

Remodeling Television

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“Back away from the back nine!”: Restructuring the American broadcast network season

The 22-24 episode American broadcast television season is dying. With shows becoming more and more expensive to produce (and ad dollars drying up), producers and writers acknowledging that quality is difficult to maintain over the course of a 22-episode season, and audiences perceived as always on looking for something new, shortening the seasons will help alleviate these concerns by lowering costs, allowing broadcasters to make each season more of an event, and maintaining creative integrity.

The suggestion that the American broadcast networks should go to a 13-episode season should not be viewed as a revolutionary idea, but as a regular progression of broadcasting practices. Broadcast networks already use shortened seasons with midseason replacement shows, and have been for years. Shows like *Grey's Anatomy* (2005 – current), *Parks and Recreation* (2009 – current), and *All in the Family* (1971-1979) began with shortened seasons. Broadcasters also use the shortened season format to fill gaps in a schedule or maintain a schedule. *Chuck* (2007 – current), later seasons of *Lost* (2004-2010), and *Rules of Engagement* (2007 – current) are examples of series that have (or had) shortened seasons but were also renewed each season.

In this light, with shortened season orders, would we consider *Lost* a midseason replacement? Its later seasons aired midseason, but it was never a “replacement.” *Chuck* airs at the start of each fall season, only to have its finale air before the winter hiatus. *Rules of Engagement* is regularly all over CBS's schedule, with episodes airing in just the fall, just the spring, or spread out across both, but still never having more than 13-15 episodes a season. These are just recent example of the broadcast networks utilizing shortened seasons for their shows. Couple it with recent short summer series like *The Gates* (2010) and *The Good Guys* (2010), the broadcast networks have a history of using shortened seasons, but unwilling to fully commit.

But they should. Cable networks have discovered the value of short seasons as they produce more and more original fictional programming. One is that the shortened seasons fit well into the off-periods for the broadcast networks (late fall to winter, late spring, and all of summer) where there is less competition and viewers are looking for new shows to watch instead of reruns. But the cable nets also realize that the shortened seasons benefit them financially. It costs less to produce 13 episodes than it does 22, and cable nets have the benefit of ad dollars (for basic cable nets) and subscription fees to finance their shows. If the broadcast networks picked up fewer episodes, ad dollars could go further, and licensing fees paid to studios, a common reason for shorter episode orders among the broadcast networks, could be lessened.

The financial benefits not only extend to cost, but to advertising as well. The shorter seasons create a compressed space of interest for viewers. Instead of drawing out a narrative across 22 episodes, 13 episodes make the season more of an event, something to be heavily promoted to audiences. There is, with shorter seasons, less risk of losing an audience and better ability to consistently maintain specific demographics for a show. At 13 episodes a season, the show could hold captive that audience, allowing for smarter ad buying, perhaps at a higher price given the specificity of the audience. Even if the show is not heavily serialized (either through plot or character), 13 episodes represent less of a time commitment than 22. Should the show be

brought back for another season, there's a year for audiences to find the show on-line and on DVD, giving shows time to cultivate an audience.

Finally, a shorter episode order allows writers and producers to maintain the quality of their shows. While especially true with serialized dramas, the shortened season prevents padding the season with episodes that fans consider filler or simply may not be good. A regular refrain from cable producers is that the shorter seasons allow them to tell tighter, more controlled stories, thus keeping the show's quality high. Valuable for serialized shows, as demonstrated by *Lost* or *The Wire*, shorter seasons can also assist comedies, allowing for writers to devote more time to a small number of scripts. A model for this would be the BBC's comedies, most of which run between 3 and 7 episodes a season, and are regarded among TV viewers for the consistent humor of the episodes.

Transitioning to a shorter episode order would not be revolutionary or outside the norm of both established and international practices. Instead, it could trim costs, increase target advertising, and maintain creative quality. The revolution comes in the effects: the broadcast networks would adopt the cable model of scheduling programming just as cable has adopted the broadcast mentality to show development. Would that really be so bad?