

USA Network's *Mr. Robot*: A provocative start, but where will it go?

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USA Network's *Mr. Robot*, created and written by Sam Esmail and already renewed for a second season, began airing in late June. So far four episodes have been broadcast. The series centers on Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), a cyber-security engineer by day and a self-described “vigilante-hacker” by night.

Elliot's opening voiceover is unusual for American television: “What I'm about to tell you is top secret. A conspiracy bigger than all of us. There's a powerful group of people out there that are secretly running the world. I'm talking about the guys no one knows about, the guys that are invisible. The top one percent of the top one percent. The guys that play God without permission.”

In general, those behind *Mr. Robot* have promoted the series by appealing to the mass hostility to the banks, conglomerates and government spies. Incendiary ads, for example, read “F--k the System,” “F--k Wall Street,” “F--k Society.” Taglines include: “Our democracy has been hacked,” “Banks own your money,” “Social media owns your relationships,” “Corporations own your minds.” The promise of something hard-hitting for once has drawn some two million people to watch each of the first four shows. Is there a gap, however, between the promise and the actual substance of *Mr. Robot*?

It does not take long for one's internal alarm system to go off. Immediately following Elliot's opening voiceover about “the top one percent of the top one percent,” the series veers off into a sort of individual vigilantism. Elliot confronts the owner of chain of coffee shops, whose computer he has hacked, about his involvement in child pornography. Later, he targets a philandering husband, who has not committed any crimes, and a violent drug dealer.

Generally well played by Malek, Elliot is another in a

long and growing list of pathologically anti-social geniuses. Speaking directly to the viewer in a running inner monologue, he explains his sense of justice, his morphine addiction and his methods for getting into people's personal computer records—which is the only way he gets close to other human beings. Malek (like the show's creator, Sam Esmail, of Egyptian descent) does manage to convey something about the low-grade depression that afflicts large numbers of young people in the US, mired in difficult economic and personal circumstances, with nothing to look forward to. Certain shots of Elliot passing anxiously and stealthily through subway stations and passageways have something especially disturbing about them.

Christian Slater plays Mr. Robot, a member of a group calling itself F-society, obviously based on Anonymous, among others. He makes contact with Elliot through a DDOS (distributed denial-of-service) attack on E Corp, a client of AllSafe, the cybersecurity company for which Elliot works. Mr. Robot then draws him into a wider plot against E Corp, which Elliot refers to as “Evil Corp,” an all-encompassing tech company.

Through Elliot's narration, we are presented with a litany of social ills; student debt, corporate power, easily hacked personal information, etc. His feverish list is accompanied by snapshots and clips of recent events—Occupy Wall Street, Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, newspaper headlines about growing inequality. In many of the early monologues, however, a disdain for the general populace seeps through—the notion that the people are “asleep” predominates.

The plan of Mr. Robot and F-society to bring down E Corp, which presumably will dominate the series' first season, is put forward as a “revolution.” The elimination of E(vil) Corp and the debt it holds (largely

student debt), including the hard copies of loan documents, no doubt has its appeal.

Moreover, many viewers will identify and sympathize with Elliot and his beleaguered friends, including Angela (Portia Doubleday), who is financially drowning, and Shayla (Frankie Shaw), who has serious problems with drugs. These characters are more or less realistically drawn, and some of the situations, which convey the stress of simply navigating daily life and a general sense of being at sea, pull the viewer in.

In other words, there are intriguing aspects to *Mr. Robot*. However, there are numerous troubling issues. First of all, there are the clichéd characters and situations. The presence of corporate evil incarnate, in the form of Tyrell Wellick (Martin Wallström), the senior vice president of technology at E Corp, is not much help. In general, the picture of business wickedness is neither earthshaking nor terribly enlightening. An accounting of contemporary corporate life and practices, which dramatized and shed light on *the objective driving forces at work*, would be far more intriguing as well as highly unusual. (The presence of an unredeemably monstrous drug dealer also hints at intellectually lazy territory.)

The biggest problem, however, is surely the glaring contradiction between the picture painted of overwhelming corporate criminality and overall social dysfunction, on the one hand, and the meagerness of the possible social responses envisioned by the show's creators, on the other.

The idea of “revolution” and “revolutionaries” put forward by *Mr. Robot* is ludicrous. The notion that wiping out one giant firm's records will bring about “the largest revolution the world will ever see,” in the words of Slater's character, hardly merits a comment. In general, the series appears to have little interest, despite the references to inequality, in the conditions of wide layers of the population, much less any conception that masses of people will take part in the process of changing things. This is a “revolution” carried out by (and presumably for) a layer of disgruntled computer engineers and other professionals.

In an interview with *Slate*, Sam Esmail makes some revealing comments. He notes that he was in Egypt “right after the Arab Spring happened, and I was so inspired by that. One of the things that defined Elliot's

character is that revolutionary spirit I saw in my cousins. These are young people who are tech-savvy, who use technology to their advantage to channel the anger against the status quo and try and make a change to better their lives.” Esmail provides some idea of the social change he has in mind. *Mr. Robot*, he notes is “set in the world of technology, because I think that is a tool that young people can use to bring about change. I mean, look at the LGBT community: What massive changes have occurred in society just in terms of marriage and trans issues being more public and open.”

Esmail later tells his interviewer that “the current mixed economy system that we have in this country is broken. It doesn't do what it's set up to do, which is to value the best product made by the best companies.” This is pretty meager, to say the least.

One also has the right as well to be made nervous by the portrayal of the hackers, offered up as uncompromising “revolutionaries.” Slater's *Mr. Robot* is distinctly unappealing—manipulative and destructive on a personal level and willing to kill people in pursuit of the plan (citing potential victims of an explosion as mere “collateral damage”). Darlene (Carly Chaikin) is unbalanced and annoying. Personalities aside, the depiction of these people as ruthless or ambivalent potential killers does little to distinguish them from their targets in the upper echelons of the corporations.

Time will tell whether *Mr. Robot* settles down and tells an important story. The fourth episode was not promising, focused on Elliot's not very intriguing personal “demons” and the unlikely plan against E Corp. Will the moral of the USA Network series prove to be that what's needed is a mere “rebooting” of capitalism and a slight redistribution of the wealth through the ascension to power of a more principled group of business men and women? It is impossible to be certain, but one has ample reason to fear the worst.



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