

Eyes Glued to the Screen: Is Binge-Watching the Future of Television?

In an era where television is readily available on a multitude of platforms and viewership is at an all-time high, this has caused an increase in the phenomenon known as ‘binge-watching’. ‘Binge-watching’ can be defined by James Hirszen as watching “multiple episodes of programs in a single sitting or an entire season over the course of a few days”.¹ Binging has surpassed the restrictions of scheduled television, subsequently allowing viewing to be ‘endless’ and what has developed into a mainstream ‘binge-watching culture’. One of the key elements of this culture is it is determined by the viewer; they make the conscious decision to watch television in this mode, as well as what to watch and when. The term is now used by streaming platforms, on social media, and discourse surrounding television as it has become a dominant way in which television is consumed and constructed. Due to its popularisation, binge-watching is now promoted by streaming platforms such as Netflix, as they advocate for this culture to heighten viewership for their programs. Despite this, there are still television platforms which don’t support this practice and refrain from making their shows bingeable. This essay will explore how we are influenced to binge-watch and the effect it has on our relationship with television. It can be argued binge-watching is the future of television as it is only going to continue growing.

The culture of binge-watching is predominantly confined to television as it is defined as ‘watching multiple episodes’ of the same series. However, the term could arguably be expanded to watching multiple films of the same film franchise, but this is not what people are usually referring to when they speak of binge-watching, and it is not promoted in the same capacity as television. Similarly, in recent times binging has become a large feature in the release of new television series as viewers are now accustomed to watching the entire new series in one go, which would not be possible with film unless it was film series which had previously been released. This places binge-watching in the future realm of television, as its characteristics focus on new releases. This is not to say viewers do not engage in

¹ James Hirszen, “Cable in Trouble over Streaming,” Newsmax, March 16, 2015, <http://www.newsmax.com/Hirszen/Cable-Streaming-HBO-ratings/2015/03/16/id/630328/>.

different forms of binge-watching, as the definition is not ridged in terms of how many episodes, the strict time frame, or place the watching will occur. It is because of this flexibility of the term and it being a relatively new construct in mainstream culture, that it is difficult to predict its future. Different studies argue between 33% and 62% of the population engage in binge watching, suggesting it is a practice undertaken by a large portion of television viewers and is therefore a central influence on our relationship with television.²

Although the term has only become popularised in recent years ‘binge-watching’ is not a new concept. Viewers have engaged in intentional binging for years, one way being compiling episodes by recording them on VCR (videocassette recorder) to be watched in succession at a later time. This demonstrates viewers actively creating the means to binge-watch if it isn’t readily presented to them. However, the practise has also been made available through DVD boxsets offering full seasons of series since 2000 and networks broadcasting series marathons.³ This has evolved to newer technologies of television such as the on-demand function of cable networks where viewers have access to multiple episodes of series to watch any time on their television. Today the dominant mode of binge-watching is through streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. These delivery systems promote the convenience of binge-watching to viewers as they no longer need to record series or purchase physical boxsets, it can all be executed with ease on the digital platform. Binge-watching then can be observed as an evolving practise centred around the choice of the viewer as they are seen to engage in binging whether it is easily available or not. It can be suggested even though the means of binge-watching has developed, and become more of a mainstream practice within television, there was always the desire to binge despite the lack of advanced technology.

² Interactive Harris, “Americans Taking Advantage of the Ability to Watch TV on Their Own Schedules: Among Those Doing so Majority Report ‘Binge Viewing,’” April 8, 2013, <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/NewsRoom/HarrisPolls/tabid/447/ctl/ReadCustom%20Default/mid/1508/ArticleId/176/Default.aspx> and Nielson, “‘Binging’ Is the New Viewing for Over-The-Top Streamers,” Nielson, September 18, 2013, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2013/binging-is-the-new-viewing-for-over-the-top-streamers.html>.

³ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005). P.200

It can be noted that binge-watching is made more accessible for the viewer because of the new way television shows are being released. Previously, episodes of a series would be released weekly and occasionally daily, meaning audiences could not watch the next episode straight away and would need to wait until it airs. This changed when streaming services began to introduce the full drop-release, where a full season of a series would be released in one go so viewers could watch it all in its entirety, eliminating the need to wait for each episode and subsequently promoting binge-watching. This release style has become the norm for streaming platforms like Netflix where it is now extremely rare for them to do weekly releases as viewers expect a full-drop every time a new season is announced. When the streaming service Disney Plus announced it would be delivering content for its new original shows on a weekly basis instead of full-drops this prompted online panic that Netflix might start doing the same. Netflix replied “we’re not changing”⁴ on Twitter, solidifying its full-drop feature as a defining aspect of its model, that it continues to offer something unique to the conglomeration of television structures. Streaming services are setting themselves apart from linear television because it removes the temporal structures put in place and instead gives the viewer free reign to watch the series at their desired consumption speed.

One of the largest appeals of binge-watching is it offers the viewer a sense of control which scheduled television does not offer. With scheduled television the viewer is made to adhere to the schedule set out by the network, as the only choice they have is which network to watch and the actual decision of watching television in that moment. The programs presented constantly change at the end of each episode as the consecutive episode in a series is rarely shown in order to keep a wide audience of viewers engaged with a broad range of genres. This means binge-watching is not accomplishable within scheduled television as the viewer cannot watch multiple episodes of the same series unless a marathon of sorts is presented in the schedule. Therefore, streaming services on the other hand, present the viewer

⁴ NetflixUS, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/netflix/status/1168998974507945990?ref>

with the ability to construct their own schedule based on what they want to watch and when. This newfound sense of control is a notable factor of appeal for viewers deciding to watch television on streaming platforms over scheduled television. It can be argued then; binge-watching feels like the ultimate form of escape from traditional scheduled television as the notion of not being confined to standard concepts of television viewing excite the viewer to the point of them testing extreme lengths of viewing. Binge-watching allows the viewer to feel as if they have surpassed the previous restraints of television and are engaging in modern modes of viewing.

Due to its deviation from traditional television watching, binge-watching has attracted many negative connotations. Firstly, the name ‘binge’ frames the practise in a negative light as it is synonymous with terms such as addiction, excess, gluttony, and a lack of control, suggesting the lengths of extreme consumption are something viewers are not proud of. P. Dvorak describes it as a “drug” and an addictive behaviour⁵, which further suggests a loss of control from the viewer and that binge-watching may not always be intentional. This could be the case when viewers only intend on watching one episode, but the availability of more episodes entices them to continue watching and before they have realised hours have slipped past. It is this addictive aspect which causes the displacement of everyday activities such as sleeping, working, and personal upkeep, as viewers abandon their responsibilities for the fulfilling hours of bingeing. With this in mind, it can be argued binge-watching lures viewers into a false sense of control as they believe they are the dictators of their own viewing modes because of the freedom of streaming and lack of temporal structures it provides them, however the addictive nature of binge-watching decreases the viewers ability to limit how much they are actually consuming. If binge-watching causes viewers to sacrifice their healthy habits then perhaps this type of relationship with television consumption is not the most promising. Lisa Glebatis Perks suggests binge-watching should be reframed as ‘media marathoning’⁶ to promote more positive connotations, as it can be concluded this

⁵ P. Dvorak, “Online TV Addiction: Man, It’s Hard to Shake,” The Washington Post, August 29, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/%20local/online-tv-addiction-man-its-hard-to-shake/%202013/08/29/0e45cf50-10ce-11e3-85b6-d2742265%20fd5_story.html

⁶ Lisa Glebatis Perks, *Media Marathoning: Immersions in Morality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

language encourages the ‘ultimate goal’ of finishing a series and this being an accomplishment. However, despite the potential shift of connotations viewers will ultimately still be engaging in excessive consumption and will be reliant on streaming services to provide and continue this relationship.

Streaming services do not only enable binge-watching, but they also promote it, as Netflix specifically does this through pronounced features and also less obvious methods. Firstly, the disguised feature Netflix adopts is the ‘auto-play’ function where the next episode of a series will begin to play directly after one has ended, unless the viewer goes back to the home screen. This continuation subconsciously encourages binge-watching as it is forcing the viewer to watch another episode and frames opting out of this structure as a negative thing as it is going against the path Netflix has created. Similarly, the ‘skip intro’ button on Netflix creates a seamless viewing experience perfect for binging as this also prevents the viewer from considering if they truly want to watch another episode or not as the narrative has already begun once this is clicked and they are drawn in. Features such as these become second nature to viewers as they begin to see them as a standard part of the viewing experience, when in actuality they are purposefully created interfaces by Netflix to encourage what Casey McCormick calls “smooth binging experiences”.⁷ This ‘smooth’ experience is made even smoother as Netflix outwardly pushes binge-watching through their recommended categories, including ones like “Binge-worthy TV Programs” and “Watch In One Weekend”. It is evident then that Netflix facilitates binge-watching as it is a central part of its distribution strategy and interface, and while binge-watching is not restricted to Netflix, the streaming platform employs it more prevalently than others. The fact Netflix is one of the most widely used streaming services means their encouragement of binge-watching will inevitably persuade their wide audience that it is a pleasurable consumptive activity to engage in.

⁷ Casey J. McCormick, “Forward Is the Battle Cry”: Binge-Viewing Netflix’s House of Cards” *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, 2016, 101–16. p.103

Not only is Netflix and other streaming platforms promoting binge-watching through their interfaces, but also their new original shows are specifically created to be binged. For instance, Netflix's original show *Stranger Things*,⁸ establishes narrative features which indicate it as a bingeable text. Firstly, the episodes are represented as 'Chapters' on Netflix, making the season comparable to a book and subsequently separating itself from the standard ways of organising television series. By using this 'Chapter' structure Netflix is pushing *Stranger Things* as a 'quality' series through associating it with the eminence of literature instead of television which is viewed as less distinguished by society. In other words, Netflix has implicitly advertised a 'quality television' narrative to deem its original programs as worthy of bingeing. The show is further differentiated from television as it is intended to be comparable to another more prestigious media form like film. Netflix achieves this through the full-drop release model in combination with the 'Chapter' titles of the episodes as the series appears as a nine-hour movie instead of the usual 22-episode season of most shows, and therefore linking it to a more 'quality' medium. Anthony Smith states "Narrative designers working on Netflix and HBO series instead often take the opportunity to implement season-spanning storylines (often referred to as 'season arcs') that accumulate slow gradual build-ups throughout the duration of a season."⁹ Smith's argument allows us to draw the conclusion that by transforming series from being viewed on an episode-by-episode basis and instead constructing a full season as one story arc this suggests to viewers it should be consumed continuously. The format of the season lessens the demand on viewers to remember what has previously occurred in throughout the season but only if they watch it all in one go. This encourages binge-watching as something necessary to watch the series properly.

The pressure to binge-watch does not only come from the streaming platforms themselves but also outside influences such as review platforms and social media. In a generation consumed with lists and reviews it is no surprise they are a main contributor to how people comprehend and rationalise binge-

⁸ The Duffer Brothers, "Stranger Things," Television series (Netflix, 2016).

⁹ Anthony N. Smith, *STORYTELLING INDUSTRIES: Narrative Production in the 21st Century*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). p.93

watching. This form of consuming is facilitated by websites such as Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Letterboxd, and Rotten Tomatoes, all which promote user reviews of television shows and curated lists such as “Most Popular TV On RT” and “Top 250 Rated TV Shows”, which are often seen by many viewers as the ultimate irrefutable catalogue. These lists motivate viewers to watch the top listed shows so they can come to their own conclusion about the list’s accuracy and collect the shows like prizes to be able to say they have watched them. This inevitably causes binge-watching as viewers attempt to complete these lists to share their own reviews and ratings with the people around them and on social media.

Shows’ online presence naturally travels to social media where television shows nowadays are as much a social media event as they are a television show. The programs’ online account will share promotional material during its season release, in addition to viewers also engaging in online discussions, particularly on Twitter threads under the hashtag of the show’s name. When shows are released in the full-drop model this prompts a fear of spoilers as viewers are afraid they will accidentally see plot points of the show revealed on social media. Therefore, the reasons people binge-watch is to participate in the online discourse at the time of a shows release but also to complete the series quickly, so the show is not spoiled by these social discussions. Moreover, there is a pressure surrounding these large social media discussions, as viewers may begin to feel left out of the conversation if they have not watched the show everyone is talking about, and therefore they hurriedly binge-watch to become a part of the ‘hype’ culture of popular television shows. McCormick states “In contrast to the shared experience of watching a serial unfold across weeks and seasons, the planned binge creates different kinds of communal bonds.”¹⁰ So, it can be argued although there is a pressure from lists and social media to binge-watch, they are also creating stimulating discussions and a community of viewers who have a series as their shared interest.

¹⁰ Casey J. McCormick, “Forward Is the Battle Cry”: Binge-Viewing Netflix’s House of Cards,” *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century* , 2016, 101–16. p.105

While streaming platforms favour the full-drop release and promoting binge-watching, many premium cable channels still prefer releasing episodes weekly. To link back to previous paragraphs which discusses *Stranger Things*, it will also be used here in comparison with the HBO show *The Last of Us*¹¹ which adopted a weekly release format and therefore could not be binged. Being one of Netflix's most successful shows, *Stranger Things* prompted Netflix to boast about its viewer statistics on Twitter: “@Stranger Things 3 is breaking Netflix records! 40.7 million household accounts have been watching the show since its July 4 global launch – more than any other film or series in its first four days. And 18.2 million have already finished the entire season.”¹² This illustrates almost half of its viewers binged the season in its first four days of release, meaning they were averaging on at least two hour-long episodes per day or more on other days. Viewer Emily Nussbaum indicated she enjoyed binge-watching; she praised its “astoundingly efficient storytelling” and “eight hours that pass in a blink”, however this ‘blink’ suggests a speed where the viewer could not possibly intake all the intricacies of the show. Arguably, this ‘efficient storytelling’ is not properly allowing viewers to appreciate the show as there is no period of reflection between episodes. On the other hand, *The Last of Us* had 40 million viewers¹³ who were sparingly fed the episodes weekly, causing them to crave the next one immediately but instead they were forced to dwell on previous moments. Therefore, in these moments of waiting they were able to bask in the appreciation of each episode as arguably binging the full-drop seasons causes the viewers to become passive audiences.

Viewers of *Stranger Things* also lack a thorough appreciation and analytical stance of the show when binging as they are not engaging in an episode-by-episode discourse on social media as they usually don't discuss their thoughts until after the completion of the entire series before they quickly move on to the next show. In comparison, *The Last of Us* viewers shared their thoughts on Twitter after each

¹¹ Craig Mazin, “The Last of Us,” Television series (HBO, 2023).

¹² NetflixUS,

Twitter, https://twitter.com/netflix/status/1148359444188712960?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Cwterm%5E1148359444188712960&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vanityfair.com%2Fhollywood%2F2019%2F07%2Fstran.

¹³ Rick Porter, “‘The Last of Us’ Passes ‘House of the Dragon’ in Full-Season Viewers,” The Hollywood Reporter, March 13, 2023, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/the-last-of-us-season-1-finale-ratings-1235351440/>.

episode under the hashtag “#TLoUEpisode1”, and the same for the other episodes, whereas *Stranger Things* only had “#StrangerThings3” to represent the whole season. This suggests the whole season of *Stranger Things* gets blended together into one arc, like the producers hoped, however it is missing the ritualistic weekly time to reflect on each episode that *The Last of Us* had where viewers created a prolonged relationship with the show and each other. It can be concluded from the social media discourse; the weekly format fosters a deeper level of appreciation for each episode, as opposed to binge-watching a full-drop release where the depth of each episode may be lost.

Both *Stranger Things* and *The Last of Us* were released during recent years so this brings into question: what is the future stance on binge-watching from producers and viewers? As it looks, the future of bingeing is on an upwards trajectory due to the continuing prevalence of streaming services which viewers rely on to give them a unique viewing experience away from scheduled television. Producers are aware binge-watching creates higher viewer rates overall for series as it decreases the possibility of viewers losing interest after a few weeks, and hence is the reasoning for them, from a statistical and economic perspective, to continue to promote it. Viewers also began to realise the benefits of binge-watching particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic when bingeing provided people with an activity and distraction while being forced to spend extended lengths of time at home. However, even before the pandemic viewers were not restricted to binge-watch at home as the non-stop growth of smart devices allows viewers to binge on-the-go. Given people’s growing dependency on their smart devices and especially streaming services to provide entertainment, it is highly likely binge-watching will continue to expand.

To conclude, binge-watching has been a dominant mode in the way viewers consume television. It is driven by a desire to control the television schedule, addiction, the construction of season arcs, a longing for completion, hype culture, and persuasion from streaming platforms and social media. These factors

ultimately frame the viewers relationship with binge-watching as a necessary means to participate in mainstream culture, as despite any awareness for the negative side effects of bingeing, viewers primarily want to be involved and knowledgeable about the shows everyone is talking about, and bingeing is a quick method to achieve this. As binge-watching continues to grow its future looks prosperous as streaming platforms show no hint of slowing down but instead potentially even more development with viewer customisation and interactivity. Only time will tell if binge-watching continues being successful in altering the way we consume and enjoy television.

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