

MIPTV 2018: Hiatus in U.S. Series Poses Challenge for Overseas Buyers

By [Randee Dawn](#)



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When you live in an era of 450-plus scripted television shows available from traditional over-the-air networks and streaming services, it's hard to imagine a problem stemming from so many quality choices. Prestige series with feature-sized budgets are creating some of the most innovative, deep-think, small-screen content we've ever seen in the U.S.

But if you're an international buyer, the side effects of top-quality U.S. television often come with a downside that can be summed up in one word: hiatus.

Shows including AMC's "[The Walking Dead](#)" can go months between new episodes when the series takes its midseason break, while calendar years can pass between seasons of HBO's "[Game of Thrones](#)" and "[Westworld](#)" or FX's "[American Crime Story](#)." Sometimes, it can feel as if producers are asking, "Do you want it done right, or do you want it done right now?"

U.S. viewers may have learned to be patient with such delays. But the overseas market faces unique challenges, and a mid- or full-season delay can sometimes be the difference between whether a show is an international hit or gets a deal at all.

“The delays U.S. networks take have an impact on our ability to make American shows the hits they should be internationally,” says Katie Keenan, head of acquisitions for Channel 5 and Viacom Intl. Media Network U.K. “In the U.K., no one would think of taking a break and breaking the momentum for an original drama that’s been commissioned.”

Rüdiger Böss, executive vice president of group content acquisition and sales at ProSiebenSat.1 Media, notes that the fan bases for some shows, including “Game of Thrones,” may be willing to wait, but they are often exceptions. “Viewers can lose patience when the break is too long, and drop the show forever,” Böss says.

But Gina Brogi, president of global distribution at 20th Century Fox Television Distribution, says international buyers have adapted to more diverse delivery schedules just fine.

“Clients that buy cable content come to expect that there are trade-offs every single year, and having terrific storytelling and an impactful series that might not be as consistent as broadcast content is worth the trade-off,” she says.

That’s true for the Canal Plus Group, where head of drama acquisitions Diane Reynald has a pretty laissez-faire attitude toward extended breaks. “It’s not a real problem,” she says. “We know that usually distributors don’t care that it’s difficult for the international market.”

Anthology shows, including “[American Crime Story](#),” are even more adaptable to long breaks, as Reynald notes, “because the second season is completely different from the first.”

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KATIE KEENAN

“We find ways for people to not forget about the story, and be up-to-date, which is easier now than it was four or five years ago.”

Some of those ways involve studios becoming more savvy about providing assets and talent to help market shows overseas. To Keenan, that can make taking extended hiatuses even more baffling.

“We’ve spent the money licensing the show, a lot of time has gone into making a big marketing campaign, and our press teams and creative teams are helping to make a success of a show,” she says. “Anything that deviates or negatively impacts your ability to do that makes the challenge of creating hits even greater.”

Another challenge for overseas programmers is whether to try and air their buys as close to the U.S. premiere as possible, knowing a hiatus is coming down the road, or to wait a few weeks or months until the full season can run without a break — a practice that can tempt fans into seeking out pirated versions.

It’s hard to know how much long hiatuses affected the decision of Denmark’s DK2 to extricate itself from output deals, but 10 years ago Anette Romer, head of acquisitions and formats, says they stopped trying to buy new American shows.

“The audience did not come to it,” she says. DK2 has rights to such shows as “Two Broke Girls” and “Wilfred” that they don’t even schedule. “I have my focus firmly fixed on 2020 when a lot [of the deals] will expire.”

Fragmentation of viewership has had an impact on the ability to create an international success, she adds. “It’s harder and harder to get a worldwide hit. Just in our territory, we have drama that used to generate a million [viewers], and now draws half a million. People have so much more choice.”

This difficulty in creating overseas hits comes roughly at the same time that international’s influence over some Stateside series’ survival is expanding. The 2017 broadcast upfront season led to fresh orders for several bubble shows (including “Quantico,” which airs in the U.S. on ABC, and “Blindspot,” whose American home is NBC) because of the licensing deals they’d made overseas. And while those series may not bedevil international distributors with long mid-season hiatuses, series that do make their fans wait may not always have the luxury to do so.

“Canada, Australia — I’m not aware that either of those territories take as regular breaks as the U.S.,” says Keenan. “It does seem that U.S. networks are moving closer to taking smaller breaks, but they’ve really got to move all the way. I don’t think there’s a happy medium.”



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