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Digital Media Trends

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## **The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends** — Sidneyeve Matrix

### **Introduction**

Entertainment is fast becoming an all-you-can-eat buffet. Call it the Netflix effect.

—Raju Mudhar, *Toronto Star*

Whatever our televisual drug of choice—*Battlestar Galactica*, *The Wire*, *Homeland*—we've all put off errands and bedtime to watch just one more, a thrilling, draining, dream-influencing immersion experience that has become the standard way to consume certain TV programs.

—Willa Paskin, *Wired*

When Netflix released all fifteen episodes of a new season of *Arrested Development* in the summer of 2013, reports showed that approximately 10% of viewers made it through the entire season within twenty-four hours (Wallenstein). This was not the

first time Netflix had released an entire season of an original program simultaneously and caused a nationwide video-on-demand stampede. When *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black* premiered in 2013, huge percentages of Netflix subscribers watched back-to-back episodes, devouring a season of content in just days. Although these three shows belong to different genres—one a sitcom and the others adult-themed melodramas—what they share is an enormous popularity among the millennial cohort that makes up the majority of the subscriber base of Netflix. When all episodes of a season were released simultaneously, these shows inspired widespread marathon-viewing sessions for the eighteen-to-thirty-four age demographic and among the younger audiences of Netflix, many of whom binge watched and then took to social media to post their (largely positive) reviews of the first steps Netflix had taken to produce original TV content. To analyze the significance of these emergent

digital media use trends, I explore in this essay some of that online discourse, unpacking two emerging patterns in young people's on-demand media engagement with some of the most currently popular (and thus binge-worthy) Netflix shows, namely, the rising importance of social TV viewing practices and new expectations about the availability of commercial-free, high-quality, and original television content.

In the popular press, binge viewing and Netflix are becoming synonymous, especially for young viewers, including "screenagers."<sup>1</sup> Of course, not all millennials were "born digital" or have access to these services. Those who do, however, increasingly are not content to abide by traditional weekly and seasonal programming schedules: connected Gen Y (currently aged eighteen to thirty-four) and Gen Z (young people born after 2005) with access to these services are practising new television viewing styles using a variety of digital technologies, particularly subscription-based video on demand (VOD or SVOD) via Netflix. In 2013, according to research by Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 63% of households in the United States used a video streaming and delivery service such as Hulu, Netflix, or Amazon Prime (Solsman), and, as the Leichtman Research Group found, 22% of those households are streaming Netflix every single week of the year ("TV"). In English Canada, approximately 25% of residents have signed up for Netflix. In households with teens, that figure jumps to 33%, and it rises again to 37%

in households with children under the age of twelve. (Oliviera). With its long-tail inventory of TV shows and movies, commercial-free viewing experience, and "post play" seamless episode delivery,<sup>2</sup> Netflix is changing viewers' expectations concerning what, how, and when they watch TV. As a result, viewers not surprisingly are watching more television, including in larger doses at a time.

This technological shift also has widespread impact on television program production decisions, distribution deals, and promotional strategies. The growing consumer preference for over-the-top (OTT) streaming services (instead of cable bundles) and video on demand (instead of appointment viewing) is having a disruptive effect on traditional television scheduling, ratings, advertising, and cable subscriptions. As a larger share of the TV audience consumes more TV shows via Netflix and other OTT services, some critics argue that such consumption practices interfere with the cultural unification effects (or "water cooler talk") that bond people through shared, mass-mediated experiences. Especially for the Facebook generation (composed of teens and twenty-somethings, who consist of Gen Z and Gen Y, respectively), however, the Netflix effect that enables weekend-long binges on *Arrested Development* is not just about convenience and customization (although those are important) but also about connection and community. Video on demand enables viewers to participate in cultural conversations,



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online and offline, about “must-see TV”—conversational exchanges they might have missed out on otherwise if they were not in front of the set on schedule, as required during the broadcast era of event programming. For this reason and others explored below, it is important to consider both the affordances and the constraints of TV binges when evaluating the impact of SVOD viewing on young people’s relationships, identities, and values, as well as their media use, habits, and literacies. And with more and more quality kids’ TV content available on demand, the binge-watching habit begins for many viewers when they are as young as toddlers.

#### **“Billions of Minutes”: VOD Viewing Trends from Toddlers to Tweens and Teens**

We have been amazed at how quickly kids have embraced this new technology. We’re talking billions of minutes spent watching.

–Nancy Kanter, executive vice-president and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide (Barnes)

In 2007, early adopter MTV showed that making kids’ television programming content available online or on demand had an unexpected effect: it led to increased ratings for traditional, linear network TV broadcasts. A case in point: in August of that year, MTV affiliate Nickelodeon made episodes of *Drake & Josh*, *iCarly*, and several other new shows available online via video on demand. The result? Over nineteen million video views, plus “*iCarly* had one of [the] biggest premieres ever, and *Drake & Josh* saw a 100% increase in their time slot,” confirmed Juliette Morris, senior vice-president

of partner market, content distribution, and marketing at MTVN (Winslow). Going forward, then, rather than fuelling concerns about online viewing cannibalizing the audience for traditional linear broadcasts, this experiment demonstrated for MTV and others that for the television audience, as Morris put it, “newer platforms are clearly additive” (Winslow).

Following this lead, currently Disney, Amazon, Netflix, and Nickelodeon are experimenting with distributing kids’ programming via these new TV delivery models to take advantage of—and to encourage—binge viewing. “Diving into” a clump of episodes is a natural behaviour for young children, Disney’s Nancy Kanter told the *New York Times*, because they “like to watch multiple episodes in a row and even the same episode over and over” (Barnes). At Amazon, 65% of the most replayed TV shows on its Prime Instant Video service are for children, which explains why this company is poised to launch three new original children’s series on VOD (Stelter). The opportunity exists for broadcasters to capture the attention of and to “establish strong bonds with tomorrow’s digital natives,” but it depends on them being able to move quickly enough to “try and shape their content in ways that reflect children’s changing digital media consumption habits,” according to Jeanette Steemers (158). Having family-friendly and much-loved kids’ content available on demand is key. This is why in 2013, seeking to maintain its position

firmly out in front, Netflix signed its largest original content deal to date for three hundred hours of first-run children’s shows by DreamWorks Animation—a distribution deal that also gives Netflix access to the DreamWorks backlist as well as its blockbuster franchises and upcoming feature films (Szalai).

The on-demand shift in the preschool media market is not just about digital distribution and quality creative content, but it also involves an increase in mobile privatization. Market research done by Disney has shown that, unlike older children and adults, who may use a tablet as a “second screen,” the youngest viewers are often a tablet-first audience and almost 40% of households with children under seven have one or two tablets (Hall). This explains why Disney opted to make the first nine “appisodes” of *Sheriff Callie’s Wild West* available for back-to-back streaming via its mobile tablet app. The app, aimed at children aged two to seven, was released in the summer of 2012 and generated over 650 million video views for Disney over the next sixteen months (Barnes). Following suit, Nickelodeon will unveil in 2014 an app aimed at the preschooler set, and Viacom-owned MTV has recently announced that it, too, plans to debut a teen television series via its mobile app in the next twelve months (Hall).

For both MTV and Disney, the actual intention of this mobile-first, pro-binge strategy is to increase traditional, linear television viewership. By getting

younger audiences hooked on a series before it hits TV, the networks seek to inspire buzz and to “build affinity to a new show” that will then be available only via traditional broadcast, according to Kanter (Poggi). This business strategy makes sense not only because of the success of *iCarly* on MTV but also because audience research done by Disney shows that on-demand streaming means that episodes are viewed in rapid succession, allowing preschoolers to bond with characters quickly, thus decreasing the time required to develop those televisual affinities, as Kanter explained to *Advertising Age* (Poggi). For tots growing up in a Netflix or TiVo household, it is likely that linear broadcasts will be repackaged as commercial-free, time-shifted television. This is especially likely if they have parents like Jason Mittell, who uses VOD and OTT technology to record all shows and to encourage his children “to think about what they’re watching and make active choices about their televisual taste and experiences in a way previous generations did not, when network programmers decided what you might watch when” (“TiVoing”).

Research has also shown that many contemporary tweens and teens are likewise voracious television viewers, spending on average two hours each day with their personal lineup of “just can’t miss” TV content (“Zero”). Although not all teens have access to cable and SVOD, studies show that those who do watch their favourite shows mostly on live cable broadcast

but one-third of the time via time-shifting technologies such as Netflix, Hulu Plus (in the USA), Apple TV, or YouTube streaming services—and, to a lesser extent, via DVD box sets and PVRs (“Zero”). In terms of screen choice, according to market research done in 2013, 60% of Gen Y and Gen Z viewers consume on-demand TV shows regularly on their laptops, tablets, phones, and TV sets, often juggling two screens at once. For example, they might watch TV while couch-surfing on social media platforms to connect with friends and view videos.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to television platforms, “a new generation is coming of age,” observes Rebecca Nelson in *Time* magazine, “and so is their collective distaste for cable.” A disproportionate number of members of the group known as the “cord-nevers” are millennials, those who watch television programming via cable or OTT technologies such as Netflix but pass the monthly pay-TV bill to their parents. In 2013, when Piper Jaffray researchers surveyed teens living at home and using their parents’ cable and streaming service subscriptions, asking how they anticipate accessing TV once on their own and responsible for their home entertainment budget, six out of ten said they expect to be paid Netflix members within five years, a figure 10% higher than in the survey from the previous year (“Piper Jaffray”). “I’m currently using my parents['] Netflix subscription,” admitted Eliza Kern to GigaOm.com, “but if they ever rescinded that

generosity or stopped subscribing, I'd happily pay up. And the reason I suspect that my friends and I are willing to fork over for Netflix is that, in general, it feels like the company understands how we want to watch TV." As Valerie Wee points out in her book *Teen Media*, youth-targeted cultural media of today benefit from digital convergence, evidencing "a tendency toward simultaneous, interconnected, multi-media products that no longer recognize medium-specific limits or boundaries" (11). As a result, networks do not lose audience reach for their shows even when teens opt in for television programming yet decide against owning television sets. In fact, there is a good chance that the connected "90s kids" will join the ranks of the "Zero-TV households" consumer segment, which currently numbers five million homes and skews young (Garibian). Moreover, youth market research firm Ypulse predicts that "the next generation of television viewers will have even less of a commitment to the actual television set than Millennials do" ("It's a Small"). According to Nielsen, nearly half of Zero-TV households watch OTT television via Netflix now. Forgoing cable and often swapping mobile screens for living-room TV sets, younger audiences watch hours of television programs each day, declining appointment viewing and settling instead into the televisual flow of binge watching.

### **Moral and Media Panic**

Every new technology that comes in creates a moral panic.

–Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center (Goldstein)

The negative connotations of television binge consumption are connected to moral panics about youth and popular media and to the negative impact of young people ingesting a steady diet of fictional melodrama, banality, and televisual representations of sex and violence. Moreover, there are widespread and long-standing concerns about young people and inactivity associated with being a TV couch potato and about the resulting health risks, including obesity. Most mass-media reportage about the Netflix effect and television binge watching adopts the rhetoric of moral media panic to suggest that sustained TV spectatorship is a health risk. For adult viewers, the choice to spend an evening or a weekend glued to the screen, immersed in consuming multiple episodes or even an entire season of television programs at once, is framed as a "guilty pleasure" or a "dirty secret" not unlike gorging on snack food. Likewise, journalists compare episodes of *Arrested Development*, *Breaking Bad*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and other popular Netflix binge-worthy fare regularly to potato chips—tasty for sure, impossible to stop snacking on after consuming

just one, lacking utterly in nutritional or intellectual value, likely to make viewers feel a bit ill in large doses, and ultimately unsatisfying (Paskin). Other binge media critiques borrow from discourses of addiction, as Elissa Bassist does in her tongue-in-cheek piece for *New York Magazine* entitled “Addicted to Netflix: Teen-Soap-Opera Binge as Psychosis.” Bassist blames Netflix lightheartedly for feeding and exploiting viewers’ self-destructive tendencies and media dependence—including her own—by offering “unlimited access, on-demand viewing, and auto-play” to those helplessly and hopelessly hooked “24/7” on the television fantasy worlds of *Dance Academy*, *One Tree Hill*, or *Freaks and Geeks*.

When it comes to teens and TV marathons, one would expect the moral panic associated with binge media use to be amplified significantly by the third-person effect (the tendency people have to think that ads and popular culture messages have a greater impact on others than on themselves). The assumption that long hours in front of a screen would have a greater negative effect on young people than on adults is an assumption in much research and social commentary into the usage of cultural media by young people, especially gaming and television. A search of recent academic literature via LexisNexis, however, turns up relatively few articles and news reports that address the specificities of teen Netflix use. This may be due in part to the limitations of access to

proprietary data, since, although Netflix collects it, the company does not release statistics about content use patterns and preferences by demographic. Moreover, even professional market research surveys seeking to measure how we watch TV often fail to break out VOD and OTT television use from hours spent with cable broadcasts. As a result, the many hours laptop-toting teens spend with Netflix often occur under the research radar (“Binging” [sic]). For example, to date, the latest “cross platform” report from Nielsen shows that, during the third quarter of 2013, the average American adult spent four hours and forty-three minutes each day watching live TV and shows on a DVR. The survey does not track specifically how viewers under the age of eighteen use TV, and, “for whatever reason, Nielsen doesn’t factor in video-on-demand viewing,” observes Peter Kafka at *All Things Digital*, even though “video-on-demand viewing is skyrocketing.” In fact, according to a 2013 study by Harris Interactive, nearly eight out of ten American adults who have Internet access watch television on demand via TiVo or another PVR technology and through OTT services such as Netflix or Hulu. More importantly for the present study, Harris found that 62% of those survey respondents admitted to watching multiple episodes back to back regularly (Goldstein). A recent study by MarketCast concluded that, although viewers aged eighteen to twenty-nine (the age bracket currently defining Gen Y) are most likely to engage in binge viewing, in fact 67% of





. . . teens are very active and articulate about their binge-viewing practices and preferences on social platforms.



television viewers aged thirteen to forty-nine admit to TV bingeing at least sometimes (Yorio).

Although precise numbers may be hard to come by, teens are very active and articulate about their binge-viewing practices and preferences on social platforms. Likewise, when interviewed by reporters and researchers, teens communicate clearly the many reasons why they prefer to use on-demand television, why they consider OTT services to be functionally superior to linear broadcast TV, and why they indulge in binge viewing. Having reviewed a random sampling of teens' social commentary online and in recent news articles on their on-demand media habits, I have observed the emergence of some patterns that help to explain how binge watching shapes and reflects young people's expectations about television production, distribution, and consumption.

**(i) "The Water Cooler Has Been Digitized": Catching Up and Connecting via Social TV**

As more people turn to Netflix to catch up, . . . the social element of television, that infamous water-cooler factor, is the first casualty.

–Mary McNamara, *Los Angeles Times*

There is no water-cooler moment. We're already well beyond that.

–Beau Willimon, Netflix producer (Goldstein)

If audience members are not on the same channel at the same time, many argue, that will kill off the fan communities that form around

event television programming. In the age of Netflix and delayed series viewing habits, avoiding TV plot-line spoilers is a considerable challenge. One of the pitfalls of time-shifted TV is that “viewers are forced to go out of their way to avoid spoilers and must live in exile from water-cooler conversation,” observes journalist Chuck Barney. Moreover, since “the water cooler has been digitized,” that exile extends to Facebook and Twitter as well (Daly).

In 2013, in recognition of this dilemma, Netflix launched its Spoiler Foiler social media app that, when activated, promises to screen out any social media status updates that may give away plot lines for shows such as *Breaking Bad*. The app makes sense, considering that, according to research done by Horowitz Associates, nearly one-third of online fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds and one-quarter of adults aged eighteen to thirty-four admit that they post comments occasionally to social media sites about the shows they watch (Friedman). This lighthearted move was an acknowledgement by Netflix that they understand their members’ preference for using digital technology to create a personalized programming menu and that they recognize that, although their members likely share television preferences with friends, their viewing schedules may be out of sync with those of their pals.

For many Netflixers, including members of its younger demographic, VOD and binge watching are not about social exile but about enabling and

enhancing participation in social conversations and cliques. “You can binge on five or six episodes at a time to catch up with your friends,” writes Gen Y blogger Eliza Kern, “and participate in the conversations on text and Twitter.” According to Netflix producer Beau Willimon, the loss of appointment viewing does not impact negatively, reduce, or “lessen the community [that forms around shows] at all”; instead, as the example of *House of Cards* demonstrates, Willimon suggests, “these communities find each other” online (Goldstein). Jennifer Gillan agrees, suggesting in *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*,

That kind of simultaneity is no longer necessary in order to participate in a community around a TV show. . . . Viewers do not need to watch a series in its broadcast time slot to stay up to date on the latest developments—concerning story arcs, production decisions, and cast and network news. All of that information is just a click or a text message away. (15)

Research shows that Gen Y students follow their favourite shows “to secure their positions within social groups defined in large part by their members’ shared cultural competencies” (Tryon and Dawson 224). Thus, in spite of their tongue-in-cheek Spoiler Foiler app, Netflix showrunners interviewed by the

*New York Times* also chimed in to assert that, far from avoiding social connectivity, younger viewers of today are more likely to binge watch in order to be able to talk about a show with friends (Manley AR1). Herein lies a key to understanding the links between binge watching, social television, and the emergence of digital publics enacting new forms of participatory cultural citizenship. As Joke Hermes argues, “if we want to understand how and when audiences turn into publics, we need to find out where and how they form opinions” (300). The idea that television functions to generate forms of societal involvement and cultural citizenship is not new: John Hartley argued the same point about broadcast TV in the network era (*Television* 123). Interestingly, even with the fragmentation of the television audience across niche channels and the shift to widespread consumption of time-shifted content, viewers continue to derive a sense of participatory cultural citizenship from TV. They continue to benefit from opportunities for social belonging and mediated connectedness when they watch TV contemporaneously, often by bingeing, insofar as it affords them an opportunity to be part of the pop culture conversational flow, as it happens or soon after (Morabito).

At MTV, marketers understand that VOD encourages community and TV chatter among telebuddies, rather than inhibits it. For this reason, MTV banked on binge-viewing buzz as a form of inbound marketing when, in

2013, they opted to post the full twelve-episode season of its new high-school football reality series *Wait 'Til Next Year* on their mobile app, ahead of the TV premiere. By enabling those early-adopter fans to view the show first and exclusively on mobile, MTV sought to engage and add value for teen influencers who would then recommend the show to friends. Ideally, MTV hoped this strategy would “reverse the current flow of conversation, where social buzz is generated by those watching a show live, which prompts others to pick up the series through on demand platforms” (Poggi). The basic premise of social TV is to find ways to leverage the social graph—a virtual friend network of strong and loose ties on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and elsewhere—as a recommendation engine driving the discovery of television content. “If a viewer knew all their friends were talking about a particular show,” explains Emma Wells of TV Genius, “they would probably want to tune in too” (Chaussé).

While the Netflix effect is centripetal, bringing people together to experience mass-media cultural productions whether collocated or connected virtually, it also inspires the phenomenon of “FOMO,” or “fear of missing out.” When *Silicon Business Insider* “grilled nine teens about their digital lives,” one female in the focus group confessed to binge watching five seasons of *Breaking Bad* in the span of a week (D’Onfro). Why? Because of a fear of being the only person who

had not seen the show and thus of being unable to participate in the fan community and conversations, online and off. As John Fiske explains in his 1987 book *Television Culture*, making meaning out of television stories is a social process of creative interpretation and negotiation. Particularly in the case of young people, that sense making depends on crowdsourcing input from friends. Such social TV talk, Fiske argues, “plays a crucial role in the social dynamics of meaning-making” as viewers draw on the collective understandings of a particular group (80). Far from killing the water cooler, binge media technologies and TV habits support the expansion of the water-cooler effect “in concentric circles”—to borrow a metaphor from Netflix’s *Beau Willimon* (Goldstein).

**(ii) “It’s All about the Content”: Immersive, Inspiring, Commercial-Free TV Binges**

24!!!!!!! It was the worst, you just kept HAVING to play the next show, next hour, and then all of a sudden a day disappeared from your life :) Then you finished a season and HAD to go get the next . . . terrible but awesome.

—Megan, no age given (ellipsis in original)

As researchers at Stage of Life found when they interviewed young people about their TV habits in 2013, sometimes teens choose to watch back-to-

back television episodes of much-loved shows for the “terrible but awesome” pleasure of being immersed in the story over an extended period of time. Respondents noted that, “[w]hether they were getting swept away by drama or rolling on the floor laughing, these teens chose TV shows that made them feel good” (“StageofLife.com”). Moreover, binge viewing is not only about “feel good” shows but also about delivering “feel better” televisual therapy, as two high-school seniors explain their stress-busting, binge-watching habits during the school year: as Stuti Arora declares, “I tend to stress watch TV like people stress eat” (Tao), whereas Luke M. notes that “[s]enior year can be quite stressful, but watching *Breaking Bad* and *The Wire* makes up for it all” (Hannah). When young people lose themselves in make-believe TV worlds, part of the escapist pleasure is about inspiration and in some cases, aspirational maturity. According to the Stage of Life researchers, the sample of teens they interviewed widely reported that “[t]hey learned to be themselves, follow their dreams, and set new and interesting goals to achieve” by watching their favourite teen dramas. As high-school senior Deveyn C. commented, “I watch *Gossip Girl* and *Vampire Diaries* and I get very emotionally attached, like it’s happening to me and my best friends in real life” (Hannah) demonstrating what film theorist Jackie Stacey called the “identificatory” pleasure of spectatorship (145). Getting caught up in the domestic comedy of *Arrested Development* or the



. . . teen audience members may be somewhat agnostic about what screens they watch, but they are very choosy about quality programming.



melodrama of *Breaking Bad* generates escapist pleasures, the sensation of “closing off the here-and-now and sinking into another world” (Morse 99). Teens report that bingeing on television comedies or dramas provides a “sanctuary for comfort and relaxation” (Tao). As with comfort food, teenager Megan Slife admitted, referring to *One Tree Hill* and *Friday Night Lights*, “I just eat that sappy teen drama up like it’s my Grandma’s spaghetti” (Squires). Beyond teen dramas, there is ample evidence online that younger viewers are watching adult programs to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, for the sexually mature content, and to enjoy the high production values. As one twelve-year-old viewer commented about the adult-themed Netflix drama *House of Cards*, “Let’s get ONE THING out of the way first. This show is amazing. . . . It is very sexual . . . and the language is vulgar . . . , but I still think it’s good for teens. If they are mature” (Pokeheart65). From big-screen TVs to laptop screens, from tablets and phablets to phones, teen audience members may be somewhat agnostic about what screens they watch, but they are very choosy about quality programming. For these teenagers, “it’s all about the content,” concludes Rachel Lewis, senior strategist at iProspect, based on her 2013 audience research (Prezant). It is clear that not only are younger viewers “engaging at a high level” with their favourite programs—many of which are not targeted specifically to teens or tweens—but also that, if given a choice, 59% prefer to watch their favourite content on Netflix (Prezant). As one teen puts it, “I’m not ever watching TV shows, I’m just watching on-demand. I don’t have time and I hate commercials” (D’Onfro).

Beyond being the TV platform of choice for teens, then, Netflix is also winning the original content wars, producing shows that are cinematically interesting, with complex narratives, compelling characters, and enough cliffhangers to keep audiences hooked, episode after episode, season after season. As a result, when larger and larger Netflix audiences binge watch

*Orange Is the New Black*, *House of Cards*, or *Arrested Development*, there are new implications for television production and promotion going forward. The public's growing preference for back-to-back, commercial-free TV binges is influencing both screenwriting and marketing strategies for new and upcoming seasons of existing shows on at least three levels. First, according to TV critics and showrunners, the Netflix effect leads to more heavily serialized storytelling, in terms of shows featuring more complicated plot lines filled with embedded clues and mysteries that require viewers to pore over the minutiae of episodes (Mittell, "Film" 170). As Paskin notes, the producers of shows like *Lost*, *24*, and *Breaking Bad* "depend on the audience having an encyclopedic grasp of all the mythology that has come before": the close-viewing and content analysis required to unlock these narrative moments—"and Easter eggs, some of which will make sense only in retrospect"—is fodder for fan buzz. "Netflix assumes that viewers won't miss a beat," observes Dawn C. Chmielewski in *The Los Angeles Times*, and the company is banking on the fact that the microcontent analysis needed to unlock these TV mysteries will keep eyeballs glued to screens and do double duty as fodder for fan community discourse and debate.

Secondly, "shorter attention spans are leading to short-lived shows," notes Claire Atkinson in *The New York Post*. Binge watching is leading to networks ordering a single season of ten to thirteen episodes

instead of the standard twenty-two, with the knock-on effect that websites and blogs overflow with peer-to-peer binge-watch suggestions such as "9 Netflix Series That You Can Watch in Their Entirety in under 9 Hours" (Atkinson).

Third, and finally, shows that demonstrate binge potential are more likely to be greenlighted by networks than other programming. For example, the decision at Netflix to back the fourth season of *Arrested Development*, a show with the double bonus of a ready-made Gen Y fan base and a strong appeal to even younger viewers hooked on edgy comedy, required large-scale budget shifting. According to one analyst, to produce *Arrested Development* "Netflix sacrificed 2,000 titles from MTV and Nickelodeon, alienating a big part of their subscriber base to go after the millennial crowd" (Solsman). This "sacrifice" makes good business sense when we consider that the Netflix audience is 67% Gen Y, with seven out of ten viewers of both *Orange Is the New Black* and *Arrested Development* belonging to the eighteen-to-thirty-five age segment (Edelhart).

From tots to teens, television viewers today have "expectations—that every episode of every show is available anytime." They "don't know a world where they had to wait for a program," Tara Sorensen, the head of original programming at Amazon Studios, told the *New York Times* (Stelter). "Kids live in an on-demand world and expect to find their shows not

just on TV but everywhere else—online, mobile, and VOD,” agrees Paul Condolora, senior vice-president and general manager for Cartoon Network New Media (Winslow). As Michael Wolff points out in *USA Today*, the significance of this shift in media use habits “is not just that audiences want what they want when they want it,” but also, as audiences get accustomed to bingeing on television content, “the way stories are told” is changing (1B). Or, as Paskin puts it, “when you start making television to satisfy those kinds of [bingeing] habits, you just might end up making a very different kind of television.”

There are additional impacts, including for TV advertisers. The high-quality, binge-worthy TV programming that inspires friend-to-friend recommendations, social buzz, and FOMO on must-see shows is also often free of advertising. For marketers seeking to reach these Gen Z and Gen Y Netflix audiences, the challenge is to integrate brand sponsorships and product placements within the shows themselves, in unobtrusive ways that will not alienate ad-adverse teen viewers on a commercial-free platform. The goal is to create a seamless integration of television and advertising, to achieve what Raymond Williams described forty years ago as the “televisual flow,” where audiences sustain their engagement in a program laced with ambient commercial messaging (89–91). Knowing the target audience is binge watching on Netflix is perhaps half the promotional battle. As Tom Vanderbilt

comments in *Wired*, “once you identify and track how an audience actually interacts with television, it’s only a matter of time until advertisers create ways to sell stuff to that audience.” When done effectively, integrated program sponsorship can be perceived by audiences as beneficial, in that it increases program realism rather than interrupt the viewing experience with irrelevant commercial messages. At MTV, when teen TV shows are released via their tablet app before and after the linear broadcast, a brand such as CoverGirl purchases pre-roll ads to reach Gen Y viewers. Likewise, CoverGirl opts to sponsor an MTV show like *Wait ‘Til Next Year*, embedding its products in the storylines to optimize impressions and ensure the branded message is skip-proof within the ad-free ecosystem of Netflix (Poggi). As a result, in the binge-media era, viewers of all ages are exposed to ever more covert and carefully integrated advertising, making it difficult or impossible for audiences to distinguish television content from marketing message.

### **Conclusion: Cultural Citizenship and Media Binges, Powered by Bespoke Coffee**

*Parks and Rec* all the way. It’s so amazing and it comes back September 26th, so everyone binge watch now to get ready!

–Unidentified teen viewer (Squires)

I just started watching *Parks & Rec* like a week ago, and I'm already on season 3. It's great!

—Teen viewer Lauren Chapin (Squires)

Television has become something to be gorged upon, with tales designed to be told over months consumed in a matter of hours.

—Mary McNamara, *Los Angeles Times*

As it becomes more culturally permissible, viewers young and old are experimenting with and enjoying binge viewing, chiefly on Netflix, where marathon spectatorship is not only encouraged but is the default consumption mode. Far from being passive couch potatoes, however, binge viewers are actively engaged in content discovery and curation, configuring highly customized television programming, and ushering in a productively disruptive transformation in viewer-program relations.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the nuances of binge viewing requires new conceptualizations of engagement that are “cognizant of a transformed socio-technical calculus of platforms, devices, mobility, [and] content” and sufficiently attuned to the different preferences and practices among and between television audience cohorts (Strover and Moner 250). As OTT and VOD trends spread, no longer are television audiences “being fed what the networks are giving them,” observes John Jurgensen in the *Wall Street Journal* (Edwins). What is more, Gen Y and Gen Z viewers use binge-watching

television marathons for what Matt Hills calls “just-in-time fandom”—to catch up and keep up with friends’ viewing habits, to connect and converse with fan communities, and for inspiration and relaxation (178–79). While doing so, these young viewers are developing new expectations for an on-demand media world, practising new modes of cultural citizenship that, as Hermes explains, are “rooted firmly in everyday life worlds . . . including in the realm of popular entertainment” (302). To this end, TV binge watching can be understood as what Hartley calls active “media citizenship,” which involves making sense of television, “not only decoding but also the cultural and critical work of responding, interpreting, talking about or talking back” (*Popular* 58).

Video on demand, or the Netflix effect, is ushering in a mediated culture of instant gratification, infinite entertainment choices, and immersive experiences in televisual fantasies that combine drama and realism in irresistibly fascinating and spectacular ways. Having conditioned audiences to binge watch, Netflix justifies its strategy of producing original content purposely for multi-episodic viewing and releasing an entire season of a show at once as a response to audience preferences, expectations, and “new norms of viewer control” (Neal). This “all the TV you can watch” flat-fee model of media consumption can be compared to the “all you can listen to” streaming music service on Spotify, the “all you can play” monthly gaming subscription model on



GamePop, the “all you can read” e-book membership plan on Scribd, and the “all you can flip through” magazine app NextIssue. This “Netflixification” of media forms encourages consumers to binge watch (or listen, game, or read), to discover and explore new digital cultural productions, and to share the experience online with all their iFriends. At the same time, young consumers’ preferences and media practices influence television program design and distribution greatly, as well as video-on-demand platforms, production, and promotions. As José van Dijck reminds us in her work on cultures of connectivity, “it is a common fallacy to think of platforms as merely facilitating networking activities; instead, the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually constitutive” (3).

With such all-you-can-eat media models, it is no wonder that bingeing is emerging quickly as the default “regime of watching,” to borrow a concept from Hartley (*Tele-ology* 213). Such choice abundance in entertainment options means consumers’

must-watch (or must-read or must-listen) lists may stretch to infinity—and the only thing lacking is time. So “because you can’t watch when you’re sleeping,” to help viewers spend more time enjoying all-night marathon video fests, CanalPlay (a Netflix-like VOD service in France) introduced, in December 2013, its newest product: *Insomny coffee*, promoted as “the first coffee that helps you to watch around the clock!” (Diaz). This tongue-in-cheek publicity stunt by Canal+ (designed to create *buzz*, in both the conversational and the caffeinated senses of the word) shipped consumers a sample of the made-to-order coffee blend bundled with a coupon for a free two-month subscription to CanalPlay. Bingeing on coffee and continuous-play TV, the Netflix generation enjoys a hyper-personalized yet socially connected media diet, with all the pleasures of on-demand spectatorship and participatory cultural citizenship, supported by new digital media networks, services, and technologies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Urban Dictionary* defines “screenager” as a teenager who spends the majority of his or her time in front of the computer, usually surfing the net.

<sup>2</sup> Netflix’s “post play” function automatically starts the next episode of a television series unless the viewer presses the pause button.

<sup>3</sup> These statistics were drawn from a 2013 survey involving 550

teens (“StageofLife.com”) and from a 2012 consumer trends study (“Ericsson”).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this fundamental shift from a programming-centred to an audience-centred approach to television production, distribution, and advertising, see Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson’s collection of essays *Television after TV* and Chuck Tryon’s *On-Demand Culture*.

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