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Developments in Television Viewership

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DEVELOPMENTS IN TELEVISION VIEWERSHIP

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies
satisfying the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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In recent years the ways in which we watch television has changed, and so has the television we watch. "Binge watching," almost the Oxford English Dictionary's Word of the Year in 2013, has taken a firm hold on the American television audience who now watches television not according to the broadcast schedule but on its own terms. So, too, has the practice of engaging with other audience members, be they friends, family, or strangers, while watching a show by using a secondary device – a "second screen." These practices have been developing for some time, and as technology adapts to facilitate them the denizens of television viewers now consider them normal.

The questions that follow are whether these new ways to watch television change the TV programs themselves, and whether the viewers' emotional response to the shows is changing, too. If it is accepted as standard that audiences will watch multiple episodes of one show in a row, instead of waiting for a weekly release of a single episode, are the episodes being written with that consumption pattern in mind? Do the old conventions written into television shows to help the viewer remember what happened in the weeks before still apply? And, if viewers are looking at their second screens to follow the national response on Twitter

at the same time as they are watching a show, can they be as emotionally engaged with the show as they would be if they were focusing on the single, primary screen?

There have been some studies that investigate these questions and others like them, and there is a plethora of written work ranging from scholarly papers to blog posts. The opinion columns of magazines and newspapers are full of think pieces on the effects of binge watching and the state of television today. My thesis incorporates existing research and writing with a historical overview of changes to television technology over time, as well as the results of an original survey distributed to my social network with the goal of reaching an understanding of how people are watching television and using the technology in their own lives.

Table of Contents

List of Tables and Illustrations

I grew up in a household without television channels (but with many VHS tapes and, later, DVDs) and as a result, missed out on many shows that are now considered by my peers to be a part of the American cultural canon. *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Boy Meets World*, *The West Wing*, and *All That* shaped the lives of many of my contemporaries, and their absence from my life left a hole that I would try to fill years later, when all those shows and more became available on the Internet. To say I tried to fill the hole is an understatement. I have put a considerable amount of time into catching up on television programs past. Netflix began streaming all ten seasons of *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) at the beginning of 2015 and I decided that it was my time to finally watch what people had been referencing for so many years. It quickly became clear that the experience I was having, watching as many as 14 episodes in a single day (and finishing the entire series in five months), was very different from the experience had by people who watched the show over the course of ten years.

The most pronounced difference was in the perception of Ross and Rachel's relationship. My fiancé, who had watched the show in syndication, remembered their relationship as a long, drawn-out, and crucial element of the show. I, in contrast, experienced their relationship over the course of about a week. In the actuality of the show, they dated from the middle of season 2 to the middle of season 3 and hooked up a handful of times after that, before getting together in the final episode. For the people who watched the show as it played out on NBC, the Ross and Rachel plotline took up a good year and held a high level of emotional significance. For people like myself, who binge watched the show and thus progressed through the episodes in which the characters are dating quickly, the plotline is a minimal part of the overall series and holds considerably less importance.

This experience inspired a question: what other differences are there in the emotional perceptions of a television show when it is watched week by week as opposed to being watched in a condensed time frame? What gravitas, if any, comes from scheduling time every week to watch a show, and knowing that if you can't see it that week that you'll probably never see that episode? In our on-demand world, do shows lose their importance by being available whenever the viewer wishes? And, conversely, is there anything to be gained from the sometimes-immense time commitments made by binge watchers? I explore these questions in my thesis, in relation to existing literature on television viewership.

There are several relatively new ways to consume television content, including but not limited to binge watching, and in recent years scholars and industry professionals have begun conducting research on how engaging in these new ways changes the viewer's response. The purpose of this paper is to ascertain new information about the current modes of consuming television content by examining the history of and trends in television consumption and existing research, and to try for a theory about the effects these new modes are having on the medium itself. My topic is a small part of the larger concern about technology and society. It has to do with possible lost value as a result of increased engagement with technology in our daily lives. The question of whether television content is less valuable when it can be accessed anytime, anywhere, is similar to the one we ask about a variety of amenities that are available on-demand. Yes, many things are made easier by technology, but is that always a good thing? Do we take them for granted? For example, video technology and the Internet make it easy to have audio-visual communication with people, no matter where they may be. It is wonderful for a child to be

able to see and speak with his grandparent who lives across the country, but does it make the time that they spend together in close physical proximity less special?

To investigate the ways different modes of viewing change the viewer's reception of television, I will look at turning points in television viewership and studies of viewer response, and will analyze the existing writing about viewing practices. My thesis will be interdisciplinary: a combination of historical, literary, investigative, and philosophical. The historical component will be the first section, in which I will give an overview of technological advances that have changed the way people watch television and the changes in how we think about television. I will use a combination of scholarly and popular writing to explain the changes that are taking place in the ways in which people watch television. My literature review ranges from popular websites such as Deadline and Vulture to compendiums of essays mostly written in the 1970s and 80s. This is because, while there is a large amount of scholarly writing on the subject of television, little of it contains reference to the newer phenomena in which I am interested. Most writing about contemporary viewing practice is in the form of opinion pieces and blog posts. When I began researching questions about binge watching, second screen engagement, and other contemporary viewing practices, there was very little data available about its effects on the audience. For this reason, I include an investigative section in the thesis that describes my primary source: a survey I wrote and conducted that was distributed via social media. However, in the past year the number of studies relating to this topic has gone up dramatically, so I am also able to draw from the work of other researchers on questions about current viewership. The thesis will end on a philosophical note, as I conclude with thoughts on how television viewership may develop in the future and make an attempt at answering some of the questions raised by the research.

Terminology

It is important, at a time when many people are talking about new activities using new terms, to be clear on what those terms mean, where they come from, and what their implications are, if any. "Binge watching" is something that is frequently referenced in modern society, yet there is no concrete way of quantifying a "binge" in relation to viewing television content. Television content itself is a nebulous category, in an age when fewer and fewer people actually watch television on a television set. Why is it not said that someone who is watching a show on his or her computer is watching computer? And when so many are using mobile devices to engage with a show while they watch, it is important that they know the term for the practice in which they are taking part.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define "television content" as video content accessible via television (network or cable), Internet (streaming and/or subscription), or recorded onto something such as a DVD that is not classified as a feature film and is segmented into episodes. This could be a show the airs on network television such as *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-), or it could be a web-series such as *Broad City* (web series, 2009-2011; Comedy Central, 2014-). Episodes may range in length from about fifteen minutes to about one and a half hours, but it is important that the episodes are part of a series. The concept of the discreet units adding up to a whole season or series is crucial to discussion of television, for in my opinion even shows structured in a way that is episodic (not serial) have a continuous, larger purpose that is developed over the course of a season or series. Some discussion will be had on the subject of television as an audiovisual text versus television as a piece of furniture.

The exact definition of "binge watching" is difficult to determine, and I devote considerable time in this thesis to exploring what it means. The dictionary definition is to "watch multiple episodes of (a television program) in rapid succession, typically by means of DVDs or digital streaming," but the difficulty with this definition is that the length of an episode can vary dramatically. I try to pin down an exact number of episodes or amount of time that one must watch to consider it binging, both by drawing from the definitions of other types of binges (alcohol and food) and by means of a survey that I wrote and distributed to my friends and colleagues via social media.

The dictionary definition of a "second screen" is a mobile device used while watching television, especially to access supplementary content or applications. "Second screen engagement" refers to the usage of that mobile device, typically accessing social media to interact with others who watch or are involved with the show that the viewer is concurrently watching. While second screen options have not caught on across the board, one network to use the technology especially well is AMC (American Movie Classics). Story Sync, an app originally created for the second season of *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2011-), "lets viewers watch an interactive presentation that plays in real time during the initial broadcast of a given episode."[1] That interactive presentation contains polls, quizzes, and supplemental information on plot lines and characters, all created with assistance from the writers of the show so that they truly match up with the feel of the episode. Following great success with the app, Story Sync was expanded for use with *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) and *The Killing* (AMC, 2011-2014) as well, and now contains a feature that allows audience members to "watch with" members of the cast, among other options. Many features of the app are available for past episodes, but it serves

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[1] Bishop, theverge.com

its full purpose when used in conjunction with a live broadcast. In this way, new technology attempts to bring viewers back to appointment viewing, away from the popular time-shifted model of watching TV.

History of Television Viewership

The level of agency held by the viewer evolves with the television industry. Today, more than ever, viewers control how they consume television content and the industry adjusts accordingly. Each technological development makes it easier to customize the viewing experience. Additionally, media studies theorists have changed their ways of thinking and methods of research to focus on the ways the viewer is in control – not the television taking control of its watcher. This section will explore the history of changes in each of those sectors, bolstered by the historic evidence from Leo Bogart's *The Age of Television* and guided by the research of Greg Metcalf, author of *The DVD Novel: How the Way We Watch Television Changed the Television We Watch*.

Changes in technology

The Age of Television outlines the beginning of the television era in the United States. First published in 1958 and revised in 1972, the book provides an interesting perspective from within the trenches of the television boom of those decades. Even at the time of first printing, Bogart writes, "television today is a firmly established feature of American life. It is present in four out of five U.S homes and within reception range of all but 3%."[2] Of course, this is nothing compared to U.S. homes today, one of which may contain four televisions itself and many of

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[2] Bogart, p. 8

which are serviced by broadcast systems that reach far beyond the reception range of the 1950's. For the time, however, the growth accomplished in just twenty years was incredible. In 1938, it was announced that "television in the home is now technically feasible."[3] Within three years there were "approximately 10,000 television sets" in U.S. homes. Growth was slowed by the war and again by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission), which placed strains on the finances and the strictures of television's expansion, but by the 1950's over half of Americans had television sets in the home.

As television came to be used by more people, the ways in which people used it evolved. One of the first significant developments in user control was the remote control. In 1950, Zenith marketed a remote control for televisions called the "Lazy Bones." With this product, people no longer needed to sit through a program because they were too lazy to get up and change the channel. This was the first step toward the viewer-dictated model that exists today. Widespread use of this technology and the "channel-surfing" that we know today were in full force in the 1970's. "The remote control altered the truism of programming that viewers would pick a channel and stay with it for the night; they could now change channels any moment they got bored" without even getting off the couch.[4] Greg Metcalf explains the effect this had on the writing and content of television shows:

> Previously, a television show had to hook its audience quickly with a dramatic opening, but had latitude with the rest of the show, assuming that the audience would stay once hooked. The remote control drove the focus to writing for the segment between commercials. The writer needed to hook the audience after each commercial, offer some sort of dramatic arc that ended with enough suspense that the viewers would stay through the commercials, or at least come back after they were over.[5]

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[3] David Sarnoff in Bogart, p. 8
[4] Metcalf, p. 2
[5] ibid.

It was around this time that premium cable television came into existence, including HBO,

Showtime, and the Star Channel, bringing television closer to what it is today.

The 1970's also brought the video home system (VHS), and by the 1980's the

videocassette recorder (VCR) was "entrenched in American homes and changing the function of

the [TV]"[6] and had ushered in the beginning of on-demand. People gained the ability to record

episodes and watch them at a more convenient time, or procure episodes to which they did not

have access (for example, because of the lack of cable or reception of local broadcasting). The

thoughts people are having now about the potential of on-demand streaming content are similar

to those that were voiced in the 1980's, in the wake of the popularization of the VCR:

> Many experts see in the videocassette recorder the potential to change the profile of the television viewer in other ways. As programs for videocassettes adapt to the special technical capabilities of the machines, for example, they could reshape how people watch television. One way might be to graft some of the values of literacy onto the experience of television viewing. "With the ability to go backward and forward and do freeze frame on a VCR, there could be more visually and narratively complex dramas on cassette," said Mr. Meyrowitz. "You would have to watch them several times to get the full meaning."[7]

Indeed, the very same "potential to change the profile of the television viewer" is evident to

people who propound binge watching.

The VHS also meant that viewers could "record a show and then fast-forward through

commercials," or "ignore television and watch rented movies… without paying HBO or leaving

their house,"[8] which provided a challenge for advertisers. Product placement increased as a way

for advertisers to embed their message into the show's content itself, so that even if a viewer

fast-forwarded through a commercial she would still be exposed to the product.

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[6] Metcalf, p. 4

[7] "New TV Technologies Alter Viewing Habits," by Sally Bedell Smith, October 9, 1985, *The New York Times*

[8] Metcalf, p. 4

The next step in the evolution of home viewing was the digital video disc (DVD). A cheap, portable vehicle for video content, the DVD has yet to be surpassed (though Blu-Ray was intended to replace it). It became very popular to own a "library" of DVDs, and boxed-sets took hold in a way that far surpassed the VHS boxed-set. The end-game for a show runner stopped being the broadcast of the episode, and started being the release of the full series on DVD. "The broadcast of a program is only a transitional state; the final state of these programs is the DVD set."[9] This is in part because a DVD set can hold supplementary material that is not broadcast on television. It is also because, just as reading a novel is a different experience from reading serialized story segments, opening a DVD set (much like one would open a book) and selecting a disc that contains three episodes (much like chapters) is a different experience from watching episodes of a larger story. The three-episode disc (for a show whose single episode would take up one hour of broadcast time including commercials) became a single ninety-minute viewing experience, and thus "the physical format [of the DVD] guides the viewer toward watching more than one episode at a sitting."[10] The new viewing experience allowed by the DVD set allowed for a deeper experience of the show, and lead the industry toward its current form.

At the turn of the century, the DVR (digital video recorder) replaced the function of the VCR. The ease of using tools like TiVo (the most popular brand of DVR, introduced in 1999) to record hours of television content lead to "almost half of American homes [having] a DVR, so viewers can record shows and watch them after they air."[11] Digital storage of television episodes was easier than recording onto a videocassette, faster than buying a DVD, and more space-efficient than having boxed sets of tapes or discs taking up real estate on the shelf. Today, one

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[9] Metcalf, p. 7
[10] Metcalf, p. 7
[11] Tyler, marketplace.org

DVR can record up to six shows at once, and can hold as many as eighty hours of content. It also affords the user the ability to fast-forward through commercials or any other parts she might not want to watch, and lets her reliably mark a television show as one to record meaning that she never has to worry about missing an episode. It is so easy to record so many television programs that the problem replacing that created by appointment viewing (the high chance of missing an episode) is having too many shows to watch and not enough time. In June 2015 TVLine posted "DVR Confessions," claiming that its staff of television critics had been "hoarding" unwatched episodes on their DVRs.[12]

By turn of the millennium we were in the era of online streaming, and there was no longer a need to own a TV. As Greg Metcalf explains,

> By the end of the 20th century, the pervasiveness of the Internet in the digital fin-de-siècle means that no one needs a television (the box) to watch television. Television programs are just one more sort of content streaming through the tubes of the Internet to be downloaded or streamed at any time and, increasingly, in any location.[13]

Television content is now free (with an internet subscription and device) and mobile. More and more people do not own television sets in their homes, or if they do, they use the Internet to obtain televisual content instead of antenna or cable. Netflix began offering Instant Viewing in 2007, cementing the Internet TV trend.

The following graph from Nielsen shows how rapidly the technology has been changing in recent years:

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[12] Team TVLine, June 1, 2015.
[13] Metcalf, p. 5

A CONSUMER'S JOURNEY TO CONTENT DISCOVERY
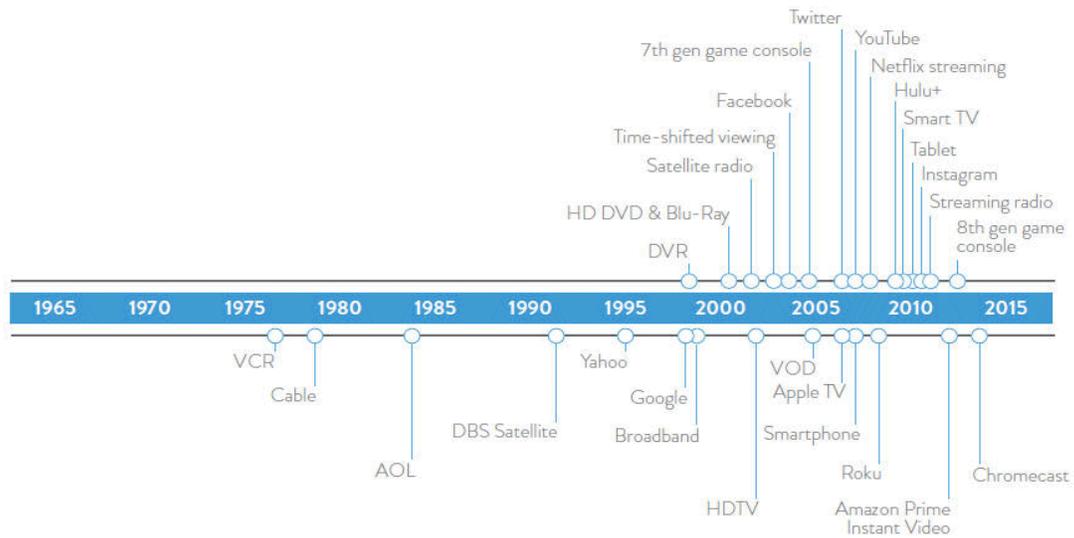
nielsen — AN UNCOMMON SENSE OF THE CONSUMER™

Changing mindsets in television studies

As much as the technology used to watch television has changed, so has the way in which scholars consider and discuss the effects television has on its viewers and vice versa. Early television studies in the 1950s and 60s followed the Marxist idea that mass communication was a method of mass control. Much attention was paid to the effects of television on the viewer. Around the 1980s scholars changed their mindset. In his 1989 article "Changing Paradigms in Audience Studies," David Morley wrote, "One can no longer talk about the 'effects' of a message on a homogeneous mass audience who are expected to be affected in the same way."[14] Instead, he talks about the effects that both the context of viewing and the viewer's personal

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[14] Morley, p. 17

context have on televisual texts. For example, Morley cites Barthes' work on reception theory and posits that, in Barthes' terms, a television show is not created until it is watched; the show is different for each viewer because of the contextualization that comes from the viewer's background and habits. "The meaning of the text will also be constructed differently depending on the discourses, knowledges, prejudices, or resistances brought to bear on the text by the reader."[15] One name for the school of thought that was popular around the time Morley wrote this article is "uses and gratifications." (For a discussion of uses and gratifications in relation to current scholarship, see part three of this thesis.) That view gave us the image of an "active viewer" and poses the question "of looking at what other people do with the media rather than what media do to them."[16] This is a shift from the "passive viewer" (a.k.a. couch potato) who leaves the television on the background, watches whatever is on, and "absorbs it into [his] momentary mood or position."[17]

One of the most informative modern studies on television viewership was conducted by Netflix and cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken, who set out to find whether binging on television is follows the pattern of pre-existing ways of binging (i.e. on food) or if it is something new. McCracken explains in an interview with the Huffington Post:

> In the days of the passive couch potato you'd… find the best of your bad choices and watch that, and then we move forward to something…hyperkinetic: channel-surfing. This new model is different. People are captive to the drama, they're participating, they're identifying…[and] there's a critical point of view going on as well.[18]

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[15] Morley, p. 20
[16] Halloran in Morley, p. 16
[17] Grossberg, p. 35
[18] "How Binge TV Watching Changed The World." *Huffington Post*. December 30, 2013.

People today watch TV with purpose and intent. They don't flip through channels or have TV on in the background; instead they set aside a block of time, watch a chosen show, and pay close attention to the show. These purposeful, engaged viewers require a caliber of show that will match their attention level. The ritual around watching television is changing, and the value of the content is higher than ever.

How and Why Viewership is Changing

Through all the changes made to television technology and the ways in which we think about watching, television remains relevant and important because "it is perhaps the one thing… that we all have in common as a topical resource."[19] It may be increasingly common to "cut the cord" and live without cable or a traditional television set-up in the home, but I do not know a single adult today who does not watch TV in some form. As of 2014, there were an estimated 116.3 million homes in the United States with televisions. Television shows remain a major topic of conversation, though these days people might discuss older shows in addition to those currently being broadcast. A show that is not currently airing might become popular because it has recently been acquired by a streaming service, or because a group of people start discussing the show on social media and word spreads to different friend groups. This section will explore the shifts taking place in television viewership.

Social media influence on the spread of TV shows

Word of mouth is crucial to the proliferation of a TV show. According to Ien Ang's study on people who watched *Dallas*, word of mouth was more important than the press when it came

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[19] Scannel in Gillespie, p. 56

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to advertising.[20] People were more likely to watch the show when it was recommended by a friend than when they read a review. One woman reported that she hadn't been interested in *Dallas*, but when a colleague said that it was not to be missed she watched an episode and afterwards "didn't miss a week." "The popular press can perhaps fasten the attention of (potential) viewers on the existence of a program or arouse curiosity for it," but "the advertising of one's own social group can be more effective." One reason for this is that one can receive a more personalized recommendation from a friend than from a magazine. A friend or colleague may know one's tastes and habits, and can make suggestions based on that information. The breadth of shows a friend or colleague may recommend is also wider than that of the press. A friend may recall a program that he or she watched decades ago and recognize a connection to one's interests, while because the press most often reports on currently airing programs its recommendations are limited to contemporary shows. The advertising enacted by one's own network is more impactful today than ever before because of the use of social media. Word of mouth is amplified by the ability to share with hundreds or even thousands at a time via Twitter or Facebook.

"Appointment Viewing"

The original model of watching TV is sometimes referred to as "appointment viewing" because viewers scheduled time – or made *appointments* – to watch their favorite shows. Shows could only be watched on a television set at the time when the network or cable company chose to broadcast them, and unless one used a VCR to record the episode there was little-to-no opportunity to watch the episode at a later date (later, that technology switched to DVR). Having

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[20] Ang, p. 16

only one chance and one way to watch a TV show made the broadcast time very important. Certain times of day were prioritized because they were logistically superior to other times in terms of likely availability of audiences, coveted by the show's broadcasters and by advertisers.

Appointment viewing was beneficial for advertisers because they could target their commercials to the audience they knew would be watching a certain channel at a certain time. O'Donnell explains, "The goal is to buy time [for commercials] in television programs watched by an audience who fits the demographic characteristics that advertisers market products to."[21] Thus, if the demographic of a given show's audience is educated people between the ages of 18 and 49 (a key demographic for advertisers, because they tend to have more money to spend), the commercials that air during that show will be for products or services used by people in that demographic.

During the heyday of appointment viewing, not only did advertisers have a reliable –and quantifiable – group of people watching their ads, but also they knew the interests of those people and so could make the ads match those interests. People who watch *American Ninja Warrior* (G4, 2009-2013; NBC, 2012-) are probably interested in fitness, for example, so companies selling athletic equipment would be well advised to air their commercials during that show. A different example of targeted advertising is the commercials that air during game shows such as *Jeopardy!* (ABC, 1964-) and *Wheel of Fortune* (ABC, 1983-). The commercials overwhelmingly skew toward products for older viewers, such as heart medicine and arthritis medicine. This implies that the audience for those shows is predominantly older. It is still true that relevant commercials air during certain programs, but advertising is made more difficult by time-shifted viewing (and the decline of appointment viewing) because viewers are not only

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[21] O'Donnell 24

watching their favorite shows during the time of broadcast. Advertisers will catch a certain number of targeted viewers during the 8pm airing of *American Ninja Warrior*, but they cannot predict how many people will watch an episode or segment after the fact or on which platform. Furthermore, digital advertising works differently such that just because I may watch *American Ninja Warrior* on YouTube, an advertisement for athletic equipment won't necessarily be shown; the browser through which I am accessing YouTube will also be fed advertising prompts based on the other videos I've watched and websites I've visited.

Aside from basing advertising on the content of the show there is also the method of basing advertising on the broadcast time of the show, and this is also made much more difficult by time-shifted viewing. Advertisers consider who is available to watch television during a certain time, and target their ads to those people. For example, a certain segment of the population normally goes to work or school during the day, and is unable to watch TV during those hours. The segment that stays home is generally comprised of retirees and homemakers, so advertisements will be for things like cleaning products, household appliances, and medication and devices for the elderly. The time-shifted viewing model means that this type of targeted advertising is no longer possible, because I have the ability to watch a show that is normally broadcast during the day (when advertisers would be promoting cleaning products) anytime I wish. Therefore, advertisers must tune their commercials to the content of the show or rely on product placement within the show itself.

Appointment viewing became unnecessary with the advent of the DVR at the turn of the millennium, and time-shifted viewing as we know it took hold by the mid-2000s (see the Nielsen chart on page 11). About five years later Netflix began streaming video, and roughly another five

years after that Netflix broke new ground by releasing an entire season's worth of episodes at one time. The first show for which Netflix released all episodes at the same time (and their first foray into original programming), *House of Cards* is notorious for ushering in the modern era of binge watching. News sources such as Forbes, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Atlantic*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and more cite the show as the epicenter of a phenomenon. Though people were able to binge on a show from the first time multiple episodes were released on VHS, releasing all the episodes at once seemed to pose a challenge to the viewer: can you be the first to watch this entire season of *House of Cards*?

As an experiment, I chose to self-impose appointment viewing for the third season of Netflix's *House of Cards* to see if it would change my reaction to the show. I watched the entire first and second seasons (twenty-six episodes running approximately 55 minutes each) in the space of eight days, sometimes watching as many as five episodes in a row, and I remember being on the edge of my seat (or, the couch) through all of them. I only stopped watching after five episodes if I absolutely had to go to sleep or had something else planned. But the signs of a binge were all there: I forwent other activities, ignored signs that I should have gotten off the couch, even felt adrenaline rushes with each new episode. I attributed the need to keep watching to the quality of the show. As the release of the third season coincided with my research for this paper, I was interested to find out whether a change in the mode of viewing would affect my enthusiasm for the show.

For thirteen weeks, *House of Cards* "aired" in my house every Sunday at 10:00pm. I decided against reading recaps or engaging in any practice that would refresh my memory of what had happened previously – I wanted it to be just like the days pre-streaming. There were certainly difficulties in undertaking this practice. To start, many other people in my workplace

watch the show, and most of them binge watched the entire season when it was released. In order to avoid learning plot details before I was able to finish the season I had to go to my colleagues and explain this experiment, soliciting their cooperation in not divulging "spoilers." As a result, I inconvenienced other people who wanted to talk about the show and shut myself out of social opportunities. By the time I finished the season and wanted to talk about it with friends, they no longer remembered what had happened well enough to engage in discussion.

Another difficulty was simply self-control. When an episode ended on a cliffhanger, I knew in the back of my mind that it was possible to resolve the tension and simply watch the next episode. Indeed, Netflix encourages viewers to do just that with its auto-play function. Seconds after an episode ends, the next one will automatically begin (to make the experience even more seamless, the playback for the next episode will begin just at the end of the credit sequence, so I do not have to re-watch the opening credits with each episode). I had to ensure that I was able to promptly turn off the television or press the "stop watching" button on Netflix; otherwise the next episode would play.

In the end, I found the third season less engaging. There is a possibility that the season simply wasn't as well written or as strongly produced as the first two, but I am inclined to believe that its narrative structure does not hold up to the appointment viewing model. When The *New York Times* profiled the series in January 2013, it featured a quote from writer and show runner Beau Willimon:

> "We approached this creatively as a 13-hour movie," said Mr. Willimon, who eschewed cliffhangers at the ends of some episodes because, well, he could. "…I didn't feel the pressure to sell the end of each episode with superficial cliffhangers or shock tactics in order to keep coming back, in order to jack up the ratings week to week," he said. "I hope

our version of a cliffhanger is compelling, sophisticated characters and complex storytelling."[22]

This change in approach was evident during my experiment. I found the plot hard to follow when there were none of the typical devices in place to jog my memory of what had happened previously. Most television shows written and produced prior to the streaming era contain a repetitious rhythm that is meant to reinforce certain plot points and help cement them into the viewer's memory. While many serial shows have built into their narrative framework a level of repetition intended to promote memorable plot points, *House of Cards* does not. Its plot develops on such a linear level that there is no going back to refresh the viewers' memories, and the weeklong gap between episodes proved challenging for my own memory. I was certainly swimming upstream, though. As Brian Stelter pointed out, "if [viewers] don't remember, Google is just a click away"[23] and Willimon and his team of writers did not have me in mind when they wrote the series.

For the people who do like to stretch out a series even when the show is not formulated with that intent, there are memory-aides in place. Wikipedia is a treasure trove of episode summaries and is equally relied on as sites with recap blogs such as *New York Magazine*'s Vulture.com, which puts out episode recaps like clockwork. Indeed, the recap culture has become so strong that not only do people have careers (part-time, at least) writing them, but also some viewers will bypass the show all together and instead choose to only read the recap. I, for example, watched only three episodes of *The Bachelorette* (ABC, 2003-2005, 2008-) last season

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[22] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/20/arts/television/house-of-cards-arrives-as-a-netflix-series.html

[23] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/business/media/netflix-to-deliver-all-13-episodes-of-house-of-cards-on-one-day.html

but read every single recap posted on Vulture.com. This was in part because I was not at home during most of the broadcast times of the show, and if I was at home I often preferred to spend my time doing other things, and in part because the recaps were written with a higher level of insight than the episodes of the show itself. (It was also because, during slow times at work, it was less conspicuous to read a web article than it would have been to watch a video.) By religiously reading the recaps I was able to contribute to water-cooler discussions about the show even though I had not actually seen the episodes.

<u>Current Practices in Television Viewership</u>

As recently as 10 years ago, a majority of television viewers were at the mercy of the network programmers. If one wished to watch an episode of a TV show, one had to be available to be within sight of a television set at the prescribed time. One might record the episode onto a videocassette if one was unavailable at the right time and watch it later, but if one did not have the foresight to set up the recording, there was no way to see that episode. Consider the importance placed upon something that can only be had once, in a small, measured dose, versus something that can be had anywhere, at anytime, in any amount. It is no longer the act of consumption but the thing itself that is more precious. The ritual of appointment viewing imbued a given television show with importance that has now been transferred to the actual content of the show – its plot, character development, cinematographic quality – in today's on-demand world.

Viewers are now living in what some call the "Second Golden Age of TV."[24] The types of issues explored on current-day television and the manner in which they are explored are more

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[24] http://www.cbsnews.com/news/welcome-to-tvs-second-golden-age/

sophisticated then they have ever been. Audience engagement is also higher, even though there is

little incentive to watch in the way television programmers originally intended viewers to watch.

Grant McCracken described the phenomenon:

> …Due to a perfect storm of better TV, our current economic climate and the digital explosion of the last few years… But this TV watcher is different, the couch potato has awoken. And now that services like Netflix have given consumers control over their TV viewing, they have declared a new way to watch."[25]

The idea of "consumer control" reverberates across blog posts and research reports. A recent

report published by Accenture proclaims, "The fact is … that the consumer is the undisputed

king of content. Over the past decade, control of the viewing experience has shifted rapidly to the

one who holds the remote."[26] From the beginning of the television era (the 1950s) until now, the

industry has been forced to respond to consumer behavior. Advances in technologies that afford

more control to the viewer are coming faster than ever before (as seen in the Nielsen chart on

page 11), and it is difficult to predict quite how content-creators will respond.

According to MediaPost.com, the most pronounced changes in television viewership

taking place today are the growing shift of audiences to time-shifted digital content, including

both SVOD (subscription video on demand), such as Netflix, and digital properties distributing

traditional television programming, such as Hulu; increased viewership of TV programs on

devices such as tablets and smart phones; and growing time and attention spent on newer sources

of video content, such as YouTube.[27] Nielsen, the preeminent firm for collecting television data,

has responded to the many changes brought about by new technologies by opening a division

dedicated to conduct research on social television behaviors. As part of this research Nielsen

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[25] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/16/canadian-binge-watch_n_4455516.html
[26] Murdoch, Tuma, and Vernocchi. Accenture.com
[27] Clarken, Megan. "Nielsen Calls For Industry To Adopt New Ratings Standards." *MediaPost.com*. November 14, 2014.

Social has coined a new term, the "+7 audience." +7 is a label for "the number of people who watch the show during the seven day period after the live airing."[28] This is also called "time-shifted" viewing, and there are more measures than seven days after the broadcast. Companies also chart the "+3 audience," but the numbers of options viewers have for when and where to watch television is truly unquantifiable. All networks can do is attempt to add value to the traditional viewing model to make it better than time-shifted viewing. This is achieved by providing supplementary content to increase audience engagement.

Audience Engagement

Audience engagement can mean many different things. One that I will focus on is the pursuit of supplementary material by the viewer, encouraged by a show's creator or not, with the goal of being a better-informed viewer. Shows for which this type of engagement is successful tend to have large presences in pop-culture, and the television show with one of the largest such presences in 2014 was the HBO original show *True Detective*. Though its run was brief (only eight episodes, running January 12-March 9, 2014) and the viewer-base was small[29], the debate was intense and the show made a huge impact on its fans. This is largely due to the viewers' engagement with the show and related topics during the time between episodes. For example, websites such as Buzzfeed.com published "A *True Detective* Reading List"[30] that contains many of the books referenced in the show as well as books that inspired the show's creator. When

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[28] http://www.nielsensocial.com/building-time-shifted-audiences-does-social-tv-play-a-role/
[29] Based on Nielsen ratings, only an average of 2.33 million viewers tuned in either at broadcast time or later on the same day. It is worth noting, however, that one month after the season ended *Deadline* reported that *True Detective* was the "most watched freshmen show in HBO's history" with a total viewership of 11.9 million per episode. (Andreeva, Nellie. "'True Detective' Now Most Watched HBO Freshman Series Ever." *Deadline.com*. April 15, 2014.
[30] Michel, Lincoln. "A 'True Detective' Reading List." *Buzzfeed.com*. February 18, 2015.

io9.com published an article[31] that pointed to the author Robert W. Chambers as a major influence on the show, many colleagues of mine spent the week between episodes reading Chambers' stories, as well as learning about the advanced metaphysical theories expounded by one of the main characters. The sheer proliferation of reading material available online during the run of the show was impressive. For example, *Slate*'s culture blog *Brow Beat* published twenty-five *True Detective*-related posts during the eight-week run of the show. *New York* Magazine published a whopping fifty-seven articles related to the show. There are also websites dedicated to the show, and a sub-Reddit with over 40,000 readers. The outside engagement for *True Detective* was outstanding, and thus made the show an unavoidable part of pop-culture during its broadcast run.

"Second screen"

Showrunners and networks are finding new ways to combat the lack of incentive to tune in during broadcast times, and second screen engagement is at the top of the list. A "second screen" is any mobile device used to access supplementary content or facilitate discussion with other viewers, and is used while the user is watching television. By providing content for a second screen that is only accessible during the live broadcast of a show, show runners and networks encourage viewers to tune in. For example, Shonda Rhimes (creator of *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-) and *Grey's Anatomy*) has had incredible success in increasing *Scandal*'s rankings through use of social media, especially Twitter.[32] Rhimes's efforts make her a preeminent example of "co-viewing." She and her key cast members make themselves available on Twitter during the

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[31] Hugues, Michael M. "The One Literary Reference You Must Know to Appreciate *True Detective*." *io9.com*. February 14, 2014.
[32] https://media.twitter.com/success/abc-scandal-recruits-fans-on-twitter

show's Thursday night slot so that viewers can tweet questions or comments directly to the cast and crew. This practice is so popular that *Scandal* is the show least often recorded on DVR, and in addition to tweeting to the cast and crew viewers have intense real-time discussions with each other on Twitter, Facebook and other online platforms.

As I discussed earlier in this thesis, AMC has been incredibly successful with their Story Synch app in enticing viewers to tune into live broadcasts of *The Walking Dead*, and they started using that feature in 2012. That same year, *Fringe* (Fox, 2008-2013) used Twitter to try to pull viewers back in before the show was cancelled. TV shows are often a "Trending Topic" on Twitter while the network broadcast is airing. This leads to the conclusion that people are either tweeting about a show at the same time as they're watching it (second-screen engagement), or at least engaging on twitter with others who are watching. The Guardian issued a report in January 2015 stating that Twitter activity is now a more reliable—and more important—metric than ratings, when measuring a show's success. "A few years ago, the only things that mattered was ratings. Now what matters more is the level of social engagement around the content," says Keith Hindle of FremantleMedia.[33] To that end, *Entertainment Weekly* reported the following top-Tweeted shows:

> *According to the report, the top television series on Twitter this season were* The Walking Dead *(average of 4.3 million Twitter TV audience members, 480,000 tweets per episode),* The Bachelor *(3.6 million, 156,000 tweets),* Game of Thrones *(2.8 million, 107,000 tweets),* American Horror Story *(2.8 million, 239,000 tweets), and* Empire *(2.6 million, 627,000 tweets).[34]*

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[33] Williams, Oscar. "Social engagement now more important than TV ratings, says Fremantle boss." *Theguardian.com*. January 21, 2015.

[34] Daley, Megan. "*The Walking Dead, Empire* among the top series on Twitter." *ew.com*, June 1, 2015.

With such great numbers of viewers engaging on Twitter, networks are beginning to judge social media engagement as more important than traditional ratings. To keep up, Nielsen created a division specifically geared toward this trend, Nielsen Social, and reported that Twitter TV activity "now stands as a bellwether for general audience engagement."[35] The television industry players can no longer ignore the changing ways in which their audience engages with their product.

Yvette Wohn (Michigan State University) and Eun-Kyung Na (Keio University) studied the usage of Twitter in connection to television viewing, and came up with four core questions within the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications theory:

Trying to examine the uses and gratifications of viewers, we formed the following research question:

1. *What types of messages are people posting while watching TV?*

2. *Do these messages correspond to the real–time context of the program?*

3. *Do people posting on Twitter engage in conversation with other viewers?*

4. *What kind of Utility functions (technical features or linguistic features) do people use to share their television–viewing experience?"*[36]

These questions point to a desire to understand the impetus behind and result of using Twitter while watching television. The publishing of this academic report, one that uses the terminology of 1970s television scholars, shows that the industry and the academic community are seriously recognizing the evolution of television viewership.

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[35] Nielsen Social, March 9, 2015.
[36] Wohn, D. Yvette and Na, Eun-Kyung, March 7, 2011.

The "second screen" phenomenon is heralding a return of appointment viewing. A conversation that took place around the office water-cooler in the past now takes place on Twitter or Facebook – with some changes, but the involvement is quite similar. The outcome of second screen engagement is so huge that companies including Nielsen have invested considerable resources into measurement of its effects. One of the most interesting reports completed by Nielsen is one that aligns Twitter TV activity with neurological engagement on behalf of the viewers.[37] Contrary to the understandable assumption that using a second screen diminishes the viewer's ability to pay attention to a given TV show, Nielsen reports that the more active a viewer is on Twitter, the more neurologically engaged she is with the program. One of the more obvious differences between water-cooler conversations of the past and Twitter discussions is that the latter can take place while the program is being aired, and can include thousands of people. The circle of friends or family discussing a show is now expanded to a global community of strangers connected by a hashtag. This might provide for a richer discussion, as a greater variety of viewpoints are encountered, but it does not facilitate bonding in the way that a small group discussion would.

With the increasing popularity of binge watching, viewers who wish to participate in feedback and conversation surrounding television content must be just as up-to-date as their community. In order to avoid "spoilers" viewers must have seen as much of a show as the other members of their social circle, so that plot points are not revealed. Online forums such as Reddit have taken to adding the words "spoiler alert" to the titles of articles that include information

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[37] "Social TV: A Bellwether for TV Audience Engagement." *Nielsen.com*. March 9, 2015.

about the plot of a show, but there is no real guard again reading something that will give away the ending.

"Binge watching"

Binge watch, v. Watch multiple episodes of (a television program) in rapid succession, typically by means of DVDs or digital streaming. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)
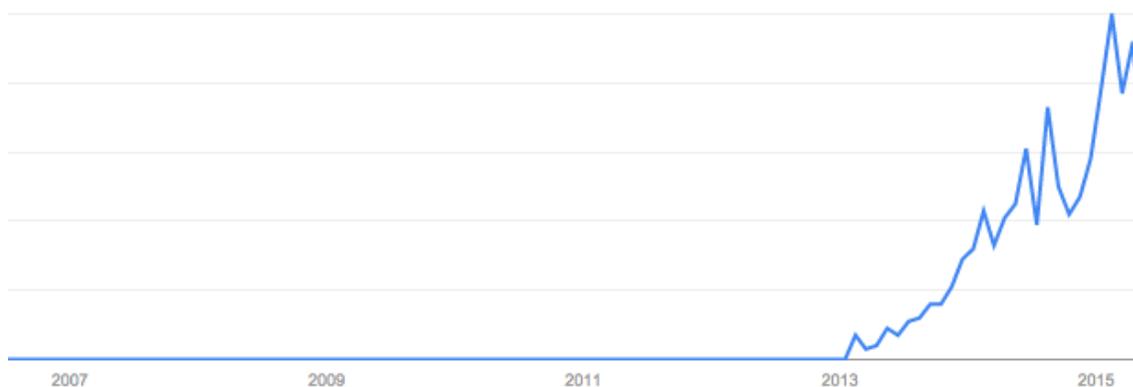
This Google Trends chart, found by entering a term into their analytics platform, reflects interest in the search term "binge watching" over time. The main point of interest on the graph is 2013 (when Google users started entering "binge watching" in their search bars), which coincides with Netflix's release of *House of Cards*. Since then, the term has become ubiquitous, but prior to 2013 its usage was nil. Greg Metcalf's book, *The DVD Novel*, was published in 2012 and he very clearly entered the field just before people began to discuss binge watching as such. Instead, he uses terms such as "extended viewing session" to describe the viewing of an entire season.[38] Had he published his book just one year later, it certainly would have contained

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[38] Metcalf, p. 5

references to binge watching. Now, as is proven by the chart, the term is cemented into modern

vocabulary.

While usage of the term is pervasive, its definition is unclear. In her *Los Angeles Times*

article, "The side effects of binge television," Mary McNamara defines the phenomenon as "any

instance in which more than three episodes of an hour-long drama or six episodes of a half-hour

comedy are consumed at one sitting."[39] She goes on to explain that while binge watching was

once a shameful habit practiced by recluses and invalids, it is now the mainstream. This is thanks

to technologies like the DVR and services such as Netflix that not only make it possible to watch

a seemingly unlimited amount of television on demand, but also made it desirable to do so.

Today's viewers tout their ability to plow through whole seasons in a matter of days. The

undesirable connotation with the word "binge," however, is rooted in discussion related to

consumption, either of alcohol or food. Binge drinking, as per the Center for Disease Control, is

generally achieved after five drinks in two hours for the common man. Binge eating implies

uncontrollable, uncomfortable consumption of a larger-than-average amount of food in about

two hours (according to the DSMV). The commonality between these two terms is in the

excessive consumption or indulgence to the point of discomfort or danger, and more basically in

consuming more than is "normal," whatever the norm may be.

Binge watching, then, can be defined as the consumption of more television episodes in

one sitting than is normal. If we take the average feature-length film, with a running time of

approximately two hours, to be a "normal" amount of time to sit and watch video content, then

the point of excess in watching can line up with the two-hour framework of the other definitions

of bingeing: watching episodes of a television show for more than two hours in succession.

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[39] *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2012

There is little-to-no hard, scientific data to support a definition of binge watching like those found for drinking and eating, but the wealth of "trend" or "opinion" pieces written on the subject adhere to the definition crafted above. The strongest data comes from a poll conducted for Netflix in December 2013 (just before the release of the second season of *House of Cards* in February 2014) by Harris Interactive. *The Atlantic* reports, "the [Harris Interactive] survey concluded that binge-watching meant consuming a minimum of two episodes in one sitting, and reported that … the session average was 2.3 episodes."[40]

Quantifying a binge by number of episodes is problematic because of the variable length of an episode. "Time constraints for broadcast television require most stories to fit into 30- and 60-minute time slots, with the stories themselves taking up no more than 22 or 44 minutes, respectively,"[41] allowing time for commercials. There are also mini-series, which tend to have longer running times (but fewer episodes) to fill a time-slot as long as two hours. If the Harris poll conclusion is accepted as the definition, then a person could watch two episodes of *Arrested Development* with a 24-minute runtime per episode and have gone on a binge. Watching 48 minutes of television hardly seems to fit the same negative mold as drinking alcohol to a level that dangers one's health, or eating a full day's worth of calories in one sitting. Thus, to allow for the variation in runtime, it would be more helpful to quantify a binge by number of hours spent watching video content. Let us say, then, that a binge watching session lasts for more than two hours. Binge eating and drinking sessions also last for two hours, and those each involve the participant reaching a level of consumption that is atypical and/or unhealthy. The question that follows, then, is whether watching television in excess of 2 hours is atypical or unhealthy. If we

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[40] *The Atlantic*, February 18, 2014
[41] O'Donnell, p. 68

accept that the two-hour movie is a standard unit of time to watch video content, then a binge watching session is atypical.

Though it is a satirical comedy, the IFC show *Portlandia*'s treatment of this question is a helpful and stimulating guideline. *Portlandia*, which routinely tackles trending questions about our society with a "how bad could it possibly get" perspective, presented a scenario in which its two main characters become so addicted to watching *Battlestar Gallactica* that their lives fall apart. They stop attending social engagements and thus alienate themselves from their friends and family, stop going to work and thus lose their jobs, no longer earn money so they cannot pay their bills, and finally become evicted from their home. This is an extreme case, obviously, but it serves as a cautionary tale. Binging is put on the same level as another addiction, and necessarily shown in a negative light.

When I asked the question in my survey, "How would you define "binge watching," my thirty respondents gave a wide range of answers proving that the term is not yet codified. Most answered quantitatively, using episodes as measurements (sixteen respondents), while some (two) used hours as measurement. Some answered more qualitatively, describing a sentiment (similar to a marathon) or environment (three people mentioned the word "couch") that goes along with the practice. Five respondents used language that implies endurance or challenge, similar to the language that might be used to describe a marathon. They spoke of reaching a finish line, the need for expedience, not stopping to watch unless physically required – one respondent said "watching TV like a champ!" These varied responses prove to me that the term is still undergoing adjustment.
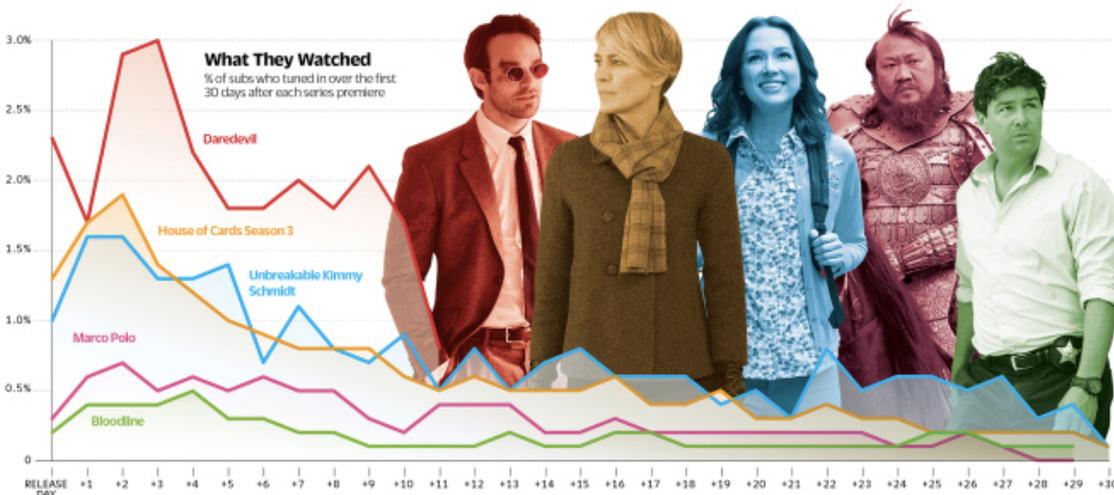
One potential flaw in taking advantage of the easily available TV content with a binge

mentality is that, once one watches it, it's over. Not only does this mean that the viewer can no

longer sustain the pleasure of watching a great show for the first time, but also that the viewer is

likely to forget what happened in the show if he or she is only spending several days with it on

his or her mind, not several weeks. This problem and its prevalence in the lives of TV viewers

speak to the current day culture of instant gratification, and it may mean trouble for the longevity

of bingeable shows. In an article about Netflix's surprising loss at the Emmy Awards, Emily

Yahr touches on this issue of quick consumption:

> As for "House of Cards," it's possible the streaming format actually hurt the show in terms of staying on TV academy voters' minds. Quick: What was "House of Cards" Season 2 actually about? Yeah, we can't remember either. That's because you can finish Kevin Spacey's 13-episode devious plot in a weekend. Shows that are on television every week for many weeks — "Breaking Bad" — have much more staying power.[42]

House of Cards shows up like a blip on the radar in the overall landscape of television

shows. When compared to the other Netflix shows that were released around the same time, it

ranked third.[43] There is intense activity immediately surrounding the release of a new season but

a couple of weeks later, once everyone has watched the 13 episodes, discussed their reactions,

and read the commentary, it's over. *Variety*, which covered a recent (and rare) release of data

from Netflix, provided a chart that displays these findings:

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[42] *The Washington Post*, August 26, 2014
[43] *Variety*, April 28, 2015.

What They Watched
% of subs who tuned in over the first 30 days after each series premiere

Daredevil

House of Cards Season 3

Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

Marco Polo

Bloodline

The chart, above, shows the percentage of Netflix subscribers who tuned into a given show during the month after its release. While *House of Cards* Season 3 did have an initial surge of interest, the viewership declined quite steadily. This implies that viewers either finished the entire season within the first three days or lost interest. (The former theory is actually supported by data from the Season 2 release, which found that 2% of all Netflix subscribers in the US finished the season in three days.[44])

The first three seasons of *Arrested Development* are the ones that fans remember and quote, not the last season that was released in bulk by Netflix, binge watched, and forgotten. Now savvy to this problem, some viewers are choosing not to binge so that they may prolong their enjoyment of a show. The first four episodes of the recent season of *Game of Thrones* were leaked online, and many avid fans I spoke with told me that they made the choice not to watch the episodes all at once but to wait for the weekly release. But, when it is possible to have all of a good thing at once it is hard to say no. Now that binge watching is the norm (according to the Harris poll), there is no social stigma that keeps people from spending hours and hours in front of

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[44] http://entertainment.time.com/2014/02/20/2-of-u-s-netflix-subscribers-watched-all-of-season-2-of-house-of-cards-in-one-weekend/

the television. Quite the contrary: if you're not up-to-date on the latest show, you're out of the loop.

Case study: *Aquarius*

To date, binge watching has only been made possible by boxed sets, DVR, or digital streaming services such as Netflix. With the exception of content that is original to the digital service, the shows that are available to binge on are older shows that aired on network or cable television and have been rereleased. The success of original content from companies such as Netflix and Amazon has provided formidable competition for the major networks. In fact, Netflix original content has grown by 71%, and is threatening to replace network TV. This year NBC adopted the phrase "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" when it offered all of its new show, *Aquarius*, for streaming at NBC.com simultaneous with the broadcast season premiere. In the era of Netflix's domination and the popularity of binge watching, NBC was the first network to offer all the episodes of a new show up front, aligning with the model presented by Netflix[45]. NBC Entertainment Chairman Bob Greenblatt was quoted as saying NBC is "fully aware how audiences want to consume multiple episodes of new television series faster and at their own discretion."[46] Greenblatt touches on two facets of the phenomenon: viewers want to watch more than one episode at a time, and they wish to make their own choices as to when and how they watch ("discretion") instead of having their viewing schedule prescribed by a network.

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[45] NBC is not, however, the first network in the history of television to offer an unorthodox, compressed release schedule. In 2006, Showtime released *Sleeper Cell* one episode per night for eight days, and made all episodes available on the first of those days to On Demand customers. See g4tv.com, October 24, 2006

[46] *Entertainment Weekly*, April 30, 2015

The news of the NBC release was so big that National Public Radio's Boston affiliate, WBUR, conducted an interview with Boston University professor of media and communication John Carroll to hear more about the impacts of the decision[47]. Carroll explained differences between the "linear," traditional viewing models and the contemporary practice of streaming. WBUR reporter Meghna Chakrabarti asked about the impact of streaming on the linear model's reliance on advertising, time of day, and number of viewers. Carroll replied that the new, digital model provides more information on viewers (the information one can track with a computer is far more detailed than one can glean from a Nielsen box) so it may in fact be advantageous to advertising companies wishing to tailor their content. The questions the segment left unanswered -possibly because it was then too soon to answer them- were those of a potential upside for networks, and how they might make a new revenue model that accommodates the new viewing models.

One initial question prior to the premiere of the show was whether viewers would choose to watch the show online in a binging pattern, or on television as NBC airs each episode week-by-week. This begs further questions, such as, would those who chose to watch linearly be subjected to "spoilers" by their personal, professional, and Internet networks? Would those who binged feel gypped when they finish the season and others still had episodes to discover? When Chakrabarti asked Greenblatt, in their *Here & Now* segment, why NBC would choose to release all 13 episodes of the season at once on the website, Greenblatt replied simply, "why not?" And indeed, if all the content is produced and ready as it is in the case of *Aquarius*, and there are other methods of gaining revenue than traditional TV advertising, there is no reason why NBC or any other company would need to retain episodes for a drawn-out release.

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[47] *Here & Now*, May 8, 2015

After the show's premiere in May 2015, the Nielsen ratings for the actual TV broadcasts dropped steadily each week, from over 5 million viewers for the first episode to under 2 million viewers for the last five episodes. Those ratings did not, however, include online viewing, which reportedly added 91% to the viewership in the week after the broadcast premiere.[48] (For a more detailed discussion of the problems in quantifying a viewer base that come with online viewing, see "Ratings" on page 39 of this thesis.) Thus, it is hard to definitively say how successful this first season of *Aquarius* was.

What makes a certain type of show conducive to binge watching?

Let us consider the many types of television shows that exist today. There are short-format shows whose episodes fit into a 30-minute broadcast slot, and long-format shows whose episodes fit into hour long broadcast slots. There are mini-series, which contain usually three or more episodes that each run for about 90 minutes. There are web-series, whose episodes can be as short as five minutes or as long as a broadcast TV episode. As far as genre is concerned, there are sit-coms, family dramas, workplace dramas, documentaries, thrillers, crime dramas, comedies, reality TV, and children's programming, to name the most prevalent. Are some of these genres better suited to certain modes of viewing than others? Or, to employ a theoretical framework, do some of these types of shows offer different uses or different gratifications than others?

The episodic sit-com, usually structured around a group of friends or family, provides opportunity for a parallel real-world group to relate and bond. It functions on a pattern of

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[48] *tvbythenumbers.com*. June 24, 2015

television writing that has existed since the early days of TV, nicely detailed by Greg Metcalf in

The DVD Novel:

> In the service of [sending comfortable, safe message to the audience], every episode of a television series was supposed to stand alone. […] You could not rely on viewers to watch every episode or to remember information from week to week, so storylines had to conclude in a single viewing. […] The main characters had to remain the same from episode to episode… so viewers saw familiar people acting the same whenever they came back.[49]

According to the results from my survey, shown in the chart below, respondents were less likely to binge watch a sit-com than a drama. I believe that this is because the structure of a sit-com, as described by Metcalf, is repetitive and has minimal character development, and thereby makes the show one that is easy to leave and return to, but does not inspire a viewer to watch many episodes in succession to see how the story unfolds. Indeed, if a "storyline had to conclude in a single viewing" there is little incentive to watch the next episode right away.
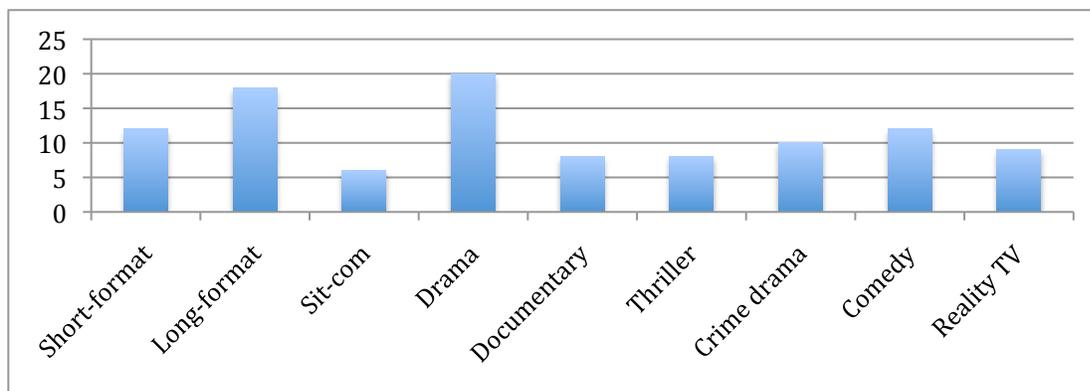
In her book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*[50], Ien Ang writes about "heavy viewing" and the types of people who engage with the practice. She points to a multitude of studies conducted between the 1940s and 1980s that describe "heavy viewing" as "a problematic behavioral phenomenon, related to invariable negative and disturbing psychosocial characteristics," and list

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[49] Metcalf, p. 2
[50] Ang, 1991

the categories of "heavy viewers" as "'females, blacks, those of lower socioeconomic status, and the elderly'."[51] Let us consider these categories. At the time that George Comstock's study was published, in 1978, females and the elderly at least were more likely to have more free time than they do in 2015. We can assume that his categories made up the segment of society that did not work and were seen as not contributing to society. Thus, "'heavy viewers' tend to be objectified as a category of stereotyped others."[52]

Though some studies find ways to categorize viewers, as of Ang's book's publishing in 1991 there was no "nuanced vocabulary" to explain how audiences function and the same may hold true today. Ang says that ratings, the most trusted data we have, are not enough. The boundaries of a television audience still cannot be defined. Even so, communications researchers try desperately to categorize.

Ang argues that there is no such thing as one "television audience" that can be defined as a taxonomic group, and therefore there can be no "viewer types constructed by communication researchers;" i.e. the "heavy viewer" cannot exist. Though some studies find ways to categorize viewers, as of Ang's book's publishing in 1991 there was no "nuanced vocabulary" to explain how audiences function and the same may hold true today. Ratings, the most trusted data we have, are not enough according to Ang. The boundaries of a television audience still cannot be defined. Even so, communications researchers try desperately to categorize TV viewers. In the 1970's, researchers tried to map audience behavior as a way to group audiences into categories. Terms such as "audience flow," "repeat viewing," and "channel loyalty" came about.[53] Ang's example of the "epistemological limitations of the pull toward generalized categorization implied

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[51] Newcomb, p. 372
[52] ibid.
[53] Newcomb, p. 370

in the search for viewer types" is the couch potato. In other words, the couch potato defies the academic and industrial urge to categorize viewers. Goodhart, one of the researchers of the 1970s, found a disparity between what people say they watch, what they want to watch, and what they do watch.[54] Instead, his studies found that people mostly watch whatever happens to be on. This is the type of research that led to the "heavy viewer" and into turn to the couch potato.

 While "heavy viewer" sounds a lot like "binge watcher," Grant McCracken and his fellow anthropologists of today find that the binge watcher behaves in quite the opposite way as the "heavy viewer." Because of the level of choice that technology affords today's viewer, and the pathway that technology makes us take to get to our chosen content, bingeing on "whatever's on" is almost impossible. People today watch TV with purpose and intent. They don't flip through channels or have TV on in the background; instead they set aside a block of time, watch a chosen show, and pay close attention to the show. These purposeful, engaged viewers require a caliber of show that will match their attention level.

The Impact of Current Viewing Modes on the Medium

The negative connotation of the term "binge" and the fact that viewers appear to be passively sitting around doing nothing for hours on end might lead one to believe that binge watchers are just couch potatoes with a new name. Research shows, however, that today's binge watchers are actively involved and engaged with what they are watching. As McCracken found in his studies, "this TV watcher is different, the couch potato has awoken. And now that services

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[54] Goodhart et al. 1975.

like Netflix have given consumers control over their TV viewing, they have declared a new way to watch."[55]

Indeed, this is a new breed of television audience. Binge watchers have more money than couch potatoes, because bingeing requires technology. While a couch potato could zone out with a television set that received local broadcast signals, today's binge watcher needs at least one of three possible (and pricey) *accoutrements*: a DVD player (with a collection of DVDs), TiVO or some other DVR system, or an internet connection and a subscription to a service such as Netflix or Hulu. If the latter option is chosen a television set is not necessary, but the viewer must then have a computer, tablet, or smart phone – in fact, the couch is not even necessary. With the possibility to stream video to mobile devices a viewer may be on the train, at the gym, in bed, or virtually anywhere. But, they must own the device and have access to the Internet. If the viewer has more money, in modern America that also tends to mean that the viewer is better educated. The high intelligence level of binge watchers is reflected in the programs that are most frequently binge watched: *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. A show with a high level of complexity in its plot and execution cannot be consumed passively, as a sit-com or talk show that plays in the background of a household.

Though there has been backlash against binge watching and instances of "tweet-peats," there may be some upside to the recent trends. Anthropologist Grant McCracken says:
It's kind of an evolutionary pattern here, [society is] moving away from the couch potato ... to a moment where people are watching shows in a more concentrated, thoughtful, engaged way and

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[55] PR Newswire. December 13, 2013

as that's happening — and I think one of the reasons it's happening — is TV is actually getting

better.[56]

      The question becomes, is television actually changing? *New York* Magazine's media

division explains some of the impact:

> With a traditional show like *The Good Wife*, the creators can respond to public reaction
> and course-correct, as happened with a widely unloved plotline about the character
> Kalinda and her husband Nick. With the binge-watchable 13-episode season-dump, there
> is no course correction. *Daredevil*'s writers have no opportunity to, say, shelve [an
> unsuccessful] subplot while giving more screen time to [a well-liked character].[57]

When *Vulture*'s writers call *The Good Wife* "traditional," they mean in this case that the show is

released in a traditional fashion: one episode per week on network television. Shows that are

released to accommodate the popular binge-watching trend, with all episodes of a season

available at one time, are unable to respond to the reaction of the viewers. This would suggest a

negative effect on the quality of television programs – they cannot hear the feedback and adjust

accordingly to satisfy the viewer. However, it may come to mean that, moving forward,

television shows will be better written from the outset and more consideration will be put into the

plotlines because the writers know that they have a demanding audience who will not allow them

the time to veer off track and then course-correct.

Optimal Viewing Experiences

      When it is possible to choose to release episodes weekly or all at once, a network must

make an informed decision as to how to release a series. An optimal viewing experience must be

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[56] *The Hamilton Spectator,* December 13, 2013

[57] *Vulture,* April 21, 2015

identified, and then the release pattern will fit that experience. The optimal viewing experience for a show depends on several factors: the runtime of episodes, theme and subject matter, suitability of content for different ages and types of viewers, and the visual qualities of the production. Depending on these factors, some shows are better suited to a smaller or larger screen, longer or shorter amounts of time between episodes, different levels of community response, and other things that are subject to variation. I will elaborate on the impact of the factors.

1. Runtime:

Victoria O'Donnell explains in *Television Criticism*[58], "Time constraints for broadcast television require most stories to fit into 30- and 60-minute time slots, with the stories themselves taking up no more than 22 or 44 minutes, respectively," allowing time for commercials. The majority of viewers would rather spend an hour (or more, if binge watching) consuming TV content on a larger screen than on something as small as a tablet or smart phone. This is simply due to the fact that it strains the eyeball to focus on small images. According to my survey, which asked whether viewers were more likely to watch a long-format episode or a short-format episode on a larger screen (computer or TV) versus a smaller screen (phone or tablet), twenty eight respondents said they would prefer to watch a long episode on a larger screen than on a smaller screen (preferred by two respondents). Thus, the optimal viewing experience for a long-format TV show would involve a large screen and thereby require that the viewer be stationary (as opposed to watching on a small, mobile device while in transit), while a short-format show could be targeted toward mobile viewers.[59] Digital providers such as Netflix,

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[58] O'Donnell 68
[59] The majority of respondents also said that they would prefer to watch a short-format episode on a larger screen than on a smaller screen, but the difference was less dramatic.

Hulu, and Amazon have followed in the footsteps of premium channels such as HBO and Showtime, allowing for a more flexible length of TV shows. This has in turn drawn artists who were long resisting doing television also because of the specific time constraints of its format.

2. Theme and subject matter:

Some shows, such as sitcoms, do not evoke a large amount of emotional response. Other shows, such as Prime Time Serials or dramas illicit a lot of emotional energy from the viewer. When I asked, in my survey, under which conditions viewers were more likely to enjoy sit-coms versus dramatic shows with intense subject matters, the results proved that the majority of viewers would prefer to watch a show with content that draws strong emotions in a private setting (i.e. at home alone or with a close friend) rather than in a public setting (i.e. on mass transit). Sixteen people said they prefer to watch dramatic shows alone, versus eleven who said they enjoy watching dramatic shows with others (the difference for sit-coms was much smaller – only one more respondent said he or she prefers to watch sit-coms alone).

3. Visual qualities of the show's production:

A show such as HBO's *Game of Thrones* has cinematic, high production value that would be wasted on a small, portable screen. Alternatively, a basic network sitcom with simple interior sets and minimal action does not benefit from being on a large screen. A study by Rovi Corporation revealed that viewers using a larger screen were more likely to prefer a movie or full television show, while those using a smart phone or similar small device were more likely to watch content such as YouTube videos.[60] As user-generated content tends to have a lower level of visual complexity, it makes sense that people would prefer watching that on a smaller screen than something as elaborate as a full episode of a quality television show.

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[60] *Rovi*. February 24, 2015.

Changes to formal TV standards

Organization and structure are important to the television industry. O'Donnell writes, "Because of frequent interruptions during the programs and week-long gaps between episodes, familiar structure enables viewers to stay with the stories."[61] When viewers watch on a streaming service and have the potential to binge watch, these structural rules are less important. Standard television-show episodes have a classic structure that serves two purposes: to constantly reinforce characters and plot points in the viewers' mind so they don't forget what happened while they're waiting for the next week's episode, and to encourage the viewers to tune in next week. These two purposes are achieved mostly via repetition and organization. Michael Z. Newman explains: "The way the story is unfolded bit by bit encourages viewers to take an interest in it, and as the unfolding progresses the storyteller seeks to intensify this interest."[62] Many television writers call these "bits" of story that unfold "beats;" viewers call them scenes. In Newman's discussion of Prime Time Serials (PTS), he states that the average hour-long episode has between 20 and 40 beats with an average of 25, and that the episode will be broken (by commercial breaks) into four segments, or acts. Beats in the first act will typically be quicker, and each beat will serve either to tell something new, or to reinforce something the viewer has already learned. The PTS usually involves an ensemble of characters so the different plots will be intertwined, different beats serving to develop different story arcs.

A defining feature of a typical PTS is that the beats are short – often no more than a couple of minutes long if that. This is because (according to Newman) people who work for

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[61] O'Donnell, p. 68
[62] Newman, p. 17

major networks believe that viewers' attention spans are short, and direct writers to package plots into small, easily consumable sections. They believe that if the action changes frequently enough, viewers will remain engrossed. *Veronica Mars* (UPN/The CW, 2004-2007) demonstrates this quite well. Episodes run for 42 minutes and tend to have thirty to forty beats, so there's an average of just over 1 minute per beat. Newman describes the purpose of the beat: Many beats consist of reactions rather than actions… But a reaction is a new big of narrative information and is often the point of a beat. Each beat tells us something new, something we want—need—to know, and amplifies our desire to know more. Each beat also usually reminds us about several old bits of information before offering us the new bit.[63]

In *Veronica Mars* the beats are either informative or they show action; they are giving information about the plot or developing the plot. *Veronica Mars* is notable for the distance to which it goes to make sure the viewer remembers the basic premise of the show. By my count of the beats in episode two of season one ("Credit Where Credit's Due," Sep 28, 2004), nine beats out of thirty-four serve to supply information on the back-story (not counting the credit sequence and the "previously on..." sequence, which serve the same purpose). In each episode of season one this type of reinforcement takes place, what Newman calls "a more elaborate form of recapping."[64] This could be due to the fact that all of the instigating actions take place off-camera and before the show actually begins, so the murder case around which season one is based begs reminder; it could also be because *Veronica Mars* contains a fairly complex web of characters and the informative beats are required to help the viewer keep everything straight.

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[63] Newman, p. 18
[64] Newman, p. 18

Whatever the original purpose of the reintroduction of characters and storylines, the effect when the show is binge-watched is quite repetitive. It is easy to see, though, why it would be necessary for those who watched the show week-by-week. As is typical of the Prime Time Serial, "certain questions go unanswered for episode after episode" and the aforementioned web of characters gets more and more complicated, as off-camera actions are revealed through Veronica's investigation. The right amount of reminders peppered into the unfolding of the action keeps the viewer engaged. Also serving to keep the viewer engaged are mini-cliffhanger endings between each act in the episode, paired with a larger cliffhanger at the end of the episode, to ensure that the viewer keeps watching after the commercial break and returns the following week.

The level of commitment to the show that the show runner desires for the viewer lies beyond the episode, with the entire season (and eventually, series). "The device that best ensures this commitment to the narrative is the character arc."[65] The character arc is crucial to a Prime Time Serial, which asks its viewers to invest significant time in their relationships with the characters. The arc could follow characters through relationships or through personal discoveries; they could take several episodes to be complete or as long as an entire series. This is the long game of the serial show, and what makes it more compelling to binge watch than an episodic show whose characters remain the same each time we see them. Recent shows such as *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, and *House of Cards* bank on the allure of the complex character arc. Fans of *Breaking Bad* reveled in the twisted path of Jesse Pinkman and Walter White; devotees of *Mad Men* continue debates as to whether Don Draper's arc was authentic; Frank Underwood's arc seems to have much further still to go in *House of Cards*. The storylines for each of these

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[65] Newman, p. 23

men plays out in protracted form as in a movie, only with these shows the writers have multiple seasons of a show to complete the arc as opposed to only two hours in a film.

If viewers are remaining committed to a series for its long-term character arc, and there is no need to employ formal devices to hold attention (because there are no commercial breaks or week-long interruptions), are show runners still using those devices? Take, for example, the cliffhanger. The cliffhanger ending goes back to the days of movie serials in the 1930's, when programs such as *The Lone Ranger* were screened in movie theaters in segments. An episode of *The Lone Ranger* could literally end with a character hanging off a cliff, and audiences would have no choice but to come back to the theater the following week to see what would happen. This plot device proved to be effective, and is still used today. One more recent show that is known for using dramatic cliffhangers is *Friends*. An episode of the show might end just when, for example, two characters with mounting romantic tension kissed. Viewers would have to wait until the next week to find out the fate of the relationship.

Today, the use of cliffhangers is both traditional and innovative. There is sometimes more cause to use them at the end of seasons, not the end of episodes. This is because viewers can, more often than not, click on to the next episode as soon as one ends and do not need a plot device like the cliffhanger to keep the show burning in their minds. Shows like *House of Cards* and *Orange Is The New Black* know that the time between seasons will be long for the viewers who choose to binge watch (if they finish the season faster, they must wait longer for the next one), so leaving a season open-ended encourages viewers to come back for the next one to see how the plot develops.

Just as show runners have less need for a cliffhanger when viewers can so easily jump to the next episode, they also have less need to remind their viewers what happened last time. Those viewers who grew up in the pre-streaming era will be familiar with the phrase "previously on [insert show title here]" followed by a few minutes of clips from episodes that came earlier in the season, refreshing their memories and signaling which plot points will be developed in the coming episode.

Depending on the series, a normal TV structure of beats that weave together, both advancing and reinstating plot points, might not hold up. *Grantland*'s review of *Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015-) highlights that binging is not always the best way to watch a show:

> Netflix's direct-to-binge distribution model seems to make people feel obligated to wolf down whole seasons in one gulp, and in [some cases], that's the right instinct. But the fact that you *can* watch all 13 episodes immediately doesn't always mean you should... I consumed *Daredevil* in a day and a half, which is a good way to ensure that you really notice when a show's beats (…) become repetitive.[66]

This is in line with the appraisal of *Veronica Mars*. Repetition of information is useful to the week-by-week viewers for whom the show was written, but it is tedious for modern-day viewers who watch multiple episodes in succession; cliffhangers are not needed when there are no commercial breaks to interrupt the episode. The question is, then, why *Daredevil*'s writers would use a classic beat structure when they knew the show would be binge-watched. It remains to be seen how show runners will adjust their process to accommodate the adjusted modes of viewing.

Ratings

The ratings system is necessarily changing because of the proliferation of new ways to watch TV (and, thus, new ways to receive advertising). Nielsen ratings take "(an estimate of) the

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[66] *Grantland*, April 14, 2015

percentage of televisions tuned to a particular show at a particular time out of all televisions…
These numbers can then be converted into estimates of the total number of viewers of the
program (and thereby total number of potential customers for the advertisers!)."[67] Flaws were
pointed out in the ratings system as early as 1991. Ien Ang wrote, "As the pre-eminent form of
institutional knowledge in commercial television institutions, ratings discourse is too replete with
ambiguities and contradictions to function as the perfect mechanism to regulate the unstable
institution-audience relationship."[68] She indicates a turning point:

> This dissolution of 'television audience' as a solid entity became historically urgent when 'anarchic' viewer practices such as zapping and zipping became visible, when viewing contexts and preferences began to multiply, in short when the industry, because of the diversification of its economic interests, had to come to terms with the irrevocably changeable and capricious nature of 'watching television' as an activity.[69]

The "'anarchic' viewing practices" Ang wrote about in 1991 were ways of using the remote
control to avoid commercials. It would be unsurprising if contemporary TV professionals
thought that modern viewing practices such as downloading shows from third-party websites
were equally anarchic.

Possibilities for the Future of Television Viewership

New technological advances and changes can already be seen in the television device
itself. Second screen-type engagement is being built into the living room television, with the
invention of tablets that come with Internet-TV devices (such as Apple TV) and are pre-
programmed to be used for second screen engagement. Apple's competitor, Amazon Fire,
enables viewers to access information about whatever they are watching from within the player

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[67] *Modeling Television Viewership*, 2015.
[68] Ang, p. 368
[69] Ibid.

device. The concept of remote co-viewing is on the rise, as viewers watch a show as a group but from different locations, with the ability to communicate while watching via second screen engagement. Additionally, mini-series and anthology shows are on the rise. They may not be quite to the point of replacing long-running serial dramas, but shows such as *Olive Kitteridge* (HBO, 2014), *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-), *True Detective* (HBO, 2014-), and *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-) are becoming increasingly popular.

Besides the increase in mini-series, there might be negative ramifications of binge watching on the television industry. For one thing, it is difficult to quantify the practice. The *New York Times* reported:

> While a large majority of TV is still watched live, not recorded, the ratings for some series — like FX's "Sons of Anarchy" — double after a week of recorded viewing is counted. A first-of-its-kind Nielsen study last fall found that a handful of shows gain an extra 5 percent after another three weeks.[70]

Not being able to chart how many people are tuning in to a specific episode throws a wrench in the decades old marketing techniques relied upon by networks and TV distributors. However, data provided by Media Life Magazine shows that though ratings are declining, companies are still buying TV advertising space at the same rate if not more. Ratings have fallen across broadcast and cable networks, but projections for TV ad spending continue to grow year by year.[71] Additionally, there may be health risks that accompany binge watching. The International Communication Association published a report in January 2015 entitled "Feelings of loneliness and depression linked to binge-watching television." Together with statements regarding mental

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[70] *The New York Times*, January 31, 2013
[71] Cromwell, 2015

health impacts, the Association reported that "physical fatigue and problems such as obesity and other health problems are related to binge-watching and they are a cause for concern."[72]

If the past is any indicator, technology and the television industry will adapt to meet the needs of its market: the viewers. What remains to be seen is how forceful or acquiescent the industry will be, either imposing strictures on viewership that force viewers to adhere to quantifiable and marketable practices, or creating new technologies and formats of television that adhere to the desires of the viewer. After all, as trends have indicated thus far, the power is ultimately with the consumer.

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[72] International Communication Association, January 29, 2015.

TV Viewership Survey
by Lucile Hecht
Distributed via social networks to over 1000 friends and coworkers.

1. How do you normally watch TV? Specify device, time of day, and place.
2. How are you more likely to watch a short-format episode? A short-format episode fits in a 30-minute time slot. Choose one of the following:
    a. Smaller screen (phone or tablet)
    b. Larger screen (computer or TV)
3. How are you more likely to watch a long-format episode? A long-format episode fits in a 1-hour time slot. Choose one of the following:
    a. Smaller screen (phone or tablet)
    b. Larger screen (computer or TV)
4. Under which conditions are you most likely to enjoy a dramatic show with an intense subject matter? Choose all that apply:
    a. When watching on a large screen
    b. When watching on a small screen
    c. When watching alone
    d. When watching with others
5. Under which conditions are you most likely to enjoy a sit-com? Choose all that apply:
    a. When watching on a large screen
    b. When watching on a small screen
    c. When watching alone
    d. When watching with others
6. Which of the following types of shows are you most likely to binge watch? Choose all that apply:
    a. Short-format
    b. Long-format
    c. Sit-com
    d. Drama
    e. Documentary
    f. Thriller
    g. Crime drama
    h. Comedy
    i. Reality TV
7. Under what circumstances do you change your normal habits?
8. How would you define "binge watching"?
9. What is the average number of episodes of a TV show that you watch in one sitting?
10. What is the average number of hours you spend watching TV in one day?
11. What is the highest number of episodes you have ever watched in one sitting? Please describe the circumstance.

12. After how many episodes (or how much time) do you feel, if ever, that you have been watching TV for too long?
13. Do you find that your response to – or engagement with – a show is different under different viewing conditions? For example, might you be more or less emotionally moved if you're watching alone or in a group? If yes, please describe.
14. Please recount a time when you binge watched a TV series. Describe the circumstances in as much detail as possible including how you felt when the series ended. What was the show? How many seasons were there? How long did it take you to watch it all?
15. Please compare your binge watching experience to a time when you watched a series one episode per week. Were your feelings different? Think about your feelings at the end of each episode and at the end of the series.
16. Has there ever been a time when you have had the ability to binge watch a show, but chose to draw out the viewing over a longer period of time? If yes, why?
17. Please list the television shows that have made the most lasting impressions on your life, and state whether you watched those shows according to a schedule, or binged.
18. Do you practice second-screen engagement while you are watching a show? Please describe. For example, by tweeting with a dedicated hash-tag made for the show or participating in an online conversation forum.
19. If you practice second-screen engagement, what is the purpose and what do you gain from it? For example, to clarify a plot point, to explore a possible alternative plot, or to discuss a character or actor.
20. How do you engage in a show between episodes? For example, by reading recaps or doing research.

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