Netflix Original Productions:
Big Data, Nonlinearity, and Unprecedented Creative Flexibility

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ABSTRACT
Through a focused study of Netflix original dramas, this dissertation examines how developments in internet-distributed television such as nonlinearity and an unprecedented access to big data are altering the logics of television production. Despite constituting a significant shift in the television industry, there is a scholarly lag time which has resulted in a lack of theory around content produced by and for internet distribution portals. To try and bridge this gap, I have investigated the impact of big data and nonlinearity on format, commissions, resources, production protocols, and marketing. Through an analysis of industry press primarily, combined with relevant television theory (e.g. quality TV and genre studies) and a detailed case study, I argue that the specificities of Netflix as a portal have directly impacted its production norms. I found that the technological advances in question promote author-driven creative productions which operate outside of the constraints of traditional television.

INTRODUCTION
Netflix boasts:
► over 117 million members in
► over 190 countries enjoying more than
► 140 million hours of TV shows and movies per day (Netflix, 2018).

In the four years since the company produced its first original show, *House of Cards* (2013 –), Netflix has rapidly increased its rate of production. The massive volume of data collected from its viewers puts Netflix in a unique position when commissioning and producing series. Furthermore, the streaming portal has allowed much more flexibility than traditional television (both structurally and from a creative perspective).

This dissertation focuses on how big data and streaming influence the creative process of serial television drama production through an analysis of Netflix Originals. In other words, how Netflix's specificities are transforming the production of serial dramas.
► What role does big data concretely play throughout the phases of television production?
► What factors have allowed Netflix to be what it is today?
► How do other companies with similar strategies compare?
► How is Netflix's detailed categorization updating and/or personalizing genres?
► As streaming has bypassed the structural constraints of broadcast television, allowing creative choices of episode/season lengths tailored to each series, how has this altered the conventions of narrative structure?
► How do writers, directors, and other creatives fit into this data dominated business?
► What is the sustainability and future of Netflix's strategy?

Addressing these questions and others throughout this dissertation, I argue that, rather than being a hindrance, technological advances have in fact established a new and thriving business model for creativity. This research aims to demonstrate how internet distribution is directly impacting television production and enabling creative freedoms which were previously highly restricted.

SCOPE
While there is much to be said on Netflix user behavior, for the scope of my dissertation I focus primarily on production (from early development to marketing/distribution), using a narrow definition of "original" programming. Only series commissioned and produced by Netflix are considered. Moreover, I restrict my analysis to the production of television dramas.

CHAPTERS
Chapter one gives a concise summary of Netflix's history as an ever-evolving portal (in tandem with global technological advancements) in an increasingly competitive area. It also explains the metrics of Netflix's access to big data, and how it is used in series commissions and commitments. Lastly, it examines how Netflix's personalized interface gathers this data, creates new genre categories, and allows for targeted advertising.

Chapter two deals with the characteristics of Netflix's production environment. It explores the influence of complex and quality television on Netflix originals. It also examines the narrative flexibility Netflix has attained through streaming and binge-releasing its series. Finally, it looks at the unique resources available for these projects and question their sustainability.

Chapter three is a case study on Netflix original *Stranger Things* (2016 –). Although I use illustrative examples from a body of texts throughout my dissertation, this case study allows me to clearly map out the development, pre-production, production, marketing, and impact of one project. Thus, it gives a detailed account of how big data and streaming continually interact with the creative process throughout these phases.

METHODOLOGY & LITERARTURE REVIEW
Recognizing that this is a new field, scholarly work supporting this topic is still limited. Thus, I use a combination of:
► television narrative theory,
► genre theory,
► industrial study,
► digital humanities,
► and trade press.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS
Through my research, I discovered that while new technologies may, over time, present a new set of challenges, they are currently giving producers the opportunity to work outside of the constraints that typically govern television production.

My first chapter demonstrated Netflix's history of capitalizing on technology which led to two major developments:
► The user metadata Netflix has collected over the years put the company in a unique position when predicting what its users want to watch and categorizing its content in a way that directly caters to its users' tastes.
► The portal's nonlinearity gave Netflix the capability of adding, distributing, and even altering its content at will.

My second chapter delved further into the repercussions of nonlinearity and assessed the current success rate of Netflix originals. Acknowledging the influence of quality and complex TV from competitors such as HBO, I explored how nonlinearity, a willingness to invest in original stories, and a hands-off production approach (giving power to creative) have contributed to making Netflix a desirable production house to many preeminent producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors. Due to certain outdated mainstream television industry practices (e.g. executive gut-feel decisions, pilot constraints, distribution/structural issues), I found that Netflix was often not just a desirable producer, but the only one willing and able to take calculated risks on series that networks rejected, ultimately resulting in its unparalleled success.

It became apparent through my case study of *Stranger Things* that from development to release/marketing, being produced by Netflix had tangible effects on the series' outcome. Had it been commissioned by a television network, the Duffer Brothers would have been forced to make sacrifices in such areas as episode/season lengths, narrative complexity, and even casting in order to mold their series into a rigid and prescribed structure. Instead, the series was produced true to the vision of its creators with incomparable narrative and structural freedom, in partnership with likeminded studios and notable stars, gained a huge internet cult following, and was acclaimed by television award ceremonies.

The outlook for the future is uncertain. As competition grows ever-more intense, Netflix will need to set itself apart to remain relevant in the pivotal and uncertain years ahead. Whether specializing as a streaming portal producing original content in a world of hybrid companies (Amazon, Facebook, HBO, Disney…) is the correct route to success remains to be seen. However, what is undeniably clear, is that when Netflix produced *House of Cards* back in 2013, **it set in motion a chain of events that would drastically change the logics of media production.**

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