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“Binge-Watching”: The New Way of Watching TV Series

Abstract: In this paper I deal with the concept of the binge-watching of television series episodes. The word *binge* means a period of excessive indulgence in an activity. Particularly, in terms of media theory, it becomes synonymous with obsessive, marathon watching of TV shows and movies through streaming television. The central hypothesis is that binge-watching goes beyond what has for previous decades been considered a generally accepted way of watching TV content. In order to better understand this notion, it is also necessary to explain the importance of non-linear television and its distinction in relation to ‘traditional’ or linear television. I will pay special attention to social networks as an indispensable factor that completes the binge-watching experience. Social networks are also involved in the peripheral specifics of binge-watching that lead to the emergence of new occupations, which are in direct correlation with the desire of viewers to be informed about their favorite TV content. I also performed a case study of the TV show *Pretty Little Liars* (PLL). This show had strong effect on connecting creators with viewers through social networks. As a relatively new phenomenon, binge-watching has the potential to soon become an interesting subject of research.

Keywords: Binge-watching; television; TV shows; social networks; viewing; series

Linear (traditional) vs. Non-linear (modern) television

On the one hand, there is a sofa, a traditional TV receiver and a nervous expectation of a new episode that is broadcasted every week day at the same time. On the other, there is a dislocation of the viewer, streaming television, video on demand, and the fact that the time is no longer an important factor when watching favorite shows is in question. The first description represents the traditional form of television viewing, most common in the late 20th century on network television, also known as linear television. In media theory, linear television is defined as “audiovisual media service for simultaneous viewing of programs on a sequential basis, based on a program schedule. From the very beginnings of television to date, the dominant way to watch TV programs.”¹ However, watching shows always at the exact same time, with only one or two possible reprise slots will not be the dominant way of watching TV

¹ Mirko Galić ed., *Leksikon radija i televizije* (Zagreb: HRT i Ljevak, 2016), 287.

for much longer. The new, soon-to-be dominant model is called non-linear television. It represents the delayed viewing of the program (for several days), watching multiple screens at the same time, rewinding commercials, pausing episodes, and much more. In the year 2015 the media research company Kantar Media conducted research on the preferences of viewers in the UK regarding linear and non-linear television. The results confirmed that non-linear television is on track to become dominant due to the fact that it is very popular among young viewers.

Linear TV continued to play an important role in most participants' viewing habits, and was particularly valued for 'event TV' content, live sports and, to a slightly lesser extent, drama series and soaps. However, the majority of participants also observed the increasing significance of non-linear viewing, with catch-up and on-demand services allowing content to be consumed at their convenience. Viewing habits and preferences varied by age group, with younger participants more likely to favour non-linear viewing and older participants continuing to prefer linear consumption. Similarly, younger and more tech engaged participants were using a wider array of devices than their older counterparts to view content.²

It appears that non-linear television will assume primacy with the shift of generations and changes in the media literacy of viewers.

Cultural and technological aspects of binge-watching

Technological advances often don't give people time to adapt to the changes they bring, which can lead to different influences on people's everyday lives. The emergence of a non-linear way of viewing TV content is one such influence. The viewer has the opportunity to devote him or herself to the desired content at any time of the day and from almost any place, in the extent of their comfort zone. This unbelievable technological option may often have a hypnotic, literally addictive effect on people. Linear television works by trying to fit into daily schedules, while non-linear TV sometimes simply changes routines in everyday life. A prime example of this is a new kind of binge-watcher, that one of the leading streaming video companies, Netflix named "Binge Racer". "Accomplishing in a day what takes others weeks to achieve, Binge Racers strive to be the first to finish (series) by speeding through an entire season within 24 hours of its release."³ According to Netflix, number of this new breed

² Kantar Media, "Linear vs non-linear viewing: A qualitative investigation exploring viewers' behaviour and attitudes towards using different TV platforms and services providers," Qualitative research report Prepared for Ofcom, 2015, 5.

³ Erin Dwyer, "Ready, Set, Binge: More Than 8 Million Viewers 'Binge Race' Their Favorite Series," <https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/ready-set-binge-more-than-8-million-viewers-binge-race-their-favorite-series>, acc. June 18, 2018.

of consumers is exponentially growing. So, now we have individuals for whom the viewing of the series has become a competitive activity. This is one of the reasons why some people think that binge-watching has a negative influence. But, there are also advocates of the theory that binge-watching has a therapeutic effect and that it actually works positively on people enjoying extended viewing of their favorite content. However, in order for a person to binge-watch, that is to “watch TV for an extended period of time”⁴ it is necessary to acquire the technological knowledge as well as the media literacy required. Unlike ordinary TV devices, where it is enough to press the activation button on the remote control and then use the up and down arrow buttons to search for channels that broadcast the desired content, in non-linear viewing this is a little different. Much depends on which platform will be used. If we start from the TV, it must be emphasized that the ‘older’ model with a cathode ray tube will no longer be sufficient, because for demanding video services and streaming television it is necessary to access the Internet, and to have additional equipment (modem, router, etc.), enabling such type of viewing. It is important to note that most of these services charge, thus knowledge of online payment culture is necessary. What should not be forgotten is that in the period of streaming TV, Netflix, Amazon and other services that provide non-linear television services, need access: “The facility to log on and log in to a space or a network where people and meanings gather. To be present, to have the ability, the key, to decode a signal, to open doors, to be able to download/upload on to any system of signs and signals.”⁵

It should be kept in mind that even people with access are often not referred to the process that binge-watching implies. There are numerous web pages online offering a variety of instructions on how to prepare for the TV show ‘marathon’ and what can be done to maximize results. Also, there are sites that deal with the best content for “binge-watchers”, often offering guidelines and instructions on how to watch the series, and what to look for in seasons, episodes and characters.

The essence of binge-watching

All content is arguably “bingeable”, but primarily “binge-watching” is associated with TV series. “It refers to the now common practice of watching many episodes of a television show in a single sitting. The term has gained popularity in recent years with the rise of streaming entertainment services that tend to release entire TV series or seasons [...]”⁶ Streaming television kept the scheme of traditional TV networks, with seasons most often consisting of 12 to 25 or even less than 12 episodes. The key

⁴ James Graham, “Word of the day: Binge-watching,” <http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/binge-watching>, acc. June 16, 2018.

⁵ Raqs Media Collective, “A Concise Lexicon of/for the Digital Commons,” in *Art and Social Change*, ed. Will Bradley and Charles Esche (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), 340.

⁶ James Graham, “Word of the day: Binge-watching,” <http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/binge-watching>, acc. June 16, 2018.

distinguishing feature is in the duration of those episodes.

The average network 'hour-long' drama runs 42 minutes. On cable, shows often inch to the full hour. Premium cable, like HBO, often fill the full 30- or 60-minute time slot, though there are outliers: *Game of Thrones* occasionally defies standards with 67-91 minute episodes [...]. In comparison, network comedies still range from 22 minutes to the full 30.⁷

Duration is important, but not crucial, when it comes to viewership. No one will stay to watch an entire episode if it is not interesting. Any episode that viewer chooses to watch needs to be dynamic and charged with emotions. Every scene has to peak interest and to maintain it to the end of the episode. Of course most of the episodes are concluded with the cliffhanger in order to provoke viewer's curiosity. So, the first encounter between the viewer and the series has to make an impact. It needs to make viewer wanting more in every sequence of the episode. Some people can accidentally, say, with another person, start watching the series after the first few episodes or even after the entire season. Still, for most of the people, the viewing experience begins with the first episode. That is why the pilot (first episode) of any series must engage the audience from the start. Often, some highly-rated series are not overly popular among binge-watchers, because they have 'slower' dynamics. On the other hand, some not so highly rated series are more prone to binge watching, where emphasis is placed on the first few episodes. Afterwards, quality may decline however viewers have already largely been drawn in. *New York Times* journalist, James Poniewozik, in his text on streaming television, referred to the 'pulling effect' that binds people in the practice of watching this series. He called it "The Suck" and in his opinion, it represents the main difference in the 'act of watching' between traditional and streaming television. Streaming relies on the 'pulling effect'.

Of course, no one's stopping you from watching a series more slowly, but that changes the experience. Declaring whether it's better or worse to binge fast or slow is like arguing whether it's better to see the Grand Canyon from a helicopter or by foot. It's beautiful either way, but it's different.⁸

And the time that is spent is very different. One season of the series is filmed for several months. The release/premiere dates are scheduled way in advance. Everything is planned weeks, even months in front, from filming locations and plots, to the exact number of scenes. Therefore, the creation of the series is a process that takes a long time. However, watching those same series is another story. Some people like to

⁷ Allie Volpe, "The One Thing That Isn't Evolving With Netflix & Hulu's Takeover of TV," <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/netflix-episode-length-streaming-services-traditional-tv>, acc. June 16, 2018.

⁸ James Poniewozik, "Streaming TV Isn't Just a New Way to Watch. It's a New Genre," <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/arts/television/streaming-tv-isnt-just-a-new-way-to-watch-its-a-new-genre.html>, acc. April 26, 2018.

binge-watch a whole season in a day, others like watching one or two episodes on a daily basis, but there are also individuals who are used to the old way of watching, before binge-watching existed. Thanks to the advance of technology people have a luxury to choose the pace at which they will view their favorite content. At the end of 20th century, online streaming was just a futuristic idea, so viewers had only two choices – to wait until the next episode airs, or to wait even longer for the whole season to be released in VHS or DVD format. Just few years later, technological breakthrough of 21st century made binge-watching possible, and gave the contemporary viewer a new way to interact with the favorite shows.

Binge-watching is not necessarily long duration viewing of a favorite series in the comfort of one's home, but can occur wherever one finds Internet access. Many people opt for binge-watching while they are on the road (in a bus or a train, etc.), in waiting rooms, or while doing some activity that does not require full attention.

Social networks and extended binge-watching experience

Most viewers who still exclusively practice traditional (linear) television viewing cannot likely imagine how much "binge-watchers", those practicing the 'new' way of TV viewing, actually have a much wider range of activities related to the act of watching, going beyond mere consumption of content. However, most, if not all of these additional activities would be impossible without social networks.

The primary use of social networks in this regard are to provide access to large communities of viewers dedicated to a single series, or group of related series, who spend hours on a daily and weekly basis, commenting on and analyzing them. "Although viewers watch the programme alone, a virtual community develops and individuals sharing an interest in a certain programme tend to feel belonging."⁹ It is exactly this sense of belonging that leads to the creation of various fan groups, which "binge-watchers" create primarily online, and often the operation of these groups is transferred to the real environment. More precisely, using different networks and sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), viewers follow everything related to the series itself, from episode release dates to the private lives of the shows' leading actors. "Binge-watchers", as well as the actors and creators of series correspond and chat. Namely, this relationship established between the creators of the series and the audience is the 'Big Media turn' that has led to a entire new experience in producing and viewing TV content. Apart from being able to contact those who create their favorite series, viewers have the opportunity to participate in the creation process themselves.

With regard to the fact that modern quality TV applies high standards to both content and form, viewers do no longer only have the narrative universe as subject-matter, but increasingly also the decoding process.

⁹ Jennifer Berz, *Managing TV Brands with Social Media: An Empirical Analysis of Television Series Brands* (Visbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 43–44.

This demands both increased media literacy and awareness with regard to narratology from viewers [...]. What distinguishes serialised media products from finished works is the fact that recipients often try to – and in fact do – influence the story. This has been the case with serialised novels or book series (e.g. *Sherlock Holmes*), and is not different for television serials. Nowadays, tools like social media enable viewers to directly interact with producers and writers, which allows for instant feedback as well as for the expression of wishes and expectations concerning future plot developments.¹⁰

Often enough people start binge-watching a TV show that has already released several seasons, but is still in production. This can be problematic for a viewer who just watched several seasons in a few days and must now wait for the next episode, like a regular, linear viewer. Nevertheless, thanks to the possibilities of non-linear television, the Internet and social networks, there are additional binge-watching activities. As mentioned above, viewers gather in their virtual communities and share ideas about what might be crucial for the new season. They also discuss opportunities for story development, which producers have left at the end of the season. Especially popular among binge communities is anticipating the continuation of the story. That is the crucial moment, when YouTube and other social media users get busy, using their profiles to publish news, development theories and other details about the series and their casts. Thus these fans are arguably specialized journalists for the series they follow, working exclusively online, selling what binge-watchers most need: continuation of the narrative they are devoted to, even in an alternative way, until the next season begins.

A simple photo from a set, taken during the filming of a scene from an upcoming season, can potentially create an avalanche of online comments, analyses, 'likes' and other reactions that can last for days. For example, in the superhero TV show *Arrow*, lead actor Stephen Amell was photographed walking on set in his character's new – and still unseen – costume. That photo launched a discussion on social networks lasting for days. Viewers tried to presume why it was done, some commented on the visual identity itself, while others tried to find out, in interaction with the producers, why the photo was 'leaked'. The situation not only benefited the show's creators, but also YouTubers who made short analyses on their channels, corresponded with interested fans, and tried to show that they had exclusive information.

Recent episodes of popular television programmes are often uploaded to YouTube shortly after they have been aired [...]. What distinguishes media consumption on YouTube from watching classic, linear television is the fact that YouTube provides the opportunity to share and discuss the content, and to recommend it on other platforms.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, 44.

¹¹ Berz, 72.

YouTubers who follow superhero series, actually exceeded the level of ordinary enthusiasts and become professional content providers. Thus, binge-watching can be profitable for those able to monetize it. Each click or subscribe to people who are in this way dealing with the series is actually making money and representing a job that can be very lucrative. There are two ways to make money as a superhero series YouTuber. First is to use special kind of software that enables site's owner to get paid for clicks. YouTube gives money for each click that uploaded video gets. A good example is the YouTube Channel *Emergency Awesome*, specializing in series and films dealing with superheroes. Channel was founded more than five years ago and has close to 2.3 million subscribers. If each subscriber clicks on every video that is uploaded, that makes the owner of the channel a rich man. There is also a second way that binge-watching can be lucrative, and that is through paid promotions. For example, if new superhero show is going to have a premiere soon, then the creators of the series may pay an influential YouTubers to get the information to their subscribers by mentioning it in the future videos.

So, binge-watching definitely can be a nicely payed job. Yet, the most important thing in this new type of job is having the newest inside information about the TV series in question. Also, people involved in this kind of work (and those following them) must always be ready for some "binge-(re)watching" – the process of reviewing episodes and seasons and trying to anticipate producers' next steps.

Social networks are very important for series fandom, but for some of those fans, who are binge-watching episodes and seasons a few hours or days after some 'big revelation', using social platforms can destroy the act of bingeing by way of 'spoilers'. "In the post-network era, spoilers may retell: the content of already-aired episodes can now be a source of spoiler information for not-yet viewers".¹² Because of that 'not-yet viewers' are surfing the Internet, careful to avoid social networks until they are done with binge-watching process.

Binge-watching as a transmedia concept

While "binge-watchers" use YouTube mostly to interact with each other, as well as communicate with YouTubers, the social network most used to connect producers and audience is Twitter, as demonstrated by the series *Pretty Little Liars*, more commonly known as PLL. The series follows the lives of four female friends from their high school years to their late 20's, showing how they try to live normal everyday lives under the constant maltreatment of a person who knows all their secrets, through social networks and modern technology, blackmails them and makes them do various unpleasant, and sometimes cruel things. The identity of this person is unknown and the only thing that is known about the mystery villain is his or her signature sign, the

¹² Lisa Glebatis Perks and Noelle McElrath-Hart, "The Television Spoiler Nuisance Rationale," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5581.

capital letter A. The show had a great seven-year run, and for all that time, fans tried to identify the 'torturer' of the *Liars*. While they were brainstorming online, producers of the show, at the forefront with Marlin I. King, the executive producer, used fan curiosity to develop the story. King used Twitter to communicate with the viewers, who were trying to extract any detail or hint about who 'A' could be. Writers used this situation skillfully to gauge the audience and push the show in the direction that fans wanted. Recently, King acknowledged that some episodes were based on ideas taken from viewers who had sent their theories, trying to figure out the identity of the main villain. Through use of Twitter, the PLL series has pushed the boundaries TV viewing.

The use of transmedia storytelling allows movies and television shows to be promoted over a variety of different platforms, which allows the name of the brand to expand. Teen television shows such as Dawson's Creek used transmedia storytelling by promoting an online website, clothing merchandise, and spinoff narrative novels.¹³

Conclusion

Binge-watching has changed some established norms, like scheduled viewing, allowing viewers greater choice of when and how they view content. That viewing autonomy, combined with social networks, morphed into a new and insufficiently explored sphere where binge-watchers, producers and influencers have collectively enhanced the viewing experience and created a seemingly new way of watching television. Binge-watching is not an entirely new phenomenon, but its popularity has increased in recent years due to the advancement and availability of technology. This can be seen in scientific and academic circles, which began more actively to deal with this phenomenon at the beginning of the decade. The name itself, "binge-watching" became better known in 2015, when "Collins's vocabulary pronounced it for the English word of the year."¹⁴ Binge-watching is here to stay and there is no doubt about that. Every day new people discover charms of this practice, making it more popular than ever.

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¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ Monita Karmakar and Jessica Sloane Kruger, "Is binge-watching bad for your mental health?" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/04/binge-watching-mental-health-effects-research>, acc. April 26, 2018.

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