



**Selected Papers of AoIR 2016:
The 17th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Berlin, Germany / 5-8 October 2016

BINGE WATCHING THE ALGORITHMIC CATALOG: AN ANALYSIS OF TWITTER'S REACTION TO THE LAUNCH OF NETFLIX ITALIA

Fabio Giglietto
Università di Urbino Carlo Bo

Chiara Checcaglini
Università di Urbino Carlo Bo

Lella Mazzoli
Università di Urbino Carlo Bo

Introduction

Following the end of September announcement, the on-demand streaming service Netflix was officially launched in Italy on 22 October 2015. Started as a US based online renting service for movies, Netflix is nowadays an innovative and global SVOD (subscription video-on-demand) platform that recently turned into a producer of original contents. Longly awaited by local fans of TV series, the launch of the platform in the Italian market expanded the existing growing offer of TV content providers. The main players in the pre-Netflix Italian television landscape were: free-to-air digital terrestrial television/DTT (Rai and Mediaset channels, La7), digital satellite subscription channels (Sky), SVOD platforms (Infinity by Mediaset, Chili TV, Sky Online).

While entering a rich market of existing established players, the launch of Netflix allowed the Italian audience to experiment for the first time some of the exclusive features that made the service popular worldwide. On the one hand, Netflix made binge-watching (watching more than one episode in one sitting) easier by advancing to the next episode in the series and skipping unnecessary recaps. On the other hand, while also allowing to search and browse the catalog by genres, it default to a radically new metaphor of finding and discovering contents based on the algorithmic analysis of viewer's preferences and tastes.

While a constantly growing amount of literature is dedicated to both aspects, the launch of Netflix in the peculiar Italian market and the conversations it sparked on social media, represent an extraordinary opportunity to study the ways viewers expected, reacted and made sense of those innovative features in the aftermath of the launch.

Framed in the existing literature on binge-watching and algorithms, the study presents the results of a content analysis on Twitter's conversations sparked by the launch on

Suggested Citation (APA): Giglietto, F., Checcaglini, C., Mazzoli, L. (2016, October 5-8). *Binge watching the algorithmic catalog: an analysis of Twitter's reaction to the launch of Netflix Italia*. Paper presented at AoIR 2016: The 17th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Berlin, Germany: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Netflix Italia (N=17,623). The study is part of a broader research effort aimed at understanding the Italian audience of serial narratives. It is thus informed by the results of this ongoing project and specifically by the findings of a national CATI+CAMI survey on a representative sample of Italian adults (N=1,021) carried on between 20th of January and 2nd of February 2015).

Italians and TV series before Netflix

Around half of the Italian population watch TV series. The large majority declared to use their traditional TV set to do so, however over half of the young adults (18-24) said they also consume series on their computers or mobile device. The viewing style also points out a generational divide with young adults more frequently seeking to watch entire seasons (76%), to binge-watch (70%) and re-watch episodes (48%). Nevertheless, binge-watching was already practiced during early 2015 by over half of Italian audience of TV series (52%) regardless their age. About a quarter of them used home videos (DVD, Blu-Ray) to watch TV series and 28% declared to have streamed or downloaded episodes (either legally or not) from the Internet (Osservatorio News-Italia, 2015).

The popularization of binge-watching

These results confirm that digital technologies have simplified content circulation (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013) and interpersonal connections (Baym, 2010). In this scenario, expert viewers and fans have gained means and tools to express and share their interests. Fan practices have increased their visibility compared with more ordinary audience routines (Andò Marinelli, 2012): binge-watching as viewing experience had been previously linked to DVD box sets and specific fandoms, but it gained popularity among TV series enthusiasts through irregular practices such as online streaming and download, especially when local networks programming policies fail to fulfill viewers' demand. Under this perspective, we can consider the popularization of binge-watching as one of the consequences of the normalization of fandoms, part of a landscape where cult TV, quality TV and fans are common concepts and commercially valuable (Jenner, 2015). Binge-watching via Netflix takes the reconfiguration of viewership time and space on a new level, because it frees TV consumption from physical support and specific locations.

The algorithmic catalog

The practice of binge-watching is further simplified by the way Netflix allows their subscribers to find and discover new contents. Unlike traditional Internet VOD platforms that tend to organize their contents by browsable genres, Netflix employed an innovative algorithm that analyze user's taste in order to recommend contents specifically tailored to the user. As most of the algorithms behind platforms such as Google, Facebook and Amazon, the details about Netflix's recommendation system are secret. However, most of those algorithms affect our culture. For this reason, the discourses around the issue of social algorithms accountability are becoming prominent (Lazer, 2015; Gillespie, 2014). In 2006, Netflix launched a public contest aimed at improving their existing recommendation engine. Analyzing the online conversations among the engineers taking part to the Netflix Prize, Hallinan and Striphas observed the traces of an ongoing process of reinterpretation of the meaning of culture itself (2016).

Starting from these premises, we formulated the following research questions: RQ1. How the Italian audience on Twitter (largely early adopters) made sense of the binge-watching facilitating feature offered by Netflix? and RQ2. What was the first reactions to the algorithmic catalog in a population mainly accustomed to find contents by browsing genres?

Methodology

Dataset consists of 36,976 tweets (45% retweets, 0.6% @replies) created by 22,635 unique contributors between 10/20/2015 and 10/24/2015 and containing the official hashtag #ciaoNetflix, a mention to the official Twitter account of Netflix Italia (@NetflixIT) or the generic term Netflix in tweets written in Italian language. Due to the known limits of Twitter free API, the dataset was purchased from Sifter, a web service that, in partnership with Gnip, provides search and retrieve access to every undeleted Tweet in the history of Twitter.

In order to address our research questions we designed a strategy for a content analysis of all original tweets (neither retweets or @replies) in our dataset (N=17,623). Leveraging on existing literature, we developed a codeset consisting of the following non mutually exclusive categories:

	Description	Example ¹
Time & Space	Readjusting the daily routine for binge-watching	- I think there's no better thing than watching a good show on netflix at night #SmallPleasures - A whole week at home.. spending time this way - Watching Narcos - Netflix
News	How to use Netflix, url, articles about Netflix and its functioning	- Netflix in Italy, everything you need to know about it [url]
Catalog	Opinions about the catalog	- Everyone talking about #Netflix lack of series, and what about the lack of movies? Ridiculous catalogue
Competitors	Mentioning a competitor	- My favourite TV series: one on Infinity, one on Netflix, One on Sky. I think I'll subscribe to Torrent
Aesthetic objects	Mentioning specific content	- God bless Netflix. #Daredevil
Device	Mentioning devices and technologies related to Netflix	- Enjoy Netflix with Sony consoles [url]

¹ Tweets originally in Italian.

Subjective reactions	Personal points of view about Netflix: -emotional POV: uppercase, exclamation points, emphasis marks; - reports: anedoctes	- HALLELUJA! #ciaoNetflix - Pizza and #Netflix tonight
----------------------	--	---

At the time of writing, the content analysis is still in progress. It is carried on by two of the three authors after a training-phase on a sub-set of 200 randomly selected tweets not included in the final dataset. The training phase resulted in an acceptable level of intercoder agreement (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.82).

The paper will discuss the results of the content analysis in the context of existing literature.

References

- Andò, R., Marinelli, A. (2012). Dal Textual poacher al like/dislike. Quale valore dare all'«engagement» delle audience 2.0?. *Comunicazioni sociali*, 2, 347-357
- Baym, N.K. (2010). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Brunsdon, C. (2010). Bingeing on box-sets: the national and the digital in television crime drama. Gripsrud, J. (ed.), *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*. London: Routledge, 61–75
- Gillespie, T. (2014). 9 The Relevance of Algorithms. *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, 167.
- Jenkins, H., Ford S., Green J. (2013). *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York, London: New York University Press
- Jenner, M. (2015). Binge-watching: Video-on-demand, quality TV and mainstreaming fandom. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, online, 1–17
- Hallinan, B., & Striphas, T. (2016). Recommended for you: The Netflix Prize and the production of algorithmic culture. *New Media & Society*, 18(1), 117–137. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538646>
- Lazer, D. (2015). The rise of the social algorithm. *Science*, 348(6239), 1090–1091.