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Will TV series go the way of Charles Dickens?

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In 1841, crowds bustled at the New York docks to meet a vessel just arrived from England. "Is Little Nell dead?" people shouted. They were desperate to learn how Charles Dickens's serial novel The Old Curiosity Shop had concluded.

Many British novels in the 19th century, like The Old Curiosity Shop, were published in parts in newspapers and magazines. They were also made available in separate monthly instalments across a period of a year or more. As novels were expensive, serial publication meant that more readers could spread out the cost of a novel over time.

Illustration of Little Nell from A Rosy Path (1904) Public Domain

Yet there was no devious flicking to the back of the book to peek at the final page of a serialised story, as the author might not yet have even written the final chapter. Readers dangled in suspense until the next instalment was published. Or, as in the case of the American readers desperate to know the fate of darling Nell, until the next magazine issue was shipped across the Atlantic.

While novels were serialised as early as the 17th century, the popularity of the serial form in the 19th century had a tangible effect on how novels were written and the shape that they took. With the story being digested chapter by chapter, with a week or month elapsing between sittings, each had to be sufficiently engaging and tantalising to ensure that the reader would purchase the next issue.

In this way, the serialised novel resembles television series prior to the advent of the Internet and DVD box sets. We once had no choice but to wait for the next week's episode of a compelling programme.

In Australia, we were also vulnerable to lengthy delays...
between seasons, with no other way to discover what was happening to our favourite characters short of hopping on an international flight. Most notably, daily soap Days of Our Lives ran on a five-year delay in Australia until 2004. Channel Nine then aired a special that distilled four years of plotlines into one hour in order to catch up to more recent episodes.

The long hiatuses required between television seasons meant that the cliffhanger, inspired by the success of Dallas’s “Who Shot J.R.?“ episode in 1980, became a stock device for ensuring that audiences returned after the non-ratings period. Dramas such as HBO’s True Blood have ramped up the cycle of unresolved cliffhangers, with each episode leaving a compelling question unanswered, or a central character lying prostrate with fangs pressed at his throat.

A significant number of people still consume series such as True Blood by viewing or streaming weekly in order to avoid spoilers and keep current with social media conversations. Yet many other TV viewers now prefer to gorge on an entire season via streaming, downloading, or DVD. This method of consumption removes the suspenseful wait between episodes, and enables the viewer to more clearly follow, and remember, plot developments.

The question is, if more viewers continue to abandon traditional viewing patterns, consuming drama series as if they are a long film to be watched in one or two sittings, will the form and content of TV series shift along with them?

If we look back to serialised Victorian novels, we might have a predictor of how the TV series could evolve. Sensation fiction, in particular, aimed to grip readers with ever more shocking partial revelations at the conclusion of each instalment just like True Blood.

When a story had finished its run in a newspaper or magazine, it was usually published in a novel edition that made alterations to the serialised version. Once a story was going to be consumed at the pace of the reader, who held the complete novel in her hands, the need for contrived cliffhangers at the end of every chapter was reduced.

Some of these cliffhangers, which were essential in the serial versions, were removed in novel editions.

We can only speculate on the future of television now that traditional methods of broadcast have shifted so dramatically. Yet it is likely that these changes in how we consume television
will have some affect on the content we watch in the same way as shifting patterns of print publication altered the very nature of popular fiction in the 19th century.

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