

Missing in Action: Quality TV and Canonization

Not What's Missing, but What's Ignored

Cory Barker, Indiana University

Concerns about what series are unavailable to us in a time of seemingly instant access are certainly still valid in 2014. There are still thousands of older series not available on streaming platforms, or on DVD and Blu-ray. Of course, anyone could come up with a list of series that aren't readily available across platforms. We could make this claim based on geographic location. In the U.S., too much of our focus is on domestic programming, with the semi-occasional nod toward things from the U.K. We could also make it based on genre; there are thousands of hours of soap operas, news programs, sports broadcasts, infomercials, and even reality TV that we simply cannot get as easily as we might like.

Similarly, critics spilled quite a bit of digital ink this year for *True Detective* and *Fargo*, series that fit the more traditional definition of "Quality TV" with their anti-hero-y and damaged leading men and "complex" narratives. Recent much-discussed books like Brett Martin's *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* and to a lesser extent Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised* provide additional legitimacy to a generally narrow collection of "important" programs.

But in thinking about my response for this panel, I kept coming back to the question of how our "curatorial viewing/writing strategies" should be expanded, mostly because I don't think we as scholars do a good enough job of expanding the so-called canon as we could, *with the access we already have*.

The content libraries of popular streaming platforms like Netflix or Hulu produce the kind of frustrating experience that I'm sure many of us have had: you log in to continue watching a series, only to find that it has been removed. Or maybe you're shocked to learn that it was never there to begin with. Nevertheless, we need to continue to look elsewhere; there are an increasingly large number of *other* platforms entering the market, looking to provide any content they can to prospective subscribers/viewers. Sony-owned Crackle, Yahoo's Screen, and Amazon's Prime Instant Video services all made headlines this year in trying to expand their libraries and there's surely more to come.

Relatedly, programming that we might consider of being "endangered" is not only available, but is in certain cases driving viewership and/or subscriptions. Children's programming has become big business for Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, as well as official network streaming platforms and apps. (A [November 2013 New York Times report](#) noted that 65 percent of the "most-replayed" videos on Amazon's Prime Instant Video were children's programming.) It doesn't stop with the kids: foreign imports play an important role in Hulu's strategies; Crunchyroll has become a popular online destination for its anime library; Warner Archive Instant offers some notable series among its large film library; and even our most successful pro wrestling company has its own over-the-

top service, the WWE Network. Plus, series long written about for their lack of DVD release—*Batman*, *The Wonder Years*, *China Beach*, the full run of *Hill Street Blues*—are finally here, or at least soon to be here. And I have not even mentioned iTunes, Google Play, or any number of illegal streaming/downloading options.

Meanwhile, the explosion of post-episode reviews and recaps online means that analysis and discussion of all types of television is readily available. In fact, economic necessity of this kind of content for media web sites actually aids in expanding the coverage and discussion of television. Prominent critics may continue to concentrate on a small number of high-profile series, but it is not hard to find recaps of everything from *Mad Men* and *The Bachelor* to *Gravity Falls* and *Monday Night Raw*. One does not even have to dig around very much to find discussion of their favorite series, however obscure they might be.

With all this in mind, it's up to us to actually address the blind spots and expand the canon. Instead of thinking about what we cannot access, why not take inspiration from these streaming platforms or critics/recappers and write or teach about as many extremely weird or innocuously popular things as possible?

If we want to write about *Suits* or *Naked and Afraid* instead of *Breaking Bad* and *True Detective*, we can do that. If we want to teach television history by showing illegally posted episodes of [Perfect Strangers](#) instead of *The Cosby Show*, we can do that. And if we want to assign our students projects that require them to explore deeper into the archives of Netflix or Hulu or even torrent sites, we can do that too (though that might require a discussion on virus protection software).

Our challenge in complicating or improving this idea of Quality TV is not just worrying about what's missing-in-action. It's also doing a better job with what we've completely ignored or forgotten.