

Style Blog

A five-day boat ride. Twelve hours of knitting. Are Americans ready for Norway's Slow TV?

By **Stephanie Merry** March 13 at 2:03 PM

Watching television has become an increasingly urgent hobby. The faster you power through the just-released season of “House of Cards,” the sooner you can get to “[Bosch](#),” which you’ve heard is pretty good for a police procedural, and besides, it’s only 10 episodes, so you can finish it by Wednesday, giving you just enough time to catch up on “Game of Thrones” before the Season 5 premiere on April 12.

Following the latest best series was once a leisurely activity. Not lazy, mind you, just slower. That word has its detractors (“I couldn’t get into it. It was *so slow*.”), but not in Norway, where Slow TV has become a cultural phenomenon.

[\[Should you be embarrassed that you already finished ‘House of Cards’?\]](#)

Norwegians have reclaimed television as relaxation. They’ll watch unedited footage of a train chugging for hours from Bergen to Oslo or a 5 1/2-day program chronicling the MS Nordnorge’s voyage along the coast. Even “twelve hours of nonstop knitting” is a selling point. There may not be much to rehash around the water cooler, and the

clips won't go viral, but the viewing experience is less harried. Brawls don't erupt over spoilers.

Maybe it's time to add attention spans to the list of things Norwegians have that Americans don't (along with fjords, [abundant happiness](#), [gender equality](#) and paid paternity leave). Or maybe not. Can Slow TV exist outside of Scandinavia? Do other cultures have the endurance to find pleasure in the monotony of handicrafts and burning logs?

“I don't think we are particularly stupid or weird in Norway to like this sort of thing,” said Thomas Hellum, a Slow TV pioneer and production manager at Norway's public broadcaster, NRK. “I think really it could work in other countries.”

Networks in England and the United States are aiming to find out. First up, [BBC Four Goes Slow](#) is testing England's patience this spring. Then the American [LMNO Productions](#) has plans to launch Slow TV shows here, although in the midst of signing contracts, the company president isn't ready to divulge details. (For those in a hurry to check it out, Slow TV is also available on the Pluto TV Web site and app, and the Norwegian shows can be found on YouTube.)

They might pick up some tips from NRK, which spurred the unexpected trend in 2007 thanks mainly to happenstance. The idea came up during lunch one day among producers of a documentary about a railway in Norway, the Bergen Line. It would be a shame to waste the extra footage, they reasoned, so why not air the whole journey, free of editing?

Hellum floated the idea to his editors, and, as he recalls, there was confusion at first, quickly followed by laughter – “in a good way,” he insists – and then contemplation. “They turned the question into: ‘What will NRK risk by not doing this?’” Hellum said.

“Because we *want* to be innovative, we *want* to surprise people and make new things.”

The show certainly has a novel feel. A camera is positioned on the front of the train as it glides along a ribbon of track through tunnels and under bridges, over a landscape that changes from snowy to grassy. A lake might materialize on occasion or the voice of the conductor announcing the next station, but largely the scenes are just simple, repetitive and, ultimately, meditative.



Hellum didn't have high expectations. Maybe a couple thousand railway enthusiasts would tune in. Instead, 1.6 million Norwegians watched part of the broadcast. Not bad, considering the population of Norway is 5 million.

Viewers flooded social media to discuss the show. One man even claimed that at the end of the line, he stood up to collect his baggage only to realize he was in his living room, Hellum recounted with a hint of pride.

Hellum then got the go-ahead to shoot “Hurtigruten Minute by Minute,” a boat

voyage that clocks in at 134 hours and 42 minutes. This time, the broadcast aired live, turning it into a national event. Coastal residents greeted the ship as it sailed by and tried to clinch five seconds of fame. People were captured patriotically waving flags and holding signs with messages to loved ones. And viewership soared with 3.2 million – well over half the population – tuning in to watch.



Since then, there has been the trip along the Salmon River and National Wood Night (a detailed discussion on the best way to stack wood followed by a fire), “Piip-Show” (little birds flitting around a tiny fake coffee shop for hours) and a broadcast of 899 hymns. The phenomenon has also been ridiculed by Stephen Colbert and Jimmy Kimmel, among many others.



The jokes are to be expected. After all, what's the appeal? Hellum has some ideas: The shows are soothing and tend to be social events. You can keep them on while chatting with friends. Slow TV may be the antidote to our daily go-go-go.

“It’s not demanding TV,” he said. “You can easily have one laptop, if not two, on your lap . . . and if you blink for 10 seconds you haven’t lost anything.”

Although Slow TV seems revolutionary, the big ideas behind it are nothing new. Real-time filmmaking dates back to some of the earliest movies, including the Lumiere brothers’ 1895 short “The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,” which is exactly what it sounds like, though at 50 seconds, it didn’t test attention spans. More recently, unedited and meditative movies have found an audience in galleries and museums rather than in the world of pop culture. Andy Warhol made his first “anti-film” in 1963 with “Sleep,” showing a man snoozing for more than five hours. He followed that up with “Empire,” 8 hours 5 minutes of footage of the Empire State Building. Dutch artist Guido van der Werve’s 2007 multimedia piece “[Nummer Acht: Everything Is Going to Be Alright](#)” shows him slowly ambling atop the frozen Gulf of Bothnia while a massive icebreaker behind him goes about its business.

With Slow TV, art and pop culture begin to blur, which is why putting the programming on BBC Four in England makes sense. The channel, which is commercial-free, like NRK, exists for experimentation. Channel Editor Cassian Harrison plans to air a two-hour canal journey, the three-hour fly-on-the-wall documentary “[National Gallery](#)” and the miniseries “Make,” three 30-minute depictions of craftsmanship – the creation of a wooden chair, for example – without commentary.

According to Hellum, one of the keys to successful Slow TV is choosing a culturally resonant subject, which is exactly what Harrison has done with “The Canal.”

“Everybody in Britain has a strong emotional affection for taking canal trips, taking a very slow, steady trip through a peaceful countryside with the putt-putt-putt of the engine behind you,” he said. “It’s a bit slower, a bit more relaxed and it gives you time to concentrate and understand the world around you.”

Harrison has no idea who, if anyone, will watch the shows, but he’s encouraged by the success at NRK. As a former film editor, he’s also interested in the way the shows “unfold in their own time, at their own pace.”

In a sense, we viewers becomes the editor, taking it all in and deciding what’s fascinating and what’s not, what touches us on some subconscious level and what’s worth overlooking. And – who’s to say? – maybe there will be a surprise along the way.

As Hellum puts it: “Probably nothing much will happen in the next hour, but you never know!”

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and the Going Out Guide. She's also the section's de facto expert on yoga, gluten-free dining and bicycle commuting.
