

The final season of HBO's *Succession*: Corporate-family power struggles and an elite in decline

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The first several episodes of the popular HBO series *Succession*'s final season deal with the question posed in its title: who will *finally* take over the media empire built by an aging corporate media tycoon? How the show wraps things up remains to be seen, but the portrait of the Roy family is unflattering in the extreme and *Succession*'s writing and acting remain sharp and amusing.

Show-creator Jesse Armstrong has fashioned a fictional composite out of various media and wealthy families in his portrait of the Roys, including clearly the Murdochs, Hearsts, Redstones, Trumps and more. The first three seasons addressed earlier stages of the cut-throat battle for ultimate control of the conglomerate created by Logan Roy, the corrupt, generally despicable family head strongly played by Brian Cox. The show has won a wide audience for its complex portrait of a rotting (and rotten) ruling elite and its emerging fascist tendencies.

As they are successively beaten down by their abusive and tyrannical father, each of Logan Roy's offspring proves him or herself equally incapable of filling the company founder's shoes. Logan's children include the buffoonish eldest son Connor (Alan Ruck), tortured and delusional son Kendall (Jeremy Strong), opportunistic daughter Shiv (Sarah Snook) and truly degenerate youngest son Roman (Kieran Culkin).

Orbiting the Roy family is an unprincipled crowd of corporate and boardroom players also jockeying for positions and Logan Roy's favor, which always comes at a high price. Among the latter are Shiv's husband Tom Wambsgans (Matthew Macfadyen) and his hapless subordinate, Logan's great-nephew Greg Hirsch (Nicholas Braun), Waystar's general counsel Gerri Kellman (J. Smith Cameron), Waystar vice-chairman Frank Vernon (Peter Friedman), the company's CFO Karl

Muller (David Rasche), Stewy Hosseini (Arian Moayed), secretly in cahoots with Waystar's rival, and numerous others. The series attempts to present a broad, complicated picture of corporate-financial circles, even as it criticizes that world.

Season 1 concentrated on the rise and fall of Kendall Roy. Groomed for corporate leadership but unable to proceed as ruthlessly as his father and struggling with drug addiction, Kendall becomes involved in a terrible tragedy at his sister's wedding.

In Season 2, we find Logan in a power struggle with activist shareholders looking to take over Waystar Royco. In an effort to stave off the bid, Logan attempts to acquire a rival news company run by the Pierce family, loosely modeled on the Sulzbergers of the *New York Times* and other such "legacy-media" families. The dark history of crimes committed on the company's cruises emerges, provoking FBI raids and a congressional hearing presided over by a Bernie Sanders-type "populist" politician.

Season 3 saw the entire family lurch toward backing a fascist for president whom Logan believes he can more easily manipulate. At the end of this season, Logan decides to sell his company to tech upstart GoJo, led by Lukas Mattson (Alexander Skarsgård), sidelining and kicking his children to the curb. Roman plays the most sinister role in the family, helping his father crown the far-right presidential candidate Jeryd Mencken (Justin Kirk).

The fourth and final season begins with the Roy children coming together to chart an independent destiny by building their own "disruptive" new media company enigmatically named The Hundred, described without irony by Kendall as being in the mold of "Substack meets Masterclass meets the *Economist* meets the *New Yorker*." But a more serious opportunity arises to take over the Pierce media company and outbid their dad, which they

manage to do. The relationship between Tom and Shiv has also fallen apart.

A number of moments stand out in Season 4 so far. In Episode 1, we see the aging Logan Roy grow even more nihilistic as he anticipates death. He leaves his birthday party, with his children absent, to go to a diner with his bodyguard who he claims is his only friend. He expresses a sociopathic view of ordinary people: “What are people? They’re economic units. I’m a hundred feet tall. These people are pygmies. But together, they form a market. What is a person? It has values and aims, but it operates in a market. Marriage market, job market, money market, market for ideas, et cetera.”

In Episode 2, Logan visits his television newsroom, standing on a stack of paper and declaring, “I wanna kill the opposition, cut their throats! We are pirates!” The blood-curdling speech is over the top, but reminiscent of something that Rupert Murdoch once did.

Later, Logan tries to confront his kids about an unwise business decision as they try to join Waystar Royco board members Sandy and Stewy to extract more from the tech upstart GoJo. The siblings put aside their differences temporarily the day before Connor’s wedding to one-up their father in business in revenge for his abusive behavior. Logan, angered by their disloyalty to him, replies, “I love you...but you are *not* serious people.” One senses that the words take in an entire ruling class and its progeny in decline.

The atmosphere in Episode 3, very well-acted, is exceptionally tense, and the segment has been much talked about. Logan Roy unexpectedly dies on an airplane as he was jetting off to organize a business deal, ignoring his son Connor’s wedding to a former escort, Willa Ferreya (Justine Lupe). The children go through different stages of shock and turmoil, but their emotions are inevitably bound up for the most part with money and power and who now gets the spoils on the death of the patriarch.

In a shark tank-like atmosphere, which Shiv calls “coronation demolition day,” the fourth episode centers on who will rule the new company as every family and old guard figure vies for the position. In an amusing scene, when Tom asks to be considered for CEO, Karl Muller dresses him down. “You’re a clumsy interloper and no one trusts you. The only guy pulling for you is dead, and now, you’re just married to the ex-boss’ daughter, and she doesn’t even like you.” We learn that Logan may have wanted Kendall to succeed him at one point, but an ambiguous line drawn under the latter’s

name may also indicate he was eliminated from consideration.

Six episodes remain, with the final one airing on May 28.

The show has been immensely popular, to its credit, primarily because of its unrelentingly scathing portrayal of a significant layer of the vastly wealthy, parasitic ruling elite. The success of *Succession* demonstrates—and this cannot make anyone in official circles easy at night—that wide layers in America genuinely and passionately despise their “betters,” the people in financial and political power.

The actors in the series, especially Brian Cox and Jeremy Strong, are artistically serious and perform phenomenally throughout. The writers room, led by Jesse Armstrong, has been described as very collaborative and is clearly filled with considerable talent (and social venom!), helping craft dramas in each episode that display a range of characters and behavior. The cinematography (Patrick Capone, Christopher Norr, Andrij Parekh, Katelin Arizmendi) and the score by Nicholas Britnell remain exceptional and evocative.

Of course, *Succession* has its limitations. At times, the series’ claustrophobic focus over four seasons on a generally contemptible crowd becomes a bit tedious and it threatens to take on the character of a slightly predictable corporate-family soap opera. Whenever the show widens its aperture, and tackles bigger problems (such as the emergence of a fascist presidential candidate), it instantly becomes more compelling.

Moreover, a series like this that operates with a kind of cynical, rapid-fire sparkle always runs the risk, even in spite of the creators’ intentions, of glamorizing its subjects. We suspect that the Roys’ real-life counterparts, profoundly mediocre and short-sighted, are far less clever and ready with a *bon mot*.

Nonetheless, the program has genuinely contributed to undermining public confidence in the media and its operations, and shedding light more generally on the criminality that pervades the upper echelons of American society.

We shall see where the show goes from here as it approaches its final moments.



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