TV Got Better:  
Netflix’s Original Programming Strategies 
and Binge Viewing  

Chuck Tryon  
Fayetteville State University  
chutry [AT] msn.com

Abstract:  
This paper analyzes the promotional strategies of Netflix, arguing that the company reinforces what Pierre Bourdieu has called the discourses of distinction. In particular, the streaming service highlights what Tryon calls the promises of plenitude, participation, prestige, and personalization. Netflix highlights these discourses in part through its ongoing engagement with subscription cable channel HBO, and in part through promotional materials such as its TV Got Better campaign, which sought to naturalize viewing practices such as binge watching as being part of a technological and narrative cutting edge.

Keywords: Netflix, HBO, Advertising, Distribution, Television

During a speech at the 2013 Guardian Edinburgh Television Festival, Kevin Spacey, star of the Netflix original series, House of Cards, positioned the streaming video service, Netflix, as a source for prestigious and engaging entertainment. Spacey’s comments aligned House of Cards (2013–) with the prestige of British television and international art house cinema. He did so through both textual and industrial discourses, pointing out that Netflix had fully committed to purchasing twenty-six episodes of House of Cards without requiring the show’s producers to make a pilot. Instead, the creators of the show could, as Spacey described it, get to the real work of developing complex characters and detailed storylines that would keep audiences engaged. Spacey went on to compare the political drama with the cinema, asking rhetorically, “Is thirteen hours watched as one cinematic whole really any different from a film?”

For those of us who work in media and TV studies, Spacey’s use of the discourses of legitimation is entirely familiar, but what seems notable here is that he links the practice of binge viewing to quality television. Popular discourse has historically treated television as a “vast wasteland,” a drug, or junk food. But, beginning in the 1990s, the subscription cable channel HBO famously branded itself and its foray into original programming with the slogan “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” This slogan became associated with shows such as The Sopranos (1999–2007), Sex and the City (1998–2004), and Oz (1997–2003), which were differentiated from TV in general, a move that Netflix borrowed from in its own promotional discourses. Netflix’s uses of
these discourses serve to define the streaming service against traditional television while also making streaming video into something that will fulfill the promise of textual novelty, of new storytelling practices that were unimaginable in the past. In particular, Netflix’s self-promotion places emphasis on its ability to deliver the promise of prestige, plenitude, and participation to its subscribers, through a mix of technological and aesthetic appeals that are meant to position Netflix as the future of television. Through these discourses, Netflix has situated itself as the future of television. This claim found its most explicit expression in its “TV Got Better” campaign, in which anthropologist Grant McCracken recoded the practice of “binge viewing” as “feasting,” a phrasing that recasts the practice of watching TV as healthy, as a good form of consumption.

This paper argues for a closer examination of advertising discourses that promote streaming video—and other new modes of delivery—as a technological solution to the limitations of more traditional forms of television. Although these technological changes have altered the social, legal, cultural, and economic conventions associated with TV as a medium, they also exaggerate their transformative potential. Thus, instead of treating streaming and on-demand formats as revolutionizing television, we should instead see them as convenient narratives that serve to promote more desired modes of media consumption.

This redefinition of television takes place as TV itself becomes increasingly difficult to define, a shift that has been marked by scholarship that suggests we have reached a “post-TV era.” For scholars such as Michael Strangelove, practices such as cord cutting—the consumer trend of dropping cable TV subscriptions in favor of on-demand and online options—are deliberate tactics by which TV viewers act on a sense of dissatisfaction with overpriced cable television subscriptions. Although Netflix promotes itself as a radical transformation of the medium of television, its account of television’s future evokes a much longer history of promotional discourses that celebrate technological alterations of the medium as having revolutionary potential. For example, cable was frequently promoted as offering solutions to social and political problems. In fact, as Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas argue, cable television was predicted to offer “a new media frontier,” filled with a variety of consumer choices and new opportunities, especially for independent content producers. Cable, in part because of its being less reliant on advertising, was also touted as providing an escape from broadcasting models driven by least-objectionable programming practices. To some extent, Netflix’s ability to recast its version of television is tied to artificial binaries between passive TV and the active web. However, with the migration of television content to the web, watching TV has gradually become reconceptualized as being something active, language that Netflix has explicitly evoked in its advertising discourse. This perception of an active-passive binary involving new forms of television persists not only in promotional discourses but also in academic work. For example, Strangelove cites the example of one cord cutter who defines broadcast TV and activities such as channel surfing as passive, while watching and finding shows online are together treated as an active process. It is certainly the case that the practices of watching television are changing in an on-demand era, especially as millennial audiences develop new modes of consuming movies and television; however, it is equally crucial to pay attention to the ways in which these practices are being redefined in order to promote more privileged methods of consuming television.

**Binge Viewing and Repackaging Television Entertainment**

Netflix, through its promotional discourse, has played a vital role in redefining the medium of television, in part by aligning its recent entry into original programming with the idea of quality television. Discourses of legitimation have been widely discussed within media studies,
especially when it comes to HBO’s promotional strategies. Avi Santo, for example, pointed out that HBO promoted itself through the promises of quality and exclusivity—allowing viewers of discerning taste the ability to watch shows unavailable to others. Notably, HBO sought to distinguish itself from its competition by defining itself against TV, in large part through the “It’s Not TV” campaign. This rhetorical strategy, as Michael Newman and Elana Levine have noted, seems to assume that TV gains legitimacy “when it no longer resembles television.”

Thus, HBO—and, more recently, Netflix—worked to define their programming against traditional television. These promotional strategies have been echoed in Netflix’s own efforts to reconceptualize streaming as a more engaging form of television, one that exists on a technological and cultural cutting edge, even while the company has ultimately worked to uphold the material interests of the major media conglomerates that provide most of the video-on-demand (VOD) service’s content.

Underlying these discussions of discourses of legitimation has been a shift in the status of the television text. As Derek Kompare argues, the introduction of DVD box sets allowed audiences and industry professionals to reconceptualize television as something worthy of sustained attention. During the DVD era, box sets of TV series were reimagined as collectible artifacts that could provide viewers with the opportunity to engage with a text more deeply through repeat viewings; through the display of series that reflected the collector’s tastes they also offered to establish a form of “cultural capital.” More recently, with the collapse of the sell-through DVD market, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services, such as Netflix, have “packaged” the television text through streaming archives that encourage users to watch episodes consecutively, especially through sustained periods of watching successive episodes, a practice that has popularly become known as “binge watching.” This shift has a number of implications for media scholars and TV audiences alike. Amanda Lotz has described VOD services as “programming banks” that can promote more personalized viewing patterns that may not conform to a linear programming schedule. However, the underlying logic that has transformed television into a “packaged” text, one that can be viewed sequentially and repeatedly, remains consistent and has, perhaps, even become intensified as critics and fans race to binge-watch popular new series or to rediscover older shows. This opens up two dominant modes of viewing on SVOD services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu: First, there is a discovery or archival mode, in which viewers may encounter older shows that they might have missed when they were originally broadcast. This discovery mode arguably has been responsible for bringing renewed attention to shows even during their original broadcast runs, as was the case with AMC’s critically acclaimed series Breaking Bad (2008-2013). Second, there is what might be called an instant mode, one that is encouraged by Netflix’s practice of releasing an entire season of a series simultaneously. This latter mode has been central to Netflix’s promotional strategies since it began licensing and distributing original TV series and has been used to emphasize the overlapping promises of prestige, plenitude, participation, and personalization.

Binge Viewing and Televisual Time

Binge viewing recasts our relationship to televisual time. Often, this desire to binge in the instant mode is driven by a desire for “cultural capital”—to participate, through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogging, in initial conversations about a series. In this sense, binge watching seems to align with and even intensify what Matt Hills has described as “just-in-time fandom,” the fan practice of consuming shows roughly simultaneously so that they will be able to participate in conversations about specific episodes—or full seasons, in the case of
Netflix—immediately after they are available. While Hills focused on the role of just-in-time fandom in encouraging fans to watch TV shows as they are broadcast, Netflix has altered this dynamic by enabling viewers to watch full seasons of shows simultaneously, consecutively, and collectively, a mode of watching that approaches the perceived liveness of broadcast television. While Michael Newman has pointed out that very little scripted television is broadcast live, TV continues to be experienced as if it were live, and this form of immediacy continues to define the medium. Netflix, through its practice of releasing an entire season’s worth of episodes simultaneously, seeks to emulate this experience of liveness, in part by promoting the idea that viewers will be left out if they don’t watch new seasons as soon as they are available. Although most viewers are not watching precisely simultaneously, and the episodes themselves have been produced well in advance of their release, a narrow slice of Netflix’s viewers will watch an entire season of thirteen hour-long episodes more or less consecutively over the course of a single weekend. Although streaming services have frequently been defined against what Raymond Williams has called the “programmed flow” of broadcast television, one that could create a national community around shared viewing experiences, Netflix in particular works to promote the idea that streaming series simultaneously could revitalize this shared sense of collectivity through its validation of the instant mode. Although these collective experiences—typically expressed through conversations on social media built around officially sanctioned hashtags—may be a minority experience, they can work to provide the water-cooler moments that supposedly have been lost in an era of fragmented TV viewing.

Underlying these practices of collective binge watching is the assumption that Netflix’s highest-profile shows matter—that they are worth intense scrutiny and attention. This description of instantaneous, collective TV viewing reverses longstanding negative associations with binge watching television programming, one that even TV critics could treat derisively, as the Hartford Courant’s James Endrst did when he referred to excessive watching as “Acute Television Toxicity.” But in reclaiming the practices of binge watching, Netflix has adopted quasi-scientific discourses, drawing from data, surveys, and other forms of research, to suggest that “linear television” functioned as a limitation that was inconsistent with viewers’ busy schedules, even asserting that not just streaming, but bingeing, has become “the new normal.” Netflix has promoted its model of on-demand television through a process of differentiation, not only with what they call “linear television,” but also with HBO. As Santo and others have shown, HBO had already branded itself as a superior form of TV, one that offered exclusive access to quality programming. TV consumers who wanted to remain conversant about the most important shows would need to subscribe to HBO or face being left behind. The result is a culture of “just-in-time promotion,” in which Netflix relies on online economies of attention in order to gain a few days of promotion and attention from cultural critics who not only review Netflix’s shows but also continue to engage with the idea that the streaming service has revolutionized television, even after the initial novelty of this practice has faded. In many cases, these forms of promotion have internalized the logic that Netflix is revolutionizing television through a combination of technological and narrative innovations that echo HBO’s perceived transformation of television during the 1990s. Thus, I now turn to an extended timeline that traces Netflix’s engagement with HBO. This timeline illustrates not only the changing strategies of Netflix as a company but also the quickly evolving perceptions of streaming television itself, definitions that are caught up in utopian fantasies about the future of entertainment.
Defining Streaming Television: Netflix and HBO

Netflix’s practice of positioning itself against HBO is no accident, of course, given HBO’s success in promoting itself as a subscription television service capable of providing quality entertainment. But what seems notable to me is the fact that this engagement has a long history, one that is inextricably interrelated with the evolution of Netflix as a distribution platform and, in turn, how it recasts itself as a brand that uses new technology to fulfill the unmet needs of media consumers. So what follows is a brief history of how, during periods of technological change, Netflix consistently rewrites itself as a home entertainment service, often through invoking HBO—initially as a model, and then eventually as a rival. Netflix’s practice of constantly recasting itself can be read as an indication of how new media technologies develop and adjust their offerings and functionality over time. Netflix, like YouTube, constantly rewrites itself in order to adjust to market dynamics and technological shifts. For example, YouTube originally promoted itself as a site for posting, sharing, and viewing amateur content, but as the service has become increasingly reliant on generating advertising revenue, it has gradually shifted into a service where users can find professionally-produced material such as music videos and, in some cases, web TV series. Thus, by looking at Netflix’s gradual shift from its function as a virtual video store into something closer to a subscription VOD service, we can begin to grasp how television itself is being reimagined in the on-demand era.

Netflix can now be said to have undergone three significant transitions since it launched in 1997 as a transactional video rental service that rented DVDs by mail for four dollars each during the height of the dot-com boom. This transactional service depended heavily on several technological and infrastructural factors, including consumer adoption of the DVD format, the novelty of purchasing goods and services over the web, and, most crucially, a skilled use of direct marketing that Netflix executives Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings had cultivated prior to launching Netflix. The first transition took place in 2001, when Netflix moved to a subscription model, with a $20 monthly fee allowing subscribers an unlimited number of rentals, although they could only have three movies at a time. Eventually, this was supplemented with a tiered pricing system that allowed subscribers to have as many as eight DVDs out at a given time. The third stage began in 2007 with the introduction of Netflix’s streaming service, a shift that was accompanied by the company’s increasing focus on refining its recommendation algorithm. The final stage began in 2011, with Netflix announcing its entry into producing original content including the Norwegian-American series, Lilyhammer, and more prominently, the political drama House of Cards.

The earliest articles about Netflix treat it as the equivalent to an online video store, a reflection of its original practice of renting movies on DVD. Many of these early articles are also attentive to the novelty of the DVD format itself. The DVD had only entered the market in 1995 and was still a relatively new format. The first mention of Netflix and HBO together that I was able to track down dates to 2001, in a San Jose Mercury News article by Dawn C. Chmielewski. It was written just a few months after Netflix switched from per-movie rental fees to a subscription DVD service. In order to describe the new model, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings explained that his service is “a little like HBO: it’s $20 a month to watch all the movies you want. The difference is, you get to pick the movies.” Already placing emphasis on the appeal to unlimited choice, Hastings also emphasized the fact that Netflix could provide access to movies that were unavailable at the local video store. Highlighting the fact that each Blockbuster video store served a four-mile radius, Hastings suggested that these stores, with their limited shelf space, could not serve the “eclectic” tastes of most movie fans. Here, Netflix quickly became linked...
with the discourses of plenitude, a connection that would eventually be aligned with Wired Magazine’s editor-in-chief Chris Anderson’s concept of “the long tail,” an idea that invoked the magazine’s long-standing fascination with and promotion of technological innovation.21 Thus, although Netflix was almost exclusively associated with movies, rather than television, the connection with HBO seemed to convey two distinct characteristics: first, the idea of paying a monthly subscription fee for entertainment, and, second, the linkage between media subscriptions and prestige content.

Later in 2001, a stunningly prescient column by Thomas K. Arnold in the trade publication Video Store Magazine also recognized the potential appeal of video rentals by mail, especially for busy families:

On a Friday, Dad picks up a movie for the kids on the way home from work and then calls the cable company to pipe a sports game into his home Sunday afternoon; the next day, Mom brings the movie and picks up two video games for the kids to play during their Saturday sleep-over.

By Sunday night, everyone’s pooped.

The family may have had a lot of fun, but everything had to be picked up, ordered and brought back.

It’s no wonder, then, that a growing number of home entertainment providers are eyeing the subscription model as the way to go.22

Arnold’s hypothetical account emphasizes the exhaustion that many parents might feel and the challenge that they might face in keeping track of movie rentals. The narrative also emphasizes that individual family members might be seeking out personalized media choices, such as the father who would “pipe a sports game” or the children who might spend their weekend playing video games. But, most notably, Arnold went on to point to HBO as an example of a subscription service that already had gained acceptance with home media consumers, while suggesting that Netflix could offer a similar experience.

By 2004, Netflix’s subscription DVD service was connected explicitly with modes of watching associated with television rather than with moviegoing. In a Washington Post article profiling how audiences were using DVDs to watch TV episodes on their own schedules, chief content officer Ted Sarandos explained that “the DVD is becoming a fifth network that [viewers] get to program themselves.”23 Here, Netflix—and the DVD format in general—is depicted as a means of gaining control over a TV viewing habit that threatened to take too much time or that imposed its schedule on busy viewers with discriminating tastes. We also begin to see a subtle shift that more readily aligns the DVD and Netflix with television rather than film. In this sense, we begin to see DVDs as offering the potential to “package flow,” to use Derek Kompare’s phrase, in order to reward more attentive viewing practices. Even so, Netflix was explicitly aligning itself with HBO, with Sarandos again reinforcing the idea that a monthly fee for DVD rentals was analogous to paying for a premium cable channel.

Netflix continued to make this comparison with HBO during the introduction of its streaming video service beginning in 2007. In a 2008 profile of the company in Investor’s Business Daily, Sarandos acknowledged that the company’s biggest challenge was in competing with premium cable channels HBO and Showtime in securing streaming rights to studio content. Notably, however, Sarandos expressed optimism that the exclusive deals that HBO used to distinguish
itself from basic cable and broadcast television were no longer relevant. Instead, he asserted that studios would be more likely to embrace nonexclusive deals, if multiple buyers were willing to pay for content. Implicit in Sarandos’s comparison is the idea that HBO and Netflix are essentially competitors in providing their subscribers with access to a wide range of material in all genres and categories, a shift that indicated that viewers could now grasp Netflix as a streaming service analogous to HBO.

The most recent stage of Netflix’s evolution entailed its transition into producing original content. During this phase, Netflix placed increasing emphasis on prestige—on its ability to provide original, groundbreaking television that challenged the norms of traditional TV storytelling. In 2011, Netflix outbid HBO and all other cable channels for the rights to House of Cards, famously committing over $100 million for twenty-six episodes. Subsequently, Netflix purchased the rights to several other critically acclaimed series, including the prison drama Orange Is the New Black (2013–) and revived the cancelled Fox comedy Arrested Development (2003–2006, 2013). This move to licensing original series further shifted Netflix away from its association with movies to its current reputation as a streaming service for television. It’s worth noting that the decision to produce original content was a response to the fact that rights to streaming content had become significantly more expensive, once their 2008 deal with Starz expired; however, Netflix continued to embrace language that cast itself as a revolutionary alternative to traditional TV. This promotional strategy gained additional support when Netflix received fourteen Emmy nominations in 2013, just months after it began producing original shows. As a way of reinforcing this hype, TV critic David Bianculli dramatically but erroneously proclaimed, “It took HBO 25 years to get its first Emmy nomination; it took Netflix six months.”

But even as Netflix embraced television content, it sought to depict itself as redefining the television medium by distancing itself from traditional modes of TV storytelling and consumption. In a 2013 article for GQ Magazine that explicitly positioned Netflix as “the next HBO,” Ted Sarandos remarked, “the goal is to become HBO before HBO becomes us.” In this case, Netflix is defined within the discourses of cord cutting, in which subscribing to cable would become an “antiquated” activity. Instead, TV viewers could reject pricey cable subscriptions in favor of an à la carte menu of on-demand television. During this era, Netflix’s practice of simultaneously releasing all episodes of a TV show season also became the object of discussion. For the most part, this practice has been characterized as enabling (1) more attentive viewing practices as binge viewers are assumed to be more familiar with previous episodes of a show and, as a result, (2) more innovative storytelling practices because a show’s creators can assume that those viewers will be more likely to remember subtle details. Again, HBO served as a foil for Netflix as it sought to position itself as reinventing television.

I’ve run through this history in detail because it illustrates Netflix’s long history of defining itself as a superior form of entertainment, in large part through a comparison with HBO. During the earliest stages of the DVD-by-mail era, HBO served as a useful metaphor for Netflix’s subscription service, but by 2011 HBO was recast as a rival for similar forms of quality content. More recently, Netflix has worked to define itself as rewriting the very rules of TV storytelling, often in language that echoes the discourses of quality and exclusivity that were used to describe HBO, with subtle differences for the convergence era.
TV Got Better

Thus, Netflix, like HBO, has sought to attract new subscribers and to retain current users through a strategy in which it promoted itself as a superior form of entertainment to a version of standard, or linear, television that really hasn’t existed for some time. The digital video recorder TiVo, for example, was introduced in 1999, allowing viewers to time-shift programming without the hassle of recording shows onto videotape, and as Netflix’s own promotional strategies illustrated, fans were using DVDs to binge-watch favored TV shows long before streaming video was introduced. These promotional discourses culminated in its “TV Got Better” campaign, a sponsored content feature produced in cooperation with Wired Magazine and written by anthropologist Grant McCracken. This sponsored content entails a series of features—articles, graphics, videos—designed to resemble editorial content, although in actuality it was produced and purchased by Netflix. As Ad Age reporter Michael Sebastian acknowledged, the “TV Got Better” campaign functioned as a form of “native advertising,” one that was “designed to draw readers’ interest by mimicking the editorial content surrounding it.”

Thus, the feature serves as explicit promotion for Netflix, even while providing the appearance that it is objectively reporting on cutting-edge changes in television viewing practices.

When a web surfer opens the “TV Got Better” page, she is confronted with an image of a solitary viewer wearing headphones, backlit by the light of a screen filled with a bright psychedelic pattern. As she scrolls down, the screen seems to shatter, as the article’s headline comes into the frame, announcing that “difficult men and brilliant women [are] turning popular culture into culture,” language that not only places Netflix on the technological cutting edge but also reframes television as something more than mere entertainment. The article and supplemental features are characteristic of Wired’s populist tech triumphalism and helped to foster Netflix’s emphasis on prestige, plenitude, and participation. But they also engage with many of the familiar cultural critiques of older forms of television that had characterized it as a “vast wasteland,” one that was navigated by bored channel flippers. In fact, McCracken’s characterization of watching television implicitly evokes Raymond Williams’s characterization of television as an almost oppressive “flow” of images, programming, commercials, and updates designed to keep viewers watching, one that is deliberately “planned” by broadcasters to promote attentiveness to a single channel over the course of an evening. Thus, for McCracken, Netflix offers a technological solution to a perceived problem with television: a lack of viewer control over how TV structures time. Underlying McCracken’s argument is the unquestioned assumption that Netflix is TV at this point, albeit a version of TV that has, through technology, eliminated all of the problems that had dogged the medium in the past.

Perhaps the most notable feature of the sponsored content is its attempt to redefine binge viewing. As a number of observers have pointed out, bingeing implies a lack of control, and frequently it has been associated with antisocial, unhealthy behaviors, with one notorious scientific study linking the practice to depression and loneliness, while others have associated it with poor physical health. The Wired article, however, reframes the practice of watching multiple consecutive episodes of the same TV show as “feasting,” a term that implies not only a clearer sense of intentionality but also a healthier selection of content. Bingeing suggests junk food, while feasting is for a more sophisticated palate. As McCracken asserts, “people are not watching predicable shows with happy windups by the end of each episode,” a description that dismisses decades of the most critically acclaimed shows on TV. This association between Netflix and healthiness was reinforced in a 2014 interview with House of Cards showrunner Beau
Willimon, in which he associated bad television with the stereotype of a distracted TV viewer “putting Hot Pockets in a toaster.” But as Netflix has defined it, binge viewing becomes an active practice, one that is capable of producing “better” television. During a GQ profile of Netflix that echoed many of these themes, we are told, “Binge viewing obviates the need for recaps and other clunky narrative devices.” McCracken’s “TV Got Better” essay goes a step further, asserting that attentive, upright audiences—as opposed to passive couch potatoes—are responsible for the sharpened storytelling of the on-demand TV era. McCracken even argues that innovative TV storytelling is “increasing cognition” in its audience, a claim that recalled Steven Johnson’s pivotal thesis that TV was making audiences “smarter.” McCracken’s celebration of complex TV narratives also functions as an ahistorical—or perhaps more precisely, pseudohistorical—claim that ignores such maligned formats as the daytime soap opera, genres that are often denigrated in part because of their association with largely female audiences. Alongside of this discussion of bingeing, Netflix included a counter that showed how many hours of content its subscribers had watched in the time since a web user opened the site—approximately sixty-one hours per minute by my calculations—an illustration of just how much content people were viewing. This data offers a slight tweak of the discourses of plenitude, with Netflix promoting itself less in terms of the sheer number of movies and television shows available through its streaming service than in terms of the ability of that content to keep its subscribers engaged for hours on end.

Notably, Netflix defines its original prestige content in part by comparing it to more privileged cultural forms. Most famously, House of Cards was described by critics as a cynical Shakespeare-on-the-Potomac series that featured an Oscar-winning Kevin Spacey in the lead role as an ambitious Richard III-style political manipulator, while Robin Wright was also aligned with her past work as a film actress in the role of a Lady Macbeth figure. Similarly, in an interview for “TV Got Better,” Arrested Development creator Mitchell Hurwitz suggested that bingeing was changing television by making it more like a novel: “You can choose to read this novel or not. But we’re not going to check in with you after every chapter,” a comparison echoed by House of Cards series creator Beau Willimon. In both cases, Netflix embraces the discourses of prestige television, even while embracing the convergence-era language that allows it to portray its prestige shows as transcending the limits of broadcast TV.

The language of bingeing—or feasting, as McCracken would have it—embeds the discourses of participation within it: “people are staying put, paying attention, watching skillfully and passionately.” As my review of Netflix’s promotional discourse suggests, bingeing has frequently been characterized not as a passive activity but as one aligned with active viewing practices, as a way of managing one’s time in front of the television rather than succumbing to a television schedule that, as one viewer put it, “occupies an insane amount of time.” Netflix, of course, has deliberately courted this attention through its strategy of releasing all episodes of a TV season simultaneously. New seasons of its most high-profile prestige shows, especially House of Cards, are events that inspire reviews, op-eds, and essays in a wide range of political, entertainment, and tech industry publications, such as Slate, The Atlantic, and Salon. These articles do much of the promotional work for Netflix, reducing the need for expensive advertising purchases, by positioning the show as something that could be of interest to fans of quality television, admirers of Shakespearean drama, or citizens intrigued by American politics.

The “TV Got Better” campaign is notable for its dexterous use of the discourses of distinction—for its ability to describe Netflix in terms of prestige, participation, and plenitude. But it’s also notable for what it leaves out. While a “typical” Netflix viewer, according to Wired, passionately
participates in water-cooler discussions of prestigious shows such as Orange Is the New Black and House of Cards, a glance at the streaming menu illustrates that Netflix continues to offer the “junk TV” it has supposedly rendered irrelevant. More crucially, these articles place almost exclusive access on the service’s prestige titles while ignoring Netflix’s distribution of children’s content, for example, and the more traditional viewing practices—of using TV or video as an electronic babysitter—associated with it.40

Conclusion
This article has sought to trace the evolution of Netflix’s promotional practices, especially as they intersect with discourses of “good TV.” Initially defining itself as a subscription service along the lines of HBO, which had by then distanced itself from broadcast television through the language of exclusivity and cultural distinction, Netflix borrowed from this discourse to promote its DVD-by-mail service as a means of satisfying consumers’ desires for unlimited choice of (quality) content, as well as control over their own viewing schedules. Netflix has, more recently, combined the technological discourses of participation and plenitude with a set of cultural assumptions about prestige audiences. In this regard, Netflix increasingly casts itself as participating in the reinvention of television and in the cultivation of new modes of TV storytelling. Although such claims should be regarded with a great deal of skepticism, they can tell us something about our own assumptions about the evolution of television as a medium and TV storytelling as a practice. While promotional discourses such as the “TV Got Better” campaign depict streaming as a cutting-edge practice—a language that might appeal equally to Wired’s technology enthusiasts, to television fans wanting to be congratulated for their tastes in programming, and even to investors looking to buy into the future of entertainment—Netflix is also very much part of the pedestrian activities of daily life. These practices of consuming streaming video are associated with what Ted Striphas has characterized as a “society of controlled consumption.”41 Striphas reminds us that this industry discourse can perpetuate an industry common sense that may lead us to ignore viewing practices and cultural tastes that may be less privileged than those aligned with discourses of quality and exclusivity. These promotional materials may also reinforce ahistorical claims about transitions in television programming that position newer shows, technologies, and delivery systems on the cutting edge. But as a set of industry strategies for promoting new ways of watching and thinking about television, they are worthy of our attention.

1 Chuck Tryon is an associate University Press. He has also published essays in The Journal of Film and Video, Jump Cut, Popular Communication, and Screen, as well as the anthologies Moving Data: The iPhone professor in the English Department at Fayetteville State University. He is the author of Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence and On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies, both from Rutgers and the Future of Media and Science Fiction Film, Television and Adaptation: Across the Screens.


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33 Hass, “And the Award for the Next HBO.”
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