

All in one sitting

We have all been there: you settle in to watch one episode of a TV show, and eight hours later you've watched the whole season...



On the day when Netflix **released** the entire 13-episode first season of its political drama series House of Cards in one go, it reminded **viewers** on Twitter to #watchresponsibly: ‘Don’t forget to shower, eat something, get up and walk around!’ All through that day, people were tweeting: ‘What episode are you on?’ Netflix’s strategy was to encourage subscribers to ‘binge-watch’ the show – the TV equivalent of binge-eating.

House of Cards of course is not rubbish; it is a highly praised political drama. Originally a novel by Michael Dobbs, it follows the congressman Francis ‘Frank’ Underwood (Kevin Spacey), his scary wife, Claire, and young reporter, Zoe Barnes, as they struggle for power and influence in Washington. At 2 a.m., two episodes into the series, I simply couldn’t stop. It was going to be a long night.

The show is clearly and cleverly structured for binge-consumption. Each episode is called a ‘chapter’. There are no introductory **flashbacks**, common in traditional series. And at the end of nearly every episode, the **cliffhanger** makes the temptation to find out what is going to happen unbearable. By 10 a.m. the next day, and minutes away from the end of the final episode, I was searching for a release date for season two.



Initial **reviews** of Netflix's strategy and the show were mixed. Liz Shannon, a fellow binge-watcher, was sceptical. 'I'm not convinced that substituting the buzz that traditional shows acquire during a whole season for the buzz of binge-watching will be a success.' Laura Hudson was slightly more critical. 'It's not a great show; it's debatably a good one, but more importantly, it was just good enough to make me press "next" every time the episode finished.' That's precisely the point.

What's clear is that with DVDs and on-demand video, consumers have never had more choice in their own media consumption habits. Why pay the very expensive monthly cost for **cable service** when you're only watching three or four shows on as many channels? And why wait each week or months at a time for your favourite show? And with Netflix another advantage is that there are no commercials.

Netflix knows that it's already succeeded, at least in the US. Breaking Bad, for example, another good show for binge-watching, has been **a hit**. According to the Wall Street Journal, '73% of members who started **streaming** season one of Breaking Bad finished all seven episodes. Seasons two and three were longer – thirteen episodes each – but the number of viewers jumped to 81% and 85% respectively.'

As for me, I've heard great things about Friday Night Lights. Netflix, here I come.

Whether it's Downton Abbey or The Big Bang Theory – tell us about your TV binge experiences...

Adapted from The Guardian

From the city to the country (and sometimes back again)

Not everyone who moves to the country ends up staying there. In fact, for the first time in years, as many people are moving back to cities as are moving out to the country.

Liz Jones

'I was just divorced, and bored with my easy, if super-busy, London life. I wanted to live somewhere quieter, simpler, more beautiful, so I sold my house and bought a big farmhouse with 50 **acres** of land. I'll look after horses, I thought, I'll get a dog. I'll grow all my own food. It will be idyllic and friends will come to stay and tell me how lucky I am to live here.

But even from the first week, it was a nightmare. When I **moved in**, the house was cold and absolutely filthy, and the cooker didn't work. I discovered everything in the countryside is more expensive: you have to drive miles to find a shop where everything costs twice as much as in my local supermarket in London. I never **fitted in**. I think that in the country, if you are a woman, you will never be accepted unless you are a full-time mum. Another thing I hated was the shooting! I just couldn't pass a group of men with guns, shooting rabbits and deer, without **getting out of** my car and saying: "Do you really have nothing better to do on a Saturday morning?" That didn't make me very popular. I became so lonely, I often used to sit in my car and listen to the kind voice of the satnav lady.'



After five years Liz decided to go back to London. ‘On my last night in the country, I sat outside underneath millions of stars and I thought to myself: ‘I’ve come to the end of a five-year prison sentence.’

Rob Penn

Rob Penn, a writer, left London for some peace and quiet in the Black Mountains in Wales. ‘I’ve been living here in a small farmhouse for eight years now,’ says Penn. ‘It wasn’t easy at first. The fact that I ride a bicycle every day caused suspicion. In the countryside you only use a bike if something is wrong. A local farmer said to me, “I see you on the bike. How long have you lost your driving licence for, then?”’

Over time, however, Penn has managed to **fit in** with his new neighbours. ‘I’m lucky. I live in a place with a strong sense of community. My local pub is an active part of that. We have two village halls as well. Between them, they **put on** activities or meetings every night of the week – singing workshops, the garden club, zumba, as well as monthly films and occasional quiz nights.

‘In the city, you choose your community. It may be through work, your football team, or your kids’ school or your colleagues,’ says Penn. ‘In the country, your neighbours are your only community.’

Penn has no plans to **move back** to London. ‘I stood in a field this week, listening to the first sounds of spring. I love to hear the birds singing in the sunshine. I wouldn’t live anywhere else. The rural sights, sounds and, above all, communities beat the city any day.’



A British Institution



Just before 7 o'clock every evening, people all over Britain, from Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (a major fan, who actually appeared on the show) to students, housewives, and farmers, tune in to BBC Radio 4, and listen to an introductory tune that has been playing every night for more than 60 years. It is the theme tune to *The Archers*, the longest running radio soap opera in the world, and a British institution. *The Archers*, which is about life in the fictional village of Ambridge, was conceived by the Ministry of Agriculture as a way of providing information about new farming methods to British farmers and smallholders in order to increase productivity after the Second World War, during the years of food shortages and rationing. It was originally about the lives of three farmers: Dan Archer, who farmed efficiently with little cash, Walter Gabriel, who farmed inefficiently with little cash, and George Fairbrother, a wealthy businessman who farmed for a hobby. The programme was hugely successful – at the height of its popularity it was estimated that 60% of adult Britons were regular listeners, and today its listeners number over a million. The involvement of the Ministry of Agriculture ended in the 1970s, but *The Archers* still contains many storylines and discussions about farming, and has a separate 'agricultural story editor'.



Glossary

smallholder

/'smɔ:l'həʊldə/

a person who owns or rents a small piece of land for farming

rationing

/'ræʃənɪŋ/

the policy of limiting the food, fuel, etc., that people are allowed to have, when there is not enough for everyone to have as much as they want; it started in the UK in the Second World War in 1940 and ended in 1954.