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Kevin Spacey stars in 'House of Cards,' a political thriller that starts Feb. 1

By [Emily Yahr](#), Published: January 25

There are a lot of locals with high hopes for the new political thriller "House of Cards," given that the Washington-themed show is likely to become the largest production ever filmed in Maryland. And there are a lot of people outside the Beltway who are just as interested in how the series fares: Its success might alter the concept of traditional television programming.

It's safe to say that the entire TV industry will carefully track the launch of the show, which premieres on Netflix on Friday. The online subscription service behemoth has dabbled in original content before, but it's hoping to make a big splash with its first major original series. Filmed around the Baltimore area and based on the 1990 BBC miniseries of the same name, about a devious politician clawing his way up the ladder, the project has big names attached, including director David Fincher ("[The Social Network](#)"), writer Beau Willimon ("The Ides of March") and two-time Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Spacey. Netflix reportedly paid around \$100 million to land the project.

No pressure or anything.

Netflix, which has 27 million streaming subscribers in the United States who can use its service to watch TV shows or movies whenever they want, is taking the idea of personalized viewing even further with "House of Cards," which is produced by independent studio Media Rights Capital. Instead of doling out one episode per week, broadcast and cable television-style, all 13 episodes of the show's first season will be available on the day it premieres. (The company will try the same strategy with "Arrested Development," the cult-favorite sitcom that Netflix is bringing back to life in May.)

Netflix stealthily tried the same trick in early 2012 with "Lilyhammer," a quirky Norwegian crime drama that had been available only in Norway. Netflix acquired the rights and aired the show in America for the first time. Though there was minimal buzz, it showed there were viewers who had an appetite for gobbling up an entire season of a series at once.

So, networks making viewers wait for episodes, with endless repeats or month-long hiatuses?

That's becoming increasingly "out of step" with the way people watch television, theorized Ted Sarandos, Netflix's chief content officer.

"I feel like what we're seeing is a huge generational shift toward on-demand," Sarandos said. "And Netflix is a pure on-demand product."

Thus, the stage is set for "House of Cards." Several unusual factors give the show an advantage, Sarandos said: Things as small as not having to waste time catching viewers up on what happened last week can add up to extra minutes of storytelling.

On a larger scale, Netflix was able to devote enough money to order two seasons — 26 episodes — at once. With a guaranteed number of episodes, the show could invest in such things as elaborate, realistic sets. In addition, with clear story lines mapped out, the writers don't have to invent artificial cliffhangers to lure viewers back week to week.

"When you're writing for your life on weekly television, you write every episode as if it may be the first or last one ever on television. . . . I don't think that's conducive to great writing," Sarandos said. "This is a long-form commitment."

Such commitment was a big selling point to Willimon, the show runner and executive producer who also wrote the first two episodes. Even though he originally had no idea if the show would air week to week, he said having all 13 episodes debut at once relieves the pressure.

"With two seasons guaranteed upfront, Netflix was placing its faith in us and not saying, 'Well, if this doesn't bring in enough viewers in the first episodes, that's it,'" Willimon said.

What also helped speed the process was "almost complete creative freedom" from Netflix executives, very rare in a high-profile television series, Willimon said. He and his staff wound up creating elements of the show that "would never have gotten past the first or second round of typical network notes."

Willimon, who wrote the play "Farragut North" — later adapted into the campaign film "[The Ides of March](#)" starring George Clooney — was brought onto the project about three years ago, when he got a call saying that Fincher wanted to team up for a remake of the British "House of Cards" miniseries. Willimon had never seen the show, but "it was a pretty good excuse to watch it if it would lead to a conversation with David Fincher," he admitted.

That led to the current collaboration. (Fincher, also an executive producer, directed the first two episodes.) It borrows some pieces of the original but brings the story to the present day and injects a cinematic aesthetic. With the tale opening at a fancy New Year's Eve party ringing in the start of 2013, House Majority Whip Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey, chillingly evil) immediately breaks the fourth wall, smugly introducing viewers to some of the key players in the room, including the newly elected president. Everything quickly unravels when Underwood, promised the job of secretary of state, is passed over for the position. The president's press secretary (Sakina Jaffrey) condescendingly tells him he's needed more in Congress than the State Department.

Underwood begins to wreak havoc on everyone around him on Capitol Hill. This is with the help of his equally devious wife, Claire (Robin Wright), and an ambitious young reporter, Zoe (Kate Mara), who is desperate to ditch the Fairfax City Council beat for her own investigative blog — which makes her a joke among the old-timers in the newsroom.

Though the fictional newspaper is meant to represent "a very prestigious nationally read newspaper in Washington" (our ears are burning!), the scenes were filmed in the Baltimore Sun

newsroom. Willimon, who worked on several presidential campaigns, said the producers wanted everything to be as authentic as possible. When it came to details of political life, that meant calling in a few favors — including asking such Washington media types as George Stephanopoulos and John King to play themselves in the show. Willimon said he was shocked at how many anchors excitedly agreed to participate.

The Sun newsroom was one of the many Maryland spots that the production crew used to its advantage. Willimon said they were eager to film near Baltimore, as quite a few neighborhoods have a striking resemblance to Washington, and it was close enough to film in the District when needed. The show offers sweeping views of the Capitol, the monuments and the Kennedy Center, and it even features a scene in the Metro. And Maryland's "terrific" tax incentives for filmmakers didn't hurt, Willimon added.

About half of the show's scenes were filmed around Baltimore, with the other half on a soundstage about 20 miles north, in Edgewood in Harford County. Thanks to the number of episodes ordered and the elaborate size of the production, the Maryland Film Office is thrilled with the economic boost to the state, from the number of local hires to the Maryland vendors used during filming.

"When all is said and done, it will probably be the largest production that has ever shot in Maryland," said Jack Gerbes, director of the Maryland Film Office. "We're still running numbers . . . but it was just an amazing production, the sheer size and scale and scope of it."

For example, he said, while they don't have the final numbers, the first season of HBO's vice-presidential comedy "Veep" shot for around 40 days and hired 978 people from Maryland. "House of Cards" went at least 100 days longer, built more sets and had a larger crew.

Gerbes is looking forward to the impact that the show might have on bringing positive publicity and more productions to the state, which would mean financial gains and work for local crews. (Hey, people still try to find the Eastern Shore location where "[Wedding Crashers](#)" was filmed.)

The "House of Cards" crew will be back in Maryland in March to begin work on the second season. In the meantime, they'll see how audiences respond Friday, though Sarandos points out they aren't in the traditional ratings game of seeing how a premiere does on the first day. Since the "House of Cards" will be available indefinitely, they have to take into account that some people may choose to watch all the episodes at once — but that may be a year from now.

Netflix doesn't publish ratings — because the company is not in the advertising sales business — so it would be an "apples and oranges" comparison to get into ratings race with broadcast and cable television, Sarandos said. Instead, Netflix will use its internal metrics to determine if the show is successful.

Meanwhile, Willimon said he hopes giving viewers the power to choose their watching experience, either as a weekly show or even a 13-hour movie, will bring them back for more.

Then Willimon quickly corrected himself. "'Bring back' isn't the right syntax," he said. "More like, 'Click on the next episode.'"

House of Cards

(one hour) is available to Netflix subscribers beginning Friday.

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