

## From Suits to Talent: "Management" in the Cultural Industries

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Showrunners are usually described as the individuals who manage the day-to-day responsibilities of television series production. Often they come from the ranks of the writers' room. Typically credited as executive producers, they are not necessarily the creators of the series they manage but they are vital to understanding how a series moves from conception to execution on a weekly basis. They straddle the line between management and creativity, serving as the middle man (and usually, they are men) between the so-called divide of network executive suits and highly paid creative talent. Few showrunners reach a level of name recognition in the popular press though the last few years have seen an explosion as a result of scandal, fighting, and tough negotiating (Chuck Lorre, Dan Harmon, and Matt Weiner, respectively).

Within this framework, it is quite rare to see female showrunners mentioned in the press. After all, women comprised just 22% of executive producer roles on prime-time broadcast series in 2010-11. One of the few that has received a lot of attention is Tina Fey, known first for her stint as a writer and performer on *Saturday Night Live* before leaving to launch her own show on NBC, *30 Rock*, with *SNL* creator and executive producer Lorne Michaels in 2006. With an active film career (both as a writer and as an actress) and a bestselling novel, Fey has become a household name, no doubt helped by being featured on a slew of magazine covers ranging from *Vogue* to *Bust*, and *Entertainment Weekly* to *Esquire* over the years.

Given the lack of prominent female showrunners currently operating on television series, it makes sense that Fey would be positioned as the (literal) cover girl for an industry that has long failed to promote women to key roles in series production. As most showrunners do emerge from the writers' room, the fact that women comprised only 15% of the writers on prime-time broadcast series in 2010-11 hardly speaks to a near-future equality in this field. In one interview in 2010, Fey was heralded as being a "one-woman comedy industry who has done it entirely on her own terms." She is often framed as the primary force behind *30 Rock*, with most press accounts eschewing Michaels' active role in its creation as well as omitting the name of her co-showrunner, Robert Carlock, in discussions about the show (though, he was included in the above cited article, just not until the fourth sentence). As both the actress playing the lead character Liz Lemon (herself a showrunner for the fictional *The Girlie Show*) and a frequent writer for the program, Fey embodies a unique ability to merge aspects of the creative and managerial aspects of being a showrunner with her critically acclaimed (though not largely viewed) series.

Yet I am hesitant to fully embrace the idea of a celebrity female showrunner like Fey as an answer to the gender divide among broadcast series showrunners. First of all, this promotion of Fey tends to exclude the fact that she is a co-showrunner, and it negates the plethora of decisions made behind-the-scenes by Carlock. This is not to say that Fey is not intimately involved in the show's overall direction. But as an actress and writer for the series, in addition to her role as a producer, many of the day-to-day activities of running the show do fall to her partner. In interviews, Carlock has discussed working with NBC executives to integrate certain guest stars and advertisers into the show as a way to keep the program on the air despite less than stellar ratings. He is presented as more of the behind-the-scenes producer of the series, actively involved in the key decisions that keep the show afloat. On the other hand, Fey tends to be asked in interviews more about the 'creative' aspects of the series, such as

the story arcs, characters, and references used on the series. It speaks to a divide between their perceived roles as showrunners.

Second of all, given her prominence before the launch of *30 Rock*, I think the instant status of Fey as showrunner also displaces the work that typically happens for a writer moving into that same position, particularly for women. Though she was a writer on *SNL*, the vast differences in writing for a weekly sketch show versus a sitcom hardly speak to an easy transition to the showrunner of a high budget, high-profile program. Other camera-ready female writers who have co-created recent shows like Whitney Cummings and Mindy Kaling have also been placed into the mantle of celebrity showrunner, and these examples help the networks promote themselves as inclusive despite the dismal numbers of women in key creative positions.

Fey's celebrity status affords her a visibility few other female showrunners experience yet she speaks to the tensions that define the role of the showrunner as both manager and talent, especially in the highly gendered world of broadcast television production.