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Golden Years of Television Find New Life on the Web

By [BRIAN STELTER](#)

Is there still money to be made from “Matlock”?

Within the last few months, television distributors have opened up their libraries of classic content online, making thousands of episodes of programs like “The Twilight Zone” and “The [Mary Tyler Moore Show](#)” available free.

On Monday, Warner Brothers is expected to add a new twist, announcing the rebirth of the WB broadcast network as an Internet destination and offering programs like “Everwood” online.

In putting old episodes online, broadcasters are tapping into the “long tail” of niche content that the Internet has monetized. While executives are reticent about the costs involved, and while syndicated and DVD sales remain dominant sources of revenue, the repurposing of long-dead shows is creating another new revenue stream for distributors.

The online re-creation of the WB — a network that disappeared in 2006 when it merged with UPN to become the CW — will represent another step in that direction. While Warner Brothers would not confirm the plans, preferring to wait until a press conference on Monday, Bruce Rosenblum, the president of the company’s television group, said in an interview last week that “premium ad-supported digital destinations that are demographic-specific” are a key part of its strategy going forward.

Advertising-supported TV streaming sites like Hulu, Veoh and Joost are forming a time tunnel to 50 years of television — to shows like “Bewitched” and “Seinfeld” (and even 26 episodes of the 1966 drama “The Time Tunnel”).

“We have all this library content, and we’ve been surprised at how much interest there is in it,” [Jeff Zucker](#), the chief executive of [NBC Universal](#), said recently. “Frankly, if there is one person interested it — and there are streaming costs so you have to make sure you’re covering that — we’ve found it’s a new opportunity for our content.”

The online shows also create new payment opportunities for the writers, producers and actors of TV’s golden years. Royalties for Internet streaming were a pivotal issue in the writers’ strike that halted television production last winter. The Hollywood studios agreed to pay writers a 2 percent cut of the receipts for ad-supported streaming of all shows produced after 1977.

But online streaming isn’t making anyone rich, at least not yet. As Mitchell Hurwitz, the co-creator of “Arrested Development,” put it, the online popularity of his former program is “enormously rewarding in every way except for financially.”

“Arrested Development,” a comedy that never attracted a sufficient audience on Fox from 2003 to 2006, consistently ranks among the top three series on Hulu, an online video site founded as a joint venture between NBC Universal and the [News Corporation](#) last year. Mr. Hurwitz wasn’t aware of his show’s top-ranked status until Jason Kilar, the chief executive of Hulu, mentioned it at a broadcasting conference in Las Vegas in mid-April.

“Isn’t that crazy?” Mr. Hurwitz remarked in an interview last week, still showing surprise. “This was a largely unwatched show when it was on network television.”

“Arrested Development” has had a cult fan base for years, as indicated by its strong sales on DVD. Mr. Hurwitz called it the “perfect show” for on-demand viewing because of hidden gems — jokes that make sense only after the viewer has seen a full season.

If Web streaming had been widespread a few years ago, Mr. Hurwitz said, perhaps “Arrested Development” could have stayed on the air. He also suggested that the show’s streaming success could enhance prospects for a film based on the series.

Hulu now offers 3,000 full-length episodes of archived television shows, including ones as old as “[Alfred Hitchcock Presents](#)” from 1955. “So you could definitely spend some time consuming the content,” Mr. Kilar said modestly. Perhaps surprisingly, four out of five titles in the Hulu library are viewed each day. Clearly, an audience is pursuing the archives.

“Very talented people spend their lives telling these stories. It’s a bit unusual that they’re only given the stage for a very discrete period of time,” he said.

The archived shows “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” “NewsRadio” and “Babylon 5” are also among the most popular shows on Hulu. The broadcast networks present many of the same shows on their own Web sites: for example, [NBC.com](#) offers episodes of “The A-Team,” “Miami Vice” and “Buck Rogers” and [CBS.com](#) shows “Star Trek,” “The Twilight Zone” and “MacGyver.”

Quincy Smith, the president of [CBS Interactive](#), said he hoped the Web site streams would create community experiences around the shows “one ‘Star Trek’ episode at a time.”

Even TV Land, the cable channel devoted to classic TV, is starting to stream. Episodes of “Gun- smoke” and “The [Andy Griffith Show](#)” are now available on [TVLand.com](#).

“The goal is to whet viewers’ appetites, and drive people back to the linear channel,” said Larry W. Jones, the president of TV Land.

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