All in one sitting

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

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

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

The show is clearly and cleverly structured for binge-consumption. Each episode is called a ‘chapter’. There are no introductory flashbacks, common in traditional series. And at the end of nearly every episode, the cliffhanger makes the temptation to find out what is going to happen unbearable. By 10 a.m. the next day, and minutes away from the end of the final episode, I was searching for a release date for season two.
Initial reviews of Netflix’s strategy and the show were mixed. Liz Shannon, a fellow binge-watcher, was sceptical. ‘I’m not convinced that substituting the buzz that traditional shows acquire during a whole season for the buzz of binge-watching will be a success.’ Laura Hudson was slightly more critical. ‘It’s not a great show; it’s debatably a good one, but more importantly, it was just good enough to make me press “next” every time the episode finished.’ That’s precisely the point.

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

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

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

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

Adapted from The Guardian