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# Switching Screens: An Examination of How House of Cards and Scandal Represent Shifting Strategies in Television

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**SWITCHING SCREENS: AN EXPLORATION OF HOW *HOUSE OF CARDS* AND  
*SCANDAL* REPRESENT SHIFTING STRATEGIES IN TELEVISION**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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**PROFESSOR FRIEDLANDER  
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Television has always been a big part of my life. When I was young, my parents had strict policies about television. Back then television was a reward, something only to be watched once a week for a very short period of time. That all changed when I turned thirteen and was given my own laptop. All of a sudden, I had the ability to watch television without my parents' knowledge. Television became less of a reward and more of a way to insert myself into other worlds. I found myself enthralled with the lives of other people and watching them develop over time. I became fascinated by the twists and turns of plots and the tumultuous relationships between characters. Television stopped being about the adrenaline of sneaking behind my parents' back and instead became about following the worlds in which my characters lived.

As I got older, the temptation grew stronger. I became aware of the endless possibilities of Internet streaming using Netflix (as well as the few illegal sites in which I dabbled). I found I enjoyed watching whole seasons of shows and series more than having to wait week to week. That way, I could immerse myself completely in the lives of the characters. I followed storylines with such intensity that my real world fell away. I found myself watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *FRIENDS* as a way of dealing with college application stress. When I became frustrated with my mother, I turned to *Gilmore Girls*. The shows I watched not only helped me to deal with the world around me but also, as the characters developed, so did I. When I went to college, I chose to examine the alternative television worlds I lived in by becoming a Media Studies major. I found myself required to watch television for class and learning how to productively discuss and critique it.

Now loving television is only part of the viewing experience for me. I have found that the bigger part of productive television viewing is being a critical observer. I discern the way in which my emotions are manipulated (I am a heavy television crier), I keenly try to spot out

advertising, and I always try to understand why plot and character choices are made. I have used this viewing dynamic to focus on two shows that have garnered particularly lively public attention in the past couple of years: *Scandal* and *House of Cards*.

Both shows have similar conceits (White House? Check. Sex? Check. Murder? Check.) but use different platforms: *House of Cards* is a Netflix Original production while *Scandal* is a broadcast television program on ABC. Through the course of this paper, I will examine how the platform and type of consumption affects the content and distribution of the show and the types of relationships they forge with their viewers. The main discussions in this paper will focus on the two series as a whole with a particular focus on the first seasons of both *House of Cards* and *Scandal*.

### **Television Context**

Before investigating the current state of television, I will discuss the history of television in relation to *House of Cards and Scandal*. Television has been a large part of the American pastime for over a century. Major broadcast networks started in the mid-1920s and by the 1950s, television dramas became the majority form (Williams 54). For decades, “medium television watching was primarily controlled by networks, offering a limited choice of programming on a tightly delimited schedule with no other options to access content” (Mittell 31). Networks controlled the various forms of television productions, from news to sports. The dramatic form was found to be profitable for broadcast television because serials and series have advantages such as time-slots that allow for a run of weeks and because of “their element of continuity the serial and the series encourage attachment to a given station or channel” (Williams 57). However, it was also found that audiences lacked the “weekly consistency to allow for serialized

narratives, and the pressure of syndication favored interchangeable episodes of conventional sitcoms and procedural dramas” (Mittell 31). These shows, generally referred to as procedurals, have consistency of character traits from episode to episode but rarely have an overarching plot or character developments. To watch a procedural, viewers do not have to have knowledge of previous episodes or storylines, as there is little narrative or character complexity.

Since cable and the VCR became mainstream in the early 1980s, viewers have gained more control over when and what they watch. Audiences suddenly had the ability not just to have access to full seasons at a time, but could also re-watch episodes or segments that contained more complex moments (Mittell 31). Subsequently, network television has seen a severe decline in viewership because it became harder to access broad heterogeneous audiences. According to Forbes Magazine, in the past twelve years there has been a 50 percent collapse in broadcast television audience ratings (Casserly). The new competition brought on by industry changes has led to transitions from mass to niche audience norms. Shows targeted to a specific type of audiences allow the viewers to bond deeply with the shows, often creating cult audiences. According to Mittell, “Audiences tend to embrace complex programs in much more passionate and committed terms than most conventional television” (32). While procedurals still exist with shows such as *White Collar* and *Bones*, the industry in the past couple of decades has opened to allow more complex shows with invested viewers like *Scandal* and *House of Cards*.

As the number of ways to access television has increased and audience sizes have shrunk, networks have discovered the importance of cult television because this creates not just extremely loyal fans, but also a buzz. The “buzz” or “buzzworthiness” of a show is a vital marketing technique because word of mouth travels fast on social media and pushes other online viewers to tune in out of curiosity (Hutchinson 9). The better buzz a show has, the more likely it

is for individuals to start watching and the less likely it becomes that they will fall behind on episodes out of fear of missing out (in terms of both finding spoilers online and not being able to keep up with discussions of the show).

With the switch to more narrative and serialized television, networks created the soap opera genre. This move to complexity started in the late 1970s through the early 1980s and included shows such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* (Mittell 32). According to Hill, “Soap operas are serial melodramas that deal with the lives of multiple characters, usually with very emotional relationships” (8). All serials today share their roots with the soap opera genre such as *House of Cards* and *Scandal*. Part of this is because soap operas are particularly price effective. Soap operas have many characters, which allows for frequent changes such as characters leaving, dying, or returning (a perfect example of this is *Dallas*). Both *Scandal* and *House of Card* have gotten rid of our killed of numerous secondary characters. Another advantage of soap operas is that they are relatively less expensive to film because they rarely go “on location” (Hill 8). Soap operas have shaped current television today, particularly with the shift to creating strong emotional ties between the viewers and the characters.

By the 1990s, serials built on the innovations of the 1980s by making increasingly complex story arcs that last through episodes and seasons (Mittell 33). Shows from this time, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The X-Files* contain episodic arcs as well as a long-term story arcs. Each episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has a beginning, middle, and end in which the Scooby Gang (a name for the main characters in the show) have to defeat some kind of evil. At the same time, most episodes build to the overarching “big bad” that the gang has to defeat at the end of the season. The show had enough episode coherence that most viewers could watch an episode without knowledge of the overarching plot. For the majority of viewers who watch

shows in a way that follows season arcs, the more complex plot requires viewers to not miss any episodes, as they will fall behind on plot. The viewers have to take an active role in watching; otherwise they will fall behind on plot developments. Most shows today, particularly broadcast shows like *Scandal*, attempt to strike a balance between being episodic enough for viewers to watch any random episode without knowledge of the previous one while also having overarching plot for people who watch every week and for those who binge-watch the show in short periods of time.

Today, binging on television is often associated with Netflix. Netflix was founded in 1997 as a DVD rental company for movies and television shows. Originally, the concept behind Netflix was to have a flat-fee unlimited rental in which there would be no late costs. By 2005, the company had 4.2 million subscribers with a consistent increase in membership numbers (Auletta). In 2007, the company, determined to stay relevant during the switch to online streaming, began streaming movies and television shows on their website. The CEO and co-founder of Netflix, Reed Hastings stated that part of Netflix's success has been the ability to take advantage of viewers' dissatisfaction with traditional television (Auletta). Instead of requiring viewers to watch an hour of programming including twenty minutes of commercials, Netflix provides a commercial-free experience.

Netflix's brand has such a widespread hold on viewers that its name is frequently synonymous with streaming movies or television, even if viewers are not actually using Netflix. Netflix originally was mainly a movie-viewing site but has slowly gained access to previously cancelled cult shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The West Wing*, and *Freaks and Geeks* as well as finished seasons of currently airing shows such as *Scandal*. This has offered a new way to build audiences for current broadcast and cable shows because of the easy access to watching

prior seasons. In fact, “the ratings for the fifth season of AMC’s ‘Breaking Bad’ were more than double those of the season before, and several times higher than those of Season One” largely because of Netflix (Auletta). The ability to watch entire seasons allows viewers to deeply invest in the shows by watching characters and plots develop over a significantly shorter time than if it was aired live. According to Auletta, Cindy Holland, Netflix’s Vice President of Original Content, Netflix viewers watching television consume on average two and a half episodes in one sitting (some of this may be due to the perfectly timed countdown after finishing one episode until the next episode auto-plays). Netflix is so widely used in fact that “during peak hours, Netflix accounts for more than thirty per cent of all Internet down-streaming traffic in North America, nearly twice that of YouTube, its closest competitor” (Auletta). By watching on average two to three episodes in one sitting, viewers choose to immerse themselves completely in the fictional worlds of television for long periods of time.

### **Case Study Context**

In mid 2011, Netflix announced that it was going to create original programming. On February 1, 2013 Netflix released *House of Cards* on its website; an original Netflix television show adapted from an eponymous British BBC miniseries. The show is generally attributed to the “creative genius” of Beau Willimon and David Fincher despite there being two producers, two executive producers, and nine executive producers (Hill 26). The show has not gone unnoticed by television award programs and critics. *House of Cards* won three Emmys for its first season and was nominated for nine, the first time a non-traditional television show won an Emmy (Auletta). Additionally, the second season received thirteen Emmy nominations.

Numerous blogs and publications including *The New Yorker*, *A.V. Club*, and *Variety* have also written about the buzz-worthiness of both the show and the platform.

The series is a political drama set in Washington D.C. starring Kevin Spacey as the main character, Francis (Frank) Underwood. Frank is the ruthless, manipulative, power-hungry majority House whip from South Carolina matched by his equally ruthless wife Claire (Robin Wright). In the pilot episode of the show, Frank is passed over for the role of Secretary of State causing him to create an ongoing scheme to exact his revenge and plan his ascent up the political ladder.

The show's first season predominately revolves around Frank while also diving into Claire's life running the Clean Water Initiative charity organization. Additionally, we learn about Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), a political reporter who has a symbiotic extra-material affair with Frank. The show also follows the life of Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), a congressman from Pennsylvania struggling with drug, alcohol, and sex addiction. The plot of the show will be further analyzed in later sections of the paper.

Nearly a year before *House of Cards* was aired on Netflix, a different political soap opera was released on ABC. On April 5, 2012 *Scandal* premiered catapulting the creator, Shonda Rhimes, and the lead actress, Kerry Washington, to fame. The show has been nominated for five Emmys and has won two. *Scandal*, like many current broadcast shows, offers its previous seasons on Netflix. The show is created with the knowledge that a large audience will binge-watch past seasons as well as view the current season live.

The series is about Olivia Pope (Washington) a former White House Communications Director turned political fixer. Olivia's crisis management firm, Olivia Pope & Associates, contains a racially diverse cast of "Gladiators in Suits" (often shortened to "Gladiators"), a term

Olivia coined for her team. The show follows the various cases Olivia works on as well as relationships between characters. Romantically, the show focuses on the relationships between President Fitzgerald Grant III (Tony Goldwyn) and his wife Mellie (Bellamy Young) as well as the love triangle between the President, Olivia, and Jake Ballard (Scott Foley). The various plot aspects of this show such as the suspense, murder, and love triangles are just a small part of how the show is marketed to a target audience.

### **Marketing and Revenue**

An important aspect of a television show's success is the way in which it is marketed. For one, both *House of Cards* and *Scandal* came at an interesting time in American politics. *Scandal* premiered a few months before the presidential election that gave President Obama his second term. *House of Cards* followed in early 2013, a month after Obama's second inauguration. The fact that the shows revolved around an alternative Washington D.C. during a time when it was a hot topic in people's minds helped the shows create a buzz to gain viewers. The marketing of the shows to help them remain buzzworthy and relevant has been an important part of their success. However, both *House of Cards* and *Scandal* have very different approaches to how they have achieved this goal.

According to Andrew Leonard in an article published in *Salon.com*, "Netflix can save big on marketing costs because Netflix's recommendation engine will do all the heavy lifting. Already, Netflix claims that 75 percent of its subscribers are influenced by what Netflix suggests they will like." This gives Netflix the ability recommend its viewers to watch *House of Cards* creating easy access to a target audience. Additionally, the large amount of "Big Data" that

Netflix has accumulated about its audiences allows it to tailor show recommendations for specific viewers.

Netflix approved the project of creating *House of Cards* without having a pilot or test-marketing it, which is practically unheard of in television production. As explained in an article in *The New Yorker*, Netflix knew that the genre of political dramas/ thrillers as well as the original British production of *House of Cards* was popular on Netflix. Additionally, David Fincher is a well-known name with popular films on Netflix such as *Fight Club* and *The Social Network*. Kevin Spacey has starred in popular movies including *Se7en* and *The Usual Suspects* (Auletta). Due to this, “*House of Cards* was able to garner viewers outside of the traditional television audience, thereby cashing in on the well-tested new serial format that premium channels have been introducing to the media landscape over the past decade” (Klarer 2015). Therefore, Netflix is able to draw viewers in by using big names of people involved as well as targeting viewers who would be most likely to be invested in and fascinated by the characters and plots.

Furthermore, by disrupting normal distribution methods by releasing all thirteen episodes of a season at once, *House of Cards* created a buzz on social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Although *House of Cards* is not the first show to mass-release an entire season, it is one of the first to take this approach and can still be considered a pioneer. Netflix was originally a way of distributing other platforms’ shows and movies and because of the switch from the more traditional streaming approach to releasing original content all at once, audiences around the world took to social media to discuss the *House of Cards*. This created a strong, committed audience following from the beginning.

ABC's marketing technique for *Scandal* also relies heavily on social media (particularly Twitter) as well as the creator/show runner Shonda Rhimes.<sup>1</sup> Shonda was relatively unknown before her work on *Grey's Anatomy*. However, once the first season of *Grey's Anatomy* aired, it became a huge hit for ABC and Shonda (Raghavan). Particularly, Shonda was known for diverse casting and building intense romantic relationships, both of which can be found in all of her shows (*Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice*, *Off the Map*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*). The popularity of show creators has had an increasingly important influence on the popularity of their television shows because they are considered the authors of the series and have created brand recognition (Hill 27). For those like myself who have watched numerous Shonda shows, her influence over *Scandal* is clear. The fact that I watched *Grey's Anatomy* and that *Scandal* was heavily marketed to *Grey's Anatomy* viewers was what originally got me to watch the show. This makes me part of the 90% majority of *Grey's Anatomy* viewers who stay tuned for *Scandal* (Casserly). This type of marketing has the ability to create a strong viewership because the audience allows itself to become invested in a new show because they trust Shonda to deliver a compelling experience.

Shonda herself frequently promotes all of her shows on Twitter. She currently has 789,000 followers, a number that is nearly double what she had in August 2013. This can be attributed to the fact that ABC has started promoting her as a reason to watch the show. "ShondaLand night" as it has been coined, is being marketed as #tgit or "Thank God It's Thursday." In September 2014, season eleven of *Grey's Anatomy* premiered at 8 pm with 9.8

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<sup>1</sup> Generally when referring to a person in an academic paper, authors use individual's last name. In my personal experience, women are more likely than men to be referred to by their first name and this is an unacceptable double standard in academic papers. However, for this paper I will refer to Shonda Rhimes by her first name as her name is well known and part of ABC's marketing technique.

million viewers. At 9 pm, *Scandal* premiered its fourth season with 11.9 million viewers. At 10 pm, *How To Get Away With Murder*, the newest ShondaLand show, premiered its first episode with 14 million viewers (Goodman). Because Shonda's shows target the desirable 18-49 age range, particularly women, all of her shows are geared to gain the same audiences. By creating a brand with her name and promoting #tgit, all of Shonda's shows have been able to promote each other and create a loyal ShondaLand fan base.

Another part of *Scandal*'s marketing technique is to try to make viewers watch the show live. Because of the invention of video recorders and streaming on the Internet, viewers have the ability to delay their watching and therefore are able to skip commercials. It has been estimated that around forty-four percent of American households have a digital video recorder (DVR), which allows them to skip commercials (Hutchinson 10). Broadcast shows like *Scandal* need people to watch shows live for a few reasons. One of these reasons is that broadcast shows get their numbers by knowing how many people are watching live. Additionally, broadcast shows get a majority of their funding from commercial advertising, which accounts for 20 minutes of an average hour-long show. The amount advertisers are willing to pay directly relates to how many people are watching the show. These are the reasons it is important for shows to have viewers watch live. *House of Cards* does not have this issue because it is created for people to watch at their own pace at any time. The show does not require commercial slots and has its own tracking systems for knowing how many people are watching. Because of this difference in how the shows profit, *Scandal* employs Twitter to provide an incentive for people to watch live.

A large part of the draw for viewers to tweet about a show like *Scandal* is it facilitates live "water cooler" conversations about television that would not ordinarily be possible. Traditionally, "water cooler" discussions refer to when people gather together (frequently at

work) to exchange opinions and information. Now, social media has become the new “water cooler.” According to Hutchinson, almost twenty-five percent of the coveted eighteen to thirty-four age range turns to social media such as Twitter to express feelings about what storylines they are viewing in their shows in real time as they are watching (1). Twitter creates a new kind of fan club in which fans from all over the world can come together to discuss their love of specific shows and storylines creating a new kind of “water cooler” discussion. This not only facilitates live conversations, but it creates a different way for viewers to invest in shows.

Since the beginning, social media (Twitter in particular) has been a large part of *Scandal*'s marketing, with a strong push during the show's third season. Because of this, the official Facebook and Twitter accounts for *Scandal* grew by 67 percent and 55 percent respectively in 2014 (Kallsen). The show promotes #AskScandal throughout every show so the #Gladiators (a term for those who love *Scandal*) can stay connected to each other and the cast. This allows for a conversation between the viewers and the cast who live-tweet about each episode during the live broadcasts. The show promotes Twitter usage by using on-screen graphics such as “Tweet with the Cast #AskScandal.” In an email to *The New York Times*, Marla Provencio, the Executive Vice President for Marketing and the Chief Marketing Officer at the ABC Entertainment group, stated: “The fans look forward to joining the cast each week so they can ‘watch together’ and talk about the show while it’s on” (Vega). In 2013 during the winter finale of *Scandal*, the fans generated 3,000 tweets a minute during the live broadcast totaling 157,601 tweets during the course of the hour (Vega). At the end of episodes with large cliffhangers, the show promotes on-screen hashtags like #WhoShotFitz and #WhoIsQuinn. This gives audiences a way to connect, speculate as to what is to come, and keep the buzz alive until the next episode.

Another way *Scandal* has created a Twitter buzz and garnered public interest is by having individuals with many followers tweet about it. Celebrities have hopped on the *Scandal* bandwagon with famous individuals like Oprah Winfrey (25.9 million followers), Lena Dunham (1.9 million followers), and P!nk (25.1 million followers) tweeting about how much they love *Scandal*. The more word of mouth and buzz *Scandal* gets, the more new viewers the show can access. Producers also use hashtags, social media, websites, etc. to promote the program because the additional content expands revenue possibilities, broadens the markets, and, importantly, reinforces viewer commitments to the show (Hutchinson 18).

Just as marketing is a large part of a show's success, so is the revenue stream. However, with about fifty percent of households with television using a DVR, the majority of viewers skip over the commercial advertisements. "Every viewer who skips an ad, or who leaves a broadcast or cable channel to watch Netflix or another ad free service, is evidence to advertisers that television airtime isn't worth what it once was – a conclusion that will eventually mean less revenue for broadcast and cable networks. Sixty-six billion dollars – four out of every ten media dollars – is spent annually on TV commercials" (Autella). This has made the competition for advertisers even more competitive for broadcast shows.

*Scandal*, as a broadcast show, relies heavily on the income brought in from advertising and is able to hold its live audience by its use of social media. The show is desirable for advertisers because it does well with its targeted demographics: *Scandal* is geared towards women and also holds a strong African American audience. In fact, 10.1% of Black households in America watch *Scandal* (Casserly). Strong demographics are highly desirable for advertisers because it helps to target products to audiences. Particularly in the past decade with declining prime-time audiences and lowering ad rates, *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy* are two of the most

valuable properties for television. The shows “pull in more than \$13 million in advertising for ABC each week—just shy of \$300 million a season, or about 5% of the network’s total revenue” (Casserly). *Scandal* is reportedly the ninth most expensive show for advertisers, ABC’s highest earning drama, with a 30-second advertisement spot costing around \$218,000 (Kallsen). With a total of around 20 minutes of commercial time per episode, ABC makes millions of dollars on each episode on the live airing alone (additional revenue is then made by selling the rights for syndication as well as selling DVDs and merchandise).

*Scandal* does not just profit from the thirty-second advertisement slots but also by using product placement. Because so many viewers watch shows uninterrupted (whether that be paying for subscriptions, watching DVDs, or streaming/downloading online legally and illegally), product placements have become a way to lower marketing costs and getting advertisement money. In 2012, advertisers spent nearly 8.25 billion dollars on product placement and the market is expected to double within the next five years (Rose). *Scandal* subtly has characters use products, such as Windows phones, as a way of receiving additional advertising revenue. The use of product placement makes *Scandal* extremely profitable.

A delicate balance is required in deciding how much advertising time to air and how much product placement to use per episode. Extreme use of advertising can be limiting to shows. Excessive commercials in every episode of *Scandal* can cause people to choose to not watch it live or to have trouble following the plot. Additionally, blatant product placement can annoy and distract audiences if they become aware of it. For the advertisers, specific guidelines must be followed as to when the show airs their product. When creating broadcast shows, show creators have to worry about whether “advertisers will resist having their products slotted after a nude scene or one laced with obscenity” (Autella). *Scandal* is a show that tries to push

boundaries and therefore has to be very cognizant of balancing leaving the audience excited and involved before commercial breaks (in order to keep them from switching the channel) and appeasing advertisers.

*House of Cards* differs in how it derives revenue. Instead of being 40-45 minutes each episode with an additional 15-20 minutes of commercials, each episode is 50-55 minutes without commercial interruptions. *House of Cards* is an expensive show to produce as Netflix reportedly spent nearly 100 million dollars for the first two seasons (Auletta). The show frequently uses product placement blatantly such as when Frank is visiting a friend, picks up Sony's gaming device, the Play Station Vita, and says, "Is that a PS Vita? ... I ought to get one of these for the car." Additionally, there are product placements for BlackBerry, Samsung, Chevrolet, and many others. There was one scene in which Frank is sitting at a table with 9 different Apple devices. Reportedly, however, *House of Cards* does not get funding for its product placements (Rose). The products are allegedly placed either to make the situation seem realistic or, in the case of Apple products, as a form of gratitude for Apple donating thousands of dollars worth of products.

Without advertisement revenue, the question becomes what does Netflix have to gain by producing a 100 million dollar show? Netflix subscriptions cost \$7.99 a month so in order to pay off the show Netflix would need around 520,000 new people to sign up for two years. These numbers are not unreasonable for Netflix, as it has had large subscriber growth in recent years. In fact, the first episode of *House of Cards* is available to non-Netflix subscribers in the hope that access and exposure will cause individuals to pay to subscribe. Original content can also be beneficial to Netflix for preventing attrition. If people are hooked on *House of Cards* or *Orange*

*is the New Black*, they will be less likely to stop subscribing because Netflix is the only place to access those shows.

Additionally, Netflix already pays exorbitant amounts of money for content to companies like Disney and Epix (even up in the billions of dollars), which make original streaming seem fairly affordable by comparison (Greenfield). In order to prevent becoming obsolete, Netflix has been pushing bringing in exclusive content that not only includes the original content but also, for example, to be the exclusive streaming location for *Mad Men* at a pricey one million dollar per episode (Greenfield). By getting exclusive contracts, bringing in original content, and by starting to stream beloved cancelled shows (such as the newly released on Netflix, *Gilmore Girls*, or the much anticipated January release of *FRIENDS*) Netflix is attempting continue to gain subscribers and therefore, revenue.

Despite their different platforms, revenue and marketing strategies are crucial to the success of both *Scandal* and *House of Cards*. Particularly with advertisements, *Scandal* has to walk a fine line between making sufficient revenue and disrupting viewers' experiences. *House of Cards* has more freedom to allow viewers to have an uninterrupted viewing experience but may be more challenged in being an economically profitable show.

## **Restrictions**

Broadcast shows air on government airwaves and due to this, follow strict regulations as to what can and cannot be seen. *Scandal* has consistently pushed the boundaries on what is allowed by having sexual content such as alluding to oral sex performed as well as phone sex. In fact, *Scandal* has run into trouble with trying to draw in viewers by being edgy. At the end of October 2014, the annual Halloween special geared towards children, "It's the Great Pumpkin,

Charlie Brown,” ended and twenty-six seconds later a *Scandal* episode started with a steamy dream sequence that involved a threesome. ABC was heavily criticized by the Parents Television Council for “putting a peep show next to a playground” and for “grossly irresponsible” choices allowing that transition (Yahr). *Scandal* pushes the limits on sexual content allowed on broadcast television and occasionally ventures into violence (a particularly gruesome scene involving Olivia’s mother biting her wrists comes to mind). Viewers’ relationships with the characters have been tied to what kind of intimacy is revealed. Because of this, broadcast restrictions on sex can change the viewers’ interaction with the characters. *Scandal* attempts to straddle the line between being explicit enough in matters of sexuality or violence to create this kind of viewing relationship while not being so explicit that it draws fines and criticism.

*House of Cards*, however, does not have these types of restrictions and does contain graphic sex, drugs, nudity, and smoking (although significantly less than a cable counterpart like *Game of Thrones* on HBO). *House of Cards* shows sex but only ever with purpose. Sex is generally shown (often between Frank and Zoe) as a visual representation of power dynamics. In fact, after one sex scene, Frank and Zoe discuss the fact that sex for them is simply a display of power and not for pleasure. The fact that sexual content is freely shown and discussed allows viewers a feeling of intimacy and understanding of the subtleties in the characters’ relationships.

Additionally, *House of Cards* shows the main characters smoking; something that in broadcast television is almost unheard of. Occasionally on broadcast networks, a villain or an unsympathetic character will be shown smoking but the protagonist would not be shown smoking (Gildemesiter). Frank and Claire frequently smoking together. One reviewer notes that according to *House of Cards*, any problems in the relationship are “nothing sharing a nightly cigarette together out your bay window won’t fix. Whether he’s off sleeping with journalists or

sacrificing his colleagues' careers to further his own ambitions, Frank always returns home to share a nightly cigarette with his wife Claire” (Fleischer). This allows viewers to connect (arguably villainous) smoking as metaphor for the depths of Claire and Frank’s relationship. While *Scandal* attempts to be racy within the confines of broadcast censorship, Netflix uses the freedom with restraint generally as a way of furthering plots and characters.

Another major struggle of broadcast and cable shows is the producers not knowing whether the show will be cancelled and how many episodes they will be allowed to shoot. Series like *Veronica Mars* and *Pushing Daisies* were cancelled without the shows being able to wrap up loose ends. Because of this, shows like *Scandal* must always be aware of the possibility of cancellation and thus be cautious about their storylines. Netflix decided before *House of Cards* was produced that it would have at least two seasons containing thirteen episodes each. *House of Cards* has the luxury of knowing that if a story was started early on, it could remain unanswered for many episodes without fear of being cancelled and the storyline never being closed.

*Scandal* has had to be watchful about the resolution and arcs of some storylines because of the risk of cancellation. Within its first two seasons, *Scandal* was almost cancelled twice. Shonda was even originally told that the second season would be shortened to a thirteen-episode season (McGee). This meant that the second season, which eventually was picked up for the second half of the season, would have an arc for the first half and a different arc for the second half. The freedom of the Netflix model allows *House of Cards* the ability to be fearless in decisions about extended plots, a luxury *Scandal* does not have. As viewers invest in plot arcs, the more the plot ends creatively and intelligently the more satisfied the viewers’ feel.

### **Episodic Structure and Story Arcs**

By making the entire first season of *House of Cards* available at once, Netflix not only broke the conventions of traditional serial distribution models, but also took into consideration the changing viewing habits of television consumers. For the past decade, people had already been using DVDs, TiVo/DVR, and online streaming to watch full seasons at once. Additionally, by using knowledge that Americans on average watch more than five hours of television per day, Netflix was able to gear *House of Cards* for binge-watching consumption (Hill 32). As Klarer explains, “Netflix not only bowed to these new viewing habits of their costumers, but also acknowledged, which seems even more important, that the series format has complete emancipated itself from its roots in television with its piecemeal release patter” (205). One reviewer for *A.V. Club* stated that by using a new distribution method, “Netflix allowed viewers to watch this show divorced from the tyranny of weekly airings” (McGee). In fact, Netflix was so successful at this ploy of releasing the whole season at once that about two percent of Netflix subscribers in the United States watched the complete second season of *House of Cards* during release weekend (Wallenstein). That means that over half a million people binge-watched thirteen hours of *House of Cards* over the course of one weekend.

Because the new form of distribution involves thirteen hours released at once with the intention for viewers to binge-watch, character development happens differently than in broadcast shows. Michael Lynton, the CEO of Sony Entertainment, explains characters have the ability to grow over the course of thirteen hours of television (Autella). This permits more sophistication of the narrative and character than is normally seen in television shows creating a more engaged viewership. *House of Cards* has the ability to not rush through plots since the audiences are generally watching for extended amounts of time. Because of this, there are episodes that do not necessarily move the plot forward but instead have the power to “delve

deeply into character complexity, [which does] not happen due to production constraints with broadcasting companies” (Hill 37). In the first season alone, there are two episodes that do nothing to further the plot at all (episode three’s trip to South Carolina as well as episode eight’s trip to the Sentinel). David Fincher himself stated that the *House of Cards* writers particularly focus on character arcs and developments because they do not always know where the plot is going. This stems from the fact that the producers do not necessarily have to follow a strict script because they do not need approval like in broadcast shows (Hill 32). This also allows *House of Cards* to develop the characters that revolve around Frank such as backstories for Zoe, Claire, and Peter. This creates a more developed world for the viewers to embrace.

Part of Frank’s development is the audience slowly learning that he is always scheming and manipulative. However, the viewers are trained to know how Frank thinks as whenever he is being duplicitous he breaks the fourth wall and gives asides to the viewers, speaking directly to the camera. Hill explains that 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” (Hill 39). Throughout the episodes, the audience is lulled into a false sense of security that Frank is a reliable narrator because the audience is led to believe he always supplies the viewers with what his real plan is. However, this is used against the audience at times because we trust that we will be kept in the loop. This is shown in episode nine of the first season in which Frank is campaigning for a bill to pass. Frank yells at Claire to do his bidding by talking two congressmen into voting in support of the bill. Claire, angry with Frank for not prioritizing her needs and yelling at her, tells the congressmen to shoot down the bill. Later, it is revealed that it was in Frank’s favor for the bill to fail. The audience comes to the realization that Frank knew how Claire would react if he yelled at her

which added an extra level of deceit.<sup>2</sup> The trust the show gives the audience that they will understand Frank's manipulations allows viewers to take pride in their understanding of the character's motives.

*Scandal* does not have the luxury of having such deep character development because each episode has to be entertaining as a stand-alone episode. The two complete seasons of *House of Cards* are almost equivalent in the number of hours of viewing to a single (average 22 episode) season of a broadcast show like *Scandal*. This is important to viewers' relationships with the characters because there has been research showing that the more exposure an individual has to a show, the stronger the relationship the viewers feel with the characters (Shiappa, Allen, and Gregg 302). This gives shows like *Scandal* the ability to have viewers deeply invested in characters.

As mentioned by Hill, production constraints make it challenging to deeply explore the development of characters on an episode-to-episode basis. For example, in *Scandal* character development is frequently used as another way to further the plot, not simply as a way to create more dimensional characters. For instance, arguably the most developed character on *Scandal* aside from Olivia is the First Lady, Mellie Grant. Mellie's calculated behavior towards her husband and others is shown to stem from when she was raped fifteen years ago. While this created a more dynamic character, it also built into the backstory of her son, Jerry, which fed into the storyline of Jerry's death. Besides Mellie, *Scandal* mostly focuses on plot and development of Olivia's character while secondary characters such as Harrison, Huck, and Abby have

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<sup>2</sup> This is not new to cinematic techniques. In Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, John Williams created music that played every time the shark was approaching. Then, when the audience trusted the music to tell them when the shark was coming, the shark started to attack without the music cue. This was a way of disorienting the viewer and making the sharks appearances more powerful. Similar techniques are used with Frank's deceit.

histories that are alluded to, but not generally addressed. This creates a slower development over time of the characters but broadcast shows have more airtime time in which to do it.<sup>3</sup> This creates an interesting dynamic with viewers because the lack of development of other secondary characters serves to highlight the viewers' attachments to Mellie and Olivia.

The Netflix model and the broadcast model of distribution not only affect character development, but also episodic structure. Traditionally, each episode of a broadcast shows contain a beginning, middle, and end with each section containing a specific purpose. Williams states that because after the first two or three minutes of a show there is a commercial break, the opening few minutes are "meant to excite interest, which is in effect a kind of trailer for itself...It is then not surprising that so many of these opening moments are violent or bizarre: the interest aroused must be strong enough to initiate the expectation of (interrupted but sustained) sequence" (Williams 93). The show must grab the attention of the audience by promising drama and excitement to come. *Scandal* has had shocking openers such as a dream sequence with a threesome between the main love interests and someone being horrifically murdered. The middle section of the episode generally contains a case of the week with exposition to make sure the audience knows all the characters and what their motivations are for that particular episode. In *Scandal*, this generally involves Olivia and her team figuring out how to approach and solve the case of the week. Since advertising interrupts the flow in broadcast, shows like *Scandal* create tense moments right before the advertising break to keep viewers watching. The case is generally solved a few minutes before the end of the episode. The last two to three minutes of the episode generally end in a teaser or promotional for the next episode. *Scandal* almost always follows this

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<sup>3</sup> *Scandal* has been criticized for lacking development of secondary characters more so than other broadcast shows. Harrison, for example, was never given a full history or development even after the character was killed off at the end of season 3

episodic recipe. For example, *Scandal* ended an episode in which the Vice President murders her husband that then leads off to another storyline that will be addressed in the episodes to come.

*House of Cards* differs greatly from this model because there are no advertisements and it is expected that viewers will have recently watched the previous episodes. Each episode was created to flow from one to the other without having a self-contained episode driven by plot. The storylines of *House of Cards* are generally open throughout many episodes with the different episodes running together. As Ryan McGee explains in a review of the show, “Seriously: Think back. If you can remember what happened in any one episode outside of the trip to Sentinel, I’d be surprised.” Because of the lack of time or episodic constraints, story threads can be addressed more slowly without as much dialogue. For example, the first episode of season two contains a minute and a half of Claire and Frank running. The actual dialogue does not start until three minutes into the episode. This creates subtext in which the viewers have time to think for themselves about the plot without it being directly told to them. This is an indulgence that a broadcast show like *Scandal* does not have.

Furthermore, *House of Cards* does not generally follow the episodic structure of broadcast television. Cindy Holland explains, “*House of Cards* was akin to making ‘a thirteen-hour movie.’ There was no need to recap episodes or to insert cliffhangers” (Autella). According to Ryan McGee, sometimes the episodes of *House of Cards* “have a beginning, middle, and end. Sometimes they don’t. Far too often, they involve origami birds.” The episodes do not follow a basic structure often found on broadcast shows like *Scandal*. Additionally, *House of Cards* does not frequently end on a thriller or cliffhanger between episodes. In the entire first season, only episode ten when Doug enters the bathroom to find Peter and reacts in an alarmed manner even remotely seems like a cliffhanger (as we do not know if Peter is dead or has run away). Instead

of forcing viewers to hold on until the next week like broadcast shows, *House of Cards* generally ends each episode with a slight increase in excitement from the rest of the episode leaving viewers wanting to keep watching. After finishing an episode, Netflix pushes audiences to watch the next episode by, as soon as credits begin, having the next episode appear to be clicked on. Moreover, if the viewer does not quit out of the tab or click to the next episode, Netflix actively takes the passive viewer to the next episode. This encourages people to binge-watch even if that was not their original intention.

One defining characteristic of television shows is that episodes build together to make a season. *Scandal*, as previously mentioned, is a show that has strong episodic structure because it is created mainly to be watched on a week-to-week basis. However, it also has a large contingency that binge-watches the show either on Netflix (the first three seasons are currently available), DVD, or DVR. This is factored in to the strength of *Scandal*'s seasonal arcs in which each episode slowly brings the viewer slightly closer to the "big bad" of the season. The end of the season or midseason break has a shocking ending which leaves the viewer breathless for the months until the show starts again. The last five minutes of the finale episode of season three contained one of the gladiators, Harrison, being murdered, Olivia's father revealing he was responsible for murdering the President's son, the President winning reelection, Olivia and Jake on a plane to leave and never return to Washington D.C., and a number of other large "game-changing" moments from the season. This leaves many viewers shocked, awed, and ready to tweet about it until the next season starts.

*House of Cards* similarly has to keep viewers interested in order to have people excited to watch the next season. Unlike *Scandal*'s several months of hiatus, *House of Cards* is released every year in February, meaning viewers who watch it all when it is first released have to wait an

entire year for the next season. Perhaps because of this, *House of Cards*' two season finales have ended at a strong, well-defined place that is likely to resonate with the viewers. For example, season two ended with Frank becoming President, standing in the Oval Office, doing his trademark double knock on the table. David Fincher has explained that watching *House of Cards* is like reading chapters of a book.<sup>4</sup> People may stop between chapters but generally they will read many chapters at once (Klarer 215). Each episode of *House of Cards* is not as plot driven as in traditional television. Instead of being distinguishable by episodic plot, most episodes slowly build to Frank's overarching long con of gaining power requiring viewers to embrace not understanding how all episodes add together and rather to enjoy character development and dialogue.

Netflix, rather than having the traditional 40 minutes for episodic plot and then two minutes for a teaser into the next episode, has eleven episodes for one plot and two episodes for the teaser to the next season. Ryan McGee, amused by Chapter Twelve of the first season, states: "40 percent acts like it's still in season one, 40 percent acts like it's already in season two, and the remaining 20 percent likes to pretend we give a shit about Claire Underwood and Gillian Cole arguing about photo shoots near wells." Netflix follows a different idea of seasons and season arcs because of the distribution method pushing viewers to accept and enjoy a new type of show where it is often hard to predict where each episode is leading.

In traditional television, the first, or pilot, episode is about introducing all the characters. However, 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 season" (Hill 33). The first scene of the first episode involves Frank killing the dog. As Frank does it, he states: "There are

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, each episode of is given the name "Chapter" such that the third episode of season one is called "Chapter 3."

two kinds of pain: The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain, the sort of pain that's only suffering. I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this require someone who will act, who will do the unpleasant thing, the necessary thing" ("Chapter 1"). Ten episodes later, after Peter has served his purpose for Frank and has slipped back into his alcoholism, Frank kills Peter. It is implied that Peter is the just like the dog despite the episode having no reference to the dog. This subtle reference is something that likely only a viewer who has watched the first episode recently would understand. This subtly works well for *House of Cards* due to the way in which it is consumed but would not work well for a show like *Scandal*.

## **Conclusion**

Because of changes in the way television is being consumed, broadcast shows and new platforms like Netflix alike are trying to adapt. Broadcast shows such as *Scandal* are trying to reach new viewers by using innovative marketing techniques with social media while Netflix has found a way to use the demographic information of their viewers to properly target shows. Restrictions on network shows change *Scandal's* approach to sex and violence while *House of Cards* has more freedom in what the characters do and how it is shown on screen. The way in which both shows earn revenues affects not only budget but also what kind of content can be shown. The distribution method also affects episode and season structures creating different kinds of character and plot developments. The complex interaction among a variety of technological, economic, and aesthetic relationships for both broadcast and Netflix original content has created an interesting time of change for viewers relationships with the shows.

According to Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, "the age of broadcast TV will probably last until 2030" (Tencer). However, *Scandal's* success at using social media and plot to create a

strong viewership might prove otherwise. A few weeks after Hastings made this statement, Netflix announced that for its new original series, *Marco Polo*, there would be a Twitter component (Smith). As Netflix begins to incorporate more social media, a few questions come to mind: Where does this leave a broadcast show like *Scandal*? How will broadcast shows adapt and find new methods of engaging audiences? The introduction of new television models is not necessarily a threat to the older models, but rather have the possibility to inspire new techniques of engaging audiences by creating stronger characters and plots and using technology in new and interesting ways.

Television continues to be an important part of American society as well as my life. As a lover of television, I am thrilled at the continuing growth of narrative and character development in shows. While I no longer fulfill my love for television in secret away from my parents' watchful eyes, I continue to explore new shows. Now, instead of being prohibited from television, the only complaint I get from my parents is that my watching habits change their viewing recommendations from Netflix.

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Auletta explains in this article the history of Netflix and how it has changed to incorporate original content like *House of Cards*. Particularly, Auletta's discussion of the benefits of the Netflix model of television is relevant to the current paper. By interviewing individuals involved with the making of *House of Cards*, such as Cindy Holland, Auletta brought a deeper understanding of why specific choices were made about *House of Cards*. The article also offered amazing facts such as "during peak hours, Netflix accounts for more than thirty per cent of all Internet down-streaming traffic in North America, nearly twice that of YouTube, its closest competitor."

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This paper examines the role of television and Twitter activity with a particular focus on *The Walking Dead*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Scandal*, and *Hannibal*. The discussion of marketing techniques of *Scandal* by using Twitter is particularly important for the current paper. Interestingly, almost twenty-five percent of eighteen to thirty-four year olds use social media such as Twitter to express feelings about what storylines they are viewing in their shows in real time as they are watching.

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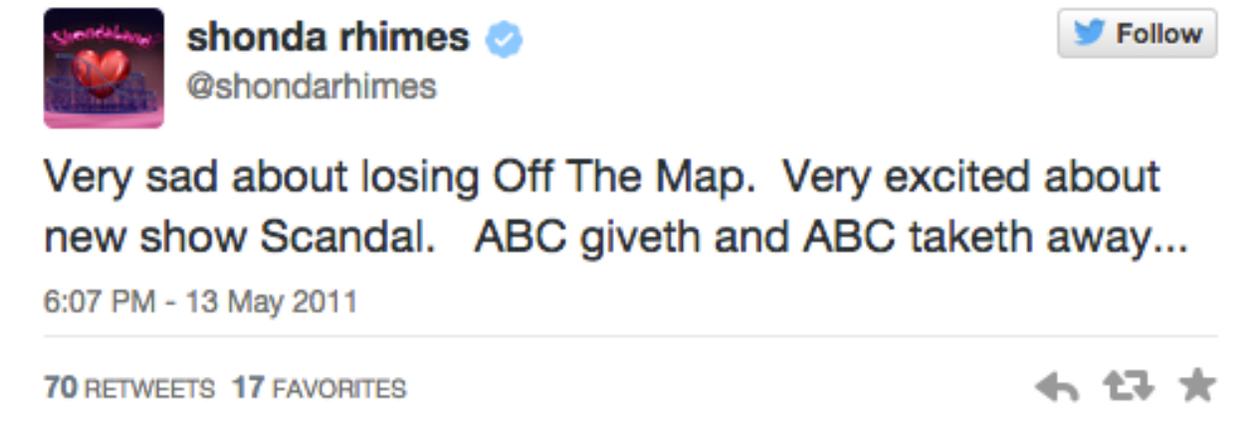
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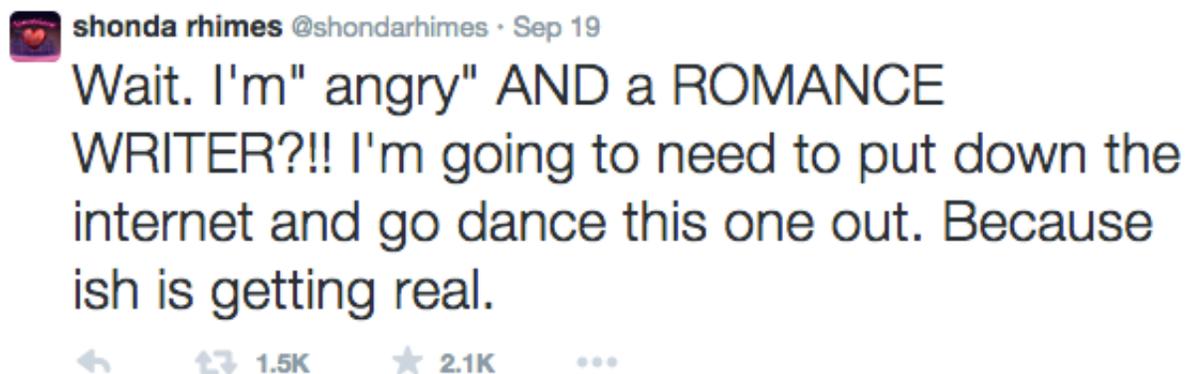
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**Appendix:**

Before the fame of *Scandal*, Shonda tweeted about the ending of one of her shows, *Off the Map*, and the beginning of *Scandal*. The tweet was only retweeted 70 times with 70 favorites.



Then, as she started become more famous, her tweets became more noticed. After the notorious New York Times article published an article in September about Shonda Rhimes and the trope of the angry Black Woman, Shonda tweeted her anger. Her tweet was retweeted 1.5 thousand times and was favorited by 2.1 thousand people.



On the season premiere of all three of her shows, Shonda thanked her viewers for watching. She also used the marketing technique of #ShondaLand and #tgit.



Last month, Shonda Rhimes trended on Yahoo showing her increasing popularity.





An example of the many Apple placements of *House of Cards*:

