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The Value of Binging in Streaming Serials The Rise of the Third Golden Age of Television

Abstract

The text explores the development of television, from broadcasting, through cable television, to streaming, identifying streaming as the culmination of television's third golden age. The author analyzes the economic and technological models of content distribution and their impact on the way series are consumed. A key theme is the comparison of streaming series to books, which allow content to be consumed at any pace and in any order. Particular importance is given to the practice of "binge-watching," as a form of consumption that best meets human cognitive and narrative needs. The text explores the tension between viewer preferences and the strategies of streaming platforms, which often revert to the episodic model for economic reasons. In conclusion, streaming is shown to be the most flexible medium, best suited to diverse ways of consuming audiovisual content.

Key words: TV streaming, binge-watching, media evolution, broadcast television, cable television, TV series

Parole chiave: streaming televisivo, binge-watching, evoluzione dei media, televisione generalista, televisione via cavo, serie televisive

Television is technically a century old – it was invented in the 1920s – but it did not become a mass medium until the late 1940s and early 1950s. It became so popular in that decade, that by the time of the JFK/Nixon debates in 1960, at least 90% of Americans who witnessed that debate saw it on television (the other 10 percent heard it on radio).

But the broadcast model of radio – each broadcast heard at a given time, according to a schedule, with no easy way to hear it again – was adopted by television. The names of the radio networks – CBS, NBC, ABC – were literally adopted by television. So was the economic foundation of broadcast media. Just as in radio, the programming – the news, the sports, the entertainment shows – were provided free of charge. The only cost to consumers was the money needed to buy the radio or the television set. So how did the networks earn their money? They made millions of dollars selling ads, broadcast before, after, and during the programming.

This made broadcast media similar to newspapers and magazines in their economic structure, and very different from books and motion pictures. Newspapers and magazines did, and still do, charge the consumer a price to purchase or subscribe, but they make the lion's share of their income through advertising. In contrast, books and movies cost the consumer money to purchase or see, but they contained little or no advertising (movies have in recent years increased display of ads, but only at the beginning of the movie, not during the film).

The Advent of Cable

Cable television began in the late 1940s and early 1950s as a way of providing television to consumers in areas that were too far away from the broadcasting centers and relay stations to receive the signals. State College in the state of Pennsylvania was too far away from either the big cities of Philadelphia or Pittsburgh to receive their broadcast signals, and cable was the solution for this college town. Though the programming was brought to the people of State College by wires rather than electromagnetic carrier waves, the content was exactly the same, including the commercials. In other words, residents of State College watched the same television programming on CBS, NBC, and ABC as the people in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and their environs.

Original content on cable – programming that differed from broadcast television – began to enter the mainstream in the 1980s, with CNN for news and HBO for movies. At first, the movies shown on HBO were already available in movie theaters. Broadcast media had been including movies in their content since

the 1950s – the “Million Dollar Movie” on Channel 9 in New York City was a personal favorite of mine as a boy back then in New York City, where television consisted of both networks and local broadcasts – but broadcast media, concerned about FCC sanctions,¹ shied away from airing the “R”-rated movies that began appearing in theaters in big cities in the 1960s. HBO established itself and built its consumer base by including those kinds of movies in its programming, and in that sense it was indeed presenting content that could not be seen in broadcast media.

In the 1980s, HBO doubled down on distinguishing itself from broadcast television and began to differentiate itself from movie theaters as well by presenting films produced exclusively for HBO (such as *Murrow* in 1986). Even more significant for its impact on popular culture was its introduction, by the end of the next decade, of television series produced exclusively for HBO, such as *The Sopranos*, whose first episode aired in 1999. By its fourth season in 2002, *The Sopranos* had attracted more than 13 million viewers, and cable as a whole was drawing more viewers than broadcast TV, heralding a new golden age (TV Technology 2002).

The notion of a “golden age” of television indicated that a new kind of television had taken center stage, replacing a previous kind that was no longer on the cutting edge. Broadcast television, which in the 1950s had taken America by storm, finding a place in nine out of ten American homes, had ceded its vaunted imposing cherished position to cable.

The conception and distribution of television series on HBO, and soon after on other cable networks such as Showtime and the USA Network (which began as the Madison Square Garden Sports Network in 1977 and included commercials despite being a cable channel), moved television slightly closer to the book and one of its crucial properties: you could pick it up and read it anytime. A program on traditional broadcast television could be viewed more than once only if it was fortunate enough to be selected for broadcast again as a summer re-run. The introduction of Betamax and VHS in the mid-1970s allowed viewers to record a television show and watch it any time after that, but this required the reviewer to purchase an expensive piece of additional equipment. HBO began to eliminate that need by making episodes of “The Sopranos” and its other shows available to watch more than once a week.

HBO was doing this with more than a dozen shows in 2013, but by then – February 1, 2013, to be exact – Netflix had put up all 13 episodes of what would be the first season of *House of Cards* all at once, and viewable any time and as many

¹ I think the FCC – the Federal Communication Commission – was unconstitutional from the day that it was created in the Communications Act of 1934. It was upheld as constitutional in a Supreme Court decision in *NBC v. the United States* in 1943, but it blatantly violates the First Amendment’s prohibition on the government’s regulation of speech or the press; see Levinson 2006, 2025 for more.

times as the viewer desired. Just as cable had replaced broadcast TV as the most exciting way to watch television, streaming was on the way to doing that to cable.

The Pleasures of Streaming

If we count the beginning of cable television as State College, Pennsylvania, it took half a century for cable to surpass broadcast TV in viewership. Even if we start with CNN and HBO in the early 1980s, it still took about two decades for broadcast television to be pushed into second place. Streaming television, initiated in a major way by Netflix and soon joined by Amazon Prime, Hulu, Apple TV+, Paramount+, and other platforms producing original programming, cut down the time to a little more than ten years. By May 2025, the number of viewers of streaming television exceeded the combined audiences of cable and broadcast television (Hazard Owen 2025; see also Levinson 2009, 2015).

And there were other benefits. The most important is what I would call the benefit of books, which I have already touched upon above. The progress of technology is notoriously uneven. Not every step forward in the evolution of media incorporates all the advantages of its predecessors. The new medium survives and thrives if it is a net gain on what was in use before. It does not have to be a complete gain. Electrical media provided what at the time seemed miraculous: the ability to transmit information from one place to another, regardless of how far apart on the planet, instantly (as the telegraph did and then the telephone did and still does), and then to millions of people at the same time (as the mass media of radio and television do). They were incredible improvements over the previous medium of print. But they also lost some very valuable characteristics that printed media had and still have: texts can be read as quickly or as slowly as desired, and as many times as one wishes.

The book, in particular, is usually divided into chapters, with convenient places to put the book down on the table or back on the shelf if desired. Printed series of news stories that appear in newspapers, and news and fictional stories magazines, do that too, and so did the series that appeared on television (or were listened to on radio). But series on broadcast television were an oddity: they did not allow the viewer to continue to the next chapter, nor to see the episode again until the summer rerun – or often, never again at all. Cable, as we have discussed, improved on that slightly.

Streaming television, however, improved upon that limitation of broadcast TV completely. Books with chapters that could be read at a pace determined by

the reader were, in some way, an expression of what our brains were hardwired to crave. Otherwise, why would television, after two earlier eras, have evolved to do the same as books, offering the same pleasures of pausing for contemplation or speeding ahead to reach the climax of the story?

But the forces of the marketplace, driven not just by what our brains and hearts want, but by the quest to make money, are powerful indeed. As streaming viewership increased during the COVID years, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other streamers noticed that many viewers would pay for a subscription long enough to watch a desired series as quickly as possible and then cancel their subscription to do the same on another platform. All of them, except Netflix, reverted to the broadcast and cable television models of releasing one episode of a series per week. In this way, viewers who subscribed to the streamer to watch a particular series would stay subscribed to the streamer for at least a few months. People like me complained, as I did in my reviews.² But money speaks louder than words. Netflix continues to usually stream all episodes of a new series or a new season of a continuing series all at once (though it sometimes splits a season in half). But Amazon Prime, Apple TV, HBO Max, and all the other streamers dole out the episodes of their series one by one (they occasionally offer three episodes at the beginning of a series).

Yet the memories of television series that debuted with all episodes presented like the chapters of a book remain, or can be experienced again any time on Netflix. And once a season of a series has been released on any of the streaming services, it usually remains online in their entirety, where it can be watched all at once or at any pace the viewer prefers. In other words, once an entire season of a series has been presented one episode at a time – like a series on broadcast television – a kind of magic occurs: the series suddenly becomes like a book, with all its reading properties.

It is easy to forget that, as I pointed out and explained in my doctoral dissertation, *Human Replay: A Theory of the Evolution of Media* (1979),³ written on the eve of cable's breakthrough into hundreds of millions of American homes, media evolve in response to human needs. Among the most fundamental of our needs regarding information is the ability to take it in at the pace that works best for us, that most serves our need to understand and enjoy the stories presented on our screens. Different people have different preferences. Some like to savor each episode before moving on to the next, while others relish getting caught up in an escalating narrative that keeps us awake until the early hours of the morning. Many of us feel both

² See, for example, my reviews of *Your Honor* (on Showtime's streaming service), *The Ark* (SYFY Channel) and *Citadel* (Amazon Prime Video); see Levinson 2020, 2023a, 2023b.

³ I published *Human Replay* as a book (Levinson 2017) with a new page of "Notes from the Author" at the beginning.

of those ways at different times. Streaming television series are a rare medium that satisfies the wide variety of viewing motives and habits that biological evolution has given us.

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Abstrakt

Wartość oglądania seriali w trybie binge-streaming Narodziny trzeciej złotej ery telewizji

Tekst przedstawia rozwój telewizji od nadawania broadcastowego, przez telewizję kablową, aż po streaming, wskazując ten ostatni jako kulminację trzeciej złotej ery telewizji. Autor analizuje ekonomiczne i technologiczne modele dystrybucji treści oraz ich wpływ na sposób odbioru seriali. Kluczowym wątkiem jest porównanie seriali streamingowych do książek, które umożliwiają odbiór treści w dowolnym tempie i kolejności. Szczególne znaczenie przypisano praktykom „binge-watching” jako formie odbioru najlepiej odpowiadającej ludzkim potrzebom poznawczym i narracyjnym. Tekst pokazuje napięcie między preferencjami widzów a strategiami platform streamingowych, które często wracają do modelu odcinkowego z powodów ekonomicznych. W konkluzji streaming zostaje ukazany jako medium najbardziej elastyczne i najlepiej dostosowane do zróżnicowanych sposobów konsumpcji treści audiowizualnych.

Słowa kluczowe: streaming telewizyjny, binge-watching, ewolucja mediów, telewizja broadcastowa, telewizja kablowa, seriale telewizyjne