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COMMERCIAL-FREE TV?: EXAMINING THE COMMODITY FLOW OF NETFLIX

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Introduction

Television is changing, or so we're told. People are recording programs and watching them when they want, they're skipping ads, they're cutting the cable cord, they're binge viewing, they're mobile viewing, they're multi-screening. It's all up for grabs. Netflix is a player in this TV revolution, and its rallying cry is its modest price and personalized, commercial-free experience. It is true that unlike YouTube and Hulu, Netflix does not require its users to view traditional commercials before streaming videos on their platform. But is it fair to say that Netflix is a commercial-free service, separated from the practices and constructs of marketing and consumer culture? In this paper I take on the assertion that Internet media services like Netflix are challenging the commercially-driven traditional media model and democratizing media consumption. Through McAllister & Giglio's (2004) work on the "commodity flow" of television and Andrejevic's thesis on the "work of being watched," I argue that Netflix and other online streaming services represent a rearticulation of the traditional media system, including an intense commodity orientation and oligopolistic market practices.

What is troubling is that Netflix is in a very powerful position to construct what we—and particularly children—believe to be commodity (or commodity-free) culture in the new media environment. The company boasts more than 33 million U.S. subscribers, and by some estimates accounts for as much as one-third of internet downloads in North America during the busiest hours of the day (Fitzgerald, 2014). Given that each subscription likely represents more than one user, the real number of people accessing the service may be more in the range of 60 million. Suffice it to say, Netflix has our collective attention. But what are they doing with it?

New Media, New Consumption, New Democracy?

One powerful message we consistently receive is that online media outlets like Netflix are fundamentally more democratic than traditional mass media outlets. Online media services give subscribers the freedom to choose the media experience they want, rather than forcing them to conform to the advertising and scheduling regimes of traditional mass media. This language is seen over and over again in corporate rhetoric emanating from Netflix. For instance, Neil Hunt, Chief Product Office at Netflix, has used the

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phrase “the tyranny of the grid” to describe the old, primetime TV model. The word tyranny, of course, denotes the activities of oppressive, anti-democratic regimes. In a free market—the cornerstone of a democratic society—a service like Netflix is presumably providing much-needed competition for the antiquated media giants like Comcast and Time Warner. This perspective was also reinforced when Kevin Spacey (2013) invoked the spirit of revolution in his McTaggart lecture given at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, in which he lauded Netflix for its commitment to consumer freedom and recognizing “that the audience wants control” (pp.9-10).

The reality is that the principles of democracy and free-market capitalism make uncomfortable bedfellows. The kind of consumer choice that Neil Hunt and Kevin Spacey argue that Netflix provides can only exist when a diverse and competitive market exists. But as Robert McChesney (2013) has argued, the internet has proven fertile ground for monopoly capitalism, with companies like Apple, Google, Microsoft and AT&T leading the way. With a market valuation of around \$25 billion, Netflix may be a small player in the new media market compared to the likes of Apple (\$483 billion) and Google (\$382 billion), but they have certainly learned how to monopolize their service niche: Netflix carries a 90% share of the subscription VOD market.

Another inconsistency in the “commercial-free” argument made by Netflix is in their conceptualization of what constitutes commercial activity. By their measure, commercial television is TV with commercials. But broken down to its most fundamental state, Dallas Smythe (1977) argued that the nature of commercial media is the commodification of audiences, in which media content is reduced to bait to attract desired audiences to deliver to advertisers. Sut Jhally (1990) has elaborated on this thesis, arguing that audience labor, or “the work of watching,” is the commodity bought and sold by traditional TV producers and advertisers. And in its latest iteration, Andrejevic (2002) applies the idea of the audience commodity to interactive media environments, arguing that the labor of new media audiences has become the exchange of information for content access, or the “work of being watched.” In the case of Netflix, subscribers must provide identifying information to create an account, and are encouraged to rank TV shows and movies on the site in order to create a more personalized system of recommendations to help navigate content choices.

In summary, through a combination of market domination and audience commodification, Netflix has initiated a process of “digital enclosure” (Andrejevic, 2002) in which audiences are pushed toward video consumption online, and specifically through gated, “commercial-free” subscription services like theirs. Netflix is trying to represent the future of television—choice, freedom, and democracy. But this also means that our media activities are becoming increasingly limited to spaces in which we must submit to data collection activities and surveillance.

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