Ramon Lobato, **Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2019, 235 pp., $89.00 (hardcover), $25.00 (paperback).

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Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution by Ramon Lobato meticulously details the complicated global ecology of Internet-distributed television. In this book, Netflix serves as a case study to explore not only tectonic shifts in the content, political-economy and underlying infrastructure of the medium but also the immense influence of platforms on both local and international cultural production.

As the title suggests, Netflix is hardly a monolithic empire, but rather multinational: a heterogenous group of producers, distributors, and consumers, all housed within a platform. Furthermore, to understand its inhabitants requires navigating an intricate geography of policy, technology, markets, and content undertaken by Netflix in all but four countries around the world (p. 2).
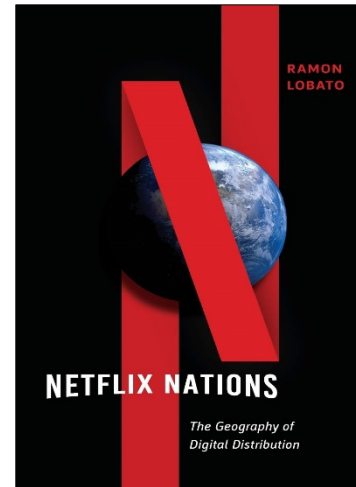
The monograph's first pages acknowledge the complexity of this task as Lobato charts a typology of interconnected Internet-distributed television services, ranging from video-sharing platforms like YouTube to subscription video-on-demand services like Netflix (p. 8). To make headway through such a morass, television scholars must tap into larger trends in "convergence, disruption, globalization, and cultural imperialism" (p. 12). Simply, Netflix represents an important economic, cultural, and technical exodus from "traditional" media studies.

This departure, deeply plumbed in the first chapter, sets a course between studies on television's future and digital platforms. Shifting tides in digital and Internet-distributed television have freed content from "a linear schedule" (p. 25). In its wake, new habits like binging have been instilled, new price models devised, and "audience expectations about TV services" (p. 25) irrevocably altered. At the same time, Netflix maintains a black-boxed "sociotechnical software system" (p. 35) that obscures the company's position as mediator of "communication, identity, and politics" (p. 35). All these are manifestations of the more pervasive digital platform economy, an assertion affirmed in the second chapter, which considers Netflix's "transnational" nature: simultaneously national in its business model; cosmopolitan in the content aggregated on the platform; and even "quasi-global" when acting as a "media service" (p. 70) during nation-by-nation negotiations. The upshot is a seemingly contradictory company compared to its television predecessors.

The following four chapters spotlight the corporation's inconsistencies in infrastructure, economy, content, and policy. Chapter 3 examines how the limits of broadband led Netflix to form "a private network built on top of the public Internet" (p. 97) through its own servers that act as caches for high-quality streaming. The result is a paradoxically open and closed system at the platform level that accommodates local and regional necessities. Even as Netflix enters foreign markets, it centralizes its programming, preferring to "invest in its

technical infrastructure rather than spending money on foreign offices and staff" (p. 115). This "long-distance localization," outlined in chapter 4, directly impacts corporate strategy and helps explain, for instance, the reason Netflix translates their content into more than 20 languages (p. 120). However, the company's profile is hardly uniform as it expands into new provinces. For instance, in India, China, and Japan, Netflix must adjust costs and content to retain relatively small market share; it is in the "difficult position of needing to try and find its own niche within resilient and highly local taste formations wherever it goes" (p. 133).

Thus, Netflix is contingent on local cultures as it attempts to reshape them. Lobato argues in chapter 5 that Netflix promotes a kind of soft cultural imperialism through algorithmic curation that elevates its own content over regional choices. However, this creates a "*both/and* rather than *either/or*" (p. 160, emphasis in original) situation where audiences easily maneuver between native, off-platform content and popular original online shows like *Stranger Things*.

The final chapter relates this "both/and" mentality to policy by tracing Netflix's view of "proxies," a blanket term for software and services that allow users to access content unavailable in their geographic locale. While early in the streaming service's history the company preferred not to comment on such "VPN Piracy" (p. 170) to curry favor from "tech-savvy early adopters" (p. 169), its position migrated to one of "Hollywood-style content protection" (p. 178) as it became a television and film producer with its own intellectual property. This more conservative stance typifies the ongoing conflicts between global services, territorial copyright, and other legal restrictions.

Lobato concludes by critiquing the supposed disruptive power of Netflix. Actually, local consumer culture and taste still sway purchasing habits; where lower cost options are available, only niche audiences have adopted it. Further, regional infrastructure, economy, and regulation have transformed Netflix, turning it into a set of "*national media services* tied together in the one platform rather than as a uniform global service" (p. 184, emphasis in original), a reality that is mirrored in other forms of Internet-distributed television worldwide.

This lesson is valuable for television studies scholars who, as Lobato notes, are finding ways to situate their research given the industry's evolution, particularly in North America and Europe. His book is a testament to the saliency of extant literature and builds from the influential writing of Amanda Lotz (2018) and Jean Chalaby (2009) among others, whom Lobato explicitly cites throughout. At the same time, *Netflix Nations* exposes an even more widespread phenomenon: the "platformization of cultural production" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) across the globe. A body of work, ranging from studies of video games to social media and music services, reflects the "penetration of *economic, governmental,* and *infrastructural extensions* of digital platforms" (p. 4276, emphasis in original) in society, where often "platform behemoths" like Netflix exert influence and become integrated into local lives and markets, which incentivizes both producers and consumers to conform to the economic and ideological prerogatives of these globalized companies. Netflix is in many ways at odds with "classic" social media platforms like Facebook, or multisided markets like Amazon. It is more "library-like" and a "portal" rather than a platform (p. 37). However, since the service's outlook and practices so closely align with the broader cultural metamorphosis from platformization, *Netflix Nations* compliments such work as *The Platform Society* (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

The unexpected effects of platformization are clearly revealed in the text. Netflix, like other platforms, "must be *made* to work" (p. 73, emphasis in original) not only through engineering and governance but also cultural norms and lock-in. There is no "typical Netflix audience, a typical Netflix user, or a coherent Netflix effect" (p. 184), a sentiment echoed by platforms from Etsy to Tinder. Lobato shows how Netflix must modify credit card systems and tweak its discovery features according to local laws, as exemplified in the Indian market. However, because of the predominance of the Bollywood film industry, the relatively high cost of Netflix compared to other suppliers—it is ten times more expensive than domestic providers as of Lobato's writing (p. 124)—and its ability to eschew local censorship laws through a loophole for online streaming, Netflix is a bizarre niche service there, a refuge for elites and expatriates (p. 125). While a minor player, its precarious status still manages to exacerbate "long simmering arguments about . . . Internet distributed television's increased capacity for 'programming from afar'" (p. 144).

A second important disclosure revolves around the geographic nature of platformization. Netflix is "fundamentally *national*" (p. 70, emphasis in original), a U.S. company projecting a U.S. "model and philosophy of entertainment into new countries" (p. 70), but also "localizing itself" (p. 70) by working within the rules of each nation and even establishing headquarters "in less regulatory-minded areas" (p. 147) to maximize potential consumption. It is only through interoperable software, hardware and policies—hallmarks of platform logic—that Netflix functions across spaces and systems. For instance, the technical makeup of Netflix consists of 700 microservices and application programming interfaces (APIs) (p. 78) that span the globe. Platformization then can be understood as "an ecology of small, purpose built systems that work together to produce the effect of a single platform" (p. 79). Similarly, audiences traverse platforms, switching between national and global content seamlessly.

Netflix Nations is theoretically rich and comprehensive. Displaying a deep knowledge of history and scholarship, Lobato skillfully brings to light underlying philosophies of platforms and expands upon intricate studies in television and media from around the world. However, while a valuable resource, occasionally contextual and theoretical conceits seem to overshadow Netflix in each chapter, though in the end they draw a very necessary roadmap for navigating a sophisticated international company. Ultimately, *Netflix Nations* not only globally contextualizes Internet-distributed television but also conveys a universal means by which to comprehend platforms in contemporary society.

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