

# Instability/Stability: Catalogue Titles, Streaming Services, and Physical Media

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On May 4, 2018, Netflix released a reedited version of *Arrested Development* Season 4, called *Arrested Development: Fateful Consequences*. The edit rearranged what had originally been fifteen episodes of varying lengths, each spotlighting a different member of the ensemble cast in stories that were interlocking but often non-chronological, into 22 episodes of approximately 22 minutes each that conveyed a linear narrative. Following the release of the new cut, Netflix banished the original version of *Arrested Development* Season 4 to the “Trailers and More” tab, making it difficult for viewers to find it. “Has anyone been able to find the original season four of *Arrested Development* on Netflix?” *Vulture* television critic Matt Zoller Seitz inquired on Twitter on May 5, “Either I’m an idiot or it’s not on there.”

In opting to making the original *Arrested Development* Season 4 more difficult to access, Netflix is essentially burying an embarrassing early chapter of its history as a producer of original programming. When it was first released in May 2013, as the second of Netflix’s “original programs” following *House of Cards*, *Arrested Development* Season 4 met with a mixed critical reception. Writing for *The New York Times*, Mike Hale declared that the season “feels slowed down and dragged out at the same time that it feels forced and overly complicated.” The season’s reputation has not improved over time, to the point that Julia Alexander at *Polygon* suggests that “Netflix...making it more difficult for people to watch the original fourth season...may be beneficial for people who slogged through the show’s choppy fourth season and want to forget it.” The disturbing implication of Alexander’s argument is that it is not only justifiable, but actually preferable, for a media conglomerate such as Netflix to attempt to obfuscate its history through curation. The obfuscation is all the more lamentable in this case because *Arrested Development* Season 4, regardless of its quality, took advantage of the narrative possibilities afforded by streaming technology in a manner that no show had done before and few have done since.

Another prominent example of a streaming platform limiting access to programming came on May 29, when Hulu pulled the original run of ABC’s *Roseanne* (1988-1997) following Roseanne Barr’s racist tweeting about Valerie Jarrett. Hulu’s decision was much more drastic than Netflix’s concerning *Arrested Development* Season 4, insofar as Hulu removed *Roseanne* from its service entirely whereas Netflix only made *Arrested Development* Season 4 more difficult for users to find. Hulu’s motives in removing *Roseanne* are also more arguably more laudable than Netflix’s in the aforementioned case – by pulling *Roseanne*, Hulu is not sanitizing its own critical legacy, but ensuring that Roseanne Barr will not receive streaming residuals. Zoller Seitz lauded the decision in a Twitter thread that begins: “The entirety of *Roseanne*, including all those years

when she was a liberal, got nuked today. Gone like *Cosby*. No streaming, no reruns, nothing. She was deleted.”

Zoller Seitz here conflates the show *Roseanne* – a program that famously went through multiple showrunners – with the person of Roseanne Barr, and intimates that limiting access to the show is akin to deleting Barr from the cultural record. *New Yorker* critic Emily Nussbaum presents a counterpoint to Zoller Seitz’s perspective in her own Twitter thread. She notes that the continued availability of *Roseanne* in reruns and on streaming platforms “lines a lot of people’s pockets” in addition to Barr’s, given that “TV is collaborative,” a circumstance that Zoller Seitz’s conflation of Barr and *Roseanne* ignores. Nussbaum also asserts that she’s “not on board with the idea that art by bad people should no longer be available (rather than be, say, critiqued or ignored.)” She argues in the same thread *The Cosby Show* and its spinoff *A Different World* “should still be available to view [as] a key part of TV history.”

The critical conversations surrounding Netflix’s burying of the original *Arrested Development* Season 4 and Hulu’s pulling of *Roseanne* key into issues of media accessibility that are central to the vocations of media scholars, both on a conceptual and practical level. Ten years ago, when boxed DVD sets of television shows were the new norm, an academic writing on *Roseanne* or the first three seasons of *Arrested Development* could be fairly confident that their access to those objects of study would remain untrammelled assuming they had the means to acquire those boxsets. With streaming technology superseding physical media to a large degree in recent years, these case studies bring into relief the challenges television scholars will face as they continue to interrogate the medium’s history and serve as a warning against relying solely on digital archives that serve the interests of the corporations maintaining them rather than those of scholars.

#### Works Cited

Alexander, Julia. “Netflix is hiding *Arrested Development*’s Original Fourth Season.” *Polygon*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/5/4/17320060/arrested-development-season-4-remix-netflix>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2018.

Hale, Mike. “A Family Streamed Back to Life.” *The New York Times*, 26 May 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/27/arts/television/arrested-development-on-netflixcom.html>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2018.

@emilynussbaum. “I know nobody will agree with me about this, but I think *Cosby* (& *ADW*, which he also gets money from) should still be available to view. They are a key part of TV history. I understand the economic ethical argument against it and I certainly understand not watching it, tho.” *Twitter*, 29 May 2018, 2:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/emilynussbaum/status/1001577546008408072>.

@emilynussbaum. "I'm sure that it lines a lot of people's pockets. But TV is collaborative and also, I'm not on board with the idea that art by bad people should no longer be available (rather than be, say, critiqued or ignored.) I know that others disagree about this." *Twitter*, 29 May 2018, 2:24 p.m.,  
<https://twitter.com/emilynussbaum/status/1001575128155779073>.

@mattzollerseitz. "Has anybody been able to find the original season four of ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT on Netflix? Either I'm an idiot or it's not on there. Of course both things could also be true." *Twitter*, 5 May 2018, 8:14 a.m.,  
<https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/992784582159273984>.

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<https://twitter.com/mattzollerseitz/status/1001658200310067200?lang=en>.