Online Programming Realities: 
A Case Study of *House of Cards* and the Perceived Advantages Over Traditional Television

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Abstract
The choice of content and number of technologies that audiences view television with are increasingly expanding in the post-network era, leading those who use the medium to question its definition. In the wake of the Internet, online programming and streaming technologies, the death of television is frequently forecast. Netflix’s 2013 release of their original online production *House of Cards* prompted popular media and trade journals alike to declare a revolution of television that would result in a paradigm shift of current production and viewing practices. *House of Cards* is esteemed for its distribution method and asserted advantages over traditional television by creators and executives surrounding the show, which calls for an examination of the specific practices that are dubbed ‘innovative’, as current television production practices have been put in place for years. The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the claims surrounding the series through production and textual analysis. Second-hand sources are used to gather evidentiary claims surrounding the production, and analyzed using historical poetics analysis with Jason Mittell’s complex television definitions in order to make comparisons of particular elements of the creation, production and distribution of *House of Cards*. Making these areas its starting point, this inquiry provokes larger questions of the future of online television programming in general, and its role in the death of television in particular.

Keywords: *House of Cards*, Netflix, television serial, complex television, historical poetics, creative freedom, distribution, production, creation, production studies, revolutionary, post-network era
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1. Introduction

What audiences used to be able to view on television a couple of decades ago was very limited compared to the vast array of content people can view television on today. Individuals have also obtained ever-growing levels of control over how, when, and where they consume media, due to the rise of new technologies (Napoli 2010: 1). This notion of viewing television at the time, place, and with the device of one’s choosing prompts scholars and audiences alike to wonder: What is television? Is it defined by the box in the living room? Is it defined by the types of programming available or the schedule of the program? If a video can be viewed at any time or place, with the method of one’s choosing, is it television? In the wake of the Internet and new streaming devices, the definition of the medium has become increasingly ambiguous.

Now in our era of digital convergence among technologies and cultural forms, there is more television than ever (Thompson 2013: 4). It is certainly a favorite form of entertainment; on average, Americans watch more than five hours of television per day (Romano 2013). Audiences have diverse viewing contexts, which makes television a multifaceted cultural practice in terms of the range of screens and places it is watched, live broadcasts to decades old programming, and online streaming (Thompson 2013: 6). According to Nielson data, in the last five years, the number of households in the United States that use non-traditional television (when television is viewed on anything but the television set) has more than doubled from 2,010,000 in 2007 to 5,010,0001 in 2013. Consumers have changed the ways in which they use television, and the television industry has had to adapt and evolve in the wake of these changes, just as radio had to fundamentally redefine itself when television rose in popularity (Lotz 2007:30) It appears the medium is in this stage of redefinition, but the parameters are increasingly diminishing.

During the beginning of the twenty-first century, the death of television was widely discussed across the trade and popular press (Lotz 2009: 25). New technologies like streaming services and the plethora of mobile screens one could watch television on pushed the industry to live in ‘cord-cutting’ fear; a concern that audiences will abandon television for the Internet as new types content become available for streaming and download (McMillan 2013). While viewing habits have been altered by new technologies and more content, these viewpoints stem from the idea that online video content is inherently different from television as a whole (ibid.).

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1 This number is out of about 132.5 million homes, which was the number of households in the U.S. at the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau mark: http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html
The general concern in the television industry is that the Internet is viewed as newer, better, and faster when it comes to online video possibilities and streaming, though the common trend is that many of the new medias and television technologies that we interact with are ones that we integrate into our lives alongside the older, familiar and pleasurable uses of television we’ve known for so long. A medium might fade and flow in its popularity, but it seldom disappears altogether (Thompson 2013: 5). If the growing concern is the effect of the Internet on traditional television, then the question to answer is how much of an impact it really has. This is precisely why I aim to explore the online video streaming service Netflix\(^2\) and their declarations of revolutionizing television as-we-know-it through both the creation and production freedoms, and online distribution strategy with the television series *House of Cards*.

1.1 The *House of Cards* and Netflix Buzz

The phenomenon of online video distribution is not new. For instance, renowned director and writer Joss Whedon produced the award-winning miniseries *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008) exclusively for internet distribution via Hulu\(^3\), and users have been publishing videos online since 2005 on the popular video sharing site YouTube (Mittell 2013; Hopkins 2006). While these examples of online content contribute to the cord-cutting fear of the twenty-first century, Netflix has gained much publicity in the trade and popular press for the *House of Cards* series causing a revolution of television. Netflix’s production and online distribution models introduced with *House of Cards* are claimed to circumvent the parameters of contemporary commercial television.

This buzz began when the premier of the new Netflix-produced original program *House of Cards* was released on the streaming site on February 1, 2013. Arguably the most high-profile series in Netflix’s venture into original programming, Netflix’s Chief Executive Reed Hastings stated in an interview that “we’re on the cusp of something that will change television forever…our view is that over the next couple of years as Internet TV really grows, people will look back and say that this was the turning point” (Edwards 2013). Discussion on television websites followed suit. Proposals that the show would revolutionize the TV entertainment

\(^2\) Netflix is a membership-only video streaming website offered in many countries, with a DVD-by-mail service in the U.S.. It can be accessed at: http://www.netflix.com.

\(^3\) Hulu is a website that offers on-demand streaming of video content, including TV shows. It can be accessed (in the Unites States only) at: http://www.hulu.com.
industry, and subsequently, viewing practices, while trying to answer the larger question, ‘What is television today?’ existed on blogs, entertainment magazine websites, trade publications and elsewhere (Kornhaber 2014). Revolutionary claims were mainly focused on the way that Netflix released the series; the membership-only site released all thirteen episodes of the first season at one time (Bond 2013).

This discourse around the release pattern and its consequences on traditional television of this particular series is curious, as this was not the first time Netflix released all episodes of a season at one time. *Lilyhammer*, a Norwegian series about a New York gangster, first premiered in Norway on NRK1 on January 25th 2012⁴, and twelve days later all eight episodes of the first season were released on Netflix. Netflix released this show one full year before *House of Cards* was released (Greene 2013). Though it was the first time that Netflix offered exclusive content on their site, Netflix did not produce *Lilyhammer* (ibid.). Discussions seemed to focus on *House of Cards* being the groundbreaking series that drives a revolution, which leads the researcher to consider that the concept of revolutionary television might have more to do with the show than simply the distribution specifics. In order for a practice to be revolutionary, it should be distinct from existing television practices.

There were claims by corporate leaders at Netflix and producers of the show that it would reinvent contemporary television in terms of production, creation and distribution. Hastings comments on this in an interview, stating that *House of Cards* is the “turning point” for a new era of television in original online programming, and that Netflix could grow to as many as 90 million subscribers over the next two decades (it currently has 33.1 million U.S. subscribers) (Edwards 2013; NewsMax 2014). Beau Willimon, the showrunner⁵ for *House of Cards*, says that the metastory surrounding the show is that Netflix is changing everything about how audiences watch television, or everything they once referenced as ‘television’ (Sternbergh 2014). These claims are very significant; the executives are ultimately proposing a new era of television. They are prophesizing the takeover of original online programming and the Netflix format while traditional television fades to the background.

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⁵ The showrunner is an unofficial title used to denote the position of the overseer of a series whom approves the production and creative content of a television program. They are the leader, technician, author and perhaps the creator of a series (Banks 2013: 244-45; Mittell 2013).
The future of online programming cannot be predicted, nor Netflix and its growth prospects, but the current success of *House of Cards* is undeniable. The first season was nominated for nine, and won three Emmy awards, including an Outstanding Directing for a Drama Series to David Fincher for the first episode: “Chapter One”\(^6\). It was also nominated for four Golden Globes, with a win for actress Robin Wright for Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Drama Series\(^7\) (O’Connell 2014). Netflix’s Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos reported that *House of Cards* was the most-watched streaming title on Netflix as of February 12, 2013, eleven days after it’s release (Bond 2013). The success continued with the second season of *House of Cards*, which premiered on Friday, February 14, 2014. About two percent of Netflix subscribers in the U.S. watched all thirteen episodes over the release weekend, and four times as many people watched at least one episode of the show compared to the opening weekend of the first season (Wallenstein 2014). The show was just signed on for a third season (O’Connell 2014).

While *House of Cards* seems to be very successful, these fruitful statistics and facts do not prove that *House of Cards* instigates a new era of television. But the claims made by the creators, the production company and Netflix executives that television will be revolutionized by means of the unique production, creation and distribution practices specific to the show leaves audience members and the television industry alike to wonder just how significant original online production and streaming is, and if we are indeed on the brink of a new era of television. It is necessary to analytically look at these claims made by those who surround the series in order to investigate whether the show itself and its practices are innovative, since current television production practices have been put in place for years, and new technologies and media forms tend to find their place alongside forms that already exist (Thompson 2013: 5).

1.2 Aim and Research Questions
The aim of this thesis is to examine the creation, production and distribution specifics surrounding *House of Cards* in relation to current commercial television, in order to specifically compare the opinions and proposed benefits of online streaming and either reaffirm or cast doubt on them. The execution of this analysis could uncover significant industrial practices or

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\(^7\) Robin Wright’s list of awards: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000705/awards?ref_=nm_awd.
possibilities specific to original online production and streaming as well as offset the theory that ‘the television is dying’.

The research questions are as follows:

1) To what extent does *House of Cards* fulfill the claims of revolutionary television made by the creators and executives surrounding the series?
2) What are the roles of the production team of *House of Cards*, which are distinctive to the series?
3) How has the distributive platform and production freedoms of *House of Cards* allowed specific narrative opportunities to materialize in creating the series?
4) In which ways does the series depart from Mittell’s Complex TV definitions which are novel elements of creation, production or distribution that do not exist in traditional television?

These questions will be researched using production studies and textual analysis that is compared with Mittell’s Complex Television⁸ and historical poetics⁹. A production study requires the researcher to examine the context of the television series production, while textual analysis can uncover details about the narrative in terms of innovation. Comparing the series using historical poetics and complex television provides a backdrop to current television practices and historical references. This is necessary because in order to be revolutionary, *House of Cards* must deviate from past and current TV practices.

We could be on the verge of a new mode of television programming, and it is possible that online production and distribution will continue to grow. I believe that I can shed light on the authenticity of the asserted advantages of original programming and distribution by examining *House of Cards*. While I focus on U.S. television in context and in the case study,

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⁸ Complex TV is a new storytelling mode, and the result of a shift in viewing, production and distribution habits over the past couple of decades. Its defining characteristic is its unconventionality against traditional television practices. This concept will be explained further in the Theoretical Background and Literature Review section.
⁹ Historical poetics is an analysis technique that is used to examine formal developments within a specific historical context of production, circulation and reception in order to uncover the historical forces that made aspects of a practices or conventions currently possible.
American television carries a pervasive reach across the globe\textsuperscript{10}, and I hope that international readers, media studies academics, television enthusiasts, and audiences find this work both motivating and beneficial in studying the positive and negative consequences that arise with online programming.

The structure of the thesis goes as follows: The following section provides a background of U.S. television context pertinent to the \textit{House of Cards} case study. Next there will be a theoretical background and literature review, which provide an overview of previous production studies and specific theories. Then are the materials and method sections, which introduce \textit{House of Cards} and second-hand sources as materials for research, and the methods of analysis with which the material will be utilized when analyzing \textit{House of Cards}. The analysis is next, in which I attempt to answer my research questions to the fullest extent by analyzing the program and its distribution, production and creation. I conclude with a summary that restates the findings, limitations and ways of improving the study and suggestions for future studies that can use this one as a point of departure, as well as my definition of television following this case study.

2. Background
This section is added in order to inform the reader of relevant contexts of television today, to provide a backdrop under which the analysis is carried out. Understanding changes in the television industry and practices are of vital importance in considering \textit{House of Cards} as an innovative series that departs from current television conventions.

2.1 Audiences in Context
Since the 1990s, network television has no longer dominated the public’s attention (Havick 2000). Content on television networks previous to this decade was understood as a mass medium that was capable of reaching a broad, heterogeneous audience and spoke to the culture as a whole (Lotz 2007: 2). This is no longer the norm in the United States.

Now, television technologies like cable and the Internet continue to expand the capability to deliver content and user access to it. Technologies provide audiences with more choice and

\textsuperscript{10} While I speak of U.S. television historically, and in current production practices, the reader should be aware that Netflix is also available in 41 countries. While \textit{House of Cards} is produced in the U.S., it is distributed internationally.
control in terms of how they consume their choice of media. These phenomena contribute to the continued disintegration of traditional mass audiences (Napoli 2010: 5, 54). Few media now target a heterogeneous audience; niche audience targeting has become an operational standard in magazines, music, film, and television (Lotz 2009:35). Mass to niche audience targeting has caused alterations in production processes and practices involved in the creation and distribution of television. This includes how producers make television programs, how the networks finance them, and how audiences access them. All of these changes create new ways of using television and challenge the basic understanding of the medium, as reflected upon in the introduction (Lotz 2007:3). For instance, when audiences access *House of Cards* on Netflix via an iPhone, the basic understanding of the definition of television is questioned. The user determines whether it is the length of episode, the programming schedule, the viewing screen, and so on that define the medium.

2.2 Evolution of the Television Serial

2.2.1 Episodic Storytelling

Episodic television and serial television modes of storytelling can be understood with the analogy of a book of short stories versus a novel with chapters, respectively (O'Sullivan 2013: 65; Mittell 2011). Episodic storytelling is also known as the anthology format; each episodic narrative is typically thirty minutes to one hour in length, and provides a beginning, middle, and end arc that are contained within one episode, meaning that each episode produces a self-contained story that has no relation to the preceding or succeeding episodes (O'Sullivan 2013: 67; Mittell 2013). Viewers are not required to have the plot knowledge of a previously broadcasted episode in order to understand a subsequent episode or season, as there are not storylines or plots that are carried over.

Episodically structured storytelling dominates the history of television programming, and this format typically offered little to no narrative or character complexity, such as jumbled chronology and subjective narration (Lotz 2013: 22; Mittell 2013). These Golden Age\(^\text{11}\) shows were mainly concerned with the intersections of character and society (Romano 2013). Though this mode of storytelling is seen as more simplistic in structure and narration, the reason that

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\(^{11}\) The Golden Age of Television in the United States began in the 1940s and ended in the late 1950s to early 1960s. It falls under the Network Era of television, discussed in the Theoretical Background and Literature Review.
episodic television was so popular (and the rise in the serial, aside from the soap opera, dampened), was that it was the most economically viable mode of storytelling (ibid.; Mittell 2013). The vast majority of 20th century television was episodic because it could air one installment at a time, in no particular order, without losing viewers since each episode is contained like a short story (Romano 2013). Episodic series are the ‘cash cow’ for television, with reruns and syndication possibilities across networks. If a viewer missed an episode, they could still comprehend the next episode of the show because it is a new story.

2.2.2 The Soap Opera
Because network-era television avoided risks on behalf of economic stability, and sought to gain profit through the conventional narrative genre norms of episodic sitcoms and dramas, serial narratives were confined to the soap opera (Mittell 2013). Soap operas and serials are the opposite of this anthology format, and soap conventions that were set in the network era have both carried over to current soap opera storytelling and spawned serial storytelling formats. Soap operas are serial melodramas that deal with the lives of multiple characters, usually with very emotional relationships. This form of narration was carried over from radio soaps, and the continuous narrative stream means that the soap opera is a never-ending story. Though this structure required committed viewing, it worked for soap opera shows in a couple of ways. First, it is economically viable because it is less expensive for a network to use the same series for a long period of time (Bowles 2000). Each series contains a plethora of characters and it is considered a storytelling convention that characters frequently change; they die off, are replaced or return (Mittell 2013). This aspect of production allows for the same basic storyline; no changes need to be made due to external ramifications of the actors’ lives (ibid).

Second, soap operas very rarely go “on location” to shoot; in terms of expenses it is profitable to be able to use the same sets. Soap operas are aired more than once a week; a new episode is usually rerun each weekday, so this structures a habitual daytime television routine that gains a committed audience (Bowles 2000). The economic advantages and audience following make the soap opera profitable. House of Cards is a serialized drama that, like every other current serial, shares its roots in the soap opera. This connects to historical poetics in that

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12 The network era of television refers to the 1940s through the 1970s, when three networks dominated the television industry. This is discussed further under the Theoretical Background and Literature Review.

current forms of media evolve from older forms, and one can examine the past contexts to establish how these systems exist today.

2.2.3 The Television Serial
Serialized television shows, referred to in current complex television as long-arc serials, are a form of narrative structure in which elements and pieces of information from one episode carry over to the next, just like the chapters in a novel build on each other (chapters in a novel must be read sequentially for narrative comprehension, just as episodes must be watched in order to understand a serial show). Serialized narratives follow a particular set of characters within a storyworld and establish their own sense of temporality and narrative conventions (Romano 2013; Mittell 2013). While episodic shows choose to ignore previous events and accumulation of events between episodes, over a season or across multiple seasons, this is what defines the long-arc serial today. This structure, therefore, requires committed, sequential viewing (Mittell 2013; Gillian 2011: 136).

Installments are aired once per week, sometimes with reruns during the week, and one season usually consists of twelve to thirteen episodes. Maintaining a consistent and committed audience is difficult due to this broadcasting constraint, but has been made easier with new technologies like TiVo recording systems and On-Demand features (Mittell 2013). The complex television serial is a 21st century phenomenon, and today’s complex narratives can be very different from their 20th century predecessors in narrative and character complexity. Complex narratives frequently disrupt expectations of serial momentum and narrative convention (O’Sullivan 2013: 69). Now, the complex serialized drama has been declared the signature American art form of the early twenty-first century (Romano 2013).

2.3 HBO’s Influence and ‘Quality Television’
Television scholars and television creators alike frequently mention the Home Box Office (HBO) network as the instigator of the evolution of the serial narrative and shift in the medium’s cultural status when it broke cable and satellite network conventions set prior to the 1990s (O’Sullivan 2013: 65; Mittell 2013). Starting with the series Oz (1997-2003) and followed by (most notably) The Sopranos (1999-2007) and The Wire (2002-2008), HBO continued producing one serialized drama after another, gaining critical buzz and acclaim for it’s brand of quality television that the
early series established (Romano 2013; Gillian 2011: 135). Audiences viewed HBO as the mecca of premium content and quality drama series, which entails “large ensemble casts in well-crafted multilayered narratives that explore a side of American society not found in more formulaic fare” (Gillian 2011: 135). While twentieth century episodic narratives and soap operas marketed continuity and progression as their defining features, these HBO serials are examples of the resistance to this (O’Sullivan 2013: 65). As HBO built its reputation on these narratively complex serials, cable and broadcast channels followed suit. ABC’s Lost (2004-2010) and AMC’s Mad Men (2007-present) are prime examples of long-arc serials that challenged the notions of what genres and formats could occupy on the broadcast networks; the long-arc serialized stories, giant casts and genre emphasis were not large components of 20th century television (Gillian 2011: 136).

These facets of the serial narrative deemed it ‘quality television’ as opposed to their less-complex television counterparts. Roberta Pearson defines ‘quality television’ as “opposition to the putatively gutless mainstream” (Pearson 2011: 112). While this is the overarching feature of quality television, the specific definition remains elusive, yet includes indicators of origin, the production source, and the relation to other programs and politics (Geraghty 2003: 26)\textsuperscript{14}.

2.4 Netflix

Netflix, Inc. is an American publically traded company that is currently the world’s largest online video subscription service, serving a total of forty-one countries, and the largest DVD-by-mail service in the United States (Chatterjee 2014). It is the leading streaming site in market shares compared to Google Inc.’s YouTube, Hulu and Amazon.com Inc (ibid.). Since Reed Hastings founded the company in 1997 it has grown substantially (Riley 2008). As of mid-March of 2013, Netflix had 33 million subscribers total, and 27.2 of them from the U.S. (The Week 2013; Edwards 2013). These numbers have changed to 40.4 million and 33.1 million, respectively, as of January 2014 (NewsMax 2014). To gain access to the content a membership is required, and after the first free month subscribers pay a standard monthly fee to access a plethora of films and television online.

\textsuperscript{14}Christine Geraghty provides more literature on judging a television drama as ‘quality’, not definitions of it but a framework for determining ‘quality’ in programming (Geraghty 2003: 25-43).
While there are other online competitors like Amazon, Hulu, Redbox Instant by Verizon, and network channels that have expanded to offering content to subscribers online like on HBO Go and Showtime Anytime, Netflix remains the number one largest competitor in the Internet television market (Edwards 2013). As I have already described, the amount of publicity they have gotten for the high-profile show *House of Cards* and subsequent online original series demands that attention be paid to the proposed benefits of their online programming.

3. *Theoretical Background and Literature Review*

3.1 Television Studies as an Academic Field

The glamour of television is celebrated daily in the U.S. popular press, and in the past couple of decades the rise in television criticism on popular online websites has grown tremendously (Holland 1997: 3). Despite this rise, television studies as an academic field features far less criticism on specific programs in comparison to literary studies, film studies, art history and music. While the study of television in the U.S. as an academic object has evolved substantially in the past thirty years since it first emerged, contemporary scholars who study the production processes of Hollywood have relatively few paradigms to guide them in their analysis (Lotz 2009: 34; Sullivan 2009: 39). Most of the preceding approaches in television studies emphasized context over text, so the critical analysis of specific programs was not held to the same standard of importance as understanding the industrial regulations and audience reception contexts of the time periods in which they were studied (Thompson 2013: 3).

Television is an certain and inescapable aspect of American culture, therefore taking the time to critically analyze programming and television industry changes is an essential process and it is of crucial interest to those who study the medium (Thompson 2013: 3-4; Lotz 2007:4). Television as a digital medium is a significant shift in its cultural form, which requires new ways of thinking about and studying it (Bennet 2011: 5). Understanding these shifts is applicable to not only those who study media, but to all who watch television (Lotz 2007: 4). This is why *House of Cards* is of interest to those concerned over the impact of online programming on current television. To logically examine the distribution, production and creation specifics of the series is to understand its proposed benefits in a new way.

15 *Bad Samaritans* (March 2013), *Hemlock Grove* (April 2013), season four of *Arrested Development* (May 2013) and *Orange is the New Black* (July 2013) are all subsequent original online television series released exclusively on Netflix. Release dates were retrieved from http://www.imdb.com.
3.2 Cultural Review of Television

Historically, television has been viewed as a simplistic and sub-par pastime in the discussion of what is culturally valued in the United States. The wave of critics of mass culture of the 1940s and 1950s frequently commented on the new technology of television, and made references to the popularity of the daily soap in particular. The label of soap opera became quite denigrated when these critics shared an opinion of the genre as culturally lowbrow (Bowles 2000). In referencing TV content of the 1950s, many critics attribute this genre to evidence a general cultural decline and contribution to a ‘climate of opinion’ in which other cultural artifacts were similarly dismissed to a lowbrow culture (Klinger 1994: 83). Hence, the previously discussed importance of the soap opera to the roots of the current television serial is overlooked (Bowles 2000).

This cultural criticism relating to television carried on to the 1960s. FCC Chairman Newton Minnow gave a speech titled, “Television and the Public Interest”, and focused on U.S. television content existing in a ‘vast wasteland’ in which programming was mind numbing and only mildly entertaining. He stated that it is the duty of those who work and participate in television to have respect for American culture and produce programming of higher quality. He calls for content that expands the horizons of viewers and provides stimulation\(^\text{16}\). This notion of television as a lesser cultural medium is still relevant in discourse today\(^\text{17}\). Despite these viewpoints on cultural value, television is a deeply integrated part of U.S. culture and is a popular pastime. There is a difference between criticism and evaluation, and deeming a medium culturally lowbrow is evaluative. I do not intend to evaluate *House of Cards*, rather, provide a critical analysis to ultimately shed light on online programming’s possible impact on traditional television.

3.3 Television Criticism

Television criticism seeks to understand and explain television, whether it seems simple or complex at first glance (Thompson 2013: 6-7). Media scholars try to understand the

\(^{16}\) The speech can be found here, published on a documents reference website: http://www.terramedia.co.uk/reference/documents/vast_wasteland.htm.

\(^{17}\) For example, showrunner David Chase of *The Sopranos* had a long career in network television, yet loathed and despised TV programs. He dismissed the medium and favored cinema: “I don’t watch television. Not a single other show. Just *The Sopranos*. I much prefer to go to the movies” (Pearson 2011: 113). This viewpoint also reflects HBO’s branding of film-like quality television series production, discussed later.
programming they may encounter in a variety of contexts. The goal of any form of criticism is to provide an insight into a text, not to proclaim a singular “correct” interpretation (ibid., 6). There is no absolute correct interpretation of television, and television criticism is more focused on the internal and external implications of a text than an evaluation of whether it is “good” or “bad” (Mittell 2013). I will focus my analysis on television criticism rather than cultural review in examining the internal and external implications of the distribution, production and analysis of *House of Cards*.

3.4 Cultural Production

Cultural producers exist across disciplines of television, beginning with propaganda in the 1930s to the auteur in the 1950s (Mayer 2009: 2). Joseph Turrow’s approach to examining interconnections within production processes provides a framework under which media scholars can consider forces that affect industry behavior and cultural production. His definition of power is a key component to the notion of individual agencies within an industry as culture creators: “the use of resources by one organization in order to gain compliance by another organization” (Lotz 2009: 28). This is a large component of political economy and television, which Leo C. Rosten touches on in his ethnographic study of Hollywood circa 1940.

Rosten is credited for producing not only the first, but also one of the most comprehensive accounts of the social aspects and cultural producers of Hollywood. Interested in social milieu of Hollywood in the 1940s and how this impacted motion picture productions, Rosten spent two years researching the “economic concentration in the motion picture industry” (Sullivan 2009: 41). Through his study, Rosten answers the question of why academics should focus on something as “ephemeral and inconsequential” as the movies: First, they are foolishly adored by the masses, and second, their messages carry a potentially powerful influence (ibid., 43). Though the study was published a long time ago, Rosten’s central insight is a factor that applies to the film and television industry today: Hollywood is a dynamic social system, which contains “status relationships, hierarchies, unrest and conflict, and unique individual personalities” (ibid., 45). The political economy perspective in his study naturally surfaced while examining these social relationships, as economic factors of the industry are interwoven into the web of production practices (ibid., 47).
3.5 Political Economy and Television

David Hesmondhalgh suggests that ‘political economy’ has been used as a lazy synonym for the studies of media production or media industry studies (Gray 2012: 95). While this categorization of production studies as political economy overshadows some important understandings of what political economy means in production, the concept can be understood in different ways (ibid.). Douglas Kellner, who roots his understanding of political economy in cultural studies, states his view of political economy within television as the fact that “production, distribution and reception of culture take place within a specific economic and political system”, and this system constitutes of “relations between the state, the economy, social institutions and practices, culture, and organizations” (ibid.). Most scholars drawing from this perspective include consideration of texts, specific contexts of production, and other cultural aspects of political economy when studying television industries (ibid., 96). Overall, facets of political economy are intertwined in every aspect of television production studies, and this must be kept in mind when analyzing a text: the United States television industry is a business.

Production and distribution of a series means expensive equipment, programming that costs millions, and licenses from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Broadcasters must comply with government regulations as far as the content that can be shown on television (Havick 2000: 278). Budgets and complying with government regulations are examples of direct links to economic constraints within television.

Economics also have a direct affect on programming and content. While it used to be economically viable to create programming that the mass audience would find appealing (like the episodic programs that could be syndicated and the low-budget static soap operas), in the post-network era the landscape of American television has changed. Complex serial storytelling can succeed both creatively and economically, while the older, conventional, formulaic approach to storytelling is viewed as a commercial failure, since it seems audiences increasingly crave complex serial narratives as seen by the growth of the genre (Mittell 2013).

Television, like other industries, is not exempt from supply and demand. Audiences, as well as those working within television, are integrated into the economics of the industries, as institutional needs and discourses shape audiences and program creators produce content with

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18The post-network era is a term for the current era of television, which began in the mid-2000s. This is explained further in Lot’z Post-Network Era section.
those audiences in mind (Napoli 2010: 4; Mayer 2009: 2). Hence, audiences and creators, are connected to the political economics of monetary goals and production aims that exist within the television industry.

Today, networks demand “high-concept, high-profile, multi-platform ‘TV Blockbusters’ that produce subsidiary revenues, take on merchandising opportunities and create multiple spin-offs that include digital content and promotions for the web…this is the new post-network TV work environment” (Mann 2009: 99). Within this environment, networks’ heightened demands are placed on writer-producers to create this type of film-like ‘TV Blockbuster’ and successful entertainment (ibid., 100). It would seem that the creative team and executives surrounding *House of Cards* are not exempt from these political economy parameters, as they are part of the American television industry. While I, like Rosten, am not directly studying political economics and television, due to the fact that these factors are intertwined into the distribution, production and creation contexts of Hollywood, I shall keep this in mind in the analysis of *House of Cards*.

### 3.6 Lotz’s Post-Network Era

Amanda Lotz provides a very insightful timeline of the U.S. television industry conventions. Timelines of television are in fact theories; many scholars have differing opinions on the exact dates from when one period ends and another begins, and the labels for those periods, but the majority agree, that there are three distinct areas of television history. The three overall periods are based on central themes: industry structure, audience targeting, and channel availability. The collection of industrial norms leads to particular viewer experiences and facilitates a particular range of programming content (Lotz 2007: 12).

Roberta Pearson mentions an important insight in creating a historical timeline: “We must be aware of the dangers of a teleological perspective that posits a linear historical process with clear demarcations between eras….useful as they may be, periodization cannot contain history’s multiple complexities and contradictions, which can be fully understood only through a detailed analysis of the historical archive” (Pearson 2011: 107). Pearson describes a timeline of television eras, labeled I, II and III. Though the her and Lotz agree on definitions of the area as far as channel scarcity and abundance, and broad and narrowcasting of audiences, Pearson closely focuses on genre and audience studies in each era (ibid.). Lotz gives a broader overview of the eras, and her labels and concept of the post-network era are pertinent to this study.
From the first U.S. television broadcast in the 1940s through the 1970s, dubbed the ‘Golden Age of Television’ by television studies authors and enthusiasts, and specifically the ‘Network Era’ by Lotz, network era conventions were put in place with the Big Three networks in charge: NBC, CBS and ABC. This non-portable, domestic medium offered viewers little choice of programming options (Romano 2013; Lotz 2007: 9-11).

New technologies like the VCR and cable television expanded viewer choice and control beginning in the 1980s, and producers adjusted government regulations on networks that were forced to surrender some control over program creation, leading to the ‘Multi-Channel Transition Era’ (Lotz 2007: 11-12). This expansion of choice led audiences to become increasingly more isolated, which in turn led producers to the practice of narrowcasting, a norm for television production today (ibid., 14).

Lotz states that the ‘Post-Network Era’, our current television situation, began with a break in the distribution bottleneck of the network and multi-channel transition eras around 2004. The industry had to shift their stance from an aversion to new technologies and making an effort to stop change, to accepting change and adjusting the industry (ibid., 20). This signifies a dramatic shift from the dominant network-era experience of TV, to a post-network one which consists of more viewer control over when, where and how to watch a plethora of different programs. Viewer choice and control only continues to expand in the post-network era. Lotz notes that it does not mean an end of networks, but erosion of their control over how viewers watch (ibid., 15).

Content is increasingly made available beyond the network platform, on the Internet and with video streaming services. Lotz states that while features of a post-network era have become more apparent, such an era will be fully in place only once choice is not longer limited to program schedules and the majority of viewers freely use the opportunities new technologies and industrial practices make available (ibid., 19). The post-network era allows viewers to choose among programs produced in any decade, created by both amateurs and professionals, and allows viewing of this programming at a place and time of an audience member’s choosing: at home on a TV set, a computer screen or a portable device (ibid.). While the previous

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19 Narrowcasting, also known as niche-targeting, is a convention in television production in which a certain program is targeted toward a small, distinct audience population.

20 Timeshifting and placeshifting are terms used to refer to the ability of an audience member to watch a certain program at the time and place of their choosing, respectively. Both of these features are made easier and more available via streaming and mobile technologies (Gillian 2011:135-137).
broadcasting eras were nation-as-audience, the post-network era is a nation-of-audiences (Boddy 2011: 80). Since the case study is an online production that is not on a current television network, *House of Cards* is situated within Lotz’s post-network era concept. Therefore this theory is taken with the researcher in the reflection of *House of Cards* and the current state of television following the analysis.

3.7 Mittell’s Complex TV

Complex television compliments Lotz’s post-network era definition; this mode of storytelling is situated within the current era of post-network television. Jason Mittell is a notable film and television scholar with many well-known and staple publications about the U.S. television industry. In his book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling*, he explores different aspects of what he refers to as complex television, which is the result of television and industrial practices that have undergone a significant shift in the past fifteen years. “Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted, leading to a new mode of television storytelling that I term ‘Complex Television’” (Mittell 2013). This new mode is not uniform and convention-driven like the episodic and serial soap opera of the past; complex television’s most defining characteristic is its unconventionality (ibid.). Mittell examines complex storytelling practices in Authorship, Beginnings, Character, Comprehension, Evaluation, Orienting Paratexts, Serial Melodrama, Transmedia Storytelling and Endings categories. Complex television practices within these categories will be used to compare *House of Cards* conventions to current television programming, in order to see if they are groundbreaking. This is explained further in the Method section.

3.7.1 Historical Poetics

Poetics builds on a model that emerged in literary and film studies, and can be defined as a focus on the way texts make meaning (ibid.). In the realm of film studies, historical poetics is a technique of analysis popularized by David Bordwell, who analyzes formal elements alongside a historical context of production, circulation and reception to examine how advances and particular norms exist (ibid.). Its basis is that innovations in media are the outcome of many

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historical forces that transform the norms of any creative practice (ibid.). In other words, the researcher is able to analyze a current aspect of a production within its historical context in order to conclude its present existence. Mittell states that innovations, especially in narrative and industry norms, are not visionary breakthroughs, but products of the evolution of television (ibid). This is a key concept to keep in mind in the analysis of any text.

Mittell utilizes historical poetics analysis to explore the rise of complex television storytelling practices, which are enabled by and helped transform the industrial, technological and reception contexts of television in the 1990s and 2000s (ibid.). He examines many different aspects of television in his book, including audience reception, fans, technology, authorship, narrative, distribution, creation of beginnings, characters, and viewing practices. I will focus on distribution, production and creation facets of the series House of Cards. Mittell notes that while the complex storytelling mode represents neither the majority of television nor its most popular programs, overall, the widespread number of current serial programs work against conventional storytelling practices and use an innovative cluster of techniques (within the aforementioned categories), which justifies his poetic analysis of complex television (ibid.). Poetics is not interpretation or cultural power. The focus of my analysis is understanding the details surrounding how House of Cards is constructed, not the cultural impact or interpretation of it, though these aspects surface when the analysis is carried out and are reflected upon in the summary.

4. Materials
4.1 House of Cards
Netflix released the entire first season of the show on their website, which is available to those with memberships, on February 1, 2013. A common blog, article and trade publication headline in February of 2013 read something like: “Netflix aims to change television forever with the remake of BBC political thriller House of Cards” (The Week 2013). I have chosen this program over other Netflix original programming because its status is significant. House of Cards is the first series Netflix undertook for their foray into original programming, and in popular media and trade journals, the buzz around its release pattern and whether original online

22 Other articles proclaim a change in current television, including Edwards (2013), Kornhaber (2014), Levin (2013), Romano (2013), Smith (2013), and others, can be found in the references.
programming would change television as-we-know-it was compelling. The fact that House of Cards was dubbed the revolutionary series is the reason why it is important that this series and its creation, production and distribution be studied.

Netflix teamed up with production company Media Rights Capital (MRC) and Trigger Street Productions23 to fund the series. MRC is an established production company, and has produced well-known films like Ted and Elysium (Shaw 2014). The series is based on the BBC series, also called House of Cards (1990), directed by Andrew Davies, which was adapted from the first book of a trilogy (also by the same name) written by Michael Dobbs in 1989 (Baldwin 2013). Beau Willimon, the showrunner of House of Cards, is credited with the screenplay adaption of the original series (Pierce 2013).

House of Cards is a political drama set in Washington, D.C. The major plot focuses on the main character, Francis Underwood (played by actor Kevin Spacey), the House majority whip and congressman of South Carolina, who is passed over for Secretary of State in the first episode, and subsequently carries out his plan for revenge on those who crossed him in order to move up the political ladder.

Underwood, played by actor Kevin Spacey, is a dynamic, manipulative, bloodthirsty and power-hungry corrupt politician with amoral principals that he is faithfully devoted to. Robin Wright plays his wife, Claire Underwood, who runs the Clean Water Initiative charity organization. Claire is equally driven by power and has no problem with being deceitful and using her organization for influence to obtain success for herself and her husband. The couple is ruthless and backstabbing, unfaithful and designed to be enthralling to watch on the screen. Specifics of the narrative complexities of the show fall under the category of creation, and will be carried out in the analysis section of this thesis.

I must note, that it is not fruitful to compare House of Cards with solely the BBC series from which it is remade, nor any single program from the network-era or the multi-channel transition era in order for the realities of distribution, production and creation to surface. First, British television operates with a different set of production practices and industry norms than Hollywood. Typically, television shows in Britain operate as short-run series, with six to eight episodes in one season. Because producers know this, there is a ‘definite end’. In contrast,

23 Trigger Street Productions is founded by Kevin Spacey and Dana Brunetti, executive producers of House of Cards. More information can be found at: http://triggerstreet.com/about.
American television typically operates through the ‘infinite middle’ model, where one season usually has double the amount of episodes and it must be written as the show succeeds (Becker 2013: 30).

The political economies of the industrial practices are very different as well. While U.S. television is considered a commercial enterprise, British television tends to operate on a public service mandate, and therefore holds different production values and goals\(^{24}\). These different storytelling modes and industrial practices in Britain are of little help when utilizing historical poetics to analyze the components surrounding this show, as historical poetics entails the examining of a certain context in history to explain why qualities of television currently exist the way they are. This is also why it cannot simply be compared to one previous series from the U.S. In any given scholarly text about a specific program in television history, many different series are mentioned to provide a comprehensive account of the text in question. Choosing one program does not strengthen the case study in this situation, but hinders possible results, as there could be divergences in the production, creation and distribution elements in *House of Cards* that are innovative compared to one program, but not others. Many texts must be included in order to prove that qualities of *House of Cards* are, or are not, revolutionary today.

4.2 Trade Publications

Kenton Wilkinson and Patrick Merle address the use of trade publications\(^{25}\) and business journals as useful tools in media research: “Many media communication researchers will be generally familiar with the growth and influence of companies like Apple and Google, yet few have the time or contacts to keep up with specifics and therefore rely on business news, the trade press, and/or news feeds such as Twitter, to learn such granular details” (Wilkinson 2013: 415-416). As media industries and their practices grow, it is important for academic researchers to stay current with industry developments; second-hand sources are key sources for obtaining up-to-date industry-related information that media and communication researchers utilize regularly (ibid., 416). Meetings and trade shows help a researcher when top-level executives are discussing


\(^{25}\) A trade journal refers to a publication that is targeted to professionals that work within an industry or business (such as television), and they are essential for producing well-informed research in many media fields (Wilkinson 2013: 417).
the evolution of their businesses like retrieving opinions about where television is heading, and trade publications have access to and report on these occasions (Lotz 2009: 34).

Research on news reporting has a deep history in journalism and media studies, and journalism can be compared to the trade press in terms of the norms and routines of the business (Wilkinson 2013: 418-421). It is important to take into account the political economics of the trade press when using them. Most trade press is straightforward, as journalists do not want to ‘bite the hand that feeds them’, but it is essential to be aware that, like news articles, second-hand sources remain vulnerable to bias and misinformation since economic interests are held at each press (ibid., 419, 427). Wilkinson provides a study of the use of trade journals and business press in academic publications, and overall, the study concludes the stress of the potential benefits for media researchers studying an industry in the use for business press and trade journals for academic purposes (ibid., 428).

Trade publications are especially helpful in this case study, as it is very difficult to contact top-level executives and producers of such a high profile television show unless journalist-level access is given. Lotz admits that she uses trade publications “to become familiar with the industry, and as a data source for quotations from top industry executives who [she] might not reasonably expect to interview” (Lotz 2009: 34). The use of trade publications, as noted by Wilkinson and Lotz, is common practice among those studying television industries. Trade journals and second-hand materials will be used as sources to obtain quotes and information about House of Cards and the professionals that surround it.

Variety, A.V. Club, Adweek and The Hollywood Reporter are among the second-hand sources from which information is gathered for this study. These initial four trade publications were chosen because they are well-known U.S. television information sources in the industry. However, more trade publications will surface with the research. It is important not to limit the available information about the production to just four sources, as important quotes or data about the production might not exist within these four. Just as House of Cards cannot be compared to one existing series, the information about it cannot be gathered from only a handful of sources.

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26 The difficulty of contacting Netflix’s Public Relations sector for access to information as an academic figure is discussed in the limitations section of this thesis.
5. Methods

This case study of *House of Cards* and its proposed benefits will force realities of online programming to surface. This will be done through a production studies analysis on the micro level, using trade journals to determine distribution, production and creation claims about the series, and a textual analysis will be used to examine narrative components of the series. Historical poetics analysis and a comparison to complex television storytelling practices will be utilized to shed light on the validity of these claims specific to the production. In order for the proclaimed benefits of the series to be revolutionary, they must deviate from historical practices and current television conventions.

5.1 Production Studies

Production studies borrow theoretical perspectives from social sciences and humanities, but also take the lived realities of people “involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture” (Mayer 2009: 4). Amanda Lotz and Horace Newcomb suggest five levels of analysis when studying the production of media fiction: First is the national and international political economy and policy, and the second level is specific industrial contexts. Much of the existing critical research focuses on these areas. These macro-level studies give a broad picture about the industry, but reveal little about how conglomerates and small companies function. Levels three to five are called micro levels of production studies. They include (in relation to the television industry): 1) Particular organizations (studios, production companies, and networks), 2) individual productions (a television series or film) and 3) individual agents (the body of work of a director, writer, producer, etc.) (Lotz 2009: 26). These micro levels of production studies emphasize the complexity of practices within the vast industry. They cannot answer theories proposed at the macro level (such as, “The television is dying.”) but by exploring the micro-level production processes in media industries, results come to surface that macro-level studies can acknowledge (ibid., 27). This analysis is a micro-level production study, focusing on the individual production *House of Cards* and overlapping with particular organizations and individual agents levels while looking at the distribution, production and creation characteristics.

An ideal way to achieve some information would be to carry out situated fieldwork, like observation of the production and first-hand interviews with the production personnel in order to investigate how *House of Cards* is made (Mann 2009: 101). In-depth interviews and on-site
empirical research would be beneficial to this study. However, as a research student, the realities of this type of empirical gathering are nearly impossible due to time, monetary and accessibility limitations. Therefore trade journals and second-hand publications are utilized to gain information on these micro levels of production.

5.2 Trade Journals

In their study of examining literature about how to treat trade journals when carrying out research, Wilkinson and Merle (2013) found only one article that assesses the awareness a researcher must have while looking at secondary research (which include news publications, trade journal publications, etc.). They found that Stewart and Kamins (1993) cite six questions that must be addressed when academic researchers evaluate secondary research: 1) What was the purpose of the study? 2) Who collected the information? 3) What information was actually collected? 4) When was the information collected? 5) How was the information obtained? 6) How consistent is the information with other sources? Wilkinson and Merle add two more questions a researcher must assess: 7) What financial connection, if any, does the news source have with the subject of the report? 8) What consequences might the news source have suffered for publishing sensitive information on the subject (Wilkinson 2013: 422)?

Trade journals can be either primary or secondary sources, and are important resources for industry-related studies. They are used to gain information that cannot be found in academic sources, or cannot be obtained due to industrial constraints (ibid., 423-424). Google searches as well as research within the following common trade journal websites – Variety, A.V. Club, Adweek and The Hollywood Reporter – will be utilized for obtaining publications dating between January 2012 to March 2014 about House of Cards and claims made by the production staff and executives surrounding the production. Many publications will surface with information related to House of Cards, and the source will be evaluated and deemed acceptable for use only after close consideration utilizing the eight validity inquiries above. It is necessary to use trade journals and secondary sources to gain information in terms of statistical information, as well as first-hand interview accounts that are relevant to the distribution, production and creation of the series.

27 As this analysis was being carried out, searches and sites were still being tracked in order to provide as up-to-date information as possible. The initial search and most of the articles focus on the events surrounding the release, in February of 2013.
5.3 Textual Analysis
I will carry out a textual analysis of the series *House of Cards* to examine narrative components of the first season of the series. This falls under the creation aspect of the show, and will shed light upon its possible revolutionary status. In order to do this I have obtained a Netflix membership, and the entire series will be watched three times, with diligent note taking on the storytelling aspects of plot, conventions and characters. These creational results will be evaluated using historical poetics analysis and Mittell’s definitions of complex television within the storytelling, beginning, and characters categories.

I will carry out this micro-level production study of *House of Cards* by first conducting the online research by gathering information about the series from trade journals and second hand sources about the production, which include interviews and industry news reports about *House of Cards*. I will watch the first season on Netflix three times and take notes regarding the storytelling. This is a sufficient number of times to watch the season in order to obtain knowledge about the plot and overall narrative structure, as well as discover detailed facts within the series. In the analysis I will present what has been stated about either *House of Cards* or Netflix in terms of how the program is perceived to achieve novel status through its distribution (the way Netflix released the series), production (the authors, directors and origin of the series) and creation particulars (creative control, storytelling, the beginning, characters, and content). I will analyze these conventions of *House of Cards* using historical poetics analysis, which is a technique that is used to analyze elements of a text alongside their historical context, in order to see how they exist today. In order to be revolutionary the specific *House of Cards* conventions should deviate from their historical contexts, and the analysis will present the extent in which they do. I will also use Mittell’s complex television definitions as a reference to current programming practices in order to see if there are indeed departures of online programming, which are revolutionary elements of distribution, production or creation compared to current television standards.

6. Analysis
6.1 Distribution: The *House of Cards* Release Pattern
In the process of creating the show, David Fincher (executive producer and director of the first two episodes) stated that his team was curious about the parameters, wondered if they would
have to create a pilot episode, and how many episodes they would be signed on for, when their vision for *House of Cards* was for thirteen episodes in the first season (Sepinwall 2013). After considering HBO, Showtime, AMC and the usual suspects, Netflix stepped up to the plate and told Fincher and the other producers that they desired to produce and distribute the show, and that they saw something in it for their subscribers (ibid.; Pierce 2012). Beau Willimon (showrunner) states in an interview that after thinking about many different models of distribution of the episodes, they arrived at the decision to offer all thirteen episodes of the first season at once, because, as Willimon states, “that speaks to what Netflix has to offer that no other network does” (Ryan 2013). This aspect of distribution was novel, as it seems it was the first time an online video streaming service produced and released an entire season of a new show on its site.

In articles commenting upon the distribution of *House of Cards* it is stated that releasing all thirteen episodes of season one on Netflix allowed the series to completely release itself from television norms of fragmentary distribution, and is a revolution in serial format broadcasting (Klarer 2014: 2, 3). In this sense Netflix operates outside the broadcasting time-slot format, however, as stated in the introduction, this is not the first time that an entire season has been released at one time. In agreeing to distribute *House of Cards*, Netflix allowed the show to circumvent *some* constraints of television distribution.

With cable and broadcast television distribution, there are constraints that come with the delivery of a typical series. Commercial television is highly structured in its delivery, with weekly episodes of a prescribed length in time slot, which usually require time for commercial breaks. This rigid programming directly influences and structures a narrative (Mittell 2013; Klarer 2014: 1). Each episode of the first season of *House of Cards* is around fifty minutes long, and there are thirteen episodes, which proves that the distribution operates under some conventionality of traditional television. If the series is created and produced as a ‘thirteen-hour film’28, it could have been released as a thirteen-hour film.

Willimon states this one-time release pattern is the great thing about the Netflix distribution, in that “subscribers watch content when they want to watch it, how they want to watch it, in chunks they want to watch it. And so it puts the decision in their hands” (Ryan 2013). As previously indicated, audiences have had increasingly more control and choice in terms of

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28 Pierce 2012
how they watch content. This statement is true of any series that is downloaded, recorded with TiVo, or, in fact, up on Netflix currently. By releasing a series at once, Netflix displays something completely new to watch, but it does not inherently affect the viewing patterns of users that have been in place since the 1980s when the VCR was made available to tape favorite shows, or a person could go into a video store and rent a series on VCR or DVD.

6.2 Production
6.2.1 Authorship

*House of Cards* has two producers, two co-executive producers, and nine executive producers\(^\text{29}\), including Beau Willimon and David Fincher, who continuously make headlines and provide interviews in trade journals and articles about *House of Cards*\(^\text{30}\). These two figures are the main ‘creational geniuses’ renowned for their work on the series across the public media. While these two men are notable figures that were a large part of the show’s creation, an analysis for the reasons why they are the consistent “headline-grabbing helmers”\(^\text{31}\) in industry news surrounding the show is worth consideration, since there are thirteen producers.

Assigning one author to a series has been a decades-long struggle, especially with complex television, when there are dozens of individuals making each episode. Before the 1950s, authorship was given to the director, though television has always been known as a producer’s medium because of the authority of the overseeing and leadership, or ‘authorship by management’. Television was always seen as produced rather than authored, yet Willimon and Fincher are consistently named as the creators or authors of the series (Mittell 2013). In fact, the very act of giving television an author is a new phenomenon, and the rise of programs using an ‘authorial stamp’ to promote the show has become routine (ibid.)\(^\text{32}\). This practice has been used with directors and their films for years.

\(^{29}\) (from credits) Producers: Karyn McCarthy, Keith Huff. Co-Executive Producers: Rick Cleveland, Sarah Treem. Executive Producers: Beau Willimon, Andrew Davies, Michael Dobbs, John Melfi, Kevin Spacey, Dana Brunetti, Joshua Donen, Eric Roth, David Fincher. The differences between these titles is elusive as far as the actual job responsibilities; they are not set in stone and fluctuate with each production. However, the ranking system is as follows: executive producer, co-executive producer, producer.


\(^{31}\) Friedlander 2013.

\(^{32}\) I have seen countless articles that refer to *House of Cards* as directed by David Fincher, and created by Beau Willimon, whom are well-known names in the U.S. film industry.
Today, the creator is considered to be the author of a television series. They provide an original story and storyworld that an ensemble cast inhabits, and often have a continuing role as the head writer-producer, or showrunner (Banks 2013: 246). Beau Willimon is credited with this title for *House of Cards*. Though accrediting authorship to a television program is a relatively new phenomenon, it is not novel to *House of Cards*. JJ Abrams (*Lost*), Chris Carter (*The X-Files*), Steven Bocho (*L.A. Law*), David E. Kelley (*Ally McBeal*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), David Simon (*The Wire*), David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Mathew Weiner (*Mad Men*) and other creators, writers, producers and showrunners associated with quality and cult television have become household names that give this ‘authorial stamp’ to a particular series (Pearson 2011: 107-108; Mittell 2013).

Publications consistently mention Willimon and Fincher’s auteur status, and the fact that they have not worked in television. This discourse parallels to the background discussion of HBO and quality programming; people believe film and non-traditional television series are superior to that of traditional, or broadcast television. Assigning this series to a certain set of authors brings notoriety to *House of Cards* because of their fame within the film industry; by recruiting experienced film figures to a series, it gets approval by those who do not watch traditional television. Well-known film directors and producers that switch to television, or go back-and-forth between the mediums is not a new practice; Robert Altman, notable film director, directed the television series *M*A*S*H* in the 1970s, David Lynch directed the popular series *Twin Peaks* in the 1990s, and HBO’s *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-present) was directed by renowned film director and producer, Martin Scorsese, to name a few examples.

**6.2.2 Direction and Head Writing**

The director of the first two episodes of the first season of *House of Cards* is executive producer David Fincher. His notoriety is consistently mentioned and reinforced in publications that give prestige to his status as a film director. He is well-known in the television world for his films *Fight Club* (1999), *The Social Network* (2010), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) (The

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33 Sternbergh 2014, Miller 2014  
34 Helmore 2014, Sperling 2011, Lowry 2013  
35 Sepinwall 2013, Marechal 2012
Week 2013). Publications mentioned his specific film aesthetic coming through in the trailer for season one of *House of Cards*, in that it brought Fincher’s “iconic look” to the screen\(^{36}\).

Usually in complex television series today, directors are often hired as freelancers, and because of this they typically direct one to two episodes of a series before moving on to their next project (Mittell 2013). *House of Cards* follows this production norm, as well as diverts from it. Out of the thirteen episodes, there are six different directors that each do one to three episodes. Fincher only directs episodes one and two of the first season, so it is unique that he is also an executive producer since this is an established and stable position.

The writing staff is central to the show’s creative vision, and considered the brains behind a television series. Due to this aspect, it is understandable that this production position is more stable than that of the director (ibid.). Beau Willimon is credited with writing ten of the thirteen episodes on *House of Cards*\(^ {37}\). This intermingling of executive producers and the directing and writing complexity falls under the concept of the showrunner. Willimon is the creator, head-writer and an executive producer, and others must write in accordance with his vision of the show. Sometimes, the head writer for a particular episode of *House of Cards* is pulled from the producer pool\(^ {38}\). It would appear that all of the producers seem to have a hand in the writing process, instead of just one overseer. The only stable staff that appears on the credits week after week are the main actors and producers\(^ {39}\). Usually, writers are considered the brains behind a television series, and must try to mimic the showrunner’s vision for aesthetic consistency from episode to episode (ibid.).

The notion of authorship is grounded in the organized hierarchies of media labor and is reinforced by the auteur studies of film. Television producers have traditionally been seen as the ‘authors’ of their creative projects. Therefore, authorship is both subjective identification and outsider objectification (Mayer 2009: 7). In reality, this idea of “who is in charge” becomes muddled, as there are different directors and head writers for the series, though they are less well-known in Hollywood than Willimon and Fincher.

\(^{36}\) Weisman 2013; Marechal 2012

\(^{37}\) Willimon is the sole head writer listed for four of the episodes, the others have one to two others listed in addition to him.

\(^{38}\) Aside from executive producer Beau Willimon writing four episodes solo, the following producers are credited with writing episodes under “Written by” in the credits: producer Keith Huff (with Willimon) for episode three and eleven (with Willimon and Kate Barnow), co-executive producer Rick Cleveland (with Willimon) for episode four and nine, and co-executive producer Sarah Treem for episode five and ten.

\(^{39}\) Kevin Spacey is the only overlap here, as he is both an executive producer and an actor.
6.2.3 Genesis of the Series

MRC purchased the rights to remake the British miniseries three years ago. Fincher sat down with his partners Josh Donen and Eric Roth to try to transfer it to the Washington D.C. political setting, when they brought in Willimon, who had a theater and film background, and they discussed the concept of the series. Willimon and Fincher state that they knew upfront that they wanted to do a 13-hour movie for the first season (Ryan 2013). “We wanted to take a cinematic approach” states Willimon, “we wanted the storytelling to be something that really spoke to the sophistication of the narrative and the layers of the characters, and not necessarily try to adhere to any [existing] TV model” (ibid.). Willimon was in charge of writing the script to adapt the British series to the American context. It was reported that after seeing the script, Netflix stepped in with the desire to fund the production and distribute the show for $100 million, and offered the creators two seasons upfront (Levin 2013).

Typically, a series creator pitches an idea to a studio. If the pitch is well received, the creator writes the pilot script that must be approved by the production and distribution companies (Mittell 2013). Next, the actors, designers, director and crew who are making the series are formed, and they produce a pilot episode. If this is successful in the eyes of the network or cable channel’s view, they move on to series production (ibid.). This is a lot of thresholds that a series must cross in order for it to be bought by a network. It seems that the creative team for House of Cards did not have to go through any of these stages aside from pitching the initial script since Netflix allowed them two seasons upfront. This liberated the creators from having to ‘sell’ a pilot series like they do for television networks with the pilot episode.

Publications circling the creation of the series present Netflix and the creators as “risk-takers” who “gamble” on original production40, in such a way that they were advertising the series as an innovative, risk-taking step towards this new original programming venture. It seems improbable that Netflix would throw $100 million at a show that would essentially launch them into original programming if they knew so little about it. Yet Netflix announced in that no more than “extensive number crunching” shaped its decision in financing House of Cards; its analysis of the audience statistics showed that many of its subscribers watched movies directed by Fincher, and starred Kevin Spacey (The Week 2013).

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40 Baldwin 2013, Levin 2013, Sweney 2013
Netflix executives revere Netflix’s mode of audience testing, and their claims to innovative methods of seeking out particular audiences is echoed in articles about the series. Cindy Holland, head of original content at Netflix, states that they “have an immense amount of data, we see everything our subscribers are watching….we can identify subscriber populations that gravitate around genre areas, such as horror, thriller and supernatural. That allows us to project a threshold audience size to see if it makes for a viable project for us” (Sweney 2014). Reed Hastings (CEO) states that Netflix’s Silicon Valley roots analyzing viewer habits give it an edge over cable channels like HBO (Edwards 2013). On the contrary, this marketing technique is basic narrowcasting, which is the current norm in television (Lotz 2009: 35). Netflix is not innovative in its approach to seeking out a specific audience that likes particular actors and genres like executives claim. They might analyze viewer habits in a different way, but television has been predicting viewership for shows and analyzing audience reception of them for years.

Netflix has not discussed the cost of the show publically, as far as how much money went toward salaries and production sets and so on (Edwards 2013). This information is likely private and shared solely with shareholders of the company. However, it is notable that, while Netflix received a lot of public attention for “gambling on original programming”, the ‘astonishing’ discourse around Netflix taking ground-breaking risks is negated by the fact that executives themselves state that the success of the show was a predetermined certainty (Levin 2013; Sweney 2014). The seemingly innovative risk of taking on an original production was heavily calculated and analysis-ensured by executives and therefore overly celebrated in the press.

6.3 Distribution and Production Conclusion: Brand Management
Willimon and Fincher, like the other creative heads I have listed, give House of Cards and Netflix a certain brand due to their notoriety, which is why they are consistently referred to in publications about the series. This is common in television series. For instance, Lost head writer-producers (or showrunners) Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof see their roles as the same as a brand manager of any label, like Coke or McDonalds (Mann 2009: 99).

In discussing its unique distribution, Netflix executives built up the brand and their image as a company who are creative risk takers with innovative ideas, and that they are on the

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42 It is also noteworthy that other online streaming sites like Amazon are finding niche shows like sitcoms and children’s shows that they can viably produce (Baldwin 2013).
‘cutting-edge’ so to speak. The ‘authorial brand’ stamp and ‘cutting-edge’ practices parallel with the ways in which HBO marketed itself in the 1990s. This concept of branding a television show will be returned to in the summary.

6.4 Creation

6.4.1 Creative Control

The most prominent discussion through publications and in interviews with Willimon, Fincher, and MRC co-chair Modi Wiczyk when it came to the creation of House of Cards, is the explicit mention of creative freedom given to the producers that is not available within television networks (Baldwin 2013).

In an interview, Willimon states that Netflix believed in the creators as true artists, and that Netflix and MRC wanted the creators to make the series they desired (Ryan 2013). Wiczyk backed-up these claims, stating that it was innovative of the series that the production staff was given final cut. He describes what final cut means: “Great filmmakers are often given final cut or creative control which allows them to take risks. In television, that doesn’t exist. MRC’s ethos is creative freedom for our artists. We were able to deliver that in television and Netflix was OK with that. MRC provided the artists with the freedom and resources to take significant creative risks and we’re just glad it paid off” (Pomerantz 2013).

While Wiczyk is promoting the MRC brand as one that allows creative freedom for their artists, this aspect of creative control is not a new concept in television studies. HBO and Showtime are both accredited as networks in which the creative staff can do what they want without the fear of focus groups and micromanaging by executives (Baldwin 2013).

The term showrunner is not an official credit, but one that is attributed to the person who is “in charge” of a television series. The showrunner gives the series and those who work for it a sense of structure and direction. They are in charge of the production and the creative content of a television show (Banks 2013: 244-45). As stated, Beau Willimon is attributed the credit of showrunner to House of Cards. Once he was on board with the project, he stated that he was given complete creative control, without limits: “We weren’t bound by convention. We didn’t even know what convention was” (Sternbergh 2014). Willimon, Fincher and executives of MRC
and Netflix echo this ‘complete creative control’ mantra many times in articles reporting on the creation of House of Cards.43

This claim provides the researcher with a standard of which to draw conclusions about complex narrative and conventional narrative in terms of storytelling procedure, narrative and character complexity. If the creators were not bound by conventions, the storytelling and narrative format should depart in the following elements of storytelling as referenced to Mittell’s complex television norms of television today; Storytelling, The Beginning, Characters and Explicit Content. These definitions and examples can be used as a framework to investigate which narrative features of House of Cards are innovative or not.

6.4.2 Storytelling

The standard practice for commercial television production is to meet a few weeks prior to day one of production, map out the arcs and goals and decide on narrative structure, and then break down each episode into an outline (Mittell 2013). The production team of House of Cards had a different strategy, as again, they wanted to make a thirteen-hour film. Fincher explains that because of the length of the series, where each episode connects to the previous one, the writers pay attention to the character arcs, because sometimes they do not know what is coming next. He states that sometimes scenes occur in episodes that were never in the original scripts, but that they just roll with it because they have that freedom, and do not need script approval (Sepinwall 2013). It seems unlikely that the creators would have complete script freedom, but the parameters of the extent of freedom have not been listed.44 While constant script approval frequently appears in broadcast shows, cable channels tend to be “hands-off” and creator-centered.45 Alan Ball, the executive producer for HBO series Six Feet Under (2001-2005) states: “At the [broadcast] networks every decision is second-guessed by every single executive. At HBO they leave you alone for the most part and trust your instincts” (Pearson 2011: 113). While this ‘hands-off’ approach diverts from broadcast television production norms, it seems the Netflix production aligns with network and cable practices.

In conventional film production, there is 6-7 months of thinking about a two-hour narrative, so a thirteen-hour one is a daunting task. Willimon and Fincher state that because of

44 As discussed in the Limitations section, contact with Netflix for their creative parameters was unsuccessful.
45 Baldwin 2013, Mittell 2013, Sepinwall 2013
this they had to think on a grand scale in terms of storytelling (Ryan 2013; Sepinwall 2013). As noted previously, none of the producers entering the project had television experience46. But, as Willimon states, “I have storytelling experience and we’re all veterans on that front” (Ryan 2013). The show reveals itself as a complex television serial does. Each episode has a beginning, middle and end, though open-ended story lines can branch across 2-3 episodes47, or remain unresolved (ibid.). The conclusion of the first season seems to partially complete Underwood’s quest for revenge (which the audience believes is taking the presidency from the man who took the Secretary of State nomination from him), which is the overarching plotline of the entire season (or possibly, the series; since this wasn’t resolved, we assume Underwood’s goals will be the same in the subsequent season). Many plotlines are left unanswered, like how close Zoe and Janine are to finding out Frank’s misdeeds, how much Christina knows or will reveal, what Doug might do to her if she finds out about Peter’s death, and the extent that Raymond Tusk will strong-arm Underwood. These all relate to the main plot. Smaller storylines are also left open, such as Gillian’s lawsuit against Claire, which arose in episode twelve, and the relationship between Doug and Rachel.

In a conventional television narrative, two or more plotlines compliment each other, where the main ‘A’ plot dominates screen time, and the ‘B’ plot offers thematic parallels or counterpoints to the ‘A’ plot; they rarely interact at a level of action (Mittell 2013). Complex television works against these norms by employing multiple plotlines within a series that are interwoven, coincide, and reach across episodes and seasons (ibid.) House of Cards does this, and is able to give an amount of both resolution and intrigue to keep compelling storylines going. By revealing too much too soon, an audience can become disinterested, and not revealing enough could alienate the audience since they want answers to open-ended plots (Manly 2005). Within the first ten minutes of the first episode of House of Cards, the audience is shown five new storylines that are all interwoven throughout the first season: 1) Frank’s revenge plot 2) Claire’s CWI business reinvention 3) Zoe Barnes’s struggles to be taken seriously at the Washington Herald 4) Congressman Russo’s relationship with Christina 5) Zoe and Frank’s partnership. This introduction is not technically a pilot episode, as the term pilot includes the concept of a trial run

46 Actor Kevin Spacey had done seven episodes of the television show Wiseguy in 1988, but Willimon disregards this as it was so long ago and Spacey is so adapted to film (Ryan 2013) Here is the information for Wiseguy: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092484/fullcredits?ref_=tt_cl_sm#cast
47 Willimon states that this is called a mid-range arc (Ryan 2013).
as discussed in the production section, but we can compare the first episode of *House of Cards* to the narrative concept of a pilot episode, which offers the audience an experience of the series, genre conventions, characters and the series’ own conventions that contribute to complex storytelling.

6.4.3 The Beginning

The first episode of a series is an essential moment, and should motivate a viewer to keep on watching, as well as fulfill other functions which Mittell deems: educational and inspirational poetics of pilots. The first episode of a series should educate the audience to the narrative conventions, characters and storyworld that they live in, and present what a series might be like on an ongoing basis. They must also be inspirational, in order to encourage the viewers to keep watching (Mittell 2013). *House of Cards* merely fulfills the function of a pilot episode. We begin with a crash and a whimper sound while watching black screen, and the next shot is of Frank Underwood leaving his home to attend to the injured dog, which was hit by a car. Within the first two minutes we are introduced to one of the fundamental aspects of the show: the aside, in which Underwood breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the camera. We receive a gaze into the eyes of the cold-hearted, ruthless politician, explaining that he cannot tolerate ‘useless pain’ or ‘useless things’, and then implements his own philosophy by strangling the dog before its owners arrive to the scene.

This first scene advances the narrative and proves innovative in two ways: It is very cruel, and the introduction of this cold-blooded protagonist goes against what conventional television would call, ‘likeability’, and it also introduces the aside, a seldom used narration device in television that when applied correctly, can provide dramatic and narratively complex results.

The first episode of a series must shortly introduce a large cast of characters, so that their personalities and relationships are clear within moments (Mittell 2013). We certainly meet a large cast of characters in the first episode. The main characters are very intriguing and leave us

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48 In this case, pilot means first episode. The first episode of *House of Cards* is not a pilot in that it was not pitched to a network or cable program to sell them a show. But a pilot is always the first episode of a series, and we can compare the two based on what a pilot episode is supposed to fulfill in terms of the narrative structure. It is a fact that because a show needs to ‘sell itself’ on the pilot, they tend to me more conventional than the rest of the episodes. But there are still grounds for comparison, as in a way, the first episode of *House of Cards* must sell itself to the viewer, or they might not stick around for the second episode.

49 I delve further into the aside under the Character chapter, below.
wanting to know more about their character, this ‘inspirational’ element that Mittell discusses is pertinent here. We are left in the dark as to what some of the names and relationships are. We assume Frank and Claire are married, but we do not know Claire’s name until she texts Frank later in the episode. Though Frank introduces politicians from afar, we never meet the President Garrett Walker\textsuperscript{50}, nor meet Michael Kern, the chosen candidate for Secretary of State. The main characters are explored below in the Characters section.

Throughout the first episode, there is consistently at least two open-ended questions that need to be answered, whether it is finding out who a character is or what Frank’s first move will be, the viewer is intrigued at the five major intertwined plotlines introduced in the first episode. The first episode makes clear that House of Cards is a complex series that demands attention, and the viewer will be more satisfied if they remember the connections between character relationships and minor details about the activities of the White House that Frank could use to his advantage.

6.5 Characters

Though much energy goes into creating characters and designing the storyworld around them, academic analysis of storytelling focuses far less on issues of character than other narrative elements like plot, the story world and temporality. But in fact, characters should be considered narrative elements in themselves (Mittell 2013). The serial genres of the past decade have included storylines that span several episodes or seasons, and the over-arching structures allow for elaborate character development and character interrelations than what film offered (Klarer 2014: 2).

ABC President of prime-time entertainment Stephen McPherson impresses the notion of character being a central component to broadcast serial television, and that characters must be made with the audience in mind (Manly 2005). Because of the said creative freedom the House of Cards creators had, they were not chained to this mantra, which allowed the creative team to make their initial vision of an intense serialized drama that doesn’t ‘play by the rules’ of television in terms of character qualities (Ryan 2013). They did not have to shy away from the evil and uncharitable qualities of the characters, however dark or amoral the audience saw them.

\textsuperscript{50} The president is finally introduced in episode four. He is a minor character, with more screen time in episodes twelve and thirteen as he is trying to make a nomination for vice president.
Willimon states that he doesn’t care about the conventional concept of ‘likability’ that television brings to it’s characters; he only cares that viewers are attracted to the characters, “and those are two fundamentally different things” (ibid.).

In *House of Cards*, the characters’ backstories matter quite a bit but this history is not provided for us. Part of the thrill of the series is that we jump in, when corrupt and amoral Frank Underwood, majority house whip, has been in Congress for more than 22 years. Slowly, starting with the third episode of the season, some deeper character qualities are revealed. This is the case in many complex television serials, as the narrative thrust is much more forward moving than complex character exploration. Key aspects of a history may be revealed, which creates a mystery for viewers (Mittell 2013). This is certainly the case with *House of Cards*, especially in judging Frank Underwood’s character and the use of the narration component of the aside.

**6.5.1 Frank Underwood**

Frank Underwood is the majority house whip in the U.S. Congress, who in the first episode is blindsided when he is not given the nomination for Secretary of State, and vows revenge on those that have crossed him. Within the first five minutes of the series, we know that he is brutal, has a desire to win, is underhanded and has been connected to politics for over two decades. While menacing and ruthless, Underwood is charming, and very personable on the outside. He is a sweet-talker, and watching his character persuade those around him with such easy lies makes the viewer marvel at how his scheming unravels, especially when the audience knows the truth via the aside, discussed in the next section.

We get an insight into Frank’s character with some pure character moments, which do not serve to drive the plot forward but give insight into his interior. Episode three and episode eight are episodes that stand out from the others in two ways: first, they are not set in Washington D.C., and second, they do not really drive the main plot forward. Frank talks a bit on the phone about the education bill with people in Washington, but otherwise, the two episodes stand out as lateral narration. In episode three, Frank travels to his hometown to do damage control when he is inadvertently blamed for the death of a young girl who crashed her car while

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51 Willimon told Ryan in his interview that Frank Underwood is “a natural descendant of the characters of *The Wire* and *The Sopranos*” (Ryan 2013).

52 Lateral narration is a term used when, at the end of the episode, nothing significant happens with the main plot; it is not driven forward. More, the narration of the episode is used to delve into character traits.
texting about a water tower that Frank fought to keep. In this episode he reveals his feelings about his hometown, his father, his mother, and religion. In episode eight he travels back to his Charleston when his military college names a library in his honor. He discusses leaving a legacy, and that he wants his life to mean something. It is also revealed that he had a relationship with one of his best friends while they were attending school, and have both tried to forget the past.

Willimon states that episodes like these, that do not necessarily move the plot forward but delve deeply into character complexity, do not happen due to production constraints with broadcasting companies. He explains that House of Cards was able to do this since they had creative control; they did not think of someone telling them not to (Ryan 2013). Lateral narration is not a new narrative technique in cable network programming. In his piece titled “The Sopranos: Episodic Storytelling”, Sean O’Sullivan identifies two episodes in The Sopranos series that did not drive the plot forward but focused on character depth. Perhaps production constraints in broadcasting companies cannot allow lateral narration, but it exists in network programming.

However, this deep character exploration and creative control paved the way to utilizing the bold narrative technique called the aside, in which Frank Underwood breaks the fourth wall in order to connect with the audience and feed us his thought process about certain situations, introduce us to people, or clarify facts.

6.5.2 The Aside
Mittell defines the term ‘allegiance’ in complex television as, “the moral evaluation of an aligned character where we find ourselves sympathetic to their beliefs and ethics, and thus emotionally invested in their stories…” (Mittell 2013). This moral evaluation concept applies to both the aside, and the anti-hero, as discussed below. But Mittell continues with this definition, stating, “…since interiority is a restricted area of access, we must infer a character’s morality and beliefs based on exterior markers, including their appearance, behaviors, interactions, and how other characters act toward them and talk about them” (ibid.). This latter part of moral evaluation can be addressed with the aside.

54 In television and film, the thought is that the scene is like a stage with three walls, and the fourth wall is the camera and audience. Breaking the forth wall is uncommon in television and film (voice-over narration is not breaking the forth wall, as the speaker is not on camera), and more common in theatre.
This narration technique is revered in publications stating the “Machiavellian” aspect of *House of Cards* and the dramatic aside (Ratner 2014). Willimon claims that the aside, or direct address to the audience, is the one thing the producers wanted to carry over from the BBC series from early on (Ryan 2013). The creators knew that Spacey would be able to produce a very dramatic, Machiavellian-like performance (Sepinwall 2013). It is dangerous, fun and entertaining, and makes the audience a co-conspirator with Underwood. Frank is both the narrator and the driving force behind the asides in *House of Cards*. It is almost like he is the author or creator of the unfolding action (Klarer 2014: 11). By directly addressing the audience, he is asking us to participate in his revenge plot, and despite his evil character with questionable morals, the audience is on his side, rooting for him to stab people in the back and get ahead, “…because he is giving you this intimacy and access, you find yourself rooting for him—that’s where the tension with the audience is really exciting” says Willimon (Ryan 2013). The aside functions to bring the audience in, elevate the drama, and provides character insight and narrative complexity.

The aside is introduced to us in the beginning (within the first three minutes of the episode), which is important because it is not a common narrative technique in television or film, though it has been done before. The aside is used in the television series *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006), as well as films like *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986, John Hughes) and *Annie Hall* (1977, Woody Allen), and of course the BBC’s *House of Cards*. However, in the U.S. *House of Cards*, it plays with the audience’s mentality (Klarer 2011: 4). As said in the beginnings chapter, it is important to establish a show’s intrinsic norms in the first episode (Mittell 2013). In the first few episodes, Frank explains his actions and plans via the aside, sometimes humorously, and we are rarely left in the dark as to what his intentions are. He seems reliable as he calls the shots, or tells us when he is acting for his co-workers, and there is a comedic element presented when he simply rolls his eyes or nods at the camera. We are let in to his emotional thought process, and character history through the aside.

In episode one he tells us he loves Claire more than sharks love blood, we know his unbreakable bond with her. In episode three, time freezes and Frank addresses us while he is giving a sermon about how sad he was when his father was taken from him, to state that he in fact did not have a great relationship with his father, and did not think much of him, that his father simply took up space. In episode twelve Frank states how nervous he is before meeting the
president. In thirteen (the last episode), he addresses us in a church again, when he is yelling at
God and states that we are alone, he prays to himself, for himself. The only time we get a
glimpse of any sort of rules of morality that Frank lives by is in episode four, when he leaves
Peter Russo’s apartment after meeting his kids, and he directly tells the audience that he does not
sympathize with and will take down hypocrites that pretend to love their family and then sleep
with prostitutes (Russo has a problem with drinking and sleeping around).

After being on Frank’s side, and a ‘co-conspirator’ as Willimon put it, we as viewers get
used to the logic of the aside, as Frank uses it to comment on a situation, clue us in on his plan or
reveal something emotionally. An unconventional narrative technique is implemented when
Frank’s situational strategy is omitted, leaving the audience searching for an explanation from
Frank (Klarer 2014: 6). In a moment of uncontrolled weakness (up until now Frank has always
been in control) Frank slips up in a debate in episode six. The audience is left disoriented,
because Frank is usually great in debates and a very smooth talker. We are left to wonder if
Frank intentionally slipped up on purpose, or if it was really a human error, yet we receive no
comment from Frank about this (ibid.). We start to question the reliability of the aside. This
escalates on an emotional level in episode nine, when Zoe tries to end their non-professional
relationship. The asides feel like he is trying to convince the audience that she means nothing to
him, but there is a hint that he is angry that things did not end on his terms. Now we question the
legitimacy of the aside and whether the audience is another pawn in Frank’s chess game, and
wonder if he is feeding the viewers manipulative information just like everyone else in his plot.
One of the glaring ways that the aside fails for us, is that he never gives us an explanation as to
why he kills Peter in episode eleven55, which was not a premeditated act (after forcing him out of
the Pennsylvania governor’s race the plan was to get Peter sober and back on his feet), and it
seems this really haunts Frank in future episodes56. Part of the narrative thrill, and operational

55 This action is shocking in itself. Viewers know the basic precepts of serial storytelling and convention. This
includes the long-established notion that the core characters are basically a stable foundation for the series run
(Mittell 2013). Peter has been one of the main characters since episode one, so it is quite exceptional and narratively
jaunting that he is killed off.
56 In episode twelve, Frank wakes up, startled to a strange dream. In episode thirteen Frank and Claire talk about not
being able to sleep with Peter on their mind. In this episode Frank also calls out to Peter during a prayer in a church
when he hears a clatter, asking if he is there with Frank.
aesthetic\textsuperscript{57} of \textit{House of Cards} is that we try to figure out all of the pieces of this puzzle and guess what is going on in Frank’s mind.

In using a first-person narrator in the show, this parallels with the author in the older medium of narration, the novel. By doing this it puts aside the traditional television serial format and evolves into a complex web of the major components of narrative like author, character, plot, and narrator (Klarer 2014: 13; Mittell 2013). Certainly all of these components become a large puzzle once the viewers learn that the aside is not as they believe. We begin to question the legitimacy and sincerity of everything Frank says or does.

6.5.3 The Anti-Hero

One narrative element that has come to surface in the past decade is the concept of the anti-hero as the protagonist in a television series (Mittell 2013). Walter White of \textit{Breaking Bad} (2008-2013), Tony Soprano of \textit{The Sopranos} (1997-2007) and Dexter Morgan of \textit{Dexter} (2006-2013) are all noteworthy anti-heroes of complex television serials.

Frank Underwood can most definitely be seen as an anti-hero, a character whose behavior and beliefs provoke “ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance”. Anti-heroes are usually male, morally questionable and villainous (ibid.). This could mean many types of characters, from selfish people to misanthropic villains. It is obvious when viewing the program that Frank Underwood fits these categories. He is definitely amoral, unsympathetic and villainous, but there is a key element of ‘likeability’ in anti-heroes that doesn’t fit with Frank. \textit{House of Cards} takes the complex television definition of the anti-hero one step further, in that it averts from obeying the following conscription of the anti-hero narrative element: relative morality (ibid.).

Audiences tend to like anti-heroes because they are juxtaposed with equally bad characters to highlight their own redeeming qualities. For example, Dexter Morgan is a serial killer that only murders ‘bad’ guys. Tony Soprano is a mobster and ‘offs’ people, but so do all of the others around him, and we get a psychological insight to Tony’s character that features his compensatory qualities. Walter White is a brilliant high school chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with cancer, his wife is pregnant and his only son has cerebral palsy. He cooks meth

\textsuperscript{57} This is a relatively new term in television studies that has surfaced in the past couple of decades, and refers to the pleasure of watching the creators of a show “pull off” a complex narrative, whether it be interweaving plotlines, surprising us with endings or brilliantly utilizing techniques like flashbacks (Mittell 2013).
because he needs the money to cover his bills, and finds validation and meaning in it. Usually, reason or a history of immorality is given to justify the main character’s behavior. Frank (and arguably, his wife) is usually the most underhanded, devious and heartless character in the diegetic storyworld. Frank makes dirty deals with politicians, and sometimes they agree to go along with him to get ahead, which could be seen as morally questionable, but Frank is always (with the exception of Raymond Tusk in episode thirteen) the one with the upper hand, and strong-arming the person that he is making a deal with. We are given bits and pieces about his childhood, but there is nothing that gives us an explanation in his history as to why he is so cold and devious.

So the question arises, if an audience likes an anti-hero because he is the “least worst” of the main characters, why are people attracted to a series whose main protagonist is a conniving, deceitful politician? The combination of the aside, and the operational aesthetic\(^{58}\) of executing such a deep laden and intricate revenge plan, forces the audience to succumb to the desires of taking part and witnessing it all unravel. There is a suspenseful feeling each time Frank Underwood might fail or be exposed that inspires the viewer to watch more. As Mittell and Willimon have said, it is the compelling characters that are essential to a complex television serial’s appeal. Charisma and charm can make the time watching them worthwhile, and Kevin Spacey does this with Underwood’s character (ibid.).

6.5.4 Claire Underwood

Claire Underwood is a very unique and compelling character as well. She runs the Clean Water Initiative (CWI), a volunteer organization in Washington D.C. that raises money for projects overseas (although her and Frank’s professional paths cross frequently). Claire can be seen as an anti-hero as well, which breaks the gender-related aspect of this narrative element, as anti-heroes are usually male, or we are given a reason for the woman to act immorally. For instance, Nancy Botwin on the show *Weeds* (2005-2012) sells marijuana, yet this is justified due to her husband’s death and made lighter by the comedic aspects of the show. Veronica Mars of *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) is a ruthless self-employed detective that has no problem breaking laws, but this is

\(^{58}\) Operational aesthetic focuses of the mechanics of complex storytelling. The viewer marvels at the complexity of the narrative and is awed by how the creators of the show carry this complexity out and unravel the narrative elements (Mittell 2013).
legitimized by the fact that she has had a troubled past and wants to catch the criminal who murdered her best friend.

Claire can be just as devious as her husband. In the first two episodes she puts a plan into action to completely gut and clean out her office to make room for new people. In the second episode, she is juxtaposed with her assistant Eleanor who has been with Claire from the beginning of the CWI. She is a very sweet, caring older woman who states that cutting people they have worked for years with would be very wrong. Claire disagrees, and is very cold and stern in her decision to get rid of people. Later in the episode when Eleanor has just finished firing eighteen people in the office, Clair, unwavering, tells her she is fired too. Eleanor points out that she is cold and ‘evil’.

Claire almost gains some viewer sympathy when she goes to a coffee shop later in the episode and sees an older woman trying to operate a digital cash register, and looks empathetic (after she was fired, Eleanor mentioned that no one would hire her because of her age). But later, Claire receives enough money to hire Eleanor and the others back, and chooses not to. Claire also makes deals behind her husband’s back that hurt his career, leaves for New York to spend time with her ex-lover when she feels like it, and is equally as conspiring as Frank. She regularly participates in his revenge plot, consistently asking, “How are we doing?” meaning, how far have they come to succeeding.

Overall, it is rare to have a female character in a television series that is a true anti-hero, as women are usually treated differently than their male counterparts. There is no explanation given for Claire’s coldness, and she is morally the worst person out compared to those around her (aside from Frank).

6.5.5 Relationships
Complex television serials often interweave melodramatic relationship dramas and character development with story arcs (Mittell 2013). Christina and Russo’s relationship is the most generic of the three main relationships. It is an office fling-turned love that is introduced to us in the first episode.
Frank and Claire Underwood’s married relationship is what some might consider unconventional. They are introduced as a very strong power couple, with no children\(^59\), who work together to get ahead in their careers. They declare their love for each other, yet there is no physical passion in any sense. It is revealed in episode four that Claire had an extramarital affair that Frank is aware of. Later, in episode eleven, Claire continues this relationship that she had ended. We do not get any emotional insight into how this affects Frank. He begins a complicated sexual exchange of information with Zoe Barnes, a reporter at The Washington Herald (Claire knows about Frank’s affair as well, and understands it as a business decision). Sometimes, especially in complex TV, plot momentum generates emotional responses to characters and allows relationships to help drive plots forward (ibid.). This relationship with Zoe drives the plot forward in terms of Frank’s plan of taking down people in the capitol, and again when she and Janine start digging into his corruption. While the Underwoods’ relationship seems unaffected by the extramarital affairs, their tension grows with balancing one another’s ambitions, and eventually, Claire double-crosses Frank in episode nine to get ahead with her business.

Claire and Frank’s relationship becomes even more romantically complex when two things happen in episode eight: first, it is revealed that Frank had a relationship with a man when he was at military school. While specifics aren’t given, it is clear that it was romantic relationship based on body language, their discussion of their feelings and trying to forget the past and move on. Second, Remy confidently and casually invites Claire up to the bridal suite of a hotel for champagne. While she doesn’t act on this, the audience wonders if they had a relationship in the past when Remy was working for Frank.

Overall, relationships within the series do not necessarily break away from convention. They are complex in terms of questioning the nature of the relationships we were introduced to in the pilot episode, and drive the plot forward since they are intertwined between characters and professional plotlines. The ambiguous nature of how the relationships work provides some narrative complexity and keeps the audience guessing, but there are many different types of relationships on television; the specifics of them, such as affairs, lying and manipulation, have all been shown on television before.

\(^{59}\) The motif of children is brought up in many episodes, and serves as a metaphor as well as drives the plot forward. Usually, it is used as a metaphor for something to be left behind; a legacy. On the other hand, Gillian’s physical pregnancy pushes the plot forward when she sues Claire for firing her because she is pregnant (a lie). The aspect of children also provides an analogy for Frank and Zoe’s relationship. He is like a father-figure to her, though they have a sexual relationship. Other motifs include death, hunger and feeding.
6.6 Explicit Content

While Mittell does not delve into explicit content, it is an area to be explored in terms of creative control. Research into the limits of exactly how far the creators could push the content and characters was unsuccessful\(^6\), but it is very hard to imagine that the creators could do whatever they wanted with them in terms of explicit content. While there is sex, nudity, drugs and alcohol in the first season, the show does not delve further into these adult themes than its cable network counterparts. A particularly noteworthy scene is in episode seven, when Frank performs cunnilingus on Zoe while she is on the phone with her dad, wishing him a happy father’s day. Willimon comments on this episode and expresses his doubt that it would get past censors in broadcast network television (Kornhaber 2014). At the same time, we see sex, drug use and violence on network and cable channels frequently. The Sopranos is a prime example of a series that has very violent murder scenes and nudity. HBO’s Game of Thrones (2011-present) is known for the brutal killings of multiple characters per episode and stark sex scenes. While this violence and sexuality may be a departure from broadcasting television, in cable and network television there is less control over explicit content. It seems Netflix is in line with cable and network television providers in this aspect.

7. Summary

This thesis has examined the claims made by executives, creators and actors surrounding the show House of Cards who deemed the program revolutionary due to its distribution, creation and production freedoms. Within the context of post-network television, the complex serialized storytelling model which constitutes of specific facets of production, creation and distribution as outlined by Jason Mittell is used to compare House of Cards conventions to those of other common complex television formats in history, in order to see if the show is indeed revolutionary. It is necessary to look at the historical context in order to see what production norms are typical in television currently, as well as provide examples of television texts and practices that reinforce findings.

Overall, it seems that the major departures from complex television storytelling strategies are through the distribution of House of Cards, and the narrative complexity. Facets under

\(^6\) This is due to parameters discussed in the Limitations section.
production - authorship, direction, head writing and showrunner positions, and the context surrounding the commencement of the series – did not prove to be revolutionary in practice.

However, a key development that surfaced in the production analysis, which relates to the political economics of the television industry, was the branding of Netflix that shares similarities with HBO. One way HBO was branded as a ‘quality television’ network was through their creative workforce. Many high profile showrunners and directors for HBO supported the slogan, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’ (Pearson 2011: 113). This is an extension of the notion that television was traditionally considered a ‘lesser medium’ with little cultural appeal. Today, networks are branded by the producers and showrunners that lead the shows, a significant practice dating back to the 1980s, as audiences paid more attention to content than distributors (ibid., 108). Production-wise, it is clear that Netflix attempts to follow an HBO model in promoting their brand as one that endorses innovative ideas, creative control and therefore superiority to traditional television. As Vicki Mayer states, media workers are “creators of popular culture” and “functionaries in the service of capitalism” (Mayer 2009: 2). The creative team and executives connected to House of Cards are creators of popular culture that service in making money for Netflix and promoting the brand.

House of Cards shifts from traditional television in the sense that the entire first season was distributed on Netflix at one time. Through research, I have not found an original season-long television program that has been aired all at once via a cable, satellite or broadcasting channel. However, the ‘revolutionary’ aspect ends there; essentially, it is like Netflix uploaded a thirteen hour movie on their site. The lengths of the episodes are about fifty minutes, and are still created with a beginning, middle and end. So the creators function within the parameters of television distribution in episode time frames.

While Fincher and Willimon, as well as MRC and Netflix stated that this distribution format allowed creative control and freedoms from conventional television, my analysis of the storytelling, narrative and character complexity of House of Cards proves otherwise. Micromanagement of executives is claimed to be non-existent, but this ‘hands-off’ approach is typical of HBO and other cable networks. An analysis of the first episode disproves any revolutionary status, as “Chapter One” is like a typical pilot that educates an audience on the conventions of the storyworld, and inspires the viewer to keep watching. The number of plotlines introduced is typical of a complex television narrative, and so is the number of the characters.
The nature of the characters and their complexity, however, is heightened in terms of how complex television defines the anti-hero. Frank Underwood diverts from the complex television definition of the anti-hero, due to the fact that the audience is provided with no excuse to why he is so conniving, and that he is the ‘most-evil’ of those surrounding him. Claire Underwood also fits the mold of the anti-hero, which is a break from convention in itself in that she is a woman, while typically the anti-hero is male, or a female who requires a justification behind her corrupt deeds.

The aside is a narration technique that has existed within theater, film and television for many years, though it is not common in the latter medium. The way it is used as a complex narration tool in House of Cards is innovative, as the audience is manipulated when the aside is used in other ways than the how first episode established it: as Frank Underwood’s partner-in-crime. When the aside then becomes elusive, the narrative becomes a puzzle the viewer desires to solve.

The relationships in the series provide complex narration in terms of their ambiguity. But the actual particulars of them cannot be deemed complex, as there are many different types of relationships that have existed on television. The relationships drive the plot forward as is typical in complex television.

Amanda Lotz’s definition of post-network era television was a jumping off point while pondering over how to define current television after examining this series. Though situated within the post-network era, Netflix itself is not completely post-network by Lotz’s definition. While it is not a U.S. television network, and viewer choice is no longer limited to program schedules, Netflix is not available to the ‘majority of viewers’ (since it is in a limited amount of countries and is membership-only). House of Cards is one narrative that is an example of the changes in practices that interconnect to expand the range of stories that could be profitable on U.S. television. It points to implications of the expanded storytelling field for the industry and culture that exists in the post-network era (Lotz 2007: 25). But in order for a show to be completely post-network, “the majority of viewers use the opportunities new technologies and industrial practices make available” (ibid., 19). Netflix is post-network in the sense that it does not rely on conventional programming distribution. But does this signal a trend that traditional television is fading, and that online streaming will dominate the industry?
I agree with Bennet and McMillans, in that the best way to describe the current state of television is that it remains one in transition (Bennet 2011: 6). They describe television as digital media as a hybrid form. Meaning television includes other media forms, and is dispersed across a range of screens, but that the *experience* is still television (ibid., 7). This is how television is situated currently. It is a hybrid of technologies and modes of practices, and contains forms of old and new media, but due to the episode release format, the experience is still television.

7.1 Limitations and Evaluation

There are considerable limitations and gaps to my research that have arisen while investigating the production, creation and distribution of *House of Cards*.

First of all, it is unlikely that *House of Cards* or Netflix would state anything negative that they have encountered production-wise⁶¹, as they are consistently trying to promote the brand. While I have been able to take the show and analyze it against the backdrop of complex television, some particulars are left open that could be filled with in-depth interviews and on-site analysis. This insider perspective would have given more insight into the conditions under which the staff worked.

Second, I have noted some of the limitations I have experienced as an academic student, not a journalist, carrying out a production analysis of *House of Cards*. As commented on, I am using direct quotes from online articles and trade journals that print facts about *House of Cards*, Netflix, and quotations and interviews made by the creators and executives surrounding the show, in order to gain information about the rationalities behind *House of Cards* being revolutionary. This is due to the fact that I do not have the monetary budget, time nor means of access to carry out an empirical study of the on-site production of the show. Lotz notes that this is a common situation for academic studies: “…top journalists on the television beat commonly have sustained access to industry workers that most academics only dream of, and their accounts are consequently often filled with information gained on or off the record in interviews with the medium’s key decision makers” (Lotz 2009: 32).

I was ignored through phone and email by persons within the production of *House of Cards*, as well as the public relations section of the Netflix website, which contains insider information about programming and business relations. Mayer reinforces this predicament; “The

⁶¹ Netflix even refuses to report their streaming numbers publically (Bond 2013).
ignorance of longstanding trade languages, personnel networks, and rifts over resources can be the surest route to a short meeting, unreturned phone calls, or even failure to achieve research goals” (Mayer 2009: 5). This is a key reason why, as I have previously stated, secondary sources are pertinent to information gathering in production studies.

Lastly, while secondary sources are necessary, I am well aware that all texts are constructions, whether found in a library book, online article, or one’s own notations. My analysis is thus prescriptive, and aims to present a balanced approach to the production analysis of *House of Cards* by addressing key proclamations made by industry and studio heads, and comparing them to realities of complex television and historical examples of television innovations.

**7.2 Future Research**

While narrative complexity within the creation of the series was able to be analyzed, certain aspects of production and distribution of the show are left open, like the in-depth details and sufficient reasoning Netflix had behind its picking-up *House of Cards* or any detailed information related to the role of Trigger Street Productions. Carrying out an ethnographic-based production study, with access to on-site production and in-depth interviews, could extend this research by elaborating on the revolutionary aspects that I proved false or slightly embellished within the analysis. First-hand explanations for why practices were stated as revolutionary when they have been done before could be helpful in further investigating how networks and companies alike brand themselves.

Another element of complex television to investigate in the future is related to the negative notion of this branding. If it becomes a heightened trend with Netflix, future online programming sites and cable and satellite networks, that a big name needs to be associated with a series in order to be picked up, there allows for little creative freedom for the younger talent trying to make it in the television business. These complex quality serials demand a certain level of talent for their big-budget, large-scale production and sophisticated film-like pictures. In other words, established directors and producers. If there is more gatekeeping in an industry with an already high barrier to entry, what does the future hold for the young talent, the next wave of television auteurs? Lotz focuses on the viewer’s freedom to use opportunities that industrial practices and technologies make available in the post-network era, but I believe the same applies.
to those within the industry in cultivating a new generation of creative talent. It will be interesting to see how this aspect of television will fit in with the post-network era as it evolves.

This research could be shifted in terms of getting an audience’s perspective of online programming advantages with uses and gratifications research. Mittell states that one of the pleasures in watching a series happens because of the “gaps”, meaning the time between the weekly airings of an episode (Mittell 2013). Viewers can reflect upon what they just watched, possibly participate in personal or online discussions and hypothesize about the upcoming episode. The Netflix distribution model circumvents this broadcast constraint, but it could possibly hinder the experience of television for the fan if the entire show can be consumed in one sitting. This could be examined through audience statistics and focus-group interviews.

This could be taken one step further with international audience reception, as Netflix is growing very quickly as an international company. Though it cannot be certain that it will obtain 90 million subscribers worldwide in the next two decades, as predicted earlier by Chief Executive Officer Reed Hastings, it is worth thinking about the impact that Netflix will have globally. If the majority of Netflix’s originally-produced programming continues to be sourced in the U.S., which seems logical as it is an American company that strives for big-budget, film-like Hollywood quality, what sorts of impressions does this make when it is distributed to forty-one other countries, and possibly a higher number than that in upcoming years? Significant globalization factors, and the exportation of western cultural values and practices can be taken into this account, which would make Netflix a very unique case study on international reception studies in the future.

Despite these growth prospects and the cord-cutting fears that some live in, I believe that television is very much alive. *House of Cards* and online programming in general is still television. The producers created the show under the parameters of television industry rules and regulations, that is, by the length of the episodes and budget constraints, and therefore the experience of *House of Cards* is television as-we-know-it. Overall, television is not dead; it is in a stage of redefinition. Online programming will most likely exist alongside current broadcast and network television because historically, that is what new media tends to do with old media.
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