

Interview with Dick Wolf

Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

9-11 minutes

Dick Wolf is creator and executive producer of three *Law & Order* series that have proven exceptionally lucrative in the world of network and cable broadcasting, especially in syndication. In many ways, this makes him an exception: a writer/producer that continues to excel with series television despite the significant changes wrought by the digital distribution revolution.

Wolf also oversees Wolf Films, a production and development unit that oversees the company's current productions and cultivates new shows that it shops around to studios, allowing NBC/Universal—it's home base—a first look at all projects.

Wolf broke into series television on the writing staff of *Hill Street Blues*, earning an Emmy nomination and enough professional credibility to land him a spot as a supervising producer of *Miami Vice*. In 1990, he launched *Law & Order*, a show that ran twenty seasons, tying *Gunsmoke* as the longest-running drama in television history. Along the way, Wolf won two Emmy Awards, was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame, and earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

MIP spoke to Wolf about launching *Chicago Fire*—a departure of sorts from the episodic nature of his previous series—during one of his visits to the Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara.

Launching Chicago Fire in a Changing Media Landscape

***Chicago Fire* seems like a real departure. It's more character driven, sort of like *ER* in the firehouse.**

Excuse me, but that's how it was pitched. [laughter]

If I was going to make a prediction, I'd say this show has the potential to be a ten-year show. I've said that all along. It will never be worth what the *Law and Orders* are worth because it's serialized. If you tune in and you've missed an episode, it's a challenge. The wonderful thing about *Law and Order* is it doesn't matter whether you didn't see it for a week, a month, a year, or three years – you come in and say, oh, it's *Law and Order*. It's a catholic high mass.

On the other hand, *Chicago Fire* is a radical departure for me. It wouldn't have been for Steven Bochco or David Kelly. They've been doing these kinds of shows for thirty years. Not me. I've been doing stand alone, self-contained episodes with no arcs.

Your shows have done very well in the syndication world, but now you're doing a show that might lean more favorably to a Netflix or Hulu environment. Going into it, were you saying to yourself, this is a different animal?

From a business stand point, it's actually a very exciting period if you have a patient attitude. I'm very fortunate that I don't have to worry about this week or next week's ratings on cable.

Everything has been sold for a long time. The shows are working off pre-existing contracts. I'm very, very fortunate. But launching anything new, it doesn't matter. The audience doesn't care what you did before. The network will use my track record to sell the show, but the audience doesn't care. It's a fresh page every time. I'm very gratified that *Chicago Fire* is now catching on. It was very scary for the first three months, but now the hook is in. You can feel it with the numbers and the audience. It was close.

Do you have someone like [Betsy Scolnik](#) monitoring social media?

She's doing both *Chicago Fire* and *SVU*. They're on the same night. She follows the conversation. Tries to guide it a bit. And then gives us a recap on Thursdays.

Is there crossover between the audiences?

A bit. We're getting more now, but initially it was two discreet audiences.

How do you use the recap information that Betsy provides?

It's nice to have the information, but the problem with social media is that there doesn't seem to be any correlation between the amount of social media discussion, the amount of advertising on Yahoo, and the interstitial stuff that's circulated. I've never seen it move the dial. And sometimes when the conversation is at the highest, the ratings have actually gone down.

My fear is that if you go into any blog and you look at the

comments, they're 95 percent negative no matter what the subject is. My initial reaction to everything online is, well: would you get a life? They ask things like, "What does it mean that his tie changed from green to red?" If any television show is even a tertiary centerpiece of your life, you've got a problem. This is entertainment. We're not curing cancer here. This is not a solution to your love life or your emotional life. It's entertainment. Very disposable. Expungeable.

Does social media feedback ever affect your writing process?

Sure, but I've never seen anything that would cause me to pick up the phone and call Matt (Olmstead) [*Chicago Fire* Producer]. Warren (Leight) [*Law & Order* Producer] is much more concerned about it than Matt is. I keep telling Warren, it's 18 people, don't worry about it. But he tweets, and he's massively involved. That's a double-edged sword.

I don't know if you were following the Mike Tyson thing, but it was a huge tempest in a teacup. We cast Mike Tyson as a death row inmate who was abused as a child. A whole bunch of survivors were outraged, and it was two weeks of Warren almost having a nervous breakdown because he responded on Twitter and they attacked him... and then it was back and forth. It was endless. I just don't engage. Social media chatter about television shows has limited positive impact.

How about market research?

Sure, the network does mid-season research. We recently got the report on *Chicago Fire*. They don't even bother doing *SVU*

anymore; it's been the same thing for 13 years: We love Mariska. You don't need additional research.

But on *Chicago Fire*, they're tracking it very closely. You're seeing exactly again what you hope to see. People are very involved with the stories. About a month ago we instituted an edict: three-episode arcs are the limit on any story line. People had started complaining about what [Lieutenant Kelly Severide, played by Taylor Kinney] was going to do about his arm. Was he going to become a drug addict? It went on too long. That's something you can learn through market research.

What are the most useful aspects of market research?

When you hear negatives. I tell my kids this: Success teaches you nothing. You only learn through failure. If you think that gee, this guy is really interesting and 70 percent of the audience thinks he's an obnoxious dickhead, then you have to pay attention. Research is never a decision-making tool. It's really never a gross surprise. It's a diagnostic tool. You go, well, I can see how people might feel that way. Then you can make adjustments, but it takes a while for the adjustments to take hold, because by the time you start making an adjustment on the character, there are three more episodes that are too far gone to change. But there are many people with helpful comments during the course of the first season.

Is market research better today than 20 years ago?

I think it's about the same. The major market research during pilots is the dial test. People sitting in a room responding to the show, minute-by-minute, by twisting a dial. That hasn't changed

in fifty years. And if you've been working on shows long enough, there are ways to stack the deck and get the response you want. Still, you do learn things that can prove useful.

Back to the issue of creative authority: During our interviews, we've heard that producers and writers are getting swamped with feedback these days. That there's more feedback coming from more directions. Do you feel that way or do you find yourself in a charmed position?

I'm not in a charmed position, but I am in a different position than a lot of producers, because – I'm trying to have this come out sounding right – at this stage, everybody knows I don't have to be doing this anymore. On a basic level, I've got mine.

Somebody said, why are you still doing it, and I said I've worked 35 years to get to a point where I can operate this way.

I spoke with Bob Greenblatt [Chairman, NBC Entertainment] just before this interview. He called and wanted to talk, which is odd, because usually Bob doesn't want to talk to anybody. I think he feels comfortable talking to me because I'm kind of bulletproof. I'm not trying to pick his pocket. I'm not trying to sell him stuff. When we have differences, it's usually a productive exchange. I say, look, this is the way I feel. You're the head of the network. It's your decision. We both may express strong opinions, but we work it out. If we have a disagreement about casting, for example, we try to keep it as uncontentious as possible.

I did make one request when [*Chicago Fire*] was picked up. I said, look, we have a huge job here and we all know it. We've got to get this show up, so what I would request is that since the

network and the studio are the same company, and the same people are basically in charge: one set of notes. Luckily, I had the ammunition. On the first two scripts we got diametrically opposed notes from the studio and the network. I said, you guys should have that conversation and then come to us with an agreed upon approach. They said okay, and it has made a big difference. It's much better than what some shows have to deal with.

[Read the complete transcript of our conversation with Dick Wolf in *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television*.](#)