

Letter from the Editor

ELLEN SEITER

Our topic for this special issue of *Global Storytelling* highlights the paradox of media studies today. Scholars of television streaming must, of necessity, reach back to the eighteenth century and beyond to consider the precedents to seriality that our issue gestures toward. At the same time, the development of streaming platforms demands that scholars tool up their comprehension of algorithms and financial markets and stocks, the deterministic role of server capacity, and the vigorous attempts at expansion by corporations with quite different endgame strategies. Streaming is not only a moving target but a topic that prompts scholars to chase headlines, thus finding the big picture difficult to capture. While some of the essays collected here revisit core concerns of television studies as a field, streaming also has pushed scholars from the comfortable niche of television studies as a close cousin of film studies—both mere infants when compared to most academic disciplines—to join sociologists, neuroscientists, artificial intelligence experts, and the broad array of disciplines who comment on the Internet. I see this as a healthy sign. The world of media studies can be surprisingly claustrophobic, engaged with questions of theory that are a bit too microscopic to yield insight. Before introducing this collection of essays, I wish to turn now to a few elements of narrative and genre theory. The study of long-form series produced for streaming platforms requires two types of knowledge: genre histories from print, tabloids, stage, and radio as well as a broader perspective on media economics. Let me offer a few examples here of how these larger contexts can enrich our understanding of streaming.

In 2017, Netflix's original series *13 Reasons Why* became its most-watched series to date, not only in the United States but in South and East Asia. As a serial narrative, the show and its success provide a powerful

reminder of just how old generic roots and serialization strategies are when viewing today's streaming successes. In the show's first season, narrator Hannah Baker records thirteen tapes before committing suicide, and she leaves instructions to share the tapes with her peers at the high school she entered as a student new to the area about a year ago. The tapes neatly structure each episode, while explaining—one might say, directly accusing—those she knew as contributors to her feelings of isolation, abandonment, humiliation, and despair. Past and present are linked like a murder mystery as the protagonist Clay, a socially awkward sophomore who worked alongside Hannah at the local movie theater, attempts to understand how he impacted Hannah's life and ultimately her decision to commit suicide.

13 Reasons Why, as a teen show liberated from the strictures of network television and thus able to show more graphic sexual content as well as a darker, more pessimistic view of high school itself, is also a coming-of-age story or what literary critics refer to as a *Bildungsroman*. The first spectacular success of the coming-of-age genre was published in Germany in 1774 at the height of the *Sturm und Drang* period of Romanticism—an aesthetic and lifestyle movement emphasizing a rejection of the norms of bourgeois society, the importance of the individual, and the truths to be gained from communing with nature. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* catapulted the poet Johan Goethe to notoriety. Like *13 Reasons Why*, the protagonist Werther, a newcomer to a small town, relates his story through a series of letters, what is called “an epistolary novel”: how he falls in love with Lotte, a young woman about to be engaged to a boring, insensitive partner and experiences of both the suffocating dullness of small-town life and liberating escapes into the natural environment. He becomes so critical of the social mores that compel Lotte to marry his rival that he comes to see the prospect of assuming his expected place in adult society as intolerable. Once there is no hope left of uniting with Lotte, Werther shoots himself in the head.

While the comparison between a contemporary Netflix series and seventeenth-century German literature might seem a stretch, the comparison usefully illustrates how TV serials (and nearly all television genres) borrow—if not directly adapt—conventions from novels, plays, tabloids,

magazines, and feature films. In many cases, the core conventions of the genre are largely unchanged, despite the fact that contemporary productions dress up their plots with crimes or social problems “ripped from the headlines,” with new levels of nudity or explicit sexual content; fashion, including clothing, makeup, and hairstyles; and the most current popular music (some enhancing the budget through product-placement fees). *13 Reasons Why* shares with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* several notable features: it is disappointment in love and disillusionment with the older generation and the conventions and hypocrisies of the social structure that drive the protagonist to despair. Because the reader/viewer experiences the story with the foreknowledge that the narrator “speaks from the grave,” there is heightened pathos to each and every aspect of the account.

Both *Werther* and *13 Reasons* enjoyed unexpectedly, spectacularly high levels of success while instigating widespread discussion in the press about suicide and its prevention—fueled by media panic over copycat suicide attempts by devotees of the stories and whether, by romanticizing suicide in the narrative, the creators actually encouraged it. Both prompted an outpouring of fan fiction and alternative endings, and both made instant celebrities of their authors. Jay Bushman designed a transmedia tie-in for the show that demonstrates how digital media can now extend, complicate, and personalize the viewer’s relationship to serial narratives.¹ Transmedia such as this strives for intimacy between characters and audience by having them call their phones, a development of second-screen strategies.

More recently, critics have noted that many original series on streaming platforms appear to extend the drama in order to maximize the number of episodes. Plotlines are becoming padded, diversions to minor characters or episodes occupying an entire episode or more in service of reaching a larger total number of episodes. For example, the celebrated series *Ted Lasso* added two more episodes to its second season after the first season did well in awards season. This, too, is a centuries-old problem authors faced with

1. Jay Bushman, “*13 Reasons Why*: ‘Talk to the Reasons’ Interactive Episode,” accessed April 26, 2022, <https://www.jaybushman.com/work/13-reasons-why-talk-to-the-reasons>.

novels published in installments. In the streaming environment, it is important to note the distinction between Netflix's strategy of releasing all episodes of a series at once and HBO or Apple or Disney+ releasing one a week or two or three episodes at a time. Audiences have clear preferences for how episodes are meted out, which is another factor in Netflix's success. The slower rollout of episodes, however, provides more opportunity for fans to discuss, forecast, and engage in what Umberto Eco called "inferential walks,"² thus expanding participation and sharing by leaving time for the viewer to consider other kinds of intertextual knowledge to support a hypothesis about the ending. Costlier streaming platforms struggle with "churn": customers cancelling once their favorite program finishes a season, hence HBO's ambition, for example, to launch *Westworld* to appeal to subscribers who had followed *Game of Thrones*. The episode bloat is more common with lower-budget series without marquee names and is occurring with docuseries as well as fictional series. Doubtless it has also been fueled by the push to satisfy audience demand for new series while confined to home due to COVID-19 restrictions. A second strategy is ending the long-form series with unanswered questions or unexplored character arcs that leave open the possibility of another season or multiple seasons. Original series on streaming platforms finish production not knowing whether or not they will be extended. Often there are practical issues of actor availability, of budget and salary negotiation, casting doubt on whether a series is even possible. The higher the marquee value of the cast, the more difficult it becomes to coordinate their availability for a cast reunion.

Salary negotiations are also at issue: unlike network television, where residual payments for after-broadcast showings in syndication, on cable, and in foreign markets could secure huge income for actors, there are no residual payments for streaming productions. For everyone involved, the paycheck at the end of production is all the money that will be made. Ironically, while streaming series have much higher prestige value than broadcast television,

2. Eco, 1979, 32.

an actor appearing in one hundred episodes of a network sitcom (one hundred being the required number of episodes produced for a series to succeed in syndication) can retire for life from the proceeds. The staying power of broadcast sitcoms has extended to streaming platforms: a clear example is *Friends* retaining its place as one of the most watched (and fought over for licensing) television series in the world.

Reports of subscriber numbers—on a global scale—between platforms typically validated Netflix, with its advantage of being the early and defining entry into streaming, what’s called “winner take all effects” despite its many failures abroad and years of operating in the red.³ COVID-19 was initially a boost for Netflix, but in 2022, the stock plunged 35 percent in one day after reporting a loss of subscribers. In a shareholders’ statement, Netflix explained: “The Big growth in streaming entertainment has led legacy competitors like Disney, WarnerMedia and Discovery to compete with us in new ways which we’ve been expecting for many years. This is in part, why we have been moving so quickly to grow and further strengthen our original content library across a wide range of genres and nations.”⁴

Indeed, the last few years have brought powerful competitors into the streaming business, and their success and failure are instructive. Disney+ continued a paid subscription model for so long their introduction of a streaming platform could have been fatally delayed. Yet its launch exceeded projections, likely due to the fact that they rescinded their licensed content to Netflix and other competitors. Disney+ has the massive advantage of possessing live sports (ESPN), a vast library of movies and programming, and ownership of two of the most sustainable sources of new IP: *Star Wars* and Marvel Comics. Disney’s success furthered the demise of cable subscriptions, whose problems have grown from cord cutting to a generation of cord-nevers: a generation who have never felt the need for a cable subscription. Prime-time network viewing in the United States experienced a 21 percent decline in audience despite the viewer

3. David P. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Cultural Commodity,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (2018): 4277–78.

4. Netflix, Q4 shareholder letter, January 19, 2021.

spike caused by quarantine, and the remaining viewers were overwhelmingly over fifty-five years of age—not a demographic sought by advertisers.

Other platforms have been less fortunate when compared to the successful rollout of Disney+. The most spectacular failure in the streaming marketplace has been Quibi. Quibi stands for “quick bite.” The formula was based on established celebrities, high production values, and a ten-minute episode rolled out weekly. What CEOs Jeffrey Katzenberg (the former Disney CEO) and Whitman (the former eBay CEO) failed to reckon with is that a globally successful quick-bite app already exists: it’s called YouTube. While it took some years to arrive at the most successful formula, the big sensations on YouTube are often a minute long instead of ten, feature amateur vloggers instead of known stars, and are shot by novices. YouTube builds its viewership and its ad revenues by the fact that popular videos are shared billions of times. One of the smartest moves Google ever made was to buy YouTube in 2006 for what seemed at the time the unfathomable price of \$1.65 billion. Today it is estimated that YouTube accounts for about a third of Google’s value. The fourth most valuable corporation in the world, Google had a market capitalization in April 2022 of \$1.894 trillion.

This brings me to my final point about streaming platforms: the differences in capitalization and core business between Netflix or WarnerMedia—and rivals Amazon, Google (YouTube) or Apple—are vast. Understanding these firms’ very different positionings, scale, and vulnerabilities requires an understanding of “network effects” as a business model: exponential growth occurs when interactions (matching a service or commodity with a user) and payment are restricted to the platform, when data acquisition is maximized (through credit card data, search history, and location tracking), and when producers and consumers are not only matched on the platform but can function in both roles. Netflix and WarnerMedia are subscription-based distributors and lack the capacity for the two-way match, where consumers can also be producers. This makes their platforms less “sticky” and less profitable than their rivals. The entertainment trade press has traditionally emphasized the horse-race aspect of media competition: Who won weekend

box office? What channel had the highest viewership last night? Who gathered the most awards? Seen in this way, Amazon Prime gets treated as a close competitor of Netflix. But it is necessary to keep in perspective the gigantic differences between the two in market capitalization, diversity of holdings, long-term strategies for expansion, and overall scale. YouTube is the property of Google, the parent company being Alphabet Inc., which was created through a restructuring of Google. Google is in the advertising business and Amazon is in the retail, transport, and server business, as well as countless others. Both of these have amassed such astonishing profits that the scale of their business overshadows Netflix. Amazon is the fifth largest corporation in the world, with a market capitalization of \$1.71 trillion as of April 2022. Netflix is approximately one-tenth the size of Amazon. Amazon Prime, a video streaming service, is a small part of Amazon's massive holdings, almost a loss leader to get customers signed up for the Prime fee-based delivery service. Amazon Web Services, which provides server space to other firms, is one of its most profitable businesses. Netflix, ranked sixty ninth, with a market cap of \$173 billion, leases from Amazon. Amazon, the fifth largest company, with a market cap in the trillions, rents nearly all of its server space from Amazon Web Services for nearly all of its operations. Netflix issues Security and Exchange Commission (the US regulatory agency) mandates that Netflix issue risk warnings about the arrangement to stockholders.

In her visionary book *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*, McKenzie Wark differentiates between the early days of platformization, when it appeared that there was a possibility that new technologies of information might “escape the confines of the existing relations of production” and the point at which CEOs such as Jeff Bezos at Amazon, Sergey Mikhailovich Brin of Alphabet, and Larry Page of Google began to dominate through an exploitation of information asymmetry. They not only exploited all classes of lower socioeconomic standing but the former ruling class itself by owning the “vectors of information”: the algorithms, the computational speed and scale, the intellectual property (both their own and what they

capture from users), the logistical and data systems, and finally financial instruments (Amazon and Google Pay). Wark explains: “It exploits the asymmetry between the little you know and the aggregate it knows—an aggregate based on information you were obliged to ‘volunteer.’”⁵ It is worth noting that as early as 2002, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos described the firm as an “artificial intelligence company.”⁶

The articles in this special issue reflect an array of critical lenses that we might apply to studies of serialized media in the streaming era. First, Jake Pitre’s “Platform Strategy in a Technopolitical War: The Failure (and Success) of Facebook Watch” explores the social media company’s foray into what Pitre terms “experiential seriality.” Pitre’s essay shows robust television studies can become when the challenges of interdisciplinary are fully embraced. Next, Jia Tan’s “Platformized Seriality: Chinese Time-Travel Fantasy from Prime-Time Television to Online Streaming” brings together television studies and platform studies to consider the Chinese subgenre of *ch-uanyue* (time-travel historical fantasy). Specifically, Tan examines how these time-travel narratives, as they move from prime-time television serials to streaming platforms, open a productive space to explore representations, temporality, and new modes of engagement. Continuing with this consideration of engagement, Anne Gilbert’s “Algorithmic Audiences, Serialized Streamers, and the Discontents of Datafication” turns its attention to audiences of these platforms and texts. Focusing on Netflix’s interface and recommendation algorithm, Gilbert suggests that growing demands on consumer labor to curate programming, coupled with the “serialized” nature of how these databases are organized and presented, creates both a lack of transparency on how these choices are measured and valued but also barriers to collective viewing experiences.

Kelsey Cummings’s “Queer Seriality, Streaming Television, and She-Ra and the Princesses of Power” and Paige Macintosh’s “Transgressive TV:

5. Mackenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso, 2021).M59.

6. J. Cassidy, *Dot.con: How America Lost Its Mind and Money in the Internet Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 2002.

Euphoria, HBO, and a New Trans Aesthetic” both address the intersection points between streaming platforms and representation on serial television series. Cummings theorizes that the intimacy and effect produced by the experience of streaming media makes it a ripe space for generating what the author terms “queer seriality.” McIntosh, meanwhile, focuses on trans representation through a close formal analysis of the HBO series *Euphoria*, drawing aesthetic connections to Gen-Z social media use and values and the ways in which “edgy” programming has become synonymous with both streaming platforms. Finally, Oliver Kroener analyzes the impact of pandemic media-production practices on one of the most enduring and popular forms of serialized television programming: professional wrestling. Kroener’s article, “Then, Now, Forever: Television Wrestling, Seriality, and the Rise of the Cinematic Match during COVID-19,” considers the emergence of “cinematic” pandemic matches, which played to empty arenas, arguing that it represents the next phase of serialized storytelling in wrestling.

In addition, this special issue includes three book reviews and a film review, all further expanding on the topic of digital seriality. Briand Gentry reviews *Birth of the Binge: Serial TV and The End of Leisure* by Dennis Broe and *Gender and Seriality: Practices and Politics of Contemporary US Television* by Maria Sulimma, both of which excellently delineate how serialized cultural products dialectically reproduce and resist social class or gender inequalities in the context of the United States. Grace Elizabeth Wilsey narrows down the streaming platforms in her review of Ramon Lobato’s book *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. The Australia-based scholar Lobato demonstrates how US-based platform Netflix becomes a global platform that is both transnational and national. Asher Guthertz provides a review of Shawna Kidman’s *Comic Books Incorporated: How the Business of Comics Became the Business of Hollywood*. It highlights how the various legal, social, and industrial infrastructures influence the ebbs and flows of comic books. Finally, Anne Metcalf reviews the feature film *Zola*, tracing the significance of its origin in Twitter seriality and outlining director Janicza Bravo’s radical attention to race and the female gaze.

Acknowledgments

This issue of *Global Storytelling* gave me the opportunity to collaborate with Suzanne Scott, whose dissertation I chaired several years ago, and to appreciate once again her keen wit, incisive mind, and her generous spirit. I wish to thank her for embarking on this journey with me during such a stressful year. Ying Zhu provided guidance throughout and extended the invitation for us to be guest editors of *Global Storytelling* during this exciting period of its launch. Thanks to Daniel Herbert—another former student I was delighted to reconnect with—for providing the book reviews. Ling Tang provided immense support, in all dimensions, and her sophisticated mastery of the digital made our work possible. Thanks, also, to Dorothy W. S. Lau, as managing editor, for keeping us on track.