**Packaging *House of Cards* and *The Knick*: How Talent Intermediaries Manage the Indie-Auteur Brand to Sell Premium Television**

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**Abstract**

The article explores the migration of indie-auteurs to television during the 2010s. Using David Fincher and Steven Soderbergh’s work on *House of Cards* and *The Knick* as case-studies, the article argues that talent intermediaries such as producers and talent managers have sought to mobilize the indie-auteur, a branded identity and authorial discourse, to package premium television programmes to exploit growing competition between channels and platforms. The article also explores repercussions of the indie-auteur’s insertion in television as a mark of distinction, arguing that it becomes increasingly important to be aware of the systems behind it.

**Keywords**:

Indie-auteur; David Fincher; Steven Soderbergh; premium television; talent intermediaries; Anonymous Content.

**Introduction**

Writing in 2013, Heuman stated that, in American television, independence ‘lack[ed] currency in industry, popular, and scholarly discussion’ (Heuman, 2013: 123). This article, however, argues that independence has since gained currency in television following the migration to the sector of several indie-auteurs, authorial figures associated loosely with an iteration of American independent or indie film that emerged in the 1980s. This iteration of indie film is one that resists definition, but can be understood as a category of American specialty filmmaking where the films are promoted as exhibiting some form of difference from the Hollywood mainstream, either because they address topics that have been ignored or suppressed, or more often because they are treated as being of a higher quality and value. Indie-auteurs are discursively constructed figures around which ideas of creative autonomy, artistic integrity, individual talent, innovation and quality coalesce, which makes them an often-important factor in defining or branding films as indie (see King, 2009: 248). Conversely, independence of Hollywood studios at the economic and industrial levels is much less important, with figures such as the Coen brothers, Wes Anderson and Steven Soderbergh having sustained indie-auteur brands even while working with the majors and their specialty divisions (see Molloy, 2017). While the indie-auteur became more valuable during the 1990s and 2000s as Hollywood studios expanded into the independent film market (King, 2009: 248-249), therefore, this article argues that in the 2010s indie-auteurism is being used increasingly to package and promote television.

Examples of television programmes where indie-auteurism has been used for promotion include *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *The Knick* (2014-2015)and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2016-present), *True Detective* (2014-present) and *Maniac* (2018-present), and *Mr. Robot* (2015-present), associated with David Fincher, Steven Soderbergh, Cary Fukunaga and Sam Esmail, respectively. Because associations between indie-auteurs and American indie film are never absolute but are always loose and complex, these figures can be defined as indie-auteurs to a greater or lesser extent. Esmail’s television work on *Mr. Robot* represents a case in point. Esmail gained associations with indie film through his work on *Comet*, which functioned as a ‘strong calling card’ for a ‘gifted director’ and positioned him positively for future employers or financiers (Anon, 2014a; Wilson, 2014). Esmail and his collaborators subsequently promoted *Mr. Robot* as akin to indie film in various ways. Esmail repeatedly emphasized that he began writing the pilot as a feature (Randee, 2015) and described the shoot as like being on an ‘indie film set’ (Littleton, 2016), while actor Christian Slater claimed that the show had ‘an edgy feel more typical of independent movies’ following the pilot’s screening at SXSW festival (Eyerly, 2015) and USA Network executives compared it to Fincher’s dark specialty film, *Fight Club* (1999) (Baysinger, 2015) (on *Fight Club*’s own complex relationship to indie, see Schatz, 2017). As *Mr. Robot* entered subsequent seasons, however, fewer links to indie film were made in promotional discourse and Esmail became known more as a television auteur. Yet Esmail’s associations with indie have not disappeared entirely, as fans of *Mr. Robot* seek out *Comet* on Netflix (Pasternack, 2016) and Esmail himself rarely misses an opportunity to articulate an affinity with 1990s indie filmmakers (Ryan and Greenwald, 2017). Esmail’s association with indie film is therefore complex because his reputation as an indie-auteur grew at the point of his move to television, while his sustained work in the sector is responsible for the reputation fading.

The migration of indie-auteurs to television has unsurprisingly generated significant attention in the trade and popular press. *indieWire* reported on the ‘Age of Auteur Television’ (Miller, 2015), while *Grantland* coined the term ‘Indie TV’ (Greenwald, 2014). Frequently, critics have suggested that the indie-auteur’s migration is driven by their commitment to artistry and pursuit of autonomy. *Wired*, for example, reported that Fukunaga, Fincher and Soderbergh are part of a ‘wave of directors willing to take their wares anywhere they can do their best work’ (Watercutter, 2015). Yet such characterizations risk depicting indie-auteurs as purely creative individuals. This article breaks away from romanticized beliefs in transcendent originality that usually underpin discourses of authorship however, instead reframing indie-auteurism as a branded identity produced through collaborative inputs and mobilized in response to broader industrial trends. To do so, the article analyses the promotional, extratextual and critical discourse around Fincher and Soderbergh’s collaboration with Media Rights Capital (MRC) and Anonymous Content (Anonymous) in the development and sale of *House of Cards* and *The Knick* to Netflix and Cinemax, respectively. These shows have been selected because they are interconnected in two ways relating to Anonymous, which, as an integrated talent management and media production company, has specialized in building its director-clients’ reputations as indie-auteurs to brand and package their projects. Firstly, Fincher gained experience in packaging content using indie-auteur branding through his involvement with Anonymous, including as partner in the company from 1999 to 2010. Secondly, it was Fincher’s success in helping to sell *House of Cards* that drove Anonymous’ increased investment in television with *The Knick*, *True Detective* and *Mr. Robot*, using clients Soderbergh, Fukunaga and Esmail.

Broadly, the indie-auteur’s migration represents an ongoing movement between environments, one performed by a type of freelance labour and managed by talent intermediaries, in pursuit of the conditions deemed necessary for achieving commercial and critical success. Between the late-2000s and early-2010s, the Hollywood studios significantly withdrew their investment in the specialty film sector, with several closing or selling their specialty divisions (Balio, 2013: 25-33). As a result, producers and talent working in the sector appeared to find it increasingly difficult to secure the resources needed to get their films made and distributed. Moreover, by financing and producing fewer films, the Hollywood studios created a buyer’s market that squeezed the fees of talent and their representatives (see Bart, 2013). Meanwhile, the emergence of streaming services, including Netflix and Amazon Instant Video, increased competition between channels and platforms over premium scripted television drama and comedy, stimulating investment in the sector and adding demand for marketable talent with reputations for creating compelling original stories (see Goodman, 2015). Accordingly, the article posits that increased competition between channels and platforms opened television up as a significant space where talent intermediaries, such as producers and talent managers, sought to profit from mobilizing indie-auteur brands to package high-end programmes, and provided them an opportunity to mitigate against some of the challenges of specialty film production. In this sense, it is argued that premium television has emerged as an area of production adjacent to Hollywood specialty film where marketable indie figures could secure lucrative contracts on projects with high production values and sizeable budgets.

The article takes a cultural production approach, seeing indie-auteurism as a product of commercial strategies that plays a significant role in generating cultural meaning. On one hand, the article draws parallels between the figures managing indie-auteurism and the ways that it is conceived in promotional and extratextual discourse. Given that Anonymous’ producers, talent managers and clients have traditionally been men, the article suggests that the gender of talent intermediaries and their clients is partly responsible for reinforcing common conceptions of the indie-auteur as a maverick male (see Perkins, 2016: 140). The article also considers how talent intermediaries and their clients seek to exploit opportunities in premium television production, keeping in mind that the male professional-class is a demographic that has historically advocated for pay-television models in the belief that they enhance programming standards and tastes (McMurria, 2007: 52). On the other hand, the article explores connotations surrounding the indie-auteur’s insertion into television as a mark of distinction, doing so by drawing on Newman and Levine’s (2012) investigation into the proliferation of discourses of legitimation around contemporary television. Newman and Levine argue that discourses of legitimation make viewing certain programming, such as drama on cable, seem to be a superior leisure activity suitable for an elite, middle-class and well-educated audience (Newman and Levine, 2012: 5-6). In turn, they posit, discourses of legitimation denigrate traditional television genres and modes of engagement associated with frequently maligned groups, such as a mass working class audience, the elderly, the disabled, and women (Newman and Levine, 2012: 5-6). With Newman and Levine arguing that ‘cinematization’ and authorship are two ubiquitous legitimating strategies (Newman and Levine, 2012: 5; 45), this article explores how indie-auteurism is being managed across *and* between media to become an increasingly valuable component in discourses of legitimation. Consequently, the article draws out relationships and overlaps between contemporary American indie film and premium television, to provide a clearer understanding of their recent interconnected histories.

**Fincher and Anonymous Content: Before *House of Cards***

This section outlines Fincher’s relationship to Anonymous, to establish how their collaboration would later inform their television work in the 2010s. Fincher joined Anonymous as a partner in 1999, only a few months after the company was founded by producer Steve Golin. Fincher’s relationship with Golin dated back to 1986, however, when they, along with producer Sigurjón Joni Sighvatsson, and directors Dominic Sena, Nigel Dick and Greg Gold, established Propaganda Films, an integrated media production and talent management company. At Propaganda and Anonymous, Fincher and Golin collaborated repeatedly, often using indie-auteur branding strategies to package films (*The Game* (1997)), television programmes (*Fallen Angels* (1993-1995)) and branded content (*The Hire* (2001)). Moreover, they developed expertise in working according to the conventions of deficit financing, an economic model where the distributor pays the production company a license fee to secure the rights in advance of the project’s completion. As shall be discussed in more detail later, this is a controversial practice because there is often no guarantee that the fee will cover all the costs incurred in production. Packaging their projects around the indie-auteur has helped Propaganda and Anonymous to mitigate against the challenges of deficit financing, because it has given the production companies leverage to help them secure greater fees (Stubbs, 2019: 216).

As talent management companies, Propaganda and Anonymous played significant roles in helping to develop Fincher’s reputation as an elite director and auteur. Propaganda produced Fincher’s music videos and provided the platform to showcase his talent, engaged in PR operations to construct him discursively as an artist-innovator and future filmmaker, and positioned him favourably to employers (Stubbs, 2019). Propaganda’s activities proved successful as Fincher won several industry awards, garnered critical acclaim, secured commercial spot work and was given his feature film directing debut on Twentieth Century Fox’s *Alien 3* (1992). Since then, a mythology has built around Fincher that has positioned him positively as an uncompromising perfectionist struggling to make alternative film against a monolithic studio machine. Fincher’s role on *Alien 3*, for instance, was reportedly fraught with tension, with the director apparently insisting on full creative control before the studio sacked him three times (Galloway, 2011). This set a pattern of press reports describing Fincher’s fallouts with producers and industry executives as evidence of his ‘uncompromising vision’ and ‘impatience with [studio] meddling’ (Goldstein, 1997; Halbfinger, 2007). Moreover, Fincher’s emergence in niche genres, making music videos and commercial spots with Propaganda, reinforced depictions of him as a figure who is somehow incompatible with mainstream Hollywood production, even as he made most of his feature films with the Hollywood majors. For example, reporting on *The Social Network* (2010), *The Independent* described Fincher’s move from director of music videos to *Alien 3* as a ‘bruising first encounter with the Hollywood studio machine,’ one that ‘taught him a valuable lesson: to maintain a perfectionist’s control of his projects, however big a budget the studio has invested’ (Walker, 2010). As a result, Fincher’s work reveals how some of the biggest media companies were increasingly using the ‘auteur ethos’ to instil impressions of indieness in their relatively mainstream productions (see also Schatz, 2017: 257).

The mythology surrounding Fincher is problematic, because it hinges on making simplistic distinctions between art and commerce, artist and industry. Fincher participates in constructing these divisions, albeit with certain caveats. Despite stressing that it is important to maintain good working relationships, for instance, Fincher claims that he ‘protect[s] for a different thing than a producer protects for’ (Weintraub, 2010). Discussing negotiations during the development phase specifically, Fincher argues that while producers and studio executives reduce costs to provide the minimum resources needed by the director to complete the picture, he protects ‘the last 10 percent, the finesse,’ that the extra budget, time and resources offer (Weintraub, 2010). Although Fincher seeks to depict himself as an artist unconcerned about the bottom-line, his comment is symptomatic of a profit-seeking agenda where greater production values and higher budgets provide scope for improving his fee. Accordingly, Fincher uses ‘finesse’ as a metaphor for his contribution to any given production, thereby suggesting that employers should pay the extra 10 percent necessary to secure his services. Contrary to notions of division between Fincher and executives therefore, his collaboration with Netflix would be built on shared motivations to profit from the broader mythology surrounding him.

**Fincher, Netflix and *House of Cards***

In 2010, Fincher struck a deal with MRC to produce content ‘using his own moniker’ (Kit and Belloni, 2010). Although the deal was originally intended to be for feature-films, Fincher and MRC turned their attention to television and capitalized on the sector’s growing competition between platforms. By the time that they sold *House of Cards* to Netflix in 2011 for $100 million, Fincher had sold his shares in Anonymous to establish Reset, a talent management company focused on producing short form and branded content. Netflix’s acquisition of *House of Cards* marked the streaming service’s entry into original programming and its emergence as a competitor for high-end scripted dramas and comedies, of a kind that were associated with premium- and basic-cable channels. The package that MRC sold to Netflix included a story adapted from the 1990 BBC mini-series of the same name, scripts by Oscar nominated writer Beau Willimon, a show bible, Kevin Spacey attached to star, and Fincher executive producing and lined up to direct the pilot episode. Sections of the press reacted by calling Netflix’s acquisition innovative and ground-breaking. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, reported that the agreement departed ‘dramatically from how traditional television programming [was] made and aired’ (Wingfield and Schechner, 2011). This reception hinged on a combination of factors including notions about *House of Cards* being a product of Fincher’s autonomy and creative vision, Netflix’s use of data to inform its acquisition, the streaming service’s decision to commission two full-seasons without screening a pilot, and the company’s success in outbidding HBO and AMC (Andreeva, 2011).

Netflix understood clearly the value of Fincher’s brand and sought to mobilize it repeatedly in interviews. Ted Sarandos, Netflix’s Chief Content Officer, asserted that the company offers bigger commitments to talent investing more in developing projects beforehand, which he called ‘shift[ing] the development burden to the producer’ (Curtin, Holt and Sanson, 2014: 184-185). Sarandos explained:

It’s how we got David Fincher to jump in with us. We gave him a two-season commitment for *House of Cards*. Nobody else would do that, and they all thought we were nuts when we did. But I feel much better spending what we did knowing that I’m going to end up with twenty-six hours of content that at worst is going to be mediocre, and I highly doubt David Fincher would create a mediocre product (Curtin, Holt and Sanson, 2014: 184-185).

Such comments reflect both Netflix’s recruitment of talent and its attempts to grow its brand. Sarandos’ comment epitomizes Netflix’s attempts to promote its service by depicting itself as reinventing, and improving upon, traditional television. Recruiting Fincher is crucial, since he functions as a metaphor for Netflix’s disruptive ethos. ‘It’s not a case of Fincher adapting to television,’ Sarandos stated, ‘it’s about television adapting to Fincher’ (Pierce, 2013). Moreover, although Sarandos asserted that Fincher is incapable of creating ‘mediocre product,’ he simultaneously suggested that the quality of *House of Cards* hinged on Netflix’s readiness to offer creative freedom. Consequently, Sarandos portrays Netflix as a more creative and forward-thinking company than its rivals in film and television production and distribution, especially the Hollywood studios and broadcast networks. This notion is consistent with certain discourses around independent film and premium television, which suggest that the Hollywood studios and broadcast networks are driven by a commercial logic to make formulaic products for a mainstream audience (see King, 2017: 60; Santo, 2008: 19).

One problem with the ideas that Sarandos puts forward is that they contribute to legitimation discourses by elevating ‘one concept of television at the expense of another’ (Newman and Levine, 2012: 5). In this case, Netflix specifically and the pay-TV model generally are elevated above traditional television and commercial-supported broadcasting. In turn, the deficit financing model that Netflix has embraced appears justified on the basis that it affords creative freedom and helps to deliver innovative product. In reality, deficit financing models encourage producers to develop shows that have a proven track-record of success, because doing so mitigates against the risk of investing in development without finding a buyer (Lotz, 2007: 83). Notions of innovation surrounding *House of Cards* are highly contentious, therefore, since Netflix’s decision to acquire the package clearly rested on marketable features – genre categorization, intellectual property, star actors, awards credentials and auteur – that have a significant history in American indie film and premium television (see Tzioumakis, 2012: 169; McCabe, 2013: 189). Yet by functioning to mitigate against risk, it helps to explain why the indie-auteur, as one form of marketable talent, would become increasingly valuable. Indeed, Fincher’s role on *House of Cards* clearly resonated with certain critics, such as *Film Comment*’s Taubin, who called the show ‘A pioneering achievement,’ one that ‘la[id] the foundation for the new genre of auteurist series drama’ (Taubin, 2013) Although Willimon has since come to be identified most clearly as *House* *of Cards*’ showrunner, it does not detract from the fact that the real impact of Fincher’s work on *House of Cards* was that it demonstrated the value of indie filmmakers in the packaging of television programmes during the 2010s. Accordingly, the following sections shall explore how Fincher’s role on *House of Cards* has helped to open a market that other producers and directors, including Anonymous and its clients, could exploit. In doing so, it is argued that Anonymous and its client disseminated even more widely these highly problematic cultural and social hierarchies.

**Managing the Indie-Auteur Brand: Soderbergh Before *The Knick***

When Netflix was releasing *House of Cards* in late-2012 and early-2013, Soderbergh was announcing what was supposed to be his retirement from feature filmmaking. According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, ‘cinephiles’ had been bracing themselves for this eventuality since the possibility of Soderbergh’s retirement from feature filmmaking was first raised in 2009 (Siegel, 2013). Soderbergh lambasted the profit-driven agendas of the Hollywood studios, criticized financiers for interfering with the work of the director and argued that the audience for ‘great movies’ had ‘migrated to television’ (Schilling, 2013; Gillane, 2013). Yet at the same time, at the San Francisco International Film Festival, Soderbergh defined cinema as something rather malleable:

Cinema is something that’s made. It has nothing to do with the capture medium, it doesn’t have anything to do with where the screen is, whether it’s in your bedroom or on your iPad, it doesn’t even really have to be a movie. It could be a commercial; it could be something on Youtube [sic]. Cinema is a specificity of vision. It’s an approach where everything matters. It’s the polar opposite of generic or arbitrary and the result is as unique as a signature or a fingerprint. It isn’t made by a committee and it isn’t made by a company and it isn’t made by the audience. It means if the filmmaker didn’t do it, it wouldn’t exist at all, or it wouldn’t exist anything like this form (Gillane, 2013).

Soderbergh thus described cinema as any authored screen work as he paved the way for his move to television. While *House of Cards* revealed the value of television series packaged with indie filmmakers, therefore, Soderbergh became a key figure carrying the banner for the indie-auteur’s migration.

As Gallagher has noted, the critical and commercial success of Soderbergh’s debut feature, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989),following its appearance at festivals like Sundance, has given him a lasting reputation as an independent filmmaker (Gallagher, 2013: 19). This is despite the facts that Soderbergh had received financial backing from media conglomerates Columbia Pictures and RCA to produce the film, and that he entered the Hollywood industries through network television as editor on NBC’s *Games People Play* (1980–1981), and director and editor of the concert documentary *9012 LIVE* (1985) (Gallagher, 2013: 23). Moreover, even though he subsequently worked on two premium-cable series, *Fallen Angels* (1993) and *K-Street* (2003), Gallagher notes that Soderbergh is still ‘rarely identified as a television practitioner, or as anything but a “filmmaker” or “director,” in trade or popular-press coverage’ (Gallagher, 2013: 13). Nevertheless, Soderbergh frequently uses the cultural capital gained through associations with indie film to procure employment with studio executives looking for distinction (Gallagher, 2013: 32-33). Furthermore, Soderbergh’s assessment of his career repeatedly shifts, ‘with different artistic tendencies foregrounded depending on the discursive forum … and on his own creative and promotional agendas’ (Gallagher, 2013: 37). Soderbergh’s employability, therefore, is not distinguishable from his authorial profile and, as we shall see, its social and cultural connotations. Soderbergh’s announcement about his feature filmmaking retirement and the activities that he engaged in immediately afterwards, should thus be understood as part of a carefully orchestrated promotional campaign designed, in collaboration with his manager Michael Sugar at Anonymous, to enhance his marketability and leverage. Indeed, that Soderbergh’s ‘retirement’ was a PR stunt became clearer years later, as he has returned to work on feature films including *Logan Lucky* (2017).

Three months before HBO acquired *The Knick*, then, Soderbergh spoke at length in interviews about his enthusiasm for high-end television dramas, including *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Mad Men* (2007-2015) and *House of Cards* (Schilling, 2013; Smith, 2013). *indieWire*, for instance, asked whether Fincher, who became a friend during preparation on Propaganda Films’ *Fallen Angels*, had encouraged Soderbergh to move to TV in light of the hype around *House of Cards* (Smith, 2013). Soderbergh confessed to being jealous about the amount of press coverage that Fincher and *House of Cards* were receiving, stating, ‘I was telling David, you’re so fucking lucky, man … They’re in the news and now this thing’s dropping’ (Smith, 2013). Soderbergh also praised ‘the subscription model’ for allowing autonomy and being innovative. The subscription model, Soderbergh asserted, is ‘about buzz. It’s about drawing people to you because you’ve got cool shit. You’ve got this guaranteed revenue stream,’ and that, he continued, meant that ‘there are no rules’ (Smith, 2013). Claiming that there are ‘no rules’ to subscription television is disingenuous, of course, just as it is when similar comments are made about the unrestrained freedom of indie film (see King, 2014: 1, 19; Newman, 2011: 226). Yet Soderbergh’s comments positioned him as an authentic and autonomous consumer and eventual producer of high-end television, thereby aligning him with the kind of shows that subscription services value due to perceptions that they demand greater investment and attention from audiences (see Santo, 2008: 20). While this rhetoric is designed to enhance Soderbergh’s employability in television, though, it contributes to a notion of distinction surrounding the subscription model, one that services such as HBO have long perpetuated to differentiate their offerings from traditional television and to appeal to a supposedly sophisticated audience (Santo, 2008: 20). While Gallagher’s work demonstrated how Soderbergh’s ‘creative efforts contribut[ed] to … 1980s and 1990s commercial-cinema discourses’ (2013: 22), therefore, Soderbergh’s PR activities were now clearly contributing to discourses of legitimation in television. Before exploring these issues in greater detail later, it is necessary to explore the industrial context and strategies involved in *The Knick*’s development.

**Exploiting Industrial Changes: Anonymous Content and Developing *The Knick***

According to Johnson, the emergence of new digital technologies and online platforms has broken a distribution bottleneck, one previously controlled by networks and cable operators, and made the television programme itself ‘an increasingly important commodity’ (Johnson, 2012: 45). Golin seemed aware of the increased value of certain programmes when he stated, ‘Companies launching their brands are willing to pay a lot of money for something they think is going to differentiate their channel’ (Goldstein, 2014). As programmes become increasingly important for branding, producers gain more clout when packaging and selling content to distributors, particularly when they have significant influence in talent networks. Indeed, MRC was able to take advantage of Netflix’s deficit financing model partly by packaging and selling *House of Cards* using Fincher’s brand. In turn, Golin credited MRC’s sale of *House of Cards* to Netflix for informing his company’s increased focus on television, stating, ‘We saw that and said, “Holy shit, we can do that,” … We saw that they were basically using the independent feature packaging technique that we have spent a lot of time doing ourselves’ (Littleton, 2015). Golin added that Anonymous prefers to develop material with its talent than ‘going around to networks and getting development deals’ (Littleton, 2015). By emphasizing Anonymous’ preference to work in this way, Golin is promoting the company as one embracing creative freedom and, consequently, portraying their projects as autonomously created. As with MRC’s deal with Netflix, however, it functions to justify an economic model that clearly benefits only *certain* producers. For producers like Anonymous, therefore, the indie-auteur is as important in business-to-business dealings as it is in the marketing of content to the consumer.

Anonymous sold *The Knick* as a package to HBO following the awards success of *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), another Soderbergh/HBO collaboration, at Cannes in 2013. At the time, the package included draft screenplays of early episodes written by Anonymous’ clients Jack Amiel and Michael Begler, Soderbergh attached as director of every episode of the first season, and Clive Owen cast in the lead role. The development and commissioning of *The Knick* became part of its promotion as innovative. Promotional and critical discourse emphasized that HBO commissioned an entire series of *The Knick* without a pilot, that HBO commissioned a second season ‘even before’ the first episode of season one had aired, and that the show would air not on HBO, but on its sister channel, Cinemax (Littleton, 2015; Ng, 2014). Most important in portraying the show as innovative, though, was Soderbergh’s role as director of every episode, a practice which remains unusual for TV. As a result, the indie-auteur became a tool elevating *The Knick* above an ‘undifferentiated mass’ (for a broader discussion of authorship’s role in these terms in television see Newman and Levine, 2012: 42). Consequently, critics reported that Soderbergh brought ‘auteur cred to Cinemax’ and suggested that he helped to rebrand a channel formerly known as ‘Skinemax’ due to its reputation for airing exploitation genre and softcore pornography (Jurgensen, 2014).

Occurring during a period when the press was reporting that consumers were cancelling their cable subscriptions (Baldwin, 2013), Cinemax’s rebranding appeared to confirm anxieties within the dominant media corporations about the challenge from online services like Netflix and Amazon. In explaining the decision to put *The Knick* on Cinemax, however, Kary Antholis, the HBO Miniseries President, stated, ‘we always talk about which project is right for which brand in a way that I imagine Bob and Harvey [Weinstein] spoke about which projects were right for Dimension or Miramax’ (O’Connell, 2014). While collapsing distinctions between the film studios and television channels’ industrial and economic models, Antholis aligns *The Knick* with genre or exploitation fare released by Dimension, rather than indie film or premium television associated with Miramax and HBO. Yet Michael Lombardo, HBO’s president of programming, contradicted Antholis’ assertion by stating, ‘It’s the first show on Cinemax that absolutely could live on HBO’ (Keveney, 2014). *The Knick* thus indicated a certain confusion within Time Warner about Cinemax’s brand. HBO’s decision to commission *The Knick* without a pilot as well as uncertainty about the show’s suitability for Cinemax, then, appeared to be a hasty response to increased competition in the premium television market. Despite implying vulnerability however, the rebranding of Cinemax was an aggressive strategy enacted by Time Warner and its divisions. As Jaramillo points out, Time Warner executives have long perpetuated the seemingly contradictory image of a business under threat and one that is successful in order to persuade an ‘investor of the thriving, competitive atmosphere of media’ (Jaramillo, 2002: 20). Rather than a quantifiable difference in the textual properties of the categories of specialty independent and genre exploitation, therefore, Antholis’ comment is part of a longer history of Time Warner creating the illusion of competition among their television channels (see Jaramillo, 2002: 69-70).

*The Knick* helped position Cinemax as a ‘flanker brand for HBO,’ to entice multiple-system operators to offer both channels in their cable packages and to boost the channels’ subscriptions (Anon, 2014b). HBO, for instance, would air the first episode of *The Knick*, along with Cinemax, as a way of hooking audiences and encouraging them to subscribe to the lesser-known sister channel. Moreover, Lombardo described HBO/Cinemax as having the ‘rich[est] canvas’ of original programming in their history, by citing not only Soderbergh’s *The Knick*, but also *True Detective* and Fincher’s then recently announced *Utopia* (Anon, 2014b). Lombardo effectively proposed that consumers wanted high quality television, and that HBO/Cinemax could offer it. Furthermore, HBO’s CEO, Richard Plepler, claimed that consumers were more likely to have subscriptions to HBO *and* Netflix (Anon, 2014b). As a result, HBO executives like Lombardo and Plepler made competition in the premium television market seem positive, presenting to shareholders the image of a company likely to experience significant growth. Ironically, by reframing growth as successful competition for talent, the indie-auteur acts as an emblem of free-market competition by supposing that autonomous labour is attracted to the more creative and innovative employer. Rather than advocating for the virtues of independence, therefore, the indie-auteur effectively endorses consolidation, by masking corporate attempts to control the pay-TV market. Moreover, the notion of a ‘rich canvas,’ which carries connotations of diverse programming, is problematic given the centrality of the three male figures to the projects cited by Lombardo. With Soderbergh having insisted that it was his decision to air *The Knick* on Cinemax because he wanted to be ‘the big kid at a really small school’ (Ng, 2014), it becomes even clearer that the promotional strategy is designed to mobilize the high-profile indie-auteur’s brand to connect with a fee-paying audience.

**Indie-Auteur Edginess in *The Knick*: Promotional and Critical Discourse**

Understanding how promotional and critical materials represented and interpreted *The Knick* helps to reveal Cinemax’s strategy for reaching its fee-paying target audience. *The Knick* revolves around the workings of The Knickerbocker hospital in New York during the early twentieth century, focusing on Dr. John W. Thackery (Clive Owen), its chief surgeon, and other staff including Doctors Algernon Edwards (André Holland) and Everett Gallinger (Eric Johnson), operating manager Hernan Barrow (Jeremy Bobb), Nurse Lucy Elkins (Eve Hewson), ambulance driver Tom Cleary (Chris Sullivan), and midwife Sister Harriet (Cara Seymour). *The Knick*’stwo seasons are each comprised of ten episodes averaging 50 minutes in duration, making the show largely consistent with cable television drama scheduling norms. The show’s narrative structure is aligned with these norms, with its story unfolding gradually and relatively slowly across episodes, with early episodes focused on the protagonist Thackery and dedicated to introducing the hospital as the central setting, and later episodes spending more time on ensemble characters once relationships are established. As character development occurs, professional and personal lives increasingly intersect, and more action takes place away from the hospital. For example, Thackery’s heroin and cocaine addiction facilitates and inhibits his pioneering medical experiments, Barrow’s infatuation with a prostitute drives his defrauding of the hospital, and Gallinger’s decision to inspect his baby’s mouth with unsterilized hands leads the infant to contract a fatal disease and brings about his wife’s immense bereavement. Episodes crosscut between story arcs involving different characters, which do not often intersect, but are linked mainly by their association with the Knickerbocker. Soderbergh has previously claimed that the unifying thread of his films is ‘main characters that are out of sync with their environments’ (Gallagher, 2013: 28-29), a theme shared with indie film generally (King, 2005: 250). Yet the crosscutting between ensemble casts in *The Knick* follows conventions more common of TV dramas revolving around specific workplaces, including hospital dramas such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-present) and *The Night Shift* (2014-2017). As a result, *The Knick*’s adherence to these conventions marks a point of departure from Soderbergh’s film work, suggesting that he must conform to certain institutional norms and raising into question notions of the indie-auteur’s autonomy in different contexts. At the same time, *The Knick* exhibits an impressive array of production techniques, including crane tracking shots, a synthesizer score and expansive period sets and costumes, enabled by its $3million to $6million per episode budget. Far removed from the rough aesthetics and minimal budgets of Soderbergh’s most marginal indie films such as *sex, lies and videotape* and *Bubble* (2005), *The Knick* demonstrates that premium television afforded Soderbergh an abundance of resources that he had only previously experienced when working within the Hollywood mainstream on films like *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001) and *Contagion* (2011).

Despite the similarities above to certain other TV dramas such as *Grey’s Anatomy*, *The Knick* is differentiated from those shows by its darker tone, graphic depiction of medical procedures, brazen inclusion of class-A drug-taking, hard-hitting violence and gore. Cinemax’s trailer uses these elements to promote *The Knick* as edgy andinnovative. The trailer combines out of focus shots, extreme close-ups, off-centre framing, slanted camera angles, distinctive colour schemes, and editing to the tempo of the score. Unsurprisingly, the trailer attributes the show’s edginess and innovation to the indie-auteur, with Soderbergh’s name appearing in big bold font against a black background accompanied by a bang in the soundtrack. Rather than representing a stamp of Soderbergh’s autonomy as it was intended however, the trailer reveals that the programme conforms to Cinemax’s branding strategies. Most clips in the season one trailer of *The Knick*, meanwhile, are from scenes set in the Knickerbocker hospital and the surrounding streets in New York. In voice-over, Thackery narrates the advances of modern society and medicine at the beginning of the twentieth century. The few clips set outside the hospital provide a contrast between Thackery as a pioneering doctor and as a man struggling to resist the temptations of society. For example, the trailer opens with a low-angle shot of Thackery coming into focus in the foreground in a room with gold lighting in what turns out to be an opium den. The gold hue is synchronized with the opening line of Thackery’s narration, an assertion that “We, mankind, have progressed so far,” to create a noble or pious impression that is quickly undermined by the immorality symbolized by the opium den. It is a moment that conveys clearly the show’s ‘edginess.’

Omitted almost entirely from the trailer are scenes in domestic settings, like the characters’ homes, that might risk associating the show with the soap opera genre, revealing some problematic issues relating to gender. As Newman and Levine have discussed, although most premium television is serialized content, rather than episodic or procedural, soap operas are very rarely referred to positively in discourses of legitimation around serialized dramas (Newman and Levine, 2012: 80-81). ‘This is a highly significant omission given the centrality of serialization to historical conceptions of feminized popular culture, and the centrality of feminized qualities in the constructions of pre-convergence television as mass culture’ (Newman and Levine, 2012: 81). Indeed, legitimated serials ‘distanc[e] themselves from “soapy,” feminized subjects,’ such as romance, to ‘masculinize a denigrated form’ (Newman and Levine, 2012: 82). Moreover, legitimated television dramas like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *L.A Law* (1986-1994)and *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), tend to be set in professional settings to balance ‘their ongoing relationship arcs with more masculinized cop, lawyer, and doc storylines’ (Newman and Levine: 2012: 97). Female characters in *The Knick*’s trailer, therefore, are typically shown anguished or hurried and appear adrift within Thackery’s world as either a patient undergoing examination or a misguided admirer. Little hint exists of the show’s romance storylines, such as the one between Thackery and Nurse Elkins, or other important storylines featuring female characters, such as Eleanor Gallinger’s (Maya Kazan) bereavement. As a result, the trailer leaves little doubt that *The Knick* is about Thackery and his experiences, as both doctor and man at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The trailer promotes *The Knick* as masculine and resists aspects of the show that may appear to feminize it. In this regard, the trailer represents an example of ‘masculine cool’ found in certain indie films like *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) (Bruzzi, 2017: 391). Like *Reservoir Dogs*, *The Knick*’s visual and aural style creates an aura of cool directly linked to notions of the unrestrained freedom of the indie-auteur (see Bruzzi, 2017: 391). With Soderbergh having praised the subscription model for providing greater autonomy by stating, ‘It’s about drawing people to you because you’ve got cool shit’ (Smith, 2013), the marketability of masculine cool is here tied directly to notions of autonomy in subscription television. Consequently, pay-TV with its more lenient censorship rules compared to network television, appears as a privileged space due to its apparent embrace of unrestrained expression (see also McMurria, 2007). Attempts to portray unrestrained expression are epitomized by the single clip in *The Knick*’s trailer in a domestic setting, where Nurse Elkins injects Thackery’s penis with cocaine. While Thackery is meant to be pitied in the scene, it is Soderbergh’s edgy approach, driven by his sense of superiority and detachment, that comes across as cool. Reviewers certainly interpreted the scene this way, with one describing it as a ‘shocking’ portrayal of the doctor as a ‘flawed genius’ (Fallon, 2015).

Following paratextual manifestations of masculine cool, critical reception disseminated notions of *The Knick* as edgier, and more innovative, than network television. Most reviews tied *The Knick*’s edginess to Soderbergh, highlighting his role as director, and occasionally cinematographer and editor, of every episode. For many critics, signs of Soderbergh’s authorship were key to their enjoyment (Hale, 2015b; Gilbert, 2015). *The Knick*’s stylistic flourishes, they said, made the show stand out from all other drama on TV (Hale, 2015a; Seitz, 2015). *The New York Times* commented on the ‘virtuoso moments’ in the show, stating, ‘it just illustrates what the possibilities are for truly cinematic TV-making, and how far everyone else still has to go to catch up with Steven Soderbergh’ (Hale, 2015a). Similarly*,* *Vulture* claimed that for Soderbergh ‘long-form storytelling … offer[ed] more possibilities for experimentation, because TV’s aesthetic hasn’t been developed as deeply as cinema’s’ (Seitz, 2015). While these comments reflect taste biases expected of critics, they run counter to pressing calls made by Wheatley and others (2007) that television’s past must not be ignored. Praising Soderbergh’s practices while suggesting that television’s aesthetic is not well developed represents an example of the discourse of ‘newness’ around television that, as Wheatley argues, has contributed to the omission of alternative and feminist accounts of television history (Wheatley, 2007: 5-6). This provides an important reminder that television’s diverse history must not be ignored and overwritten in favour of praise for the more high-budget and seemingly seductive work of indie-auteurs like Fincher and Soderbergh.

**Conclusion**

Taking *House of Cards* and *The Knick* as case-studies, this article has demonstrated how talent intermediaries such as MRC and Anonymous Content actively construct and manage indie-auteurism. With talent intermediaries having gone largely overlooked in media scholarship, this article demonstrates how teasing out their often hidden but influential roles can provide a clearer understanding of the interconnectedness of media industries. Having focused on Fincher and Soderbergh in this article, much more work needs to be done to understand the roles that talent intermediaries play in building the careers of media professionals and constructing star profiles. Doing so can help to dispel the autonomous artist myth surrounding certain figures, revealing them to be operating within broader labour networks and following commercial imperatives often under the direction of their advisors. Moreover, if we are to understand the contribution that talent intermediaries are making to cultural production, much more work is needed on the roles that they play in facilitating broader media industry dialogues, collaborations and processes. That talent intermediaries also operate across media reveals problems in the way that media scholars too often study film, television and advertising as distinct subjects. Indeed, with talent intermediaries adapting their strategies to exploit media industry changes, media scholars must similarly become more flexible to trace and understand those strategies fully. Finally, indie-auteurism’s growing prominence in television, surrounding shows including not only those other works developed by Anonymous Content and its clients, but also the Duplass Brothers’ *Togetherness* (2015-2016), Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (2017) and Nicolas Winding Renf’s *Too Old to Die Young* (2019-present), among others, provides many new and fruitful avenues for analysis. This article has sought to provide some direction, by arguing that indie-auteurism is not necessarily innovative or radical, but is indicative of increasingly consolidated media industries, is well-aligned with certain free market economic practices, and wrongly generates impressions about improvements in programming quality and diversity. As a result, the article has demonstrated that the study of talent intermediary strategies can produce greater insights into important issues concerning industry commissioning and hiring practices, labour hierarchies and inequalities, and programming diversity. In a context witnessing a proliferation of pay-TV services each rushing to bring talent in-house and control the market by securing as many subscribers as possible (Sandberg, 2019), therefore, it becomes increasingly important to look beyond the seductive legitimation discourses that indie-auteurism helps to perpetuate, to understand instead the systems involved in its dispersal, as well as its various functions and repercussions.

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