

“Television of the future”? Netflix, quality, and neophilia in the TV debate

A “televisão do futuro”? Netflix, qualidade e neofilia no debate sobre TV

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we investigate Netflix, questioning the expectations of the public and the critics regarding changes that arise from the introduction of this service in the market. From the analysis of trade press coverage, access data, and the company’s investment trends, we inquire what types of TV consumption experiences are at stake in the discourse promoted by analysts and *novelty* enthusiasts. We also discuss how evaluations on these platforms renew the ongoing controversies about television quality. In spite of the type of elucubration awakened by the sensation of ubiquity and stylistic revolutions, we will defend that the practices related to streaming work, in fact, as updated models of linear TV. **Keywords:** Netflix, television, streaming, discourse, quality

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RESUMO

Neste artigo, investigamos a Netflix, colocando em questão as expectativas do público e da crítica a respeito de mudanças advindas com a introdução do serviço. A partir da análise de matérias jornalísticas, dados de acesso e tendências de investimento da empresa, averiguamos que tipos de experiência sobre o consumo de TV estão em jogo no discurso propalado por analistas e entusiastas do *novo*. Debatem, também, como as avaliações sobre as plataformas de *streaming* renovam as permanentes controvérsias sobre a qualidade televisiva. A despeito do tipo de elucubração despertada pela sensação de ubiquidade e de revoluções estilísticas, defendemos que as práticas relacionadas ao *streaming* funcionam, na verdade, como atualizações de modelos consagrados na TV linear. **Palavras-chave:** Netflix, televisão, *streaming*, discurso, qualidade



INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS THE future of television? This question, which has troubled researchers for decades, recurrently arises in media articles, with professionals rushing to put an end to a medium that is still so present in peoples’ everyday lives. Considering the most recent technological advances that allowed the on-demand consumption of television content, the one-drop distribution model (when all episodes of a season/show become available at once), and a certain multi-territoriality of TV flows, Netflix quickly established itself as a symbol of the so-called *new* television. When the North American company arrived in Brazil, in 2011, the journalistic articles addressing the streaming service were quite compelling: television as we knew it would cease to exist. The expressions employed in the following years about this ineluctable new moment left no room for doubt: “revolution” (Salgado, 2017), “Netflixation” (Costa, 2019), “company that reinvented television” (Sandoval, 2015), “hurricane Netflix” (Teixeira, 2017), “Netflix phenomenon” (Nunes, 2015). Here, we mention articles from Brazil, but we noticed similar reactions upon the company’s arrival in several other countries, such as Mexico (Diebold, 2018), South Africa (Cullis, 2016), and England (Jeffries, 2013).

To understand the enthusiasm caused by the arrival of Netflix and other streaming services, first, we need to highlight the distinction between linear TV and non-linear TV employed by Lotz (2017). By linear TV, Lotz refers to television that is structured around a programming schedule, that is, free-to-air channels (ad-supported) and subscription-supported channels (pay-TV). Non-linear TV, on the other hand, has detached itself from television’s flow and organizes its content in a catalog. Although subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services share some similarities with the economic model of pay-TV channels, their main distinction is the freedom from the TV flow and the consequent independence from the programming schedule. We recognize that this characteristic implies several changes and novelties, the main one being a certain deterritorialization of audiovisual content through catalogs filled with productions from different countries (Jenner, 2018).

Although the streaming wars¹ are agitating television markets around the world, in this article we consider Netflix a unique SVOD model. Unlike its competitors, Netflix does not have its own consolidated content library as Disney +, HBO Max, and the Brazilian streamer Globoplay. Netflix also is not part of a larger business, such as Amazon Prime Video or Apple TV. Netflix’s business model is dependent only on subscribers interested in accessing its library. This dependence led the company to seek consumers

¹ Television critics and media analysts from the U.S. began using the term streaming wars to refer to the proliferation of video-on-demand platforms and these companies’ intense competition for local, regional, and global markets. In addition to competing for subscribers, these companies have also been fighting for the licensing rights of successful television productions, such as *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004) and *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al., 2007-2019). Yet, the streaming wars have gained more imperialist connotations with the presence of these U.S. platforms in local markets such as Brazil (Meimaridis et al., 2020) and Japan (Tse, 2020).

in different markets, producing original content and investing in cultural industries from several regions of the world (Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019). In recent years, it has won recognition from the television industry and, in 2020, it received the most Emmy nominations – a total of 160 nominations (Schneider, 2020a). Although the streaming platform employs a discourse of distinction and positions itself as a *new* type of television producer (Castellano & Meimaridis, 2016), here we deconstruct the idea of Netflix as the *future of TV*.

In this article, we start from this troubling scenario, marked by intense competition for viewers, to analyze how the media built a discourse about revolutions, transformations, and *new eras* brought by streaming services². We investigate how this discussion sheds light on what we call the “eternal debate on television quality.” A process based on a sort of faith in the medium’s redemption, which could happen after the introduction of a novelty. This has already occurred in the past, with innovations as the videotape, color television, the remote control, and cable TV; today, it manifests itself mainly in companies like Netflix.

Our argument is that despite being involved in statements about major transformations, these platforms base a large part of their productions on established models from traditional television. For this, we analyzed journalistic articles about SVOD services in the Brazilian media, focusing on Netflix. We divided the discussion into four parts. First, we contextualize the discourses present in the media and in the scholarly literature about the end of television. Then, we challenge Netflix’s positions of *novelty* and *future of TV*. In the third and fourth parts, we question the extent to which Netflix’s programming strategies relativize the discourse that points to streaming as the new locus of quality television. We start by analyzing the relationship between the television *of the future* and the television *from the past*, essentially, through the presence of linear TV productions in Netflix’s catalog. Lastly, we investigate the investment in original productions based on models from linear and the so-called *banal* television, with a focus on reality shows.

THE PERPETUAL END OF TV

The rise of Netflix and other SVOD services was not the first time that television found itself at a turning point that would change its future *forever*. Like so many others, television is a medium in perennial transformation, yet its critics, researchers, and market agents are constantly enchanted

²In this article, which is part of a broader investigation, besides an extensive literature review, we also searched for content specifically related to Netflix on Google. Our time frame was from 2011, the year Netflix arrived in Brazil, until mid-2020, when this paper was written. This research was done mainly during the first half of 2020. We analyzed digital reproductions of articles published in traditional media, such as online versions of newspapers and magazines of great circulation in Brazil. Also, we examined articles from news portals, websites, and blogs specializing in television and technology. To refine our search, since Netflix is mentioned in many different areas, we used the results from the combination of specific keywords: “Netflix” and “television.” In this way, we managed to gather a corpus that allowed an overview of the discourses about the company in the context of its relationship with the television market. We selected, among the more than 50 articles analyzed, those that represented the most repeated discourses and that more clearly emphasized the type of argument that we sought to question in our research.



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(or frightened) by the perspectives that lie ahead, as if nothing, from that moment on, could resist the seductive arrival of a *novelty*. Even before its invention, television raised expectations about the medium’s possibilities. When dealing with the dawn of television, Barbosa (2010) analyzes what she calls “televsual imagination” based on Raymond William’s idea of the “structure of feeling”:

More than a mere “lived meaning of time,” the structure of feeling presents itself as an imagination of the possible relations of the public with the media, an expectation for the materialization of a communicational relationship, which exists as a possibility and a wish even before it comes true. New social and mental practices and habits, which start and become dominant at a given time, pre-exist as a communicational imagination, as a mental possibility, in short, as a structure of feeling. (Barbosa, 2010, p. 26)

The structure of feelings that guided the viewer’s relationship with television throughout decades, thus, goes through phases associated with several issues. Some are linked to transformations of a social or technological nature, while others concern the political economy of the medium. Recently, streaming introduced changes and expectations that would, in principle, define a new form of relationship with television.

Part of the journalistic articles dedicated to analyzing the rise of Netflix seems to mistake the idea of television as a medium with the electronic TV set itself, popularly called *television*. In other words, when we say “TV” we are referring to a set of phenomena that involves cultural, social, technological, aesthetic, and legal issues (linked to state regulations, for example). These aspects present themselves in an audiovisual production with a specific grammar, social audience practices, financing systems, global flows, and particular modes of creation, among other issues. In the words of Fechine (2014), television as a phenomenological reality, “with the way it has penetrated deeply into the fabric of our daily life, becoming so natural and familiar, mobilizing so much emotional and cognitive energy” (p. 3).

Although this confusion seems like an oversight, it can explain the contradiction of critics and specialized journalists defending that we are in the *Peak TV* era, defined by exorbitant numbers of production, circulation, and consumption of television products, and, at the same time, proclaiming, with enormous brazenness, the imminent end of television. If some people today renounce the TV set in the middle of the living room³, many others still spend much of their free time watching television content on smartphones,

³Even this issue can be quite relativized. While there has been an increase in access to TV content through devices such as those mentioned (smartphones, tablets, laptops), there is also a significant advance in television sets. They continue to occupy an important place in the living room, larger in size and with high-definition screen resolution. These features provide a more sophisticated experience from a technological point of view. Added to this, if television content is increasingly watched on media other than the TV set, the so-called Smart TVs also allow access, through the device, to social networking sites and web browsers.

tablets, laptops, etc. (Barros, 2015). In this regard, we highlight the creation of narratives designed for mobile devices, such as South Korean web dramas (Kang, 2017) or series and reality shows with short episodes of the, now extinct, Quibi platform.

The idea that television is set to die is not new. The same yearning for changes and revolutions in the TV medium is also found in the will to determine its end. Much of the fabulation surrounding the exhaustion of television was centered on a possible dispute with the internet for popularity and audience. In 2015, the digital version of the *El País* newspaper published the headline “TV will be replaced by the internet just like cell phones did with landlines” (Sandoval, 2015), with quotes attributed to Netflix’s CEO, Reed Hastings. Although we can argue that the executive was advocating in his own favor, this discourse appears widespread in many media texts regarding the introduction of new access technologies.

The transformations in the relationship with television motivated discussions about its end even before the consolidation of SVOD services. Titles such as *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Spigel & Olsson, 2006) and *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (Lotz, 2007) are just a few examples of how the transformations experienced by this medium have troubled TV scholars from the beginning of the century⁴. The fascination with *new media* and technological-based transformations experienced in the digital age, according to Buonanno (2016), makes television obsolescence a recurring theme in specialized media since the mid-1980s and a key issue in academia since the early 2000s. The author argues (supported by the work of Graeme Turner) that these perspectives revolved around two different perspectives: *broadcast pessimism* and *digital optimism*. For the author “the two antithetical perspectives converge to provide the same diagnosis that television is over” (p. 95).

Dhoest and Simons (2016), however, highlight that a good part of these discussions made assumptions about the new directions of television without carefully considering an important part of the process: the audience. That is, the rhetoric about new television ages has always been very connected to a type of technophilia, easily seduced by a market discourse that is also disseminated by the specialized media.

Scholars investigating what really has been changing tend to reach conclusions such as that of Van Esler (2016): “television as a medium is actually not terribly different, at least not enough to conclude that we have entered a new era” (p. 131). In the text, the author comments on how this idea of post-TV began to be disseminated as a *fait accompli* or, at least, as a

⁴For an overview of studies that address the end of television, see Buonanno (2015), Miller (2009) and Parmeggiani (2017).



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kind of inevitable outcome, both in academic texts (Leverette et al., 2008; Strangelove, 2015) and in journalistic articles (Poniewozik, 2014). In 2011, Machado discussed in the article “End of Television?” the impact of audience fragmentation caused by cable TV and on-demand services such as self-programming, made possible by pay-TV companies, besides technologies such as the DVD and Blu-ray.

This discussion is even more problematic in Brazil, considering the dominance of free-to-air television in the country. With 96.4% penetration in Brazilian households, free-to-air TV is still well ahead of pay-TV – with 31.8% penetration – and the Internet, with 79.1%, according to data released by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) for the fourth quarter of 2018⁵ (Gomes, 2020). Regarding the use of the Internet via a television set, the numbers are even more modest: the service is only available in 23.3% of the households with access to the internet (Gomes, 2020). Although data on SVOD services in Brazil is difficult to access, according to an estimate by Bernstein consulting agency, Netflix has reached 17 million subscribers in the country (Rodriguez, 2020). That said, we need to question the discourses that position Netflix as the future of television since access to streaming services is still very much related to a consumption with clear social class distinction in Brazil.

If the collapse of TV has been discussed for many decades, the *competition with the internet* argument is currently the greatest source of expectations regarding this nearing finality. Yet, not only our daily practices, but also the research developed in the field of Communication prove that the two can coexist. The phenomenon of Social TV⁶ (Almeida, 2020; Blake, 2017; Sigiliano & Borges, 2013), for example, brings this reality to the forefront. With this, we enter a new phase of the discourse in which the idea of *competition* seems to be replaced by the notion of *incorporation*. In this sense, television would not cease to exist because people would swap its content for different online practices, but because it would now be available in mediums that are not characteristic of it – *something else* enigmatically offered by the internet, in services like Netflix. It is, ultimately, an excessive emphasis on the materiality of access and a disregard for language, which is overlooked.

An approximate reasoning can be made in relation to the cinematic arts, as if films can only exist as films when they are watched in the movie theater. Although the importance of this form of exhibition is unquestionable for the cinematographic experience and even as a historical construction of what we understand as cinema (Ferraz, 2009), it would be simplistic to imagine that a film airing on TV would automatically become *television*. The

⁵ We highlight the difficulties in finding more up-to-date data for the penetration of free-to-air channels, cable TV, and SVOD services in Brazil. For this reason, we used the IBGE reports released in April 2020.

⁶ Social TV, as understood in these studies, also helps to relativize another discourse that is very present in academic and journalistic texts about the transition from a socially shared television to an individual TV (Katz, 2009; Lotz, 2009). Part of the authors who work with this premise base their argument on the fact that people, especially in the home environment, are no longer in the habit of gathering on the couch to watch television together. However, besides lacking a more objective empirical analysis, which considers, for example, the group of people we are talking about, in view of aspects such as social class and locality, it is certain that the existing dynamics in social networking sites create new forms of sociability around television content.

device taken as the essence of the relationship with the medium says a lot about the type of discussion that has guided the debate about the possible interpenetrations between the forms of production and consumption of these contents. Here, we are not defending a ‘purism’ in the delimitations of what is, after all, televisuality, but it seems symptomatic that television is often diluted in the more general idea of *audiovisual works* while cinema, in spite of the countless transformations it suffers, is relatively spared from this process⁷.

If Netflix’s relationship with the film industry is troublesome, it is even more complex with television. At first, the company functioned as a huge depository of television content from different producers, who saw this availability as another form of distribution. Thus, fiction and other programs that originally aired on linear TV were licensed to integrate the catalog without major problems and at relatively low costs. As the company gained momentum in the market and subscriber numbers grew, media conglomerates began to harden the negotiations and impose higher costs and conditions that made it difficult to renew these contracts. Concurrently, these companies created their own streaming services. It is in this context that Netflix began to invest more forcefully on original productions and, with this, it became a competitor instead of just another form of distribution and access to content.

⁷In this sense, it is interesting to note how often the expression “*cinema e audiovisual*” (“cinema and audiovisual media” in English) appears in Brazil. Although cinema is also a form of audiovisual production, it stands out from the other category, which encompasses anything other than it, including television.

NETFLIX AND QUALITY TELEVISION

“Everyone is discussing the level of our television. ‘Vulgarity,’ say some; ‘Vulgarity,’ says another; ‘Vulgarity,’ swear others” (Freire Filho, 2003, p. 112). Nelson Rodrigues wrote this quote in a short story published in 1971. What motivated the debates commented by the writer and journalist about television quality in Brazil were the popular variety programs, known for their sensational attractions. The Church, the State, and the “intellectual elites” campaigned against the so-called “*baixaria televisiva*,” which loosely translates to crude or vulgar television programming. At the time, television was synonymous with free-to-air TV and had few channels. As it started to expand its audience, it obtained higher ratings and greater commercial interests. Yet, critics started to attribute the decrease in the quality of TV productions to the popularization of the medium.

Waves of indignation at TV programs have happened in practically every era since its emergence. It is interesting to note how television has always seemed harassed by comparisons with other forms of cultural expression. At first, it



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should have resembled theater, opera, or even incorporate what it could from literary works. However, a great part of the scrutiny around television products is based on comparisons with the cinematic arts. This process contributed to the conception that television was a “bad object” among cultural and political elites of western countries (Bourdon, 2018; Hilmes, 2005). Criticism of television and its programs, with very few exceptions, demotes the medium as a whole, rather than focus on specific cases, as *inferior* genres or products. This contributes to the use of the opposite strategy to redeem the medium. That is, it has become common for scholars and critics to single out TV programs that are worthy of attention, distinguishing them within the limbo of television programming.

In the United States, the trend to diminish television began to be progressively reversed from the 1980s onwards, with certain productions praised for their aesthetic and/or narrative quality. Among the productions of the time, the police drama *Hill Street Blues* (Anspaugh et al., 1981-1987) became emblematic of the concept of “Quality TV” (Thompson, 1997). The production, although not popular in its first seasons, was renewed thanks to its ability to attract a young and urban audience. The series marked an important change in the transition from a production model aimed at the largest possible audience (catch-all) to one focused on attractive audience demographics (Stark, 1997).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, this process was intensified with cable channels producing original content, mainly HBO. Especially after the rise of pay-TV, the escape route from ordinary content started to be offered by television itself: through monthly payments, the most demanding viewer could get rid of the outrages provided by free-to-air television and receive, through premium services, products more suited to their consumption profile.

Thus, there is an elitist aspect intrinsic to the promotion of a group of pay-TV productions and, more recently, those from streaming services as symbols of *quality* television that needs to be better explored and problematized. In a way, the attack on television can be considered one of the ways in which economic, intellectual, and cultural elites rationalize their distaste for popular and mass media. For this, they use a logic of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979/2007) when demeaning television content in favor of the consumption of more culturally legitimate products. Bourdon (2018), in turn, observes the use of “negative distinctions,” evidenced in the contempt for television and its productions in expressions such as “I don’t have a television set at home” or even “I don’t watch TV.”

Interestingly, this type of phrase gained a new guise today and is now used even by people who watch television content quite regularly on platforms

such as Netflix. Although it sounds hypocritical, a similar ruse is present in HBO's slogan (It's not TV. It's HBO). Recently, streaming services that seek a form of vicarious prestige (Castellano & Meimaridis, 2016), associate their productions with the "not TV" discourse. In other words, our argument is that part of the confusion between technology and language, verified in the journalistic articles analyzed in this paper, is motivated by producers of television content who often seek to discursively separate their brands from TV.

Here, we understand that labels as "quality TV" or "not TV" are often used to *justify* the attention and consumption of these products by groups of higher economic, intellectual, or cultural capital (Jaramillo, 2013). Newman (2016) even defines the "not TV" audience as "more masculine, adult, and upscale by comparison with those associated with ordinary television, conceived as feminized mass culture addressed at a lowest common denominator" (p. 3). Therefore, the reiteration of the "not TV" discourse, reinforces the misconception that television became *better* once its audience *improved*, which was previously feminine and inattentive and, now, it is more masculine and demanding.

If streaming services (and Netflix in particular) possess a catalog full of products from different TV producers, it is emblematic that, in terms of the company's discourse, it has positioned itself as a direct competitor of premium pay-TV channels, like HBO (Lima et al., 2015). This process occurred once Netflix began producing original films and series. The choice of *House of Cards* (Fincher et al., 2013-2018) to showcase what the public could expect from Netflix's original programming was in direct dialog with its brand-positioning, evident in statements like "The goal is to become HBO faster than HBO can become us" given by Ted Sarandos, Netflix's CEO, in 2013. Produced by David Fincher, who added a cinematographic quality to the show, the series starred Kevin Spacey, chosen at the time to also act as a kind of spokesman for the company, responsible for giving interviews that praised Netflix's new venture (Tryon, 2015), either by calling the service revolutionary or associating it to a consolidated model (like "the new HBO"). Eager for formulas and catchphrases that simplify complex processes, specialized journalists from the field of television seemed to like this new feud, prompting stories that framed the series debut with titles like "And the Award for the Next HBO goes to ..." (Haas, 2013).

By positioning HBO as its main competitor, Netflix placed itself in the market as a premium service. The company would offer subscribers the *crème de la crème* in television content. After seven years, this narrative



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seems a little more *complex*. The recognition that Netflix’s productions have received from critics and the industry is undeniable, especially regarding nominations at major awards, such as the Emmys and the Golden Globes. Yet, a viewer who accesses the platform today and chooses to browse the “Netflix Originals” tag will face a scenario quite different from that promised by the laudatory stories that celebrated the entrance of the old DVD rental company in the world of serial fiction production. If this person decides to incorporate the figure of the outraged aristocrat (the target of Nelson Rodrigues’ frequent mockery), he/she may resent the level of the service’s productions. Vulgarly, some would say. To understand the discrepancy in the products offered by Netflix, we first need to point out how the company organizes its content library.

Instead of developing a programming schedule, Netflix needs to build an attractive catalog that entices new users and avoids subscriber turnover (Robinson, 2017). This collection is composed of licensed content and, for this reason, it is subject to constant reconfiguration. Lotz (2020) indicates two content licensing models to explain how Netflix builds its library: acquisitions and commissions. While acquisitions refer to programs produced by other companies – which can be exclusive to Netflix or licensed to other streaming platforms/channels – commissions are programs that Netflix produces, that is, the company has some kind of creative and/or financial input.

After it became a streaming service, Netflix invested heavily in acquisitions. However, with the end of licensing contracts and a higher cost to keep popular productions in the catalog, the company has, in recent years, invested globally in commissions and co-commissions (when a production airs on linear TV in one country, but in the rest of the world it is only available on Netflix). Netflix strategically makes it difficult for subscribers to distinguish their acquisitions and commissions because it catalogs productions to which the company has exclusive streaming rights and their commissions as “Netflix Originals” (Penner & Straubhaar, 2020). An example that we can see in the Brazilian catalog is the comedy *The Good Place* (Schur et al., 2016-2020) which appears as a Netflix original, although it is really from the broadcast network NBC. This practice becomes even more problematic when we consider productions from other cultural industries outside the United States, to which the public has more limited access, such as the drama *Vincenzo* (Jang-soo & Sae-jung, 2021), also tagged as a Netflix original, but is actually from the South Korean cable network, tvN.

With that in mind, we argue that the most recent investments in original productions contradict the company’s discourses of distinction and quality. Here,

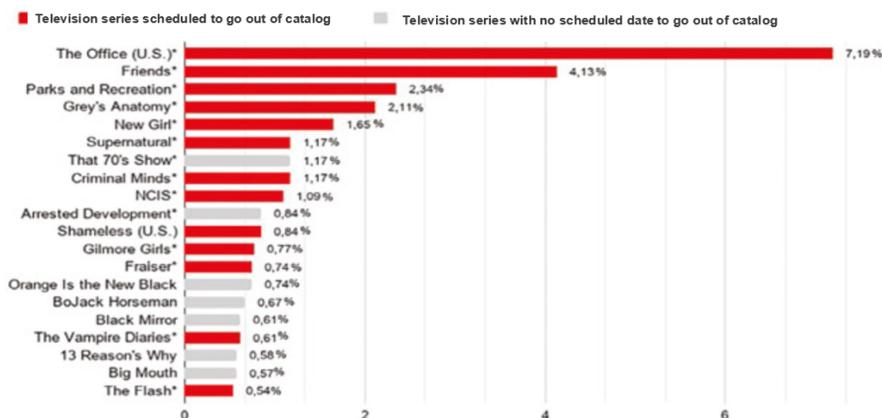
we chose to highlight two current strategies that corroborate our argument: 1) investment in acquisitions from linear TV; 2) the commissioning of reality shows.

THE ONE WHERE PEOPLE SUBSCRIBE TO NETFLIX TO WATCH FRIENDS

Streaming services have emerged in the last decade as a new kind of paradigm that would innovate the ways in which we relate to television content. This is especially true in Netflix, given the pioneering nature of its global expansion. Yet, significant data, related to consumption practices of U.S. subscribers, emphasize the expressive dominance in these services of content from a production and distribution model that was supposedly dying – broadcast TV networks.

It is worth mentioning that Netflix is still dependent on its acquisitions, especially from linear TV. These titles fill the company’s library and are some of the most popular shows on the platform. We start this section with a small joke in reference to the titles of Friends’ episodes (Crane et al., 1994-2004), which always start with “The One ...”, as in “The One With the Dozen Lasagnas” (Astrof et al., 1995) and “The One Where Rachel Finds Out” (Brown & Bright, 1995). It is no accident that we chose to mention this sitcom. In 2018, Vox media released a survey (Molla, 2018) in which the series appears as the second most-watched show on Netflix, second only to The Office, as you can see in the following figure:

Figure 1
Most watched series on Netflix, as a percentage of total views



Note. Most watched series on Netflix between January and November 2018. Figure produced based on data collected by Jumpshot and presented in the article published by Vox (Molla, 2018).



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Television shows in red are leaving the catalog of Netflix U.S., thanks to the creation of other streaming services by the companies that own these productions, such as Disney, NBCUniversal, and WarnerMedia. The shows with an asterisk (*) next to the title come from free-to-air television channels. Some key issues are worth mentioning. First, the theme that motivated Vox’s piece: the withdrawal of these titles from the service corresponds to a significant loss for Netflix and explains the voracity with which it has been investing in original commissions. But the most eye-catching information is that the five most-watched TV shows are all from broadcast TV networks. *The Office* (Silverman et al., 2005-2013), *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004), and *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels et al., 2009-2015) are three NBC sitcoms. The medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy* (Rhimes et al., 2005-present) has aired since 2005 on ABC, and the comedy *New Girl* (Meriwether et al., 2011-2018) aired between 2011 and 2018 on FOX.

In 2018, these five series concentrated 17.42% of all content watched on the platform. These productions, and eleven other shows in figure 1, came precisely from that television model singled out as a TV *from the past*. A television that nobody watched anymore and that would not resist the competition from streaming services⁸. Netflix’s dependence on its acquisitions is observed in the company’s effort to keep these productions in its catalog. In 2018, the service renegotiated the contract with WarnerMedia to license all 10 seasons of *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004) for just one year, an action that cost more than \$ 100 million (Gavin, 2018), an amount three times higher than what was previously paid to secure the licensing rights of the comedy.

We stress that when streaming services first appeared they would (supposedly) not only kill television but also DVDs, which would become obsolete (Garcia, 2017). The DVD would be replaced by SVOD in the same way that it replaced VHS tapes. Besides being a discourse based on mediocide (Fidler, 1997), this reflects a greater paradigm shift, from a more permanent logic – in which the DVD symbolized the possession of a cultural asset – to a more ephemeral logic, centered on a subscription and temporary access to several audiovisual products in a catalog (Kelly, 2020). Such ephemerality of the new audiovisual distribution models has led to the disappearance of titles in SVOD platforms. In 2019, when Netflix announced the departure of *Friends* (Crane et al., 1994-2004) and *The Office* (Silverman et al., 2005-2013) from its catalog in the United States, DVD sales for both comedies grew in the country (Schneider, 2020b).

Even faced with this kind of data, journalists specializing in television, and even some scholars, still insist on burying (alive) free-to-air television. In the

⁸The only productions from non-linear television in the figure are *Orange Is the New Black* (Kohan et al., 2013-2019), *Bojack Horseman* (Bob-Waksberg et al., 2014-2020), *13 Reason’s Why* (Yorkey, 2017-2020) and *Big Mouth* (Kroll et al., 2017-presente).

article “End of TV?” (Machado, 2011), the author analyses the TV drama *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004-2010) to understand the reconfigurations of television “as we know it.” According to Machado, the show would be emblematic of “what Americans call a post-network era, as if experiencing possibilities of the survival of television in the world of computers, mobile telephony, the planetary telematic network, and media convergence” (Machado, 2011, p. 96). Nevertheless, *Lost* (Abrams et al., 2004-2010) is yet another production by ABC (American Broadcasting Company) – a free-to-air TV network that exists since 1943.

In this sense, it is important to explore the ‘*TV from the past*’ argument. First, it is clear that SVOD companies present a new way to access content. Several authors have argued how audiences are gravitating from the flow model, which has characterized television for decades, to the archive model (Cannito, 2010; Mittell, 2011). The ease of consumption and the notion of greater *control* of the audience are unquestionably seductive. From the point of view of business models, the data already reflects that free-to-air networks are facing an increase in competition from these platforms. This is a significant reality in Brazil. According to data released by UOL columnist Ricardo Feltrin (2020), between seven o’clock in the morning to midnight, the consumption of streaming video content in the country was 7.0 points and a 15% share. That is, for every 100 TV sets turned on, 15 were streaming content, which comprises companies such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Globoplay, and YouTube, for example. Together, these platforms are already competing with the audience of free-to-air TV channels⁹, but it is pay-TV that has been hit the hardest in the country. According to Feltrin: “streaming ‘took’ the second position from pay-TV, which until recently was, as a group, second in ratings (considering all channels together)” (para. 9).

In fact, Brazilians have swapped cable subscriptions for SVOD platforms. Naturally, there are several reasons for the cord-cutting trend, which include the price of the subscription, the ease of consumption without a programming schedule, and the frustrations of technological limitations of linear TV (Tefertiller, 2018). In Brazil, we must also consider the fact that streaming has enabled access to a type of content that for a long time was associated precisely with pay-TV, such as television series from the U.S. Despite these productions airing on free-to-air channels, they occupied very specific time slots and aired mostly out of the prime-time programming. Still, they dominated pay-TV schedules airing all day long on channels that arrived in Brazil in the 1990s, like Sony and Warner.

It is remarkable that this replacement of pay-TV for SVOD platforms is interpreted as the death of television. This can be observed in articles

⁹It is important to note that Netflix limits its access data. Because of this, researchers need to rely on figures released by the press from informants in addition to the scarce and incomplete reports issued from time to time by the company itself.



such as “TV is a thing of the past” (Masson & Amaral, 2017), published by the *IstoÉ* magazine, which focuses precisely on the loss of subscribers by pay-TV services. Throughout the article, the authors present the misleading duel between television and the internet and fuse the idea of the television medium with the TV set. These inaccuracies appear both in the interviewees’ responses and in the journalists’ analysis: “with so many great options on the internet we don’t need television” (para. 3), “Television was over a long time ago. In our house there is only the internet” (para. 5), “TV, as we know it, is giving its final breaths... The viewer has already gotten used to smaller screens and most of them watch movies and series while checking their e-mails or chatting with friends” (para. 6).

If companies that sell cable and satellite TV packages certainly have reason to be concerned, they have also integrated the SVOD logic, offering access to their content via their own streaming platforms, such as HBO Go and the Globosat channels – the latter became part of a premium Globoplay package (Rede Globo, 2020) in September 2020. This is, again, an example of a medium incorporating and merging its logic with another, instead of signs of a rupture or even extinction.

On the other hand, it is important to question the hastily abandonment of the idea of television *flow*, not only because of the importance that free-to-air TV still has – an argument defended by authors such as Buonanno (2015) and Fechine (2014) – but, also, considering current audience behaviors, as proposed by Uricchio (2004). If Williams (1974) perceived flow mainly as a marketing strategy aiming to create an incessant sequence of content that mixed programming and advertising, Uricchio (2004) transfers this responsibility to the viewer. Equipped with instruments, such as the remote control, viewers can skip from one content to another, therefore repositioning the flow “as a means of sketching out a series of fundamental shifts in the interface between viewer and television, and thus in the viewing experience” (p. 165).

This sense of continuity is not only based on the more active role of the audience, but it is also provided by streaming platforms, such as Netflix, YouTube, and Globoplay. These platforms feature the post-play function, which automatically plays the next episode seconds after the viewer finished watching something. In this way, they create “a never-ending stream of custom-tailored pleasure” (Uricchio, 2004, p. 178); since these recommendations are guided by an algorithm (Ladeira, 2019). Alternatively, Amazon Prime recently made it possible for subscribers to watch episodes in

a random order (shuffle), that is, the viewer leaves it up to the algorithm to adjust the experience by elaborating its own flow of episodes. Netflix itself, at the end of 2020, released the “random titles” feature in which undecided viewers let the platform randomly select a movie or TV episode. Lastly, the debate about the decline of a fixed TV schedule directed at a large group of people needs to be examined more thoroughly, since research on this topic reveals this model is still relevant, as argued by Vilela (2017) and Fechine¹⁰ (2014, 2017).

In Brazil, the confusion between a form of access and content is relevant in Globoplay’s creation. The Brazilian streamer is Netflix’s main national competitor. The way this service operates reveals an even deeper hybridization between new and traditional models of television. Although it presents flexibility of access, which seems to be the main trend demanded by the audience, the streaming service of *Grupo Globo* is betting on its direct relationship with its productions from linear television (Meimaridis et al., 2020). In this sense, Globoplay seems to realize that its main asset is its collection of old TV programs, which originally aired on the free-to-air network, TV Globo. The streamer recently started adding past *telenovelas* to its catalog, an undertaking responsible for the expressive growth of 62% in Globoplay’s subscriber base during the first semester of 2020 (César, 2020). Globoplay also offers content from popular linear television shows. A significant example is *Big Brother Brasil*, the most accessed product on the platform in the first months of 2020 (Padiglione, 2020). By making TV flow available online, the platform not only attracts people who are not in the habit of watching television on the TV set, but also converts them into viewers of content with commercial breaks.

We reiterate that the non-dependence on the flow model allows SVOD platforms to organize their content in a more diversified and increasingly personalized way. Also, it changes the way we understand key issues as ratings and success. While in linear television (mainly free-to-air channels) the goal is to get as many viewers as possible watching a given program synchronously, on non-linear TV, SVOD services do not require their subscribers to consume the same product, much less at the same time. For this reason, streaming companies use numerous strategies to consolidate their title catalogs. The demand for subscribers has led Netflix to present greater diversification of its library to attract multiple niches. However, this diversification makes it difficult to create a cohesive catalog, at least regarding the discourse of “Quality TV” the company initially promoted.

¹⁰The scholar draws attention to the importance of TV’s daily schedule in the organization of the viewer’s everyday life. At first glance, this perception may sound outdated. Yet, it was interesting to note how, during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, the beginning of the *Jornal Nacional* (the highest-rated TV news program on free-to-air television) marked the start of the daily protests against President Jair Bolsonaro. From Monday to Saturday, people from all over the country would go to their windows and perform the so-called *panelaço* (pot banging as a form of protest). The beginning of the newscast, filled with stories about the problematic way in which the politician dealt with the health crisis, worked like a clock that orchestrated collective indignation.



NETFLIX AND THE DECLINE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

It is tough to define a single programming strategy adopted by Netflix because the company uses different approaches in each market where the service is available. Nevertheless, in this subtopic, we question the company's recent investments in a television product that has always struggled with legitimacy issues: reality shows. The reasons behind the discredit of this type of television product are many and varied: from their industrial and easily reproducible characteristics to the moral collapse they represent. Many scholars and television critics have dedicated themselves to analyzing their sins. Machado (1999), when discussing the issue of television genres, argues that reality shows are even more “degenerate” forms of talk shows, which, in turn, would already be responsible for “diverting television to simplicity, convenience, banality” (p. 145), and he defines them as “programs of domestic intrigue and physical or verbal aggression, generally led by a terminally ill lumpenproletariat, who accepts public humiliation in exchange for any sum” (p. 145).

Campanella (2012), in his book about fans of *Big Brother Brasil*, states that the strong criticisms towards reality shows reveal a “common concern among those who reflect on contemporary society, the media and the relationship between them” (p. 13). The success of the program would epitomize “the decay of both current television programs and, perhaps especially, its audience” (p. 13). The author also mentions a very common approach to this type of program, which leads from a psychological perspective. Within this framework, traits as voyeurism are viewed as essential to the experience with this type of program, which would, in turn, institutionalize “practices previously considered perversions” (p. 13).

According to an article published by the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper, reality shows have risen from just 2 programs to 64 in the last four years among the productions tagged as “Netflix Originals” (Balbi, 2020). This article represents a new phase in the relationship between the specialized media and streaming services, which we can characterize as *disenchantment*. Titled “After the golden age of the series, streaming embraces trash programs”, the text characterizes as a “trash avalanche” the growing investment in reality shows like *Too Hot to Handle* (Sleeman et al., 2020-present), *Nailed It!* (Starkman, 2018-present) and *Floor is Lava* (Carbone et al., 2020-present), programs described, respectively, as follows:

Attractive women and hot guys are challenged to spend a month without having sex on a paradise island. Amateur confectioners make disastrous cakes, which

appear to have been the victims of a nuclear accident. Players grab scenographic objects as if their lives depended on them when crossing a room flooded with explosive goo. (Balbi, 2020, para. 1)

The emergence of reality shows in the catalog is viewed as the epitome of a possible decline in the quality of the company's programs. The popularization and expansion of Netflix's programming, however, is only a surprise for those who believed the discourse of distinction that the company employed since it started producing original content (Castellano & Meimaridis, 2016). This controversy translates into a concern to make the catalog more attractive and, for a good portion of the audience, reality shows fulfill this function very well.

Since the late 1990s, and particularly until the mid-2000s, reality shows have become an important cultural phenomenon. With space on free-to-air and pay-TV channels, programs of wide-ranging formats present content that muddles the separation between fiction and reality. In fact, it is difficult to even search for an instrumental definition that can group these shows under the same label, given the variety of themes they present (Andrejevic, 2004; Hill, 2004). These programs shared the ability to adapt to a context that, already at that time, was marked by the integration between different platforms and the importance of the internet (Campanella, 2012; Fechine, 2009). Programs characterized as cheap and quick to produce, with often high financial returns, and responsible for generating conversations on social media, reality shows are now gaining more and more space in streaming services.

Curiously, the journalist uses the expression 'trash' to characterize the investments in this format. The term trash became a concept, although quite tricky, normally associated with audiovisual works with a production, direction, and/or performance that, in most cases, do not meet the standards and norms of technical and artistic quality (Castellano, 2010). They are cultural objects that, in short, are rejected by the so-called "arbiters of taste" (Bourdieu, 1979/2007).

In February 2018, the news portal UOL published an article entitled "With bizarre projects, Netflix threatens to become a complete pay-TV" (Guaraldo, 2018). The text brings up an important issue, which is the difficulty in defining Netflix. It singles out a problem that sums up the very business idea contained in a SVOD service: "With increasingly *bizarre* [emphasis added] and diversified projects, ranging from radical competitions to decoration programs, the service *threatens to become* [emphasis added] a complete



“Television of the future”?

pay-TV programmer, with a little bit of each channel” (Guaraldo, 2018, para. 1). The productions identified as “bizarre” are, as expected, reality shows. The same tone of perplexity in the face of a possible contradiction between the original products that are emerging on the platform and the *promise of quality* associated with serial fiction of streaming platforms appears in the commentary about *Amazing on the Inside* (Barcroft & Wyles, 2018). The show is a lifestyle reality program with twelve episodes that reveals houses with simple facades and unusual interiors. When describing the production, the journalist comments that “the project... seems like it came out of a Discovery channel rather than a Netflix series” (Guaraldo, 2018, para. 4). The argument is similar to the one present in the *Folha de S.Paulo*’s article, which refers to a lost golden age.

Although the article loosely refers to a “golden age,” considering the traditional division proposed by TV scholars, we believe the journalist is regretting the end of the third golden age of U.S. television. The first encompasses the beginning of TV productions and the second refers to the 1980s, with the appearance of series like *Hill Street Blues* (Anspaugh et al., 1981-1987). The third is usually pointed out as starting in the late 1990s, specifically in 1999 with the premiere of *The Sopranos* (Chase et al., 1999-2007), not by chance a series from HBO, which at that time was trying to differentiate itself employing a quality discourse (Leverette et al., 2008). The beginning of Netflix’s original productions, with the debut of *House of Cards* (Fincher et al., 2013-2018), was strongly influenced by the debates about quality that elected certain products, especially serial fiction, as worthy of attention, notable works, detached from the rest of television programming. These productions shared some premises, such as focusing on the troubled lives of middle-aged white men, a script that the Netflix series followed faithfully, although behind-the-scenes twists have caused narrative changes over the seasons (Castellano et al., 2019).

Nowadays, instead of a new “golden age,” many researchers have been working with the notion of a Peak TV Era. This moment is marked, basically, by an excessive production, with a huge number of new programs appearing every month, coming from TV markets from all over the world and, particularly, from streaming services, which are not limited to a 24-hour programming schedule. Yet, it is important to note that even when TV was producing the shows that are today acclaimed as the synthesis of quality television, other programs aired and were massively consumed.

In the year following the premiere of *The Sopranos* (Chase et al., 1999-2007), *Survivor* (Burnett et al., 2000-present) debuted on CBS. *Breaking*

Bad (Gilligan et al., 2008-2013) started airing three months after the first episode of Keeping Up with the Kardashians (Seacrest et al., 2007-present). While House of Cards (Fincher et al., 2013-2018) became available on Netflix, Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (Lexton et al., 2012-2014) aired on TLC, with a lot of attention. All these programs coexisted during the height of television's so-called "third golden age." Similar products will continue to coexist, more and more, especially now that television consumption does not depend on the flow of programming tied to a broadcaster, but can occur through internet distributed television (Lotz, 2017). Now, each person can set up their own consumption routine, based on their interests, which can even contemplate, simultaneously, an Emmy-winning *complex* drama and a reality show about culinary disasters.

Nonetheless, the omnivorous quality (Peterson & Kern, 1996) of cultural consumption is not new. Already in the 1970s, in the aforementioned debates about the crude level of television programming, Nelson Rodrigues used to pick on these discourses stating that certain things an "aristocrat would only dare to reveal in a vacant lot, under the light of torches, in the solitary presence of a wild animal grazing in the background," but that others would never confess, not even in a safe place. For example:

An aristocrat who watched *Direito de Nascer*, *Sheik de Agadir*, and *Os Irmãos Coragem*, and did not miss a program by *Dercy Gonçalves*, *Chacrinha*, *Raul Longras*, would only admit that he/she liked television to a medium, after their death. (Freire Filho, 2003, p. 112)

Even today, 50 years later, we still cannot say that people feel comfortable to admit spending hours watching TV. Maybe watching HBO, or perhaps searching for something on Netflix, but in this case, one should be careful in choosing the title, as to not have their taste evaluated by the algorithm.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The emergence and popularization of video-on-demand services, particularly Netflix, has re-ignited discourses in the media about the supposed end of television. If Netflix and other streamers have certainly brought inflection points to the already almost centenary history of the medium, our main argument in this article is that there is an excessive emphasis on the idea of novelty associated with the type of product offered by these companies, when, in fact, a good part of their investments and popular products are legacies of a very consolidated model of television.



¹¹It is important to remember that for many people in Brazil, free-to-air television is still the only way to access TV content.

Besides the discussions about the *TV of the future*, we consider that streaming services (here symbolized by Netflix) indicate a trend in *how* people want to watch television. We suppose that a good part of the inquiries about the end of TV should be directed, in fact, to a question about how long the linear programming model, based on a 24-hour schedule, will still be the main (or only)¹¹ form of access to TV content. However, even this type of debate needs to be conducted with great caution. At the same time, access data from streaming services and an examination of their new investment trends in original content demonstrate *what* people seem to want to watch. This destabilizes a good part of the discussions the media and TV scholars have proposed about the future of television. What these indications have shown us is that, perhaps, to exercise futurology when it comes to TV, we often gain more by looking at its past.

If, on the one hand, the extremely saturated media environment has led streaming companies to bet on an already consolidated TV language, on the other, these same services struggle to maintain a catalog consistent with brands aligned with a *not TV* discourse, notably regarding the idea of television quality. The recent investments in reality shows are just an example of how Netflix breaks away from its own discourses of distinction and reiterates models that are closer to a television that has for so long (supposedly) been giving its final breaths. ■

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