

## Book Review

Ramon Lobato. 2019. *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. New York: NYU Press.

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2019 was a pivotal year for the reconfiguration of the U.S. streaming television model, which saw the introduction of several new players in the industry. *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (2019) is the consummation of a work begun in 2015 by the television scholar Ramon Lobato. It benefits from the inclusion of several perspectives and a variety of academic and professional sources. Consolidated by thorough research and detailed analysis, this publication calls attention to one of the first “global internet TV networks” (Reed Hastings, as quoted in Lobato 2019, 43) and leading streaming platform: Netflix, founded in 1997 by Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings, and later launched as a streaming service in 2007. By addressing theoretical and methodological issues in approaching the complex geography of digital distribution, the book provides a resourceful systematization of academic perspectives in the field of media studies, able to tackle the thorny geo-political, economic, socio-cultural, technological dimensions of streaming platforms and how they affect the circulation of television content on a global scale. Leaving aside specificities related to production and reception, *Netflix Nations* aims to explore more closely how Netflix remodels global distribution, by accounting for some of the most urgent topics in the study of contemporary media—such as cultural convergence, digital disruption, globalization, media imperialism. While observing the geography of online

television distribution, this book investigates Netflix’s role in redefining spatial patterns and logics of consumption behind the circulation of television content, as it shifted from local U.S. streaming services to global media platform operating worldwide in more than 190 countries.

The author ushers the reader carefully around two central questions. Firstly, Lobato considers how streaming services are transforming spatial dynamics of global distribution; secondly, he questions the very theories and concepts available to the academic community for understanding such transformations. Echoing media history milestones of yore such as Raymond Williams’ *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) and Milly Buonanno’s *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories* (2008), Lobato substantially bridges the conceptual gap in cultural studies and internet research, creating a direct conversation between academic classics in television studies and new media theories on platform studies that mostly focuses on approaches taken by the media scholars Ian Bogost, Nick Montfort, and Tarleton Gillespie. Engaging with both media and communication research, the book outlines the fundamentals for analyzing internet platforms *spatially* (i.e. as global distribution nodes) and technologically (i.e. as contingent instruments of digital transformations). Netflix is considered in the broader context of internet-distributed television, thus calling for an ecological

approach to understanding the intertwining of services, platforms, and institutions that converge in shaping the streaming television ecosystem. The book proceeds to a detailed analysis of the spatial patterns that influence the availability of content, switching between various mobilities and immobilities, while examining the discourses around Netflix as seen by audiences, industries, and often flummoxed regulators. In this sense, *Netflix Nations* constitutes a ground-breaking contribution in the field. It blurs intra-disciplinary boundaries and invites scholars to think about streaming platforms as hybrid media in need of a critical and cross-disciplinary perspective.

The book's first chapter goes into precise detail on the ontology of television platforms, both in the context of a historicization of television and in connection with different media forms (Spigel and Olson 2004; Turner and Tay 2009; Bennett and Strange 2011; de Valck and Teurlings 2013). By focusing attention on Netflix as a multifaceted corporate entity, the chapter helps problematize the role of streaming platforms in relation to television studies and new media theories (platform studies, internet studies), to ultimately redirect the reader towards a flexible analytical framework. Central to Lobato's discussion, Chapter I offers an original view on internet-distributed television that blends television and internet research and introduces the following chapters. Chapter II and III contribute respectively in localizing Netflix in the evolution of transnational television and in rethinking platforms in terms of infrastructures. Going through the sociopolitical implications of technological changes, Lobato echoes Raymond Williams' perspectives on television as "a site of structural conflict" (Lobato 2019, 47), thus shedding further light on a key debate in television studies of geo-industrial power relations as they have played out in the interrelation between dominant and peripheral markets. Netflix has undoubtedly proclaimed its global status; yet, as the author repeatedly emphasizes, it is still profoundly national (70), ever watchful to territorial constraints of legislation and licensing agreements.

Not only does Lobato's second chapter insert Netflix in the larger debate on the institutional context of global television (from satellite to streaming television), but its third also provides

the very framework for observing streaming platforms under the lenses of infrastructure studies (Lobato 2019, 74). Ramon Lobato retraces this infrastructural turn starting from its original focus on the materiality of media technologies (Innis 1951), as well as on the interplay between human and non-human actors that has long dominated debates in science and technology studies. Investigating the concept of infrastructure further, Lobato moves onto more recent theoretical evolutions at the intersection of media history, social science consumer research and geography. The chapter rapidly refocuses attention away from television studies to new media theories that explain the complexity of various Netflix-like players, and their entanglement between digital media services and socio-technical software systems. By stating the necessity of studying the design, affordances, limitations of large-scale online systems, comprised of several hardware and software components, Lobato engages with an extremely topical conversation within internet studies, shifting from a solely humanistic perspective and embracing approaches in fields as varied as engineering and information design. This call for an infrastructural turn in studies on internet-distributed television is accompanied by a useful list of key concepts in defining the relation between infrastructures and communication.

The core ideas suggested by Lobato as starting points for the understanding of Netflix's infrastructures are as follows: *reliance* on hard and soft infrastructures; the principle of *invisibility* and *breakdown* of the infrastructural system; the *co-determination* between infrastructure and communication; the *layering* of infrastructures; the process of *standardization* and consensus in equipment, materials, processes, formats (Lobato 2019, 76-77). The strength of this portion of the book lies precisely in its ability to reconnect infrastructure studies with socio-political issues deeply tied to cultural uses of technologies, namely digital divide, local internet policies, net-neutrality, geographies and politics of data (e.g. clouds, content delivery networks). Lobato uses much of this third chapter to openly position himself in the social debate and invite scholars to account for infrastructural inequalities, stating that "infrastructural thinking is above all a mode of theorizing. It allows us to see

(indeed, demands that we see) media systems from unusual perspectives” (102).

In its critical—theoretically and methodologically—view of internet-distributed television, *Netflix Nations* finally concludes with a series of case studies, respectively discussing Netflix’s attempts to enter foreign markets, facing mechanisms of adaptation, long-distance localization, internationalization of labor (notably in key Asian markets like India, China, Japan), problematizing dynamics of cultural imperialism, policy-making, creation of local catalogs and content (making the case of Canada and European countries, both sharing histories of cultural protectionism). Drawing upon such reflections on Netflix’s interaction with local industries and cultural policies, the sixth chapter illustrates the evolutions, debates and challenges of Netflix’s response to issues of copyright, geoblocking, piracy in the scenario of what Lobato labels as “the proxy wars” (2019, 163) with reference to a “history of user experimentation, circumvention, and copyright infringement” (164). By shelving a purely theoretical perspective found in the first part of the book, Lobato therefore charts, with remarkable insights and accurate examples, the premises for future studies on Netflix at the intersection between the global and the local.

Having provided useful hands-on applications of how Netflix research might look like, the last chapter of the book serves as a valuable conclusion for re-tracing and re-contextualizing a more general overview on the geography of digital distribution, in an effort to assess Netflix’s impacts on contemporary television landscape. Particularly meaningful are the lessons summarized in the closing chapter, which, once again, helps the reader reconnecting internet studies to previous research on traditional, linear television. As the author suggests, with its wide-range of social, cultural, economic, technological implications, Netflix indeed appears here as a valid point of departure for laying the ground for further research on internet-distributed television. Overall, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* is an outstanding scholarly book, clear and well written, built upon a solid research on new media and, at the same time, mindful of the rich theoretical and methodological tools inherited from television studies. Each chap-

ter ends with a brief review of the main topics and concepts discussed, and provides a precise personal analytics based on vast knowledge of the streaming field, rendering equally accessible to academic and non-academic readerships alike.

The diversity of cross-disciplinary and cross-national perspectives that this book accounts for makes it an essential bibliographic reference in any study on Netflix, as well as an organic enquiry on theories and interdisciplinary methods for internet research. This publication will ultimately rest atop an emerging genealogy of internet-television studies, offering a wide variety of citations to old and new publications engaged in the perennial debate on television as a cultural mode. While acknowledging the challenges of theorizing Netflix solely within a historical and historiographic perspective on television, *Netflix Nations* embodies the long tradition of television studies in more recent academic debates on the ecology and ontology of streaming platforms, thus providing a view of Netflix not as merely a static, standalone entity, but as a shifting media object that “performatively enacts” (Lobato 2019, 43) viewership across geopolitical spaces and temporalities.

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