

NINETEEN

HBO's Ongoing Legacy

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The expectations game is an essential part of how television works. Each new season brings a fresh batch of original programs that are tested by networks, handicapped by critics, and sampled by audiences. Viewers are bombarded with a seemingly endless stream of promos and ads that are all intended to get them to watch what is supposedly the next sure-fire hit. Most of these shows fall rapidly by the wayside: an estimated three-quarters never make it beyond their first seasons. Still, breakout series do occasionally transform a few select networks into the hottest destinations on TV. Given their longevity, NBC, CBS, and ABC have all climbed to the top of the broadcast television world more than once over the past half-century. In the cable and satellite TV sector, HBO was the first service to break away from the pack by adding satellite to cable distribution in 1975, causing its subscriber base to skyrocket from a mere 287,199 at the close of that year to 14.6 million a decade later.¹

By the end of 1994, however, HBO was stalled at around 19.2 million subscribers.² During the next decade, “the HBO leadership team decided to ‘jump fully off this cliff,’” recalls Jeffrey Bewkes, then the newly appointed chairman and CEO of the network, referring to his staff’s total commitment to “produce bold, really distinctive television.”³ In turn, HBO set itself apart from the competition for the second time in its short history by deciding to emphasize innovative, original programming above all else, increasing its number of subscribers by more than 50 percent between 1995 and 2007. More importantly, HBO also emerged in the late 1990s as the most talked about, widely celebrated, and profitable network in all of television.

Jeffrey Bewkes is largely credited with initiating and nurturing the still-thriving conditions at HBO where creative people are welcomed and encouraged to do their best work. Time Warner's then-president Gerald Levin replaced Michael Fuchs with Bewkes as head of HBO in November 1995. After eleven years at the helm, Fuchs's controlling, top-down managerial style proved inhibiting for his colleagues, as did his longstanding belief that "HBO has to offer subscribers a wide range of programming they couldn't see anywhere else" with a continuing emphasis on movies. Fuchs's stated preference was for "commercial rather than artistic" program development.⁴ In contrast, Jeffrey Bewkes brought a more collaborative, bottom-up way of doing business to the company, unleashing a great deal of creative energy and a new era at HBO.⁵

The tipping point for HBO was the unprecedented success of *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). In July 1997, *Oz* (1997–2003) had enjoyed a promising debut with 2.6 million viewers; *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) garnered 2.75 million in June 1998; and *The Sopranos* 7.5 million in January 1999.⁶ To be sure, these were robust numbers for any cable and satellite network at the time. For HBO, though, these audience figures were even more striking when seen in the context of a subscriber base that then totaled slightly more than one-quarter of all of the television households in America. Furthermore, HBO's latest spike in popularity and prestige was just beginning. By the start of its third season in March 2001, *The Sopranos* attracted 11.3 million viewers, and the premiere of the edgy, idiosyncratic *Six Feet Under* (2001–5) followed up three months later with 4.8 million.⁷

HBO was certifiably white hot in September 2002 when *The Sopranos* opened its fourth season to an audience of 13.4 million, which not only won its time slot, but placed "sixth for the entire week against all other prime-time programs, cable and broadcast," despite HBO's "built-in numerical disadvantage." Even though HBO was based on an entirely different economic model than most of the rest of the U.S. TV industry, it had beaten all of the advertiser-supported networks at their own game. More significantly, it was also asserting once and for all that "the underlying assumptions that had driven television for six decades were no longer in effect."⁸ The momentum in the industry had shifted unmis-

takably and irrevocably away from the traditional broadcast networks and more toward the cable and satellite sector of the business, with HBO leading the way.

Along with HBO's newfound ascendancy, "cable-and-satellite delivery systems were now entrenched, with generations of viewers knowing, and expecting, a wide range of channels. They would even pay outright for a handful of favorites."⁹ For its part, HBO boasted 29 million subscribers during the first quarter of 2007—approximately twice the number of its nearest rival, Showtime, at 14.5 million.¹⁰ Back on September 19, 2004, moreover, HBO had made TV history by winning a staggering 32 Emmy Awards after receiving a record-setting 124 nominations. "This will never happen again," admitted HBO's newest chairman and CEO Chris Albrecht, who had replaced Jeffrey Bewkes in July 2002 when the latter was promoted to president and chief operating officer of Time Warner because of what he had just accomplished at HBO.¹¹

HBO was no longer benefiting as it had a decade earlier from the expectations game because most industry watchers now assumed that the network would just keep producing more popular and critically acclaimed programming. In the mid- to late 1990s, no one other than HBO insiders expected the network to emerge as the gold standard for original programming in all of television. By 2005, however, TV professionals and critics alike were expecting HBO to create one breakout hit after another. That year, journalists nationwide first began referring to an apparent drop-off in "high-quality programming" from the "once-invincible HBO."¹² A mild undercurrent of HBO fatigue was clearly surfacing.

As one representative reviewer observed at the time, "there's an ebb and flow to what's hot and what's not on television. A personality, a show, even a whole network or cable channel can be the talk of the water cooler one moment and yesterday's hot topic the next." According to this line of reasoning, HBO was now in decline because "its newer original series didn't generate the buzz of past programming."¹³ Many other TV critics took HBO to task for the perceived hypocrisy of its branding line—"It's Not TV, It's HBO." Aaron Barnhart of the *Kansas City Star*, for example, pointed out that "it is TV, in that HBO is susceptible to the same laws of hit-making as any other network."¹⁴ In

response, Carolyn Strauss, HBO's president of entertainment, explained: "We're in a very competitive environment right now. We always need a hit, but everybody does."¹⁵

In the face of such growing skepticism, HBO continued to outperform the rest of network television from both a commercial perspective and in terms of winning more top institutional awards than any other service. Throughout the mid- to late 2000s, HBO was trapped in a game of ever-higher expectations. For instance, FX's Emmy-nominated flagship series *The Shield* (2002–) was widely praised in the popular press for achieving its largest audiences ever by averaging 2.8 million for its eleven-episode fifth season between January and March 2006.¹⁶ In contrast, the 4.6 million garnered by HBO's *Big Love* for its thirteen-episode first season run between March and June 2006 was viewed as somewhat of a disappointment because it was merely "holding onto about half of its *Sopranos* lead-in," even though FX reaches 60 million more television households than HBO.¹⁷

In the short-term, at least, the unusual success of *The Sopranos* and other breakout series such as *Sex and the City* clouded the ongoing legacy of HBO. The extraordinary success of these two programs in particular led to the mistaken assumption that other HBO shows were underperforming when in fact many were still artistically challenging and were averaging more viewers per episode than just about any other cable and satellite series on TV. Instead of overemphasizing the importance of a few high-profile programs in the more-than-thirty-year history and development of HBO, therefore, a broader historical critical perspective suggests at least seven distinguishing features that characterize the legacy and continuing relevance of HBO.

1. *The full measure of HBO's historical importance is best delineated by taking into account all four main programming groups where it has broken new ground—comedy, documentary, sports, and drama—and the ways in which television has changed as a result of the innovations that the network has made in each of these areas.* In every instance, HBO has become the premier location for creative talent as well as the place where audiences can turn for quality viewing. HBO Comedy, for example, has replaced *The Tonight Show* (NBC, 1954–) as the launching pad for up-and-coming stand-up comics. It is also the primary showplace for established comedians. With its \$20 million

annual budget, HBO Documentary, too, has surpassed public television as the principal outlet for cutting-edge social documentaries while employing some of the most respected producer-directors working in this programming genre.

HBO Sports has not only replaced ABC Sports as the premier showcase for boxing, but has been at the forefront of producing intelligent talk and investigative exposes into the inner workings of professional and amateur athletics. Last but not least, HBO Drama has transformed the creative landscape of television since the mid-1990s with its potent range of innovative series that have both captured the zeitgeist, as with *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*, as well as broken new ground with consistently well-drawn characters and finely crafted narratives. The highly acclaimed *The Wire* (2002–) is a prime example of these latter sorts of shows, having taken top honors among a poll of sixty-seven critics across the country as the "Best Overall Program" on television in 2006. Ellen Gray of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, for instance, explained her vote by asserting that "*The Wire* lives in a world that broadcast networks can't even find on the map, much less afford to visit."¹⁸ In addition, HBO's dominance of the Emmys since the mid-1990s, and the numerous Golden Globes, Oscars, and Peabody Awards that it garners on a near-annual basis, demonstrates the extent to which HBO achieves a level of "excellence" across four very different television genres.

2. *HBO's dramatic series in particular have provoked an "aftereffect" in the industry, which raises the bar and influences the kind of original programming that all of its various competitors across subscription, cable and satellite, and broadcast TV produce.* As is discussed in this book's introduction, HBO's original series have inspired some of the most innovative shows of the 2000s that have appeared on Showtime, FX, the USA Network, TNT, Fox, and ABC, among other networks. In particular, Miller Tabek & Company media analyst David Joyce reports that "Showtime is reinventing itself following the HBO mold by generating more proprietary content."¹⁹ Moreover, HBO's creative influence has been as widespread over the last decade as CBS's was in the early 1970s, ABC's in the mid- to late 1970s, and NBC's in the early to mid-1980s. In short, HBO continues to inform shows as widely diverse as Showtime's *Weeds* (2005–), TNT's *The Closer* (2005–), and ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (2004–), to name just a few, with such

