

Review: Netflix and Hulu's new scripted originals

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In this image released by Netflix, Steven Van Zandt is shown in a scene from "Lilyhammer. Both Netflix and Hulu are debuting their first stabs at original scripted programming. Netflix has released all eight episodes of "Lilyhammer" a fish-out-of-water drama with Steve Van Zandt, and on Tuesday, Hulu will premiere "Battleground," an "Office"-style political faux-documentary. (AP Photo/Netflix)

Within just over a week, Netflix and Hulu are both debuting their first stabs at original scripted programming.

The shows amount to a milestone in [Internet television](#), an early sign of the leveling between broadcasting and streaming. Programming options between TV and the Web are increasingly separated by little more than the "video source" button on your remote.

But the most salient thing about the new offerings from Netflix and Hulu

are just how "TV" they are.

Earlier this week, Netflix released all eight episodes of "Lilyhammer," a fish-out-of-water drama starring Steve Van Zandt ("The Sopranos") as a New York mobster relocated to Norway. On Tuesday, Hulu will premiere "Battleground," a faux-documentary sitcom about the young operatives of a middling [political campaign](#) in Wisconsin.

Each has a broadcast pedigree. "Lilyhammer" was produced for the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (a lesser known NBC) and began airing there in January. As a script, "Battleground" was initially purchased by Fox (whose corporate parent, News Corp., is a co-owner of Hulu, along with [Walt Disney Co.](#) and NBCUniversal).

That both "Battleground" and "Lilyhammer" look and feel so much like broadcast shows is a signal of their high-quality (though "Lilyhammer" is notably better made) and their lack of innovation. These are ultimately just a couple of new shows among hundreds, only ones consumable through a new distribution method.

The 50-minute-long "Lilyhammer," for which Van Sandt is also a producer and writer, is the more intriguing of the two. It often feels almost like a parody of a "Sopranos" spinoff: If we're going to have Silvio in Scandinavia, then how about Paulie Walnuts in Walla Walla? Or Uncle Junior in Jakarta?

When "Frankie the Fixer" (Van Zandt) gives up a rival to the FBI, he opts for witness protection in Lillehammer, Norway. Remoteness is part of the attraction, as is its wintery allure: "Did you see the Olympics of '94?" he asks. "It was beautiful."

In Norway, Frankie - now renamed Giovanni Hendriksen - cuts an amusing figure in parkas and sweaters. He easily grasps the language

from audio tapes (Frankie speaks in English but most other character speak Norwegian, which is subtitled) and finds it quite easy to set up shop.

Giovanni quickly gathers a girlfriend (Marian Saastad Ottesen), a nightclub and a few minions. The jokes mainly revolve around either Giovanni being out-of-place (a Mafioso on skis!) or the locals' reaction to his crudeness.

One gets the sense that "Lilyhammer" would be funnier to Norwegians. Mostly, Giovanni is portrayed kindly, a straight-talking dose of manly aggression who runs roughshod over softer, peaceful Norwegian folk. It's entertaining enough, but about as subtle as "Sopranos on Ice!"

"Battleground," judging by its first two episodes, is a light, watered-down knockoff of "The Office," moved a little further west and focusing on a slightly younger demographic. Its 13 episodes will debut every Tuesday.

It stars Jay Hayden as Chris "Tak" Davis, campaign manager to Deirdre Samuels (Meighan Gerachis), who's running for a Wisconsin Senate seat. The show, about 22 minutes long, uses the "Office" format of interstitial interviews with the twist that they take place after the election - and thus carry foreshadowing of trouble to come.

The timing of "Battleground" might seem good considering the current Republican presidential primaries, but any actual politics are left out. There's nothing that might offend either side of the political spectrum here, and also little to inspire either Democrats or Republicans.

Instead, "Battleground" - whose producers include Marc Webb, the director of "(500) Days of Summer," as well as an "Office" episode - is a typical workplace comedy, only with the backdrop of campaign posters

and buttons. No one over 25-years-old much matters - it's the "zany" young staff and volunteers who get all the screen time.

It comes off something like a student fantasy of playful politics. Hayden expends more energy trying to look suave and knowing than funny.

For Hulu and [Netflix](#), the shows don't need to be masterpieces, just conversation-starters - drops of newness to freshen up their extensive libraries and garner media coverage in articles like this one. Neither "Lilyhammer" nor "Battleground" is good enough to send anyone rushing to sign up for a subscription. (Netflix's streaming service is \$7.99 a month, as is Hulu Plus.)

But in the gathering convergence of TV and Internet viewing, these shows represent an early salvo.

Netflix's most anticipated shows - a David Fincher-produced adaptation of the British series "House of Cards" and new episodes of the cult comedy "Arrested Development" - are due later this year and in 2013. Hulu has plans for more original programming, including a documentary series from Richard Linklater ("Dazed and Confused").

Google Inc.'s YouTube is in the midst of rolling out more than 100 niche-oriented "channels" on its video platform. Yahoo will later this year release a sci-fi, animated series produced by Tom Hanks.

And for the first time ever, even the Super Bowl was streamed online. More than 2.1 million viewers watched the game on either NBCSports.com or NFL.com.

"Lilyhammer" and "Battleground" are, surely enough, just a beginning.

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