

The Patchwork That Makes a Global Streaming Giant

Review of *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* by Ramon Lobato, New York University Press, 2019

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In *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, Ramon Lobato provides an insightful map of the complex processes and negotiations involved in Netflix's transition to a global online streaming platform. Lobato, who is an associate professor of media and communication at RMIT University, describes his research question as twofold: "How are streaming services changing the spatial dynamics of global television distribution, and what theories and concepts do scholars need to make sense of these changes?"¹ In answering these questions, Lobato situates Netflix as an object of study within both the academic fields of television studies and digital media studies, arguing that Internet television "adds new complexity to the geography of distribution."² He focuses on controversies surrounding the platform, beginning with its global switch-on in 2016 in order to theorize about the relationship between global television and Internet distribution.³ Based on a combination of firsthand platform use and research from journalistic, academic, governmental, and public corporate sources, *Netflix Nations*

1. Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 4.

2. Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 5.

3. Lobato, 16.

provides a complex picture of the operations of global Internet television by foregrounding the regionally specific relationships between Netflix and its international markets.

Lobato writes about Netflix from an outsider perspective, unaffiliated with the company directly but one that provides convincing insights into the global strategies and complicated negotiations that Netflix navigates as it continues to expand internationally. The first chapter builds the theoretical framework for the text by seeking to define Netflix as a medium and a technology through reference to notable television scholars such as Amanda Lotz and platform studies scholars such as Tarleton Gillespie. Lobato concludes that “Netflix is a hybrid technology that remediates a range of earlier media technologies in different aspects of its operation, and this mix of associations is constantly changing.”⁴ Netflix proves difficult to pin down; as a company, its identity is constantly in flux both due to changes in offerings and due to localization of catalogues for different regions. As a media producer, its content also varies widely and changes constantly.

Much of the fluctuations of Netflix’s identity seem to revolve around its transnational expansion, which is the topic of the second chapter. Chapter 2 contextualizes Netflix in academic debates surrounding transnational television and describes how Netflix is both a national and a transnational technology with many complex operations that differ significantly based on region. This provides valuable context for the third chapter, which considers the infrastructure behind Netflix’s operations. Here, Lobato examines the complicated “ecology of small, purpose-built systems” that make up the platform and argues that the “hard, soft, and human infrastructures” of Netflix need to be studied simultaneously.⁵ One of Lobato’s most salient examples in this chapter involves the role of Internet bandwidth in various global regions. The data he collects on relative Internet speeds not only reminds readers of the imbalance in Internet infrastructure globally but also

4. Lobato, 44.

5. Lobato, 79.

underlies one of his key points that infrastructural issues directly affect Netflix's market positioning and the customers that it caters to globally.

After outlining Netflix's infrastructural operations, Lobato focuses chapter 4 on how Netflix adapts to global markets and the efforts the platform has made thus far to localize content. Centering on three case studies of their attempts to expand into India, Japan, and China, Lobato considers the specific regional factors influencing Netflix's market strategies in these three countries in a way that underlies his point that it is both a transnational and national platform. In chapter 5, Lobato grapples with Netflix's potential role as cultural imperialist by analyzing the cultural-policy debates surrounding the company internationally. Lobato formulates the platform as largely an add-on service to existing television systems and, while he makes a valid point that "export power does not transfer directly into cultural power,"⁶ he also seems to resist directly criticizing Netflix and their potential for interrupting culturally specific local programming. In this chapter, Lobato alludes to the fact that the Netflix original show *Orange Is the New Black* has been universally popular worldwide, opening up questions about the company's role as content creator in addition to distributor. Though analysis of Netflix as a production company may fall outside of the scope of the book, Lobato does recognize that Netflix's identity undergoes a transition from "a new-economy Silicon Valley company" to that of "an old-fashioned media company," with its clampdown on virtual private networks in chapter 6, which focuses on Netflix's decision to implement geo-blocking, a form of restricting access to certain programming based on geographical location.⁷ Chapter 6 provides a fascinating view into Netflix's so-called proxy wars and left me curious to learn more about how the company's identity shift maps onto its global strategy.

Overall, Lobato provides compelling industrial analysis of Netflix as a platform. One of the many strengths of the book is its wide-ranging global

6. Lobato, 142.

7. Lobato, 175.

perspective; not only is Lobato himself located in Australia but he takes care to focus on how Netflix operates in many parts of the world and provides an excellent set of country-specific case studies. It would have been helpful to see more data on the types of programming that is popular across many of the highlighted regions (as with the case of *Orange Is the New Black*), but this would likely require insider data and Lobato clearly identifies the book as coming from an outsider perspective. This points to one of the key difficulties of researching major digital media platforms. Companies such as Netflix keep a tight hold on their analytics, and gaining access to such information (if even possible) typically requires a sacrifice in neutrality. Lobato navigates this hurdle by focusing on the effects of Netflix's expansion into various global regions and the differing techniques instituted in each of these regions, proving a complex and nuanced picture of the global streaming giant.