

NEW TRENDS IN PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION OF EPISODIC TELEVISION DRAMA: BRAND MARVEL-NETFLIX IN THE POST-TELEVISION ERA

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ABSTRACT:

Episodic television drama is currently one of the most popular, profitable and variable forms of audio-visual media production. The author of the study focuses on its ability to appeal to people preferring 'traditional' modes of reception as well as to media audiences that spend a lot of their free time in the virtual world. New trends in production of dramatic television series and serials refer to importance of multimedia distribution platforms and fully acknowledge social networks as communication and advertising channels that are capable of actively encouraging the emergence and evolution of so-called "institutionalised fandoms". The text aims to offer a set of theoretical outlines related to post-television era, placing emphasis on "brandcasting", a term that has been developed in order to thoroughly reflect on processes of television branding which often result in hybrid communication forms merging media content and promotional material. The author also focuses on specific modes of producing, distributing and consuming episodic television drama in the context of so-called "over-the-top" television (OTT TV) or rather "connected" television. The addressed development tendencies are explained through an analysis of successful cooperation between two popular entertainment brands (*Marvel Television* and *Netflix*) that is built upon the contemporary 'boom' of superheroes and their stories. A basic assumption here is that television drama serials produced by *Marvel* and exclusively distributed by *Netflix* can be seen as hybrids of content and promotion which significantly expand *Marvel's* global popularity and *Netflix's* increasing influence in the sphere of digital media production and distribution.

KEY WORDS:

brandcasting, broadcasting, episodic television drama, Internet-delivered television, *Marvel's Daredevil*, *Marvel's Jessica Jones*, *Marvel's Luke Cage*, *Marvel Entertainment*, media culture, *Netflix*, superheroes

Introduction: Old Medium, New Ways of Distribution

Following the latest developments of communication technologies and digital services, genres of episodic television fiction (and, of course, other television products as well) are no longer bound to 'traditional' forms of media presentation. Contemporary episodic television dramas are of diverse genres; this genre-relat-



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ed variability significantly influences not only their form, but also content (story, narrative, meaning) and interpretation. The word ‘interpretation’ is highly important here – serial television dramas and their meanings may be continually analysed and reflected upon by media theorists, media producers, journalists and other interested scholars and professionals, but television production’s popularity and financial success are, in accordance with today’s economic imperatives, still mostly dependent on good reviews, positive word of mouth, stable viewership and, above all, own ability to meet the volatile preferences of their audiences.

Whether we talk about the ‘traditional’ forms of watching television or about the latest development tendencies of accessing movies and television through digital media, it is necessary to point out that media audiences nowadays choose from a wide spectrum of different entertaining products. However, the adjective ‘different’ does not – at least not necessarily – indicate that today’s television entertainment is richer (in terms of its contents) than ever. Douglas Kellner, whose lines of thinking are partially connected with ‘the third generation’ of critical theory by Frankfurt School, argues: “Commercial television has been constituted as an entertainment medium and it appears that its producers believe that audiences are most entertained by stories, by narratives with familiar and recognizable characters, plot-lines, conventions, and messages, as well as by familiar genres.” The author tries to explain why cultural theory and cultural critique often tend to see television as an aesthetically inferior cultural form: “This aesthetic poverty of the medium has probably been responsible for its contempt by high cultural theorists and its designation as a ‘vast wasteland’ by those who have other aesthetic tastes and values.”¹ Despite such critical (and in many cases fully legitimate) remarks, we have to point out that television is, at least on the global scale, still the most popular medium which influences the ordinary lives of billions of people, even those that live in less economically developed parts of the world and do not have opportunities to work with the Internet and digital communication forms. Dolf Zillmann emphasises that “the right to be entertained” is proclaimed by media in highly developed liberal-democratic societies as well as in post-colonial and developing countries.² The notion of entertainment is crucial; cultural production of the 21st century is very well aware that people need (and thus persistently search for) entertaining impulses provided by media professionals, and it is rather unreasonable to expect that this could change in the near future.

For purposes of this article we offer a more detailed explanation of so-called “over-the-top television” (OTT TV) as a specific form of Internet-delivered television service. The theoretical framework of the term is based on partial application of basic marketing strategies of ‘push’ and ‘pull’, representing new trends of distributing television content. Peter B. Seel remarks that programme delivery is also shifting from “over-the-air broadcast” where viewers have content ‘pushed’ to them; in favour of “an expanding online environment where they ‘pull’ what they want to watch when they want to see it”. In the United States, the author explains, this online-delivery process is known as “over-the-top television” – with OTT TV as the obligatory acronym. However, it should more accurately be called “over-the-top video” as the term “refers to non-broadcast, Internet-streamed video content viewed on a digital display, but the confusion reflects the blurring of the line between broadcast/cable/DBS-delivered ‘linear’ television and that of on-demand streamed content”. In addition, the term “over-the-top” is unique to the United States – in other regions of the world it is most often called “connected video” or “connected television”. As the author suggests, an all-encompassing term would be “Internet-delivered television” or I-DTV.³ Nitin Narang’s short analysis notes that “over-the-top” as a concept is not new; however, it had been synonyms with low quality content and largely restricted to audiences owning personal computers.⁴ More recently OTT has started to seriously challenge the existing models of broadcasting and delivering of television content – mostly serial television production and films – via digital services. Content creators are thus able to establish cooperation with “over-the-top” video providers in order to offer their products to a much wider spectrum of media audiences or rather to users that are interested in multi-screen consumption of audio-visual content.

1 KELLNER, D.: *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. New York, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 235.

2 ZILLMANN, D.: The Coming of Media Entertainment. In ZILLMANN, D., VORDERER, P. (eds.): *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*. Mahwah (NJ, USA), London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000, p. 7.

3 SEEL, P. B.: Digital Television & Video. In GRANT, A. E., MEADOWS, J. H. (eds.): *Communication Technology Update and Fundamentals*. 15th Edition. New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 65-66.

4 NARANG, N.: *Over the Top (OTT) – Is It for Real: Part II*. Released on 28th February 2011. [online]. [2016-12-10]. Available at: <<http://www.mediaentertainmentinfo.com/2011/02/over-the-top-ott-is-it-for-real-part-ii.html/>>.

The most popular providers of “Internet-delivered” television content are *Netflix*, *HBO Now* (but not *HBO Go*), *Amazon Prime* and *Hulu*.⁵ *Netflix* specialises in providing access to a significant amount of original content; the service is advertisement-free, available in more than 190 countries all over the world, and it allows its users to choose from dozens of episodic television dramas and feature films. *HBO Go* that was founded in 2010 is, in certain ways, different from the other mentioned digital services since it is a video-on-demand service offered by the American premium cable network *Home Box Office* (better known as *HBO*). In other words, viewers are required to subscribe to a pay television provider or to a premium package in order to use *HBO Go*. However, a significant change of *HBO*’s previous business model came in April 2015 – the company officially launched its new Internet-delivered video service *HBO Now* to better appeal to customers who primarily use digital media and prefer them over the necessity of subscribing to a satellite provider or a cable television. On the other hand, *HBO Now* is available only in the United States and certain U.S. territories. *Amazon Prime* is a more costly digital service (yearly subscription, no option to pay in monthly instalments) that offers not only an extensive library of television products and films (including original and critically-acclaimed television dramas such as *Mozart in the Jungle*, *Transparent* or *Alpha House*), but also additional features such as cloud storage, access to a large variety of e-books and music. *Hulu* provides the majority of its content for free (mild presence of advertising is quite understandable here); premium services are bound to *Hulu Plus* monthly subscription and their biggest advantage lies in availability of the latest seasons and episodes of the most popular television series and serials (often in less than 24 hours after they air on broadcast television). Even though all the above-mentioned services are interesting to analyse and definitely worthy of media professionals’ attention, the thematic framework of this article is bound to *Netflix* and its long-term cooperation with *Disney-Marvel* – that is why we are going to further discuss *Netflix*’s branding, original content and public reputation in the fifth chapter.

Personalised online video services based on digital distribution technologies are designed to constantly provide new emotional stimuli and new stories to follow. Most of them partially or totally ignore once unavoidable ‘side effects’ of watching television (predefined, rigid programme schedule, often even the ‘one episode a week’ distribution strategy and other basic aspects of so-called seriality). One of the most significant consequences of watching episodic, i.e. serial narratives via online services and digital applications is the fact that the original concept of “seriality” does not apply here. Irena Reifová and Petr Bednařík discuss this issue and point out that an ordinary viewer – free from institutionalised restrictions and ready to choose from vast amounts of entertainment – is unable to limit the range and timeframe of his/her own consumption of serial narratives, i.e. to indulge in episodic stories in accordance with predetermined “doses”. The authors also claim that the general Czech television-related terminology (and we have to acknowledge that this statement applies to Slovak media studies as well, remark by J. R.) tends to define all types of episodic television narration as “serials” and any inner determination of modes of seriality is therefore notably absent, especially compared to Anglo-Saxon studies on television culture and genres.⁶ The related terminology within cultural and media studies is rather diverse. Nevertheless, as Tudor Oltean states, it is possible to draw one or two guidelines: “So far, the term ‘series’ has been used as a general term denoting this kind of narrative construction. Even so, it is quite possible that the term ‘series’ acquires specific meaning according to the following set of contrasting pairs: series vs serial; continuous vs non-continuous serial; and series vs mini-series. The terminological choices are often clear when considered separately for each and every case, but it may become difficult to make the right choice when one considers the phenomenon generally.”⁷ Respecting Oltean’s opinion on the issue (especially the need to distinguish between “series” and “serials”), we have decided to specify the basic terminological framework of the addressed issue in accordance with narrative structure of episodic television dramas by *Marvel*, available via *Netflix* – all of the television products analysed in the fifth chapter (i.e. *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s Jessica Jones* and *Marvel’s Luke Cage*) may be defined as ‘serials’ since their narrative structures are dependent on systems of interwoven plotlines and they do not involve stories to be resolved within a single episode as in case of “series”.

5 *Hulu* is not available to the users living outside the United States of America and Japan (remark by the author).

6 REIFOVÁ, I., BEDNAŘÍK, P.: Televizní seriál – záhada popkulturního sebevědomí. In *Mediální studia*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 72.

7 OLTEAN, T.: Series and Seriality in Media Culture. In *European Journal of Communication*, 1993, Vol. 8, No. 5, p. 14.

Serial narrations of this type may be further divided into various categories. We apply the typology of serials proposed by Umberto Eco – all three analysed serials are based on the “retrospective” (“loop”), which often works with flashbacks activating the characters’ key memories of the past and thus expanding their secret inner motivations. Such a retrospective structure, i.e. an explanation of previous experiences related to fictitious heroes functions as an effective tool for subsequent and seemingly accidental discovering of hidden aspects of characters’ personalities. The method of the “loop” is strictly commercially driven; it aims to “keep the story alive” and allows the producers to avoid the problem of inevitable aging of the major characters. This strategy, however, also produces many logical issues and paradoxes related to the storylines – many of these lapses are often creatively explored via parodies.⁸

The online environment does not support the ‘traditional’ modes of seriality due to its main feature – the continual availability of the digital streaming services which organise the offered contents in different ways than traditional broadcasting. Moreover, television is losing its identity of a ‘family’ medium – many households are equipped by more than just one television and there are various alternative ways of viewing television content. Online television services (e.g. Internet-delivered video, video-on-demand and similar distribution lines) creatively and efficiently work with all possibilities of multimedia distribution channels, bringing ‘television’ to portable devices (intelligent mobile phones, tablets, laptops, other types of communication technologies that are easy to carry, no matter where we go).

Taking into account this theoretical basis, the new kinds of viewing television have also brought new challenges for media producers as they heavily depend on online marketing communication. We believe it is adequate to admit that the concept of “brandcasting”, which is in the centre of our attention in the next chapter, is neither established and used as widely as many other terms bound to innovated media terminology, nor it is the only hybrid expression that strives to better define the processes of media (or rather television) branding. However, we have decided to discuss it in relation to television serials produced by *Marvel Television* and *Netflix* since watching these stories and following their promotional campaigns often cannot be seen as two different communication processes with clearly defined boundaries.

Broadcasting or Rather “Brandcasting”?

The last few decades of media research on television and television viewership and many revised media theories have brought new lines of thinking to follow and new issues to address. One of these issues is that even though it is not quite clear how to define ‘an active audience member’, we have to take into consideration that media audiences co-create the final meaning of all kinds of media content (including dramatic television serials) and are able to actively participate in the processes of media production – or at least they may choose to do so.⁹ According to Marta Žilková, the visual culture of today, television not being an exception, is evolving towards constant ‘acceleration’ – through advanced editing, shortening of story segments, performances and scenes. Naturally, the outlined trend strongly influences the contemporary art and its aesthetic value, leading to superficiality.¹⁰

Zuzana Slušná expresses a similar opinion. In her words, the current form of cultural consumerism is unique; it is unlike any other cultural consumption before and it also offers an answer to questions related to previous eras of human existence. Late-modern culture has provided us with attractive concepts of lifestyle that directly influence today’s styling – fragmented attention, episodic storytelling, adventurousness, versatility, fashionableness and practicality. This styling has been grasping not only

visual imagery but also culture and cultural values for decades.¹¹ We would like to add that promotion-related activities and marketing strategies have been following this trend as well – its reflection is quite visible also in case of television broadcasting which heavily relies on creation of successful brands.

Branding in electronic media involves image-making and planning of marketing activities that are aimed at creation or strengthening of commercial disposition of goods and services. Juraj Rusnák sees “image-making” in the sphere of media production as one of the most important strategies of influencing the media audiences – most media organisations producing entertainment would not be able to maintain and improve their market positions without employing specialised professionals who create and disseminate these kinds of ideas towards media audiences (so-called image-makers).¹² Television production is nowadays very diverse – this fact also means that television branding is becoming far more complex as there are more parts of the production chain to ‘brand’. Internet-delivered television services only reaffirm the existing need for critical reflection on branding in the context of production of television shows.

Even though analysing the trends in television production through the concept of “brandcasting” had appeared in scholarly literature on the topic of media branding decades ago, some of influential works addressing this issue in terms of the 21st century and its culture were published only a few years back. For example, Jennifer Gillan discusses the notion of “brandcasting” in the context of television aimed at reinforcing corporate, channel or programme brands, which hybridizes promotion and content. As the author emphasises, it becomes unclear whether “brandcasting” is promoting itself as a brand, or whether it offers up media content predominantly: “*Brandcasting is always conflicted and often contested, because as much as it tries to pre-create meaning, it cannot predetermine it.*”¹³

Paul Grainge and Catherine Johnson use a similar argument: “*Branded entertainment encapsulates the fluid boundaries of promotion and content within contemporary screen culture and reveals the shifting industry configurations, and trade theorizations, that sit behind this change.*”¹⁴ Catherine Johnson also remarks that academic discussions on television branding need to consider the current trends in television production. Television, as the author explains, produces programmes that are ordered and transmitted as a schedule through television channels by specific broadcasters: “*Essentially what is provided is the experience of watching television. Within the consumer goods industries branding emerged to manage the relationships between the producer, product and consumer. In the television industry the channel that aggregates the consumer’s experience of the television programme adds an additional layer to the relationship between producer, product and viewer.*” According to the author, while in the consumer goods industry it is the product (and occasionally the corporation) that is branded, within the television industry the product is potentially both the television programme and the channel (or other services, media) through which that programme is viewed.¹⁵

In other words, television branding includes not only products, in our case television serials (e.g. *Marvel’s* television narratives broadcast by *Netflix* – *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s Jessica Jones*, *Marvel’s Luke Cage* and a few other future serials and next seasons of the already released ones that are currently in development), but also broadcasters, i.e. providers of the entertainment experience of watching television serials (*Netflix*) and often producers as well. It is highly notable that production company *Marvel Television*, a division of *Marvel Entertainment* in *The Walt Disney Company* conglomerate, has integrated its name into all official titles of own television serials exclusively distributed by *Netflix*. Following Catherine Johnson’s understanding of television branding, we visualise its characteristics by the picture below:

8 ECO, U.: *Meze interpretace*. Praha: Karolinum, 2005, p. 96-97.

9 For more information, see: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: Kultový televizný seriál v súčasnej mediálnej produkcii. In PETRANOVÁ, D., RYBANSKÝ, R. (eds.): *Diskurzy v masmediálnych štúdiách: Zborník z medzinárodnej vedeckej konferencie Nové trendy v marketingu 2012*. Trnava: FMK UCM in Trnava, 2012, p. 159.

10 ŽILKOVÁ, M.: Vplyv médií na kultúru (nielen mediálnu). In FICHNOVÁ, K. (ed.): *(KO)Médiá: Monografia odborných a vedeckých štúdií*. Nitra: Constantine The Philosopher University, 2007, p. 15.

11 SLUŠNÁ, Z.: Konzum vo veku hypermoderny. In *(KO)Médiá: Vedecké a odborné štúdie zamerané na mediálnu a marketingovú komunikáciu*. Nitra: Constantine The Philosopher University, 2012, p. 153.

12 RUSNÁK, J.: Branding. In *Texty elektronických médií. Stručný výkladový slovník*. Prešov: University of Prešov, 2010, p. 16.

13 GILLAN, J.: *Television Brandcasting: The Return of the Content-Promotion Hybrid*. New York, Abingdon (UK): Routledge, 2015, p. 11.

14 GRAINGE, P., JOHNSON, C.: *Promotional Screen Industries*. New York, Abingdon (UK): Routledge, 2015, p. 24.

15 JOHNSON, C.: *Branding Television*. Abingdon (UK), New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 6.

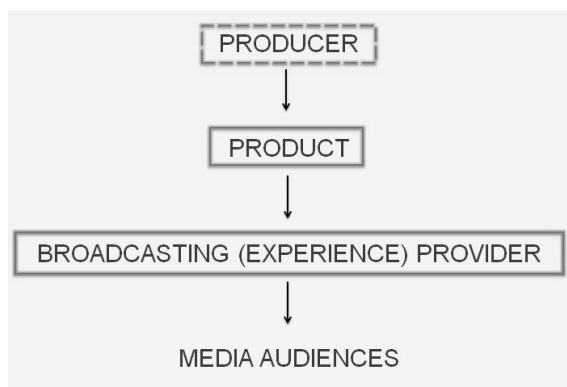


Figure 1: Television branding

Source: Own processing, based on: JOHNSON, C.: *Branding Television*. Abingdon (UK), New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 6.

The following chapters of the text aim to specifically discuss digital television services and principles of multimedia communication in order to provide a more thorough reflection on broadcasting in the context of television drama series by *Marvel* distributed through the Internet-delivered television platform *Netflix*. We have to stress out, however, that even though ‘traditional’ television broadcasting and online television services differ in many ways, offer varying kinds of experience and appeal to different segments of media audiences, they share most of their promotional and marketing strategies and activities. According to Jo Pierson and Joke Bauwens, television channels communicate with their viewers through a whole repertoire of marketing (logos, promos, video clips), production (e.g. easily recognisable design of news studios, brand personalities and celebrities, modes of audience address, in-vision announcers, jingles) and programming strategies. They try to build an identity, to differentiate themselves from others and establish a loyal relationship with audiences.¹⁶ Denis McQuail focuses on various different types of establishing a connection between media content and media audiences – he specifically mentions, among other related things, the phenomenon of “institutionalised fandom”. This kind of parasocial interaction is often not spontaneous, but rather highly organised and manipulated by media producers¹⁷ (nowadays mostly through communication via social networks). Fictitious episodic narratives disseminated by television, especially the most successful and popular ones, seem to build their marketing communication around favourite protagonists (the heroes and actors who portray them).

Parasocial relationships between viewers and characters from television shows (or celebrities, i.e. the faces, bodies and voices of popular television heroes) tend to be quite intense and involve a lot of emotional investment. As Hana Pravdová, Zora Hudíková and Eva Habiňáková observe, media content, which is fully based on commercial principles and imperatives, also defines the value of the final consumer – the recipient. Transformation of a recipient into a devoted consumer is the guarantee of being successful on the media market. The goal of marketing communication is to form a hedonistic consumer category – a marketing and media projection of various cravings, dreams, expectations, experiences or pleasures desired by media audiences.¹⁸ Martin Solík and Martin Klementis articulate a similar opinion – all products of popular culture must reflect on everyday lives of their users. If the users do not “find themselves” in the products of popular culture, such products will not be able to gain popularity: “*The power of popular culture lies in the numbers of its users who are given a chance to independently construct their own social identities. The phenomenon of popularity cannot be created by employment of – whatever advanced – production technologies.*”¹⁹ Anna Predmerská points out the recent popularity of “emotional marketing” which tries to understand the ways people react to brands,

products and services, and to explain why they do react to them in the first place.²⁰ Episodic television narratives of the fictitious nature – whether those broadcast in ‘traditional’ ways or those which rely exclusively on digital distribution via the Internet and streaming services – become popular only in case their creators and marketing campaigns are able to convince the target audiences that consuming (viewing, buying, subscribing) these stories offers entertaining experience, pleasure and fulfilment of their intrinsic (mostly hedonistic) needs.

Referring to the above-mentioned outlines of the discussed issue, the current development tendencies of television industry thoroughly fulfil John Hartley’s prediction published in 2008: “*Post-broadcast (i.e. customized) television will follow; not only migrating out of the lounge-room and into the kitchen, study, or bedroom, but out of the sphere of domestic identity altogether. The TV-computer interface also means that all sorts of online services can merge with TV content. (...) Consumption has become co-production. TV is about ‘creating my (or our) experience’ not ‘consuming your products’.* For today’s teenagers, of whom there are over a billion worldwide, each one wanting to make their mischief and fulfil their dreams, this will be the new ‘history of me’.”²¹ It would be unreasonable to disagree – today’s television production, especially in case of television serials, is definitely dependent on digital communication technologies, accessible via different media platforms and portable devices, and persistent in its efforts to offer highly standardised, but still refined and popular forms of entertainment experience.

Today’s Television Drama as a Part of Media Culture: Collision of Volatile Tastes, Excessive Consumption and Transmedia Narratives

As we have mentioned above, the current trends in merging content with promotion in terms of television production lead to constant reconsideration of what to brand, how to perform the communication activities related to branding and what kinds of audiences to appeal to. Small-screen production – and episodic television drama in particular – is rarely seen as a ‘highbrow’ type of audio-visual content, and for good reasons; nevertheless it is beyond any doubts that its commercial potential is immense. Of course, the term “episodic television production” represents a wide variety of products with differing normative and aesthetical value.

Fictitious television drama is a form of cultural expression which has always been defined as aesthetically and culturally inferior (in comparison with, for example, cultural artefacts originating from the fine art worlds). As Irena Reifová and Petr Bednařík observe, seriality has been strongly connected with the “everydayness” and its needs – television production (especially television drama) is situated far away from the art and artistic ambitions.²² However, it would be improper to neglect the much-needed critical analysis of episodic television entertainment and its place in today’s media culture just because of its (presumably) dubious aesthetic qualities. Tudor Oltean observes that the study of popular series as fictional narratives is considerably more complex (‘fiction’ is encoding ‘real life’) and it serves also as a general framework for considering seriality. According to the author, the multiple ways of constructing fictitious realities seem to be unrestricted by the boundaries of the real.²³ Moreover, the cultural situation of late 1990s and new trends emerging in 21st century suggest that distinguishing between ‘highbrow’, ‘middlebrow’ and ‘lowbrow’ cultural tastes is now even more problematic than ever before. Even though key texts that address the topic in question, e.g. the most renowned

16 PIERSON, J., BAUWENS, J.: *Digital Broadcasting: An Introduction to New Media*. New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 78.

17 McQUAIL, D.: *Úvod do teorie masové komunikace*. 4th Revised and Extended Edition. Praha: Portál, 2009, p. 457.

18 PRAVDOVÁ, H., HUDÍKOVÁ, Z., HABIŇÁKOVÁ, E.: Secularization Process of Homo Medialis. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2014, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 194.

19 SOLÍK, M., KLEMENTIS, M.: Mimicry of Cultural Production for the Majority: Development Tendencies of Mainstream Culture. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2015, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 103-104.

20 PREDMERSKÁ, A.: Prepojenie umenia a reklamy. In *Quaere 2013. Recenzovaný zborník príspevků interdisciplinárni mezinárodní vědecké konference doktorandů a odborných asistentů*. Hradec Králové: Magnanimitas, 2013, p. 562.

21 HARTLEY, J.: *Television Truths*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, p. 5-6.

22 REIFOVÁ, I., BEDNÁŘÍK, P.: Televizní seriál – záhada popkulturního sebevědomí. In *Mediální studia*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 73-74.

23 OLTEAN, T.: Series and Seriality in Media Culture. In *European Journal of Communication*, 1993, Vol. 8, No. 5, p. 8.

works by Dwight MacDonald²⁴ and Umberto Eco²⁵ still maintain their timeless validity, there are many new facts to consider. Sam Friedman's study published in 2012 claims that in recent decades, the dominant paradigm in cultural sociology has shifted arguably; from an emphasis on culture as a vehicle for class reproduction (as influentially discussed by Pierre Bourdieu and other authors in 1980s) towards the widespread adoption of Richard A. Peterson's thesis of "cultural omnivore" in 1990s. This argument is, according to Friedman, based on both theoretical notions and empirical evidence that "contemporary 'elites' no longer use highbrow taste to demonstrate their cultural distinction, but are better characterised as inclusive 'omnivores', happy to consume both high and low culture".²⁶

Taking into account the given development of cultural production and consumption and its far-reaching consequences, specialists in marketing communication need to carefully revise and adjust their existing strategies in order to successfully communicate with desired audience segments. What is especially important is that, according to Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, the addressed cultural shift (from "snobishness" to "omnivorousness") results not only from common changes in fashion, but rather from significant alterations in social power relationships.²⁷ The notions of cultural "omnivorousness" may seem to be quite appealing but, in fact, they are based on empirical generalisations and so far have been unable to explain the true reasons behind these cultural shifts.²⁸ Even though it may seem that Pierre Bourdieu's thoughts related to social status of individuals as well as societal groups, i.e. the notions of economic and cultural capital are no longer up-to-date, there are interested authors who see the issue from a different perspective, referring back to Bourdieu's work in new contexts and considerations (in Slovakia this topic was recently discussed by Ján Višňovský in relation to contemporary journalistic production).²⁹ For instance, Philippe Coulangeon claims that purposeful employment of embodied cultural resources during consumption of 'lower' cultural forms (such as mainstream television, remark by J. R.) actually leads to empowerment of elite's cultural dominance: "Clearly there is no surer way for upper-status class members to affirm their symbolic domination than borrowing forms of expression from outside the perimeter of highbrow art..." According to the author, instead of manifesting true "omnivorousness", elites rather showcase their ability to "culturally empower" the popular culture in order to further distinguish themselves from societal members with lower class status.³⁰ On the other hand, it would be quite unreasonable to think that best educated and culturally superior audience members do not seek mainstream media products for purposes of entertainment and emotional pleasure. Moreover, critically-acclaimed quality television dramas are sometimes (although quite rarely) able to thoroughly achieve 'quality status' through appealing to a wide spectrum of television audiences and cultural critique as well (e.g. worldwide phenomenon *Game of Thrones* produced by HBO).

The outlined factors of cultural change related to the blurred boundaries between once irreconcilable and sharply defined 'cultural levels' are also associated with technological development. We may even argue that television and video displays are getting larger (flat screens or intelligent Internet-connected televisions with ultra-high definition) and smaller (tablets, intelligent mobile phones, devices providing virtual reality experience, etc.) at the same time. Ján Višňovský remarks that rapid technological advances related to television (UHD, a wide variety of available domestic and foreign television channels, global television networks, digital video services available via the Internet) have brought new circumstances that intensify the competitive struggle to attract television audiences.³¹ Similarly, Jo Pierson and Joke Bauwens argue that some television stations

(traditional channels and digital services alike), while trying to succeed in this highly challenging media business environment, "hold a so-called highbrow programming culture and broadcast TV series, comedies and documentaries that show a more unconventional, alternative, serious, sophisticated, intellectual and aesthetized style of narrative and production. Other endorse a more popular, mainstream philosophy of programming and fill the programming hours with genres such as comedy, action and police series and reality TV".³² Discussing the normative approach to studying television production, Miloš Mistrík explains different 'faces' of television broadcasting through a metaphor of Dionysus and Apollo, where Dionysus represents the audience that is often attracted to programmes appealing to lower instincts, pleasures and delights (mainstream television programming) and Apollo offers objective, complex approaches to the world that tend to attract considerably less viewers (quality television).³³ However, it is notable that many of the most popular Internet-delivered video services seem to foster the mentioned – and widely criticised – trend of "cultural omnivorousness" since they are able to offer a wide variety of audio-visual entertainment genres. Some of them (e.g. *Netflix*) even create their own original programming besides distributing other producers' property; they establish a whole new dimension of television branding that may – if done right – appeal to a much wider spectrum of potential customers and thus offer 'something for everyone'.

Media culture of the 21st century disseminates its artefacts, meanings and commercial activities across new layers of society – many media and cultural theorists define these tendencies as "hypermodern". This term is prominently discussed by Gilles Lipovetsky and Sebastien Charles – the authors claim that in "hypermodernity" communication processes are speeding up significantly, along with consequences of major social and cultural changes which are manifesting themselves rapidly as well. Social relationships are still subject to narcissist individualism, but in different and even more substantial ways. Narcissist personalities of today's people remain immature, bound to "hyper-narcissism" and "hyper-consumerism"; moreover, "hyper-consumerism" now involves all aspects of social life, exploiting the principles of human spirituality and emotional pleasures. "Hypermodernity" is trying to establish a new culture of individual well-being.³⁴ Zuzana Slušná states that in the hypermodern society time goes by much quicker than ever before. "Acceleration of time" is associated with a number of technological innovations as well as with changes of social and cultural surroundings which influence every individual and the ordinary reality. Our lack of free time, the author suggests, paradoxically results from a never-ending chase after pleasures and experiences via free time activities we indulge in. It is very common to "not have enough time", but we still find it unacceptable to miss pleasures of the simulated world offered through serial narratives beyond the reality. Contemporary ways of living are very similar to episodes of our favourite television shows.³⁵ Adopting this point of view, we may even say that our life has (in certain ways) become as episodic as are all imaginary lives of fictional television characters. Moreover, the given lack of time leads to time management issues, impatience and it also heavily influences the ways certain audience segments perceive 'traditional' advertising and branding. Constant stimulation of hyper-consumerism has become a key part of practically all marketing strategies. *Netflix* and various other digital television services tend to release whole seasons of popular episodic television entertainment and thus partly 'sacrifice' the dramatic potential of thrilling 'cliff-hangers' in case of all released episodes – except the last one to date. Kelly West explains this tendency (often called "binge-watching" or "marathon-watching") as a consumer practice that is not a thing of the future, but rather a thing of the present day's mainstream culture. According to results of surveys conducted by *Netflix* in 2014, some subscribers might define "binge-watching" as a weekend-long marathon of non-stop TV watching. However, the survey indicates that the majority of people define it as "watching between 2-6 episodes of the same TV show in one sitting" (73% of people surveyed say that is what qualifies as "binge-watching"). Furthermore, 61% of the surveyed respondents said they "binge-watch" regularly.³⁶

24 For more information, see: MacDONALD, D.: *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*. New York: The New York Review of Books, 2011.

25 See also: ECO, U.: *Skeptické a těšitelé*. Praha: Argo, 2006.

26 FRIEDMAN, S.: Cultural Omnivores or Culturally Homeless? Exploring the Shifting Cultural Identities of the Upwardly Mobile. In *Poetics*, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 5, p. 468.

27 PETERSON, R. A., KERN, R. M.: Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore. In *American Sociological Review*, 1996, Vol. 61, No. 5, p. 904-906.

28 For more information, see: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: *Mediálna zábava v 21. storočí: Sociálno-kultúrne aspekty a trendy*. Trnava: FMK UCM in Trnava, 2016, p. 62.

29 VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: *Aktuálne otázky teórie a praxe žurnalistiky v ére internetu*. Trnava: FMK UCM in Trnava, 2015, p. 91.

30 COULANGEON, P.: Social Stratification of Musical Tastes: Questioning the Cultural Legitimacy Model. In *Revue Française De Sociologie: An Annual English Selection*, 2005, Vol. 46, No. 5 (Supplement), p. 126-127.

31 VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J.: *Televízia v Spojených štátoch amerických: História, fakty, súvislosti*. Trnava: FMK UCM in Trnava, 2014, p. 95.

32 PIERSON, J., BAUWENS, J.: *Digital Broadcasting: An Introduction to New Media*. New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 81.

33 MISTRÍK, M.: Discipline and Punish? In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 8.

34 LIPOVETSKY, G., CHARLES, S.: *Hypermoderní doba: Od požitku k úzkosti*. Praha: Prostor, 2013, p. 29-34.

35 SLUŠNÁ, Z.: Nové funkcie kreatívnych a voľnočasových aktivít. In GAŽOVÁ, V. (ed.): *Acta Culturologica 23: Metamorfózy priemyslu kultúry*. Bratislava: Comenius University, 2014, p. 70.

36 WEST, K.: *Unsurprising: Netflix Survey Indicates People Like to Binge-Watch TV*. [online]. [2016-10-05]. Available at: <<http://www.cinemablend.com/television/Unsurprising-Netflix-Survey-Indicates-People-Like-Binge-Watch-TV-61045.html>>.

The subscribers are therefore able to excessively ‘devour’ whole seasons of their favourite television ‘stories to continue’ in the range of several hours. This also means that such consumption-centred stimuli force the viewers to express the same motivation that may – in case of different audience segments – lead to obtaining all released episodes from illegal sources just to avoid having to wait for them. It seems that many producers and distribution services aiming to appeal to young audiences are well aware that these recipients are not patient enough to wait for a couple of hours, let alone for a week or more. Many subscribers of Internet-delivered video services – while waiting for release of another season of their favourite television series or serial – ‘swallow’ thematically or visually similar products just to avoid the possibility of being bored. All media users are – at least to some extent – familiar with specific conventions, genre features and tropes that are related to television dramas and feature films. It would be unreasonable to expect something truly new, fundamentally different. The market is over-saturated so the audiences have enough entertainment options to choose from. Moreover, much shorter production spans give mainstream television series and serials an undeniable advantage over cinema blockbusters – full-length feature films require much higher investments and if a project of this kind is exceptionally ambitious it may take up to 6 years or even more to transform the initial idea into the final product.

Our reflections reveal that the new modes of watching television have brought much more than just additional impulses to reconsider ‘traditional’ (and now practically non-existent) boundaries between elite and popular, analogue and digital, real and virtual. Entertainment experiences that spread across a variety of different media platforms, everyday activities and narratives, are hard to determine clearly. The current ‘terminological chaos’ related to media studies manifests itself strongly here; when addressing the issues of television in the post-broadcasting era and thus acknowledging the importance of online distribution platforms, interested authors often work with the term “multimedia entertainment” and in some cases use it interchangeably with different expressions such as “transmedia storytelling” or “crossmedia distribution”. However, regardless of which of the mentioned terms are preferred by specific authors, this new generation of episodic television entertainment is here not only to offer a wider variety of thrilling experiences, but also new opportunities for media producers and advertisers.

Henry Jenkins, one of the most influential media theorists dealing with “transmedia storytelling”, provides a compelling explanation of such entertainment experiences: “So let’s be clear: there are strong economic motives behind transmedia storytelling. Media convergence makes the flow of content across multiple media platforms inevitable. (...) Everything about the structure of the modern entertainment industry was designed with this single idea in mind – the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises.” The author also stresses out that there is a strong interest in integrating entertainment and marketing, to create strong emotional attachments and use them to make additional sales.³⁷ Internet-delivered television entertainment relies on more active attitude of media audiences – the most desired result of communication between producers, advertisers and consumers is to create so-called “institutionalised fandom” or at least cult following related to a specific television series or serial. As Henry Jenkins remarks, the fans, in turn, may translate their interests in the franchise into Wikipedia entries, fan fiction, videos, fan-made films, cosplay events and some of them often take part in a range of other participatory practices that extend the story world in new directions; this new mode of storytelling involves both commercial and grassroots ‘expansions’.³⁸ He also mentions that “transmedia entertainment” simply pushes the search for complexity to the next level, spreading the information across multiple media platforms: “The more people get absorbed into putting together these scattered bits of information, the more invested they are in the brand/fan narrative. In a film franchise, what fuels this interest may be a story – or more precisely, a fictional world rich enough to support a range of possible stories.”³⁹ In order to successfully work with these production and promotion strategies, it is necessary to understand the target audience, perform careful strategic planning and create stories that are able to emotionally affect their consumers.

37 JENKINS, H.: *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006, p. 104.

38 JENKINS, H.: *Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment – A Syllabus*. Released on 11th August 2009. [online]. [2016-10-05]. Available at: <http://henryjenkins.org/2009/08/transmedia_storytelling_and_cn.html>.

39 JENKINS, H.: *How Transmedia Storytelling Begat Transmedia Planning... (Part One)*. Released on 11th December 2006. [online]. [2016-10-05]. Available at: <http://henryjenkins.org/2006/12/how_transmedia_storytelling_be.html>.

It is obvious, however, that if specific members of the media audiences decide to dedicate their free time, emotional investment and (often other than financial) resources to actively expand stories told by television drama series or serials (e.g. via own creative production), the process of active viewership is not only commercially convenient from the viewpoint of the producers, but also empowering in terms of the audiences and their role in the processes of media production. As Michaela Malíčková remarks, contemporary television drama series or serial is a representative genre of popular culture: it serves as a proof of the existence of pop-cultural memory, claiming that it is absolutely essential to understand this pop-cultural memory and thus be able to move within its communication space.⁴⁰ Discussing the issue, Michaela Malíčková clearly refers to intertextuality of today’s serial narratives and places emphasis on its crucial importance.

Jonathan Gray accurately follows a similar line of thought to point out that films and television series or serials are, in fact, only “a small part of the massive, extended presence of filmic and televisual texts across our lived environments”. Given their extended presence, no film or televisual text (and its cultural impact, value and meaning) can be adequately analysed without taking into account the film or programme’s many proliferations that – although often only slightly – change its overall meaning. For example, as the author argues, trailers and reports from the set may construct early frames through which would-be viewers might think of the text’s genre, tone and themes. Discussion sites and social networks might then reinforce such frames or otherwise challenge them, while digital games, comics and other narrative extensions render the story world a more immersive environment.⁴¹ We would like to add that these facts outline the essential parts of the process of building entertainment brands. As we mention in the next chapter, *Marvel’s* films and television serials are anticipated eagerly; future viewers discuss them online and offline long before their scheduled release and spend hours of their free time (that free time they claim to completely lack) watching, discussing and looking for promo-related content that was produced for the sole purpose of creating a ‘pre-sold’ audience.⁴² To put it simply, many viewers of episodic television dramas might spend long hours with promotional materials before experiencing the story itself.

When considering the not-so-surprising success of *Marvel* in the sphere of television-related brands, we have to bear in mind that the company’s strategy relies on a vast amount of financial resources, global business ties and personal as well as production backgrounds of *The Walt Disney Company*, the most profitable show business enterprise in the world. Moreover, as Liam Burke remarks, few narrative sources can actually “match the scope for transmedia storytelling inherent in the ready-made worlds of comic book mythology”. *Marvel Entertainment* is one of the world’s most prominent character-based entertainment companies, built on a library of over 5,000 characters featured in a variety of media over seventy years. According to Burke, it is easy to see why a conglomerate such as *The Walt Disney Company* decided to acquire not just a part of the world, but the whole ‘*Marvel* universe’.⁴³ The recent years have shown that audio-visual stories featuring superheroes, however one-dimensional and purely entertaining they often are, seem to be equally compelling on large screens in multiplex cinemas and on screens of devices providing home and portable entertainment.

Taking into account the above-mentioned theoretical outlines, our subsequent analysis of *Marvel’s* television production and the company’s cooperation with *Netflix* firstly includes a short overview of *Marvel Entertainment’s* recent financial success related to global cinema. Secondly, we are interested in a detailed explanation of specific aspects of branding which can be identified in the case of *Marvel-Netflix* creative and promotional collaboration – we mention branding activities such as promos, logos and their use, brand personalities and involved celebrities, modes of audience address (communication channels, etc.) and opening sequences of the analysed serials. Thirdly, the following chapters provide a thematic and cultural determination of *Marvel’s* digitally-distributed television serials created for *Netflix*. We analyse *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s*

40 MALÍČKOVÁ, M.: Intertextuálne čítanie seriálových narácií. In URBAN, P. (ed.): *Súmrak médií: Problematika narácie v médiách*. Žilina: University of Žilina, 2013, p. 170.

41 GRAY, J.: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York, London: University of New York Press, 2010, p. 2.

42 For more information, see: RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: Vývojové trendy americkej mainstreamovej filmovej produkcie. In *Communication Today*, 2014, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 16-24.

43 BURKE, L.: *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre*. Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2015, p. 66.

Jessica Jones and *Marvel's Luke Cage* in terms of their intertextuality (in relation to movies and other entertainment products) and potential for transmedia storytelling; the analysis also aims to determine key themes and topics presented by the discussed television serials through comparing their cultural backgrounds and life environments they reflect. Our next goal is to explain range and meaning of moral conflicts and spiritual motives involved in the analysed serials; specific representations of the contemporary cultural framework and social problems are also of our concern here.

Superheroes and Small(er) Screens

Television drama series and serials are amongst the most prominent (and easily identifiable) forms of media production that are able to use contemporary mythological figures and (super)heroic stories in order to keep their audiences engaged, and thus to fulfil own commercial objectives. Although it is not simple to determine why these types of narratives influence the current trends in media culture so much, we assume the hardly bearable pressure of the contemporary post-capitalist rationalism would be probably too much to endure without investing a part of one's free time in escapist, relaxing stories provided by media producers. Together with the audiences' immense interest, the enormous production background of *The Walt Disney* conglomerate allowed one of its wholly owned subsidiaries, *Marvel Entertainment, LLC* to become one the world's most popular and best known entertainment brands. *Disney* acquired *Marvel Entertainment* in 2009 for 4.24 billion dollars.⁴⁴ Less than a year after that *Marvel Television*, a division of *Marvel Entertainment* in *The Walt Disney Company* was founded. *Marvel's* television production is therefore closely intertwined with the brand's greatest financial successes in terms of film blockbuster production.

The Walt Disney Company's recent acquisitions and long-term investments indicate that the conglomerate successfully reacts to preferences of the contemporary media audiences. These preferences are strongly bound to quick emergence of digital television services and virtual environments. It is therefore hardly surprising that the company follows the steps of other prominent producers of television drama serials or series by using the current global popularity of superheroes. Although superheroes first appeared on 'small screens' decades ago, the current trends in production of superhero television dramas indicate that production companies are willing to invest a lot of their personal, technological and financial resources into ambitious projects, some of which aspire to reach formal and content qualities that would be comparable with full-length feature films. Such television products appeared in years 2012 and 2013 when *Marvel's* long-time rivalry with *DC Entertainment*, its most serious direct competitor in the area of comic books production and movie production, started to manifest itself in the sphere of ambitious (i.e. costly and episodic) television production as well. This competitive struggle is (and always has been) very extensive, nourished and further disseminated by emotional manifestations of fan culture. Superman and Batman, the most popular superheroes created by *DC Comics*, have appeared in many well-known animated series and also in live-action television drama. Teenage cult *Smallville* (2001 – 2010) is probably the most globally successful television serial based on adaptation of stories by *DC Comics*; another television project *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993 – 1997) was once highly popular in Slovakia and other European countries. *DC Entertainment* now produces a rather wide collection of television serials involving superheroes – *Arrow* (since 2012), *The Flash* (since 2014), *Supergirl* (since 2015) or *Legends of Tomorrow* (since 2016). All mentioned titles are co-produced by *Berlanti Productions* and *Warner Bros. Television*, and primarily distributed by *The CW Television Network (The CW)*.

Marvel's television portfolio includes various (at best mildly successful) animated series and serials, but prior to 2013 lacked a live-action television product comparable with those produced by *DC Entertainment* (in terms of financial success and popularity). *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, the first television drama serial produced by *Marvel Television*, was publicly released in 2013 by *ABC (American Broadcasting Company)*,

a commercial broadcast television network owned by *The Walt Disney Company*. This product is therefore predominantly bound to the traditional ways of broadcasting. Its initial public reception was quite positive, as the serial directly followed storylines established by *Disney-Marvel's* most profitable motion picture so far, *Marvel's The Avengers*. The television show is centred on work of agent Phil Coulson, an important member of the S.H.I.E.L.D. (acronym for *Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division*, the occasionally laughed-at actual name of the organisation). Paul Tassi comments on the thematic determination and intertextual potential of the television drama *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* by saying: "For a year, this worked very, very well. That would be season one of *Agents of SHIELD*, which not only utilized a beloved character directly from the movies (Phil Coulson), but also let Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury guest star a few times. (...) And yet, after that, *SHIELD* grew increasingly isolated from the rest of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. It no longer built entire seasons around events in the movie *MCU*. Its guest stars were scaled way back, having access to only say, Maria Hill for two minutes, or the fifth most important character in *Thor*, Lady Sif, for an episode or two."⁴⁵ Even though the serial is currently going through its fourth season, the ratings are significantly lower in comparison with, for example, the first season – premiere of the tenth episode of the fourth season, which was aired on 17th January 2017, attracted just slightly above 2 million watchers.⁴⁶ It seems that the new storyline featuring *Marvel's* character of Ghost Rider (previously portrayed by Nicolas Cage in 2007's highly unpopular motion picture) does not appeal to television audiences, either.

Marvel's next attempt to directly build upon popularity of movie superheroes is based on wider exploration of the story of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011, directed by Joe Johnston). The television drama serial titled *Marvel's Agent Carter* follows the life and adventures of Margaret 'Peggy' Carter, a young female spy who once lived through unfulfilled love story with Captain America. The initial idea is quite unique, as it is rather rare to encounter a mainstream television product that offers a portrayal of a professionally capable woman making her mark in politics and sphere of military intelligence, not to mention the historical setting of the serial in 'retro' background of the post-war America in 1940s. However, the serial has been cancelled recently by its producer and broadcaster, *ABC Television Studios* – despite quite stable ratings of 2.3 – 2.5 million viewers.⁴⁷ Relatively low general interest in this product may be related to the notable absence of references to the beloved character of Steve Rogers alias Captain America; on the contrary, the narrative presents Peggy's new male colleagues and potential love interests, none of which is as interesting for the mainstream audience as the boyish charms and patriotic personality of Captain America.

Agent Carter's too casual audience reception only confirms problems which *Marvel Television* encounters in the field of 'traditional' broadcasting – the ever-important audience segments of people aged 18 – 49 are not interested as much as they should be, given the serials' continuity in relation to some of the most successful motion pictures of the last years and presence of their supporting characters such as Phil Coulson in *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* or Peggy Carter and Howard Stark in *Marvel's Agent Carter*. It seems that the obvious reluctance of major movie stars portraying, for example, Captain America, Thor or Iron Man to guest-star in *Marvel's* television products is a serious issue here, as it is almost impossible to further develop the stories' intertextual potential to the extent expected by the target audiences. That may be why producers associated with *Marvel Television* decided to step into a new line of work by establishing cooperation with *Netflix* in 2013 – *Netflix*, even back then a leading provider of digitally distributed video content, had just decided to create its own (original) programming and made all necessary preparations for the company's final (meaning global) expansion. Unlike in case of previously mentioned television serials, *Marvel Television* decided to focus on new stories introducing much less globally popular superheroes from *Marvel's* extensive portfolio of comic book material ready to be adapted – including *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage* and *Iron Fist*. The idea here was to use new distribution channels in order to repeatedly employ *Marvel's* enormously successful

44 WILKERSON, D. B.: *Disney to Acquire Marvel Entertainment for \$4B*. Released on 31st August 2009. [online]. [2016-11-19]. Available at: <<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/disney-to-acquire-marvel-entertainment-for-4b-2009-08-31>>.

45 TASSI, P.: *It's Time to Admit the Marvel Cinematic Universe Will Never Really Connect via TV*. Released on 19th October 2016. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2016/10/19/its-time-to-admit-the-marvel-cinematic-universe-will-never-really-connect-via-tv/#4d5043b27a0d>>.

46 *Marvel's Agents of SHIELD: Season Four Ratings*. Released on 19th January 2017. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/marvels-agents-shield-season-four-ratings/>>.

47 *Marvel's Agent Carter: Season Two Ratings*. Released on 2nd March 2016. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/marvels-agent-carter-season-two-ratings/>>.

business strategy – similarly as in case of *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the producers were interested in subsequent introduction of yet unseen superheroes; misfits that would eventually form an unlikely group of allies.

It is no coincidence that *The Walt Disney Company* established such a partnership with *Netflix* specifically. *Netflix*'s global communication potential is quite clear – the company is currently “the world’s leading Internet television network with over 93 million members in over 190 countries enjoying more than 125 million hours of TV shows and movies per day, including original series, documentaries and feature films”.⁴⁸ *Netflix* was founded in 1997 in order to provide offline movie rentals. Its first rental and sales website was launched a year later. In 1999, the company decided to change its business model radically – a subscription service offering unlimited DVD rentals for one low monthly price was introduced. However, the real breakthrough came in 2007 and 2008, when *Netflix* started to provide streaming services and partnered with consumer electronics companies to stream via gaming consoles, set-top-boxes and Blu-ray players. The company’s expansion began in 2011 (Latin America), continued in 2012 (Great Britain, Ireland and Nordic countries) and 2013 – 2015 (most of Western and Southern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan). Its worldwide availability was established a year later, in 2016.⁴⁹ In recent years, *Netflix* has become one of the most successful and globally popular brands related to providers of digitally distributed video content. The company strongly emphasises its reputation as a highly innovative enterprise through public statements such as: “Innovation involves a lot of failure. If we’re never failing, we aren’t trying for something out on the edge from where we are today. In this regard, failure is perfectly acceptable at Netflix. (...) The only real failure that’s unacceptable at Netflix is the failure to innovate.”⁵⁰ In terms of branding, *Netflix* took a huge step in June 2014, by unveiling a new logo. A new user interface of *Netflix*'s website was introduced as well. Alexis Kleinman reacts to the company’s re-branding by saying that this new logo uses a modern typeface with the drop shadowing removed. Kleinman sees the change as controversial; some users like the new minimalist design, whereas others felt more comfortable with the old interface.⁵¹

As *Netflix* continues to expand, it is evolving from a niche network to the ‘something for everyone network’. Neil Landau points out that its target group involves people of all ages, genders, socio-economic and education levels (in Slovakia, mostly people who speak English fluently, remark by J. R.). When compared to, for instance, *HBO*, it is necessary, according to Neil Landau, to mention three things:

- *HBO* has more overall subscribers all over the world and is able to compete against *Netflix* through its digital applications *HBO Go* and *HBO Now*,
- *HBO* is vastly more profitable,
- *Netflix*, unlike *HBO*, does not own most of the content it offers. However, thanks to *Netflix*'s aggressive marketing, key television dramas within its portfolio of exclusively distributed products such as critically-acclaimed episodic dramas *House of Cards* (produced by *Media Rights Capital*) and *Orange Is the New Black* (produced by *Lionsgate Television*) are known as ‘*Netflix* shows’ – even though these shows are, in fact, produced by other media companies.⁵²

Marvel’s Production on Netflix: Analysis

As we have mentioned above, the cooperation between *Marvel Television* and *Netflix* officially began in 2013. It is quite interesting to read a related statement by Ted Sarandos, *Netflix* Chief Content Officer: “*Marvel’s* movies, such as ‘*Iron Man*’ and ‘*Marvel’s The Avengers*’, are huge favorites on our service around the world. Like *Disney*, *Marvel* is a known and loved brand that travels. (...) With ‘*House of Cards*’ and our other

original series, we have pioneered new approaches to storytelling and to global distribution and we’re thrilled to be working with *Disney* and *Marvel* to take our brand of television to new levels with a creative project of this magnitude.”⁵³ It is very clear that *Netflix*'s head representatives are very well aware of the benefits resulting from cooperation with *The Walt Disney Company* and its subsidiaries. That is why *Netflix* was also willing to pay 300 million dollars in total to obtain the exclusive streaming rights to all *Disney*'s new releases, including the products created by the company’s daughter studios *Pixar*, *Lucasfilm* and *Marvel Entertainment*. The deal entered into force in September 2016.⁵⁴ This exclusive contract was also the first time any major Hollywood or television production enterprise decided to favour online distribution channels over cable networks or other types of ‘traditional’ broadcasters in the matter of distribution exclusivity. It also helps *Netflix* keep an undeniable competitive advantage over platforms such as *Hulu*, *Amazon Prime* and others.

The given circumstances of cooperation between *Marvel Television* and *Netflix* directly imply that all joint ventures of these companies are supported by immense financial resources and production background (*The Walt Disney Company* and its subsidiaries, mostly *ABC Television Studios*). One of the most important aspects that distinguish *Marvel*'s original content created for *Netflix* from blockbuster movie production is the fact that producers aim to appeal to adult audiences instead of teenagers. That is why they are not obliged, in contrast to film producers dealing with superhero stories which are seldom rated higher than PG-13 (Parents Strongly Cautioned), to create products within the rating of TV-14 or less. American television-related content rating system is called *TV Parental Guidelines* and all existing *Marvel*'s television products on *Netflix* are rated as TV-MA (the highest possible rating of television content, equivalent of *Motion Picture Association of America*'s film rating R). In terms of branding, *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s Jessica Jones* and *Marvel’s Luke Cage* are all branded as *Marvel*'s products, but also as ‘*Netflix* original series’. All audio-visual promo materials (mostly trailers) are predominantly uploaded on communication channels of *Netflix* (e.g. trailers available on *YouTube*). As we have mentioned in the previous chapters, logos are amongst the most important elements of branding. Both *Marvel*'s and *Netflix*'s logos are present on dynamic as well as static promotional materials (trailers, behind-the-scenes featurettes, downloadable official wallpapers). All *YouTube* trailers related to the given television serials first display the logo of *Netflix* (always approximately 20-25 seconds after the trailer begins) and right after that *Marvel*'s short opening sequence appears – the ‘trademark’ sequence of quick shots portrays the process of turning pages in comic books, and it is quickly followed by the static capitalised and white-framed title ‘MARVEL’ in white letters on bright red background. Another part of this ‘joint brand’ is the short statement “A *Netflix* Original Series” that in some way appears in all audio-visual promo materials related to *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s Jessica Jones* and *Marvel’s Luke Cage*.

The first and so far most commercially successful result of *Disney-Marvel*'s episodic television production distributed by *Netflix* is titled *Marvel’s Daredevil*. There are two seasons (the first one released in April 2015, the second in March 2016), third is currently in development. Alisha Grauso addresses this topic in more detail – *Netflix* does not disclose its viewing figures, but San Diego-based *Luth Research* conducted an independent study two years ago and determined an estimated 10.7% of *Netflix*'s subscribers streamed *Daredevil*, far more than the platform’s other popular contents such as *House of Cards* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.⁵⁵ The television serial is actually re-take of a story of Matthew Murdock, a young visually impaired lawyer living in Hell’s Kitchen, New York. The previous portrayal of the same superhero dates back to 2003 – the full-length feature film starring Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner received bad reviews and it was generally perceived as dull and only sporadically interesting.⁵⁶ Matt Murdock works with his college friend, Franklin

48 NETFLIX: *About Netflix*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix>>.

49 NETFLIX: *About Netflix*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://media.netflix.com/en/about-netflix>>.

50 NETFLIX: *How We Determine Product Success*. Released on 19th January 2011. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://techblog.netflix.com/2011/01/how-we-determine-product-success.html>>.

51 KLEINMAN, A.: *Netflix Has a New Logo and a New Look*. Released on 13th June 2014. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/13/new-netflix-logo_n_5491965.html>.

52 LANDAU, N.: *TV Outside the Box: Trailblazing in the Digital Television Revolution*. New York, Abingdon (UK): Focal Press, 2016, p. 132.

53 NETFLIX: *Disney’s Marvel and Netflix Join Forces to Develop Historic Four Series Epic Plus a Miniseries Event Based on Renowned Marvel Characters*. Released on 7th November 2013. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://media.netflix.com/en/press-releases/disneys-marvel-and-netflix-join-forces-to-develop-historic-four-series-epic-plus-a-miniseries-event-based-on-renowned-marvel-characters-migration-1>>.

54 GRAUSO, A.: *Netflix to Begin Exclusive Streaming of Disney, Marvel, Star Wars and Pixar in September*. Released on 24th May 2016. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alishagrauso/2016/05/24/netflix-to-begin-exclusive-streaming-of-disney-marvel-star-wars-and-pixar-in-september/#5848b681322b>>.

55 GRAUSO, A.: *Netflix to Begin Exclusive Streaming of Disney, Marvel, Star Wars and Pixar in September*. Released on 24th May 2016. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alishagrauso/2016/05/24/netflix-to-begin-exclusive-streaming-of-disney-marvel-star-wars-and-pixar-in-september/#5848b681322b>>.

56 *Daredevil (2003)*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/daredevil>>.

'Foggy' Nelson, also a lawyer. The two of them run an attorney-at-law office named *Nelson and Murdock*. As the main hero encounters injustice on daily basis and finds it hard to rely on American legal system, he uses his extraordinary abilities (all his senses are highly developed in order to replace the missing eye-sight) to fight criminals on his own, as a masked vigilante. The first season refers to the central idea of "Justice being blind" and features Matt's initial attempts to fight crime in the streets of Hell's Kitchen; his most dangerous enemy Wilson Fisk's employees intimidate or even harm the residents of Hell's Kitchen so Fisk is able to become a prominent 're-builder' of the neighbourhood. The second season's main idea "No good goes unpunished" unfolds around Daredevil's conflict with a veteran member of US Marine Corps Frank Castle (also known as Punisher), who seeks to wipe out all gangs of Hell's Kitchen and thus revenge his murdered family. Acting as 'Daredevil' or 'a devil of Hell's Kitchen' – both nicknames are, in fact, made up by local media for commercial and sensational purposes –, Matt often gets seriously wounded as he cannot see and uses only his four remaining human senses and extraordinary ability, which allows him to create a mental picture of his surroundings. He is in no way a 'traditional' invulnerable superhero.

The serial's styling and themes frequently emphasise the uniqueness of the area of Hell's Kitchen, its special cultural setting. Even though Matt Murdock (or rather his superhero alter-ego Daredevil) claims to defend his city, 'his city' is, in fact, a clearly determined neighbourhood in New York City. The records of the City of New York state that the name Hell's Kitchen "is taken either from a notorious 1860s gang of that name or from a nickname given to the area by local police in the 1870s". It is also known that impoverished groups of Irishmen, African-Americans, Scots and Germans moved to shacks and tenements in the area to work at the nearby factories, docks or slaughterhouses. Many formed gangs and fought to assert themselves in the growing neighbourhood, making for frequent violent clashes that earned the area its nickname.⁵⁷ Matt is a descendant of Irish immigrants – he used to live with his father, Jack Murdock, who earned money as a boxer taking part in match-fixing. As a child of Irish ancestry, Matt received strong Roman Catholic upbringing – his father's violent death left him orphaned not long after he had lost his sight due to roadside accident involving exposure to a radioactive substance. The hero therefore often questions morality of his life decisions and acts of violence through private conversations with Father Lanthom, a Catholic priest. The hero is perceived as attractive despite his serious physical disability – mostly because of his socially recognised occupation, but also due to his boyish appearance and respectful behaviour towards women. Matt's religious beliefs transform into his secret superhero identity too – he does act violently and seeks physical confrontations with his enemies (mostly gangsters, drug dealers or receivers of stolen goods), but he is also reluctant to kill unless it is absolutely necessary in order to stay alive.

The serial introduces various brand personalities. The actor portraying Matt Murdock and Daredevil, Englishman Charlie Cox, is relatively unknown, at least to mainstream television audiences; his previous work includes fantasy motion picture *Stardust* (2007, directed by Matthew Vaughn) as well as supporting roles in *The Theory of Everything* (2014, director James Marsh) and *HBO's* critically-acclaimed original drama *Boardwalk Empire* (2010 – 2014). In fact, the actor has become widely known for portraying Daredevil, so his face and posture – unlike in case of Ben Affleck before – is linked to *Marvel's Daredevil* strongly and specifically. It is notable that supporting cast includes American actress Deborah Ann Woll, also known as an activist raising public awareness of choroideremia, a rare genetic disease that ultimately results in blindness – her long-time life partner suffers from the same medical condition.⁵⁸ The serial also involves a supporting character of Claire Temple (played by known American actress Rosario Dawson) who provides a tighter intertextual connection with *Marvel's Jessica Jones* and *Marvel's Luke Cage*.

Marvel's Jessica Jones introduces a female superhero – or rather an attractive young woman who may be aware of her outstanding physical abilities, but hesitates or maybe even refuses to embrace the possibility of helping people, of becoming publicly known as 'enhanced'. Jessica lives a lonely personal life; her relation-

ships lack commitment and intimacy as she favours short-lived and strictly casual sexual encounters. At first, this fact seemingly positions the heroine in the stereotypical role of 'seductress'. However, she is a 'survivor', a woman who has gone through a great deal of emotional and sexual abuse and mental manipulation. In terms of intertextuality, the serial introduces Luke Cage, here as Jessica's seemingly random sexual partner and occasional ally. Luke is actually a secondary victim of 'Kilgrave', a dangerous sociopath with superhuman ability of mind control, who used to utterly control Jessica's behaviour and actions in order to hurt or even kill other people (in this particular case, Luke's life partner Reva). As we have mentioned above, all three serials are intertextually bound to the supporting character of Claire Temple, a helpful and courageous nurse working at emergency room of the local hospital.

Just like in case of previously discussed product, the story is situated in the area of Hell's Kitchen. This connection is also manifested in the serial's trailer – by appearance of statement "From the home of *Marvel's Daredevil*".⁵⁹ In sharp contrast with Matt Murdock, Jessica is not interested in becoming a vigilante guardian of the local people. She is neither religious, nor does she work for free; she is known as a morally ambiguous, unscrupulous private investigator that specialises in taking orders which involve obtaining photographic evidence of infidelity. These are later used as leverage in relation to divorce settlements. Jessica uses almost all money she earns to buy alcohol – she drinks at nights and spends the following mornings lying in bed and being sick. Her only close friend Trish, a successful radio speaker, often offers help, but mostly fails to understand her. The serial's key plotline is marked by Jessica's constant fear of Kilgrave's return, which does happen eventually. Of course, 'Kilgrave' is a self-fabricated nickname used by a sociopathic man with extreme narcissist traits. He is portrayed as a capricious and unpredictable villain. His ability to compel people to tell, do or think anything he wants makes him very dangerous and hard to fight against. Jessica is the only person who is now capable of resisting Kilgrave's mind compulsion and does not know about it.

Just like Charlie Cox in case of *Marvel's Daredevil*, Krysten Ritter, the leading actress of *Marvel's Jessica Jones*, is also quite unknown. Even though her filmography is rather extensive, it mostly includes episodic roles in television shows. The actress's more significant guest appearances are related to feature film *Big Eyes* (2014, directed by Tim Burton) and highly popular episodic television drama *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013). Ritter's unconventional beauty (long black hair combined with notably light complexion) is now strongly linked to portrayal of a female 'superhero' with strong narcissist traits and troubled past. Her attractiveness is highly suitable for the producers. As Zuzana Slušná reminds, although a lot has changed in relation to this matter, male gaze is still present in the means by which the female is visualised in the current mainstream culture and media producers know how to exploit this opportunity.⁶⁰ Another brand personality is represented by British actor David Tennant (Kilgrave). Even though the character he plays may seemingly refer to the repeatedly used and parodied cliché of a villain speaking with British accent, Tennant's unique acting (wide range of behavioural patterns he is able to impersonate) and expression point back to his most famous role of Tenth Doctor in cult British television show *Doctor Who* (aired since 1963 with a few discontinuances). His portrayal of Kilgrave is thus especially appealing to British television audiences.

The third analysed television serial titled *Marvel's Luke Cage* was released a couple of months ago, in September 2016. The story follows African-American bartender Luke Cage (real name Carl Lucas), here presented as a fugitive from prison living in Harlem, New York. Similarly as in case of Jessica Jones, Luke is no 'true' superhero and has no interest in public demonstration of his abilities – he is aware that doing so would probably lead to revealing his real identity. However, he eventually becomes 'a superhero for hire'. Luke's special powers (superhuman strength, unbreakable skin which makes him invulnerable to knife attacks or bullets) result from a sabotaged medical experiment. The circumstances of his subsequent escape from prison remain unclear; however, Luke often remembers his girlfriend Reva, a former prison psychologist that helped him escape. She is now dead because of Kilgrave, Jessica Jones's enemy. Angry after learning the truth about Reva's death and Jessica's active part in the murder, Luke decides to move to Harlem and starts to work for 'Pop', an

57 *Hell's Kitchen Park*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/hells-kitchen-park/history>>.

58 SPENCER, A.: *True Blood Star Deborah Ann Woll's Story of Her Boyfriend's Fight against Blindness*. Released on 13th June 2013. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://www.glamour.com/story/true-blood-s-deborah-ann-woll-s-boyfriend-s-fight-against-blindness>>.

59 *Marvel's Jessica Jones Official Trailer [HD] Netflix*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWHUjuJ8zxE>>.

60 SLUŠNÁ, Z.: Paranormal and Religious as Part of Pop-Cultural Consumerism. In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 2014, Vol. 10, Supplement 1, p. 106.

owner of a well-known barber shop and respected 'pillar' of Harlem community. Pop's violent death makes Luke intervene and look for his friend's murderers, even though doing so may compromise his fake name and reveal his true identity of an escaped convict. The story's main idea is included in most promotional materials – "Sometimes if you want justice, you have to get it yourself". It means that Luke has no choice but to step up and protect the residents of Harlem, because no one else cares.

Luke Cage's story involves many topics popular in 1970s. Specific events and presented issues associated with Harlem's culture stress out the importance of subcultural colourfulness and tolerance, along with empowerment of once-isolated and racially discriminated African-American population. The hero's investigation points towards an exclusive local music club owned by Cornell 'Cottonmouth' Stokes and his cousin, an ambitious local politician Mariah Dillard. The atmosphere and environment of the club aspire to 'revive' the former importance of Stokes's and Dillard's family in relation to Harlem's community (both of them would like to earn respect of the locals to get the same social status as 'Mama Mabel', their grandmother and previous head of the family clan). The club's music styling involves jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, soul and similar genres originating from African-American culture; however, it is widely known that the enterprise is financed through illegal business operations (e.g. drugs, arms trade that includes military-issue and strictly controlled devices), so the place also represents everything that harms and endangers Harlem's multicultural residents. It is especially interesting to see how Mariah Dillard communicates with the local media and easily undermines the authority of law enforcement representatives. The peculiar mentality of local people influences the course of actions quite seriously; for example, Misty Knight, a bright young detective born and raised in Harlem, is unable to acquire much needed information since people she has known for her whole life are just not willing to talk to her at all. The people simply refuse to acknowledge that Knight is thoroughly dedicated to protecting them.

The serial portrays Harlem as a truly special place, even in the context of New York's mainstream reputation of the most cosmopolitan city in the world. The idea of Luke's indestructibility (although the story also shows, and very clearly, that his seemingly unmatched abilities are limited in many aspects) and the ways he act often refer to so-called "Blaxploitation". It is quite obvious that the serial contains only certain elements of this phenomenon of American popular culture of 1960s and 1970s. According to Juraj Malíček, the aim of the original concept of "Blaxploitation" was to contribute to emancipation of African-American minority, i.e. to appeal to the cultural taste and mentality of African-American media audience by portrayals of explicit violence, incomprehensible slang and often also casual, spontaneous sex.⁶¹ Many of these elements are partly explored in Luke Cage's story too. Firstly, the narrative involves corrupt white policemen that are not part of Harlem's community and damage it through taking bribes from gangs, destroying the police's public image and credibility. Secondly, physical confrontations between Luke and gangsters working for his psychopathic half-brother, Willis 'Diamondback' Stryker, are extremely violent, as it is almost impossible to hurt the main hero. Thirdly, the element of casual sex is present too – Luke Cage often emphasises that he does not like coffee, so his occasional innuendos related to 'grabbing some coffee' clearly refer to offering sexual intercourse. Fourthly, there is Luke's unclear past full of betrayals (his time in prison, false conviction). However, it would be inadequate to claim that the serial focuses on deliberate exploitation of various elements of African-American culture – people of Harlem are portrayed in the spirit of New York's multiculturalism. For instance, Claire Temple or rather actress Rosario Dawson is of Puerto Rican and Cuban ancestry; various displays of Dominican community are offered too. Even though the serial suffers from inconsistent writing and contains many logical errors and narrative problems, it still manages to disseminate rare portrayals of New York's culture which are only seldom mentioned in other types of mainstream media products, at least in terms of globally accessible television production. The serial often creatively re-introduces some of the most famous interpreters of African-American music styles – the iconic portrait of rapper Notorious B.I.G. hanging on the wall inside Cornell Stokes's office is just one example of many.

The actor Mike Colter's face is often hidden inside a grey zip 'hoodie' with yellow lining, which Luke Cage wears most of the time. The hooded sweatshirt, in fact, underlines his appeal and posture of a superhero,

as it is always damaged by bullet holes and covers the hero's unaffected skin. The character of Luke Cage confirms that *Marvel Television* still successfully casts relatively unknown but skilled leading actors to support their newly formed television brand. It is also evident that this story aims to raise the brand's popularity among multicultural, especially African-American television audiences. Where *Marvel's Daredevil* succeeds in portraying a visually impaired young lawyer of Irish ancestry who has lost faith in legal system and justice and *Marvel's Jessica Jones* brings into spotlight a troubled and extremely individualistic, but highly skilled and bright woman, *Marvel's Luke Cage* offers a different type of superhero – a falsely accused former member of law enforcement with African-American roots who decides to take matters into his own hands.

We have mentioned that in-vision announcers and jingles are particularly important elements of television branding. All three analysed television serials have very creative opening titles that determine the specific serial's colour scheme, themes and overall styling. *Marvel's Daredevil* starts with opening titles stylised in red and black colour. The thick red colour is trickling down to form lines and silhouettes of various visual elements – a metaphoric portrayal of blindfolded Lady Justice (the visually impaired hero's conviction that justice is, at least sometimes, indeed blind and there are other ways to 'see', i.e. to rectify injustice), New York's easily recognisable buildings and bridges, a Roman Catholic church with a big Christian cross on its roof (indication of Daredevil's deep religiousness) and the masked figure of the hero himself. Opening sequence introducing *Marvel's Jessica Jones* is significantly different. The colour scheme includes grey, blue and purple elements, some scenes also use orange colouring. With a jazz piano music playing in the background, blurred silhouettes of various people are wandering across the dark streets of New York, performing everyday activities and often arguing, endangering someone else or protecting themselves from verbal or physical attacks (the serial's leitmotiv, abuse, maltreatment, is very visible here). There are also moments which refer to Jessica Jones's morally questionable profession of a private investigator (the final shot visualising in big detail the heroine's facial profile with her right eye wide open). Opening sequence related to *Marvel's Luke Cage* is based on warm colours – the scheme uses yellow and brown overtones and blends a markedly muscular silhouette of Luke Cage (mostly back and arms, one of the final shots portrays Luke's fist punching against a concrete wall) with images and symbols of Harlem. The buildings, street signs and other instantly recognisable places or objects are reflecting upon Luke's bare skin, underlining the hero's indestructibility.

Of course, *Marvel Television's* original television serials created for *Netflix* have some weaknesses related to branding – the most notable of them is the fact that the serials do not explore their own potential for transmedia storytelling thoroughly. Related transmedia products including the characters of Daredevil and Jessica Jones are two digital games accessible via intelligent mobile phones, tablets and other portable devices. The first game titled *Marvel: Contest of Champions* (Kabam, 2014) is aimed at action, the second one is known as *Marvel: Future Fight* (Netmarble Games, 2015) and contains role-playing elements. The notable lack of transmedia storytelling is clearly visible through comparison with, for example *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s* transmedia expansions include artbooks (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Season One Declassified 2014* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Season Two Declassified 2015*), behind-the-scenes features (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Double Agent* in 2015 and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Academy* in 2016), a web series (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Slingshot* consisting of six episodes, 2016) or a comic book (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: The Chase* from 2014).

In our case, the only notable transmedia products related to the first season of *Marvel's Daredevil* are artbook (*Daredevil: Defender of Hell's Kitchen: Season One*, 2015) and promotional website titled *Daredevil: Red Thread*. The title refers to an investigation board similar to the one the serial's supporting character, an investigative journalist Ben Urich, conducted to connect the different 'players' in Hell's Kitchen. On the board various names of key figures from the story are placed in an orderly formation. The investigation board is interactive and involves play cards and photographs of key characters. Each photograph or card offers a small collection of pictures, gifs and video clips of the person of interest. Viewing all items on the investigation board allows the user to play promotional videos related to the serial.⁶² Another notable transmedia product related to

61 MALÍČEK, J.: *Vademecum popkultúry*. Nitra: Constantine The Philosopher University, 2006, p. 86.

62 *Daredevil: Red Thread*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com/wiki/Daredevil:_Red_Thread>.

Marvel's Daredevil is based on the principles of ambient marketing – promotional bench that was placed near the venue of *New York Comic Con 2015*. Other parts of the campaign were fake posters with tear-off stripes promoting the law firm *Nelson and Murdock* and distribution of the company's business cards. *Marvel's Jessica Jones* has also various transmedia expansions – comic book titled *Jessica Jones* and artbook *Marvel's A.K.A. Jessica Jones: Season One*, both published in 2015. However, there are no significant transmedia products associated with *Marvel's Luke Cage*.

Even though transmedia storytelling is very much different from merchandising, we would like to mention this matter as well. *Marvel's* merchandise plan was quick to embrace this new opportunity. Paul Gitter, *Disney Consumer Products'* senior Vice President of *Marvel Licensing*, stated that the first show, *Marvel's Daredevil*, would have a smaller line of products that cater to a more adult audience, given the show's edgier tone: "The merchandise that's being developed around the Netflix content is somewhat limited in scope. (...) We'll be focusing less on products that are targeted at the very young consumer."⁶³

Marvel Television's cooperation with *Netflix* is far from over. Even though the existing products have been widely criticised for the lack of tighter intertextual connection,⁶⁴ the future plans suggest that this may change quickly. *Marvel's Iron Fist*, another serial to indirectly build upon the existing ones, is to be released in March 2017. The story seeks to expand the current target audiences by introducing themes such as fascination with Eastern spirituality (mostly Buddhism), following the wave of action movies aimed at young adults, which involve currently popular sports and entertainment forms such as mixed martial arts (e.g. *Never Back Down*, 2008, directed by Jeff Wadlow). Moreover, *Marvel's The Defenders*, a cross-over miniseries providing the final intertextual connection between serials by *Marvel Television* and *Netflix*, is set to be released in summer 2017. The team of *Defenders* consisting of *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage* and *Iron Fist* thus precisely copies the unprecedented success of *Marvel's* motion pictures – introduction of the specific superheroes followed by a carefully planned team event that brings them together to fight side by side and culminate audiences of all individual products into one large target group (*Marvel's* 'phases' which involve production plans scheduled for many years to come). Repeated implementation of this 'plan' in relation to different media platforms (comic books, motion pictures, television serials) makes *Marvel* 'universe' one of the most remarkable phenomena of contemporary popular culture. Moreover, similar or even identical production schemes have been re-applied successfully by different products in *Disney's* portfolio (*Star Wars* franchise), other *Marvel*-related narratives (*X-Men*) and competition too (*DC Entertainment* and their most popular characters of Batman and Superman, along with Wonder Woman and other superheroes affiliated with Justice League of America). All mentioned variations of '*Marvel* plan' have been highly profitable so it is reasonable to expect that this procedure will be used again many times.

Marvel and *Netflix* take all necessary production steps to re-introduce *Marvel's Punisher*, a spin-off based on *Marvel's Daredevil* focused on the character of Frank Castle, one of *Daredevil's* toughest opponents. There are various reasons leading to this recent development – mostly the fact that the *Netflix* audiences regard *Punisher's* portrayal by actor Jon Bernthal as exceptionally appealing. The final product is scheduled to be released later in 2017 and it is interesting to note that after *Daredevil*, *Punisher* is to become the second *Marvel's* superhero which was previously unsuccessful on the 'silver screens' (in 2004). It seems that some superhero narratives might unveil their true potential not in cinemas, but rather in the context of new forms of episodic television production.

The analyses have shown that television serials by *Marvel* and *Netflix* are able to attract the attention of 'pre-sold' *Marvel* audiences seeking to fill the gaps between blockbuster cinema events involving *Marvel's* superheroes. Thanks to *Netflix's* global availability, the products are accessible to interested media audiences all over the world. Strength of this production line is bound to the fact that it is meant for adult audiences and the producers do not have to adjust the serials' topics, plotlines and key scenes to fit into ratings suitable for

teenagers or even children, as it is common in case of blockbuster movies. Jeph Loeb, the Head of *Marvel Television*, explains: "There's a level of savagery that's not only unusual for *Marvel*, but for most television series, even those on cable. It sets a very specific tone, and one that lends itself to the story they were seeking to tell."⁶⁵ It is understandable that the television serials by *Marvel* and *Netflix* share or even recycle some of their subplots and conflicts; however, the current global popularity of superheroes is actually based around repeated spectacular presentation of similar conflicts or even the same genres, ideas and themes, and still manages to maintain or even increase its enormous profitability. We may say that production of superhero stories is strongly standardised in general.

Presumed weaknesses of television serials by *Marvel* and *Netflix* are associated with so far insufficient exploration of transmedia storytelling. The stories lack neither 'transmedia potential', nor possibilities of establishing closer intertextual connection with, let us say, *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. It seems, however, that the most popular 'faces of *Marvel*' (Robert Downey Jr, Chris Evans or Chris Hemsworth) are not willing to appear in *Marvel's* television serials. The serials indirectly refer to prominent movie superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America or Thor quite frequently ("the guy in a tin suit", "the guy with the shield" or "the guy with the hammer"), but the characters never actually see or otherwise encounter them. It is hard to predict if this will change in the future. Furthermore, some viewers may perceive the presented places and environments – Hell's Kitchen and Harlem, two parts of New York – as too stereotypical. Nevertheless, it seems that filming the serials directly in New York receives a lot of public praise, at least in the United States. Empire State Development President, CEO & Commissioner Howard Zensky: "There is no better destination for film and television production than New York and we're big fans of *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* for bringing more than 3k jobs to the Empire State. (...) From cameramen, to production assistants and set designers to local businesses hired, these productions are creating thousands of new jobs and generating millions of dollars in spending state wide."⁶⁶ Such positive-minded PR activities definitely provide the television serials in question with highly desirable added value.

Conclusion

Cinema and television may have decreased the prominent pop-cultural influence and commercial potential of comic books, but narratives, stories and other source materials originating from the comic books significantly shape the face and core of the contemporary mainstream movie production as well as the segment of television industry aimed at episodic drama. Numerous stories provided by comic books have become highly popular thematic and narrative 'templates'; they now function as frameworks, source materials suitable for audio-visual adaptation. It seems that this kind of mainstream media production nowadays does not have to end up in multiplexes. The target audiences may as well experience and enjoy it via small or rather smaller screens – displays of personal computers or laptops, intelligent (smart) television screens, mobile phones or tablets.

Lenka Chrenková and Dagmar Valentovičová observe that the current level of competitiveness within specific segments of entertainment industries forces the producers to innovate and experiment. According to the authors, the constant pressure related to creation of new commercial models often results in hybrid experiments which cannot be successful in the long term and will never become a fully functioning, sustainable commercial platform. The whole process depends on audience preferences and there is no media production company whatsoever, which would be able to precisely estimate the ever-changing tastes and expectations of

63 GRASER, M.: *Marvel's Merchandise Plan for Avengers: Age of Ultron: Make the Big Bigger*. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://variety.com/2015/film/news/marvels-merchandise-plan-for-avengers-age-of-ultron-make-the-big-bigger-1201449832/>>.

64 See, for example: TASSI, P.: *It's Time to Admit the Marvel Cinematic Universe Will Never Really Connect via TV*. Released on 19th October 2016. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2016/10/19/its-time-to-admit-the-marvel-cinematic-universe-will-never-really-connect-via-tv/#4d5043b27a0d>>.

65 CORNET, R.: *Daredevil: How the Netflix Series Will Change the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. Released on 8th April 2015. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://www.ign.com/articles/2015/04/09/daredevil-how-the-netflix-series-will-change-the-marvel-cinematic-universe>>.

66 MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA: *Marvel's Daredevil and Marvel's Jessica Jones Providing More than 3,000 Jobs to New Yorkers*. Released on 19th November 2015. [online]. [2017-01-16]. Available at: <<http://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Marvel%E2%80%99s-Daredevil-and-Marvel%E2%80%99s-Jessica-Jones-Providing-More-than-3000-Jobs-to-New-Yorkers.pdf>>.

media audiences.⁶⁷ Episodic television production is facing many new challenges as well – the producers have to carefully determine what to produce, who their target audiences are, how to distribute the content to reach them, how to remain successful, what to do next in order to improve their own market position. Henry Jenkins summarises the issue quite thoroughly: “*I think in an age where consumers increasingly control the media they consume, and we can no longer simply interrupt, entertain for 25 seconds and then sell them something, then we have to offer them more than a core idea well told. It’s not about individuals responding to the whole world – it’s about whether a community will adopt it. And groups naturally spring up around stories that have rich worlds to explore, discuss and share.*”⁶⁸

New ways of distributing television content have disrupted the traditional modes of seriality quite significantly. Predetermined programme schedules and other tools of broadcast programming have been replaced by the digital distribution platforms, at least in case of many (mostly younger and highly media literate) consumers. The services’ instant availability, personalisation of user interfaces and possibility of ‘marathon-watching’ whole seasons of episodic television drama are indeed very attractive. Catherine Johnson observes that today’s production and propagation strategies of the media industry increasingly encourage and ‘reward’ loyal viewers, looking for new ways of engaging these consumers in participative activities.⁶⁹ It means that the current trends in watching television content have to be thoroughly and critically analysed; the interested media scholars and professionals need to work hard in order to develop a consistent terminology bound to the issue, as well as a more universal typology of available platforms providing television content.

We have decided to define *Marvel Television*’s products created for *Netflix* as ‘serials’, mostly because of their narrative openness and the fact that none of the serials in question require the story to be resolved within a single episode (as it is common in case of, for example, most crime television shows). *Marvel’s Daredevil*, *Marvel’s Jessica Jones* and *Marvel’s Luke Cage* are all divided into seasons consisting of 13 episodes. Each episode is approximately 45 – 55 minutes long, being in sharp contrast with episodic situation comedies where a single episode entertains the viewers in the modest time range of 20 minutes or even less.

When paying attention to so-called “brandcasting”, we have to acknowledge a few facts – *Marvel*’s serials created for *Netflix* merge full-fledged stories and promotional content quite frequently. For example, was the story of Luke Cage, the story suffering from its many narrative flaws and containing a notable amount of ‘filler’ episodes, meant to truly expand the emerging television universe by *Marvel*, or was it just a product aiming to fill the target audience’s supposedly non-existing free time, to promote a much more ambitious event – the miniseries *Marvel’s The Defenders*? It is therefore quite problematic to determine what is branded here and how. Firstly, **the producer** – *Marvel Television* in association with *ABC Television* – uses these dramatic television serials to expand its current target audiences, mostly towards older or rather more mature viewers (in comparison with the majority of consumers favouring ‘family-friendly’ blockbuster superhero movies rated PG-13). The most prominent commercial articles of the company’s production (motion pictures) are also promoted through inconspicuous intertextual references, stating clearly that *Marvel*’s television serials are situated in the same ‘universe’ as stories about Iron Man, Captain America or Hulk; however, film superheroes are not truly ‘present’, as the ‘A-list actors’ portraying them are not interested in guest-starring. Secondly, **the product** is the most important part of branding. In order to differentiate themselves from the competition (for example episodic television products by *DC Entertainment*), *Marvel*’s television serials on *Netflix* have established their own ‘trademarks’ – mature themes, frequent occurrence of explicit violence, high-end visual effects and special effects. Moreover, television serials by *Marvel* and *Netflix* are globally accessible. Thirdly, there is **the content (experience) provider**. *Netflix*, the most popular online provider of digital television content, is working hard to secure its currently unrivalled market position. The company is also interested in contracts granting distribution exclusivity and co-production activities in order to tightly bind the final products with the brand *Netflix* (as, for example, in cases of

House of Cards and *Orange Is the New Black* which may be produced by other companies, but are publicly known as ‘*Netflix* television dramas’). That is why *Marvel Television* inserts its logo into almost all key propagation materials, communication channels and the serials’ titles so vehemently – to make sure the viewers will know who the ‘real’ producer is. Summarising the issue, we believe that cooperation between *Marvel Television* and *Netflix* in the field of television production is very prospective and in many ways also ground-breaking, since it results in establishment of a new, now undividable television brand – *Marvel-Netflix*.

The creative cooperation of *Marvel* and *Netflix* has brought television one step closer towards the mainstream motion picture industry with global reach. Many of today’s episodic television dramas ‘outgrow’ blockbusters of global cinema – in terms of production costs, viewership and often even better character development and more thorough explanation of the characters’ motivations and mutual relationships. It will be interesting to observe the future changes, to see how the ‘traditional’ forms of television broadcasting will compete against digital distribution via the Internet and personalised platforms. The common understanding of television channels states that these media are no ‘products’, but rather providers, distributors, sometimes co-producers. However, digital television services such as *Netflix* are neither ordinary television channels, nor they aspire to be perceived that way. The ways people experience watching television are crucial here – subscribers of digital distribution platforms specifically select those programmes that best suit their entertainment preferences and individual expectations. On the other hand, all available ways of delivering television content have one thing in common – in order to generate profit and strengthen their market position, they have to embrace any new possibility of interacting with their audiences. The aim is to be somehow different from all their competitors, to stir the audience’s emotions and preserve their long-time loyalty.

Acknowledgment: This article was elaborated within the research project supported by the Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences (VEGA) No. 1/0611/16 titled “Multi-platform Concepts of Journalism in the Context of Development of Digital Technologies in Media Environment in the Slovak Republic”.

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