

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING BINGE-WATCHING

Neta Alexander

**Originating with the advent** of DVD box sets, binge-watching is often described as “an emergent media behavior that blends culture and technology.”<sup>1</sup> Despite its ever-growing popularity, bingeing continues to be a relatively undertheorized spectatorial mode. As demonstrated by Caetlin Benson-Allott, bingeing scholarship to date has often relied on metaphors of inebriation, distraction, or addiction.<sup>2</sup> Pushing against this trend, the authors in this Special Focus section argue that the COVID-19 pandemic recast bingeing as a civic duty and a survival mode—an ideal antidote to quarantine malaise.

In order to “flatten the curve,” those living under lockdown were told they must stay put, avoid contact with others, and consequently double down on their attachment to screens and fictional worlds. This entails a surprising plot twist for the short history of bingeing scholarship: instead of associating bingeing with feelings of shame, guilt, exhaustion, and regret, more positive terms such as “marathon viewing” linked it to athleticism and well-being, while listicle culture reframed bingeing to claim it as a means to combat white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>

Exploring these recent developments, this Special Focus section seeks to update and expand Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner, and Tina Kendall's previous work on binge-watching.<sup>4</sup> In an earlier essay, they had defined binge-watching as a form of “self-determined viewing” that happens only in relation to serialized formats, and they argued that the automated play and “skip intro” features on Netflix reshape domestic spectatorship as an “insulated flow.”<sup>5</sup> Building on the work of Jonathan Crary, they described Netflix's self-declared war on sleep as “a key form of biopolitical production.”<sup>6</sup>

How does “pandemic time,” then, relate to temporalities of bingeing, labor, and sleep? How can media scholars explain the global success during lockdown of true-crime documentaries like *Tiger King* (Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin, Netflix, 2020) or beloved sitcoms such as *Friends* (David Crane and Marta Kauffman, NBC, 1994–2004 / Netflix, 2015–2020 / HBO Max 2020–)?<sup>7</sup> And how can the pandemic expand preexisting theories of domestic spectatorship in light of the nascent division between “home” (safe, clean, pathogen free) and “non-home” (public, uncontrollable, dangerous, deadly)? Bringing together new conceptual frameworks and case studies, the following essays explore this ubiquitous spectatorial mode under the conditions of corona capitalism in relation to boredom, co-watching, healing, activism, and labor.

Opening the section, Tanya Horeck expands the analysis of bingeing as a survival mode by focusing on the “Netflix and heal” phenomenon. Seen as a nascent civic duty, bingeing social-justice films and shows became a crucial part of the news coverage of Black Lives Matter protests in the United States during the summer of 2020 and continuing into 2021.<sup>8</sup>

While bingeing scholarship is too often limited to Netflix, Hulu, HBO, and other American-based streaming platforms, Tina Kendall theorizes how scrolling through TikTok videos proved crucial for combating boredom and cabin fever during lockdowns. Her analysis leaves the Netflix universe to focus instead on memes, scrolling-as-watching, and the bingeable potential of social media.

Kartik Nair reassesses the continuity between pandemic media and the fraught relationship between bingeing, labor, and “the political economy of loafing.” Focusing on the case of an employee who lost her job following an escapade of bingeing *Friends*, Nair asks whether it is possible to binge while asleep and wonders what happens when bingeing becomes a professional hazard.

Finally, I close the section by offering a series of new critical propositions for reevaluating binge-watching after the pandemic: paying close attention to interface design

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decisions, such as the addition of a “playback speed” feature to Netflix in August 2020; studying co-watching apps in order to move away from the cliché of bingeing as an individual activity; and exploring how this mode of spectatorship trains viewers to ignore their basic biological needs.

Taken together, these essays update existing scholarship on bingeing to unpack its ubiquity during the pandemic. The authors consider boredom, survival, and healing as essential to the unique narrative pleasures of watching one episode after another, losing oneself in a fictional world in which hugging, kissing, and dancing were not yet potentially deadly encounters. Studied alongside emergent spectatorial modes such as speed-watching or scrolling, binge-watching exposes the tensions that inform every engagement with interface-mediated fictional worlds.

## Notes

1. Emil Steiner and Kun Xu, “Binge-Watching Motivates Change: Uses and Gratifications of Streaming Video Viewers

Challenge Traditional TV Research,” *Convergence* 26, no. 1 (February 2020): 83.

2. Caetlin Benson-Allott, *The Stuff of Spectatorship: Material Cultures of Film and Television* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 242.
3. Lisa G. Perks, “Media Marathoning through Health Struggles: Filling a Social Reservoir,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43, no. 3 (2019): 314. For an analysis of the rise of binge-worthy social-justice shows during the pandemic, see Tanya Horeck’s essay elsewhere in this Special Focus section.
4. Tanya Horeck, Mareike Jenner, and Tina Kendall, “On Binge-Watching: Nine Critical Propositions,” *Critical Studies in Television* 13, no. 4 (December 2018): 499–504.
5. Horeck, Jenner, and Kendall.
6. Horeck, Jenner, and Kendall, 501.
7. For an analysis of bingeing *Tiger King* during the pandemic, see Tanya Horeck’s essay elsewhere in this Special Focus section; for an analysis of binge-watching *Friends* prior to the pandemic, see Kartik Nair’s essay, also in this Special Focus section.
8. Racquel Gates, “The Problem with ‘Anti-Racist’ Movie Lists,” *New York Times*, July 17, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/opinion/sunday/black-film-movies-racism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/opinion/sunday/black-film-movies-racism.html).