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Interventions

On binge-watching: Nine critical propositions

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Proposition 1: Binge-watching is not defined by the number of episodes you watch

For many journalists and scholars, what distinguishes binge-watching from garden variety television viewing is the number of episodes viewed in one sitting. However, the question of what viewers define as 'bingeing' is likely to shift significantly depending on a range of factors, including age, occupation and family situation. What remains stable is that binge-watching is always understood as self-determined viewing: It is the viewer who decides when to watch and what to watch, not the broadcasting schedule. Another key aspect is that binge-watching only happens in relation to serialised formats as opposed to films or one-offs.

Proposition 2: Binge-watching is Netflix's schedule

The television schedule has been theorised as central to the television medium, from Raymond Williams (1974) to John Ellis (1992). So, what does it mean when Netflix highlights, at every juncture, that the schedule (or its absence) is precisely what sets it apart from television? BBC iPlayer, Hulu or HBO Go may allow for self-scheduled viewing, but the way programming is disseminated remains contingent on the

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television schedule (with weekly episodes published only after they air on television). Netflix, on the other hand, introduced the full drop-release 'binge model' as its publication model, setting itself apart from linear television. What this implies is that Netflix has a specific idea of how it should be watched: as insulated flow (Perks, 2015: xxii–xxvii). Rather than going back to the home page and making a deliberate choice (as was the case with Amazon Video until recently), the post-play function takes us directly to the next episode. The 'skip intro' function even allows us to make the narrative flow feel more seamless. Where the schedule 'explains' to us how television needs to be watched, one programme after another, Netflix explains how it needs to be watched via insulated flow.

Proposition 3: Netflix's use of binge-watching is historically situated

Netflix builds on the history of ancillary technologies on television, which has highlighted giving audiences 'control' over scheduling (Dawson, 2008: 8–43). Embedded in neo-liberal discourses, this control is usually bought and paid for with the various ancillary technologies to television that allow for self-determined viewing (VCRs, DVD players, DVRs) outside of the broadcasting schedule. Implicit here is the search for what Jason Jacobs (2011) terms a 'pure' text, a serialised text without the 'pollution' of linear television schedules in the form of ad breaks, teasers or other promotional material. Netflix's use of binge-watching as a structural feature highlights this supposed textual purity.

Proposition 4: For Netflix, the 'binge model' serves to position it as transnational broadcaster

Netflix's binge model not only indicates insulated flow as a mode of viewing but also is a publication model that allows Netflix to significantly reduce time lags via simultaneous transnational publication of its in-house productions. This enables social media communication among viewers on a global scale. As Jean Chalaby (2005: 8–9) notes, national time in accordance with the organisation of national television often makes it more difficult for transnational broadcasters to integrate into nation-based television cultures. The reliance of Netflix on binge-watching and self-scheduling makes it easier to integrate into national media systems and viewers' media habits and to position it as a transnational broadcaster.

Proposition 5: Binge-watching repurposes problematic gender and racial dynamics

While research has explored the ways in which Netflix's 'algorithmic determinism' reproduces stereotypical identity categories based on reductive assumptions about race, gender and viewing preference (Arnold, 2016: 56–58), more work is required on the gendered and racialised dimensions of binge-watching. To what extent does the 'user-

directed' pull of a show, where 'each episode becomes a new level to be unlocked' (Poniewozik, 2015), depend on dominant gender and racial tropes? It is notable that a diverse range of Netflix hit series, from teen drama *13 Reasons Why* (2017) to true crime blockbuster *Making a Murderer* (2015), turn on the trope of the dead pretty White girl, with Caucasian male protagonists as the active heroes. In these texts, the calculated capture of audience attention through the use of cliffhangers and plot twists is designed to encourage viewers to hit 'play next episode' and is often dependent on familiar gendered scenarios. It is interesting to consider how the binge-able text – in which well-worn themes are extended across several episodes – allows scholars to freshly observe the problematic gendered and racialised mechanics of TV programmes.

Proposition 6: Temporality is key to the affective dynamics of binge-watching

Although binge-watching might evoke notions of longevity, duration and endurance, it also points to the reduced attention spans that allegedly characterise the age of the internet (Atkinson in Matrix, 2014: 130). Traditionally, network television's long-running series tend to consist of at least 22 episodes per season and therefore require a longer, ongoing commitment (Atkinson in Matrix, 2014: 130–131). By contrast, long-form bingeable series – following the model of 'quality' TV in the TV III era – are shorter, and it is only the act of watching hour after consecutive hour in short blocks of time that makes them *feel* longer and more intense. While it has been claimed that the long-form allows for 'more storytelling, more richness' (Sarandos in McCormick, 2015: 102), it is important to question whether the immersive long-form necessarily leads to more in-depth storytelling or critical reflection on the part of viewers.

Proposition 7: Binge-watching is a key form of biopolitical production

The typical binge watcher has frequently been depicted as an overexcitable viewer, whose rapt absorption in a series requires them to override essential biological requirements, such as eating or sleeping. In a 2015 publicity campaign (Netflix, 2015), Netflix playfully acknowledged the 'problem' of sleep by instructing viewers how to make their own 'sleep detecting' socks, which automatically pause a show when the wearer falls asleep. While this campaign pokes light-hearted fun at sleep as an impediment to the pleasures of bingeing, the endeavour to colonise sleep is at the heart of Netflix's business model. As CEO Reed Hastings commented recently, Netflix's biggest competitor is not 'Amazon Video . . . YouTube' or broadcast television, but rather the human need for sleep: 'when you watch a show from Netflix and you get addicted to it, you stay up late at night. We're competing with sleep, on the margin . . . it's a very large pool of time' (Hastings in Hern, 2017). Thus, the binge model is a key form of biopolitical production, which contributes to the wider cultural 'erosion of sleep' in a 24/7 world of round-the-clock consumption (Crary, 2014: 11).

Proposition 8: The quick-hit intensities of 'switched-on' binge culture coexist with opportunities for 'zoning out'

While the new landscape of streaming TV platforms has emphasised high-intensity forms of viewer engagement, it has also seen the rise of low-intensity formats and viewing practices, which create opportunities for viewers to zone out. Capitalising on the spike in interest in 'slow' culture, Netflix in 2016 acquired the Norwegian, *Slow TV* series (2009–16): extremely long-form episodes of mundane events such as knitting and train rides. Similarly, the 'siesta video platform' Napflix encourages viewers to actively curate their viewing atmospheres and content so as to carve out spaces of restorative calm. If scholarship in television studies has tended to emphasise the more affectively gripping and cognitively demanding forms of 'complex TV' (Mittell, 2015) in an era of binge-watching, it is vital to recognise the continuing relevance of what Derek Kompare calls 'banal television' in this context: a form of viewing which is comforting rather than entertaining, 'habitual, rather than compelling' (2009: 56). Thus, in a binge culture, the banal pleasures of zoning out coexist with – and play an increasingly strategic role in maintaining – the intensive pleasures of switched-on viewing.

Proposition 9: Finally, binge-watching is a central part of wider listicle culture

Social media networks abound with lists and listing. As Liam Cole Young has argued, while listing is 'an ancient technique', the list seems 'almost paradigmatic' of digital culture: 'the zeitgeist in a Buzzfeed listicle' (2017: 12). Not only is listing an inherent part of Netflix's curation of TV programmes, it is also central to how people make sense of the activity of binge-watching. This ritual puts an emphasis on completing series quickly, accumulating them as prized objects to be discussed and 'spoiled' on social media forums. In a culture obsessed with listing, data flows and the snowballing of affective judgement and response, it is no surprise that binge-watching has emerged as the idealised mode of consumption. What is perhaps most important for TV scholars to consider is the operative status of binge-watching and how it is shaping viewing protocols in relation to a wider media ecosystem concerned with the generation of 'clicks, likes and shares' (Young, 2017: 121).

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