

# ‘Beyond the box set, could ‘binge watching’ affect how linear TV is scheduled?’

**➤ IT COMES as no surprise that the film and TV Internet streaming service Netflix recently commissioned research into the ‘binge watching’ phenomenon. According to the survey of about 1,500 regular users, more than 60 percent said they indulged in binge watching, which was defined as viewing two to six episodes of one series in a single sitting.**

The fact that Netflix acknowledges that binge watching is definitely a ‘thing’ among customers is hardly news but the practice has become prevalent enough to be cited by the Oxford Dictionary as among 2013’s notable words or expressions. While ‘binge watching’ as a phrase only hit the mainstream consciousness recently, as a habit it’s been around for ages and arises from the human desire to hoard. Not everyone is such a hoarder that they end up on one of those freakish documentaries (you know the sort) but if you visit someone’s home and it’s so minimalist and uncluttered, you can’t help thinking there’s something odd, as if they don’t actually live there.

Binge watching was impossible before the development of VCRs. People could then accumulate unofficial compilations, if they mastered timer settings and the eccentricities of the VideoPlus numbering system. It didn’t seem that TV shows were a big draw in terms of videocassette sales until the late 1980s when you could buy releases of cult shows such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, sometimes before their UK terrestrial screening.

As the technology evolved into DVD, the shelf space required for both shops and homes to keep full seasons of much-loved series reduced substantially and the era of the boxed set came into its own. With the often variable quality of movie franchises, a package of outstanding small-screen fare like *The X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would make a more valued possession than, say, a *Nightmare on Elm Street* collection with all those deteriorating sequels.

## Digi-boxes

With fast broadband the boxed set has now gone completely digital. The ‘box’ term still lingers (like ‘copy and paste’ does in computer software) to describe on-demand TV archives from the major media providers. When it is online and on a flat-rate subscription it’s less of an effort and arguably less expensive to wade through a multi-episode session. You don’t get the nagging guilt of having invested in loads of discs of *The Wire* or *The Killing* only to leave them gathering dust.

Saving something in a personal viewing list for later – as you can do with services such as Netflix – appeals to our

## Ian Calcutt

Despite his dark taste in popular culture (see below) Ian was glad to score only 30% on the psychopathic spectrum – without lying – in Channel 4’s online test released to promote the recent ‘Psychopath Night’. It means he has ‘a heightened awareness of social responsibility and a strong sense of conscience’, apparently.



enduring habit to bookmark, maintain diaries or make scrapbooks. The online world is awash with apps to save web pages for later or store notes in the cloud. I couldn’t do without them now but they are basically just digitised notebooks, and media streaming sites are doing the same kind of thing.

Another significant shift is the perception of TV as being just as valid an art form as film; more so in many cases. I now look at a list of new cinema releases and usually feel the same as I do if I ever catch a glimpse of what songs are in the Top 40 – I have hardly a clue what some of them are and not many look very appealing. But give me a batch of high-calibre grown-up TV drama like *Breaking Bad*, *Hannibal*, *Mad Men*, *Utopia*, *The Fall*, *Southcliffe* or *American Horror Story*, and I won’t be disappointed.

Netflix now makes its own drama series. It started with the acclaimed US remake of *House of Cards* and continued with the revival of another box-set classic, the offbeat comedy *Arrested Development*. In a move that really drew attention to binge watching, it premiered every episode of these on its steaming service at once, which broke the old network model of drip-feeding fresh episodes every week.

Showing bursts of new productions is done on the networks occasionally, maybe for a major four or five-part miniseries that can be strip-scheduled at the same time each night over a week. However, the idea of spewing all dozen or so episodes of a brand new series in one go is a concept that traditional broadcasters will find alien.

The networks all have their internet ‘catch-up’ players, as we tend to call them, but both the BBC and Channel 4, for example, have experimented with premiering content online before its conventional broadcast. In light of this it may not be long before entire drama, comedy or documentary seasons go online for those who want to binge from the outset, while the regular channels slot them into their linear over-the-air schedules for people who prefer to consume in smaller chunks over longer periods.

A dilemma will come with the big shows that everyone likes to talk about. Not live events obviously; I’m thinking more about *Sherlock*, *Broadchurch* or *Doctor Who*, where the ability to avoid spoilers will get tougher if always-connected binge-viewing audiences get all they can watch without the waiting time.

Binge watching might be less unhealthy than its namesakes, binge drinking and binge eating (as long as you don’t spend too much time on the sofa) but this habit is poised to inspire more than simply changes to the dictionary, it’s redefining the TV industry itself ■

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