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Streaming Services, Binging, and Cultural Consequences

Streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu have changed the way we consume media in the world today. With the emergence of “binge watching” we now have access to and can consume more entertainment than ever before. But how are these new opportunities affecting our culture as a whole? Many scholars have discussed how these services affect, for example, media as a business, yet I would say there is a lack of focus on how they change our collective subconscious beliefs about media. I will argue that streaming services are currently changing and, in fact, have already changed our cultural attitudes about media and have transformed how we view entertainment. I plan to demonstrate this by observing how the media landscape has shifted in recent years and how journalists and scholars have recognized these trends.

For example, it will be helpful to look at how the digital delivery of entertainment has changed over time and how this in turn affects our culture. I will describe the circumstances that led to the rapid changes in how people consume television and movies by giving a brief history of the movie rental industry. Then, with the full context established, it will allow us to examine how these changes are affecting our culture of consumption and vice versa.

It will also be important to look at the business side of these changes. What decisions led to the dominance of streaming services? What can older forms of media consumption possibly do to compete? Time is of the essence when it comes to answering these questions especially for the companies themselves. For if they do not come up with an answer soon, they will surely be left behind. This, in turn, will result in further changes to the way we consume television and movies, and we may not have much of a say if these changes arise. When looking back at how these changes have arisen in the past, we can prepare ourselves for new ones even if we cannot control them.

By diving deeper into these and other ideas, it will allow us to have a better understanding about how these resources change our beliefs and attitudes towards media. With this greater understanding, we will then be better equipped to adapt to our constantly changing and rapidly accelerating technological culture.

In order to fully appreciate the impact that Netflix has had on the world of media, we must first look back at how the company emerged and the environment and decisions that led to its rise to dominance. While it may seem ridiculous to say so now, there was a time where the DVD and VHS movie rental stores reigned supreme. A person could simply walk into a store and see before them more movies than they would likely watch in their lifetime. I can personally still remember the times as a kid when I would go with

my parents to our local Blockbuster and help pick out the movie we would watch that night. For me and my generation, it was the closest I had to a record store experience. Seeing the covers, reading about the movie on the back of the box, and meandering through the different aisles was such an exciting experience. At the time, it seemed like the best way to rent movies; but we all know what happened next. Just as soon as they had arrived, the video rental stores disappeared and were taken over by the new king of the hill, Netflix. One source that gives insight into how this came to be is an article written by Kevin McDonald titled “Digital Dreams in a Material World: the rise of Netflix and its impact on distribution and exhibition patterns.” So what was it that Netflix did differently? While Netflix was one of countless companies that threw itself into the digital world through the dot-com boom of the late nineties, it took a slightly different move. “While most of these companies failed, Netflix succeeded by adapting the brick-and-mortar video store convenience into an online environment. The company was especially noteworthy in that it combined the power of a web-based interface with the existing United States postal system to deliver DVDs directly to customers. It was with this unique, and in some ways counter-intuitive, hybrid approach that Netflix supplanted not only neighborhood video stores like Lost Weekend, but leading corporate giants such as Blockbuster Video.” (McDonald 1) This led to the dominance of Netflix and the company shows no signs of stopping. In fact, Netflix alone accounted for 29% of all broadband traffic in North America during the peak demand hours of 7-9pm in 2011 (Spangler 1). With the emergence of smart TVs and other new ways to watch, the

company seems as if it will only extend its grasp. By looking at this history we can not only see how helpful thinking outside the box can be for a company, but also how Netflix was able to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented in order to change the landscape of entertainment consumption.

One of the ways that we can observe how streaming services are changing the entertainment landscape is to look at how some movie theaters have changed their approach. Today, movie theaters are searching for ways that they can enhance the “experience” of seeing a movie. This is achieved by increasing the comfort of the chairs and environment, providing a bar, or other such additions. I would argue that these extra services are in direct response to Netflix and its competitors. In order to pull people away from the comfort of their own couch in their own home, movie theaters have been forced to change their mode of operation. With the convenience and diverse selection that streaming services offer, theaters are clamoring to provide the luxuries that one would experience in their own home.

As of right now, I see theaters as having two major advantages over streaming services. Firstly, the fact that certain films by their nature simply demand to be seen on “the big screen.” Movies such as *Interstellar* or *Avengers: Infinity War* that display such stunning visuals certainly have their particular viewing experience enhanced by offering the sights and sounds only a theatre can provide. Secondly, the fact that fans who simply

must see the movie as soon as it comes out must visit a theatre to do so. However, I would argue that both of these leads that movie theaters have are shrinking; and not all through Netflix's doing. For those that can afford the luxury, *Blu-ray*, surround sound, and flatscreen 4k televisions are closing in on the monopoly that movie theaters supposedly have on the "complete movie experience." Combine this with the fact that hit movies are being released on Netflix more quickly after their release, and it looks like trouble for the cinema. For example, *Thor: Ragnarok* was released on Netflix for streaming in June, about half a year after its release in 2017. While this may seem like a long delay, for a casual fan of Marvel movies such as myself, it seemed like perfect timing as it surrounded the release of *Infinity War*. Reflecting more on this, I realized that the release of *Thor* for streaming confirmed something for me that I may not have originally noticed. Like many people in my generation, I rarely find myself going to the movies and *Thor: Ragnarok* was another one of those movies that, while I was interested in it, my interest did not compel me to actually going to a theatre to see it. When it came out on Netflix it confirmed for me that I did not, in fact, need to visit a movie theatre to see it and from my perspective it would have been a waste of money. If more people begin to think this way, it could mean that theaters go the way of the dinosaur, or, in this case, the way of the Blockbuster.

In the next section it will be important to discuss what exactly is considered “binging” when it comes to streaming services and what its effects are on our culture. First of all, we must unpack the word itself. The word, by definition, means a short period of time dedicated to excess. In one academic journal binge watching is described as “...viewing suspenseful dramatic, narrative content for a considerable amount of time: often more than three or four hours.” (Rubenking 1) To me this says that as a culture we are fully aware that watching ten episodes of a show in a single viewing session is far from the healthiest thing. But this also shows that our culture recognizes that every once in a while we all have the capacity to indulge ourselves. While we may not necessarily encourage it, we know that with so much quality television available, it is expected that we sometimes enjoy it in excess; just as we accept the same when it comes to alcohol or any other vice. While there have always been marathons of certain shows that have been played on live television, the idea that someone would be able to have access to every episode of a variety of programs at any time is a very new phenomenon.

It has become extremely common especially among younger generations that a person watch a season or more in a single week. However, television shows, especially those that debuted before the Netflix era, were never intended to be watched this way. Therefore we must ask ourselves some important questions regarding what effects this change is having. Netflix remains one of the few services that will release entire seasons of a particular show at once. Clearly, the company has motives to encourage the binging habits of its subscribers, but I find it very interesting that other services have not followed

suit. On Hulu, for example, *Castle Rock* was originally released with its first three episodes. This is an area in which I believe Hulu has taken a half-measure, but a very smart one. Allowing the viewer to watch the first three episodes of a series is just enough to get the audience hooked into the story without blowing through it all at once. This allows the show to gain traction through word of mouth and grow the anticipation for the following episodes, which are released once a week. I myself have already told multiple people about the show, and find myself extremely excited for every Wednesday when the new episodes are released. I believe that this is the kind of excitement that would be missing from a TV show released according to Netflix's formula. While it is true there will be anticipation in-between the episodes, it will last only a few brief seconds before Netflix throws you into the next. So is bingeing more evidence of a millennial generation obsessed with instant gratification? I would argue it is not. I think that everyone regardless of age has been guilty of watching an extra episode of *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*, or some other popular show. Television, like everything else, can be dangerous when used in excess. As long as people bear that in mind, I do not see streaming services as causing any major cultural issues. Everything, including binge watching, is sometimes appropriate in moderation.

In this section I will discuss how the mobility and subsequently the perception of media is changing. In my view, Netflix and other such streaming services have changed two key components of media consumption that go hand-in-hand: mobility and availability. Immediately after getting an account on a particular service, the customer has seemingly endless access to the library of media and can watch any of it anywhere that has an internet connection. I would argue that these fundamental changes to the way we consume media are having a large effect on its perceived value. One source that I would like to discuss is a book titled “On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies” This source is written by a Chuck Tryon, a professor of Film and Media Studies and in the chapter titled “Coming Soon to a Computer Near You” he explores how the recent changes to how people consume movies and TV is having an effect on the economy of the film industry, and also how the perceived value of the product has changed. The chapter also attempts to explore how digital delivery reworks traditional modes of distribution.

I agree with much of what the author proposes and believe that he offers a balanced view of the situation. He does not argue that the streaming services are destroying the movie industry or even that these rapid changes are as rapid as most think. Tryon reminds us that even though, “...digital delivery has been treated in the entertainment press as a new phenomenon, it is important to consider the longer history of pay-per-view (PPV) entertainment, wether that content was delivered through cable television services or online” (22). He reminds us that the idea of paying for specific television subscriptions

can be traced back to the 1970s and that by the mid-1980s, people were paying to watch specific events such as boxing matches or Wrestlemania. I find myself agreeing with the author's point that the idea of paying for immediate entertainment is not new, however I would still contend that the kinds of changes we have seen in recent years due to the explosion of internet availability are more drastic. Services such as Netflix, while they are in many ways the objective superior to previous forms of media consumption, to me seem to take away from the "experience" of watching a hit movie or anticipated event. There still exists the intangible feeling of seeing something on a screen that's larger than life while being surrounded by mass of awe-struck faces.

I value Chuck Tryon's views and believe he offers an interesting and new perspective. He reveals that it is important to look back at history so as not to be overwhelmed by the new and often intimidating technological advances before us. Now more than ever we find ourselves desperately trying to adapt to the changes that surround us. These changes are inevitable, and therefore I believe the goal should be cautious optimism rather than fear.

It is also important to consider how the widespread availability of media can affect how we perceive it. One source that attempts to tackle this issue is from the book titled "For the Love of Cinema: Teaching Our Passion in and Outside of the Classroom" by

Lisa Patti. The chapter I draw from is titled “Cinephilia and Paratexts: DVD Pedology in the Era of Instant Streaming.” This source describes how streaming services and Netflix in particular have shaped attitudes towards cinema and how media is consumed. One of the ways this is a trustworthy source is that it is written by a professor who has used Netflix in her course and has seen first hand how this form of consuming media can affect how young people absorb information.

Online streaming is not killing cinephilia, but rather it is changing the way we view movies and interact with that particular medium. I would also say that cinephilia is not dying and, in some ways, I would say it is stronger than ever. How can one say cinephilia is dying in a world where one has seemingly endless access to film? However, there are important things to consider here. The emergence of virtual streaming means that the primary location for cinephilia is no longer at theaters or film festivals, but is instead at the home. Not only that, but also the fact that entertainment is now hand-picked for the individual through the use of algorithms (this is the classic “if you like x, you might like y” formula.) Just simply viewing the User Interface of Netflix reveals this. Many of the first categories that one sees on the Netflix home screen are specifically designed to cater to the subscriber. These include “My List,” “Continue Watching for (insert name here),” or, “Because you watched “X.” This is an extremely clever move by Netflix to make it a more personalized experience while also helping to guide the user through their seemingly endless and sometimes overwhelming selection of titles.

While it is certainly a convenience to have your tastes catered to, we must ask ourselves how much we are willing to let outside sources dictate what we should watch. This also begs the question, “If I have the ability to watch whatever I want, whenever I want, why would I compromise that to watch something someone else wants?” I believe that this line of reasoning can and already has led people to seclude themselves from others in order to fully enjoy material that suits them. For example, a friend of mine whom I live with and I have two shows in particular on Hulu that we always watch together. One of them is a show that I picked, and the other is a show that he picked; however, we both enjoy both programs to a certain extent. It soon became an unspoken rule between the two of us that we would only watch those particular shows when we were together. This has been an extremely useful way in which we have found a compromise to the problem of watching what we both want without sacrificing the experience of watching them with another person. However, the system is clearly not perfect. There are inevitably times when I, for example, will want to watch the one of the shows, but my housemate has gone home that weekend. So far, neither one of us has broken our agreement, but is it worth stopping myself from watching something I enjoy in order to watch it with someone else? I believe that streaming services are aware of this issue and have capitalized on it in a major way.

I was recently hanging out with some friends and we began talking about upcoming seasons of shows we were looking forward to. The Netflix series *Castlevania* was brought up, as it currently only has one season available and the second is due to be released in late October. I was one of the few out of the group who had never seen the show, so we decided to watch it from the beginning. When the first episode ended, there was nothing but silence as the second began to play. No one objected to the binge-watching threshold we had stepped into. This could have been the result of many factors, one of the most important being that Netflix seemingly decided for us; starting the next episode after only a few seconds. However, even though this was a factor, I find it interesting that it was assumed we would continue watching. It was not discussed beforehand how much of the show we would watch, but I would argue that this small moment exemplifies the kind of shift in attitude toward media that my generation is going through.

So what can we say about what sites like Netflix and Hulu tell us about ourselves and our culture as a whole? While the rise of these sites show that along with everything else in recent years, media has become something that can be consumed in large quantities anytime, anywhere. We now have access to more than previous generations would have ever thought possible. However, I would say that our attitudes toward entertainment have remained largely unchanged. We still love our violence, action, drama, and comedy just as we have for hundreds or perhaps even thousands of years. For the most part, we also still prefer to enjoy entertainment surrounded by others. No matter how convenient

entertainment is to consume or how polished it becomes, people still pay large amounts of money to crowd themselves into music and film festivals. To be a human being is to be a social creature and crave personal intimacy, and we still love to see the things we adore surrounded by others who appreciate it. It can be easy to forget that television and film are relatively recent inventions, and for this reason I believe it is often difficult to step outside our current situation and realize the true scope of what is happening. As for what the future of these services will bring and how the world will change as a result, who's to say? Perhaps one day we will have truly unlimited access to all forms of entertainment, or maybe the gateways to television and film will be guarded by a select few corporate entities. Although I will say that, at least for the time being, too much access to entertainment is a fairly good problem for a society to have.

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