**Talent Intermediaries:**

**Anonymous Content and the Independent Feature Packaging Technique**

**[Slide 1: Introduction/Title]**

**---Introduce Yourself --- Institution.**

Hi everyone. So, today I’m going to be discussing how Anonymous Content, an integrated media production and talent management company known largely for managing directors associated with American indie film, increased its investment in television production during the 2010s. I will explore especially how the company used a practice that its executives called the ‘the independent feature packaging technique’ to market and sell premium – expensive, extravagant, event – programmes including *The Knick*, *True Detective*, *Mr. Robot*, and *The OA*, with indie-auteur clients including Steven Soderbergh, Cary Fukunaga, Sam Esmail, and Brit Marling, respectively. In doing so, I will explore how Anonymous has adhered to and shaped television production, and analyse the effect that their work has had in generating cultural meaning.

**[Slide 2: Beyond Anonymity]**

In Television and Media Studies, authorship has regularly been analysed as a branded identity and promotional discourse surrounding individual writer-producer creators and mobilized by channels and platforms to promote certain high-end event programmes. Some scholars have also explored how figures such as Jess Oppenheimer, Rod Serling, and JJ Abrams have actively cultivated their own authorial brands and pursued authorial status. In doing so, scholars have helped to reframe authorship as a form of professional capital, creative authority and credit competed over and granted by the participants of industrial networks. The role of talent intermediaries, including talent agents and talent managers, who facilitate dialogue and exchange between creators and channels has, however, frequently gone overlooked. There are several reasons why this is the case: Talent intermediaries often cross media and organisational boundaries posing problems for scholars analysing media categories separately; the agency of individual managers has proven difficult to capture especially by macro-level political economy studies of industry focusing on the accumulation of capital and ownership structures; and talent agents and managers not only work behind-the-scenes but also usually actively resist becoming exposed to public scrutiny for fear that their association with deal-making might detrimentally associate clients with commerce and bureaucracy. In critical discourse, meanwhile, talent intermediaries are frequently framed alongside other media industry managers in overly broad terms as the personification of bureaucratic constraint opposite the autonomous artist.

**[Slide 3: Beyond Anonymity: Anonymous]**

To overcome the challenges of studying industry players operating behind-the-scenes, Denise Mann, Tom Kemper, and Emily Carmen, have analyzed archival materials including employment contracts and correspondence between agents, clients, and producers, from classical- and early post-classical Hollywood. Meanwhile, Violaine Roussel has undertaken ethnographic observation within agency offices. A common thread throughout this work explores how industry players–including agents themselves–build reputations within institutional and industrial frameworks. Despite laying important groundwork, however, each of these studies focuses almost exclusively on talent agents before the 2010s. Notably, Roussel does examine agents’ roles in contemporary Hollywood up to the early-2010s, but her ethnographic method and commitment to confidentiality mean that detailed case-study examples are generally missing.

**[Slide 4: Anonymous Content]**

Significantly, talent managers are different from agents because they tend to represent fewer clients and offer more long-term strategic career and business advice, usually collect a 15% rather than 10% commission from their clients’ earnings, and are legally prohibited from procuring employment but are permitted to engage in production. As already mentioned, production comprises a significant component of Anonymous’ overall business. Like agents, however, managers participate in ‘classification struggles’ that shape perceptions about what constitutes art and who is granted artistic legitimacy. Talent intermediaries participate in these struggles to enhance their clients’ marketability, and, in turn, shape their own professional standing, sphere of influence, and perceived worth. As Violaine Roussel argues:

Through relationships between professionals in evaluation communities, the mechanisms that produce economic and artistic value in Hollywood are inseparable. Relationships and transactions that have to do with naming, gauging, classifying, and pricing talent make economic and creative value in the same movement’.

Consequently, Roussel continues, talent intermediaries can sometimes be engaged imperceptibly in the ‘progressive and collective rearrangement’ of industrial and cultural divisions and hierarchies. With that in mind, I’ll now turn to Anonymous.

**[Slide 5: The Throughline]**

First, we need to understand Anonymous’ operations and branding more generally. A useful starting point is the 2014 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, where Anonymous was the recipient of a special tribute. Steve Golin, Anonymous’ founder and then-CEO, and Michael Sugar, a partner, manager and producer, were in attendance and three of Anonymous’ most critically acclaimed productions, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Winter’s Bone*, and *True Detective*, were being screened. Asked what unites Anonymous’ projects, Sugar stated:

The throughline of the movies and TV we make and even the clients we represent on the management side is a certain quality of storytelling, the canvas — its size, shape — is less relevant. If the first two episodes of *True Detective* were a movie we would be very proud of it … We are very driven by the quality of the filmmaker. The movies and television we are making are with what we feel are the best directors in the business.

Claiming to be very driven by the quality of the filmmaker makes Anonymous’ clients appear highly autonomous and depicts the company as offering creative freedom. Sugar’s emphasis on working with directors that they *feel* are the best, meanwhile, bestows upon Anonymous’ clients an aura of greatness while simultaneously building the talent managers’ reputations for having exceptional taste and spotting talent. Symptomatic of Anonymous’ branding and market positioning, though, Sugar’s comments about being driven by the quality of the filmmaker obscures the full range of the company’s work, subsumes its commercial imperatives, and deflects potential scrutiny about the talent manager’s perceived ability to interfere in their clients’ career choices. Yet as Roussel points out, ‘Agency leaders know that they must institutionalize the necessary circulation of their artists between complementary sectors, and toward what they believe to be the most promising new areas’.

**[Slide 6: Peak TV]**

Rather than being driven by the quality of the filmmaker, however, Anonymous and Sugar responded to a set of changing industrial, economic and cultural conditions. Specifically, they sought to capitalize on a highly competitive marketplace where cable channels and streaming platforms increasingly used authorial branding to promote and differentiate their premium programming. In an era where cable and then the internet have fragmented television’s mass audience, pay-cable channels and streaming platforms especially have used authorship to target highly privileged demographics in the form of educated young adults on high incomes. In fact, Leora Hadas argues that in the 2010s the number of channels producing premium television programmes grew so exponentially that the supply of brand-name authorial figures capable of overseeing production and offering programmes artistic legitimacy could not keep pace with demand.

**[Slide 7: Decline of the Specialty Sector]**

This situation appears in contrast with that of film where the Hollywood studios’ diminished investment in the indie or specialty film sector, in favour of blockbuster franchise production, has significantly reduced opportunities for brand-name directors. In this context, television provides talent intermediaries such as Sugar an opportunity to sustain and even potentially enhance their fees despite declines being experienced in film. Rather than merely reducing employment options, however, the studios’ withdrawal of investment in specialty film helps to provide the narrative that justifies the indie-auteur movement to television and bolsters impressions that they are artists-at-heart.

**[Slide 8: IFPT HoC]**

As I have explored elsewhere, Anonymous increased its investment in television after seeing Media Rights Capital and former Anonymous partner David Fincher selling *House of Cards* to Netflix in 2011 for $100million dollars. Starting with *True Detective* and *The Knick*, Anonymous began producing premium television programmes using what Golin called ‘the independent feature packaging technique’. On one hand, the independent feature packaging technique refers to a practice established in the 1980s and 1990s, which saw certain agents and managers taking on greater roles in developing non-studio productions by attaching talent and putting in place sometimes complex co-financing arrangements.

On the other hand, the packaging technique is a strategy intended to generate value around certain productions by creating positive associations with indie film. Doing so involves differentiating those projects from traditional practices and mass modes of production associated with the Hollywood mainstream and broadcast television. Thus, whereas traditionally in American television drama directors are hired to shoot individual episodes and distributors regularly measure a programme’s potential appeal by test-screening pilots, Anonymous’ packaging technique involves developing projects in-house, hiring indie-auteur directors often to shoot entire seasons, attaching known actors, and landing straight-to-series orders. As a result, the strategy is designed to position Anonymous’ productions as escaping meddling television network executives and being higher quality than most television fare. Speaking about this whole process, Sugar stated:

Well, “House of Cards” did have an impact because it was straight to series, and it had movie stars — Robin [Wright] and Kevin [Spacey]. And it was a paradigm-shifter. I think the evolution of that was maybe “True Detective,” in that it was a singular director. Also straight to series. And “The Knick” was a singular director, also straight to series. We have several more in the pipeline.

Sugar’s abbreviation of the single-series director to the ‘singular director’ here is particularly telling as it not only connotes the presence of a figure who has absolute authority over production but also one with a unique vision. In turn, describing *House of Cards* as a ‘paradigm-shifter’ and the ‘singular director’ as an ‘evolution’ makes Anonymous’ productions appear to be significant improvements on traditional television by effectively resembling something like the purest form of ‘Indie TV.’

**[Slide 9: IFPT Soderbergh]**

The independent feature packaging technique involves enhancing the appeal of the project to talent, distributor-buyers, and consumers. According to Roussel, however, many Hollywood talent agents still struggle to convince clients who are used to working in film to take a job in television. As well as a continued privileging of film over television within Hollywood, the barriers that Anonymous faced in convincing their director-clients to accept work on their projects were the general lack of currency that the indie-auteur brand had in television coupled with tendencies for pilot directing to be treated as merely profit driven. Before committing to direct *The Knick*, Soderbergh described having rejected many highly lucrative offers to direct pilot episodes. ‘I don’t wanna just do the pilot … and have my name on as an executive producer and then have nothing to do with it,’ Soderbergh stated before adding, ‘If my name’s on it I need to be involved’. Here, Soderbergh was not merely rejecting commercial gain but attempting to retain the value of his brand by indicating that it denotes quality underpinned by his authentic investment.

**[Slide 10: IFPT “Like a Movie”]**

While Sugar describes how he and producer Greg Jacobs ‘ganged up’ on Soderbergh to get him to read *The Knick*, the single-series director model addressed Soderbergh’s anxiety about potential damage to his brand by creating an impression of the indie-auteur’s authentic investment. As a result, Sugar states of Soderbergh’s role directing every episode of *The Knick*: ‘We did it like a movie’. Asserting that ‘this is sexy for a film director’ and that Anonymous has many clients keen to participate in their ‘model,’ Sugar subsequently differentiates the work from directors shooting pilots. ‘Some director doing a pilot,’ Sugar asserts, ‘has usually been about the money. Just do a job, do a pilot, you’re in and out in two months’. Coupled with Soderbergh’s own comments, this demonstrates how Sugar’s efforts to enhance his clients’ marketability and leverage depends on elevating them above directors lacking auteur brands. Rather than improving the status of television directing work in general, therefore, this strategy contributes to denigrating most television directors who are unfortunate enough to ‘just’ be doing ‘a job’.

**[Slide: IFPT Film Actors]**

As Roussel points out, packaging involves creating belief in a project to aggregate clusters of talent. Accordingly, the single-series director model also serves to bolster the appeal of Anonymous’ projects to other key players. Fukunaga and Anonymous producer Richard Brown, for instance, confess that attaching a single-series director was a way to attract feature film actors Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson to *True Detective*. This tactic involves both offering feature film actors the consistency of working with a single director as they are used to in film and legitimating the project with an auteur. Indeed, McConaughey described himself as a ‘big fan’ of Fukunaga’s debut feature *Sin Nombre* and was reassured that he would be ‘in the hands of a good storyteller’ after Fukunaga signed on to *True Detective*.

**[Slide: IFPT Cinematic Looking]**

As with *The Knick* and the pairing of Owen and Soderbergh, this technique creates an impression of a high-quality cinematic project that would prove irresistible to a channel seeking to bolster its reputation for offering differentiated premium programming. In these terms, the single-series order must be understood as not only indicative of the project’s appeal but as part of its promotion. Indeed, the single-series order enhances the impression of the show’s exceptionality *and* creates an impression of the channel as one supporting innovation and creative freedom. Upon announcing that Cinemax would air *The Knick* instead of its sister company HBO, for instance, Sugar stated that it was ‘the pioneer in [Soderbergh] that persuaded him to lead us to Cinemax’. Meanwhile, Fukunaga stated that before beginning to shoot *True Detective* he asked HBO, ‘Do you want me to shoot this for television, because I don’t want to be fighting with you on the shots I want’. Fukunaga says that HBO responded, ‘Shoot it as you see it’. Thus, while Fukunaga depicts himself as being prepared to fight for quality, he ultimately suggests that conflict was not necessary because HBO readily offered creative freedom. Even though Fukunaga *did* make *True Detective* for television, he encourages audiences to read the show instead as a form of cinematic innovation underpinned by his supposedly unique vision. This is merely one instance of the named talent involved with Anonymous’ programmes boasting about the cinematic qualities of the work. That they often do so even while arguing that boundaries between film and television have become seamless, demonstrates how in fact talent migrating between media wrestle with and reinforce cultural hierarchies simultaneously.

**[Slide: Critical Discourse]**

According to Pierre Bourdieu, works produced in a field of cultural production ‘demand of the receiver a specifically aesthetic disposition in accordance with the principles of their production’. Extratextual and promotional discourse championing the indie-auteurs’ autonomy thus encourages critics positioning themselves as possessing a purportedly superior aesthetic disposition to read the shows as effectively manifestations of the purest form of ‘Indie TV.’ As the comments onscreen reveal, critics showing off their supposedly sophisticated tastes reinforce notions of the transcendent cinematic creative genius helping to improve traditional television. Thus, they contribute to a sense of traditional television as ‘its own limiter’ and the cinematic as somehow capable of liberating television from itself. As a result, they reinforce cultural and social hierarchies elevating niche premium programming seemingly suited to sophisticated middle-class audiences’ tastes above traditional television catering to an undiscerning mass. Far from representing an improvement, this shows that the independent feature packaging technique taps into and reinforces the same old tired legitimation discourses.

**[Slide: Collective Misrecognition]**

With all this in mind, Sugar’s description of *House of Cards* as a ‘paradigm-shifter’ resembles a form of ‘collective misrecognition’ described by Bourdieu as establishing the value of the (art)work within a field of cultural production. While collective misrecognition represents a form of ‘social alchemy’ jointly conducted with sometimes equal conviction, however, Bourdieu notes that it often brings about ‘very unequal profits’. Thus, although *House of Cards* was celebrated widely in extratextual and critical discourse as a programming innovation, it served Anonymous, Sugar and their clients’ business interests especially well by helping to create an impression of a market shift that they appeared primed to exploit. By referring to Anonymous’ apparently evolutionary ‘model’ and ‘pipeline’, Sugar makes the company appear to be an innovator and market-leader. Similarly, Sugar’s depiction of Soderbergh as a ‘pioneer’ not only boosts Soderbergh’s reputation specifically, it also enhances the currency of Anonymous’ indie-auteur brands in television in general by denoting the first of many. Thus, Adam Sternbergh wrote that twenty-five years after Miramax’s acquisition of Soderbergh’s *sex, lies and videotape* prompted an indie film renaissance, ‘The same swashbuckling energy … has migrated to TV programming.’

**[Slide: Conclusion]**

To conclude, after weighing the methodological difficulties involved in studying individual managers within industry contexts, this paper has staked a case for understanding Anonymous and its manager-producers as having adapted to and influencing television production simultaneously. After producing *True Detective*, *The Knick* and *Mr. Robot*, several moredirectors associated with indie film have migrated to television to take on responsibilities for directing the entirety or majority of full seasons. Among others, Mark and Jay Duplass directed all but one episode of *Togetherness*, Jean-Marc Vallée and Andrea Arnold directed one season each of *Big Little Lies*, Spike Lee helmed all nineteen episodes of his adaptation for *She’s Gotta Have It*, Greg Araki directed the entirety of *Now Apocalypse*, Nicolas Winding Refn directed *Too Old to Die Young*, and Barry Jenkins directed all of *Underground Railroad*. Rather than necessarily representing new modes of expression and being indicative of evolutions in television production, however, this paper has suggested that the indie-auteurs’ move to TV and the single-series director model are symptomatic of, and reinforce, broader legitimation strategies and discourses elevating authored cinematic premium programming over traditional television and mass media. As a result, the paper has suggested that Anonymous and its manager-producers have really contributed to reinforcing, rather than rearranging, hierarchies between media.

**[Slide: References]**