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## HBO effect

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### Book Review

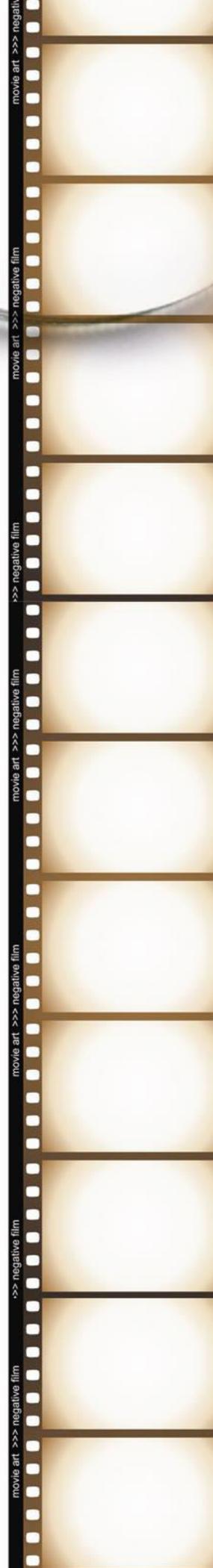
Dean J. DeFino, *HBO Effect*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8264-2130-2. Paperback, 245 pp.



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## HBO effect

Max Sexton

One more book on HBO risks raising critical eyebrows in some quarters. Much has already been written, especially on classic shows such as *The Sopranos*. However, *HBO Effect* amply provides fresh perspective by shedding light on HBO's enduring legacy or, as the title of the book suggests, its effect on US television from HBO's inception in 1972 to the present-day.

HBO's legacy of original programming has become so familiar in the history of television it can seem *sui generis*. However, the book argues that what defines HBO's success was not its ability to have utilised the technological possibilities of cable TV, but its innovatory approach to content – a reminder that whatever creative and interactive possibilities exist in the post-television era, content continues to be king.

HBO's antecedents, including Pat Weaver's<sup>1</sup> failed ambitions for subscription cable TV in the early 1960s, demonstrate that structural logics of exclusivity and specialisation associated with cable television cannot fully explain the success enjoyed by HBO. Its technological base, in addition to cable's challenge of dominant paradigms to do with television spectatorship as being distracted, did contribute to its success. But the book makes it clear that HBO's success can only be understood within a wider, discursive account of its ability to experiment with the norms and conventions of generic forms such as the sit-com (*Larry Sanders Show*) and police procedural drama (*The Wire*). An experimental approach to form situated within ideas of specialisation became a future marketing strategy in contradistinction to the flow of free-to-air television that produced a compelling narrative about HBO itself: It's not TV.

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvester 'Pat' Weaver was President of NBC from 1953-1956.

To examine these experiments which, hitherto, had been neat and discrete generic forms, *HBO Effect* addresses the need within the rapidly growing discipline of Television Studies of providing detailed case studies that map out broader social and political trends. The book handles a comprehensive set of information about various programmes, including *The Larry Sanders Show*. Moreover, it discovers that the willingness to take risk is the key to understanding HBO's success. The section, 'I Took a Risk' is one of the most interesting passages in the book and includes a discussion of how the use of controversial material at the heart of HBO's comic legacy continues to affect non-HBO shows such as *Louie*. The author concludes that the practice of risk-taking is due primarily to institutional policies at HBO, which provides a nurturing environment that empowers artists to take chances with challenging material. In this way, rejecting false claims about technological determinism, the book acts as a counter narrative to the view that innovative content is developed as newer forms of transmission are developed.

One limitation of the book is that its account of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* runs the risk of covering old ground which, if necessary as an introduction, would have been better if it had served as a primer for lesser known shows. What emerges in an explanation of how risk has been managed by exploiting television's distinctive characteristics of production, as well as its reception. The argument is that 'quality' television has secured its high cultural status because it has used precisely those characteristics offered by the serial drama and its construction of viewing habits suitable for immersion in such drama. The author is correct not to extend the scope of the book by speculating on how on-line narrative may affect future television drama. Although, using the example of *Game of Thrones*, the book makes a few salient points about possible convergence between TV and the net, while indicating the differences between drama and role-playing video games.

*HBO Effect* makes excellent points regarding the shift in political and social values in contemporary American society, and its effect on HBO drama. The book makes clear how shifting definitions of ‘quality’ in television also signify shifts in political realities. The book relies heavily on *The Sopranos* to make its claim that as politics have dissolved into the personal so the programme reflects recent millennial social complexity in its main character of mobster leader, Tony Soprano. Such an account is useful, though familiar, as it discusses attitudes to masculinity and power. Other commentators such as McCabe and Akass have already reminded us that in HBO drama there are no immutable truths in modern-day America.<sup>2</sup>

Similar points are made later about sexuality in the wake of post-feminist drama such as *Sex and the City*. Shows such as *Girls* operate as an inversion of some of the received wisdom of its predecessor. Political realities to do with the failure of middle-class aspirations in the face of few well-paid jobs for millennials appears in the transposition of the location of *Girls* from glossy Manhattan to gritty Brooklyn. The author’s claim that such new shows indicate a trend toward more programmes by and about women acknowledges other changes in television spectatorship from women not only being primary consumers of a domestic medium but also as its primary producers.

*HBO Effect* is a mainly excellent addition to the growing scholarly literature on HBO. It will serve a broad readership, even if it occasionally suffers from re-visiting already familiar shows, without giving proper regard to others outside the canon. For example, to avoid the tendency of a self-fulfilling prophecy, an account of risk-taking at HBO could have looked at failed shows, as much as the successes, offering further insights. The book does examine a few shows

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<sup>2</sup> Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007)

which did not become successes – *Carnivale* is conspicuous by its absence – but the account of failure at HBO is marginal to the overall account of its success in the book, and continuing legacy. Nevertheless, the argument by the author that HBO uses risk and experimentation to exploit the medium’s characteristics of serial drama is illustrated with case studies that will inform students and scholars alike.

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