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Who You Know in Hollywood: A Network Analysis of Television Writers

Patricia F. Phalen, Thomas B. Ksiazek, and Jacob B. Garber

"It's who you know, not what you know," is a familiar phrase—often repeated by professionals in Hollywood. The present study focuses on "who knows who" among Hollywood television writers. Using network analysis, this exploratory study identifies the degree of centralization and types of connections found in this elite writers' network. Results show a great deal of collaboration in the network, and while male writers are more connected overall in Hollywood, women are more likely to be brokers—a structurally advantageous position. The authors provide explanations for collaboration patterns, especially with regard to gender differences in network roles, and propose avenues for further research.

Introduction

Television writers, unlike their feature film counterparts, have a great deal of decision-making authority over the final product (Newcomb & Alley, 1982, Phalen & Osellame, 2012). They create prime time entertainment; their ideas, experiences, and decisions determine the types of characters we see and the kinds of stories millions of people watch every day. As Marc and Thompson (1992, p. 4) put it, "The work of TV producers has come to dominate the American imagination and, increasingly, the world's imagination of America." Consequently, analysis of the institutions and processes of television production, or the program content of this influential medium, requires understanding writers and how they work.

Patricia F. Phalen *(Ph.D., Northwestern University) is an associate professor of Media & Public Affairs at The George Washington University. Her research interests include television production, the work culture of television writers, audience research, and the history of media organizations.*

Thomas B. Ksiazek *(Ph.D., Northwestern University) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Villanova University. His research interests include patterns of cross-platform media use, new forms of user engagement with the news, implications of audience behavior for society and the field of journalism, and the application of network analysis to the consumption and production of media.*

Jacob B. Garber *(B.A., The George Washington University) is a master's candidate in English at the University of California, Davis. His research interests include cultural geography, contemporary media consumption, and narratives of the Silicon Valley/Bay Area in television, film and literature.*

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This study contributes to this understanding by identifying central figures in the network of prime time writers, mapping the characteristics of writers' networks, and posing questions for further research based on these findings. After reviewing the literature on writing for television, we explain our research questions, methodology, and results. We end with a discussion of this study's implications and proposed avenues for further research.

Literature Review

Academic studies of television writing come mostly from the fields of media industry studies and sociology. Phalen and Osellame (2012) found that the social realities of reputational effects, and the experience of the group writing process, dominate the professional culture of television writing. Their study documents, in the words of writers themselves, the importance of social networks in getting and keeping jobs. The research further suggests that lack of access to these networks often results from prejudice based on gender, race, and age.

Bielby and Bielby (1996) also observe that the highly structured market for television writers relies heavily on gaining access to the social network (p. 163). They argue that "women's marginal location within networks of decision makers, and the high levels of ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty surrounding employment decisions, social similarity, and gender stereotypes are likely to have a strong impact on employment decisions" (p. 249). The same authors (Bielby & Bielby, 2002) found that women and older writers face discrimination in television and feature film. Stempel's (1996) history of American television writing also suggests hiring bias against women and minorities.

Caldwell (2008) emphasizes the importance of studying the professional cultures of media workers. He observes that film and television are influenced not only by macroeconomic processes, but also by the micro-social level as local cultures and communities in their own right. The more we know about these communities, the better we will understand the creative products of these culture industries (p. 201). And, as Bielby (2010) argues, "understanding the social organization and dynamics of the creative worlds in which cultural production takes place is crucial to achieving a more nuanced and empirically informed approach to the study of global cultural production" (p. 590). A key dimension of the social organization and dynamics of writing for television is the configuration of the writers' network.

In addition to academic studies, literature about the television writing process includes two additional categories: "how-to" books and articles containing script samples, descriptions of the writing process and career advice for those new to the field; and transcripts of interviews with well-known writers. How-to publications, especially those that include overviews of the writing profession, invariably emphasize the importance of tapping into the network of writers by cultivating contacts in the industry. Pamela Douglas (2015), for example, provides a comprehensive description and analysis of the craft, including quotes and anecdotes from successful television writers. She emphasizes professional networking as the way to find and land writing jobs on TV series, summarizing this advice as, "Producers hire who they

know" (p. 198). She stresses the importance of building networks of trust and staying in touch with people over time. Smith's (1999) discussion of writing as a business explains that getting hired as a writer might be based entirely on personal connections within the industry, sometimes requiring no formal education (p. 175). These publications also provide insight into the day-to-day work of TV writers, especially the social realities of the workplace (e.g., Blum, 1995; Epstein, 2006; Kelsey, 1995; Pearlman & Finer, 2004).

Transcripts of interviews with writers and stories about their career experiences provide valuable insight into the realities of professional success . . . and failure (e.g., Froug, 1991; Meyers, 2010; Prigge, 2005; Wild, 1999). When writers discuss their career paths, they often reference a friend or acquaintance that helped them find (and keep) their jobs. Prigge (2005) found, for example, that all seven writers he interviewed agreed that who you know is more important than what you know when it comes to getting a job as a television writer. Showrunners give a great deal of weight to recommendations when they hire a writing staff because, while evaluating an applicant's writing ability is fairly straightforward, it is very difficult to know whether a writer is able to work with others under stressful circumstances. This kind of information is gleaned from people the showrunner trusts—in other words, people within his/her network of contacts (Phalen & Osellame, 2012).

Although both the academic and trade literature about television writing is rife with arguments about the importance of social networks, little research has been done on the specific configuration and ongoing effects of personal networks in the television industry. However, relevant empirical precedents do exist in research on the film industry. Cattani and Ferriani (2008), for example, studied the professional networks of filmmakers, concluding that individuals who occupy the intermediate positions between core and periphery in a network are in favorable positions to innovate. Perretti and Negro (2007) studied the characteristics of team membership in filmmaking, and found that genre innovation occurred when teams included newcomers. Yet other research (e.g., Wakabayashi, Yamashita, & Yamada, 2009) has found a lack of integration, where filmmakers display a tendency to collaborate with small, stable, and homogenous teams.

The goal of the present study is to address the gap in our understanding of the configuration and role of professional writers' networks in the television industry.

Research Questions

The importance of professional relationship networks in the market for television writers, and the differential experiences of men and women within these networks, suggested the following exploratory research questions:

RQ_1: Who are the central figures in the Hollywood TV writing profession?

RQ_2: Is the network of writers highly centralized or more balanced?

RQ_3: Is there a difference between men and women in the influence they have in the network of television writers?

Our expectation was that the writers' network would be highly centralized with a few very powerful showrunners in a well-connected network. Writers like J. J. Abrams, Stephen Bochco, and Dick Wolf have created several highly successful programs—in fact, successful showrunners often have more than one show on the air at the same time. Their proven ability to create and run hit series makes them highly valued by studios and networks. It stands to reason that they would occupy a privileged position in the network.

Further, we expected the most powerful writers would be men, and far fewer women would be centrally located in the network. Based on previous research (e.g., Bielby & Bielby, 1996; Bielby & Bielby, 2002; Phalen & Osellame, 2012; Stempel, 1996) showing that women face more obstacles to advancement than do their male counterparts, we also expected women to appear more often on the periphery, possibly even in subgroups—small clusters of writers mostly or completely disconnected from the main network.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the network of writers in television drama, we created an extensive database linking writers with the programs they worked on. This information came from two commercial industry databases: Studio System by Gracenote and IMDBPro. Studio System is the standard data source used by the industry, so it was the primary resource used to compile the database. IMDBPro served as a backup to check for accuracy.

Our network database includes all regularly scheduled drama series that ran on broadcast or cable television during the 2005–2012 broadcast years, and all writers who worked on these series. Studio System identifies programs by the broad categories of "drama" and "comedy" as well as sub-genres such as sci-fi, crime, and mystery. Our analysis includes all the series they designate as dramas. In cases where programs are listed as both drama and comedy, we made judgment calls based on content. So, for example, we included *West Wing* and *The Newsroom* in our analysis of dramas, even though they are listed in Studio System as "drama and comedy."

Some series had their full run within this time period; others began earlier or ended later but aired at least one season within these 7 years. This time frame was chosen for three reasons. First, the goal was to get a sense of the writers' network as it exists today—a "first look" at relationship patterns. Future analyses will include older programs as well. Second, the time frame ensures that programs still in their original run are part of the database. And third, the approach yields a mix of "full run" and "partial run" series,[1] which means there is enough movement of writers between programs to capture connections built over time.

For each drama, the network database includes all writers credited on the series. Because titles are sometimes ambiguous in television, we used decision rules to avoid crediting non-writing producers in the database as writers:

- Showrunner, Supervising Producer, Consulting Producer, Writer, Creator, Script Editor, Story by, Story Editor, "Screenplay by" and "Teleplay by" are always credited as writers.
- Executive Producer, Co-executive Producer, Producer, Co-Producer, Script Producer and Series Producer are counted as writers if Studio System identifies them as writers in other capacities (e.g., if a Co-Producer on Program A is identified as a writer in his or her profile s/he is credited as a writer on Program A. If a Co-Producer is not identified as a writer in the profile, s/he is not credited in the network database as a writer on Program A).

Each writer is also identified in the database by gender to allow comparisons of networking patterns.

Network Analysis

Collaboration patterns were explored through a network analysis of all writers on the 380 prime time drama series in the dataset. The nodes in the network represent individual writers (N = 2,432) and the connections represent the number of times each pair of writers worked together on a series. The analysis was conducted with the UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) statistical package for network analysis and the visualizations were created with the complementary NetDraw software (Borgatti, 2002). For each writer we calculated a degree score, a common network measure of the number of connections per actor. Writers with high degree scores have collaborated more often with other writers—this is a measure of how prolific a writer is, as well as how influential s/he is in the network. For example, J. J. Abrams has a degree score of 137, meaning that he has collaborated with 137 other writers in the network.

Centrality measures offer a parsimonious way to capture the degree of collaboration for each writer in the network. The initial analysis included three common centrality measures: degree centrality, closeness centrality, and betweenness centrality. After careful consideration, we chose to use closeness and betweenness centrality in the final analysis because each accounts for both direct and indirect connections. "Direct" ties capture pairs of writers that have worked together on a series. "Indirect" ties would account for instances where writers A and C haven't worked together, but they have both worked with writer B. We would say that writers A and C have an "indirect" connection through writer B. As Hanneman and Riddle (2005) suggest:

> Degree centrality measures might be criticized because they only take into account the immediate ties that an actor has, or the ties of the actor's neighbors, rather than indirect ties to all others. One actor might be tied to a large number

> of others, but those others might be rather disconnected from the network as a whole. In a case like this, the actor could be quite central, but only in a local neighborhood. Closeness centrality approaches emphasize the distance of an actor to all others in the network by focusing on the distance from each actor to all others. (Chapter 10, Closeness Centrality section, para. 1–2)

In other words, closeness centrality is a more comprehensive measure because it takes into account indirect contacts to all other writers in the network. In fact, the centrality of an actor changes—often dramatically—when we look at closeness centrality vs. degree centrality. For example, the five most influential writers when we consider only first order connections are Jonas Pate, Bryan Burk, J. J. Abrams, Bruce Miller, and Marc Guggenheim. But when we consider indirect ties as well, the most influential writers are Ian Beiderman, Treena Hancock, Melissa Byer, Rob Wright, and Marc Guggenheim. Only one person shows up on both lists.

In addition to closeness centrality, we explored "brokerage," or "betweenness centrality." A broker is influential because s/he sits in a structurally advantageous position, where s/he can connect others in the network. In the hypothetical example above, writer B would be considered a broker between writers A and C. Hanneman and Riddle (2005) explain betweenness centrality:

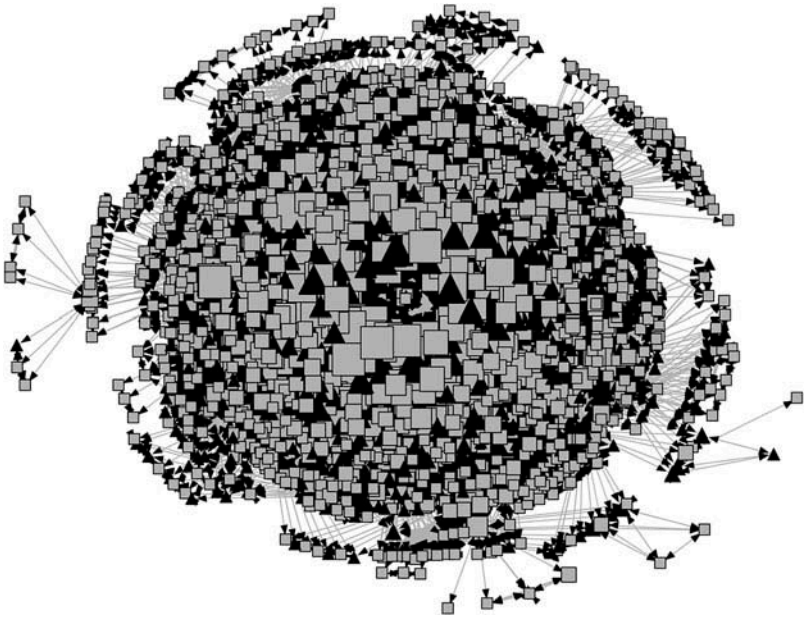
> betweenness centrality views an actor as being in a favored position to the extent that the actor falls on the geodesic [shortest] paths between other pairs of actors in the network. That is, the more people depend on me to make connections with other people, the more power I have. If, however, two actors are connected by more than one geodesic path, and I am not on all of them, I lose some power. (Chapter 10, Betweenness: Freeman's approach section, para. 1)

This means that when a writer is connected to another writer only through the one person who can broker the contact, that broker has power in the network. The five drama writers with the highest betweenness centrality scores are: Melissa Byer, Treena Hancock, Barbara Nance, Sheila Lawrence, and Gabrielle Stanton.

Findings

The full television writers' network, using a spring-embedded layout algorithm,[2] is shown in Figure 1. Black triangles are female writers; gray squares are males. The size of the nodes indicates the number of shows they've worked on. Nodes are located spatially based on their connections to other nodes, which means that two writers who have worked together will be closer to one another than two writers with no shared writing credits. The more a writer collaborates, the more centrally s/he will be located. In order to reduce the clutter in this already-dense visualization, we chose to show only the nodes and connections, without writers' names. However, our observations in this section and the next will refer to writers by name when appropriate.

Figure 1
Television Writers' Network 2005–2012.



Contrary to our prediction for RQ_1, the television writers' network is not highly centralized; there is a great deal of collaboration in this network. This visual interpretation is supported by a relatively low centralization score[3] of 0.63% (on a scale of 0–100%), which suggests a more equal distribution of collaboration patterns as opposed to just a handful of highly central actors with the rest on the periphery. Figure 1 is consistent with this interpretation, where the vast majority of writers exist in the densely connected center of the visualization. While the majority of those in the center are men, many women also occupy central positions. In fact, 2 of the top 3 writers, based on closeness centrality, are women: Treena Hancock and Melissa Byer.

As noted earlier, high degree scores indicate that a writer is prolific—s/he has worked on a number of programs, and is therefore connected to many other writers. It is interesting to note that the ranking on degree centrality yields a different "top 10" list than the ranking on closeness centrality. J. J. Abrams, for example, is one of the most prolific writers, but when indirect ties are included in the analysis, he barely makes the top 20 writers. One possible explanation for this is that Abrams hires the same writers on different shows, and/or he works with writers who are not part of the Hollywood network. As a consequence, he doesn't have the same number of indirect ties as his colleagues.

The network centralization score of 0.63%, while indicating that relationship patterns are more balanced than centralized, does not mean that there are no writers on the

Table 1
T-test Results Comparing Centrality Between Female and Male Writers (n = 2432)

	Female		Male		
	M	SD	M	SD	T
Normalized Closeness Centrality	0.49	0.10	0.51	0.06	–3.01**
Normalized Betweenness Centrality	0.09	0.21	0.07	0.15	2.37*

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$
Note. Means are based on real values for ease of interpretation, while *t* statistics are calculated with log-transformed values to address skewed distributions.

periphery of the main network.[4] As Figure 1 illustrates, there are several subgroups that are loosely tied to the main network. There are several reasons a subgroup might be relatively unconnected. For example, a subgroup might have older connections that don't appear on this graph because our analysis is limited to 7 broadcast years. Additionally, while it is difficult for writers to move from one genre to another, some have made this change successfully; a subgroup might represent writers who have moved from comedy to drama and, as a consequence, have contacts in a different network. The subgroup could also work for a new production company that hired writers outside of the Hollywood mainstream. And, members of the subgroup might have worked on too few shows to develop an extensive set of contacts.

We expected to find more women than men on the periphery of this network because female writers face more obstacles to advancement. However, this was not the case. Writers in the subgroups are just as likely to be men as women. Whether (and how) these writers are able to transition from subgroups to the main network is a subject for future study.

To answer RQ_3, we compared the closeness centrality and betweenness centrality scores for men and women. Table 1 shows the results of a t-test of these scores.

Normalized closeness is a metric that measures centrality in terms of the distance of each writer from all other writers. In essence, this measure accounts for the prestige of a writer's connections—if s/he is connected to other central figures, s/he is closer to all others in the network. On this measure, there is a significant difference between male and female writers. Men are more likely to have contacts of a higher prestige.

"Betweenness" is a metric that indicates the extent to which a writer falls on the geodesic (shortest) paths between other pairs of actors—the extent to which a writer is in a position to broker connections. Normalized betweenness expresses this metric as a percentage of maximum possible betweenness. While men are more likely to be centrally located in the network overall (Normalized closeness centrality: $t = –3.01$, $p < .01$), women are more likely to be in a position to broker connections in the network (Normalized betweenness centrality: $t = 2.37$, $p < .05$). In fact, as we discussed earlier, writers with the top five scores on "betweenness" are women.

Discussion

This analysis reveals important characteristics of the elite Hollywood network of television writers, and suggests several questions for further research. The high degree of collaboration among writers in the network suggests that reputations are easily made, and lost. In this sense, the phrase "you'll never work in this town again" is a real threat in terms of writers' careers. Potential employers are likely to hear about bad work, bad attitudes, and bad behavior on the part of writers before they even meet.

While not particularly surprising that men are more central in the network than women, a lack of diversity does have consequences for the production of television drama. However, the evidence that women can exercise power through the ability to broker contacts is significant. While past research finds discrimination and hiring bias against female writers (e.g., Bielby & Bielby, 1996; 2002; Stempel, 1996), this study suggests that some women in Hollywood have the opportunity to counteract these systematic tendencies by leveraging their structurally advantageous position as brokers. In his widely cited study "The strength of weak ties," Granovetter (1973) showed that indirect (weak) ties can be just as important as direct ties in an individual's network. For instance, he found weak ties were often more important in finding a new job because these connections introduce individuals to new contacts that would otherwise be outside their immediate network (strong ties). This pattern is consistently found in "small world" networks and is widely recognized in the "six degrees of separation" phenomenon (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). It also offers an empirical explanation for the common practice of "networking" to find a job, and suggests—from the perspective of brokerage—that female writers do hold powerful positions in the network of Hollywood TV writers.

Research has shown that minorities are conspicuously absent in the writers' rooms of Hollywood (Phalen & Osellame, 2012). At the present time our database does not contain information on race or ethnicity; as we add this information we will address questions related to minority writers. For example, do writers of different ethnicities network in different ways? Are minority writers present in the central positions of the writers' network? And how strong are the ties among minority writers themselves?

Another avenue for further research is the comparison of different networks of writers. As noted earlier, writers generally choose either comedy or drama; very few move from one genre to the other. It is possible that the comedy writers' network exhibits different centralization and brokerage patterns than the drama network. Do comedy writers network in the same way as their counterparts in drama? Are women more or less likely to be central figures in the comedy network? Are the collaboration patterns in comedy similar to those we found in drama?

Longitudinal analysis will allow us to look at changes in relationship patterns and, importantly, to identify events in the television industry that have affected writers' networks. For example, when cable television became a viable competitor to broadcast television in prime time, did established writers move from broadcast to cable? Did new writers enter the network—and what happened to them once they did? Are streaming services like Netflix and Amazon hiring experienced television writers for their original series, or are they drawing from outside the TV writers' network (e.g.,

hiring feature film writers)? Do changes in the networking patterns of writers coincide with technological or other changes in the television industry?

Finally, while this exploratory analysis provides broad insights into the overall structure of the TV writers' network, interviews and ethnographic work would contribute depth to our understanding of these collaboration patterns. Taking the present findings as a starting point, researchers could explore individual interpretations regarding collaboration in Hollywood. For instance, how do women experience the networking process? Do the brokerage findings actually play out in the day-to-day experiences of female writers?

The network characteristics we identified in this study of drama writers—the dominance of male writers as central figures, the highly collaborative nature of the television writing profession, the influence of female writers as brokers in the network and the presence of peripheral subgroups—add to our knowledge of the structure behind the production of television programs. Our findings also raise the questions for further research that we outlined in this section. "Who You Know in Hollywood" demonstrates that network analysis is a very promising line of research on television production.

Notes

1. "Original run" means the first time a series runs on television; "full run" means the series is over; "partial" run means the series is ongoing.
2. The spatial placement of the nodes in Figure 1 is based on a spring-embedded layout procedure. The distance between two nodes is determined by a combination of the geodesic distance (i.e., shortest path) between those nodes, node repulsion, and similarity in tie strength. In simpler terms, the procedure treats the links as springs that enact a force upon a given node based on the tie strength between that node and all those to which it is connected. Thus, stronger ties will pull nodes together, while still accounting for the strength of ties to all other nodes.
3. Network centralization is a measure of the variability or inequality in the degree scores of all nodes in a given network (Monge & Contractor, 2003). It provides a macro-level indicator of the relative heterogeneity of the network, in terms of the linking architecture. Network centralization indicates the extent to which a few nodes exhibit disproportionately high degree scores. A high centralization score represents a high level of inequality in the degree scores, while a low score signifies greater equality. Thus, a high score suggests that a small number of writers are central in the network, with the rest on the periphery. A low centralization score, as was found in this study, suggests a relatively even distribution of degree scores across the entire network.
4. UCINET offers a core-periphery analysis, which seeks to determine whether the network is a good fit for a core-periphery structure. We ran this on our network, but the network was not a good fit for the strict core-periphery model. This does not mean that there isn't a core of more densely connected writers (i.e., the central ones); it just means that they are not completely disconnected from the rest of the network.

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