

## SAMPLE SYLLABUS: WEB-BASED TELEVISION

### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course introduces students to the production, distribution, and reception of web-based television. In recent years, original television programming made exclusively for online distribution has become very successful. Both independent series made for YouTube and mainstream content produced by Netflix and Amazon have inspired creators and audiences. The course provides students with a concrete understanding of the possibilities and challenges inherent in producing television for the web.

The course begins with a historical overview that traces the emergence of web series and then moves on to examine how independent web series are produced, financed, and distributed. Next, a unit on content and narrative highlights web series' critical engagement with cultural diversity and their experiments with televisual form via transmedia storytelling. From there, we move on to look at how audiences support and participate in web series and how this constitutes a reimagining of the traditional creator-viewer relationship. The class concludes with a look at global web series and mainstream web TV made for Netflix and Amazon.

Throughout the semester, Skype conversations with web series creators and scholars provide students with practical and critical insights into the world of web-based television.

### COURSE GOALS

- *Assess the industrial significance of web series:*
  - Identify multiple possibilities for producing, financing, and distributing web-based television and apply this knowledge to case studies
- *Grasp the cultural significance of web series:*
  - Examine the range of diverse representations in web series and understand how they compare to broadcast/cable programs
  - Understand the close audience-creator relationship and articulate its transformative potential for TV production
- *Analyze the aesthetic significance of web series:*
  - Break down experiments in form, genre, and narrative

### REQUIRED TEXTS:

- All readings will be available as PDFs or online via links in the reading schedule.
- Students are also encouraged to keep up with [News for TV Majors](http://www.newsfortvmajors.com/) (<http://www.newsfortvmajors.com/>), a daily update of TV industry news compiled by Christine Becker (Associate Professor of Film, Television and Theater, Notre Dame)

### SCREENINGS:

This course includes screenings of web series both inside and outside of class time as noted in the reading schedule. Occasionally, we will also watch industry panels from events like *Transmedia Hollywood* and *The Future of Entertainment*, both of which are yearly conferences bringing together media creators, executives, and scholars. Links to screenings will be available via the course website.

Tips for productive viewing:

We will be talking about the screenings in class. Be prepared to engage in discussion about the screenings in relation to the readings. When watching series, take note of themes, narrative, aesthetics and politics. Ask yourself:

- Who/what is this show about?
- Who is the imagined/target audience?
- Who does it represent? How are they depicted?
- Who is not represented?
- How does this series relate to our topic of the week?

**ASSIGNMENTS:**

Course Tumblr

We will use Tumblr to share news about and analyses of web series and the TV industry at large. Everyone shares the same username and password—this means everyone also takes responsibility for curating the posts and reblogs that appear on our Tumblr account. Each of you will take primary responsibility for our Tumblr for a week, but you should also contribute at any other time. We review Tumblr posts together in class once a week.

Reading Quizzes

The quizzes test whether or not you have completed the readings assigned for that day and if you have engaged with the major arguments and concepts in preparation for class discussion. Some quizzes will ask you to define specific concepts introduced in the reading. I will give the quizzes unannounced during the semester. Quizzes are given at the beginning of class. If you are late, you will not receive extra time to finish the quiz. If you miss a quiz due to illness or another valid reason, you will be able to make up for it.

Web Series Analysis

In this essay, you will carry out a critical analysis of one web series. You should pick a particular focus from among the areas we study: production/distribution/financing, cultural diversity, experiments in style, or audience engagement. Ideally, you will work on a series we don't discuss in class.

Web Series Project

As a final project, you will work in a team to produce a concept for a new web series. In addition to developing culturally diverse characters and narratives, you will also consider financing, distribution, and audience engagement. You will pitch your show to the class in the final week of the semester.

Participation

Your participation is crucial to the overall success of the class. You are expected to keep up with the readings. This means you should not only have completed the readings, but be ready to discuss and engage the reading's major arguments. Good participation means contributing thoughtful comments and questions that refer to readings, screenings, and core concepts during our class discussion. The quality of your remarks is at least as important as the quantity of your remarks.

**Course policies are listed after the reading schedule.**

## READING SCHEDULE

Please note that this schedule is subject to change depending on current developments. You will be notified of any changes ahead of a class meeting. You need to complete all readings before coming to class.

### **Week 1 (8/24): Foundations I: Understanding Contemporary Television**

*Topics: Broadcast TV production, distribution, and financing*

Day 1: Course Introduction & Overview

Day 2:

- Mittell, Jason. "Exchanging Programming." In: *Television and American Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2009: 17-46.

### **Week 2 (8/31): Understanding Contemporary Television, cont.**

*Topics: convergence culture, early digital production and distribution*

Day 1:

- Lotz, Amanda. "Understanding Television at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era." In: *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. NYU Press, 2014.

Day 2:

- Lotz, Amanda. "Making Television: Changes in the Practices of Creating Television." In: *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*.

### **Week 3 (9/7): Foundations II: History of Web Series**

*Topics: user-generated content of the 1970s+1980s; web series experiments of the 1990s; 2007 WGA Strike and its influence on web series*

At-home screening: *The Guild*; In-class screening: *Doctor Horrible*

Day 1:

- Jenkins, Henry. "What Happened Before YouTube." In: Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. Polity Press, 2009: 109-126.
- Christian, AJ. "Toward a History of Web Series." *Television*, 2010.  
<<http://blog.ajchristian.org/2010/04/05/toward-a-history-of-web-series/>>

Day 2:

- Haenschen, Katherine. "Introduction to the Writers' Strike Issue." *Flow*, 2008.  
<<http://flowtv.org/2008/05/introduction-to-the-writers-strike-issue-katherine-haenschen-flow-staff/>>
- Jenkins, Shelley. "Internships, Idealism, and the WGA Strike." *Flow*, 2008.

<<http://flowtv.org/2008/05/crossing-the-line-internships-idealism-and-the-wga-strike-shelley-jenkins-cal-state-fullerton/>>

- Leaver, Tama. "Joss Whedon, Dr. Horrible, and the Future of Web Media." *Popular Communication* 11:2 (June 2013): 160-173.

#### **Week 4 (9/14): Indie TV: Production, Financing & Distribution**

*Topics: impact of digital media on Hollywood work worlds, precarious labor, ethical media production, financing via brand integration and sponsorship, digital distribution platforms*

In-class screening: Excerpt from *Transmedia Hollywood* panels

Day 1:

- Mann, Denise. "When Television and New Media Work Worlds Collide." In: Denise Mann (ed). *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*. Rutgers University Press, 2014: 1-10.

Day 2:

Skype Call with AJ Christian

- Christian, Aymar Jean. "Indie TV: Innovation in Series Development." In: Bennett, James and Niki Strange (eds). *Media Independence: Working With Freedom or Working for Free?* Routledge, 2014: 159-182.

#### **Week 5 (9/21): Indie TV: Production, Financing & Distribution, cont.**

*Topics: advantages and drawbacks of crowdsourced financing, Kickstarter, social media, new digital studios*

In-class screening: Excerpts from *Future of Entertainment* panels

Day 1:

- Wong, Freddie. "The Cost of a Webseries." *Rocket Jump*, 2012. <<http://www.rocketjump.com/blog/how-much-webseries-cost>>
- Chin, Bertha, Bethan Jones, Myles McNutt, and Luke Pebler. "Veronica Mars Kickstarter and Crowd Funding." In "Fandom and/as Labor," edited by Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Vol. 15.

Day 2:

- Kohnen, Melanie. "Report from the New York Television Festival's Digital Day 2014." *Antenna*, 2014. <<http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2014/11/05/report-from-nytvf-digital-day-2014/>>
- "Interview with Jordan Levin, President, Alloy Digital." In: Curtin, Michael, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson (eds). *Distribution Revolution: Conversations About the Digital Future of Film and Television*. University of California Press, 2014: 101-111.

## **Week 6 (9/28): Indie TV Case Studies**

*Topics: web series creators' perspectives on independent production, distribution, and building an audience; creative ownership and creative freedom*

At-home screenings: *Whatever This Is* and *The Outs*

In-class screenings: *High Maintenance*, *Black & Sexy TV*

Day 1:

- Katja Blichfeld and Ben Sinclair, "When Work Isn't 'Work'." *Televisual*, April 4, 2013. <<http://tvisual.org/2013/04/04/when-work-isnt-work-high-maintenance>>
- Mitchell, Jessica Ann. "How Black & Sexy TV is Becoming an Online Empire." August 2013. <<http://www.blackwebseries.com/how-black-sexy-tv-is-becoming-an-online-empire/>>

Day 2:

Skype Call with Adam Goldberg, creator of *Whatever This Is* and *The Outs*

## **Week 7 (10/5): Reimagining Diversity: Race**

*Topics: Possibilities and limitations of creating meaningful racial diversity in web series*

Screenings: *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*; *East Willy B*; *Illegal*

Day 1:

- Beltran, Mary. "Meaningful Diversity." *Flow*, 2010. <<http://flowtv.org/2010/08/meaningful-diversity/>>
- Pinon, Juan. "The U.S. Hispanic Television Industry in the Era of Digital Convergence." *Flow*, 2013. <<http://flowtv.org/2013/09/the-u-s-hispanic-television-industry-digital-conversion/>>

Day 2:

- Talks at Google. "A Conversation with the cast and creator of *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*." (one-hour video). <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bynfUels8Zo>>

## **Week 8 (10/12) Reimagining Diversity: Sexuality**

*Possibilities and limitations of creating meaningful LGBTQ diversity in web series*

Screenings: *Anyone But Me*, *Husbands*

Day 1:

- Kohnen, Melanie. "Television's Queer Futures? The Possibilities and Limitations of Web Series, Digital Distribution, and LGBT Representation in *Husbands*." Forthcoming in *Future Texts: Subversive Performance and Feminist Bodies*. Ed. Vicki Callahan and Virginia Kuhn (Parlor Press, 2015).

Day 2:

- Battles, Katherine, and Wendy Hilton-Morrow. "Production as Resistance: LGBTQ-Produced Media for LGBTQ Audiences." In: *Sexual Identities and the Media*. Routledge, 2015: 133-144.

### **Week 9 (10/20): Experiments with Form**

*Topics: combining television narrative+style with digital formats like vlogs and multi-platform storytelling*

Day 1:

- Jenkins, Henry. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." <[http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html)>
- Johnson, Derek. *A History of Transmedia Entertainment*. Online supplement to Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked World*. NYU Press, 2013.

Day 2:

- Clarke, M.J. "Introduction." In: *Transmedia Television: New Trends in Network Serial Production*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.

### **Week 10 (10/27): Experiments with Form, cont.**

*Topics: transmedia adaptation of classic literary works; social justice outreach via web series*

At-home Screenings: *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, *East Los High*

In-class screening: *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' co-creator Bernie Su explains their transmedia strategy at San Francisco Transmedia Meet-up. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITv5ryeAWm0>>

Day 1:

- Tepper, Allegra. "Lizzie in Real Life: Social and Narrative Immersion Through Transmedia in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*." *Spectator: The University of Southern California Journal of Film & Television*, 34: 2 (Fall 2014): 52-62.

Day 2:

Skype Call with Flourish Klink, Transmedia Producer for *East Los High*

- Population Media Center. "East Los High Transmedia Experience." 2014. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOM\\_eLHDty4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOM_eLHDty4)>

### **Week 11 (11/2): Audience Engagement and Participation**

*Topics: Ethical audience engagement, collective digital authorship, audience integration into storyworlds*

Day 1:

- Jenkins, Henry, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green. "The Value of Media Engagement." In: *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. NYU Press, 2013: 113-152.

Day 2:

- Stein, Louisa. "Collective Authorship and the Culture of Feels." In: *Millennial/Fandom Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age*. Forthcoming from University of Iowa Press, 2015.

## **Week 12 (11/9): Global Web Series**

*Topics: web series as global television; local/global storytelling; global media distribution*

At-home screening: *GayXample: La Nueva Serie Web de Barcelona* (Spain)

In-class screening: *Flat 3* (New Zealand), *Bộ Ba Đĩ Thõa* (*My Gay Best Friends*, Vietnam)

Day 1:

- Stewart, Mark. "This Content is Currently Unavailable: The Tyranny of Digital Distance, Reconsidered." *Flow*, 2014. <<http://flowtv.org/2014/07/this-content-is-currently-unavailable/>>

Day 2:

- Li, Xioachang. "[Transnational Audiences and East Asian Television](http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/li/#.Upts8uLieLs)." *Spreadable Media* Online Supplement. <<http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/li/#.Upts8uLieLs>>

## **Week 13 (11/17): Mainstream Web TV: Netflix, Amazon, and Beyond**

*Topics: differences between mainstream and indie web series; Netflix and Amazon: the new cable TV?*

Day 1:

- Curtin, Michael, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson. "Introduction: The Making of a Revolution." In: *Distribution Revolution: Conversations About the Digital Future of Film and Television*. University of California Press, 2014: 1-21.
- "Interview with Ted Sarandos, Chief Content Officer at Netflix." In: *Distribution Revolution*, 132-146.
- Barker, Cory. "Populist or Prestige? Amazon's Attempts to Brand Pilot Season." *Antenna*, 2014. <<http://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2014/08/28/populist-or-prestige-amazons-attempts-to-brand-pilot-season/>>

Day 2: Meetings to discuss Web Series Project

## **Week 14: 11/23-11/29: Fall Recess**

**Week 15 (11/30) Mainstream Web TV, cont.**

*Topics: cultural diversity in mainstream web series*

Screening: *Transparent, Orange is the New Black*

Day 1:

- NPR Staff. “In *Transparent*, Trans Issues are a Family Affair.” 2014.  
<<http://www.npr.org/2014/09/21/349075013/in-transparent-transgender-issues-are-a-family-affair>>

Day 2:

- Click, Melissa, and Brandon Miller. “Is Orange the New Television?” *Antenna*, 2013.  
<<http://blog.commart.wisc.edu/2013/10/22/is-orange-the-new-television/>>

**Week 16 (12/7): Student Pitches**

**COURSE POLICIES**

**Assignment Schedule**

If not specified otherwise, all assignments are due at 11:59PM on the due date. Extensions are only available in the case of dire personal circumstances, and you must contact me at least 24 hours before the deadline. If you don't contact me 24hrs before the deadline and don't submit an assignment, you will not receive any points.

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Due Date</b>	<b>Points</b>
Participation	Ongoing	100
Tumblr	Ongoing	100
Quizzes	Ongoing	200
Web Series Analysis	Week of 10/05	200
Web Series Project Draft	Week of 11/17	100
Web Series Project Pitch	Week of 12/07	100
Web Series Final Draft		200
Total		1000

**Grade Breakdown:**



1,000 points = 100%

A+ = 98-100%; A = 94-97%; A- = 90-93%

B+ = 87-89%; B = 84-86%; B- = 80-83%

C+ = 77-79%; C = 74-76%; C- = 70-73%

D+ = 67-69%; D = 64-66%; D- = 60-63%

F = 59% or below

### **A Note on Laptops and Cell Phone Usage**

You are encouraged to bring an internet-enabled device to every class--all of our readings are available in digital formats, after all. It is your responsibility to monitor your use of the internet, texting, etc. in class. You should be mindful of where your attention is during class time (hint: it should be focused on the discussion that's happening among the people in the room). You should feel free to look up information online that is relevant to in-class activities and share this information with the class.

### **Absences**

Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed two unexcused absences during the semester (if your unexcused absences exceed that limit, you put yourself at risk of failing the course). All other absences must be for valid, non-academic reasons, such as medical emergencies (confirmed by a doctor's note) or religious holidays. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to catch up on the work we have done during class. Also note that showing up more than ten minutes late to class automatically translates into an unexcused absence for that class meeting.