

# Netflix's War on Mass Culture

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Given all the faces you see glued to computers, tablets, and cell phones, you might think that people watch much less television than they used to. You would be wrong. According to Nielsen, Americans on average consume nearly five hours of TV every day, a number that has actually gone up since the 1990s. That works out to about 34 hours a week and almost 1,800 hours per year, more than the average French person spends working. The vast majority of that time is still spent in front of a standard television, watching live or prescheduled programming. Two decades into the Internet revolution, despite economic challenges and cosmetic upgrades, the ancient regime survives, remaining both the nation's dominant medium and one of its most immutable.

And that's why what Netflix is trying to do is so audacious. For the past two years, the Silicon Valley company has been making a major push into original programming, putting out an ambitious slate of shows that have cost Netflix, which had profits of \$17 million in 2012, hundreds of millions of dollars. Because of the relative quality of some of those series, such as "House of Cards" (a multiple Emmy winner) and "Orange Is the New Black," they've been widely interpreted as part of an attempt to become another HBO. Because every episode of every show is made available to watch right away, they're also seen as simply a new twist in on-demand viewing. But in fact the company has embarked upon a venture more radical than any before it. It may even be more radical than Netflix itself realizes.

History has shown that minor changes in viewing patterns can have enormous cultural spillovers. CNN can average as few as 400,000 viewers at any given moment—but imagine what the country might be like if cable news had never come along. Netflix's gambit, aped by Amazon Studios and other imitators, is to replace the traditional TV model with one dictated by the behaviors and values of the Internet generation. Instead of feeding a collective identity with broadly appealing content, the streamers imagine a culture united by shared tastes rather than arbitrary time slots. Pursuing a strategy that runs counter to many of Hollywood's most deep-seated hierarchies and norms, Netflix seeks nothing less than to reprogram Americans themselves. What will happen to our mass culture if it succeeds?

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Online, people are far more loyal to their interests and obsessions than an externally imposed schedule. While they may end up seeing the same stuff as other viewers, it happens incrementally, through recommendation algorithms and personal endorsements relayed over Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, and e-mails. New content is like snowfall, some of it melting away, some of it sticking and gradually accumulating. The YouTube Music Awards may have been a bust as a live show, but within two weeks, the production had racked up 3.5 million views.

Through the sheer number of hours watched and the dictation of evening routines—not to mention the way people orient entire rooms around the shiny screens placed at the center of their homes—network television played a singular role in creating American mass culture over the last 60 years. It now does the same in sustaining its vestiges. In the absence of a generation-defining genre—the rock of the 1960s, the rap of the 1990s—today’s pop hits flit through radio dials and iTunes playlists, catchy but ephemeral. Blockbuster movies and books are few these days, and the windows during which they command widespread attention brief. But television, despite the fragmenting influence of the Web and proliferating cable channels, continues to bind us more than any other medium. That’s why, should Netflix and the other streamers even partially succeed at redefining the network as we know it, the effects will be so profound.

If modern American popular culture was built on a central pillar of mainstream entertainment flanked by smaller subcultures, what stands to replace it is a very different infrastructure, one comprising islands of fandom. With no standard daily cultural diet, we’ll tilt even more from a country united by shows like “I Love Lucy” or “Friends” toward one where people claim more personalized allegiances, such as to the particular bunch of viewers who are obsessed with “Game of Thrones” or who somehow find Ricky Gervais unflinchingly hysterical, as opposed to painfully offensive.

The baby-boomer intellectuals who lament the erosion of shared values are right: Something will be lost in the transition. At the water cooler or wedding reception or cocktail party or kid’s soccer game, conversations that were once a venue for mutual experiences will become even more strained as chatter about last night’s overtime thriller or “Seinfeld” shenanigans is replaced by grasping for common ground. (“Have you heard of ‘The Defenders’? Yeah? What episode are you on?”) At a deeper level, a country already polarized by the echo chambers of ideologically driven journalism and social media will find itself with even less to agree on.

But it’s not all cause for dismay. Community lost can be community gained, and as mass culture weakens, it creates openings for the cohorts that can otherwise get crowded out. When you meet someone with the same particular passions and sensibility, the sense of connection can be profound. Smaller communities of fans, forged from shared perspectives, offer a more genuine sense of belonging than a national identity born of geographical happenstance.

Certainly, a culture where niche supplants mass hews closer to the original vision of the Americas, of a new continent truly open to whatever diverse and eccentric groups showed up. The United States was once, almost by definition, a place without a dominant national identity. As it revolutionizes television, Netflix is merely helping to return us to that past.