

## Reconsidering Digital Distribution

### **The Destandardization of Season Lengths: Digital Distribution and Changing Network Practices**

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Under the traditional broadcast network model, each series must be vetted through the same set of hurdles, commencing with a pitch to network executives and continuing through a commissioned pilot, an initial thirteen episode order, and an additionally ordered "back nine," which brings a freshman series' length to a total of twenty-two episodes. Customarily, every additional season will continue with a consistent twenty-two episodes. However, as a result of flourishing digital distribution methods, a destandardization of season length is taking place.

The origination of this destandardization is the disruption of programming practices. Original programming was long unique to broadcast television, with the majority of cable networks focused on syndicated television programming and feature length films. However, with rapid developments in technology (DVDs, DVR, VOD, downloadable files and online streaming,) the demand for cable networks devoted to such content has greatly diminished. If an audience member misses an episode during its original airing, it is simple, painless and almost instantaneous to catch up via iTunes, Hulu or Tivo. Cable marathons of syndicated programming have also experienced a significant dip in demand, as viewers now have easy access to DVD sets and streaming options through which they can "binge watch" shows at their leisure. With the profitability of syndication fading, cable companies have shifted their focus towards developing, producing and airing their own original series.

These shifts in network practices are accompanied by significant risks to a company's finances and brand image. This risk is likely responsible for many cable networks' choice to shorten their series orders significantly below the broadcast standard: a cable series order can now run as low as six episodes, as with Sundance's first original series, *Rectify*.

Syndication's decreasing significance has also destabilized broadcast television's operations. The existence of alternative modes of distribution decreases the pressure on networks to quickly reach the magic one hundred episode mark to secure the sale of syndication rights. Therefore, individual seasons need not be as long. The sale of streaming rights to online streaming sites has replace syndication. As a result, there has been movement away from episodic formats, which play well in syndication because they can be watched out of order without consequence. Alternatively, fast-paced, shorter, serialized programming benefits from the "binge watching" aspect of streaming. Furthermore, a trend of dramatically shortened "wrap-up" seasons has appeared, as in the case of The CW's *Nikita*. Despite low on-air ratings that would normally warrant cancellation, the closure provided by these final episodes causes the series as a whole to be more appealing for streaming purposes.

As more premium and basic cable networks - along with newly-formed online content distributors - enter the market for original programming, competition skyrockets for all networks, regardless of business model. The sheer number of options for audiences has resulted in thinly spread public, with smaller audience numbers for all. Gone are the days of the simple choice between The Big Three. The resulting confusion for network executives as to what size audience constitutes a successful series has complicated renewals. Consequently, there is a tentativeness on the part of the networks to fully commit to a show whose ratings have placed it "on the bubble." Unsure of the potential prosperity of these "bubble" shows are more regularly being renewed with shorter than standard episode orders. NBC's *Parenthood* is a prime example with its inconsistent season lengths (varying widely from the standard 22 to the low teens and back again) while its viewership remained consistently disappointing.

In the last two years, a "straight-to-series" model has emerged as an alternative to the traditional pilot process. This process involves a network chooses to pick up a series for an entire season based on the strength of the pitch and/or pilot script without ever producing and assessing a pilot episode. This phenomenon can be attributed to what I refer to as "The Kevin Spacey Effect." When Netflix announced its first original series, *House of Cards*, a considerable amount of press centered on lead actor and spokesman for the project, Kevin Spacey's condemnation the traditional pilot model. He claimed television networks failed to give *House of Cards* a chance for the reason that the creative team refused to do a pilot for the series, convinced it would have stifled their artistic voice. In wake of the massive critical success of the Netflix series, there has been a flood of straight-to-series show orders from the likes Showtime (with "Penny Dreadful") and Fox (with the majority of their 2014-15 season). Nearly all examples of the "straight-to-series" model are small orders, and thus minimize the risk taken by circumventing a pilot. While the model is too young to fully evaluate, at this time such orders rarely have "back nine" added and even when renewed, generally remain below traditional lengths. As the results of digital distribution take effect on the television industry, season length expectations are no more.