

Title Needed

Subtitle also needed

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This was a trying season of *True Blood* for blogger Meredith

Woerner of io9.com, a science-fiction and fantasy site. Entering her fourth year of summarizing each episode with pithy lists of pros and cons, Woerner, along with her dedicated contingent of readers and commenters, began with elevated expectations. “*True Blood* is back!” she exclaimed in the first recap of 2011, which she posted on June 27. The enthusiasm, however, quickly waned. Woerner wrote that a mid-season episode was a “whole lotta nothing for a long damn time”; she described the season finale as a “wet fart,” writing, “So that’s it. The season is over. And it was well, fine? The worst season in *True Blood* history, very possibly.” As her reviews became more resigned and disappointed, a consensus developed among the dozens of unpaid commenters contributing every week: *True Blood* had jumped the shark. Season 1 was definitely the best, followed by 3, while 2 and 4 vied for the title of worst. season. ever. And as they soured on the show itself, the viewers/readers spun another narrative: io9.com’s recaps were the reason—or at least an excuse—for continuing to watch. As *True Blood* shifted from campy and melodramatic to just plain bad, viewers had at hand a rationale for their ongoing dedication: I did it for the recaps.

The recap is a genre of internet writing that combines the irreverence of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* with the shorthand utility of CliffsNotes. Every day, thousands of bloggers are writing summaries of almost every program currently on TV, offering scene-by-scene analysis of the plot, characters, sets, and Easter eggs—all those fun, insidery details you might have missed because you were too busy multitasking while actually watching the thing. Unlike in traditional reviews, the assumption behind recaps is that readers have already seen the show; spoilers and elaborate hypotheses are the norm. Hundreds of thousands of people are spending their time reading descriptions of TV shows that they have already watched.

The recap has become such a universal type of blog content that Choire Sicha, an editor for the online magazine *The Awl*, recently hyperbolized, “The Internet is about 55 percent composed of people talking about what was on TV last night.” The recap is not exactly an industry—I doubt many laid-off freelancers are restarting their journalism careers by watching TV and writing 500-word responses—but it is something.

Recaps are the online genre par excellence. They’re cheap and easy content, they’re profoundly multimedia in nature, and they allow writers and readers to take an ironically knowing stance toward the often sub-par material they’re dissecting. Recappers, relying on their cultivated commenter groups, tend to take a don’t-try-that-shit-with-me attitude toward the shows’ writers. Even a bad show, they seem to say, can and should be held to a higher standard; at the very least, recaps can demonstrate the fact that you know we all know it’s bad. As Woerner summarily decreed of the season finale of *True Blood*, earlier this fall, “Some of it was good, but most of it was bad.” So say we all.

The genealogy of the TV recap is a bit murky, but online response to TV shows appears to be connate with the rise of the internet itself and, in particular, with the explosive spread of blogging and social media. If, as Marshall McLuhan argued, old media become the content of new media, then one of the first things the internet remediated was TV. Many of the early recaps were simply online forums devoted to sci-fi, fantasy, and other cult shows: *Buffy*, *The X-Files*, *The Simpsons*. The nerdy subculture of the early internet dovetailed nicely with the nerdy subcultures of these audiences’ finely drawn cultural allegiances. Here, it was not only accepted but expected that participants had watched every episode of a series more than once. The ability to notice when a show’s creators changed a character’s date of birth mid-series was a sign of expertise rather than insanity. From the outset, online discussion of offline TV programming favored obsession, devotion, and audience fragmentation.

But if it's obsession with a show that leads viewers to seek out recaps, what is it, exactly, that makes the written discussion so pleasurable: the quality of the writing, or the quality of the program generating the writing? Last year, Mac Slocum argued on TV Fodder, a blog he founded—motto: “Because TV is awesome and so are you”—that “the key to a good recap lies not with the ‘writer.’ It doesn’t matter how snarky or funny or thorough you are. A good recap comes down to one tiny thing: The show must be awesome.” True, to an extent; an awesome show certainly makes me want to seek out more online response. But that isn’t the whole story. There’s an entire subgenre, which began way back in the late 90s with the Seattle season of *The Real World*, devoted to bad reality programming and any other show that “sucks/blows.” The founders of Television Without Pity first “met” in a Beverly Hills, 90210 chat room and started their site with only one show, what they called the “teen pap” of Dawson’s Creek. I’ll admit that the only reason (well, okay, 80 percent of the reason) that I continue watching the teen pap of Gossip Girl is so I can spend 15 minutes afterward giggling at Vulture’s “reality index” for the show, which assigns points for both accurate portrayal of life in New York and adherence to common sense and its own storylines. (Typical bullet point: “‘I hate professional gift wrapping,’ Serena grumbles, tearing at a tightly wrapped present. **Plus 4** for identification of a little-recognized but entirely extant Rich People Problem.”) These blogs couldn’t exist without a healthy understanding that it’s more than a bit ludicrous for a coterie of adults to earn money and spend their time reading and recapping shows about over-privileged New York teenagers, lusty Louisiana vampires, or delusional, Botoxed “housewives.”

The attraction of the recap, I’ll propose, really comes down to two things. First, like any blog with a good commenter section, recaps enhance the reading experience by making you feel like you’re part of a cultural niche that just gets it—whether “it” is how shockingly underrated or how deliciously terrible a particular show is. Your boyfriend refuses to watch *Community* with you? Don’t

worry, just turn to Vulture's recap, where the commenters are so loyal to the show that the critic frequently has to defend his right to, well, criticize. Just starting the final season of *Friday Night Lights*? *Slate*'s TV Club can catch you up on how critics and commenters received the episodes as they aired. This is a deeply communal reading experience in which you are relying on others having seen things you didn't, and then taking the time to write about them on the internet, all to make that static, corporate medium, TV, more fun. I don't read recaps simply for a summary of what I've already watched. I read them to discover the best of what I missed.

Second, readers of TV recaps feel as if they're participating in improving the shows themselves. Almost as soon as there were recaps, producers and show runners were monitoring and responding to them, both accepting and lampooning the people who would spend so much time dissecting each episode of a series. In 2000, Aaron Sorkin famously waded into the TWoP comment boards, lost his patience with the commenters' critiques, then introduced a subplot in a 2002 episode of *The West Wing* in which the moderators of a Josh Lyman fan site are portrayed as obese, chain-smoking losers. Daily Intel's *Gossip Girl* recappers had a minor freakout when Josh Schwartz, the creator of the "Greatest Show of Our Time," revealed that the inclusion of three blog-reading characters in a 2008 episode was "a little bit of a nod to *New York* magazine's Daily Intel." And following her negative reviews of *True Blood* this year, Woerner offered a post titled "Why This Was the Worst *True Blood* Season Ever—and How the Show Can be Saved," with detailed instructions for the series's writers. "Don't get me wrong," she wrote, "I love *True Blood*.... But first we have to dissect the failures in order to fix the problems."

The TV-Internet feedback loop doesn't exist only between recappers and producers. It's also, and perhaps more important, between recappers and their commenters. Without traditional copy editors and fact-checking, writers rely on reader response to correct errors, maintain plot continuity, and draw connections the recapper

may not have noticed or may have left out of the summary. Overly earnest commenters can spontaneously produce spoken-word poetry, as in this nymag.com comment on an early *Gossip Girl* episode: “i definitely knew eric was going to be gay with asher / but serena killing someone? / that was never even a consideration / plus it looks like she’s going to cheat on dan in the next episode / & they’re going to break up / i keep thinking of how they unrealistically did it in an ‘abandoned loft’ / & i almost want to cry.”

Many blogs post “roundups” of the best comments, promoting them to post status. But even for those average writers toiling in the depths of the commenting mines, or lurking readers who never post their own responses, the sense of back-and-forth between writer and audience is one of the most integral elements of the recap experience. There is even a dimension of enjoying recaps that is separate from the show itself; as one Gawker commenter wrote to blogger Brian Moylan in a February post, “Brian, I cannot read your *Top Chef* recaps any more because they are better than the show.” Recapping manages to make watching TV feel as engaging and participatory as the other social media that have taken over the web in recent years.

Like many other genres of internet writing, then, the recap blurs the line between amateur and professional criticism and journalism, and not only in a financial sense. The traditional TV-critic model assumes that the person being paid to write is more knowledgeable, more insightful, and more interested in the program under discussion than the average reader. Recapping in many ways assumes the reverse: the writer is offering one take on the show to serve as a springboard for further discussion and analysis by the truly dedicated and expert viewers. There is a sense that the narrative of the recap, like a kind of open letter between the writers and readers, is unfolding and evolving along with the week-to-week fluctuations in plot and quality that characterize even the best TV shows. A pan this week could turn into a rave the next, and the serial quality of the writing maintains the productive relationship between

the recappers and the commenters. As Jessica Pressler and Chris Rovzar, who have spent the past four years recapping *Gossip Girl* for *New York* magazine blogs, wrote of a particularly confusing episode earlier this year, “Only in the fullness of time, when historians and scholars have studied the *Gossip Girl* texts, will we truly know the answers to these questions. Until then, all we can do is compliment and judge the accuracy of the minor details in our weekly reality index!” Recaps are the first rough drafts of ... media studies dissertations?

The recapping phenomenon muddies many of the divisions we take for granted in entertainment media: between watching and reading, consuming and producing, and enjoying and criticizing. The ability to participate in these conversations turns traditional TV watchers into blog readers and comment writers, who perpetuate an ongoing, back-and-forth mode of engagement week after week. For me, recaps and other Internet genres like them provide a comforting rebuttal to the recent proliferation of articles about the supposed death of reading. Like other online reading, recapping isn’t between the covers of a book, but it is addressing more people than ever before, who are “talking” with each other about what they read. And it’s more tied to personal, local networks of communication than to the national media brands that are supposed to be all things to all people. What the narrative of the decline and fall of the American reading public sees as a new, lamentable change may actually be more like a correction of a historical anomaly.

In fact, the communal, feedback-oriented cultural consumption that recaps call for has a lot in common with some centuries-old reading practices. In the eighteenth century, similar types of reading communities emerged as literacy rates climbed and books and newspapers became more accessible. The new and trendy genre of the novel was the lowbrow reality TV of its day, and it generated similar cultural hand wringing and won’t-somebody-please-think-of-the-

children commentary—as well as huge volumes of feedback, in the form of letters, for bestselling authors such as Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Back then, people were much more likely to read in groups, share letters between families and friends, borrow newspapers, and get novels from subscription libraries than they were to read their own books, alone. Reading was just one form of cultural consumption, and it was often a collective activity. From the news-generating coffeehouses of London to the fiction-focused atmosphere of women consuming novels together, reading was understood as taking place within a community of other like-minded readers.

Take Jane Austen. She was not only a compulsive writer from her teenage years on, but also an inveterate novel reader, at a time when most novels, in the words of one magazine critic, were seen as “wretched trash.” (Sound familiar?) Novels had recently become more plentiful and readily available, and new circulating libraries made it relatively easy and affordable to read one novel after another, compulsively and indiscriminately—leading to accusations like those we hear now about consumers becoming “addicted” to TV, video games, and the internet.

Much of the Austen family’s reading material was obtained via circulating libraries, part of whose appeal lay in access to their membership lists, and Austen inserted these institutions into many of her novels. She also filled her letters to family and friends with lists of the books, almost all novels, that “we”—the Austen family—were reading together. The Austens, as she wrote on December 18, 1798, “are great Novel readers & not ashamed of being so.” It’s clear that their reading decisions were made within a group of neighbors, friends, and families, with whom they exchanged and discussed books. While the Austens could not easily influence the authors they were reading, they could react to and shape the reading habits of their own community. Once Austen became a published author, her novels were built into the same system of circulation that had

offered her literary models, and in 1814 she wrote of *Mansfield Park*, “People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at.”

This type of communal reading was a fundamental element of the media environment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A variety of technological and cultural changes in the Victorian period ushered in the type of literary reading—private, quiet, individual—that we now worry is dying out. And while I don’t think we’re going to be giving a TV recap the same cultural status as an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel any time soon, the new genre lets us experience a type of reading that derives as much of its pleasure from its context as from the work itself. Austen would have read recaps and not been ashamed.

What I want to suggest, then, is that what we think of as the “traditional,” separate way to watch or read was actually part of a twentieth-century historical blip in which culture became less communal and more private and individualized. This is a trend that in many ways is now being reversed across a wide spectrum of entertainment. The recap’s transformation of viewers into readers and writers demonstrates just one way in which contemporary cultural consumption may have more in common with what was happening 250 years ago than with what was happening fifty years ago. Then, as now, privately owned books were the province of an educated elite, while the masses enjoyed a wide array of cheap ephemera and pirated copy. And then, as now, keepers of the high-culture citadel—educators, critics, established authors—proliferated more and more words bemoaning society’s declining tastes and sophistication. You want people to go back to reading middlebrow novels? Imagine trying to get them to read only in Latin and Greek.

Of course, there are slight differences between the types of reading happening now and those of the eighteenth century. The material transformation from page to screen has an impact, we’re told, on how we process information, encouraging us to focus more on reading many things at once than on engaging with each text

individually. More important, the level of connection and speed of communications is beyond what could have been imagined in the eighteenth century, itself a time when better printing technology and modernizing postal systems were making correspondence faster and more reliable. But if we're concerned about the outsized impact the "death of reading" narrative seems to be having on contemporary cultural discourse, we might do well to look at how earlier readers dealt with new genres and media—principally, the novel and cheap, widely available print—to reflect on our "new" reading habits. The mode of community-based, response-focused reading and writing that I've been describing here, and that has become so central to life online, has a lot more in common with earlier forms of reading and sharing information than with the twentieth-century emphasis on private reading of individual books.

And, well, at least recaps let us all get together online to agree that vampires' deep feelings, love triangles, and conflicts with witches and werewolves—what iog's Woerner recently called "schlock on schlock on vampire cock"—are silly. Watching supernatural sex on TV might be fun, but anatomizing supernatural sex positions on the Internet is completely hilarious.