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Unpopularity and cultural power in the age of Netflix: New questions for cultural studies' approaches to television texts

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Abstract

Although Internet-distributed television bears much in common with the television long studied and theorized using cultural studies-based approaches to analysis, several of its features profoundly deviate from earlier television norms and require reassessment and adaptation of theoretical frames. This article focuses on the issue of textual popularity in relation to these services and identifies key challenges to using the same frames of cultural power that have been used for studying television in the past. The underlying problem of audience fragmentation does not originate with streaming services, but this profound contextual change, in concert with industrial aspects that further distinguish internet-distributed television from television's past norms, must be addressed. The article concludes by identifying several ways the cultural power of streaming services can be investigated despite the challenges that emerging norms of Internet-distributed video provide.

Keywords

Audience fragmentation, industry logics, Internet-distributed video, Netflix, television

What has come to be understood as television studies (Brunsdon, 1998; Gray and Lotz, 2019) derives its theoretical roots from some of cultural studies' earliest investigations. The field-defining work of Charlotte Brunsdon (1981), David Morley (1980), Stuart Hall (1973), John Fiske (1987), Christine Geraghty (1991) and their contemporaries

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established television as a site of meaningful cultural practices and an important conduit of ideology. This research complemented others (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983) taking television and other popular video seriously and explored questions about its relationship to power in society. Of course cultural studies has taken up many other objects of study and expanded its theoretical influences in subsequent decades. But this examination returns to cultural studies' foundational research on television and its construction of television as a form of 'popular' culture in order to investigate the conceptual challenges posed by the characteristics of streaming services.

Much of the sophistication of contemporary television studies owes to its cultural studies' foundation. The theoretical nuance with which Hall conceptualized representation and the 'decoding' of television (Hall, 1973; Media Education Foundation, 1997) provided a basis for rich scholarship that considerably advanced thinking about television and its role in society. Cultural studies' engagement with television subsequently concerned itself with theorizing the diverse forms of pleasure, power, discourse, experience, and identity that television produces. Such inquiry understands television as a crucial source of storytelling within cultures – both in its factual and fictional forms. Television's storytelling power derives from its vast reach and selective ability to tell particular stories about particular types of people and plays a role in constituting dominant ideology and in the operation of hegemonic power. In the 1980s, the scarcity of its offerings – both in paucity of channels and a channel's ability to only deliver a single program at a time – afforded television and its texts with notable cultural power.

During the last two decades of disruption to the norms of home video consumption introduced by digital distribution technologies, scholars have faced the challenge of adapting and expanding theoretical frameworks for studying television to Internet-distributed catch up (iPlayer) and streaming services (Netflix). Many aspects of Internet-distributed television bear a considerable correspondence to the 'technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking' that Spigel (2004: 2) describes as characteristic of television. Yet, the parallels are not uniform. Streaming services create the opportunity for markedly different practices of looking that revise what were once norms of both television and film. They allow for different experience by many measures, including enabling different viewers to simultaneously watch many different things, an affordance that undermines what Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) described as television's ability to construct a 'cultural forum'. Several of the emerging protocols of streaming services provide this opportunity for viewers to consume stories at their own pace and schedule. This augments audience fragmentation that began to be normalized by distribution technologies such as satellite television and videocassette rental in the 1990s and digital video recorders (DVRs) at the turn of the century. Consequently, societies remain full of in-home video viewing, but what viewers watch now varies widely, and the landscape of services used to access that content – and their underlying industrial characteristics – is also more variable and complex. Of course, there is also much continuity. Time spent watching video – now across a variety of screens and devices – remains very high and a significant component of daily leisure. This mix of sameness and difference poses many challenges to how we think about television and what mix of concepts and theories we use to understand it.

The differences should not entirely disorient our approaches. Yet, while in-home video viewing remains a popular and pervasive leisure activity, individual texts have become far less popular or pervasive. A key dilemma for using a cultural studies approach to examine streaming services derives from the uncertain popularity – and thus power – of their texts. Viewers' lack of control over the television schedule and the relative scarcity of texts in the 1980s enabled scholars to assume texts achieved a degree of pervasiveness that steadily eroded in subsequent decades. A base level of popularity was simply a characteristic of television under the conditions of television from the 1960s through the 1980s in many countries, and enabled scholars to presume shows such as *Nationwide, Crossroads, Coronation Street* or *Cathy Come Home* played a role in culture that can be certainly asserted of few texts today. To be sure, this is a very basic notion of popularity, which Hall (1981) quickly discards in his 'Notes on "Deconstructing the Popular"', which is primarily engaged in the battle fought by early cultural studies over what constitutes culture. But 40 years later, forms of 'mass' culture grow rare and warrant consideration of the adjustments in the audience scale of in-home video. Whether or not it is still tenable to speak of 'popular culture' as a category in its own right, or in any kind of stable relation to elite, high or dominant culture, is itself worthy of interrogation, though beyond the scope of this article.

Nonetheless, the category of the popular remains entrenched in approaches to television derived from cultural studies – regardless of its distribution technology. In assessing the cultural power of contemporary television and in-home viewing, we lack an appropriate vocabulary for how to describe and theorize video services such as Netflix – something that is similar to a channel, yet notably different. It is a service that nearly half the population of some countries pays to receive, but offers so many text options that few texts may achieve anything approaching the scale of viewers of 1980s television. Although regarded by many as just another option among other video choices, it is a service that is different in every nation, carries a rotating library of 5000-odd titles, and can be used to different and unpredictable effect by a wide variety of different constituencies – from science-fiction fans to preschoolers. What modes of critical evaluation are consequently appropriate and possible in this context?

Where popularity was central in many of cultural studies' analyses of television, this article examines how the comparative unpopularity of much streaming service viewing challenges such approaches for analysis. The article first identifies two industrial aspects that significantly distinguish the current context of analysis from the past: the absence of data about audience scale and a business model unlike those previously typical that does not prioritize mass audience construction. Identifying these features provides necessary path-clearing for the discussion of audience fragmentation that follows. Although audience fragmentation is not a phenomenon introduced by or isolated to streaming services, it is their dominant mode of operation and on-demand access has considerably intensified the fragmentation introduced by expanded channel choice. This discussion identifies the multiple ways streaming services have exacerbated audience fragmentation and the features that correspondingly work against the features of popularity once assumed to be inherent to television. The article focuses on issues related to studies of television that foreground texts. Other cultural studies-derived approaches that are less centrally about texts – such as du

Gay et al.'s (1997) circuit of culture – do not suffer precisely the same challenges, but warrant reflection as well.

Unknown audience scale

The most obvious challenge to assessing the popularity of streaming services and their texts is the lack of public data about text consumption.[1] Previous conceptualization of popular television owes a debt to metrics of consumption that are no longer authoritative. Although audience size was never the sole determinant of the popular, many analyses were buoyed by data about the exceptional scale of audience. Many of the programs now part of a received mythology of television's influence on culture – the *Roots* miniseries for US discussion of racism, *Cathy Come Home* giving voice to homelessness in Britain, or any of the other examples commonly rehearsed in the literature, were known to have reached a significant number of television sets. A considerable amount of the perceived influence of these series derived from their market-based popularity, which can only be known with access to audience ratings or equivalent metrics.

Netflix does not even release *subscriber* counts for its international markets, let alone anything resembling the traditional 'ratings' of linear channels. The proprietary nature of the data collected by Netflix and most other streaming services means that it is impossible to know with any certainty how many people are watching in a given country or what they are watching. In early 2020, Netflix did begin reporting daily Top 10 data by country. This does reveal what is most watched,[2] but nothing beyond ordinal ranking is provided, which makes it impossible to gauge cumulative viewing. Moreover, the 10 most viewed titles, out of 5000 in many countries, is likely an insignificant accounting of the titles being viewed.

Although Nielsen ratings and similar measures were not the starting point of establishing the cultural significance of linear television, they provided an important guide and revealed the scale at which television series could be understood as different types of cultural phenomena. Studies about streaming services and their texts lack context of scale except on the rare occasions streaming services reveal this information, and even then, the data are often difficult to contextualize and not independently verifiable.[3] To be fair, the main reason scholars had viewing data in the past was because of the reliance on advertising and the use of viewer metrics as the basis of advertising deals. This industrial dynamic created support for independent agencies (Nielsen, BARB) to generate viewer data. Subscriber-supported streaming services are not being deliberately nefarious in keeping data to themselves – there just is not an industrial reason to support independent measurement.

Proxies do exist for some of these metrics, but they invariably pose their own problems of reliability, objectivity, or scope. For example, market research firms have offered estimates of country-specific subscriber levels outside of the United States, and some firms claim to have developed mechanisms for estimating levels of viewing for specific titles. Netflix does occasionally disclose viewing numbers for particular shows – although often this offers fairly decontextualized information such as worldwide viewing, that lacks relative comparison. Notably, bits of released data have often been surprising, for example that *The Crown* did not rank among the Top 10 shows viewed in the United

Kingdom, and that US titles were among the most-watched titles throughout much of the world (Kay, 2019). In some cases, proxies for cultural impact such as press coverage of particular shows, social media buzz and industry awards are taken as indications of popularity, but none of these sufficiently provide a meaningful or reliable indication of the reach or impact of Netflix shows, especially among a broad audience. These types of elite commentary (social media may be of the people, but those using it to deeply dissect television series are not) are ultimately poor substitutes for the blunt, though consistant and reliable metrics available for linear television viewership.

This inability to gauge scale of reach makes it difficult to apply a cultural studies approach aimed at making an assertion about the implications of ideological factors – dominant and otherwise – in texts. While assertions more characteristic of film studies, such as those attending to aesthetic and formal features are not impeded by this uncertainty of scale, scholars need to account for the scale of viewership in making claims of cultural significance. It is a paradox, because even though 21st-century television texts – distributed by Internet and other technologies – may rarely reach a 'mass' audience, these texts still do ideological work and can be profoundly important to those who view them.

Business models seek satisfaction not mass popularity

Beyond the challenge of identifying what texts are widely screened and thus are more likely to have cultural impact, arguably a more substantive industrial pressure confounding the mass reach once assumed of television is the extent to which most streaming services are not built on creating mass audiences for particular shows. The sizable audiences reached by television in the 1980s and earlier played a significant role in its perceived power in reinforcing, or on rare occasions, challenging dominant ideology. But the success of subscriber-funded, Internet-distributed video services is not measured by constructing a mass audience in the manner common for linear, ad-supported services. The scarcity of pre-multichannel television, and the related scarcity of content that could be included in the schedule, made it possible to imagine 1980s television as popular by design. The industrial practices of the time created and conceived programs differently from the industrial logics of niche services – whether distributed by cable, satellite or Internet. Even 'failures' reached audiences many times the size of today's successes.[4]

The comparatively small audience scale achieved by streaming service titles is not a discrepancy that disqualifies streaming services and their shows from being part of popular culture, nor does it prevent us from using a cultural studies framework for their analysis, but it does warrant particular theorizing. The evident popularity of a service such as Netflix cannot confer popular culture status upon all the titles in its catalog in the manner reasonably assumed of programming as part of a linear schedule offered by one of a handful of channel choices four decades ago. Beyond theoretical opining on the nature of the popular, it is necessary to establish something like a threshold of significance required to warrant the type of assumed cultural consequence previously applied. Programs lacking a mass audience are still culturally important, but we do not have – in the inherited scholarship – good mechanisms for arguing how and why they are implicated in the construction and transmission of significant cultural power.

Assessing the cultural significance of streaming service programming is difficult. This is not strictly a matter of programs deriving greater significance based on the scope of their audience, although this is a consideration. Features of Netflix's business model allow different strategies from linear, ad-supported services. It is not compelled to prioritize series that will attract the largest audience, but instead can simultaneously service many different sensibilities and aggregate viewers across national borders. Nevertheless, its programs may achieve a different type of cultural significance. A series that is consumed by many in a particular, but small, taste cluster might have cultural significance equivalent to or greater than a title viewed by more people in general – in a manner characteristic of 'phenomenal television' (Lotz, 2014; pp. 40–45). For example, the Netflix series *Sense8* was hailed for its non-binary constructions of gender and sexuality, which anecdotally, appeared to make it widely viewed among those who might be identified as part of a queer-embracing taste culture. Although the Netflix movie *Birdbox* may have been viewed by more subscribers overall, it may not have the subcultural significance of *Sense8*.

These two industrial factors – the lack of audience metrics and that streaming services (at least Netflix[5]) can succeed without prioritizing the mass popularity of each text – are foundational differences that affect the study of the video these services produce and circulate. They do not entirely negate the theories and goals of cultural studies approaches to television nor make use of such approaches impossible, but they are crucial contextual changes that must be acknowledged and accounted for in the scope of research questions and analytic design. The article next examines how analysis of television texts derived from early cultural studies assumptions is challenged by its persistence as a medium that is watched by a mass audience, but that disperses that attention across a wide array of programming sources and shows.

Cultural power in niche media and unpopular television

The wide adoption of streaming services in some countries has escalated the scale of audience fragmentation. Fragmentation has been a strong trend since the 1990s and arguably warranted adjustments to television's presumed status as a mass medium for some time.[6] Although cultural studies theorists have been certain to make clear that the significance of popular culture is not directly or exclusively tied to its popularity (Frith, 1998), this issue of establishing popularity in a post-mass media age is deeply vexing for using theories of television established before the 1990s to examine the texts developed subsequently. In many countries, only sports matches and exceptional media events reliably reach anything comparable to the once-assumed norm of the mass audience and popular culture of 40 years ago. It is factually the case that very few television shows are at all 'popular' in the manner of which television was once capable, and that was largely presumed typical. The ability of niche media to reproduce cultural power in the manner of mass media has not been significantly contemplated (Lotz, 2014; Webster, 2014), thus making it difficult to assess contemporary television in a manner consistent with the earlier scholarship.

The experiential features of Internet-distributed television discourage the mass popularity once common to television in two key ways: in relation to *scope* of content and *time* flexibility. The freedom to watch any show in a streaming service library *at any*

time, in combination with this expanded scope of available programs, produces an exponential effect on audience dispersal. Both result in much more choice for viewers and lead to substantial audience fragmentation. Scope is an issue in terms of how the capacity of streaming service libraries provides content options many times greater than the number of slots available on a channel in any day, week, or month. Also, there is the scope provided by other service options. Streaming services coexist in a world that also includes the enduring offerings of linear channels and their related catch-up services.

One of the ways streaming services diminish the popularity of their texts is through library breadth many times greater than that available to a linear service. The scope of a streaming library may allow a streaming *service* to have a considerable role in culture, maybe even to exert cultural power, but attention to the service is likely spread widely across its library. The problem of scope is particularly acute in considering the most widely used multinational services. In 2020, Netflix's libraries ranged from 6214 titles in the United Kingdom to just over 4002 in Portugal, among the 32 countries monitored by Unogs. In the case of television programs, a title might include 20 or more hours of programming. Even Netflix's smallest library offers far more than could fit in the 168 hours available to a linear service in a given week. This makes it more difficult for particular *texts* to achieve the cultural significance of those placed within a linear schedule.

This difference in capacity and the difference of on-demand access versus linear supply also means that the inclusion of a text in a library is likely of much less significance than the inclusion of a text in a schedule. The competition for inclusion on a program schedule with scarce capacity is quite high. Even without viewing data, analysts can surmise that persistent inclusion on a schedule indicates a basic level of popularity, and relative audience size and cultural reach can be assumed about programs that air in evening hours versus the early morning or midday. Given scarce capacity, it was reasonable to assert any show on a linear schedule had a level of cultural significance. But this cannot be attributed to every title in a streaming library.

The technological and industrial affordances that allow streaming services such library capacity enables them to pursue different strategies than channels. Channels have tended to seek coherence in 'brand' or identity across their programming (Johnson, 2011). Netflix's strategy – although perhaps not representative of streaming services generally – is quite different. Unlimited by signal capacity, Netflix arguably pursues a programming strategy infeasible for a linear service. Described elsewhere as a 'conglomerated niche' strategy (Lotz, 2017), Netflix uses the affordances of Internet distribution that allow its millions of subscribers nonlinear access to different programs at self-appointed times so that it can be different things to different subscribers. Netflix consequently does not have a particular program brand nor does it cater to a single audience or taste niche in the manner of specialty, and even some more general interest, channels. It is a source of high-end prestige drama like *The Crown*, genre fare such as horror and science fiction, kids and teen programming, an array of documentary that spans the gamut from award-winning to true crime, and at one point, the service reported its most popular content was an Adam Sandler movie (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 2016). Such variation in programming suggests how the service may be widely used but also how texts attract quite different viewers. This variation illustrates how Netflix builds its library to service a multiplicity of what it has called 'taste communities' (Adalian, 2018;

Barrett, 2016). Although it targets broad audiences with some titles – notably its Hollywood-style films such as *Extraction* and *6 Underground* – titles likely to be 'most viewed' are not the sole focus of the service. In fact, its most valuable titles are those that may only be known within the taste communities to which they are targeted.

This program strategy of pursuing distinct taste communities has multiple implications that differentiate subscriber-funded video-on-demand services (SVODs) such as Netflix from television. Television has been theorized to create shared cultural texts powerful in their ability to provide consistent and wide-reaching portrayals, but Netflix can succeed without pursuing or prioritizing only a strategy of mass attraction, and this makes appreciating the cultural significance of its texts difficult. Without a schedule and interstitial promotional breaks, many of the mechanisms for promoting titles to a wide audience are absent or opted against. Netflix may control the home screen and recommendations viewers see but it highlights content that matches previously viewed titles instead of blanketing all subscribers with the same title recommendations.

Even those titles discussed by critics and journalists encompass a small subset of what subscribers choose to watch, and many titles that do not align with the critical taste culture go without notice by these cultural intermediaries. Netflix's kids and teen series illustrate this point well. Rarely would a Netflix subscriber who does not have kids using the service have any idea of the service's offerings. Far more popular journalism will explore *Tiger King* than many other titles that target more specific tastes. The fantasy adventures *The Witcher* and *Cursed* are good illustrations – these series ranked among most watched, but received scant attention in the press.

The point here is not that critically acclaimed or most-watched titles are especially culturally important, but that it is very difficult to perceive what texts on Netflix matter to different audiences in a manner challenging for cultural analysis. A service optimized for personal taste obscures much else. Many titles and the passion with which specific taste communities regard them can remain obscured in a manner much less likely when the same, few shows are promoted and available in a linear schedule. There is little in the scholarship to frame phenomena that are neither mass nor related to fanship, but such a middle ground is becoming a common mode for contemporary audiovisual services.

Another key difference of Internet-distributed video from linear television that exacerbates the tendency toward audience fragmentation is the role of *time and timing* in relation to audience construction and the operation of cultural power. Indeed, much of the cultural pervasiveness of textual engagement is owed to the collective co-viewing that television's network era distribution regime enabled, or rather, required. For those who missed the live airing, access to that piece of television largely disappeared. Here too, features of streaming services work against the common temporality that previously enabled television texts to function as popular and temporally shared culture. This specificity of time was important to the cultural role television played. Television before the 1990s was fleeting and ephemeral – available at a particular time and then gone; a norm that required the audience to view simultaneously and at an appointed time. Videocassette recorder (VCR) adoption enabled some control of viewing time, but despite this and subsequent technological interventions, viewing behavior data suggest that until the last decade most television viewing has remained tied to a particular moment determined by the scheduler.

Reconciling the different temporality of streaming services involves both affordances and limitations for those concerned with investigating questions of cultural power. The lack of a scheduled viewing time diminishes the ability of streaming service titles to generate immediate conversation, but the long-term catalog access also enables later viewing, once a phenomenon begins to emerge around a text. Streaming services arguably lack what might be considered an 'agenda-setting-like' power that derives from offering programs with time specificity in a manner that can generate shared engagement and conversation within the culture, the sort of engagement that inspired discussions such as 'did you see what happened on X last night'. This simultaneous consumption, once common to television, created shared points of reference and is decreasingly common today.[7]

Although programs accessed through a streaming service are far less likely to be collectively shared in a manner of temporal co-viewing, they do offer greater access over days, weeks and months than did previous distribution technologies. This introduces considerable dilemmas for trying to assess cultural impact. Netflix now releases daily top 10 lists, but it is unclear how much these lists reveal about the service's use – how much use do those 10 titles account? Most-viewed status tends to be achieved immediately after availability, but programs continue to do cultural work long after they are 'dropped' into the library and the first wave of viewers encounter them. The ongoing access to content is an important new affordance in assessing cultural significance. For example, in December 2015, discussion of the documentary series *Making a Murderer* spread as more and more viewers found the series or heard discussion of it. The 20-hour examination of the potentially false imprisonment of Steven Avery – who had already served 18 years in prison for another crime he was wrongly convicted of – captivated many who then recommended the series to others. In a linear television era, those who missed a show or its start would find it difficult to access or catch up. It remains feasible and even likely to discover shows consistent with personal taste long past their debut as a result of recommendation functions. Multi-week, month, and now commonly, multi-year library availability extends the reach and potential cultural work of programs offered by streaming services. Given this alteration, what is the proper span of time by which to gauge the viewership and cultural reach of programs in a streaming service?

Scope and time continue to fragment viewership and diminish television's once common cultural function. Importantly, popularity is not the key issue here, but program reach serves as an indicator of the extent to which power operates through these texts in the manner of pre-multichannel television. It is not that niche content lacks cultural value or fails to function hegemonically for those who consume it. Rather, cultural studies approaches that ascribe significance at least partially with regard to considerations of reach and popularity can continue to be reasonably applied, but are not well suited to all cases.

Flagging these concerns is intended as a step toward dialogue and theory building about how to surmount these challenges. Cultural studies approaches have been applied to many other media that never exhibited the scale of popularity of television in the past. And, as recounted earlier, studies of television rooted in a cultural studies approach have focused on theorizing the diverse forms of pleasure, power, discourse, experience and identity that television produces, and several of these foci are unaffected by the differences of streaming services considered here. It is likely that some of these lines of inquiry

become less compelling or significant as a result of the extent to which the viewing of particular series normally operates as a niche phenomenon even though watching video in the home persists as a mass cultural practice. There are not clear or easy solutions, but it is incumbent on those turning to the study of streaming services and their series to wrestle deeply with these issues in establishing research questions and not presume titles heavily discussed in press accounts or about which Netflix releases limited data are the only, or most important, sites through which such services perform cultural work.

This interrogation of the bounds of popularity in relation to streaming services is more than quibbling. Engaging these questions gets to the core of the analytic project and the meaningful differences of the mediated world of 2020 compared with that of 40 years earlier. Where being included in a channel lineup endowed a level of cultural significance to programming, it is not clear that library inclusion is at all indicative of the cultural significance of the titles available on streaming services. Not all streaming services matter – culturally – in the same way, nor do their texts, and some may not matter much at all.

One clear need is for more conceptual complexity to be added to the concept of 'niche'. There is considerable variation in scales among niches, and the nature of how niches matter is blunted by the common and unspecific use of this term. Consider the varied viewing groups and textual categories identified as niche in these pages: pre-schooler fare, science fiction, prestige dramas and queer-embracing taste cultures. These are wildly discrepant categories both industrially and culturally, and an era of unpopular television requires more sophisticated categories for parsing among the different scales of niches and how and why they matter.

Thus, the contextual difference of mass versus niche media circulation and the significant differences in circulation power characteristic of linear versus on-demand distribution technologies have complicated the common previous frames of cultural analysis. There are substantial questions here about how media matter in a niche media world; questions that are important to establishing the authenticity and legitimacy of inquiries into popular culture far less 'popular' than was once the case. This lack of popularity by no means eliminates its significance for those who consume it and find it meaningful and important. But these changes in context must impact how claims of the significance of streaming services and their texts are theorized and understood.

Preliminary questions for investigating the cultural significance of streaming services

Given these different features of streaming services – as well as the broader changed cultural context in which they exist – can the theories and analytic lenses for studying in-home viewing derived from cultural studies be adapted? For that matter, how effective and appropriate do those tools remain for examining the linear television that persists but no longer achieves the once common expanse of viewing? The purpose of this article is not to captiously police the boundaries of acceptable scholarship, but to suggest that some lines of inquiry are particularly productive to advancing understandings. The aim is not to dismiss lines of inquiry or suggest that X must not ever be done, but to identify

the challenges of inquiry about culture and power in the post-mass video age. In the current environment, it is difficult to make claims about the cultural power of texts, and in most cases, single texts likely do not have the same cultural significance once reasonably presumed. Rather, broader questions about the intersection of texts and industrial practices may prove more suitable for investigating cultural power.

Such questions likely require investigations that span beyond single texts. Inquiries are better aimed at the significance that can be found in *identifiable patterns*. Importantly, texts on streaming services still do important cultural and ideological work, though the ways in which that work differs from what was typical in the past requires assessment. Streaming services are able to construct audiences differently, and this is relevant to questions of culture making. Of particular note is the multinational reach of some services and the extent to which the industrial features of a service enable it to cater to tastes and sensibilities too narrow to be valued in ad-supported, linear commissioning. A notable site for investigation is the emphasis Netflix has placed on developing series and films about teenagers, many of which are produced outside of the United States. For instance, comparison of the stories told about teen life, ideological patterns in these stories, and differentiation from common themes of linear television or theatrical film treatment of such stories would be more helpful to appreciating the phenomenon than analysis of a single text such as *13 Reasons Why*.

Another angle of investigation might involve pushing away from the mass culture assumptions of in-home video viewing that have been adopted from television to consider *how cultures of music and book use might be more applicable to the experience of on-demand video*. The affordances of title scope and viewer control that differentiate streaming service use from 1980s linear broadcasting are more typical of how music and books have been accessed and consumed for decades. Similarly, the music and book industries have a long history of targeting a broader array of particular tastes and not as exclusively aiming to construct a mass audience for a handful of texts.

Investigating the *operation of production power within streaming services* offers one trajectory of inquiry that explicates connections among culture and dynamics of power. A fairly big question in this regard interrogates whether Netflix and other streamers offer distinctive stories from those otherwise available and to what extent they can be perceived as consistently ‘dominant’ or ‘oppositional’. This question gets to the heart of whether there are meaningfully novel aspects of these services. Such a question might be best answered with a focus on original series and attention to whether, and if so how, the series developed are differentiated from those likely to be created by linear channels. Does Netflix enable the telling of new or different stories? Do its commissions present topics, people and places otherwise unseen? If so, what explains this ability? Its funding model? Its distribution technology? Its ability to cater to a narrow taste culture yet achieve feasible scale due to its multinational reach?

Another set of questions, related to production power, queries whether Netflix and other streaming services provide voice to creators that have been marginalized in or excluded from other distribution technologies. Relatedly, what evidence-based arguments can be mounted of Netflix’s impact on production communities marginalized by past norms? Is it expanding the range and improving conditions of production, or the opposite? Is it pushing incumbents to innovate? To what end, and with benefit to whom?

These too are questions most applicable to original series, but investigating licensing practices for acquisitions is also helpful.

There are many other questions related to *how circulation power is refigured* in a context of Internet distribution. By 2020, many multinational streaming services – many of which were based in the United States – had entered the market. However, one need not look too closely to realize the significant differences in how these services approach that multinational audience. Netflix, for example, has steadily increased its production of series outside of the United States. It also makes series produced in countries as varied as Brazil, Japan and Germany available to its multinational subscriber base, creating a circuit of multilateral cultural flow significantly different than the characteristics of past television trade. It is likely that few viewers had access to such a range of multinational production in the past. Can it be claimed that Netflix counters or varies the imperialist flow that has been previously common in multinational media? How is this development meaningful given that its libraries remain dominated by US productions?

There are also many ways in which Netflix exerts different circulation power than that characteristic of linear services and with consequences and implications distinct from those that have been theorized. Carefully constructed studies that explore how and to what extent being available on a streaming service extends or diminishes the audience for programs with particular cultural character or value make a significant contribution. There are many excellent, culturally meaningful stories produced every year, but the constraint of scheduling capacity made it difficult for audiences to connect with the most interesting material. Library-based services make them more accessible and discoverable.

Decades of scholarship explains the complex operations of power throughout the production and circulation process as it existed before Internet-distributed video. This work identified why shows are not made, are likely to be canceled, what ideas have little chance, and so on. It is not the case that these same limitations exist for streaming services – or exist in precisely the same ways. There remains constraint, although it is reconfigured and different, and those implications need to be assessed too. It may be that what we thought curtailed producer creativity or audience empowerment was not actually governing cultural production in the manner imagined. What are these new constraints and what do they reveal about the old constraints? Now that the circulation power of scheduling has been diminished, how do we theorize the role of interfaces and recommendation engines that replace them? Does algorithmic recommendation add value, or only does so while introducing significant limitations? Can this value overcome the potential for cultural power used to advance commercial priorities? What are the implications for both viewers and producers?

As these questions suggest, there are many, many questions yet to be asked and answered about streaming services, their texts and their cultural significance. Exploring many of them is not foreclosed by the lack of metrics regarding audience scale or even by the fact that these services may not aim to create content viewed by audiences on par with the mass era. While there remain questions to be asked of the texts offered by these services and the audiences who consume and make meaning from them, perhaps beginning with deeper theorization of the services themselves will aid in illuminating how to best reconcile cultural power amid such audience fragmentation.

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Notes

1. Notably, most Nielsen data were also not public. Data sets were produced for industry clients, and data with any depth were beyond what most scholars could afford, but a discourse about hits and failures that was based on independently collected data shared throughout the industry existed and a rudimentary but adequate knowledge of audience scale could be achieved.
2. The current accounting 'counts' a show if 2 minutes are viewed. This measure is very different from those used in counting linear viewers but is consistent with other Internet-distributed services.
3. Moreover, we can be much less certain of these reports given the services' self-interest in reporting them, and different services often report different data; for example, they might have very different measures of the duration of a 'view'. Such information is also difficult to discern. This variation also makes comparison among streaming services and linear television difficult.
4. In the interest of argument flow, this discussion presumes metrics of audience size, which are paramount for advertising-funded channels, as a norm that is not wholly the case of government-funded public service broadcasters. The charters of government-funded services also include society-making ideals that could encourage content with other priorities, although number of viewers is often a metric applied nonetheless.
5. Importantly, multinational subscriber-funded video-on-demand services (SVODs) assert quite different strategies. The video services of Apple and Amazon are offered in support of these companies' core device and retail enterprises, respectively. Disney+ and HBO Max aim to build direct-to-consumer businesses for owned content. This analysis focuses mostly on Netflix, which is primarily aimed at providing a multinational video service.
6. Of course the extent of fragmentation depends very much on one's location, though it is the case in most places that video is no longer scarce in the manner it was in the 1980s.
7. Indeed, shared and coterminous viewing happens, but I argue it is the exception. The launch of a widely anticipated show such as *The Mandalorian* may have demanded the immediate attention of many, but these cases are unusual.

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