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Televisual Authorship and Comedy Showrunners: The Case of Greg Daniels

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Abstract
The article focuses on Greg Daniels, the acclaimed comedy showrunner whose credits include the US version of *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) as well as *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997-2010), *Space Force* (Netflix, 2020-2022), and *Upload* (Amazon, 2020-). The author analyses press and podcast interviews with Daniels and his co-workers, as well as other articles connected to the showrunner and his works, supplementing them with quotes from a previously unpublished in-depth interview. The central emphasis lies on Daniels's creative methods, situated within the broader context of television and streaming shows authorship. The sources are interpreted with the help of methods characteristic of the critical media industry studies and utilize Jason Mittell's model of authorship by management.

For a significant period since the conception of the medium, television authorship had been overlooked as the production and reception strategies of fiction programming had relegated its creators to obscurity.[1] The situation started to change in the post-network era, when seminal works such as Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley's *The Producer's Medium*[2] as well as Robert Thompson's *Television's Second Golden Age*[3] have been published and the academic exposure of the issue in question gradually increased (within the field of production studies in particular, as well as media studies in general). The body of works dedicated to analysing the position of the showrunner[4] in the entertainment industry is indisputably growing, but while the research in question does attempt to fill significant gaps in the existing knowledge, it also tends to concentrate mostly on the creators of prestige TV dramas. Ted Nannicelli offers a useful enumeration of the most popular objects of focus in that regard, which includes such names as *Aaron Sorkin, David Chase, Joss Whedon, David Milch, and Vince Gilligan*.[5]

The claim to authorship – irrespective of whether it is defined as collective,[6] by management / by responsibility[7] or in an alternative way – tends to be made in the cases of showrunners whose output predominantly consists of dark, serious, and critically acclaimed dramas.[8] It seems that, so far, less attention has been given to the authorial agency of televisual comedy creators. While the causes of this predilection are consistent with the pathway laid out by research in adjacent fields, neglecting to examine cases from the other end of the narrative spectrum would be an oversight. This article will attempt to contribute to that area, by presenting a case study of Greg Daniels, who has served as a showrunner of such productions as *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997-2010), *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013), *Space Force* (Netflix, 2020-2022), and *Upload* (Amazon Prime, 2020-).

I will utilize methods characteristic of the critical media industry studies (CMIS), which, as the proponents of the field describe it: *First, in an anthropological sense, … examines the business culture of the media industries; how knowledge about texts, audiences, and the industry form, circulate, and change; and how they influence textual and industrial practices. Second, in an aesthetic sense, critical media industry studies seeks to understand how particular media texts arise from and reshape midlevel industrial practice*.[9] To that end, I will analyse articles about Daniels and his co-workers and interviews with them released in the press (both trade and general) and podcasts, as well as other publications connected to the TV creator and his works. The American version of *The Office* stands out here, since the exceptionally popular show has inspired numerous books and podcast series, the majority of which, even though they are addressed to a non-academic, popular reader, tend to adopt an oral history methodology, which is particularly useful within the CMIS framework. To supplement these sources, I have conducted an in-depth interview with Daniels, fragments of which will be quoted in this article.[10]

The Office: An enduring phenomenon

The year 2020 witnessed millions of people abruptly confined to their homes, and seeking ways to engage in leisure activities that would limit the possibility of COVID-19 transmission. As a result, the consumption of television and

streaming content has significantly increased.[11] Even though traditional networks and streaming services had to shut down production in March and, as a consequence, trim down the output of scripted shows for the first time since the inception of the so-called peak TV period, the final total number of new scripted series that year settled at a still impressive – and arguably overwhelming – 493.[12] Among those were the new seasons of numerous hit shows such as *The Mandalorian* (Disney+, 2019-), *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-), and *The Umbrella Academy* (Netflix, 2019-), to name a few. However, the most streamed television series of 2020, according to Nielsen, was not a new offering, but *The Office*, a show that aired its last episode seven years earlier on NBC.[13]

This situation is even more interesting when one considers that the series in question is an adaptation of a format owned by BBC. The pilot episode is a faithful recreation of the British original, and the central characters of Michael Scott (Steve Carell), Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson), Jim Halpert (John Krasinski), and Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer) have been inspired by David Brent (Ricky Gervais), Gareth Keenan (Mackenzie Crook), Tim Canterbury (Martin Freeman), and Dawn Tinsley (Lucy Davis), respectively. While the similarities naturally run deep, the American version establishes its unique identity early on. Daniels considered using an original script for the pilot but finally decided against it to avoid extensive network interference. *Whenever they asked me: "When are you going to do the script?" I would say: "Well, I'm just rewriting the original. You said you loved it!". So, I managed to sort of avoid a notes process on the script*.[14] This strategic move on the showrunner's part demonstrates how familiarity with industry conventions can allow a seasoned creator to affirm his independence and salvage the intended shape of the project. As soon as NBC greenlit the series, Daniels tapped directly into the local specificity of US corporate culture. This is evident in the second episode, "Diversity Day," in which Michael, the manager of the titular workspace, attempts to hold a diversity training, even though he is hopelessly oblivious to both codified and unwritten rules of conduct and decency. As the show progresses, its distinctiveness from the British original becomes even more pronounced, thanks in no small part to Daniels's contribution.

Biographical inspiration as a production requirement

Analysing the interplay between an author's supposed biography and their creative output is often criticized by anti-intentionalists as an oversimplification similar to the coarse implementations of *politique des auteurs*. While this article is not a voice in support of single authorship theory, I posit that Greg Daniels's creative input as a showrunner conforms to what Jason Mittell calls *authorship by management*.[15] Daniels himself on numerous occasions emphasized the significance of artistic contributions from other creators within and beyond the writers' room; in fact, I interpret this collaborative managerial style as one of the hallmarks of his authorship approach. Notwithstanding, I believe that including certain biographical facts in this analysis will allow for a better understanding of the showrunner's productions and artistic strategies.

The Office (NBC, 2005–2013)

In a profile article published in *The Exeter Bulletin*, Daniels recollects that his father, who was a broadcast executive for Capital Cities Communications, *had an act that he would do at the yearly meeting of his company – it was his version of Johnny Carson's Carnac* [the Magnificent] *called Aaronac, and so I wrote jokes for him … In "The Office" there's an Aaronac joke where Michael is preparing to do something for the Dundies. He tells the same joke that I wrote for my dad when I was 14*.[16] Daniels stresses that the practice of 'writing from life' is at least partially inspired by the general demands of comedic writing craftsmanship: *There's a lot of volume involved in television, so if you have a good story, you put it right in there. That way, you're not copying other shows, you're taking the stories from your lives*.[17] This statement clearly situates the 'writing from life' practice within the realm of production requirements: for television writers and showrunners, taking inspiration from their respective biographies is usually not a gesture of a solitary authorial genius,[18] single-handedly forging a fictional world rooted in their internal experiences and memories, but rather a necessity, dictated by the rapid pace and high demands of the industry.

After graduating from Philips Exeter Academy in 1981, Daniels was admitted to Harvard University, where he majored in history and literature.[19] While attending the Ivy League institution, the future showrunner of *The Office* engaged in journalism, at first writing for the university newspaper and then, as a junior, joining the staff of *The Harvard Lampoon*.[20] This humour magazine is not only a well-recognized publication but also, more importantly, a genuine talent forge for the entertainment industry – active involvement in the magazine has proven advantageous for *Lampoon* alumni, helping them secure positions in television writers' rooms.[21] Daniels and his friend, the future *Late Night* (NBC, 1982-) show host Conan O'Brien, joined those ranks when, shortly after graduating, they landed a job at HBO's sketch comedy show *Not Necessarily the News* (HBO, 1983-1999), followed by contracts at the short-lived *Wilton North Report* (Fox, 1987-1988) and the legendary *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-).

The next step for Daniels, who moved back to Los Angeles, was writing screenplays 'on spec'[22]. After spending the year 1991 working on a script for a feature-length motion picture that ultimately remained unproduced, Daniels once again used a biographical anecdote as a source of inspiration and prepared a screenplay that eventually found its way to the screen as the 22nd episode of *Seinfeld*'s (NBC, 1989-1998) third season, which aired on 22nd April, 1992.[23] The future showrunner then joined the writers' room of *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) during the show's fifth season in 1993. Daniels went on to pen some of the most critically acclaimed and fan-favoured episodes during his three-year stint at the animated sitcom, including "Homer and Apu" (season 5, episode 13, aired 10th February, 1994), "Lisa's Wedding" (season 6, episode 19, aired 19th March, 1995), and "Bart Sells His Soul" (season 7, episode 4, aired 8th October, 1995). Daniels's involvement in the influential animated sitcom proved fundamental in securing a position as the showrunner of NBC's version of *The Office* almost a decade later, in 2003: as it turned out, both Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant greatly admired one of his episodes, "Homer, Badman" (season 6, episode 9, aired 27th November, 1994).[24]

However, before Daniels could take the helm of *The Office*, he acquired his initial expertise as a showrunner on another animated sitcom, *King of the Hill*,

which tells the story of Hank Hill, the patriarch of a family living in the fictional city of Arlen, Texas. As part of an overall deal with the Fox network, he joined Mike Judge of *Beavis and Butt-Head* (MTV, 1993-1997) to help restructure and supplement the already partially developed project, which earned him a co-creator credit. Daniels has been recognized for introducing a unique, compassionate, and character-driven tonality to the first seasons of the animated comedy. The distinctive storytelling approach and production strategies established in *King of the Hill* became the defining features of his subsequent projects.

Beauty in ordinary things: Empathetic observational comedy

When crafting a comedy with a provincial setting, writers may find themselves leaning towards a strand of humour that can seem patronizing or even condescending; writing about the so-called fly-over country from offices located on the studio lots of Los Angeles or in Manhattan skyscrapers often proves a challenging task. Despite being born and raised in New York City, Daniels has always kept clear of using that scornful tone in his shows. Inhabitants of Arlen, Texas and Scranton, Pennsylvania (the American equivalent to Slough, where the British *Office* is set) are portrayed with empathy and attention, never sliding into hurtful stereotypes of dim-witted rednecks or narrow-minded small-town folk. At first glance, both the workers of the Scranton Branch of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company and the Hill family members seem to constitute rather unremarkable groups, but once the viewers get acquainted with them, it becomes evident that their struggles and aspirations can be not only entertaining and amusing, but also surprisingly touching. The fact that *The Office* utilizes a mockumentary style (or, as Brett Mills aptly calls it, *comedy vérité*[25]) allows the creators to make metafictional comments that work seamlessly within the larger narrative structure. The final episode includes a particularly adequate remark on the show's thematic scope, delivered in the form of the last talking head interview given by the character Pam Beesly: *I thought it was weird when you picked us to make a documentary. But, all in all… I think a paper company like Dunder Mifflin was a great subject for a documentary. There's a lot of beauty in ordinary things. Isn't that kind of the point?*

The series finale has been written by Greg Daniels, who resumed his showrunning duties for the concluding season, having handed them over to Paul Lieberstein and Jennifer Celotta for seasons five to eight. Therefore, the above-quoted line can be construed as an artistic manifesto of sorts. When asked directly about his approach, Daniels once again grounds his stylistic preferences in the realities of television production: *I think that your style comes out when you're not really paying attention. There's so much volume of work involved in running a TV show that you can't be too precious and intentional about curating a personal style. But what I'll say is, looking back, I'm drawn to certain kinds of topics, and then the way I execute them is* [by] *artistically checking with what makes me happy or what I believe, and then executing. The sum total of millions of little decisions like that turns into a style. There are certain beliefs that I have about people that underlie it, and one of the reasons why I loved "The Office" so much was because it was a mock documentary … To make it a good show, you had to*

imitate the value system of a documentary, which is very interested in truthful human behavior and ordinary people. I agreed with all that and I feel like in doing shows like "King of the Hill" – it was also observational comedy, supposedly about truthful behavior – we did our research. … The shows that I've done would fall into the category of character comedy. … There is, in these [kinds] *of shows, an emphasis that the differences between human beings in terms of their personality are interesting and valuable to look at. I do think that that's a more empathetic way to look at people nowadays when people seem to discount personality differences as being interesting. But I think they're very interesting.*[26]

Daniels firmly opposes the exaggerated vision of crafting an all-encompassing and entirely intentional showrunning style, instead pointing out how his creative method is impacted by the production conditions and – in the case of mockumentaries such as *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009-2020) – genre conventions. To communicate his approach to writers, camera operators, and actors alike, he advised them to always seek *truth and beauty* in their pursuits.[27] The expression, borrowed from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"[28] and rooted in the ancient concept of καλὸς κἀγαθός (Gr. *kalos kaghatos*), may sound pompous, but Daniels uses it in a straightforward manner, grounding it in specific practical techniques. Among them, he lists the previously mentioned method of 'writing from life' and discarding the tendency to reuse clichéd concepts from classic sitcoms.

Together with Ken Kwapis, who directed the pilot, and directors of photography Peter Smokler and Randall Einhorn, Daniels also developed a set of rules governing the visual style of *The Office*. To best emulate the spontaneous and authentic feel of a docusoap, the show – similarly to Gervais and Merchant's original – was shot on a set that did not include typical soundstage amenities, in particular movable prop-walls. DPs and camera operators were forced to work around numerous obstacles, and Daniels would give them notes that were more similar to those administered to performers than the usual technical guidance: *On any other show, it'd be, "Okay, I want you to pan over here and then on this line I want you to push in" … But on "The Office," I'd give notes to them like they were actors. I'd say, "You've been following this story and you know that this person, who's never expressed any interest in that person before, but you've suddenly noticed that they're eyeing them differently. Go for that."*[29] In order to strengthen the perceived authenticity, Daniels, Kwapis, and Einhorn treated the camera and its unseen operator like one of the characters and ensured that they were given a specific agenda.[30]

The desired sense of genuineness was further amplified in the editing room. Of all the cutting decisions made by the showrunner, the editing of talking head interviews provides the most evident example. Mirosław Przylipiak states that the primary ideological function of a talking head interview in a classical televisual documentary is to give an impression that the form is democratic – each of the characters is, supposedly, given a chance to justify their behaviour and provide their own interpretation of the recorded events. However, it is actually the director, hiding behind the presented statements, who decides how they will be placed within the structure of the film – and thus, how the viewers' reception is likely to be shaped.[31] This contradiction is a source of comedy in virtually every episode of *The Office* – time and again, Michael's failed comedic skits, which he

performs before his embarrassed employees, are cut together with his self-unaware, prideful enunciations in talking head segments or, alternately, with the reactions of his unimpressed subordinates. This editing technique is not characteristic of most documentaries – Przylipiak writes that a documentary director would usually cut out all of the *hesitations, stumbles, slips of the tongue, grammatical errors, i.e., everything that, while harming the readability of the argument, defines the individuality of the speaker*.[32] In the case of *The Office*, all such imperfections of speech come to the fore.

This method is not exploited to provide a simple parody of the talking head interviews but rather to show characters who are familiar with the conventions and attempt ineptly to imitate them. Michael tries to show his best side, which is evident not only in the contents of his soliloquies but also in voice modulation, facial expressions, and gestures. What is more, most of his statements in the talking head sections seem to be monologues unrelated to the crew's questions rather than actual interviews. In the pilot episode, Steve Carell's character states that he is a role model in the office, respected by his subordinates, and then proceeds to list his personal inspirational figures. The group includes Bob Hope, Abraham Lincoln, Bono, and, in the fourth place, God. Michael states that *all those people really helped the world in so many ways that it's really beyond words. It's really incalculcable* [sic!]. He delivers the entire tirade in a studied, elevated manner, glancing at the camera while adjusting a serious facial expression.

The other characters initially seem to be more sincere and treat the camera almost like a psychoanalyst with whom they can share their problems. What is clear, however, is that they, too, try to control the way they are portrayed in the talking head interviews. This is most prominent in the conversations with Jim Halpert and Pam Beesly, a pair of characters who are clearly attracted to each other but try to hide their feelings from both their colleagues and the documentary crew. Although the receptionist at Dunder Mifflin Scranton is engaged to Roy Anderson (David Denman), the emotional bond between her and the character played by John Krasinski is evident from the first minutes of the pilot episode. The two characters spend most of their time at work together, usually playing pranks on Dwight or mocking Michael. Occasionally, they let their guard down and allow themselves to experience a more affectionate encounter: In "Diversity Day," Pam falls asleep on Jim's shoulder, and in the first episode of the second season, she even briefly kisses him while under the influence of alcohol. However, the characters do not want to admit their feelings in front of the cameras because of Pam's relationship with Roy. On a few occasions, though, they do come close – a notable example, which highlights original editing choices made by Daniels, Kwapis, and David Rogers (the series' principal editor), is featured in "Booze Cruise," the 11th episode of the second season. Pam decides to confide in Jim about her relationship problems – her line *Sometimes I just don't get Roy. I mean… I don't know* is followed by 27 seconds of silence, during which the camera focuses on Jim, as he contemplates whether to reveal his infatuation. At the time of the episode's premiere, including such a long section with no line of spoken dialogue or expressive sound design was virtually unprecedented in American broadcast sitcoms.

The unwritten rules of television comedy dictate a strict rhythm, with the dialogue culminating in a punchline every half-minute, usually supplemented with a live or prerecorded laugh track. Daniels, however, felt it was crucial to avoid that ritualized pattern: *There's a lot going on in those 27 seconds. Just* [because] *people aren't talking doesn't mean nothing is going on. …* [In *The Office* – D. J.] *moments of behavior were really important, more so than jokes and setups and punchlines and lines*.[33] The tension between Jim and Pam is the focal point of the plot of the American version of *The Office*, and the classic will-they-or-won't-they storyline continues for three seasons, but is not acknowledged in the talking head interviews by the characters themselves until a member of the camera crew confronts them in the first episode of the fourth season. The narrative progression of the romantic plotline in later instalments is yet another instance of the *truth and beauty* principle at play. In numerous sitcoms, after the central romantic couple starts a relationship, the showrunners feel compelled to break them apart and thus reinstate the romantic tension between the protagonists. Daniels and his successors, Paul Lieberstein and Jennifer Celotta, rejected this cliché and allowed Jim and Pam to marry and have kids.

While this section focused primarily on the analysis of *The Office*, the stylistic principles discussed are also evident in other productions led by Daniels. *Parks and Recreation*, which he has co-created with Michael Schur, is perhaps the most obvious point of reference since it was initially conceived as a de facto spin-off of *The Office* in the form of a more upbeat mockumentary, focusing on local government officials. However, I posit that the *truth and beauty* principle, as described by Daniels, can be seen at work not only in this particular series but also in TV shows that do not utilize the *comedy vérité* formula. The animated *King of the Hill* and the high-concept *Upload*, as well as – to a lesser degree – *Space Force*, also fit the description of empathetic observational comedy.

The instance of *Upload* is particularly notable here. The show produced for Amazon Prime is set in the near future when people can reach digital eternity[34] by 'uploading' their minds into virtual afterlife servers owned by big technological corporations. The plot follows Nathan Brown (Robbie Amell), a newly deceased programmer, as he attempts to adjust to the digital reality and bonds with his 'handler,' Nora Anthony (Andy Allo), who becomes convinced that Nathan might have been the victim of an attempted murder. Even though the dystopian, futuristic setting and rich saturation of the visuals with advanced computer-generated imagery might seem almost antithetical to the mundane theme and unpolished aesthetics of *The Office*, they nevertheless consistently remain subordinate to complicated and believable characters who persist at the centre of the story.

A baseball team of writers

Describing the aforementioned branch of authorship theory he calls *authorship by management*, Jason Mittell is right to point out: *Highlighting producers' managerial functions is not to deny their roles in originating ideas or taking responsibility for choices, but it emphasizes the additional role that television authors must take in helming an ongoing series rather than a stand-alone work, as well as highlighting the importance*

of the sustained team of creative and technical crew that often stay with a single series for years.[35] Thus far, this article focused mainly on Daniels's and his co-workers' particular stylistic predilections, which readily translate into on-screen output. However, to provide a fuller picture of Daniels's showrunning activity, one must also examine his managerial strategies and staffing patterns.

During his days as a junior writer, Daniels had the opportunity to experience different writers' room arrangements. As he recalls in an interview with Karen Herman from the *Archive of American Television*, *There was a real division … between the actors and the writers* [on *Not Necessarily the News*]. *You never talked to the actors and you weren't really allowed on the set*.[36] On the other end of the spectrum lies *Saturday Night Live*, a program famous for hiring writer-performers and including writers in different stages of the production. When Daniels was faced with the challenge of assembling a writers' room of his own for *The Office*, he opted to follow in the footsteps of Lorne Michaels (as well as the team behind *Monty Python's Flying Circus* /BBC1, 1969-1963, BBC2, 1974/, which he cites as one of his major childhood influences) and lean towards comedians that would excel in both realms. One should note that this decision took the American remake in the opposite direction from the British original, as each of the latter's 14 episodes was co-written by its creators and principial producers, Gervais and Merchant.

The first 'hyphenate' hire was B. J. Novak, who played Ryan, the temporary worker. Novak was soon joined by Mindy Kaling, who portrayed Kelly Kapoor from the customer service branch, and Paul Lieberstein as Toby, the HR representative. Outside of the principal cast, other writers would also make sporadic appearances on screen, with Michael Schur's portrayal of Mose Schrute being perhaps the most notable example. According to Daniels, working with writer-performers increases the creativity of the entire team and allows the ideas to flow organically between different occupational groups. This management strategy proved crucial in attaining the show's unique tone, especially since, contrary to popular assumptions, the on-set performances were mostly scripted and usually did not incorporate improvisation. When hiring the rest of the writers' room, Daniels aimed to compose it in a manner that resembled the lineup of a baseball team: *you can't get all pitchers. Somebody has to be really good with* [the] *story. Somebody has to be really good with jokes. And I always feel like the story people should be in charge*.[37] Once the team is picked, the showrunner-coach can then delegate his players to the established positions and play to their strengths: in the case of *The Office*, Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky would usually cover the cringe comedy aspects of production, Kaling was writing absurdist storylines, Schur was responsible for the more optimistic narrative threads, etc.

Analogous staffing strategies were employed in other network sitcoms that Daniels has worked on, *King of the Hill* and *Parks and Recreation* chief among them. Industry practices, ubiquitous in the productions of the Big Four networks, included a large writers' room and a specific stratification of positions within it: *The baseball metaphor was certainly right for the shows I worked on when I first made it … because they have 16 writers. … The insight is that you don't need every single one of them to be great at the same thing. You want some people to be really thoughtful about character, you want other people to be really clever about stories, and you need some people to be great at dialogue. …*

The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-)

In those days my experience was that the people who were good at story and character couldn't maybe generate such great jokes, but they appreciated the jokes when they heard them. They knew that they were good and they were greedy to put them in the script. But the people who were really good at jokes, when they heard the good contributions of the people who were good at story and character, often they couldn't understand them. They didn't see it, so they didn't value it, and they would waste them. The experience that I had was that you want the senior people to be good at character and story, and the junior people to be generating lots of jokes, then the senior people will select the jokes that work for the story. … As a show gets older, the contracts on the senior people run out, and then they leave to create their own shows. The contracts on the junior people are renewed, they become the senior people, and it becomes inverted a bit. I think that explains why shows sometimes get broader in season four or five – it's because it's a different crew who are in positions of power.[38]

Another analogy that comes to mind when reading about Daniels's writers' rooms is that of a painter's workshop. The junior writers working like apprentices under the guidance of a showrunner gradually get ready to break out on their own and eventually take apprentices under their own wings. Such was the story of Mike Schur, who left the writers' room to create *Parks and Recreation* together with Daniels and then, ultimately, run it on his own. Schur's recollection of his early days at *The Office* includes yet another illustrative metaphor – that of a college classroom: *Greg essentially led a graduate-level class on sitcom writing. … Greg would say things like, "Well, what makes a good story?" And then he'd start talking about the basic building blocks of storytelling: motivation, stakes, twists and turns, escalations, stuff like that. I realized, "Oh, this is a class. I'm in a class now." And I remember turning the page in my notebook that I was sketching dumb pitches on and starting to take notes like I was in college.*[39] One should note that while Daniels clearly had a well-thought-out vision of his craft that he was trying to pass on to the junior writing staff and crew, he was at the same time open to suggestions from any team member. The collaborative nature of the creative process saw the showrunner working closely not only with the writers but also with prop master Phil Shea and editor David Rogers, among others.

These writers' room staffing patterns proved successful for Daniels in producing a large-scale broadcast network sitcom, but he was not able to apply them in his more recent shows, made for streaming platforms (Netflix in the case of *Space Force* and Amazon Prime in the case of *Upload)*, where his writers' room size has been limited:

Greg Daniels: *I'm there alone a lot more in the new streamer pattern than I was back when I had 16 writers and every season we did 25 shows. There* [were] *a lot of people to delegate to. You could say: "All right, I've got my three lieutenants: you go do the mix, you do this, and you do a cut, and I'll just go in and sort of rubber stamp it." You don't have that ability now. You end up doing a lot more work for these streaming shows.*

Dawid Junke: *Do you think that you have more creative control in this new situation, or does the amount of hours spent on the job not necessarily translate into more creative control?*

Greg Daniels: *You always have the control. The question is: "Are you doing the work?" To me, that's the thing. On the big show, you're the conductor of the orchestra, and on a smaller show, you might be conducting, but you also might be playing three instruments.*[40]

The above statement highlights an interesting aspect of working in a streaming platform environment: even though the budgets of streaming shows do not seem to be smaller than their historical broadcast counterparts (there is no official data for *Upload*, but the high production values seem to suggest that it was a relatively expensive show), the allocation of funds is markedly different, which significantly impacts the scope of responsibilities that the showrunner must undertake. At the time of writing this article, the joint WGA-SAG-AFTRA strike is still ongoing; increasing the small size of contemporary writers' rooms is listed among the most important demands of the Writers Guild of America, which makes the relevance of this issue even more pronounced.

The conductor of a comedic orchestra

As I have noted before, the multiple authorship model makes it possible to analyse the creative input of a showrunner as the person with the most influence over a television show's production without discounting the contributions made by other cast and crew members. When discussing *The Office*, a solid case can be made for Steve Carell, the show's biggest star in seasons one to seven, as a significant authorial instance. There are a couple of notable examples where Carell's experience, industry stature, and agency have been helpful in the production process. The opening episode of the second season, "The Dundies," is set in a restaurant belonging to a big international chain, Chili's. The plot involves Pam engaging in excessive alcohol consumption and displaying disruptive behaviour. After the majority of the episode had already been shot, Chili's representatives raised concerns about how their brand was being portrayed and threatened to withdraw from the previously established verbal agreement. The situation seemed hopeless, but Carell, drawing from his background in improvisational theatre, came up with a solution that pleased both Chili's and the writers. All it took was to insert into the episode a brief segment in which a waiter condemned Pam's behaviour and made it clear that she was no longer welcome at any restaurant belonging to the chain.

Another occasion that made Carell's influence evident was during the 2008 writers' strike. As the screenplay for "Dinner Party" (season 4, episode 13) was already finished when the strike commenced, the network was pushing for the production to go through with the filming. Carell, however, refused to cross the picket line in a gesture of solidarity with the writers. Even though NBC put significant pressure on him, the actor did not change his position, and the episode was only shot after an agreement was reached between the WGA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP).[41] Carell's agency and ability to influence the production process stems from his position as a star performer, but Daniels is adamant about recognizing the contributions of other members of the cast and crew as well. Ken Kwapis, mentioned above in the context of the rules governing the show's visual style, is among those described as considerable authorial instances. His contributions, as related by Daniels and Baumgartner in the latter's podcast, consisted, among other things, in introducing a unique approach to the beginning of shooting days on the pilot:

Space Force (Netflix, 2020-2022)

Upload (Amazon, 2020-)

Greg Daniels: *The whole thing with Ken was wanting everybody to believe that they were working at a paper company and absorbing that, and kind of taking the Hollywood out of it.*

Brian Baumgartner: *Well, there were so many things that you guys did. … And Ken and his making us be all ready to go at 7 A.M. and doing 30 minutes of just work.*

Greg Daniels: *Yeah, that was really part of that notion of obstacles … trying not to be factory, not to be Hollywood.*[42]

After helming the pilot, Kwapis returned to direct 11 other episodes of *The Office*, including the series finale, and, more recently, Daniels brought him on to work on *Space Force.* This fruitful, time-tested partnership aligns with a broader pattern within his team organization strategies – he has also frequently collaborated with writer-producers Paul Lieberstein and Jennifer Celotta, editor David Rogers as well as casting director Allison Jones, to name just a few.

Conclusion

Greg Daniels's standing within the television industry can be assessed not only by acknowledging the substantial volume of high-profile projects he has been actively involved in but also through the way his name is utilized as a brand by broadcasters and streaming services in marketing materials (by way of example: posters designed by the Barlow Agency promote Amazon's *Upload* as a show *from Greg Daniels who brought you "The Office" and "Parks and Rec"*). This article attempted to describe those aspects of his showrunning practice which have contributed to him reaching this stature, and to situate those qualities within broader industry practices. Decisions made by Daniels in the pre-production phase of adapting *The Office* serve as an example of operation methods informed by the structural determinants of the system. Drawing from his earlier experience at the helm of *King of the Hill*, Daniels asserted his agency and avoided excessive network interference by relying on a script that largely mirrored the British version for the pilot and introducing original material only in the second episode of the premiere season. Daniels's staffing patterns and the writing strategies utilized in his writers' rooms provide interesting examples of authorship by management. His conviction that the practice of 'writing from life' is primarily determined by the production requirements of the television industry translates into a work environment conducive to autobiographical creation. The differences in the exact configuration of writing teams assembled by Daniels on his network and streaming shows illustrate, in turn, the broader transformations within the industry. The metaphors of a baseball team and an orchestra illustrate a creative division of labour designed to play to the strengths of all writers' room members and provide them with an opportunity to follow an apprenticeship-like path. However, this approach seems all but obsolete in the media landscape of the last few years, where the size of writers' rooms has been drastically reduced; hopefully, the agreement reached by the WGA and AMPTP at the conclusion of the 2023 strike will reverse the course of those changes to a certain degree.

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[2] H. Newcomb, R. S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV*, Oxford University Press, New York 1983.

[3] R. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1997.

[4] For a definition of a showrunner, see e.g.: M.-J. Higueras-Ruiz, F.-J. Gómez-Pérez, J. Alberich-Pascual, "The Showrunner's Skills and Responsibilities in the Creation and Production Process of Fiction Series in the Contemporary North American Television Industry", *Communication & Society* 2021, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 185-200.

[5] T. Nannicelli, *Appreciating the Art of Television: A Philosophical Perspective*, Routledge, New York – London 2016, p. 23.

[6] J. Sweet, D. Carlson, "Collective Creativity: Pedagogies of Collective Authorship in a Hollywood Writers' Room and Its Implications for the Teaching of Writing", *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 2020, vol. 19, no. 4.

[7] J. Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York University Press, New York – London 2015, p. 88.

[8] My own prior research has likewise leaned in this direction, see, e.g.: D. Junke, "The Showrunner as Televisual 'Auteur' in Promotional Materials – A Case Study of Posters for David Simon's Television Shows", *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 2020, vol. 24, no 4, pp. 77-91; D. Junke, *Transcendencja i sekularyzacja*, Wydawnictwo Libron, Kraków 2018.

[9] T. Havens, A. D. Lotz, S. Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach", *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2009, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 237.

[10] I was able to conduct the interview during my stay as a Fulbright Scholar at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Washington, Seattle during the spring quarter of 2022. I would like to express my deep gratitude to the members of the J. William Fulbright Commission as well as Department Chair Katarzyna Dziwirek, Krystyna Untersteiner, and Peter and Annemarie Colino for making this research possible.

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[12] N. Andreeva, "Peak TV: Scripted Originals Dipped in 2020 for the First Time Since FX Launched Tally Amid Pandemic", *Deadline* 29.01.2021, https://deadline.com/2021/01/peak-tv-scripted-originals-dipped-2020-first-time-fx-tally-coronavirus-pandemic-1234683721/, (accessed: 02.08.2023).

[13] [NN], *Tops of 2020: Nielsen Streaming Unwrapped*, Nielsen.com, January 2021, https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2021/tops-of-2020-nielsen-streaming-unwrapped/ (accessed: 30.10.2023).

[14] G. Daniels, interview conducted by the author, 21.04.2022.

[15] J. Mittell, op. cit., pp. 88-94.

[16] J. Wagner, "Exeter People: Greg Daniels '81", *The Exeter Bulletin*, 31.10.2020 (Fall), https://www.exeter.edu/people/greg-daniels (accessed: 23.08.2023).

[17] Ibidem.

[18] I am using the expression as a reference to Jack Stillinger's exploration of multiple authorship. See: J. Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, Oxford University Press, New York 1991.

[19] G. Daniels, "Greg Daniels on Archive of American Television", video interview by K. Herman, *The Interviews: An Oral History of Television* 5.04.2013, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/greg-daniels (accessed: 26.08.2023).

[20] Ibidem.

[21] J. T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Duke University Press, Durham 2008, p. 205.

[22] A spec script is a *motion picture screenplay written by a screenwriter who is not writing such screenplay at the request of an employer production company and without any commitment from any prospective purchaser to purchase the screenplay* (J. W. Cones, *Film Finance and Distribution: A Dictionary of Terms*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles 1992, p. 484).

[23] J. Wagner, op. cit.

[24] A. Greene, *The Office: The Untold Story of the Greatest Sitcom of the 2000s: An Oral History*, Penguin, New York 2020, p. 26.

[25] B. Mills, "Comedy Verite: Contemporary Sitcom Form", *Screen* 2004, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 63-78.

[26] G. Daniels, interview conducted by the author, 21.04.2022.
[27] B. Baumgartner, B. Silverman, *Welcome to Dunder Mifflin: The Ultimate Oral History of "The Office"*, Custom House, New York 2021, Kindle edition, loc. 6839.
[28] J. Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, ed. P. Washington, Modern Library, New York 1994, pp. 185-186.
[29] B. Baumgartner, B. Silverman, op. cit., loc. 2110.
[30] In the last season of the show, members of the fictional crew documenting the everyday life of Dunder Mifflin's workers come into the limelight, but the principle of their visual absence is broken only briefly.
[31] M. Przylipiak, *Poetyka kina dokumentalnego*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2000, p. 220.
[32] Ibidem.
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[36] G. Daniels, "Greg Daniels on Archive of American Television", op. cit.
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[38] G. Daniels, interview conducted by the author, 21.04.2022.
[39] B. Baumgartner, B. Silverman, op. cit., loc. 1837.
[40] G. Daniels, interview conducted by the author, 21.04.2022.
[41] B. Baumgartner, B. Silverman, op. cit., loc. 4255.
[42] B. Baumgartner, op. cit.

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Słowa kluczowe:
Greg Daniels; showrunner; autorstwo seriali telewizyjnych; teoria autorska; sitcom; krytyczne studia nad przemysłami medialnymi

Abstrakt

Dawid Junke

Autorstwo telewizyjne i komediowi showrunnerzy. Przypadek Grega Danielsa

Artykuł skupia się na sylwetce Grega Danielsa, uznanego showrunnera seriali komediowych, kojarzonego przede wszystkim z amerykańską wersją sitcomu *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) oraz tytułami takimi jak *King of the Hill* (Fox, 1997-2010), *Space Force* (Netflix, 2020-2022) i *Upload* (Amazon, 2020-). Korzystając z wywiadów prasowych i podcastowych z Danielsem oraz jego współpracownikami, historii mówionych wydanych w formie książkowej oraz przeprowadzonego osobiście pogłębionego wywiadu, autor opisuje metody twórcze showrunnera oraz wpisuje je w szerszy kontekst autorstwa seriali telewizyjnych i streamingowych. Zgromadzone materiały zostały zinterpretowane w paradygmacie krytycznych studiów nad przemysłami medialnymi i z użyciem modelu autorstwa przez zarządzanie Jasona Mittella.