

USA Network's *Mr. Robot*, Season 2: Pessimism overtakes anger, with unfortunate results

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7 November 2016

The second season of the USA Network television drama *Mr. Robot*, created by Sam Esmail, concluded recently. Though drawing a somewhat smaller audience than the first season, the show remains popular among critics and has developed a following among young viewers in particular. The series has won a Golden Globe for best drama series, and star Rami Malek won an Emmy award for his portrayal of Elliot Alderson, a security engineer-turned-vigilante hacker who leads a cyberattack on E Corp, described as “the world’s biggest conglomerate.”

In the first season, Elliot is recruited into the hacker group “fsociety” by the mysterious Mr. Robot (Christian Slater). Fsociety plots to wipe out the debt records of E Corp in order—in Mr. Robot’s words—to “take down” the “evil corporation” and incite “the biggest revolution the world will ever see.” The hack ultimately throws the global financial system into chaos. In a narrative twist, Mr. Robot is revealed to be a mental construct inside Elliot’s head, based on memories of his dead father.

At the start of the second season, Elliot has retreated to his mother’s house, seemingly having abandoned his “revolution” to focus on ridding his mind of Mr. Robot. The cyberattack itself, far from “taking down” E Corp, has instead caused it to consolidate its power. E Corp CEO Phillip Price (Michael Cristofer) is using the chaos created by the hack to secure a government bailout and to advance Ecoin, the company’s proprietary digital currency.

Meanwhile, the effects of the financial crisis are largely being borne by the population itself. A credit crisis has frozen the accounts of masses of people, and most are forced to subsist on a \$50 a day allowance.

The economy is in freefall. Major cities have ceased trash collection, leaving mountains of garbage to pile up on city streets. E Corp banks have taken advantage of the loss of data to gouge customers for interest and loan payments that they have already paid. Large protests are a regular occurrence, and social unrest is boiling over.

Darlene (Carly Chaikin) assumes leadership of fsociety. She is determined to “finish off” E Corp by “destroying public confidence” in the company, largely through the use of stunts and “symbolic” protests. Meanwhile, the killing of a key member of fsociety causes the hackers to fear that they are being targeted by the Dark Army, a shadowy group of Chinese hackers who participated in the E Corp cyberattack. At the same time, an FBI investigation led by agent Dom DiPierro (Grace Gummer) is closing in on the fsociety hackers, and the resultant panic and paranoia forms something of a throughline for the season.

The first season of *Mr. Robot* suffered from a number of problems, not least of which was a kind of narrative hyperactivity that resulted in a maddening array of subplots, distractions and “twists.” The series seemed unable to hold its attention on important matters, and the meagerness of the political content, steeped in a kind of shallow anarchism, limited its ability to say much when it did. But the first season also possessed what seemed a sincere outrage at the corporate-financial elite, the “top one percent of the top one percent” who “secretly run the world” as Elliot says in the pilot.

The second season is sharply different in tone. In place of the rapid-fire editing and the pounding, insistent soundtrack, the second season is much quieter

and more slowly paced. One gets a sense that the show creators had a desire to settle down and tell a more grounded, perhaps more realistic story.

They are partially successful in some places. The various scenes that take place among the E Corp elite are generally convincing, with recurring images of financial oligarchs gazing contemptuously—and nervously—down on crowds of protesters from high-rise offices. An atmosphere of foreboding and tension pervades.

It doesn't take long, however, for the show's attempts at realism to descend into the kind of affected "darkness" so prevalent in contemporary film. Characters wax pseudo-poetically on the human condition, generally expressing hopelessness and angst. Lines such as, "We're all just tightrope walking above that pit of ungodly pain that's daring us to trip up," are par for the course. The scenes themselves are underlit and gloomy, with shots scrubbed of color and framed to make the world seem inescapably isolating and cold.

Matters are not helped by the scenes involving Elliot's struggle with Mr. Robot, which end up becoming a tedious series of exchanges on the nature of "truth," "reality," "illusion," "control," etc. Additionally, Elliot's tenuous grasp on reality gives the show creators free rein to pull the rug out from under the audience whenever they see fit.

When Elliot states in an internal monologue that "We trust that [our senses] accurately portray the real world around us. But what if the haunting truth is they can't? That what we perceive isn't the real world at all, but just our mind's best guess? That all we really have is a garbled reality, a fuzzy picture we will never truly make out?" one is hardly surprised.

The change in tone is apparently a deliberate attempt on the part of the show creators to depict the consequences of the first season's "revolution." Indeed, the fsociety hackers often express ambivalence, if not outright regret, for their actions in the first season, which everyone agrees have only made things worse.

In the *World Socialist Web Site's* initial assessment of the show, we wrote that, "The idea of 'revolution' and 'revolutionaries' put forward by *Mr. Robot* is ludicrous ... 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."

The creators' conceptions have led them from outrage to pessimism. It is no doubt true that a cyberattack like the one depicted in the first season would likely bring about little more than increased state repression. But insofar as the show creators continue to identify these actions with "revolution" while refusing to see an alternative, they end up condemning the entire notion of revolution itself. Taken at face value, the show depicts "revolution" as a cure worse than the disease, one that, at best, is the product of misguided naiveté; and at worst, inevitably leads one down the road of violence and treachery.

More than a few retrograde elements accompany all this, including the sympathetic portrayal of the FBI and an undercurrent of anti-Chinese chauvinism.

By the end of the season, some of the fsociety "revolutionaries" have set out a plan that would include an act of violent terrorism, while others are speculating about the possibility of "undoing" the effects of the hack and "putting everything back the way it was." One has little reason to believe that any of this will turn out well.



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