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**Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences**  
**Doctoral School of Political and Communication Sciences**  
**Study Field: Communication Sciences**

**The Production and Consumption  
of TV Series in the Digital Era**

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**2018**

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## **Keywords:**

TV series, video-on-demand systems, Netflix, narrative structures, binge-watching, post-television, digital consumption

## **Introduction:**

The massive growth of video-on-demand services (VoD) in recent years, as well as the original productions created by these media companies, have brought about a series of phenomena that deeply transform the production, distribution and consumption of TV series. Digital distribution frees this process from the constraints of traditional television, thus maximizing the creative freedom of the production team and making new consumer behaviors possible. In this context, this paper explores recurrent narrative patterns in TV series created for digital distribution, the relation between this type of distribution and binge-watching, as well as the behavioral patterns associated with this form of media consumption.

## **1. TV Series**

Chapter 1 sets out the general coordinates of serialization in media production and briefly explores the history of TV series, from their beginnings in cinema to the quality narratives of the 1990s and 2000s, which produced a fracture between the old television, traditionally associated with passive consumption and low-brow productions, and the new television, targeted towards a young, active, involved audience. At the same time, the chapter examines the complex relationship between television and postmodern aesthetics.

The segment of the paper introduces two major categories of serialized television productions that differ in the degree of conflict closure at the end of each episode: series and serials. Differences between the two categories are essential for the evolution of series in recent years. At the same time, the chapter examines the general principles of serialization and explores the way temporal gaps are used in serialized media productions.

From a historical perspective, the late 1990s caused a change in the production model, but also in the reception of TV series. HBO productions like *Sex and the City* or *The Sopranos* were the first steps of an important paradigm shift in serial television production. From series that often followed narrative simplicity (and were usually based on episodic conflicts) in order to respond to the needs of a passive public, TV production began to address more complex narrative structures, addressed to a younger, educated, active audience that was eager to consume quality media.

In the same sense, the last decade of the XX<sup>th</sup> century also brought changes to the aesthetic paradigm of TV series, or as theorist R. Nelson puts it, created "a new affective order" (Allrath, Gymnich, and Surkamp 2005, 4). This new perspective implies fragmentation and eclecticism, short and intense audio and video segments, non-linearity, and random access to various media – like in the case of online streaming video services such as YouTube, Netflix or Hulu. In fact, all these changes are related to the broader cultural framework of postmodern aesthetics, which has produced important changes in the way producers and audiences likewise perceive serialized television productions.

## **2. The TV Industry**

Chapter 2 describes the evolution of the television industry's operating mechanisms from the 1950s to the popularization of technologies that have given users more control over their own consumption choices: the VCR, the DVD, and the DVR. Amanda Lotz (2014) divides the history of television into three major stages: 1. the network era, which went on from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s, when the television market was dominated by three big companies: CBS, NBC and ABC; 2. the multi-channel transition, defined by a fragmented market and the emergence of niche channels; 3. the post-network era, circumscribed by the digital revolution and the increasing consumer control capabilities.

For most viewers, the experience of television in the network era meant a single television, no remote control, or devices for recording and playback of the content. Even though the emergence of color television was a novelty that has enjoyed tremendous success, the network era implied a certain uniformity in consumption, allowing TV programmers to adapt their content and formats to the needs of a generally homogeneous audience (Lotz 2014, 24). Many of the industry practices established at this stage remained extremely prominent over the multi-channel era, ranging from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. In spite of this, the emergence of new production and distribution technologies has led to the erosion of their role as the main actor in the television industry (Lotz 2014, 25).

According to Derek Kompare (2006b), the VCR functioned as an extension of the film industry in people's homes. It was based on an alternative economic mechanism: instead of selling audiences to companies through advertising, the video tape industry sold products directly to consumers. In this respect, quoting Bernard Miège's work, *The Capitalization of Cultural Production*, the author makes a difference between two cultural production models: the publishing model – used by publishers and music companies, and flow – used in traditional television.

DVDs brought consumers a number of new benefits. The high fidelity picture, which surpassed the qualitative losses associated with television and the VCR, the greater contrast, the wider spectrum of colors, the multi-channel sound led to the rapid adoption of the new technology by movie lovers (Kompare 2006b).

Unlike the VCR, which requires video cassettes to play audio-video content, the DVR takes out the need for physical objects to be handled by the user in the consumption process (Schaeffler 2013). Thus, the DVR produces important mutations in the way users consume television programs: instead of watching productions according to a linear flow, which involves the physical presence of the consumer in front of the screen in certain predetermined time slots, the user interacts with an interface that allows him to access the programs stored on the HDD of the DVR at any time. TiVo, ReplayTV or any other DVR device thus becomes the main television channel for them (Chorianopoulos and Spinellis 2007). In this way, for many users, time-shifting becomes the main mode of consuming television programs.

In *Database as Symbolic Form* (1999), Lev Manovich talks about the database as the main model for content structuring in the digital age. In the eyes of the user, these databases are series of digital objects in which they can operate various actions - opening a file, navigating, searching - which leads to fundamentally different consumer experiences from those of reading a story or watching a movie.

Although the DVR has been called a "VCR on steroids," in the sense that it is a technology which only improves the performance of the previous one (Schaeffler 2013), Derek Kompare claims that such devices are not just improvements to our way of consuming media products, but they are products that force us to reposition in relation to the entire media industry. From this perspective, the DVR, as a new technology, means a departure from the old model where the control is held by media institutions and a rethinking of the user as the center of the entire communication process.

### **3. Video-on-Demand Portals**

Chapter 3 explores the core mechanisms of over-the-top distribution and examines the different types of VoD systems. Also, this section of the paper talks about the shift from an informational flow-based distribution model, to one which focuses on the delivery of texts in multimedia catalogs that follow database aesthetics. The chapter also approaches audience fragmentation in the digital age and VoD recommendation systems. At the same time, the section explores the production, distribution and consumption dynamics of digitally-distributed TV series.

Digital media distribution refers to a series of business models that deliver content over the Internet, in contrast to terrestrial broadcasting, cable, satellite, or disc and tape distribution. In this context, the term Over-The-Top (OTT) refers to those services that distribute audio-visual content through digital technologies directly to user terminals, without any control over content tracking, copyright, or redistribution of the content by the Internet service provider (ISP). Such services are called Over-The-Top because they involve the distribution of audio-visual content over an existing Internet service (Roberts and Muscarella 2015).

Based on their underlying economic mechanisms, we can identify several types of video-on-demand systems:

**a. Subscription VoD (SVoD)**

SVoD services allow users to access any element of their media catalog whenever they want, based on a prepaid monthly subscription. The most common example for such services is Netflix.

**b. Transactional VoDs**

Transactional Video-on-Demand services differ from SVoDs through the fact that the users pay for each product they consume. Example given: iTunes.

**c. Advertising-based VoD services**

These services allow users to access content free of charge. The only condition is that they also have to watch ads. Example: Youtube.

**d. Catch-up TV**

Many TV channels give users the ability to watch programs several hours or days after their initial broadcast via Catch-up TV services. These services give users more freedom, allowing them to choose the most suitable timeframe for viewing.

**e. Near VoD**

Near Video-on-Demand (NVoD) systems simultaneously deliver audio-video content on several channels, with output being programmed at certain intervals (eg 10 or 20 minutes).

**f. Push Video-on-Demand**

These services are used to prevent media content playback problems that may occur in the absence of enough streaming bandwidth. They record certain programs on a DVR automatically. By storing files locally, the audio-visual files can be played without buffering.

**g. Hybrid models**



Some content providers try to find viable business models by combining certain features of different VoD types. Hulu offers its users the choice between a cheaper, but advertising-based subscription, and a more expensive one, which does not play ads.

Smith and Telang (2016, 25-26) summarize the production and distribution features that differentiate SVoD from traditional television using the Netflix example:

- a new way to greenlight content, based on information on user behavior data as opposed to expensive pilot episodes,
- a new type of content distribution, based on personalized "channels" as opposed to traditional channels,
- a new, less restrictive perspective on content production, where creators no longer have to comply with the rigors of 30 or 60 minutes slots and commercial breaks,
- new creative freedoms for screenwriters,
- a new way to combat piracy, based on user comfort, as opposed to control,
- a more efficient way to monetize content, based on a media catalog, as opposed to the transactions of individual products.

Of all the types of VoD systems, the largest market share is held by those based on monthly subscriptions and, in particular, by Netflix. The fundamental difference between the distribution model used by SVoD services and the publishing model lies in the fact that such portals do not provide access to individual products, but to a media products catalog. According to Gomez-Uribe and Hunt (2015), one of the great benefits of catalog-based distribution is the fact that it may contain products that address a wide range of interests and tastes, including niche products that address small consumer groups. The distribution of media products through catalogs rather than continuous narratives (as in the flow model) is a precise image of what Lev Manovich (1999) called "database logic."

SVoD services use recommendation systems designed to create a customized experience for each user. Lev Manovich (2008, 2) points out that software "is at the heart of the economy, culture, social life and, increasingly, politics." The author introduces the concept of "cultural software" to mark the huge effect that automated computational techniques have on consumers in all sectors of their lives. In a similar sense, Morris (2015) uses the term "infomediaries" for companies that play – by mining, monitoring and analyzing large sets of data (music files, e-books, video files, and user reactions to them) – an important role in the process of delivering certain media products to certain users.

The Netflix recommendation system is based on several functions and algorithms:

- Personal Video Ranker (PVR)
- Top-N Video Ranker
- Trending Now
- Continue watching
- Video-video similarity
- The generation of the page and selection of rows
- The selection of product-related information
- The search function

The ability to customize user experience through recommendation systems gives SVoD the opportunity to experience new ways of promoting shows (M. D. Smith and Telang 2016, 22). Traditional television channels know their audience in a rather rudimentary way, through polls that indicate the general characteristics of consumers and their behavior. SVoD systems, on the other hand, base their decisions on data that speaks about each user in particular.

Many industry representatives talk about the creative freedom of the screenwriters and directors working on digitally-distributed TV series, once released from the constraints of the traditional television flow (Lotz 2017). By positioning itself in opposition to traditional television, Netflix promises its consumers an active experience, where their participation holds a crucial role, and thus defines itself as "the future of television" (Tryon 2015, 105).

In the past, TV series were generally associated with the negative effects of television, with low-brow content and broadly regarded as targeted towards housewives. Today, on the other hand, TV series released by VoD companies get associated with expressions such as "binge-worthy" and are promoted as high-quality productions aimed primarily at a young, active audience. Thus, they receive a cult-like aura and gain a certain quality certification in the cultural discourse (Jenner 2015).

"Binge-watching" is not easy to define. A survey (Netflix Media Center 2013) showed that 73% of Netflix users associate this behavior with watching two to six episodes of the same production in a single session. On the other hand, when referring to the consumption of TV series sold on DVDs, Debra Ramsey (quoted in Jenner 2015) says that binge-watching is rather associated with consuming a whole season in a single day, while Nolan Feeney (2014) states that the term refers to watching four episodes in a row.

According to Chuck Tryon (2015, 106), SVoD systems encourage the sequential consumption of several segments of the same series by distributing productions in "packages", catalogs of media products that can be consumed in any way the user chooses to. In the same sense, Mareike Jenner (2015) talks about binge-watching as the core strategy of SVoD services.

From this perspective, Netflix largely builds its distribution strategy around binge-watching, relying on all-at-once distribution and personalized user recommendations (Jenner 2015).

Several studies (Steiner și Xu 2018; Conlin, Billings, și Auverset 2016; Merikivi et al. 2016; Walton-Pattison, Dombrowski, și Presseau 2016; Pittman și Sheehan 2015) discuss binge-watching from a uses and gratifications perspective.

Steiner and Xu (2018) show that the main reasons why users choose to engage in binge viewing sessions are catching up on the missed episodes, relaxation, the feeling of fulfillment that they have after completing a series or a season, engagement, cultural inclusion and a better consumer experience. Also, qualities such as portability and navigability (the ability to control consumption by episode navigation, pause and playback functions, etc.) occupy an important role in the consumer's decision to watch multiple episodes in a single session.

Pittman and Sheehan identified five main motivations for binge-watching: engagement, relaxation, passing time, hedonism, and social consumption. Conlin, Billings, and Auverset (2016) examined the relationship between the phenomenon called fear of missing out – the fear of not taking part in a pleasant activity that other people share –, and the behavior of users who engage in TV series marathons.

Matrix (2014) notes two emerging behavioral patterns of teenagers who engage in binge-watching sessions. On the one hand, due to the new distribution models, the watercooler moment disappears and gets replaced by discussions that take place in online communities. The phenomenon through which the use of social networking sites is triggered by the consumption of TV shows is called Social TV (Buschow, Schneider, și Ueberheide 2014; Gray, Sandvoss, și Harrington 2017; Roebuck 2011; Matrix 2014). Therefore, we can't really talk about a loss in the cultural discourse when it comes to next-day discussions about certain TV shows. What happens nowadays is rather a reconfiguration of these discussions, in strong connection to the new distribution system.

An essential aspect when it comes to why users engage in binge-watching sessions is the fact that they get afraid that the public discourse about the series will lead to the premature disclosure of key narrative points, which could alter their whole experience (Conlin, Billings, and Auverset 2016, 155). Brojakowski (2015) notes the close link between the fear of spoilers and the use of social networking sites by users, as a way to enrich their consumer experience by being part of a community and, thus, being part of the public discourse surrounding their favourite shows.

#### **4. Digital Distribution and Narrative Structures in TV Series**

Chapter 4 discusses the main features of complex television series and examines the relation between these narratives and binge-watching. Issues such as the different types of narrative conflict in terms of their serialization degree, the use of temporal gaps between different segments of a show, and also diegetic and paratextual recaps are explored.

The digital distribution of serialized productions has led to discussions (Lotz 2014, Tryon 2015, Newman and Levine 2012, Romano 2013, Brojakowski 2015, Mittell 2015a, Pedersen 2016, Diez 2014, Mittell 2015b, Jenner 2015, Innocenti and Pescatore 2015) about a new "golden age" (Newman and Levine 2012) of the television industry, or the transition to its fourth evolutionary stage, TVIV (Jenner 2015), in which complex, multidimensional narratives reconfigure the entire media landscape and encourage new ways of consumption.

According to Jason Mittell (2015a), the complexity of the TV narratives (or what the author calls "complex television") became an area of interest with the emergence, since the 1990s, of several series that dislodge from the traditional series' model by experimenting with new narrative formulas: *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *The Wire*, *Seinfeld*, *The X-Files*, *Lost*, etc. Mittell says that in order to understand what distinguishes complex contemporary series from other narrative forms, it is necessary to identify the features of a unitary narrative model that transcends individual genres or creators. In this sense, he writes about the experience of progressive narrative accumulation as a *modus operandi* of new series: departing from the episodic structure, the new narrative formula becomes more serialized, as the narrative threads extend over several episodes or even several seasons of the text. Thus, the need to begin each episode with a state of equilibrium disappears in favor of larger structures, where the plot evolves from one segment to the next.

Digital distribution merges all episodes into a whole whose structure and access points resemble those of a novel rather than those of a traditional TV show (Mittell 2015b). This mechanism leads to the possibility of adopting major conflict based narrative formulas. At the same time, it profoundly affects the use of temporal gaps, diegetic or paratextual recaps and cliffhangers in serialized productions.

Melanie Bourdaa (2011) describes complex television as an emerging genre that has continuously evolved over the past two decades. In the age of streaming services, this kind of production encourages a new way of watching, where the consumer intensely engages in the fictional universe. Series rely on both complex diegetic worlds and giving consumers the satisfaction to decipher the hidden mechanisms, the internal cuisine of the story. The current association between quality television and binge-watching is an area of cultural exchange between producers and consumers. On the one hand, creators engage in the production of complex and intriguing narratives to encourage binge-watching, while the new consumption

pattern gives writers, directors and producers the freedom to experiment with innovative narrative formulas.

## **5. Case Studies: Narrative Structures in TV Series and Binge-Watching**

Chapter 5 presents and discusses the results of two case studies. The first one explores the recurring narrative patterns in television series distributed by the major players on the linear and digital television market over the last five years. The focus of this study is on the narrative differences between weekly broadcasted and digitally distributed productions. It explores aspects such as the degree of serialization, the conventions and tropes used, or the archetypal structures that stories follow. The research is based on 372 series with at least one season distributed between 2013 and 2018. Out of the 372 identified series, 244 were broadcast linearly and 128 were created by VoD services for digital publishing. Also, 261 of the productions are prime-time serials (SPT) or are identifiable with a one hour slot of the traditional program flow, while 111 are media products that can be overlapped over the traditional 30-minute slot.

After the data extraction by API queries and manual coding, the following aspects of each series were identified: production title, year of release and cancellation (where applicable), first episode broadcast date, average length of an episode (or the exact length, in the case of linearly-distributed series), the genre(s), the one-paragraph synopsis, the spoken languages, the country of origin, the number of seasons, the IMDb rating and the total number of users' votes, the episodic or serial structure of the production, the conventions and tropes related to the fictional setting, the type of conflict, the conventions and tropes related to the characters, the type of plot according to the taxonomies developed by Ronald Tobias (1993) and Christopher Booker (2005), and additional information related to gender, sexual and racial representations.

The study has led to the identification of recurrent narrative patterns in the types of productions considered. The results highlighted the basic narrative coordinates of TV series distributed by the big players in the market over the last five years and also the differences between TV series produced for weekly distribution and the ones created by VoD services. First of all, according to the results, digital productions deviate from flow-based time conventions: the duration of episodes increases both in series that can be identified with the tradition of prime-time productions and comedies. Also, in the absence of precise time constraints, episode lengths tend to vary. From this perspective, series' creators are no longer required to fit episodes in a constraining time slot. Thus, the length of digitally-published episodes is rather dependent on the narrative needs of the specific segments of production.

The results also showed a strong tendency of the creators to approach narrative formulas based on major conflicts. Although this can be seen both in weekly distributed TV shows and in digital series, it is much more evident when it comes to the latter. While some linearly distributed TV series keep on using the episodic conflict pattern - as with detective procedurals or traditional sitcoms -, such a narrative approach is almost entirely absent from the digital production landscape. Long narrative threads suggest a high level of narrative complexity (Mittell 2015a) for both prime-time and comedy series.

The study also led to the identification of a set of features of what Jason Mittell (2015a) would call "complex television series": the taste for antiheroes and anti-villains (Romano 2013; VanDerWerff 2017), the strong emphasis on internal conflicts in digital series, highly serialized comedies orbiting around a protagonist (Innocenti and Pescatore 2015) are all signs of a new stage in the production of television series. Another interesting fact is that although they have built a huge part of their brand image because of original dramas such as *House of Cards* or *Sense8*, Netflix relies heavily on comedies in their production strategy. This can stand as a sign that, as Amanda Lotz (2017) puts it, VoD services are not looking for a huge public through any individual product, but they rather base their strategy on several niche audiences. The same mechanism stands behind Netflix's decision to create many stories about teenagers, the road to maturation and the main character's evolution from rags to riches, as well as including a large number of series with at least one LGBTQ protagonist in their catalog.

In fact, the entire Netflix strategy revolves around a user who, once emerging from the rigors of traditional television, can consume whatever he wants, wherever he wants and however he likes. This democratization has led to the unprecedented upswing of a consumption model that has become, over the past five years, a buzzword for the media, a favorite leisure and socializing pattern for many users and, beyond all that, a true cultural phenomenon: binge-watching.

The second study examines behaviors and affects related to binge-watching exhibited by users in 11040 Facebook comments on several popular series' official pages. At the same time, the research explores binge-watching as a way of spending leisure time and the motivations behind users' decisions to engage in extended viewing sessions. The study also shows the strong correlation between the digital distribution of TV series and this type of consumption behavior. At the same time, it explores the narrative structures usually associated to binge-watching.

The corpus was comprised of two data sets:

DS1. The first part of the corpus consists of 6951 user comments that mention the concept of binge-watching, posted on the official Facebook pages of 94 series. The analyzed comments were posted between February 1, 2013 and February 1, 2016. The Facebook pages

chosen for the analysis belong to both digitally published series and weekly distributed productions. The extracted data only refers to the Facebook pages of productions which can be identified as dramas (in the sense of the television tradition of productions covering one hour of broadcasting, not necessarily that of the cinema genre itself) or comedies (in the sense of the tradition of sitcoms, which cover half an hour of broadcasting). The 6951 reviews analyzed were filtered for relevance (the presence of the term "binge-watching", in its various forms) using Microsoft Excel, out of a total of 11.5 million extracted messages. Data extraction took place on September 10, 2017.

SD2. The second data set was comprised of 4089 comments that mentioned binge-watching. All of the comments were posted on the official Facebook pages of 71 original Netflix productions. The selection took into account all the original Netflix productions that had an active Facebook page on June 29, 2018, except for children's productions and those spoken in a language other than English. The extracted comments were posted between January 1, 2016 and June 29, 2018. The 4089 comments analyzed were filtered for relevancy (the presence of the term "binge-watching" in its various forms) with Microsoft Excel, out of a total of 220,591 extracted messages. Data extraction took place on June 29, 2018.

Data on the Facebook pages of the series were extracted through API queries, using Facepager. All the analyzed comments contained the word "binge" in one of its recurring forms in the corpus. Comments that referred to other behaviors, such as binge-drinking or binge-eating, were manually removed from the data set.

The study used inductive coding (Stuckey 2015; D. R. Thomas 2006) to categorize behaviors and emotions recurrently expressed by users. After the codes were established, the data went through a manual quality analysis and through an automated analysis using KH Coder, a free software for text mining, quantitative content analysis and natural language processing. The research also used Sketch Engine, a language corpus management software. Sketch Engine was used to generate lists of recurring words and phrases in the corpus, which were implemented in creating the coding file used in the KH Coder automatic quantitative analysis. Also, a sentiment analysis was applied on the corpus, in order to identify the general attitude of the users towards binge-watching. The analysis used Text Analysis, a Google Sheets extension for natural language processing and automatic learning.

The study has shown that there is a strong link between digital distribution and binge-watching. Users tend to talk more about this type of behavior and engage in such watching sessions when they have the opportunity to access media products according to their own schedule. The spearhead of this consumption phenomenon is, as expected, Netflix. Also, the research found that many users plan their binge-viewing sessions for the following weekend,

which shows the prevalence of this type of consumption as the favorite leisure time spending of many and, beyond that, as a way of spending time socially while watching several episodes of a certain show.

Many express their enjoyment regarding their binge-watching sessions, while others are proud to have watched a full season of a production in one evening. An important phenomenon is the high degree of frustration that occurs both among weekly distributed and digital series consumers. On the one hand, fans who watch traditional shows would like to be able to watch more episodes in a single session, and on the other, those of digital production get frustrated because of the long gaps between two consecutive seasons. Also, the research has indicated the existence of other consumption phenomena associated with binge-watching: some users choose to wait until the full season is broadcasted in order to watch all the episodes in a single session, and others turn to this type of consumption to catch up with the current episodes or to watch certain series again. Another interesting phenomenon resulting from the data is the large number of comments in which users brag about their engaging in extended and frequent binge-watching sessions, or about watching a wide segment of a series over a short period of time. At the same time, the study highlighted the importance of the social component of binge-watching, as well as the general positive attitude of the public towards it.

Binge-watching is one of the most prominent media consumption phenomena in recent years. Its examination gives us a detailed picture of the underlying dynamics of the attitudes, behaviors and underlying issues of this behavioral pattern. Pleasure, relaxation, immersion in the narrative universe of a series, catching up with the missed episodes, the collective dimension of consumption, as well as social pressure or distribution-induced frustration are all factors that contribute to a clearer image of the intimate mechanisms of this consumption behavior.

## **6. Conclusions**

The rise of VoD services on the media market has produced key mutations in the television series industry at all levels. The dynamics of the tripartite relationship between production, distribution and consumption gained new ground when a series of services broke the traditional lineage of television and adopted the aesthetics of media catalogs that users can access whenever and wherever they want. This new distribution model allows the creation of complex narratives, of new story devices that were impossible to implement in linear TV. At the same time, the way VoD services function triggered a democratization of consumption which in turn led to an unprecedented popularization of binge-watching as a new TV series-watching norm.



The deep transformations that the TV industry goes through because of the popularization of VoD services reconfigure the production, distribution and consumption mechanisms traditionally associated with it. This shift also affects the way people perceive the concept of "television": it no longer just means a screen running programs in a continuous flow. It gets the pattern of flexibility and virtually limitless freedom of choice. The mutations that occur both at the level of the productions themselves and that of the consumption patterns have led to theoretical discussions about a new Golden Age of TV. As the industry is expanding and could follow many different leads, and Netflix - the top VoD player - seems to be experimenting with new production formats and strategies, the phenomenon deserves to be closely followed in the years to come. The complex and fluid mechanisms that define television today may hold many surprises for us in the future. However, it is certain that if we can talk about the birth of a new Golden Era of TV in the following years, it shall be binge-watched.

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