

Netflix as Global Thought

What can paying attention to the intentionally obscured shadow industry of television piracy reveal about Netflix and its delivery of global thought?

White, P. (2025). Netflix as Global Thought: What can paying attention to the intentionally obscured shadow industry of television piracy reveal about Netflix and its delivery of global thought?. *INTER- The Journal for Global Thought*, 1(1), 171-182. <https://doi.org/10.15664/ejh2kx93>



The Graduate School for
Interdisciplinary
Studies



INTER- The Journal for Global Thought

ISSN 2976-7628

Issue 1 (Fall 2025)

<https://inter-journal.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

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Netflix positioning itself as Global Thought

Netflix promised a revolutionary shift in television consumption, offering audiences unprecedented global freedom and accessibility. To outline how streaming services were *intended* to function, or if one is to be cynical, how they were *proposed* to function, I turn to Netflix's definition of itself. In a keynote speech given in 2016, Netflix co-founder and CEO Reed Hastings stated Netflix was giving audiences what they always wanted, building upon the progress of broadcast TV, cable TV, and the VCR; internet TV is positioned as the revolution of television.

With the internet, we can finally give people what they have always wanted. We can now put consumers across the world in the driver's seat when it comes to when and where they want to watch. You don't have to sit through commercials or be at the mercy of an 8 pm tune-in. You just click and watch, a simple but revolutionary shift from corporate to consumer control (CES 2016).

Hastings emphasises that streaming equips audiences across the world with choice and control. Piracy, as a shadow industry, surging up from beneath the official television power structures, challenges the utopian digital age offerings of globalisation. Piracy here is used to give a name to the activities of the shadow industry which enables the unauthorised and unofficial distribution of television content. Where this can be seen operating closer to the light, as it were, is in the use of VPNs, which allows for the unauthorised and unofficial streaming of television content from different global regions, although not illegal, here piracy - a VPN - enables this activity. By investigating the unofficial offerings of privacy, and paying attention to the practices of this shadow industry, we can see a television industry not moving forward, but instead reinforcing

the power structures of earlier television incarnations. Upon closer inspection, Netflix is not global and it is not accessible. Instead, where the sensibilities of region-locked television remains, the content itself is transient, with an unstable catalogue of content to view plagued by licensing policies, global politics, and the disappearance of the digital.

Temporality: The Control and Curation of Global Thought

We can encounter Netflix as a library or database, and it positions itself as such. A few interesting things are happening here with regard to the implications of the term “library” given the historical evolution of the concept of libraries from exclusive, restricted-access institutions to public, accessible spaces, through technological shifts and the revolution of knowledge production with the internet. It is debatable the extent to which streaming explicitly promised permanence, or if there was a presumed permanence which has been shown by creators in the industry and viewers. This presumption stemming from streaming as a remediation of broadcast television, a more transient medium, which when streaming pitted itself as progress, and used the semiotics and lexicon shifts of a library, lead to the conclusion of a promise of permanence which people now feel has been betrayed. The promise of control, through any “anywhere, anytime” rhetoric was made, and in order to be delivered, stability and permanence is required. With the understood lexicon links at work when streaming services position themselves as a library, any failure to deliver feels like a public service under attack. Further, the modern library is a dynamic entity that fulfils educational, cultural, and social needs, enriching the community it serves. Piracy therefore acts as an intervention to a societal crisis,

acting as a decentralised open-source library, be it a temperamental one, as links break and are removed due to the illegality of the system.

Travis M. Andrews considers access and ownership in what he refers to as a post-DVD digital age where “viewers may never be able to access the shows again. Show runners might not even have physical copies of their own work” (2022). The practice of piracy highlights a fundamental disconnect, challenging the ideal of streaming platforms as reliable repositories of content, as they are seen to position themselves in Figure 1 through the rhetoric of content being available “any time” which does not account for the unreliable realities of these libraries.

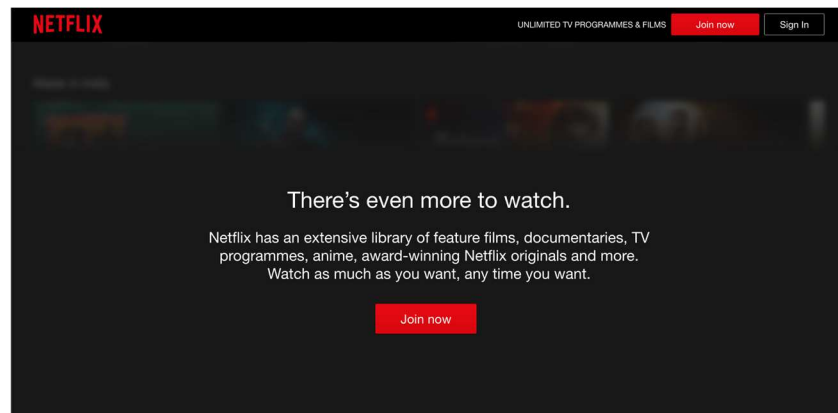


Figure 1: Netflix describes itself as an “extensive library” of programming to watch “any time you want”.

Reliable repositories of content can also be understood as an archive. An archive is in its most simple terms provide long-term preservation of, protecting its contents from deterioration and loss. There are implications here of the function of the archive as a protector and controller of global thought, choosing what to protect and who to share it with. Piracy has also highlighted the failings of streaming services here, through the

practice of pirate-archivists who preserve content that would otherwise be lost. Kwasu Tembo argues that viewers interact with Netflix as an archive, as the “ever-updating Netflix catalogue represents a digital space in which cultural texts are archived or dislodged from the sequential temporal imperatives of the over-the-air-broadcasting” (2019, 221). Streaming appears then to empower audiences; a split from the schedule offers choice and control, moving from national to global, from corporate media to alternative voices.

Abigail De Kosnik states “amateur archivists are also donating their free labour to preserve official, industrially made, commercial productions. Those who download copies of industrial mass media productions, we can call pirate-archivists” (2020, 65). Well-renowned figures in the film industry Guillermo del Toro and Christopher Nolan are shown in Figure 2 expressing concerns about the transient nature of streaming services, with Guillermo del Toro referring to owners of physical media as a “custodian”, a term which also holds connotations with archives. Moving from physical to digital, ownership to subscription, the imagining of streaming services as a remediation of VHS and DVD libraries fails when the associated imagining of streaming as permanent also fails. Therefore those who maintain libraries through the physically pirated act as custodians, preserving, maintaining, and protecting cultural texts.



Figure 2: Guillermo del Toro responding to comments made by Christopher Nolan on content disappearing from streaming services.

Mike Flanagan, creator of the Netflix series *Midnight Mass* (2021), reflects that “[working] in streaming for the past few years has made me reconsider my position on piracy.” While advocating for the physical release of his work

[it] became clear very fast that their priority was subscriptions, and that they were not particularly interested in physical media releases of their originals [...] While companies like Netflix pride themselves on being disruptors, and have proven that they can affect great change in the industry, they sometimes fail to see the difference between *disruption* and *damage*. [...] The danger comes when a title is *only* available on one platform, and then - for whatever reason - is removed. We have already seen this happen [...] Titles exclusively available on streaming services have essentially been erased from the world. (flanaganfilm 2023).

Streaming services can then be understood to not care for maintaining a stable library at the expense of the preservation of a historical archive: why should they spend money on something that will not gain any new subscribers? The BFI National Archive offers a partial response to the crisis at play here with the archiving of streaming services. In 2022 Netflix became the first streaming service to enter programmes into the BFI archive, as “[twenty-six] series and films reflecting the diverse communities of contemporary Britain” were digitally preserved (BFI 2022). However, such actions of an official archive are limited in their ability to address the crisis of lost content, with select titles from only one streaming service being added and it in no way addresses the concern of changes made to programmes post initial release. I cite this official archiving to show where the industry and shadow industry mirror one another.

The presence of pirate archivists and the discourse of piracy in the public sphere signify a critical breach in the streaming model, which could once be envisioned as a digital library. I have demonstrated that the temperamental temporality of television under the control of streaming services brings into question the ownership and protection of art, where the function of the archive as a protector of global thought has been shown to be responded to by the BFI, in their preservation of “contemporary Britain”, and are further protected regardless of country or cultural origin by pirate archivists, custodians of global thought.

Spatiality: Global Thought or Glocalisation

The perceived failings of streaming in the context of spatiality further reveal our relationship with the global. I challenge the idea of streaming services as truly global.

The use of VPNs and continued practice of localisation, which piracy calls attention to, does not fit this image of global accessibility. Further, piracy reveals acts of censorship and where piracy circumvents censorship, marking piracy as an act which responds to actions which seek to control and limit the spatiality of digital streaming.

Michael Strangelove discusses the line of legitimacy and piracy that VPNs straddle, as VPN usage, “shows how piracy is used by the post-television generation to enhance legitimate services that are stunted because of geographical licensing restrictions” (2015, 148). Here Strangelove refers to region-locked content on the platforms which are also circumnavigated using VPNs. For television texts on streaming services which are truly available globally, streaming services offer a model of simultaneous release, as Zoë Shacklock observes regarding Netflix “a so-called 'global' platform, Netflix promises both universality and diversity: transforming global distribution flows so that texts are accessible at the same time in every place, and widening access to a broader range of world media” (2021, 52). VPNs have then been shown to offer an alternative view of this inconsistent “universality”.

Netflix further distinguished itself as a platform of global thought with its distribution model of a simultaneous global release. It is however worth highlighting that Netflix is not available in China, leading to the piracy of its shows. A notable example is *Squid Game* (2021), as reported by the BBC “Squid Game, the global hit show centred on deadly children's games, has become hugely popular in China even though it is not officially released there. Netflix is not available in China and many people have been watching the show on illegal streaming sites or by downloading torrents” (BBC 2021). As

there is no legitimate release of *Squid Game* available in China, discussions of the show in the country make piracy highly visible, and prompted South Korea's ambassador to China, Jang Ha-sung, cited on AFP, to ask Chinese authorities to take action: "our assessment is that *Squid Game*, which is gaining global popularity, is being illegally distributed on around 60 sites in China" (France 24 2021). AFP reported, "[as] fascination with the show swirls among China's tech-savvy youth, the hashtag "Squid Game" got nearly two billion views on social media, and related topics have been trending for weeks" (France 24 2021). Piracy in China has been shown to be a response to geographic restrictions imposed by both commercial and state actors. There is also a practice of fan subbing, providing unofficial subtitles, for shows not available with translations. Nectar Gan reported on the shutdown of YYeTs.com in 2021, "the site — one of China's largest, longest-running and last-remaining destinations for pirated, subtitled foreign content — was shuttered on February 3 as part of a sweeping police clampdown on piracy. While the website is still live, none of its services work anymore" (2021). This continued crackdown on piracy in China also restricts the practice which provides uncensored foreign content.

Gan states

[the] public outcry came, at least in part, because of how tightly the Chinese government restricts access to foreign content. It is one of only four countries or regions, alongside North Korea, Syria and Crimea, that doesn't allow access to Netflix, the world's most-popular streaming platform, for example. China also strictly limits how many foreign films can be screened in cinemas each year. And of the content that is allowed to air in the country, much is heavily censored (2021).

As of 2024 China is one of five countries or regions, alongside North Korea, Syria, Crimea and Russia, that does not allow access to Netflix.

Conclusion

I argue for exploring piracy of television as an unofficial viewing practice which draws attention to issues of temporality and spatiality, two key components of a *shared* global space, with official streaming services, positioning piracy as an act of revelation and intervention, one which seeks to provide access to global thought.

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Figures:

Figure 1: Netflix. "There's even more to watch." Accessed August 13, 2024.

<https://www.netflix.com/gb/browse/genre/34399>

Figure 2: @RealGDT. Twitter, November 20, 2023.

<https://x.com/RealGDT/status/1726694961255506007>