# Abstract

The following thesis examines how changing expectations from media consumers is challenging the established paradigms of traditional media production and distribution. My chosen object of study is the 2013 Netflix produced adaptation of the BBC miniseries House of Cards, with regards to deliberate choices made, so as to best meet the changing demands from a media consuming customer base, which expects a higher degree of control over how and where they choose to digest audio visual media.

The theoretical framework for examining the adaptation itself is based on Linda Hutheon’s publication *A Theory of Adaptation,* in which she presents the key areas of focus when analysing both the product and the process of adaptation. Hutcheon does not, as such, present a theory behind adaptation analysis, but instead a framework, which considers widely differing imperatives behind the choice to adapt a prior work. Instead of examining in regards to its fidelity to its source text, she argues that the motives of the adaptor is to be examined to gain an understanding of the adaptation process and thereby the product of the adaptation as well

As a foundation of my analysis of the trends in media consumption and the impact of new forms of media distribution I have chosen Marshall McLuhan building my approach around his explanation of his statement that: *“The Medium is the message”* By this statement he means that the social and cultural impact of a given media. His definition of medium is anything that extends human ability beyond our own bodies, arguing that a light bulb is a medium because it gives humans the ability to see where we had not been able to without it. His arguments are central to my analysis of Netflix’s distribution model.

I start by examining the Netflix’s transition from a content facilitator to a content producer. Thereby becoming a competitor with the business partners on who it relies for the vast majority of its content. Then I examine how new trends in media consumption and the impact this is having on traditional media outlets, while at the same time playing into the strength of alternative platforms, such as the afore mentioned, Netflix.

The second part of my analysis is a comparison between the original BBC miniseries House of Cards and the recent Netflix adaptation. In regards to how the production company tailored the series specifically to the alternative platform and its key customer base.

I conclude that the traditional scheduled broadcasting model is in direct conflict with how a growing number of consumers desire to receive their daily media dose. That Netflix’s strength lies in its fine grained usage statistics, which allow it to predict what types of content its users will flock to and this can guide them to new media properties with a higher degree of accuracy than its competitors. Lastly I posit that it will be interesting to continue to observe this development as generations grow up, who have had streaming services as a viable alternative to regular television all their lives and see it as a natural part of the media landscape.

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# Introduction

The streaming service Netflix was originally founded in 1997, as an online DVD rental service, which among other things made movie rentals more convenient for most, since they were delivered right to the customer’s mailbox.

Since its inception Netflix has branched into other areas related to its original core business. First adding an on-demand Internet video streaming service, as a complimentary to its existing customers, building a library of instantly available films and television-series across genres. This service was one of the first, all you can consume, video streaming services, which allowed its subscribers unlimited access to its library titles. While Netflix did not invent the concept of binge-watching, which is defined by Netflix as watching two or more episodes of a given television series in a sitting, it is reasonable to say that they were among the first companies, which made it a convenient way for its customers to indulge in longer stretches of media consumption. The concept of binge-watching was originally related with DVD box sets of popular television shows, however the sheer size of Netflix’s library, which would be impractical, if not impossible, for any individual to match, makes it so that while the consumer may not find exactly the title they are searching for, there is a high probability that they will find something according to their tastes.

Where Netflix’s business model, prior to 2011, was entirely based around delivering content produced by, mostly traditional, production companies, it has since expanded further to become a content producer itself. First with the dark comedy-drama *Lillyhammer* (2012), which was a collaborative production with the Norwegian television station NRK1. The year after releasing *Lillyhammer*, Netflix took the leap and became a full-fledged content producer, when it picked up the political drama *House of Cards* (2013). House of Cards (2013) is an adaptation of an earlier BBC mini-series with the same name, which originally broadcast in 1990, and the novel, also by the same name, by Micael Dobbs. The British miniseries was adapted for an American audience by Beau Willimon and it is the first full-length drama series produced with direct consideration for Netflix’ distribution model. The original mini-series and novel revolve around the British conservative party after the resignation of former Prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. The Netflix adaptation, however, takes place in Washington D.C. and the narrative has been translated to early 2010s American politics, changing the main protagonist’s party affiliation to the American Democratic party, which is in sync with who were sitting in the White House at the time of the series’ release.

In this thesis paper I intend to examine the Netflix adaptation of House of Cards from the original BBC production, both focusing on the consequences of transposing the narrative from the original setting to a markedly different political reality and geographical setting, while also examining the results of the distribution model pioneered by Netflix. The primary focus of the paper will be how changes in the way that serialised storytelling is consumed has effected the way in which it is produced. The paper will primarily revolve around Netflix, as a fairly new content producer is aiming its own exclusive productions directly at the desires of its primary customer base. Since the focus of this paper’s case study is the differences in circumstances regarding their production environment and the choices made because of this the question of fidelity towards the source material becomes largely irrelevant and I will therefore primarily disregard the original novel, only mentioning it in passing to underline that while both the new and the older television series can, of course, be seen as individual creations they are also adaptations of a completely different media than the audio visual one. As such the question that I intend to examine is:

*Based on an examination of the 2012 Netflix adaptation of House of Cards, how are the changing expectations of the modern media consumers, in the post-broadcast era, shifting the production paradigm in relation to the classic broadcast media?*

As a basis for this examination, I will present an account of Marshall McLuhan's reasoning behind his statement that the medium is the message. As this will provide a foundation from which to explore how characteristics central to Netflix's service and distribution model are both responding to and shaping trends in how the modern consumer accesses media, in what I have chosen to call the post-broadcast era.

After this I will present the ideas put forth by Linda Hutcheon in her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, which presents a more faceted approach to adaptation analysis, which suggest that the analysis focuses on both the product as well as the process adaptation. This allows for both an analysis of the adapted text and its adaptation, as well as the cultural factors, which must be assumed has been a factor during the process.

After the initial presentation of the theoretical foundation for this paper, I will give a presentation of Netflix focusing on the transition from content-distributor to content-producer. This will lead to an examination of both the original BBC miniseries and the recent Netflix adaptation of House of Cards, with regards to specific characteristics, which set them apart, to show how the distribution model has impacted the modern adaptation in relation to the original.

# The Medium is The Message

During the process of adaptation, that is the transference of a narrative from one medium to another, there are important concerns to consider beyond merely the content that is transferred. Maybe most obviously there are some more or less formalised structural characteristics that are apparent in different media, which must be taken into account, these, however, are not the focus of this chapter and will be discussed later in this report. Other than the way in which a medium presents its content, a proper adaptation must, however, also consider the sociological implications of medium, which is receiving the content, when forming a conscious choice about certain strategies involved in the adaptation process. To illuminate this separation of medium and content, or form and function, this chapter will examine Marshall McLuhan’s thesis that *“The medium is the message”* to see how the medium of choice impacts the consumers of the adaptation, since these are necessary for the author or authors behind an adaptation, they are also inherently necessary for an analysis of the same entity. I will begin by giving an overview of how McLuhan defines a medium. Following this I will examine his argument of why the content of a medium is irrelevant to the impact of it and then end with a brief discussion of how medium and content still has some interdependence.

## What is a medium?

A medium is sometimes defined as anything, which carries as its content a certain form of communication or discourse, however Marshall McLuhan defines a medium as: ”*Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 146)That is to say that a medium is anything, which extends our human abilities and through this fosters a broader change in the society that is exposed to it. On the first assumption, this definition of a medium is extremely broad, since it can entail any and every human construction or artefact, as these all help shape how we interact with each other in society. So in the following I will further elaborate on the primary characteristics, that McLuhan attributes to a medium, in this sense.

To fully understand what a medium is, it is important to separate the medium from its content, since McLuhan argues that: *“For the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 156) This is of course not to say that there is anything wrong with the analysis of the content or program of a medium, but only that:*”Indeed, it is only too typical that the “content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p.149) what this means is that, if an analysis that centers around the content of a medium: what it says and how it says it, will focus on these internal characteristics and therefore fail to understand the impact of the medium on both the individual and on society as well.

A further problem with focusing an analysis on the content of a medium is that: ”*This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the ’content’ of any medium is always another medium.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 148), McLuhan argument here, by saying that the content of any medium is another medium, is to be understood in the way that: when a new medium obtains content, it does so by appropriating the underlying characteristics of another, in the sense that, for instance McLuhan states that: *If it is asked, “What is the content of speech?,’ it is necessary to say, “It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal.’”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 148) the content of speech, which is in itself a medium, is thought, in the same way, as the content of a movie is a novel or other forms of written and expressed discourse*s.* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 156), while he does not state so I would like to add, that the content in regards to the film medium depends highly on its genre, where, for instance the documentary is more akin to explorative print journalism than a novel, but even when considering this, the statement still holds true. To further elaborate this statement another example can be how the mediation of news has gone through severeal permutations, from a strictly oral tradition, before the advent of the printing press, through new mass media of print, in the form of news papers, then back to speech with the spread of the radio through the tv medium, with its almost ritual news casts, and lastly now in the digital information age, as a mix of all of the afore mentioned. This is because the internet, which is arguably the dominant medium of the digital information age, has the ability to appropriate and express all prior traditions of mediation. This is, however, according to McLuhan, inconsequential when analysing the medium as such, because this analysis should not center around the mediums medium of expression, but rather the effect of this new expressiveness. To analyse the content would be to overlook the medium itself and therefore merely adapt modes of analysis, which have been fitting for prior media.

While McLuhan described the idea that the medium is the message in 1964, and therefore obviously could not take the modern digital information age into account, when he described the effects of a medium on human affairs, he did, however, make some observations, which to an extent describe the effect of the current dominant medium when he stated that:

*In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action*. (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 147)

This is an observation of the perceived compression of time and space, as a result of near-instantaneous communications which led to the spread of knowledge at a formerly unheard of speed. When events and their consequences around the globe are almost simultaneously available, the shared information lessens the perceived distance between two points and thereby foster a sense of community on a far wider scale than previously possible. Through what McLuhan calls the electric age access to information, even if it neared instantaneous speed, was still curated by different news outlets and other cultural institutions. This has continued to be true, to a large extent, until the advent of social media, which has led to a mostly unhindered and uncurated spread of thoughts and concepts, both through new forms of mass media, in the form of for instance blogs as uncurated one to many communication, as well as interpersonal communication through social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter. The result is that the time and space compression, which McLuhan described, has progressed the extent where perceived distances have imploded and therefore no longer exist.

## Did you get the message?

The last section of this chapter sets out to describe what Marshall McLuhan meant by medium and why it is important to separate a medium from its content in order to fully appreciate the effects of the medium, instead of only the expression of the medium. This section aims to describe the second part of the statement and concretise what McLuhan intended as the message of the medium.

The assumption that the message of a medium is the message of its content, while often the product of analyses, is inherently false, as the message of the content is only the message of one distinct mediation, and in fact does not, at least not fully, describe the message of the medium itself. This was described above and is why it is necessary to separate the two, but if not the content, then what is the message of the medium?

*“The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium— that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 148)

I choose to insert McLuhans complete definition statement as the beginning of this paragraph, simply because I see no way to describe the relation between media and message more concisely. What it means is, as already alluded prior in this chapter, that the message of any medium is not the apparent message that the author of the content presents to the consumer of the medium, but rather the impact of the medium on human affairs. That is to say it is the way in which the medium impacts how we as individuals interact with each other and with our environment. To further illustrate why the content of a medium is inconsequential to its message McLuhan states that:

*“In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 148)

This further reiterates how, here in the case of automated production, the importance of the aforementioned separation. In the above example, the machine is the medium and its content is what it produces, however the product of the machine has no impact on the effect of the medium. In the case of mechanized production, the effects of the medium are, among others, both the disappearance of certain roles for workers who had earlier carried out the roles, which were now being done by machines, however, it also created new jobs since the machines, obviously had to be operated. However these are just the first tier of impact in this example, as mechanization also brought with it a far greater speed of production leading to greater demand for the resources needed for production and at the same time caused an abundance of the product, or content, of the production. Even more concisely McLuhan stated that: “*For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 149) As seen above these changes are structural in nature and can, and will often, have a far wider reach than what is apparent at first glance.

## Know thy medium

I began this chapter by saying that a proper adaptation must consider more than just the formal structural implications of the medium receiving the adapted content and in the past two sections I have shown why, if one wants to understand the impact of a medium one must separate it from its content, so that the broader social changes imposed by the medium become apparent. This does not, however answer the question why this understanding of the medium as an entity beyond its content is important to the authors of an adaptation. I will use one of McLuhan’s examples of the importance of looking beyond content to illustrate my point:

*“Print created individualism and nationalism in the sixteenth century. Program and ‘content’ analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge.”* (McLuhan & Zingrone, 1995, p. 157)

The main point of the above quote is as already stated, that any medium fosters social change. This is as valid an argument for media today as it was when considering the impact of the printing press in the 16th century. Take for instance the television medium, which in its repetitive nature has an, almost, ritualistic implication, many people structure their schedules around what programs they follow in the sense that for instance the evening newscast is still a central pivot point of the schedule of the daily lives for many, even if this is being, somewhat, eroded by the constant access to uncurated news stories through the internet. In the same way, a recurring television show will be a weekly ritual that is taken into consideration when scheduling ones week and many loyally tune into the same shows every week. So with this in mind my argument for the importance of the awareness of the implications inherent by a given media, when producing content for it, which obviously includes adaptations of popular novels into television shows, is a fairly simple one. In order to fully exploit the medium, so as to have the best chances that the adaptation is a success, an understanding of the social implications of the medium is necessary. If such an understanding is lacking there is a risk that the product of an adaptation, or in fact any content aimed at the medium, will miss what the consumer expects of their experience.

# A theory of Adaptation

When examining the product of an adaptation the focus often falls to the differences between the adapted work and the product of the adaptation in order to determine how close the adaptation is to its source text. While examining the differences between source and product is not necessarily the wrong framework for an analysis of an adaptation. The question of proximity to the adapted text is, in many ways, irrelevant, since it fails to consider the adaptation as an autonomous object, an artefact in its own right. To reveal the underlying and sometimes hidden choices made during the process of adapting the source text it is therefore necessary to consider more things than just the origin, among others, the cultural environment in which the adaptation is produced.

## Fidelity

When a novel is adapted into a film, the question of how close, or true, it is to he original source it was adapted from is often asked. This is not the same as asking which version is best, the answer to which would invariably become a subjective answer, it is the question of how close the adaptation is perceived to be to the adapted text. The same question has long been at the centre of adaptation studies and this question is one of the reasons that there have been a largely negative discourse surrounding the products of an adaptation, because it is perceived as an extension of another work instead of an entity entirely on its own merits. However adaptations, or retellings of already known older stories have long been a part of Western culture and as Linda Hutcheon quotes: “*storytelling is always the art of repeating stories”* (Benjamin in Hutcheon, 2006, p. 2), so the negative discourse traditionally surrounding adaptations is not solely because the adaptation is a retelling of something older, but rather a certain version of an older story:

*“One of the central beliefs of film adaptation theory is that audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with classics, such as the work of Dickens or Austen.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p.29)

This leads on to another problem faced by adaptations, because just as there is a perceived hierarchy of stories, the same is true for different media chosen as part of adaptation when the story is translated or transposed to another form than the original.

*“The move from the literary to the filmic or televisual has even been called a move to ‘a willfully inferior form of cognition’”* (Newman in Hutcheon, 2006, p. 3)

## Mode

It might seem self-explanatory that different media, here to be understood in the sense of the physical devices that deliver a certain content, have different rules, different possibilities as well as limitations and as a result of this also different expectations from prospective audiences. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the medium as well as the content, when confronted with an adaptation. It is not, however, only the technological capabilities of a certain medium that have to be considered, but even more so, according to Hutcheon, the mode in which the audience interacts with the adapted story, which must be understood to fully grasp the processes involved when transposing a story from one medium to another. Hutcheon proposes three different modes of engagement:

*“An emphasis on process allows us to expand the traditional focus of adaptation studies on medium- specificity and individual comparative case studies in order to consider as well relations among the major modes of engagement: that is, it permits us to think about how adaptations allow people to tell, show, or interact with stories.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 22)

On the surface these three modes may not appear as faceted and diverse as considering each delivery medium on its own, but it is important to note that these modes do not negate the traditional considerations about the medium of an adaptation, but instead expands upon them to consider what the medium does and equally how it does it.

One medium can take on different modes of engagement at different times, however, not all media can necessarily present all three modes. The mode is as much dictated by the chosen medium as it is by the genre and while there are, more or less, common exceptions in each case it can to a certain degree be said that novels tell a story, films show a story and video games let you participate in a story.

A novel, in its most mainstream form, is usually comprised of nothing but words, it is purely language and as such it can describe, it can explain and it can present dialogue etc. but as it is either read or spoken and therefore it cannot show the story or let the audience participate in the story. It has no direct visual means of communication. However, the most predominant medium for the novel, the book, can and often does contain pictures, so the medium in itself can show, but the genre makes this choice unlikely.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Most non-experimental movies, Hutcheon argues, are generally naturalistic, in that they show the world of the movie in a way that is close to how we experience reality. The film makes voyeurs of its audience, letting them observe the story world as passive spectators. In contrast to the novel it does not rely heavily on written language, instead it employs video and audio this means that the film does not describe, as the novel does, it shows the story through moving images, dialogue and a mixture of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, including sound effects and score. The same distinction between genre and medium that was with the novel/book can be seen with film/video. Video, while, usually, containing moving pictures, can technically present language as text, in much the same way as the book, this is, however, rarely seen other than briefly bookending the film.

Videogames may on the surface resemble movies to a certain degree; they are most often comprised of moving pictures and audio, but also often text. The most important distinction from film, in this context, is that instead of placing the audience outside of the story looking in, videogames invite the audience to participate and thereby become part of the story world. The digital medium, which is the only medium for videogames, but not necessarily the only interactive medium, is in itself a hybrid medium, which can just as easily present text as it can video and audio, so the same considerations about medium and genre apply as did in the two former examples.

These are only three examples of many possible, but the considerations that are highlighted by them apply more or less generically in any case. What Hutcheon argues is that it is just as important to consider the desired mode of engagement, as it is to consider the technological aspects of a media. Or as she puts it:

*“In other words, no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression—media and genres—and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 24)

## Motive

Why choose to adapt an already existing text instead of producing an entirely original property? Considering the often, negative discourse surrounding adaptations it seems almost oxymoronic that these are so prevalent in the media content landscape. So it must be that there are motivations behind the choice to adapt a prior text. Hutcheon argues four different cultural and personal imperatives, which reveal, at least some, of the possible impetuses that impact the choice made by the adapter.

### Economic imperative

The economic incentive behind adapting content from one medium to another may seem obvious, however, there are two important facets to this motivation, first and maybe most apparent in our modern world of large media conglomerates is the fact that, as Hutcheon states:

*“It is obvious that on one level they are attempts to cash in on the success of certain movies and vice versa, as the popularity on film.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 86)

The reasoning behind this statement is that when a media conglomerate, with access to different distinct outlets for its content, experiences success with the mediation through one such outlet then has a motive to exploit this success through multiple channels, in order to increase its earnings. A current example of this can be seen in how the Walt Disney Company has spread many if its intellectual properties on different media platforms. For instance how, after the massive success of the movie *The Avengers* (2012), which became the third highest grossing film worldwide ever, Disney, to expand this success developed a television series, called *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, for its television network, ABC. While not a direct adaptation of the narrative from the movie, or even the comic books which the movie is based on, it is set in the same universe of the movie, with overlapping characters, played by the same actors that the audience already know from the movie and as such adapts the setting, but not the content. This transferral is possible because the Walt Disney Company owns both Marvel Studios, which produced the original movie, and also the television network, ABC. This is, however, only one aspect of the economic incentive, another according to Hutcheon is:

*“From another economic angle, expensive collaborative art forms like operas, musicals, and films are going to look for safe bets with a ready audience—and that usually means adaptations.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 87)

This is almost the same argument as above, only in reverse, as it is the adapter who seeks to exploit the already established goodwill of a certain source text in order to guarantee an audience for the finished adaptation, in the way that, for instance, the musical *Wicked* (2003) adapts characters and settings from the *Wizard of Oz* (1939)*,* which was already an adaptation of the earlier childrens book of the same name, in order to latch on to an already present fan base.

### Legal imperative

The legal motive, as Hutcheon argues, is somewhat related to the above-mentioned economic motivation. It is relatively inexpensive to make an adaptation when a change of mode is involved. As Hutcheon explains it:

*“In the case of a novel adapted to film, the courts study the plot, mood, characters and character development, pace, setting, and sequence of events, but because so much has to be cut from a novel and because so many adapting agents are involved in a collaboratively produced film, the adaptation is rarely ever close enough to warrant prosecution.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 90)

The consequence of the change of mode, which is often necessary, when transferring from one medium to another, makes it difficult for the author of the original content to prove plagiarism, and as such has no power to either hinder or claim compensation from the producers of the adaptation. It is only, according to Hutcheon, when an author can prove financial losses, that there is a chance that a court will rule in favour of the original author, however:

*“But on the contrary, often a film version boosts sales of the novel, as publishers know. They even release new editions with photos from the film on the cover. This economic/legal complicity operates in other art forms as well.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 90)

So the effect of the adaptation, most likely, means that the original author will receive financial gains, in the form of book royalties, as a result of the higher sales of his or her intellectual property and therefore has a weak case to present to a potential judge.

### Cultural capital

The idea of cultural capital comes into play when the adapter, for instance, wishes to raise the perceived authority of the adapted content that can result from the transference from one medium to another, Hutcheon defines it as follows:

*“Related to this desire to shift cultural level is the pedagogical impulse behind much literary adaptation to both film and television.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 92)

When the novel is perceived as higher on the loosely defined hierarchical relation between different media. So if one accepts that different media have different inherent levels of authority, this means that a novelisation of a movie or television series heightens the perceived cultural capital that the content carries with it.

### Social commentary

When transferring a narrative from one medium to another, the adapter has to place him or herself both inside and outside the content that is adapted, in order to interpret both the content, which is transferred, and the receiving medium at the same time. This interpretation will always carry with it the preconceived cultural values of the interpreter and as such will often reflect his or her views on the contemporary society of the adapter.

*“They not only interpret that work but in so doing they also take a position on it.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 92)

While this can be the result of unconscious processes because the adapter reacts his or her reality, it can also be a conscious choice which affects both the choice of adapted source as well as the choice of receiving medium.

## Reception

As with any form of communication it is important to consider the audience when producing an adaptation, since a lack of understanding of this can result in missing the expectations of the audience and thereby risk failing to gain any form of cultural penetration.

*“Obviously, the creation and reception of adaptations are inevitably going to be intertwined—and not only in commercial terms. Because audiences react in different ways to different media […]”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 114)

So according to the above quote, the choice of medium for the adapted content has an impact on how it will be received by its potential audience.

Beyond this consideration of the relationship between content and medium, because of the implied expectations they both carry with them. The adapter also has to consider the fan culture that exists around the adapted text, but also the separate and overlapping fan culture which spawns around the adaptation itself.

*“Another name for adaptation audiences here is obviously ‘fans,’ and the community they constitute is consciously nurtured by adapters […]”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 116)

This effects both the choices of which texts are adapted and certain choices made regarding the adaptations themselves as the adaptor will seek to please as wide a crowd as possible. For instance the surge of comic book adaptions in recent years can be seen as a result of the overlapping of nerd and fan culture, since this creates an automatic marked for the adaptation, however, it also carries risk of alienating the, sometimes, entrenched fans if it fails to understand the expectations that are in the communities surrounding the adapted text.

*“This is the intertextual pleasure in adaptation that some call elitist and that others call enriching.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 117)

If an adaptation is made with consideration of the already established fan base, it can stimulate the satisfaction of recognising intertextual references inherent between the adapted text and the adaptation, which gives a sense of knowing within the consumer of the adaptation and can lead to a sort of treasure hunt, where fans actively seek out these references and communities sprout within the fan communities, where the audience discusses these references amongst each other. This is the mechanic that Hutcheon alludes at when she states that the intertextual treasure hunt can seem elitist to those not “in the know” while it is an enrichment to those participating.

As much as the adaptation can foster the creation of, somewhat, elitist communities, it can also do opposite:

*“In direct contrast to this elitist or enriching appeal of adaptation is the pleasure of accessibility that drives not only adaptation’s commercialization but also its role in education.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 117)

The argument for this is that the transferral of content from one medium to another can make that content accessible to audiences that would otherwise not have been exposed to it. For instance, the adaptation of a novel to a movie can make the content of the novel available to the illiterate or dyslexic. In the same vein as the adaptation of a novel to a comic book can make its content accessible to a younger audience than the adapted text is aimed at. This, as Hutcheon states, elicits the "pleasure" of accessibility, and therefore inclusion.

## Context

The last point Hutcheon makes in *A Theory of Adaptation* is that it is necessary to consider the context of the adaptation since:

*“An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum.”* (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 142)

I will not spend a lot of space explaining this, as I would argue that this is true concerning any mediated text, be it literature, in the classic sense, movies, television series or even music, whether they are the product of adaptation or not. Any text is always the product of its author and the author a product of his or her contemporary cultural conditions, therefore this statement is true for any analysis of literature, no matter if it is an adaptation of an earlier text or an original text, if such a thing as a completely original text even exists.

## Non-famous last words

What Hutcheon presents in *A Theory of Adaptation* is not so much a theory as it is a framework for both the process of production and analysis of an adaptation. What it does provide is a conscious method of dissecting an adaptation by stating the different considerations, which are necessary in order to understand both the process of adaptation as well as the motive behind it.

# A brief history of Netflix

Netflix was founded in 1997, by Reed Hastings and Marc Rudolph (Netflix, Inc., 2014), as an online movie rental company and opened its subscription model to customers in 1999. This model promised, among other things, to do away with late fees and other penalties connected with classic brick and mortar movie rental services, such as Blockbuster, where a late return will usually end in fines compounding until ending in a request for a replacement copy. Under Netflix's business model the customer would sign up for a monthly service, which allowed them to have a certain number of DVDs at any time and granted access to an online portal where they could administer a queue of movies that they wanted to watch. The rental DVDs could be kept for as long as the customer wanted and when one was returned to Netflix, by mail, the next one in the queue would be mailed to the customer. The subscription model furthermore let Netflix gather statistics on exactly who of their customers were watching what and when. As a consequence of this Netflix had, and still has, the ability to track which genres, actors or directors are the most popular among their subscribers thereby letting it place its investment in new titles with a greater amount of precision than traditional competitors.

Netflix began as an exclusively American service with steady customer growth within the United States until expanding its service to Canada in 2010, Latin America and the Carribean in 2011, The UK, Ireland and the Nordic countries in 2012 and adding the Netherlands in 2013. (Netflix, Inc., 2014) Netflix today has more than 50 Million subscribers in 40 Countries and is adding six more European countries in 2014, these being Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland, Belguim and Luxembourg. (Lawler, 2014) While a number such as 50 Million subscribers worldwide may not seem astronomical, it is important to remember that many, if not most, households share a single subscription, so the actual number of active users is a lot higher.

## Following the stream

Netflix entered the streaming business in 2007 (Netflix, Inc., 2014), complimenting its physical, through the mail, rental service with a library of titles accessible for instant streaming on demand. The streaming service originally started as an added value to the primary rental service and it has since been spun off as a subscription plan by itself available at a lower fee compared to the full service. Furthermore, the original rental service is only available within the United States, so foreign markets only have access to the streaming plan. The streaming service negates the wait between returning a title and receiving a new one through mail, thereby allowing for a form of instant gratification and a faster turn around which had not been possible earlier. The number of available titles and which titles are accessible differs across different territories taking syndication and exclusive first run agreements into account and adding localised content.

The addition of the streaming service has allowed Netflix to obtain even more fine-grained data about the viewing habits of its customers, beyond merely observing how long its customers keep certain titles before returning them, it has made it possible to see how often and with what frequency its users watch movies or tv-series available through its library, it can see how many episodes of a tv-series its users choose to watch in one setting, along with other demographic data about its users. (Abele, 2013)

## Norwegian woods

It is only fairly recent that Netflix has begun transitioning from a business model, which was solely focused on content delivery to becoming a content producer in its own right. As mentioned briefly in the introduction to this paper, Netflix’s first foray into content production was the 2012 tv-series *Lillyhammer* starring guitarist and mandolin player from the E-street band, Steven van Zandt, about a New York mafia henchman, turned state’s evidence, who was sent into witness protection in the small Norwegian town of Lillyhammer. This was, however, not produced exclusively by Netflix itself, but in collaboration with the Norwegian television station NRK1, which retained first showing rights and the show was not made available through Netflix’s service until it had partially aired in Norway. (Amazon, 2012)

The next year Netflix optioned its first exclusive production, *House of Cards*. An adaptation of a British miniseries originally broadcast on the BBC in 1990, which was itself an adaptation of a novel by Michael Dobbs. (Ryan, 2013) Since enjoying a fair level of success with House of Cards, among other things garnering both industry and critical acclaim, Netflix has expanded its exclusive programming with, among others, the teenage horror-drama *Hemlock Grove* and the prison chick-comedy *Orange is the New Black* and has furthermore picked up shows which has priorly been cancelled by traditional networks, such as the sit-com *Arrested Development*, which had its initial run from 2003 to 2006 on the FOX network before being cancelled because of failing ratings. However, because of its very fine-grained details about its customers usage patterns Netflix could directly see the popularity the show enjoyed amongst its customers, making it a, somewhat, safe bet to relaunch the series as a Netflix exclusive.

## It is a brave new world

The transition from merely a content distributor, acting as an alternative pipeline between content producers and content consumers, to a content producer has put Netflix in a new position, which could potentially have far reaching consequences for the company. It is no longer a, somewhat, passive ally of the content industry, but is instead a player and competitor in its own right. This situation is potentially dangerous to its core business, since, for the foreseeable future, the major bulk of Netflix’s library will be comprised of titles that it licenses from other content providers, such as the traditional television and cable networks and the major Hollywood studios. As Netflix grows, the more traditional content producers gain more and more incentive to protect their business models by holding on to their respective intellectual property thereby forcing customers to their service in order to gain access to those.

It is important to note that while Netflix is a content producer, and that its shows fall under the classification of television shows, Netflix does not itself deliver television in the strict sense. This is because television is defined by more than its content, but also the presence of a laid out programming schedule, with a certain form of continuity and restraint. Furthermore, Netflix sets itself apart from the regular broadcast television networks by not being affected by the rules and regulations imposed by the Federal Communications Committee (the FCC). This freedom from, some of the, restrictions set forth by the FCC is shared by cable television providers, such as HBO and Showtime as well.

## And The Times They Are a Changing

The thing that sets Netflix apart from regular scheduled television programming is the very thing that threatens the established television business. Up until a few years ago the only real alternative to scheduled programming was large and, somewhat, cumbersome DVD collections requiring both a large financial investment and archival space requirements. The digital streaming model, which Netflix employs, has done away with the requirement for archival space all together and with a monthly subscription fee of 8.99$, recently raised by 1$ from 7.99$ the monthly investment is less than purchasing one newly released DVD or Blu-ray per month. This, of course, comes at the price of choice, since the user has no direct impact on which titles become available through Netflix or how long a given title stays in circulation. This is comparable to the older physical rental model, such as for instance Blockbuster, which has now all but gone out of business. And it still gives a very higher degree of individual choice than scheduled broadcasting, by the fact that there is a choice at all.

It is not only about choice though. Netflix caters very well to a specific usage pattern that emerged with the advent of the DVD box-set, where entire seasons of a television series was released in bulk or for series, which has ended, the entire show run in on convenient collection, still far less convenient than the streaming model, since it rested on physical media. Binge watching was the second runner up for word of the year, for 2013, in the United States, only losing out to the word selfie., and this is a direct indicator that the ways in which television series are consumed have and are changed. A not insignificant part of television consumers are no longer satisfied with watching their favorite shows in small installments, at a certain time every week. They have instead shifted to consuming large chunks of shows at the time. Binge watching is, as mentioned earlier, defined as consuming two to three episodes of a television series in one setting, by Netflix’s own numbers. (Newswire, 2013)

The word *Binge* may on the surface have negative connotations of overindulgence, which is, of course, unfortunate, but there is reason to believe that it is of very little importance. In the article: *Cable Companies Still Whistling Past The Cord-Cutting Graveyard*, veteran journalist and academic, Brian Proffitt, quotes a recent study commissioned by Netflix and carried out by cultural anthropologist, Grant McCracken, where he examined 1,500 active Netflix subscribers, by interviewing them in their homes. The study found that: "Nearly three-quarters of TV streamers (73%) say they have positive feelings towards binge streaming TV." (Proffitt, 2013) This means, assuming that this number can be extrapolated onto the whole of Netflix’s American subscriber base, which comprises approximately 36 million out of the over 50 million world-wide, that there are approximately 26,280,000, subscribers who disregard the negative connotations related with binge watching and instead embrace it. This is a staggering number when compared with the fact that: “The number of cable TV-only subscribers remaining could sink below 40 million later this year,(…)” (Edwards, 2013) a number from an ISI Group projection quoted by Jim Edwards of Bussiness Insider. The worrying thing about these numbers to the traditional cable providers is not how close they are, but that 26,280,000 potential customers want a service that they, quite simply, cannot provide without a complete shift in paradigm.

Even more of an indicator that the way people want to consume media is changing is the fact that while the number of, so called, cable cutters, which are households with no traditional television service at all is still fairly low, at about five million, this number is growing, slowly but, steadily at a rate of 0,59% per year since 2007, while the number of new cable service subscribers in the United States has all but stagnated with an annual growth of 0,04% and one of the most cited reasons behind cord cutting is the price of service. (Edwards, 2013)

This is furthermore problematic for the cable companies, since they have an obligation to their shareholder to increase profits year to year, and when more and more people drop their cable-tv subscriptions in favour of other alternatives, such as Netflix, the only way to do this is to raise the price of service. Brian Proffitt quotes a projection by NPD Group, that the average monthly cost of cable service in the United States could go as high as 100$ a month by late 2013 that means that the five million cable cutters amount to a total of 6 billion$ in lost potential profits. (Proffitt, 2013). It stands to reason that these numbers will continue to rise and the higher the cost of cable service becomes the more incentive cable service customers will have to cut the cord and go with an alternative.

According to technology website AllthingsD, Youtube’s and Netflix’s combined traffic made up slightly over 50% of the total internet traffic in the United States. (Kafka, 2013) Of course 50% of traffic is not equal to 50% of the time spent online, since video streaming is a generally traffic intensive service, but it is still a massive amount of both data and time spent on just two services. This sends a signal that consumers to a still higher degree expect content to be available to them when and how they want it and this is shaping the way media producers have to meet their consumers. Netflix’s chief content officer, Ted Sarandos is quoted as saying: "Netflix has pioneered audience choice in programming and has helped free consumers from the limitations of linear television. Our own original series are created for multi-episodic viewing, lining up the content with new norms of viewer control for the first time." (Newswire, 2013) So the media producer is actively seeking to meet its customers’ and potential new customers’ viewing habits by producing content specifically designed for continued viewing.

While a service like Youtube is generally disjointed and fragmented, with users jumping from video to video either based on recommendations from their social circle or through the site’s recommendation system. Netflix offers regular programming in its library, so there needs to be a mechanism making it easy for the consumer to stay with a show for a prolonged amount of time and anyone who has ever used the Netflix service will know that when you’re watching a tv series, the service will automatically jump to the next episode once the one playing has finished unless the consumer takes action and actively stops the playback, only pausing to ask if the viewer is still interested after seeing three episodes in a row, which is coincidentally the same number of episodes that the study that I have mentioned earlier defined as binge watching.

It is impossible to say for certain what is affecting the other most, are services like Netflix and others gently guiding its customers towards overindulgence or are the consumers pressuring the services to adapt to their wishes and consumption patterns. One thing is, however, certain that if the true message of a medium is its impact on society, as McLuhan states, then the message of streaming services like Netflix is that we as a culture are consuming a lot more, but with greater freedom than earlier.

# House of Cards (BBC)

House of Cards is a mini series in four parts, which was broadcast on the BBC from November 1990, starring Ian Richardson, a founding member of The Royal Shakespeare Company in the lead role. It is an adaptation of Michael Dobb’s 1989 novel of the same name. The series, as well as the novel, is a political thriller about powerplays and intrigues centered around the protagonist, Francis Urquhart, who is chief whip in the British conservative party, which at the time of its release was in the middle of a real-life power struggle.

## Main characters

### Francis Urquhart

The main protagonist of the series. He is chief whip in the conservative party, which means that his function within the party is to make sure that the party's voting members of parliament stay on the party line. He is an elder statesman of Scottish nobility, he among other things states that his family came down with King James I, the son of Queen Mary of Scots, who took the British throne in the early part of the 17th century.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the first episode of the show, while commenting on the prospective candidates for the post as leader of the conservative party, he remarks about the most likely candidate that he is: “the people's favorite, a well-meaning fool, no background and no bottom.” (Davies & Dobbs, 1990) He views himself as a man of better breeding than the coming candidate for prime minister. He, of course, has no way of knowing exactly who of the mentioned candidates are going to win, but the foreshadowing is, somewhat, obvious. He is, however, quick to add that: “What, me? Oh, no no no. I'm the Chief Whip, merely a functionary. I keep the troops in line. I put a bit of stick around. I make them jump. And I shall, of course, give my absolute loyalty to whoever emerges as my leader.” (Davies & Dobbs, 1990). It is hereby established that Francis Urquhart works behind the scenes and always keeps the appearance of loyalty to the party, the leader is, after all the party's choice. However, his position as chief whip gives him a high degree of power to manipulate events. Francis is absolutely ruthless, not shying away from murder to further his cause.

### Mattie Storin

Mattie Storin, played by Susannah Harker, is a junior reporter to the tabloid newspaper *The Chronicle*, with whom Francis Urquhart, with the blessing of his wife, begins an affair. She falls completely for the much older man and exhibits some tendencies of an Elektra complex with him, among other things by calling him *Daddy* when the two are intimate. Her sentiments are not, however, reciprocated by Francis Urquhart, to whom she is little more than a pawn in his personal game of thrones. She is a means for him to control how the conservative party is covered in the media, so as to further his own cause.

### Roger O’ Neill

Roger O’ Neill, played by Miles Anderson, is the public relations consultant for the conservative party. He is a drug addict with, what is shown as, a massive cocaine addiction, which Francis Urquhart uses to blackmail him into leaking compromising material concerning the party’s chairman, in a plot to get him away from his place of power. Internally Roger O’ Neill has no problem with his cocaine use, at one point commenting to his lover that he has got his hands on some cocaine so good that usually only the CIA has it, even going “Nom, Nom” as a way to show that he thinks it is delicious.

## Plot synopsis

The series opens with Francis Urquhart sitting at his desk looking at a framed picture of Margaret Thatcher, the real leader of the conservative party and British prime minister from 1979 to 1990. As he looks at the picture he reflects by saying, almost as if he is saying it to Margaret Thatcher: "Nothing lasts forever. Even the longest, the most glittering reign must come to an end someday.” Then to turn directly to the camera, looking directly at the viewer. The narrative begins as the conservative party is about to elect a new leader and candidate for prime minister and Urquhart sees his opportunity to gain a top political position within the party. This is, however, thwarted by the new prime minister when he refuses Francis Urquhart’s proposal to change the cabinet after the party’s candidate has won the general election. Francis Urquhart then sets out to overthrow the prime minister, through manipulation and slander. On the suggestion of his wife, a modern day Lady MacBeth, he enlists the aid of a young tabloid reporter by starting an affair with her. He furthermore blackmails the drug addicted public relations officer to leak sensitive documents, in order to remove his opposition. When Francis Urquhart is done exploiting his pawns he unceremoniously murders them both. First he murders Roger O'Neill by poisoning his cocaine, framing it as an act of mercy, when he says: "This is an act of mercy. Truly. You know the man now. You can see he has nowhere to go. He's begging to be set free. He's had enough. And when he's finally at rest, then we'll be free to remember the real Roger. The burning boy in the green jersey. With that legendary, fabulous sidestep and brave, terrified smile." (Davies & Dobbs, 1990). Stating that he is preserving the memory of Roge O'Neill's innocence instead of as a washed up drug addict. Later in the last episode of the show he murders Mattie Storin, by throwing her off the roof of parliament after she professes her loyalty to him. Lastly, the story ends with Urquhart being invited to see the Queen with regards to forming a new government, after defeating his only last opposition, Michael Samuels, as the leader of the conservative party.

## Cultural references

House of Cards is very clearly a modern day MacBeth (the Scottish play), even nailing in the fact when Francis Urquhart references the famous Withes’ greeting from Shakespeare’s play where the witches in turn say:

First Witch: “All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!”

Second Witch: “All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!”

Third Witch: “All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!”

(Shakespeare)

Furthermore, Francis Urquhart's wife acts, as already mentioned, as a modern Lady MacBeth, mirroring the original femme fatale, from Shakespeare's play, when she spurs on her husbands play for power. In House of Cards it is, however, to become prime minister instead of to become King.

Stylistically House of Cards employs heavy use of frame breaking, usually seen as a postmodern narrative device, by letting the protagonist, Francis Urquhart, speak directly to the viewer, thereby breaking the imaginary fourth wall between the performer and the spectator. This has the effect of creating a sense of immediacy and companionship with the protagonist, instead of existing outside of the world of the series, the viewer is made in direct contact with it and thereby becomes a, maybe unwilling, co-conspirator with the series protagonist. The choice behind this strategy may well only have been the novelty behind using it in a visual media in 1990, since it was not something, with which television viewers were accustomed to. This does not, however, change the function of it, by letting the viewer conspire with the tv series protagonist, the producers allowed some form of kinship with an, at least to most, highly unlikeable character, thereby ensuring a higher chance that viewers would continue tuning into the series, instead of turning their back at the, at times, monstrous Machiavellian main character.

# House of Cards (Netflix)

The 2013 adaptation of the British television series of the same name, is produced by Production company Media Rights Group in Collaboration with Trigger Street Productions, which is owned by the series lead actor, Kevin Spacey, and Panic Pictures. As was the case with the original series, the Netflix series, which is an adaptation and not a remake, is a political thriller centered around one man’s grab for power. Separated from its source material by more than twenty years, and the entire breadth of the Atlantic ocean, the focus of the series is no longer late 1980s to early 1990s British parliamentary politics, but instead it concerns contemporary modern-day American politics, and instead of being a conservative MP with scottish ancestry the protagonist, Francis ‘Frank’ Underwood, is a Democratic Congressman from South Carolina, with, somewhat, unclear, but not exceedingly wealthy roots. The series is produced by director David Fincher, who also directed the first two episodes and the rest of the first season is directed by different directors, with that in common that they all are recognizable as Hollywood film directors.

## Main characters

### Francis ‘Frank’ Underwood

The protagonist’s first name is, as in the original series and the novel, Francis, however, he is almost exclusively referred to as Frank and in the adaptation he has gained a new last name, instead of Urquhart, as he was named in the source material, his last name is Underwood in the Netflix adaptation. As in the original he is party whip, and he gains his last name from the first democratic whip in the American congress, Oscar Underwood. Frank Underwood is, in every way, as ruthless as Francis Urquhart, which is established very clearly in the opening scene of the first episode. The series opens with a completely black screen, the sound of a dog barking and tires screeching followed by a crash, before it opens up to Frank Underwood’s chauffeur telling him that the neighbour’s dog has been run over, while it can be heard whimpering out of frame. Frank kneels at the injured dog and examines it as he instructs his chauffeur to get the neighbours to come out. While the chauffeur is away Frank directs his attention to the camera and tells the viewer that: “There are 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. To do the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing - There, no more pain.” (Willimon, Dobbs, & Davis, 2013) as he breaks the neck of the dog. This very clearly sets a precedence for the show that if Frank senses weakness in someone he will either use it to his advantage, if he has any use for that person, or he will do away with them.

### Clair Underwood

Frank Underwood’s wife, and the second half of the power-couple, Clair Underwood, played by Robin Wright, is as directly a catalyst for the events in the narrative as Francis Urquhart’s wife was in the original. She is an independent woman with independent goals, but it is, however, clear that both are working towards a common endgame scenario. She is the head of the Clear Water NGO and is every bit as ruthless as her husband, even if she takes less direct action in the course of retaining her goals. Most often she aids her husband in reaching their common goals for power, however she is shown to run her own game alongside him at different points. Among other things when she conspires with her husbands former employee, Remy Danton, who has since gone to work as a lobbyist for the gas company SanCorp.

### Zoe Barnes

Zoe Barnes, played by Kate Mara, is a Journalist at *The Washington Chronicle*, who after seeing a picture in an online article where Frank Underwood glances at her posterior, views him as her way of rising in the ranks at the newspaper, which makes her seek him out and convinces him to leak stories to her. At first she enjoys nothing more than a relationship as a journalist and informer. During the first few episodes of the series she does, however, instigate an affair with Frank Underwood, behind his wife’s back. Zoe Barnes is to an extent a contrast to her rather passive and submissive counterpart in the original BBC series, in that she seeks the affair with Franks Underwood, and in doing so she retains a modicum of control, even though that is slowly peeled away. Zoe Barnes is portrayed as an independent if, somewhat, fragile, individual. She has little to no contact with her family, as is shown when Frank Underwood, in the fourth episode, comments on the state of her beat-up apartment by asking: "Do your parents know you live like this?", to which Zoe replies that they do not because they have not been to see her.

### Peter Russo

Peter Russo, played by Corey Stoll, is a representative from Pennsylvania. He is first introduced being pulled over by a policeman at night, openly intoxicated and with a prostitute in his car. After this incident, which Frank Underwood has his right hand man, Doug Stamper, take care of by, among other things, paying the prostitute to stay silent about being in the car with Peter Russo that night, Frank gains a hold over Peter by threatening with the exposure of his addiction. Peter is a divorced father of two small children, who he has shared custody over, so beyond losing his standing and place in the House of Representatives, exposure of his addiction would mean that he would stand to lose his children as well. Peter Russo is shown as a plagued individual, in contrast to his counterpart Roger O' Neill he hardly gains any pleasure from his drug use, instead it haunts him and he is very clearly shown as struggling throughout the series. After sobering up, on the request of Frank Underwood, he runs for governor of his home state, but when this turns out to be a tactic by Frank to get the Vice President, and the former governor of Pennsylvania, out of office, Peter relapses and threatens to expose Frank’s blackmailing after which Frank murders him.

### Raymond Tusk

Raymond Tusk, played by Gerald McRaney, is a midwestern billionaire, who is shown to live a somewhat, simple life despite his enormous wealth. In the final act of the first season, Frank Underwood is sent to visit him, under the premise that Frank is to vet Raymond Tusk as a potential replacement for the departing Vice President. It turns out, however, that in reality Raymond Tusk is an old acquaintance and confident of the president and he is the one vetting Frank Underwood for the position of Vice President. Raymond Tusk is one of the only characters in the series who has as much authority as Frank and the visit ends in a powerplay when it is revealed that it was Raymond Tusk, who advised the President against making Frank the Secretary of State in the beginning of the series, which was the event that set the entire plot in motion. When Raymond Tusk puts the matter on its edge by saying that: “Fact, I have something that you want. You have something that I want.” (Willimon, Dobbs, & Davis, 2013) Frank, after responding to Tusk, turns to the camera and tells the viewer: “He doesn't measure his wealth in private jets, but purchased souls.” (Willimon, Dobbs, & Davis, 2013) This is a reference to earlier where Frank states that he has no respect for a man who chooses wealth over power, since power is fleeting where wealth is robust. Frank is matched by Tusk and capitulates after a while.

### Plot Synopsis

The series begins on the election night and the candidate who Frank Underwood had backed has won the Presidency of the United States. Frank has been promised the title of Secretary of State. However, shortly after the president has been appointed Frank is told by the President’s Chief of Staff, that he will not be getting the promised position anyway. Instead of Frank Underwood, the President appoints Senator Michael Kern, as Secretary of State, however, Frank successfully plots, with the help of his wife, who uses her connections from her NGO, to get Michael Kern out of office and arranges that he is replaced with a candidate of Frank’s choosing. Frank is no longer interested in the position he was originally promised, but instead plans to get rid of the Vice President, who he sees as too liberal and ineffective, so this starts the chain of events, already hinted at in the character descriptions, so I will not repeat them here in detail. Using his hold over Peter Russo, he uses him to influence the Vice President to go back to his former position as governor of Pennsylvania. After Russo’s death, Zoe Barnes begins investigating the circumstances of his death and when she uncovers leads that Frank murdered him, he also murders her. The series closes as Frank, after striking a deal with Raymond Tusk, is nominated as the next Vice President.

## Cultural references

There is nothing that anchors the series in its contemporary time as directly as the opening monologue of the original BBC series did. It is probably not, however, a coincidence that Frank Underwood is a Democratic Congressman and not a Republican, which would have been a more direct cross-cultural reference, since the series was released under a Democratic President.

Stylistically the frame breaking from the original series has been carried over and is used often during the 13 episode season, when Frank breaks the fourth wall he steps out of the internal reality of the show completely, the characters around him either pause or completely ignore that he is talking to, what in the logic of the show, must be an imaginary camera. It is, however, used in a wider context in the Netflix adaptation, where Frank will often break away in the middle of a conversation in order to comment on what has just been said, or even sometimes comment on what is going to happen in a moment, overtly foreshadowing coming events to the viewer. It serves largely the same purpose as in the original show, creating a bond, a form of kinship, between the viewer and an inherently unlikeable protagonist, but since this series was released in its entirety all at once, it may not as directly be a device to make viewers coming back, but more a nod towards the source material and a fairly normal story-telling device. Frame breaking is not as unusual in the mainstream as it once was since it has gained a fair amount of use among other places in American sitcoms.

## Production Details

House of Cards stands out in other ways, that is just because it is the first content exclusively produced for Netflix. As Robert Abele says: “What viewers will also get is a series uncommon as a creative enterprise, in that it marries the production efficiency of multiple-episode television with the directorial control typically associated with moviemaking.” (Abele, Playing With a New Deck, 2013) Without knowing how television series are, usually, optioned by cable-tv providers and network television stations in the United States, it can be difficult to see why that statement should show anything especially exciting. Normally when a television series is picked up, the network will commission a pilot based off a script, this pilot is then test screened for a selected audience that the network wants to capture with the series and if it is positively received, then it may be picked up for run of one season, but more often than not it will be commissioned for half a season and then renegotiated based on what ratings it garners, some series do not finish their first season run even though they were picked up by a studio for production. This may or may not have to do with the quality of the series, but it can as well have to do with the timeslot the tv station chooses to broadcast it in. An example of this could be the cult show *Firefly* (2002), which in its broadcast run failed to gain traction among viewers, among other things because the television network, FOX, chose to broadcast it irregularly and aired its episodes out of order, but which has gained a very large fan following after its cancellation. What was different with House of Cards was that Netflix used, exactly, what sets it apart from regular broadcast institutions. Instead of looking at ratings and playing it careful, it looked at its actual customer viewing statistics and decided to pick up the series for a full two season run, without even ordering a pilot episode that it could test screen with an audience.

This allowed the writers of the show to plan longer and more intricate storylines because they had the advantage of knowing beforehand that they would have, at least, two seasons. (Abele, Playing With a New Deck, 2013) Furthermore the distribution model gave them the creative freedom that they did not have to rely on adding superficial cliffhangers at the end of every episode, in order to keep viewers coming back at a scheduled time, because the statistics which Netflix provided showed that the majority of its customers would consume the series in a more contracted timeframe compared to regular weekly broadcasts. (Abele, Playing With a New Deck, 2013)

# Discussion

## House of Women

There are many differences between the original BBC production and Netflix’s modern adaptation of House of Cards and I do not intend to list every one of them here. One particular difference that I want to highlight, because I think it is one of the most apparent and, at least to me, important indicators of the differences between the reality of Britain in 1990 and The United States in 2013. The two series have chosen very different ways to portray the women that surround Francis Urquhart and Frank Underwood. In the original series, the women are generally shown as weak and submissive, at the mercy of the men they are surrounded by. Both Mattie Storin, who is almost entirely at the mercy of Francis Urquhart, in the series she all but throws herself at him, seeking someone to live out her Elektra complex with and who better than Francis Urquhart. He has both age and power, so he is the perfect candidate for her, but she gives herself completely to him at almost no notice, surrendering her safety and personal progression to him, up to the point that seconds before he murders her, by throwing her off the roof of Parliament she professes her loyalty to him to which he remarks that he does not believe her and throws her to her death with no hesitation. Francis Urquhart has obtained his goal and has no further use for her, so she is unceremoniously discarded. Francis Urquhart’s wife Elizabeth Urquhart is, of course, his co-conspirator, however, she shows no personal goals at any point in the series, she exists only to further her husband’s cause, which, of course, also benefits herself, however she is hardly shown outside short interactions with her husband. And lastly Penny Guy, assistant and lover to Roger O’Neill is the only woman in the series to offer any opposition to her male counterpart, however, even though she prostitute herself, because the hold that Francis Urquhart has over Roger as a result of his addiction. It is, of course, possible that this is a consequence of the short form of the miniseries, it does, after all, only have four one-hour episodes to complete its narrative, but they are, except, for Mattie given so little impact in the story, that this is the only facet of them that the viewer is shown, so on the surface it is easy to assume that the women portrayed serve little other function than furthering their mens' causes.

This is in contrasted, by the way, the younger adaptation from 2013 portrays women. Frank and Clair Underwood are shown as a power couple, each with their own, though mostly compatible, agendas. Clair Underwood is the head of an NGO and while she happily helps further her husbands cause, her reality is not completely defined by her husband and she has personal agendas and motives. This is shown most clearly when she conspires with SanCorp lobbyists, and former employee of her husband, Remy Denton. Lastly, the young journalist Zoe Barnes is far from the submissive Mattie Storin from the original series. She actively seeks out Frank Underwood, when she sees a way to further her own career and she is the one instigating the affair with the older Congressman. She may well also have a little of the Elektra complex, so apparent in her British counterpart. It is shown that she has little contact with her family and that may be why she is attracted to an older man in power, but it is never as directly stated as in the original series. The women in Netflix's adaptation, while still at the mercy of men, to some extent, are shown as a lot less timid and submissive, which is safe to assume has been a deliberate strategy from the production side, since anything else would alienate a large group of female, and its safe to assume also male, viewers .

## Let me be ‘Frank’

Another major difference between the two shows is clearly visible to anyone, even before pressing play on the first episode. The original series is a miniseries comprising of, as already mentioned, four hour-long episodes, while Netflix’s 2013 adaptation consists of thirteen, also hour-long, episodes. While I am not a mathematecian, even I can tell that this means that Netflix’s adaptation has nine more hours to fill with narrative. This leaves two major options, either slow down the pacing of the show and let events unfold more slowly or fill it with more minor sub-plots, which give room for deeper characterization. The production team behind the series has chosen both. The cut-pacing of the show is noticeably slower than in the original show. The executive producer of the show, and director of the first two episodes, David Fincher, who, from his movies, is know for his steady symmetric cutting style. Directing the other directors, the first season was divided between six directors, not to use handheld at any cost and even the use of steady cams was frowned upon unless absolutely necessary. (Abele, Playing With a New Deck, 2013) This calm and intentional camera use along with the slower cutting rate has certainly helped slow down the visual pacing of the series and, as a result, the pacing of the narrative has been brought down as well. This is, of course, not enough to fill the entire nine hour difference, but what the viewer gets are small and mostly, to the main narrative, insignificant storylines, which depart from the main narrative shortly, only to meet up with it again, almost exactly where it left it. For instance there is an episode where Frank has to return to his home state, because a young woman was killed in traffic while she was texting her boyfriend about a local landmark, which looks suspiciously like a human behind, but is in fact a giant peach on a stick. The viewer is told that Frank Underwood has repeatedly helped block actions to tear the landmark, which has resulted in the girl's parents putting the responsibility for her accident on Frank, this is helped by one of his old political adversaries. There is, as such nothing wrong with this episode and subjectively it is as entertaining as most other episodes in the series. However, the viewer learns very little new about Frank Underwood as a person, only gaining an anecdote about his father. The problem is that it has no impact on the series after, other than conveniently placing Frank out of Washing D.C. during a negotiation with a teacher's union, however, as the viewer knows Frank, he could just as well have skipped that and stayed in Washington D.C. The problem only grows larger as the viewer is shown small storylines concerning other characters than Frank Underwood, since this series is all about Frank Underwood.[[3]](#footnote-3) What the series House of Cards really is, is an invitation to look in on Frank Underwood as he weaves his web of intrigue and every character no matter how significant they may seem, with the possible exception of Raymond Tusk, are all but pawns in Frank's overarching grab for power.

The reason for this deeper characterisation, however, may be found when looking at how the majority of Netflix’s customers are expected to consume the series. Grant McCracked remarks in the study he made for Netflix, that it is possible that binge watching gives a higher degree of intimacy with the characters on a show and is by some used as a substitution for long social interaction, which he claims are becoming increasingly rare. (Newswire, 2013)

## Television is dead, long live television!

The above statement is, of course, a case of gross hyperbole. Clarifying this may seem highly superfluous in itself. What seems like a more poignant statement is that traditional broadcast programming is in a crisis, it is under pressure from multiple sides. The most obvious of the contenders to the throne, as the royalty of media proliferation, are the major players in burgeoning on-demand streaming video market and the leader in this space worldwide is, without a doubt, Netflix. With a total of 50 million subscribers worldwide, it may not yet have achieved critical mass. But the numbers are a little more interesting in its home marked, where approximately 36 million of these aforementioned 50 are situated. Considering that analysts predicted that cable-tv only subscriptions in America would fall below 40 million households (Edwards, 2013), this brings it with danger of being overtaken by streamers in the near future, furthermore the number of “Zero TV homes” is on a slow but steady rise and at the same time the number of new cable-tv subscribers has all but stagnated. (Proffitt, 2013) So while the cable-tv is still orders of magnitude larger than the new kid on the block, there is a clear trend and it does not seem like it will be slowing down anytime soon, at least not when considering that the most often cited claim for dropping cable-tv service is the price of service. The problem here is that the more customers that drop the service, the more expensive it has to become in order to retain the same level of profits year – over – year, thereby driving even more customers over the threshold where they may begin to consider alternatives.

Television is, of course, more than only cable-television, there are, especially in the United States, a fairly large amount of programming freely available to anyone with enough of an old fashioned sense to connect an aerial to their television-set. There is a reason these television networks are available freely though. They are, of course, not free at all, but instead financed through advertisement revenue. The financial worth of advertisement space on these free-to-air channels is directly connected with the ratings that its shows have in a given timeslot, the more eyes a station has, the higher prices it can charge potential advertisers. The competition between the on-demand video streaming services and the freely available broadcast programming may not be as readily apparent as it is with the subscription based services. It is, somewhat, reasonable to assume that cable-tv providers care little about how many subscribers a service such as Netflix has, as long as those customers still pay cable-tv service as well. But it stands to reason to assume that the more consumers spend their time binge-watching their favorite television series on Netflix and its competitors, the less they watch traditional programming, since there are only so many hours in the day after all, so every hour spent watching streaming serviced is the same as an hour not being spent on their service, and in the long run that will result in lower advertising revenues, since those deals will become less lucrative to advertisers.

The on-demand streaming services are, however not the only competitors to traditional programming, because while it does not enjoy the same ‘air time’ in the public forum as it seemed to have only a few years back, internet piracy is still a very real thing and television shows are among the very popular files on different piracy sites. The site Torrentfreak.com releases yearly statistics on the most downloaded television shows in the popular BitTorrent network and the numbers of illegal downloaders often equal or even surpass the regular viewers reported by the ratings agencies. (Ernesto, 2013)

Since this paper concerns itself with the potential paradigm shift brought on by new alternative services this is nothing more than a sidenote, it does, however, illustrate a point. The attack on classic established broadcast services is two-sided in that users want what they want, and if it is restricted they will find it somewhere else. This is clearly illustrated by looking at the list of most pirated shows, at the top of the list three years in a row, is the HBO produced show, *Game of Thrones* (2011). In the United States the show is only available through the premiere cable-tv network HBO and while the network does have a streaming service, HBO GO, this service is only available to customers of the main cable service. So it would seem that instead of being locked into a packaged service agreement, which they do not want, consumers to a high degree seek alternative channels of delivery. And while Netflix and friends, may seem as a direct competitor it might be more correct to view it as the lesser of two evils, since when content producers negotiate streaming rights with the video-on-demand services they gain revenue by agreeing to make their content accessible through these kinds of services. This is not to say that piracy is a problem that will go away by itself, the point is that while Netflix and other alternative, legal, content providers are, to a still higher degree, competitors it may be in the interest of both sides to collaborate, since there are profits to be made in contrast with piracy, which in its nature leaves no added value to the content producers, disregarding word of mouth advertising of course, since this is largely immeasurable.

# Conclusion

I began this paper by asking the following question:

*Based on an examination of the 2012 Netflix adaptation of House of Cards, how are the changing expectations of the modern media consumers, in the post-broadcast era, shifting the production paradigm in relation to the classic broadcast media?*

What I have found is, that media consumers are demanding a choice about when and how they consume media, this is in direct conflict with traditional broadcasting services where a planned schedule determines what is available at any given time. There is a reason to believe that this model is becoming outdated as more and more consumers cancel their pay-tv subscriptions entirely, in favor of services, such as Netflix, which lets them determine their own schedule.

The main strength of Netflix as a content producer, is its database of usage statistics, letting it make educated prognosis about which new productions to pick up for its service as exclusive content. This is shown very clearly with House of Cards, which it picked up without commissioning a pilot episode, for test screening, which has been the norm in the traditional content production industry for years. And it has worked, House of Cards has been met with enthusiasm, among other awards winning the first Prime Time Emmy for a web based television series.

The series is shown to have been produced directly with typical Netflix customers in mind, being specifically designed to allow for both staggered, traditional viewing and at the same time it is specifically aimed at binge-watchers, who gain a more movie-like experience by watching larger chunks in a setting, thereby awarding this usage pattern, which the consumer is requesting.

As a closing remark is should be stated that broadcast television is far from dead and buried but the development in the field is going to be interesting to observe as generations who have grown up with streaming services as a viable alternative to classic programming. Have the couch potatoes awoken and is now demanding a say in what they are served or will the choice result in an overload of possibilities, which could reverse the trend and drive consumers back to a stress free passive consumption cycle? I have no way of answering this last question, but I am looking forward to seeing for myself.

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1. It should be noted that it is a common occurrence to include maps in many forms of fantasy fiction, if these are viewed as part of the novel and not as an included paratext, then this is a rather common exception to the norm. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This fact is not revealed until the later mini-series *To Play the King(1993)*, it does, however, go to his character, which is why it is mentioned here [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted that this is not directly related to the observations about stronger women with deeper characterisation since this is just as visible within the main narrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)