12

Individual Disruptors and Economic Gamechangers: Netflix, New Media, and Neoliberalism

Gerald Sim

> *In many ways television is being disrupted in a dramatic way and Netflix is a perfect example of that.*
>
> Ken Auletta, *Charlie Rose*, January 29, 2014

In the final week of January 2014, Netflix's stock price surged an incredible 21 percent on news in the company's quarterly earnings report that the service had added more than 4 million new subscribers worldwide.[1] Those shares grew by another 36 percent over the next month. It represented a stark turnaround from a pricing and public relations debacle approximately two years earlier, when an unwelcome price increase amid plans to charge customers separately for its "Netflix Instant" streaming service incurred the wrath of subscribers and investors. Netflix aborted the idea, but was forced to claw its way out of a sustained nightmarish period when it lost customers and the faith of market watchers. But claw its way out it did, which was reflected in both its latest news and forecasts of future business. Two weeks later, Ken Auletta, media writer for *The New Yorker*, published a 6,100-word article titled "Outside the Box: Netflix and the Future of Television," documenting Netflix's major role in slaying Blockbuster Video, popularizing mobile platforms of media consumption, and radically altering the television business.[2] Auletta promoted the story with an appearance on the *Charlie Rose* show. Much of what he reported in the magazine can be gleaned from various industry studies undertaken in various quarters over the last decade[3]; Auletta's account, however, rubberstamped by the imprimatur of Rose's late-night sobriety, is noteworthy. I spotlight it less as a definitive record than an ossified popular narrative of putative discourses situating Netflix in media history. In many ways it also underlines the current and possibly future ways with which scholars grasp Netflix's impact.

Auletta's lede takes his readers to a 2000 meeting in Dallas between Netflix CEO Reed Hastings and executives from Blockbuster, long-time leader in the video rental business. Hastings offered to sell 49 percent of his company in exchange for running Blockbuster's online service. Blockbuster spurned the deal, a fateful decision in light of Netflix's steady advances on the home video market since then and the inverse trajectory of Blockbuster's fortunes over the same period. Auletta's article was published merely two months after the chain shuttered its remaining 300 outlets, and forty months after it filed for bankruptcy.[4] From its prior hegemonic position as cultural institution, Blockbuster's demise felt momentous. Its postmortems usually run through the company's litany of strategic indecision and missteps. But Auletta lauds Hastings' nous and foresight regarding online streaming as the catalysts in a zero-sum game between the companies. Here lies a key turning point in his version of the tale. Post-Blockbuster, historians are negotiating the larger cultural impact of online content distribution and mobile exhibition platforms. That Netflix killed its dithering and overly cautious rival is a closed debate.[5] Instead, this chapter litigates aspects of how historians and media users are coming to terms with Netflix's second act, namely in regard to the social significance and economic workings of digitally enabled consumption.

Defined as an online video platform, Netflix is categorically associated in popular as well as scholarly historical accounts with services such as Apple's iTunes, Amazon's Instant Video, and Hulu—a cohort of technological peers and business competitors. Having vanquished Blockbuster, Netflix now ostensibly faces them as fresh adversaries. Herein I rethink the tendency to comprehend Netflix this way, and posit that the predilection is encouraged by the lure of autonomy and mobility that new media ostensibly affords to both spectators and content creators. I argue that the inherent populism in particular is ideologically inflected. On the one hand, it is hard to deny that a cultural shift toward convergence and new habits of spectatorship is irreversibly underway; the media industry is also without question realigning. For example, Netflix recently became the latest attempt to unsettle Hollywood's norms by narrowing the theatrical release window. Its plans to stream its production of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon II: The Green Destiny* (2016) during its theatrical run was met with threats by major theater chains to boycott the film.[6] In any event, the outsized role frequently attributed to Netflix in effecting these changes is ideologically if not politically fraught. Specifically, writers are codifying a history where Netflix and, by extension, Hastings are institutional and individual change agents within a narrative laden with individualist tropes favored by neoliberalism.

If the history of Netflix were to be scripted as an overblown biopic movie, the storyline would write itself. The protagonist in that telling is naturally Hastings the visionary, whose invention slayed a corporate behemoth, changed the business, and eventually altered the way that the world consumes and interacts with media. This chapter in fact contemplates how these tropes appear in key productions associated with Netflix, *Breaking Bad* (2008–13) and *House of Cards* (2013–). The historical stakes are multifold. Besides the interests of balance, if not accuracy, we must remember that neoliberalism is not merely an economic doctrine. It subtends a cultural mythology and political hermeneutic that conditions how we perceive new media spectatorial practices such as time-shifting and binge-watching. Consider Auletta's account, which quite assiduously hews to predictable types, beginning with the title, "Outside the Box."

The pun denotes the main topic, television, and designates Netflix as innovator. On *Charlie Rose*, Auletta furthers his narrative by referring to the company as a "disruptor," a marketing *mot à la mode* (of expiring utility, as it were[7]). Confluence between historical discourse and what Madison Avenue manufactures and releases into our cultural ecosystem further presses the case to reconsider accepted wisdom, especially when it echoes neoliberal jingoism.

Few works of new media history are more important than *Convergence Culture*, in which the author Henry Jenkins diagnoses a cultural shift rooted in more active consumer participation.[8] He argues that technologically empowered audiences, "occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture."[9] These hopes have been alive at least since Walter Benjamin wrote that famous essay about the work of art. According to Jenkins, convergence might be a bidirectional process—both "top-down corporate-driven and bottom-up consumer-driven"—where media consumers have wrestled away from the industry the power to control their experience and are now able to drive cultural change from below. Media producers, Jenkins believes, will either reexamine their relationships with audiences or suffer the economic consequences.[10] Where Netflix is concerned, Hastings evidently agrees. Auletta reports as follows:

> Hastings has succeeded, in large part, by taking advantage of what he calls viewers' "managed dissatisfaction" with traditional television: each hour of programming is crammed with about twenty minutes of commercials and promotional messages for other shows. Netflix carries no commercials; its revenue derives entirely from subscription fees. Viewers are happy to pay a set fee, now eight dollars a month, in order to watch, uninterrupted, their choice of films or shows, whenever they want, on whatever device they want. "Think of it as entertainment that's more like books," Hastings said. "You get to control and watch, and you get to do all the chapters of a book at the same time, because you have all the episodes."[11]

Do we? We might have all the episodes but do we hold all the cards? Given Netflix's market penetration, my reader is also a likely subscriber. If that is so, do you feel more in control of the experience than you were before, or might you merely be enjoying more customer satisfaction than is possible with a cable monopoly? My cynicism arises partly from the tidy consistency of Jenkins, Hastings, and Auletta's testimonies.

Nonetheless, the purpose is not to question the presence of change or the propositions offered by *Convergence Culture*. Change is definitely afoot, but this chapter pauses and reflects in the midst of much excitement, where an era is being consigned to the past and celebrations are kicking off for the digital future. Jenkins charts a progression where online video services alter modes of consumption, change textual forms, and move media culture into a new era. Although he does not name Netflix, it is easy to transpose the discourse surrounding the company onto his narrative. In that context, I reconsider the degree to which "disruptive," "gamechanging," or "transformational" are truly appropriate adjectives.

It all sounds pretty familiar. Christopher Anderson's important work in *Hollywood TV* provides adequate warning about the tendency to go along with the idea of "seismic shifts described in … epic accounts of the industry's demise."[12] Wracked with uncertainty after the Paramount Decrees, the film industry perpetuated a mythology about its postwar business. "Under conditions that threatened the very existence of the studio system, television served many in the Hollywood community as a convenient stock villain," when television production in fact turned out to be a crucial source of revenue. It turned out that the film and television industries were symbiotic. "The motion picture industry during the 1950s was less an empire on the verge of ruin than one struggling, under unsettling conditions, to redefine its frontiers."[13] Anderson's findings reduce the temptation to see Netflix as a rival bringing the television industry face to face with its demise, and more of a symbiotic partner with the networks. Even Auletta cites the case of the CBS Corporation where the drop in revenue from commercials is being partly offset by licensing fees that parties such as Netflix pay for its programming. Still, CBS continues to monitor the hovering specter of an existential threat posed by so-called cord-cutting audiences who opt for streaming services over traditional cable subscriptions.[14]

Anderson argues that depicting cinema and television as distinct industries in competition with each other is discursively reinforced by perceptions of the latter's technological inferiority, susceptibility to commercial pressure, and lack of artistic sophistication. Mobilized within a marketing strategy of product differentiation, "movie industry discourse has often implied that the cinema exists in an autonomous sphere outside the corrupting influence of the marketplace."[15] The Netflix-versus-television story updates that construction too. This time, it is the upstart that offers autonomy to consumers with the freedom to choose what they want and when they want it, as well as creative freedom to artists to develop riskier and more demanding shows. Furthermore, Netflix is able to offer what Jason Jacobs terms the "pure" text, free of "adverts, promotional material, and other pollution."[16] The ballyhooed phenomenon of "binge-watching" multiple television episodes uninterrupted, especially serials, is central. It is an offshoot of "time-shifting," the original practice of recording programs for later viewing at consumers' convenience. Do they truly transform viewing practices in the wake of Anderson's reformulation of the film–television binary and his cautionary tale of overstating change?

A further corollary exists between the film–television dynamic in the 1950s and that of Netflix–television today—recourse to "quality television." Binge-watching on Netflix is routinely associated with the series *Breaking Bad* because of how the streaming service helped the show expand the audience for the cable network AMC. *Breaking Bad* is commonly taken as an exemplar of the current "Golden Age" of television, a term that associates the present with "quality" reminiscent of the past. Since these monikers are discursive constructions, what is the historical significance of their contingencies? In other words, what may we glean from "quality television" such as *Breaking Bad* and its place in Netflix history? Economically, Mareike Jenner argues that Netflix produced "quality" specifically to brand itself as source and venue of binge-worthy programming.[17] Ideologically, "quality" is a shiny result that burnishes the company's achievements, validating capitalism's promise that productivity and innovation arrive via an "invisible hand" that guides individualist effort.

The final consequence is historiographical. Anderson points out that the original "Golden Age" of the 1950s, brought about by movie producers' venture into prime-time programming, is important for understanding how the film and television industries intersected.[18] Reflecting on the new Golden Age as a meeting between Netflix and television can be comparably instructive. The perceived role of Netflix in encouraging networks to produce "quality" shows strikes at a similar sweet spot, a coming together that ironically draws contrast within the Netflix–television binary. To the extent that the term "Golden Age" is presently invoked out of yearning for prestige, pining for quality during this period of realignment is indirectly deployed as an impetus for change brought by Netflix and as a reason to encourage the media industries to follow its lead and collectively evolve.[19] It is as if to say, Netflix can make television as good as it used to be, if not better. But underneath the hype and luster, is Netflix truly the change agent that everyone wants it to be?

The false promise of creative autonomy

Film and media scholarship usually takes note of Netflix as part of the epochal transition from old to new media.[20] B. Ruby Rich believes that as cinema rolls through the "post-celluloid era … in which film is on the verge of becoming a generic term, a signifier devoid of any fixed category," television faces its own seismic challenges.

> Television addresses a fundamental shift in viewer habits and public consumption: the desire for the episodic, a refusal of the one whole organic object, the reliance on continuity and replicability into an uncertain but newly reassured existence. Further, new digital platforms have altered television's seriality: now it's possible to be immersed in marathon viewings that stitch together epics out of once-parsed chapters. Such new viewing habits affect the narrative power of television and reset cinematic expectations. With Netflix, iTunes, and Amazon Prime as studio and distributor, an update is overdue.[21]

Encapsulating other writings in television—and new media studies—the passage articulates the links between technological change, evolving viewing practices, and textual transformations, while situating Netflix specifically.[22] Streaming platforms such as Netflix enable consumers to alter the nature of their experience. As a consequence, they lead producers to tailor their programs for binge-watching, or at least incentivize a structural redesign of episodic narratives. Rich's characterization darkens the ink even further on Jenkins' oft-repeated account of empowered audiences who now enjoy a right of refusal—of commercial interruptions, or of having to watch at the pleasure of predetermined programming schedules.[23] For some critics, liberation also arrives in the form of random and unplanned encounters with media objects and new meanings.[24] Audiences today can call the shots on what they watch, when they watch it, and how. Mobile platforms and lowered price points have additionally led to rapid market penetration by devices such as tablets and smartphones. Consumers are not only able to time-shift; they are also unbound to living rooms or desktop screens.

This represents the new reality confronting producers and distributors; this is the disruption that the industry must navigate. Nonetheless, by associating the nature of Netflix usage as Jason Hill and Elisa Schaar do, with words like "dialogical" and "usurp," the current historical view seems to conflate its consumption with a strong hint of political bearing.[25] Rich goes so far as to argue that accessibility to film archives via new media channels can "democratize."[26] It would be unfair to accuse these writers of trying to equate consumption with meaningful political activity. However, questions should still be posed regarding the newfound control that new media's denizens are claimed to possess. What is the nature of Netflix users' autonomy? To what degree is it significant? Even if the industry is being forced to reassess their revenue streams, are questions being asked of the *culture industry*?

To hear the brigade from Netflix tell it, the company stands squarely as a comrade marching arm in arm with newly empowered spectators.[27] As if heeding a clarion call, Netflix continues its mission to rescue traditional viewers from the indignities of "managed dissatisfaction." Hastings elaborates in a corporate and personal profile published in *GQ*.

> "The point of managed dissatisfaction is waiting. You're supposed to wait for your show that comes on Wednesday at 8 p.m., wait for the new season, see all the ads everywhere for the new season, talk to your friends at the office about how excited you are." If it's a movie, he adds, you wait till the night it opens, you wait for the pay-channel window, you wait for it to come to cable. Waiting means pent-up demand, millions of people watching the same thing at the same time, preferably at night, when they're pliant with exhaustion and ready to believe they need the stuff being hawked in all those commercials. Waiting, Hastings says, is dead.[28]

According to Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos, the company's designs for culture extend even further. It speculates openly about how liberating customers from managed dissatisfaction can "radically alter the way stories get told."[29]

On this score both Netflix and media historians place high premiums on ideas of individual freedom and flexibility. But where consumers are concerned, the notion of an alliance propagated by public relations exercises such as the *GQ* article obscures the materially transactional nature of their relationship with Netflix. Customers are not comrades. Beyond that, the individualism implicitly defined bears the contours of a neoliberal subject, which as David Harvey points out, neither possesses nor seeks the sort of ideals and freedoms capable of threatening corporate power.[30] At a minimum, Harvey's critique prompts an assessment of whether the hype emanating from corporate headquarters holds up under scrutiny.

The popular and largely unchallenged view of Netflix positions the company as a hero to both users and creators of media content. It has supposedly brought about a new economic model and mode of consumption understood to benefit television programs in particular. Because Netflix revenues stem from membership subscriptions, it becomes easier to believe in a direct correlation between the nature of its content and what customers desire, part of which is the luxury of time-shifting and the related fetish of binge-watching. Producers are thus freed from the dictates of decency standards and of corporate risk aversion on the part of those who purchase advertising time. As a result, content is less constrained by rigid conventions routinely imposed on narrative content and episodic structure. Afforded creative autonomy and serial formats, so the logic goes, producers now possess license to construct lengthier story arcs and deeper, more complex plots to house fuller and more nuanced characters, ushering in the new Golden Age of television. "Quality TV" never had it so good, and Netflix seems at the heart of it all. Its flagship of original programming, the political drama *House of Cards*, enjoys all these benefits. Netflix outbid HBO and AMC by discarding the usual requirement of a pilot episode for prior testing; it committed long term to two 13-episode seasons in March 2011.[31] Showrunner Beau Willimon was all too ready to give Netflix credit in an interview with *Variety*, which also hailed the company for "forcing the entertainment industry to reexamine the very definition of a TV series."

> I think it's the smartest business model out there. When you give artists the opportunity to make what they want to make, place faith in them, allow them to take risks, to push boundaries, to even flirt with failure and take those risks, then you're going to get the best possible work, because that's what they thirst for.[32]

"Faith," "risk," and willingness to "flirt with failure," however, rarely constitute wise economic strategy. Contrary to what the party line articulates, Netflix financed *House of Cards* with a defined risk abatement strategy.

Willimon is probably sincere in his romanticization of how much creative freedom he enjoys with Netflix, but highlighting the company's gamble requires a concomitant de-emphasis of the rationality mitigating the financial risk. Netflix's faith in *House of Cards* was not blind, but methodically guided by conclusions based in turn on its trove of usage statistics compiled on an unprecedentedly extensive level for years. One aspect of this database consists of tagging each and every title in its catalog with an elaborate system of labels. This produces a complex taxonomy of traits, including genre, content, tone, character attributes, narrative resolutions, and so on. Dubbed the "Netflix Quantum Theory," this document is layered with user profiles and metadata generated by tracking subscriber behavior—how they scroll through its menu, select titles, and play videos. Devised primarily to generate personalized recommendations, the data has proven useful elsewhere.[33] Netflix had in fact explicitly declared its intention to apply that knowledge in its foray into original programming.

> Netflix's data indicated that the same subscribers who loved the original BBC production also gobbled down movies starring Kevin Spacey or directed by David Fincher. Therefore, concluded Netflix executives, a remake of the BBC drama

> with Spacey and Fincher attached was a no-brainer, to the point that the company committed $100 million for two 13-episode seasons.[34]
>
> Netflix has created a database of American cinematic predilections. The data can't tell them how to make a TV show, but it can tell them what they should be making. When they create a show like *House of Cards*, they aren't guessing at what people want.[35]

What people want, therefore, is both quantified and commodified. The freedom of choice exercised by what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School term "pseudoindividuals" resembles Harvey's depiction of the neoliberal subject, who prizes "the liberty of consumer choice, not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural processes."[36] The "Netflix Quantum Theory" renders abundantly clear, the literal existence of a system fashioned to feed "differentiated consumerism," "individual libertarianism," and "consumer niche choices."[37]

House of Cards began its run on Netflix eight months before *Breaking Bad* aired its final episodes on AMC. The two shows feature prominently in historical accounts of Netflix and the industrial reorganization brought on by its success. Those reports consider Netflix an important instrument of time-shifting and binge-watching—along with DVDs, video on demand (VOD), and even illegal downloading—that enabled *Breaking Bad* to develop an audience over time, reducing the traditional pressure on shows to hit ratings targets during initial broadcast.[38] Viewers whose interest developed gradually from a combination of word of mouth, critical praise, and high-profile award show victories could binge-watch and get caught up in time for new episodes airing on AMC. The showrunner Vince Gilligan even credits Netflix with keeping the drama on the air while its broadcast ratings lagged.[39] But ascribing causal recognition to Netflix in this instance discounts AMC's strategic commitment to a show that underlined the cable channel's own investments in original programming. AMC had been trying for at least a decade to establish its own slate of original programming, as other cable networks had successfully done. *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* (2007–15) merely represented the culmination of those efforts to accrue brand equity as a destination for quality television and consequently, if not more importantly, good films. AMC president Charlie Collier explained it thus in 2008:

> The mission is to make sure we build a breadth of originals that really complement what we do best—present a diverse array of the best movies of all time. We know very well what we want. We want our brand, when we do originals, to be as high-end and high-quality as the films we're airing.[40]

These objectives do not override the imperative for these shows to succeed either commercially or critically, but they do alleviate some of the usual pressure to garner ratings. For that matter, not all ratings points are equal. Advertisers more greatly covet a show's audience if it skews richer, younger, or more male as it was in *Breaking Bad*'s case.[41] And before its final run of episodes began, the Film Society of Lincoln Center stamped its cultural imprimatur by indulging in some binge-watching of its own, feting the production with an entire week of events, including a marathon of all previously aired installments. The show also enjoyed significant and high-profile critical acclaim from its very first season, all of which represents the "third-party validation" that Collier and the network craved. In short, binge-watching did play an important role in building the show's audience for its final season. But the enduring belief furthered by Gilligan that Netflix and its subscribers saved *Breaking Bad* from cancellation is also outlandish.

Binge-watching in the neoliberal economy

We should therefore not be as cavalier in thinking that Netflix empowers audiences against the industry. New media technologies are far more likely to advantage owners of production before they benefit consumers. If the history of *Breaking Bad* illustrates how AMC's corporate decisions can be elided in favor of an admittedly more inspiring populist narrative, the data-driven rationale behind the important choice to greenlight of *House of Cards* calls the very idea of autonomy into further question. Consumer sovereignty in the realm of programming decisions is a manufactured fantasy, just as creative control was limited by rationalized parameters determined prior to production.

It might also be presumptive to equate the practice of binge-watching with consumer autonomy. Empirically speaking, time-shifting, made exponentially easier since the advent of video cassette recorders that gave audiences greater ability to avert their eyeballs from commercials, represents an unmistakable transformation. Still, the relevance of "appointment" television remains vital. Research commissioned by the digital video recorder seller TiVo suggests that "binge-viewing is primarily a function of playing catch-up … [53 percent of its subscribers] binge in order to be sufficiently caught up in time for the next season premiere."[42] Indeed, the important benefit AMC derived from the binge-watching of *Breaking Bad* was the ratings momentum and higher ad rates that Netflix, along with other platforms such as VOD and iTunes, helped to generate for the show's final run of original episodes.

An audience of 50,000 watched the entire fourth season of *Breaking Bad* in the twenty-four hours before the show's fifth season premiered on AMC.[43] Are these small windows of time not "events" for all intents and purposes? The cultural writer Graeme McMillan concurs that even though television networks are not responsible for staging these events.

> Technology may have freed us from the restraints on our viewing schedules placed on us by television networks, but it turned out to be a zero sum game; at the same time as one hand offered us freedom, the other was ensuring that we'd have to keep up to date and fall under an equally artificial schedule created by our online communities.[44]

Eulogies for appointment television specifically prompted by *House of Cards*, blamed indirectly on Netflix, thus seem premature.[45] The 10.3 million viewers for the *Breaking Bad* series finale outdrew the program's previous record by 56 percent.[46] From that point of view, the result of binge-watching *Breaking Bad* was ultimately the creation of a television "event" and cultural phenomenon. *Variety* reported on elaborate viewing parties around the United States for "perhaps the most anticipated scripted TV event of the social media era."[47] AMC reaped a windfall when the cable network's top ad rates for the finale matched those of broadcast series.[48]

Moreover, binge-watching is etymologically associated with indulgence, compulsion, and loss of self-control—behaviors conceptually antithetical to autonomy.[49] TiVo discovered that approximately 74 percent of its subscribers watched at least one full season of a television show over a number of days.[50] Two percent of Netflix subscribers in the United States watched *House of Cards*' entire second season within its first weekend of release. In other words, 634,000 viewers consumed thirteen hours of programming over three days.[51] According to Jacobs, for digital television's time-shifting spectators, it is a Kantian "question of will," that is to say, of control, intention, or choice.[52] We can condense it further and consider the integrity of those choices. Are they made autonomously, as it were? Beyond pseudoindividuality, Adorno likens the mental state of those living in standardized mass culture to that of fascistically manipulated subjects. These "members of contemporary masses are, at least *prima facie* individuals, the children of a liberal, competitive and individualistic society," but are in fact "largely robbed of autonomy and spontaneity, instead of setting goals the realization of which would transcend the psychological status quo no less than the social one."[53]

The strength that Netflix provides consumers to disrupt is illusory. Even if we generously estimate the limits of their autonomy and available choices, we would be well advised to consider talk of revolution and gamechange carefully. But the temptation to adopt optimistic lines of individualist discourse can be irresistible. Their neoliberal truthiness is additionally reinforced by the company's public image, corporate practices, and the ideology of its most prominent shows. Netflix is famous within Silicon Valley for its constitution (labeled "Netflix Culture" on its website or known alternatively as its "Culture Deck") that rewards performance over effort, and encourages employees to assume personal responsibility and adopt appropriate ethics when utilizing uncommon perks. Netflix does not track vacation days, sick days, or expensing.[54] Peppered with terms from the neoliberal lexicon such as "freedom," "responsibility," "flexibility," and "market," the document grants Netflix's staff uncommon freedom to determine where, when, and how they labor. And if they successfully eradicate "managed dissatisfaction," they will permit subscribers to consume media where, when, and how they desire.[55] The corporate ethos comes full circle.

Its celebrity CEO, profiled in *GQ* as an ascetic rogue and free-spirited visionary, personifies those values. Hastings' paternalistic position in the imaginary recapitulates Adorno's Freudian theorization of fascism's sadomasochistic subject, who idealizes and succumbs to the leader even if doing so is "irreconcilable with his own rational interests as a private person as well as those of the group or class to which he actually belongs."[56] Readers and customers alike are called to identify with the peripatetic figure.

> Hastings is a rangy, goateed 52-year-old with a master's in computer science from Stanford who left the Marine Corps officers' training program to teach in the Peace Corps in Swaziland.[57]

House of Cards showrunner Willimon apparently internalized the culture when he was brought on board. He describes the early phases of the venture to *Variety*:

> We were all excited about this possible programmatic shift. None of us had really done television before and neither had Netflix. So we were all in the same boat of experimentation, trying something different. We didn't know what the rules were, so we were completely ready to break them.[58]

We chance upon an iconographical mirror in Frank Underwood, protagonist in *House of Cards*, who is likewise a fearless rule-breaker. An even stronger parallel to Hastings is Walter White, the high school chemistry teacher turned meth dealer in *Breaking Bad*. When the Netflix founder displayed his well-known brashness in early 2014, joking publicly during an earnings call that HBO copresident Richard Pepler's password is "netflixbitch," he harkened back to White's famous declaration, "I am the one who knocks!"[59]

These connections do not prove that the productions are manifest irruptions of corporate speech—especially since Netflix did not produce the AMC hit. Without extrapolating too eagerly from text to economic base, an ideologically critical reading of *Breaking Bad* demonstrates nevertheless the pervasiveness of neoliberal discourse from which media history can be more critically distant. Readers of Adorno will inevitably wonder about the extent to which history is reified in the show. As scientist, innovator, sociopath, and entrepreneur in artisanal meth production, White embodies the type of personality prized by the present economic era (Figure 12.1).

Figure 12.1 The final shot of *Breaking Bad*

Conclusion

Over the course of five seasons, Walter White struggled continually to find newer and more extensive distribution channels, perpetually hindered by one established network after another. As the camera pulls away in the series' wistful final crane shot, somewhere in that world, Madrigal Elektromotoren GmbH remains intact, a massive German industrial conglomerate fronting a multinational drug operation. The hero was defeated after having vanquished a slew of economic adversaries. In a way, where he fails to become a mogul with mass distribution, Netflix has succeeded, primarily by dominating the video-streaming market.[60]

Netflix reached that zenith by way of Amazon Web Services, a cloud-computing platform used for vital operations such as delivering content and managing customer accounts.[61] The corporate partnership may seem strange, but only if one perceives Netflix and Amazon as direct competitors, a predilection exacerbated by those who privilege spectatorship as the variable with which to chart media history. Studies that measure industrial realignment or technological development through the impact on modes of spectatorship habitually clump streaming video services together as a result: Netflix, Amazon Instant Video, iTunes, HBO Go, Hulu, VOD, Google Video or YouTube, and others. This customary list implicitly equates those services, and when famous corporate names are cited interchangeably with their popular products (e.g., Amazon and Instant Video, Apple and iTunes, Google and YouTube), the companies can appear economically comparable and competitive when they are fundamentally not. Netflix's reliance on Amazon Web Services should not strike anyone as peculiar. Every company on the list derives its biggest source of revenue from different businesses; each is also of vastly different size.[62] Apple is essentially a smartphone manufacturer whose dalliance in the media business with Netflix and Amazon merely involves the so-called hobby revenue.[63] Amazon is a retailer that dangles Instant Video as a perk for Amazon Prime members. Google's main interest in advertising moved it to acquire YouTube, but more as a source of metadata than a source of profit, which in fact remains elusive.[64] Looking behind the businesses reveals that although these companies have horses on the same track, they may in fact be running different races. These material relations can be obscured when media are historicized through spectatorship and consumption.

This tendency attests to the intellectual influence of thinkers like Carolyn Marvin who believe that media are defined by how society uses them. In her classic text, *When Old Technologies Were New*, she declares that media "are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication. The history of media is never more or less than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate."[65] Her argument's attractiveness in this case is intensified by the optimistic allure of greater agency within the culture industry, against its indomitable ideologies. A media landscape experiencing tectonic shifts causes enough turmoil to offer hope of conjuring some autonomy. It is an understandable impulse. The expansion of broadband internet access, initially through hardwires, then wirelessly, enabled online streaming platforms to reshape mass media industries. Diversity within screen culture proliferated, and software and interfaces advanced alongside those developments, all of which has changed how we consume media. Unprecedented encounters with films and television shows can recontour interpretation, generating new meanings in unpredictable ways. Opinions currently differ on whether streaming platforms including Netflix encourage intertextuality, for example. Against J.M. Tyree's belief that they cultivate "fluid" enjoyment of "interlinking" "points of reference," Jonathan Nichols-Pethick reminds us that "pure agency" is elusive because those points are preselected according to usage history.[66] Counterintuitively, Caetlin Benson-Allott has also observed viewing practices on online platforms narrowing in a sense, toward "stripped down, feature-only convenience."[67] In the clamor to make sense of it all, we should neither overestimate individual agency nor misread where subjective autonomy is headed. If they are moving toward neoliberalism, under the very regime that nurtures the digital era's trajectories, it would be ironic to understand Netflix or its users as "gamechangers." The term matches the discursive fabric, but may be inaccurate in substance, and therefore warrant some disruption of its own.

Notes

1 Netflix, letter to shareholders, January 22, 2014. http://ir.netflix.com/results.cfm (accessed July 9, 2015).

2 Ken Auletta, "Outside the Box: Netflix and the Future of Television," *The New Yorker*, February 3, 2014. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/03/outside-the-box-2 (accessed June 3, 2015).

3 See, for example, Kevin P. McDonald, "Digital Dreams in a Material World: The Rise of Netflix and Its Impact on Changing Distribution and Exhibition Patterns," *Jump Cut* 55 (2013). http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc55.2013/McDonaldNetflix/index.html (accessed May 5, 2015).

4 Alex Barinka, "Blockbuster Video-Rental Chain Will Shut All U.S. Stores," *Bloomberg Business*, November 6, 2013. http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-11-06/blockbuster-video-rental-chain-will-shut-remaining-u-s-stores.

5 See also Gina Keating, *Netflixed: The Epic Battle for America's Eyeballs* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

6 Brent Lang and Marc Graser, "Amazon Movies May Crack Theatrical Windows, but It Won't Break Them," *Variety*, January 19, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/film/news/amazon-movies-may-crack-theatrical-windows-but-it-wont-break-them-1201408849 (accessed July 14, 2015); Brent Lang and Dave McNary, " 'Crouching Tiger 2' Fallout: AMC, Regal Won't Play Imax Release," *Variety*, September 30, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/film/news/crouching-tiger-2-fallout-regal-cinemark-wont-play-imax-release-1201317183 (accessed July 14, 2015); Brent Lang, "AMC Entertainment Chief Talks Netflix's 'Crouching Tiger' Sequel, MoviePass Trial and Theater Innovations," *Variety*, February 18, 2015. http://variety.com/2015/film/news/amc-entertainment-chief-talks-netflixs-crouching-tiger-sequel-moviepass-trial-and-theater-innovations-1201436114/ (accessed July 9, 2015).

7 Simon Dumenco, "Eight Media and Marketing Buzzwords That Must Die," *Advertising Age*, July 28, 2014. http://adage.com/article/the-media-guy/media-marketing-buzzwords-die/294333/; Dumenco, "Six More Media and Marketing Buzzwords That Must Die," *Advertising Age*, August 11, 2014. http://adage.com/article/the-media-guy/media-marketing-buzzwords-die/294521/ (accessed June 3, 2015).

8 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

9 Ibid., 24.

10 Ibid., 18, 24.

11 Auletta, "Outside the Box."

12 Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 6.

13 Anderson, *Hollywood TV*, 2, 5, 13.

14 Auletta, "Outside the Box."

15 Anderson, *Hollywood TV*, 16, 18.

16 Jason Jacobs, "Television, Interrupted: Pollution or Aesthetic?" in *Television as Digital Media*, eds James Bennett and Niki Strange (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 257.

17 Mareike Jenner, "Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and Binge-Watching," *New Media and Society* (July 7, 2014): 11.

18 Anderson, *Hollywood TV*, 11–12.

19 A parallel case is found in Roger Ebert's declaration of the present as a "golden age" of film criticism, where critics can develop and disseminate their craft through new media. Online streaming platforms such as "Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, MUBI, the Asia/Pacific Film Archive, Google Video or Vimeo" provide unprecedented access to films, while blogs offer easy means to self-publish and potentially find a massive audience. Roger Ebert, "Film Criticism Is Dying? Not Online," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 22, 2011. http://on.wsj.com/1w7vKmD (accessed July 14, 2015).

20 For film studies, see Chuck Tryon, *On-Demand Culture: Digital Delivery and the Future of Movies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013); B. Ruby Rich, "Film [*sic*]," *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): 5–7; Lucas Hilderbrand, "The Art of Distribution: Video on Demand," *Film Quarterly* 64.2 (2010): 24–28; Jenna Ng, "The Myth of Total Cinephilia," *Cinema Journal* 49.2 (2010): 146–151; Caetlin Benson-Allott, "Cinema's New Approaches," *Film Quarterly* 64.4 (2011): 10–11; J.M. Tyree, "Searching for Somewhere," *Film Quarterly* 64.4 (2011): 12–16; Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, "Going with the Flow: On the Value of Randomness, Flexibility, and Getting Students in on the Conversation, or What I Learned from Antoine Dodson," *Cinema Journal* 50.4 (2011): 182–187; Alisa Perren, "Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies," *Cinema Journal* 52.3 (2013): 165–171; Jason E. Hill and Elisa Schaar, "Training a Sensibility: Notes on American Art and Mass Media," *American Art* 27.2 (2013): 2–9.

21 Rich, "Film [*sic*]," 6.

22 For television and new media studies, see Jenner, "Is This TVIV?"; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Sidneyeve Matrix, "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-Demand Digital Media Trends," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6, 1 (2014): 119–138.

23 See also Jenner, "Is This TVIV?"; Matrix, "The Netflix Effect," 120; Ng, "The Myth of Total Cinephilia," 150.
24 Nichols-Pethick, "Going with the Flow," 183–184.
25 Hill and Schaar, "Training a Sensibility," 7.
26 Rich, "Film [*sic*]," 7.
27 Netflix similarly places itself within a popular alliance in the political debate over net neutrality. Anne Marie Squeo, "What Netflix CFO David Wells Really Said About Net Neutrality and Title II Yesterday," *Official Netflix Blog*, March 5, 2015. http://blog.netflix.com/2015/03/what-netflix-cfo-david-wells-really.html (accessed June 21, 2015).
28 Nancy Hass, "And the Award for the Next HBO Goes to … " *GQ*, February 2013. http://www.gq.com/entertainment/movies-and-tv/201302/netflix-founder-reed-hastings-house-of-cards-arrested-development?printable=true (accessed May 19, 2015).
29 Hass, "And the Award for the Next HBO Goes to … "
30 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.
31 Andrew Wallenstein, "Netflix Seals 'House of Cards' Deal," *Variety*, March 18, 2011. http://variety.com/2011/tv/news/netflix-seals-house-of-cards-deal-1118034117/ (accessed April 24, 2015).
32 Laura Prudom, " 'House of Cards': Beau Willimon on Netflix's Rule-Breaking Creativity," *Variety*, June 20, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/tv/awards/beau-willimon-house-of-cards-netflix-1201229981/ (accessed July 15, 2015); Jenner (2014) argues that the "business model" Willimon mentions is part of a branding strategy to associate Netflix as a destination for quality television, "Is This TVIV?" 7.
33 Alexis C. Madrigal, "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood," *The Atlantic*, January 2, 2014. http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/how-netflix-reverse-engineered-hollywood/282679/ (accessed July 2, 2015); see also Seth Fiegerman, "Netflix Knows You Better Than You Know Yourself," *Mashable*, December 11, 2013. http://mashable.com/2013/12/11/netflix-data/ (accessed June 26, 2015).
34 Andrew Leonard, "How Netflix Is Turning Viewers into Puppets," *Salon*, February 1, 2013. http://www.salon.com/2013/02/01/how_netflix_is_turning_viewers_into_puppets/ (accessed June 26, 2015).
35 Madrigal, "How Netflix Reverse Engineered Hollywood."
36 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 42.
37 Ibid., 42, 47.
38 Josef Adalian, "What Networks Can Learn from Breaking Bad's Ratings Explosion," *Vulture*, August 16, 2013. http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/lessons-from-breaking-bads-ratings-explosion.html (accessed May 28, 2015).
39 Jon Weisman, "Emmys: Vince Gilligan Credits Netflix for AMC's 'Breaking Bad' Surviving, Thriving," *Variety*, September 22, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/breaking-bad-amc-vince-gilligan-credits-netflix-1200660762/ (accessed May 28, 2015).
40 David Bianculli, "AMC's Brand-Smart Strategy," *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 26, 2008. http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/news-articles/amcs-brand-smart-strategy/85213 (accessed June 6, 2015).
41 Tom Lowry, "How Mad Men Glammed up AMC," *Bloomberg Business*, July 23, 2008. http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2008-07-23/how-mad-men-glammed-up-amc (accessed July 15, 2015).

42 Anthony Crupi, "Study: Nine Out of 10 Americans Are Binge-Viewers," *Advertising Age*, June 30. 2015. http://adage.com/article/media/study/299284/ (accessed July 2, 2015).
43 Georg Szalai, "Edinburgh TV Fest: Netflix's Ted Sarandos Defends International Expansion, Content Spending," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 23, 2012. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/netflix-ted-sarandos-edinburgh-tv-festival-365002 (accessed June 26, 2015).
44 Graeme McMillan, "Why Do People Still Watch Live TV?" *Time*, March 4, 2014. http://time.com/12431/appointment-viewing-spoilers-live-tv/. McMillan's allusion to online communities of viewers also weighs against the axiom that "digital television threatens the universal experience of television's social function" (Jacobs, "Television, Interrupted," 267), as well as the empirical trend of lone binge-watching (Crupi, "Study: Nine Out of 10 Americans Are Binge-Viewers").
45 David Zurawik, "The Year Appointment Television Died," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 27, 2013. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2013-12-27/entertainment/bal-the-year-appointment-television-died-20131227_1_amazon-prime-vince-gilligan-public-tv (accessed July 13, 2015); Katie Collins, "*House of Cards* Producer Declares Appointment TV 'Dead,'" *Wired*, November 6, 2014. http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2014-11/06/house-of-cards-netflix (accessed July 13, 2015).
46 Rick Kissell, "AMC's 'Breaking Bad' Returns to Record 5.9 Million Viewers," *Variety*, August 12, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/amcs-breaking-bad-returns-to-record-5-9-million-viewers-1200576953/ (accessed July 2, 2015); " 'Breaking Bad' Finale Soars to Series-Best 10.3 Million Viewers," *Variety*, September 30, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/breaking-bad-finale-ratings-1200681920/ (accessed June 6, 2015).
47 Allegra Tepper, " 'Breaking Bad' Finale Viewing Parties Sweep the Nation," *Variety*, September 29, 2013. http://variety.com/2013/tv/news/breaking-bad-viewing-parties-1200671090/ (accessed June 6, 2015).
48 Jeanine Poggi, "The Cost of 'Breaking Bad': AMC Asks $400,000 for Finale," *Advertising Age*, September 27, 2013. http://adage.com/article/media/cost-breaking-bad-amc-asks-400-000-finale/244442/ (accessed June 7, 2015).
49 For a brief discussion of Netflix watching and spectatorial control, see Ariane Lebot, "Netflix and Rethinking Ritualized Consumption of Audiovisual Content," *In Media Res*, December 3, 2013. http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2013/12/03/netflix-and-rethinking-ritualized-consumption-audiovisual-content (accessed July 13, 2015).
50 Crupi, "Study: Nine Out of 10 Americans Are Binge-Viewers."
51 Andrew Wallenstein, " 'House of Cards' Binge-Watching: 2% of U.S. Subs Finished Entire Series Over First Weekend," *Variety*, February 20, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/house-of-cards-binge-watching-2-of-u-s-subs-finished-entire-series-over-first-weekend-1201114030/ (accessed July 6, 2015).
52 Jacobs, "Television, Interrupted," 264.
53 Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," in *The Culture Industry*, ed. and trans. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 135, 150.
54 Hass, "And the Award for the Next HBO Goes to … "; Netflix, Inc., "Netflix Culture: Freedom and Responsibility," https://jobs.netflix.com (accessed July 9, 2015).

55 Charles Tryon connects this flexible consumption with the flexible labor prized by neoliberalism.
56 Adorno, "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda," 139.
57 Hass, "And the Award for the Next HBO Goes to … "
58 Prudom, " 'House of Cards': Beau Willimon on Netflix's Rule-Breaking Creativity."
59 Sam Thielman, "Reed Hastings Takes a Loud Shot at HBO: 'His Password Is Netflixbitch,'" *Adweek*, January 22, 2014. http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/reed-hastings-takes-loud-shot-hbo-155140 (accessed May 26, 2015); "Cornered" (director: Michael Slovis) *Breaking Bad*, AMC, August 21, 2011. Television.
60 Todd Spangler, "Amazon Streams More Video Than Hulu or Apple, But It's Still Miles Behind Netflix," *Variety*, April 8, 2014. http://variety.com/2014/digital/news/amazon-streams-more-video-than-hulu-or-apple-but-its-still-miles-behind-netflix-1201154130/ (accessed June 6, 2015).
61 Brandon Butler, "Amazon and Netflix: Competitors Who Need Each Other," *Network World*, July 24, 2013. http://www.networkworld.com/article/2168433/cloud-computing/amazon-and-netflix–competitors-who-need-each-other.html (accessed June 20, 2015).
62 Even when Netflix's valuation was highest, Apple, Google, and Amazon were more than 19, 9, and 5 times as large. HBO is a division of Time Warner Inc., a media conglomerate perhaps most similar to Netflix, but whose market capitalization is 82 percent larger. Market capitalization figures were based on stock prices at the end of June 5, 2015. The share price of Netflix, $633.22, is only $0.55 off its record high, and more than 50 percent greater than its value after the surge in early 2014.
63 John Martellaro, "Apple Reveals Movie & TV Sales in Billions—Is This Really a Hobby?" *The Mac Observer*, July 23, 2013. http://www.macobserver.com/tmo/article/apple-reveals-movie-tv-sales-in-billions-is-this-really-a-hobby (accessed June 20, 2015).
64 Rolfe Winkler, "YouTube: 1 Billion Viewers, No Profit," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2015. http://www.wsj.com/articles/viewers-dont-add-up-to-profit-for-youtube-1424897967 (accessed May 29, 2015).
65 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electronic Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.
66 Tyree, "Searching for Somewhere," 14; Nichols-Pethick, "Going with the Flow," 184–185.
67 Benson-Allott, "Cinema's New Appendanges," 10.