As trailblazers in the television business go, Garry Trudeau, the iconic, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist/creator of Doonesbury, has an unprecedented track record. In 1988, Trudeau wrote and co-produced (with director Robert Altman) the critically acclaimed, political mockumentary Tanner ’88 for HBO. It was HBO’s first foray into the original scripted TV business, albeit for a limited series. (9 years later, in 1997, Oz became HBO’s first scripted drama series.) Tanner ’88 won an Emmy Award and 4 cable ACE Awards.

25 years later, Trudeau created Alpha House—which holds the distinction of being the very first original series on Amazon. The single-camera, half-hour comedy orbits around the exploits of four Republican senators (played by John Goodman, Clark Johnson, Matt Malloy, and Mark Consuelos) who live as roommates in the same Capitol Hill townhouse. The series was inspired by actual Democratic congressmen/roomies: Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL), Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), and Representative George Miller (D-CA). Bill Murray did 2 cameos as hapless Senator Vernon Smits. Other real life politicians appeared throughout the series’ 2-season run.

The series follows in the footsteps of Lacey Davenport (the Doonesbury Republican congresswoman from San Francisco), and presidential candidate Jack Tanner (played by Michael Murphy). All of Trudeau’s politicians are struggling to reframe their platforms and priorities while their parties are in flux. I think it’s safe to say that the more things change in Washington, the more things stay the same. Trudeau explores identity crises through his trademark trenchant humor. As he explained to Washington Post blogger Alyssa Rosenberg (10/24/14):

“The things that I’m interested in have changed dramatically. I couldn’t have done Tanner [‘88] with Republicans in the late 1980s in a way that I could have figured out that would have been interesting. And conversely, I couldn’t have done Alpha House with Democrats. In what sort of bind are they that is dramatically interesting other than the fact that they can’t get anything done? They just come home and be frustrated.”

The first season of Alpha House (per Alyssa Rosenberg) “…featured the ramping up of primary season, galvanizing a group of men who were used to not having to work for their seats.” As Trudeau puts it, “…with these tea party challenges, man, it’s fun to watch!” And so
are the gaffes and scandals that continue to challenge the four GOP Senators, blurring the lines between their personal and political lives.

Gil John Biggs (John Goodman) had been a legendary college basketball coach back in his hometown, but his subsequent success in Washington alienated him from his core constituents—which Biggs laments until he pays a visit to Ruby Shoals; back home at the old barbershop, instead of nostalgia, Biggs encounters racism aimed at his Nigerian personal aide, Hakeem (Bjorn Dupaty).

“He had all these memories of it [Ruby Shoals] being a place of decency,” Trudeau says. “I idealize my small town upbringing. I grew up in a town of about 7,000. I don’t have any bad memories of that time. There must have been some, but I’ve edited them out […] I grew up in a Republican family and we lived next door to my best friend Peter, whose father was the publisher of the paper and was a Democrat, he worked for [Adlai] Stevenson,” Trudeau continued. “And my mother worked for Eisenhower. It wasn’t that it wasn’t important. It’s just that it didn’t create any tension between us. It didn’t say ‘Well, you’re just real different from me, you have a different worldview.’ So what am I papering over in my memory? What wasn’t I noticing? Or is that a reasonable facsimile of what was actually happening?”

Biggs’ housemates have their own identity issues with which to contend: Louis Laffer Jr. (Matt Malloy) is beleaguered by rumors of homosexuality and tries to butch up his image on a trip abroad; Robert Bettencourt (Clark Johnson) is an African-American Republican from Pennsylvania whose stance on the GOP’s voters’ rights record is becoming untenable; and the Lothario of the townhouse, freshman Senator Andy Guzman’s (Mark Consuelos) sexual appetite is only rivaled by his brazen presidential ambitions.

Andy Guzman affords Trudeau the opportunity to skewer the younger, entitled generation. Or as he puts it: “There are a generation of young firebrands who say ‘Oh, yeah, it’s okay to throw bombs. Why wouldn’t it be okay to throw bombs? That seems perfectly normal to me,’” Trudeau says. “And they’ve grown up with the degraded culture of online conversation, and they’re comfortable with it. I think it’s fun having Andy in the house for that reason. He can’t quite understand why they’re having so many problems. You just adjust! You just pivot!”

The retired literary agent, Elliot Webb, has served as Garry Trudeau’s trusted advisor for most of Trudeau’s career. It was Webb who brokered the pioneering Tanner ‘88 deal at HBO. And it was Webb, serving as an Executive Producer, who also brokered the precedent-setting deal for Alpha House at Amazon Studios.

Elliot Webb began his career as an agent at ICM in 1974. In 1983, he left ICM and joined agents Bob Broder and Norman Kurland to form Broder, Kurland, Webb—which later
expanded and added agent Beth Uffner\(^1\) as another partner, with subsequent partners Chris Silbermann and Ted Chervin. For many years Broder-Kurland-Webb-Uffner was the preeminent boutique literary agency in the TV business, representing a stellar client list of A-list TV writers and showrunners. The small agency was acquired by ICM in 2006.

In addition to Garry Trudeau, Elliot Webb guided the careers of Chris Carter (*The X-Files*), Josh Brand (*Northern Exposure*), Mitchell Burgess & Robin Green (*The Sopranos*), Barry Kemp (*Newhart*), and Chip Johannessen (*Millennium* and currently Executive Producer of *Homeland*), among many others. Webb retired from the agency business in 2009.

With his nearly 4 decades of experience, I was keen to get Webb’s insights and perspective on both *Alpha House* and the future of the television business. I caught up with the Hollywood veteran who now resides in New York City and continues to develop TV projects for traditional broadcast and digital streaming networks.

**Neil Landau:** How did *Alpha House* find its way to Amazon?

**Elliot Webb:** Garry Trudeau had written the script on a speculative basis a few years prior to it finding its way to Amazon. I was still his agent. When originally written, I had circulated the pilot script to senior executives at traditional media outlets. At that time, politics and satire were not popular TV fare. While Garry’s script was very well executed, the market was not very enthusiastic about the subject matter. Three to four years later, Jonathan Alter, a prominent journalist and biographer, and, a good friend of Garry’s, mentioned that Amazon was entering the original content business. Jonathan made contact there. I was asked to forward the script to Amazon, and they responded very well to the material. That started a proverbial romance between buyer and seller. *Alpha House* was to become the first pilot ordered. Garry, Jonathan and I became partners in the endeavor.

**NL:** At what point was the decision made to turn them into Republican senators—and why?

**EW:** Prior to Amazon’s interest, Garry and Jonathan believed that the Republicans were in disarray. There was an opportunity to poke fun at their escapades. The Democrats were still in control of the Senate, however Garry saw more opportunity to satirize the Republicans and their point of view.

**NL:** What are the key differences working with Amazon Studios versus a broadcast, cable, or premium cable network?

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\(^1\) Beth Uffner was my first agent. We met when I was a college intern at MTM Enterprises – where she was VP of Comedy Development. Small world. Beth’s credo: Hollywood is built on relationships.
**EW:** All broadcasters are looking for a hit series, and seeking the best on-air and behind the camera talent to make that happen. With *Alpha House*, we were the script they were intent on making, as a pilot, and hopefully, a series. It was a trailblazing deal in part because we were coming to the negotiation where there was no business template as a seller. Amazon had constructed a business template that they were comfortable with, however, as a seller, we pretty much had to negotiate from whole cloth.

At the time, Netflix had previously committed to doing original content starting with *House of Cards*, which was pre-packaged with the actors, producers, creator and director. When the series was ordered, there was no intervening pilot, and therefore a different business template was used with a 13-episode, straight to series commitment. With *Alpha House*, Amazon Studios was originally wanting to option the script with the mutual understanding that they then wanted to order a pilot first, and a series thereafter. My perception is, the marked difference between traditional broadcasters and the new streaming services, the networks were a bit more transparent. There were previous [salary and budgetary] business models and precedents. Both Amazon and Netflix were working with different metrics. When I was actively working as an agent, few creators wrote spec pilots. Now, speculative pilots are much more en vogue, than in the last number of years. At that time, it was very much a sales approach. Our agency, my partners, Bob Broder, Ted Chervin and Chris Silbermann, were of the belief that the development process could not start without our writers writing, “Fade In.”

From that perspective, we were at the start of the process. The networks’ leverage was, that as buyers, they could arbitrate what it is they wanted to make and how much they wanted to produce it for. Negotiations, and eventually the agreements were based on past history.

Business was done differently at the broadcast/cable networks at that time. As for digital/streaming networks, there was and is a difference between the traditional landscape and leaders in the digital landscape of Amazon, Netflix and all new streaming platforms.

**NL:** How so?

**EW:** Both need to provide a wide array of programming to keep their subscription and customer base growing and happy. Amazon’s main directive is to drive traffic to their retail site. Both companies use proprietary customer algorithms, to make their creative decisions.

**NL:** Amazon picked up *Alpha House* for a second season, so certainly that was a big vote of confidence, but how did you and Garry know if the show was doing well? Did Amazon ever share those numbers with you?

**EW:** The answer is no. We were able to move forward based on the script, and John Goodman agreeing to be the lead of the show.
NL: So you never got any indication how the show was doing compared to their other shows?

EW: I hadn't asked Roy Price (Vice-President of Amazon Studios) and Joe Lewis (Head of Comedy Development). They have always noted that it was proprietary information. I was interested in their decision metrics, and was not made privy to them!

NL: [Laughs]

EW: I’m very clear that if I put too much effort into what Amazon were basing their decisions on, I am taking my mind away from what is important, and that is “the quality of the show.” Amazon is developing a number of scripts. They go through the customer review and online voting process, which in fact they did with us. There was enough positive feedback from that process, on the potential of Alpha House as a series, that we were offered to produce a pilot. Thereafter, the produced pilot was put through a similar screening process, to determine if a series was to be ordered. We were successful in that endeavor.

NL: Did they share those specific numbers and reactions with you?

EW: No. The bottom line for us was they were going to go forward with the series, based upon the fact that we were the first one out of the box, and there was some traction with Garry Trudeau and John Goodman.

NL: And their internal metric for success must have proved the show was popular enough to warrant a second season, right?

EW: The biggest problem we had with Amazon was their lack of transparency about how they measured customer response, which was private information. When the first season ended, we had a good feeling about Alpha House, as we believed the show was creatively strong. We were pretty much at sea for about 6 months as to whether we were going to be picked up. The show was critically praised, and Amazon was giving us hopeful signs, although we didn’t get the official second season pickup for 6 months after it aired.

NL: As primarily a retail company, Amazon doesn’t have the same pressures to feed the pipeline as a traditional network, or Netflix.

EW: I agree. It should be noted that even though Netflix seems more forthcoming, by, in some cases, ordering a second season while simultaneously airing the first, nobody really knows how they measure the success of their shows either.

NL: Netflix is also in the global TV business, and Amazon focuses on domestic. And yet both companies have found early success with shows set in the theater of politics. But maybe Alpha
House was a better fit for Amazon because Hollywood's conventional wisdom has been that comedies don't travel well overseas. Do you agree?

**EW:** Both have strong overseas components to their service. Amazon and Netflix were competing, and therefore weren't going to go in the same direction. If Netflix produced a drama, Amazon would counter program with comedy. As both are subscription based, and are online overseas, I don't believe the issue is whether it would travel well. I think each service believed it would attract a foreign online audience. I would say conventional history points to the fact that dramas played better overseas than comedies. The US marketplace still imports and adapts both comedy and drama, and vice versa. There continues to be an international business for formats that can be adapted or reproduced for another market and culture.

**NL:** When I interviewed [former CBS President] Peter Tortorici, about the future of TV, while he recognizes the enormous impact of the digital television revolution in terms of more choices—especially for the younger generation—he doesn't anticipate the traditional TV business changing very much in the near future. I humbly disagree with him. Your thoughts?

**EW:** The traditional TV marketplace is growing. Financially, they are doing very well. The digital marketplace still does not compare financially to the advertising monies that flow into the networks. As long as the broadcast networks are alive and thriving, though they might eventually disappear, they continue to remain strong advertiser supported outlets. They are still the main outlets for viewers to watch sports and live events. Do I think that's going to be sustained? My response would be that every generation is different as to viewing habits. The younger generation has a completely different relationship to television, whether on their iPhones, tablets or laptops. Eventually, there will be a shift. I think Peter's point of view has validity, in part because that was and is his experience. We want to believe that the institution we grew up with is not changing as fast as others would like us to think.

If you're a young person, you're not going to care whether there are networks or not. They will become dinosaurs. And some people consider them dinosaurs even now! Who knows? In 20 to 30 years, Netflix and Amazon might become dinosaurs themselves. Presently, most traditional and cable outlets have their own streaming platforms.

**NL:** I believe the decline of network TV is going to happen much sooner for the reason that time moves much faster now. All of our communication and transactions happen remarkably fast. Look at the Arab Spring. Look at the sea change in this country over legalizing gay marriage. Social media and instant messaging—our incessant connectivity—has caused what I like to call a celestial speedup. A 10-year window could be a 5-year window in the near future when you consider how quickly everything is changing, and people are adapting. It's pretty mind blowing when you think about it.
EW: I agree. I might be one of the dinosaurs I referred to, and I see my peers, who still work in the agency business, feel the same. The recent seismic shift between CAA and UTA shows that change is happening. At ICM, my former partners are also experiencing the change.

As an aside, when I was a young agent, Irving Azoff, who I had met, had a distinctive point of view about the feature business at that time: “If you start the process, they will come.” And I think that that’s true, now, especially in television. The process is going to move along whether you choose to be on the train, or not. And, yes, the business is changing. It’s more lucrative than ever for the TV media outlets, as there are many more places to sell your ideas.