Limited Series Are a Product of Brand Management, Not Innovation

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Over the past year, pressure to capture live audiences and compete with high-profile cable series has led to a resurgence of short-form television, most commonly referred to as “limited series.” While this programming shares a relationship with long-form miniseries that were once a stalwart of broadcast television (ABC’s *Roots*) and have remained vital on cable (HBO’s *Band of Brothers*), it has its origins in a contemporary moment where the relationship between broadcast and cable has shifted, and where new logics of distribution are creating changes in how programs are developed and marketed.

Understanding this shift requires not only tracing its origins, but also delineating between a range of different approaches and terms used to describe it. In all instances, however, we see the industry searching for a new programming strategy—and branding language—to capture audiences growing less enamored of the traditional rhythms of series television.

1. The industry doesn’t agree on what limited series are, or what to call them.

CBS' *Hostages* was a limited series. FOX is calling *Wayward Pines* an event series. USA's *Political Animals* was a Limited Series Event, while Fox's *24: Live Another Day* has been billed as a Limited Event Series. In the span of a single report on NBC's long-form plans, a range of "event programming" initiatives are termed limited series, event series, and miniseries— at the 2014 Winter Press Tour, even NBC President Robert Greenblatt admitted he had no idea how to distinguish between these terms, with the recently announced *Heroes: Reborn* being labeled a miniseries (to the chagrin of some).

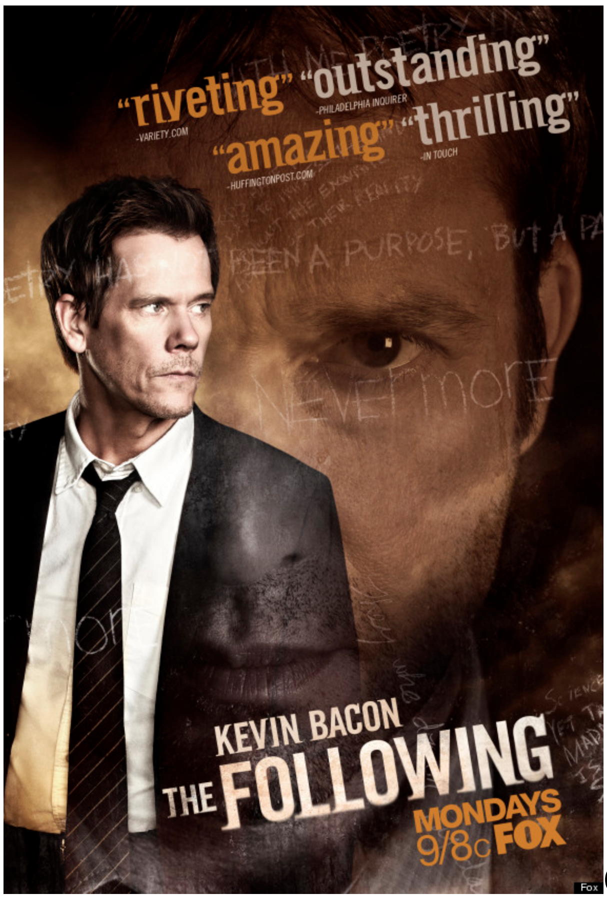
Trade press attempts to describe the trend have largely chosen limited series as the catch-all term for these series and others like them, but they have also used terms like "event series" and "miniseries" interchangeably, mirroring the confusion found in different broadcast networks' press materials. It reflects the fact that the above programs follow a range of different development models and programming strategies, ranging from six to fifteen episodes and including shows that have the potential to continue for multiple seasons and those designed to end after a single closed-ended story.

Broadcasting & Cable defines limited series as "series planned from the beginning to air less than the traditional 22 episodes, and more like 10 to 15 episodes." However, this definition only works in a broadcast context where 22 episode seasons are the norm, even though this form of development is extending to cable outlets where 10 to 15 episodes would be a traditional series order. The most inclusive definition of limited series is that they are television series with seasons—most often ranging from 4-15 episodes—that are not beholden to the traditional patterns of development for their respective channels and networks; they are primarily dramatic in nature, often heavily serialized, and in terms of the number of episodes ordered but not necessarily in the number of seasons they could run.

The focus on context means that the actual shape and form of a limited series depends on the series (and network) in question. For example, CBS designated *Hostages* as a limited series because it has been capped at 15 episodes per season rather than 22, and because its heavily-serialized storyline represented a departure for a network known for its traditional procedural dramas. If the series had debuted on Showtime, however, its serialization and episode order would have fit well with premium cable drama series like *Homeland*. Limited series, then, are less a specific form of television and more a way to designate when a television series' form or structure represents a departure for its network or channel. Those designations can be seen both as an effort to tap into existing discourses of quality television associated with serialized programming, as well as efforts—in using terms like "limited" and "event"—to prioritize appointment viewing in an age of extensive use of DVRs and online streaming.

However, as the programming trend spreads, so does the confusion over its definition: *Under the Dome* was originally sold as a thirteen-week "event" which led many to assume it was a miniseries and refer to it as such in reviews or trend pieces. While producers were always adamant they had plans to continue the series should it be successful enough to warrant another season, Internet commenters still felt misled when the show was renewed. While it's easy to think about these programs and terms as being related, it's harder to communicate their distinctions to audiences, creating confusion whenever these series are announced, discussed, or renewed.

2. Limited series are a new form of brand management, not a new form of television.



One overarching statement we can make about all of these series, however, is that they rarely represent a bold new form of television content. History's highly successful *Hatfields & McCoys* (2012) has been credited with "reviving" the limited series form, which correctly identifies a relationship between these series and other, previously released programs.

In the case of limited series like *Hostages*, we simply see broadcast networks adopting cable-length seasons, a strategy also used by FOX with *The Following* and *Sleepy Hollow*. Meanwhile, in other instances, limited series are a much more explicit effort to revive the development of traditional miniseries. Fox's event series, like *Wayward Pines* or *Blood Brothers*, are closed-ended narratives planned—as their names suggest—as event programming to help flesh out the network's planned year-round schedule (which recently gained steam in Kevin Reilly's plans to develop outside of the traditional pilot season). NBC is developing a range of more traditional miniseries projects, including a sequel to Mark Burnett's successful *The Bible* miniseries for History, and a new version of *Rosemary's Baby* (billed as a "reimagined event miniseries"). In the rush to capitalize on the limited series trend as a distinctive programming strategy, networks and cable channels oftentimes expose their own historical amnesia. USA Network, for example, described *Political Animals* as a Limited Series Event when it debuted in 2012, but it was following the same development model—in which an initial six-episode order could be extended to a full second season—as USA's 2007 "miniseries" *The Starter Wife*.

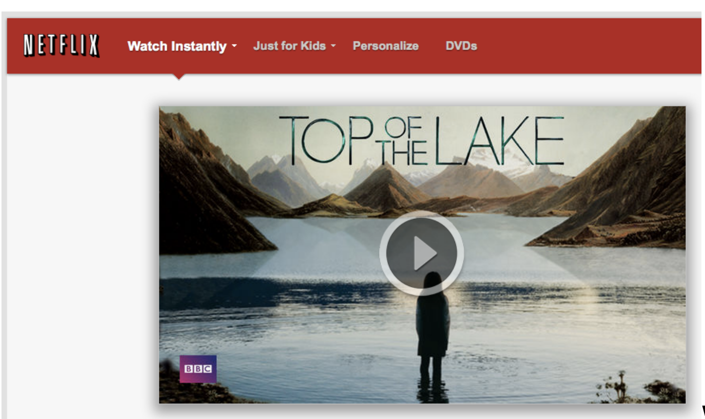
The closest the industry has come to a new form has been what we could term the anthology miniseries, where series like FX's *American Horror Story* tell contained single-season stories featuring entirely new characters (a model FX is also using for its adaptation of *Fargo,* and which HBO is using for *True Detective*). However, in addition to adapting the traditional anthology format of the medium's earliest years (from an episode-to-episode to season-to-season model), the form also draws from series like *24* that resolve their narratives each season.

Ultimately, we should primarily see limited series as a form of brand management heightening the appeal of specific series. CBS did not refer to *Under the Dome* as an event series solely because it represented a departure from their traditional episode orders and procedural focus, but also because it wanted to avoid the label of "summer series" that marks a show as being not good enough for fall or midseason.

For broadcast networks and basic cable channels, limited series also are an effort to tap into the prestige generated by premium cable channels, like HBO. HBO's television movies and miniseries have been a substantial component of the channel's brand, drawing big name stars and significant award recognition. By shifting to shorter seasons and close-ended series, other networks hope to draw similar stars (like *The Following*'s Kevin Bacon), although they face an uphill battle: While premium cable miniseries have thrived with critical and popular hits like HBO's *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*, broadcast miniseries have devolved from the heights of *Roots* to the lows of NBC's disaster epics, which have more in common with *Sharknado* than *From The Earth To The Moon*. In explaining why FX chose limited series to describe its development in this area at this summer's Television Critics Association Press Tour, FX Networks CEO John Landgraf cited the low reputation of broadcast miniseries as a reason for avoiding the term “miniseries,” seeking instead to affiliate itself with a term that has less baggage for their brand.

While according to reports, ABC, Fox and NBC are actively seeking pitches for both closed-ended and open-ended limited series, CBS is more cautious in only considering open-ended projects, consistent with the long-established conservative management of its brand. Fox and NBC have both established new positions in the past year that focus on this development area; while most networks have had an executive overseeing the development of movies or miniseries, the high-profile nature of these new roles signals a long-term, strategic development interest in limited series. It’s true that all development functions as a form of brand management, but the zeitgeist-catching goals of this most recent trend have particularly foregrounded branding as networks and channels reframe older programming forms for a new television landscape.

3. Limited series depend on a new, uncertain distribution economy.



While channels like HBO have been able to justify big-budget, star-studded miniseries as an exercise in brand management, the economics have been more challenging for broadcast networks. While limited series may cost less to make—given that fewer episodes are produced—the return on investment is more challenging: Trade reports have suggested the miniseries was phased out by broadcast networks due to its lack of value in the syndication market, while networks looking to take advantage of the increasingly global television marketplace would be hesitant to invest in close-ended series with only short-term sales potential, or even open-ended series with fewer episodes to sell (even if shorter seasons are actually more common in international markets like the U.K.).

However, the rise of the limited series comes alongside the rise of new forms of distribution. Without Netflix, it's possible the limited series trend wouldn't exist—Netflix and other streaming services have expanded ways to make money on completed productions, similar to how the rise of the DVD market incentivized serial programming in the mid-2000s. Additionally, the ability for limited series to continue for multiple seasons makes them more lucrative than a close-ended miniseries, both for non-linear streaming deals and for international sales. At the same time, limited series still allow networks to draw stars willing to take on an ongoing commitment provided they are guaranteed shorter episode orders.

The drive toward limited series is, therefore, inextricably linked to the modes of distribution that make the economics of the productions feasible or, as is the case with CBS' *Under the Dome*, incredibly lucrative: speaking to critics at the Television Critics Association Press Tour in August, Les Moonves revealed that between the sale of international distribution rights and a landmark streaming deal with Amazon Prime, *Under the Dome* was already breaking even for CBS, lowering its ratings threshold and mitigating risk to the conservative-minded network.

However, as with all new forms of development, the rise of limited series depends on the future stability of these economic models. FX's John Landgraf has [openly criticized] the *Under the Dome* model, believing its embrace of cord-cutting vis-à-vis the shortened window before episodes are available on Amazon Prime risks damaging the symbiotic relationship between networks and cable/satellite providers, who fear the day when audiences will watch all their television through Netflix or Amazon.

The long-term value of CBS' deal with Amazon Prime and other programming strategies under the umbrella of limited series has yet to be tested. What value does Amazon Prime—competing with Netflix—see in agreements like the one with *Under the Dome* (an agreement that was [renewed] for a second year)? How do services like Netflix balance their partnerships with cable outlets like Sundance Channel—which debuted its BBC co-produced miniseries *Top of the Lake* on the streaming service only days after it finished its run—alongside their own push into original programming? While successful for series like *Under the Dome*, is the international market's appetite for limited series programming a sustainable one, worth reorganizing a network or channel brand in order to capitalize on? The answers to these questions are uncertain, as this new distribution economy continues to function as a work-in-progress.

4. The success or failure of any one show does not determine the fate of limited series.

Given that so many different strategies for limited series are operating across broadcast and cable, it would be premature to use any single limited series project's success or failure as a bellwether for future development. *Under the Dome* may have debuted to strong numbers on CBS, particularly for a scripted summer series on a broadcast network, but it represents a single experiment among many; on CBS alone, *Hostages* was a high-profile failure despite star Toni Collette, while the jury remains out on the network's *Extant*, starring Halle Berry, which debuts this summer.

Although the increase in limited series investment in the most recent development seasons—bolstered by *Under the Dome*'s success—may seem similar to the rise of period dramas in the wake of *Mad Men* or espionage dramas in light of *Homeland*'s success, it depends on more than the tastes of audiences lining up with the taste of executives and focus groups. The shift toward limited series offers one of the most substantive industrial responses to the uncertainty of the contemporary television landscape. Part branding exercise to encourage live-viewing and allow broadcast networks to tap into cable prestige, and part shift in programming strategies designed to reflect changing logics of distribution, limited series development aims to convince viewers and advertisers alike that television remains a vital medium; there may be no agreement on what they're called, and there might not be anything revolutionary in shorter seasons and the occasional miniseries, but the limited series has nonetheless become a staple of contemporary television development.