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The show starts here:

viewers' interactions with recent television serials' main title sequences

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Abstract

Recent title sequences for high production value television serials are generally one of two kinds: either extremely minimal, appearing part way through the episode with credits dispersed through the show, or as an extended format of c. ninety seconds' duration, at or near the start of the show. In a previous book chapter I presented analyses of examples of the latter, arguing that the sequences form an efficient part of the brand image for both the show and commissioning channel. In order to explore the extent to which such sequences are watched or skipped by viewers, and how such decisions are made I organised a series of preliminary focus groups in February 2012 with participants who identified themselves as regular viewers of television serials, the findings of which are presented here. Two forms of stimuli were used: a main title sequence and an end credit sequence from a serial where different music is selected for this sequence for each episode. Analysis of the discussions indicates that the decision to view these sequences is dependent on a variety of factors. While for some the titles are required viewing, the participants in the groups are more likely to persistently view an end credit sequence where the music changes with the episode than an unchanging main title sequence. Perhaps most surprising, given the increase in opportunities for mobile viewing, is that for the participants of these groups television serials continue to be associated with social viewing in a domestic setting.

> P1: If you watch *True Blood* and just the title sequence, you'd think it was an amazing show, but it's kind of cheesy prime time viewing after that.
> P2: Just watch the title sequence, skip the episode ...
> P1: Yeh [laughs, group laughs]. (Focus group, 23 February 2012)

John Ellis recently suggested that title sequences are 'becoming the audiovisual equivalent of hardback binding on a book, denoting quality, seriousness of intent and the buyer's willingness to pay more' (Ellis, 2011a, p. 61). At 90 seconds duration, Digital Kitchen's title sequence for *True Blood* (HBO 2008-) is representative of one of two distinct approaches to title sequences for recent high production value, US-produced serials: an extended, equally high production value sequence. Other serials, by contrast, offer only a single title card and brief audio cue with text credits dispersed over the opening moments of the show's dramatic content. The distinction maps onto the different economic models adopted by US channels. Paid for by subscriptions, serials for premium pay TV channels use the main title sequence as an effective means of branding both the show and the commissioning channel (and even the channels on which they are subsequently screened [Grainge, 2009]). By contrast, where advertisers are a factor serials frequently not only begin with a 'cold open' – i.e. they jump straight into the story – but also hold back even a mini-

mal title sequence to maximise time spent on action in the first (and longest) of the show's segments (Ellis, 2011b).[1,2]

But does anyone actually watch title sequences anymore? Who decides whether they are watched or skipped and in what contexts? Taking a grounded theory approach to these questions, I organised a series of focus groups with viewers of long-running serials. Hypotheses and further questions were generated from viewers' discussions of these sequences and of their behaviour in response to them. This article summarises the results of this pre-pilot study. A brief discussion of the functions of television title sequences and of relevant theoretical work and its relation to the methodological basis of the study follows.

On television title sequences: functions and theory

Main title sequences for television shows fulfil a variety of functions.[3] They may indicate a significant boundary in television's continuous content flow. They present information about the show that follows and may thus function as a promotional trailer. Titles can also assist in transporting viewers into the world of the show. Aspects of the show's genre or content may be conveyed through text, visual imagery, cultural and other types of semiotic coding in the show's theme music and lyrics (if there are any), the design of textual display in terms of the choice, size and colour of the font used, and the mixing of such elements via design and editing. The character of a show's main title sequence may be shaped by budget, the show's commissioning channel, the show's place in the transmission schedule as well as the period of production and the technological means available.

John Ellis and Rick Altman were among the first to highlight the vital work of sound and music in/on television, in particular its capacity to draw distracted viewers *back* or potential viewers *to* the screen, whether via main title music for a show just starting or to indicate an important event in the show's dramatic action (Ellis, 1982, p. 128; Altman, 1986). Ellis argues that sound plays a key role in a mode of address that attempts to capture the attention of the ever-distracted television viewer, even when he or she is out of sight of the screen; he contrasts the 'glance' of the television viewer with the focused, heightened mode of viewing associated with cinema, the 'gaze' (p. 50). As Robin Nelson argues, however, such attempts to define television's medium specificity may indicate 'a contingent, rather than an essential, characteristic', since contemporary high production value drama serials 'seem to reward a more concentrated viewing response' (2007, p. 15), which may mobilise 'a different range of pleasures' to those offered by '"moving wall-paper" in a domestic space in which [...] a wide variety of distracting activity might be happening' (p. 15). Indeed, the widespread availability of large (and wide-)screens that support digital sound, with increased opportunities to view content without interruptions

(via a premium subscription channel or DVD, for example), means 'the experience of watching television (for some people at least) increasingly approximates to that of cinema' (p. 14). The distinctiveness of the serial as a narrative televisual format central to broadcast content, however, highlights that the blurring of television and cinema is not complete. But might such a 'cinematic' mode of viewing affect the decision to skip (or not skip) a serials' title sequence? What role does title music play in the decision to watch? Although it is not possible to answer these questions fully in this short article, here I present a first step towards understanding viewers' experience of and engagement with title sequences, particularly in relation to title sequence music and some of the other key factors that affect the decision to watch or skip these sequences.

Methodology

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau argues that examination of the representations and behaviours of a society should also involve an exploration of 'the use to which they are put by groups or individuals'.

> For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does' during this time and with these images. (1984, p. xii)

Following the direct observation of a small number of families in their homes via video cameras, Robert Bechtel, Vlark Achepohl and Roger Akers discovered that 'television viewing is a complex and various form of behavior intricately interwoven with many other kinds of behavior' (1972, p. 299).[4] More recent studies of television viewing in its domestic context demonstrate its centrality to family/household communication (Lull, 1990) and understand television viewing as a social activity 'conducted within the context of the family as a set of social relations' (Morley, 1986, p. 7). Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley argue that, as a domestic technology, television is 'doubly articulated': 'Both the television and the television programme are objects to be consumed, and to be consumed in ways dependent on the particular cultures of the household' (1992, p. 20). In studies conducted in the UK in the 1980s, Ann Gray and David Morley both found that use of the television and the video cassette recorder (VCR) in the home correlated with the performance of gender roles and/or power structures within the family, in terms of control of the remote control device, the choice of programmes watched and the mode of viewing (Morley, 1986; Gray, 1992). Such research indicates that watching television involves a heterogeneous range of practices or behaviours, and that the negotiations involved

in television viewing, competence with and control of its associated technologies both articulate and mediate the domestic relations of the family/household.[5]

For this study of audience behaviour in relation to title sequences a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate, and focus groups seemed to offer more advantages than in-depth interviews or questionnaires. In a focus group participants are able to describe and discuss their behaviour in their own words, and the group discussion situation has the potential to approximate real world conversations about relationships with, and shared experiences of, cultural objects (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 180). Thus, it is also possible to gain insight into why participants hold the views they do, since this approach offers participants 'the opportunity [...] to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view' (Bryman, 2004, p. 248). As Michael Bloor, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas and Kate Robson explain, 'The group is a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in "retrospective introspection", to attempt collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions' (2001, pp. 5-6).

Focus groups have their difficulties, however (Bryman, 2004, pp. 345-362; Bloor et al., 2001). There may be a drift towards 'conformity', on the one hand, or 'polarisation', on the other, with participants either withholding views they might express in private or expressing 'more extreme views in a group than in private' (Morgan, 1997, p. 15). Power dynamics may arise that may skew results (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 360), and respondents may 'perform' knowledge rather than reflect actual behaviour. In addition, findings from focus groups cannot be generalised to the wider population. Nonetheless, Bloor et al. argue that the approach has the potential to 'yield as much rich data on group norms as long periods of ethnographic fieldwork' (2001, p. 6).

While television viewing behaviours are in part the result of a variety of contingent factors specific to the moment of viewing – such as fatigue or the social, age-related, power-based, gendered dynamic of the group watching – they are in part also a function of the demands of the text on the viewer and the viewer's investment in the text, which may in turn be related to competence or familiarity with the genre. For this reason no attempt was made to form focus groups from a randomised or broad demographic sample for this pre-pilot study. Rather, I recruited participants who identified themselves as regular viewers of long-running television serials and who would therefore have had the opportunity to re-view a serial's main title sequence repeatedly. This also offered the possibility that changes to viewing behaviour over time could be explored. I hoped to access more normative responses to these sequences than might be the case with self-identified fans of title sequences. An email invitation was sent to students and academic and administrative staff in a small number of departments at two universities in the UK. Basic information about participants, such as age, gender, education and a list of serials

viewed regularly, was collected at the start of each focus group session via a single page survey.

Four focus groups were organised and took place in February 2012 at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Leeds, UK. There were 21 participants – 13 male and eight female – comprising 11 students, six administrative staff and four academic staff. The majority were in their twenties (13), four in their thirties, two were in their forties, one in his/her fifties and one participant preferred not to give his or her age. 17 of the 21 participants were British. Group sizes varied from four to six participants, more or less in line with the typically advised group size of six to eight participants (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 26). Participants were invited to talk about their viewing behaviour in response to two stimuli and the contributions of the other participants. The first stimulus was a main title sequence of c. 90 seconds duration taken from either season 1 of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) or *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005); the second was an end credit sequence from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007).[6] Structuring discussion around audiovisual stimuli offered better opportunities for memory retrieval than other forms of data collection. Aside from asking participants to elaborate on points made during the discussion I let the conversations take their own course and avoided other kinds of intervention.

The methodology devised for this study has its own difficulties, however. In eliciting participants from university mailing lists there was perhaps a possibility that there would be a bias towards a particular demographic that is a key target audience for premium pay TV. However, since the study was interested less in *which* serials participants were viewing and rather more with *that* and *how* they were viewing serials (in terms of viewing behaviours), the possibility of such a bias does not undermine the results of the study.[7] The decision to select stimuli solely from HBO-produced serials may have skewed discussion towards these serials in particular, though those from a variety of producers were discussed during the sessions.

Viewing serials: devices, means and modes of viewing

In the UK television set ownership remains extremely high, though increasingly viewers are watching television content on other devices in a limitless range of locations.[8] Digitisation and digital media have had a significant impact on the aesthetics and economics of broadcast content and its distribution via digital networks (satellite, cable, the Internet), with content available 'on demand', for example. The opportunity to skip broadcast television content via time-shifted playback is now possible across a variety of devices and media formats, including 'smart' TVs, personal/digital video recorders (P/DVR), DVDs and Blu-Ray discs.

The serials discussed by participants were most often those broadcast in a weekly pattern initially. Although some participants continue to watch some serials in this

way, a significant proportion time-shift their viewing. Most prefer to view serials on a television set for the comfort of its room setting, opportunities for social viewing and for the better sound and/or larger screen it affords. Some watch alone via a laptop or desktop computer, streaming or downloading content, apparently mostly legally, though sometimes not.[9] A small number of participants also watch serials alone on a laptop in bed for comfort and warmth.

When watching with others many of the participants view their favourite serials via DVD box sets on a television set. Serials produced in the US were discussed most often, and several participants stated that the decision to view via DVD box sets was primarily due to frustration over availability, whether caused by a delay in the airing of the next season on channels available in the UK, a move from terrestrial/'free-to-air' channels to subscription channels between seasons[10] or changes made to scheduling such as the allocation of unfavourable slots.[11] The same reasons were given for downloading episodes via the Internet, though this was the least preferred means of viewing favourite serials, with the most preferred being the DVD box set, mainly due to the higher definition of sound and image of the DVD format compared to streamed or downloaded content. Episodes are often watched back-to-back in a compressed time frame: a practice described by participants as 'binging'. Some participants prefer not to view particular serials in this way, however, because the show's original weekly transmission fits the demands of the text better. For example, serials that regularly incorporate cliffhanger endings benefit most from an imposed delay; participants enjoy imagining and discussing what might happen next during the obligatory wait for the next episode. One participant explained that he avoids binge viewing one of his favourite serials, because it increases his awareness of the show's formulaic character, diminishing his enjoyment. For some viewers at least, certain types of viewing behaviours are more (or less) appropriate to the demands of particular texts.

Participants discussed the social uses of television in terms similar to communications scholar James Lull, who highlights television's 'potential as a resource for the construction of desired opportunities for interpersonal contact or avoidance' (1990, p. 38). Several participants described watching serials at the moment of transmission as a 'social event':

> I just love it and on a Saturday night if [my husband] and I were in we would ... sit down and ... *Borgen*'s [DR1, 2010-] coming on, you know, bottle of wine. And that was, I suppose, a bit of a social event. Yeh, I did enjoy doing that. (Focus group, 10 February 2012)

For others, watching television at the moment of transmission for extended periods was described nostalgically, particularly in terms of social interaction, and is a relatively novel experience.[12] Some use the same type of viewing to avoid inter-

personal contact, however, '*lessen*[ing] the demand for the manufacture of talk and the exchange of thought by providing a sustaining focus for attention which can be employed as a kind of social distractor, rendering less intense the communicative formalities which might otherwise be expected' (Lull, 1990, p. 39). For one participant, it was a 'resource for escape ... from the social environment' (p. 39) when visiting a parent (Focus group, 9 February 2012).

Somewhat paradoxically, viewing serials via DVD box sets was also understood as a 'social event', albeit of a different order to viewing at the moment of transmission.[13] Indeed, it was noted that watching *The Wire* in the UK was 'definitely an individual event [...]. It wasn't like waiting for HBO to like ..., the next episode, it was more like you sat down and got really engrossed in it, maybe on your own, or maybe with a few people, close friends' (Focus group, 9 February 2012). Viewing in this way inevitably limits opportunities for 'water cooler' moments or regular periods of discussion outside of the (domestic) viewing group for UK viewers of some of these US serials. Increasingly, however, blogs and podcasts are springing up as alternative sites for this type of discussion, creating communities of viewers who watch separately.[14]

Viewing behaviours and main title sequences: watching, singing and skipping

Some participants always watch the title sequence, but only in the case of particular shows. In answer to the question posed above concerning the role of title music, it is certainly important to some of the participants; whether the sequence's music is liked or judged to be 'good' is a significant factor in the decision to watch (rather than skip) a title sequence.[15] For one participant, for whom the title sequence for *The Wire* was 'one of the most memorable and sort of symbolic things about the whole experience of watching it', its music was 'one of the most ... stand out bits' (Focus group, 9 February 2012). Participants in another group discussed the five versions of the song 'Down in the Hole' used for the show's five seasons, with the version used for season four considered the most interesting, most liked and listened to.[16] A possible link between that season's subject matter and the younger voices used in that version was explored, as well as whether a similar association could be mapped across all the seasons, particularly racially.[17] To explore such an analysis retrospectively indicates a deep level of involvement between the participant, the serial and its title sequence.

For some a show's signature music enables reminiscence of the music's origins in or appropriation by a television show, but it may also be enjoyed in its own right.[18] Participants also highlighted that the use of pre-existent music can introduce older music to a new generation (Focus group, 10 February 2012). In three of the groups

there was discussion of songs by The Who used in title sequences for *CSI Las Vegas* (CBS, 2000-)*, CSI New York* (CBS, 2004-2013) and *CSI Miami* (CBS, 2002-2012), and participants set themselves the task of identifying the three songs, expressing relief when they had done so. Rather than resulting in competition between the participants, this self-set task appeared to unite the groups. The participants watched the shows separately, but gained pleasure from their shared knowledge of the shows and the music for the title sequences.

Some participants sing along with others to the main title music of particular serials, accessing a different type of social pleasure.[19] A participant who watches *The Wire* with others noted that 'we tend to, as a sort of joke, imitate [the main titles music] with one another, particularly in our singing style' (Focus group, 9 February 2012). Another said in relation to *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), 'it's got a credit sequence where the actors come up in the same order and their name comes up and so you can actually sing their names to [group laughs] ... the theme tune ... which is really fun' (Focus group, 23 February 2012).[20] Singing along to a show's signature music thus enables viewers to share their knowledge of the music, but also to ritualise the (social) viewing experience. In the case of some participants at least, then, the role of title music is more multifaceted than simply deciding whether the title sequence is watched or skipped.

Indeed, title sequences are also watched for reasons other than music; participants described specific images they like to watch repeatedly.[21] Several drew attention to the title sequences for *The Wire* in this regard. These incorporate images from both current and previous seasons, enabling moments of recognition when shots from the titles are identified in an episode's dramatic content (Focus group, 23 February 2012). In this way, regular viewers are offered familiar pleasures to enjoy in the re-viewing of title sequences that weekly instalments enable, and may also be rewarded in terms of recognising the familiar in a different context. Indeed, regular viewers of *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-) have also been rewarded for familiarity with its title sequence; participants noted that a version of the sequence appeared during the final episode of season two, and that an altered version opened season four, to reflect the protagonist's changed situation (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

A key factor in whether a title sequence is watched or skipped is whether viewers consider it a vital part of the show that follows or extraneous, supplementary, an element that may be skipped to get to the action/content more quickly.[22] This may be related to how successfully the title sequence is judged to prepare the viewer for the show. With *True Blood*, for example, the participant quoted at the opening of the article suggested a mismatch between what the title sequence promises and what the show delivers. Whereas, of the participants who consider title sequences a vital part of the show's content, several highlighted the capacity of particular title sequences to prepare viewers for the show that follows. With *The West Wing*,

for example, 'you've got shots of the Oval Office, and it's all sort of grandiose music, and, and then you're back in, I'm into the fictional world of, of Martin Sheen being president' (Focus group, 7 February 2012).[23] Another said, 'I think some intros like get you all jazzed up for the show. Like, when … I'll be watching *The Sopranos* … and someone wants to fast forward, and I'll be like, no, no, you've got to watch this bit' (Focus group, 10 February 2012). Indeed, when watching serials socially the decision to watch or skip a title sequence involves negotiation. Although the decision may also depend on other variables, such as the mode of viewing,[24] the decision is in part organised around the viewers' relationship with the text and the various responses to the paratextual character of these sequences (which may in turn be due to the nature of the relationship between the title sequence and the show's content).[25] Such negotiations may also be mediated through the dynamics of power within the household/group of viewers and competence with the technologies involved; skipping content requires control of and experience with the remote control device.[26]

The placement of a title sequence is another parameter that affects whether it is watched or skipped. Some participants are more likely to watch a title sequence if it follows a pre-credit sequence, for example, but the perceived duration of the sequence is also a factor. One participant noted that she would 'tend to watch them' if the titles were 'actually quite short' (Focus group, 7 February 2012), while several others stated that though they watch the title sequence for part of a show's season, they skip it when viewing later episodes (Focus group, 10 February 2012; 23 February 2012).[27] Indeed, in the case of a participant for whom the means to skip appears to be the deciding factor in whether or not to skip titles, he too watches the title sequences for the first episodes in a show's season.

> I fast forward through them, credit music, when I'm watching DVDs … and, I've got it down to a fine art, so that I know exactly when I have to kind of be, you know, go from eight times speed to press play and put it back into normal. So that there's like a frame will come up, and, [makes clicking noise] and that's it, and I'm back in the flow. So after a while, … if I'm not watching it in real time, I generally will *not*, not do the music. (Focus group, 9 February 2012)

The practice of skipping title sequences when binge viewing serials (most often via DVD box sets) is common among some participants, as is the pleasurable sense of satisfaction that results from the ability to exit fast-forwarding and return to normal speed at exactly the right moment at the very end of the main title sequence, with visual markers used to enable successful skipping.[28] Participants expressed irritation over situations where a failed attempt to skip takes longer than watching the sequence (Focus group, 9 February 2012). The ability to successfully skip such sequences thus not only requires access to and mastery over particular technolo-

gies, but also – somewhat paradoxically – demands considerable familiarity with the visual structure of the main title sequence.

Within the groups there was an awareness of the extended main title sequence as a genus in its own right.[29] In one group the 'self-referentiality' and 'very different kind of aesthetic' of the sequence for *Dexter* was highlighted in contrast to title sequences for *24* (Fox, 2001-2010) and *Glee* (Fox, 2009-), where 'there's almost … nothing to skip because the credits all come up over the action, and the music is sort of it's there, finished and gone' (Focus group, 23 February 2012). Participants thus recognised the distinction highlighted at the start of this article between a 'blink and you miss it' approach to titles, on the one hand, and aestheticized, high production value extended sequences, on the other. Although it was noted that examples of the latter most often accompanied serials produced by HBO and Showtime, it is perhaps not surprising that there was no discussion of the fact that serials made by the US networks or basic cable channels usually feature significantly shorter title sequences; the institutional distinction between US channels does not necessarily impact on viewing US-produced serials in the UK, though clearly the branding of particular shows as produced by HBO or Showtime is successful. Some participants discussed how title sequences for several HBO serials differed from earlier models, such as those for *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), *The West Wing* and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2006), as evidenced by the absence of visual depictions of the show's characters and a focus on setting a mood (Focus group, 9 February).[30] Stylistic similarities between extended sequences were also noted, some of which were grounded in aspects of production or branding; for example, participants highlighted correspondences between the sequences for *True Blood* and *Dexter*, both of which were produced by the same design company, Digital Kitchen. In noting similarities of style between Digital Kitchen's sequence for *Six Feet Under* and the original title sequence for *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012), created by design studio yU+co, one participant elaborated: 'In the kind of imagery kind of not being direct all of the time until the very end …' (Focus group, 10 February 2012). Another highlighted the capacity of these sequences to stand as short films in themselves: 'the credits almost exist … on their own. They are kind of a piece of creativity rather than just … pictures of the characters popping up and then the actors' names'.[31]

Conclusion

This initial pre-pilot study creates a snapshot of aspects of contemporary television viewing, particularly the viewing of US and Danish serials in the UK, and may become the basis of a larger study in the future. Among the most interesting findings is the persistence of social television viewing, particularly where serial viewing has been pre-selected.[32] For this, television sets are preferred over laptops, tablets

or phones. Although participants listed a variety of devices via which they access television content, just one viewed television content on the move. Thus, despite the apparent proliferation of opportunities for mobile viewing and the profusion of screens now located outside the home (cf. McCarthy, 2001), the participants in these groups associate both regular and compressed viewing of television serials with the home, with the desire for social viewing likely to be a mediating factor.

It is clear that the mode of access and type of viewing engaged in affects viewer behaviour in relation to title sequences, but it is also inflected by the demands of the sequence, a viewer's engagement with a particular serial, its theme music and title imagery, and a viewer's relationship to televisual paratexts more generally. Given the variety of modes of viewing US serials in the UK, main title music is far less likely to function as a hail to the present but distracted viewer. Nonetheless, other aspects of the function of title sequences associated with previous phases of television broadcast and reception, such as preparing viewers for entry into the show's world, seem to persist.

The main title sequences for *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* were those discussed most and were among the most viewed. Rather than original music, both use arrangements of pre-existent songs, edited or arranged so that lyrics relevant to the show's content are foregrounded.[33] Both title sequences were made in-house by the show's production company, rather than outsourced to a digital design company. The sequences are less oblique in terms of the show's content than is the case with many of the design-led sequences made by external companies.[34] Although the latter are often flashier in terms of aesthetics, budgets and high production values and are appreciated as films in their own right by some, regular viewers skipped these design-led title sequences more frequently than those made in-house. Of course, such sequences not only promote and brand the show, but also function as promotional videos for the sequence's production company, which is not generally the case with those made in-house. It would be interesting to explore further whether title sequences with a more direct relationship to a show's content (e.g. featuring shots, characters or locations from the show's episodes) generate more sustained (loyal?) repeat viewing by regular viewers, i.e. whether the type of relationship between a title sequence and the content of its associated show (e.g. direct versus oblique) also inflects the decision to watch or skip. Gaining access to audience research commissioned by production companies on this and other topics pertaining to titles and end credits would also be interesting, particularly in terms of the influence title sequences have on potential/new viewers, and any bearing it may have on the decision to watch the show.

Although in some contexts the main title sequence may be on its way out, a significant number of the focus group participants were still excited by extended sequences, where they exist. The decision to watch a main title sequence (and to

continue to do so throughout the course of a show's season) is complex and dependent on a variety of factors, several of which may be interrelated. This study demonstrates that, for this sample at least, regular viewers of television serials display a high level of familiarity with the main title sequences for the serials they watch and engage in a variety of participatory behaviours with them. This article presents a first step towards understanding current viewing behaviours in the case of main title sequences and regular viewers of serials; more and larger studies are needed to assess whether the behaviours described here are typical for this and other constituencies and for other forms of programming. Once such evidence has been collected, it would be interesting to investigate whether the current situation signifies a change, but we also need to explore the history of these sequences: their aesthetics, the institutional and economic factors affecting their development, and their impact on viewers.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1   A key reason for this compression is the move away from a commercial break at the top of the hour on US networks. According to John Ellis, shows are now frequently run together in an attempt to keep viewers tuned to the same channel (Ellis, 2011b).

2   It should be noted that basic cable networks are funded by a combination of advertising and subscription. Nonetheless, the distinction between high production value extended sequences and much diminished sequences appears to hold, at least in the case of US-produced serials. Title sequences for a number of HBO serials operate to something of a standard length of between 90 and 97 seconds, including those for *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-), *Carnivàle* (2003-2005), and *Big Love* (2006-2011), for example. Those for Showtime serials are less standardised, but also tend towards longer durations – e.g. *Dexter* (2006-): 110 seconds, *Homeland* (2011-): 78 seconds – whereas title sequences for basic cable or broadcast network serials are generally shorter (e.g. *The West Wing* [NBC, 1999-2006]: 45 seconds, *Mad Men* [AMC, 2007-]: 36 seconds) and often *much* shorter (e.g. *The Good Wife* [CBS, 2009-]: c. 9 seconds).

3   For a more extended discussion of these functions see, for example, Davison 2013.

4   Similar findings were replicated in later studies, such as Collett & Lamb 1986.

5   See also Gauntlett & Hill 1999.

6   Responses arising from the second stimulus form the basis of a further article: 'The Show Stops Here' (in preparation).

7   The British context of this pre-pilot study is also relevant here. The premium subscription channel Sky Atlantic (the so-called 'home of HBO' in the UK) was launched in the UK in February 2011, a year before the focus groups took place, though only one of the participants stated he subscribed to the channel. It was clear from the discussions that the participants were more likely to access such content via terrestrial and basic cable channels in the UK, via DVD box sets and latterly via streaming, as discussed below.

8   The UK's Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) states that c. 97 per cent of UK households own televisions (http://www.tvlicensing.co.uk/about/foi-licences-facts-and-figures-AB18/ [accessed 20 April 2012]). Smartphone ownership has risen to 39 per cent of UK adults, and in 2011 tablet ownership rose from two to 11 per cent. (Ofcom, *Communications Market Report 2012*: 26, 91. Available: http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cmr12/ [accessed 14 August 2012]).

9   Participants did not use the term 'illegal downloading' explicitly, though in several cases it was implicit in the discussion of downloading. For example, 'occasionally I download stuff but usually only if I've missed an episode for some reason. [...] I download things occasionally and then I just think [sharp intake of breath] – [whispers] I'm going to prison. [Group laughs] I can't take the guilt. So I burn it and then I delete it from my computer'. (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

10   Seasons 1 and 2 of *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010) premiered on Channel 4 in the UK, but seasons 3 and 4 were secured by (pay channel) Sky. Watching televised content at transmission in the UK requires purchase of an annual television licence, irrespective of the device used to access content. The licence fee supports the provision of public service broadcasting in the UK in the form of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Thus, although certain channels can be viewed without purchase of a subscription package, they are not exactly 'free-to-air'.

11   When *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) was first shown in the UK on the BBC in 2009, it was shown five nights a week at 11.20pm and was not available via the BBC's catch-up service, iPlayer. Although seasons were scheduled to run back-to-back, the start of season two was delayed for the BBC's coverage of the World Snooker Championship. See the link below for an explanation and the complaints made about this scheduling: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcinternet/2009/03/why_no_wire.html (accessed 26 July 2012).

12   This was true of one participant's description of an extended period of 'let the TV decide' viewing with friends on New Year's Day, for example: 'We were all very hung over ... we all just watched general crappy television for the whole evening. So it was a combination of World's Strongest Man contest, and er, a film on the sci-fi or the horror channel, about this kind of weird hill-billy cult in Virginia who took a couple hostage and tried to force them to procreate for their weird Christian cult ... Fantastic! Um, and a few other random choice bits of televisual crap, but it was quite, you know, a good social experience'. (Focus group, 9 February 2012).

13   'My mum's 82 and she always used to speak about *Downton Abbey* [ITV, 2010-] ... And I actually said to her, don't bother watching it on the television, I'll get you them on the box set ... and it became ... like a little Friday night occasion, where I would go down ... and we'd put on *Downton Abbey*, and became a little social event, you know. And she's now on series two. [Laughs] That's nice'. (Focus group, 10 February 2012)

14   For example, *The Guardian*'s *The Wire* blog offers an episode-by-episode section for 'those who have already seen *The Wire* in its entirety'. This appeared alongside the transmission of all five seasons on the digital channel FX in the UK and offers those viewers who probably watched first via DVD box sets opportunities for discussion. Links to these and some of the original blogs can be found here: http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/wire (accessed 16 April 2012).

The blog was billed as 'Your chance to share the whole of *The Wire* with a wider group' (Available: http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2009/feb/23/wire-television [accessed 16 April 2012]).

15 For example, 'I think it depends on how much you like the music actually, so, I always listen to the *Buffy* [*the Vampire* Slayer] [The WB/UPN, 1997-2003] theme tune. And I always listen to the *True Blood* [HBO, 2008-] theme tune, which I love' (Focus group, 10 February 2012). Two participants agreed that the music for *Star Trek: Enterprise* [UPN, 2001-2005] was 'just horrible' and that they always skip the title sequence as a result (Focus group, 10 February 2012).

16 Here young (non-professional) voices are used, rapping.

17 It was noted that season two (more concerned with white, working class immigrant life/ ports) featured a more 'white' sounding version of the song (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

18 One participant noted that she buys the soundtracks for television serials, preferring 'pieces of music you can watch [sic] without having the show on' (Focus group, 10 February 2012), but also indicated that the tracks reminded her of the associated programme. In an extension of this cueing function, two participants said they would always watch the main title of a particular serial because hearing its music reminded them of a particular moment in their lives, acting as a moment of personal reminiscence.

19 Several participants mimicked sounds and musical fragments from main title sequences during the focus group discussions.

20 The participant noted that this becomes more difficult as new characters are introduced, and the order changed: 'you have to stay on your toes!' (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

21 For example, 'I absolutely love the bit where he emerges from the Lincoln Tunnel, or rather probably when he's just about to [gestures Tony Soprano snatching a ticket from a toll-booth machine in *The Sopranos*] [...] I love that bit, and I'll happily watch it again, again, again' (Focus group, 10 February 2012).

22 One participant noted that skipping the main title sequence is a 'point of contention in our house, 'cos I like to watch it all [...] to the end of the credits. [...] It's part of the experience' (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

23 The same participant always watches the title sequence for *The Wire*: 'I don't know why! It's sort of like ... getting into the mood of the programme, like a little singalong' (Focus group, 7 February 2012).

24 For example, one participant stated that because he was usually 'binge watching these things and they go on quite a long time, somebody will, somebody in my group will ask to fast forward through these [main title sequences]' (Focus group, 9 February 2012).

25 See Genette, 1997. For application of the notion of the paratext to audiovisual media, see Kernan, 2004; Gray, 2010. Although some critics categorise television title sequences as paratexts (e.g. Gray, 2010, pp. 72-79), as yet there has been little detailed exploration of the value (or validity) of conceptualising them in this way.

26 Such dynamics did not appear to be a key feature of the negotiations described by the participants in these groups, however. Ann Gray's evidence that 'access to cultural capital through education produces an alliance of male and female preferences for "quality" texts' (1992, p. 251), and given that all of the participants in this study were either attending or working for a higher education institution in an academic or administrative capacity offers a possible reason for this. It is certainly possible that negotiations over viewing decisions would be different in a larger sample across a broader demographic.

27 A participant who professed to 'love' the *Dexter* title sequence, despite skipping it regularly, later explained, 'I guess part of the reason I'm happy to skip the credits is because "I know that already"' (Focus group, 23 February 2012).

28 In response to the group member quoted above, another said 'there was at least one season [of *The Wire*] where there was a very striking visual image of Idris Elba's hand unzipping

D'Angelo's wife's track suit top [laughs] and you knew that he had his hand slightly like that [demonstrates] with fingers slightly out, and he would just go zzzzzzzzip, like that and that was, I think, that was right on the cue to one of the last cadences of the music or something, so you knew that if you started it there you'd just get the [demonstrates] "Cogh" thing that begins each episode of *The Wire*, you know, that [???] space motif. [...] not only do we fast forward but we know when to stop fast forwarding which is cued by musical things and the image [laughs]' (Focus group, 9 February 2012). The other group member agreed: 'When I see Martin Sheen in a particular position with his pen, that's when I have to press stop, or put it into regular speed' (Focus group, 9 February 2012).

29   Websites such as 'The Art of the Title' (www.artofthetitle.com) and 'Forget the Film, Watch the Titles!' (http://www.watchthetitles.com/), dedicated to the title sequence as an art form, demonstrate that such a view is held more widely.

30   No comment was made about the fact that all three of the earlier models mentioned were for shows produced by the network NBC, however; as noted above, this is probably because the shows were watched via British television channels and/or DVD box sets. The participants clearly felt that the title sequences were memorable, though in terms of how they differed from the sequences for HBO serials that were discussed, the period of production is perhaps as relevant as the fact that the show was produced by a network and thus reliant on income from advertising.

31   She continued, 'And I think the music's very, very distinctive and it sort of gives you a sense of both the kind of quirkiness and both the mystery and underlying darkness of *Six Feet Under* which is, sort of does tread this fine line between being quite funny and also being really quite dark at times as well, and I think that the, maybe more the music than the credits, although the pictures of feet and the mortuary gives you some idea what it's about' (Focus group, 10 February 2012).

32   In attempting to gain access to information about viewing behaviours via focus group discussion, a methodology that relies in part on social collectivity, it is possible that this may have resulted in a bias towards thinking about television viewing in those terms, i.e. as a socially collective experience. Although social viewing via a television set was certainly discussed most by participants, other forms of viewing were also mentioned, including viewing individually via a laptop.

33   'Woke up this morning/Got myself a gun' in the case of *The Sopranos*; 'Down in the hole' and reference to the devil, in the case of *The Wire.*

34   For more on this distinction, see Davison (2013) for a comparison of the sequences for *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under.*