Control Issues: Binge-watching, channel-surfing and cultural value

Mareike Jenner,
Anglia Ruskin University, UK

Abstract:
This article explores binge-watching as part of neoliberal discourses surrounding control, class and 'good' television, which leads to an overall discourse concerning the legitimation and de-legitimation of the medium. Binge-watching is understood here as part of a continuum of viewing practices that help us to understand and discuss the medium in popular discourse. As historical precedent, the emphasis lies on channel-surfing to illustrate the intersection of technology, control and 'good' television. This article outlines some of the discourses at stake in channel-surfing and its relationship with remote controls as these ancillary technologies move from being devices associated with avoiding 'bad' television to devices that subjugate viewers. Such a discursive de-legitimation of a viewing practice interlinks with an overall de-legitimation of the medium. This precedent is indicative of the way binge-watching's cultural positioning has been negotiated throughout its history and may be re-negotiated now, especially in relation to Netflix. The dynamics of this negotiation take place at the intersection of class, technology, viewing practices and 'good' or 'quality' television.

In the course of promoting *The Innocents* (Netflix, 2018-) in 2018, Guy Pearce stated that he was instructed by Netflix not to use the term *binge-watching*. This led to an immense amount of press coverage and speculation over company policy. Particularly telling is a *Yahoo! Finance* piece written by Andy Meek (2018) that speculates that the practice of binge-watching has become 'low-brow' and Netflix is seeking to extricate itself from these associations, possibly in advance of launching a more 'elite' version of its service in the US. Leaving aside speculation about Netflix's company policy, this episode shows how strongly Netflix has managed to become associated with binge-watching. Of course, this association was only reinforced by Pearce's (supposed) gaffe. The practice of binge-watching goes back further than Netflix's existence, but, arguably, it was Netflix more than other companies that has 'mainstreamed' it (see Jenner 2018, 161-82). When it published its first in-house

productions in 2013, the publication model was often as much part of the press coverage as the texts themselves (see, for example, Jurgensen 2013, Hale 2013). Binge-watching or what was soon called 'the binge model' of publishing content quickly became tied to Netflix and ensured an intermingling of viewing practice and brand. As much as the association with Netflix is an important aspect of the discourse of binge-watching, what is even more fascinating is Meek's discussion of a shift in cultural value linked with the term. He argues that binge-watching was long thought of as an 'elite' practice, but has since become 'everyday,' mundane, even low-brow. Within the context of American programming and usage, this article explores this shift and its links to the history of the medium.

Binge-watching's move from 'elite' to 'everyday' practice is hardly unprecedented within television history: channel-surfing and its links with the technologies of cable television and, arguably more importantly, the remote control, have gone through a similar cycle. The first remote controls that allowed users to change the channel became available in 1950 in the US with Zenith's Lazy Bones (Benson-Allott 2015, 32).[1] By 1980, more accurate RCDs (Remote Control Devices) that were cheaper to manufacture became available (ibid., 81). Additionally, the 1980s saw an extension of available channels and remote controls that enabled viewers to switch easily between vast numbers of channels as well as between technologies like VCRs and video game consoles. Channel-surfing, or a version thereof, was possible before the 1980s and of course is technically possible without a remote control. Yet, the RCD arguably helped it to become a common, even necessary, media practice to manage an ever-increasing number of TV channels. RCDs were originally introduced as a way to subvert commercial television by allowing viewers to change channels during ad breaks. More optimistic interpretations viewed them as a way to schedule television autonomously (Bellamy and Walker 1996). Nevertheless, in popular discourse, RCDs quickly lost their disruptive qualities and became symbols of subjugation rather than subversion, as evidenced by cultural stereotypes of the 'couch potato' (see Scott 2016). In other words, as these technologies to control television became more widely accessible – even unavoidable as they were included as a matter of course with TV sets, VCRs and cable boxes – they became part of the 'problem' of television. For binge-watching, as the practice has been made widely accessible through Netflix and its comparatively low subscription prices, a similar cycle may be repeated.[2] Only the initial waves of the cultural de-legitimation of binge-watching have been felt, usually in relation to specific texts Netflix has released. Yet, considering that this shift in the understanding of new technology is not new, questions need to be posed surrounding how current shifts in the cultural value of viewing practices and the medium of television may be understood in the context of television history.

This article aims to understand binge-watching and its location within cultural discourses by linking it to channel-surfing and its relationship with the RCD. As explained in more detail later, the practice of binge-watching became common with the rise of HBO-style 'quality' television in the late 1990s. At the time, it was largely linked with the ancillary technology of the DVD player and DVD box sets. Popular among fans and enthusiasts of

'quality' television, it was Netflix's streaming service that moved to 'mainstream' the practice by using it as a guideline for publication models and interface structures (post-play and, more recently, skip intro, skip recap). Along with its status as a company and a brand, Netflix and its recommendation algorithms are understood here, like the RCD, as an ancillary technology that helps to manage television. There are, of course, other online platforms that have generated technological innovations that heavily influence contemporary television consumption. However, Netflix's 'binge-structure' or structure of insulated flow (Perks 2015) in the presentation and publication of serialised dramas and its recommendation algorithm (see Finn 2017, 87-111) are particularly relevant here. Positioning it as an ancillary technology aligns Netflix with discourses of past ancillary technologies and the language of control and choice linked to these technologies and associated viewing practices. As Netflix describes itself to investors, 'Members can play, pause and resume watching, all without commercials or commitments' (https://ir.netflix.com/ir-overview/profile/default.aspx), thus embedding itself into discourses of self-scheduling as control.

Both channel-surfing and binge-watching are practices of control linked with technologies of control. The term *control* encapsulates a number of desires, anxieties and ambitions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A range of cultural analysts and philosophers have analysed concepts akin to what Gilles Deleuze (1992) calls 'control societies,' meaning the control government and private businesses exercise over individuals (Harvey 2005, Chun 2006). My focus here is more on the control subjects of control societies, like that of neo-liberalism, exercise. Other than in the case of governments or private capital, this individual control does not equal power and only pertains to the individual's personal environment. Thus, the control exercised may have a real impact on the individual and their immediate environment without having any effect on broader social structures or behaviours (see also Jenner 2018, 35-68). This control is framed by 'narratives of self-improvement,' which posit that the 'right' choice of partners, parenting style, living space or consumed cultural capital leads to a 'better' human being (Salecl 2010). As Michel Feher argues:

> Insofar as our condition is that of human capital in a neoliberal environment, our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves — or at least prevent our own depreciation (2009, 27).

This situation produces dominant narratives of 'self-improvement' or, as Feher puts it, 'self-appreciation' to ensure that, even during leisure hours, the neoliberal subject remains invested in value-creation. Individuals can increase their own human value by gaining control over the culture they consume and the ways in which they themselves are consumed.

In the context of these narratives, individual viewers can avoid some of the worst assumed effects of television by choosing to watch 'good' television. Ancillary technologies of television allow viewers to 'better' themselves by exerting control over the medium and watching 'good' television. Periods in which new technologies are introduced often coincide with periods when discourses of 'quality' TV are particularly strong – discourses that not only suggest which programmes to watch, but also how to watch them. The period in which channel-surfing becomes more common was also the period of series like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1980-7), a show lauded by public intellectuals and journalists alike (see Jenkins 1984, Thompson 1996, 59-74, Gitlin 2000). Binge-watching's emergence is heavily associated with the circulation of HBO-style 'quality' TV dramas like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2005) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-8) on DVD.[3] The investment of the 'gatekeepers' of high culture, such as journalists or academics, in valuing TV series as 'high culture' at times when new technologies and viewing practices emerge is indicative of the degree to which concepts of control and cultural value are connected (Newman and Levine 2012, 153-71). In other words, 'good' TV makes self-improvement possible, while the new technologies of control make manipulating the set so easy that there is no excuse for not seeking such programs out. The narratives of (individual) self-improvement linked to ancillary technologies of television often expose assumptions about how self-governance and freedom to determine television viewing through self-scheduling will lead to a 'better' form of entertainment. Yet, this also means that the individual has to take responsibility for the viewing of 'bad' television and its (assumed) consequences.

Newman and Levine, discussing processes of legitimating television, outline different cycles in which art forms rose to a broader cultural appreciation over time. As examples they name jazz and film, initially associated, respectively, with African American and immigrant working class cultures in the US:

> Among the lessons from this history of art forms rising in status is the significance of class distinction in legitimating culture, separating higher from lower classes of consumers. One function of legitimation in these historical cases is to manage social change and class mobility, to secure the culture of an elite against the intrusion of undesirable masses, and thus to perpetuate the privilege of the dominant (2012, 9).

Thus class, along with race and gender, is central to the construction of cultural value in relation to television. As part of neoliberal discourses, class is understood here in a Bourdieuian sense as both economic and cultural. Television studies and sociology often invoke Pierre Bourdieu's work (2010) to conceptualise class distinctions within neoliberalism. His model describes a system in which the middle class retains cultural power even as neoliberalism works to erode its financial power (see, for example, Savage et al. 2015, Harvey 2005). In this light, 'good' television is understood as reproducing values and aesthetic sensitivities of what, in this system, is depicted as 'middle class.' Thus, 'good' TV,

in cyclical logic, is both determined by and constitutive of a 'middle class' that is defined by cultural markers rather than money. However, lower pricing of ancillary technologies widens accessibility because more people with low incomes are able to afford them. At the same time, the price-point indicates increased competition, which often signals that a technology is easier to manage. Lower prices mean that more people are likely to buy the technology or, as in the case of remote controls, have them included with other technologies (TVs, Hi-Fi systems) without necessarily being interested in the technology as such. Whereas previous iterations may have only been available to technology (or television) aficionados, technology and associated practices are eventually 'mainstreamed' and integrated into everyday media practices. Thus, lower pricing is an indicator of wider availability across class spectrums, going beyond economic considerations of class. Yet, wider availability includes broad-scale adoption by such demographics as young people and the working class and the television texts that target them. This will be examined later in more detail with respect to the RCD.

In relation to moral panics Julian Petley argues that concern for young people often serves to hide a disdain for the working class as supposedly similarly 'uneducated' and in need of guidance. As he writes,

> Debates about media effects tend to focus on how children and young people are supposedly affected – usually for the worse. But lurking behind these fears about the 'corruption of innocent minds' one finds, time and again, implicit or explicit, a potent strain of class dislike and fear (2000, 170).

Thus, within the theories used to conceptualise moral panics, the concern about young people often goes along with a broader concern for 'uneducated' and often infantilized groups, such as the working class (see Murdock 2001). Though this article does not deal with a specific moral panic, it is useful to invoke the concepts used to analyse them to develop an understanding of how concern about societal groups serves to de-legitimise cultural movements, fashions, or media. Different groups with reduced cultural and societal power can stand in for each other when sharing markers, such as presumed levels of education or maturity. This is relevant here, as concerns about the medium of television arise frequently and moral panics emerge often in relation to programmes aimed at teenagers, as discussed later in relation to *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-). Such outrage cannot be viewed separately from broader discourses surrounding class and the cultural legitimation of the medium.

If the cultural status of a medium is thus linked to certain target audiences, then what kind of television they are watching is equally important:

> Legitimation is deeply invested in discourses of progress and improvement, and it works by elevation of one concept of television at the expense of another. For some kinds of television to be consecrated as art, other kinds

must be confirmed in inadequacy. New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine (Newman and Levine, 2012, 5).

Thus, as we shall see in more detail later, the technologies and practices of control are deeply enmeshed with an ideology of 'good' and 'bad' television. Ancillary technologies, along with discourses establishing 'quality,' help viewers to access 'good' and avoid 'bad' TV. Moreover, it is individual viewers, the subjects of neoliberalism, that potentially fail in their 'self-improvement,' that let the broader system down by watching 'bad' television. Enabled through technology and 'good' television, the viewer still chooses to watch 'bad' TV and suffers the consequences (e.g., illness, anti-social behaviour or depreciation in the value of the neoliberal subject). Class distastes are rarely as elucidated as when considering this aspect as a cycle: technological innovation is followed by innovative programming that conforms to middle-class taste structures. Its wider accessibility (often through lower pricing) is then followed by a cultural denigration of the practice and the overall de-legitimation of the medium.

It is this idea of cultural value that I mean to trace by comparing channel-surfing and binge-watching. My article will focus on the discourses surrounding viewing practices, technologies and the cultural valuation of content in different eras. The purpose of this comparison is to trace cycles of legitimation and de-legitimation within the discourse of television. The legitimation and de-legitimation of television may be more easily understood as cyclical: as all new technologies and viewing practices become old, 'good TV goes bad' as a series in *The Guardian* puts it and, consequently, a legitimated medium becomes de-legitimated.

The scope of this article does not allow a close analysis of all the discourses at work to establish cultural value, including the way consensus among the 'gatekeepers' is established, often through agreement on a few 'quality' series. Such agreement becomes even more difficult in what Chairman of FX Network and Network Productions John Landgraf calls the era of 'peak TV' (see, for example, Press 2018). 'Peak TV' means that more television content, geared to smaller and smaller audience niches, is available than ever before. Further, services like Netflix have designed algorithms that recommend 'peak-TV' texts based on past viewing behaviour, meaning that audiences are less aware of texts that were not designed *for* them and people like them (see also Alexander 2016, Uricchio 2017, Finn 2017).

To grasp the outlines of cycles of legitimation and de-legitimation, this article uses the terminology of TV I, II, III and IV to describe different eras or 'phases' of television, which are explained in more detail throughout. These are, to use Derek Kompare's language (2005, 199), reconceptions of television, periods when the idea of what television *is* changes (for more detailed discussion see Jenner 2018, 9-20). My focus here is on the linkage between technology and discourses surrounding control and 'good' and 'bad' TV with a particular emphasis on some of the discourses surrounding channel-surfing and binge-watching.

Practices of Control: Surfing Channels

Channel-surfing becomes particularly common in the TV II era. TV II encompasses developments of the mid-to-late 1970s until the late 1990s. This period saw the introduction of technologies like the VCR, the broader availability of cable TV in the US and the introduction of these technologies in other countries. Remote controls were introduced earlier, but as Benson-Allott points out, they came with a high price tag and were often inaccurate (2015, 32-42).[4] Infrared technology made them at once more accurate and cheaper to manufacture, and they were quickly included with a range of electronic devices from 1980 onwards (ibid., 81). The proliferation of channels that came with cable TV also made them necessary to navigate television. In this context, there were also massive changes to industry and television content (see, for example, Lotz 2018, Thompson 1997). Though few people would have acquired all of these new technologies at the same time, making shifts feel less radical than they actually were, it cannot be underestimated how much this period changed the cultural idea of what television *is*. These new technologies extended uses of the set and immensely increased viewer control.

Urban Dictionary's colloquial definition of channel-surfing in 2006 is instructive for cataloguing what the practice encompasses:

> The act of changing TV channels without finding a channel to stop on. Pressing the up or down button on the TV remote control while hoping to find something worth watching. This involuntary muscle reaction is triggered by the commercial. Sometimes the act of channel surfing becomes entertainment in and of itself ... For males of the species, it is possible simultaneously [to] watch two or three programs and still follow the weak attempt at a plot (RadioRay 2006).

Some of the more contemporary views on watching scheduled television in an era when binge-watching on DVD box sets is possible are visible in this definition, while others are heavily influenced by popular culture depictions and gendered assumptions of the 1990s. The Urban Dictionary definition understands channel-surfing as an umbrella term that unites a variety of practices, such as grazing (sampling different channels until one is found), parallel viewing, and advertising avoidance (Bellamy and Walker 1993, 4), making it a more nuanced definition than those often offered by more 'legitimate' dictionaries. This definition also includes the idea that channel-surfing in itself can be entertainment, pointing to its status as an activity without a specific goal (finding a programme to watch) or purpose (following the narrative of that programme). In other words, this viewing practice can take place independently of any specific programmes that are watched. On the one hand, the physical mastery of waves implicit in the activity of channel-surfing is translated to the control of airwaves. This mastery implies the ability to 'better' oneself through disciplined television watching. On the other hand, channel-surfing is linked to cultural stereotypes such as the 'couch potato,' which suggests physical inactivity, even laziness, and thus the

opposite of what is suggested by the term. Hence, channel-surfing, and later binge-watching, should be viewed as a complex intersection of contradictory discourses of 'quality' television, technology and class.

The TV II era saw a wave of 'quality' TV that Robert J. Thompson, in remarking on developments in TV from the late 1970s onwards, called the 'Second Golden Age' of television. He introduces a list of twelve characteristics of 'quality' TV in this era, which importantly includes the criterion that it attracts an audience of 'upscale, well-educated, urban-dwelling young viewers' (1996, 14). This suggests once again the role of class and cultural capital in discussions of television. 'Quality' TV of the era included *Hill Street Blues*, *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-94), *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1981-8), *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987-91), *Moonlighting* (ABC, 1985-9) and *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-90).[5] As Thompson (1996, 59-74) and Steve Jenkins (1984) suggest, discourses on 'quality' television extended beyond television academics to encompass a range of cultural commentators, including journalists and other 'gatekeepers' that, for example, championed *Hill Street Blues*. John T. Caldwell argues that the 1980s saw a movement towards a unique television aesthetic he describes as 'televisuality' (1995). Caldwell himself does not engage with issues of 'good' or 'bad' TV, but his highlighting of an innovative, medium-specific, aesthetic form ultimately elevates 'televisuality' to the level of art. Caldwell positions the stylistic innovation of the era as tied to the RCD:

> With the choice of over one hundred channels now coming to some cable markets, and five hundred on the horizon in others, consumers face immense viewing choices. ABC cites this factor, and the resulting tendency of viewers to endlessly zap channels [channel-surf], as the reason for the demise of television as aesthetic forms on television and for the *viewers' new lack of commitment*. But this excuse is both short-sighted and revealing. If one views the emergence of excessive visuality as a counterstrategy by the industry, as I have argued, then stylistic extremes will continue as a way to fight viewer disinterest, channel grazing, and infinite choice – in short, will continue as a way of attracting and intensifying the spectator's visual gaze (1995, Kindle location 4152-9, italics in the original).

Thus, Caldwell positions RCDs and channel-surfing as among driving forces in the development of sophisticated television aesthetics.

Within neoliberal narratives, the increased control given to viewers would ideally be used to 'better' oneself by watching 'good' television. Charlotte Brunsdon reflects on 'good' television in a British context when she writes:[6]

> Television (by implication, not itself good) becomes worthy when it brings to a wider audience already legitimated high- and middlebrow culture . . . So

we have 'good television,' so far, constructed across a range of oppositions which condense colonial histories, the organizing and financing of broadcasting institutions, and the relegitimation of already legitimate artistic processes (1990, 59-60).

Here Brunsdon states that the most common euphemism for 'bad' television since the mid-1970s was 'American television.' This judgment, of course, is difficult to adapt to an American context, but terms like 'popular' television that imply that a programme is widely watched still ring true. Ien Ang points to the American-ness of *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91) and discourses in the Netherlands that highlighted the way it promotes American neoliberal ideologies as 'bad' television (1985, 55-6). The British context, with its separation into Public Service Broadcasting and commercial television (primarily funded through advertising) is instructive in identifying the 'ultimate bad television': commercials. As Bret Maxwell Dawson (2008, 44-102) points out, marketing discourses for the RCD in the 1950s emphasised its ability to mute advertisements or change channels to avoid them. In fact, Zenith's founder Eugene F. McDonald Jr. criticised the American commercial media system and pointed to the remote control as a means of avoiding advertising and thus 'bad' television. Though much of this kind of commentary envisions advertising as mainly a nuisance, the publication of Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* in 1957 explicitly positions it (in all media) as a strategy of brainwashing or mind-control. Thus, 1950s discourse depicts advertising on television as not just 'bad' because it disrupts programming or detracts from aesthetic and narrative quality, but also because it has ill effects on audiences. Remote controls were initially sold as a strategy to 'repair' television (to borrow Dawson's terminology) by offering viewers the opportunity to avoid advertising and thus 'bad' television with its destructive influences (Dawson 2008, 44-102). This attitude pervades all eras of television history.[7] E. Graham McKinley (1996), in her research on girls' and young women's viewing of *Beverly Hills 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000) argues for the series' potential 'bad' effects on viewers who fail to question its foundations in patriarchal ideologies.

Less concerned with media effects and more with value judgements made by viewers, Brunsdon addresses the negative judgements about programmes explicitly directed at women, particularly soap operas (1997, 9-11). Ann Gray also finds this in her research on British women's use of VCRs when asking about judgements of 'quality' about a programme (1992, 49-78). Several of her interview subjects seem ashamed of enjoying texts like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-9). We can see here that concepts of 'good' and 'bad' TV are tied to issues of class and gender.[8] Discourses surrounding 'good' and 'bad' television help viewers exercise control and (potentially) accumulate cultural capital in the TV II era. In other words, these discourses help police the boundaries of what should and should not be watched. This is particularly important in times when technological shifts linked to cable and the RCD make it easier for viewers to channel-surf and make choices about what to watch.

Considering the vast extension of choice through cable and additional network channels throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it is perhaps unsurprising that channel-surfing's linkage to ideas of an empowered, self-scheduling viewer who will not be lured by 'bad' television are soon supplanted by narratives of the 'couch potato.' This term was trademarked by cartoonist Robert Armstrong, who claims to have come up with it in 1976 in the US (Scott 2016). 'Couch potato' did not always have a negative connotation. Yet, it is not until 1987 that the *New York Times* reports on a range of events as well as a comic book and board games that ironically capitalise on the term. The ironic self-awareness of Yuppies and their viewing of *Moonlighting*, part of the 'quality' TV of the era, in New York's fashionable clubs still signals positive connotations of the terminology ('Home & Garden Editorial,' *New York Times*, 1987). At the same time, this positive outlook would be supplanted by wider cultural anxieties surrounding groups with considerably less cultural and economic capital: young people and the working class. To a certain extent, the idea of the couch potato may be the most significant indicator of the way the technology and practices of control become reformulated to express some of the worst fears linked to television: laziness, apathy, and the emergence of health issues. It is TV itself in the late 1980s and 1990s that promotes some of the class distaste inherent in this anxiety through its depiction of working-class men such as Al Bundy (Ed O'Neil) in *Married ... With Children* (Fox, 1986-97) or Dan Connor (John Goodman) in *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-97). Both characters are intended as parodies of this type, but the blank expression in Bundy's face, one hand in his trousers, as he flips through TV channels in the opening credits of *Married ... With Children*, is designed to criticise stereotypes of working-class masculinity, not television viewing or the stereotype of the 'couch potato.' Bundy is a character who routinely alienates his middle-class neighbours (and, supposedly, middle-class viewers) through overly stereotypical behaviour, such as exaggerated misogyny or ignorance in a way that suggests irony. Meanwhile, though his pose may be taken as part of this ironic exaggeration, it is never questioned that television viewing is part of his 'bad' behaviour, as his blank stare suggests it could not have any other effects. Through his television viewing Bundy, possibly more than other television characters, shows the way television is de-legitimated in the TV II era.

Thus, channel-surfing, with its connotations of activity and discipline and its potential for 'better' television viewing of 'better' television becomes an increasingly maligned practice in discourses on television. At the very least, from marketing discourses of the 1950s to 'quality' TV discourses of the 1980s, channel-surfing complicates discourses of empowerment, 'quality' TV, and medium legitimation.

Practices of Control: Binge-ing Television

With respect to channel-surfing, binge-watching manifests a different relationship between practice and technology. In fact, binge-watching is not uniquely tied to a specific technology or formation of technologies that occurred at the same time. Binge-watching emerged largely in relation to DVD box sets in the early 2000s, though VCRs and some sell-through VHS tapes of TV series make it very likely that it was not an uncommon practice previously

among fans.[9] Even now, when online streaming has made this form of viewing easier and more prevalent, it is tied to different platforms in distinct ways that are dependent on interface structures and marketing. That said, Netflix in particular has claimed the term to describe viewing on its platform in a way that no individual media company has ever incorporated channel-surfing into its own branding. Furthermore, just as the RCD became more accessible to audiences in the TV II era, Netflix has made binge-watching more widely accessible in the TV IV era through its user-friendly interface and the affordability of its service. Accordingly, my focus here is on binge-watching in relation to Netflix rather than television in the TV IV era in general. Yet, this does not mean that binge-watching's history and wide emergence in the era of TV III 'quality' TV is not important, as this highlights some discursive linkages between binge-watching, control, class and neoliberalism, as discussed in this section. Like channel-surfing, the practice of binge-watching is embedded in a number of technological and industrial processes as television becomes reconceptualised as what is, essentially, an online medium in the current TV IV era. The fact that VOD (Video-on-Demand) allows television content to be consumed away from the television set has made controlling it a different experience, contributing to a shift in the viewer-content relationship that can be summarised under the term *binge-watching*. Both channel-surfing and binge-watching have been associated in popular discourse with loss of control. Unlike channel-surfing, binge-watching already connotes the idea of losing control. However, as we shall see, the parameters in which control is lost are neatly defined and policed via discourses of 'quality.'

The definition of binge-watching I adopt here means the watching of several episodes of a serialised programme consecutively on a medium other than broadcast television. This does not imply a specific number of episodes that need to be watched in one sitting, but it does mean that only one serialised programme is watched at a time (unlike traditional schedules where one programme is followed by the next) and that the pace of viewing is determined by the viewer, not the broadcaster. The kind of narrative that was originally considered to benefit from this level of control was the twelve-episode-per-season 'quality' drama that became common for US cable channels in the early 2000s as part of the TV III era. The loss of control implied here is in the narrative, not the medium. Unlike channel-surfing, which routinely disrupts the programme through grazing, parallel viewing, or advertising avoidance, binge-watching is predicated on having found a programme, while the activity describes following the narrative of that programme beyond the individual episode without disruption. To use Jason Jacobs' (2011) language, where channel-surfing is based on the idea of a 'polluted' text interrupted by advertising, previews or idents, binge-watching means indulgence in an uninterrupted 'pure' text.

Another parameter of how the 'loss' of control implied in binge-watching is policed lies in the technology. Binge-watching on DVD or SVOD implies a way of consuming television that actively seeks to subvert the schedule and the commercial, much like channel-surfing originally did. As Newman and Levine argue, this is supported by a range of technologies: 'The introduction of TV shows on DVD and the TiVo and Replay TV digital

video recorders, along with HDTV and digital sources of content, changed the ways many viewers watched television' (2012, 4). The digital technologies of television, including Netflix, imply alternative ways of presenting and ordering content than that of the broadcasting schedule RCDs allowed viewers to subvert. In fact, much of the control exercised in relation to binge-watching lies in the fact that the broadcasting schedule no longer dictates *when* and *where* specific programmes are available to view.[10] Because of this, the idea of binge-watching that Netflix capitalises on links it neatly with previous ancillary technologies. Netflix appears to pride itself on not having a schedule – a language that seeks to hide the fact that it still structures viewing in significant ways, even if these structures are not as prescriptive as more traditional strategies of scheduling (see Jenner 2018, 119-37). What Lisa Perks refers to as 'insulated flow' (2015, xxvi) describes an important part of such structures. Netflix promotes insulated flow via the post-play function, which automatically starts the next episode after one has finished and thus privileges the sequential viewing of a single text rather than the viewing of different texts in succession as is custom on traditional broadcasting schedules. More recently, Netflix also introduced the 'skip intro' button, which enables viewers to skip opening credits, heightening the importance of a continuous narrative arc over separation into individual episodes. Thus, Netflix highlights insulated flow and suggests sequential binge-watching for any texts (even those from the TV I or TV II era). At the same time, insulated flow is associated with the idea of the 'pure text,' a text that is uninterrupted by commercials – the embodiment of 'bad television.'[11] This idea of the 'pure' text of 'quality' television initially serves to dictate some parameters of the loss of control implicit in binge-watching.

The self-scheduling implicit in binge-watching, wherein audiences are expected to binge-watch at times convenient for them to get 'lost,' for example during holidays (see Perks 2015, 15-38), represents another parameter of the loss of control. Self-scheduling implies that viewers binge-watch carefully selected texts that allow for an immersive viewing experience, rather than watching whatever is on TV, as implied in channel-surfing and the dependence on the broadcasting schedule. This kind of control over what-is-watched-when may be best expressed through Perks' favoured term *media marathoning*. For her, marathoning includes a sense of accomplishment after having completed an extended exercise. The parallels of athleticism and control with channel-surfing are obvious and highlight the control expected of viewers. Perks emphasises the importance of control when she argues: 'By controlling the pace of the narrative journey and focusing on one story world, marathoners can maximize the emotional and cognitive rewards of their media experience' (2015, xi). Thus, the control over scheduling is key in earning personal rewards. Controlling when to binge-watch and what to watch allows viewers to ensure maximum rewards can be gained from the experience.

Thus, binge-watching implies a 'controlled' or planned loss of control in the 'pure' text of 'quality' TV. This loss of control is, however, heavily policed by a number of discourses: concepts of 'quality' television, issues of technology that make watching the 'pure' text of 'quality' television possible and desirable, and the overall subversion of the

schedule of broadcast television. Such factors thus setting binge-watching apart from what is commonly understood as television.

The reason Netflix plays such an important role in the phenomenon of binge-watching lies not only in its structure or current market dominance, but also in how affordable and accessible it has made this mode of viewing. Initially binge-watching was linked to financial and, more importantly, cultural capital, remaining accessible only to those who could afford (in terms of money and leisure time) to own these technologies and the box sets and were committed enough to media to do so. Now, journalists and scholars in the US, where cable access is relatively expensive, have noted the phenomenon of 'cord-cutting':

> Among the television industry's biggest fears is the phenomenon known as cord-cutting (also called cable-cutting). Cord-cutting refers to individuals cancelling cable television subscriptions and turning to 'over-the-top' services such as Netflix, Hulu, Boxee, iTunes, and YouTube, free over-the-air television, or simply pirating all their entertainment needs off the Internet (Strangelove 2015, 94).

Though this phenomenon has gained more traction since Michael Strangelove's book was published, both in the US and elsewhere (O'Halloran 2018), it is still difficult to foresee how much online TV will replace other technologies. Lotz's industry focus leads her to quickly dismiss any panic over the practice (2018, Kindle location 3665-72). Yet, as much as cord-cutting may not be a major concern for the industry, it is still relevant in other contexts.

As Strangelove notes, 'Pay-television may only cost 30¢ an hour, but it still costs $900 or more a year. That is a large pile of cash to a family struggling to meet mortgage payments' (2015, 96). Inherent in the principle of cord-cutting is online access at lower prices for viewers in light of the fact that such access is a necessary expense for many of them. The idea of cord-cutting, however, is not only economic in its implications either for the industry or viewers, but also has cultural ramifications. Because of this, the popular debate around it cannot be dismissed, as it signals ideological shifts in cultural understandings of what television is and should be. Strangelove describes cord-cutting as a time-intensive and complicated process to find and access texts via different legal and illegal means on a variety of platforms (ibid. 102-3). Netflix makes this process significantly easier through its sophisticated recommendation algorithm and by allowing viewers enhanced control over their own schedule at a comparatively low price. In a country like the US, where broadband internet and devices to stream content are widely available and accessible, Netflix and other platforms in this way offer a serious alternative to linear cable television. Cord-cutting as a cultural phenomenon encapsulates the accessibility of streaming and its viability as an alternative to broadcast television. Considering how extensively Netflix's branding is associated with binge-watching, its affordable pricing makes it more accessible to 'the masses,' including those who have no time to scour the internet for 'good' TV to

watch. Wider access – somewhat inevitably – makes the parameters of the loss of control implied in binge-watching more difficult to control. In other words, it becomes more difficult to police what is watched and when.

In the middle of a broad debate on 'quality' TV and the cinematization of television, Brunsdon's 2010 analysis of binge-watching highlights the contradiction at its centre:

> The sequestered autonomy of binge viewing, the implied squandering of time and money, points to a paradox at the heart of the new, valorized 'not television' DVD television ... Despite the valorization within traditional aesthetic discourse, there is, in this metaphor of bingeing, the trace of a persistent cultural shame at absorption in an audio-visual, fictional world (2010, Kindle location 1649).

In other words, in times when the cultural debate about binge-watching is dominated by its linkage with 'good', even 'quality' TV, the term itself already suggests a means of medium de-legitimation, with 'cultural shame' becoming, of course, more pronounced when the consumed text is less valorised within cultural discourse. Yet, this may only indicate a(nother) shift in the paradigms of defining 'good' TV.

The debate surrounding *13 Reasons Why* is significant to understanding how debates surrounding binge-watching and its links with 'quality' TV have shifted: with its sophisticated narrative structure, cinematic aesthetics, and serious subject matter (sexual assault and teen suicide) at least the first season of the series would have been easily considered 'good,' even 'quality' TV in the first decade of the 2000s. Later, however, the debate surrounding it draws together ideas of binge-watching, privileged modes of viewing promulgated by Netflix, and the series' supposedly 'bad' effects on teen audiences (see Proctor 2017), as discussed in more detail by Tanya Horeck (2019) in this issue. While the debates may not directly address the question of whether *13 Reasons Why* is 'bad' TV, they clearly identify the show with the effects of 'bad' TV – effects that lead in this case to anxiety, depression, re-traumatization, and even imitation of the suicide depicted on screen (Allem 2017). This implies a resurgence of television as de-legitimated medium with 'bad' effects on young audiences and possibly even other 'undereducated' or 'uneducated' groups, such as working-class viewers. In much of this media coverage, the practice of binge-watching is being maligned, then, not the 'quality' of the text itself. Following the formal conventions of 'quality' television, *13 Reasons Why* stands out, largely because those with similar cultural capital as the 'gatekeepers' of culture may find it among their recommendations while they may never notice Netflix's more 'low-brow' in-house productions, such as the Ashton Kutcher-led sitcom *The Ranch* (Netflix, 2016-). The outrage about *13 Reasons Why* is important because it signals a broader discomfort with the platforms and culture of binge-watching, while contextualising Guy Pearce's statements as recounted in the beginning of this article.

Controlled Television?

In 1987, John Fiske discussed the 'semiotic excess' of television. He means the excess of meanings in a short scene in the TV series *Hart to Hart* (ABC, 1979-84). This indicates just how excessive the meanings across the entire medium must be. The technologies of control and the practices associated with them offer a way to manage this excess and, thus, the possibility of managing the meanings of television. Supposedly, then, viewers can counteract the assumed negative meanings and effects of television and only receive the 'good' meanings, pleasures, and effects by exercising self-discipline.

Yet, as we have seen, some contradictions are central to this assumption. The pricing of remote controls provides a sense of how much these practices become troubling at the moment when access is significantly widened to include the (supposedly) 'uneducated.' Meanwhile, binge-watching implies little power for the viewer to disrupt the text. In fact, the implicit assumption is that viewers will watch the 'pure text' with as little interruption as possible: Netflix even offers viewers the possibility of skipping the opening credits, further 'purifying' the text of commercial signifiers. Though the goal of the practice is clearly defined here (following the narrative to its conclusion), the practice seems to have proven increasingly troubling. Concern about binge-watching is framed by a concern for young people, presumably not mature or 'educated' enough to deal with challenging material, as in the case of *13 Reasons Why*. The concern about youth audiences has historically served to imply wider anxieties about the effect of media on the 'uneducated' more broadly (Petley 2001). As much as the personalization algorithm makes it difficult for the (often white, middle-class, male) 'gatekeepers' of culture to gauge the full extent of 'bad' TV on Netflix, the concern about *13 Reasons Why* indicates a broader discomfort with the medium, its viewers, and viewing practices. One moral panic may not indicate a wider de-legitimation of the medium of television. In fact, the outrage over *13 Reasons Why* refers to one text on one platform. Yet, the disregard of the 'quality' TV aspects of the series point to a broader disenchantment that may very well affect other texts and platforms that rely on binge-watching and its 'quality' TV connotations in the future. At the very least, it appears to influence the speculation over Netflix's company policy mentioned in Pearce's statements on binge-watching. If the history of channel-surfing is any indication, the de-legitimation of binge-watching and television may be imminent – even though the conditions of algorithmic culture mean that this de-legitimation will likely look very different than that in the TV II era.

Overall, this article has emphasised how channel-surfing and binge-watching bring together various discourses of technology, viewing practices, and content in order to tie television and television viewing to neoliberal discourses of self-improvement. Most significantly, television and its ancillary technologies hold the promise of self-improvement and appreciation in valuing the self through cultural capital. In other words, the 're-education' of the audience through streaming fits well with broader neoliberal culture. Yet, the ability to 'self-improve' through television is premised on the viewer's ability and desire to seek out 'good' TV. These discourses of 'good' TV explain the valorisation of new technologies and viewing practices. Yet, somewhat inevitably, wider access makes it difficult

for viewers and technologies to fulfil this potential, leading ultimately to the de-legitimation of technology, viewing practice, and even the medium itself within the context of neoliberalism.

Biographical Note:

Dr Mareike Jenner is a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. Her research is focused on contemporary television cultures and their relationship with American television history. Her work has recently emphasized Netflix and the way it has shaped binge-watching and contemporary television. Her monographs *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* was published by Palgrave in 2018 and *American TV Detective Dramas* by Palgrave in 2015. Her edited collection *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Research* will be published by Edinburgh University Press in 2020. Contact: Mareike.jenner@anglia.ac.uk.

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TV

13 Reasons Why (2017-), USA: Netflix

Beverly Hills 90210, (1990-2000), USA: Fox

Cagney & Lacey (1981-88), USA: CBS

Dallas (1978-91), USA: CBS
Dynasty (1981-89), USA: ABC
Friends (1994-2004), USA: NBC
Hart to Hart (1979-84), USA: ABC
Hill Street Blues (1980-87), USA: NBC
Innocents, The (2018-), USA: Netflix
L.A. Law (1986-94), USA: NBC
Married ... With Children (1986-97), USA: Fox
Miami Vice (1984-90), USA: NBC
Moonlighting (1985-89), USA: ABC
Ranch, The (2016-), USA: Netflix
Roseanne (1988-97), USA: ABC
Seinfeld (1989-98), USA: NBC
Sopranos, The (1999-2005), USA: HBO
thirtysomething (ABC, 1987-91)
Wire, The (2002-8), USA: HBO
X-Files, The (1993-), USA: Fox

Notes:

[1] Earlier versions, such as the Telezoom, had different functions (Benson-Allott 2015, 32).

[2] Netflix announced a price hike for North America and large parts of Latin America in January 2018, but the price of a Netflix subscription remains below that of cable subscriptions.

[3] As an example of the hyperbole that surrounds these series, *Vice* journalist Jesse Pearson describes *The Wire* as a 'A FUCKING GOD' (2010). *The Sopranos* is usually credited as ringing in a new era of 'quality' TV, or, as David Stubbs puts it in *The Guardian*:

> A new mode of binge, longform consumption. This was a new mode of television, one which showed [that] the medium was capable of exceeding cinema. *The Sopranos* concluded 10 years ago this week, but its legacy in making the so-called small screen huge is permanent. (Stubbs 2017)

[4] As Benson-Allott argues of the early remote control:

> It added $30 to the price of any Zenith television set at a time when sets ranged in price between $269 and $629. It could also be purchased separately and installed by a handy homeowner or television repairman. $30 in 1950 is equivalent to nearly $300 today, though, so the Lazy Bones remote still represented an extravagant expense for middle-class consumers (2015, 33).

[5] As a further example, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi name their 1984 edited collection on the production company MTM *MTM: 'Quality Television*,' highlighting discourses of 'good' television

[6] Brunsdon's work on 'good' television is rooted within feminist frameworks and the exploration of soap operas within women's lives (1997, 2000). This is not the approach taken here, though its usefulness cannot be doubted.

[7] An exception to this is Caldwell, whose – somewhat polemical – positive attitude to television aesthetics leads him to describe advertising as 'the stylistic avant-garde of television' (1995, Kindle

location 4152), pointing to the aesthetic value of advertising without commenting its assumed effects. What does this mean?

[8] Gray's research focuses on women from different class backgrounds, though it is particularly educated, middle-class women who express these kinds of cultural judgements.

[9] Not many TV series were available on VHS tapes, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that series like *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) or *The X-Files* proved profitable in this format (at least profitable enough to allow for publication in the UK and Germany).

[10] Other mechanisms and practices, however, do dictate this. Broadcasters – whether platforms or linear broadcasters – still make the decisions on when, where, and what is available through publication schedules, availability of translation, geo-blocking or available apps, to name just a few, but more leeway is currently given to audiences than previously possible.

[11] The structure of inserting trailers between episodes, as was common for Amazon, was trialled in the US, but met with vast outcry by audiences, so the future of this strategy is currently unknown.