

Media studies: New forms of media

Reading skills: Identifying the writer's stance

Writing skills: Using distancing expressions

Unit 7 TV viewing

1 SPEAKING

- a**  In 2014, streaming video service Netflix launched an advertising campaign with the slogan 'TV Got Better'. How do you think TV and TV series have got better over the last 20 years? Think about:
- choice
 - technology
 - quality of programmes
 - variety of programmes
 - opportunities to watch
- b**  What do you think might be 'better' about companies like Netflix?
- c**  Do you think there are ways in which TV has got worse?

2 READING 1

- a** Read the title and the abstract of an academic article about Netflix and TV viewing. Which topic will the article mainly be about ...?
- 1 the reasons why people watch TV
 - 2 general changes in TV technology
 - 3 the ways Netflix are promoting their programmes



TV Got Better:

Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and Binge Viewing

— Chuck Tryon

Abstract

This paper analyzes the promotional strategies of Netflix, arguing that the company reinforces what Pierre Bourdieu has called the discourses of distinction. In particular, the streaming service highlights what Tryon calls the promises of plenitude, participation, prestige, and personalization. Netflix highlights these discourses in part through its ongoing engagement with subscription cable channel HBO, and in part through promotional materials such as its TV Got Better campaign, which sought to naturalize viewing practices such as binge watching as being part of a technological and narrative cutting edge.

b Skills focus 1 Close reading of key phrases

According to the abstract, Netflix has made these claims in their promotional campaigns:

- 1 They offer something different from normal TV.
- 2 They offer variety and quality.
- 3 You can choose what you want to watch to suit your interests.
- 4 There's nothing wrong with watching a lot of TV in one sitting.
- 5 Binge viewing is the modern way to watch TV.

Find one phrase in the abstract which refers to each claim. What made you choose this phrase?

STUDY SKILLS: UNDERSTANDING ABSTRACTS

- 1 Academic texts often begin with an abstract which summarises the content of the article. Why is this information important?
- 2 Abstracts often contain abstract concepts which are hard to understand but it's worth reading them closely and 'getting to grips' with them as they will make it easier to understand the article. How can the following techniques help with this?
 - use an English-English dictionary
 - try to guess what expressions might mean
 - use the internet to check technical terms

3 READING 2

a Read the article. What do we know from the article about ...?

- 1 Kevin Spacey
- 2 The series *House of Cards*
- 3 The slogan 'It's not TV. It's HBO.'
- 4 Netflix's promotional campaigns
- 5 The difference between 'binge viewing' and 'feasting'
- 6 millennial audiences

 Compare your answers. Do you have the same ideas?

b Skills focus 2 Identifying the writer's stance

Discuss answers to these questions. Find parts of the article that helped you decide your answers.

- 1 What is the purpose of the article?
 - 2 How much does the writer know about the topic?
How do we know this?
 - 3 Do you think the writer is ...?
a enthusiastic about Netflix
b critical of Netflix
- Find phrases in the article to support your choice.

c CRITICAL THINKING



EVALUATING ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST AN ISSUE

- 1 Look at these opinions and decide whether you agree with them.
 - a 'Companies like Netflix have revolutionised TV and have improved its quality.'
 - b 'Binge viewing is a good way to appreciate a good TV series.'
 - c 'Watching TV series is a waste of time – it doesn't matter how good they are.'
- 2 Note down one argument for and one argument against each opinion. Make some brief notes.
- 3 Compare your ideas with other students.

During a speech at the 2013 Guardian Edinburgh Television Festival, Kevin Spacey, star of the Netflix original series, *House of Cards*, identified the streaming video service, Netflix, as a source for prestigious and engaging entertainment. Spacey's comments aligned *House of Cards* (2013–) with the prestige of British television and international art house cinema. He pointed out that Netflix had fully committed to purchasing twenty-six episodes of *House of Cards* without requiring the show's producers to make a pilot. Instead, the creators of the show could, as Spacey described it, get to the real work of developing complex characters and detailed storylines that would keep audiences engaged. Spacey went on to compare the political drama with the cinema, asking rhetorically, 'Is thirteen hours watched as one cinematic whole really any different from a film?' For those of us who work in media and TV studios, Spacey's justifications for Netflix are quite familiar, but what seems notable here is that he links the practice of binge viewing to quality television. Popular discourse has historically treated television as a 'vast wasteland', or junk food. But, beginning in the 1990s, the subscription cable channel HBO famously branded itself and its foray into original programming with the slogan 'It's not TV. It's HBO.' Netflix's use of similar claims serves to define the streaming service against traditional television. In particular, Netflix's self-promotion places emphasis on its ability to deliver the promise of 'prestige, plenitude, and participation' to its subscribers, through a mix of technological and aesthetic appeals that are meant to position Netflix as the future of television. This claim found its most explicit expression in its 'TV Got Better' campaign, in which anthropologist Grant McCracken rephrased the practice of 'binge viewing' as 'feasting', a description that views watching TV as healthy, as a good form of consumption.

This paper argues for a closer examination of claims in advertising that promote streaming video—and other new modes of delivery—as a technological solution to the limitations of more traditional forms of television. Although these technological changes have altered the social, legal, cultural, and economic conventions associated with TV as a medium, they also exaggerate their transformative potential. It is certainly the case that the practices of watching television are changing in an on-demand era, especially as millennial audiences develop new ways of watching movies and television; however, it is equally crucial to pay attention to the ways in which these practices are being redefined in order to promote more privileged methods of consuming television.



4 LANGUAGE FOCUS

Distancing expressions

a The expressions 1–4 below all have the effect of making the writer seem more ‘distant’ or objective. Match them with the categories below (add letters A or B).

- A reporting what other people said
 B balancing different points of view

- 1 **Although** these technological changes have altered ... conventions associated with TV, **they also** exaggerate their transformative potential. _____
- 2 The creators of the show could, **as Spacey described it**, get to the real work of developing complex characters. _____
- 3 **This claim** found its most explicit expression in its ‘TV Got Better’ campaign. _____
- 4 **It is certainly the case that** the practices of watching television are changing in an on-demand era ...; **however**, ... _____

b Here are some more ‘distancing’ expressions. Add them under the two category headings.

- 1 It is sometimes claimed that ...
- 2 Many people believe that ...
- 3 ... is often presented as ...
- 4 There is no doubt that ... however, ...
- 5 It may be true that ... but ...

A reporting what people say/think	B balancing points of view

c Look again at the expressions in 4b. How do the following features help to give the impression of ‘distance’ or objectivity?

- 1 sentences beginning *It* or *There is*
- 2 passive verb forms
- 3 qualifying verbs and adverbs: *may, sometimes, often*

5 WRITING

a Choose an issue that people have differing opinions about. It could be one of the topics below or a topic of your own.

- Will streaming make buying music obsolete?
- Should people pay for newspaper content online or get it free?
- How do social media sites affect real-life relationships?

Write a short paragraph (two or three sentences) about it. Adopt a point of view, but try to write about it objectively, distancing yourself from any strong opinions. Include at least two of the expressions in 4a or 4b.

b Swap paragraphs with another student. Can you identify ... ?

- what issue your partner is writing about
- what stance he/she is taking on the issue

Decide if you agree with their point of view.



6 READING EXTENSION

a Read the Netflix campaign feature 'TV Got Better', which was mentioned in the article. Answer the questions below.

- 1 Choose the sentence which best summarises the text.
- Not surprisingly, new technology has improved the quality of TV, but people still expect the same things from TV programmes as before.
 - Because of new technology, people now watch TV in a different way and they now expect better quality TV programmes.
 - Although people expected TV to get worse, in fact the quality has improved and is attracting a new kind of viewer.

2 Match these expressions with their meanings. Check your answers by seeing how the expressions are used in the text.

- couch potato
- channel surfer
- twitchy creature
- barely conscious
- alert to the fine details
- junk food
- migration of talent
- virtuous circle

- someone who can't keep still
- unhealthy meals and snacks
- a positive effect that leads to further positive effects
- actors moving from film to TV
- someone who spends hours on the sofa watching TV
- noticing everything that happens
- nearly asleep
- someone who keeps switching between TV programmes

b You can tell from the style and language that this text is not a factual article but is promoting Netflix. Find examples in the text of the following style features:

- short, simple sentences
- phrases used as sentences
- informal phrases and sentences.
- questions included which the reader might ask
- positive adjectives and adverbs

TV GOT BETTER

Difficult men and brilliant women turning popular culture into culture

By Grant McCracken

People are watching TV in new ways. The couch potato, once a fixture of talk show ridicule, op-ed disapproval and man-caves everywhere, has slipped into obscurity. We're not sure where he went. He just did.

The 'channel surfer' has also disappeared. That twitchy creature, dashing from one entertainment assignment to another, he too has left us. Gone.

What we have instead are highly sentient people watching TV in an upright position. And they are watching lots of TV, big chunks of continuous TV, entire seasons in a single week. No longer barely conscious and amphetamine-edgy, these people are staying put, paying attention, watching skilfully and passionately.



The weird thing is that when we ask people to describe what they are doing, they say they are 'binge-viewing'.

'Binge-viewing', though? Not very flattering. It makes them sound like they expect to wake from a stupor covered in junk food and regret.

The truth is otherwise. First finding: people are not watching predictable shows with happy windups by the end of each episode. They are not watching junk TV. They are watching great TV: *House of Cards* and *Orange Is the New Black*.

Second finding: nothing escapes them. The ethnographic interviews showed us viewers who are alert to the fine details. People are committing to the narrative even as they second-guess casting decisions and creative philosophies. These viewers are keen. In point of fact people are not bingeing. They are feasting.

The hidden fact of the matter is that TV got better. Against the odds. In the very face of sanctimonious criticism from industry regulators who have declared it a wasteland. By this reckoning, TV was a cultural sinkhole. It could only get worse, drawing American culture downwards into mediocrity.

Irony of irony, TV got better partly because it escaped the stupefying control of ratings and regulations. Now the difficult men and the brilliant women of cable could go places TV had never gone before. While experts and intellectuals scolded it for its failings, TV began an exploration of new dramatic possibilities.

Quite suddenly, a series of virtuous cycles unfolded. Good TV created smarter viewers. Smarter viewers in turn made for better TV. Good TV created smarter writers who in turn made for better TV. Good TV created better critics who in turn made for better TV. Opposers threatened us with a descent into bad. TV somehow managed an ascent into better. Even Hollywood says so. Look at the migration of talent. Bona fide movie stars are prepared to make TV because that's where real creative opportunities now lie.

