

Serial Reading as the Origin of Binge-Watching: From Print Culture to Digital Immersion

Gordana Tkalec 

Department for Communication Sciences, Media and Journalism, University North, Koprivnica, Croatia
Email: gtkalec@unin.hr

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Abstract

This paper investigates the historical and cultural roots of binge-watching by tracing its origins to the 19th- and early 20th-century phenomenon of serial reading. While binge-watching is typically framed as a product of digital technologies and streaming platforms, this study argues that the practice of consuming stories in extended, immersive sessions has deep precedents in literary history—specifically in serialized print fiction. The widespread publication of novels in installments, made possible by technological advances in print production, laid the foundation for a form of narrative engagement that closely parallels today's binge-viewing culture. By comparing the mechanisms of engagement in serial reading and binge-watching—such as narrative suspense, emotional investment, and episodic structure, this study identifies shared cognitive and affective dynamics. Both practices encourage sustained immersion, often within private, domestic settings, and provoke anticipation that drives continued consumption. The analysis draws on examples from 20th-century literature, including the work of Croatian author Marija Jurić Zagorka, whose serialized fiction attracted mass readership and commercial success despite critical disdain—a pattern also observed in contemporary television series. Ultimately, this study reframes binge-watching as part of a longer cultural tradition of serial consumption, demonstrating how the human desire for story, character, and continuity transcends media formats. Recognizing serial reading as a historical antecedent of binge-watching allows for a deeper understanding of narrative engagement across time and technology.

Keywords

Serial Reading, Binge-Watching, Narrative Engagement, Serialized Fiction, Audience Immersion

1. Introduction

Binge-watching, typically associated with the streaming era, represents an intensive form of media consumption characterized by sustained narrative immersion. “Binge-watching is a notable phenomenon that is changing the production, distribution, and consumption of television programs” (Cha & Chan-Olmsted, 2024).

While often considered a product of modern technology, the roots of this behavior can be traced back to the 19th-century practice of serial reading.

Both forms of content consumption were primarily enabled by technological advancements: flatbed printing and, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, offset printing, which allowed for faster and cheaper newspaper production and the expansion of printing houses. A century later, digital television and the emergence of streaming platforms had a similar effect. Once these technologies became accessible to the masses, they also enabled private, individual consumption. The evolution from printed installments to serialized television and on-demand digital streaming reflects a continuity in narrative form rather than a rupture. Psychological, social, and technological factors all contribute to the appeal of serialized storytelling, whether in print or on screen. In today’s digital era, audiences not only consume narratives rapidly but also influence their development, sometimes even determining alternative endings. This shift underscores a growing interactivity and democratization of storytelling.

“The technological progress that allows the television series to be emancipated from the linear broadcast schedule brings a new way of watching several episodes in a row, when and as much as the viewer wants (bingewatching). Previous research suggests that binge-watching is characterized by engaged enjoyment. The communicology concept of narrative engagement provides insight into the mechanisms of engagement in consuming narrative text, connecting the intensity of narrative experience and enjoyment.” (Karuza Podgorelec, 2024) “Streaming video as a disruptive technology has shifted content distribution from linear to on-demand manners. It also provides distributors with more flexibility in terms of release strategies.” (Cha & Chan-Olmsted, 2024)

Both serial reading and binge-watching create a unique interaction between the reader/viewer and the work. Serial novels and series draw the audience into their world, and they are consumed at a time chosen by the reader, usually in the privacy of their home. As suspense and the desire to know “what happens next?” increase among audiences, mass production begins, with an increasing number of episodes or installments, resulting in significant commercial impact.

2. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to draw a parallel between serial reading and binge-watching, taking into account the influence of the audience on content production, as well as the influence of content on the audience. The paper relies on previous research on audience habits: studies on the habits of readers of serialized novels,

which are compared with recent studies of audiences engaged in binge-watching.

The following research questions are posed in this study: Do serial reading and binge-watching, despite involving the consumption of different media, have a similar impact on audiences? Is new production driven by the audience's need and desire for new installments (in the printed form of serialized novels and in television/streaming series) and by commercial outcomes? In what ways do contemporary media enable a stronger role for audiences in shaping content?

The research used the method of content analysis. As an example of the production of printed serialized novels, the works of Croatian writer and the first female journalist in Croatia-Marija Jurić Zagorka and her influence on the audience were examined. As an example of audience influence on the creation of a series, the Netflix production *Sense8* was used.

3. Historical Context of Serial Reading

In the 19th century, novels were often published in serialized form in newspapers and magazines. Authors such as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and later, writers of popular or "trivial" fiction used the installment format to maintain reader interest over extended periods. Serialization shaped narrative strategies, including cliffhangers, episodic arcs, and complex character development.

"Serialization is not just of historical significance, however. Scholars of narrative studies have been keenly interested in serialization as well because it changes the contours of what can be considered a text in the first place. As many scholars theorizing serialization have explained, this publication structure creates an inter-textual environment. Recognition of the networks in which a particular serial novel, for instance, exists has the potential to reveal, in turn, subtle but important intersections among economic, scientific, literary, and even imperial facets." (Bernstein & Derose, 2012)

In Croatia, at the beginning of the 20th century, journalist and writer Marija Jurić Zagorka published the serialized novel *Grička vještica* (The Witch of Grič) in *Male novine*. The series became so popular that new episodes were promised to readers without her knowledge, and she was practically forced to continue writing under threat of dismissal. At the time, literary critics labeled her work as "trash literature," but the public adored it.

A similar situation occurs with series designed for binge-watching: critics often dismiss them as cheap entertainment, yet behind this new phenomenon lies a massive commercial impact that drives creators to produce more episodes and seasons—because the market demands it.

4. Narrative Mechanics and Temporal Immersion

"Binge-watching is a popular form of media consumption, and entertainment is one of the main drivers of this activity... the motives of relaxation, fun (hedonic), habit, easier following of intricate storylines, escape, and thrill (hedonic) are prominent." (Karuza Podgorelec, 2020)

Serialized fiction required readers to maintain memory across installments, develop emotional investments in characters, and anticipate future developments. These practices mirror the emotional pacing and narrative complexity of binge-worthy television series. The delay between episodes heightened anticipation, encouraging interpretative engagement and discussion.

“To a greater extent than any short-form medium, serialized narratives create a real-life experience of inhabiting uncertain worlds whose storylines thwart our longings for knowledge and plenitude... Long-form serials (even if we consume them rapidly) mark time’s passage through purposeful pauses between chapters and installments while staging dialectical movement between parts and wholes. The sync between narrative time and the lived time of audiences which they accentuate, invites communities of conversation around shared temporal, affective, and aesthetic experience.” (Goodlad, 2018)

One of the hallmarks of both serial reading and binge-watching is temporal immersion. Readers or viewers become enmeshed in a narrative world over extended periods. While serial reading relied on temporal gaps to sustain engagement, digital streaming collapses these gaps, enabling uninterrupted narrative flow. Despite this difference, both formats foster a deep psychological attachment to narrative worlds—an attachment that often does not end with the consumption of the content but spills over into the real world. The previously mentioned Marija Jurić Zagorka once remarked: “Through my texts, I was able to give people hope through my texts, a story that would take them into another world, far from their own worries — and one they would be able to read in the Croatian language. My greatest reward was hearing down at marketplace that people were naming their children after characters from my novels!” A century later, *The Paper* became the first Croatian television series to be acquired by Netflix, thereby entering the global streaming market and becoming available for binge-watching; in the Croatian language. Audience identification was achieved in a different way: through the reflection of transitional societal realities and the use of documentary-style elements. Consumption in one’s native language adds an additional layer of immersion, as well as interest and motivation to read or watch content. This applies both to literature and to streaming platforms alike.

5. From Page to Screen: Evolution of Serial Consumption

The transition from serialized print fiction to serialized television and, eventually, on-demand digital platforms, demonstrates continuity in narrative consumption patterns. The development of series storytelling in 20th-century radio and television preserved the appeal of long-form narrative. Streaming platforms like Netflix and HBO merely intensified this trend by offering immediacy and control over pacing.

“We must understand serialization as a literary form attuned to the fundamental spirit of the age,” Hughes and Lund (1991) claim in their book *The Victorian Serial*, speaking about literature, but this very sentence is also applicable to the

contemporary culture of binge watching.

Binge-watching, like serial reading, involves narrative memory, emotional catharsis, and identification with characters. Psychological studies show that prolonged engagement with serialized stories can affect mood, empathy, and social behavior. Serial reading, in its heyday, inspired similar phenomena—fan letters, reader communities, and public debates around story developments.

While binge-watching offers convenience and enjoyment, it poses challenges to time usage efficiency, a critical factor in achieving personal and professional goals (Rai & Gautam, 2025). “However, as with all media use, there are circumstances in which binge-watching may be functional for an individual /.../ intentional binge-watching sessions are generally associated with positive mood states and satisfaction, while unintentional sessions often lead to negative outcomes such as goal conflict and guilt.” (Ulusoy, Wirz, Eden, & Ellithorpe, 2025)

Both binge-watching and serial reading are often, in interpretation, associated with negative, almost addictive behavior. An interesting work on this topic is the doctoral dissertation *Novel Addiction: Consuming Popular Novels in Eighteenth-century Britain* by Jayoung Min from the Department of English, Duke University, or, if we are speaking about binge-watching, the paper *Binge-watching as a behavioural addiction: A systematic review of causes, consequences, and potential for mental health intervention*, in which the authors state that binge-watching has gained attention for its potential addictive nature and adverse effects on physical and mental health. In some cases, it is also explored as a mental health intervention (Joseph & Varghese, 2025).

In our research, we focused on the influence of the audience on the creation of a series, as well as on the influence of works (novels and series) on the audience.

6. From Reading Communities to the Power of Social Media

Although writing a novel, as well as creating a series, is considered an authorial act in which the audience has no direct influence, the interactivity (and commercialization) of contemporary media has enabled a significantly greater audience impact on content creation. Audiences shaped by digitized media are considered not only as a transformation from passive to active audiences, but above all as a shift from active to interactive audiences (Zgrabljic Rotar, 2011). What happens to audiences in the context of new media? The modern user base chooses, participates, creates, edits, publishes, communicates, exchanges, criticizes, advises, shops, is mobile and relentless, active and selective, digitally literate and demanding. (Mučalo & Šop, 2008).

However, even traditional, pre-digital media enabled audiences to influence content creation, and indeed, encouraged them to do so. An example of pre-digital interactivity can be found in the previously mentioned Croatian author of serialized novels, Marija Jurić Zagorka. In addition to being the first female journalist in Croatia, this writer was also the editor of the women’s magazine *Hrvatica*, which was published from January 1939 to December 1940. This publication had

a section titled “Ask—You Will Be Answered,” and in every issue there were invitations for readers to subscribe, but also to express their opinions about what they would like to read. Expressions of gratitude for support, as well as calls to evaluate the magazine, were also equally important segments of Zagorka’s editorial practice, which was focused on building dialogue with contributors and female readers. The fact that this call for proposals, suggestions, and even criticism was not merely formal is evidenced by the statement in the same proclamation in which Zagorka asked readers to be sure to provide their address so that the Editorial Office could contact them and, if necessary, discuss all suggestions (Lakuš & Lakuš, 2025). She also addressed her female readers with questions about serialized novels, encouraged them to send her their own works, and invited them to visit her during office hours or outside them so that she could personally, face-to-face, receive their suggestions and comments.

A contemporary example of the role of the audience can be found in Netflix’s series *Sense8*. Netflix based its initial international expansion strategy on generating original, disruptive content aimed at segmented communities, but globally, betting on costly productions signed or produced by renowned contemporary audiovisual creators. This is the case of the *Sense8* series, directed by the Wachowski sisters, whose contents include the use of novel and unique ways of appealing to feelings, spirituality or sexual identity. The series is an example of a loyalty strategy for new audiences in its international expansion. For the same reason, its cancellation was due to high production costs, meaning a first episode of crisis with its public subscribers (del Olmo & Díaz, 2020). The resulting crisis and the audience’s strong reaction on social media caused a change in the company’s communication strategy, and also resulted in the filming of new episodes under audience pressure, demonstrating the power of both social media and the contemporary audience. “Netflix’s original programming seeks to extend many of the medium’s fundamental properties: it heightens its capacity for serial storytelling, it seeks to magnify its intimate address through its focus on the body, and it extends its promise of community out to the scale of the whole world. *Sense8* offers a unique case study for approaching these questions because it stands as a success and a failure in equal measures /.../ *Sense8* explicitly narrativises Netflix’s evolutionary discourse within its own presentation of *Sensate* evolution: just as the *Sensates* themselves are ‘no longer just you’, Netflix presents itself as no longer ‘just’ television.” (Shacklock, 2021)

7. Conclusion

Binge-watching is less a rupture from traditional media consumption than a technologically enhanced iteration of a long-standing narrative practice. By framing serial reading as the cultural and historical ancestor of binge-watching, we gain insight into the psychological, formal, and cultural continuities that shape contemporary media habits. The serialized *feuilletons* of the 19th and early 20th centuries—particularly in the form of popular fiction printed in newspapers and mag-

azines—established narrative strategies that still resonate: suspenseful endings, character arcs that evolve over time, and episodic structures designed to retain audience interest.

Furthermore, both serial reading and binge-watching thrive on temporal immersion and emotional engagement. While the format and medium have changed—from printed columns to digital screens, the core appeal remains remarkably similar: the human desire to inhabit richly constructed fictional worlds and follow characters through unfolding storylines. The audience's role in this process has also evolved—from passive readers eagerly awaiting the next newspaper issue to active viewers who can influence content through ratings, online feedback, and social media discourse. In both cases, the mass audience plays a central role in shaping production, often driving content beyond the creator's original intent due to commercial demand.

Importantly, this continuity also reveals the underlying economic logic of serialized storytelling. Whether in 19th-century print culture or 21st-century streaming media, serialized narratives have proven to be powerful tools for sustaining consumer attention and generating profit. The criticism often directed toward such content—labeling it trivial or lowbrow, highlights a persistent tension between popular taste and critical evaluation. Yet, the endurance and adaptability of serialized formats attest to their cultural significance.

Historical examples, such as Marija Jurić Zagorka's editorial strategies in serialized novels, demonstrate that even pre-digital audiences influenced content creation through active dialogue with creators. In the digital era, this influence has intensified through the interactivity and reach of social media, as illustrated by the Sense8 case, where audience mobilization directly impacted production decisions. These parallels suggest that audience agency—whether in print or digital formats, has long been a driving force in shaping narrative forms, with modern technologies amplifying its scope and immediacy.

In this light, binge-watching can be seen not as a fleeting or superficial trend, but as part of a broader and deeply rooted narrative tradition. Understanding its lineage helps us not only to situate it within media history but also to anticipate how narrative forms might continue to evolve in response to technological and cultural change.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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