

TV Review: HBO's 'The Newsroom' Adjusts Its Broadcast Style

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on July 14, 2013 - 10:47am

- [Aaron Sorkin](#) [2]
- [Allison Pill](#) [3]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [4]
- [Dev Patel](#) [5]
- [Emily Mortimer](#) [6]
- [HBO](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Jeff Daniels](#) [9]
- [John Gallagher Jr.](#) [10]
- [Olivia Munn](#) [11]
- [Sam Waterston](#) [12]
- [Television](#) [13]
- [The Newsroom](#) [14]
- [Thomas Sadoski](#) [15]

CHICAGO – There's no television program that can be more simultaneously brilliant and frustrating as Aaron Sorkin's "The Newsroom," returning tonight, July 14, 2013, to start an already-tumultuous second season. It's crystal clear that Sorkin took some of the criticism of season one to heart (as evidenced right from the less-pretentious new opening credits) but there are still some creative wrinkles that need ironing out. "The Newsroom" is a unique program in that it can be nearly problematic enough to give up on in one scene and then turn it around in the next and show signs of the landmark show it could still become. Much like its emotional rollercoaster of a lead character, it can be exhausting. And exhilarating. And then exhausting again.



Television Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The first season of "The Newsroom" suffered from many problems but the two things that drove me nuts were simple and fixable — the self-important sense that everyone involved not only thought they were making great, important television but they were going to remind you of that mission constantly and the horrendous writing of the female characters, all women in positions of power and all obsessed with who they have slept with, are sleeping with, or want to sleep with. Both of those serious dramatic flaws have clearly been addressed in the off-season as the pretension is notably slighter and Mac (Emily Mortimer) is less inclined to mention her romantic past with Will (Jeff Daniels) every other scene. There are still some soap opera elements that frustrate me and the plotting of these first two episodes (which were reshot after Sorkin decided to change the arc of the season after the beginning of production) feels a little cluttered.



The Newsroom
Photo credit: HBO

Cribbing his own structure from his Oscar-winning screenplay for "The Social Network," Sorkin employs a legal wraparound for this season, opening in depositions with an attorney (Marcia Gay Harden) investigating a story that's become an international crisis. As she questions Will and Mac, the episodes flash back to about a year-and-a-half earlier as this season will take place from Summer 2011 to Election Day 2012. It's a ripe time for Sorkin, allowing him to play with Occupy Wall Street, drone strikes, SOPA, and the anniversary of 9/11 — and that's just in the premiere. Many of the plot points of season one have been entirely discarded (although the Jim-Maggie-Don love triangle, sadly, has not) and it's almost as if Sorkin is going for "The Newsroom 2.0."



The Newsroom
Photo credit: HBO

In the first episode, Will has to deal with the ripple effect of a comment that compared the Tea Party to the Taliban. At the same time, the romantic drama between Jim (John Gallagher, Jr.), Maggie (Allison Pill), and Don (Thomas Sadoski) heats up when a YouTube video of her "Sex and the City" breakdown from last season goes viral. Jim tries to escape the melodrama by embedding himself with the Romney campaign (talk about masochism) while Maggie goes into damage control. Meanwhile, Neal (Dev Patel) stumbles into the story of his young career when he asks to cover a growing protest in the city that becomes Occupy Wall Street. Sloan (Olivia Munn) is still the most interesting supporting character, as her on-air profile grows while Hamish Linklater ("The New Adventures of Old Christine") makes an excellent new fit as the reporter who will start the ball rolling to the legal action that serves as the narrative structure for the season.

While there are clear attempts to ground the characters in more than just what they do or who they do there needs to be more to round these characters out in a way that makes their accomplishments at work more than just a mouthpiece for Sorkin. Jeff Daniels always came off as the MVP of season one because his character felt the most complete. The rest of the cast and characters need to catch up for "The Newsroom" really to work. It helps that Mac isn't nearly as shrill or self-obsessed but separating the ensemble might not have been the smartest move on Sorkin's part. Jim is not yet a strong enough character to survive on his own on the Romney bus. And Maggie will soon head out on her own as well. The best episodes of season one focused on how these people interacted at work and off-hours (such as in the party that led to the Bin Laden announcement episode or the Fukushima controversy for Sloan, the two best of season one). When Sorkin loses sight of these people as characters and makes them little more than political props, the show loses its way.

We may be 11 episodes in, but this is still a program finding its way. The music cues are less on-the-nose (there's a great one at the end of episode one and nothing yet as numbingly awful as that Coldplay sequence in season one that literally made me grind my teeth). The female characters aren't as obvious. It doesn't feel like Will always needs to be the center of attention. Supporting players like Munn and Sadoski (two of the underrated performers) are given good screen time to grow. And the second episode focuses on several travesties of justice with a nice thematic coherence that was often missing from season one and feels particularly timely given the recent debacle in Florida. Although even that episode has to end with Will giving a monologue about how all the various stories of the week center on the same theme. Sorkin NEVER lets the audience connect the intellectual dots. He always does it for you.

While one can feel some growing pains at the start of season two of "The Newsroom," I'm actually encouraged by the show's struggle to find its feet and finetune its tone. Sorkin could have thrown up a middle finger to the show's critics and plowed forward without addressing any of their complaints. He clearly didn't do that. The only argument would be whether or not he addressed them enough. While there were times last season where I was ready to give up on the ACN team, I'm more interested than ever to see where they go next, even if I know the journey will sometimes drive me crazy.

"The Newsroom" stars Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, Sam Waterston, Dev Patel, John Gallagher Jr., Thomas Sadoski, Allison Pill, and Olivia Munn. It was created by Aaron Sorkin and returns to HBO on July 14, 2013 at 9pm CST.



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