

Review of Netflix at the Nexus: Content, Practice, and Production in the Age of Streaming Television [Book Review]

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From an order-by-mail movie rental service to a producer of award-winning films and TV series and a top contender amongst the legacy media giants, Netflix's almost incogitable evolution is indicative of the ways that digital technology has upended media's institutional and cultural norms. It's taken almost fifteen years since Netflix launched their streaming service in 2007 for scholars to gain sufficient perspective on the so-called disruptor's place within the media landscape; thus Theo Plothe and Amber M. Buck's (2019) edited collection, *Netflix at the Nexus: Content, Practice, and Production in the Age of Streaming Television*, is amongst the earliest few monographs to detail the institutional, technological, and cultural shifts that Netflix represents.

The titular word "nexus" is an operative conceptualization of Netflix's evolution, as the term's etymology implies simultaneously, and somewhat incongruently, a connection/link (a conjunction between old and new) and a center/axis. As Plothe and Buck (2019) outline, concepts like convergence and remediation are operative lenses through which to understand Netflix's role as a key conjunction, carrying television from its linear origins to its Internet-based future. On the other hand, these concepts come short of explaining the way Netflix has become an axis of the changing ontologies of film/television themselves—best emblemized by what Plothe and Buck (2019) describe as the "new terms for culture practice" (p. 1) that the platform inspires, like "binge-watching" (p. 1) and "Netflix and

chill” (p. 1). Like any good analysis of Netflix, *Netflix at the Nexus* contends with both what has transitioned and what has emerged as distinct through the platform’s increasing prominence, pursuing this question through the frames of platforms, content, and viewer practices. The chapters organized under each of these sections employ varied cultural and empirical methodology and identify key theoretical questions that arise from Netflix’s cultural dominance.

The first section of the book focuses on Netflix’s platform’s affordances and constraints. Collectively, the chapters in this section demonstrate that the platform is not only a culturally laden site of negotiation between Netflix and its users, but also indicative of the evolving nature of the medium of television itself. Jana Zündel (2019) starts the collection by interrogating the degree to which streaming television constitutes a new IV era of television. Focusing on how Netflix centers the experience of its platform around the ability to break from the linear schedule and the way that Netflix reconceptualize audiences through the lens of mass individualization, she argues that IV era streaming television is not just a shift in distribution logics, but an alternative conceptualization of seriality and audience engagement. Streaming television, she says, has not replaced former ontologies of television—which coexist and contrast within the streaming television landscape—it has disunified and heterogenized the way we conceptualize the medium itself. Chapter two is one of the best published analyses of the role that platform interfaces play in shaping contemporary film/television engagement. Annette Markham, Simona Stavrova, and Max Schlüter (2019) center their analysis of Netflix’s platform around the concept of control. They demonstrate that while Netflix sells the experience of its platform as highly integrated with users’ input—from the way users select their preferences to the way their navigation through the site trains the algorithm—in actuality, interface features also make hidden decisions on behalf of users and even soft-condition them toward specific actions. Further, the authors argue that analyzing these underlying conditioning features of the Netflix interface can make visible the cultural, ideological structures that are reinforced through the platform. Chapters three and four explore what the rise of streaming platforms indicate about the reconfiguration of media at an institutional level, with Luis F. Alvarez León (2019) examining the changing cultural-geographic economies that arise from internet convergence and Gabriele Prospero (2019) examining the way Netflix borrows interface design tactics from piracy indexing sites to cultivate users’ loyalty. Through their close analyses of Netflix’s platform, these first four chapters illustrate how platforms mediate our engagement with streamed media and fit into larger reconfigurations of media institutions, demonstrating that the platform is itself a nexus of digital distribution as well as an important

The book's second section examines Netflix's content brand. Through the methodology of textual analysis, the chapters in this section explore how Netflix uses the affordances of its liminal position to experiment with formal conventions, genre boundaries, the potentials of cultural representation, and the affordances of transnational hybridity. In Chapter five, Ana Cabral Martins (2019) analyzes *Stranger Things* (2016) and *The OA* (2016-2019) to demonstrate how Netflix's content collapses the divide between television and cinema, in effect replacing medium-specificity with the moniker 'content' which entails its own digital-age textual poetics. In Chapter six, Jessica Ford (2019) looks at how Netflix's position of both privilege and liminality within the television industry correlates with their "quietly radical" (p. 98) focus on themes of privilege and liminality in many of their original dramedies. Through analysis of five series, Ford (2019) reveals how this engagement with privilege and liminality manifests not only through representation of marginal characters and in storylines about the friction between individuals and systemic power, but also in the radical narrative structure and form that enables these themes to emerge with complexity. Further engaging with Netflix's treatment of marginality, the next two chapters focus specifically on Netflix's representation of gender and race, with Chapter seven analyzing *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) and Chapter eight focusing on *Beasts of No Nation* (2015), *13th* (2016), and *Luke Cage* (2016-2018). Both chapters demonstrate the necessity of analyzing cultural representation in relation to industry context and creative labor, especially as Netflix's liminal position affords the opportunity to rethink production logics. As the final piece in this section, Chapter nine turns its attention to a third element of Netflix's boundary-crossing content brand—its showcasing of international series, specifically ones that exhibit hybridity in their production processes, genre, and formal conventions. Oranit Klein Shagrir (2019) analyzes *Dramaworld* (2016-2021), a story about an American girl who mysteriously transports into a Korean drama, co-produced by Japanese streaming platform Viki in collaboration with Chinese, Korean, and American companies. The series is reflexive about both its mode of production and its reliance on fan prosumption. Shagrir (2019) argues that *Dramaworld's* cross-border production, cultural meshing, and thematization of the new role of the consumer may be indicative of the trajectory of transnational co-produced content that emerges from a global streaming landscape. Collectively, these chapters initiate a conceptualization of Netflix's content brand—which leans into the company's role as an industrial maverick by collapsing medium-specific distinctions, representing experiences of marginality, and showcasing hybridized international series—while also demonstrating the need for continued research

into to the unique production contexts of individual series.

The third section of *Netflix at the Nexus* focuses on viewer practices, including how users engage with the Netflix platform and integrate viewing into their daily routines. In Chapter ten, Sheri Chinen Biesen (2019) reflects on how Netflix's programming and interface design work together to encourage new viewing behaviors—most notably, the adoption of binge watching. Then, the remainder of the chapters draw on an integration of empirical audience research and platform studies, an intersection of research that is understudied albeit central to contending with the new modes of engagement wrought about by streaming media platforms. Chapters eleven and twelve focus on Netflix users in Italy and Singapore, respectively, drawing on methodologies such as content analysis of Tweets, observed walk-throughs of the Netflix interface, and semi-structured interviews. The two chapters push back against the technological determinism that sometimes plagues platform studies, demonstrating that Italian users' adoption of Netflix was not a disruption as much as a somewhat seamless integration of the site into their regular media routines and Singapore users often intentionally direct the algorithm's function, acting as co-producers of content. Chapters thirteen and fourteen explore the social and affective elements of users' engagement with Netflix. Theo Plothe and Amber M. Buck (2019) undertake an analysis of tweets under the #HouseofCards hashtag to examine the way spoilers circulate on Twitter. The authors find that most of the tweets tended to be about the action of watching the show itself and those that do discuss specific plot points mostly express vague emotional reaction (meant to elicit shared experience with other viewers) without giving away specific details, which demonstrates that viewers have adopted a shared etiquette around how to connect with the larger community of viewers on Twitter. Finally, Vanessa Amália D. Valiati (2019) interviews Netflix users in Brazil about the way Netflix gets routinized into their daily lives. Among other findings, Valiati (2019) discovers that these viewers have an almost reflexive technical competency with the interface and experience an emotional reaction akin to loss when they finish binging a series. While television has long structured many of the social routines of our daily lives, these final two chapters suggest that streaming platforms afford unique modes of social and affective engagement. The chapters in this third section take the anthology full circle, opening key inquiries into how users engage with the Netflix platform and its content—from how they develop competency with the interface to how they incorporate viewing into their daily lives and discuss content on social media.

Netflix at the Nexus explores how Netflix's platform features shape the experience of encountering film/television, how Netflix cultivates

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its brand through its original content, and how users engage with Netflix's interface. Collectively, the anthology demonstrates that Netflix has preserved some elements of legacy film/television culture while re-inventing others and elucidates the stakes of such transformations for user agency, cultural representation, and the routinization of television into daily life. While the collection does not cover every essential aspect of Netflix's role in the convergent media landscape—such as its intra-industrial relationships with legacy media companies including its content licensing strategies and its material-technological infrastructure—the anthology homes in on the key cultural, theoretical inquiries induced by the developing streaming ecosystem, making its chapters great additions to undergraduate syllabi. Moreover, amid the streaming wars, *Netflix at the Nexus* provides a roadmap for future comparative studies across emerging platforms.

Jennifer Hessler is a Lecturer in the department of Media, Journalism and Film at the University of Huddersfield, UK. Her work appears in *Television and New Media*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, and *Participations: Journal of Audience Research*, as well as numerous edited collections. Her current book project is a technological history of the Nielsen Ratings that examines the role of audience analytics and data-driven consumer surveillance in the foundation and evolution of commercial television.

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