

## 24 Writing about streaming portals

### The drama of distribution

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While the discipline of screen studies has traditionally focused on the analysis of texts, screen distribution can also be a fruitful area for critical writing and analysis. This chapter offers some reflections on how (and why) to write about distribution, using Netflix as an example.

Streaming portals such as Netflix, Hulu, iPlayer and iQiyi are integral to film and television distribution in many nations. For screen scholars, these portals represent an interesting challenge because they are simultaneously cultural, technical, and logistical in nature. This means that the topic of streaming can be approached from many different angles simultaneously, and written about in diverse ways.

What writing styles and techniques are available to students approaching this task for the first time? How can we delve imaginatively into the range of issues that streaming portals present – from catalog curation and algorithmic recommendation to frame rates, freezing and pixellation? In this chapter, I want to suggest that streaming portals, as technologies of distribution, present rich possibilities for interpretation and critique: they invite us to tell interesting stories about how movies and TV shows reach their audiences (or do not reach them, as the case may be).

The first step in the process is to decide on your angle. What do you find most interesting about a given portal? Is it the range of movies, TV shows, and other texts in its catalog? Or are you more interested in the user communities that congregate there? Perhaps even the portal's institutional or regulatory history? Each of these approaches lends itself to a particular analytic approach, from content analysis to audience studies to regulatory/policy studies. Reading across the literature by media scholars will reveal how these approaches can be used, and the diversity of ideas and theories that can be applied in your analysis – from Amanda Lotz's analysis of streaming business models and affordances, through to Ghislain Thibault's media-archaeological analyses of streaming metaphors.

One can also look outside the academic literature for ideas. For example, technology websites – *Wired*, *The Verge*, *Ars Technica* – contain valuable

information, reportage, and product reviews about streaming services. The best technology journalists combine business and cultural analysis in a way that seems effortless, but is actually very hard to pull off. Consider, for example, Alexis Madrigal's famous 2014 article in *The Atlantic*, "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood," which blended ground-breaking reporting into Netflix's genre classification system with the writer's personal reflections about how Netflix works from a user perspective. Using scraping experiments and other online detective work to dig into the Netflix system, Madrigal produced a memorable piece of journalism that mixed big data analysis, industry reportage, and cultural criticism.

Business and trade press publications such as *Variety* and *The Financial Times* are also useful sources to consult, and may provide some ideas for writing techniques. The best business journalists write in a way that goes beyond mere financial reporting and tells a larger story about power struggles in the media industries, explaining what is at stake for governments, investors, audiences, and producers. Sometimes business reporting offers its own implicit theories. For example, journalist Michael Wolff's inimitable book *Television is the New Television* – a collection of short essays with provocative titles like "The Netflix Unrevolution" and "Consolidating Consolevision" – is a memorable example, combining business commentary with media history and theory.

As these examples show, there is no single way to write about streaming services, and writers need to find their own approach and their own voice in this endeavor. I speak from experience here, having spent the last four years writing (and wrestling with) my own book about Netflix's internationalization (Lobato). Writing about Netflix was a more challenging task than I initially realized, and I learned a few things along the way about how to reconcile the fast-changing world of digital media within the slow-moving world of academic publishing. I was also fortunate to learn from scholars around the world – all fellow members of the Global Internet TV Consortium ([global-internet-tv.com](http://global-internet-tv.com)), our research network dedicated to comparative study of multi-territory streaming services – who were grappling with similar challenges. Based on this experience, I offer four simple suggestions:

### Take a long-range view

When writing about digital media, it is tempting to try and keep pace with every new development, from new app features to today's stock price. Consequently, much writing about streaming is very "present-ist." In my view, the best writing on this topic is engaged with longer-range questions about the history and future of the moving image. My advice, then, is to historicize wherever possible: while attending to the dynamic nature of the portal you're describing, also try to keep an eye on the bigger issues, and look for the continuities as well as the changes. (This is easier said than done, of course.)

## Focus on links between technology and culture

Streaming services are highly technical, and it is easy to get lost in the minutiae of codecs, bit rates, and file sizes. For humanities students writing in a critical mode, this technical aspect can be daunting. The best approach may be to focus on the connections *between* culture and technology. For example, what does the shift to 4K streaming mean for the availability of older and classic movies in streaming catalogs? What might future developments in artificial intelligence (AI) mean for film archives, cultures, and appreciation? There are fascinating cultural angles to any given technical phenomenon, so seek them out and see where they lead you.

## Look beyond the hype

A third suggestion is to take industry rhetoric with a grain of salt – especially trade sources, which are full of spin and product placement. For example, much of the best-known trade reportage around Netflix has been produced by embedded journalists (in other words, journalists whose access to the company has been arranged and approved by senior management). One never knows the back-story of a trade article, so it is essential to read these sources critically.

## Consider the experiential specificity of streaming

Finally, try wherever possible to account for the distinct viewing and production protocols associated with streaming, as opposed to broadcast or cable/satellite television. Binge-watching a Netflix original is obviously different from watching a series on broadcast television, one weekly episode at a time; and as many commentators have noted, the shift to streaming is also reconfiguring production practices (especially in scriptwriting, where longer narrative arcs and complex storylines are becoming more common).

One consequence of all this is that we often need to adjust our analytical paradigms – for example, presumptions about audience agency, spectatorial engagement, or attention – when analyzing streaming texts. (Having said this, a lot of content that is available on streaming portals was actually produced for broadcast TV, or was produced with both “linear” and “nonlinear” audiences in mind, so it’s not a clear-cut issue.) In any case, the practice of televisual textual analysis is changing with the times. When writing about television today it is therefore essential to think carefully about the intended *and* actual reception of the text you’re studying, so that you’re doing justice to the complexity of your object.

These suggestions are just a starting point, of course. And while I’ve used Netflix as my main example here, there are hundreds of other streaming services around the world that merit your attention as researchers – many of which pose their own unique methodological and analytical challenges (see,

for example, Dovey; Vašíčková and Szczepanik). Whatever angle you take, and wherever your geographic focus lies, there are many fascinating stories to be told about how these portals variously inflect, construct and reconfigure our cinematic and televisual cultures.

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