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TV's Alternate Universe

Basic-cable shows are multiplying—and changing the way TV is made. Can the major networks learn from them? Plus: six new shows to watch

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By AMY CHOZICK

Los Angeles

As a longtime producer on CBS's popular crime series "CSI," Josh Berman got used to submitting scripts to network executives and changing them according to their dictates. But when he pitched his own series to cable, Lifetime "just said go for it," and its executives have mostly left him alone ever since, he says.



Danny Feld/TNT

Above, Ray Romano and Andre Braugher shoot an episode of 'Men of a Certain Age.'

The show, "Drop Dead Diva," about a model who dies and comes back to life as an obese attorney, isn't driving water-cooler banter the way some broadcast hits do, but it's doing just fine. The show has a devoted audience and turns a profit, and its presence helps Lifetime as it negotiates for higher fees from cable operators. The majority of the show's 3.1 million viewers are women ages 18 to 49 for which advertisers pay a premium.

Hidden in the higher reaches of the TV remote, prime-time cable series like "Drop

Dead Diva," "Army Wives," "Sons of Anarchy" and "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" are reinventing the way TV is made. For years, the few original scripted shows on basic cable were considered the industry's minor leagues. Shows like "Monk" and "The Shield" won some awards and critical pats on the head, but they were anomalies.

Now, as the media landscape changes and viewers flock to shows they like wherever they air, series on basic cable are still a junior circuit compared with the networks, but their universe keeps expanding, attracting better talent and growing in vibrancy. Once the province of reruns and sports, basic-cable networks will spend an estimated \$23 billion on 1,462 original programs (including reality shows and specials), compared with \$14 billion on 863 shows in 2005, research firm SNL Kagan reports.

"Broadcast used to be like the sun, and everything else was the satellites around the sun. Now, I feel like the sun has exploded and no one knows how many little solar systems will be formed," says Jeff Melvoin, producer of "Army Wives" on Lifetime.

Many of these shows were rejected by the networks, often because they weren't broad-based enough to appeal to more than a niche audience. Now cable, with its narrower demographics, is trying to turn this to its advantage.

Spike TV, MTV Networks' channel aimed at young male viewers, has an open call out to producers and agents. "If the networks say it's too male, please pitch it to us," says President

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EDITORS PICKS

Keep it on TV Land, and another TV channel that has two former reruns, put a stop to it. It's not a new network, it's just too old. It's President Obama's.



USA/ Everett Collection

Sally Pressman in 'Army Wives.'

That's how TV Land... a sitcom about three... fans who end up in Cleveland and their... Justin Bieber Wins Big at American Music Awards... average of 4.2 million people watched the sitcom, starring Betty White, a TV Land record. ("The Big Bang Theory," a broadcast hit, has about 14 million viewers.)

With no expensive pilots, few Hollywood sound stages (they often shoot in regional locations), no affiliated local stations to placate, and very little corporate feedback, these shows operate in a parallel universe. They're a safe haven for those weary of the broadcast model, which hasn't changed much since the 1960s.

In recent weeks Fox canceled "Lone Star," which critics loved, after two episodes. ABC axed "My Generation" after two outings; NBC dumped the courtroom drama "Outlaw" with Jimmy Smits after four. As networks scrutinize ratings this month and kill off new

shows that don't measure up, the industry is giving the basic-cable model a closer look.

From Zombies to Lawyers

Coming attractions: The new slate of basic-cable shows tackle horror, sitcoms and gritty dramas. A 'Friends' for vampires



AMC

'The Walking Dead' begins on AMC on October 31.

The Walking Dead

(AMC) Oct. 31; 10 p.m. ET AMC is betting that zombies are the new vampires with this drama based on a cult comic book. The action takes place in a postapocalyptic world inhabited by the living, lurching dead. It's a departure from the network's "Mad Men," "Breaking Bad" and "Rubicon," but this is no cut-rate B-movie. The costumes and on-location shoots make "The Walking Dead" a particularly big gamble.

Glory Daze

(TBS) Nov. 16; 10 p.m. ET For years, networks said cable couldn't do comedy, and therefore had to rely on network reruns of "Seinfeld," "Friends" and "How I Met Your Mother." TBS intends to prove that thinking wrong with this retro onehour comedy about a motley group of friends who try to navigate college life in 1980s Indiana.

Lights Out

(FX) January 2011; 10 p.m. ET FX is hoping the young male viewers who embraced its series "Sons of Anarchy," about a motorcycle gang, can extend their loyalties to boxing. This drama in the gritty tradition of "Raging Bull"

On a break from shooting "Men of a Certain Age" this week, Ray Romano perched on a kitchen stool in a Paramount Studios set made to look like a messy suburban L.A. home. Mr. Romano, the star of CBS's long-running "Everybody Loves Raymond," says CBS expressed interest in developing the series, but executives wanted it to be a half hour and more comedic.

So the show, which has its darker moments, went to Time Warner's basic cable channel TNT, where it was okay to target men ages 25-50—a group that doesn't excite most big-network advertisers. "I just thought, 'I've done my network thing. The next thing I do I want to have a little more freedom,'" Mr. Romano says. He puts on a hand puppet of a lion for laughs, underscoring how relaxed he is about his new gig. The second season begins Dec 6.

Less pressure means more creative freedom. "We like an environment where we can focus on the creative issues, which is difficult enough, without 1,000 people tap dancing on your skull for 100 different reasons," says Mr. Melvoin, who did broadcast time on shows including "Northern Exposure" and "Hill Street Blues."

About 90% of the 115.9 million homes with TVs subscribe to basic cable shows, whether from a cable operator or a satellite or phone company, according to Nielsen. (Unlike premium cable channels such as HBO and Showtime, which charge an extra subscriber fee, basic cable channels are included in most cable and satellite packages.) A basic cable



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follows a washed-up heavyweight champion who tries to cope with life outside the ring.

Fairly Legal

(USA) Jan. 20; 10 p.m. ET Looking to add a female heroine to its successful lineup of procedurals that includes "Burn Notice," "Royal Pains" and "White Collar," USA will premiere this light drama about a young litigator who leaves the law to become a cutthroat (but quirky) mediator. USA had recent success with a female CIA agent in "Covert Affairs."

Being Human

(Syfy) January 2011 Syfy's mission is to extend the definition of who watches science-fiction beyond the middle-aged men who embrace "Star Trek" reruns. Its upcoming series based on a British show of the same name follows twenty-something roommates who go through the usual "Friends"-like struggles, despite being a werewolf, a vampire and a ghost.



TNT

'Franklin & Bash' will air on TNT in the Summer of 2011.

Franklin & Bash

(TNT) Summer 2011 TNT has found a hit formula with crime dramas like "The Closer" and "Rizzoli and Isles," which on some nights outrank their network competitors. Now, TNT ventures into law with this comedic drama about two rebellious young attorneys who join a snooty, buttoned-up law firm.

bunch of repeats of movies and "Two and a Half Men" reruns. Would you call your cable operator to subscribe to that?" Mr. Landgraf says.

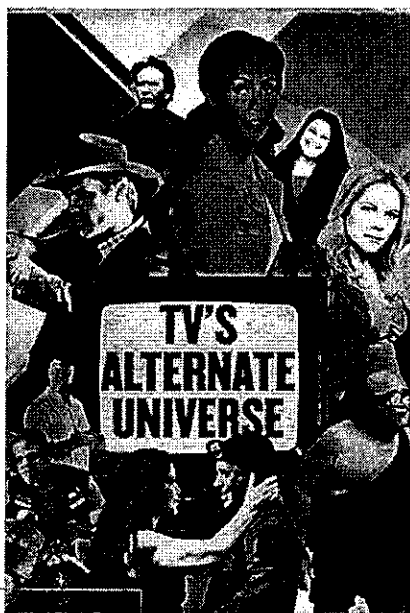


Photo illustration by Ian Kellie; Everett Collection (8); TNT (Hutton)

Some of the faces heating up basic cable, above. How many can you single out?

series has a budget of about \$2.5 million compared with \$4 million for a typical network drama. Episodes generally are shot in seven days compared with eight days for a network series. A season is likely to be 12 or 13 episodes long, not an exhausting 22 weeks.

"It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia," a half-hour comedy with Danny DeVito about a group of underachievers who run an Irish pub in South Philly, had a budget of about \$475,000 when it premiered on FX, roughly half that of a prime-time network sitcom. Charlie Sheen alone can make as much as \$1.25 million per episode for his role in CBS's hit "Two and a Half Men," depending on the show's profits.

It took years for "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" to build a following after its 2005 debut. Online streaming on websites like Hulu gradually let fans spread the word. Last season reached a ratings high of 1.83 million viewers ages 18 to 49. Those numbers still would have gotten it canceled on a broadcast network.

"Philadelphia" is no big profit center, but the long-term benefits of keeping a low-rated series like it on the air outweigh the short-term financial losses, says FX Networks President John Landgraf. Cable networks rarely make an immediate profit on scripted series, since they cost more to make than reruns or reality shows. But a stable of original shows helps the network in the long term build a brand identity, which makes cable operators pay up to keep it in the package they offer subscribers. Otherwise, "it would just be a

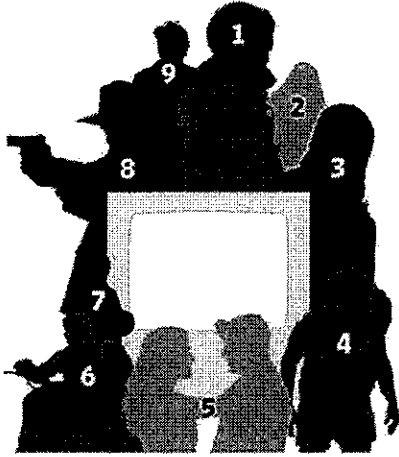
These cable shows aren't critical darlings like AMC's "Mad Men," and they'll never drive the cultural conversation like a breakout broadcast hit like "American Idol" or "Lost." A small audience, even a fanatical one (avid fans host viewing parties to watch FX's "Sons of Anarchy," about a ragtag motorcycle gang), means shows are rarely the subject of Internet buzz and glossy magazine covers.

That means cable series must be scrappy. TNT's "Leverage," about a team of lovable con artists, shoots in Portland, Ore., where the state offers a tax incentive, and uses digital cameras. For driving scenes, directors mount cameras inside the car and let Timothy Hutton and his co-stars drive off on their own. That way, a director can shoot another scene back at the set. (A network drama would require dollies and cameramen moving along with the car.)

TNT's upcoming legal drama "Franklin & Bash" shoots each episode in 6½ days. Courtroom scenes for a couple of different

episodes are often shot consecutively, a practice that can distract some actors. ("They're professionals, so they're used to it," says executive producer Jamie Tarses.)

Jeff Wachtel, head of original programming at NBC Universal's USA network, says he knew early on USA couldn't compete with big-budget procedurals like "CSI" or NBC's new spy series "Undercovers." So it's up to the writers to create sharp, funny dialogue. "You don't need an explosion every five minutes," he says.



On the soundstage of USA's "Royal Pains," an indoor set at a Brooklyn, N.Y., studio is made to look like the Hamptons patio of Hank Lawson, a doctor who makes house calls to the wealthy. Giant bulbs pump realistic light down on wicker lounge chairs and a backdrop with sand dunes and the ocean. Two large flat-screen TVs mounted to the wall in executive producer Michael Rauch's office above the set keep in video contact with the show's Santa Monica, Calif.-based writing team. The crew shoots some scenes two hours away in Eastern Long Island, but almost everything can be done in Brooklyn.

The four big networks—ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox—dwell in what most admit is an antiquated system. The "ratings war" over 22 hours of prime time is fought for bragging rights, even though advertisers for decades have valued demographic targets over total viewers, a change the Internet has hastened even more. The process of developing and filming a host of pilots to choose from is very expensive. The "fall season" dates back to the era when the big U.S. car companies unveiled their new Pontiacs and Thunderbirds with great fanfare every September.

A Guide to Who's Who in the Illustration: 1) Jada Pinkett Smith, 'Hawthorne,' TNT; 2) Brooke Elliott, 'Drop Dead Diva,' Lifetime; 3) Mary McCormack, 'In Plain Sight,' USA; 4) Danny DeVito, 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia,' FX; 5) Kim Delaney and Brian McNamara, 'Army Wives,' Lifetime; 6) Ron Perlman, 'Sons of Anarchy,' FX; 7) Andre Braugher, 'Men of a Certain Age,' TNT; 8) Timothy Olyphant, 'Justified,' FX; 9) Timothy Hutton, 'Leverage,' TNT

Cable shows are less immediately dependent on ratings because they have the added revenue stream of cable fees. And cable networks, used to filling hours with reruns and other cheap programming, don't obsess over every time slot. Instead, they debut shows strategically throughout the year.

Over the years, the broadcast networks adopted some aspects of the cable playbook. They've dialed down their commitment to filling 22 hours with original shows. Repeats and cheap reality shows now fill the airwaves on Saturday. Friday nights attract so few viewers that being consigned there makes producers feel they're in Siberia. When Fox first launched nearly a quarter-century ago, it didn't program the 10 p.m. hour, giving it to local news rather than competing with expensive prime-time dramas—and it's seen no reason to change since then. When the networks UPN and WB merged to form the CW four years ago, it more narrowly positioned itself as a niche destination for women ages 18 to 35. Two of the current broadcast network entertainment chiefs, ABC's Paul Lee and NBC's Jeff Gaspin, cut their teeth in basic cable.

Despite the creakiness of the broadcast machine, the big media companies can't turn their backs on the ad revenue from hit shows like "Grey's Anatomy" and "Two and a Half Men," which can attract eight-figure audiences. Then these shows can sell their reruns into syndication for huge profits.

Many of these reruns, of course, are precisely what the cable networks fill their schedules with, allowing them the luxury of just focusing on a few original shows. Just seven weeks after CBS launched spinoff "NCIS: Los Angeles" last fall, USA inked a deal to pay \$2.35 million per episode for rights to air it along with shows like "Burn Notice."

The cable networks themselves usually don't reap these multimillion-dollar syndication deals, because their shows are worn out by the time they're ready. Cable plays them over and over again, unlike the networks, which often only air them twice.

"The broadcast model isn't broken," says Garth Ancier, a former executive at NBC, Fox and the

WB. "It's an important part of the ecosystem."

The most ardent defender of the broadcast model is Leslie Moonves, chief executive of CBS, which owns fewer cable channels than its rivals do. His mantra is that as cable and the Web offer more niche programming, mass-market entertainment becomes more scarce and valuable. "The Internet is offering a whole new set of opportunities that were undreamed of just five or 10 years ago," he said in a speech earlier this month at the University of Texas.

And indeed, CBS is winning the ratings race this season with shows such as "CSI: Miami," "The Big Bang Theory," "The Good Wife," and freshman series "Hawaii Five-0."

What has changed is that many producers are considering cable as attractive a playing ground as broadcast. "Broadcast networks are big tents, so they don't always know precisely what their audience wants," says Scott Kaufer, an executive producer/showrunner on "Boston Legal" and most recently TNT's "Memphis Beat." But cable networks know what works for their specific audience, and strictly cater to it. "That can be frustrating for you as a writer or creator, but it can also be immensely helpful."

John Wells is a broadcast veteran who has run shows including "E.R." and "The West Wing." His cop drama "Southland" went to TNT when NBC canceled it after one season.

"At this point," he says, "everybody should be asking, 'Why aren't we more like cable?'"

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