

Book Review

Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution

Ramon Lobato

NYU Press, New York, NY, 2019 \$25.00 (soft)/\$89.00 (hard), pp. 240. <https://nyupress.org/9781479804948/netflix-nations/>

With 158 million subscribers in more than 190 countries and an annual content budget exceeding \$15 billion, Netflix has attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention in recent years as subscription video on-demand (SVOD) platforms create new possibilities for global audiences. Yet, questions related to the ways in which Netflix interacts with the international television market and to what kinds of impact the service is having on national television industries remain unanswered. Furthermore, little work to date has examined this U.S.-based company's international expansion in the context of ongoing discussions about media globalization and digital distribution. Ramon Lobato's latest offering, *Netflix Nations*, admirably fills this void with a compelling analysis of the world's most popular SVOD service and a thorough exploration of what its global presence means for television more broadly.

Grounded in the tradition of critical media research, *Netflix Nations* uses the debates and discourses that surround Netflix to forward a deceptively simple argument: there is no singular entity

called "Netflix." Instead, the meanings of "Netflix" depend upon cultural, industrial, and geographic contexts. For television studies scholars, for example, Netflix is a digitally enabled form of television that is familiar to viewers but nonetheless diverges from the medium's past in significant technological and economic ways. From the perspective of platform studies, however, Netflix is a complex sociotechnical software system. Netflix itself often relies on such ambiguities. When dealing with governments, the company presents itself as a digital media service, which often falls outside the regulatory schemas applied to traditional broadcast media. In its public relations, the SVOD proudly markets itself to consumers as the future of television. It seems that even Netflix can't agree on what Netflix is.

Embracing this complexity, *Netflix Nations* focuses on the process by which a national media company transformed itself into an international one between 2010 and 2016. In less than 250 pages front to back, this book efficiently challenges the widely accepted understanding of Netflix as a revolutionary media company providing a uniform global service. In its place, a nuanced portrait emerges of a former DVD delivery company navigating the complex regulatory realities of the national Internet infrastructure while facing similar challenges in international markets as traditional television networks, like MTV, did more than 25 years ago.

Throughout the analysis, Lobato denies the reader easy answers about this global SVOD. How should we think about Netflix in terms of old/new media? Lobato argues that the service is best understood as a hybrid media technology that remediates a range of earlier forms while also incorporating distinctly digital elements, like its algorithmic suggestion engine. Where does Netflix fit in broader discussions regarding the interpenetration of local and global media? Lobato is quick to reject the idea that Netflix is displacing local television. Rather, the company's heavy investments in translation, subtitling, and dubbing for specific national markets reflects the necessity of localization, just as the commitment to produce series in multiple languages is indicative of global audiences continuing preferences for local content. Is Netflix disrupting national television industries? Citing a wide variety of examples, Lobato convincingly shows that Netflix has quite different effects in different markets. Although Netflix presents significant challenges to legacy broadcasters and multi-channel providers in the United States and Canada, in Europe, for example, successes have been more modest.

As a television studies scholar, I greatly admire the elegance with which Lobato weaves earlier contributions to the field into a thoroughly contemporary analysis. He uses the work of seminal scholars, like William Urrichio and Milly Buonanno (among many others), to remind readers that many of the questions now being asked about Netflix are not, in themselves, new.

Similarly, in continuing conversations first started by Amanda Lotz and Jean Chalaby more than a decade ago, Lobato helps the reader situate Netflix's rise within the broader transformations reshaping the television industry and the global television market. Indeed, *Netflix Nations* is a most significant contribution to the television studies literature and will doubtlessly inform work in the field for years to come.

As a media industries scholar more broadly, I find Lobato's analysis of Netflix's efforts in India, Japan, and China to be particularly valuable. In contrast to the corporate mythology found in the popular and trade press, the history of Netflix's initial efforts in these Asian markets is primarily defined by failure. In asking local customers to pay the same price as subscribers in much wealthier nations, Netflix was inaccessible to all but the most affluent Indians. In Japan, an ultracompetitive streaming market and the inability to license popular content left Netflix with little mass appeal and a subscriber base limited to expats and Anglophiles. The inability to enter the Chinese market due to regulatory obstacles remains Netflix's largest global failure. Although the company recently launched a more affordable mobile-only plan in India and investment in locally produced original content has led to subscriber growth in the Japanese market, taken together, these case histories highlight the fundamental messiness of internationalization for digital streaming services. In light of Disney+'s global launch and the impending launch of Time Warner's HBO Max, *Netflix Nations* will serve as an excellent starting point for industry

scholars concerned with such processes moving forward.

Beyond its significant scholarly contributions, *Netflix Nations* is particularly impressive as a text written to maximize accessibility. Lobato's straightforward prose and intuitively organized chapters stand in stark contrast to the overwrought style and convoluted arguments found in much contemporary communication research. Put simply, this book is a pleasure to read. In

conjunction with uncommon conceptual depth and empirical richness, this accessibility ensures that *Netflix Nations* will resonate with a wide variety of general and academic audiences.

Michael L. Wayne
*Department of Media and
Communication, Erasmus University,
300 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands
E-mail: wayne@eshcc.eur.nl*