Binge Viewing Gets A Bad Rap; Here's The Reality

By Grant McCracken

Binge viewing fills some hearts with horror. The idea of seven unbroken hours collapsed on a couch, bleary eyed, unwashed, surrounded by junk food. It just seems so wrong. So indulgent. So bad for you. Even the name is a loaded term.

But this is the jaundiced view. The truth is otherwise. Binge viewing is a widely misunderstood phenomenon.

It turns out Newton Minow was wrong. As John F. Kennedy's chairman of the FCC FCC, he declared that TV was a "vast wasteland" from which nothing good could every come. Intellectuals and academics have been retailing this notion ever since. And then quite suddenly, along came TV so good we wanted to stay home and consume it in big chunks. We won't ever get a recantation from the intellectuals, but I think we deserve one.

Indeed, when we call this "binge" TV, I think we perpetuate the error that Minow made in 1960. Some part of us still thinks of TV as a waste of time, a guilty pleasure, a dreadful self-indulgence. Perhaps once it was. But we must also reckon with the possibility that TV has changed and that we are changing with it.

Here are the real facts about binge viewing.

1. People average 2 to 3 hours a session

In other words, about the length of a movie or a restaurant meal. Those weekend-long marathons you hear about? They're the exception, not the rule. Bingers know when to say when. And like movies and meals, TV binges are more often than not a social experience: 51% of multiple-episode streamers say they prefer to watch with at least one other person, according to a recent survey of 1,500 TV streamers conducted by Harris Interactive Harris Interactive.

2. Binge viewing takes us beyond the old, hyperkinetic model of TV viewing into something deeper, quieter, more concentrated, and more contemplative

People are no longer channel surfing. They are no longer watching 132 shows an hour, in 10 second or 2 minute bursts. Binge TV is dwelling TV. They watch one show, often consuming a season a week, and an entire story arc over a month or so. This is the way we have always read Dickens. It's a new way to watch TV.

3. Binge TV is good TV

The shows that win this sort of attention are things like "Breaking Bad," "House of Cards," "The Wire." These shows are dramatically better than the "Dukes of Hazzard" or "The Rockford Files." Binge TV is not being driven by a sudden need to binge on anything. We are bingeing because we now have shows worthy of our attention.

4. The couch potato is dead

People are watching not as couch potatoes, thoughtless, witless, uncritical. They're not watching "whatever's on." They have been released from the old model of flipping around the dial until they "find something." They are choosing. The streaming TV that comes to us from providers like Netflix represents a vast catalog. And people are exploring this catalog. Typically, they are they are watching from two points of view. They watch passionately, even as they criticize casting choices and camera angles. This is the outcome of a virtuous cycle. Better TV (driven not least by the cable revolution) produced better viewers. Better viewers then began to demand better TV.

5. The binge TV trend took all of us by storm

Binge viewing is done by all viewers, regardless of age, background, part of the country. There was almost no diffusion curve. Suddenly everyone was doing it. TV got better. We got smarter as viewers. Streaming TV made great programming possible. Netflix opened a great catalog. Now we could choose. Demand skyrocketed.

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Grant McCracken, a cultural anthropologist trained at the University of Chicago. Recently, he worked with Netflix Netflix to study the behavior of its users. He is the author of Chief Culture Officer and Culturematic.

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