

Filmmaking



Developing the Netflix Series

Writing and producing
has dramatically changed

by Michael Barmish & Neil Fallon

Introduction

Netflix has dramatically changed the game when it comes to watching television, hence writing and producing television.

Appointment television, where viewers or family members gather in the living room to watch the same program at the same time, is quickly becoming a relic of the past. Today, it's all about "binge watching" – watching on a mobile phone, tablet or on a TV HD Screen, multiple episodes of a TV series in one sitting or over a weekend.

With online streaming, the way we consume a TV series has changed irreversibly. This means writing and producing television has also dramatically changed. New rules have replaced the old when it comes to developing and producing a series or film for streaming services. This guide will take you through the business of Netflix and the key elements you need to

understand when developing TV series and films for Netflix from the standpoint of the writer and producer.

Data vs data

Traditional network television, especially in the United States, is advertiser-based. Networks like CBS and ABC in the US, and ITV in the UK rely on selling ad space to generate revenue. The number of viewers and its demographics are used to determine advertising rates for commercials. The more viewers, especially those in coveted age groups like, 18-49, the higher the fees for commercial time.

Viewership is determined by ratings. In the US, ratings are measured by Nielsen Media Research, while the UK uses a system called BARB. There

are various other services in countries around the world, such as OzTAM in Australia.

This makes it necessary to program for the masses, hence the term “broadcasting.”

Developing programs that cater to a small segment of the viewing audience and, heaven forbid, anyone over the age of 50 is something the traditional networks rarely consider. Don't bother writing or pitching a series like this. That's not to say there aren't exceptions, but you definitely put yourself at a disadvantage developing projects catered to a more niche audience.



Netflix uses data differently when it comes to green-lighting a series.

In fact, according to Netflix's website, they claim to not include demographics in their algorithm, a complete break from traditional television audience-gathering data.

What's more, unlike traditional ratings, which are by total household, Netflix considers the viewing habits of all members of an account. So, in a family with two adults and two children, each with their own profile, each family member generates their own set of data, viewing patterns and playlists. Netflix offers each family member different programming suggestions with different "Percentage Matches".



Netflix currently has just over 160 million subscribers worldwide and reaches more than 300 millions TV when taking into account the various "box integration" partnerships. While the streaming service is notorious for not releasing viewing numbers, it uses subscriber data to create an algorithm to determine whether a series or film will be successful. If a project satisfies the criteria established by the algorithm, the project has an excellent chance of being greenlit.



Box Integration means that cable and satellite customers can access Netflix through set-top boxes. This way, they can easily access Netflix on their televisions if they don't have a game/DVD console or TV with smart apps, and can pay for it all on one bill.

Rating

Recently, Netflix updated its viewer recommendation system.

The traditional star ratings system, which was an aggregate of all viewers ratings, was replaced by a more powerful and complex “Percent Match Score”, which indicates how likely Netflix thinks you will like a program.

The Percent Match Score is generated by an algorithm which takes into account various factors, including:

- Your rating of a title. This is where the stars have been replaced by a simple Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down viewers can click on. (You like or you don't like a title, like a post on Facebook.)
- Your streaming (viewing habits) and rating history.
- The combined rating of other viewers who share similar tastes (based on Netflix data).



The aggregation of all this data allows Netflix to calculate and present a Percent Match Score which is unique to you. In other words, someone in another part of the country may see a different Score for the exact same title, depending on their viewer profile/habits.

This “personalized rating” is essential for Netflix to customize for each viewer a list of suggestions and promote titles, whilst creating targeted categories of viewers.

Recommending programs watched and enjoyed by viewers who fall within a particular data set means there is a greater likelihood that other viewers who fall in that same set will also enjoy them. So not only will they maintain their Netflix account, but they will also spread the word about a series or a film, which is so important for the promotion of any title.

According to Netflix, in addition to the types of series and movies you watch, it looks at other statistics, including:

- The time of day and week you watch a particular show or movie.
- The devices you use to watch, even down to what type of program or movie you watch on which device.
- Geographic location.
- How active you are when you watch - rewinding, fast-forwarding, etc.

These statistics will determine whether Netflix renews a series or resurrects one from another

outlet. Data like series completion rates, where users complete an entire season in a relatively short period of time, is the reason why Netflix resurrected a series like “Arrested Development.”

Distribution & production

One of the key things to remember about Netflix when considering developing a series or film project is their production and distribution policy. Whilst they produce a large number of Netflix Original series and have a huge budget to do so, attracting major producers like Ryan Murphy and Shonda Rhimes, a lot of its content is produced elsewhere. It’s also expanding rapidly into foreign markets.



Netflix is more than a content producer, but also a content distributor and production partner.

What this means is, many series that are branded as Netflix Originals are actually series produced by other networks and studios in a domestic market that Netflix makes available in foreign markets. For example, Showtime's "Penny Dreadful" and the BBC's "The Bodyguard" appear on Netflix in non-U.S. or non-UK markets as Netflix Originals.

Netflix is also making a huge investment in international production, especially in Europe, where it is partnering with local production companies in countries like Germany, France, Italy and Spain to produce more regional content. These countries' largest output is in the drama genre. While they are usually available in dubbed or subtitled versions for foreign markets, they are produced in the local language, limiting international appeal. Netflix

is fine with this because it's goal is to create a greater foothold in foreign markets with more subscribers, producing content specifically for that market.

So, what does this all mean for you when developing a series or movie for Netflix? Let's find out.

Unlike songs that you can listen to many times, you only watch a film once or twice. Therefore, acquiring and showing old catalogue of films was not enough to support their growth. Hence, Netflix had no choice but to produce a huge amount of original content to keep their customers satisfied.

Themes and genre

Because Netflix is not beholden to the same data as traditional broadcasters, it can offer a wide variety of programming. But that doesn't mean they will develop everything that comes along. Again, data determines a great deal of the decision-making. And genres have their own set of data.

Comedy

In fact, according to Ampere Analysis, Netflix has more comedies in development than any other genre. There are several key reasons for this.

Comedies are certainly cheaper to produce. This means an 8- or 10-episode season can be turned out rather quickly. As there are no traditional television “seasons”, subsequent

seasons can be released as needed or as developed.

These shorter seasons with less time commitment for production means Netflix can attract major talent that traditional networks cannot. The service has become so buzzworthy in the industry, that doing a Netflix series carries with it an air of prestige. There is also the “hipness” factor—a relatively new, exploding entertainment platform that creates a bandwagon many actors want to jump aboard. This means that traditional movie stars like Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin in “Grace and Frankie”, and Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin in “The Kominsky Method” can reach a new, younger audience that their films might not. Not only would these actors be less likely to commit to a 22-episode traditional U.S. network shooting schedule, but their attracting primarily a 50+ age group is

considered undesirable to major networks, at least in the US. One of the last successful 50+ series in the U.S. was “The Golden Girls”, and that went off the air in 1992.

Perhaps most importantly, comedies are shorter than dramas. Netflix subscribers have wanted shorter episodes to binge watch. With comedies, this is much easier to do than with dramas.

Sci-Fi/Fantasy

The genre with the second most number of series in development is the Sci-Fi and Fantasy genres. This is a major break from traditional television where, with a few exceptions, this genre has failed. With its smaller audience and expensive production costs, the genre is unattractive to major broadcasters. Netflix’s niche programming is perfect for these shows.

Without a doubt, the biggest example of this is “Stranger Things”, one of the most talked about series in recent years. Again, nobody but Netflix knows how many people actually watched the series. But the show has been at the forefront of pop culture everywhere, from chat shows to magazines to podcasts. It has made stars of the young actors in the show. This has even led to the release of “Dark” from Germany, a country notorious for shying away from genre projects, billed as the “German Stranger Things.”



Note that this is similar to Amazon Prime and even the new Apple streaming service, where the genre is a high priority for developing series. Sci-Fi/Fantasy is in hot demand. Amazon is producing what may be the most expensive series ever created in its upcoming “Lord of the Rings” series.

Drama

Without question, drama is king when it comes to the percentage of TV series produced around the world. According to Statista.com, 33% of the top 250 series in the U.S. were dramas.

Netflix gained its reputation with award-winning dramas like “House of Cards.” In the early days, when Netflix was building its initial U.S. audience, it needed to not only produce content that would establish itself as a major player in the industry, but would also create a brand loyalty so that existing users wouldn’t cancel the service and new users would sign up.

“House of Cards” was such a property. Netflix invested \$100 million and outbid HBO and other major U.S. networks for it. No doubt it has paid off tenfold.

Today, Netflix dramas in development comprise only about 17% of overall series in development. But when you look at Netflix options, this is

misleading as the availability of drama series are much higher. As noted earlier, much of Netflix Original content is actually produced and aired by network partners in other countries. Many of these programs are dramas.

Crime

The crime genre is one of Netflix's smallest genres for production development. This is a genre where the major television networks and producers in most countries still excel. Netflix wouldn't be offering much of an alternative with their own crime series. The procedural crime series, "The Good Cop," starring Josh Groban and Tony Danza made a big splash when it premiered. However, it lasted only one season.

Where Netflix is excelling in the crime drama is with true crime documentaries and dramatizations. "Making of a Murderer" and "When They See Us" are two examples of true

crime series that have riveted audiences and gained widespread international success. This is an area where the audience seems to have an unlimited capacity to digest, and more importantly, binge watch.



So in conclusion, when developing a potential project for Netflix, it's important to keep in mind the genre and international appeal of your project, and to be aware of projects being produced in foreign markets.

Audience

So what does this mean in terms of audience? As previously stated, traditional networks cater to demographics that will attract advertisers. Programming is built around pleasing the advertiser.

With streaming services like Netflix, revenue is generated primarily by subscribers. The \$10-15

monthly subscription fee that is paid by the 65-year old viewer is just as valuable as the money coming from a 35-year old.

As previously mentioned, Netflix currently has just over 160 million subscribers. While nearly half are aged 18-34 (according to YouGov statistics), 14% of its viewers are over 55. In raw numbers, this is almost double the average number of total viewers (18+) for the CBS network, the largest network in the U.S. And given that the older audience is underserved by network television, this creates a great opportunity for Netflix to attract and, more importantly, maintain this important customer base. As populations continue to age around the world, the opportunities continue to grow.

And Netflix employs a kind of “scorched Earth” policy. Get as many subscribers as possible by putting out as much content as possible, content that becomes an important part of the pop culture landscape.

Showing a large variety of content for all age groups is part of the Netflix strategy to reach out to the whole family making the monthly subscription even more attractive, more justifiable.

And as its competition increases, Netflix continues to add features to enhance and alter the viewing experience. For example, they have recently added a “Skip Intro” button to allow viewers to bypass an episode’s opening credits, especially helpful during binge watching. Currently, they are working on a feature that allows users to watch a movie at a faster pace, a kind of fast track that you find on YouTube videos.



Netflix is more concerned with audience behaviour. So, when developing a project to pitch* to Netflix, it’s how the series or movie will conform to audience behaviour over audience demographics.

* See Paragraph Working with Netflix



Netflix has only recently started to share information about viewing audiences worldwide. For example, *The Crown* has reached more than 70 million households worldwide since it began streaming in 2016.

Series development

So, now that you have the background information on the business of Netflix let's discuss key points to developing and writing those projects.

Without a doubt, Netflix has made the expression "binge watching" a part of our everyday lexicon. When it comes to developing a Netflix series, the bingeability factor is vital. An entire season of episodes must be written, produced and ready for release long before it makes it to the screen. This is the same

for both scripted and non-scripted series, which includes reality programming and documentaries.

Fortunately, unlike traditional broadcasters who have to worry about offending potential advertisers, Netflix gives a lot of freedom to the creative teams.

This puts much fewer constraints on the development of a series. There is no such thing as a time slot with a definitive start and end time. So episodes can be as long or as short as needed. No padding to fill time and no cutting to conform to a schedule.

This also means that writers are not being paid to remain on staff, cutting major costs.

The writing of the series is usually completed before production, rather than having ongoing scripts being written. With the writers' jobs completed, an entire writing staff is not needed during production, except for small rewrites, as everything has been planned out ahead of time.

Among Netflix's most prestigious and successful series are:

- Bojack Horseman (Animated comedy)
- Stranger Things (Sci-Fi)
- House of Cards (Drama)
- Orange is the New Black (Comedy-Drama)
- Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt (Comedy)
- Grace and Frankie (Comedy)
- Jessica Jones (Action/Adventure)
- The Crown (Drama)
- Narcos (Drama)
- Master of None (Comedy)
- GLOW (Comedy-Drama)
- Dear White People (Comedy Drama)
- Making a Murderer (Crime Documentary)
- Daredevil (Action/Adventure)
- When They See Us (Drama - Crime Dramatization)

If you take a look at the running times of episodes, they vary from episode to episode.

Jessica Jones' first season episodes run from 46 minutes to 55 minutes. In the 4th season of Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt, with its episodes averaging at 30 minutes, one episode is 53 minutes. Likewise, a new season is released whenever the production is ready. Not, for example, in the following September at the start of a new network television season.

But you have to consider more than just each episode as a one-off. Because Netflix promotes binge watching, seasons must be considered much like the 3-act structure of a screenplay.

The 3-act structure of a screenplay

The first few episodes build up the season arc. The middle episodes are like Act 2. And the final episodes are structured like Act 3. Not only is a cliffhanger at the end of the season important, but each episode should have some small cliffhanger to get viewers to want to continue watching through the subsequent episodes.

Episodes cannot be developed in a vacuum, but rather as a part of the whole.

Because you can take your time and develop the story over an entire season, it allows the writers to go further in-depth into the characters while building the story over time. Likewise, it allows for stronger character development. Many shows have large casts, so not every character needs to be introduced and their storylines established right from the start.

This is a big change from network television, where a series needs to grab the audience in the pilot and keep them. How many times have we seen a network series canceled just before the story even hits its stride because its ratings haven't had a chance to grow?

There is also less need for exposition from one episode to the next because episodes are usually watched so closely together. There's no need to plant reminders of plot details, unlike episodic network television where a week or

more (like those painful mid-season breaks) may go by between each episode. This creates a more engaged audience.

Working with netflix

In the space of a few years, Netflix has become a multinational company generating billions of dollars of revenues. They invest massively in original content. They continue to open production offices in many cities across the globe, which is another testimony of their interest in producing more and more original localised content over the coming years.

With such an expansion, putting in place a control process was essential. (Giving freedom to the creative team doesn't mean being lax

when it comes to production management. On the contrary!)



In order to maintain the level of quality that contributed to building its reputation, Netflix has introduced very strict procedures in terms of production workflow and control process.

Just to name a few:

- Shooting exclusively in 4K
- Submitting budgets using Movie Magic Budgeting software and the Netflix template (After all, comparing budgets in a comparable format, is the first thing you would expect from a “data company”.)
- Delivering content using fulfillment companies that have partnered with Netflix under its Preferred fulfillment Partner Program
- ...

Therefore, as a producer, it's very important to be ready to adapt your development and

production processes to Netflix's standards and building your knowledge to be able to assess the technical and financial impact on your production when shooting in 4K, for example.

Many articles about Netflix workflow & process (production and post-production) can be found on Netflix Partner Help Centre.

<https://partnerhelp.netflixstudios.com/>

More about Netflix Preferred Fulfillment Partners:

<https://npfp.netflixstudios.com>



For decades, producing for TV or producing for cinema were two separate worlds, two different ways of developing, writing, producing and financing projects. By working with both TV and feature film producers, Netflix has definitely removed that divide.

CONCLUSION

Despite an increasing competition in online streaming services, Netflix will remain the pioneer of film streaming services. It has changed the game when it comes to television production. And in order to play the game, it's important to consider the key differences between traditional television production and streaming services, the number of which will only increase in the future. Knowing how Netflix selects its projects, how the audience consumes them and the important differences with developing the stories and writing will give you an advantage when creating your own project.



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