Personal Primetime

An Exploration of Television Viewing Decisions in an Era of Many Options

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May 2011

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Abstract

Not all that long ago, there was just one main way to watch television: Turn on the set, sit down in front of it, and watch what was on. Today, though, watching television can have multiple meanings. Looking at the expanding number of viewing technologies that allow television content to be viewed at various times and on various screens, some have suggested that viewers now have near-total freedom to choose what, where, when, and how they watch television. But in a universe of greater choice, how do viewers make sense of their options? Through interviews with 16 television fans, this study seeks to uncover and understand the constellation of factors that affect how viewers decide which primetime television shows to watch and where and when to watch them. This paper discusses a number of these influences, including a complicated web of content rights and restrictions; the potential for conversation with a viewer's peers; and personal preferences for watching television in particular ways and on particular screens. Using this information, potential future directions for television innovations are discussed and evaluated.

1. Introduction

Not all that long ago, there was just one main way to watch television: Turn on the set, sit down in front of it, and watch what was on. The choices about what, when, and where to watch were very closely tied: a relatively small set of shows aired in each time slot, and the only place to watch them was the television screen.

Today, though, watching television can have multiple meanings. We can still tune into a show that's been selected to air on a particular channel at a particular time and watch it at the appointed hour in front of a television set. But we can also record numerous programs for later viewing, download shows to computers or mobile phones, and stream single episodes or even entire series from any of several online services. Looking at this expanding number of viewing technologies, some have suggested that viewers now have near-total freedom to choose what, where, when, and how they watch television (Simons, 2009; Van den Broeck, Pierson, & Lievens, 2007).

But in a universe of greater choice, how do viewers make sense of their options? How do they piece together their own television schedules and select their modes of viewing? Through interviews with 16 television fans, this project seeks to uncover and understand the constellation of factors that affect how viewers decide which primetime television shows to watch and where and when to watch them.

It might be easy to assume that watching television is now a thoroughly unscheduled affair — that because television shows don't have to be watched at particular times, they won't be. But what I found was something more complex than that. The broadcast schedule is no longer the sole dictator of what shows are seen when, but viewers do create their own personal, carefully considered viewing agendas in which the broadcast schedule can be one factor among many.

Exactly what those factors are and how much priority they're given differs widely among my 16 participants, but there are some common themes. My findings are essentially twofold: First, while technologies do provide new freedoms for changing when and where television shows can be seen, a complicated web of content rights and restrictions keeps viewers from truly being able to watch any show on any device — causing a significant amount of frustration and a desire on the part of some viewers to create workarounds that subvert the system. Second, even if all of the rights issues were to be resolved, other influences still weigh heavily on viewing decisions and schedules. In particular, viewers often take into account what their peers (whether virtual or in-person) are watching and when conversations about those shows are likely to take place; the type of viewing experience they want to have and how that interacts with the affordances of various viewing platforms; and how much a given show is "worth," in terms of both actual economic value and level of priority granted in the viewing schedule.

The next section of this paper will provide an overview of some major moments in the evolution of television and TV-watching technology — from the development of primetime programming to the introduction of products and services that began to give viewers a measure of control over when and how to watch television shows.

Section 3 explains this study in-depth, detailing the methodology and introducing the participants.

Sections 4 and 5 are the heart of this paper, exploring what the 16 participants had to say about when, where, and how they watch television and which factors they value in making their decisions. Section 4 covers technology decisions and general attitudes about television, while section 5 explores three key categories of influences on viewing.

Given all of that, section 6 introduces some possible future directions that designers and technologists trying to create innovative television viewing experiences could explore. Finally, section 7 presents suggestions for future research into television viewing habits.

2. Background

For more than half a century, the television set has been Americans' "electronic hearth," a place to gather with friends and family while watching entertainment together (Tichi, 1992). And the shows that appear on that screen — whether black and white or color, analog or digital, filmed live or sent coast-to-coast on video tapes or broadband connections — have become fodder for rich discussions. While the television set was a physical gathering place, the content it showed provided a cultural gathering place — something for coworkers to bond over at the proverbial watercooler, for acquaintances to discuss en route to becoming friends. As Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote:

> Today, the thing hundreds of millions of humans most have in common with each other, aside from their humanity, is television. It has become our culture's dominant form of leisure and its most powerful form of mass communication (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

For many years, conversation around television worked so well because viewing options were relatively limited: Only a few networks had the resources to put shows on the air, and those shows reached all households with television service at more or less the same time in each time zone. Anyone watching television at a given time was watching one of a small number of programs, and that was the only time those programs could be seen. "Viewers possessed no recourse against network schedules, and time-shifting remained beyond the realm of possibility. If the PTA bake sale was scheduled for Thursday night, that week's visit with *The Waltons* could not be rescheduled or delayed" (Lotz, 2007, p. 11).

But recent technological and social developments have challenged nearly every traditional idea about television — from its role as a physical object in the home to its regulation of

time by the rhythms of its schedule to its very meaning as a medium.

2.1 Television and Time

Television's early development largely followed the path that radio had paved decades earlier. A few major outposts in key cities begat a network of stations stretching from coast to coast, and the programming itself echoed patterns familiar from the radio — variety shows, mysteries, newscasts. "Much early television programming was radio material with the addition of limited visual elements" (Sterling & Kittross, 2001, p. 302) — and, just as with radio, most programs were broadcast live.

Many of those initial live broadcasts took place during "primetime," a designation still in use today to refer to a particular set of evening hours. Then as now, primetime is the part of the day when the most people are believed to be home to watch television — and when advertisers pay the most money to reach the largest possible audience. Today, primetime remains the commercial heart of the industry and the time of day when the most-watched programs on television premiere their new episodes.

The primetime concept was yet another thing television borrowed from radio. In 1929, a broadcasting industry survey found that most American households had their radios on at night — peaking between 9 p.m. and 10 p.m. and with a sizable audience between 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. Thus, "prime time" came to refer to those hours, the part of the day when most people were listening (Sterling & Kittross, 2001). Television was expected to follow the same patterns, and in the early years of TV, when programming options were slim and broadcasting power limited, stations would come on the air specifically during these evening hours to maximize their reach.

The exact hours of primetime differ by time zone, a relic of technological limitations that restricted the distance that broadcast signals could travel. "During the late 1920s, when the radio networks were being developed, the technology was such that the signals could not be sent across the whole country" (Hamermesh, Myers, & Pocock, 2006, p. 8). So one broadcast was produced live for the Eastern and Central time zones and sent to both simultaneously, even though one time zone was a clock-hour ahead of the other. Then a second broadcast was produced, also live, for the Mountain and Pacific time zones, though they too are one clock-hour apart. These technological limitations are long gone, but the staggering of programs persists, though the Mountain time zone now follows the Central schedule: The primetime window covers the block from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. in the Eastern and Pacific time zones and 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. in Central and Mountain.

From the earliest days of television, the medium's role in everyday life was a subject of heated debate. Broadcasters at first created short segments — 10- and 20-minute bursts of programming — because they were "uncertain as to how long audience attention could be held" (Sterling & Kittross, 2001, p. 303). By the 1960s, shows were starting to look much more like their current format: 30- and 60-minute segments, with shorter slots reserved

largely for comedies and longer slots for dramas, live events, and variety shows. Eventually, programming expanded beyond primetime, with forms such as daytime soap operas and news shows filling out the broadcast clock.

Until relatively recently, television programming followed such a routine schedule that it and radio were often thought to be "'programming' the everyday lives of their audiences" (Hay, 2000, p. 60). Television's signaling of the schedule extended not just to the evening but to the passing of weeks and even seasons. "Soap operas, weather reports and news broadcasts, perhaps above all, provide a framework for the hours, days and weeks of the year" (Silverstone, 1994, p. 15).

2.2 Active Programmers, Passive Viewers?

Partially because of this clockwork schedule, television was initially thought of as a passive medium, where viewers simply leaned back and let entertainment come to them — regardless of the content of the programs. If a choice was made at all, it was to turn on the television; what viewers watched when they got there was secondary (Comstock, 1980). These beliefs were prominent not just among scholars but also those working in the television industry; Gitlin (1983) cites former NBC executive Paul Klein and other prominent executives arguing "that viewers do not care much which shows are plunked in front of them as long as they are, as Klein memorably said once, 'the least objectionable programming'" (p. 61).

Programmers strived to capitalize on viewers' perceived laziness and passivity, launching unproven new shows immediately after highly rated programs (Tiedge & Ksobiech, 1986); "hammocking" a less popular show between two better-viewed series (Pingree et al., 2001); or running a program a few minutes over the traditional break time at the top and bottom of the hour. (Many of these strategies remain in play today.) As the British scholar Raymond Williams discovered while jetlagged and captivated by American TV in a Miami hotel room, extricating oneself from the "flow" of the television schedule could be a challenge: "We can be 'into' something before we have summoned the energy to get out of the chair, and many programmes are made with this situation in mind: the grabbing of attention in the early moments; the reiterated promise of exciting things to come, if we stay" (Williams, 1974/2003, p. 94-95).

The notion of the two-step process of watching television (first, decide to watch television; second, and far less importantly, decide what to watch) isn't without merit or evidence. Viewing routines can persist even once the specific shows are gone: "Once you've persuaded someone to turn on the set on a regular basis, the chances of persuading them to watch whatever show you air in that time slot is higher" (Rosenstein & Grant, 1997, p. 32). And a relatively recent study of viewing among college students found that unpopular programs "hammocked" between more successful series were still watched more than programs airing without the support of popular shows (Pingree et al., 2001).

But starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, new technologies and their adoption and use by television viewers began to point to a different model of television viewing — one with an active audience consciously choosing what to put on the screen.

2.3 Remote Control, Viewer Control

One now-familiar piece of technology was likely missing from Williams' experience of American television flow: the remote control. As Uricchio (2004) notes, the remote control — and its capability for viewers to change the channel or even turn off the television completely without having to walk across the room to do it — brought "a shift away from the programming-based notion of flow that Williams documented, to a viewer-centered notion" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 239).

It seems ironic that one of the first remote controls was dubbed the Lazy Bones; in fact, the remote gets credit for empowering viewers to take command of their own television experiences (Southerton, 2003). The remote control "was a 'subversive technology,' demonstrating from its start that viewers had the ability to disrupt program flow and the economic flow so central to commercial television. At the same time, a new conception of viewer-dominated flow took hold" (Uricchio, 2004, p. 243).

This viewer-centric conception of programming only expanded with the introduction of the videocassette recorder (VCR) to the consumer market in the early '80s. Soon, viewers were "time-shifting" programs, recording them for replay later at a time that fit better into their lives. And perhaps even more disturbing to an industry premised on a steady, inertia-fueled audience, the remote control and VCR together allowed viewers to "zap out scheduled commercials to roam freely through channel and program options" (Fransecky, 1984, p. 98). Viewers could now more easily access specific television content, rather than watch whatever was on merely because they were available to watch (Webster & Wakschlag, 1983).

The remote control and the VCR signaled the start of an era of increasing viewing options — both in terms of the program content available and the technology that allowed viewers to access it. Cable television, though available starting in the 1950s, began to hit the mainstream in the 1980s; by 1990 it was in 50 million American households, presenting niche content for specific, targeted audiences — young people, news junkies, sports fans. And in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a barrage of technologies and programming choices hit the market: the digital video recorder (DVR) took the VCR several steps further and allowed simultaneous recording of multiple programs and the pausing of live television; DVDs greatly increased the number of television shows available for purchase and later viewing; and downloading and streaming shows — whether legal or illegal — encouraged "choice, collection, and organization" of television programs "rather than the passive consumption of content" (Barkhuus & Brown, 2009, p. 3).

It's important to note that while technology often gets the credit for enabling an active

viewing experience, such a view discounts the very human desire for intentional, considered viewing choices. As Adams (2000) found, what may appear to be routine, habitual viewing is in fact often a purposeful decision: "When participants said they viewed out of habit, it turned out that the majority meant they already had a strong mental image of the schedule. … They actually knew what was supposed to be on and usually tuned in with a specific program in mind" (p. 85).

2.4 The Death of the Schedule?

These days, Americans are watching more television than ever. According to a Nielsen report, by the end of 2010 the average American was watching more than 154 hours of television per month (Nielsen, 2011). But viewing is increasingly fragmented, taking place at more times, over more channels, and on more screens. Another Nielsen report found that 40 percent of American homes now have access to a DVR (Nielsen, 2010); in those homes, viewers use it to watch almost 26 monthly hours of TV. And there's a whole world of viewing that happens outside of the traditional television and DVR setting; while no good measurement system exists for streaming video, both because of the vast number of sources and because there are not yet any accepted metrics for what counts as "watching," those options undoubtedly have some impact on the amount of television content viewed. "While not a perfect analogy, TV viewing is becoming more like reading magazines — people consume TV, like magazine articles, at different times and in different places" (Einav & Carey, 2009, p. 128).

These myriad modes of viewing challenge the notion of the television schedule as a regulator of time. With DVRs, "a number of clocks can run parallel … considerably strengthening the media consumer's control over time schedules" (Southerton, 2003, p. 9). With the ability to record numerous shows, the viewer can more easily "take over control of the broadcast schedule and become the master of his own time" (Van den Broeck et al., 2007, p. 23). And an increase in options for streaming television online or purchasing shows a la carte has led some viewers to cancel their subscriptions to cable television altogether; while just a small percentage of the overall television-watching population, half a million households were found to have cut cable by late 2009 (Cheng, 2010).

And this potential loss of mass programming has threatened television's role as a cultural catalyst as well. Traditionally, television content could be experienced individually at home but shared around the watercooler the next day (Simons, 2009); in a world where people can watch many different shows at many different times, the path to a watercooler conversation is less clear. Some have posited that increasing division of the viewing audience and individual control over the viewing schedule could completely kill conversations about television, which rely on people watching the same programs at the same time (B. Lee & R. S. Lee, 1995). Others, though, say this concern is overblown; fan communities have long been connecting online (Baym, 1997; Costello & Moore, 2007; Jenkins, 2006), and that remains a place where viewers can talk together about shows they've collectively seen. Still, audience fragmentation has changed the ubiquity of specific

shows; while Nielsen ratings can't capture all viewing, as discussed earlier in this section, today's top-rated prime-time television show (*American Idol*) would have ranked no higher than fourth in 1980.

3. About This Study

From a technological perspective, it's undeniably true that viewers can access television content in more ways than ever. "At a basic level, the number of ways people can receive and watch television programs has expanded from over-the-air broadcast, cable, satellite and purchased or rented DVDs to all of those plus DVRs, telephone company video systems, online video and portable video devices such as iPods" (Einav & Carey, 2009, p. 121). But does this necessarily mean that television's roles in daily scheduling and social interactions will fall away? This study was constructed to explore that question.

3.1 Overview

Sixteen participants — representing 15 households (two are roommates) — were interviewed for between 45 and 90 minutes each about their television viewing habits and technologies, their conversations about television shows in person or online, and a variety of other topics about television viewing. They were also asked to reflect on moments when their viewing practices were altered, whether because of changes in technology, lifestyle, or any other factors.

The focus of the questions was on primetime programming, as the primetime shows remain the most-watched shows on television (with the occasional exception of sports) and the primetime period is where networks and advertisers focus the bulk of their attention. Daytime and late-night programming, such as talk shows or soap operas, were included in the questioning if participants raised the topic, but that happened only a handful of times during the 16 interviews. Likewise, sports broadcasts were occasionally mentioned by participants but were otherwise not a key area of inquiry.

Interviews with participants within the San Francisco Bay Area took place in person, most often in a public place such as a coffee shop but occasionally also in the participant's home or my home, depending on the participants' preferences and on mutual convenience. Interviews with participants living outside the San Francisco Bay Area were conducted via Skype.

Participants were asked to keep an optional journal of their television viewing for a week, recording what they watched, when and how they watched it, and any interactions that took place around viewing. A total of 12 participants kept journals, nine on paper and three in digital format. Whenever possible, participants were re-interviewed after I received the completed journals, and elicitation techniques were used to draw out stories about specific television-watching experiences and attitudes that might not have been addressed in the

original interview (Carter & Mankoff, 2005). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and analysis of those transcripts was conducted using grounded theory (J. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & L. H. Lofland, 1971).

3.2 Recruiting Method

I constructed a webpage[1] with some basic background about the project and a form that potential participants could use to volunteer for the study. (No compensation was offered for participating, though I did purchase coffee or a snack for participants if the opportunity arose to do so.) Those filling out the form were asked to provide optional information such as their geographic location, the approximate number of shows they considered themselves fans of, and how often they typically talked about television either online or offline. The only required fields were those for a name and contact information, and the rest were left optional; in practice, though, everyone who filled out any part of the survey answered all of the questions, whether optional or required. This allowed for some initial screening of participants.

Participant recruiting proceeded along two parallel paths. I posted a link to the webpage on my own Twitter and Facebook profiles and asked my friends and followers to pass on the information to anyone they thought might be interested in the study. I routinely interact with a number of television critics and bloggers because of my past professional involvement in the television field, and a handful of them saw the link and retweeted or posted it to their own friends and followers. I also posted the link in the Volunteers section of the San Francisco Bay Area edition of Craigslist and in a general discussion forum thread — TV Potluck — hosted by the popular television-focused website Television Without Pity.

At the same time, I carried out a modified snowball sampling method, asking friends and acquaintances who had previously expressed interest in talking about television to recommend potential participants in their own wider circles.

A total of 31 people filled out the online survey. After screening out those who lived outside of the United States, who didn't respond to a follow-up e-mail, or whose schedules turned out to be incompatible with the time frame of the study, nine of those 31 are represented in my final pool. The other seven participants entered the study through the snowball sampling method.

3.3 Participant Demographics

Practical considerations prevented me from achieving a geographic balance among my participants, but I was able to speak to people both within and outside of the San Francisco Bay Area. Nine of the participants live within 50 miles of San Francisco; the other seven live in a variety of places around the country, including Ithaca, NY; the Washington, DC, metro area; and Austin, Texas.

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[1] http://personalprimetime.onsugar.com

Crucially for dealing with issues of television scheduling choices, my participants represent the Eastern, Central, and Pacific time zones. (No participants in the Mountain time zone were recruited, though one Pacific time zone participant views several shows on the Mountain schedule due to a quirk in her cable system.)

My youngest participants were in their early 20s and my oldest in their mid-40s. A full list of interview participants, their location of residence, and whether they have live television service (either through broadcast channels, cable, or satellite) can be seen in Figure 1. For the purposes of this report, all participants' names have been changed.

Participant Name	Age Group	Location	Access to Live TV?
Clara	30-34	San Francisco, CA	No
Sabrina	30-34	Seattle, WA	No
Charlie	20-24	Ithaca, NY	Yes (cable)
Christine	20-24	Austin, TX	Yes (DirecTV)
Lila	25-29	Madison, WI	Yes (cable)
Susan	40-44	San Francisco, CA	Yes (broadcast)
Elaine	40-44	Washington, DC	Yes (cable)
Erin	35-39	Oakland, CA	Yes (cable)
Victor	30-34	San Francisco, CA	Yes (cable)
Melissa	25-29	San Francisco, CA	Yes (cable)
Rosa	35-39	Sunnyvale, CA	Yes (DirecTV)
Alex	25-29	Berkeley, CA	No
April	30-34	San Francisco, CA	Yes (DirecTV)
Leslie	30-34	Antioch, CA	Yes (cable)
Noelle	30-34	Seattle, WA	No
Cassie	20-24	Syracuse, NY	Yes (cable)

Fig. 1: List of Participants

3.4 Limitations

A couple of characteristics of my participant pool deserve note. First, my participants fall within a relatively narrow demographic range: early 20s to mid-40s. It's possible that younger or older viewers could have viewing practices not represented by any of the participants in my pool, given the rapid changes in television-related technologies in the past 30 years (and especially the past decade). However, the demographic I recruited resonates strongly in the television industry: the 18-49 demographic is the most commercially desirable demographic, and shows with high numbers of viewers in that demographic draw the highest advertising rates (Storey, 2009), as viewers in that range are believed to have the greatest purchasing power and influence.

Second, none of my participants had children living at home, and while I did not purposely exclude parents while I was recruiting participants, I also did not explicitly seek to add them. Parenting introduces potential constraints on the time available for television viewing and the negotiations of which shows to watch that wouldn't be considerations for the non-parents I interviewed; these issues alone could likely be the subject of their own study.

4. Relationships to Television: Technologies, Schedules, Shows

Taken as a whole, the 16 participants exhibit a tremendous variety of viewing behavior — from watching all of their chosen shows live via over-the-air broadcasts to not having seen live television in several years and streaming all of their television content through a service such as Netflix. My participant pool includes cable-cutters, those supposedly elusive viewers (Kafka, 2010) who choose to cancel their paid television subscriptions in favor of streaming and/or downloaded content. And it even includes cable-reconnectors, those who tried life without cable and opted to reinstate the service.

Despite their differences, my participants had one thing in common: Decisions about what television shows to watch when involved balancing a number of different factors, often with different weights assigned for different shows. Section 5 of this paper will discuss those factors and the way my participants saw them playing out in their everyday lives.

First, though, it's worth exploring the range of attitudes exhibited with regard to the highest-level questions of this study: whether the television schedule as planned by television networks has any relevance; what types of technology the participants use to access and discuss television; and how they define what television is.

4.1 Technology

Twelve of my participants have some kind of live television access at home (DirecTV, a local provider such as AT&T or Xfinity, or an antenna for the broadcast networks). Of them, nine have a premium cable or satellite package and a DVR; two (roommates representing one household) have the most basic cable package available from their provider and no DVR; and one has only broadcast access and no DVR. The other four have no live television access and watch all of their television content via streaming services or downloading.

Compared to the viewing population as a whole, people in my participant pool are more likely to have a DVR: 56% of my participants vs. 42.2% of viewers nationwide (Seidman, 2011). And they are also more likely to have cut cable service in favor of online-only access: 25% of my participants have done so, as opposed to an estimated 7% of viewers nationwide (Cheng, 2010). One participant actually canceled her cable service during the course of the study.

All 16 of my participants had at some point accessed some form of television content online, and the vast majority do so at least semi-regularly (though not always happily, the reasons for which are discussed later in this paper). At least eight of the 16 have some type of device that allows them to display streaming or downloaded content on their television screens rather than on their laptops only; those devices are not always television-specific (for example, several participants stream Netflix to their televisions through a video game console).

4.2 Schedule Awareness

For some of these 16 viewers, the broadcast schedule retains little relevance. For others, it remains a guiding force.

Merely owning a DVR does not necessarily mean that all programming is time-shifted. Several participants who have DVRs also watch a number of television shows live; sometimes, shows are recorded because they conflict with another program in the same time slot that is being watched live. Furthermore, a handful of participants with DVRs spoke of watching a show just slightly delayed — enough to be able to skip commercials, but not so much that it was moved to a thoroughly different spot on the viewing schedule. That said, many programs *were* shifted to different time slots or allowed to build up on the DVR's hard drive to be watched in a marathon viewing session later.

Some of the viewers who rarely watch television live still maintain a working knowledge of the broadcast schedule. In fact, two participants who watch the majority of their television through streaming services said their awareness of the schedule was actually enhanced by not having access to broadcast television. In one case, the participant knew the schedules of her favorite shows because she kept track of the first time she could look for them online; in the other, the participant knew what nights her favorite shows aired precisely because she usually had to wait a day to watch them (e.g. on Wednesday, she knew she could check Hulu for Tuesday night's shows). On the other hand, two other participants without access to live television declared that they had absolutely no idea when any shows aired on TV.

The majority, though, fell somewhere in the middle, taking the broadcast schedule as a starting point and arranging things from there. Several participants spoke of the schedule as a habit or an ingrained reference point for how television was meant to work. For example, one participant said she had been "trained" to expect comedy shows to air on Thursdays because of NBC's long-running "must-see TV" comedy block; another said he'd likely give less credence to a show that aired on Friday nights because he knows that means the networks don't expect that it could draw a large audience.

An entire mini-study of its own could probably be constructed around just the ideas of "watching live" and "being caught up" on shows. The specific definitions again varied widely, but watching a show "live" most often meant either watching it actually live as it aired with no time-shifting technology involved or watching it on a small delay to fast-

forward through commercials. People typically considered themselves "caught up" on a show if they watched it within a week of its first broadcast, before the next new episode had aired.

4.3 What Television Is

The idea of the passive viewer coming home, sitting down on the couch, and turning the television on to any channel seemed out of step with how these participants view television. For the most part, they want to watch *a particular show*, not "watch television" generally.

This is maybe where the 16 participants as a whole break most dramatically from a previous conception of television viewing. Williams (1974/2003) wrote that we talk of "watching television" to mean something general rather than something specific — that even though television programs are discrete units, "watching television" was the broader act of turning the set on and watching whatever happened to float by. Very few instances of "watching television" by that definition cropped up in this study.

On the whole, these participants' attachment to television was about specific shows, not about the medium as a whole. And that was the case regardless of where the content was actually viewed (e.g. regardless of whether the participants owned a physical television set). Very little channel-surfing behavior was reported in interviews or captured in the diaries; what was reported was largely tied to a specific purpose (e.g. finding a reality show marathon for "vegging out" on the weekend). Even television watched for the sake of watching television had another motivation behind it (e.g. providing a source of noise in the house when things felt too quiet; being background entertainment during cooking or cleaning). This was true for viewers who had access to live television, but it was even more so for those who did not; for them, every decision to watch television was premised on the idea of watching a specific show.

Additionally, it's notable that across the board, television was television no matter where it was watched. That is to say, watching *Grey's Anatomy* on a laptop or an iPad instead of a stationary, hearth-like appliance didn't make it any less of an instance of television. According to Gibs (2009), this attitude is unusual: Most Americans, he writes, tend to view "television" as a coupling between programming and appliance. Gibs posits that only early adopters "have decoupled TV content from the physical object that is the TV. That they keep the TV off most of the time, rather than treating it as a constant companion, suggests that TV is only valuable for the content that comes through it …" (p. 20). By that definition, all 16 of my participants would fall into Gibs' early adopter category.

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt my participants' definition of television as any show that ever airs on a broadcast network or cable channel — regardless of whether it is accessed on a network or channel or viewed on a television set. The television set (the

traditional "electronic hearth") is a separate and somewhat secondary technology, and my participants' relationships to it will be discussed in a later section.

5. Key Influences on Viewing Choices

As the above findings reveal, there is certainly no one model for watching television today. As participant Noelle put it, television viewing is "like the wild west" right now — and no particular option, site, or method is the clear winner either among my 16 participants or among the wider public. But across the 16 interviews, a few key factors emerged as influences on the decisions of what to watch when.

The first of these influences is dictated by powers beyond the viewers' control. Though new technologies have provided new freedoms for watching various shows, that freedom is far from absolute. Rights and restrictions on whether particular shows can be watched in particular formats at particular times on particular technology platforms — imposed either by the television industry or the capabilities of the technologies themselves — exert some measure of control on viewing. The specifics of those regulations are often messy, and viewers sometimes try to subvert the system to watch shows the way they want them — or even drop shows from their schedule when navigating through rights issues becomes too onerous.

The other factors, though, involve personal choices to customize the viewing experience made within the limits of the technologies. These types of influences include online and face-to-face interactions around particular shows, mood and personal schedule, and what kind of experience of "watching television" is desired at a given time.

5.1 Rights and Restrictions

Just as the remote control was once given the credit for making television viewing active, the large and growing number of technologies for viewing television today — from DVD to DVR to OnDemand to Hulu and beyond — are often credited with turning television into a "whatever, whenever, wherever" medium (Jensen, 2005; Simons, 2009). And indeed, for many of my 16 participants, the various means of accessing television content have given them more control over what they watch when: DVRs allow viewers to watch shows at times other than when televisions schedulers decide they should be seen; DVDs and streaming services provide avenues to catch up with shows that aren't currently airing on broadcast or cable; and iPads and other portable players mean shows can come along for a long trip or a weekend at a friend's house.

That said, the reality of what can be watched where and when is complicated by limitations of technologies and restrictions on program availability dictated by networks, studios, and other content distributors.

5.1.1 Restrictions and Frustrations

Because of Hollywood contracts, distribution structures, and compensation calculations that were largely designed for a world where all viewers watched shows at the same time and on the same technology — and because advertising and payments simply work differently on, for example, live TV, Hulu, and iTunes — not all shows are available in all formats and on all devices, at least for viewers who strive to watch content legally. Content providers choose how open they want to be with access to their shows and what kind of compensation they want for making programming available. Furthermore, specific technologies have their own limitations — e.g. Apple's mobile devices not displaying Flash video. Viewers themselves, then, must keep track of which shows are available where and how — not to mention decide if the available methods are ones they're willing to use and/or pay for.

To mention just a few examples raised by my 16 participants: CBS shows that are free online via a web browser on a computer can't be viewed on an iPad because the CBS website uses Flash; Bravo makes single episodes of some shows available for free on Hulu but doesn't make it clear whether more will ever appear; and across the board, episodes are only available online for a limited time, sometimes shocking viewers when they disappear without warning — as with the outcry when Starz pulled streaming episodes of *Party Down* from Netflix (Ryan, 2010).

"*House* was the most annoying example" Charlie said. The show airs on Fox, but it's produced by an NBC-owned studio, and for a week after its first airing, the cable channel USA has the exclusive right to replay it. The episode isn't posted online for free until the following week, either on Hulu or on Fox's own site, and so Charlie had to wait, finding himself "really getting behind."

Skeptics may take issue with stories like these. After all, every episode of *House* is technically available with less than a week's delay for purchase on services such as iTunes or Amazon. And someone like Charlie, who has both cable and a DVR, could choose to watch it live or at least record it during the first airing on Fox.

But Charlie watches other shows at the same time as *House*, and his DVR doesn't have the capacity to record *House* too. And since Charlie's already paying for cable and a DVR, he's reluctant to commit additional money for a single episode of a single show. True, it may sound like Charlie's asking to have his cake and eat it too, to skip the first airing of a show he doesn't love enough to watch live and get it online for free later. But that's the point: If television truly could be watched whenever and wherever Charlie desired, he'd be able to do exactly that.

Many other participants had stories like Charlie's: trying to access some particular show in a way they believed they were entitled to see it, failing, and growing frustrated with the current state of TV access. And while those who create and distribute television content may hope that viewers would choose solutions such as buying a higher tier of cable, adding

DVR service, or paying for a single episode or online season pass from a paid download site, among my 16 viewers there were actually two much more common solutions: downloading episodes illegally (or streaming them quasi-legally), or dropping the show from their lineup.

5.1.2 Solving the Problem, I: Solutions and Workarounds

For Charlie, waiting a week for *House* wasn't feasible in his schedule, nor was replacing one of the other shows in his lineup with it. So he went a different direction: SurfTheChannel.com. SurfTheChannel is a site that allows users to search for and post links to online video — often recordings of TV shows hosted on other, equally quasi-legal sites. (SurfTheChannel itself purports to facilitate search only and have no knowledge or control over what members of its community post; the site claims safe harbor under section 512 of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, and its policies state that it will remove any link upon complaint of the copyright holder, but it's unclear how often that actually happens.)

Another site that participants turn to is Megavideo, which hosts videos uploaded by its users. (Though its hosting of videos means it operates differently than SurfTheChannel, the two sites' legal policies are similar: Also claiming safe harbor under the DMCA, Megavideo disavows any knowledge of videos posted by its users unless a copyright-holder files a complaint.) Sabrina has used the site for years to watch shows on Showtime and other premium networks to which she doesn't subscribe; most recently, she used it to watch the final season of *Friday Night Lights*, one of her favorite series, which aired exclusively on DirecTV months before re-airing on NBC. In the case of *Friday Night Lights*, the episodes that aired on DirecTV weren't available any other way, even for purchase on iTunes or Amazon; viewers without the satellite service who wanted to watch legally needed to wait until the show's DVD release and re-airing on NBC. But asking people to wait for those means may be a tall order when the show is readily available online for viewers like Sabrina who know where to look. "It's unfortunate that it's only on DirecTV — that's such a weird format," Sabrina said. "It's forced me to only watch it illegally."

For Christine, finding *Top Chef* online in a way that worked with her schedule meant looking no further than YouTube. She doesn't want to wait till the show's regular airing at 10 p.m. to watch because she has to be up early for work; she also doesn't want to wait a full day to watch a recorded episode on her DVR because she's likely to stumble upon the name of the person eliminated from the competition at the end of the episode online. (Spoiler avoidance is another factor that influences decisions about when to watch a show; that issue is addressed further in section 5.2.3.) She tried to find the series legally, and for two episodes, Hulu was her answer. But when additional episodes weren't posted on either Hulu or Bravo's own website, she searched on YouTube and found a channel that posts the most recent episode. She's never had a problem watching them before they get taken down.

Sabrina, who's on the west coast, noted one key benefit of Megavideo: She doesn't have to abide by the delay imposed by time zones. "I know that whoever's doing this stuff is

probably recording real-time," she said. "So if they're on the east coast, then *Gossip Girl*'s already online before 9 p.m." Leslie, also a west coast resident, employs a similar strategy to watch her favorite show, *Supernatural*, live online during its east coast airing.

Across these anecdotes, illegal and quasi-legal methods of viewing weren't anyone's first choice. If there were a legal way for viewers to see the episodes when and how they wanted them, they'd likely have used it. But some people won't wait or pay twice (once for cable, once for a pricey copy of an individual episode they could have seen on the TV service they're already paying for) when other means are available faster or for free.

5.1.3 Solving the Problem, II: Quitting the Show

Dropping a series rather than paying for it or waiting to watch it at an undesirable time was another frequent response to imposed restrictions. Especially if a show isn't deemed "worth it" (a concept that will be discussed further in section 5.3.3), viewers often choose not to work that hard to access it.

Clara, who doesn't have cable, used to watch lots of shows on Hulu. But one day, she stopped having access to key episodes of a few of her favorites, including *Grey's Anatomy*. When she looked into the reason, she learned that those episodes were only available on Hulu Plus, Hulu's $7.99-per-month premium service. Presumably networks hope Clara would choose to subscribe to Hulu Plus to keep watching. Instead, though, Clara just dropped *Grey's Anatomy* from her viewing schedule and switched to watching series she was already paying for through Netflix Instant Streaming.

During a time when Charlie didn't have DVR access with his college-provided cable setup, some of his series "went by the wayside," he said. "I had been keeping up with *Grey's Anatomy* and *Private Practice*, but I dropped both of them, just because I didn't even care enough to go and seek them out on Hulu when I wasn't getting them on a DVR."

For Melissa, not having a DVR means often struggling to watch *The Good Wife*, a show she'd prefer to follow regularly. As a teacher, she's usually asleep by the show's 10 p.m. air time; as an iPad owner, she can't access CBS's online streaming site because it uses Flash. So, she either has to pull out her old laptop specifically to watch the show or purchase episodes online somewhere. Instead, she often chooses not to bother: "I'd say I watch *The Good Wife* much less frequently because it's harder for me to watch."

Rosa and her husband also dropped a show because their DVR could only record two shows in a time slot; rather than seek out the third one online somewhere, they just stopped watching. Christine had a friend stop following *The Big Bang Theory* because it hadn't been posted on CBS's streaming site; she recounted the joy she'd felt telling her friend that the episodes were finally available online. And for Cassie, when *90210* started airing at the same time as two other shows she was already watching, she realized she could follow the show to Hulu — "or I could just stop watching it. And I just stopped watching it."

5.2 Social Factors

Rights issues and technology restrictions were an annoyance that viewers tried to subvert in order to watch the shows they wanted to watch in the ways and at the times they wanted to watch them. But they were far from the only influences on personal viewing schedules. The remaining factors I will discuss are ones viewers choose to pay attention to or work within, as opposed to the rights and technology barriers imposed by business forces.

One of the most frequently mentioned of these chosen influences was the social world in which television exists. A huge determinant of which shows were highest priority in my participants' lives was what type of social activity (if any) they experienced or sought out around a given show.

Traditional "watercooler" chatter, the proverbial workplace conversations where colleagues turned the previous night's happenings on popular shows into common ground for small talk, may in fact be declining; based on these 16 interviews, the perception that fewer people are watching the same shows at the same times and initiating conversation about those shows the next day appears to have some truth to it.

But that hardly means that conversations about television are dying out. On the contrary, individual groups of friends, colleagues, and even strangers serve as major influences on viewing. Among my 16 participants, talking about television shows can involve physically gathering in a living room to view a show, turning to online forums to pick apart plot points after an airing, or even live-blogging or live-tweeting the action with thousands of other fans. Those relationships are thriving — and they exert a strong influence over individual television viewing schedules.

5.1.1. Watching Together

The actual, physical experience of watching television can be a highly social one, especially for participants living with spouses or roommates. Control over the household television set is a process of negotiation — of time, of program, and of what other activities can happen while the TV is on.

This has perhaps always been the case, and even in recent studies, "in-the-moment acts of choosing what to watch on TV were critically shaped by anticipation of collective experiences of watching to come in the future" — both within and across households (Irani, Jeffries, & Knight, 2009, p. 4).

Knowing which shows one party in a household watches — or doesn't — often influences what comes on the screen at any given time. Noelle, who is married, said she mentally divides her television shows into "shared programs" and "alone programs." "Shared programs" are those she and her husband — who generally watches less TV than she does

— will watch together. “One of the rules of that — an implicit rule — is that I won’t watch [a shared program] by myself,” she said. “I’ll wait for when we can both watch it together.”

Social influences can work the other way, too, pushing a viewer to schedule an “alone show” when his or her typical TV-viewing partner is out of the house. “On certain nights [my husband]’s not home,” Erin said, “so I can watch *Glee*, which he can’t stand.”

A few of my participants with roommates noted that they’d ended up watching shows that weren’t initially on their radar purely because a roommate was watching it. April started to follow *American Idol* because one of her roommates is a regular viewer, and Victor called his roommate his “TV-watching buddy”: “I’ll watch *Glee* with Melissa, but I wouldn’t if it were just me.” (This effect doesn’t just cover new shows; Alex and his roommate frequently choose an older show on DVD to watch together.)

Sometimes, watching with others extends beyond the walls of a single household into a viewing party with larger groups of friends. But these aren’t everyday occurrences — and the participants who throw and attend such parties treat them as something special. When Victor and Melissa host television-related parties at their apartment, they target big events such as the Oscars, the Super Bowl, or a season finale or premiere of a favorite show. As Victor put it, “We wouldn't really do it for a new episode of anything ordinary. A new episode of *The Office* doesn't really warrant having a TV night.” For Clara, who has watched shows such as *Battlestar Galactica* with groups of friends, successful group-viewing shows have to deliver a lot of conversational fodder: “The sillier shows … it doesn’t seem worth it to get together and watch it, maybe because there’s not as much discussion about it afterwards,” she said. “It’s just like, ‘Oh, that was funny. Ha-ha.’”

Social viewing doesn’t just happen in person. It can take place thousands of miles apart, with friends and strangers meeting up online or over the phone to discuss a show as they watch it. Again, this desire for interacting during a show is not new; there are plenty of stories from decades ago of viewers watching the same show together while waiting on the telephone, discussing the plot during commercials. But some of my 16 participants are taking advantage of emerging technologies to define new social experiences around television — experiences that help to determine which shows get watched when.

Christine used to watch television with a handful of friends who now live in different cities. So, as often as possible — typically at least once a week — she and a friend will sign into Google Chat or Skype and type comments to each other while they watch a show. Sometimes they choose a current show, such as *Chuck*; other times, it’s a show they’re re-watching on DVD or online, such as *Veronica Mars*. Either way, though, they’ll try to make sure their viewing syncs up. “We try to make sure the episode starts at the same time,” she said, “so when someone has a reaction they type it in right away and you know what they’re reacting to.”

5.2.2 The Watercooler and the Twittercooler

Outside of individual groups of friends, the proverbial “watercooler effect” — the idea of everyone in the office or at school talking about a show the day after it airs — seemed to be fading from my participants’ lives. There were a few exceptions for specific shows: Many people cited *Lost* as the last show that everyone around them seemed to be discussing, and *Glee* and *Mad Men* got mention as shows with currency in certain circles. But overall, this is the area of the social landscape of television where the ability for people to watch different shows at different times seems to be having the greatest impact.

In person, trying to discuss a show with someone whose viewing habits are unknown can lead to a string of “I haven’t seen it yet!”s and “It’s still on my DVR”s. These days, discussions around television are often postponed until all parties in the discussion are ready to talk about a given show (Irani et al., 2009). This phenomenon has given rise to its own vocabulary: “When life interrupted participants’ weekly routines and they had a means to record the program, they spoke of ‘catching up’ or ‘being behind’ on a particular show” (Irani et al., 2009, p. 4), a relationship with television that was relatively rare even a few years ago.

That language — and, more important, that feeling — was apparent in many of my interviews. For Rosa, talking about television with her friends is less fun now that “they’re always behind.” But knowing that she will likely want to watch a certain show can have an influence on their viewing: “I have a couple of friends that do watch *Gossip Girl*, and they're usually a couple of days behind, and before they see me they try to — ‘Oh, gosh, I meant to watch it before I saw you so we could talk about it!’”

April has experienced that pressure from the other side. She used to work in the television industry, and when she visits her out-of-town friends who are still deeply connected to Hollywood, she starts to view television like it’s homework to prepare for their conversations. “I went to New York and [my friends] were talking up the wazoo about *Real Housewives* and how they love Andy Cohen and all that stuff,” she said, “and I was like, ‘I need to go home and catch up on [*The Real Housewives of] Beverly Hills* so I can talk to my friends about it.’” She’s even used the live satellite television on Virgin America flights to quickly cram a few episodes of a show she knows is likely to be a topic of conversation during a visit. This feeling is consistent with one observed by Barkhuus and Brown (2009), who discovered that while “most of the participants found great satisfaction in watching television to socialize afterwards, some found it stressful at some times” (Barkhuus & Brown, 2009)

At least since the rise of Usenet, the internet has provided spaces for discussion of television shows, with forums serving as “a true interpretive community, where people discuss their delight and disgust at plotlines, dialogue, and character developments” (Costello & Moore, 2007, p. 135). In recent years, as people’s viewing schedules began to diverge, it’s also become a place to seek out other viewers who have definitely seen a show. At first, such discussion spaces operated much like the traditional watercooler, but on an

accelerated timeline: Viewers would head online to dissect shows within minutes after their airing, rather than wait until the next day.

That model persists for some of my participants. The idea of going online as soon as a show ends to connect with others doing the same is key for Lila's experience of watching TV, and it's a big part of the reason why she watches most of her shows close to live: "[Liveness] is not what I'm feeling during the show. It's what I feel after the show when I go online and see people commenting after the episode." Similarly, the internet is the first place Elaine turns when she's done with a program: "Within seconds of the show ending, we'll be talking about it."

For some participants, online conversations now happen even sooner — often in real time. Charlie is among the handful of participants who will "live-tweet" a show, posting frequent play-by-play updates throughout an airing. (Live-tweeting, dubbed "the Twittercooler" by Time magazine (Poniewozik, 2010), has taken hold for some shows more than others. It's such a major phenomenon for *Glee*, for example, that Fox has started posting the show's Twitter "hashtag" — #glee, which enables Twitter users to easily gather all the posts about the show in one place — in the corner of the screen during the show.) Cassie does the same for *So You Think You Can Dance* as well as for some shows, including *Cougar Town*, that she feels don't get the attention they deserve; she hopes her tweets can help others discover them. Christine, meanwhile, said she'll tweet sparingly during a show to avoid taking over her friends' feeds, but she frequently reads others' live posts. (Not every participant who uses Twitter embraces live-tweeting: "Other people's stream-of-consciousness is not that interesting," Susan said; she prefers to discuss television in person with a friend each Friday.)

Posting about a show online — whether live-tweeting or reacting in forums later — can help develop relationships that then reinforce a desire to keep up with a particular show. The more Susan watches a show, the more she's likely to talk about it. And Leslie, who's part of an active *Supernatural* fan community online, sometimes will have simultaneous conversations happening on her phone and laptop during an episode of *Supernatural* and rarely misses an airing. "I have met so many people because of the show, and I actually went to my first [*Supernatural*] convention because of Twitter," she said. And meeting others who were as into the show as she was, she said, "made me love it more."

Indeed, there's a significant overlap among my participants who watch their TV live or very close to live and those who use Twitter and other social media to talk about it. "One of the best things about Twitter, at least for me, is it gives me an outlet to talk to other people who share a common interest," Charlie said.

5.2.3 A Note About Spoilers

All television talk, but especially the rapid-fire online conversations that happen close to real-time, carries with it the danger of spoilers. After all, Twitter isn't only used to talk

about television — and checking one's account without having seen a show raises the possibility of inadvertently learning something major about a show they were saving. That's one reason the more active Twitter users tend to do more of their viewing in close to real time.

This theme arose in many of my interviews. "I don't like to go too long [before watching] because otherwise I'll see spoilers online," Cassie said. "If I have the chance to watch [a show] before someone tweets, I will definitely do that," Elaine said. Leslie, who lives on the west coast, has found east coast feeds of major episodes of her favorite shows online before they air on television at her home because otherwise, "if I get on Twitter I'm going to see something I don't want to see."

And for the Twitter users, restraint in their own posts is a tough line to walk. "I probably ruin [*American Idol*] for people who don't have east coast feeds on the west coast who are following me," Charlie said. Elaine, who does a podcast about *Chuck*, feels an extra responsibility because viewers who follow her Twitter account want to talk about the show right away, but she knows that other viewers — especially those in other time zones — might not have seen the show yet. She tries to reply to people directly, rather than publicly, or just wait a day to comment. "There's part of you that really doesn't want to wait till the next day — you want to talk about it right then," she said. "But you have to just try to stifle it or people get mad at you."

Several participants mentioned that the threat of spoilers could move a show up in their viewing lineup. Among my participants who watch shows where contestants get eliminated, such as *Top Chef* — and especially those where viewers can vote and have some control over the show's outcome, such as *American Idol* — get watched more quickly because the results are more likely to show up online, negating the point of watching. "You can avoid it for an hour or two," Rosa said, but not for days. "I won't wait on football or stuff like that, or who got voted off [some show]. I'll have to watch it that night at some point."

Typically, these decisions are not universal but show-by-show: "I don't really care if *Glee* gets spoiled," Cassie said. "But if there's something that gets spoiled for *Pretty Little Liars* or *The Vampire Diaries*, I'd probably be upset, because those are the kind of shows where the suspense is kind of the reason you watch it." In general, these experiences align with previous studies that have found that "sports programs and news related programs have to be watched live, or at least the same day" (Simons, 2009, p. 221).

And if a show can't be watched live? There are only a couple of solutions, my participants said: stay offline or scroll fast. "A lot of people I follow will be nice, and they'll say, 'Don't click through; there's a spoiler,' or they'll be like, 'SPOILERS' in big bold letters at the top of the column," Cassie said. "I try to look out for them and just scroll quickly." Rosa, on the other hand, typically opts to stay away completely: "You can't expect people not to talk about things."

5.3 The Television Experience

The final set of factors is the most personal of all, having to do with individual motivations and viewing preferences — their relationships both to television shows and to television as a medium and a physical technology. These factors help viewers decide when to watch shows based on their moods and potential levels of engagement with the content, the screen on which the show can most easily be displayed, and their relationship to the show itself.

5.3.1 The Persistence of the Television Set

Online access has been a major step toward making television available whenever and wherever. However, for the majority of my 16 participants, that mode of viewing is a stopgap or a security measure against other methods failing — not a preference. Online streaming to a computer screen was far from beloved, suggesting the persistent appeal of watching television programs on a television screen.

A television can more easily be social than a computer screen can; Victor cited his large television as the reason he often hosts viewing parties at his apartment. It can be watched from a greater distance, lounging on a couch. The video quality is better and sharper. And it's a significant change from the computer screen many of my participants look at most of the day for work and school. "The computer is for work, and the TV is for relaxing," Alex said, noting he prefers "mentally keeping them separate." These findings are consistent with other, earlier studies that found that even though viewers can choose on which screen to watch television content, the television set won the battle most often (Einav & Carey, 2009; Simons, 2009).

For Cassie, who didn't have a DVR during her first year of college, "having the ability to watch TV on my DVR made me realize how much I hate watching TV on my computer. It's really warm, it's really loud, and if I'm watching TV on my computer I can't do anything else." (The effects of multitasking on television scheduling will be discussed further in the next section.)

And it's not just convenience and video quality that get lost on a computer screen. Sitting in front of "the real TV" (as Lila put it) has emotional resonance for a number of people I interviewed. "I just feel happy when I get to sit in front of the TV," Erin said. "I love watching TV because it's so comfortable," Clara said. Even the two participants who do not currently own television sets said they planned to get another set eventually.

This desire to watch television *on* a television also affects what gets watched where, when, and how. Charlie talked about watching his higher-priority shows on TV and saving the lowest-priority ones for catching up online later: "*Mike and Molly* ended up conflicting with three other things, and I cared about it the least, so I went to Hulu." Several participants had purchased devices (such as Victor and Melissa's Roku, Clara's Mac Mini, and Alex's media computer) specifically to be able to watch streaming content on the television

screen; others were taking advantage of capabilities built into their video game systems to stream Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon content.[2]

For the most part — and excluding the two people who did not own a television set during the time of the study — viewing television content on something other than a television screen was relatively rare and limited to a handful of specific situations: catching up on a missed episode of a favorite show when streaming to a TV screen was not available; getting through a gym workout; killing time in a waiting room; streaming a live event; watching in bed when the bedroom lacked a television; or storing television content temporarily so that it could be viewed on a television screen later, as when Christine would use her iPod to download episodes and then connect the iPod to a friend's television set.

The iPad was to some degree an exception and is certainly a viewing technology worth tracking for the future. The participants who owned iPads generally spoke highly of the viewing experience, noting that both the video quality and the television-specific applications improved upon previous smaller-screen options. Still, the iPad was largely a private device, as opposed to the public and social television set. Participants largely watched television on their iPads in their bedrooms or otherwise alone, consuming shows they didn't share with anyone else (Victor plays *Entourage* on his iPad because he doubts his female roommates would appreciate the show's vulgarity) in situations where nobody else would have been watching with them (on long car trips, Christine has hooked her iPad up to her car's stereo system to listen to episodes while she drives). Nobody spoke of the iPad as a replacement for a television set, but it also wasn't met with the general vitriol of computer streaming.

5.3.2 Multitasking

The location of viewing also influences — and is influenced by — the purpose of any specific period of television viewing. One certain thing from these 16 interviews is that watching television serves a wide variety of purposes in my participants' lives. Sometimes it's highly social; sometimes it's solitary and relaxing. Sometimes it's background noise; other times it's the only activity worth doing.

Scholars have long acknowledged the wide range of attention that can be paid to the television. In defining three levels of television viewing — TV in the front, when it's the primary activity; TV on the side, where TV is one of a couple of activities receiving approximately equal attention; and TV in the back, where TV serves as essentially background noise or "a kind of wallpaper" — Van den Broeck et al. (2007) wrote: "More and more, TV accompanies us while we are doing other activities, like surfing the web with the TV on in the background, ironing in front of TV, reading while the TV is on etc." (p. 27).

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[2] As of spring 2011, all three major video game console systems — Wii, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3 — had some capability for streaming television content, though the specifics varied by the system and the selected level of service.

But one particularly interesting finding from this particular research study is how the level of attention a show is perceived to require — or the level of attention a particular viewer *wants* to pay to a particular show — influences when and how it's viewed.

April has gotten into disagreements with her boyfriend and roommate because of her propensity to multitask on her phone or laptop computer during television shows. But when she really cares about a show, she puts the computer away and gives the television screen her full attention. "*The Wire*, I couldn't be on the laptop because I felt like every word spoken and every scene shown was full of meaning," April said. "When *Parks and Rec[reation]* is on, I have my laptop. *30 Rock*, I don't, cause I just love it."

With a couple of exceptions, including the participants who watch all of their television on a laptop, most participants who multitask during TV do so when the show they're watching is on the actual television set. And that's by design, according to Cassie, who said that watching on a laptop "becomes more of a burden and you're less likely to keep up with your shows if you have to block out this time when you can't do anything else."

5.3.3 Is a Show "Worth It"?

How much a show is "worth" came into play as well — both in terms of attention in the types of multitasking decisions described above(e.g. was a show worth putting everything else away for, or could it be essentially background noise for other tasks?) and in actual monetary terms.

The monetary issue in particular is a recent development. Economic decisions about what television shows to watch used to happen on a fairly macro scale: A viewer subscribed to cable or didn't, and bought access to premium channels such as HBO and Showtime or didn't. Certainly, there were gradients (different tiers of cable service that offered more or fewer channels, for example), but the most granular the decision could get was whether to purchase the right to watch a particular network. Purchasing a particular level of service entailed paying for all the channels in that package, regardless of whether or how much a viewer watched any particular one.

Now, economic decisions about television can happen on the most micro level: individual series and even individual episodes. As discussed earlier in the section on rights, nearly every show — still not all, but a large and growing percentage — can be bought or rented a la carte for a small fee.[3] But just because the shows are available doesn't mean viewers necessarily choose to purchase them. Each show has to meet a certain standard — often

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[3] The cost of an episode on popular services such as Amazon's Video On Demand and Apple's iTunes Store varies from roughly $1 to $3, and season subscriptions can be purchased for many shows. In the spring of 2011, Amazon opted to make streaming free for subscribers to its Prime program.

defined differently by each viewer — of quality, utility, or necessity for it to be "worth the money."

This effect was especially apparent for my participants who don't have a DVR or access to live television and make the vast majority of their purchasing decisions a la carte. For Clara, keeping up with *Grey's Anatomy* wasn't worth buying a subscription to Hulu Plus; for Melissa, *The Good Wife* can be skipped sometimes rather than bought episode-by-episode. When Victor grew disenchanted with *Mad Men*, he simply didn't buy it any more — "it wasn't worth two or three bucks an episode," he said, "so we just stopped watching it."

This has some interesting implications for programmers. With cable service, television is a fixed expense; it's possible people would be more likely to stick with a show through some less-compelling episodes when the cost of watching any particular episode is obscured. But when shows are purchased individually, every episode of every series can get its own evaluation. Is this particular hour of entertainment worth $2?

Even for those participants who do not necessarily purchase all of their television a la carte, show-by-show economics still come into play for missed episodes or time conflicts — as with Charlie's experience of temporarily dropping *House* or Cassie's of choosing not to follow *90210* to Hulu. Both of those shows would have been available for purchase, but for Charlie and Cassie, they just weren't worth it.

5.3.4. Emotional Responses and The Importance of the Show Itself

Finally, there's one last major factor whose influence cannot be discounted when sorting out when people choose to watch television: the television show itself and the attendant pleasure, suspense, or other emotional response it elicits from viewers.

Digging into the motivations for any particular viewer watching any particular show is beyond the scope of this study, but plenty of literature explores such motivations deeply (Adams, 2000; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lin, 1993; Rosenstein & Grant, 1997). For these purposes, it's sufficient to note that a couple of motivational factors relating to particular shows were frequently mentioned as reasons to watch (or delay watching) a particular show: the mood a viewer is in at the time of the viewing decision; the complimentary or contradictory mood a particular show is expected to invoke; and the viewer's desire to see what's going to happen, plot-wise, on that episode of the show itself. Cassie described these choices eloquently, comparing her own setting of a television schedule to the pacing of a restaurant meal, starting with something light — the comedy as *amuse bouche* — moving to a heavier or more suspenseful drama or a highly anticipated key episode as a main course, and finishing off with another comedy as dessert.

For my participants, these mood- and plot-based decisions often work in tandem with the other factors mentioned earlier in this paper, for example wanting to watch *Top Chef* because it's an enjoyable, lightly suspenseful viewing experience *and* because if it's not

watched by a certain time it might get spoiled online; choosing to DVR *Chuck* rather than watch it online because the show itself is a higher priority than anything else in that time slot *and* because otherwise it won't be online legally for a week; deciding to watch *Supernatural* as it's broadcast because it's a favorite show *and* because friends will be talking about it immediately after (or even during the show) on Twitter.

Interestingly, these decisions do not always play out in the ways that television executives likely expect — or that the ratings and advertising structure is set up to reward. An underlying assumption of the television industry model is that people will watch the shows they care about the most first, live or close to it. But several cases popped up during this study that revealed a far greater level of nuance to the decision — and sometimes meant the unimportant shows were watched first and the most beloved ones last. The most salient story was one from Rosa, who talked about delaying her viewing of an episode of *Fringe* until a time when she and her husband could give it full attention. She could have watched the show late at night on the day it aired, but she was too tired to watch closely; she could have watched it over the weekend, but she was busy. She continued to watch other television shows that required less attention, but this particular episode stayed filed away on her DVR until she could truly devote herself to viewing it.

6. Television's Possible Futures

The television industry has been in a state of continual upheaval essentially since the introduction of the remote control, VCR, and cable system in the 1980s, but even given that, the current period is one of especially rapid change. Social applications are rolling out quickly in an attempt to capitalize on the online discussions currently taking place on Twitter and similar systems; new technologies such as Google TV are promising a more connected television-watching experience by combining the internet and television on a single, large screen; and networks and content distributors are scrambling to piece together their relationships with online and streaming access and figure out how they can generate income from the different modes of providing content.

So given all of these developments, and the large number of competing and conflicting factors that weigh on decisions about how, where, and when to watch television, what do viewers actually want?

The decisions about what television shows to watch when are complex and interrelated. As illuminated throughout this paper, they involve thinking through many factors: Can I watch this show some other way? Or at some other time? Will my friends be talking about it? Is it free, or do I have to pay? Are there other things I can get done while I watch it, or do I have to give it my undivided attention?

There's no one answer to those questions. There may not even be a handful of prototypical answers. The choices are different for each person — and sometimes for each show.

But a few things are undeniably true for my 16 participants:

- **The television world is increasingly approached a la carte, show-by-show**. For the most part, viewing decisions aren't made about the medium of television. They're made about shows: which specific shows to watch when, where, and how. Television as a medium invokes nostalgia ("I miss seven channels"), and channel surfing has yet to completely fade among those who have live television access. But "television" isn't the whole world of possible programming; it's about *individual beloved shows*. While channel surfing hasn't completely faded away by any means, watching television doesn't have the random appeal of, say, turning on ChatRoulette; very little viewing happens just to see what's on.

- **Live television still has a couple of killer apps.** Sports is one, and probably the most significant: I heard a number of stories about people who either hadn't cut cable because they wanted to be able to watch sports or who missed sports more than anything else when they discontinued their live television service. Sports content is often live, it's often consumed socially, and (with some rare — albeit increasing — exceptions) it's not available readily online, especially not on the kind of online services that can be ported to a television screen. If sports content were to become available in a different way (for example, through Hulu Plus or even via game-by-game purchase directly from sports teams or leagues), at least two more people out of my 16 would most likely cut their cable service. Additionally, for some viewers, conversation — whether in person or online — remains a key reason for keeping live television service. For those who get personal satisfaction out of, for example, posting or reading play-by-play of shows on Twitter, subscribing to a television service that allows for live viewing is still the only way to go.

- **Content rights and technological limitations are a barrier to "whatever, whenever, wherever" viewing — but they're not the only factor in scheduling decisions.** The technological reasons that television isn't watched wherever, whenever seem like they'd at least be plausible to solve. Distribution rights and royalties could be granted differently; all shows could eventually be available on every device. But there are still many other factors that lead to the creation of individual viewing schedules, from conversations to the potential for multitasking to the fact that the television set is still usually the nicest screen in the house. Even if there were no technological or legal restrictions whatsoever on what shows could be watched when, there would still be other influences pushing viewers to consider watching certain shows at certain times.

Predicting the future is a fool's game, and it feels especially so for something like television during a period of such rapid change; it seems likely that there won't be one particular path of watching television that will be universally followed by everyone. (People's individual viewing schedules have been deviating from the broadcast list since the introduction of the VCR; it's unlikely that particular genie could go all the way back into the bottle.)

But I close this paper by presenting a few possible future directions for designing television experiences. A few of these are already happening in some way. Others are more radical. These futures aren't meant to be mutually exclusive; someone could piece together a whole

new model incorporating parts of each suggestion. My goal here isn't to nail down the single best vision for how television will function in the future. It's merely to provoke thought about what might happen if the industry moved in one direction or another — and to point out some pros and cons of going in various directions based on the 16 people whose viewing habits I studied.

6.1 Design for Conversation

Social factors were hugely influential in how my 16 participants watched television. From discussing shows in person with friends to delivering live play-by-play online, the social landscape around a show is at least as important as the show itself for determining how and when episodes are viewed.

Social television has been the subject of much technology research, especially in recent years as researchers sought to counteract the potentially fragmenting effects of the DVR on television viewing. One such system, CollaboraTV, provides a mechanism for users to type text comments while watching a show. The comments are displayed in real time to anyone else who happens to be watching the same show on the system; they're also archived so that anyone who watches the show later using the same system will be able to see how the comments played out (Nathan et al., 2008). Other systems have envisioned connecting viewers via live audio or enabling graphics that users could manipulate together (Quico, 2003; Regan & Todd, 2004; Shamma, Bastea-Forte, Joubert, & Liu, 2008). "Chat features and other forms of interactivity will allow community to build around programming in ways we are yet to see. The Internet will no longer be an isolating factor for TV viewing, but rather a unifying one" (Gibs, 2009, p. 28).

But currently available social television applications are limited, and others had clear drawbacks in the prototype stages. In some cases, it's hard to differentiate between similar options; at least three services currently allow viewers to "check in" to television shows to alert their friends to what they're viewing and earn badges, following the model of the Foursquare service for location tracking. More work can — and, most likely, will — be done on making television an even more social experience.

Designers interested in creating social television applications could emphasize one or several factors: alerting people to when their friends are watching particular shows; facilitating conversations between specific groups of people (as viewers often adapt services such as Google Chat to do) or between all viewers watching a show at a given time (as Twitter currently does); or displaying the conversations that are already taking place (as shows on Bravo, Fox, and BET have done by streaming Twitter posts to the screen). All of the efforts currently under way could be refined to make the information more accessible and customizable by individual viewers, instead of the sometimes overwhelming streams of conversation that currently exist.

Designers also could focus on developing technologies that would hide spoilers, allowing viewers to jump into the conversation at any time without fear of uncovering plot points they hadn't yet seen. And though a particularly far-fetched suggestion, abolishing time zones as determinants of broadcast time would go a long way toward letting people coordinate their viewing with friends across the country.

6.1.1. Benefits

Social interactions around television shows have been demonstrated to "increase the viewer's loyalty to the program, so that he or she stays with the program and even returns to the channel or program for the next event" (Jensen, 2005, p. 93). More loyal viewers may also be more engaged in the show, which itself is an issue worth further exploration. The prevalence of multitasking during lower-priority shows — and the fact that people will sometimes move a show they really care about to a time when they can devote their full attention to it, even if that's not the time slot where it airs — suggests several weaknesses in the current television ratings and compensation structure. Having a greater awareness of which shows are actually being discussed could create a fuller picture of a given show's value to viewers.

6.1.2 Drawbacks

The idea of making viewing information automatically viewable by friends or strangers would require significant sensitivity to viewers' privacy concerns. In one 2008 study of a proposed system that included a "now watching" feature that tracked what shows people were watching and shared that information with their online contacts, nearly all of the study's 13 interviewees rejected the idea, and several compared it to "Big Brother" (Ali-Hasan, 2008). And some viewers are simply reluctant to share their viewing patterns broadly for fear of embarrassment (throughout my research, it wasn't uncommon for my participants to make self-deprecating comments about the amount or type of television they watched — even though they knew that's exactly why I wanted to talk to them; sharing that information broadly might not always be comfortable).

Furthermore, prioritizing conversation — especially if shows that were highly discussed turned out not to be well-rated by conventional means — would throw the current system of making money on television shows into question. This is not necessarily a bad thing (it's widely understood that Nielsen ratings are not a particularly successful measure of viewing behavior these days), but it would require a significant commitment on the part of networks, content distributors, and advertising partners to figure out how to value larger, less-engaged audiences versus smaller, more-engaged ones.

Finally, there's a chance that the viewers who have been participating in online and social media conversations about television would be less likely to do so if networks or content distributors began to explicitly attempt to make money off their conversations. Especially

among the younger viewers I interviewed, there was a desire to not "give content away for free." Striking a balance between rewarding engagement — and thus potentially pleasing viewers by keeping shows on the air that would have been canceled in a less socially oriented ratings environment — and making viewers feel like cogs in a network publicity machine would require a delicate hand and a deep understanding of viewers' motivations.

6.2. Design for Control

For the past several years, networks have been in a precarious position with regard to making their content available on platforms other than the television set. The relationship to online streaming is clearly uneasy, driven largely by hasty trial and error. In the spring of 2007, the CW network decided to discontinue streaming access for the show *Gossip Girl*, which was popular and influential (especially among the network's core audience of women 18-34) but not highly rated by any traditional measure. Instead of driving traffic to the live broadcast of the show, as the CW had hoped, the move did not change the show's ratings at all — and became somewhat of a PR disaster for the network for having removed a method of viewing to which viewers felt entitled.

Hulu, launched publicly in early 2008, was an attempt by several broadcast networks to regain control over content and monetize online viewing. But even Hulu has not been a panacea: Individual shows are frequently added to or pulled from the service, and the advertising model is a work in progress (the Plus service, launched in the summer of 2010, makes more episodes available but still includes advertising). Furthermore, show creators are not necessarily fond of the service, because they don't always get the feedback they'd desire on how their show is performing.

Meanwhile, a few networks and content distributors are bucking the trend of making content available, choosing instead to attempt to secure it for themselves. Showtime announced in the spring of 2011 that it would be ending its partnership with Netflix Instant Streaming, choosing instead to control its own distribution networks.

What if more networks were to follow in Showtime's tracks? Granted, it seems unlikely; the CW's *Gossip Girl* experiment showed that eliminating access didn't help either ratings or the network's public standing. Still, it's interesting to consider what might happen if networks tired of giving their content away for less than they're making from television broadcasts.

Actually doing this would require a heavy hand in policing distribution. First, networks would pull their content from any service that wasn't allowing them to control when or how their shows were viewed. This would require not just making decisions about whether to continue partnerships with sites such as Hulu or iTunes but also putting significant effort into monitoring illegal downloading communities as well as the quasi-legal sites such as Megavideo and SurfTheChannel. If networks wanted to get truly controlling, they could disable fast-forwarding of ads on DVR-recorded shows — a suggestion that might seem far-fetched but that is actually semi-employed on many OnDemand programs already (the fast

forwarding that can happen is often at a lower speed than what's possible on regular recordings).

6.2.1 Benefits

These moves, while out of step with current trends, would restore a more traditional model of television viewing, largely re-coupling the decisions about what, when, and where to view television while maintaining some flexibility (for example, networks could approve a chosen set of platforms for distributing their shows, so all viewing wouldn't necessarily need to return to the television set).

Assuming illegal downloading and streaming could actually be curtailed, this vision of the future would remove much of the uncertainty that pervades the current viewing environment. Networks could judge more accurately how many people were watching their shows because they would have a better window into the means of distribution. (Furthermore, some of the technological brainpower that's currently going into developing new methods of distributing television programs in novel ways could theoretically be used to instead come up with more accurate and meaningful measurement methods.)

6.2.2 Drawbacks

In each case to date where networks have chosen to restrict access to content unexpectedly (the CW eliminating online access to *Gossip Girl*; Starz pulling *Party Down* from Netflix's streaming service), the move has been met with a significant level of outcry from fans. The story of the past 30 years of television has been one of increasing viewer control; suddenly throwing that movement into reverse and making things more challenging for viewers to get access to the programs they love would not likely be well-received.

Furthermore, it's unclear how possible asserting control would actually be. True policing of illegal download sites has proven difficult; many content owners claim they do it, but the fact is that most shows can still be found by savvy viewers who know where to look. And technological developments could easily throw the balance of control out of whack again; it's unlikely that networks thought about what would happen if viewers were setting their own schedules before the VCR or if they could manipulate live television before the DVR. Future technologies will likely raise issues of their own that could not possibly be predicted yet.

6.3 Design for Personalization

Instead of asserting control, networks and content distributors could move the other direction, opening up even more content and making it available on even more platforms.

The first tenet of this design strategy would be to make television programming available on a television screen, no matter when or how it was accessed — and in the least burdensome way possible. For example, the current iteration of Google TV blocks many of the networks' online streaming sites because content deals were not worked out in advance. In a model where personalization was prioritized, that kind of deficit would cease to exist. Any television show, found on any device or service, could be easily ported to a television.

Beyond that, the next step would be to make any television show available on any device equipped with the minimum necessary technology to play video. Alternate versions would be provided for cases of technological incompatibility — for example, this would allow Melissa to access *The Good Wife* on her iPad for free just as she could with her laptop, without her having to account for the incompatibility between Flash technology and the iPad. In the case of true personalization, viewers might be given several options for how to watch a show simultaneously: live on television with ads for free; live on television without ads for an additional fee; or rented or streamed to any number of devices. The key would be simultaneous access: all viewing options would be available at the same time.

Eventually, all content would come out of a central repository — a scenario that a 2003 Bernstein Research report envisioned happening with the advent of personal digital video recorders: "Studios would provide their content directly to cable and satellite operators, which would be a primary source for consumers who want to cherry-pick their content selections, download them to a server and access them at will … The only surviving networks would have proprietary 'live' content that could not be time-shifted, such as ESPN and CNN" (Mermigas, 2003). The scheduling function would be completely taken over by viewers, who could create their own schedules and perhaps even publish them as playlists for others to enjoy.

6.3.1 Benefits

Making shows available at the same time across any possible device could go a long way to quelling illegal and quasi-legal downloading and streaming. In general, as discussed earlier, accessing shows illegally was not the first choice of my participants; downloading can be quite time-consuming (Alex even mentioned that he started streaming shows instead of downloading them from torrents because he "got lazy") and many of the quasi-legal streams are not particularly good quality and can't be easily viewed on a television screen. But in a choice between watching illegally and not watching, illegal viewing often won (and, not watching would hardly have been a better outcome for content creators and distributors). Why should that have to be the choice? Most likely, some viewers will remain committed to getting shows for free regardless of the personal cost involved with finding download sources or streams of suitable quality; I suspect, however, that the streamers and downloaders among my participants would watch in a better way if a better way were made available.

6.3.2 Drawbacks

Especially in the early stages of establishing this model, the rights and compensation structures would take significant energy and time to work out. Essentially making all television available on-demand would mean rethinking what it means to advertise and possibly even what it means to be a television show.

Making viewing choices so deeply individualized could also cut further into the common social experience of television viewing. If it's hard to know who has watched what show now, it would be even harder in a world where the broadcast schedule looked more like a release calendar or a starting line after which anything was available. That said, television conversation has proven to be awfully persistent, adapting to various new forms — especially online — fairly readily. I suspect that viewers who want to talk about a certain show will always find ways to come together and discuss it; that said, with this model those avenues might take longer to become established.

There's also the question of how much scheduling viewers want to do and how much control they would actually like to exert over their access. Presumably this varies significantly by viewer, as even in my pool of 16 television viewers, some are far closer to fully programming their own viewing than others. There was some evidence in my interviews of people getting frustrated by overly complicated means of accessing their programming; how many steps can stand between viewers and their shows before watching television is no longer worth it?

Finally, there are questions about how much "liveness" can be removed from the television experience — and what would be lost if it were. It's notable that a handful of my interviews took place after this spring's earthquake and tsunami in Japan. During those interviews, even viewers who routinely watched very little live television said they'd been turning the TV on more lately, just to check in on the news. Some particular cases and experiences still call for live communication. It's unclear when, if ever, that need will disappear.

7. Future Work

This project represents the culmination of a semester's work and 16 individual interviews about television viewing — but it is only a start at sifting through the information I collected. These interviews point to several interesting issues in today's television landscape that I could not fully explore here but that could provide great fodder for additional research.

First, one key issue many participants mentioned was that of discovery: learning about new shows and adding them to their personal viewing schedules. It's clear that modes of discovery are different for the viewers in my pool who watch less live television and those who watch more. Exploring the sources of those differences (whether it's just seeing fewer commercials or spending less time tuned to broadcast stations, a generally lower level of

engagement in discussions about television, or something else entirely) and understanding how people who rarely watch live television *do* hear about new shows could be valuable to designers and technologists trying to figure out how to better recommend television shows.

Second, a similar methodology to this study could be used to explore different viewing habits within different demographic groups and perhaps ultimately across groups. Parents, as mentioned earlier, would be one; college students could be another. For the purposes of this study, I was curious about the behaviors of viewers with few definite factors determining their choices; it could be quite interesting to conduct a similar study with groups that have known constraints.

Finally, it would be fascinating to conduct a case study of these issues from the other side, inside a television network or production studio. How are the people who make television dealing with the wider universe of options for when and where viewers see their shows? Does it change how the shows are created, marketed, distributed? Should it? The television industry has some hard decisions to make about how open to be with content while still attracting enough viewers in a financially feasible way, and those decisions will largely determine what television looks like a few years down the line.

8. Acknowledgements

Thanks to my advisor, Jenna Burrell, for shepherding this project through many stages; Coye Cheshire, for helping me refine some early thoughts about television, spoilers, and Twitter; and my research participants for their time and willingness to chat about TV.

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10. Appendix: List of Television Shows Discussed

Show	Network/Channel	Type	Length
American Idol	Fox	Reality/competition	1-2 hours
Grey's Anatomy	ABC	Drama	1 hour
Party Down	Starz	Comedy	30 minutes
House	Fox	Drama	1 hour
Friday Night Lights	DirecTV 101/NBC	Drama	1 hour
Top Chef	Bravo	Reality/competition	1 hour
Gossip Girl	CW	Drama	1 hour
Supernatural	CW	Drama	1 hour
Private Practice	ABC	Drama	1 hour
The Big Bang Theory	CBS	Drama	30 minutes
90210	CW	Drama	1 hour
Glee	Fox	Comedy	1 hour
The Office	NBC	Comedy	30 minutes
Battlestar Galactica	SyFy; no longer airing	Drama	1 hour
Chuck	NBC	Comedy	1 hour
Veronica Mars	CW; no longer airing	Drama	1 hour
Lost	ABC; no longer airing	Drama	1 hour
Mad Men	AMC	Drama	1 hour
Real Housewives franchise	Bravo	Reality	1 hour
So You Think You Can Dance	Fox	Reality/competition	1-2 hours
Cougar Town	ABC	Comedy	30 minutes
Pretty Little Liars	ABC Family	Drama	1 hour
The Vampire Diaries	CW	Drama	1 hour
Mike and Molly	CBS	Comedy	30 minutes
The Wire	HBO; no longer airing	Drama	1 hour
Parks and Recreation	NBC	Comedy	30 minutes
30 Rock	NBC	Comedy	30 minutes
The Good Wife	CBS	Drama	1 hour
Entourage	HBO	Comedy	30 minutes