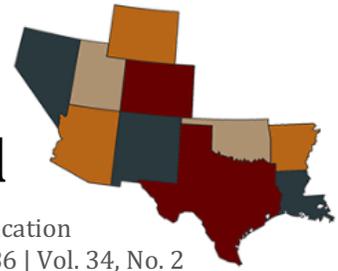


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## Socially Mediated Stranger Things: Audience Cultures and Full-Season Releases

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Research on social television has primarily emerged based upon regularly scheduled broadcasts that fans could discuss more or less simultaneously in real time over the course of emergent narratives. The advent of full-season releases on streaming services has disrupted those patterns and prompts a re-examination of audience behaviors and the theoretical models that seek to describe and explain them. The present article proposes an “atomized engagement model” as an alternative to the linear model of social television for today’s nonlinear television environment.

*Keywords: social television, fandom, social media, “binge-watching,” streaming services, audience studies, Stranger Things*

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**I**n recent years, both real-time and asynchronous discussions in which television fans engage with each other to create meaning or produce new material have coalesced on social media platforms and online discussion boards, in a phenomenon known as social television (Buschow, Schneider & Ueberheide, 2014). Early social television research addressed series released on regular schedules. Netflix, Hulu, Amazon and other streaming services have, however, recently begun making all episodes of some original series available at once, a practice known as full-season release (FSR). This rising trend of new series released in their entirety on streaming services, prompts a re-examination of the dynamics of social television behaviors.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Streaming television was successfully launched in 1995 by a Seattle startup company known as Progressive Networks. The technology allowed audiences to stream television shows and movies

directly over the Internet (Zambelli, 2013). Around 2008, Netflix introduced the idea of a streaming service with monthly fees (McAlone, 2016). However, these services only provided audiences the ability to watch shows and movies that originally aired on other networks. The platforms were not yet creating their own content. The 2012 release of *Lilyhammer* on Netflix was the first time a series was released in its entirety (Gilbert, 2012), thus giving way to the concept of full-season release (FSR). Other streaming services such as Hulu and Amazon soon began to provide their own content. Viewers were able to sit in front of their computer and watch original and new content one episode after another with minimal breaks in between, in a practice commonly referred to as binge watching. The term “binge watching” originated in 2003, referring to watching a marathon of an entire series on DVD (Zimmer, 2013). Poniewozik (2015) suggested that viewers in today’s television environment begin series on services such as Netflix with the pre-conceived idea of bingeing.

### **Social Television**

Active communication by fans on social platforms is defined by scholars as *social television*. Buschow, Schneider & Ueberheide (2014) defined this term as “the use of social media stimulated by television programs” (p. 129). For fans, social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram act as a “form of ‘social cement’ which binds together characters and narrative strands ... binds viewers to each other as they gossip about the show, and establish an active relationship between viewer and program” (Fiske, 2011, p. 77).

In communicating these theories across various platforms, active viewers form what Jenkins termed a “collective knowledge community” (Jenkins, 2008). This community of active viewers is held together “by the social process of acquiring knowledge - which is dynamic and participatory, continually testing and reaffirming the group’s social ties” (p. 54), thus forming a virtual community. Jenkins claimed that active viewers see television-based discussion forums as a way to challenge the secrecy of a series—the plot twists, character deaths and seasonal arcs—and work together to draw conclusions.

Buschow, Schneider & Ueberheide (2014) examined how fans engage in social television and view and engage with a series released one episode at a time on a network imposed schedule. They found that social engagement occurs on what they referred to as a *linear engagement cycle* consisting of three stages: pre-communication, parallel communication, and post-communication. *Pre-communication* takes place prior to the release of a season and involves analysis of the upcoming series’ commercials, teaser trailers, promos, interviews with series stars and other content. Once a series or season premieres, fans move into *parallel communication*, involving discussions about the most recently aired episode, relationships among characters, speculation about future plot developments, and the fate of characters. Fans then move into *post-communication*, where they can discuss the entire season.

These phases are predicated on a traditional distribution model of regularly scheduled episode releases, which allow viewers to flock together for social television discussion at predetermined times - such as after each weekly episode’s premier. Wood and Baughman (2013) claimed that “a user’s ability to participate in the real-time social media conversation around shared texts is crucially dependent on parallel, synchronized viewing by large audiences” (p.318). AS FSRs allow viewers to watch a series at their own pace, the advent of these series thus disrupted established viewing and engaging practices. For example, if two viewers are watching a FSR simultaneously, but one viewer “binges” the series in a day and the second viewer watches one episode per day for a month, this may make it more difficult for the two viewers to engage in discussion. Thus, it is plausible to claim that FSRs have disrupted traditional viewing patterns in two primary ways. First, they established a specific time anchor for beginning a binge viewing session, as streaming services teased and promoted release dates just as any network would publicize a new show, or season of an established show. This provided some structure to a casually amorphous viewing practice. Conversely, it removed the anchors of scheduled releases around which social television users structured their interactions. No longer bound by the network-determined schedule, geographically scattered viewers must develop new strategies for establishing community.

Taking Buschow, Scheider, and Ueberheide's (2014) linear model as a starting point, the present study therefore set out to address the following research question:

*In what ways do viewer engagement patterns for FSR series correspond to or deviate from the linear model?*

## METHODS

The Netflix drama *Stranger Things* was selected as a focus FSR series for analysis. The first season, released in July 2016, was a popular and critical success (Barrett, 2017). On August 31, 2016 Netflix announced the second season of *Stranger Things* would be released in its entirety on October 27, 2017. Table 1 shows the release and other key dates for the first and second season of *Stranger Things*. This timeline was used to determine the start period for social media monitoring. Data collection began on September 26, 2017, one month before the release date, to monitor pre-communication. As the basis of this research centered around whether new viewing patterns had emerged, no specific end date for data collection was set.

**Figure 1. Stranger Things Series Timeline.**



*Figure 1.* Timeline of events prior to *Stranger Things* season 2 release. This timeline was used to determine when to start data collection for the previously termed Pre-Communication Phase.

Through multimodal analysis, monitoring all of the relevant technologies available (Brock, 2018), it was possible to gain a better understanding of how each platform operates and settle on the four technology platforms chosen. Preliminary investigations prior to the release of the show's second season made it

possible to identify where fans were discussing *Stranger Things*, and select a range of platforms with a variety of technological and cultural characteristics: Twitter, Instagram, Reddit and FanFare.

Twitter is a microblogging platform which, at the time of the study, permitted users to post messages (tweets) of 140 characters or less (since expanded to 280 characters). Tweets may include any combination of text, visual content and links, and is a popular site for social television discourse (Buschow, Scheider, & Ueberheide, 2014). Instagram, a visual platform, is used by television fans to upload photos and videos relating to the object of their fandom (Rouse, n.d). Both platforms allow users to employ hashtags associated with a particular series or event, to “mark their tweets as relating to a certain topic or TV programme, and address the entire community of users who are tracking the hashtagged discussion” (Highfield, Harrington and Burns, 2013, p. 316) When an event or series becomes popular, a few hashtags typically emerge that guide users to the designated collective intelligence community of their fandom. Thus, hashtags act as a connecting tool that helps shrink the immense world of social networking into topical communities.

Discussion forums are another popular site for social television discussions. Reddit (<http://reddit.com>) is a free social networking forum that allows users to post content and exchange news (Park, Conway & Chen, 2018). Fans can post series-related content in discussion areas known as subreddits. These subreddits often contain discussion threads where one fan posts a finding or question and other fans reply with comments. FanFare is a subsite of the community weblog Metafilter (<http://fanfare.metafilter.com>), with designated forums for discussions about television series, movies, books, podcasts, and other media.

#### **Data collection**

Data were collected using a variety of tools and methods. Popular hashtags provided a means of tracking tweets and Instagram posts related to *Stranger Things*, while discussion posts from Reddit and FanFare were gathered manually.

**Twitter.** Twitter Archiver, a Google Chrome add-on, was used to track tweets related to *Stranger Things* based on a set of identified hashtags. Preliminary research indicated that the most popular hashtags accompanying discussions of the first season of *Stranger Things* and anticipation of the second season included #StrangerThings2, #mileven, #upsidedown, #StrangerThings, #whereiswill, and #worldupsidedown. These hashtags were input into Twitter Archiver and the tool automatically created a data spreadsheet with contents and metadata for all relevant tweets. The data were monitored twice daily to identify any emergent patterns. For the purpose of this study, the tweet text and date were the only columns of concern.

**Instagram.** Picodash (<https://www.picodash.com/>) was used to collect data for Instagram. Picodash was a search engine that collected data and exported it into a spreadsheet. (The tool is currently unavailable due to changes to the Instagram API.) The string “*Stranger Things*” was entered into Picodash to generate the most popular relevant hashtags. During the research period, these included #StrangerThings, #StrangerThingsFanArt, and #StrangerThingsSeason2. Because of the popularity of the series and the user-driven nature of hashtags, the list evolved throughout the course of data collection, with new searches conducted to ensure that all of the most popular hashtags were monitored.

**Reddit and FanFare.** Unlike the two previous platforms, there exist no independent search engines for discussion boards. Data for Reddit and Fanfare were therefore collected manually. The two subreddits dedicated to *Stranger Things*, “*Netflix Stranger Things*” and “*Stranger Things on Netflix*,” were monitored daily for observations, taking screenshots of threads and comments suggestive of patterns. The designated *Stranger Things* FanFare forums for both the first and second seasons were monitored daily and observations recorded.

All of the data collected were reviewed using an immersive, iterative process to identify themes and patterns. Changes in the contents of posts – such as viewing behaviors, references to plot points, character plot arcs, speculation regarding future seasons, and sharing of media articles and interviews – were monitored to determine how fans in engage in consuming and discussing FSRs. These reviews

took place while data were still being collected, also to identify any macro shifts in posting patterns that might signal new phases.

Common post patterns included countdown, plot, rewatching, parasocial, fan art and first-timer posts. A few of these patterns were found to exist on all platforms while others were restricted to particular technologies. Plot posts and first-timer posts were the sole post types to appear on all four platforms. *Plot posts* involve questions surrounding the new season, overall reactions to the plot, and observations of the series. While these posts were found on all platforms, Reddit and FanFare posts were more extensive than those on Twitter and Instagram.

The data further revealed that many viewers began watching the first season of *Stranger Things* close to the release of the second season. Posts regarding the completion of the first season are termed *first-timer posts*. Fans across all social platforms frequently posted about rewatching the first season of *Stranger Things*. Rewatching is not a new behavior, Buschow et al. (2014) did not include such a phase within their linear engagement model. Current research illustrated that *rewatch posts* were a common occurrence prior to the release of the second season. *Countdown posts* were only found on Twitter and Instagram and are identified as any post regarding the time remaining until the second season's release. These posts began on Twitter about 39 days prior to the season's release and appeared on Instagram approximately 13 days prior to the release. While the majority of post behaviors occurred on at least three of the four observed platforms, Instagram featured unique posting behavior.

Parasocial posts and fan art were exclusive to Instagram. Guo and Chan-Olmstead (2015) define parasocial relationships as the connectedness that a user feels toward a character. Collected data suggests that *parasocial posts* link an actor and their behaviors to the character they portray. Fanart is defined as fan-made drawings or projects centering around the object of a viewer's fandom. Similar to parasocial posts, *Fan art* posts were only found on Instagram. Similarly, *fan art posts* were an Instagram-only posts of fan made art in relation to *Stranger Things*. Through multimodal analysis distinct patterns were determined and conclusions regarding the patterns of communication on different social platforms were determined.

Around November 9, approximately 13 days after the series was released, the content of social television discussions began to change, signaling a shift in the viewer engagement cycle. In order to ensure that the detected shift was correct, data collection was extended one month to December 9, 2017. Ultimately, TwitterArchiver saved a total of 281,967 tweets from six different hashtags; Picodash had recorded 7,968 Instagram posts from three hashtags; 42,501 posts were made to two *Stranger Things*-related subreddits; and FanFare had 396 posts made to two seasonal discussion threads about the show.

## DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that fans utilize social media in different ways for a full-season release compared to Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide's (2014) linear engagement model. As traditional episodic television follows a regimented pattern of scheduled releases, the majority of the audience will tweet or post about the same episode at around the same time. Previous binge-watching behavior, on the other hand, did not lend itself readily to social television practices, since it was untethered to any schedule.

While the linear engagement model proposed by Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide (2014) is driven by the network or other broadcasting entity, FSRs shift the locus of control to audiences. Fans not only determine how they talk about the series, but in the instance of some of the observed platforms, fans are able to structure the social platform to best fit their discussions. The analysis of socially mediated discussions of *Stranger Things* thus makes it possible to understand how fans self-organize in terms of both viewing behavior and social television practices for FSR series. As discussed below, these behaviors and practices may be conceptualized as similar to the movement of atoms moving freely

through time and space, acting individually for viewing but coalescing for social engagement. In contrast with the linear engagement model, it is therefore described here as an *atomized engagement model*. This new model still carries pre- and post-communication phases, but fans now have the ability to steer through these phases largely as they please, without a broadcast entity imposing a pre-determined viewing schedule. Parallel communication also exists but is self-organizing rather than occurring on a fixed timetable: since all episodes become available at once, fans are left to their own devices in choosing when to watch them. Viewers who happen to find themselves at the same point in their watching progress will seek each other out for engagement.

### **The Atomized Engagement Model.**

The linear engagement model classifies stages according to where audiences fall in their viewing with relation to when a season airs: before (pre-communication), during (parallel), and after (post-communication) (Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014). Since the broadcaster controls the schedule, audiences who follow a series in real time are more or less watching at the same time. Technologies such as digital video recorders (DVRs), streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon allow for some flexibility, as do DVDs for shows later released on physical media. Despite these options, synchronous viewing has been deemed an essential requisite for social television practices (Baughman, 2013).

The *Stranger Things* audiences observed for the present study still engaged in patterns reflective of the pre-communication and post-communication phases described by Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide (2014), but were not bound to adhere to them consistently. Rather, individuals could move freely through the series and engage with the show at whichever point and for the duration of time they desired. Extending the atomization metaphor, some users could even find themselves in a quantum state of occupying multiple phases simultaneously, for instance engaging in post-communication with others who had also finished viewing the released episodes, while also discussing earlier episodes with viewers who were encountering the series for the first time in parallel-style conversations.

For conversations analogous to the parallel communication phase, viewers are instead forced to seek out people who are at the same point in their viewing. This is the stage that is most disrupted by this new distribution model.

At the macro level, one can observe phase transitions reflective of the linear engagement model, though at a greatly accelerated pace compared to traditional television schedules. This macro audience consists largely of fans who have kept up with the series since its inception and can anticipate the new season release in real time. Once the new episodes are made available on Netflix, however, this macro audience becomes fragmented, as each fan is engaging and viewing the series at their own pace, and new audiences are drawn in.

The discussion below offers descriptions and examples of the kinds of communication found in each atomized stage.

**Atomized pre-communication phase.** After the second season of *Stranger Things* was announced on August 31, 2016, the media promoted posters and entertainment journalists crafted articles for the upcoming season. For example, posters of *Stranger Things* season 2 were released online by Entertainment Weekly on September 16, 2017 (Romano, 2017). This was approximately 41 days prior to the release of the season on Netflix. This suggests that the macro audience entered the pre-communication phase, able to share their excitement about the upcoming new series, links to articles in the entertainment press, merchandise, and speculate on plot and character developments in the new season. However, on the micro level, individual fans were engaging in multiple phases. While many fans on Twitter and Instagram were counting down, such as in @RachelDocca's tweet, "When there's only 30 days to go until #StrangerThings2 there's only one thing 2 do" (Rachel, 2017), there were others who were not yet in the atomized pre-communication phase as they were just discovering the first

season. For example, @itwrkdnjh (2017) tweeted “oh man I just finished watching #StrangerThings and poor Will oh man,,,can’t wait till s2 yaaas.”

While both @RachelDocca (Romano, 2017) and @itwrkdnjy (2017) were preparing for Season 2, and therefore they were both in the atomized pre-communication phase, @itwrkdnjh (2017) was reacting to Season 1 and therefore was also in atomized post-communication phase of Season 1.

**Atomized engagement phase.** Atomization takes place at every stage of this model, but its departure from the linear engagement model is most apparent after the pre-communication phase. Whereas the linear engagement model offers a specific time frame for parallel communication, while the show airs on a regular schedule, FSRs have shattered these parallel lines. Fans are not only allowed to determine their own viewing schedules, they are required to self-organize for social engagement.

All eight episodes of *Stranger Things* season 2 were released at midnight on October 28, 2017. Many fans chose to binge the series in a single session, back to back. Others decided to space the episodes out by watching one or two episodes per day; still others opted to replicate a broadcast calendar of one episode per week. These are just a few of the nearly infinite options available to audiences. This freedom resulted in fans moving through the series at different paces, in an atomized fashion.

Rewatching behavior was also quite varied. Some fans began watching the series, then doubled back to rewatch a particular episode. Other fans consumed the entire season twice in succession, perhaps more slowly the second time to gain further insight into the plot and share their thoughts with fellow fans. For example, FanFare user **skycrashesdown** (2017) wrote “Random thought on 2<sup>nd</sup> viewing (why yes, I did watch all 9 episodes yesterday, and I am rewatching it 24 hours later).” Yet another group of fans rewatched the first season in preparation for the release of the second, placing users simultaneously in the atomized engagement phase and post-communication phase.

While fans prior to FSRs had the ability to rewatch, the availability of all episodes at once potentially shortens the period it takes to rewatch an episode or a series. The ability for viewers and fans to navigate back to old episodes while watching the new series at their own discretion, while interacting with other viewers at the appropriate level, is what atomizes and distinguishes this model from the one developed by Buschow, Schneider, and Ueberheide (2014).

**Atomized post-communication phase.** In the linear model, the parallel engagement phase has a clear end date determined by the network, but the atomized engagement phase does not. Around November 30, almost five weeks after the release of the season, the overall tenor of social media posts shifted. Most of the actively communicating fans were analyzing the series as a whole, but others were still entering the fray having just begun the season or the show as a whole. These overlapping viewing and communication patterns creates a potentially endless engagement cycle. Despite this extreme freedom, however, the macro audience did show evidence of a shift, signaling a new phase.

Post-communication participation was observed as early as October 30, just three days after the series dropped, but continued up until research concluded on December 9. Posts generally consisted of overall opinions of the series and questions about season three. The atomized post-communication phase is continuous and linked to the other engagement phases, as fans who have watched the entire series can rewatch and interact with other fans at any stage of the viewing process. Much of this behavior depended on the technical features of the different social media platforms.

### **The impact of affordances**

Some platforms lend themselves better to these atomized, or asynchronous, discussions than others. Some of the key differences in engagement behaviors were thus determined by the social media platform chosen and individual preferences, rather than imposed by an external entity such as a broadcasting network.

Previous research on social television models has focused primarily on Twitter (see for example Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014; Wood & Baughman, 2012). As a result, these placed a premium on the immediacy of communication offered by the microblogging platform, and the ability to easily connect with vast networks of fellow enthusiasts through the use of hashtags.

Twitter was still very active during the data collection period here. However, with fans watching on any number of different timetables, Twitter's immediacy revealed itself to be a weakness when it comes to FSRs. With a quasi-chronological timeline (somewhat complicated by obscure algorithms), users are limited to engaging with people experiencing the show at approximately the same time. While this is effective for programs aired on a traditional fixed schedule, FSRs force viewers to actively seek out others who have opted for a similar watch plan. Additionally, the microblogging platform's enforced character count inhibits fans from engaging in elongated plot posts. Twitter is therefore less attractive for those who stretch out their consumption beyond the first couple of days, or who wish to take advantage of atomization and move in and out of different stages and craft detailed questions or observations. Similar limitations apply to Instagram, which is also tied to a temporal structure. As a visual platform, users primarily posted photos of characters or actors, stills from episodes, and fan art.

Therefore, Twitter and Instagram fans prior to the series release expressed their excitement with short countdown posts or tended to post individual comments after the release about wherever they were in the viewing cycle, with a hashtag to remain part of the community. This activity is not only different from activity observed on Reddit and FanFare, but also from those who watch a traditionally scheduled series (Buschow, Schneider, & Ueberheide, 2014).

Discussion boards such as Reddit and Fanfare offer more flexibility. Specific forums can be created for each episode, specific aspects of the show (such as character relationships, or nostalgic intertextual references), or entire seasons, which allow users to customize their discussion experiences much more granularly. People can move seamlessly between the different discussion areas depending on where they are in their viewing progress, and the kind of conversations they wish to have. Although online discussion boards are a much older technology compared to the other social media platforms, dating from the mid-1990s (Forum Software Timeline 1994-2012, n.d.), their organizational structure proves to be more flexible in allowing viewers to take full advantage of new social television opportunities offered by FSRs.

On the other hand, this same flexibility creates challenges when it comes to the issue of handling spoilers for a FSR series.

### **Spoiler management**

Johnson and Rosenbaum (2014) described spoilers as "premature undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (p.1069). Since FSRs allow fans to make their way through the series at differentiated paces, fans earlier in the viewing process risk being advertently subjected to viewing spoilers while scrolling through different platforms.

As mentioned, Reddit and FanFare have created specific sub forums to discuss each episode of a series, but Twitter and Instagram's technical feature do not offer many strategies to managing spoiler content.

Further complicating matters is the fact that users have different attitudes about spoilers. While some attempt to avoid them at all costs, others actively seek them out. This range of perspectives contributes to challenges when social networking communities try to agree on a method for handling spoilers. In one FanFare discussion, for example, Invitapriore (2017) observed that Netflix binge-watchers on Metafilter tended to create a thread about every episode upon the series release. To encourage users to post only about the specific episode in the appropriate thread even if they hadn't paid attention to episode titles or numbers, simple spoiler-free plot summaries were included at the top. Reddit users who wish to discuss specific plot points practice spoiler etiquette by writing the word "Spoiler" in the header of the fan-made thread. Only after opening the thread can users see the spoiler-related plot question or statement. These systems grant considerable autonomy to fans in how they choose to navigate discussions.

Since Twitter and Instagram do not have the option of hiding individual posts or creating distinct conversational areas, all posts are visible to other users, regardless of where they are in the atomized

engagement model. This structural difference in platform affordances leads to different, more communal, discussions on Reddit and FanFare compared to Twitter and Instagram.

### CONCLUSION

The progression of technology has created new distribution modes for television, such as full-season releases. The atomized engagement model seeks to account for fans' viewing autonomy, which allows them to be anywhere in the engagement cycle at any time, while still free to engage in social television conversations with other viewers, appropriate to their point in the process. For example, although one user may be in the atomized engagement phase and viewing the second season of a FSR series, other viewers may be in the atomized post-communication phase of the first season.

This study had several limitations. As FSR are a relatively new type of television program format, there was little prior research on which to base the theoretical development. This study focused on a single series, on a single streaming service. Audience viewing habits and social engagement practices may vary depending on show genre, popularity, and even the service on which it is distributed.

This research brings to light some new ways viewers and fans consume content on streaming services, and combine that consumption with the social opportunities offered through a variety of online platforms. Future researchers may wish to investigate questions regarding the types of fans who use different social media platforms, and whether their choice of platform is indicative of differences in their engagement with the television content, or simply of their existing online habits.

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