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## Unpacking Binging: New Ways of Production & Consumption

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### *Abstract*

The last five years have been increasingly transformative in the realms of broadcast and electronic media; following an inevitable convergence with internet-centric technologies. The emergence of new platforms has enabled the untethering of audio-visual content from specific temporal and spatial bounds as consumption of AV programming has embraced the facets of mobility. This paper critically examines content streaming applications like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar and Voot in conjunction with similar platforms of streaming content for media forms like podcasts. By analyzing the content on offer, the various modus-operandi for content creation and dissemination and the way consumers engage/consume content on these platforms; this paper hopes to arrive at a nuanced understanding of binging both as an activity and as a new way of engaging with broadcast content. In terms of market value, the Indian online streaming market is estimated to be over 100 million regular subscribers and is valued at USD 280 Million. By using specific cases and situating the analysis in the context of an increasingly connected world; this paper will extend the academic understanding of binging by building on the foundations of a remediated understanding (McLuhan) and giving it a social dimension.

*Keywords:* binging, binge-watching, streaming, podcasts, remediation

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### **Introduction:**

#### *a. Web 2.0*

The internet has often been considered to be a unique medium and the field of study that examines the role of internet in society is called new media studies. However, it is surprising that the discipline is termed 'new' when there is nothing new that the internet as such offers to the general media form (Lister et al, 2008; Manovich, 2001). It doesn't offer any radical shift in media consumption the way text does to visual or radio does to acoustic or television does to the audio-visual experience at large.

However, what the internet does bring with it is the ability to augment and amplify existing media forms. By bringing about digitization and the conversion of all mediated content into binary form there have emerged radical new ways for engagement, manipulation and creation of content (Lister et al, 2008; Holmes 2005). This effect is much more noticeable after the advent of Web 2.0 and the subsequent rise of global internet bandwidth. The rise in bandwidth in conjunction with development of advanced web-based applications laid the foundations for storage of large amounts of data in remote servers and the ability to retrieve the same at any connected location.

Web 2.0 and the rise in bandwidth has also enabled the creation of data clouds which enable the infrastructure that allows for streaming and networking applications to function today. However, if Bill Nichols' understanding of cybernetic systems is to be applied in these scenarios, it is important to note that the limits of engagement and interaction are bound by the abilities of the system. In other words, the more advanced the system is; the more possible applications that it can offer (Nichols, 1988).

### ***b. Rise of streaming***

The recorded history of streaming media dates to the point where blogs began to transcend the textual form. As the blogosphere began to adopt a more multimedia-oriented format, audio logs began to appear. At the same time there was an emergence of internet-based radio as audio files largely began to embrace a digital form. The first podcast stream was born at the Berkman Center where Dave Winer an RSS innovator combined audio files with an RSS feed to give birth to the podcast form. He uploaded 25 audio interviews at once on his blog from where people could download them and listen to them at their convenience (Locke, 2017).

“My goal then was to upgrade the blogosphere. At that point, it was a clubby social thing, and it was way focused on Silicon Valley and the tech industry. Syndication and RSS hadn't been done on the web—my idea was that we could do blogging with our voice, but I needed a flow of MP3s that people would find compelling.” (Winer in Charley, 2017)

As audio logs emerged it was not long that people began to experiment with video and soon the popular culture of v-logs and video diaries began to find place on the internet. The term streaming was coined to describe the phrase “video on demand.” The first instance of a live performance on the internet can be traced to the performance of the California based band *Severe Tire Damage* which performed on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1993 in California but the

performance was streamed to people live in Australia using a technology called multicasting (History of the Internet, 2017). However, it was a long time before the streaming of video became a mainstream phenomenon as the capability of the internet as a global network was quite limited at the time.

### ***c. The YouTube revolution***

The launch of YouTube in 2005 began to disrupt/transform the way people used the internet as suddenly the doors to online streaming were opened and the rest of the world had to play catch up. Macromedia Flash became a popular format as videos began to be consumed at a rapid rate; this was also the time that *Netflix* decided to make its move to a digital existence as prior to this it was only a chain of store that rented CDs and DVDs to paying customers.

With the rise of YouTube not only did videos embrace the internet but also the AV form was suffused with the qualities that were unique to users of the internet. The adoption of YouTube wasn't possible without the rise of User Generated Content as the adopters of the platform began to shape it the way they desired. The pro-sumers (producers + consumers) (Lister et al., 2008; Holmes, 2005) of content who had shaped text-based worlds like MUDs, MOOs and experiences like *Zork* did the same for streaming platforms (Turkle, 1995).

As uninterrupted video was now available to anyone, with access to the internet; streaming of content had now become a reality. As the world became accustomed to new terms like "buffering" and "high definition" (HD) it was also left to grapple with means of optimization of both streaming as a form and as well the monitoring content that was being streamed.

### ***d. New ways of doing things***

With the assimilation of the internet and its convergent nature into mediated content, the established status quo was challenged. One no longer needed a radio station or a newspaper or a television station to send messages across; three things began to rapidly change as a consequence. Owing to its new digital form content became both instantaneously replicable and easily manipulable (Lister et al, 2008; Homes, 2005). Questions of credibility and authorship became difficult to answer as examples of Baudrillard's concept simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994) began to manifest.

Secondly, the internet's abilities for both instantaneity and its asynchronous nature allowed for consumption of content both in real-time but also at the leisure of the user (Manovich, 2001; Lister et al, 2008). Lastly, the internet's infinitely large archives meant if something ever was on the internet it was more than likely to remain there forever in some form or the other (Manovich, 2001; Lister et al, 2008). Newer content embedded with all these characteristics meant the processes of content creation and consumption would never be the same again.

## **Binging as an activity**

### ***Defining binging***

The word 'binge' has been about since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, its first recorded usage was in 1848 to indicate the high levels of alcohol consumption. Overtime 'binge' as a verb began to apply to acts of eating as well and thus it became available as a verb to signify consumption at large. With regards to mediated content binge consumption or 'binging' then becomes consumption of a specific kind of media content in large quantities at a stretch.

Despite the new age currency of the term, activities that can be termed today as binging have been around for quite a while. Binge-reading or binging on books is not a very uncommon practice. Similarly, conventional movie marathons of franchises like *Star Wars* have also been around for the last three decades. With regards to binging in the confines of the home it is something that should have been ideally enabled by the advent of the VHS tape and the technology of the VCR. However, the popularization of binging as a habit happened only post digitization because replicability became both effortless and instantaneous (Lister et al 2008). With the advent of the internet and highspeed FTP protocols the transferring of content eclipsed geographic boundaries. The potential of this as a habit is ever increasing as data storage becomes cheaper and more reliable and the internet gets faster.

### ***Remediations***

If McLuhan's trusted tool remediation (Bolter, 2000; Strate, 2008) is to be applied to streaming platforms then YouTube in its early days could have been first understood as always available free television with no advertisements. However, since the early days a lot has changed as YouTube

has grappled with issues of broadcast rights across the world and at the same time in a bid to maximize advertising revenue one finds the content is often riddled with ads. In the nature of content too YouTube has shifted the focus from users merely watching content to a system where it promotes a lot of user generated content monetizing number of views garnered. If we are to remediate YouTube today; it is noticeable that it has successfully collapsed the content producer and consumer binary and created a space which feels more like a community than a streaming platform.

Platforms like *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime* seemed to have gone the other way by paying considerably to acquire rights for streaming traditional broadcast content and then also beginning the production of original content. They however have achieved that by sacrificing the free to access element. They can be remediated as always available television services. Consequently, their way of functioning has ensured the retaining of the producer-consumer binary and thus despite embracing the internet, they remain as part of the traditional broadcast business setup.

Podcasts on the other hand can also be similarly remediated as radio via the internet or paid repositories of audio access. However, on the other hand there are also services like *Tidal*, *Spotify*, *Apple Music* and *Google Play* which have gone the *Netflix* way with regards to music. In fact, with platforms like *Spotify* the music industry, one that was ravaged by online piracy has finally begun to see an inflow in revenue.

The remediation of these platforms allows for us to build a foundation from where we can critically examine what these platforms have transformed and what they have retained from conventional systems.

### ***New means and modes of interaction***

With regards to content consumption, the biggest change that these platforms offer the consumers are the removal of spatial and temporal biases. They enable anyone in the world to watch anything on their servers as long as they are connected and also allow them to watch them at any time. The unique retrieval-based design of the application system allows for any user to watch what they searched for in other words what one watches is choice based and so is the time one watches that.

The consumers then are liberated from the time-based constraints of TV viewing in the traditional sense and the unique personal experience allows for infinite pauses, breaks, skips and resumptions from the last

position; things that conventional TV just can't offer. These apps have made the experience more interactive by giving information overlays like subtitles, cast-information and other related trivia.

The consumer on the other hand can download the shows he/she desires and watch them when they have the time. They are also independent of periodicity as most of these platforms make the entire batch of episodes available at one go. The consumer is then free to consume them as they see fit in any specific order they desire.

### ***Algorithmic viewing***

The one loss in this entire viewing process is the disappearance of the chance encounter. The time when one comes across a totally new show while switching channels or an interesting new book at a bookshop. In a bid to counter this, most streaming platforms have in place predictive algorithms that keep track of viewer's histories and choices in order to then suggest newer content for viewing (Gillespie, 2014).

While the success of the algorithms' predictions is open to debate, their utility can be questionable for the fear of the experience being reduced to that of a walled-garden. The apps by themselves restrict consumers to content that they have secured rights for and within that limited buffet of mediated content the algorithms reduce the viewing options further. The resultant experience thus can be quite reductive if a consumer doesn't regularly use the search function to navigate the limits of the database.

### **Unique cases**

#### ***The curious case of Bee***

*Netflix* launched its yearly statistics about how its viewers were consuming their content on Dec.1, 2017. The data gave trends on what shows were being most watched and how quickly were the episodes being consumed (*Netflix Media Center*, 2017). One statistic that stood out among the large dataset that was released was of a single user in the UK who had seen the Dreamworks movie *Bee* 352 times in 365 days in a time frame ranging from Nov.1 2016 to Nov.1 2017 (Coy, 2017).

Following two weeks of endless speculation as to who the mysterious viewer was on Dec. 14 Gemma Chalmers accepted that she was the person who had 're-watched' the movie 352 times (Robertson, 2017).

On being asked further, she responded that for her child Jaxson showing *Bee* was the only way to calm him down. Despite trying numerous other successful animated movies like *Trolls* and *Cars* nothing seemed to work the way *Bee* did.

“We’ve watched it multiple times a day to keep him happy. He watches the film from the moment he wakes up until he goes to sleep at night. I know every word of that film. I am completely fed-up with it.” (Gemma Chalmers as quoted in Robertson, 2017)

While preventing babies from crying can be considered one of the biggest challenges in parenting, I can personally attest to the miraculous benefits of streaming “soothing music” (though what a baby considers soothing is at best anyone’s guess) to prevent them from crying. I was in Agra attending a friend’s wedding in February when we as a group decided to visit the Taj. In the group also present was a close friend, his wife and daughter.

As we made our way through the endless crowds attempting to capture the perfect selfie of holding the Taj by their fingertips, the day got sunnier and unbelievably warm for February. The heat seemed to have ticked little Anvi off as she began to cry. No amount of shade from the trees or the cajoling from the parents could calm her down until my friend used his trump card. Quickly blaring was a Tamil song from the trusty YouTube app and lulled the baby into a good mood.

On further questioning, my friend conceded that the song was downloaded and ready to be used at all times. In the last week it had been used on the flight to Delhi, in several sites of national heritage in Delhi and the Shatabdi to Agra and now the Taj was added to this growing list.

While this particular case might seem frivolous and tangential to the discussion there are two unique elements of streaming platforms that stand out. One their ability to perform when you require the most and secondly, their ability to archive what the user desires in a way that it can be summoned by the tap of a few fingers. While often bingeing is understood as consumption of large volumes of content at a stretch, there is a need for the term to also include repeated re-consumption of the same content. One of *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime*’s coups has been their ability to add sitcom evergreens *FRIENDS* and *Seinfeld* to their respective rosters. To their legions of loyal fans worldwide re-watching the series has become a norm.

### *Marvel's Jessica Jones*

For the longest while, one of the biggest discussions in both the Television and the Film space has centered around the ability of a lead woman character to carry a show entirely on her shoulders. Even Scarlett Johansson with her incredible set of loyal fans couldn't get herself a standalone *Black Widow* movie from Marvel for the longest time. However, post the success of *Wonder Woman*, things have changed in the world of films. In TV however, that change started with the efforts of icons like Tina Fey, Amy Schumer and Mindy Kaling. *Netflix* has done its bit by promoting shows like *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and *Jessica Jones*.

Part of a larger Marvel Superhero universe and set in Hell's Kitchen, New York; *Jessica Jones* has gone one to become an integral cog in *Netflix's* successful money-making wheel called the *Defenders*. This case however examines the specific case of *Jessica Jones's* Season 2.

A lot of the critics and viewers have pointed out the incredibly slow start of the season and the time taken by the showrunners to get things going towards the finale. The reviews claim the starting of the show lacked focus but made up for all of it with a thrilling finale (Miller, 2018).

If we were to put the same case in the setting of a traditional broadcast environment, then things would have been very different with *Jessica Jones*. In a setting where ratings numbers are monitored every week and then shows are re-written and re-purposed to suit specific demographics week-to-week; the slow start and lack of focus would have rung the death knell two-three weeks in to the broadcast cycle. If we are to focus on the show's schedules with regards to its pre-production and pilot pitching phases, characters that focus on niche sections of the nerd/geek communities would have gained little traction in the conventional broadcast space as is evinced by the failure of cult shows like *Firefly* and the non-pickup of pilots like *Aquaman*.

*Jessica Jones* similarly isn't as popular as her other Marvel counterparts and would have gained similarly little traction. However, *Netflix* in an environment unbothered by traditional ratings numbers or by the quest for advertiser demographics at the moment could allow the team to work in a more unconventional setting. The fact that the online streaming platforms' dissemination abilities aren't limited by geographical or time-based elements or the notion of a limited audience makes things much more interesting to examine.

Allowing the team to film the entire season in one go rather than for a yearlong regular TV show allowed for everyone to appreciate what the show had in store. Similarly, the viewers being unbothered by the slow start and the week-to-week wait of episodes were able to quickly make their way to the interesting portions as consumption of content is at their discretion entirely not being structured by the EPG or decision making of the network's executives.

### ***Trollhunters***

Guillermo del Toro, the Mexican filmmaker is one of the most diverse creators of content in the global industry today. With a keen eye to tell a story that stands out, del Toro has helmed the direction of classics like *The Shape of Water* and the acclaimed action flick *Pacific Rim*. However, the academy award winner includes an animated TV show in his eclectic resume called *Trollhunters*. In partnership with DreamWorks the show is available exclusively on *Netflix* and has been incredibly well liked. Such has been the success of the show, that del Toro's team has used the finale of *Trollhunters* to lay the foundation for three new animated series for *Netflix*. While the success story stands in its place, what *Trollhunters* allows us to see is the incredible flexibility that streaming platforms allow for collaborative transmedia projects. Similar examples see *Amazon Prime* launching *Jack Ryan* a series set in the universe of Tom Clancy, a universe that has made its mark in the realms of books and video games. Another such example is the acquisition of rights by *Amazon* for the universe of J.R.R. Tolkien (of *Lord of The Rings* and *Hobbit* fame) as the pre-production of shows from Middle-Earth has begun.

Closer to home we see the success of shows like *Sacred Games* where established people in other media forms have taken the dive with doing 'television.' While the step to TV for the longest time was considered a step-down for A-listers, the perceptions seem to have now changed. Streaming Platforms with their unique style and disruptive qualities seem to have narrowed the chasms that separate traditional media; in the process carving a newer space where media forms can merge and collaborate for a richer, fuller experience for all parties involved.

### ***Sarabhai v Sarabhai Take 2***

*Sarabhai v Sarabhai* was a sitcom that aired on *Star One* in 2004. One of the first shows on the channel, it was part of several that were specifically made for the urban middle class. A comic take on the usual saas-bahu dramas that

were the part of the erstwhile Indian primetime fare; the show was expected to stand out with its snappy writing and wonderful cast. Despite running for two years and a production list of eighty episodes, the show failed to stand out. However, things changed once the show went off the air. Overtime the show developed a cult following and with re-runs and binge watching, there began a clamor for its return. By the time the fans' calls reached a critical point the channel *Star One* was shut down and it has been rebranded as *LifeOK*.

The production team and the actors were often asked about a possible return and there was never a positive response until the entry of *Hotstar*. *Hotstar* had just entered the Indian online streaming space and had secured the rights for the digital broadcast of the IPL. At the same time, it had also secured the rights of several TV shows for its library, one of which was *Sarabhai v Sarabhai*.

The large viewer traffic for the original series on Hotstar coupled with the effect of vociferous fans, Hotstar decided to produce a return of the series. The series did return in May 2017 and the response has at best been a mixed bag.

While the response from viewers has been tempered at best, what stands out here is the ability of Hotstar to step in and listen to its viewers as opposed to the traditional broadcast space. An existence of a transparent communication channel and a willingness to pro-actively fulfil demand where there's a perceived shortage seems to be the hallmark of the new-age streaming media houses.

Similar examples include the saving of the popular comedy *Community* by Yahoo, and the more recent acquisition of the Neil Gaiman show *Lucifer* by *Netflix*. A willingness to take risks and acquire fans by saving the shows they love not only brings in newer viewers but also can foster long term loyalty when annual subscriptions come into play.

## **Economics & Numbers**

The global market for streaming platforms has seen a steady rise in revenue year on year as the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) was 15.2 percent between 2016 and 2017. The overall size of the market was calculated to be USD 20.1 Billion (PWC in Bloom, 2018) and is expected to grow to USD 82 Billion by 2023. However, Price Waterhouse Cooper's report suggests

that the market will be dominated by adopters from the US for the foreseeable future. Closer to home, the Indian online streaming market is pegged at a modest USD 280 million with a hundred million subscribers.

With regards to platform specific numbers, it is interesting to note that none of the streaming platforms in question are profitable yet. A trend that has become the norm in today's start-up economy. *Netflix* is the best possible example with a debt exceeding USD 20 Billion (Roberts, 2017) for a market that is valued at the same amount. Most platforms have considerable debts that are similar to *Netflix* owing to similar business models save for *Amazon's Prime*. Amazon's video service is part of a larger bouquet of prime services that the global retailer offers. However, looking at their bouquet of original content, their investments are like to be of a similar tune to *Netflix's*.

The existing trend with internet centric businesses like *Uber*, *Amazon*, *Flipkart* and now the aforementioned streaming platforms is to sacrifice profit maximization in the search for the more elusive customer-share by focusing on economies of scope rather than scale. Consequently, most of these battles are now being fought over the large population bases of India and China. Streaming platforms too are locked away in a constant battle as they dole out subscriptions for free or paltry sums in a hope to acquire a dedicated viewer base.

Though the market for streaming platforms is still in the stage of infancy and most revenue/business model are far from being perfect one thing that has reached maturity is the habit of bingeing. However, in a country like India only a mere 0.5 percent watches western syndicated content; this trend is of a major concern as most platforms libraries are heavily stocked in this regard (Madhavan, 2017). If India and China are key to unlocking the true potential then there is a serious need for the platforms to embrace the diverse culture of the people they are wooing.

## Discussion

Bingeing though defined as consumptions of large amounts of mediated content also needs to be understood as an evolution of video consumption for the post-modern age. For a society that has increasingly shrunk distances and broken barriers of space and time, it is only natural that their habits also transcend the same barriers. If someone can instantaneously correspond with anyone across the globe they can also expect to watch content instantaneously irrespective of where they are. Streaming platforms can be viewed as the means to fulfil that need.

Binging and streaming are just two mere facets of the larger umbrella term of “digital leisure activities,” a small spectrum of these activities today include gaming, video-logging (Snapchat & Instagram stories), social network-based communications and virtual and augmented reality-based experiences. As India and the world at large becomes increasingly poised to make the jump to wards an increasingly digital existence, then understanding new forms of leisure and content consumption preferences becomes paramount.

In India especially post the Jio revolution in telephony, access to data has never been easier and more affordable. For the first time answering questions of access and reach in the traditional digital divide seems a possibility. Once access is widespread, interesting questions that deal with usage patterns and various approaches to newer practices will become interesting sites of inquiry.

Future studies can look at the various ways by which the production processes of digitally mediated content vary as there will be room for newer kinds of production ethnographies. The makers of streaming content don't seem to bound by the traditional power structures that governed traditional media companies, interesting issues with regards to certification, licensing and revenue generation are bound to rise. On the usage side of things, studies can examine how viewers adopt these platforms and how overtime they evolve into practices and eventually then become part of the social fabric. The potential seems vast and we are situated at the best possible time and place to chart the phenomenon.

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