

# Syndication, Box Sets, & Streaming: Forming the Television Canon

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When I first posed this question regarding canons and availability, there was a far more specific and far snarkier concern underlying the inquiry; why in 2018 are 20-year olds watching *Friends*? In classrooms of 80-300 students, *Friends* remains a somewhat reliable shared piece of media, second only to *The Bachelor*. As of August 2018, *Friends* is available in the United States on Amazon, Netflix, iTunes, Google Play, vudu, TBS, Paramount Network (Spike), and Nickelodeon as part of the nick@nite evening line up. While traveling this summer, *Friends* was one of eight English comedy television shows offered on Icelandic Air. *Friends*, a 22-minute, multi-camera sitcom with a laugh track that ran on NBC from 1994 (before the birth of some of the students watching it) to 2004 for a total of 236 episodes. *Friends*, a show set in New York, that never explains the exorbitant real estate of the characters, the lack of people of color, and the changes in American life post 9/11.

I'd like to first acknowledge the absurdity in the proposal of a television canon. Canons inevitably highlight particular stars, particular types of stories, particular modes of production and will be necessarily incomplete. For television in particular, country of production and broadcast becomes a determining factor, and, timeslots such as primetime carry more weight than others, such as post-school children's programming. Canons determined by popularity and ratings will neglect critical hits that never maintained substantial audiences, while canons determined by critical attentions will neglect the pleasurable popular. Screening canons created for the sake of education will be tilted toward shows for which we have accessible scholarship to pair with, even while students lack any and all context. An example: to coincide with a chapter from John Caldwell's *Televisuality*, I recently showed the beginning of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* (1986). Not only had the students never heard of the show, they had never heard of Paul Reubens.

Aiming to be comprehensive requires narrowing the scope like an overdetermined Netflix category: TV Dramedies Featuring a Strong Female Lead. 24-hours a day, 365 days a year for three channels for decades would be too much to sort through; add to that mix the hundreds of cable stations, streaming producers, international sources and the amount of potential content is overwhelming.

Elihu Katz, John Durham Peters, Tamar Liebes, and Avril Orloff describe canons as "durable objects" rather than unchangeable, unassailable collections of master items. 'Durability' offers us a far more potent entry into thinking about canons than the choice of the objects themselves. Durability requires the object to withstand the wear and tear of everyday use and maintain its function. Syndication used to excel at this role of everyday use. That which was somewhat current and profitable, or a past notable and cheap, propagated from channel to channel, filling the schedule and the broadcasting

hours. In this industrial model, viewers from multiple generations experienced multiple generations of productions side-by-side. Within the same flow, children could encounter the entertainment of their parents. A year before the launch of DVDs in America, TVLand took this the nostalgic format of nick@nite even further with a channel of entirely decades-old programming. Time, access, and communal viewership contributed to durability. Access here has the dual connotation of both physical access and access to meaning.

The rise of DVDs sped up the divorce among time, people, and programming. While editing for syndication always meant a certain degree of variability in content, DVD distribution took this potential even further. Music rights, in particular, challenged the consistency between different formats. An example: *Married...with Children* (1987) aired on FOX and in syndication with Frank Sinatra's "Love and Marriage" as the theme song. The original Sony box set release lacks this signature tune. This program provides many opportunities for discussion in a classroom, but to use the DVD version would be to canonize an altered version. Complicating the use of DVDs further, for a generation accustomed to streaming, DVD players are not standard home equipment except as tied to gaming consoles.

Streaming services—the big players, Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, but also CBS All Access, HBONow, the upcoming Disney service—fracture everyday accessibility as well as shared viewing. Assembling services and passwords becomes a complex jigsaw, and that's presuming that viewers have the energy to seek out the pieces. Why watch television programming from a previous decade when Netflix commits to over 80 new films and 700 new or exclusively licensed programs in one year?

Streaming services call durability into question even further as we consider the second component: maintenance. *Friends* became available on US Netflix January 1, 2015 and has remained there for an exorbitant fee. But many shows have shifted services after contracts expire, leaving viewers to either adopt another subscription or to abandon watching. This flux adds a burden to instructors who must assemble a canon from what is available, what is accessible (both meanings), and what achieves the goals of a course.