

# **New Patterns of Media Consumption. TV Series on Demand as a Form of Virtualizing the Social Space**

**Review to the doctoral thesis of Paul BOCA, presented at Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, December, 2018**

**Antonio SANDU<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Professor PhD, Stefan cel Mare University from Suceava, Romania, [antonio1907@yahoo.com](mailto:antonio1907@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** The thesis “Producția și consumul filmelor seriale în era digitală” [The Production and Consumption of TV series in the Digital Era], presented at the Babeş Bolyai University of Cluj, under the coordination of Professor PhD Elena Abdrudan, is remarkable through its exceptional documentary on the use of TV series and the peculiarities of this social phenomenon, correlated with the development and widespread access to the Internet.

The results obtained are of particular importance for the understanding of the social phenomenon studied from a transdisciplinary perspective, based on the specifics of the communication sciences, as well as on a pertinent sociological research, also involving a number of specific elements of marketing research. The amount of work involved in preparing the paper is impressive, and the results are in line with it, the paper reaching its research objectives.

**Keywords:** *Paul Boca; media consumption; tv series; public demand; social space.*

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## Introduction

The thesis “*Producția și consumul filmelor seriale în era digitală*” [*The Production and Consumption of TV series in the Digital Era*], presented at Babes Bolyai University of Cluj, under the coordination of Professor PhD Elena Abdrudan, is remarkable through its exceptional documentary on the use of TV series and the peculiarities of this social phenomenon, correlated with the development and widespread access to the Internet.

The results obtained are of particular importance for the understanding of the social phenomenon studied from a transdisciplinary perspective, based on the specifics of the communication sciences, as well as on a pertinent sociological research, also involving a number of specific elements of marketing research. The amount of work involved in preparing the paper is impressive, and the results are in line with it, the paper reaching its research objectives.

The phenomenon studied is particularly current, the online distribution of the series and the access to them on demand, regardless of a grid of programs, creates a series of consumer behaviors, still inadequately studied from the sociological point of view and the communication strategies involved. The author captures and aims to sociologically explain a major change in the production and distribution system of on-demand video content, such as the series, the productions being created for digital distribution. As the author of the paper notes, we are faced with a new way of producing, distributing and consuming television series, which is a social phenomenon in itself, beyond the economic success of the new media industry sector.

**1. The purpose of the paper** is to decrypt the social and communicative phenomenon of broadcasting and receiving TV series through online channels. In particular, the paper aims to "examine the essential aspects of the production, distribution and consumption of series films, from the perspective of the dichotomy between linear and digital television" (Boca, 2018: 4). The purpose of the research as a whole transpires both from the broad and highly documented theoretical exposition, and from each of the two studies - the first, exploring the recurrent narrative patterns in the television series distributed over the last five years, and the second one, analyzing the behaviors of the serial consumers after sequences of binge-watching.

## 2. Objectives of the paper

The main objective of the paper is "exploring recurring narrative patterns in TV series created for digital distribution, but also the relationship between the distribution of series productions through video-on-demand services and binge-watching" (Boca, 2018: 4).

The operational objectives of the research were:

O1. The first operational objective of the research is to examine the narrative differences between linear and digitally distributed productions through VoD services. Within this objective, it is also intended to examine the «recurrent narrative models in the prime-time series (SPT) (Mittell, 2015a, Newman, 2006; Lotz, 2014), respectively, in those that have a duration identifiable with the traditional broadcasting space of 30 minutes in the program grid" (Boca, 2018: 114);

O2. The second operational objective of the research is "to identify behaviors and affects of users in relation to binge-watching as well as the correlations between the different categories of behavior and emotional states related to this phenomenon" (Boca, 2018: 114).

O3. Research aims to identify TV series closely related to binge-watching (Boca, 2018: 114).

## 3. Theoretical approach

The theoretical approach of the paper begins with the presentation of the TV series as a social and communicative phenomenon. The approach is scholastic, almost didactic, the pedantics of communication making the doctoral student explain every term, from the most common, even the *TV series*, to complex terms such as *multi-channel reception*, *post networks*, *narrative mechanisms* and so on. The almost didactical approach is apparent, the theoretical exposures of some syntheses from the literature, making space for some of the author's own comments, some exegesis about the social phenomenon, exegesis which constitute elements of originality of the work. For example, we analyze the structure of a TV series, divided into narrative sequences that are defined as episodes, seasons, etc. The transition to digital content production, according to the author's opinion, produces mutations in the series structure, the magnitude of the narrative conflict and its sequencing, because TV series built for an online priority distribution are not dependent on the TV grids and are accordingly adapted to a *marathon* type of watching (Boca, 2018: 8).

The history of television and TV series is a pretext for extensive analyzes, starting from the principles of serialization in TV production and the business model of producers and distributors. The concept of serialization is explained, from the serial distribution of novels in newspaper pages to television series. The reception of the series is directly related to the consumerism phenomena, specific to postmodernism. The author feels that "a basic feature of postmodernism that theorists emphasize is intertextuality" (Boca, 2018: 17). This feature is specific to series as a media product, which ensures that they receive and have a faithful specific audience. Although the author is right, the phenomenon of series consumption can be viewed aesthetically as a systematic deconstruction of complex narratives, such as classical novels in multiple volumes or art films. The distinction between postmodernism as a cultural current and postmodernity as a civilization stage, whose specificity is the predilection for alternative social models and practices, should be taken into account. From this point of view, of the serialization of cinematic production, the theoretical construction sinks towards a semiotic series approach as hypertext and metatext, in addition to the idea of hyperreality, understood as "*simulation of reality in the media, perceived by some commentators as more authentic than the reality itself*" (Danesi, 2009).

The author of the paper draws attention to the fact that Video on Demand (VoD) services made available by companies such as Netflix, Hulu or Amazon Prime Video, "maximize this effect by making available to consumers a catalog with a large number of media productions , which they can access whenever they want, in what order they want, on what terminals they want. Thus, the consumption experience becomes a diverse, fragmented, disruptive one, in contrast to the type of linear consumption that traditional television implies" (Boca, 2018: 24). This particular approach to serial consumption is correctly perceived by the author of the paper as being specific to a postmodern approach to cultural consumption, whose particularities are related to fragmentation and diversification, to the uniqueness of the cultural and communication experience.

The author decodes the cultural meanings, but also the marketing, of the two ways of reception of the TV - linear programs, in the case of programs watched according to the TV program grids, and the multilinear, when the reception is done by pre - recording and watching them in the time-frame decided by the receiver (Boca, 2018: 45). An important element, we consider, is the difference between the feeling of solidarity between consumers, what happens in the case of linear reception, when the viewer is aware that he is watching the series in unison with other viewers, and the solitary independence of the receiver that watches the pre-recorded favorite

program. Recovering solidarity through the phenomenon of sharing of meaning, highlighted by the author, talking about binge-watching sessions in order to be able to participate in social networking discussions, is a sensing process and, at the same time, one of virtualization of cultural consumption. In our opinion, the reception of the media product no longer has the aesthetic experience as its sole purpose, but it is a preparation for a virtualizing event of sharing reactions to the cultural product, a process which is in itself a collaborative creativity, able to grasp the emitter in more than the cultural product itself.

The theorization of postmodernism and postmodern culture allows the author of the paper to refer to an interpretative drift of the meaning of *the society of show*, from a society of the generalized, polymorphic, indistinct and inconsistent show, specific to the postmodern reception style, to the one in which the spectator is the co-constructor of the significance of the artistic message, through the comments they post on social networks. The spectator builds his *fan* identity, his fictional identity sometimes crossing the real one, the proof being that the fans of the series are planning marathon watching sessions only to communicate cultural messages derived from receiving the artistic message of the show. What the postmodern receiver understands as a *surrogate of reality*, for the current receiver, it turns into a *virtual reality*. We suggest on this occasion that the description of the reception of the series in the form of video marathon is partly inconsistent with the specificity of the postmodern reception of the artistic act, which is a kaleidoscopic one. The new form of participatory receptivity, in which fans themselves become the creators of meanings of the media, is rather tributary to a transmodern society, of *integral culture*, the fans becoming what H. Ray (1996) in his work *The rise of integral culture*, called cultural artists. The new form of participatory receptivity, in which fans themselves become the creators of meanings of the media, is rather tributary to a transmodern society, of the integral culture, the fans becoming what H. Ray (1996) in his work *The rise of integral culture*, called *cultural artists*.

The work continues with the analysis of television from a postmodern perspective, theorizing its function and role in the construction of the performance society. The presence of the ludicrous in TV productions invites viewers to access this personality side in receiving the media message. Another feature considered postmodern by the author is the pasticheation of classical style or even the avoidance of classical narratives, for "complex narratives come with mutations in conventions specific to traditional genres" (Boca, 2018: 22). As an example, the "postmodern specific narrative technique of the fourth wall transcender" is used, which is

appearing in Netflix's House of Cards or Big Mouth, where the main character addresses directly to the fans.

The participatory perspective of postmodern inspiration can be attributed to a *constructionist* social model of understanding the *fictional reality*, in which the public is present in the dramatic act as a specific contributor with creative attributes without which the fictional message could not make sense in the *virtualization process of the social space* (Sandu, 2016). If the postmodern use of the technique was to stimulate the receptor's participation in the creative act, being related to a deconstruction of the narrative form, we consider that its transmodern approach, which we suggest to the author of the paper to read about, at least as a possible alternative interpretative model, be linked to *the dissolution of the relation between the subject and the object of the fictional construction*, a form of deconstruction-reconstruction of virtual reality, as a multidimensional and transdimensional continuum at the same time.

This additional distinction between the postmodern and the transmodern approach of the artistic act has been suggested to us by the author himself, who aims to give meaning to a multidimensional process of reception of the fictional work, a process in which the receiver's contribution becomes a significant added value, different from the simple *narrative participation*. Of course, the two interpretations are not disjunctive, and fundamentally, after H. Ray, the transmodern perspective does not exclude postmodernism, but submits it to a deconstructive-reconstructive process of identifying *interpretive derivations* of the meanings of key concepts, such as the public, the receiver, the author, the fiction, and even *the reality*.

Postmodernist perspectives behind the narrative construction, such as metatextuality and narrative autoreflexiveness, focusing on personal and private instead of rational and universal, etc. are evoked. The analysis of the postmodern (meta) discursive elements present in the television series allows the identification of these types of cultural production as transmission vectors of postmodern axiology, which is in conjunction with the postmoralistic ethics (Lipovetsky, 1996). These constitutive values of postmodern society are the mistrust in metanarratives and the overcoming of the constraining and unitary empire of the so-called harmonious forms, reconstructed as kaleidoscopic and multifaceted images of a world in full thirst for affirmation of the individual. The narrative coding of the series comes to form the taste of the contributing receiver, to which the cultural product is not only addressed, but which temporarily embraces it in a process of co-constructing the reception. Of course, one could move on to this idea and analyze the behavior of the consumer of video games started

from fictional hypertexts in films or television series that allow for even greater immersion of the receiver in the epic thread of the cultural product. Of course, this approach far exceeds the theme of this research and has been formulated exclusively as an invitation to possible further research by both the author of the paper and, in the spirit of narrative co-building, the recipients of the paper, including with great pleasure and interest also the undersigned.

A series of specific elements of series consumption in the digital age are also brought into discussion, such as "algorithmic rotation" (Uricchio, 2011), total reception democratization, on-demand culture, mediation of the content distribution company at demand on the media market, etc. (Boca, 2018: 58-60). Attention is drawn to the use of data on consumer preferences in the process of influencing the reception of cultural products, which removes the consumer from the traditional pattern of cultural consumption based on aesthetic experience and interpersonal communication. The automatic referral system is, however, doubled by the existence of receiving communities, which restores somewhat the *sense* of the process of selecting the cultural product and, ultimately, of the suggestive and the construction of the social reality through the media (Frunză, 2004).

The author analyzes the particularities of the series' marathon reception as well as the emergence and development of fan communities on the Internet, the trolling phenomena associated with virtual communities, the distortion of the message, etc. (Boca, 2018: 87-90).

According to the author, digital television has become a "democratization of consumption, of expanding access for users" (Boca, 2018: 91) and "new opportunities for aesthetic progress, such as" more complex "stories, or the Netflix strategy to launch all thirteen episodes of a season simultaneously for non-linear consumption" (Newman, 2006: 134). The distinction between classic and digital TV series is made from the perspective of "narrative closure" (Boca, 2018: 92). In the classic series, the story comes to a conclusion at the end of each episode, even if the characters and frames are "recycled" for each episode and series. Conversely, serials have a broader narrative consistency, with the narrative ending after a number of episodes, possibly a whole season. The temporal breaks between the serialized elements are considered a prerequisite for receiving this kind of cultural products. Delivering all of the custom-made content or even launching all episodes in a series simultaneously eliminates this feature of series production.



#### **4. The methodological approach**

From a methodological point of view, it is worth mentioning the use of a methodological mix, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The author has analysed the peculiarities of the reception of the series, especially those distributed through the Netflix network, and how this reception occurs in the virtual communication of the series consumers and in the social networking posts. Content analysis aims to establish thematic maps that allow the identification of behavioral patterns, both those that influence the consumption of serials, and those generated by this consumption.

The first of these two studies is based on content analysis. According to the author, "the data set is composed of information about 372 series with at least one season broadcast or published between 2013 and 2018" (Boca, 2018: 114). Basically, all the prime-time or comedy series that met that time criterion were analyzed (Boca, 2018: 114). The analysis of the 372 films was made using a specific software, which allowed them to be categorized by the types of broadcasts being watched, categories of viewers, etc. Qualitative information was subjected to an inductive coding process (Stuckey, 2015; Thomas, 2006), which sought to associate each "production with a set of conventions on narrative framework, conflict and characters."

The second study was also conducted using the content analysis of "11040 user comments that mention the concept of binge-watching, posted on official Facebook pages of popular series" (Boca, 2018: 114). The selection of the analyzed comments was done with software but also partially manually. It is, however, rather unclear the period of selection of the comments analyzed, as the year 2017 is mentioned as the year in which the data were extracted and then progresses to a date in 2018 as a limit date for analyzing data on Facebook accounts dedicated to series. The analysis is again conducted inductively, by KH Coder.

The proposed methodology is coherent and allows to achieve the research objectives.

#### **5. Appreciation of the results obtained**

In the case of the first research, a structure consisting of semantic categories was built, which was subsequently ranked according to their importance and frequency of occurrence. The qualitative analysis of the data for both researches was doubled by a quantitative one, which took into account the frequency of the emergence of repetitive themes, models and patterns, etc.

The obtained results are true, being from our point of view correctly derived from the data under analysis.

**6. The conceptual and critical apparatus** of the paper are suitable for a thesis in the communication sciences, the concepts with which the author operates are defined, either in the introductory part of the first chapters or during the work, when they are used. The conceptual device is rigorously scientific, and is used in a manner that leaves no room for confusion. The bibliographic device is used in a coherent and convincing manner, being made in the APA style, suitable for research in the field. Basically, the bibliography includes reference works in the field. The information taken from the various bibliographic sources is synthesized by the author, being addressed in a critical manner.

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