
The Crooked Timber of Humanity: How HBO Is Redefining Storytelling

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD PLEPLER

In April, *the Fletcher Forum* spoke with Mr. Plepler about creating complicated heroes, curating quality programming and the future of leadership.

FLETCHER FORUM: *During more than 20 years that you've been at HBO, you've had the opportunity to watch it evolve in a variety of ways alongside the national reality and the national culture. Do you have any thoughts about the TV shows that have been successful in recent years and the ways in which they've driven and shaped American culture and specifically the sort of times that we find ourselves in now?*

RICHARD PLEPLER: One of the things that I think HBO led the way with is the protagonist as this complicated hero — although Steven Bochco,

Richard Plepler is Chairman and CEO of Home Box Office, Inc., responsible for the overall management of the world's most successful pay TV service, which provides the two television networks — HBO and Cinemax — to over 134 million subscribers in over 60 countries and its programming into over 150 countries worldwide. HBO's productions were recognized with 29 Primetime Emmys® in 2017, the most of any network for the 16th year in a row. This year HBO won top honors including Outstanding Limited Series (Big Little Lies), Outstanding Variety Talk Series (Last Week Tonight with John Oliver), and Outstanding Comedy Series (Veep). Game of Thrones, HBO's most popular series ever, continues to hold the record for the most Emmy Awards ever won by a scripted series with a lifetime total of 38 Emmys. As co-president from 2007 to 2012, Plepler greenlit some of HBO's most successful series including True Blood, Boardwalk Empire, The Newsroom, and Game of Thrones, as well as Emmy Award winners Girls and Veep. He serves on the Board of Directors for the Council on Foreign Relations and the Board of Trustees for the Museum of the Moving Image, the Asia Society and the New York Public Library. He also serves on the National Advisory Board of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

who we just lost sadly, deserves an enormous amount of credit for this with *NYPD Blue*.

The hero of course throughout most American television prior to Sipowicz [*NYPD Blue*] and prior to Tony Soprano [*The Sopranos*] and prior to the complexity of Walter White [*Breaking Bad*] had to be noble and all-knowing. The bravery of what began to happen in the late 90s was people began to take risks and show the complexity of what Kant calls “the crooked timber of humanity.” I think television began to explore the crooked timber of humanity and people said “I like that” because timber is crooked and, no straight line is ever drawn. The American family, the relationships, love, raising children, marriage — no straight line is ever drawn.

And so, these shows began to explore that, and I think they were in touch with an evolving need to look at the reality of the fragile nature of life and family in a more honest and authentic way. People like [Steven] Bochco, David Milch, David Chase, and David Simon [*NYPD Blue*, *NYPD Blue*, *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, respectively] began to push on these boundaries and found there was great receptivity for it.

It’s never easy to do but storytelling at the end of the day is about the story. Usually your protagonist needs to want something, and he needs to want it a lot and he or she needs to have difficulty getting it and so there are always these meta-stories. For example, what was *Sex and the City* really about? At the end, I thought it was really about a search for home — each of those women were looking for home in different ways.

I think it landed among young women and women in their 30s so passionately and so emotionally because everybody is looking for home. These women — you watch their journey, their struggles — they were different; some were career people, one in the case of the Kim Cattrall character was a kind of va-va-voom character, Sarah Jessica Parker’s character was everybody’s best friend. But you know, they were trying to find their balance and they wanted something. Tony Soprano wanted something; he wanted equilibrium in his life. He wanted to have some semblance of normalcy with his family, and he wanted to trump his dad in the management of the crime family. Walter White at the beginning, of course, was just looking to survive and take care of his family.

So what happened with us and some of the other wonderful *auteurs* who came throughout the industry is they started to bravely go to the crooked timber and hit the zeitgeist. As always is the case, imitation is the highest form of flattery. People began imitating that and telling those stories in many different ways, and it involved into many different dimensions, and here we are.

FORUM: *As other platforms are seeing those trends too, what distinguishes HBO as a creator of content as we are seeing that spectrum evolve in the last couple of years?*

PLEPLER: Well you know, this isn't a zero sum-game. There are going to be and continue to be great stories produced by a lot of different people. So, you have to define success correctly for what you do. A brand is a promise and you need to deliver on that promise.

[The HBO] brand makes a promise. Our brand promise is to curate quality. If we curate quality across a wide dimension and our brand continues to stand for that kind of excellence, then even with all this multidimensional programming that's being disseminated throughout our culture, we'll still stand for that kind of excellence. It doesn't mean that Netflix isn't going to have a good show or Amazon or Hulu aren't going to have good shows. Of course, they're going to. We need to play our game and play it really well. If we continue to execute on the optionality of distribution for our consumers then we are going to succeed.

Most importantly, we make sure that our culture is a culture that celebrates talent. I have a phrase that I use, which we live and breathe at HBO: "talent is sacred." Talent, talent, talent. We are not the writers, we are not the directors, we are not the producers or the actors. They are out there. We have to bring them in here and then we have to create a home for them so that they can do what they do to the best of their ability and their experience.

It's not dissimilar to an art gallery. We want to make sure that we are hanging the best pictures on our walls that we can. Why do different artists go to different galleries? Well, they feel a simpatico with them. They feel that the galleries understand who they are as an artist and what they're trying to do. They want to be associated with that gallery. I think we are doing our job right as we have a lot of artists who want to be associated with our gallery and they want to hang their pictures on our walls. If we continue to be a home for them, they will come, and we will deliver on that

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brand promise, which, said another way, is to make sure whatever we put up there makes you say “wow.”

FORUM: *It's been an interesting year in news and in media. Where do you see HBO in terms of playing a role with the rise of fake news or fabricated information? We're thinking specifically of John Oliver's show, which is perhaps one of the most prominent examples of that. Where do you see HBO falling in that?*

PLEPLER: We don't have a mission to address any particular subject matter. We have an environment that invites creative people to come in with their best ideas, to deliver their expression. We don't say to John Oliver, “Hey, make your main story about this. Make your show about that.” What we say is, “John, we think you're great. Go produce your show.” I don't tell Bill Maher what to say or who to put on. We believe in Bill Maher. We believe in *VICE*. We like the *VICE News Tonight* voice. I don't say to them, “Hey, go address this or go address that.” I say to them, “Go tell the stories that you think this generation of viewers want to hear and want to know about.”

We've created an environment where we believe interesting voices want to come and because of this, when the subject of addressing the sacredness of journalism and the sacredness of institution is front and center of the national conversation, they can express themselves. We have no real doubt that the creative people who deal with those issues know that HBO is the place they'd want to come. President Obama's former speech writing team of Jon Favreau, John Lovett, and Tommy Vietor have a podcast called *Pod Save America*. I went and had coffee with them and liked them. I said why don't you come and do something with us. I don't know what they're going to do, I just know I like their voice and I know that they're probably going to touch on these issues.

So, I think what's important is not to have a predetermined sense of how you're going to look at any subject but rather to have a community and an environment of talented voices that know they can stretch out on your canvas and paint how they want to, to use the metaphor again of the art gallery. And you're going to find that you're touching the issues at the end of the day, and you are going to hit the zeitgeist in that way, authentically rather than didactically.

FORUM: *In this edition of The Forum we are looking at where we are going and are asking our contributors to forecast the world in 2030. Given the recent sexual harassment claims and evidence of abuse of power in some parts of the media industry that has taken it by storm, do you think this is a turning point*

for how women may not only be treated in the industry but represented in projects going forward?

PLEPLER: If you look at some of the leaders of the movement — Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman and others — we have always been a place where the talented women of our industry want to work and show their work, because we're a great home for storytellers and because women have a lot of stories to tell. *Big Little Lies* is an example of a very powerful contemporary tale and we're now doing a second season of *Big Little Lies*. Sarah Jessica Parker is addressing the issue of divorce and family in her series *Divorce*. Issa Rae, a brilliant talent, is looking at African-American life among women in their early 30s in her series, *Insecure*.

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The key is creating an environment where storytellers want to be, where storytellers know that they're welcome, and know that they're going to be supported. Nicole Kidman is coming back with a project with David E. Kelley that we're very excited about after she finishes *Big Little Lies*. Michelle MacLaren, who is a great director, who directed some of *The Deuce*, along with Maggie [Gyllenhaal] and David Simon is coming back to do some more things with us. It's all about making sure, as I said earlier in the other contexts, that you are a home where storytellers, women, people of diverse cultural backgrounds know that they're not only welcome and invited, but supported and encouraged. We've been that. We're going to continue to be that. And I just think it makes us a better network.

FORUM: *There's been a recent trend in the last five years or so of shows about government and politics becoming the sort of shows that are leading the way in terms of the cultural conversation people are having. To what extent do you think those shows are ultimately about critique or social commentary or is there something else within those stories that is appealing to consumers of entertainment?*

PLEPLER: Well again, story trumps didactic. *The West Wing* — one of my favorite shows — was about noble government. What should government look like? What should a president look like? And there was a little bit of

leading the witness in terms of the writing and in terms of the character, but at the end of the day it was also just great storytelling. It appealed to our better nature. It appealed to the notion of government being about these smart people irrespective of party or partisanship. That's why it landed.

The dark side of the story of course is shown by *House of Cards*, which was about Iago in the form of a modern day political character and his wife was Lady Macbeth. And so, you had two Shakespearean tragedies coming together to tell this story. But it was a story of chicanery, a story of manipulation, a Machiavellian story. People like to be voyeurs in that, and I think again, you are entertaining people at the end of the day. I think that all artists, all auteurs, start with "How am I going to entertain my audience?" The *House of Cards* dynamic was that he wanted something, he wanted it bad, and he was prepared to do anything to get to it. Is he Iago? Is he evil personified? You wanted to watch that story.

Game of Thrones, just to finish the troika of examples, is about power. That was the pitch of *Thrones*. And it is about power, but it's a great story. There are webs and webs of intrigue. I think if something is tendentious in any way, it turns off an audience. So, you need to find the side door to get in there and tell the story however you want to tell the story. I think the beautiful thing about *Thrones* is that those guys are so good that they found a way. I'm not saying that they're teaching us lessons, but the Lannisters represent Machiavellian nastiness and yet they spawn somebody with a heart inside their family who may prove to be their redemption. The Starks, who represented in one generation nobility, decency, and honor have spawned a pretty Machiavellian little girl...two Machiavellian little girls. You have this fascinating mixture of characters all reflecting a different Shakespearean model. So, story first.

There will be movies like you just saw recounting the Pentagon Paper stories in *The Post*. We will ultimately, I'm sure find our way, to take a look at this rather anomalous experience that we're all having in public policy and government at some point just like we did with *Game Change*, just like we did with *Recount*, just like we did with *Too Big to Fail*. I think the beautiful thing about our business is you can look at it in many different ways. You can do a mini-series of the story of American history like we did in *Band of Brothers* or *John Adams*. You know, you can go in and make a movie on the financial crisis like we did with *Too Big to Fail*, and you can tell the story of an American election like we did with *Game Change*. So, we have this lesson that as long as the storytellers and the writers are open, we can address any subject we want and still have it be entertaining.

FORUM: *You spoke a little bit earlier about how viewing habits have changed and demand for entertainment has changed with this streaming culture. What is HBO's strategy to address these changing trends in viewership and maintaining audiences?*

PLEPLER: Well, I think the first thing that we had to do is create the capacity for the next generation of viewers who only have an internet subscription to be able to watch HBO, wherever and however they want on whatever device — we did that. So, you want to watch HBO through your internet subscription on your phone or your tablet — you can do that. We still think it's about great storytelling. Where you launch it is less important than if what you were watching is engaging. You may want to watch *VICE News Tonight* on your phone, but you may want to watch *Big Little Lies* on your 60-inch flat screen TV. You may feel that you can catch *Bill Maher* on your iPad, but you may want to catch *Silicon Valley* on your TV. So, all we care about is that we're giving you maximum flexibility to watch whatever you want to watch.

And that's just what we built. I did not want to find ourselves in a position where an entire generation of viewers who were cutting the cord couldn't get HBO. That would have been a disaster. When I began having some rather intense conversations with the traditional distributors, I said to them "What would you do if you were me? You would build optionality for your consumer." That's what we did. You guys have broadband-only customers inside your system, bundle HBO with it, which is what I believe they will end up doing. So great stories, great content, engaging content, other optionality of viewing — that's the strategy.

FORUM: *You've described yourself as a political junkie. From your perspective and experience, what do you think are the greatest risks today and the biggest emerging risks that leaders across government and various private sector industries should be aware of going forward?*

PLEPLER: I think that any leader who does not surround himself with wide-ranging talent better than they are in any number of things is going to disadvantage themselves tremendously. Great leadership paradoxically is less about talking than it is about listening because the ultimate manifestation of a good leader is, "Can you identify where the North Star is? Can you build a team that wants to row to it together?" Because you need a lot of help get to the North Star, and then you need to constantly check and make sure that the North Star that you find at one particular time in

history hasn't shifted on you to another galaxy and you now have a new North Star.

And I think the way you do that is you should always wake up every day and say, "What now?" "What am I missing?" Two of my favorite lines

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are "Think with me" and "What am I missing?" Invite your team to tell you what you're missing. Don't tell your team what we're going to do. And then make sure that the core values inside your company are values that reflect respect, decency, and character. Do the right thing.

Jim Burke — one of my mentors — once told me a great story. He ran Johnson & Johnson in the 1980s. When the Tylenol scandal hit, you guys are all too young to remember this, but Tylenol was poisoned in a drugstore and somebody died. Johnson & Johnson was faced with a huge question: "What do we do with this penetration of one product? Could it happen again? Was it systemic?"

And Burke called his team together. They ultimately decided to take all Tylenol off the shelf and take a write-off and create the first tamper resistant packaging. Jim told me — a great story that I never forgot — that he never had to have a real big deep discussion with his management team because they all knew what the right thing to do was. Customer first, safety first, and if there was a one percent risk that any of their customers could be injured by something that was anything other than an isolated incident, they weren't going to take it. And so, they took all Tylenol off the shelves and they replaced it with tamper resistant packaging. Jim Burke went out and said: "this is a tragedy and this is what we are going to do about it." And the result was that Johnson & Johnson's brand was enhanced. Values! And you need to make sure that the core values of your institution, core ideology, are shared by your senior team and that your team carries your voice.

The most important thing I believe about leadership is that you create an environment where people are liberated to think together rather than where they feel like they're following orders.

FORUM: *What is one suggestion that you would pass along to graduate students as they embark on a career in international affairs?*

PLEPLER: In an interconnected world where we are all increasingly linked by our devices, via social media, it's so important to travel. It's so important. You know Woody Allen's famous line: "90 percent of life is showing up." It's so important to show up and to meet with people from different cultures, to go to different countries, to see the world through the perspective of other people. There's no substitute for travel and for marinating in another culture and for listening to the perspective of another culture. I think what's really exciting about your generation is the world was so much more closed off when I was in your chairs, you could go to Europe and Asia, but you could not communicate on a daily basis; you could not read their presses easily; you couldn't see their social media; they couldn't see yours. And I think that you all have this breathtaking window into what different cultures can become.

You all are being trained in international diplomacy and trained in communications. You all need to figure out a way to break down those barriers because if we live in a Malthusian environment where everybody believes that what I take you lose, we're not going to make our way through this. It's too dangerous. There are pandemics; there are nuclear weapons; there are chemical weapons; there are radicals who are propagating and spreading all kinds of vicious canards about different cultures and different peoples. Your job, should you choose to accept your mission, it is to trump — pardon the pun — their dissemination of toxicity with the dissemination of illumination, with the dissemination of clarity and respect for other peoples and other cultures. Mandela used to say, "In the village people didn't say hello. They said I see you." And I think the mission of international diplomats like you is to help us and each other see one another better and more clearly. If we can do that, and use the world of storytelling through documentaries, through media to help bridge those gaps, we can do it. Tom Stoppard said he did. When asked why he wrote plays he said: "I write plays to nudge the world." We can nudge the world. Your generation can nudge the world together by helping people see one another rather than the past with another in a zero-sum game world. That's not how we get from here to there. We get from here to there by connecting. *f*