadwood, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, and Friday Night Lights*—a mix of older and more recent shows. All of the comedy writers I spoke to mentioned *Cheers* as an influence of theirs. Oliver admired the stand up comics of the older sitcom era as she felt they were skilled at bringing real stories to their shows. Several writers simply told me that they loved sitcoms (Cackowski, Baker, and Bacon). Other past comedies that multiple writers mentioned were *Friends, Roseanne, The Cosby Show, Moonlighting, and MASH*.

The writers continue to be influenced by what they watch today, also often going back to past shows to look at them again, or to engage with shows they might have missed. Bacon just caught up on *The Sopranos*, a show he missed because he did not have HBO when it first aired, and he no longer has to pay $100 for a DVD set to catch up on older shows. Smith has been going back through old episodes of the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, which he said is “Still my favorite sitcom,” and trying to see the process behind that show while viewing it. He said he can see the writers getting a little tired creatively towards the end of the 30 episode seasons. When Woo was first breaking into television
writing he binge watched *Six Feet Under* to understand “how the mechanics of the show might work.”

Reflecting on past television, many of the writers I spoke with saw not only saw the past echoed in the foundation of today’s television, but also saw some replication of the past in today’s television. Reviewing my interview with Oliver, I noticed a quote from her I wished I had responded to at the time to ask for elaboration, “The other thing about TV too is that while it’s changing so rapidly in terms of format and platform sort of, the models on which these shows were built are from the 40’s. That hasn’t changed, like the format of TV News while it’s gone entertainment, a talking head sitting, using that weird journalist voice, has been the same, that’s not changing at all.” Earlier in my interview with Oliver she had some criticisms for today’s television that had lost site of what worked in the past, “The people who used to write for those shows during the birth of the multicamera those guys had 25 years in the business, on stage, in vaudeville, making the rounds to those clubs, those comedy clubs. There’s a much different pool of writers now, you get kids coming out of film school who haven’t even really lied yet… I don’t feel that background of life, I feel like I’m watching something written by somebody who’s watched a lot of sitcoms as opposed to drawing you material directly from human nature.” Finding pieces of this reflection on the successes of the past in my interviews, I wanted to keep pursuing that idea.

The last writer I sat down with for an interview was Wenner, so I took the opportunity to dig more deeply into the idea of the television of the present echoing the television of the past. My discussion with Wenner included a longer conversation about the successes of television’s past. Like Tucker had reiterated how soap operas have
always used serialization, Wenner also noted that serialization and cliffhangers are not new to television. And what we are doing today in comedy, particularly in multicams, is what Luci and Desi figured out decades ago. Wenner believes that we already know what is funny, we already know how to tell jokes on television. He sees Cheers as an early and influential example of character driving the comedy. When we talked about the “new” of today, he countered that the medium has always engaged in experimentation, and offered MASH as a strong example of pushing the boundaries of television. But he thinks the stability of the genre is what allows room for that experimentation. While some of my other interviews did not go to the same depth on this topic, I saw the same argument in smaller pieces. Baker said that Girls gets people talking because it has nudity and swearing, but remove that and it really is not as good as a lot of network comedy. Woo pointed out that shows like St Elsewhere and Hill Street began the primacy of long-term story. Spitzer also thought that the bigger arcs in comedy may have started with Cheers. And one writer made the point that some of what is new, edgier comedy, is not that different after all.

Many of the comedy writers echoed this support of the past when we talked about multicam and single cam comedies. There is a sentiment that it is the single camera comedy that is dominating the landscape today. Comedies like VEEP, Girls, Orange is the New Black, and Modern Family get a lot of discussion. And these are all comedies that the writers I spoke with, particularly the comedy writers, watch on television. There also criticisms of the traditional multicam show, that it is too broad or not challenging enough—Smith described them as “Multicams gather that big broadcast audience, they cast a wide net, they’re easy to follow, and nothing else changes in that universe.” When
the most successful comedy on television today, *The Big Bang Theory*, came up for
discussion in my interviews, none of the writers claimed it was great television. At best it
was called “Successful.” However, the multicam persists today. As discussed in the
industry section, when TBS was getting into the original content game, they went with a
multicam to build on the success of the syndicated multicams they air (Bacon). Bacon
was perhaps the strongest champion of the multicam of the writers I spoke with. He
acknowledged that there are a lot of single camera comedies begin produced today, but
he pointed out that lots of them fail and successful ones are built on the back of the
multicam tradition, “the most successful [single cam] comedy is *Modern Family* which is
all multicam veterans. The rhythm of the show is multicam—it’s like the actors pause for
laughs even though there’s no audience… I think multicams will be around forever
because it works” Wenner also believes in the strength of the multicam sitcom. He sees
*Modern Family* as an anomaly and believes that the multicam still dominates.

Comedy writers see today’s television landscape as one that offers room for
different types of comedy, but not replacing the traditional multicam sitcom. Smith told
me that there is a wider variety of comedy types on television today, but there is room for
all of them to co-exist—one is not pushing out another. Cackowski echoed that
sentiment saying that she sees “a lot more variety or comedy tones [now]… not a
‘mainstream’ sense of what is funny anymore.” Cackowski believes that having so many
different television outlets allows for that, but that we will still have “classic family PG
comedies on the network.” Caleb Bacon agreed that there is a wide variety of comedy
now “that’s allowed for new creative opportunities, and I think those types of story-
telling have probably brought some people deeper into comedy that they would’ve been
otherwise.” But Bacon does not believe that the multicam is the simpler form of comedy. He made the argument that multicas are not just easy viewing, that his current show has “hard jokes” in it, and his show is re-watched by viewers. He thinks that having to create a product in front of a live audience helps hone the craft, creating stronger comedy and that single cam writers “don’t have the experience of their joke bombing.”

Stepping back from where it came from or how it is developed, what do the writers prioritize in making their shows? What do they think makes a TV show good? Spitzer thinks it’s an “exciting time in TV. Everyone is talking about it’s this golden age in television.” Bacon agreed, “I think this is the golden age of TV, since the 2000’s.” Woo also sees a more recent era as one that has been ushering in better television. Citing shows like West Wing, Six Feet Under, and the Sopranos, Woo took note of “the very late 90’s early 2000’s where suddenly there was really good work being done on television which I had grown up with it being the idiot box.” Tucker enthused about just how much good television is out there right now, “even with really quality work to like create a ripple [is so hard] because there’s just so much and a lot of it’s really amazing, like that’s the incredible time we’re in.” Writers see excellence on television happening today. Mad Men was brought up by most of the writers I spoke with as a quality show. Oliver thought highly of Mad Men, “[especially] in the first couple seasons the writing was so good.” Tucker agreed with the praise, “Mad Men. I think it’s the best written show in the history of television.” Another recent show that got the praise of the writers was Breaking Bad. When it was airing, Spitzer might have said Breaking Bad was the best show on television and laughed admitting “There’s nothing original about saying that.” Bacon professed, “Breaking Bad was huge for me.” Woo also admired that series, and
added that he thinks that watching *Breaking Bad* over the course of years, spending a longer time knowing the characters, affected him in a deeper way than if he binged it. Multiple writers mentioned *The Good Wife* as a quality network television show that they watch (Tucker, Barnow, Baker). The comedy writers I spoke with all mentioned *VEEP* as one of the shows they watch. Wenner called it his favorite comedy, “It’s just so different.” When describing what makes television good, Oliver pared down the factors for me, “I really like good storytelling and interesting characters and women.” The writers I spoke with were looking for good writing in what they watch and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they found the strength of the writing in the story and the character.

The writers I spoke with like to let the characters lead. They value story and, in comedy shows, humor, but they put the characters in the driver’s seat. Smith told me that you draw people in by getting them invest in the characters. Woo sees an audience’s long-term attachment with characters as a driving force in the medium. Woo believes that “the appeal of a television series is that it simulates a relationship you have with other human beings that has to be the characters.” Wenner agreed that characters are what keep an audience coming back, and you get a better show if you let the characters and not the jokes drive the story. Wenner explained, “What I strive for is what’s the—the laugh is out of—‘Oh, I know that person and that person saying that thing is really funny,’ so on paper, whatever Sam Mallone said is not, a perfectly structured joke…you get to know them {characters} and the laughs aren’t necessarily the joke.” Baker told me she is looking for character over easy jokes, “I don’t want slapstick… I like banter, back and forth.” Cackowski also said her priority is character, “If the story or the line of dialogue emotionally gets me, if I laugh, if I think it is true to the character and the tone
of the show, then I like it and want it in.” Baker added that she learned to “write from the character as opposed to the plot… if you took care of the characters, the plot would take care of itself.” Wenner explained that “You want to find 7 characters that I know they’ll all interact in some glorious way no matter what you throw them, they’re gonna get something funny, but also kind of revelatory out of it.” Bacon told me that on his show, “there’s a special written effort at making humorous lines come out of a character’s mouth” something the resonates with viewers who know the characters. Success comes from the audience believing in the truth of the characters, not the circumstances. Woo gave the example of *Lost*, “the thing that was great about *Lost* was actually really good character work” not the crazy circumstances, and he has seen unsuccessful shows try to copy the craziness and not the character work. Woo believes that a successful show is created when the audience truly cares about the characters and want to talk about them the next day.

From the characters comes the story for the writers, but the story cannot be overlooked and remains a priority for the writer. Wenner stated it simply, “I think you just tell the best story you can tell.” Baker told me, “I’m actually just telling a story. I guarantee people are going to laugh.” Spitzer would rather have a good story than the funniest lines. Tucker explained her priorities, “I will notice a beautiful shot, but if it’s distracting to what I really care about which is what’s happening in the story, what’s happening emotionally…” Smith explained to be that the goal of the writers’ room is “to figure out what story we’re telling.” He said they start with the “Big mission of let’s tell good stories and get people watching” and then start working on each episode, each scene, each joke. Oliver agreed that after coming together in the writers’ room on the
story, it is in the layering that you can “work in the things that I find in scenes that maybe there’s something different that can be brought out here that still tells the story but can make it more human or grounded in this or grounded in that.”

The writers have an appreciation for a greater move towards serialization over procedural television shows—though they also feel this shift is seen more in dramas than in comedies. Woo feels that the move away from the procedural is also a move towards story—going from *Murder She Wrote* to *Breaking Bad* is a move towards, “what’s gonna happen next.” Serialization did not just happen in this current era of television though. Many sitcoms of the past such as *All in the Family* had a structure where the characters’ lives changed over time but the episodes still remained independent of one another (Spitzer). But Wenner noted that *Cheers* had a timeline, an arc, and you could not get away with reordering those episodes as easily as other sitcoms. In terms of dramas, *St. Elsewhere* and *Hill Street Blues* in particular were innovators in the move towards more serialization— and this began in an era without DVR’s or DVD’s—and those shows understood the importance of the series over the episode (Woo). Now writers are often drawn to the longer story arc. Today’s television shows live on a spectrum of serialization. Bacon described his current show *Sullivan and Sons* as having some episodes “that have arcs in a way, but it’s not *Breaking Bad.*” Spitzer told me that he prefers to pace his “story moves” for the long-term. And Tucker elaborated that, “The first thing we do it look at the season as a whole and how is the story as a whole, like, there is no close-ended nature to any of my episodes. They’re all ongoing. It’s an ensemble, soapy drama so there’s no ending to anything [on her current show].”
The writer may be pulled in different directions, but they must make sure to attend to the story. There can be a temptation to appease the network or TV outlet or the audience or the technology. Spitzer said he always fights for a good story; he needs it to be “something I feel proud of.” When I asked writers if they thought about screen size when writing, they all said no. As Wenner put it, “It never occurred to me. I definitely think about the difference in storytelling. If I have an idea… what it quickly divides down into is this something, is this one story, or is this 100 stories and then, that’s one of the first questions I ask. I’m almost always more attracted to the thing that can be 100. I think that’s why I’m naturally more of a TV- television, or whatever that is going to become now, writer.”

While the audience is an ultimate concern in terms of making sure they can reach the story you are telling, that is limited concern in creating the story. Oliver argues that you cannot listen to the outside noise, you have to tell the story well, “what you want as a viewer isn’t always possible and doesn’t always make good writing.” Cackowski agreed saying, “I don't really think too much about an audience to be honest. If the story or the line of dialogue emotionally gets me, if I laugh, if I think it is true to the character and the tone of the show, then I like it and want it in. I personally think shows suffer when they try to hard to reach an audience and think about what the audience wants. You can never guess what an audience wants, that's just too many people and personalities and opinions. You would never get that right. I think it's best to go with what you like, what your gut says.” Cackowski did explain that her one audience concern is making sure to avoid “inside” jokes that are funnier to writers than to an audience. And Smith said he thinks it
is important to make sure the pacing is for the audience and not the writer, and that the pace is not for the person who has watched the edited cut four times already.

The writers push for their story against real limitations—episode length, advertisers, network preferences, cancellation, production constraints. Oliver thinks that the long hours and months of a television season keep writers away from real life, which is where the best material comes from. Smith agreed that the length of the season itself, often up to nine months can leave writers creatively drained. Baker conceded that particularly in a 22 episode season, not every episode will be great. Each episode is shot in a narrow shooting, window, and in order to keep production moving, there is not time to perfect each episode or each scene. Even some of the “quality” shows face these time constraints. Television seasons are long and the episodes are short. Bacon explained that just a few years ago “half hour” comedies with commercials were up to 24 minutes long, and that his show’s running current time is 21.5 minutes which is “not much space to have a beginning a middle and an end.” Spitzer told me that sometimes networks chose to re-order episodes even when a longer plot arc has been put in place and sometimes he has been limited by advertiser needs—having to scrap things that could offend advertisers. Baker feels strongly that networks limit creatively because they focus on avoiding risk rather than seeking out creativity. And television’s structure is such that the beginning is cemented in place before the rest is decided, and Smith explained that in the writers’ room they have often discussed how they cannot go back and tweak the beginning of their story in order to make the end work better. They just have to keep moving forward, “You’re hopefully telling a bigger story but you’re selling it in segments where you can’t go back and correct things.” This is the opposite of filmmaking. Oliver
described the process of writing her feature film as one where she was able to spend so much time on her film script that it needed no revisions “if you mess[ed] with a word in the third act, it would screw up the first act.” Television writers do not have that luxury.

Nevertheless, the writers I spoke to still felt that they are able to tell good stories and create quality work. What are often claimed as limitations can often be worked around or used as an advantage, countering the notion that network television is more limiting. “Commercial breaks can work to your advantage sometimes if you know how to really use them—they can create fantastic drama and excitement for the viewer,” Baker countered when I asked if ad-supported television’s structure felt limiting. Tucker agreed, and she sees writers approach commercial breaks in a variety of different ways that can be successful- building to them or ignoring them, “Mad Men just cuts to a commercial at whatever time.” A television show is always facing possible cancellation, and there is often pressure to front load the story early in the season, and not leave anything “in the tank” (Spitzer). Spitzer told me he admires Shonda Rhimes because she used that to her advantages on her shows and puts the “crazy stuff right up front” not holding back plot points for traditional climaxes in the season—she just keeps the momentum going to keep viewers tuning in. Spitzer has also had the episode order of his shows adjusted by the network trying to put the funniest episodes forward first, and while he prefers to have ordered episodes stay in place because it makes the best sense for the story, he thinks audiences will catch on anyway because audiences are able to put the pieces together out of order.

Wenner explained that the professed differences between the different television outlets are often not significant. Instead of the notion that a better show is going to
happen because the show is off network and less constrained, Wenner insisted that ultimately it would be a similar show on any outlet. Writers can only remold a show a bit for different outlets, maybe by making “it a little more enticing to just keep going” from episode to episode if it might be binge-watched, but the story stays the same (Wenner). And Smith, who has spent most of his career on network television, said that although there may be a little more creative space off network, “I don’t feel like there’s anything keeping me from telling whatever story I want… I’ve found a way to tell the stories I kind of want to tell within the limitations of whatever series I’ve been on.”

Conclusion

One of the biggest takeaways from my discussions with the writers is that television can be something and its opposite at once. The writers would talk to me about both change and the history of the medium all at once. While freedom from constraints can add to creativity, in talking about the medium the writers are also explaining to me that on television their creative vision must remain fluid. Fluidity in making story means the ability to bend to parameters and still tell good stories – writing in Television trains writers to do this successfully. They expect and embrace it. Television is the paradoxical business of storytelling. That it meets and defies expectations should not be surprising. In the following section I will look more at the impact of new technology on television and examine what has changed, what only appears to have changed, and what remains the same. The last two categories are often concealed behind the dramatic and often discussed recent changes in today’s concept of television. However, the medium itself remains recognizable because there is a drag on the pull of technological determinism.
Something at the core of television prevents a total reinvention. On the surface level our screens have transformed in size and quality, yet we are still watching parceled serialized stories on them. The writers I spoke with see the change happening around them and are excited to be a part of it, yet at the same time, they remain a force that also works as a counterweight to that change.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The technology of television continues to change. In recent years the number of television content producers has grown, and distribution models have been altered. Looking into the television writers’ perspective on the intersection of technology and television, I am attempting to understand the impact of technology on television content as well as the forces present in content creation that inhibit the medium from being radically changed by technology. While the continuing technological changes will have some effect on the content of the medium, television as a whole remains familiar to its audience. For the most part, television audiences still see 30 minute comedies and 60 minute dramas with characters and settings that are created for an ongoing narrative. Looking into the less explored angle of direct interviews with television writers uncovers a culture of creative practices that often work as a counterweight to the pull of technological change on the medium.

In my interviews with writers, several consistent themes emerged regarding their approach to content creation indicating a culture of television writing that has been built by television writers which wields its own power in the medium. I found similar prioritizing and understandings of the medium present in my interviews with writers. The writers had a respect for the past, an appreciation for the collaborative aspects of television, an understanding of working within constraints, and most importantly a priority of story and character. Within the discussion of content creation, technology stayed somewhat removed. While as audience members, these television writers engage with technology directly—recording shows on their DVR’s, watching television on their
iPad’s, and paying for off-network series—as writers, technology falls out of their sightlines. The writers’ main focus remains on the characters and the stories. While the writers did not seem to notice they disengaged from technology when describing content creation, they did acknowledge that attempting to focus on too many parameters outside of character and story can muddy the process and make for a less dynamic show. The business of television often pushes back against the writers’ choices, and the writers’ do feel that impact when writing—perhaps because the writers feel able to navigate through those imposed constraints. They writers I spoke with usually feel that they are able to negotiate a version of the show they are happy with. Parameters are expected in all aspects of television making, so having to alter their path along the way does not mean to them that they cannot create a good series.

The writers I spoke with see the impact of technology on the industry of television. They acknowledge a change in the business of television with some division between network and non-network outlets. They see the growing number of television outlets as offering more room for stories that appeal to narrower audience numbers. Mass appeal is not a necessity today, and critical acclaim as well as cultural buzz can be as important as ratings. The writers know that audiences are watching television in different ways as they themselves—usually recorded, rarely live, often whole series watched in a binge. While in broad terms the writers see the technology changing and industry changing often in response to new technologies, when speaking of their writing, their priorities do not to be changing at the same pace of technology. While they work to be innovative in terms of story, but this is not a response to technology. Industry changes might allow them new parameters for creating a show, however their choices in mapping out a story
do not seem to be directly affected by technology. A gap remains between technology and content creation.

I believe that while no claim can be made that television content is unchanged by technology’s advancements, the culture of the television writer is a powerful force that at times can act as a counterweight to technology in the creation process. Technology changes rapidly, but television content’s change over the years is a slower and more methodical one. While there is a narrative told about the new and changing television and how the medium is being transformed, there is also consistency in the medium driven by the writers. We hear a message of change, and it feels as though technological determinism is inevitable. But it is worth exploring the opposing forces. The steps that move us towards change are often incremental, even at times facing backwards. First I will explore the apparent changes taking place in television today, their link to technology and content, and the how the writers’ interact with those changes. Then, using the interviews, I will look at aspects of television that appear to be new but are reformulations of the past, and how in appearing new, they augment the narrative of change surrounding television today. Finally I will discuss how the writers’ role in the process of content creation embeds continuity into the medium.

*The Narrative of Change*

Reading pop culture headlines about television, we are told everything is changing. Television today is different. New technologies are leading to both a death of the medium and into a new Golden Age. DVR’s are proliferating, streaming is normalized, and network ratings are down. We rave about the best of the best of TV with
some recent shows like *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* being heralded as possibly some of the best ever on television. Non-network, non-cable outlets are expanding with even HBO and Showtime recently deciding to make their services available separate from a cable subscription. An article in *The Guardian* called Netflix “So damn good they’ve changed the way we watch TV” (Wollaston). Certainly the way we watch TV is changing, but is the way we create TV changing in step? The writers I spoke with echoed many of the changes highlighted by Television Studies research, but the link of technology to the creative process did not always seem direct. When writers spoke of change it was most often in regards to industry rather than creation.

Certainly there are new aspects of the television medium today changed by television. More and more television is consumed off of DVR’s. Some original content comes from non-network outlets completely separate of the cable grid. And there are expectations of more unknown changes to come. When NBC bought the rights to the upcoming Olympics, their deal included “all digital and streaming options, even those that have yet to be conceived” (Rose and Guthrie). There are significant changes to the industry—both the standard traditional season length and pilot season have been disrupted; distribution methods continue to evolve. In terms of content, serialization, a decrease in the reach of “broad” programming, and a rise in the value of buzz have all impacted the creation of television content.

The writers I spoke see more room for a wider array of content given the number of content providers. They see more allowances for slower, longer arc, more nuanced storytelling both on and off network as more shows like this have gained non-network success over recent years. The writers I interviewed, in particular the drama writers
(Tucker, Woo, and Baker), noted these changes in the types of stories on today’s television. While Woo felt that perhaps there is a belief that the industry is less “disposable” so more “care” should be given, other writers saw this trend less as directly linked to technology and more a response from the industry to follow the cable model’s lead to seek out profit as network viewership wanes (Spitzer, Baker, and Smith).

Today viewers can consume television in binge form either by DVD, recording and saving multiple episodes, or watching streaming episodes one after another. DVD’s of television series opened up this possibility and the technologies that followed—DVR’s and streaming—made it even easier. There is a definite scholarship belief that the DVD and the ability to binge watch have allowed for an increase in longer-arc storylines in television (Gillian 20; Lotz 66). Some of the writers I spoke with also brought up this correlation (Tucker, Woo, and Smith). However, when pressed on keeping these specific viewership practices in mind when writing, they do not. Given the writers’ responses about their considerations while writing, this link between technology and content creation is not necessarily a direct one. It is possible that the industry has allowed for more room for nuanced storytelling allowing the writers more space to craft those types of stories now, but there does not appear to be an absolute link between the technology of binge-watching and the writers’ storytelling choices because the audience’s means of consumption is not considered by the writers when they craft their stories.

The writers I spoke with did note some significant changes in the medium such as the ebbing of broad-appeal television and a trend of smaller audience shows becoming the norm. The traditional broad audience from the early era of television no longer exists. Sports and live events remain among the few mass audience draws (Rose and
Newer outlets have shifted season length, from the traditional 22 of network to 10 to 12 on cable, and premiere dates, from the traditional fall release of new shows to a year-round release. The normal of television seasons of the past exists in a limited form today. We are seeing real adjustments in business models, even the newer models of premium cable are changing course. In March of 2015, HBO rolled out a stand-alone platform independent of a cable distributor (Bloom), and in early June of 2105, Showtime followed suit with its own stand alone option (Lewis). The industry is reshaping itself, often directly linked to technology. And some connections between this shifting technological landscape and television content seem evident.

With the infrequency of mass appeal hits, comes a rise in the value of buzz over ratings. Some academic writing takes note of the new appreciation of buzz. Lotz uses the term buzz to describe the cultural value of the series *Sex and the City* in spite of a small audience and shorter season (*Revolutionized* 218). Curtin also notes the drive of today’s television producers to find “new techniques for generating buzz” (3). As when discussing the appeal of the low-rated but much talked about hit *Girls*, the writers I spoke with explained the draw of a show that may not have a lot of viewers, but can get a lot of people talking (Tucker, Baker, and Smith). The success of a show like *Girls* in capturing the public’s attention makes room for more niche programming. Smith reminded me that Netflix is a business model built on buzz as there is no reporting of their ratings. Spitzer sees not just non-network outlets but also the traditional networks increasing the value placed on buzz.

Looking at the three components of television as technology, industry, and content, the writers see a changing landscape where new technology influences industry,
and industry influences content. But the influence on content is both secondhand, and broad. Technology has disrupted traditional viewing and distribution patterns which in turn have allowed for variations in the industry—alternate television outlets with different business models able to cater to different sizes and types of audiences. This has created an opening for different types of television, as well as an environment where buzz, particularly in the overpopulated television landscape, can wield as much if not more power than ratings. Not having to create shows for the masses has altered the parameters of content creation. The content that the industry will accept from writers is more expansive than it has been in past decades. But within the narrow scope of the content creation process, overt consideration of this new technological landscape by the writers is lacking, and the culture of television writing, built alongside the rise of the writers, yields more control. Within the new parameters surrounding content creation are traditional concepts of storytelling.

Academic literature has been eager to discuss what is new. Books like Lotz’s (2007) *The Television will be Revolutionized*, Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*, and collections of essays such as *Television as Digital Media* (Bennett and Strange) shape the digital media. *Distribution Revolution* is a collection of interviews with TV and film professionals that examines the “tumultuous transformation” of the creative industries in this new digital age (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 2). Much academic research looks at the impact of technology on the medium, yet also within those texts are suggestions of a continuity of the medium that lies beneath the change. In his afterward, Jenkins offers a reminder that it is not simply out with the old and in with the new in terms of media producers and distributors, “convergence culture is shaped by increased contact and
collaboration between established and emerging media institutions” (274). Even with “new” technology, the new is often a recreation of something that already existed. Television Studies scholar Boddy wrote about the DVD player as a reformulation of the VCR, and noted that the new format was not all-encompassingly different but rather, “a refinement on what came before” (174). And Bennett and Strange in their discussion on the new “digital media” that in some ways “the practices and technologies of digital television have long been established within television and its associated industries” (6). This is reminder to examine the change we see around us as not overtly new, but as a continual reformulation, often even a clear reappropriation of the past.

*New as a Revision of the Past*

Our discussion of the medium today often implies that the current technological overhaul is unique. However, the notion of technology radically shifting television as we know it is not new. In the introduction to their 1983 book, *The Producers’ Medium*, Newcomb and Alley wrote, “Once again, technology has revolutionized thinking—about the future of networks, the future of those responsible for television content, and the ways in which audiences will deal with the new opportunities for entertainment in the coming decades… Discussions of cable and satellite technologies now consume nearly as much media space as the great debate over color systems did in the fifties” (Newcomb and Alley 7). In 1983, the concept of technology overhauling television was already a rerun of the past. Today we are again immersed in the discussions about television “change,” and those discussions often mask a lack of change. Some of the change is actually a retread or possibly an amped up version of the past. Understanding that the change in
television today is not as new as it seems helps dilute the power attributed to technology in shaping the medium.

What is this current television revolution? The television industry is growing. New outlets for television distribution are emerging. However, there is not independence from big industry. The mass in mass media remains in the massive media conglomerations. “Television is neither ‘beating’ nor ‘losing’ to new media in some cosmic clash of technology; rather television is an intrinsic part of ‘new’ media” (Gray and Lotz 3). Banet-Wiser, Chris and Freitas noted that cable companies are owned by the same conglomerates as other media (4). Even television’s new outlets are trying to find ways to become a part of the established system of television. Netflix is seeking to integrate its platform into cable provided DVR’s (Newman). Netflix also takes on the semantics of traditional television by calling itself “the world’s leading Internet television network” on its website (Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 13).

The multitude of new outlets does not guarantee a new type of television, or even of original television. Netflix is seen as a new version of what television could be, but their business development has replicated that of HBO. Both started as an outlet for consumers to view previously released movies, and both slowly moved to original programming promoted as having a distinctly different feel than traditional television. Television shows are now moving from one outlet to another. Criminal Intent moved from NBC to USA network in 2007 (Gillian 12). Netflix picked up the former FOX show Arrested Development in 2013. Community moved to Yahoo last season, and reportedly The Mindy Project will be moving to Hulu next season (Andreeva). While some of the writers I interviewed spoke about networks working to catch up to the cable model
(Spitzer and Tucker), today’s new shows are moving around the television outlet spectrum, much like older shows do in syndication. New television outlets are buying cache with previously established shows. Writer Bacon explained to me that his current show, *Sullivan and Son*, is original programming made with the intention of pairing it with reruns of *The Big Bang Theory* on TBS. Even while claiming to be different, new television outlets build their brand on a foundation built by the traditional networks.

Primetime television has moved more towards serialization and away from procedural shows. Writer Woo believes the end of the disposability of television has moved the medium towards an embrace of more serialization. But while Tucker noted that years ago shows she worked on were pushed to do less serialization of their stories and create more procedural episodes, she was also quick to point out that television is not just learning how to do serialized narratives—soap operas have been doing that for decades. Television Studies scholars Newman and Levine makes the same point in their book *Legitimating Television*, calling daytime soap operas a “pioneer” in serialization (84). The most recent decade of detailed serialized narratives like *Mad Men* was not the first instance of this in primetime television. As Thompson described, “The same technique was imported to prime-time television in the US through *Dallas* (1978 to 1991) and *Dynasty* (1981-1989)” (56). Today’s Shonda Rhimes shows echo Aaron Spelling shows of decades past.

What is new in television today can be construed as an amped up version of the past. We hear claims that attention spans have decreased and that everything must be shorter now. The rise and popularity of YouTube is professed in the media. Likely there is some truth in waning attention spans and the draw of shorter videos. In an interview
for the book *Distribution Revolution*, Producer Paris Barclay argued, “Television is telling stories in shorter bursts… We rarely go longer than 3 pages with a scene.” (qtd. in Curtin, Holt, and Sanson, 179). However, even in the midst of our shortened attention spans, audiences are now also binge-watching hours and hours of television at a time. While live viewing seems to be trending downward (Rose and Guthrie), binge-watching, particularly for streamed programs, is growing. Binge-watching is surprising evidence that our attention can still be held, and binge-watching could even be considered a hyper version of live-viewing as audiences are watching even more of a show immediately than we have ever been able to do previously.

While scholarship from Jenkins (121), Bennett (6), and Bar (76) all discuss the move away from live TV, we see counter-examples of audiences tweeting live reactions, posting live thoughts on Facebook and submerging themselves in full seasons of television the moment they are released. There is a concerted effort to include this live new media with live broadcast. Spitzer told me that every showrunner is live tweeting his or her show today. Bacon sees this live multi-platform use firsthand as he interacts with audience members of his show *Sullivan and Son* as the host of the show’s official podcast. His understanding is that the audience enjoys live-tweeting their experience of the show. They are not forsaking their television set for their computer or phone, rather they are using their computer or phone *while* also watching television. New devices do not only pull us away from our television sets, but they also deepen our link to our televisions.

Ad driven TV has not gone away. There have been moments before where the torch was said to be passed away from the networks. HBO owned Sunday night
television in the early 2000’s, but then, as Polan described, the “risqué and quirky genre-mixing suburban soap” *Desperate Housewives* regained the network’s foothold (278). Again today, with all the talk of its demise, network television still has legs. FOX’s *Empire* broke a ratings record earlier this year as the first series with an increase in its viewership for each of its first 5 telecasts (Hibberd “Empire”). This has not been done in the 23 years that Nielson has been tracking ratings. And other ad-supported shows are still amassing significant ratings. AMC’s *The Walking Dead* averages 17 million viewers a record for any non-sports event on basic cable (Hibberd “Leaving Reality”). *Better Call Saul* debuted to 9.8 million viewers in February (Patten). The writers I spoke with talked about today’s successful methods of keeping advertising a part of television, maintaining that tradition—whether by product placement, banner ads during a show’s broadcast, and traditional commercials (Spitzer and Bacon).

Layered under the modern changes of television is the past. As new technologies flow into the television industry, the parameters available to writers for creating stories change. There is more room for niche programming, for serialization, for interactive elements. But beneath these changes is a familiarity to the content on television today. Looking directly at the role of the writers on television content we can better understand how this trend of the past as a guide to the future of television is maintained. The rise of the writers makes them more powerfully positioned in the shaping of current content. There is a culture of television writing built on shared values and goals that not only guides how writers manage storytelling within the parameters of the medium but also guides the trajectory of television content within the medium. The content creation process helps maintain the continuity of television content.
Scholarship starts to address this continuity of the past within the medium, but stops short of it in discussing content. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses the impact of technology on the television industry and makes the case that we must distinguish between media and the tools of media. He offers the example that recording sound has remained a constant while the tools of recording sound-- the 8-track, the CD, and now electronic formats continually evolve (13). Jenkins notes an underlying continuity within the television industry. Television Studies scholar Boddy noted the continuity of technology when he wrote about the DVD player as a reformulation of the VCR, and noted that the new format was not all-encompassingly different but rather, “The basic idea is a refinement on what came before, and in its present form, a limited on at that” (Boddy “Last Format” 174). While the book *Legitimating Television* does some comparison of past and present content, it looks more at why certain content today is lauded and does dig into why similarities in content remain today. Kristin Thompson’s book *Storytelling in Film and Television* examines television content creation, but she mostly examines the use of seriality in television story arcs as compared to the story arcs used in films. And discussions of content in *Legitimating Television* or *Storytelling in Film* are more text-driven, rather than interview-based.

What is missing from today’s discussion is the narrative that looks at the intersection of rapidly changing technology with the slower trajectory change in content. While scholarship does not claim a complete overhaul of the medium in the face of new technology, it often remains focused on the change rather than looking for other forces at work. There is a belief that change has been made possible by technology. Just as some suggest that the remote control allowed the audience to shift from a passive to active
viewer, there is an argument that technology that has allowed writers the opportunity to create better television. Scholars argue that a non-network outlet can offer a writer flexibility in the exact minute total of an episode, and therefore more creativity is available to the writer. And the writers I spoke with do see an enlarged space available for telling television stories—different types of stories are finding space in the medium they did not have before. But just as the audiences of television of the were not waiting to be offered technology to improve their viewing experience—in fact, the remote control was created by “independent entrepreneurs or electronics enthusiasts” (Thomas 58). The audience’s enthusiasm created the technology. In a similar fashion, the writers’ rise could be argued to have expanded the industry and technology. The evolving types of stories told on television have also given opportunity for these new technologies. We can see evidence of the power of the writer in the medium through their content creation. In the process of content creation, the writers have built some separation from technology. Rather than examining how technology is impacting content, we look at how the writers’ impact the medium—and how that force interacts with technology.

If we look at the three components of television as the content, the technology, and the industry, we see overlaps. The industry both innovates and assimilates to new technologies. The writers are producers in today’s business models and they are hired by the corporate entities, so their space in the industry is in both the industry and the content components. But the link from the writers to technology is indirect. This is where the distinction comes between technology’s effect on the industry and on content. Content remains slightly removed from the immediate influence of technology. It is mediated through the industry, and that divide must create some tension in the medium’s trajectory.
With the rise of the writer in television, that distinct category of content, and within it content creation, gains more strength as its own component, furthering the notion that the content creators have established a creative space outside the weight of new technology.

_The Continuity of the Television Writer_

When I asked writers to define television, they often hedged. They needed a lot of words to answer. Sometimes we had a back and forth to solidify their definition. All the writers agreed that Netflix shows are television, but asking about short serialized content on YouTube demanded more dissection. There were vague parameters offered like “produced with enough quality to look like it should be on TV” (Bacon). Spitzer went back and forth on YouTube videos, “it’s a show no matter what, but I don’t know if it’s a television show…it has to be some sort of produced content.” The broadest definitions included all screens (Wenner) and all serialized stories (Tucker), usually with qualifying statements on production quality to distinguish television from a home video. The definitions, while lengthy, still coalesced around similar traits, and there was a general agreement about specific programs meeting the definition of TV. _House of Cards_ is not on a network or cable station. It is not made available in weekly installments. It does not need to be watched at home. But everyone agreed it is television because it fits into the familiar mold of television. It is a professionally produced serialized story available on personal screens. In spite of all the changes surrounding it in recent years, television remains identifiable to its writers and to its viewers. In some ways, that consistency is built into the nature of the medium with the writers curating a world of television that includes both stasis and evolution.
Television writers have learned to make television by creating a world for their characters and remaining true to it, and this is how the medium of television continues. There are both big and small changes along the way, but the pieces of the world remain the same in order for it to be familiar and recognizable to the audience. The past remains a part of the present. In creating television, even when moving the medium forward, part of the writers’ process is a countering force to the technological tidal wave of change.

Television writers have developed their own culture with traditions imbued in the content creation process. As the importance of their craft has risen in the medium, the strength of writers’ position has grown. The writers’ shared practices have become a force within the medium that yields its own strength. None of the components of television – its content, its technology, nor the industry— is able to set the pace of change alone. While technology can serve the creative process, it does not drive the process alone.

Television writing throughout the industry shares distinct characteristics. Not surprisingly, writers prioritize their characters and their stories. Scholarship based on direct interviews with television producers repeats that priority over the years (Newcomb 1983, Kubey 2004, Curtin 2014). Writers are creators, and they take care of their creation. But that priority combined with the writers’ respect for the past as well as their understanding of how constraints and collaboration shape the medium has become a foundational aspect of television. These shared aspects of television writing—primacy of character and story, respect for the past, appreciation of collaboration, and an understanding of constraints—push television content on its own slower trajectory of change, different from the fast pace of technology.
Constraints-

The television writer starts with a variety of constraints and parameters—genre, episode length, network/outlet restrictions, season length, necessity of collaboration. When Newcomb and Alley reflected on their interviews with television writers, they wrote, “Creativity in television, perhaps in any medium, is not a solitary act. Rather it is quite a process of negotiation,” (97). Writers must examine the space available for them to tell their story and then craft the best story possible in that space. Different production outlets can have different parameters. In a 2011 moderated Q&A discussion, Matthew Weiner, creator of Mad Men, talked about the difference between an HBO show and Mad Men on AMC. “Mad Men is TV-14, not even TV-MA,” said Weiner, “I’m allowed three ‘shits’ a show. I can say ‘Jesus,’ I can say ‘Christ,’ but I can’t say ‘Jesus Christ’ unless he’s actually there …” (qtd. in Brown). Weiner writes within constraints, and yet his audience, including other writers, is impressed with his writing. Writer Tucker called it “the best written show in the history of television.” The best shows are able to mask the constraints that come with them, dismissing parameters that are uncontrollable.

Television writers are surrounded by constraints, and working in the medium trains them to remain fluid to find the path to a good story.

The new technological parameters of television are much like Matthew Weiner’s inability to allow his characters say “Jesus Christ.” The shows may be distributed differently, may be broadcast on a variety of screens, may be recorded or live—those are all parameters set outside the boundary of writing, so the writers set them aside and move on with the process of writing. The writers I spoke with watch television on a variety of screens, but they do not consider those screens when writing. Screen size variation is a
parameter of the medium that is uncontrollable, and a consideration of uncontrollable parameters weakens the storytelling. Cackowski told me it would be an impossibility to attempt to consider the individual tendencies of the audience, and it would ultimately distract from the story. Spitzer joked that although the writers never know if any given episode could be the show’s last, writing as if each episode is a possible ending would be ridiculous. Working in a medium of constraints could be overwhelming, but writers are constantly filtering out the constraints that they cannot control. So while as an audience member the writers see and engage with all of the new technology around them, as writers, they must almost put on blinders to it in order to create. Television writers are striving to, and believe they are able to, work within the parameters of the medium to craft compelling characters and stories.

In the stories of television today, we see that the past remains. Older television series formats like multi-camera sitcoms and procedural crime dramas remain popular on television today. The draw to the past is also seen in the revival of older television series. Pilot meetings are built on describing your new pitch in terms of past successful shows that the industry hopes to emulate (Smith). Reboots remain a part of the landscape. Fox is working on reboots of *Prison Break* and *X-Files* (Hibberd “*X-files*”) and *Full House* is being rebooted by Netflix, *Twin Peaks* is being revived on Showtime (Ng). The past and future of television are both a part of the television present. Wenner talked about the usefulness of having both multicamera sitcoms and *MASH* on at the same time in the 1970’s—“anchoring” and “experimenting” with the medium at once. We can see pairings of anchoring and experimenting on television today. Bacon talked about with his current show *Sullivan and Son* on TBS being a new foray into original programming by
TBS that is buoyed up the anchor of reruns of *The Big Bang Theory*. Television does not need to be just one thing.

**Respect for the Past**

Television as a medium is a collaborative process and depends on many people working together, working alone is not an option. Even if a script is written in solitude, though in television it is almost always partially worked on in the writers’ room, the production process of television requires other players. Writers appreciate being a part of a process that requires this collaboration. But they also keep in mind that as the writers they are the advocates of the story and the characters, and will voice that from the writing of the script, to giving notes on set, to sitting in on the editing process. Part of becoming that advocate for the story comes from a respect for the past as the writers I spoke to were influenced both by the more experienced writers they have worked with as well as by the past television shows whose characters and stories have stuck with them over the years.

The past and future of television also comes together in the writers’ room. Part of learning to be a television writer comes from time spent in the writers’ room with other writers, as an assistant or as a lower level writer, and also time spent dissecting past shows held in high esteem. The television writers I spoke with talked about the influence of other writers in their craft, particularly the more experienced writers with whom they worked when they were starting out. They were impressed by their experience and the shows that they had helmed. The writers spoke of the wisdom they had gotten from Alan Ball, David Milch, Carlton Cuse, Bryan Fuller, Rob Long and others. There was not a disavowal of the past accomplishments or a claim that the older writers’ successes
are no longer what TV is anymore. The writers I interviewed actively sought out to learn from the more experienced writers. They were given advice that included taking care of their characters, being willing to make bold choices (Baker), and to stay flexible (Tucker). This advice was foundational for many of these writers. Woo felt that he learned the craft of writing from studying the execution of past shows such as *St. Elsewhere* and *Six Feet Under*. The writers did not speak of moving away from the lessons they learned from other writers, but rather using those tools in their own work. The writers’ link to the past keeps both the history and future in mind. They are both taking on aspects of past work that was successful as well as modeling efforts in the past to tell new and different types of stories. Their admiration for the past is both for what television has accomplished and how television has evolved—leading writers of today to build a slow but steady trajectory of content change in the medium.

**Priority of Story and Character**

When writers from past television eras have talked about their craft, they also spoke about pushing to prioritize character and story. In the Newcomb and Alley’s 1983 book interviewing writers and producers on TV has writers speaking of the same priorities. Writer-producer David Victor believed that character was king—if the audience does not care about them, they will not come back (qtd. in Newcomb and Alley 83). Writer-producer Hamner tried not to get “bogged down” by what the sponsors or the audience wanted, but rather tried to tell the best story (qtd. in Newcomb and Alley 156). This was a roadmap for future writers to follow. Television writers from decades past were advocating for their content, “Both Serling and Rodenberry occupied similar
ideological positions, contrasting their artistic integrity and social conscience with the commercial degradation of mainstream television, in doing so establishing a template for the creators and show runners of the future” (Pearson 109). This has not changed, and it has been passed down to writers of today. The constant remains the focus on character and story.

To change focus away from character and story is to do a disservice to the show you are making. As Cackowski told me, “I personally think a show suffers when they try to hard to reach an audience and think about what the audience wants… You would never get that right.” The writers keep their focus away from technology. Spitzer told me that technology is “not something we consciously think about.” Cackowski told me, “I don’t care how people watch a show,” and Tucker said, “I don’t think about how it is viewed at all.” This sentiment is echoed outside of my interviews as well. In an interview with television producer Paris Barclay in the book Distribution Revolution, Barclay declared, “I don’t think the creators care [about where the show is watched]. I think they are telling the story the way they want to tell it” (qtd. in Curtin 180). Giving the audience a good story, rather than trying to guess what they want or how they engage with the show achieves a better result. Matthew Weiner said in an interview about the multiplicity of fans’ conflicting complaints on shows that “Fans don’t run the show.” He is trying to create a good story and not appease the masses, and his strategy works, people keep watching (Neff).

What is taken into account are the parameters of the medium that can be used to craft the story. While there are constraints of television—such as a faster production schedule and lower budget than film—an advantage is the length of time the audience
spends engaging with the characters and story, so a focus on them results in a more
dynamic series. Smith explained that the way to draw in an audience is to get them
invested in the characters. Woo believes characters are a driving force in television
because audiences form long-term attachments to them. *Agents of SHIELD* Executive
Producer Jeph Loeb described for in *Entertainment Weekly* one of the benefits of the
television medium, “And the fun of the show was taking our time in order to let you get
to know our characters and hopefully fall in love with them… the movies… have the
widescreen adventure that we obviously can’t do every week on a television budget and
television schedule. But what we can do is create an intimacy with the audience and
create characters that our audience is invested in…” (Towers). Television plays to its
strengths to make the best shows.

There is not always an easy path to prioritizing character and story above all other
parameters. The production outlets have a voice as well since they provide the financing
and at times push the writers to make choices they disagree with (Spitzer, Baker, and
Smith). The writers I spoke with talked about times of pushing back to tell the story they
want to tell. And there is a sense that the industry, particularly the networks, push for
more traditional television content, and that the writers are pushing to do something
different and held back by industry forces. But there are examples of a show being given
drastically different parameters and yet the characters and stories remained nearly the
same, so writers are finding ways to make the shows they want to make. When *Arrested
Development* moved to Netflix, some thought there would be an entirely different show.
But this show came up in multiple interviews, and each time the takeaway was that the
show remained the same. The changes were smaller than would be expected after changing production outlets (Wenner and Smith).

Another more recent example is *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Season 1 was shot and the first 6 episodes were also edited to be on commercial broadcast television. However, the show ended up on Netflix and needing to have the commercial breaks taken out. But when co-creator Robert Carlock was asked about what changes he would make for season 2 now knowing it will be on Netflix, he predicted that any changes due to being on Netflix would be “subtle.” “We really did write the show we wanted to write.” (Snetiker). Moving the show from the most traditional venue of network television to one of the least traditional outlets of streaming on Netflix was done without significant change to the show. Wenner told me that if he were moving a show from network to a streaming platform, he would only make slight changes if any. Maybe he would “make is a little more enticing to just keep going [watching],” but the story would stay the same.

This is not to say that none of the stasis seen in television industry is due to the industry asserting its control, only that the writers also have a role in this. Technology and the writers are not both attempting to run into the future while old business models attempt to hold them back. When shows move from one production outlet to another, the constant is the writing team. The lack of change in these displaced shows is indicative of the writers’ steadying hand.

Television writers do not want to overhaul the show their audience is watching. Spitzer explained the term “pipe” to me, as the “exposition” of the show. The writers take care in “setting up the pipe” because this is the world of the show, the world the audience will come to know. One writer explained that different genres of shows are
adjusting the world of their show as they go as well as protecting it. Drama requires bigger shifts in the world, but in comedy the world definitely wants to change on a slower pace and “[you] dive into the details of their life because if the world changes from week to week the audience won’t know what to expect from their characters, they’ll be surprised for the wrong reasons” (Smith). Again in his interview in *Distribution Revolution*, producer Paris Barclay explained, “Audiences generally don’t want to see a different version of the show they love” (qtd. in Curtin, Holt, and Sanson 178). In the same book, an interview with showrunner Dick Wolf discussed his success in a similar way, “The wonderful thing about *Law & Order* is it doesn’t matter whether you didn’t see it for a week, a month, a year, or three years—you come in and say oh, it’s *Law & Order*. It’s a Catholic high mass” (qtd. in Curtin, Holt, and Sanson p. 224).

Writers do not want their shows to be static, so they are balancing engaging the audience with new with staying true to the world of the show that the audience is attached to. Inside the writers’ room, they debate about when to make those changes and how to introduce them so they feel natural to the story (Smith). Priority on story and character, understanding the constraints of the medium, the necessity of collaboration, and respect for the past are the pieces that the writers’ bring together in the creation of content.

While technology is acknowledged by the writers, in the process of content creation, it remains on the outside of consideration. The writers’ process remains somewhat insulated from the technology. Talk of the future is almost seen as separate from their writing—Wenner calls himself a “tech luddite,” and Woo is convinced that someone born well after him will drive the next big technological invention. The technology remains outside the box and the content within it. If the writers were to open themselves up to all
considerations of text would move them away from the priorities they see as more valuable in creating a television series. This is not an active disengagement from the idea of technology’s influence on television. Writers see technology all around them in the industry. The lack of consideration for technology while creating is an unspoken protective instinct that helps preserve the medium.

The Story of the Medium-

While our television sets and television outlets morph into new versions of themselves, content takes a more gently sloped path. On the macro level, we can see the writers’ priorities in action. The pieces of the writers’ process that shape individual television shows also shape television as in its entirety. Writers want to allow their shows to remain one of surprises but also one that is understood. The medium of television echoes this—remaining both familiar and surprising in its presentation to its audience. New types of stories are told next to familiar stories. Each television show is, in a sense, a storyline in the largest television “show” – the television medium. If all the storylines change at once, the audience’s link to the medium will be broken. Survival of television is dependent on viewers being engaged in good but recognizable storytelling. An audience tunes in both for the characters and the stories that they have come to know and to be surprised by additions of new characters and surprises.

Space for the new is created by including room for the old. In remaining focused on a collaborative process that prioritizes character and story, the writers have built a foundational consistency in the medium that also allows for flexibility that can adapt without bending to new changes. When popular culture expounds on the death of
television or the new golden age of television or a game-changing innovation, this is just a commercial for the television medium—hyping the medium, making sure the audience knows something new is around the corner in the same old medium we have been watching for decades. Pop culture takes the juiciest nuggets of today’s television to promote the medium. But tuning into the medium as a whole, we see a spectrum of content that feels both new and traditional, not just the highlight reel. And the writers are curating that experience for the audience, both within individual episodes, individual television series, and within the medium as a whole.

The writers’ influence on the television is one that both preserves continuity and moves it forward. The writers I interviewed both excitedly talk about changes in television today and effusively praise creators’ of past television. Television both holds and masks opposing truths about its nature, so it makes sense that its evolution takes a different pace in different aspects of the medium. The medium of television is a merging of storytelling and profit. Storytelling has been a part of culture as long as we have kept track of human history, and remains a grounding force for television, but not one that prevents change. The practices television writers have developed over time have support the groundwork of the medium. In particular the combination of the writers’ priority of story and recognition of constraints creates a culture where the writers tune out the limits they cannot control and narrow their focus back to what they are creating. Overthinking parameters like new technology would inhibit storytelling, so they are not considered. While technology is bound to have an effect on content, and outside of content creation that affect can be seen by the writers, within content creation, the writers seemed to have created an insular world to protect from those influences. By insulating the creative
process, the writers are also tethering themselves to the foundations of television creating a counterweight to technology.

Conclusion

While television’s box looks different than it did ten, twenty, and fifty years ago, the contents within the box have not followed the same trajectory of change. The content change has been a more tempered path driven by television writers. The rise of the writers has come with a powerful culture of television writing that is able to counterbalance technological and industry forces within the medium. Writers are telling a story first. Creation of that story begins in a moment separate from the screen and the distribution model, so an aspect of storytelling manages to stay slightly removed from its surroundings. Writers build on the past, find space in the parameters they are given, and push forward incrementally to create an engaging world for their audience. Consumption, distribution, and production of television content will continue to change, and there is no way to control the multitude of variables that affect how an audience views a show. So the writers insulate themselves from these changes when creating content by creating a culture built on the past that remains focused on their story and characters, pushing to innovating within storytelling. While technology has some affect on the content, the changes in television content cannot solely be attributed to technology. Television writers are a force building the storyline of the medium over time through their shared priorities of the creative process.

Technology does impact television and its content, but this is not an all-encompassing change. It is limited. The landscape that allows for television shows to be
bought and produced is influenced by technology as different types of shows are being produced today. The distribution models that move shows to the audience are also evolving with new technologies. Change in technology has given viewers more ability to shape their own television experience. Traditional television outlets are trying to wrestle back control of the television experience. Who wins that tug of war may determine the future of television outlets. Outlets like Netflix invite an audience’s curation of the medium, and traditional networks push to “eventize” (Rose and Guthrie). But industry changes, distribution changes, and consumption changes do not necessitate content change. While there is overlap, they exist on different trajectories. The culture of television writing keeps the trajectory of television content a smoother path. While the rise of the writer has certainly helped enable a change in television content giving them more room to explore and experiment in their storytelling, the power of writers in television today also helps keep technology’s drive for change in check. The rise of the writer and the primacy of story prevent the medium from being unrecognizably transformed.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Television content is changing. More and more, programs are serialized and narratively complex. More content is available than ever before. Mass audiences are no longer necessary to have a hit show. But this is not sudden or without precedent. In terms of content creation, technology alone cannot claim responsibility for the change. Looking through the lens of the writer’s experience, today’s content is not constructed around new technology; rather it is built on the foundation of the past and with a focus on story and character. The writers I spoke with are astute observers of the television industry. They see change technological changes in the medium and resulting industry shifts. However, within the process of content creation, there is a lack of consideration of these new technologies. The shared cultural practices of television writing insulates content creation from being overwhelmed by too many factors, and these shared practices help create a consistency in the medium that can act as a counterweight to television. This continuity of television is often obscured by a narrative focused on change—and almost exclusively on change fueled by new technology. Ultimately, this popular ‘change narrative’ overstates the newness driven by digital technology and undervalues the continuity of the medium.

At the beginning of my research I was surprised to find the limited amount of attention that writers paid to technology as it related to content creation. Even though the writers have an understanding of the technological changes in the industry, and use new technologies as television audience members, consideration of new technology is not a part of the content creation process. While there is some awareness paid to industry
changes, even that is secondary to story and character and the collective choices made in the writers’ room on how to make their show good. This is what led to a questioning of whether there are forces working towards consistency over change. The rise of the writers in television gives their position even more strength on the medium’s structure. My research shows a clear connection to the past in the writing process, and also a continuing focus on story and character over outside factors. As this shared culture of television writing has coalesced, it has built a consistency and familiarity in the medium that continues to hold today. While change does exists and talk of change dominates much of the conversation, the continuity of the medium from past to present is valuable to note as it could be predictive in how the medium will be shaped in the future.

My research does not definitively answer why television is pulled both forward and backwards at once. But I do think there is a drag created by the contradiction of creativity and commodification. This foundational contradiction of television makes for a more convoluted path into the future. Writers are driven by story, the industry is driven by profits, and the technology is driven by change. Each force pulls on the other. While this paper examines ways in which aspects of the writers’ creative process can slow down change, another study could certainly demonstrate the ways in which writers push the medium forward as writers continue to find new types of stories to tell. The rise of the writers has given more control to the creative forces in television. Perhaps in the future that creative control may exert even more power over the financial aspects of television allowing the medium to change in a different and unexpected way. But the old and the new of television will continue to co-exist.
My research explores a model of television that exists in three parts that move at different speeds. The trajectory of technology moves forward quickly and often disruptively. The trajectory of content moves forward slowly and gently, at times not even noticeably. And the trajectory of industry is more fitful, moving at varying speeds both forward and backward and remaining in stasis, all in search of profits. My research looks closely at the writers’ perspective of and position within the television medium, noting how their shared values have created an less explored force within the medium. A future study could further dig into the trajectories of other aspects of television by looking more expansively at industry trends or possibly look more closely at the trajectory of television content if the rise of the writer continues. While technology is not considered in content creation, the writers do not bend their stories around new technologies, some of the writers I spoke with have preferences over how and which technologies are used in the industry. Perhaps one day the writers’ priorities will trump all industry and technology priorities.

Even in a technologically driven medium, other influences such can wield power. By engaging directly with television writers, I was able to gain insight into other forces at work in the medium, looking at the pieces of the medium before it becomes content. And the consistent trajectory of the television content reinforces the notion of the writers as a force within the medium. There is a shared cultural practice of television writing in the medium that operates alongside technology. Speaking with writers illuminated how they have created a space in the medium to operate that while affected by the changes around them also has some insularity. Writers acknowledge the impact of technology on their industry, but a less distinct line is drawn to their work as content creators. That
small space of content creation where the impact of technology is less invasive ends up having a ripple effect that impacts the trajectory of the medium as a whole.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First is the scope. This research is based on a small number of interviews. Ten television writers cannot possibly represent the number of unique creative opinions in the television industry, though I hope they can be representative in a limited manner. While I am making conclusions based on the interviews I have completed, they might not hold true if a larger pool of interviews were used. While I tried to supplement my interviews with published interviews of other television creators, a bigger study would be preferable to confirm the conclusions I have found. There are basic limits of any interviewing process as well. I am looking to find the truth that is available in this data, but the medium is full of a variety of perspectives, and I only reached a few.

I took what the writers told me as their truths, though in all interviews there are agendas brought by both the interviewer and interviewee. Though Caldwell does warn that, particularly in this industry, there can be a romanticizing of the process, of the creators’ own story (Production Culture 14), I attempted to discern the truth of the writers’ experiences. A more elaborate study might look at the possible disparity between the story that television writers tell and contradictions they might not realize they are facing, or possibly try to further examine their experiences of ceding creativity to business needs. The basic opposition of creativity and commodification of the television
medium would lend itself to a stronger postmodern analysis of how these opposing forces interact with each other.

Within my interviews, time was another limitation. I would have liked even more time with each writer, or possibly a second round of follow up interviews, but both their schedules and my research timeline prevented that. I did manage to get some, but not all, follow up emails answered. And I found that the two email-only interviews ended up having a more narrow scope than the eight in-person interviews. Ideally all interviews would be in-person. But a perfect set of conditions is not often possible for research, so I used the opportunity I had as best as I could. Overall, this is a small study that is able to offer insight but not absolute answers to the mechanics of a medium in transition.
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