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Algorithmic cosmopolitanism: on the global claims of digital entertainment platforms

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ABSTRACT

Streaming entertainment services Netflix and Spotify sell themselves as stewards of a benevolent form of globalization characterized by liberal-cosmopolitan ideals of international connection. Drawing on discourse analysis and critical political economy, this article examines how Netflix and Spotify market their platforms through initiatives that encourage global, intercultural connection and affinity. The first such venture is Spotify's "I'm with the Banned" project, which initiated and promoted collaborations between U.S. pop acts and musicians from countries affected by the Trump administration's 2017 travel ban. The second is Netflix's mid-to-late-2010s discourse of the "taste cluster" or "taste community." This is the idea, supposedly discovered by Netflix's analysis of user data but steeped in established practices of psychographic marketing, that common tastes bind viewers across geographic distances and cultural differences. I argue that by centralizing international, intercultural connection and affinity within their public images, the platforms attempt to legitimize their globally expanding business and technological practices as humanistic and cosmopolitan rather than faceless, mathematical, and all-consuming. By claiming that the services help enable cross-cultural global community, they promote a benevolent vision of themselves to new markets while tacitly attempting to soothe anxieties about the platform-imperialist dominance of a small handful of algorithmic digital platforms.

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As major digital entertainment platforms spread to an increasing number of territories around the world, their corporate owners recognize the need to communicate the platforms' benefits to various global publics and industry stakeholders. Focusing on the globalization of video-on-demand platform Netflix and online music service Spotify, I examine how streaming platforms brand themselves internationally as *global* entities. Tsing (2005, p. 57) argues that we need to assess the geographic claims that institutions make–in her words, to critique how corporations "imagine globality" in a "dramatic performance" of what it means to be global. Following such a charge, my guiding questions are as follows: How do digital entertainment corporations perform globality? What vision

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of the globe are they offering, and how do they present themselves as the ideal institutions to help encourage this vision? What technological and institutional processes do such corporations highlight in their visions of globalness, and which ones do they obscure? Finally, how and to what end do digital entertainment platforms promote their global reach as a positive development rather than a threatening one? To answer these questions, I draw on discourse analysis of public statements by and about each platform, as well as critical political economy of media-industry operations. This involves assessing not just the legitimacy of the platforms' claims, but also what they reveal about broader cultural investments in digital platforms as spaces of global public life and international connection.

Netflix and Spotify each ask their consumer and industry constituencies to view the platform as a steward of a benevolent form of globalization characterized by liberal-cosmopolitan ideals of international connection. From this premise, I argue that by centralizing international, intercultural connection and affinity within their public images, the platforms attempt to legitimize their globally expanding business and technological practices as humanistic and cosmopolitan rather than faceless, mathematical, and all-consuming. By claiming that the services help enable cross-cultural global community, they promote a benevolent vision of themselves to new markets while tacitly attempting to soothe anxieties about the platform-imperialist dominance of a small handful of automated, algorithmic digital platforms.

These two platforms are particularly worthy of focus due to their relative dominance in online global entertainment markets and because of how each service overtly positions itself as a global entity. Speaking to this last point, I emphasize two visible examples of the platforms' global branding. The first is Spotify's "I'm with the Banned" project, which initiated and promoted collaborations between U.S. pop acts and musicians from countries affected by the Trump administration's 2017 travel ban. The second is Netflix's emergent mid-to-late-2010s discourse of the "taste cluster" or "taste community." The taste cluster is the idea, supposedly discovered by Netflix though well established in the history of psychographic marketing, that common taste in entertainment binds people across geographic distances and cultural differences. In promotional, trade, and journalistic outlets, the company repeatedly suggests that its data analytics systems have uncovered the taste community and thus revealed an understanding of taste unbound from demographic identity. Although different in their intended audiences—the former geared more toward consumers and the latter directed primarily at other industry players—each associates the platform with a vision of algorithmic culture's globalization that is marked by interconnection and cosmopolitanism rather than stereotyping, global uniformity, and quantification.

Discourse analysis of streaming entertainment industries

Netflix and Spotify advertise their global cosmopolitanism to the public and to other participants in the streaming economy (production companies, advertisers, marketers, critics, journalists) in various spaces: keynote addresses, advertisements, P.R. initiatives, platform interfaces, social media accounts, and interviews with company executives and spokespeople. Collectively, these texts comprise discourses that signal the platforms' global intentions and promote a privatized, tech-entertainment hybrid vision of cultural

globalization. I assess these by combining discourse analysis of statements by media-industry figures and commentators with critical textual analysis of platform-produced texts such as playlists and accompanying videos. Such an approach is textually focused but draws inspiration from Havens, Lotz, and Tinic's (2009, p. 247) Foucauldian/Gramscian model of industry research, which involves "analyzing how institutions organize ways of knowing into seemingly irrefutable logics of how systems should operate, thereby bringing to the forefront the material consequences of industrial 'common-sense.'" Such an approach allows us to explore how Spotify and Netflix seek to shape established knowledge and beliefs about streaming entertainment services as appropriate and even ideal stewards of progressive forms of cultural globalization. It also opens up spaces to critique how such discourses act as trojan horses for platforms to gain a greater share of the global streaming market while promoting their global ambitions as humanistic projects rather than economic ones.

But what can an approach centered on discourse and texts tell us about media industries, and what can it not? Broadly, discourse analysis searches for "patterns" in "language in use" (Taylor, 2001, p. 6). Netflix's talk of the "taste cluster" and Spotify's "I'm With the Banned" have different primary audiences (the former more industry-directed and the second more toward the public), but they both produce patterns of talk about streaming entertainment's supposed ability to connect the world and promote a progressive vision of cosmopolitanism. Thus, while a textual approach cannot tell us how users and industry players respond to such issues the way that, say, an ethnography of media audiences or industry laborers might, it allows us to investigate how Netflix and Spotify's cosmopolitan discourses *set the conditions* for users and industries to buy into a streaming-era version of the "mythology of global media," or a corporatized vision of new media bringing about a McLuhanesque, global utopia of democratized access and greater understanding (Morley & Robins, 1995, pp. 11–12). Cosmopolitan marketing and P.R. work allow Netflix and Spotify to trade on this mythology not only to draw in high-profile talent and subscribers in new markets via a positive association with the platforms, but also to brush away more complicated questions about the global hegemony of a small number of digital services in the global entertainment landscape.

Netflix, Spotify, and globally scaled digital entertainment

Increasingly, it makes sense to think of streaming media platforms as internationally scaled services with global user bases and financial interests stretching across territories. Having eliminated most of its geographic restrictions in 2016, Netflix famously announced itself as a newly "global television network" at the Consumer Electronics Show that year. In the third quarter of 2018, the company reported 78.64 million non-U.S. subscribers and 58.46 million U.S. subscribers, projecting the number of international subscribers to increase exponentially (Netflix, 2018). If Spotify's availability is not quite as geographically expansive as that of Netflix's, it has still become a dominant force within the corporate-mainstream global music industry, boasting over 200 million active worldwide users in 2019 (Billboard Staff, 2019). Founded in Sweden and initially available primarily in Europe, it has since expanded to over 70 countries—including 13 more in North Africa and the Middle East in 2018 (Stutz, 2018). For such platforms, global expansion is one route toward increased revenues in an industry where growth is often prized over profits (Soderpalm, 2019; Steel, 2017).

To reach users in new markets, both platforms have likewise expanded the geographic scope of their distribution practices and industrial relationships. Netflix has partnered with film and television producers and distributors in various markets around the world, including a 2017 announcement of 50 original productions from Latin America as well as a production deal with Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan (Hopewell, 2017; Tartaglione, 2016). If Spotify's library/curatorial approach is not as focused on *original* productions, the platform likewise aims to integrate into circuits of global media industry and finance. Its initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange was seen in 2018, and it increasingly signs global licensing deals with major record labels (Safian, 2018; Sisario, 2017). Following Vonderau's (2019, p. 9) argument that Spotify is now less a Swedish platform and more of an American media company emplaced within global financial markets, both of these services cannot be understood solely as representatives of their home bases. This is the case not simply because of the platforms' geographically expansive footprints and financial dealings, but also because of how they present their "globalness" textually and paratextually. Following a general trend in digital entertainment, the platforms assert themselves as central forces in a digital world that is putatively interconnected more so than ever before. They do so not simply in terms of providing the technological possibility for that connection, but also by branding themselves as appreciating and encouraging global cultural difference and cross-cultural interconnection—as platforms that are cosmopolitan, in other words.

Cosmopolitanism and popular media

Netflix and Spotify claim that they can foster a cosmopolitan orientation toward the world by exposing audiences to works of art by people from different places and by revealing how common taste binds people regardless of background. My use of cosmopolitan draws from a range of scholars who have employed the term to describe an ethical and political perspective marked by an openness toward global difference and a zeal for travel and global intercultural interaction (Appiah, 2006; Hannerz, 1990). Much research in media and cultural studies has considered the possibility that popular media can be spaces of encountering global difference via a kind of mediated travel, which in turn can bring about a cosmopolitan mindset (Gillespie, 1995; Silverstone, 2006; Zuckerman, 2013). Jenkins (2004) writes of "pop cosmopolitanism" as the way that popular culture might bring about a recognition of the world beyond one's own national framework. By promoting the possibility of virtual connection with other cultures, Netflix and Spotify sell audiences and industry stakeholders on the idea that their platforms are resources of pop cosmopolitanism.

In a world marked by both increasing global interconnection and reactionary nationalist attitudes, cosmopolitanism becomes shorthand for a progressive, worldly appreciation of multiculturalism. Idealized understandings of cosmopolitanism posit this worldliness as more forward-thinking than the putatively backward and inward-looking "local" (Morley, 2000). This not only allows privileged travelers to flatter themselves as cosmopolitans, it also enables corporations and other institutions to align their global reach with an inherently liberal-progressive project—to conflate globalization as a market strategy with cosmopolitanism as an ethical-political identification, in other words. This happens in cosmopolitan branding, wherein institutions articulate their

products and projects to a benevolent vision of international, cross-cultural connection. For instance, through its "Land of Ideas" campaign, Germany brands itself as a progressive, cosmopolitan nation (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 148). In the context of global corporate culture, Starbucks promotes its international reach through its sales of coffee beans from around the world, which consumers associate with a kind of "cosmopolitan cool" (Bookman, 2013, p. 57). Through their own articulations of cosmopolitan cool, streaming entertainment platforms likewise find ways to present their global spread in a positive light.

"I'm With the Banned": Spotify's audiovisual globalness

Spotify's corporate cosmopolitanism emerges out of its Scandinavian brand of egalitarianism and "Nordic cool" (Vonderau, 2019, p. 6). This is represented in part by its Swedish founder and CEO, Daniel Ek, who proselytizes about Spotify's ambitions of global connection in public statements that reflect utopian images of global equality-via-popular-music. In a letter written as part of the company's Securities and Exchange Commission filings, Ek says that Spotify aims to "democratize the industry and connect all of us, across the world, in a shared culture that expands our horizons" (Flanagan, 2018). In recent years, Spotify's cosmopolitan brand has manifested in public-facing initiatives that communicate an engagement with global difference. In October 2018, the platform launched its "Global Cultures Initiative" which promotes playlists stocked with songs by Arab, African, South Asian, and Latinx musicians ("Discover Hits," 2018). As part of the Global Cultures Initiative, the platform introduced a new high-profile playlist called Global X, which includes crossover collaborations between popular musicians from different parts of the world.

Although it predates the announcement of the Global Cultures Initiative, one Spotify project illustrates how the platform has directed its cosmopolitan brand toward more explicitly political ends. In response to the Trump administration's travel ban against citizens from six largely Muslim countries, Spotify released a multimedia initiative in 2017 entitled "I'm With the Banned." A series of songs and videos compiled together in a playlist with the same title, the project promoted collaborations between U.S. pop acts and musicians from Somalia, Iran, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Syria. In the videos (later edited together as a half-hour documentary viewable on the Spotify platform), a musician from a banned nation arrives in Toronto to record a song with an American musician. Each elegantly shot video begins with the banned artist ruminating on their background, the importance of music in their life, and their experiences of marginalization and alienation. We then see the American pop musician(s) arrive at the studio, engage in banter and conversation with the artists, and record the song.

Two major themes of "I'm With the Banned" are music's power to break down borders and the common humanity shared by artists from different backgrounds. In one of the videos, American rapper Pusha T states the project's thesis statement: "Music is the ultimate connecter of people and it knows no boundaries." He continues, "Me being from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and [collaborator] Moh Flow being from Syria, it's that interaction that makes the song that much greater." Such ideas are underscored in another video featuring rapper Desiigner, who professes, "Music really has no language." The videos echo these ideas in various statements by the artists about the importance of cross-cultural bonds and pleas for tolerance. Somali hip-hop collective Waayaha Cusub explain that

God made humans "to know each other," and Syrian rapper Moh Flow says, "We might have Syrian passports but we live the same dreams just like any other artist that lives anywhere." The lyrics to the songs produced through the collaborations—some of which are multi-lingual—likewise reflect ideas related to the experience of exile and transience, even obliquely in songs that are more overtly about love or a break-up. "Thinking 'Bout You (Sleepless in Cairo)" by Sudanese producer Sufyvn and American rapper BJ the Chicago Kid contains the lyrics, "Feels like they're holding me as a prisoner / Only thing in my head, baby, is us laying together." "Cycles" by Yemeni singer Methal and American rock band X Ambassadors includes the lines, "I keep thinking that we'll wake up / Some place that we used to be." On the whole, "I'm With the Banned" uses multiple textual registers to associate popular music experienced through the platform with pro-immigration, anti-racist politics.

If "I'm with the Banned" is an audiovisual protest against an unjust policy, it also helps Spotify push its brand as a global entity promoting progressive forms of international interconnection. On an industrial and technological level, for instance, it allows the platform to promote a rejection of imposed borders that papers over the fact that the service is still geoblocked in many territories (Elkins, 2019, p. 111). Furthermore, it draws on Spotify's considerable power as a curator of taste in order to brand the platform with "cosmopolitan capital," or cultural capital gained through the engagement with and knowledge of international culture (Hage, 2000). Specifically, the initiative associates the platform with a progressive worldview via the longstanding alignments between cosmopolitan capital and the industrially defined genre of "world music." Non-Western musicians grouped into this category have often gained international popularity by collaborating with well-known, canonized Western musicians such as Paul Simon and David Byrne. As Taylor (2015, p. 97) suggests, these "collaborations commonly take the form of curatorship" by the famous North American and British artists who lend their fame and cultural capital to the musicians. The Western musicians thereby receive cosmopolitan capital through their expressed openness to and interest in "world" music. In the case of "I'm With the Banned," the same process takes place but with the platform rather than the artist acting as the curator of international bonds. This is part of a broader trend in the streaming era of users interacting with the "branded musical experience" of the platform-as-service rather than engagement with a particular artist (Morris & Powers, 2015, p. 107). The artists themselves are relatively incidental to the project of elevating Spotify as the cosmopolitan, anti-racist institution that enables these cross-cultural collaborations.

Netflix's taste clusters: squaring globalization and individualization

If Spotify's Global Cultures Initiative and "I'm With the Banned" suggest that popular taste can be an avenue toward encountering and appreciating other cultures, Netflix repeatedly suggests that common tastes can be a bridge connecting viewers across cultures as well. Starting in the mid-2010s, a variety of interviews, profiles, and puff pieces in tech and trade literature included quotes from Netflix brass about how the platform uses compiled data and collaborative filtering to reject demographic and identity-based forms of market segmentation when targeting films and programs to users. Rather, the platform groups its audiences into over 2000 "taste clusters" or "taste communities," to use its own terminology (Adalian, 2018). Netflix V.P. Todd Yellin, perhaps the most visible

public proselytizer of the taste cluster, summarizes the difference between this kind of audience group and the traditional demographic approach:

> You might think if we know someone's a 17-year-old guy versus a 67-year-old woman … [y]ou know exactly what they want to watch. Show the 67-year-old woman lots of things with Meryl Streep and Shirley MacLaine, show the seventeen year old guy lots of Marvel superheroes and lots of explosions. And you'd be wrong, because that's not how it works. (Future of StoryTelling, 2014)

Rather, that 67-year-old woman and 17-year-old man might be part of the same taste cluster—an affinity of taste connecting people *across* demographic differences. In a global context, Netflix suggests that these taste clusters extend across geography, with Yellin claiming elsewhere that one's "taste doppelganger" is likely to be found in another country (Laporte, 2017). As a company press release puts it, rather than segmenting audiences along geographic boundaries, Netflix uses its complex systems of content tagging and viewer data to locate "the most relevant global communities based on a member's personal tastes and preferences" (Gomez-Uribe, 2016).

Despite Netflix's hype, the basic idea that behavior binds people together more than demographics is not new in marketing and audience analytics. The taste cluster is an algorithmically generated version of psychographic marketing, which defines and segments markets based on perceived values, behaviors, and psychological traits rather than demographic identity. It has been present in marketing in one version or another since the popularization of "motivation" research in the 1950s (Gunter & Furnham, 1992, p. 32), and it gained popularity in the late 1970s through proprietary marketing systems such as VALS (values and lifestyles), which segmented consumers into categories such as "survivors," "belongers," and "achievers" (Turow, 1997, pp. 46–47). In the entertainment industries, psychographic marketing has existed in various forms in 1990s American network television and 2000s cable television, when advertisers and channels used it alongside more fine-pointed demographic information to build brands that targeted complex intersections of identity backgrounds, values, and behaviors (Becker, 2006; Ouellette, 2016, p. 38). This is all to say that the taste cluster is, in some ways, a familiar tech-industry phenomenon: a "disruptive" invention of something that, in fact, already exists.

What distinguishes Netflix's taste cluster is its emergence from algorithmic computation's supposedly "mathematical, logical, impartial, [and] consistent" nature rather than from the decisions of human actors (Gillespie, 2016, p. 23). This helps Netflix distinguish its measurement practices not only by drawing on standard associations between algorithmic systems and precision but also by articulating this accuracy to a nominally more progressive comprehension of taste (Blakley, 2016, pp. 42–43). The ideological association between algorithms and rational objectivity both lends the taste cluster an appearance of unimpeachable accuracy while highlighting Netflix's computational power as uniquely suited to discovering and assessing human relationships. This framework helps sell Netflix as a company that rejects stereotypical, demographic-based forms of market segmentation, promoting the common trope that algorithms can instead reveal non-essentialist forms of identity (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 123; Harvey, 2014; Prey, 2018, p. 1092; Seaver, 2012). In a 2018 *New York Times* profile, Netflix executive Lisi Nishimura asserts this in a quotation that echoes Yellin's, saying, "We don't pull demographic information because you would be in danger of imparting biases of what a 75-year-

old Japanese grandmother would want to watch versus a 14-year-old kid from Ohio" (Zinoman, 2018). This line of thought has been picked up by the trades, with a 2017 *Variety* article on Netflix celebrating the company's use of "global content recommendations that defy stereotypes" (Roettgers, 2017). Never mind that algorithmic systems can be the opposite of cosmopolitan, in fact reflecting traditional stereotypes of race and ethnicity back to us (Baker & Potts, 2013; Noble, 2018).

The intended alignment between statistical precision and humanistic connection is underscored by the two respective terms that Netflix uses interchangeably to refer to these groups: taste *cluster* and taste *community*. The invocation of a market as a "community" is important in how Yellin and others promote the taste cluster as a mechanism of a cosmopolitan, networked global society. If, as Netflix claims, taste cannot be reduced to demographic identity or geographic location, then taste clusters/communities can highlight moments of unexpected affinity between people from different backgrounds. By using observed taste to group its audience rather than demographics based on geo-cultural and cultural-linguistic similarity, Netflix attempts to square the highly individualized nature of its recommendation system with the global scope of its operations. The taste cluster thus solves a functional problem for the company—how to manage an ever-increasing audience made up of untold numbers of "niche" audience groups—while also giving it an opportunity to sell new partners and publics on taste clusters as a Netflix innovation. While it makes sense that the taste cluster as a form of social organization would exist naturally in the world, Netflix P.R. suggests that its data analytics systems are uniquely powerful and precise enough to pinpoint these groups of like-minded viewers. We are, of course, asked to take this on faith since Netflix famously keeps its audience data hidden from the public (Gray, 2017, p. 80). But even setting aside the veracity of Netflix's "taste cluster" claim, the claim itself does the public work of positioning the company as a force that locates and values cross-cultural communities of viewers.

Ironically, Netflix's notion of the taste cluster celebrates the possibilities of cross-cultural taste similarities while erasing difference. It both invokes a trans-border, cosmopolitan affinity of taste while suggesting that identity status is not a determining factor in the construction of taste. It also exemplifies the trend of streaming platforms using mountains of user data to engage in their own sophisticated theoretical and statistical analysis of audience tastes—often in ways that recall Bourdieuian sociological practices while questioning Bourdieu's conclusion that tastes arise from and structure social hierarchies (Harvey, 2014; Seaver, 2012; see also Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, trade and journalistic rhetoric tends to echo Netflix's celebration of the taste cluster as a way to recognize cross-cultural taste similarities without having to deal in the complicated business of cultural power and difference, with one *Wired* article noting that it affords Netflix "freedom from worrying about signals like geography, gender, and age" (Barrett, 2016). Such celebratory, P.R.-influenced pronouncements offer a different mode of cosmopolitanism than that described above—one that superficially celebrates connection across identity boundaries on a global scale but fails to engage substantially with difference and distinction.

Globalized streaming: the cosmopolitan spin

In a moment when Netflix and Spotify are gaining footholds in new international markets, their cosmopolitan brands offer an implicit counterpoint to anxieties over platform

imperialism, or the tendency of a small number of mostly—though not exclusively—U.S. American digital platforms to accumulate power and capital by serving as the world's major conduits for communication and media practice (Jin, 2015; see also Fuchs, 2010). Netflix, in particular, has been a flashpoint in debates over platform/cultural imperialism around the world, which have only intensified as the service has expanded its geographic scope. Its entrées into new territories occasionally animate protests from local consumers, governments, and media industries concerned about local content quotas, introduction of foreign ideologies, local language broadcasts, and suppression of local media industries among other issues (Lobato, 2018; Roxborough & Ritman, 2018; Warner, 2016). Spotify, likewise, has been charged with cultural imperialism at the level of content, with industry and journalistic discourse suggesting that the platform's curatorial playlist model, fed in part by the feedback loop of algorithmic recommendation systems drawing from listener metadata, highlights and promotes only the most popular artists within the U.S.-based record industry (Aguiar & Waldfogel, 2018; Forde, 2016).

The platforms' cosmopolitan brands thus seek to put a positive spin on a global uniformity that has long been associated with capitalist empire. They present each service's international imprint not as a dystopian, all-consuming content pipeline but as a promoter of diversity. If the idea of accessing media culture via one global digital platform is more frightening than exciting (and, indeed, the phrase "global domination" pops up repeatedly in trade and journalistic discourse about both Netflix and Spotify's international ambitions), the platforms work to clean up the optics of what appear to be platform-imperialist business practices. Netflix executives, for instance, stress publicly that the platform encourages more than simply north-to-south or west-to-east media flows. Often, this is presented through the typically vague rhetoric of corporate globalization, as in one CNN interview wherein Netflix CEO Reed Hastings pre-empts charges of platform imperialism, instead saying that we should "think of [Netflix] as trying to curate the world's best stories and provide them to the whole world" (Anashkina & Fink, 2016). This gesture toward cross-cultural viewing is consistent with the platform's "translational" brand, which is built around its attempts to target "foreign" programming to audiences around the world (Havens, 2018, p. 328). The general idea that Netflix's global presence can thus in fact *encourage* global media diversity rather than squash it is likewise at the heart of the taste cluster, which uses the media object as the site of serendipitous intercultural affinity. Similarly, Spotify's "I'm With the Banned" and Global Cultures Initiative suggest that the service encourages a multicultural blend of artistic experiences rather than simply reasserting the global popularity of a small handful of mostly American and European pop acts.

In touting their internationally focused engagement with diversity, Netflix and Spotify routinely invoke their sophisticated computational systems as paths toward greater human understanding. Broadly, then, they promote a positive, humanistic vision of algorithmic culture, or the "enfolding of human thought, conduct, organization and expression into the logic of big data and large-scale computation" (Striphas, 2015, p. 396). This is particularly important at the moment of their globalization, as it enables the companies to highlight algorithms as engines of multiculturalism. As Spotify's logic goes, if curated playlists can expose us to artworks by people from other cultures, reveal new markets for "global music," and engender feelings of empathy for immigrants and refugees, then algorithmic culture more broadly can be considered a force for good. "I'm With the Banned" suggests

that diverse tastes reveal possibilities for connection and progressive forms of sociality—an idea that flatters the listener and presents Spotify as the curator of such tastes. The Global Cultures Initiative likewise proposes that the platform's "Discover" brand of curated playlists will act as avenues of greater exposure to different cultures rather than the oft-repeated charge that they represent invasive and unimaginative sources of familiar musical experiences (Harvey, 2014; Pelly, 2018). For Netflix, the taste cluster allows the company to tout the complexity and capriciousness of taste on a mass scale while also pointing out how its data analytics offer the supposedly revelatory (but, as we have seen, relatively familiar) discovery of taste affinities across identity lines. The cosmopolitan brand thus offers an implicit rebuttal against the idea that streaming entertainment and algorithmic culture make us less adventurous. In their "dramatic performances" of globality, to again invoke Tsing, Netflix and Spotify promote algorithmic culture as a pathway to global connection, thereby justifying it as essential to their global ambitions as well as their broader cosmopolitan projects. At a key moment in the platforms' play for global dominance, this sells Netflix and Spotify's globalization as benevolently multicultural rather than cold, techno-corporate, and threatening to global cultural diversity.

Conclusion: multicultural branding and global platforms

This article has explored how two public- and industry-facing initiatives by Spotify and Netflix, "I'm With the Banned" and the concept of the "taste cluster," respectively, enable the two companies to position themselves to the public and the media industries as progressive, cosmopolitan institutions. These strategies allow Spotify and Netflix to focus attention on their sensitivity to multicultural difference rather than their platform-imperialist global expansion strategies. In making such claims, I argue that these two initiatives do not reveal a fundamental truth about the relationship between popular media and intercultural affinity, so much as they allow digital entertainment platforms to employ cosmopolitan, multicultural branding as a way of encouraging public acceptance of their financial and technological practices. This, in turn, may result in the public and industry players viewing such services as institutions primarily invested in philanthropic and progressive politics instead of global expansion and greater market share.

The two services' cosmopolitan brands develop from a longer trend of corporations and advertisers selling certain consumption practices as central to progressive cultural citizenship (Banet-Weiser & Lapsansky, 2008). Netflix and Spotify thus recycle for an algorithmic era an overtly multi- and cross-cultural approach to marketing and brand identity that has existed for decades. Such a model offers consumer-oriented performances of difference that promote corporate attentiveness to diversity and court audiences embodying a variety of backgrounds—all strategies that are important to streaming platforms as they enter new international markets. Fashion company United Colors of Benneton's famous diversity-oriented campaign offers a paradigmatic historical example of this sort of visibly multicultural marketing, but we can observe it throughout the history of conglomerated brands performing difference in post-1980s environments of niche marketing and narrowcast entertainment (Becker, 2006; Giroux, 1994; Lotz, 2005; Sender, 2005). Like many such practices, the cosmopolitan branding strategies discussed here present their multicultural appeals through a flattened, one-dimensional, and consumerist approach

to promoting difference, all while congratulating the corporation as the force discovering and engendering it (Giroux, 1994; Sender, 2005, pp. 61–62).

What distinguishes Netflix and Spotify's cosmopolitan brands from earlier forms of multicultural marketing is that they refer back to the platforms' datified, algorithmic nature and their overtly global reach as the forces that help encourage cross-cultural understanding. By incorporating cosmopolitanism into some of their broader promotional projects—namely, selling their intensifying globalization as a positive development and showing how their data analytics systems can encourage interconnection via media—Netflix and Spotify imply that a global perspective buttressed by hard data about audience preferences will be the best route toward an engineered cosmopolitanism. As *globally scaled* promotional initiatives that tout streaming's supposed innovations through a cosmopolitan lens, taste clusters and "I'm With the Banned" suggest that Netflix and Spotify are not only sensitive to the particulars of international cultural difference, but that they are well equipped to encourage global understanding. The taste cluster highlights the possibility of intercultural affinities through taste, but in a way that reflects hoary tropes of psychographic marketing while ironically downplaying identity as a factor in the construction of taste. Whatever its merits in shedding light on the effects of the travel ban, "I'm With the Banned" "cynically deploy[s] woke optics and commodified activism" in order to curry favor with a predominately progressive user base (Pelly, 2017). The end result exemplifies a kind of "corporate transculturalism," wherein visions of globally fluid cultures and multicultural signification are used toward the ends of privatization and global market expansion (Kraidy, 2008, pp. 95–96). In their own ways, both projects thus exemplify the danger of cosmopolitanism "becoming reduced to a Western vision of global togetherness that, instead of foregrounding social inequality, is co-opted in new projects of power" (Chouliaraki, 2017, p. 53).

Indeed, one problem with the taste cluster and "I'm With the Banned" is that their claims on identity, culture, and engagement with difference are determined by market and algorithm-driven ideas about global identities and populations. Carmi (2018) sees a danger here, suggesting that Netflix and other digital services produce "algorithmically created" communities from the top down without considering how people self-identify. The hidden nature of such decision-making practices makes it increasingly difficult to research algorithmic culture beyond its public traces and points to the importance of holding platforms accountable for the social effects of their computational systems (Caplan, Donovan, Hanson, & Matthews, 2018). We may not have access to how Netflix and Spotify use the data that we provide, but we can question the alignments they propose between complex data analytics practices, global market expansion, and a vision of a more understanding world. Further studies in the realms of streaming and surveillance might consider how data-tracking and analytics systems are not only personally invasive, but also how digital media companies incorporate them into their newly global brands.

Through their cosmopolitan brand, Netflix and Spotify sell their global expansion practices as aligned with progressive politics rather than incongruous with them. The attempt to humanize mysterious, back-end business and technological practices represents a savvy P.R. move at a time marked by palpable anxiety about algorithmic culture. While I would not suggest that these questions' importance is determined only by a few specific political conditions, it is worth considering why digital platforms want us to see them as avatars of

global, cosmopolitan liberalism in an era marked by reactionary ethno-nationalism. This is especially apparent when we consider a phenomenon such as Facebook's Cambridge Analytica scandal, wherein the recent rise of reactionary ethno-nationalist politics is in part blamed on the abuses and failings of data-harvesting and algorithmic systems. Interrogating such public-facing projects can enable us to understand how media systems exploit the desire for a world marked by intercultural connection and how such desires are not necessarily fulfilled by the global expansion projects of privatized digital entertainment.

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