People are watching People are watching TV in new ways. The couch potato, once a fixture of talk show ridicule, op-ed disapproval and man-caves everywhere, has slipped into obscurity.

We're not sure where he went. He just did. The "channel surfer" has also disappeared. That twitchy creature, dashing from Reader's Poll one entertainment assignment to another, he too has left us. Gone. Do you binge-watch TV?

passionately.



position. And they are watching lots of TV, big chunks of continuous TV, entire seasons in a single week. No longer barely conscious and amphetamineedgy, these people are staying put, paying attention, watching skillfully and

What we have instead are highly sentient people watching TV in an upright

NETFLIX

The weird thing is that when we ask people to describe what they are doing, they say they are "binge-viewing." "Binge-viewing," though? Not very flattering. It makes them sound like they

The truth is otherwise. First finding: people are not watching predicable shows

with happy windups by the end of each episode. They are not watching junk

TV. They are watching great TV: "House of Cards" and "Orange Is the New

expect to wake from a stupor covered in junk food and regret.

Black." Second finding: nothing escapes them. The ethnographic interviews showed us viewers who are alert to the fine details. People are committing to the narrative even as they second-guess casting decisions and creative philosophies. These viewers are keen.

The hidden fact of the matter is that TV got better. Against the odds. In the very face of sanctimonious criticism from industry regulators who have

In point of fact people are not bingeing. They are feasting.

Live Stat Viewers have watched

declared it a wasteland. By this reckoning, TV was a cultural sinkhole. It could

only get worse, drawing American culture downwards into mediocrity.

of TV since you opened this browser.

Irony or irony, TV got better partly because it escaped the stupefying control of

ratings and regulations. Now the difficult men and the brilliant women of cable

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could go places TV had never gone before. While experts and intellectuals scolded it for its failings, TV began an exploration of new dramatic possibilities. Quite suddenly, a series of virtuous cycles unfolded. Good TV created smarter viewers. Smarter viewers in turn made for better TV. Good TV created smarter writers who in turn made for better TV. Good TV created better critics who in

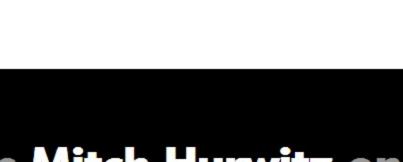
turn made for better TV. Opposers threatened us with a descent into bad. TV somehow managed an ascent into better. Even Hollywood says so. Look at the migration of talent. Bona fide movie stars are prepared to make TV because that's where real creative opportunities now lie. Arrested Development's Mitch Hurwitz on How TV is Changing

Video Interview

They are feasting.

In point of fact people are not bingeing.

The creator of a network-comedy-gone-Netflix comments on the industry that got better

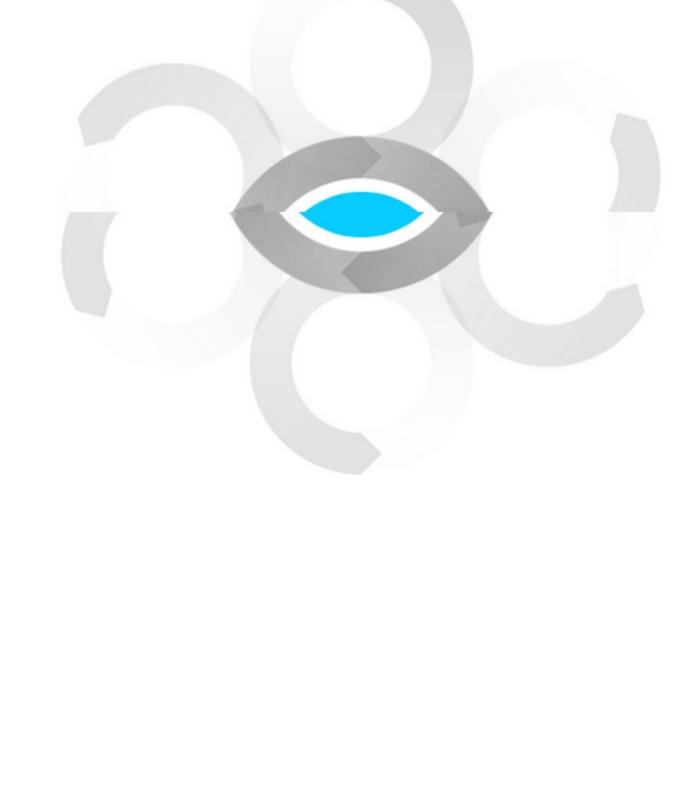


Creator of Arrested Development

The Virtuous Cycles of Captivating TV

Author Grant McCracken discusses TV's turn for the better. Press play for audio.

Interactive Audio



do it for the purposes of mischief and play, happily accusing one another of being "just like Lindsay on 'Arrested Development." They do it for philosophical purposes, wondering in some cases, "What would Piper from 'Orange Is the New Black' do?" But most of all, they are flexing critical skills and augmenting deeper knowledge and mastery of this once disdained medium called television.

This puts paid to the intellectual's favorite idea that TV creates "anomie" and

"alienation," that it isolates Americans from one another. Wrong. Americans

may watch TV alone, but they do so to access a set of shared topics. And not

just shared topics but shared languages. We talked to a mother and teenage

The new technology stepped up. Netflix evolved feverishly to aid and abet the

new TV, and it's possible to get the best shows anywhere at any time. Viewers

of "flipping around," settling for "whatever's on." Now we have access to

As TV got better, it became more social. This was one of the revelations of

intellectual purposes, so that they could take a show apart scene by scene. They

Netflix research on streaming. We saw people watching TV together for

virtually everything captured on film and video. Now we could feast.

were no longer captive of good enough. Thus ended the time-honored practice

daughter, people who have a contested relationship of the kind common to adolescence, people who sometimes have difficulty finding one another in conversation. (There are several identity issues at issue, especially "you're not the boss of me.") But when watching the new TV, and characters you can conjure with, certain conversations become possible. Topics once impossible now flourish. Shows were increasing cognition in viewers. In the place of single story line, TV narratives were taking on new complexity. Some shows were even engaging in virtually secret messaging. Only the most

making running gags more complicated and dramatic subtleties more embedded with the knowledge that viewers could re-watch episodes. TV once worked hard to protect the viewer from anything that looked mysterious. Now mystery was OK.

TV became more inclusive. Once preoccupied with nuclear families, white

picket fences and stunned Protestants, it began to acknowledge families that

were ethnic, gay, divorced, melded, blended, adopting and variously multiple.

dedicated viewers could discover the intricate plotlines. Producers were actually

TV actually started to engage in new risk-taking. This was the work of competition within a community of difficult men and brilliant women. If you weren't going to try it, someone else would. This relieved us of having to "play

it safe." In one famous, formative experiment, a network tried putting some

Reality TV is the new favorite target for intellectual disdain. But you might say

this is a popular medium deliberately giving up control in order to capture

something more interesting than the genre and existing story engines could

In another era, "Dr. Exposition" was a great dolt who, in a conventional show

deliver. And TV ended up giving us something much more daring that

anything intellectuals have ever risked. Risk? No, see, they have tenure.

kids in a house with cameras running. Hey presto, Reality TV.

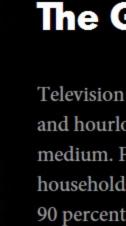
or movie, joins the proceedings whenever things get complicated. In order to explain everything. These days we don't need Dr. Exposition. Unlike previous generations we know a thing or two about TV content and production. The more complicated the better. Let's have at it. (Plus, we know they're not coming back for us.)

Interactive Timeline

1940

#TVtalk on Twitter

The most talked about shows by genre



Late 1940s - Early 1960s The Golden Age

Television gains popularity nationwide with variety shows and hourlong drama series at the forefront of the new medium. From 1950 to 1960, the number of American households with a television set climbs from 9 percent to 90 percent and the demand for quality content increases.

killing characters because they can, because it's good for the narrative and

because they are worried we might just be sitting there, a little too

1960 ----

Milestones in TV history

complacently. Couch potato, awake!

Perhaps the biggest change is the death of the old rule that read: Bad things won't happen to good people. This was a founding TV bargain. Any character who looked like an exemplar of any kind was out of harm's reach. TV is now prepared to break this rule. To be sure, characters sometimes die because actors want to leave a show. But our difficult men and brilliant women are sometimes

TV has become more irreverent and when necessary scatological. Strangely, the Trojan horse proved to be the cartoon. Out of the mouths of babes ... came the strangest, most transgressive things. TV had annexed the vulgar. TV got "cringier." Now we are treated to a succession of characters who have a gift for doing the wrong thing, for making a spectacle of themselves. This is TV

excavating everyday life in pursuit of rules to break. TV goes all sociological! In some ways, this is a simple story. It's a medium growing up, systematically breaking the old rules and opening up new terrains in the search for new

dramatic and comedic territory. More broadly, this is popular culture becoming culture, plain and simple. Once a "wasteland," once a "guilty pleasure," TV is becoming, um, good. We continue to torment ourselves with the idea that it is merely entertainment, something beneath our dignity. We can't help thinking we ought to apologize for all those viewing hours. And now, courtesy of Netflix, we watch great stretches of TV, entire seasons in a week well, clearly an apology is called for! Think of this as the last gasp of the old order, Minerva's famous owl taking wing at dusk. This is the last message beamed from the old TV. The critics were wrong. TV got better. As it got better, viewers, writers and

critics got better. And as it happened, American culture rose. (If you're a culture creative, I hope you are factoring this in.) We haven't quite come to terms with this radical change. We insist on calling it "bingeing." But is it

bingeing? No, it's feasting. This program is produced by the Advertising Department of WIRED in collaboration with NETFLIX, Inc.