The Sternberg Report

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A Brief History of Predicting TV Hits and Misses

(A Young Media Person's Guide to Evaluating Pilots)

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Leading up to their annual upfront presentations to the advertising industry in May, the broadcast networks unveiled their respective primetime fall TV schedules. I'm about to start the process of reviewing the new series pilots for my annual predictions of hits and misses.

This purpose of this report is to provide some insights into what to look for when evaluating the success potential of a new TV show. In the 40 years or so I've been analyzing the television landscape, the benchmark of success for a new series has continually shifted, with the bar gradually getting lower and lower.

As streaming starts to supplant linear TV in terms of time spent viewing (to programming, not yet commercials), the broadcast networks are relying more and more on franchise extensions, spin-offs, and prequels (all of which are easier and less expensive to promote), high-profile sports (which get sizable live audiences and help promote the rest of a network's lineup), and games/reality (less expensive than original scripted series, and still more prevalent on broadcast and cable than on streaming platforms). There are fewer new original scripted series on the broadcast networks slated for this fall than any time I can recall.

Before further discussion on how to analyze new series pilots, here's some historical perspective of how networks and media agencies have traditionally evaluated TV series success and failure, and how it has changed over the years.

In the 3-network world of the 1980s, when cable was just starting to impact the broadcast network s, if a new show didn't generate at least a 30 household share (something that is virtually impossible today for a regular series), it was considered borderline – even if it won its time period.

Although back then, if a network believed in a show it would often be given time or moved to a new time period to see if it could find an audience. One network was usually so far ahead or so far behind the pack that giving a show a network head of programming (or their spouse) liked more time to grow had little downside. The average household had fewer than 30 channels, and primetime on three broadcast networks (or syndication on pre- WB/UPN stations) was the only place to find original scripted series.

This was the last decade of three network dominance, when a low-rated fall series could become a word-of-mouth hit over the summer (the networks would typically air reruns of an entire season), or win an Emmy and then see its ratings surge.

Dallas (1978-91) changed time periods a couple of times before becoming a major hit. *Miami Vice* (1984-89) became a hit over the summer, as its fashion and MTV-style soundtrack dominated entertainment TV shows and magazines.


Hill St. Blues (1981-87) might have been canceled if it hadn't won multiple Emmys and received a subsequent ratings boost. *Cheers* (1982-93) premiered as the lowest rated show of the week, but finished its 11-year run in the top 10.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, as three networks grew to four, and then six, and cable began expanding, siphoning off broadcast viewers, a 20 household share or a strong demographic performance was good enough for a show to be considered successful. Fox became a major force, appealing to younger viewers with shows like *Married..With Children* (1987-97), *Living Single* (1993-98), *The X-Files* (1993-2002), *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and *24* (2001-10). While not at the level of the Big Three among total viewers, Fox surpassed them among viewers 18-34, and eventually started competing, and often winning, among adults 18-49.

The fledgling WB and UPN networks (since combined into the CW) had different metrics of success – they were all about the under-35 crowd, with UPN also focusing on Black viewers. Both had success with shows like WB's *7th Heaven* (1996-2006), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001), *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), and *Smallville* (2001-11), and UPN's *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000), *Moesha* (1996-2001), and *Girlfriends* (2000-06). They were able to thrive with ratings that might have led to quick cancellation on the Big Four networks.

On the traditional broadcast networks, average ratings were no longer what they were during their heyday, but blockbuster hits were still possible – and it was another Golden Age of comedy. Shows like *Roseanne* (1988-97), *Home Improvement* (1991-99), and *Friends* (1994-2004), were not only hits right out of the gate, but also buoyed the shows that followed them – lead-ins were still important and created so-called "time-period hits" (such as anything at 8:30 or 9:30pm on NBC Thursday or ABC Tuesday).

During this time, it was still possible for a low-rated show to build into a hit (although not as common as in previous years). *Seinfeld* (1989-98) was a modest mid-season entry for three seasons before becoming a hit on Thursday. *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) was a weak performer on Friday night before being moved and enjoying success on Monday.

Throughout the early 2000s, ad-supported cable started airing original scripted series, a trend started by **Syfy** with *Farscape* (1999-2003), *Stargate SG-1* (2002-07), *Stargate Atlantis* (2004-09), and *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09), **USA** with *The Dead Zone* (2002-07), *Monk* (2002-09), *The 4400* (2004-07), and *Psych* (2006-14), **FX** with shows like *The Shield* (2002-08), *Nip/Tuck* (2003-10), and *Rescue Me* (2004-11), and **TNT's** *The Closer*. FX shows were known for content deemed too risqué for the broadcast networks.

Original **premium cable series**, such as **HBO's** *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *The Wire* (2002-2008), and *True Blood* (2008-14), and **Showtime's** *The L Word* (2004-09), *Weeds* (2005-12), *Dexter* (2006-13), and *Nurse Jackie* (2009-15), commercial-free and without the same content restrictions as ad-supported television, started to draw viewers away from the broadcast networks. Unlike their traditional TV counterparts, they weren't restricted by programming schedules, and were able to build viewership by repeating episode broadcasts in primetime throughout the week.

In the 2010s, more people started owning DVRs and multi-media devices. Original scripted ad-supported cable series, such as *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, *Justified*, and *The Americans*, were generating more buzz than anything on the broadcast networks. Streaming and social media platforms were starting to grow, and time-shifted viewing became a thing. Definitions of success became even more nebulous – receiving a solid audience bump in delayed DVR viewing and having a strong social media following became factors contributing to whether a new show was perceived as successful and deserved to be renewed.

The first real internet-driven success, Fox's *Glee* (2009-15), debuted to modest ratings in May, despite premiering after the *American Idol* season finale. But clips from the show, including its great musical sequences, went viral over the summer and it became a hit the following season.

The 2010s saw premium cable continue to debut one hit series after another – **HBO** with *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-14), *Game of Thrones* (2011-19), *The Leftovers* (2014-17), *Westworld* (2016-22), *Insecure* (2016-21), *Succession* (2018-23), *Barry* (2018-23), and *Euphoria* (2019-), **Showtime** with *Homeland* (2011-20), *Shameless* (2011-21), *Ray Donovan* (2013-22), *The Affair* (2014-19), *Billions* (2016-23), and *The Chi* (2018-), and **Starz** with *Spartacus* (2010-13), *Black Sails* (2014-17), *Power* (2014-), Outlander (2014-), and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2016-21).

The heyday of new original scripted series on ad-supported cable was from 2007-2017 (before the streaming wars), with **AMC's** *Mad Men* (2007-15), *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), *The Walking Dead* (2010-22), *Hell on Wheels* (2011-16), *Halt and Catch Fire* (2014-17), *Better Call Saul* (2015-22), and *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015-23), **FX's** *Damages* (2007-10), *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-14), *Justified* (2010-15), *American Horror Story* (2011-), *The Americans* (2013-18), *The Strain* (2014-17), *Fargo* (2014-), *Legion* (2017-19), and *Snowfall* (2017-23), **TNT's** *The Closer* (2005-12), *Saving Grace* (2007-10), *Leverage* (2008-12), *Southland* (2010-13), *Rizzoli and Isles* (2010-16), *Falling Skies* (2011-15), *Major Crimes* (2012-18), *The Librarians* (2014-18), *The Last Ship* (2014-18), and *Animal Kingdom* (2016-22), and **USA's** *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2007-11), *Burn Notice* (2007-13), *In Plain Sight* (2008-12), *Royal Pains* (2009-16), *White Collar* (2009-14), *Covert Affairs* (2010-14), *Necessary Roughness* (2011-13), Suits (2011-19), *Mr. Robot* (2015-19), *Queen of the South* (2016-21), *Claws* (2017-22), and *The Sinner* (2017-21).

As viewing splintered among numerous viewing sources, ratings and shares became less significant as an indicator of success. Rankings among key demographics became more important. Finishing first or second in a given time period, doing well relative to its network's other programming, and holding onto a decent portion of its lead-in audience, all factored into whether a new show would make it to a second season or beyond. Whether a network owned the show also started to carry more weight when it came to deciding which shows to renew, since the networks made their real money when a show it owned accumulated enough episodes to be sold in the syndication rerun after-market (usually 90-100 episodes, which not long ago meant four or five seasons). Of course, that was when the average season for a series consisted of 22-26 episodes.

Only a few broadcast shows, such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-19), were still given time to find an audience – it finished its first season in 68th place but ended up as the longest running multi-camera comedy ever, with 12 seasons. But more times than not, shows without decent ratings to start were quickly axed.

The first major streaming hit, Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013-18), foreshadowed further declines in ad-supported TV viewing for both broadcast and cable. (as "binge viewing" entered the media lexicon).

Between 2013 and 2017, the bulk of original scripted streaming series were on Netflix, with Amazon Prime Video starting to ramp up its programming. Hulu had fewer original scripted series, but would soon be expanding its slate.

During this period, **Netflix** debuted *Orange is the New Black* (2013-19), *Daredevil* (2015-18), *Jessica Jones* (2015-19), *Narcos* (2015-17), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-20), *Grace & Frankie* (2015-22), *Master of None* (2015-21), *The Ranch* (2016-20), *The Crown* (2016-23), *Stranger Things* (2016-), *13 Reasons Why* (2017-20), and *Ozark* (2017-22), *Dear White People* (2017-21), and *GLOW* (2017-19).

Prime Video didn't yet have nearly the quantity of original series as Netflix, but it had several high-quality series of its own, premiering *Red Oaks* (2014-17), *Transparent* (2014-19), *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014-18), *Bosch* (2015-21), *Sneaky Pete* (2015-19), *The Man in the High Castle* (2015-19), *Goliath* (2016-21), and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017-23).

Hulu was not yet producing a high volume of original series, but did debut *East Los High* (2013-17), *Deadbeat* (2014-16), *Casual* (2015-18), *The Path* (2016-18), *Future Man* (2017-20), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-25), and *Marvel's Runaways* (2017-19) during this time.

While CBS All Access (now **Paramount+**) actually launched in 2014, it didn't air original scripted programming until 2017, when it debuted *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-21) and *The Good Fight* (2017-22).

In the 2020s, streaming started to dominate the TV landscape, as **Disney+** and **Apple TV+** debuted in 2019, followed in 2020 by **HBO Max** and **Peacock**.

As a result of media conglomerates making an all-out effort to compete with Netflix, **ad-supported cable** started to cut back dramatically on original scripted series. The few successful ones premiering this decade include, **AMC's** *Gangs of London* (2021-), *Dark Winds* (2022-), *Mayfair Witches* (2023-), and *The Walking Dead* franchise (*The Ones Who Live*, *Dead City*, and *Daryl Dixon*), FX's *Shogun* (2024-) and *Alien: Earth* (2025-), **TNT's** *Snowpiercer* (2020-22 moved to AMC) and *The Librarians: The Next Chapter* (2025-), **USA's** *Chucky* (2021-24), and *Resident Alien* (2025 season 4) – and the upcoming *The Rainmaker*.

The Big Eight streaming platforms (Netflix, Prime Video, Hulu, HBO Max, Paramount+, Disney+, Apple TV+, and Peacock) spent massive amounts of money on original scripted programming with no regard to linear networks' traditional TV seasons or scheduling structure. Some streamers dropped full seasons of a new show all at once, and others opting for the once-a-week model. This has changed not only how viewers watch television, but also how they think of TV seasons.

Benchmarks of success vary significantly by platform – and are often measured by total minutes viewed in a given week or month (as opposed to average minute Nielsen ratings that have traditionally been used to measure linear TV viewing). The average household now subscribes to more than four streaming services.

But the broadcast networks still air one episode per week, and continue with their traditional fall and mid-season schedules.

Despite the sea change in what, how, and when people watch television, **how to evaluate the success potential of a new broadcast series** has not changed all that much over the years. But how long a new show is given to reach that potential has. Today, the broadcast network races are closer than ever, with tenths of a rating point often separating first and last place (the same is true for the top 10 or 15 cable networks). When networks care more about rankings, streaming subs, and positive press than growing their audience, potential is sacrificed in favor of immediately doing even slightly better (and saving money).

Traditionally, where a new series is scheduled, has been just as important, sometimes more so, than the quality of the show. It is still a consideration, but much less so than in years past. At one time, a new show scheduled opposite *E.R.*, *CSI*, or *Grey's Anatomy*, was virtually guaranteed to fail, while a new series following *Seinfeld*, *Roseanne*, or *NCIS*, was a good bet to draw a sizable audience.

The TV/video world today is much different and more splintered. There are no NBC Thursday night "Must See TV" lineups anymore, when they could throw anything in the 8:30 or 9:30 slot and get a solid rating (remember *Suddenly Susan*?). There are no 30+ share programs or time periods anymore. A strong lead-in, while still valuable, is not nearly as significant as it used to be. A good show can succeed anywhere and a bad show can flop anywhere. **The concept of "least objectionable programming,"** a phrase with which people under 40 (50?) are probably unfamiliar, no longer applies.

Nevertheless, being able to evaluate a new show's success potential based solely on the pilot episode is still important.

Here are some guidelines:

Comedies should be funny because of the characters, not the plot

When I used to give new season presentations to clients and our media agency staff (when I was head of TV analysis at Bozell, TN Media, and MAGNA Global), I compared the differences between some of the funniest pilots I ever saw, and why some were long-running hits, while others were canceled within a season or two.

Questions worth asking when evaluating a comedy pilot:

- Did some specific event happen in the pilot to make it funny? Will that situation still exist in the next episode?
    - Is it a romantic comedy where the two main characters meet during the pilot?
    - Is it a "fish out of water" comedy where the main character returns to his or her small home town after years of having a career in the big city?
    - Does some poor schlub somehow strike it rich or get some major promotion at work?
    - Does someone inherit his or her sibling's kids or business?
    - Does someone's estranged teenage or adult child (with our without kids of their own) suddenly arrive on their doorstep?

You get the idea. By the second episode, many of these plot-driven comedy pilots become substantially different shows. What made the first episode so funny is gone (watch the short-lived

The Famous Teddy Z – one of the funniest pilots I've ever seen – and you'll see what I mean). You need to look more deeply to determine whether you think this type of comedy can be maintained on a weekly basis. Once in a while, one of these shows will work, but more often not.

ABC's new comedy, *Shifting Gears* seems to fall into this category – gruff widower who runs an auto repair shop reluctantly takes in his estranged daughter and her two kids. But the fact that it stars the popular Tim Allen and Kat Dennings, and ABC is pairing it with *Abbott Elementary*, might enable it to buck the trend. The network must be high on it since it is leading into, not out of its hit comedy.

Perhaps the most important question of all is do the supporting actors stand out and do they have chemistry with both the main star and one another? Is it funny because the characters gel and are funny together, not because of anything that happened in the pilot? There were many hit comedies over the years that fit into this category – *Cheers*, *Cosby*, *Family Ties*, *The Golden Girls*, *Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *Seinfeld*, *Home Improvement*, *Frasier*, *Living Single*, *The Simpsons*, *Friends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Scrubs*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Modern Family*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, *Abbott Elementary* and *Ghosts* (just to name a few from every decade since the 1980s). Viewers look forward to watching slight variations of the same situations week after week – because they like the characters, not the storyline or plot device.

CBS's new workplace comedy, *DMV*, fits into this category, and its success will depend largely on how well the ensemble cast gels (and, of course, *The Neighborhood* lead in). CBS Monday 8:30 pm comedies are often interchangeable, but this seems to have some potential.

Comedy spin-offs, once common, are now rare. Of course, that's a function of there being far fewer successful comedies. Long gone are the days when an *All in the Family*, *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, or *Happy Days* can spin off multiple hit series. And even back in the day, some of the most popular comedies, including *Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, and *Friends*, were unable to develop successful spin-offs. *Frasier*, which spun out of *Cheers* 32 years ago, and *Grown-ish* which came from *Black-ish* in 2018 are the last successful comedy spin-offs I can recall before last season's *George & Mandy's First Marriage*, a spin-off from *Young Sheldon* (which was a prequel, to *The Big Bang Theory*).

What will a drama's third episode look like?

Does the pilot make a good one-time movie, or will it work as a weekly series? Some of the things you look at to predict comedy success apply to dramas as well. Are there specific guest stars or events in the pilot that drive the story but won't be there by the second episode? Medical, police, or legal dramas can seem compelling based solely on the cases presented in the pilot – particularly when they're written or directed by great talent who may not be involved in subsequent episodes. We need to consider the potential strengths and charisma of the lead and supporting characters, and ongoing themes of the series beyond the pilot's script.

Sometimes it is considerably more complicated. Here's just one example of how I evaluated two dramas that had excellent pilots during the same season.

I pegged ABC's *The Good Doctor* (2017-24) as one of the best medical drama pilots I had ever seen and predicted it would do well. The characters were strong, the cast was solid, and the direction the show was headed seemed clear. It was able to maintain the quality of the pilot from week-to-week and became one of the highest rated shows on television, airing 126 episodes over seven seasons..

The same season, I said ABC's *For the People (2018-19)* was one of the best legal drama pilots I had ever seen. The characters were strong, the cast was solid, and the direction the show was headed seemed clear. But I doubted it would succeed. It was canceled after its second season, having aired just 20 episodes.

So why did I think *The Good Doctor* would appeal to a broader audience, and have a better chance to succeed? It's not always easy to describe what makes me think one show will work, while an equally good show might not. You often need to look beyond the things that made you like the pilot. In this case, it came down to two things. People like to root for a person or a side. With *The Good Doctor*, the main character is someone people could empathize with or as he faces the many obstacles that an autistic savant surgical resident might face. Viewers root for him as he gradually gets most of his doubters to come around.

In most legal dramas, either the prosecution or the defense are the protagonists, giving viewers a clear side to root for. *For the People* presented both the prosecution and defense lawyers as essentially equal sides, with some winning their cases one week and losing them the next. It just seemed to me that this would not have as broad an appeal. One additional factor in my projections

was that a legal drama like *For the People* typically appeals to an older audience. Many of these viewers prefer shows that focus primarily on the characters' work lives (as most older-skewing procedural dramas do). When a show centers just as much on the characters' personal (i.e., sex) lives, older viewers tend to shy away.

Another important indicator is that ABC had other programming in the same genre as *The Good Doctor*, making it easier to promote the new show (given the ridiculous policy of not cross-promoting broadcast series on other broadcast networks). *For the People* did not have similar programming on ABC – it also debuted in March, which often makes a new show harder to market, particularly if a network gives its promotion short-shrift.

Procedural dramas are a lot like sitcoms. They're essentially situation dramas. Does the cast gel and will viewers want to tune in to slight variations of the same situation week after week? This can be telling when you compare successful procedurals and their spin-offs. The differences between the excellent *Criminal Minds* and the failed *Criminal Minds: Suspect Behavior* and *Beyond Borders*, or the original *CSI* and the short-lived *CSI Cyber* are dramatic (and demonstrate the importance of good casting – *CSI: Miami* and *CSI: NY* were both successful). All of the *NCIS*'s, on the other hand, managed both the casting chemistry and the mixing of drama and humor quite well, and all were hits (until *NCIS: Hawaii*, which still lasted three seasons).

Which brings us to the most important trend enabling the broadcast networks to maintain a chunk of their dwindling audiences – **franchise extensions**. These mostly come with built-in audiences and are easier to promote than a totally new product. And while most do not perform as well as the original, they are usually successful. In today's splintered viewing environment, with linear TV on the decline, extending successful franchises is as close to a sure bet as you can get.

As already mentioned, CBS has enjoyed major success with its ***NCIS*** **franchise** (the original was itself a spin-off from *JAG*) – *NCIS* will be entering its 24th season, *NCIS: L.A.* ran for 14 seasons, *NCIS: New Orleans* for 7; *NCIS Sydney* goes into its fourth season this fall, with *NCIS: Origins* entering its third. **A new spin-off** of the original, *NCIS: Tony & Ziva*, will debut on Paramount+ in September.

The *FBI* franchise – *FBI*, *FBI: Most Wanted*, and *FBI: International* – all succeeded for CBS, although the latter two were surprisingly just canceled after six and four seasons, respectively (which seems like a money-saving move). The original will be in its ninth season this fall. **CBS's new series**, *CIA*, will be joining the franchise this fall.

CBS continues to extend successful franchises, with *Fire Country* leading to this fall's Sheriff Country (an awkward title to force "Country" into the name), the canceled *Blue Bloods* (after 15 seasons) spawning *Boston Blue*, and this winter's *Y: Marshals* being a spin-off from *Yellowstone* (which aired on the Paramount Network for five seasons, and was the highest rated show on linear television). All should do well.

NBC, of course, has its ***One Chicago* franchise**, *Chicago Fire* (14 seasons), *Chicago PD* (13 seasons), and Chicago Med (11 seasons) all thriving despite multiple cast changes. Only *Chicago Justice* failed to catch on (being canceled after a single season).

Law & Order: Organized Crime successfully joined that long-running ***Law & Order* franchise**, and recently shifted from NBC to Peacock. *Law & Order* has been on for 24 seasons which includes an 11-year hiatus, and *Law & Order: SVU* has been on for 27 seasons, each with numerous cast changes.

The *911* franchise has been successful, first for Fox, then ABC. *911* (9 seasons) and *911: Lone Star* (5 seasons) have both been hits. Both series initially aired on Fox, but *911* shifted to ABC in 2024. *911: Lone Star* was just canceled after five seasons, but ABC will air **the new** *911: Nashville* in the fall.

In 2024, *Tracker*, became the most watched new broadcast show of the season. Again, slight variations of the same show every week. Viewers know exactly what they're getting, they know the star is going to come through unscathed and find whoever he happens to be looking for that week. It's comfort food. Can a spin-off be far behind?

Going into next season, ABC's *High Potential* and *Will Trent*, CBS's *Tracker* and *Watson*, and Fox's *Murder in a Small Town*, are the only procedural dramas not part of a larger franchise (and all are returning series).

It typically takes about three episodes before a drama settles into its regular audience level. New CBS dramas tend to get higher viewer sampling (its audience base is still the most network-loyal), and they typically check out any new CBS procedural. So it sometimes takes a new CBS drama longer to hit its regular performance level.

Shows make stars, stars don't make shows

The failed TV series with major stars attached are too numerous to list here. Who remembers Robert Mitchum in *A Family For Joe* (at the time, in 1990, it NBC's highest testing pilot ever – it aired nine episodes). And then there was Bette Midler in *Bette*, Hugh Jackman *in Viva Laughlin*, Halle Berry in *Extant*, Octavia Spencer in *Red Band Society*, Kyra Sedgwick in *Ten Days in the Valley*, Edie Falco in *Tommy*, and Hilary Swank in *Alaska Daily*, just to name a few.

In most cases, for broadcast and ad-supported cable series, it's the show that makes the star, not the other way around. Hit shows, ranging from comedies such as, *Cheers, Friends, Seinfeld, Married…With Children, Everybody Loves Raymond, Modern Family, The Big Bang Theory*, and *Abbott Elementary* to broadcast dramas such as, *E.R., The X-Files, CSI, Grey's Anatomy,* and *This is Us,* to cable dramas such as *The Shield, The Closer, Mad Men, Breaking Bad, Sons of Anarchy, Suits,* and *The Walking Dead,* were cast largely with actors who were not well known to the general public at the time.

Some stars, such as Tom Selleck (*Blue Bloods*), Kathy Bates (*Matlock*), and Tim Allen (the upcoming *Shifting Gears*) can bring long-time fans to a new show (and usually appeal to an older audience).

This doesn't apply to streaming series or limited miniseries, which often rely on big-name stars to draw in viewers. With fewer episodes (and more creative freedom) than a typical broadcast series, they are more likely to lure movie stars, as the shorter commitment still leaves them time for other projects.

Series based on theatrical movies usually don't work

Between 1971 and 2024, the broadcast networks aired 68 television series based on or adapted from theatrical movies. Only 12 lasted three seasons or more – *M*A*S*H* (1972-83), *Alice* (1976-85), *House Calls* (1979-82), *Private Benjamin* (1981-83), *In the Heat of the Night* (1988-94), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Clueless* (1996-99), *Friday Night Lights* (2006-11), *Parenthood* (2010-15), *Nikita* (2010-13), *Hannibal* (2013-16), and *Lethal Weapon* (2016-19). That's an 18% success rate, significantly less than the 32% rate of the average network series.

There are a few major reasons for this. Movies are typically designed as a single two-hour contained event, not an ongoing series (unless it's a Marvel, DC, or other action/sci-fi franchise). Successful movies also bring high expectations, which the television version seldom meets – and usually, there are lesser "stars" associated with the TV show than were in the movie.

During the 2016 and 2017 seasons, there were an unprecedented eight new series based on movies. Only one, *Lethal Weapon*, was even moderately successful (it was canceled due to on-set turmoil rather than low ratings). The others, *Uncle Buck*, *The Exorcist*, *Rush Hour*, *Taken*, *Frequency*, *Time After Time*, and *Training*

Day did not last long. Since then, there have been only two, CBS's *Clarice*, in the 2020/21 season and *True Lies* in 2022/23. Both were canceled after a single season.

Reboots typically don't work – unless they do

There have been many reboots of successful and not so successful TV shows over the years (roughly one-third of them have succeeded – similar to the success rate of all primetime series). Both the positives and negatives are fairly obvious.

On the plus side, reboots are pre-sold concepts that don't require the same amount of promotional weight as a completely new series to generate awareness. They also tend to receive a fair amount of pre-season buzz. Most will get decent viewer sampling, so if they're good, they have an above average chance to succeed.

On the down side, they tend to carry high expectations, which are often hard to meet. Also, younger viewers are often unfamiliar with a reboot of a show that aired 20 or 30 years ago, and older viewers, who liked the original, are often disappointed with the new version.

Popular shows that come back with the original casts (or at least one cast member) can do quite well (see *Dallas*, *The X-Files*, *Will & Grace*, *The Conners*, and *Night Court*). *Murphy Brown*, on the other hand, didn't perform well and was canceled after a single season. *CSI: Vegas* ran for three abbreviated seasons.

Reboots with new casts (e.g., *Bionic Woman*, *Ironside*, *Dragnet*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Melrose Place*, *90210*, *The Odd Couple*, and most recently, *Quantum Leap*, often can't match the original (particularly if the original had iconic casts) and often don't last long. There have been some notable exceptions, however. *Hawaii Five-0*, *Magnum PI*, and *The Equalizer* were all hits for CBS, while *Charmed*, *Walker* and *Kung Fu* (the latter two reboots in name only) did well by CW standards.

So how do you know if a reboot with a new cast will work? You don't. You need to evaluate them just as you would any other series in that genre, at the same time realizing that it will probably get an above average viewer sampling.

Pilots often look better on your laptop than on TV

Over the years I've watched pilots at the broadcast networks, in a conference room at work with media buyer and research colleagues, on VCRs and then DVDs at home, and these days online on my laptop. I watch them at my leisure with no commercials, no multitasking, and no distractions. I'm leaning forward. Sometimes I stop in the middle and finish watching it later. A lot of series look decent nwhen watched in these types of environments.

When the show premieres on television, of course, it will air following some other show, opposite some other shows, and most viewers will simultaneously be doing some other activity. Even if you like the pilot, it doesn't necessarily mean you (or other people) will watch it in a real-world setting. Despite the high

degree of DVR and time-shifted viewing that currently exists, scheduling and the competitive landscape are still important to a new (linear) show's success.

Streaming Series Have Different Criteria

Unlike linear television shows, new series on streaming platforms don't have to fit into artificial TV seasons or specific network lineups, and are not reliant on lead-ins or surrounding programming. And their success or failure are not immediately determined by average minute Nielsen ratings.

While ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox use pretty much the same benchmarks for gauging a new show's success potential, Netflix, Prime Video, Apple TV+, Disney+, HBO Max, Paramount+ and Peacock, each have their own criteria (which are often mysteries to outsiders).

So, when evaluating new streaming series, you can determine whether you like the show, and whether you think others will like it (not the same thing) what the audience skew might be, and if it's a good fit for specific advertisers, but predicting long-term success is much trickier than for linear television.

Most big hits come out of nowhere.

My track record of predicting new series hits and misses is pretty good. Roughly 9 out of 10 shows I think will flop do (it's easier to pick a miss than a hit). I'm also not bad at projecting which shows will win their time periods. But the big-time hits almost always come out of nowhere (not counting spin-offs, reboots, or franchise extensions). Anyone who tells you they predicted *Seinfeld, E.R.*, *NCIS*,

Grey's Anatomy, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Empire*, *Smallville*, *Modern Family,* Arrow, *The Big Bang Theory*, or *Abbott Elementary* (or dozens of other shows) would be long-running hits, is simply lying.

And who saw *Squid Game*, *Beef*, *Ted Lasso*, *Tulsa King*, *Severance*, *Fallout*, *Poker Face*, or *The Pitt* coming? You just never know what is going to connect with a broad spectrum of viewers. The next *Tracker*, or *Severance* is perpetually around the corner. But we won't see it until after it debuts. It's one of those things that makes this business often exciting, sometimes frustrating, and always interesting.