"NOT AVAILABLE FROM YOUR LOCATION": CONTROL AT THE INTERSECTION OF GEOGRAPHY, TECHNOLOGY, AND POLICY – A CASE STUDY OF NETFLIX IN AUSTRALIA

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The relationship between media industries and technologies of media distribution is long-lived and pervasive. Central to this has been the nexus of the control of space and the control of various technological affordances that accompany new methods of media distribution and consumption. From publishing houses in the early days of the printing press attempting to limit "pass along-s" of books to Hollywood seeking to ban the VCR within domestic settings, the struggle between audience convenience and accessibility, and industry profit and control is ever-present. With the move to digital content and distribution, the television industry is in a state of flux both within the United States and around the world. Online streaming services are transforming not only how people watch television, but they are also pushing the academy and the industry to reconsider what television is.

In general there is a disconnect between how streaming is discussed within the US academy and popular press and how it is being understood in other geographic locations. Whereas US conversations tend to centre on how online streaming and subscription services are changing television viewing habits, in non-US contexts the discussion hinges on questions of access. The process of geo-blocking content, and the ways in which viewers in geo-blocked locations access this content, has profound implications for the ways in which television is consumed in non-US contexts

Technologies of Control, Controlling Technologies

The regulation of online content and questions of access have always been an issue facing government and industry. In discussing zoning laws in the implementation of the Communications Decency Act, Wendy Chun explains how previously existing laws that dealt with the display of obscene material in public spaces were brought to bear on the regulation of cyberspace. In this way, "the geography of the physical worlds and cyberspace are correlated" (111). This correlation can be seen throughout the history of attempts to control digital content. Whether this is the segmenting of the globe into regions for DVD and Blu-ray playback, or the practice of geoblocking online content, the material boundaries of nation states are continually applied to digital content and to the internet at large.

This imposed state and supranational control onto the internet flies in the face of many of the utopian predictions that still accompany it. The democratizing potential of digital technologies and their perceived ability to flatten hierarchies through universal access to a vast wealth of content and experiences that accompanied the early world wide web of the 1990s is still invoked. While we are more likely to talk about the potential that blogs and social networking sites afford, the underlying infrastructure of the internet is what enables this. However, there are clearly "disconnections, prohibitions, and disjunctures" (Elkins) that characterize the current state of digital content flows. The rise of "internet geography" as an area of academic interest speaks to interest in the impact of the geographic specificities of the internet (see Graham et al.). Since we don't often think about the location-specific aspects of the internet, it is largely assumed to operate similarly—and have similar effects—everywhere, even when this is clearly not the case.

Netflix Down Under

Geographic isolation, first from Britain, and now from other Western countries, has played an important role in Australia's development as a nation. Even though technology has drawn some aspects of the world closer, distance still haunts Australia's participation in, and engagement with, new communication technologies. While physical distance remains, the idea of "digital distance" (Leaver) has been used to explore the impact that being removed in terms of content distribution has on how Australians access and consume—primarily American—media. Leaver explains that "the tyranny of digital distance occurs when older political and economic divisions, which were designed in an analog era, when distance really mattered, continue to dictate the rules by which media content are distributed" (npg). This disconnect between the analogue and the digital effectively translates physical distance to the realm of the digital, undermining utopian predictions that the rise of digital content and distribution methods—including the internet—would break down such material barriers as distance.

Netflix is the world's leading video on demand (VOD) subscription streaming service with many of its original series gaining widespread popular and critical acclaim. This content as well as their vast library of television and film that is available at a reasonable price point has made access to Netflix highly desirable. Netflix's proposed official introduction to Australia in 2015 fueled debates around piracy, digital distribution and the role of the internet and media content as it relates to national identity and participatory culture. In particular, discussions in and about pieces that appeared in popular and trade press gained increased visibility.

An examination of these stories highlights how a rhetoric of "user experience" is mobalised to talk about the regulatory moves and justifications from Australian industries and government to 1) initially limit unauthorised VPN use, and 2) to position Netflix as a company that is "bad" for Australian culture and Australian television. This second point in particular played out between Australian cable and streaming providers like Foxtel and Quicklfix, and popular press and opinion pieces which framed the lack of access as harmful to cultural participation. While Australia is physically distant from the US, it is culturally close and so there is a desire to consume media products that while they are not made in Australia, can be considered part of mainstream Australian popular culture.

Furthermore, this rhetoric is used in contradictory ways by Netflix: geoblocking is justified as it will ensure more geographically-specific content to audiences, and VPN use is looked upon as audiences going after what they want. Ultimately the industry logics and popular discourses at play are contradictory. Consumers expect universal access to content, while established content providers claim they are able to provide the best kind of universal service to the nation at large. The industry is simultaneously interested in "protecting" users from content that they believe does not allow for the national interest, but at the same time relies on narrowcasting and niche marketing to segment those same users. And Netflix itself seems to tread the line between agreeing with geoblocking policies of the government and supporting consumers VPN use.

Working Across Fields: Internet and Television Studies

Television studies, like the television industry itself, has to change in the face of digital content. Yet those of us working within this field must be wary of rushing to explore streaming at the expense of noting its geographic peculiarities. Here, internet studies offers useful lessons through its history of investigating how users interact with technological interfaces, its theorisation of cyberspace as another means of thinking about geography separate and yet intimately connected to the physical, and its tradition of taking the materiality of user experience with technology seriously. This is not, however, a one way street from internet to television studies, as there is significant room for the latter to inform the former as well. As a field, internet studies stands to gain from a more rigorous engagement with media industries. Much of the industrial work in internet studies seems to stop at issues of government regulation and does not do much to delve into the complexity and impact of media industries.

What is important to remember, however, and what I hope an examination of Netflix's expansion to the Australian market illustrates, is that we must ensure we do not take the US experience as a given for all parts of the world, even relatively culturally similar Western nations. As television continues to move online, we must not forget that geography still matters. Just because the internet is global, does not mean national boundaries do not exist. And just because content is digital does not mean it is place-less.

Works Cited

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