

FRANCES NELSON

Auckland University of Technology

ANGELIQUE NAIRN

Auckland University of Technology

An exploration of identity work in *Showrunners*

ABSTRACT

A prevailing tension exists in the creative industries between the need for creative people to express their intrinsic motivations to the highest standard and the external and possibly mundane pressures of regular employment. In other words, creative people who seek employment and strive to be employable are expected to navigate the daily administrative pressures of budgets, deadlines, market demands and client needs, while holding to 'their artistic capabilities and credibility.' Negotiating the prevailing artistic-commercial duality pushes creative people into forms of immaterial labour to maintain their personal feelings of authenticity and preserve identity concepts. The need to wear both creative and commercial hats is strongly evident in the complex role of television showrunners, who are expected not only to write a hit show, but also to produce it.

*Against this background of the conflicted role of showrunners, we thematically analyse the documentary *Showrunners: the art of running a TV show*¹ to show how workers' identities are constructed and maintained in an environment that is both highly creative and strongly commercial.*

KEYWORDS

identity
showrunners
creative identity
commercial
identity development
intrinsic motivation

INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles Times columnist Scott Collins² describes showrunners as:

Hyphenates, a curious hybrid of starry-eyed artists and tough-as-nails operational managers. They're not just writers; they're not just producers. They hire and fire writers and crew members, develop story lines, write scripts, cast actors, mind budgets and run interference with studio and network bosses.

The term 'showrunner', as Collins puts it here, designates a person responsible for the writing and the timely, on-budget production of television series.³ Groves⁴ defines a showrunner as 'a writer-producer who has the primary creative oversight of each project'. We submit that the position of showrunners is an invidious one, because like Janus, they look simultaneously in opposite (and in this case, opposing) directions: one direction faces them towards the intrinsic satisfaction of creative work, and the other, towards the daily exigencies of budgets, project planning, risk management and the general administration of creative projects.⁵ The purpose of this paper is to examine the identity work of showrunners, using the eponymous documentary as our text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically (but stereotypically), the prevailing view of 'creative people' (whatever that means!) has constructed them as talented, free-spirited non-conformists, wrapped up in the pursuit of their art to the point that the commercial value of their work was of little concern to them.⁶ A cynic might say that there is some utility in perpetuating the tradition of artists starving in garrets for the sake of their art⁷, because the more desperate the artists' financial plight, the more likely they are to accept any price for their work, or in the case of actors, any job, even if it undervalues their artistic worth⁸. Artists, the arts, creativity, were kept under control⁹ by the operation of financial and social forces that benefited a relatively small and elite social group.¹⁰

A change in the discourses of creativity took place in the mid-nineties¹¹, when a policy-based push towards 'creative industries'¹² began to promote the notion of the 'creative entrepreneur' and prompted creative people to adopt more commercial attitude towards themselves and their work.¹³ This move towards the dollar was not exactly a stampede, however, and creative workers did not immediately abandon their intrinsic motivation¹⁴ in favour of primarily pleasing the market-place. Instead, what did seem to happen was an acceptance, albeit a sometimes uneasy one,¹⁵ of the constraints imposed by the business and organisational side of creativity, such as tight deadlines, shoe-string budgets¹⁶ and technological advances. In a view far removed from early ideas of artists single-mindedly

guarding the purity of their art against all comers, successful creative people are now considered multi-skilled and multi-talented, because as Elsbach and Flynn¹⁷ argue, they are attuned to the idea that they will don different hats at different stages of the creative projects in which they are involved. For instance, at the beginning of a project, a creative person may be quite idealistic about and defensive of their vision for making something ‘novel and useful,’¹⁸ but as the project progresses, will become increasingly pragmatic and prepared to compromise their vision as they strive to bring the project in on time and on budget¹⁹. Showrunners’ work is a contemporary example of constantly seeking equilibrium between responsibility to, and satisfaction in, the creative ideal, and pressures from the studios and networks whose financial survival is tied up in the shows.

How do creative people, including showrunners, navigate such conflicting values? According to Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis and Ingram,²⁰ creative people sometimes manipulate their creative identities according to the time and space in which they find themselves. For example, working with a mix of different talents can challenge creative people so that they generate abundant new ideas, as happens in the writing room where showrunners develop the storylines for their shows. That said, they may need separate spaces dedicated to particular activities in order to move from one salient identity to another,²¹ locating ‘doing business’ in an office area, and ‘doing creativity’ at (for example) the writing desk.

Shifting from one identity to another depending on task and situation requires considerable effort. Individuals who undertake such identity work strive to build a sense of *self* that satisfies their need for approval²² and do so by adjusting their behaviour within social structures in accordance with their evaluation of others’ responses to them.²³ People’s need to validate their self-concepts leads them to associate with those who are likely to augment identity positively, so that they develop positive self-esteem.²⁴ The potential for conflict between creativity and business that is inherent in the showrunner role means that there is no one group for showrunners to identify with. Instead, they must simultaneously be all things to at least two, possibly opposing, groups, and may end up with no clear source of positive esteem.

Socialisation into the prevailing cultures of creative workplaces and what it means to be either a creative *or* a ‘suit’, or, in the case of the showrunners, a creative *and* a suit, can mean that creative workers are able to fulfil the needs of the job only by subordinating their private lives to their projects. The fears induced by precarious work²⁵ lead to over-identification, and as Kreiner and Ashforth²⁶ assert ‘...an overidentified individual can become completely

consumed by work and thereby lose a sense of individual identity, or might be less able to see faults of the organization or less willing to point them out'. Showrunners belong in the precariat²⁷ and the 'life of gigs' means that they all tend to see themselves as workers before anything else. No matter the confusion that might ensue to personal identity, for showrunners the construction of the 'working stiff' identity provides a relatively unproblematic social identity that is built around work.

METHOD

Noting key words and recurrent ideas,²⁸ we each watched *Showrunners: the art of making a TV show* six times to see whether the data in the documentary coalesced into recurrent patterns that would allow us to describe and classify observed phenomena.²⁹ Finding patterns in the raw data allows researchers to begin the process of interpretation³⁰ and to set up some basic codes³¹ that identify and name 'interesting features.'³² We each developed a set of codes separately, then compared notes to assess the similarities and differences in our individual readings of the documentary. This process led us to organise group some codes, discard one code, and accept the others as valid. The established codes,³³ were grouped into the themes that follow. We found two clearly delineated themes: 'Imposed constraints' and 'It's not easy being me!' Both themes were universally represented by the participants in the documentary: there were no outliers.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first theme that was uncovered in the data was 'imposed constraints', which sums up the idea that the freedom to be creative is not infinite, and that sooner or later (often sooner), inspiration has to coalesce into concrete, bankable product. A good showrunner, therefore, manages to balance creative drive with externally imposed constraints of time and budget, accepting the reality of what Bilton³⁴ and Cools, Stouthuysen and Van den Abbeele³⁵ have called 'bounded creativity'. Bounded creativity has appeal because it posits that there is room for the intrinsic motivation that is reckoned to be part of the creative psyche³⁶ while simultaneously acknowledging the validity of organisational requirements. Certainly, the discourse of bounded creativity is likely to hold strong attraction for managers who are faced with the opposing needs of both managing for and fostering creativity while simultaneously upholding the legitimacy of organisational procedures. In the reality of organisational life, however, bounded creativity may be more successful as a discursive construct than as a practice for managing creative people.

The imposition of organisational limitations may be thought to impinge on creative identity because an economic logic might diminish or in other ways threaten the creative impulse, but Eikof and Haunschild,³⁷ take an opposing view, saying, ‘Since it is commonly acknowledged that professional artists experience an economic necessity to market their artistic capabilities and credibility, a certain level of market-orientation will not spoil an artist's credibility within the occupational community.’ The Eikof and Hauschild³⁸ argument here seems designed to comfort and reassure creative workers (and possibly their managers as well) that it is acceptable to make money from talent, but it is a vague statement: how much market orientation, for instance, constitutes the ‘certain level’ that will not spoil credibility?

Cohen³⁹ argues that cultural workers need no coercion to invest themselves deeply in their work, often self-exploiting by working long hours for no pay to achieve their desired standard. In relation to this, it appears that on the one hand, showrunners have control of their careers and their day-to-day work, but on the other hand, studios are in the position to demand high quality products while imposing intense constraints.⁴⁰ As one showrunner said, ‘They [the studios] write the cheques, they pay the bills’ and ‘Networks have goals too’. Although showrunners appear to have autonomy over much of the any show they work on, in fact, studios never surrender full control over production and editing decisions.⁴¹ Bilton⁴² points out that embedded ‘mutual suspicion, defensiveness and culturally-embedded assumptions and values’ separate creative workers and ‘suits’, and certainly, some showrunners said that they have had ‘to compromise [their] vision’ or risk being ‘branded a maverick’. Resistance, in fact, might be said to be futile: showrunners feel vulnerable and untrusted⁴³ when they fight back against control by the organisation, because opposition to organisational wishes inevitably has a negative impact on professional reputation.

Despite the tension outlined above, the showrunners featured in the documentary are presented as fully aware of the drives of both their own creativity and the needs of the organisations in which their creativity was temporarily housed. One showrunner, for instance, spoke of the need to deliver ‘quality scripts on time’; and another said, philosophically, that the work ‘is a dance’ between delivering quality scripts and delivering quality scripts *on time*, which are not, of course, necessarily the same thing and may sometimes be mutually exclusive. Another showrunner seemed quite approving of the imposed balancing act, saying simply that he ‘gets bored if it is too straightforward’. Thus, for some, the imposed constraints are acknowledged as part of the creative brief and further, even a stimulus to ingenuity: the showrunners are shown as conscious of the need to manoeuvre their creative

and business identities according to the time they have and the space they are in.⁴⁴ One showrunner commented that he develops ‘a rhythm for the day’ in line with the demands of the organisation. Others, however, focused chiefly on the joy they found in their creativity, saying, ‘I am a writer first’; ‘I feel awesome [when writing]’.

The second theme in the documentary centres on the professional self-awareness of the showrunners, and rotates around the idea that ‘it’s not easy being me’. Showrunners, like everyone else, construct their identity from social interaction and collaboration, during which they evaluate and respond to the people around them. In the work context, strong personal identities may undermine an individual’s creative vision: group projects and collaboration require recognition and incorporation of other people’s ideas⁴⁵ in order to produce creative goods that can be ‘adored, respected, worshipped, idolised...consumed.’⁴⁶ The process of producing these desirable goods, however, is not necessarily easy: the showrunners speak of people who. ‘shit on everybody’ and admit that they ‘drive each other crazy’. It is a workplace in which, apparently, ‘everybody is just a little annoyed at you’.

They all express the idea, too, that they must work as hard on developing a personal brand as they do on the creative good they are contracted for. Thus, they feel that the workplace is, as one participant said, ‘a little bit like a rock concert’; in that they are always ‘on’ and must be able to deliver high energy, high quality performances or run the risk of losing the ‘fan base’ and reputation that guarantees them future work. Conditions of work for showrunners are, therefore, inherently emotionally debilitating, and these negative emotions are often impediments to the creative process, which carries its own burden of frustration and anxiety⁴⁷. As Gnezda,⁴⁸ puts it, ‘creators struggle, start over, reconsider, become exasperated, and question their abilities’, and the showrunners in the documentary say they. ‘worry about everything’ and ‘never feel like you are doing a good enough job’; they are aware that ‘every episode is not a home run’.

Two factors seem to be inextricably intertwined with the ‘it’s not easy being me’ theme. First, the work is precarious, and future contracts depend on present success⁴⁹. Second, the showrunners are creative people, and express creatives’ usual concerns about doing creativity. These two aspects of the showrunners’ working life lead to self-doubt and identity conflict within their role, and contribute to a degree of over-identification with the job in hand. Kreiner and Ashforth⁵⁰ posit that ‘...over-identified individuals can become completely consumed by work and thereby lose a sense of individual identity’ to the point that they will sacrifice relationships, self-exploit by working unsustainably and unhealthily long hours, and ultimately, experience depersonalisation of the self. The documentary shows

the showrunners in various stages of this state. One, for instance, remarks, ‘the work is utterly consuming’ and ‘all I thought about was the show’. Another commented that show failure ‘is like giving away an appendage’. Perhaps the most moving remark, however, was from the showrunner who said simply, ‘you need to sacrifice a lot’.

CONCLUSION

Showrunners, this odd ‘hyphenate’,⁵¹ are shown in the documentary to express, primarily, the creative stereotype of intrinsic motivation and aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction⁵²: they feel they must show a rebellious and nonconformist side so that they retain their uniqueness in collaborative work situations that dilute their creativity and obscure their signature style.⁵³ At the same time, the showrunners are shown as pragmatic, reluctantly willing to compromise their personal creativity in order to meet in the creative process and to comply with the organisation’s objectives. The showrunners were also shown to move between idealism and pragmatism in relation to the stages of the creative project, predictably displaying more idealism at the beginning of the project and more pragmatism towards the end when they felt pressure to accept the organisation’s requirements. This being so, it is perhaps inevitable that showrunners were pigeon-holed in the documentary as being too inflexibly concerned with either the initial ideas or final version of the product, rather than with the whole project. This finding contrasts with Elsbach and Flynn’s⁵⁴ assertion that creatives are often considered to be flexible people who are able to combine creativity and practicality in ways that lead to innovative, well-executed ideas. Importantly, however, the view of showrunners as inflexible is not borne out by their behavior: the showrunners were, as we have already pointed out, pragmatic about serving organisational requirements. The difference between Elsbach and Flynn’s⁵⁵ findings about creatives in the wider milieu and the representation of showrunners in the documentary may be that the showrunners often reveal their reluctance to compromise and their sense of themselves as creatives first and organisational servants second.

Having revealed excerpts of the showrunners’ ‘real’ lives, what does the documentary have to say about the nature of creative labour and the deployment of creativity as a fuel for the work? Perhaps that all creative projects are ‘same, same, but different’ or more accurately, ‘different, different, but same’? In other words, in the creative sector, the type of endeavour may vary – acting, fine arts, fashion, film, writing, and so on – but no matter what is being made, working conditions in creative projects continue to allow exploitation and self-exploitation.⁵⁶ What comes across strongly in the documentary is the sense that compliance

with organisational imperatives is an unspoken rule against which the showrunners rarely rebel lest they be labelled ‘childish’ or ‘mavericks’ and endanger the possibility of future work. At the back of their minds, there always seems to be the echo of Wexler’s⁵⁷ observation of the reality of work in the film industry: ‘If you don’t like it, go sell shoes’.

In summary, then, the job title ‘showrunners’ is part of the ‘different, different, but same’ illusion. It is a relatively new term for a reconfiguration of old job, and the inclusion of the word ‘runners’ implies power and control, that the bearers of the title will be in charge, running everything, responsible for all decisions. In terms of control, the title is a sham. Showrunners may be given an illusion of more power and a perception of creative freedom, but they still cede ultimate control to the people with the money. In fact, showrunners wear a new label, but they work in a space that is delineated by the old divide between creativity and commerce.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dr Frances Nelson is the Creative Industries curriculum leader on the Bachelor of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests include organisational communication, organisational legitimacy, organisational power dynamics and the age of creativity

Dr Angelique Nairn is a lecturer in Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology where she specialises in teaching creative industries and media communication. Her research interests include organisational identity and identification, creative work and the business of creativity.

CONTACT: fnelson@aut.ac.nz; angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz

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