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Just One More: How Journalists Frame Binge Watching

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Abstract:

“Binge watching” is a term associated with multiple practices of serial narrative consumption afforded by digital infrastructures. This paper tracks the normalization of the term “binge watching” in the press. I look at the archives of *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, *Slate*, and the criticism of several prominent journalists from the 1980s to 2016 to trace the phrase and its evolving social relevance. I find that for journalists, the episode, not the hour is the fundamental unit of the “binge watch”. Journalists participated in the construction of “binge watching” as an all-consuming experience that takes place at the expense of daily life. At the same time, they contradicted this construction by using the term to represent practices of serial media consumption that fit seamlessly within existing patterns of work and leisure.

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Introduction

In an episode of the TV comedy *Portlandia*, a young couple about to go out for a social evening find themselves hopelessly sucked in by episode after episode of *Battlestar Galactica*. They gradually abandon any engagement with the world outside the show, skipping their social plans, ignoring their ringing phones, and abandoning their jobs. They are jolted out of the world of the show twice, once when their power is cut off and once when they finally watch the last episode, and in both instances they are absolutely devoted to returning. This skit was generally understood to represent binge watching in a nutshell, though taken to the absolute extreme for comedic effect.

If we attempt to extract a definition of binge watching from this clip, we might come up with something like this: Binge watching is an experience of total immersion. All other responsibilities, activities, and social connections are abandoned, as are washing and dressing. It begins with the first episode and ends with the last—no episodes are skipped

or postponed, and the duration of the binge watch is the duration of the content. As such, it takes place outside of normal time—it is not restricted to the evening, like primetime viewing. The watcher enters something like a different state of consciousness and is increasingly unaware of time passing outside the show. The length of the content is the only time that matters.

Aspects of this image of binge watching appeared in journalistic coverage more than ten years before this show aired. In 2005, a *New York Times* article appropriately titled “Lost Weekend” framed “binge watching” in precisely the same way. Binge watching was described as an experience of intense excitement distinct from everyday life, whose acolytes dedicated time to it on the weekend (even during the day) rather than in primetime, craved immediate gratification, turned down social invitations, didn’t eat, and stayed in their pajamas. These viewers both compressed time — “a month’s viewing in one sitting” (Rosenblum, 2005) — and lost track of it. Two years earlier, a *New York Times* article, which referred to the “sickly pleasures” of binge watching had referred to a similar experience: “At this point, it’s 5 in the morning and time to call in sick for work” (Nussbaum, 2003).

Use of the term “binge watching” was sporadic until 2011, when it exploded into the popular conversation, inspiring hundreds of news articles over the next five years. This paper tracks the normalization of the term “binge watching” (along with related terms “binge viewing” and “bingeing”) in the press. I look at the archives of *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, *Slate*,

and the criticism of Pulitzer prize-winner Emily Nussbaum, from the 1980s to Feb 2016, in order to trace the phrase and its evolving social relevance and meaning. In this paper, I argue that a close examination of binge watching's coverage charts the shifts in the discourse over time as journalists react to a "new" medium (streaming video) and its multiple associated consumer practices. The term itself moved out of niche usage in 2011 to become a novelty and a news story. It received widespread news coverage as an emergent practice between 2012 and 2015, and became normalized by late 2015.

Many journalistic pieces published during this period contain journalists' own reflections on their experiences of what they called binge watching, and consider its experiential and social/cultural meanings. They emphasize number of episodes watched rather than number of hours spent in serial media consumption. They frame the binge watch as all-consuming while at the same time presenting multiple examples of more moderate practices. Their construction of the binge watch is a product of an environment in which media texts are digital and immediately available on multiple services, moving between services as a product of shifting license agreements rather than inherent properties of distinct media technologies. What comes to constitute a binge watch for journalists is also deeply rooted in historical conceptions of the television industry and journalists' roles as entertainment critics. Journalists evaluate "binge watching" in relation to its perceived effect on social bonds and labor for capitalism. They value binge watching more when it produces a shared experience and worry about the loss of "the water cooler effect", which draws from older ideals of broadcast media as a source of common culture. They worry about self-control and the seductive power of serial narrative. They analyze the aesthetic

impact of binge watching, and restrict their discussion to certain professionally produced serial narratives in ways that are very much shaped by their roles as entertainment critics.

By looking at how journalists' definitions change over time, we can better understand the practices of binge watching as a collection of viewing patterns with historical roots. They allow us to adopt a perspective grounded in the cultural moment within which these viewing practices were conceived.

Where does the term binge watching come from and what does it mean? Journalists, scholars, media producers, and fans co-create multiple definitions of the term and dispute them even as they use them. Journalists quote scholars; scholars quote the press; producers listen and engage with both in a feedback loop. Although the term itself has been critiqued by scholars, no one has yet traced the evolution of the term in journalistic discourse. By isolating one strand in this discourse—journalistic coverage—we can distinguish between the historically specific term “binge watching” and the diverse collection of serial media consumption practices with which it is associated.

We can see evidence of the scholarly and journalistic feedback loop noted above in Matthew Pittman and Kim Sheehan's (2013) work applying uses and gratifications theory to binge watching. They noted that multiple definitions of “binge watching” exist, and they chose to work with Netflix's definition at the time of their writing. Pittman and Sheehan (2013) used press reports on binge watching to generate a list of “bingeable” shows, on which they based part of their survey. In their work, therefore, concepts

migrated from public relations and from news coverage and became embedded in academic research.

We see another example of explicit conversation between journalists and media scholars in a piece by scholar Sidneye Matrix (2014) in which she both addressed journalistic discourse around binge watching and participated in some of its concerns. One section of her paper, which argued that binge watching enabled a kind of participatory citizenship for young people, functioned as a kind of rebuttal to a quote Matrix (2014) included from the *Los Angeles Times*, “As more people turn to Netflix to catch up, . . . the social element of television, that infamous water-cooler factor, is the first casualty.”

Matrix (2014) cited journalistic accounts of young people’s binge watching practices as evidence of those practices, and the article as a whole was peppered with quotes from the news and from producers like Netflix’s Beau Willimon. Her primary concern was young people’s media use, and she observed that “binge watching” had not been accompanied by the usual stream of articles focusing specifically on the dangers of young people’s media consumption, speculating that this may have been the result of a lack of available data. She engaged multiple themes prominent in the journalistic discourse of binge watching: the tongue-in-cheek use of the idea of bingeing as addiction, the concern about binge watching as an indulgence, and the valorization of the water-cooler conversation about television.

In *Legitimizing Television*, Newman and Levine (2012) note that show producers are sometimes in direct conversation with TV scholarship, as in the case of *Heroes*. There is evidently also a direct conversation between academics, producers and journalists in defining and using the term “binge watching”. We need an empirically grounded approach to understanding the emergence of the concept of binge watching so that discussions on the topic don’t emerge from what is clearly a discursive feedback loop.

New Media

If we are going to understand viewing practices today, we must understand binge watching. How people behave when they have access to a shifting assemblage of media content that they can search and access almost instantaneously has implications beyond the television industry, however we now define television.

“Binge watching” emerged as a term for the practices associated with new distribution media that allowed viewers to watch video outside the TV broadcast schedule, including VCR, TiVo, DVD, and streaming video. These technologies increasingly facilitated the bundling together and consumption of sequential units of the same artistic production, such as an entire season of one TV show.

Both these new media technologies and the practices that they afford are part of a broader landscape of digital seriality. Media scholars Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann (2016) remark that new iterations of serial media are often presented within a logic of inclusion and subordination of older serial content. For example, new video game

consoles such as Nintendo Wii U include the newest games, their predecessors, and other forms of digital media content like Netflix and Twitch. These options for serial media consumption are laid out spatially in columns and rows and are all simultaneously available. In digitizing media, we move towards what Lev Manovich (2001) called a “database logic” in which text-based searching and almost immediate access to serial media create affordances for changes in media consumption practices. Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2016) framed binge viewing as an option emerging from digital infrastructures as users choose “when and how fast they will consume a series.”

The introduction of new media technologies often ignites polarizing debates about the utopian possibilities and potential threats that would accompany the adoption of such technologies. On the one hand, new media are recurrently lauded as evidence of social progress, and champions of the new apparatus often proclaim a revolutionizing effect that such a device—such as the Internet, the radio or the telegraph—might have on society. Yet, on the other hand, critics of such advances worry that society will be corrupted or that social relations will erode or some other cataclysm will result. Paul Virilio (1999) pointed out that every new technology brings with it not only promises, but an accompanying accident, such as the train wreck with the locomotive or the network-wide crash with the Internet. Social anxieties or utopian dreams about emerging media have historically been pinned to a particular gadget or software: video games will make kids violent; social media will liberate nations; access to the Internet will lead to universal education; television will bring high culture to the masses. Is this the case for binge

watching and streaming services? In the following sections we will look at how journalists frame various answers to this question.

Definitions and Discourse

Between 2011 and 2015, “binge watching” became fashionable. Eminent figures declared themselves to be binge watchers, including both U.S. President Barack Obama and former U.S. President Bill Clinton. Full seasons of television shows were shown at SXSW and the Sundance Film Festival for binge watchers. Journalists described their own binge watching as “like going to a museum – it enriches me.” *House of Cards* producer Beau Willimon compared his “bingeable” work to a sonnet, a play, a novel, and a symphony, all of which have traditionally been considered high culture (Kornhaber, 2014). Articles on binge watching also described shows as giving insight into the human condition or into important political or social issues generally considered “hard news.” *Time* magazine published, “Binge-Watching Picks for Edward Snowden” in May of 2014. The British dictionary *Collins* reported that use of the term “binge-watch” rose 200% in 2015 and declared “binge-watch” to be the Word of the Year (Flood, 2015).

A search of the ProQuest database of newspapers for articles using the terms “binge watching” or “binge viewing” returned over 5000 articles published in more than 98 different newspapers between 1984 and 2016. Between 1984 and 2012, there were 52 articles mentioning these two terms — slightly fewer than the 57 articles published during the same period using the term “binge reading.” In 2012, there were 76, including a major feature article in *The Wall Street Journal*, and the debate about a binge watching

“pandemic” which began in *Slate* and sparked at least one article written in response in another periodical. In 2013 there were 608, in 2014, 1359, in 2015 there were 1808, and between January and August 2016 there were 1366. Database search results can vary, and therefore these numbers must be taken as approximate. Even so, they point to a dramatic expansion of coverage. Clearly, binge watching was news.

Headlines and excerpts from these articles show that journalists made no particular effort to define “binge watching” or “binge viewing” during the first thirteen years of coverage. Articles that focused on the DVD characterized binge watching as a “new” practice but others treated it as unremarkable. Definitions cropped up in 2011. In 2012, journalists assumed with greater frequency that the terms binge watching and binge viewing might not be familiar to their readers. At least 22 of 76 articles ProQuest returned for 2012 included a stab at a definition, beginning with the following example from Nicole Rogers in March 2012, “I’ve heard it called binge viewing ... (what would that be, consuming four or more episodes of the same show in one sitting; three if you’re a woman? For me, it’s anything more than two in a row)” (Rogers, 2012). In this definition we see both a reference to binge viewing as a term that has been talked about and confusion about what that term actually means.

This confusion did not resolve as quickly as might have been expected. Two years later, journalists had yet to settle on a consistent definition of binge watching. It was “the practice of watching multiple episodes of a television series back-to-back” (Soojung-kim Pang, 2014) or “devouring multiple episodes at a time” (Sharma, 2014). Definitions

consistently emphasized episodes, not time, but sources differed on whether the episodes had to be consumed in a single sitting. How many episodes constituted a binge varied, with Netflix’s own estimate of 2.4 episodes coming in on the low side. In an *Atlantic* article the magazine’s staff concluded that binge watch meant “to watch at least four episodes of a television program, typically a drama, in one sitting (bathroom breaks and quick kitchen snack runs excepted) through an on-demand service or DVDs, often at the expense of other perceived responsibilities in a way that can cause guilt” (Feeney, 2014).

By the end of that year, “watching a number of episodes of the same series in one sitting — was becoming a regular behavior among adults who stream television online” (Steel, 2014). In early 2015, bingeing was “the unappetizing name given to watching (or in the case of podcasts, listening to) multiple episodes in a single sitting” (Rosman, 2015).

More recently, however, binge watching seems to have become so commonplace that journalists no longer seem obliged to provide a definition of the term. While, over the course of 2013 and 2014, there were a number of popular news articles in which the term was defined, definitions trail off in early 2015. In a piece in later 2015, one critic even declared, perhaps preemptively, “Sure, streaming services have been around for ages; bingeing is so old hat we’ve stopped calling it that” (Thomas, 2015).

By mid-2016, the term binge watching had been normalized. In 334 articles using the term binge watching or binge viewing published from June to August of 2016, definitions had almost completely vanished. Binge watching rather than binge viewing was

consistently used. The term was no longer set off with quotation marks, with the exception of a short spate of articles covering a study on TV watching and blood clots. Binge watching was no longer cast as "new" but as "commonplace" (Jaramillo, 2016), "a norm" (Overly, 2016), and something to which viewers are "accustomed" (Sandomir, 2016).

“Binge” was frequently paired, especially in early coverage, with “marathon” and “addiction.” It exists midway between them on a spectrum of self-control and intention. “Marathon” implies dedication, discipline and training, “addiction” represents the opposite extreme, a surrender of self-control to a substance.

“Binge” implies an excessive consumption of a substance that is acceptable or even necessary in moderation. People binge eat, drink, and shop. “Addiction” is more frequently associated with more stigmatized substances, some of which are illegal. A person can be a cocaine addict, or a heroin addict. One is a behavior and the other is an identity. For example, a college student who binge drinks may be perceived as simply going through a stage of life. A college student who is addicted to cocaine is perceived as needing significantly more intervention. Even when you apply the two words to the same stigmatized substance, the distinction is present. Also, an individual binge, unlike an addiction, is finite. It may end involuntarily (as in the case of the *Portlandia* clip, in which the supply of episodes was exhausted) or voluntarily, as a result of satiation, but a binge always comes to an end. In its draft additions of 2006, the Oxford English Dictionary defined binge as "a bout of overindulgence; an instance of engaging in a

particular activity (esp. eating) to excess (cf. BINGE EATING n.).” “Bout” and “instance” point to the finite nature of the binge, and the use of the word “over” in “overindulgence” points to an excess of something fundamentally permissible. “Binge watching,” therefore, is not as grave a matter as “television addiction,” a term used by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi in a 2002 article in *Scientific American*.

Multiple Practices

Arts and entertainment critics provided first person accounts of their experiences of “binge watching.” Some recounted their experience with the deeply immersive lengthy surrender of consciousness exemplified by the *Portlandia* clip.

Many reviewers reported having their consciousness overtaken by a show, and when it was part of a planned session they could find it very pleasurable. Reviewers described certain binges as similar to dreams, fugues, poems, or eight-hour works of Dadaist art. Two reviewers described bingeing the fourth season of “Arrested Development” as “a roofie circle” (Stephenson, 2013). Watching “Breaking Bad” outside the prime-time schedule became an “imagistic poem,” detached from episodes, in which images from first seasons and last seasons echoed one another. In February 2010, Nussbaum describes the experience of watching *Lost* in a binge with a newborn and experiencing it while “up at 2 AM, 4 AM, and 6 AM ... less as a story than as a loopy, unforgettable dream, the kind that alienates you from strangers when you try to explain the damn thing” (Nussbaum, 2010). In the same year, she described watching hundreds of episodes of *Law and Order* in “fugue-state binges during a particularly exhausted period in my last

pregnancy.” Maureen O’Connor observed her boyfriend slipping “back into the comfortable fugue of Netflix absorption” (O’Connor, 2003). James Poniewozik described binge watching as producing “a dynamic that I call ‘The Suck’: that narcotic, tidal feeling of getting drawn into a show and letting it wash over you for hours” (Poniewozik, 2015).

However, while journalists continued to frame binge watching as irresistibly compelling and immersive, their use of bingeing in articles not focused on the binge itself demonstrated a wide range of behaviors and an ability to fit “binge watching” neatly into their available free time.

Journalists writing for *The Atlantic* applied the term “binge” to a broad set of media consumption practices, including some that seemed the pattern of restraint. Three reviewers spent an hour listening to an album and watching the associated music videos (Feeney, Fetters and Kornhaber, 2013). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) spent a five-hour train ride reading the work of a particular comic book author. A novelist described himself producing three novels to be released in a single year to support “binge reading.” In one case, the magazine’s entertainment editor described himself as engaging in several different practices. He tweeted that he had watched the first *House of Cards* episode on the 12th of February, 2015. On the 28th, he tweeted, “Yo, I’m binge-reviewing House of Cards. A leisurely binge though. Just finished episode 10.” He watched the first season of *House of Cards* over a week, and the second over a long weekend (Kornhaber, 2014). He watched and reviewed the second six episodes of the second season of *Orange is the*

New Black over a week. By the standards of American TV consumption, one or two episodes a night is positively abstemious.

By this definition, drinking a glass of wine every night would be a binge if you eventually finish the bottle. What constitutes a binge in this usage, fundamentally, is sequence. The excess is not located in the time spent, but in the consumption of more than one video, comic book, novel, or episode. It is not a question of duration, but of number. The episode, not the hour, is the fundamental unit of the binge watch. The prominence of unit number over time is directly exhibited in “When Exactly, Does Watching a Lot of Netflix Become a ‘Binge’?,” in which Nolan Feeney (2014) interviews his colleagues at *The Atlantic* to ask them to define a binge and found, to his surprise, that they defined more than three episodes as a binge, whether the episodes last an hour or half an hour.

In an article published in 2014 in *Antenna*, “Binging isn’t Quite the Word,” the television scholar Amanda Lotz argued that the term “binge” was not the right word for her current practices of watching television (Lotz, 2014). She described herself watching shows by season at a leisurely pace, according to her mood and her available leisure time. It appears that while journalists continued to frame binge watching as an all-consuming sporadic event that takes place outside of everyday life, they were simultaneously creating a secondary definition for it, which was attached to the very practices Lotz described.

The focus on episode rather than hour is a significant marker separating the discourse of the “binge-watch” from the discourse of “television addiction”. For Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (2002), the medium trumped the message. The hour, not the episode, was the key measurement of television addiction, as was appropriate for a medium which was organized around time—the broadcast schedule. Defining the “binge watch” around the episode instead suggests a shift in focus—the aura of compulsion remains, but it is individual content, not the medium, which compels. This also helps illuminate why the word binge, with its implicitly finite nature, should have risen in popularity over addiction. The supply of television is never exhausted, but the supply of episodes in a series can be, whether a viewer likes it or not. One can’t run out of television, or finish television. Series may end; television doesn’t.

Value Judgments

Articles like “Get a Life? No Thanks. Just Pass the Remote” (Atlas, 2013), “Life is Streaming Past You” (Teddy, 2014), “Binge Viewing: TV’s Lost Weekends” (Jurgensen, 2012), and “The Dirty Secret of Binge-Watching” (Paskin, 2013) spoke to concerns about what was being sacrificed for binge watching: “life.” When, where, what, and with whom viewers binge watched strongly affected journalistic value judgments about whether it was worth sacrificing “life” for an immersive story world.

The construction of binge watching as overwhelmingly compelling reflects anxieties about intention and control. In 2003, an article in *The New York Times* about TiVo binge watching was distinctly ambivalent. “The most important way that TiVo has changed my

life is that it has given me freedom,” said one interviewee “fresh off a two-hour ‘Simpsons’ binge.” The final quote, however, from another interviewee, was, “the freedom that TiVo allows you may be a bit more fleeting when you find yourself glued to the TV for 12 hours straight, watching a ‘Saved by the Bell’ – ‘Fresh Prince of Bel-Air’ marathon” (St. John, 2003).

Eleven years later, in 2014, staff members of *The Atlantic* agreed that they were more likely to enjoy a binge (rather than feel guilty about it) when they had intended to binge watch, as opposed to intending to watching one episode and then ultimately getting “sucked in” to watch more. When they didn’t intend to do it, they experienced it as “yucky,” as if their “consciousness had been overtaken by the show” and they wanted to get it back (Feeney, 2014).

The value judgments that journalists passed on binge watching were strongly affected by context in ways that reflect American ideas about leisure and class. The ideal binge watch, in terms of journalistic value judgment, was a weekend viewing party of prestige drama organized by young professionals, preferably during a snowstorm. (Winter at home is a consistent theme. The *Daily News* offered winter binge viewing picks. The *New York Times* published an article in the Style section about a cashmere Snuggie perfect for winter binge watches. In quotes about individual binge watches, snowstorms are repeatedly mentioned.) The most stigmatized binge would be a solitary, weekday session of low-brow TV watched without intention. The parental question, “Why are you sitting

indoors on this beautiful day?” mentioned by a journalist in an article pushing against the idea that binge watching should be prestigious, still hovered in the air.

Part of the “life” journalists worried would be sacrificed for binge watching evidently meant “social life.” Journalists were preoccupied with the impact binge watching would have on social bonds both within and without the household. Each new distribution technology brought with it a journalistic comment on the domestic squabbles specific to each. Couples with TiVo were described as fighting over storage space, Netflix DVD subscribers disagreed over the queue, and users of the Solo were warned that it was better for single people since “if you’re watching in Wilmington or changing channels in Chattanooga, whoever is at home trying to watch TV will be forced to surrender to your tastes.”

With streaming, the journalistic conversation shifted from disputing over scarce resources to watching together as a sign of love, and watching apart as “Netflix cheating.” “Streaming a show is intimate: You watch at your own pace, often on a personal computer calibrated for privacy. Sharing that experience, then, is a small act of interpersonal intimacy” (O’Connor, 2013). Streaming is described as having seductions earlier distribution technologies did not. The journalist quoted above, O’Connor, described herself as powerless to resist completing a series alone despite her promises.

The domestic disputes journalists reported shifted from who controlled a limited resource, like the remote, to whether partners and families would experience a show

together or in isolation. Anxieties about solitary binge watching TV later morphed into anxieties about the loss of a public sphere of media consumption where audiences are experiencing the same media events and rituals at the same time.

More recent discussion around binge watching lamented the golden days of the “water cooler”: that idealized time when co-workers gathered on their breaks to chat about the previous night’s media event, whether a political debate, a live TV show, or the latest episode of *Dallas*.

Aesthetics

In 2015, binge watching was simultaneously normal and new. Both producers and critics presumed that practices for consuming streaming television varied but that watching a single show in uninterrupted sequence was mainstream enough that it had to be reckoned with. Critics presumed that binge watching had become such a popular form of TV consumption that it was worthwhile for producers to make the investment to adapt their format and modes of storytelling to appeal to these practices. The result of this investment would be “new”, and potentially aesthetically exciting.

First, a number of articles appeared which discussed producers’ efforts to cater to both binge watchers and “appointment viewers,” referring to the older habit of viewing TV shows as they are aired. For example, a few sources wrote about how the show *Aquarius* was produced with a “clean” version for network broadcast and “blue” version for streaming. This two-pronged approach meant that the show was distributed both at

weekly intervals *and* all at once (Turchiano, 2015). We can infer that binge watching had become normalized by the increasing number of television critics and articles discussing how producers might construct narratives that are specifically adapted to binge watching.

Entertainment critics were consistent in how they described their own experience of binge watching (the “fugue”, the “suck”, the “mind meld”) and agreed that there was something new and distinctive about it. However, they disagreed about what this meant aesthetically. Critics publicly discussed the aesthetic pros and cons of binge watching. Willa Paskin (2015) countered Nussbaum saying, “I think binge-watching steamrolls flaws. It’s like driving down the highway extremely fast. If the scenery is mostly bucolic, the open sewage pit you flew by that one time barely registers.” The same day, also on *Slate.com*, June Thomas wrote in response:

Willa, I agree that Netflix has brainwashed us into believing that creating a show we are willing to watch in one or two butt-numbing sessions is a greater achievement than producing something we’ll commit to coming back to on a regular basis more than 20 times a year. That’s nonsense. Still, watching television did *feel* different to me this year—in part because of Netflix and its would-be rivals. (Thomas, 2015)

Critics concurred that the same show was experienced differently based on the mode of viewing, but they did not always consider one mode to be indisputably better. For example, James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* wrote about two ways one could view the popular show *Breaking Bad*:

The live viewer saw Walter White’s change distended, in slow-motion; little by little, he broke badder and badder, in a way that emphasized the gradual slope of moral compromise. The binger saw him change in time-lapse, in a way that suggested that the tendency to arrogance and evil was in him all along. Neither perception is wrong. In fact, both themes are thoroughly built into the show. But how you watch, in some way, affects the story you see. (Poniewozik, 2015)

In presenting both methods of watching serialized content as equally valid, Poniewozik implicitly accepted them both as normal. In arguing that streaming bingeable TV was a new and aesthetically exciting genre, as he did later in his article, there was never a suggestion that binge watching television presented a social danger.

An article in *The New York Times*, this time by Dave Izkoff, corroborated this new approach to TV production. Izkoff quoted *Daredevil* producer Steven S. DeKnight as saying, “When you’re working on a network show, especially a pilot, the notes you get are, basically, ‘Cram the entire first season into that first episode, so everybody knows what they’re going to get.’ But for Netflix things are different, the exact opposite, in that case the message is to ‘slow things down.’” As Izkoff (2015) concluded, “The Netflix model also means that subsequent episodes don’t have to spend time recapitulating what happened in previous installments.”

James Poniewozik (2015), writing for *The New York Times*, viewed the bingeable show as an entirely new genre of TV with particular conventions and aesthetics. He posited that Netflix producers knew that viewers were willing to watch four episodes to test out a

series, and explained that the first season was akin to the pilot episode. Producers could pack more story into the time that would otherwise have been used on “gimmicks” or recaps. He described *Orange is the New Black* as having “built out arcs for dozens of characters in a mere three seasons.” But in other cases, this could lead to “lethargic, shapeless narratives that rely on The Suck to keep viewers watching sheerly on the sunk-costs principle” (Poniewozik, 2015). To support his claim that streaming bingeable video was a new genre, Poniewozik (2015) linked binge watching to serial novel consumption and also to video games. As he did so, he borrowed from two different discourses of legitimation, blending the respectability of Dickens with the digital cachet of video games.

Critics wrote excitedly about the new aesthetic opportunities that streaming and binge watching allowed. David Sims (2016), in *The Atlantic*, for instance, wrote that there was a lot of repetition in shows, but ultimately argued that “the medium is primed for experimentation more than anything else”. The high value put on the aesthetic consequences of binge watching suggest two things. First, binge watching was not considered a serious social threat — critics don't debate the aesthetics of toxic waste or poisoned water, for example. Second, the content around which discussion centered would be more likely to be material critics were already primed to consider aesthetically valuable.

Conclusion

The wealth of first-person journalist accounts of changing video consumption practices is notable not only for what it contains, but for what it leaves out. The conversation revolves primarily around prestige, professionally-produced shows. In the archives I examined, binge watching is not used to describe, for example, young women’s makeup tutorials on YouTube, pornography, or streaming video produced by online gamers. All of these are popular video entertainment consumed serially, but they are not prestige drama, and they are not material generally considered the purview of entertainment critics. Viewers may exhibit the same consumption practices with this content, but journalists did not cover it as “bingeable”.

The legitimation of television as an aesthetic medium, its connection to digital media, and its critics’ long-standing practices of covering professionally-produced entertainment all supported the development of “binge watching” as a news story. Valorization of work and family connections and anxiety about isolation and health all fit into the particular set of moral judgments around binge watching.

Powerful desires for social bonds and fears that they may be lost, the high value put on self-control and on labor, and intricate gradations in prestige are all on view within the coverage of “binge watching.”

If guilt can spoil a pleasure, then the elaborate architecture of moral judgments journalists have constructed around “binge watching” matters. It matters to them, as they consume

narratives both for pleasure and work, and it matters to us, who participate in the public conversations journalists so highly value.

Journalists helped define and propagate an image of binge watching as an all-consuming experience, an altered state of consciousness. At the same time, they contradicted this definition by using “binge” to refer to slower consumption of serial media at a speed and during times that fit into their existing patterns of work and leisure.

Binge watching arose from an environment in which serial media became available from databases of media content. Users could find content using text-based search queries and could view that content instantly. For scholars interested in studying self-control, these databases present different conditions than the video rental store or the DVD. The video rental store required effort and time to visit and select titles, and the DVD required a premeditated purchase or rental. There is a delay between deciding on a show and watching it with the DVD. DVD playback and the availability of box sets of television shows provided the opportunity for serial, or binge watching, but it was limited to the show or content available on a given DVD. The streaming service, or database presentation of media, represents a progressively larger supply of immediately available distinct content. It reduces the effort and the delay required to satisfy an impulse – consumers can satisfy their impulses immediately – and an equally low barrier to continuing and completing an entire series.

The research on self-control demonstrates the powerful effect that ease of access has on temptation. As Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2016) have pointed out, video narratives are now grouped together on the same platforms with other forms of media under the same conditions of access as digital games, audio narratives, news, and digital media in general, which removes constraints on immediate access to many types of content. As such, the same conditions apply to serial media consumption.

The “database logic” (Manovich, 2001) of digital media offers two incentives to continue with a given series. The first is the pleasure of remaining immersed, which we see expressed in the *Portlandia* clip and journalistic first person accounts. The second is the desire to avoid the effort of choice, which increases with the extent of available selections. In economic terms, choosing an unknown game, show, or book is a risk. Continuing with another of the same kind in a series reduces that risk. The journalists analyzed in this essay who revealed their preferences for “a leisurely binge” benefit from the latter.

The conditions of access afforded by the new media infrastructures that enable binge watching also enable other forms of immersive, serial engagement, such as reading every single article available on the election or scrolling back through photos of an ex on any social media platform. The emphasis on the number of episodes over number of hours in the definition of a binge foregrounds the new importance of seriality of media consumption in this context. The binge is not about time, but about immersion in

seriality—indulging in *just one more* of the same kind of thing, whatever is perceived to be the same kind by the user, in order to continue or complete a series without constraint.

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