HBO's *Succession*: Why are these dreadful people allowed to decide what we see and hear?

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Created by Jesse Armstrong

The HBO television series, *Succession*, is a sharply drawn, scathing portrait of a family that owns and operates a global media conglomerate. The 10-episode first season—six have aired so far—premiered in June and has been renewed for a second season.

Succession is the creation of British writer Jesse Armstrong, whose credits include *Black Mirror* (one episode), *Veep*, *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop*. Armstrong, actor/comedian Will Ferrell and Adam McKay (director of *The Big Short*) serve as executive producers, along with Frank Rich (former *New York Times* columnist and *Veep* producer), among others.

At the center of *Succession*, set largely in New York City, is Logan Roy (Brian Cox), a tyrannical, 80-year-old patriarch and the head of Waystar Royco, a media behemoth that operates in some 50 countries.

Married to his third wife and wily champion, Marcia (Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass), Logan suffers a massive brain hemorrhage early on in the series. Taking him for dead, or, at least, brain-dead, his children begin vying for control of the empire.

The most likely successor is Kendall (Jeremy Strong), Logan's eldest son from his second marriage. Next in line is Roman (Kieran Culkin), an irresponsible, self-centered jokester, as degenerate as he is quick-witted. Connor (Alan Ruck), Logan's eldest son, and only child from his first marriage, is a "New Ager" now living in New Mexico, while Siobhan "Shiv" (Sarah Snook), Logan's daughter and youngest child, is pursuing a career in Democratic Party politics.

Arriving on the family-corporate scene is cousin Greg (Nicholas Braun), an apparent dolt and grandson of Logan's estranged brother Ewan (James Cromwell), currently residing in Canada. Though viewed by his cousins as a "rescue pup" or charity case, Greg catches the ambition bug as he works under the direction of Tom (Matthew Macfadyen), Shiv's boyfriend and a senior executive at the firm. Frank (Peter Friedman) is the company's Machiavellian Chief Operating Officer.

As the conspiring surges and the feuding rages among the siblings, Kendall acquires—at an exorbitant price—a digital media firm run by Lawrence (Rob Yang), who gloats: "You just invited me into the chicken coop. And without Daddy around to protect you, I'm gonna eat you all, one by f-----g one."

In Episode 2 (Sh*t Show at the F**k Factory), Logan lies in a hospital bed. Connor, who considers himself a "UN White Helmet"-type in the succession struggle, muses bizarrely that his father "once talked to me about cryogenics … All the other billionaires are strolling around in new bodies, but not Dad, because we were too embarrassed to actually discuss it."

In an effort to stabilize Waystar's plummeting stock price, Kendall schemes to take the reins and "control the narrative," while the others are in favor of a more nonaligned CEO. General counsel Gerri (J. Smith-Cameron), not inclined herself to take a "job that makes your brain explode," stuns Kendall with the information that Logan has strapped Waystar with over three billion dollars in debt.

Kendall tries unsuccessfully to negotiate with one of the banks in question, whom he accuses of extortion and "buzz-saw castration." Faced with "total corporate collapse," he rallies the employees to brainstorm his "Strategy of a Thousand Lifeboats," imploring them to activate their "armada of eyeballs." Meanwhile, Shiv enlists the help of an old flame to investigate Marcia, who Kendall and Roman view as a "power-hungry maniac." Kendall makes a deal with a private equity huckster, Stewy (Arian Moayed), described as chiseling his profits "like a vampire locust."

Upon hearing that Logan, now semi-recovered, is planning to address Waystar's charity ball, dubbed the "Sad Sack Wasp Trap," Kendall, who was originally slated to speak, is concerned—and jealous: "What if he falls asleep in his soup? What if he starts shouting racist comments? ... When he opens his mouth, anything could come out. Drool, anti-Semitism, a f-----g string of silk handkerchiefs tied together." But Logan comes on strong, telling the audience, that includes Stewy—"the little schmuck who owns such a big chunk of me"—that he is not retiring.

Increasingly desperate, Kendall sets about organizing a vote of no-confidence in his father. Meanwhile, Logan and his brother Ewan face off at a Thanksgiving dinner, during which the former accuses the latter of being a "carnival barker for all the wars we really didn't need," such as Vietnam: "Viet Cong come up your drainpipe in Ottawa, did they?" To which Ewan replies, "This whole family is a nest of vipers." Proving the point, Tom sends Greg to the office to shred documents related to Waystar's criminal behavior. The resentful Greg keeps some for future leverage.

In Episode 6, entitled "Which Side Are You On?" (the famed 1931 coal miners' union ballad plays during the closing credits), Kendall pleads his case with the Waystar Royco board members: "[Logan] is currently unfit to run this company … He took on levels of debt that threatened the very existence of our firm, he is lining up dead-weight acquisitions in a sector that he has a historic regard for, but which is a non-growth area.

"We face existential battles in scale, and he is facing precisely the wrong direction. He is making decisions for a future that he no longer

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understands, and we don't have time for missteps … Our entire ice cap will melt. He is gambling our last dollars at the track on a horse that's ready for the glue factory, and I am calling for a vote of no confidence in him as CEO and chairman."

Kendall's effort is unsuccessful, in part because Logan intimidates Roman (a central figure in the plot!) into voting against the no-confidence motion. Logan instantly fires all those, including Kendall, who lined up in opposition to him, The episode ends with the mogul smugly speaking on the phone to the US president—who previously cancelled a meeting with Logan because of a terror scare—about fast-tracking his proposed acquisitions: "Well, you really had a terrorist problem. I've just taken down a terrorist myself. My son. So, can you help me with this FCC [Federal Communications Commission] red tape bullshit?"

The series is relatively unsparing in its criticism of the rich. Some moments are stronger than others and there are a number worthy of special mention. For example, in Episode 3, Kendall is advised that there are a "million options" to save the company, including "swaps, acquisitions, cooperative interactions. You know, smart stuff only a young man like you can conceive of." But the firm's attorney Gerri prefers the old-fashioned option: "If you want stuff that works for the price: layoffs." In other words, the reckless and shortsighted running up of billions of dollars in debt will translate into a global slaughter of jobs.

In Episode 6, Tom takes Greg to a disgustingly expensive "pop-up"—i.e., a temporary restaurant (during a festival or some such event). He wants to educate the neophyte: Greg: "How come the wine list doesn't have any prices?" Tom: "Because they're obscene. Look, here's the thing about being rich, OK? It's f-----g great. OK? It's like being a superhero, only better. You get to do what you want, the authorities can't really touch you, you get to wear a costume, but it's designed by Armani, and it doesn't make you look like a prick." The pair proceed to drink vodkas at "2,000 bucks a pop."

Tom receives a call informing him the no-confidence vote is going ahead. He deliriously tells Greg: "It's happening. The troops are taking Saddam's palace, man. This time tomorrow, you and me … I could be like the third most important guy in the company. I mean, it's the storming of the Bastille. Let us eat cake." It's an effective sequence, summing up the backstabbing and unvarnished ostentation. In an interview, actor Jeremy Strong bluntly notes that the "language of our family is just the language of business."

Succession is well done, and strongly focused within its own parameters. It delights in gleefully and nastily taking on this crowd, and reaffirms that television is capable of producing biting social satire and critique. It is an angry series with a sharp vision and direction, working with an obvious purposefulness.

The series is especially valuable because—whether the creators recognize it fully or not—it poses a burning question: how is this miniscule group of self-involved and essentially talentless nobodies able to determine what an American and global population of billions gets to see and hear?

Succession contributes to undermining what's left of people's confidence in the news and entertainment world, which is no small matter at this time of frenetic efforts to censor the Internet and prop up "authoritative" news sources.

Above all, the show paints these billionaires and their hangers-on as cutthroats and parasites, who offer absolutely nothing to (in fact, subtract a great deal from) society or the public discourse. Their vast uselessness, their social "unnecessariness," stands in contrast even to the Robber Barons of the past (Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, etc.) who at least were engaged, brutally, in building and producing something. *Succession* points to the truth of the Bertolt Brecht adage that perhaps people like the Roys have to be the way they are, but they *don't have to be* .

And, although it may be a secondary matter, the creators also point to the fact that the reckless, careless and anarchic pursuit of wealth and power is self-destructive, that it does not make a single one of them happy. Tension, anger, discontent, frustration are their lot.

The actors give it their all: the veteran Cox as the ruthless Logan is excellent, as is Strong as Kendall, a man who fools himself into believing his dirty maneuvers are altruistically motivated. Culkin stands out as a fast talker without principles or backbone, as does Macfadyen as Tom, an opportunist social climber who is not embarrassed to buy Logan a watch that "every time you look at it tells you exactly how rich you are."

An interviewer from *Forbes* asked Armstrong if *Succession* was an evolved version of his 2010 script about Rupert Murdoch, to which he answered: "[*Succession*] offers the liberation of not being tied to a real family and a real man. But are there echoes of Murdoch? I think anyone who knows about him and his family will feel the echoes there. They'll feel echoes of Trump, of Redstone [owner of Viacom], of the Sinclair family [another conservative broadcast empire], of the Roberts family from Comcast, the Mercer family from Breitbart. There's a lot of resonance and Murdoch is certainly one of those"—in short, a rogues' gallery of media and corporate titans!

One might quibble that the "real-life" Murdochs, Redstones and Sinclairs are not nearly as clever and energetic as their portraits here. Armstrong and other comedy writers like Armando Ianucci tend at times to get a little carried away with their own creations. This can even inadvertently lend a little too much luster to their characters whose originals, in this case, are simply mediocre and vicious.

In any event, the interest in and popularity of *Succession* is further proof that, despite the lingering claims of the official "Americans love free enterprise" narrative, great numbers of people, including a good many artists, view the layer at the very top as greedy, cruel and half-mad.

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