



Dip or dive?

Binge-watching TV series is tempting, but does it always provide the best entertainment?

How many times have you tuned in to watch just one episode of a TV series only to find yourself still on the sofa three hours later, immersed in the lives, loves and lessons of imagined worlds, characters and circumstances, any worries temporarily put to one side? It's intriguing that TV, whether familiar or fantastical, can have this effect, that it can on occasion actually ease real-life tension even as the on-screen drama ramps up. Could this explain why half of the 5,500 respondents to a 2019 survey conducted by RadioTimes.com revealed they'd binge-watched eight hours of a show in one sitting and 80 per cent admitted to sacrificing sleep to view even more?

It's an escapist activity that's become more accessible with the proliferation of streaming platforms and catch-up services. But that doesn't mean people weren't already partaking. It's just that media networks have made it much easier. Whether it's appropriate for shows to be on demand 24/7 and the effect it might have on viewers is sometimes forgotten. Entertainment is, after all, the name of the game. Yet some would argue that experiencing a series fully immersed, versus coming up for air between episodes, can affect its impact on the viewer.

Firstly, however, it's helpful to understand why viewers can become hooked. Neuroscientist and author Dean Burnett says

serialised shows, for example, a traditional six-by-one-hour format, are compelling in and of themselves because the brain likes finishing things – tying loose ends, dotting the Is and crossing the Ts. These series tantalise the brain. He explains how 'several experiments have shown humans will complete an unfinished task even if they're told they don't need to and won't receive any reward for completion'. This could shed some light on why viewers stay tuned in for hours, because simply knowing that there's more to watch tempts them deeper into a fictional world, and reaching the end is sometimes all that's needed to make the experience feel worthwhile.

'The brain is also instinctively wired to minimise effort wastage,' adds Dean. 'It's an evolved tendency, but humans don't like seeing effort and energy squandered. So, if someone has spent a lot of time engaging with something, they're more likely to want to continue doing so, if it's ongoing, because [otherwise] their initial investment seems like a waste of time.' Imagine, for example, a person has tuned into a new drama without first checking how many episodes are in the series. A couple of hours in, they decide to take a look... If they've watched four out of six episodes, they might be disappointed (particularly if they're enjoying the show), but if they're only one-third through

a tired plot, they'd likely be fed up. Despite this, many would still plough on, hoping to break even on the time stakes at some point and at least to reach the end.

'You often hear people say about a long-running show that it "gets really good around season three",' says Dean. 'This means they watched two whole seasons they didn't rate, which for many US shows is about two solid days' viewing.' This, in turn, feeds into the sunk-costs fallacy, where, explains Dean, 'people know something is a bad idea or not working, but persevere with it anyway, as they've already put time, effort or money into it'. And this isn't necessarily restricted to viewing habits – think, for example, how much time, effort and money a person might invest in a hobby they don't really enjoy.

So far, so good. Binge-watching ticks some of the brain's most basic boxes, so why does the verb 'binge' carry negative connotations in modern-day speech, especially when its meaning, 'to excessively indulge in an activity', is neutral? Also, there's much to be said for some extended sittings. Think about reading a book from start to finish in one go, for example, driven from one chapter to the next by the author's exquisite prose or a tightly drawn plotline. Is that not binge-reading? Some might even opt for a bathing binge, spending several

hours luxuriating in a hot, foam-filled tub. Both might be deemed indulgent, but they can also be beneficial for mind and body. But back to the more familiar extended TV viewings. The temptation is right there all day, every day, on the big box as well as tablets and smartphones. So, the question of whether to dip or deep dive into a series might be thornier than imagined.

Jen Chaney, TV critic for *Vulture*, the culture and entertainment site from *New York* magazine, is paid for her marathon efforts: 'Sometimes I don't have a choice because I have to preview and write up episodes quickly. Networks often send several episodes or even full seasons to critics in advance, which means I'm bingeing days or even weeks ahead of the public,' she says. Does this dent her enjoyment? It depends on the show: '[Binge-watching] provides the most pleasure when I really love the world the series has created. *Normal People* [the BBC and Hulu's 2020 adaptation of Sally Rooney's novel of the same name] is a good example of that.'

Other long-running examples of serialised shows include HBO's *Game of Thrones* and *The Wire*. Although different in genre, their format and complexity means it might benefit the viewer to watch many episodes in one sitting. This way, the characters and story arcs stay fresh in the mind and crucial plot



twists and clues are less likely to be missed or forgotten. Some broadcasters even launch series on the assumption that many viewers will both tune in from the first episode and then work through the others in quick succession. A 2016 Netflix study, for example, which examined the viewing data of more than 100 serialised TV series across 190 countries, found its subscribers chose to dive into content more often than dipping in and out, on average finishing an entire season in one week.

The channel's comedy drama, *Orange is the New Black*, which finished in 2019 after a mammoth 91 episodes and seven seasons, is just one example of a show that seemed made for bingeing. Would its cast of 40 characters have been as popular if binge-watching wasn't available? We'll never know, but when the final season launched, it was the most-watched original on Netflix, with subscribers who finished any one season tuning in, on average, for more than two hours every day.

Long-running shows that follow the same beats and characters in every episode, however, such as NBC's American sitcom *Friends*, which ran for 10 years from 1994, make for less full-on viewing. Dean suggests that long sittings with formulaic shows can make 'annoying character traits or plot holes more apparent and lessen enjoyment'. In this instance, waiting a week between episodes and building anticipation, can help to increase the viewer's investment in the show and make them more forgiving of any flaws.

Jen agrees: 'There's a value to shows that roll out episodes once a week and allow viewers to sit with each one. It allows series to gain steam in the cultural buzz department, too.' In fact, it could be argued that this buzz, where friends, colleagues

and family members might be enjoying the same series and revel in discussing its finer points, is part of a programme's impact. Consuming a show whole and not exchanging opinions with fellow viewers is like eating out and not musing over your meal's flavour with a companion. Discussing the minutiae of characters and plot between episodes can bring different perspectives, which can often alter your opinion of a show while also ensuring it's more likely to stay in the memory banks.

These are all sensible reasons to pace viewing patterns more evenly, but it's easier said than done when the pull to escape a difficult day is strong and an evening watching six episodes of BBC4's latest Scandi noir is the most attractive option. Fortunately, the more we exercise the parts of the brain responsible for impulse control and self-regulation, the easier it becomes to call them into action and hit the off switch. Dean points out, however, that 'everyone is different and some people have a more powerful reward system or less-potent self-control areas'. This makes it harder for them to refuse the automatic episode-loading tactics employed by many streaming platforms.

Sometimes, binge-watching is subconscious and bang on the mark, affording the mind a weightlessness that can't easily be found elsewhere. Occasionally, however, it might be less effective and even detrimental to sleep and focus. But whether you choose to dive deep or just get your toes wet, make sure the freedom and pleasure is all yours

Words: Jenny Rowe

POPCORN AT THE READY

Knowing when to switch off is different for every person and every show. Try asking yourself these questions:

- What type of show is it? Series that comprise standalone plots, where a story or case is resolved in one episode or season, are great for quick dips. Those where the action continues across many series might benefit from more sustained submersion.
- Are you losing sleep? Choosing to watch TV over getting some healthy shut-eye might cause problems.
- Have you taken the show off your sofa and into the real world? Chatting about content you watch on television can increase its value. Consider waiting between episodes so you can compare notes with a friend before pressing play once more.



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