Research Proposal for the Doctoral Programme in Media and Communications

The Nostalgia Economy: Netflix and New Audiences in the Digital Age

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1. Problem Statement

Over the past years, there has been an increase in the media production of contents that are based on a past source: from remakes to reboots, the industry of entertainment has been developing renewed versions of successful franchises targeted to contemporary audiences (Child 2016; Faughnder, 2016). For instance, with the acquisition of Lucasfilm, the Walt Disney Company plans to continue with the saga of Star Wars, not only with the production of the next episodes derived from the main story arch, but also with ‘stand-alone’ films based on characters of the same narrative universe (Schou, 2012).

This situation marks a production tendency whose main strategies are the continuation and expansion of successful narrative franchises, the adaptation of past media products to contemporary contexts in terms of plot, and the reworking of an original material in a different medium. Hence, a nostalgia economy has appeared, being focused on creating mediatic iterations that mirror previous ones. The nostalgic component is found, narratively, in all the connections with the original material, and, economically, in the purpose of engaging past viewers, or fans, with the return of a ‘beloved’ content and, at the same time, luring younger audiences to consume a product which appears to be new, but it is rooted in a sense of reminiscence.

Parallel to this dynamic, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Hulu, have gained prominence as media outlets of entertainment (Barr, 2011; Hallinan, & Strphas, 2016). These platforms of content have posed important challenges to the traditional media industry, not only in terms of distribution, but of production: these services have been generating content of their own, having as consequence a relative independence from traditional television networks and film studios (Snyder, 2016).

In their quest for creating original material, streaming services have recurred to successful patterns of production in order to guarantee their subsequent economic survival as a service. Thus, these platforms have also developed content that is anchored in a nostalgic sentiment. Netflix has taken advantage of this ‘nostalgic desire’ in distinct modes: the service has continued with series that were previously cancelled by other networks, such as Arrested Development (2003); it has adapted successful products from other markets to more Americanized audiences, this is the case of House of Cards.
(2013); and it has produced series such as BoJack Horseman (2014), which is a direct tribute and parody of the celebrity culture of Hollywood.

The production pattern of repetition is not a novelty for the contemporary entertainment industry (Baudrillard, 1994). Indeed, intertextuality is an intrinsic feature of any creative endeavor, and of culture (Kristeva, 1974; Jameson, 1981). However, with the high penetration of the Internet, and the constant advancements of technology, it becomes a task to question the role of originality and reiteration in the present media industries.

2. Objectives and Research Questions

This research proposal is concerned with the implications of a nostalgia economy in contemporary media production. Its main objective is to analyze the consumption practices of new audiences regarding products moored on nostalgic meanings. The term ‘new audiences’ imply the groups of viewers that did not consume the original materials, or sources of nostalgia, when they were first released; in other words, the term refers to young individuals that consume contents with strong echoes from the past. With this, it is intended to comprehend how these audiences elaborate the meanings and values of contents that form part of a dynamic of repetition and follow a formula of previously produced features; furthermore, it is intended to understand the reasons that lead young individuals to the consumption of nostalgic products.

Streaming services have become an important home for nostalgia-inspired products; thus, this research proposal also aims to study the use of these services as a platform for and as part of consumption practices that rely on the past. It is intended to scrutinize the experience of new audiences as users of Netflix in terms of the viewership strategies they unfold, and the possible modes in which a narrative product is affected by and developed within these media platforms.

Thus, the general research question that guides the present proposal is:

- How do contemporary new audiences consume nostalgia-based contents on video streaming services?

Moreover, the specific research questions are:
1. What are the causes and consequences of a nostalgia economy inscribed in contemporary media industries?

2. How do contemporary new audiences elaborate the meanings and values contained within the nostalgia-inspired contents produced by Netflix?

3. What is the point of attraction that motivates contemporary new audiences to consume nostalgia-inspired contents produced by Netflix?

4. How does the materiality of Netflix, as a platform, is appropriated by its users in the consumption of nostalgic contents?

3. Literature Review

In terms of content production, the digital age has been marked by the myth of innovation and progress; nonetheless, market and political forces have hindered the completion of this ideal of emancipation, generating instead dynamics of imitation and concentration (Boczkowski, 2004, 2010; Christensen, 2011). For Webster (2014, p.50), the current digital media environment is unfolded upon a marketplace of attention in which the main objective is to attract the interest and interaction of the user. This tendency may have as an outcome the utilization of validated strategies in order to succeed in terms of profitability.

The Internet-based consumption processes are influenced –and tracked- by algorithms constructed upon the traces left by the users, having as a consequence the generation of paths that direct the attention to previously enacted media patterns (Gillespie, 2010, 2014; Harper, 2016). In this context, streaming services have become a relevant option to access different kinds of entertainment on the Internet or other devices (Hilderbrand, 2010; Kjus, 2016; Sheen, 2013). Netflix in particular is a video streaming service that has evolved based on the formation of an algorithmic culture and the viewership possibilities provided by the media outlet as such. For Hallinan and Striphas (2016), the development of algorithms within the service has permeated the prominence gained by the service over the past years. From the classification of genres and themes, Netflix has an organized repertoire of contents that is tailored according to the users behaviour.

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1 In this sense, two factors have to be considered: 1) Most mainstream media outlets are developed within a capitalistic economy based on profit, making commercial results a priority in their operations (Ampuja, 2016); 2) Evidently, there are other alternative media outlets that may follow a distinct objective (Fenton, 2011); nevertheless, they do not represent a high amount of traffic in terms of use, albeit they might have a loyal community of consumers.
Netflix have already utilized the results derived from its data banks to create original material: The production of the series *House of Cards* (2013) was motivated by a found prominence of political dramas among a sector of users (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). The creation of original content has been a common practice for Netflix, allowing the platform to unearth distinctive forms of production structures, branding, and media distribution (Jenner, 2016, p.258).

Hence, Netflix and other services such as Amazon Prime, or Hulu, have inaugurated a new way of consuming television: As Bury and Li (2015, p.593) argue, the new streaming and downloading technologies have decoupled the television content from the screen itself, allowing time shifting and spatial detachment in terms of viewership strategies. These changes unravel new possibilities and practices for the users (Tse, 2016); for instance, the option of binge-watching, or marathon viewing, the act of consuming a TV series, or a franchise of films, without a pause (Silverman & Ryalls, 2016).

The use of streaming services is an opportunity to analyze the contemporary engagement of the users of these platforms regarding the roles and activities enacted in the process of consumption. Radway (1991) has signalized the importance of understanding the tensions formed in the relationship between media industries and their main target of consumers. Thus, the reading, or viewership, strategies of a determined population follow patterns that flourished from a complex interaction between generic conventions anchored in the objectives of a media industry, cultural habits, and individual aspirations (Hall, 1980; Liebes & Katz, 1993; Livingstone, 2015; Morley, 1992).

Focused on audience dynamics proper of digital media, Livingstone (2004, pp. 4-5) highlights the necessity of understanding the changes and residual trends developed within a mediatic environment of social diversification, technological convergence, and interactive tools. In this sense, it becomes compulsory to study the interactions between the signification processes unraveled in a digital ecology and its material frameworks (Sterne, 2006, 2014), as audiences and publics may overlap or differ in different degrees of activity and commitment (Livingstone, 2005, 2014; Webster, 2014).

Being a harbinger of the digital age, Netflix represents a dynamic in which products that belonged to more traditional media outlets are rearranged and reproduced in a platform
with all possibilities proper of the Internet as a medium (Siles, 2013; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012). Therefore, the paradigms of consumption located in the service deserve to be scrutinized in order to grasp how meanings are interpreted and operationalized within the material contrivances characteristic of Netflix.

4. Methodology and Data

As the main focus of the research is the interaction of new audiences with a nostalgia economy generated in streaming services, the analysis would be centered on a group of young individuals, regular consumers of these kind of content. It is proposed that Costa Rica is an ideal place to locate the research. Costa Rica has often been called a ‘Latin-American Silicon Valley’ thanks to the growth of industries related to new technologies such as Intel (Ciravegna, 2012; Siles, Espinoza & Méndez, 2016). Moreover, the penetration of Internet has fostered a disposition in the population for the use of social media and other web-based services, especially through mobile services (Cordero, 2015; Vargas, 2016). The situation of this developing country becomes a fertile ground to investigate the relationship between nostalgic contents and streaming services in the consumption practices of audiences inserted in a context of globalization.

A relevant population for the research objective would be students in their final year of high school. They represent a sector that, throughout their recent teenage years, was exposed to a wide variety of nostalgic manifestations, from remakes to reboots; in addition, they entail an age in which is probable to find a relatively high level of self-consciousness of choice regarding media consumption.

A population of high school students in their last year of studies would be selected. In Costa Rica, primary instruction goes from the first grade to the sixth, while secondary instruction goes from the seventh grade to the eleventh; the average age of an individual during the eleventh grade is 16 or 17 years. A total of 6 schools (3 private and 3 public), located in the urban central area of the country, would be chosen, procuring a balance in social status. The distribution would consist in:
Table N.1
Selected population
Costa Rica High Schools Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 Private Schools</th>
<th>3 Public Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 High Income Schools</td>
<td>1 High Income Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Middle Income Schools</td>
<td>1 Middle Income Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Low Income Schools</td>
<td>1 Low Income Schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total of the sample: 6 schools

It is important to note that this research proposal has the potential of expanding its scope to a comparative analysis: the studied population could be selected from education institutions of Costa Rica and the United Kingdom. This decision would be made in later stages of the development of this proposed research.

Methodologically, the research would employ qualitative and quantitative techniques in order to attain its main objectives. Based on the procedure elaborated by Radway (1991) the research would follow three phases. First, an analysis of contemporary media industries would be executed to fathom the causes that impulse a nostalgia economy. For this, a compilation of sources regarding the production tendencies of the last decade would be deployed in order to examine the socio-economic motivations behind the dynamic. This phase would rely on historical and theoretical accounts to provide a clear picture of the studied tendency.

Second, a group of nostalgia-based contents produced by Netflix would be analyzed with the intention of grasping the narrative mechanisms through which past meanings are enacted in contemporary iterations. It would be intended to comprehend the narrative structures and the development of characters that allow the reactivation of nostalgic contents on the streaming service.

The third phase would be concentrated on the chosen population. Thus, a series of individual *in-depth interviews* would be applied in the selected high schools in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the interaction of the students with these productions; moreover, the interviews would assess the engagement of the population with Netflix as a platform of entertainment. Based on the preliminary findings recollected in the interviews, a *questionnaire* would be elaborated with the intention of
obtaining a more general knowledge of the consumption practices and user interaction that emerges in a streaming service such as Netflix. The ideal goal would be to apply the questionnaire to all the sections that form the eleventh grade of the selected Costa Rican high schools. The questionnaires would be processed in the SPSS software.

Finally, a total of three focus groups would be executed in each selected institution. For Lunt and Livingstone (1996, p.96), the technique has the potential of revealing ideological premises rooted in particular contexts and given experiences. Additionally to these methods, it would be expected to interview a group of executives or developers from Netflix in order to attain an inside comprehension of the organizational dynamics of the company that are related with the production of nostalgic contents.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between the economy of nostalgia and streaming services poses several questions regarding the contemporary media industries. Economically, nostalgia-based contents have a proven commercial value. In this sense, the reception of these products has to be inspected thoroughly to grasp whether or not this tendency has a basis in the tastes and desires of the targeted audiences. The fact that many of these productions have found a solid place in video streaming services has to be scrutinized in a detailed manner as well: These platforms may facilitate the attraction of users with a previous experience or a disposition toward the nostalgic meaning of a certain product; furthermore, several conditions of production might stimulate the creation of nostalgic contents as ‘original series’ of these services.

Politically, the dynamic between nostalgic products and video streaming services highlights the status of property in the digital age. The Internet brought many challenges concerning issues such as intellectual property with the practice of piracy and illegal downloading (Sterne, 2014). Distinct platforms, from Netflix to Spotify, have settled a middle ground in which the consumer pays for the use of a media product, in a transaction that resembles the act of renting a good. If this practice becomes extrapolated to other fields by different organizations, it may mark the establishment of a form of commercial transaction proper of the digital age, immersed obviously in a capitalist mode of production, and a redefinition of the frontiers of property.
The present research proposal suggests a path to study the relationship between contemporary consumption practices regarding the nostalgia economy and the user experiences in streaming services that offer these contents. This research is an opportunity to question the incidence and role of streaming services such as Netflix in the current cultural production, and the motivation that lead an entertainment industry to support these platforms.

6. Bibliography

a. Academic Sources


Tse, Y. K. (2016). Television’s Changing Role in Social Togetherness in the Personalized Online Consumption of Foreign TV. *New Media & Society*, 18(8), 1547-1562.


b. Journalistic Articles


c. Audiovisual Material

