

## The Age of Peak Television

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***“Change happens slowly, then all at once”***

**Overview:** The term “peak television” refers to both the multiplicity of platforms and artistic heights of today’s serialized programming environment. Spurred on by rapid technological and cultural change, television content and business forms have evolved dramatically in the past twenty years. Digital media has absorbed television into a broader category of serialized content that is now intermediated by all manners of consumptive platforms and delivery systems. Today, legacy broadcast networks, cable television, transactional and subscription services all compete side-by-side in a fragile equilibrium, each pursuing viewer attention and cultural stature as exemplified by landmark shows such as “The Sopranos”, “Game of Thrones” and “Breaking Bad”. What do these shows share in common and what business exigencies nurture their creation and abundance? How has serial in-home content seized the prestige mantle away from Hollywood films? Will too much TV eventually spell its own demise? This course will examine the historical evolution, aesthetic opportunities and technological dynamics that have fueled television’s ascendancy into this new Golden Era.

### The Details

1. **Assignments:** The readings are contained in the suggested texts list to be purchased with all other readings excerpted from books, trade periodicals and newspapers and posted on CANVAS as pdfs. As the course deals in events that are evolving in real time, there may be relevant articles that will be added to the syllabus as the class proceeds. You must do the readings and you will be expected to contribute in each class. If you do the reading, you will get more out of the classes and enhance your command of the material. In the attempt to manage costs, I will supply electronic versions of as many assigned readings as possible within the copyright rules.
2. **Reading Materials:**
  - a. Suggested Texts to be Purchased:
    1. We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Disrupted Television, Lotz, Amanda D. , MIT Press (2018)
    2. The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century, McDonald, Kevin (ed), Bloomsbury Academic, 2016
    3. Streaming, Sharing, Stealing: Big Data and the Future of Entertainment, Smith, Michael D. and Telang, Rahul, MIT Press (2016)
  - b. CAN= Posted on CANVAS site
3. **Grading:** Grades are based on the following criteria and weightings: 15% class participation and instructor judgement, 15% for each of two 4-6-page essays, 25% for a mid-term quiz and 30% for the final debate and group paper.

Screening: There will be one mandatory screening assigned for Class 5

Paper:: The class will be divided into two groups, each will submit three (3) 5 page papers based upon assigned thought topics, research or specific readings. Topics will be assigned in one class and due the following weekly class session. The essay paper topic will likely concern an historical topic concerning the evolution of television as a business and cultural phenomenon.

Debate-a-thon: Final debate topics will be selected from a list to be distributed in class around class 5. The class will be divided into teams of three or four who will cooperate in researching the topic and make a presentation- pro and con- in a debate format. Each group will be expected to submit a detailed written summary of their research and preparation (15-20 pages). Grading will be based upon both the debate performance and written report and participants will receive a group and individual grade

**Required Work:**

- Class attendance and readings
- Screening (see Class #5)
- Two 4-6 page papers (Class #4 & #8)
- Mid-term Quiz (Class #7)
- Debate-a-thon with group report (Class #10)

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**Class #1: Introduction- An Embarrassment of Riches**

We start with an overview of the course, key terms and business concepts to be used during class. We will look at what “peak television” encompasses in the context of today’s panoply of television choices. What distinguishes serial content production and distribution from other businesses?

**In-Class Viewing:**

- “The 2016 TV Executives Roundtable” *The Hollywood Reporter*,  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/video/watch-thr-s-full-tv-918281>

**Readings:**

- Freeman, John “Has the Novel been Murdered by the Mob?” *The Guardian*, July 5, 2007 (CAN)
- Madrigal, Alexis “When did TV Watching Peak?” *The Atlantic*, May 30, 2018 (CAN)
- “The State of Traditional TV: Updated With Q2 2017 Data” *Marketing Charts*, December 17, 2017 (CAN)

**Class #2: Humble Beginnings: Don’t Adjust Your Set**

The birth of the television networks and the first “Golden Age” of programming. Radio

roots lead to the formation of nascent TV network groups by their founders- Sarnoff (NBC), Paley (CBS) and Goldenson (ABC)- What were the earliest programming forms and how did they set the stage for what laid ahead? How did Hollywood grab a piece of the action?

**Readings:**

- Edgerton, Gary "Not According to Plan 1940-1947" Chapter 2, pgs. 61-90 and Chapter 4 "Here Comes Television 1948-1963" pgs. 113-140 in The Columbia History of American Television, Columbia University Press, 2007 (CAN)
- Barnouw, Eric Tube of Plenty, pgs. 150-218 Oxford University Press, 1975 (CAN)

**- Assignment:**

Short Paper #1 Assigned (due Class #4)

**Class #3: From Over the Air to Through the Pipe**

Overview of the business evolution 1960s - 1990s through the rise of pay and basic cable. The corporatization of the networks, impact of government regulation and the roll-out of cable delivery. Specialized basic cable networks challenges network primacy- Turner Broadcasting, the FCC and cable franchising. How the networks missed the boat on the rise of cable.

**Readings:**

- Selected readings from Auletta, Ken Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way, Random House 1992. (CAN)
- Reeves, Jimmie L. and Epstein, Michael M. "The Changing Face of Television: Turner Broadcasting" Chapter 9 pgs. 323-345 in The Columbia History of American Television, Edgerton, Gary Columbia University Press, 2007 (CAN)
- Lotz, Amanda Now We Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television, The MIT Press 2017 pgs. 47-110

**Class #4: Programming Forms and The Advertising Business Model**

The evolution of series television and TV as a writer's medium. Examine the network programming theory of "flow", the development of the ad-based revenue models and the rise of the Nielsen ratings. We will discuss the impact of personalized viewing technology and how new in-home conveniences, along with regulatory easing, pulled television into an inextricable alliance with Hollywood.

**Readings:**

- Williams, Raymond, Chapter 4 "Programming: Distribution and Flow", pgs. 78-118 in Television: Technology and Cultural Form, Routledge, 2003

- Blumenthal, Howard J. and Goodenough, Oliver R., "Audience Measurement, Research and Ratings", pgs. 402-415 in This Business of Television, Billboard Books, 1998 (CAN)
- Blumenthal et al "Advertising" pgs 416-439 in This Business of Television.
- Epstein, Edward Jay "The Creators" Chapter 2 pgs. 27-84 in The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money & Power in Hollywood, Random House 2005
- **Assignment:**
- Short Paper #1 Due

### **Class #5: Developing & Producing Series**

The logic and structures by which television shows are produced. How and why are so many shows produced by the Hollywood film studios? Why do talent agencies play such an essential role in the production of series? What is deficit financing and how do television series make money? What are the differences in producing for network, cable and streaming? We will examine the showrunner model as the creative center – how are new shows get piloted and selected?

#### **Assigned Screening:**

"Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show" dir. Des Doyle 2014

#### **Readings:**

- Dahir, Rohin "The Economics of a Hit TV Show" *Priceonomics.com* 10/17/2013 (CAN)
- Rasko, Rob "Are You Ready for the Digital Upfront?" *Marketingland.com* 04/16/2015 (CAN)
- Robb, David "WGA Data: 87% Of All Scripted TV Shows Are Packaged" *Deadline.com* 03/15/2018 (CAN)
- Sherwin, Adam "Seinfeld is Laughing All the Way to the Bank" *Vulture* 04/03/2013 (CAN)

### **Class #6: Merging Film and TV- consolidation and the wages of synergy**

The push to concentrate media power in 1990s-2000s, the absorption of cable and networks into global content production and distribution enterprises led by Hollywood studios. We will examine how a revolution in convenience and consumption changed the audience. We will discuss the impact of personalized viewing technology and how new in-home conveniences, along with regulatory easing, pulled television into an inextricable alliance with Hollywood.

### **Readings (all on Canvas):**

- Epstein, Edward Jay “The Creators” Chapter 2 pgs. 27-84 in The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money & Power in Hollywood, Random House 2005
- Hoffmeister, Sallie and Hall, Jane “Disney to Buy Cap Cities for \$19 Billion” *Los Angeles Times* 08/01/1995 [http://articles.latimes.com/1995-08-01/news/mn-30178\\_1\\_walt-disney/3](http://articles.latimes.com/1995-08-01/news/mn-30178_1_walt-disney/3)
- Mifflin, Lawrie “Making a Media Giant; Viacom Buys CBS” *The New York Times* 09/07/1999 <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/08/business/making-media-giant-overview-viacom-buy-cbs-forming-2d-largest-media-company.html>
- Lander, Mark “Turner to Merge into Time Warner” *The New York Times* 09/23/1999 <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/09/23/us/turner-to-merge-into-time-warner-a-7.5-billion-deal.html>
- Littleton, Cynthia “Comcast, NBC U Merger A Done Deal” *Variety* 01/29/2011 <https://variety.com/2011/tv/news/comcast-nbc-u-merger-a-done-deal-1118031139/>
- **Assignment:**  
Short Paper #1 Assigned (due Class #2)

### **Class #7: Netflix- The Eve of Disruption**

Netflix has come a long way since 1997, when two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings, decided to start an online DVD store. From DVD purveyor to content licensor to streaming pioneer to reinventor of television programming, Netflix has bumped its way into becoming a content revolutionary. Today, it engaged in an even bigger battle for online video streaming against Google, Hulu, Amazon, and the big cable companies. We will examine in what ways Netflix successfully has redefined the television playing field forever.

How did TV supplant film as the prestige content formula? How did developments in the theatrical film market contribute to TV’s rise? An examination of the genres and the story forms that have fueled Peak TV. How did the oft-maligned miniseries rebrand itself into the exalted “long-form limited series”? We’ll discuss the evolution of the anti-hero drama, the ascendancy of the writer and expanding creative freedom brought on by streaming competition,

### **Mld-term Quiz prior to class**

#### **Readings:**

- McDonald, Kevin “From On-Line Video Store to Global Internet TV Network” Chapter 13 pgs. 203-215 in The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (CAN)

- Auletta, Ken “ Outside the Box: Netflix and the Future of Television” *The New Yorker*, 08/19/2013
- Edgerton et al The Essential HBO Reader pgs. 23-41 (CAN)

### **Class #8: A Panoply of Choices- Too Much Television?**

What is television anymore? Digital media began to take hold in the mid 1990s and with it came the development of multiple delivery and revenue models with cable companies and satellite providers competing against phone companies for the pipe into the home in a newly deregulated environment. Various types of video-on-demand evolved along with devices and apps to mobilize all forms of content. The traditional network business models continue in a diminished form but remain relevant thanks to the structure and regulation of cable operators. Then there is cord cutting and over-the-top. And now we are facing the entry of Apple, Disney and others into the digital programming crucible. We will sort through all of these options and consider how all maintain relevancy for now.

#### **Readings:**

- Wolk, Alan Over the Top: How the Internet is Changing the Television Industry, Parts 1 & 2 “What’s Disrupting The Industry Today” (Kindle version)
- Lotz, Amanda Now We Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television, pgs. 113-186
- Ryan, Maureen and Littleton, Cynthia “TV Series Budgets Hit the Breaking Point as Costs Skyrocket in the Peak TV Era” *Variety* 09/26/2017 (CAN)

#### **Assignment:**

- Short Paper #2 Due

### **Class #9: Peak TV: Subscriptions & Disruptions**

We are entering a period of increased content “siloeing” in which viewers will have clear choices about which discreet platforms are the source of their entertainment content. For cable companies, it’s retaining customers with “skinny bundles” and participating in OTT apps. For ascendant streaming networks, its about aggregating subscribers and bundling exclusive content offerings whereby the value of specific programs is being supplanted by an emphasis on overall engagement and viewer satisfaction. What are the blockbuster and long-tail approach to content and which one is likely to prevail in the future? Finally, we look at the rise of data-driven content, how data is it gathered and applied and what does it mean for the network’s traditional model of creating demand and curating your viewing.

## Readings:

- Anderson, Chris "The Long-Tail" *Wired Magazine* 10/01/2004 (CAN)
- Lodz, Amanda "Strategies of Internet-Distributed Television" Chapter 3 in Portals: A Treatise on Internet Distributed Television
- Streaming Sharing Stealing: Big Data and the Future of Entertainment, Smith, Michael D. and Telang, Raul Part 1 & 2 (Kindle version)
- Arnold, Sarah "Netflix and the Myth of Choice" Chapter 3 pgs. 49-61 in The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (CAN)

## Class #10: Debate-a-thon

As a capstone to the semester, we will divide up into teams for a series of debates on relevant topics on the present and future of . Each group will be representing one side of an argument- pro and con- and will fully prepare to engage in a formal debate lasting approximately one-half hour. Each team will submit a report to accompany their debate position that will discuss the background of the issue in detail, their position and support, their evidence as well as a list of anticipated arguments from the other side and your prepared rebuttals. Approximately 12-15 pages.

\*\*\*\*\*GROUP PAPERS ARE DUE AT THE END OF CLASS\*\*\*\*\*