

# Once kings of TV, US broadcast networks face reckoning

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At the Emmys in September 2018, ABC got one award, CBS got two and Fox got three—only NBC won a respectable 16, but nearly all of them came in technical categories

They once produced must-see television shows like "Seinfeld," "ER" and "Friends" but America's broadcast networks are facing a major crisis, as

more and more viewers cut the cord in search of innovative content elsewhere.

Some are even wondering if there is a future for scripted television at ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox, which were roundly snubbed in major categories at last month's Emmy Awards.

NBC came away with 16 statuettes, half of them for sketch comedy juggernaut "Saturday Night Live," and nearly all of them in technical categories. Fox got three, CBS two and ABC a lonely award.

By comparison, premium cable network HBO got 23, as did streaming giant Netflix.

"It is sad to say, but if the networks don't change the way they do business, chances are they won't be around five to 10 years from now," Martie Cook, a writer and producer who also teaches at Emerson College in Boston, told AFP.

America's traditional networks basically invented the concept of the television series, and dominated the format for 40 years—from the 1950s to the end of the 1990s. Shows like "Dallas," "Star Trek" and "M\*A\*S\*H" are part of television history.

But the pioneers have been trumped, with basic cable (AMC), premium cable (HBO, Showtime) and streaming services (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu) churning out top quality programming with major stars and huge budgets—that wins major awards.

At the Emmys and the Golden Globes in recent years, only a handful of network shows were even nominated.



Most of the Emmys glory in recent years has gone to cable networks and streaming giants like Netflix—not the traditional US broadcast networks

"They have to start taking more risks and stop pumping out the same kind of shows," said Cook.

"They have to realize that what has worked in the past no longer works in the present... and what no longer works in the present surely won't work in the future."

## **Snobbery or too much good TV?**

Some industry experts say the demise of the broadcast networks is

simply a question of snobbery.

"Entertainment-industry awards honor the productions they feel make them look good, not the ones the audience likes best," Rich Heldenfels, a veteran pop culture writer, said in a column for the Tribune Media Service.

And indeed, if the networks are not raking in awards, they are snaring millions of viewers—for scripted series, reality shows and sports programming.

On CBS, comedy "The Big Bang Theory" and crime drama "NCIS" each earned more than 12 million viewers during the week of October 1.

Over at NBC, singing competition "The Voice" earns roughly 10 million viewers twice a week.



Long-running CBS comedy "The Big Bang Theory"—cast members Melissa Rauch, Johnny Galecki, Kaley Cuoco, Simon Helberg, Jim Parsons, Mayim Bialik and Kunal Nayyar are seen here in 2016—is one of the most successful network TV shows

At HBO and Netflix, most shows, even the critical darlings, cannot boast of such viewership.

"The audience now has so many more options," says Amanda Lotz, a professor of communications and screen arts at the University of Michigan.

"Going forward, it requires them to recognize what they can do well as opposed to what a streaming service can do well."

## **'Do something different'**

In recent months, some of network TV's biggest names—notably, "Grey's Anatomy" and "Scandal" guru Shonda Rhimes, and CBS comedy creator Chuck Lorre ("The Big Bang Theory")—have made huge production deals with Netflix.

While Lorre's deal is not exclusive, Rhimes definitely seems to be shifting her allegiance from ABC.

Of course, the networks still create popular shows that do well.

NBC's "This Is Us" has earned critical praise and won multiple Emmys for acting in recent years, while Fox's music drama "Empire" was must-

watch TV for younger viewers when it started in 2015.

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