

Peak Television: The Journey from Network to Streaming

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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

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 either placed on library reserve or 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 place on reserve or supply electronic versions of as many assigned readings as possible within the copyright rules.

Reading Materials:

Suggested Readings to be Purchased:

Shapiro, Seth Television: Volume 1 The Broadcast Age and the Rise of the Networks, Parts 1 & 2
New Amsterdam Media LLC, 2016 - available in Kindle version
We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Disrupted Television, Lotz, Amanda D. , MIT Press
(2018) – available in Kindle version
Streaming, Sharing, Stealing: Big Data and the Future of Entertainment, Smith, Michael D. and
Telang, Rahul, MIT Press (2016)- (kindle)

CAN= Posted on CANVAS site

Grading: Grades are based on the following criteria and weightings: 10% class participation and instructor judgement, 15% for each of two topical essays, 10% teaching assignment, 20% for a mid-term quiz and 30% for the final project.

Screening: There are several screenings assigned. Some are recommended, others are optional-check status

Paper/ Teaching Assignment: The class will be divided into two groups, each will submit two (2) 4-6 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 topics will be assigned in Classes 2 (due Class 4) and 5 (due Class 7). Each class member will be responsible to present once in class based on those papers during Class 4&5 and Class 7&8.

Mid-term Quiz: There will be a quiz scheduled prior to the 6th class that will cover topics from prior classes, details to be provided in advance.

Final Assignment: A take-home open-book assignment to be submitted prior to the last class.

Required Work:

- Class attendance
- Readings. pre-recorded lectures and interviews
- Two 3-5 page papers (Class #4 & #7)
- Mid-term Quiz (before Class #6)
- A Final Assignment (due Class #10)

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?

Recordings:

Lectures 1.1 “Introduction” 1.2 “What is Peak TV” 1.3 “Is It Peak TV or Just More TV”

Readings:

Nicolaou, Anna “Whatever happened to the golden age of television?” *The Financial Times* April 20, 2020 (CAN)

“Video Streaming Market Stalls in the US “ *Kanter Analytics Report* April 22, 2022 (CAN)

Mullin, Benjamin and Marcelis, David “Disney+, HBO Max and Other Streamers Get Waves of Subscribers From Must-See Content. Keeping Them Is Hard” *Wall Street Journal* January 31, 2022 (CAN)

Fletcher, Bevin “Netflix Loses 200k Subscribers in Q1” *fierce.com* April 20, 2022 (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:

Shapiro, Seth Television: Volume 1 The Broadcast Age and the Rise of the Networks, Parts 1 & 2 New Amsterdam Media LLC, 2016

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 (On Course Reserve CAN)

Recordings:

Class Lectures 2.1 “TV Begins” 2.2, “Early TV and the Influence of Regulation and Hollywood” 2.3(a) “ The Network Era Part I”

How Desi Arnaz Invented Television” National Public Radio *Planet Money* January 22, 2021

Optional Assigned Viewing:

“Lucy & Desi” available on Amazon Prime

Assignment:

Short Paper #1 Assigned (due Class #4)

Class 3: Elements of Network Television

Following from the achievements of “I Love Lucy”, the normative elements of broadcast television emerged early, only to be further refined through the 1960s and 1970s by the priorities imposed by the evolution of advertising and the audience. The promise of an electronic public forum

rapidly devolved into a singular focus on the bottom-line as the popularity of the medium brought vast profits and influence to the network troika.

Readings:

Shapiro, Seth Television: Volume 1 The Broadcast Age and the Rise of the Networks, Parts 3,4,& 5 New Amsterdam Media LLC, 2016 (Purchase Book)

Ryan, Maureen "TV Writers Weigh In On Legacy of 'Hill Street Blues'..." *Huffington Post* 6/23/14 (CAN)

St James, Emily "Norman Lear on the past and future of television" *Vox* 02/06/15 (CAN)

Recordings:

2.3(b) "The Network Era Part II" 2.4 "The Mass Market versus the Public Interest"

"How Desi Arnaz Invented Television" National Public Radio *Planet Money* January 22, 2021
<https://www.npr.org/2021/01/22/959609533/how-desi-invented-television>

Optional Viewing:

"Just Another Version of You" (Norman Lear doc) available on various services to rent or stream

Class 4: From Over the Air to Through the Pipe- The Transition

Overview of the business evolution 1970s - 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:

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 (On Course Reserve and CAN)

Mesce, Bill Jr. Inside the Rise of HBO "Walson's Mountain" Chapter 7, pgs. 63-70 "Into the Sky Junior Birdmen" Chapter 9 and Chapter 11 "Fallout" pgs 108-115 (Course Reserve)

Lotz, Amanda Now We Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television, Part One: Sections 1-11 The MIT Press 2017 (Purchase Book)

Recordings:

Class Lectures 3.1 "The Multi-Channel Transition Part 1" 3.2 "The Multi-Channel Transition Part II"

“On Cable Television” Part 1 – a conversation with Sam Howe, former Time Warner Cable CMO

Grading Assignment:

First Paper Due at beginning of Class- Teaching exercises begin

Class 5: From Cable to Digital- the Post- Network Era

The push to concentrate media power in 1990s-2000s, the absorption of cable and legacy networks into global content production and distribution enterprises led by Hollywood studios. Why was this inevitable? We will examine how a revolution in convenience and consumption changed the audience. We will discuss the impact of narrow-cast networks and how new time-shifting conveniences, along with regulatory easing, pulled cable television into an inextricable alliance with Hollywood.

Readings:

Lotz, Amanda [Now We Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television](#), Part Two: Sections 20-24 assigned (remaining sections optional) The MIT Press 2017

Epstein, Edward Jay [The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood](#), Selections from Chapter 3 “The Creators” Random House, 2005 (On course reserve and CAN)

Recordings:

Class Lecture: 6.1 “Merger Mania”

“On Cable Television” Part 2 – a conversation with Sam Howe

Grading Assignment:

Teaching exercises continue/conclude

Short Paper #2 Assigned (due Class #7)

Class 6: The Advertising Business Model

This session concerns the economies of ad-based networks and show producers. The first half of this class will examine advertising in relation to network programming. Cable and legacy networks rely on ad sales as primary revenue sources. We will examine the elements of the ad-based revenue models, the issues surrounding audience measurement and the ratings. We will then examine related topics of carriage fees and subscription TV and a deeper dive into the chase for syndication and the resilience of advertising prices in the face of declining viewership.

Readings:

Blumenthal, Howard J. and Goodenough, Oliver R., "Audience Measurement, Research and Ratings", pgs. 402-415 in This Business of Television, Billboard Books, 1998 (On course reserve)

Blumenthal et al "Advertising" pgs 416-439 in This Business of Television (On course reserve)

Auletta, Ken Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way, Random House 1992. Pages 302-322 (CAN)

Lotz, Amanda The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Chapter 6 "Recounting the Audience" New York University Press 2014 (CAN)

Adgate, Brad "Nielsen: How The Pandemic Changed At Home Media Consumption", *Forbes* August 21, 2020 (CAN)

Navin Ashwin "Don't Fear The Backlash: We've Only Seen The Shift to Streaming TV's First Wave" *advertisingweek.com* February 16, 2022 (CAN)

Recordings:

Class Lectures: 4.1 "Advertising 101" and 4.2 "Cable and the Ad Model"

Grading Assignment:

Mid-term Quiz before Class

Class 7: Developing & Producing Series

The logic and structures by which television shows are produced. Some potential areas of discussion include: How and why are so many shows produced by the Hollywood film studios? What is syndication and why does it play such an essential role in the financial model? What is deficit financing and how do television series make money? What are the differences in producing for network, cable and streaming?

Optional Viewing:

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

Recordings:

Class Lecture: 5.1 "Syndication" Class Lecture 5.2 "Developing and Producing Series" (in-class)

Readings:

Lotz, Amanda Television Will Be Revolutionized, Chapter 3: Changes in Production Practices, The MIT Press 2017 (Course Reserve)

Dahir, Rohin "The Economics of a Hit TV Show" *Priceonomics.com* 10/17/2013 (CAN)

Horton, Adrian "Last Laugh: behind the multimillion dollar deals to buy old sitcoms" *The Guardian* 10/8/19 (CAN)

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)

Macon, Thomas "Netflix's Cancellation Rule Is Now the Streaming Service's Biggest Problem" *Screen Rant* 03/22/22 (CAN)

"True Detective" Treatment (CAN)

Grading Assignment:

Second Paper Due at beginning of Class- Teaching exercises continue

Class #8: Times Are A Changing – The Reimagining of Programming and the Rise of Streaming

In Part One of this session we will continue to discuss how programming took an abrupt turn around the turn of the century. New business models brought about changes in content that heralded the climb toward Peak television and an increase in norm-breaking series. How did the greater availability of programs and distribution methods lead to their overall improvements in content? At the same time, the era of internet took hold- how was its potential both underestimated and over-estimated? Finally, after cable invested in 500 channel capabilities, how did it get devoured by its success?

In Part 2- we will discuss Netflix. From DVD purveyor to content licensor to streaming pioneer to programming juggernaut, Netflix has bumped its way into becoming a business revolutionary. Today, it engaged in an even bigger battle for online video streaming against Amazon, Disney, and Comcast. We will examine the ways in which the "Netflix Effect" took hold to define the rules of television in the streaming era.

Recordings:

Class Lecture: 7.1 "New Content and the Cable Squeeze", and "Netflix: How a \$40 Late Fee Revolutionized Television"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrpEHssa_gQ&t=14s

Readings:

Lotz, Amanda Now We Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television, Part Two: Sections 28-31 The MIT Press 2017

Auletta, Ken "Outside the Box: Netflix and the Future of Television" *The New Yorker*, 08/19/2013 (CAN)

Lindsay, Cameron "Questioning Netflix Revolutionary Impact: Changes in the Business and Consumption of Television" Chapter 11 pgs. 173-184 in The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (CAN)

Anderson, Chris "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture" in The Essential HBO Reader pgs. 23-41 (CAN)

Grading Assignment:

Teaching exercises completed

Class #9: Peak TV: The Logic of the Streaming Era

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.

Recordings:

Class Lecture: 8.1 "Subscription Streaming: The Data-Driven Business Model" (in -class)

Readings:

Anderson, Chris "The Long-Tail" *Wired Magazine* 10/01/2004 (CAN)

Streaming Sharing Stealing: Big Data and the Future of Entertainment, Smith, Michael D. and Telang, Raul Part 1 & 2 (Kindle version)

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 21st Century, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016 (CAN)

Sanneh, Kelefa "Blockbluster: Who Needs Hits?" *The New Yorker* 11/24/13 (CAN)

Class #10: A Panoply of Choices- Too Much Television?

We'll continue the discussion from the last class and revisit the themes from the first class. What is television anymore? Digital media began to take hold in the late 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, over-the-top and dongles such as Roku. And now we are facing the limits of SVOD as new entrants crowd the digital programming crucible. We will sort through all of these options and consider how all maintain relevancy for now.

Graded Assignment:

Final Assignment Submitted