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The New Netflix and the Evolution of Television Series Programming

Netflix' high-cost, high-stakes move to series programming is scarcely surprising. From MTV to HBO to AMC, successful cable television networks in successive eras have produced their own series programming not only to generate revenues but also – and perhaps more importantly – to enhance its brand, to regularize viewing, and to intensify the commitment of its core audience. At this point, it's still far too early to tell whether Netflix' original series will be successful, or whether its series will be all that "original." Predictably enough, its productions efforts thus far have involved the resuscitation or reproduction of existing series.

While Netflix remains unproven as a television series producer, however, several related changes in its overall "programming" strategy are enjoying significant success. First and foremost, Netflix in just the past year has become predominantly a supplier of TV series, with "flix" – i.e., feature films – dwindling to less than a quarter of its delivery output (a portion that continues to erode). An equally rapid and profound shift involves network TV series production, as the industry responds to Netflix' changing business plan and to related changes in audience behavior. Simply stated, Netflix' aggressive move into TV series delivery appears to be impacting the production, the aesthetics, and the viewing protocols of series television. Moreover, the current "renaissance" in primetime scripted programming, particularly original cable series, is both intensifying and accelerating due to Netflix, which for the moment at least is providing a lucrative pre-syndication revenue stream and ratings-driving exposure for hit (or near-hit) TV series.

The evidence to support these claims is still anecdotal but rather plentiful and provocative. Consider the case of *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM), which was recounted by Bill Carter of the *New York Times* last spring ("How It Met Big Ratings 7 Years Into Its Run," 8 April 2012). Carter reported that the long-running CBS series finally became a bona fide hit in its seventh season, particularly with the critical 18-49 demographic, when its early seasons became available on Netflix. Carter posited various reasons for HIMYM's success on Netflix, and two in particular: first, that "it is a television rarity: a completely serialized sitcom," and second, the fact "that people had changed their viewing habits and were now watching shows on DVD or Netflix all in one sitting." This latter point, in turn, demonstrably affected the creative approach to HIMYM's production. In the words of series co-creator and show-runner Carter Bays, "We started writing with that in mind" – i.e., the "binge viewing" of entire seasons. The objective of Bays and partner Craig Thomas was now "to make every season an epic movie as opposed to 24 individual little short films."

The Netflix effect has been even more pronounced with regard to cable series, particularly on premium cable networks – i.e., subscription services (including Netflix itself) which are less constrained by sponsor-related and regulatory pressures. This has been most evident with HBO, perhaps the prime beneficiary of Netflix' pivot to TV series delivery. After years

of competition and open antagonism, in fact, Netflix and HBO have in just the past year developed a far more cooperative and collaborative relationship.

With Netflix' move to TV series delivery, three general trends appear to have quickly coalesced. The first is the shift to *concentrated viewing* – with the term “concentration” applying both to the penchant for binge viewing of entire seasons (and entire series runs), and also to a more selective and attentive mode of “watching television.” The second is a *more intensified seriality*, as the shift to concentrated viewing not only allows for but actively promotes the development of tighter and more complex narratives in the episode-to-episode construction of a series. The third related trend involves the ascendancy of the *seasonal text* – i.e. the construction of the seasonal run as an internally coherent and fundamentally self-contained narrative unit, and one that can be varied from one season to the next (due to the duration between seasonal series installments).

All of these tendencies have been evident in the post-network era, and particularly with the ascent of original cable series production since the late 1990s. My point here is that this has gone into a distinctly different register with Netflix' aggressive shift to television series as its primary product. And it will be interesting to see whether – and how – Netflix' own productions relate to the trends described here, particularly with regard to concentrated viewing, program scheduling, and seasonal runs.