**Binge watching: where immersion, indulgence and escapism meet**

By Amy Matthew

It's not illegal. It won't add pounds. It probably won't send you to the emergency room.

There's a newer indulgence among us and it's all about merging familiarity with new technology. Welcome to binge television.

Chances are most of us have taken part in a binge-watching session, especially since the definition of "binge" is pretty low.

Netflix viewers (surveyed by Harris Interactive in 2013) define it as watching between two and six episodes of a show in one sitting. TiVo, in a June survey, defined it as viewing a minimum of three episodes in one day.

By that standard, if you've occupied the couch for an extended amount of time during network marathons of "Big Bang Theory," "NCIS," "The Andy Griffith Show" or any other series, thou hast binged.

**Becoming binge-worthy**

What created this phenomenon? It's been a gradual process that involved several technological advancements: Studios started releasing full seasons (and series) on DVD. Yes, some had been available on VHS, but DVD and its much easier navigation (and streamlined packaging) opened the floodgates.

The VCR and DVR made hoarding episodes a breeze. Appointment viewing -- i.e., watching a show when it airs -- isn't a must anymore (most sporting events excluded). No need to worry about missing episodes of your favorite shows when the machine will record everything for you.

Going digital makes it even breezier. Netflix and Hulu started making full seasons and (sometimes) series available to stream on their services.

Grant McCracken, a cultural anthropologist and author who assisted with last year's Netflix sur- vey, found three factors in the recent rise of binge watching: the struggling economy, increasing digital options and, probably most noteworthy, TV worth bingeing on.

"TV viewers are no longer zoning out as a way to forget about their day; they are tuning in, on their own schedule, to a different world," he reported. "Getting immersed in multiple episodes or even multiple seasons of a show over a few weeks is a new kind of escapism that is especially welcomed today." Shows such as "The Wire," "Breaking Bad" and "Game of Thrones" have earned large binge followings due to excellent reviews and complicated story arcs that are easier followed by absorbing multiple episodes at once.

"Binge watching is not reckless or indulgent," McCracken said in a Dec. 13, 2013, CNN Money story about the Netflix survey. "It's a smart and an even contemplative way to watch certain kinds of TV. Good TV especially."

Selective screening?

It's not exactly the sort of pattern that might be associated with a binge, but both the Netflix and TiVo surveys reveal selective watching habits, not all-weekend marathons that isolate a viewer from the outside world.

In fact, while 38 percent of the Netflix respondents said they watch alone, 51 percent prefer to watch with someone else. (Eighty percent also said they'd rather stream a good TV show than follow a friend's social media posts. Even Facebook can't compete with "The Walking Dead.") McCracken determined that the in-depth nature of many of today's most popular TV series provides an antidote to the truncated social world of Twitter and Facebook.

Binge watching allows us a welcome immersion.

One-third of the more than 15,000 TiVo viewers who participated in its June survey said they had a negative perception of the term "bingeing." Just one year ago, that number was 53 percent.

That doesn't mean bingeing can't become a problem. In a widely referenced January 2004 article in Scientific American, professors Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discussed the reality of TV addiction. They reported that people who watch a significant amount of television can exhibit similar symptoms to substance dependence -- watching more than planned; being unable to cut back; experiencing withdrawal; and forgoing other activities in favor of TV viewing.

A difference with the new wave of bingewatching may be found in McCracken's assessment: Those who dive into a show aren't zoning out; they're very much engaged. The goal isn't simply to watch TV, it's to complete a task -- i.e., finish the season or series.

**Why we watch**

The reasons for binge watching are as varied as viewers' habits, but these are some of the bigger ones.

We're collectors. Those complete season and complete series DVDs exist for a reason: TV viewers like to keep watching the shows they love.

No ads. On the DVR, we fast forward (and yes, companies are toying with ways to prevent that). Netflix doesn't have ads. Hulu does, but the interruptions are much shorter than the average TV break.

Nostalgia and escapism. As McCracken said, bingeing allows viewers to immerse themselves in a show. It doesn't matter if it's a new series such as the Netflix series "Orange is the New Black" or a childhood favorite like "The Brady Bunch."

Up next: All 10 seasons of "Friends" will be available on Netflix in January. That's going to create some viewing backlogs -- and probably cause a spike in song downloads for The Rembrandts' "I'll Be There for You."

"On-demand" expectations. To paraphrase Queen, we want it all and we want it now. Forget one episode at a time; today's viewers will postpone seeing a show for an entire season or more just so they can watch it all at once on DVD, DVR or streaming services.

Add to that the fact that sites such as Netflix and Hulu can be streamed on smartphones and tablets for even more access, and there's no wall separating viewers from what we want, when we want it.

Too many choices. Remember when the TV season started in September and ended in May -- period? Now there are mid-season starts, summer series, limited series (formerly known as miniseries) and, oh yeah, 200 channels from which to filter viewing options.

"It is now literally impossible for viewers to see all the shows they enjoy when they are first broadcast and there's no 'summer break' when viewers can catch up," TiVo Chief Research Officer Jonathan Steuer said in the company's survey summary.

Binge watching isn't a blip in the evolution of TV; it's a strong indicator of TV's future. That's why HBO and CBS both recently announced upcoming streaming options (for a fee, of course). Hulu, Netflix and now Amazon continue to add original programming.

Will cable and satellite companies eventually have to change the way they offer their services? Will viewers, rather than broadcasters, finally be the ones in control of programming?

One thing is certain: We'll be watching.

amym@chieftain.com

\_\_\_ (c)2014 The Pueblo Chieftain (Pueblo, Colo.) Visit The Pueblo Chieftain (Pueblo, Colo.) at www.chieftain.com Distributed by MCT Information Services.