Angkuran Dey

The Rise of Netflix and the Paradox of Choice

Abstract: User data and the choices that we make have emerged as contested areas in the world of cyberspace. This contestation is demonstrated through the rise of Netflix, an over-the-top (OTT) platform, which makes an exceptional claim to understanding the individuality of its users. A radical readjustment of the viewing experiences and the use of algorithms has led to the negation of individual choices. Platforms like Netflix function on this perceived sense of audience autonomy right from the time one creates their account. Algorithms shape the cyberspace that we inhabit and have become a part of our daily interactions. Platforms like Netflix have justified using their sophisticated recommendation systems to give their users a better experience and take them out of the dilemma of too many choices.

The paper seeks to argue how OTT platforms like Netflix steadily depersonalize the masses and direct users to a specific form of content. Through the use of concepts like "Algorithmic Governmentality," as given by Antoinette Rouvroy, the Buadrillan notion of simulation, individual agencies, and data collection methods. This paper seeks to question the notion of choice on Netflix and how our choices are being governed on the platform. Its complex personalization systems seem to be manufacturing choices under the guise of a user-friendly interface while profiling its users. This makes it imperative to look at Netflix beyond just as a platform or a content provider but as an entity that breeds through collecting and employing user data in various forms.

Keywords: Netflix, Governmentality, Data, Algorithm, Choice…

Introduction

In mainstream media, Netflix has become synonymous with the idea of binge-watching, and teenagers of the present generation have been dubbed 'screenagers'. The growing preference of consumers to watch Netflix at their convenience is disrupting the traditional television viewing experience. This success of Netflix and the personalized experience it offers to its users through analyzing vast amounts of data is changing the way audience tastes are being defined.

With well over 200[1] million subscribers worldwide, the impact of Netflix has somewhat consistently been underestimated by media conglomerates. The relationship that Netflix has with its subscribers is mediated by complexities, making it critical to take up an appropriate rubric for examining the intersections that elucidate this increasingly pervasive relationship. While claiming to construct the individuality of its users, it also renders them powerless, with their autonomy on the platform being steadily eroded. This renders the behavioural patterns of users abstract and shifts control away from individual agencies in a bid to replace the unpredictable lacunae of making a choice.

The platform has been celebrated as a medium that puts individual choices on a pedestal but is instead steadily disempowering its users through algorithms. The incongruity between predictability and unpredictability forms the basis of the paradox of choice, within which Netflix seeks to function. The controlling and profiling of

---

[1] Stoll, Julia. "Number of Netflix Paid Subscribers Worldwide from 3rd Quarter 2011 to 2nd Quarter 2020." *Statista*, 10 Feb. 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/250934/quarterly-number-of-Netflix-streaming-subscribers-worldwide/.

individual users allows Netflix to regulate behaviours and direct certain forms of content to diffuse the unpredictability that comes with each new user. Antoinette Rouvroy, while borrowing from the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality', developed the notion of "Algorithmic governmentality". Rouvroy's concept allows us to look at how data is collected from various online interactions in the burgeoning cyberspace leading to the priming of audience behaviour. Rouvroy and Berns describe algorithmic governmentality as:

> "a certain type of (a)normative or (a)political rationality founded on the automated collection, aggregation and analysis of big data to model, anticipate and pre-emptively affect possible behaviours."

This places Netflix within the domain of audience agency, identity, and the idea of autonomy. While alluding to the liberation of individuals, it masks the propensity for using big data that leads to profound forms of individual manipulation. It is indeed a simulacrum that Netflix creates in a bid to simulate a world that functions on choice. This makes it paramount to acknowledge the perils and decipher the complexities that have been invisiblized through various means.

Big data and the Power of Algorithms

Netflix has emerged as a run-away success story by using its subscription-based model to provide its users with video-on-demand (VOD) services. The platform employs a complicated data analytics model for influencing consumer behaviour and curating individual choices by gleaning data from its subscribers. Collecting such humongous sets of data points has created a well-oiled machine between the application of big data analytics and machine

learning algorithms. Big data, in simple terms, are the vast amounts of data points that get accumulated through a host of online interactions.

These interactions are growing exponentially every second as our world becomes mediated through data and to make sense of these colossal amounts of data, we require algorithms. While Netflix, in some cases, might rely on traditional audience measurement methods and even use surveys to gauge an understanding of the audience. It primarily prefers to create knowledge that is produced via its extensive data algorithms, revealing its 'big data mindset' and seeks to shape the identities and behaviours of its consumers (Arnold 80). The rapidly evolving usage of big data has rattled existing imaginaries and practices, whereby logic is produced by garnering data from interactions.

This leads us to the core question of the preponderance of an algorithmic life and the future of sovereignty. In this hyper-inductive world of digital interactions, new subjectivities are being produced through foregrounding the notion of human desires. These new imaginaries are being created through interactions on platforms like Netflix, which feels like a reflection of reality. In an age of "Surveillance Capitalism", as put forward by Shoshana Zuboff, companies are increasingly asserting their independence and, through making extensive claims about the people's individuality, are seeking to automate choices.

An intricate relationship ensues between the perceived space of choice, monitoring the consumer and carving out an environment where making a choice is turned into an unnecessary exercise. While this can be seen as a loss of freedom and agency, there

has always been a justification for taking over individuals' dilemmas, which is redefining the existing capitalistic structure. Giddens, while observing surveillance, sees it as: "constitutive of modernity alongside the advent of capitalistic enterprises."

Bringing in the Foucauldian understanding of power here, we have moved away from a world of 'sovereign power' to one of 'disciplinary power', which is being done by watching the population, here, the users on Netflix. However, bringing this framework into cyberspace, allows us to understand how platforms like Netflix seek to discipline their consumers towards making a particular set of choices. Antoinette Rouvroy's notion of "Algorithmic governmentality" looks at how algorithms seek to suspend the sources of uncertainty, which becomes vital when we are looking at making a choice.

It embodies the paradox of individual personalization, whereby an unwillingness to be profiled is not a choice anymore. The data collected is exhaustive, and everything becomes important regarding constructing a personal avatar of the consumer. While we might be free to breathe and act in our real-world interactions, algorithms seek to govern all senses of possibilities starting from our past to future projections.

Algorithms transform profiles and choices into an augmented realm of certain forms of predictable possibilities. One has lost the sense of freedom and is governed by the logic of intelligence embodied through the data collected from our interactions. Rouvroy's words sum up the personalisation paradox: "despite hyper-personalization, we are nobody." We have lost our inherent individuality and autonomy, which have historically formed the basis of our existence.

Simulation of Choice and Audience Autonomy

Right from the dawn of the enlightenment, autonomy has been the crown jewel of what makes us essentially human (Verbeek 44). However, it is ironic that this basis of humanity is under threat and that the rise of digital technologies is slowly taking away this crowned autonomy. This is exhibited through the roles algorithms play in reducing humans to mere data points to make decisions on their behalf, essentially turning them into puppets of the system. This radical readjustment of agencies involving human beings and technologies is blurring existing distinctions. While it might be easy to view the current convergence of digital technologies and human agencies as a threat, this would instead only lead to a polarization of the debate. It cannot be denied that we also seem to have given up on our autonomy and organizing our lives with our increasing dependence on technology.

The question of control and its illusion of choice can be looked at through the Buadrillan notion of simulation. In our everyday interactions, we are placed in this simulacrum of choices where we feel that we are the ones in control. Indeed, Netflix gives you a choice at the onset to select what forms of content you might like. What happens post that? One is pushed into complex interactions with data, and slowly our autonomy seemingly turns into a thing of the past. We are stuck in a maze of this choice of affordances as if it is a perfect representation of our autonomy and agency. The question, though, emerges now, where is the reality? Where are our choices? We have been pushed into a space where no longer there is a real or a truth that defines our sense of being (Baudrillard 5).

The consumer gets liquidated of all forms of referential and gets resurrected through identities created on platforms like Netflix. Netflix can be conceptualized as a hyperreal space, sheltered from human experiences and conceived through symbols based on data

points. This space becomes one of fascination, a place where our online avatars start to redefine our sense of being, and this myth venerates through the patterns of consumption. The knowledge being produced by Netflix works to negate choices and creates a sense of shared experiences bound by predictability. With the user being classified as data sets, the real-time use of algorithms takes over the responsibility to make that next choice. The knowledge thus produced has no reference to the real-life personhood of the user but produces a truth through data and leaves human agency out of the equation (Arnold 77). This seems to closely embody the dystopian realm of the "Brave New World" created by Aldous Huxley, where devices work invisibly and direct the individuals (Verbeek 46).

The abstraction of behaviours and inscribing identities onto profiles certainly has implications for human agency. Netflix's regulatory powers bring into perspective how human agency is essentially seen as a necessary part of one's being that is best surrendered. The simple interface of Netflix comes into play while shaping the interactions, as it seeks to hide the complexities involved in the process. The user becomes a part of the habitat, where Netflix steers the immediate response of the users and also foresees the long-term consumption patterns. This relationship between human and non-human entities has gone beyond just being in the background but has now permeated into becoming an inescapable reality. Amidst these immersive configurations, our lives on platforms like Netflix are being shaped in radically novel ways, and the ethical questions surrounding this convergence have emerged as a territory of deliberation. Looking at Ladelle McWhorter, who, while talking about freedom and agency, states:

> "If it is the case that power is the source of conscience and self-knowledge, then it would appear that individual selves have no control over their own beliefs and hence their actions, the agency is an illusion."

Conclusion

The growth of Netflix as the largest streaming platform has given rise to phrases like the 'Netflix effect' and 'binge watching'. However, putting Netflix into the box of a streaming platform would oversimplify the role it has been playing since its inception. Its use of data mining systems and algorithms has led to the datafication of its users. The platform has heralded a shift from a traditional television viewing experience to one where each user is served with a specific platter of content. The audience choices are produced by computing data sets and putting individuals into predictable boxes to avoid any form of unpredictability, which might deter its personalization and recommendation system.

With services like Netflix gaining traction and creating new agencies for the audience to make sense of the content present there. The shifting away of control from the users to maintain a sense of predictability has led to the steady depersonalization of the masses on the platform. The idea of surveillance, big data ideology, and the usage of algorithms have created potent forms of governance in the digital sphere, where choices remain limited. This paradoxical discourse surrounding choices and audience autonomy has come to define the role Netflix is playing in redefining the personhood of its users. A platform that runs on the currency of data brings with it the pressing questions of privacy, data storage, and ethics. Stepping into this debate has become vital, and there is no turning back from the fact that these concerns will remain.

Works Cited

Arnold, Sarah. *How Netflix Changed What We Watch on Our Screens*. 1 Apr. 2020,

    www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2019/0313/1036204-how-netflix-changed-what-we-

    watch-on-our-screens/.

 "Netflix and the Myth of Choice/Participation/Autonomy." *The Netflix Effect:*

    Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century, edited by Kevin

    McDonald and Daniel Smith- Rowsey, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, pp. 68–

    81.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Precession of Simulacra." *Simulacra and Simulation*, by Jean

    Baudrillard, University of Michigan Press, 1981, pp. 3–12.

Bellanova, Rocco. "Digital, Politics, and Algorithms." *European Journal of Social*

    Theory, vol. 20, no. 3, 15 Dec. 2016, pp. 329–347,

    10.1177/1368431016679167.

Crogan, Patrick. "Bernard Stiegler on Algorithmic Governmentality: A New Regimen

    of Truth?" *New Formations*, vol. 98, no. 98, 1 July 2019, pp. 48–67,

    10.3898/newf:98.04.2019.

Del Casino, Vincent J., et al. "The Social Life of Robots: The Politics of Algorithms,

    Governance, and Sovereignty." *Antipode*, vol. 52, no. 3, 24 Feb. 2020, pp.

    605–618, 10.1111/anti.12616.

Dent, Chris. "Identity, Technology and Their Confluence: Governmentality in the

    Digital Age." *Law, Technology and Humans*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1 July 2020, pp.

    81–96, 10.5204/lthj.v2i2.1437.

Dillet, Benoît, and Anaïs Nony. "Introduction: Noology and Technics." *The London*

    Journal of Critical Thought, vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 26–37.

Elrod, James M. "Book Review: Netflix & the Re-Invention of Television." *Critical*

    Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies, vol. 15,

    no. 1, Mar. 2020, pp. 93–95, 10.1177/1749602019888322a.

Erkan, Ekin. "The Post-Human Media Semblance: Predictive Catastrophism."

    Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge, no. 36, 1 June 2020,

    10.20415/rhiz/036.e06.

Gomez-Uribe, Carlos A., and Neil Hunt. "The Netflix Recommender System." *ACM*

    Transactions on Management Information Systems, vol. 6, no. 4, 28 Dec.

    2015, pp. 1–19, dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2843948, 10.1145/2843948.

Pop Stefanija, Ana, and Jo Pierson. "HOW to BE ALGORITHMICALLY

    GOVERNED like THAT: DATA- and ALGORITHMIC

        AGENCY from USER PERSPECTIVE." *AoIR Selected Papers of*

    Internet Research, 15 Sept. 2021, 10.5210/spirv2021i0.12227.

Rouvroy, Antoinette. "Algorithmic Governmentality and the Death of Politics."

    Green European Journal, 27 Mar. 2020,

    www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/algorithmic-governmentality-and-the-death-of-

    politics/.

sdiffrie. ""Priming" the Audience, "Profiling" the Customer: The Algorithmic

    Cultures of Amazon and Netflix." *NETFLIX STUDIES*, 23 May 2018,

    netflixstudies.com/2018/05/23/priming-the-audience-profiling-the-customer-

    the-algorithmic-cultures-of-amazon-and-netflix/.

Shapiro, Stephen. "Algorithmic Television in the Age of Large-Scale Customization."

    Television & New Media, vol. 21, no. 6, 26 July 2020, pp. 658–663,

    10.1177/1527476420919691.

Shoshana, Avi. "Governmentality, New Population and Subjectivity." *Subjectivity*,

vol. 5, no. 4, 6 Nov. 2012, pp. 396–415, 10.1057/sub.2012.19.

Törnberg, Petter, and Justus Uitermark. "Complex Control and the Governmentality of Digital Platforms." *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities*, vol. 2, 13 Mar. 2020, 10.3389/frsc.2020.00006.

Verbeek, Peter Paul. "Subject to Technology: On Autonomic Computing and Human Autonomy." *LAW, HUMAN AGENCY and AUTONOMIC COMPUTING EDITED by MIREILLE HILDEBRANDT and ANTOINETTE ROUVROY the PHILOSOPHY of LAW MEETS the PHILOSOPHY of TECHNOLOGY*, edited by Mireille Hildebrandt and Antoinette Rouvroy, Routledge, 2011, pp. 44–61.