“As the Cyber World Turns”: Web Soaps and the History of TV Storytelling Online

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the history of the web soap, serialized, fictional programming distributed online and associated with the US daytime television soap opera. I locate its origins in the mid-1990s and document its development in three subsequent periods: the convergence of soaps and the internet between 2000 and 2007, the web soap’s expansion between 2008 and 2013, and the marginalization of soaps post-2013. The web soap helped to shape the economic and narrative possibilities for streaming TV but has been supplanted by the higher-profile fare it helped make possible, repeating gendered patterns of cultural value that have long accompanied television.

In 2013, Netflix’s House of Cards (2013–2018) became the first drama series distributed via streaming platform to win Primetime Emmy Awards, marking the first time that a so-called web series was accorded such recognition. Of course, this big-budget production featuring Hollywood feature film stars distinguished itself from the content typically associated with the web, signaling that the kinds of web series that could win Primetime Emmys were quite different from the web-distributed content of the past. Throughout the 2010s, some of the most highly regarded and awarded US television series were distributed by streaming-exclusive companies, helping television to accrue such labels of distinction as Peak TV. While certain dimensions of American television have been undergoing a process of cultural legitimation for decades, the post-2013 streaming era has accelerated this elevation in status, wherein certain instances of serialized scripted narrative have come to

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stand in for both the best of television and the promise of the internet to free us from the denigrated sphere of the “old” TV.  

What remains submerged in popular, critical, and industrial discourses that herald the streaming era as television’s best is the history of scripted, serialized drama distributed online. This is a history innovated, developed, and continued by so-called web soaps, a descriptor of internet-distributed storytelling begun in the mid-1990s and evolving over the next twenty-five years. Despite this long history, by the latter half of the 2010s, the web soap was supplanted by the very legitimated fare it helped to make viable. Web soaps began as an early effort at serialized storytelling distributed online rather than through broadcast or cable companies. They would take various forms from the mid-1990s on, but throughout their history they have retained a connection to the broadcast daytime soap opera, a TV mode long associated with stories about the emotional trials of interpersonal relationships.

Soap opera is an originating program form of American broadcasting, begun with daily, serialized, quarter-hour episodes in radio of the 1930s; transitioning to television in the early 1950s; and continuing to air weekdays on broadcast networks ABC, NBC, and CBS in the early 2020s, albeit with many fewer such programs than in their network-era heyday. Long associated with an audience of women and recognized as speaking to and about feminized concerns, the broadcast daytime soap opera is foundational to the economic and narrative history of American television but also has been marginalized and dismissed in circles of prestige. Its lower-budget and rapid production, its overtly commercial origins (as a vehicle for advertising the household goods manufactured by its original sponsor-owners), and its associations with women have kept the broadcast daytime soap in a separate sphere from more culturally legitimated forms of television.

Web soaps have some explicit connections to broadcast daytime soap opera, including being named as soaps by creators, distributors, journalists, and audiences and, eventually, being labeled as Digital Daytime Drama Series for award consideration by the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (NATAS), the home of the Daytime Emmy Awards. Many web soaps have featured actors and creative personnel who have worked in broadcast daytime dramas. Yet web soaps also differ quite significantly from their broadcast counterparts, given their short episode duration, limited numbers of episodes, and on-location rather than studio-centered productions. The association of web soaps with broadcast daytime soap opera is as much discursive as it is direct or causal, which is why tracing the history of web soaps so crucially centers on gendered conceptions of cultural status.

This article examines the history of the web soap as repeating gendered patterns of social and cultural valuation that have long accompanied television and that have been especially prominent in the history of soap opera. As an emergent form of online TV storytelling, one that preceded and undergirded the heralded streaming TV dramas of the 2010s, the web soap pro-

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vides a twenty-first-century example of how soap opera historically has served as a foundation and boost for higher-profile fare.2

In what follows, I locate the origins of the web soap in the mid-1990s and its development in three subsequent periods: the convergence of soaps and the internet between 2000 and 2007, the expansion of the web soap between 2008 and 2013, and the marginalization of soap opera in the post-2013 streaming era. I examine the positioning of the form in the media industries and in the culture at large. Aymar Jean Christian notes in his work on the “open TV” world of independent production that some of the earliest imaginings of the internet as an entertainment medium envisioned the web as akin to television.3 As I examine, this linkage was literalized in the mid-nineties cybersoap craze. When that era in the history of the web waned, and once broadband technology better accommodated the transmission of video online, the web soap was revived. I argue that between 2000 and 2013, soap opera again became a pioneer, this time forming a prominent strand of the scripted content produced for web distribution and imagined as appealing primarily to audiences who were feminized or otherwise socially marginalized. The first half of this period of TV and internet convergence, until about 2007, was more experimental, as broadband capacity and digital production tools better accommodated web-distributed video and soap-like serial narratives explored what was possible. The years between 2008 and 2013 were those of expansion as the web soap explored the narrative, production, funding, and distribution challenges and potential of this new way of creating and consuming television. In 2013, however, the high-profile launch of Netflix original programming initiated a new shift, one that increasingly pushed the web soap to the margins of internet-distributed TV, displacing the soap opera as a new media innovator and burying its history, ultimately repeating gendered patterns of cultural value as old as broadcasting itself.4 In documenting the story of the web soap, this article asserts that, in the digital age, soap opera has been a form as foundational to the contemporary evolution of television as it was across American broadcast history.5

THE CYBERSOAPS OF THE 1990S ‘NET

In his history of independent TV production and distribution for the web, Christian describes the early envisioning of the web as television and the centrality of The Spot, one of the internet’s first cybersoaps, to that conception.6

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4 In Open TV, Christian identifies the earlier period in the history of web programming as running between 2000 and 2005 and does not specifically periodize the time thereafter, although he notes the impact of “big data television” (e.g., corporate players like Netflix) post-2013. My periodization is thus very similar to but slightly more specific than this.
5 Levine, Her Stories.
The Spot, begun June 7, 1995, was a creation of ad agency Fattal and Collins and featured written diaries from a range of characters, twentysomethings living together in a beach house. The characters’ web pages included photos and short videos but were primarily text based. The entries were posted daily, and audiences would engage with the characters “through electronic messages known as email.” The agency got some sponsors for the site, but ultimately The Spot drew more attention than it did revenue. While the format inspired many imitators—one observer identified seventy-six “webisodics” in its wake—it proved unsustainable financially. By 1998, this form of text-based cybersoap had largely disappeared.

The Spot and its imitators would not have a long-term presence as internet-based entertainment, but the industrial and cultural discourse surrounding these projects would persist, placing television in general and soap opera in particular at the center of ideas about the internet and its storytelling potential. Christian notes that The Spot and the other cybersoaps borrowed conceptually from television by drawing on practices of serialization, sponsorship, and networking, as well as by identifying the text-based narrative as soap opera, and he points out that creator Scott Zakarin had Hollywood filmmaking aspirations, for which the TV framing was an analog. I am extending Christian’s analysis to attend specifically to how the discourse identifying The Spot and other such efforts as soap (rather than simply as television) was also widespread and how it positions soap opera as a foundational form of television. In many respects, the discourse linked the narrative potential of the internet to soaps as a lucrative, compelling, and sexy form, rooted in broadcast history, albeit somewhat low in cultural status. “As the Cyber World Turns” was one such typical newspaper headline. A popular book about this period from 1999 described the heady, trendy, yet doomed effort as “Digital Babylon,” while a public television documentary narrated the project as “episodic melodrama made according to the same formula you see on afternoon television.” Meanwhile, People magazine profiled The Spot’s Kristin Herold, “the show’s Heather Locklear [star of prime-time soap Melrose Place, Fox, 1992–1999]” as one of its “startling breakthrough” “Fresh Faces” of 1995.

The Spot was frequently connected both to Melrose Place and to the MTV reality series The Real World (MTV, 1992–2017), each just a few years into their hit runs and both widely recognized as variants of daytime soap opera. Both of these influences, and The Spot itself, had direct creative connections to daytime. Melrose Place writer and co-executive producer Charles Pratt Jr.

8 Story about The Spot on Extra, aired August 1, 1995, in syndication.
10 Geirland and Sonesh-Kedar; and Marc Graser, “Play or Payoff: Nets Eye New Website Uses,” Variety, September 14, 1998, 32.
12 Monica Yant, “As the Cyber World Turns,” St. Petersburg Times, July 23, 1996, 1D–2D.
13 Geirland and Sonesh-Kedar, Digital Babylon; and “Coming Attractions,” Life on the Internet, aired 1996, on Georgia Public Television.
had previously spent years as a writer for daytime soap *Santa Barbara* (NBC, 1984–1993). Mary-Ellis Bunim had spent a decade as the executive producer of multiple daytime soap operas before creating and running *The Real World* beginning in 1992. Sheri Anderson had been the head writer for a number of daytime dramas as well as for the prime-time soap *Falcon Crest* (CBS, 1981–1990) when she began writing *The Spot*, which she described as “the future” because it allowed one to “really get into the hearts and souls of the characters.”15

The cybersoaps embraced a characterization as *soapy* by promising to outdo the (broadcast TV) soaps in the salaciousness and voyeurism they offered, making web soaps seem especially bold, pushing boundaries of social acceptability. “*The Spot* blows television away,” because it is “jagged, edgy, immediate, full of emotion—the real kind, not the TV kind,” promised *The Spot*’s companion book.16 A 1995 segment on the entertainment news program *Extra* (syndicated, 1994–) promised that *The Spot* can “put things out there that television never could,” and Anderson noted the greater freedom “with language, sexuality, titillation” in comparison to TV proper.17 This boundary pushing became even more daring in connection to the new degree of interactivity promised by *The Spot* and its followers. The marriage proposals *The Spot*’s Herold reported receiving suggested an intensification of the behavior of the over-identified soap fan.18 The cybersoaps were directly connected to broadcast daytime drama, but they also promised more, even if the more was to be more risqué storytelling or more extreme fan involvement.

In the mid-1990s, the broadcast daytime TV soap opera was still remunerative for producers and networks and still popular. NBC premiered several new soaps during the nineties, ABC launched a spin-off of *General Hospital* (1963–) in 1997, and a new generation of prime-time soaps were also hits. Daytime ratings were down from their early 1980s height, but scripted, soapy drama was still a vibrant part of the TV business, a phenomenon visible as well in cable innovations such as docu-soaps, exemplified by *The Real World*.19 It is thus reasonable that those seeking to turn the internet into a Hollywood-like entertainment space featuring compelling scripted storytelling would see soap opera as a viable model and as a metonym for television itself. Russell Collins, the head of the agency that produced *The Spot*, was labeled “the Aaron Spelling of the internet” when he created the (ultimately short-lived) online “network” American Cybercast.20 Long a successful TV producer, in the 1990s Spelling was most associated with prime-time soaps such as *Melrose Place*, making the comparison between Collins and Spelling.

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15 Yant, “Cyber World Turns,” 2D.
17 Yant, “Cyber World Turns,” 2D.
18 “Fresh Faces ’95,” 127.
19 On the changing landscape of daytime soap opera ratings in the 1990s, see Levine, *Her Stories*, 200.
yet another link between the cutting-edge online phenomenon and the soapy dramas of broadcasting.

Despite the many linkages between The Spot and soap opera, some involved with the internet sensation began to distance themselves from this low-status form of television. American Cybercast executive Sheri Herman promised, “We really feel that The Spot is more than a soap opera. It’s really creating a new form of entertainment, which can only really happen on an interactive medium like the internet.” American Cybercast would be a quickly failed venture, so these declarations soon rang hollow. Yet such assertions make clear that embedded in the linkage of soap opera, television, and the entertainment potential of the internet was an impulse to present the vaguely defined technological future that The Spot purportedly foretold as distinct from and surpassing both soap opera and television. This conflicted discursive relationship set a prescient pattern for the simultaneously foundational and dismissed status of soap opera that would reverberate across the first quarter-century of the intertwined relationship of TV and the internet.

SOAPS ONLINE, 2000–2007

By 1998, American Cybercast was a bust and the webisodic craze had dissipated; cybersoaps were clearly not the destined future. Early into the twenty-first century, however, soap opera reemerged as a common referent for the convergence of TV and the internet. Many in the broadcast soap business began to envision the web as a potential future for a faltering TV form, and a new wave of web-based experiments in video storytelling drew on the economic and narrative foundations of broadcast soap opera. The first years of the new century would be the precursor to an era of creative expansion for the web soap between 2008 and 2013, when the form was envisioned as a true alternative to broadcast daytime, capturing the interest of independent and corporate creators alike. Before that could happen, however, a transitional phase would revitalize the link between soap opera and the web that was thought dead just a few years prior.

The intersection of soaps and the internet had never wholly disappeared. It just took on forms other than those imagined amid the cybersoap craze. The broadcast network soaps were early occupants of the internet as a space for fan communion, for industry promotion, and even for program distribution. As Nancy K. Baym has examined, “Soap viewers were among the first to appropriate the Internet for recreational use,” participating in Usenet groups to talk with fellow fans as early as 1984. By 1997, soap fans’ use of the internet was increasingly commercialized, as Columbia Television and its parent company, Sony, created a website, SoapCity, as a place for soap fans to

21 Geirland and Sonesh-Kedar, Digital Babylon; and “Coming Attractions.”
congregate and for Sony both to promote the broadcast soaps it owned and to sell soap-related merchandise.\textsuperscript{24}

SoapCity pioneered a number of innovations in the relationship between soaps and the web. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, SoapCity became an early site for the distribution of original soap episodes, when the site hosted what was perhaps the first web soap in video form, a serialized drama called \textit{Santa Cruz} consisting of four six-minute episodes. \textit{Santa Cruz} was a tie-in promotion for Columbia’s feature film \textit{28 Days} (Betty Thomas, 2000), in which the protagonist becomes invested in that very soap along with her fellow patients in a rehabilitation center for substance abuse. Snippets of \textit{Santa Cruz} appeared within the film, but full episodes were produced and released only on SoapCity before they were included on the special edition DVD of the film later that year.\textsuperscript{25} In 2003, the site offered the first paid downloads of some then-running broadcast daytime soaps.\textsuperscript{26} This was over a year before iTunes began to offer downloadable video, again putting soap opera at the forefront of the initial convergence of television and the internet.

Also in 2003 came an effort to revitalize \textit{The Spot}, this time in video form. The “first mobile soap” was produced by Stewart St. John and Todd Fisher, who had worked on the mid-nineties text-dominated version of \textit{The Spot} and continued to be invested in soaps as the future of the internet. This version borrowed the mid-nineties title and premise but took on the new form of the so-called mobisode, short videos distributed by mobile phone carriers to their customers, in this case by cell phone service provider Sprint. The video version of \textit{The Spot} ended by 2005, but St. John and Fisher then created a new web soap, \textit{California Heaven}, initially intended for distribution through internet service provider AOL until the company decided against moving into original programming.\textsuperscript{27} Nevertheless, the producers continued \textit{California Heaven}, which appeared online for some time in 2005 but was ultimately shelved and rereleased in 2011, when web video, and web soaps in particular, had carved out a more established space. Described as combining the appeals of \textit{Melrose Place}, prime-time soap \textit{Dynasty} (ABC, 1981–1989), and supernatural daytime soap \textit{Dark Shadows} (ABC, 1966–1971), \textit{California Heaven} linked the cybersoap experiments like \textit{The Spot} with the web soap world that would be thriving by the early 2010s.\textsuperscript{28}

Web soaps such as \textit{Santa Cruz}, \textit{The Spot}, and \textit{California Heaven} presaged the broader development of internet-distributed video in the first decade of the twenty-first century when technological developments in broadband capacity, cell phones, and mobile devices (e.g., the video iPod) began to alter

what was possible. As Max Dawson documents, mobile and miniaturized forms of TV were a growing trend in these years, as both independent and Hollywood-connected creators began to produce what he calls “unbundled” texts: fragmentary, self-contained segments that could be consumed on their own or together to form longer narrative sequences, including those of serialized dramas. By 2005, what was categorized as “mobile television” was becoming broad and varied, including machinima (capturing video game play), vlogs (a video version of the diaristic-style “web log” or blog), viral videos (including the amateur content most typically uploaded to YouTube upon its 2005 launch), and fragmented versions of various TV forms—news, sports, comedic bits, and continuing drama.29

Much like their early involvement with the internet, the broadcast soaps explored various digital convergences in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, mostly through non-video promotional content designed to entice audiences back to the TV screen. The broadcast networks and cable channels were all experimenting with online video clips and continuing series at this point, as in the web-based companions to prime-time TV dramas such as 24 (Fox, 2001–2010, 2014) or Lost (ABC, 2004–2010) that Dawson documents. This kind of webisode content tended to offer self-contained, serialized narratives, often telling stories of minor characters both to expand the main series’ narrative worlds and to keep fans invested and engaged between seasons, as Suzanne Scott explains regarding the ancillary content for the Sci-Fi Channel series Battlestar Galactica (2004–2009).30

Daytime soaps were also part of these experiments in web-distributed content. CBS’s website, Innertube, put the network’s soaps at the center of its efforts through two web series. In 2006, contestants on reality competition series InTurn competed for a role on CBS Daytime’s As the World Turns (1956–2010). In 2007, Innertube ran an original scripted series, L.A. Diaries, that paired a young woman character from The Young and the Restless (CBS, 1973–) with a new character that would transition from the web to As the World Turns, a crossover between CBS soaps as well as across media.31 NBC meanwhile was using its website to stream episodes of its daytime soap Passions (1999–2007).

The daytime soaps’ efforts to incorporate the internet were clearly motivated by the declining profitability of broadcast daytime. Ratings had been falling gradually since the later 1980s, but the soaps took some particularly intense hits in the early years of the twenty-first century, just as all of broadcast TV was losing audiences. Between 1999 and 2003, the average ratings for daytime soaps fell by about 5 percent each year.32 Ratings measures of the most desirable categories to advertisers, those that included younger women,
also saw ongoing drops; some reports put these at a 12 percent to 13 percent loss from 2004 to 2005 alone. A major daytime advertiser such as Procter & Gamble (P&G) had been contemplating ways to sustain its business by moving away from TV and toward the internet since at least 1998, “trying to figure out how to sell soap without soap operas,” given the fact that the earliest experiments with serialized storytelling online, the cybersoaps, had been a brief, unremunerative flash in the pan.

By 2007, however, amid the revitalized convergence of soaps and the internet, P&G, as well as multiple other major brand advertisers long invested in daytime, had somewhat changed course, turning to branded entertainment in the form of serialized, web-based storytelling as a viable advertising space. P&G created Crescent Heights (2007), a series of light, loosely serialized installments in a story about recent college graduate Ashley (Erin Cahill) and the relationships she builds in her new job and her apartment building. Released through GoTV Networks, a production company that created and distributed unbundled video via mobile providers and the web, Crescent Heights was emblematic of this era of branded entertainment as scripted storytelling. The serial was designed to advertise Tide laundry detergent, but the brand only gradually appeared in the narrative, displayed on a title card at the end of the three-minute episodes until episode 4. More prominent in Crescent Heights was attention to clothes, especially those of protagonist Ashley. As Tide’s marketing director explained of this strategy, “We want to speak to people about more than just laundry. . . . We provide benefits to the fabric she wears on a daily basis.”

The Tide logo, and the product itself, became more and more prominent as the episodes continued—Ashley gets a care package from her mom, which includes a bottle of Tide, and scenes start to take place in the building’s laundry room (see Figure 1).

As much as Tide and P&G sought to describe Crescent Heights as cutting edge and contemporary, the program harked back to the company’s long history as a broadcast daytime soap opera sponsor-producer. Episodes ended

35 Tedeschi.
37 Tedeschi, “P&G.”
39 Soap opera was central to P&G’s advertising strategy for most of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. The company has been one of the highest-spending advertisers in American broadcasting across its history and one of the largest advertisers worldwide. The company spent $10.1 billion on advertising, marketing services, and digital marketing in 2019, the largest such expenditure by any company globally. Barrett J. Brunsman, “P&G Reclaims Role as World’s Largest Advertiser,” Cincinnati Business Courier, December 30, 2019, https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2019/12/30/p-g-reclaims-role-as-world-s-largest-advertiser.html. The company was one of the first sponsor-producers to transition its successful daytime radio serial business to television.
with a prompt to viewers, posing a question about their own experiences with 
an encouragement to text a particular number to share their views: “Have 
you ever experienced love at first sight?” or “What should Will’s next job 
be?” These calls to action were reminiscent of the mail-in offers promoted 
in 1930s and 1940s radio serials used to measure listener involvement by 
sponsor-producers like P&G (see Figure 2).40 Press coverage always connected 
Crescent Heights to P&G’s broadcast soap history; one story described the 
company as “[t]he Pioneer of Mixing Soap and Drama,” even as the piece 
characterized the serial as more like a sitcom than a soap; it was covered on 
soap opera blogs; and both the program and the coverage of it emphasized a 
potential romance plot.41 In press releases, GoTV used the program as exemplar 
of the “short form serialized content” in which it specialized.42

Tide and P&G’s effort with Crescent Heights was just one instance of the 
integration of brands and serialized, web-based storytelling around 2007. 
Viral sensation lonelygirl15 (YouTube, 2006–2008) tentatively included product 
placements as it sought out much-needed funding. Prom Queen (MySpace, 
2007), a serialized teen-oriented soap with a central mystery, featured brief 
spots promoting the (teen-oriented) feature film Hairspray (Adam Shank-
man, 2007) in each of its eighty three-to-four-minute-long episodes and also

40 Crescent Heights, episode 3, “Love at First Sight,” released October 3, 2007, 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NH0_89kvWIA; and Crescent Heights, episode 
/watch?v=EPizyH2jAOI.
41 Tedeschi, “P&G.”
included product placement for companies such as Victoria’s Secret. As producers and advertisers began to experiment with short-form, web-distributed narrative between about 2005 and 2007, the close interweaving of sponsor and story was understood as fundamental to the form. This logic was much like that of broadcasting’s daytime radio serials of the 1930s and 1940s, which had short installments (daily fifteen-minute time slots) bookended by sponsorship messages. Heralded as an extremely effective advertising strategy, the daily format established a listening habit for audiences that also encouraged loyalty to the soaps’ sponsor. The early twenty-first-century world of web-distributed, scripted serials seemed to rediscover this value. As Prom Queen creator Doug Cheney observed of his web content, “I noticed there was a bond with the audience that formed if you kept [the episode length and daily release schedule] consistent. . . . It’s the closest thing you can get to appointment viewing.”

Other experiments in original, web-based, serialized storytelling emerged in this time, most notably quarterlife (2007–2008), the independent creation of longtime prime-time drama showrunners Marshall Herskovitz and Edward Zwick. However, NBC’s effort to adopt the program in 2008, and its designation as a broadcast flop upon its network debut, made quarterlife seem more a failure of the web to live up to the level of TV than it did a truly alternate space. Still, quarterlife followed The Spot and the other early cyber-soap experiments in putting continuing narratives of interpersonal drama at its center, keeping soap-like storytelling central to web series.


The centrality of soap opera to the kinds of storytelling emerging on the web would deepen in the wake of several key industrial developments, especially the Writers Guild of America strike in late 2007 and early 2008 and the cancellations of a number of broadcast daytime soaps beginning in 2009. As television more broadly grappled with the impact of digital media, and as the US broadcast daytime soap business reckoned with its increasingly shaky economics, web soaps took on new life. Instead of scattered experiments or efforts at branded entertainment, web soaps became opportunities for creative expansion and expression, a way for creators with varying degrees of connection to the world of broadcast daytime drama to reimagine what television, and soap opera, could be.

**THE NEW WEB SOAP, 2008–2013**

The world of web soaps and of independent, online, serialized television was most robust between 2008 and 2013, a period in which shifts in the broadcast network business and independent creative experimentation intersected. During this period, conventional Hollywood creators also began to explore soap-like production for the web in an attempt to connect the world of independent web video with corporate media. These specific efforts were short lived, but they helped to establish a pattern of serialized, streaming narratives as typical of web-distributed TV. At the end of this period, companies such as Netflix would place serialized drama at the center of their own big-budget, original productions. Netflix’s strategy was most directly influenced by prestige competitors such as HBO. But other Hollywood players were also experimenting with serialized production for web distribution in the five years before Netflix launched *House of Cards*. It was clear that many industry figures saw serialized drama as foundational to the streaming TV age. In some such cases, web-distributed serialized drama, web soaps, and the broadcast daytime soap opera were explicitly aligned.

The web soaps that emerged late in the first decade of the twenty-first century and early 2010s operated in a liminal space between the deeply institutionalized broadcast network serials to which they were connected and the low barriers to entry in the open TV world of the web. Unlike the branded entertainment strategizing that had so clearly shaped web-based serials such as *Crescent Heights* and *Prom Queen*, in 2008 and 2009 a number of creators launched web serials driven by creative passions and a desire to disrupt conventional industrial structures. The structures these projects disrupted touched on multiple aspects of the economic and creative practices of the mainstream TV industry, including that of daytime soap opera. Late 2005 had seen the launch of YouTube as a streaming video site and iTunes as a destination for paid downloads of full-length TV episodes; by late 2007 the Writers Guild of America strike made clear that digital technologies were forcing a rupture in the TV business, with the strike itself centering on residuals for digital distribution.46

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During the strike, a substantial group of Hollywood writers together launched Strike TV as a platform to showcase their independently produced content, demonstrating their freedom from the major studios. The site’s original content included a comedic, serialized drama by former broadcast daytime writer Karen Harris, *Life in General* (2008), which was focused on the behind-the-scenes shenanigans at a daytime TV soap and was accompanied by episodes of the fictional soap itself, *Greenville General*. These projects not only referenced Harris’s former employer, daytime soap *General Hospital*, but also included an array of broadcast soap talent in its cast. Another WGA strike-motivated project was the series *Imaginary Bitches* (2008), a comedic serial in which the main character interacts with an imaginary group of girlfriends after her real friends get involved in their own romantic relationships. Writer Andrew Miller created the series out of a desire to see what was possible apart from the mainstream industry, and he cast his wife, former *All My Children* (ABC, 1970–2011; Online Network, 2013) star Eden Riegel, as lead, along with a number of her soap industry colleagues in supporting roles.47 Other web series that grew out of the WGA strike included *Anyone But Me* (2008–2012), a serialized, same-sex romance between two teen girls that put its characters through the kinds of emotional trials typical of soaps.48 Subsequent creators in the web soap world frequently reference these projects as helping them to envision their own endeavors.

Most of the web soaps inspired by these 2008 experiments were particularly invested in diversifying the characters and stories possible in the soap form, an investment in marginalized identities that Christian argues is central to web-distributed “open TV.”49 Some creators came from outside the world of broadcast soaps but were inspired by them. Anthony Anderson initially created *Anacostia* (YouTube, 2009–2017; Amazon Video, 2018–), set in a Washington, DC–based African American neighborhood, to “do something for family and friends” by featuring an array of African American characters, “especially the women, who had their own minds, who had their own opinions, who were self-assured in everything about their lives, but also had the soap opera tropes of love and desire and mystery and backstabbing.” Having grown up watching daytime and prime-time soaps with his mother and grandmother, Anderson was invested in the form but critical of its minimal inclusion of non-white characters. Anderson was shocked when his self-funded, low-budget endeavor “caught on so fast with black audiences,” which helped him to recognize that “this is what we’ve been missing, like, this is what we’ve wanted to see, we want to see our faces and our people in these types of situations.”50 Over the next twelve years, Anderson would produce six ten-episode seasons.

Along with its focus on an African American community, *Anacostia* includes LGBT characters and issues. LGBT themes have been central to

47 Banks, 32.
48 *Anyone but Me* co-creator Susan Miller did not come from a daytime soap background but had been a writer and producer on the lesbian-themed Showtime series *The L Word* (2004–2009) earlier in the 2000s, a premium cable serial that drew on soap opera conventions.
many web soaps, especially those of the growth era between 2008 and 2013. The broadcast soap world had already begun to engage more substantially with LGBT stories by that time, but some of the most prominent and popular storylines, such as the budding romance between Olivia and Natalia on *Guiding Light* (CBS, 1952–2009), were prematurely halted with the cancellation of multiple broadcast daytime soaps between 2009 and 2012. The so-called Otalia story coincided with the rise of social media platforms such as Twitter, which made evident the active fan base for the story. But the storyline was cut short when *Guiding Light* was canceled in 2009. Inspired by the fan community, and by projects such as *Imaginary Bitches* and its ties to the daytime soap world, Crystal Chappell (who had played Olivia), launched the web series *Venice: The Series* in 2009, just months after *Guiding Light*’s end. P&G, the owner-producer of *Guiding Light*, had declined Chappell’s suggestion to continue Olivia and Natalia’s story in another format, so Chappell fashioned *Venice* around a new same-sex couple played by *Guiding Light*’s Natalia (Jessica Leccia) and herself: “We took that story, changed the characters’ names, changed the characters and sort of did something like it that was soap opera-like.”

51 Bringing other colleagues from the daytime soap community into the cast and beginning with a scene of the two women in bed—a plot point Olivia and Natalia never reached—*Venice* signaled both its continuity with and marked difference from the broadcast daytime soap (see Figure 3). Like *Anacostia*, *Venice* has continued off and on for more than a decade, with six seasons released through 2020.

The launch of *Venice* was directly tied to the cancellation of *Guiding Light*, but its existence, and the attention the project received, made the web an increasingly attractive space for creatives with connections to the world of the broadcast daytime soap. Particularly prominent were a number of soap actresses, such as Chappell, taking up roles as writers, directors, and producers of web content, giving them a degree of creative control unavailable to them before this point. Martha Byrne, a leading actress on *As the World Turns* since her 1980s teen years, became an active participant in web soap production after departing the soap in 2008 (*World Turns* was canceled in 2010, and Byrne’s departure was connected to the budget cuts the serial was facing in that era). Admiring his work, Byrne introduced herself to Anderson and then joined *Anacostia* as an on-screen villainess and then as a producer, beginning with its third season. She also produced her own web soap, *Gotham*, in 2009, a project that featured colleagues from the broadcast soap world in production and performance roles.

As more of the broadcast daytime soaps were canceled in the early 2010s, a number of actors and behind-the-scenes personnel sought new opportunities, creating or appearing in a range of independent, serialized productions distributed online. Some offered an affectionately parodic take on the world of daytime drama, whether by setting the story behind the scenes at a soap opera or by playing up narrative conventions associated with daytime or prime-time soaps. For example, actor Michael Caruso had seen his work opportunities shrink in the wake of the writers’ strike and decided to create a

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51 Crystal Chappell, interview by the author, June 12, 2019.
web series, *DeVanity* (2011–2014), in the spirit of the prime-time soaps he had grown up watching: “I thought maybe it would be fun if we did kind of like a modern take on one of these shows, a little self-aware and kind of a little revel in, kind of like an R-rated version of these classic eighties soaps.” In the second season, his friend Kyle Lowder, an actor best known for his role on daytime’s *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965–2022; Peacock, 2022–), joined the cast, increasing its visibility among soap audiences. The web serial eventually included such prime-time soap fixtures as Gordon Thomson (best known for his role on *Dynasty*), all of which helped establish Caruso as one of the central creators in the independent web soap sphere.

The booming world of independent web soap production of 2008 to 2013 was boosted by growing attention to these serials in various award communities, the most visible of which were directly linked to soap opera. While the Daytime Emmys had been experimenting with categories for web-distributed content since 2006, its first Outstanding Special Class Short Format Daytime Emmy went to Chappell’s *Venice* in 2011. In the years to follow, the name of the category evolved, landing on Outstanding Digital Daytime Drama Series and eventually proliferating to include acting categories. Many of the nominees and most of the winners in these categories have had ties to the world of broadcast daytime. A number of festivals and awards for web video emerged over this same period, but the one that most prominently highlighted soap opera was the Indie Soap Awards, pioneered by the blog *We Love Soaps* in 2010. That year, the site noted twenty-four eligible web soaps that had aired at least two episodes in 2009 and pointed readers to another eight “indie soaps to check out” as well as six “non-soap indie web series produced by/starring soap actors” and an additional “soap-connected web series.”

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52 Michael Caruso, interview by the author, September 18, 2019.
independent film website *Indiewire*, in 2014, Christian noted the significance of the Indie Soap Awards as the space where the diverse array of creators for independent web series was first recognized. While fan and industry boosterism of the soap world is a crucial component of the growth of web soaps, awards that identified and celebrated the form helped to root serialized narrative produced for the web to the history of soap opera in both the entertainment industries and the broader culture.

The number of web soaps continued to grow across the early 2010s. Yet even as more and more participants from the broadcast daytime world got involved in web soap productions, these projects did not prove particularly lucrative, and some only barely broke even, relying on a combination of crowdfunding, subscriptions, and ad revenues, usually those garnered through Google AdSense via YouTube. As a consequence of these challenging economics, many web series creators saw their efforts as trials for gaining access to more remunerative commercial distribution options rather than as sustainable enterprises. The press, industry, and academic attention to the handful of “success stories” of independent web series that transitioned to legacy distribution perpetuated this narrative. At the same time, however, many in the mainstream media industries increasingly understood the web to be the inevitable future of TV. This meant that the early 2010s became an era in which more conventional Hollywood-connected players began to experiment with creating and distributing their own web series, including web soaps, co-opting the practices of independent creators to suit legacy interests. Web soaps would be central to several early mainstream industry efforts to produce and distribute TV online in this emergent period before major streaming portals introduced original content.

The Hollywood business that most directly connected the world of broadcast daytime to web soaps was Prospect Park, a production company theretofore involved in conventional narrative series production for prime-time broadcast and cable. In 2011, the company took the unprecedented step of licensing ABC’s recently canceled daytime soaps *All My Children* and *One Life to Live* (1968–2012), planning to create original episodes of both as the launch content for a new digital platform, the Online Network. While corporate streaming portals such as Netflix and Hulu were up and running by this point, they had yet to debut original content, functioning instead as secondary distribution sites, making off-network and off-cable series (as well as feature films) available. Prospect Park’s venture was aligned with a broader turn toward original, Hollywood-connected content produced for web distribution the same year. For example, this coincided with YouTube touting its


55 I heard from multiple web series creators in my interviews with them about the economic challenges of their distribution options.

56 Christian, *Open TV*, attends to both the more independent initiatives and the “success stories,” such as those of creators Felicia Day and Issa Rae. Much other discussion of web series focuses on those productions that made the leap to legacy distribution; for example, Bridgette Glover, “Alternative Pathway to Television: Negotiating Female Representation in *Broad City*’s Transition from YouTube to Cable,” *M/C Journal* 20, no. 1 (March 2017).
launch of “100 niche channels” to debut in partnership with “Hollywood providers.”

Prospect Park’s endeavor would prove something of a debacle, as the company failed to grapple with the complicated labor and budgetary issues associated with daily soap production. The continuation of the soaps was first canceled, then resurrected under more realistic terms (fewer, shorter episodes and tighter budgets). About forty episodes of each soap were eventually produced, debuting in 2013 on Hulu alongside the first original productions to appear on Netflix (House of Cards, then Orange Is the New Black, 2013–2019). By that point, Prospect Park’s inexperience with web-based production (and with soap production) made the endeavor an odd blip in the history of soap opera, television, and the web. But the company’s early envisioning of the project further connects soap opera to the long arc of streaming TV history.

While Prospect Park was the most direct attempt by a mainstream provider to make soap opera the basis of a streaming TV business, it was not the only such effort. Another early attempt to program for the web by the Hollywood mainstream came in the form of the YouTube channel WIGS, one of the new partnerships the site pursued in the early 2010s. WIGS premiered in 2012 and was helmed by creators with roots in feature films and premium cable. The channel was pitched in terms atypical for those with such culturally legitimated pedigrees. WIGS was to offer serialized narratives in five- to eight-minute installments “about the lives of women featuring some of Hollywood’s biggest actresses and actors,” including Jennifer Garner and Julia Stiles. The channel acronym stood for “Where It Gets . . .” with the last word filled in according to the series being promoted (“Where It Gets Interesting” or “Where It Gets Spicy”). Each series was titled with the name of its female protagonist, such as Christine, Lauren, and Blue, the serial starring Stiles as a single mother/sex worker.

Press coverage likened the WIGS dramas to the made-for-TV movies of cable channel Lifetime crossed with the “tasteful” production values of HBO. But WIGS’s episode release schedule more closely approximated

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58 The sets and production studios owned by ABC were no longer available once the Prospect Park deal began to move forward. See Daniel Holloway, “AFTRA Soaps Up,” Backstage, July 28, 2011, 3; and Maria Elena Fernandez, “Why All My Children and One Life to Live Are Dead,” Newsweek Web Exclusives, November 23, 2011.


62 Kirsten Acuna, “First Look: WIGS—the YouTube Channel That Will Change the Way
daytime soaps, one serial at a time with three episodes per week released across several days. The *New York Times* described the formula as most similar to “a chamber drama or radio play,” both of which have resonance with the dialogue-heavy, sparsely produced world of daytime drama, as did the lower-scale budgets committed to the WIGS serials. Because the channel premiered in 2012, when Prospect Park’s online soap project appeared to be a no-go, some coverage understood WIGS as soap opera or, rather, as a new version of soap opera attuned to the era of the web, one that would pick up where broadcast soaps, and the seemingly short-lived effort to move them online, could resume. One *Business Insider* story noted the female viewers were “left without their stories” in the wake of daytime soap cancellations and suggested that WIGS’s “shorts certainly have the feel and appeal to become a new genre and the answer to fallen soaps.” WIGS’s women-focused, serialized dramas, and its imagined audience of women viewers eager for new, involving storytelling, positioned the project within the longer history of television for women, suggesting that soap opera was foundational to the transition of television to the web.

**STREAMING TV AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF SOAP OPERA SINCE 2013**

Prospect Park’s Online Network and WIGS would both be casualties of their era, joining many of the web soaps in abbreviated efforts to bridge daytime soap opera and web-based TV. The online versions of *All My Children* and *One Life to Live*, doomed perhaps from their starts due to Prospect Park’s missteps, were dwarfed at their 2013 debuts by the attention granted to the high-profile launch of the big-budget, original series premiering on Netflix the same year, especially *House of Cards*, with its A-list feature film talent, and then *Orange Is the New Black*, branded as the vision of premium cable series creator Jenji Kohan.

*House of Cards*’ Primetime Emmy nominations and wins in 2013 and 2014 signaled a key shift in the cultural status of web-distributed TV. NATAS, home of the Daytime Emmy Awards, had created an award category to recognize programming “made-for-broadband” or “made-for-mobile” in 2006. NATAS revised its labels for these awards over the coming years, eventually settling on Digital Daytime Drama Series. Labeling digital content, available on viewer demand, with a specific time in the TV schedule has no logical rationale; rather, it likely was connected to NATAS’s effort to claim ownership of these categories well before the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (ATAS), purveyors of the Primetime Emmys, acknowledged web-based fare. ATAS first recognized web-distributed content in 2011, with its Outstanding Short-Form Live-Action Entertainment Program category. This category was

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64 Acuna, “First Look.”
presented at the Creative Arts Emmys ceremony, rather than the Primetime Emmys ceremony, keeping it lower profile. With the House of Cards nominations, ATAS marked a break in these patterns, distinguishing the output of Hollywood-connected streaming portals from the lower-rung categories of “short-form,” “web series,” and the many NATAS labels for such programs, all of which included the term daytime. This move allowed ATAS to trump NATAS in its embrace of web-based television, despite the fact that NATAS and the Daytime Emmys had been attending to web-distributed series for years and had long connected those series discursively to daytime soap opera.

The ascendance of high-profile original series distributed via subscription streaming platforms such as Netflix was accompanied by a number of other shifts that began to further marginalize the category of web soap. In 2013, the Indie Soap Awards announced a change in their name—to the Indie Series Awards, affiliating themselves with independence more than with soaps. Web series continued to reference and parody soap opera, but such efforts—especially those that received the most mainstream attention—often were not generated by broadcast soap talent and adopted a tone more mocking than affectionate toward daytime drama. For example, comedian Jane Lynch starred in Dropping the Soap (2017) as the producer of a failing daytime drama. The project was announced in 2013 but no episodes were released until 2017, when ten short-form entries debuted. The log-line for the series was “Shit’s about to get real for the cast and crew of the long-running (awful) soap-opera Collided Lives when new Executive Producer Olivia Vanderstein arrives to shake things up. Bend over, Daytime.” This not only marked the fictional soap as “awful” but also referenced a stereotype of gay male sex, exposing the program’s mocking hostility to the feminized space of soap opera proper. Lynch’s Primetime Emmy win in the short-form category for this role further emphasized the difference between Dropping the Soap and the more soap-connected digital series nominated in the Daytime Emmy categories—the web series openly disdainful of soap opera was validated above the long history of web series that openly embraced the legacy form.

Another high-profile entry in the Primetime Emmys’ short-form awards was An Emmy for Megan (2018–2019), a web-distributed comedy series created by sitcom writer Megan Amram that self-reflexively told the story of the fictionalized Megan doing whatever she could to win an Emmy. While less directly targeting soap opera as its object of mockery, An Emmy for Megan characterized web series as illegitimate, as more akin to dominant cultural assumptions about soap opera than to typical Emmy fare. The character’s

67 In 2016, ATAS split the Short-Form category into three: Variety Series; Non-fiction or Reality Series; and Comedy or Drama Series, the latter of which is the best comparison to NATAS’s Digital Daytime Drama Series.

68 NATAS would revise the label for these awards multiple times, using titles such as Special Class Short Format Daytime and New Approaches Original Daytime Program or Series, before settling on Digital Daytime Drama Series, which linked such programs overtly to its (broadcast) Drama Series categories.

69 #BendOverDaytime was used across the promotion for the series, including in its Amazon Prime listing. The longer text quoted here appears on the series’ own website, http://droppingthesoap.com.
constant, boastful talk of her “web series” suggests a cynicism about the form as a whole. A gag about her efforts to bring diversity to her project (as an overt ploy to win an Emmy) reads as especially dismissive of the substantial strides in diversity made in the independent world of web series and web soaps. This willful ignorance of the diversity of the web series world is further heightened by the fact that Amram’s series is produced by Abso Lutely Productions, a company best known for its absurdist comedies airing as part of the white, straight male-skewing Adult Swim block of the Cartoon Network, a block that arguably “profits from and disavows white-male privilege.” Finally, when comedic actress D’Arcy Carden guest stars on An Emmy for Megan, the plot turns into an overt soap opera parody, with D’Arcy murdering Megan in an effort to claim the Emmy for herself (see Figure 4). Amram’s critique of award-grubbing in Hollywood is pointed, but her targets read more as the independent, de-legitimated worlds of soap opera and the web soap than as the mainstream industry. That Amram’s web series received more and more attention across the 2010s indicates another way in which soap opera in general and the web soap in particular have been increasingly marginalized since 2013.

The Daytime Emmys’ digital drama series categories continued across the 2010s, and soap-connected talent continued to be recognized in this space. However, in the later 2010s, the kinds of series nominated in this category gradually moved away from broadcast soap opera, whether in the talent involved, the creators’ positioning of their work, or the series’ narrative

70 The diversity question was at the center of An Emmy for Megan, season 1, episode 3, “Diversity,” released April 26, 2018.
72 An Emmy for Megan, season 1, episode 6, “Episode 6,” released April 28, 2018.
interests and concerns. In these cases, there has been less of the outright repudiation of soap opera found in projects such as *Dropping the Soap* or *An Emmy for Megan* and more of a drifting away from the earlier era’s embrace of the web as a space to reimagine daytime drama. Thus, a Digital Daytime Drama Series nominee such as *Conversations in L.A.* (2017–2019) may borrow from the soap’s emphasis on interpersonal relationships, dialogue as a means of exploring character, and recognition of women’s experience, but creator Anne Marie Cummings understands her work as influenced by and in concert with theater and with independent film, not with daytime drama.73

In some respects, web soaps have gained in status since 2013. Take the case of *EastSiders*, initially an independently produced and distributed web soap that debuted on YouTube in late 2012. *EastSiders* centers a gay male love story and co-stars Van Hansis, the actor who had played gay teen (and then young adult) Luke Snyder on daytime’s *As the World Turns* from 2005 until the soap’s 2010 cancellation; the web soap drew many fans following Hansis from daytime. In 2016, after two seasons, Netflix began to distribute the program, introducing many viewers to it as a “Netflix show,” seemingly a sign of success in the new streaming marketplace.74 But this distribution deal did not fund additional production. Instead, creator Kit Williamson and his production company, Go Team Entertainment, continued to support the series, generating two more seasons through crowdfunding and sponsorship deals.75 The soap thereby gained in status through its visibility on Netflix, even as it continued to function economically on the industry’s margins.

Similarly, Amazon’s Video Direct platform has allowed a wider array of creators to distribute their work through Amazon Prime, making these web series seem more like high-profile Amazon original series such as *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–2023) than like the work of an independent YouTuber.76 But Video Direct does not offer remuneration substantially better than YouTube, and creators that have used it as a distribution platform have not necessarily benefited financially. An established web soap producer such as *Venice*’s Chappell has continued to offer her series directly to subscribers through sites long amenable to independent creators, such as Vimeo, rather than pursuing the limited revenues available via Amazon.77 The fact that more and more web soap creators are able to distribute their work through


77 Chappell, interview by the author. Anthony Anderson saw more benefit to placing *Anacostia* on Amazon Video Direct than did Chappell for *Venice*, but Chappell was comparing the service to her experience with Vimeo. Anderson has found Amazon more remunerative than he has YouTube, but not exceptionally so. He described the Amazon revenues as “a cute little piece of change.” Anderson, interview by the author.
portals such as Amazon Prime or Netflix, reading to many as major players in the post-2013 corporate streaming landscape, does not in fact signal any change in their economic status within the television industry. If anything, the scant monetary rewards for most web soap creators via these distribution portals mean that web soaps are no more established in the competitive streaming TV landscape than they were earlier in their history.

In the early 2020s, new projects in internet-distributed TV retain some connection to soap opera and to the twenty-five-year history of web soaps but position themselves as high-status revolutions distinguished from TV history, including web-based and streaming TV history. Most notable here is the ultimately short-lived Quibi, the mobile-only subscription platform that promised “quick bites” in the form of feature film chapters or TV series episodes of ten minutes or less in daily installments. Not only was this release strategy akin to that of broadcast soap opera, and to the earlier period of soap-like mobisodes, but so too were some aspects of the platform’s economics. P&G, once the dominant sponsor-producer of broadcast daytime drama, an early participant in branded web series, and the world’s largest advertiser, was the first sponsor to partner with Quibi and was part of its development process, helping to design the service in ways friendly to advertising. Quibi was launched with two subscription tiers, the lower of which included ads, among them serialized sixty-second ads that P&G planned to release in fifteen-second episodes that “[follow] viewers until they’ve seen the whole thing,” in keeping with the history of advertising via serialized narratives that had launched the daytime radio soap in the 1930s.78

Multiple aspects of Quibi drew upon elements of the history of television, of soap opera, and of web soaps: the centrality of advertiser funding, the emphasis on serialized narratives, and the daily release schedule all come from broadcast soap history. P&G’s involvement references not only broadcast history but also the history of web soaps, as in early projects such as Crescent Heights, and in the initial understanding of web-distributed video as mobile. Yet the cutey references to soap opera that appeared frequently in press coverage of Crescent Heights were nowhere to be found in the conversation about Quibi, which largely centered on the upscale talent founder Jeffrey Katzenberg signed on to create content, on Katzenberg’s own history as a media mogul, particularly in his ties to the feature film business, and on the cutting-edge technology Quibi used.79 Broadcast soap opera, and the more recent era of web soaps, were clear antecedents to Quibi, but in the


anticipatory discourses about the platform, those legacies were sidelined in favor of the legitimation afforded by association with the Hollywood elite and technological innovation.

Quibi itself was a failure, perhaps due to its debut during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is ultimately no more than a sidenote in the history of web-distributed TV. More significant to understanding the role of soap opera in the history of digital TV storytelling is the discourse surrounding the Quibi launch, which made clear the ongoing, likely permanent, marginalization of soap opera and the web soap in the evolving sphere of digital moving image storytelling. That this discourse emerged alongside other signs that the history of the web soap was being dismissed and discounted makes clear the ways that soap opera has been afforded little place in the stories we tell about the historical relationship of TV and the internet. Despite the quarter-century presence of soap opera in the evolution of web-distributed scripted storytelling, the disarticulation of soap opera from the newest frontiers of streaming video continues apace, an all-too-familiar pattern for soap opera and for the legacies of all media associated with the feminine.

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