<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Title:</th>
<th>On Streaming Media Platforms, Their Audiences, and Public Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript Number:</td>
<td>RRMX-2020-0044R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article Type:</td>
<td>Regular Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Platform Capitalism; Algorithmic Regulation; Audience Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract:</td>
<td>Over the past decade, streaming media platforms have emerged as new and natively digital forms of content delivery. For the audience, streaming media platforms appear as the new way of watching TV, or new kind of film distribution at the outset. Yet, they radically transform the spatial and temporal settings of the audience activity, introduce an algorithmically modulated logic of programming that we provisionally call microcasting, and change the way we relate to the entertainment content in general. In this paper, we critically evaluate how streaming media platforms restructure the temporal, spatial, and relational dynamics of the audience activity and strip off its collective essence, and discuss the actual and potential effects this new technological form on public life by referring to certain foundational concepts in television studies, audience studies, and film studies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Title:** On Streaming Media Platforms, Their Audiences, and Public Life

**Authors:**
Aras Ozgun  
Izmir University of Economics, Cinema and Digital Media Department  
e-mail: aras.ozgun@ieu.edu.tr, Tel.: +90 545 287 4044  
Address: 2092. Sk. No:24, Iskele Mahallesi, Urla, Izmir, 35430, Turkey

Andreas Treske  
Bilkent University, Department of Communication and Design  
e-mail: treske@bilkent.edu.tr, Tel.: +90 312 290 1749  
Address: Department of Communication and Design, Bilkent University Main Campus, Bilkent, Ankara, 06800 Turkey

**Authors Biographies:**

Aras Ozgun is a media scholar and artist, teaching at the Cinema and Digital Media Department at Izmir University of Economics, Turkey, and Media Studies Graduate Program of the New School for Public Engagement, USA. He studied Political Science (B.Sc.) and Sociology (MS) at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, and Media Studies (MA) and Sociology (Ph.D.) at New School for Social Research in New York. He writes on media, culture and politics, and produces experimental media, photography and video works.

Andreas Treske is an author, and filmmaker living in Turkey. He graduated from the University of Television and Film, Munich, where he also taught film and video post-production. He teaches in the Department of Communication and Design at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. His academic work focuses on visual communication and media production, including new media.
On Streaming Media Platforms, Their Audiences, and Public Life¹

Aras Ozgun and Andreas Treske

Abstract:
Over the past decade, streaming media platforms have emerged as new and natively digital forms of content delivery. For the audience, streaming media platforms appear as the new way of watching TV, or new kind of film distribution at the outset. Yet, they radically transform the spatial and temporal settings of the audience activity, introduce an algorithmically modulated logic of programming that we provisionally call microcasting, and change the way we relate to the entertainment content in general. In this paper, we critically evaluate how streaming media platforms restructure the temporal, spatial, and relational dynamics of the audience activity and strip off its collective essence, and discuss the actual and potential effects this new technological form on public life by referring to certain foundational concepts in television studies, audience studies, and film studies.

Keywords: Platform Capitalism, Algorithmic Regulation, Audience Studies, New Media Studies, Public Sphere

Streaming Media Platforms in the context of Platform Capitalism

¹ An earlier and shorter version of this article has been published as a book chapter titled “Narrative Platforms: Towards a Morphology of New Audience Activities and Narrative Forms” in Video Vortex Reader III: Inside the YouTube Decade, ed. by Geert Lovink and Andreas Treske, published by the Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2020.
The transformation of the communication technologies in the past three decades have been imposing upon us the reappraisal of both components of the term *mass media*, by altering the temporal, spatial and linguistic settings of the information flows—the media, and the public life sustained through such information flows—which had been characterized as composing a *mass* when the term was coined around mid 20th century. Streaming media platforms, which have been increasingly becoming dominant forms and channels of media consumption over the past years, appear to be another phase of this transformation. In this paper, we intend to examine how this new technological form restructures the temporal, spatial, and modal/relational dynamics of the *audience activity* (the collective act of relating to, watching, and processing the informational content), and discuss its actual and potential effects on public life by referring to certain foundational concepts in television studies, audience studies, and film studies.

Streaming media platforms emerge and operate under the conditions of a new economic modality labeled as *Platform Capitalism* by Nick Srinek (2016). This new economic modality resulted in the domination of media and entertainment industries by businesses which provide various forms of media products and services together with a variety of other services through algorithmically regulated marketing processes. Some of these platforms (such as Google, Amazon, Apple) offer diverse forms of entertainment products (music, film, tv programs, games, applications, social media services) along a variety of other products and services. Whereas some others (such as Netflix, Hulu, Youtube, etc.) solely focus on providing entertainment products in a variety of narrative forms and styles that can be accessed online via computer screens and modern TV sets as well as mobile devices.
In the *economic context* of the Platform Capitalism, the transformation of audience activity streaming media platforms effectuate is two-fold. On one layer, streaming media platforms radically transform the spatial and temporal settings of the audience activity, as we will discuss at length below. Through mobile media technologies, one can watch *whatever content* s/he likes at *anywhere* and *anytime*. Yet, the liberation of viewership from its spatial and temporal constrains also brings the erosion of its collective dimension, since such spatial and temporal limits provided the social contexts that made the audience activity a shared one. In this sense, streaming media technology brings the fragmentation of audience (which started as a tendency fueled by marketing initiatives and the development of cable and satellite TV networks in the past decades) to the individual level. At another layer, the formulation of that *whatever content* the audience like —the almost individually customized marketing of the content— transforms what we used to call *programming* in television, or rather replaces it with what we may provisionally label as *microcasting*. Streaming media platforms introduce algorithmic marketing techniques that paint the now individualized audience activity with a liberating facade of personalized content delivery and pseudo-interactivity. Yet, the immediate effect of such pseudo-interactivity is not only the concealment of sophisticated marketing techniques involved; algorithmically personalized content delivery (that is, algorithmic formulation and presentation of *what we may like* based on the data available to the platform) acts as a filter that sieves what we are already predisposed to watching, and eventually sterilizes the content we are exposed to. In this second layer, the sterilization of the information and narratives as such under the economic logic of the platform results in further *privatization* of the audience activity, narrows the *publicness* of the information flows, and diminishes the *public sphere* as we know it.
Therefore, under the all-inclusive and unifying commercial logic of the platform in terms of narratives and their audiences—under its promise to become the common ground for everyone and very taste, we find the dissolution of the audience, and the collective form the term once necessarily referred to, the *publics*. In this respect, in order to evaluate the social impacts of streaming media platforms in a political context, we first have to consider how they structure a new type of audience activity, and how they transform the traditional modes of watching and relating to the narratives.

**Emergence of Streaming Media and the Rise of Algorithmic Regulation**

Over the past decade, streaming media platforms have emerged as new and natively digital forms of content delivery. Although all traditional forms of audio-visual content (along with new interactive forms) is now being streamed online, entertainment media is increasingly being serviced through the streaming media platforms, while news media remains to be mostly watched on legacy TV sets on broadcast and cable channels for practical and habitual reasons we will discuss below. According to recent statistics, streaming media platform subscription rates increased to 69 % in 2019 (from 10 % in 2009) and surpassed the cable and satellite TV subscription rates of 65 % in US (Bratner, 2019). This trend is not specific to US; according to MPAA (The Motion Picture Association of America) statistics, streaming media subscription has surpassed the cable TV subscription globally by increasing 27 % since 2017. Through such rapid growth, streaming media have become the dominant distribution form in media and entertainment industries, which has become a 100 billion dollar global industry by growing 9 % in scale since 2017 (Liptak,
Although we don’t have the exact statistical data yet, the ongoing pandemic crises at the moment of writing this article seem to have accelerated market penetration of streaming media platforms immensely. While the global film release schedule has been upended, and advertising revenues of traditional TV channels declined steeply due to the severe economic effects of the pandemic (Waterson and Sweeney, 2020), soaring share prices of Netflix reflects the growth of streaming media viewership in the same period (Duprey, 200).

Among others, Netflix represents the streaming media platform model in a highly refined fashion; it offers an all-inclusive subscription service in which the user/audience can choose what to watch just like in traditional broadcast/cable TV entertainment (whereas the business of Amazon Prime and Hulu rely on pay-per-view offerings besides the basic subscription content), it dominates the streaming video market by far (in US it controls 87% of the market, while Amazon Prime Video and Hulu holds respectively 52 % and 41.5 % shares) (Neiger, 2019). Netflix is not only globally available (except mainland China —and Syria, North Korea and Crimea due to U.S. sanctions) but also peculiarly local in its programming (it supports 23 different languages in its user interface and customer relations, and forefronts regional productions besides its international repertoire). As such, approximately 37 % of the global internet users are believed to watch Netflix (Watson, 2019).

Netflix also emphasize both in its operation and publicity the distinguishing feature and essential power that separates streaming media platforms from broadcast and cable TV as technological forms; the algorithmic regulation of its service that enables it to offer custom programming to each user according to her/his individual taste. In 2006, when Netflix was a mail-order DVD
rental business, even before it launched its first instant streaming service in 2007, it announced the Netflix Prize; a one million dollar prize for an algorithm that would improve the cinematch algorithm Netflix had been using in its recommendation engine for its DVD subscribers. Generating much publicity among the tech world, the prize was finally awarded to a team of programmers, BellKor’s Pragmatic Chaos, in 2009 (Buskirk, 2009). Yet, Netflix announced in 2012 that the winning algorithm had not been, and would never be implemented; the streaming video platform Netflix moved onto since 2010 had been generating much detailed and minute data about its subscribers preferences and the costly implementation of the new algorithm was not needed (Johnston, 2012). By switching to streaming media distribution, Netflix did not need to predict its customers choices anymore; their customers’ watching experience had become entirely transparent, they now ‘knew’ their audiences choices, and had the chance to guide their predispositions with an interface that implied interactivity. As Netflix’s operation and publicity crystalizes, algorithmic regulation of program flow that is masked behind the interactive menu becomes a constitutive element for streaming media platforms and changes the business of 'media distribution' in profound way.

The Spatial and Temporal Transformation of Audience Activity

For the audience, streaming media platforms appear as the new way of watching TV, or new kind of film distribution at the outset. The media content they deliver appears to be the same with what we used to watch on TV or at the movie theater. In fact, nowadays major streaming media platforms provide us with not only archives of television and cinema classics, but also with newly released serials and movies —in some cases, as soon as the serials and programs are
broadcasted on the television or films open up in movie theaters (Amazon), and original content of the same sorts produced by the streaming media platforms themselves (Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, HBO, CBS All Access, Apple +). While major streaming media platforms compete to capture the pulse of the general public with massive investments on mainstream content, we are now also seeing minor platforms appearing for niche audiences in this growing market — such as Warner Media’s DC Universe offering programming for the comics fans, or MUBI delivering arthouse films just like an arthouse movie theater, or Criterion Channel offering the cinema classics the video distributor amassed over the decades, just like a special interest channel on cable TV. Besides these global streaming media platform, we also observe the rapid emergence of local platforms catering to certain culturally or linguistically framed media markets — such as Blu TV that offers a distinctly Middle Eastern programming with Turkish and Arabic interface options. Thus, while they slowly replace television and movie theaters, streaming media platforms appear to us as a combination of both, conveniently delivered together on to our screens. Yet, although the narrative forms that reach to their audience through streaming appear to be similar or the same, the settings and the nature of the audience activity is profoundly different from television broadcasting and cinema screening.

Streaming media platforms and the media consumption patterns they introduce depart from the traditional notion of ‘audience activity’ in two layers. In the first and most important layer, streaming media transforms the temporal and spatial settings of the audience activity. Although we perceive it as some other form of TV watching (since the activity formally resembles it by taking place before a screen), the settings of the audience activity in the streaming format is different from TV — it doesn’t necessarily take place in the living room, and in fact, as Gerard
Goggin (2014) points to, it doesn’t even necessarily take place in front of the TV screen. Every member of the household can stream the content of their choice on their individual computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, game consoles and mobile devices along the traditional TV sets (Treske, 2015).

As such, streaming media spectatorship substantially alters the spatial organization of the television. Televisions spatial organization had two dimensions; the TV screen materialized before us as a visual/perceptual space, and at the same time, the TV set constructed a social space around itself —whether at home, in the middle of the living room, or in a public setting, at the pub or the waiting room. As a visual space, TV screen has been a window that connected the viewer to many distant places in the world simultaneously (Weber, 1996, p. 117-118). Within televisions particular representational dynamics that constantly dissect the continuity of corporeal spaces and reassemble them virtually (which Weber describes as “splitting the unity of place and with it the unity of everything that defines its identity with respect to place: events, bodies, subjects” [p. 117]), TV screen appeared to be a perfectly heterotopic space —a “counter site… in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.” (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). The mode of perception in television resembled monitoring, visually accessing the events that simultaneously took place in such disparate locations, characterized as zapping between channels and programs (Cavell, 1982). Cavell emphasizes the monitoring of a there (or an any-space-whatever in Deleuze’s terms) as “the material basis of television”, and points out that such monitoring does not only the viewing of live events/shows but all kinds of televisual content in general (p. 205). Although the screen it-
self continues to be a heterotopic site that passes the viewer from place to place within the diegetic space of the narratives in streaming media spectatorship, as we will discuss in more detail below, the relation to these spaces turns into a concentrated, attentive, immersive watching experience, rather than a distant monitoring of the events simultaneously taking place in the distance.

The diversification of viewing activity across a variety of screens and personal mobile devices, working together with the main affordance of streaming media platforms — the seemingly personalized content delivery, results in the erosion of social space constructed around the TV set. The TV screen in our living rooms looses its centrality for gathering the family around; now the members can watch the streaming content they like on their own, individually, around the house or elsewhere. The TV screens in public spaces (such as pubs, waiting rooms, airport terminals) also loose their gravitational force in contesting for our attention, and become reduced to almost decorative objects. The focal point of our attention becomes our mobile devices, which offer us a new social space that now materializes on the surface of each individual screen, in between the connections of these mobile devices, or otherwise, take us back to the familiar diegetic space of narrative while waiting alone in public.

These practically bring the temporal and spatial individualization of the spectatorship, which immediately effects the social organization time; the program flow in broadcast television had been structured according to everyday activities of family members, with the notion of television accompanying the household in their domestic life throughout the day — weekdays started with morning news, continued with women’s magazine programs after husband leaves for work, news at lunch time, afternoon magazines, children’s programs when they return from school, evening
news when husband comes back from work, prime time for the whole family after dinner, late night programs after children sleep. Besides these regular, repetitive consecutive sequences, TV schedule also reproduced the social time regime of public life in its weekend and holiday programs, and responded to important public events (Williams, 1974). Programming in TV industries did not only referred to the production of the content, but also the scheduling of the various genres in accordance with the social schedules of the audience segments. Williams referred to the overlapping of televisual programming with social time as “planned flow”, and pointed to it as “the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form” (p. 86). Such planned flow regulated social subjects individual everyday schedules and incorporated them into a collectively experienced social time. Streaming media platforms, in comparison, do not only deliver their programs to the individual users mobile screens wherever they are, but also whenever they want. Under these circumstances, streaming media spectatorship as an activity becomes completely detached from or minimally effected by social time.\textsuperscript{2} Thus, scheduling ceases to be a concern for the platforms, and the production and curation of content, which is now regulated by algorithmic assessments, takes precedence.

**Microcasting, Binge Watching and the Transformation of Narrative Forms**

\textsuperscript{2} In this context, we also have to consider the evident transformation of social time under post-fordist production regimes, and the ways post-fordist capitalism restructure the temporality of work and labor processes. The detachment of audience activity from social time through streaming media platforms occurs in tandem with various forms of precarious labor, outsourcing, freelancing, remote working practices that transgress 9 to 5 working hours and blur the distinction between leisure time and work time. In this respect, it is possible to think that streaming media platforms fulfill the leisure time of the social subjects who do not conduct their lives according to a generally observed social time regime anymore.
At another layer, streaming introduces what we may provisionally call *micro-casting* — an almost individually *customized* form of content delivery at the practical level, further than 'narrow-casting' introduced by cable/satellite TV in the previous decades. Streaming media spectator does not only watch wherever s/he is, whenever s/he wants, but also whatever s/he chooses. In effect, streaming media platforms bring the fragmentation of the audience to the very level of individual spectator. Past television studies showed that, the audience activity has been shaped by and reflected the power relations in the domestic sphere, and was dominated by men as the head of the household (Morley, 1986). In fact, women and children’s programs found space on the daily schedule of the broadcast TV only at times men were supposed to be away from home (Ang, 1996). Therefore, individualization of the audience that we describe above can be perceived to have an emancipatory effect; streaming media spreads the audience activity around the house(hold), and frees it from the domination men. According to Lynn Schofield Clark (2014) it creates a setting, which enables 'minor' choices within the household (those of women and children) to be effective in demanding content. In fact, the streaming platform Netflix anticipates such individualization from the very beginning, and gives two or four different user accounts per every subscription at different price ranges when signing up — so that, every member of the household can have their separate playlists, and their likes and choices are individually registered.

Yet, although it is composed of the very same people, the very same mass of ‘viewers’, we would like to underline that streaming media audience is not just a 'fragmented' version of the TV audience, but an entirely different one. Netflix’s programming itself attests to such trans-
formed notion of the *audience*. It is significant that, the constitutive formats of traditional broadcast TV programming (such as game shows, reality TV, news, talk shows, variety shows, sports, cultural coverage) are not the most important assets on Netflix. Only culturally or historically significant shows of these types are presented within its repertoire, in a rather retrospective, curatorial manner. These types of shows have once provided the *liveness* of the broadcast TV, and the 'live broadcast' has been the essential characteristic of *televisuality*. In contrast, the programming of Netflix is mostly geared towards narrative formats, serials and films from every genre, and *special interest* documentaries. Except the few instances of anticipating forthcoming episodes, or *seasons*, the content on Netflix is timeless, or at least time-divorced.³ *Live TV* programming finds its place in Netflix’s scheduling only when it leaves its *liveness* behind, becomes a part of the past or *timeless*, and belongs to a historical/cultural narrative. For the streaming platform the definitive aspect of audience activity is not ‘watching what happens in the world’ as it happens, live, at the same time with the rest of the world/nation, collectively, together as a family in the living room anymore. *Liveness of the event* takes a new form on the platform, launching of the new shows, the starting of the new seasons become the *events* that construct the temporality in that global *depth of time* upon which the platform operates.

Televisions liveness has been its constitutive attribute, the specific signifying practice that provided its ontological reference, its adherence to the real (Feuer, 1983). Of course, such adherence

---

³ It is true that such anticipation or releases of the new seasons of popular serials and shows on streaming media platforms generate a shared excitement among their viewer base, and thus have a temporal effect that points to some form of scheduling/programming. However, this is still different than the social scheduling/programming of TV shows and film releases, since the actual watching experience still happens in solitude, and full season releases neither sustain the temporal continuity of the weekly episodes, nor actually refer to the *seasonal structuring* of the TV programming. The term *season* comes from the Fall, Spring, and Summer programming seasons of the TV networks, which determined the number of weekly episodic installments —ie, 13-16 episodes per season.
to the real has been rather an ideological effect, since its seemingly uninterrupted direct transmission of events in present time has been permeated by representational devices and their ideological interventions. Still, televisions potential of transmitting the events live, in real time, as they happen, turned watching television as a collective social experience, a common occurrence (Carpigano, 1997). In this respect, streaming media platforms withdrawal from liveness sets another basic condition for the individualization of their audiences.

The detachment from liveness, and exclusion of live programming formats by streaming media platforms is evidently a strategical commercial choice, rather than a technological limitation. Some other platforms, for example Amazon owned Twitch, or Twitter owned Periscope, solely rely on exploiting the live transmission potentials of same technological form. Also evident is that ‘liveness’ delegated to these ‘live streaming’ platforms is structured differently from that of television. Televisions liveness was strategically anchored in the public significance of the event it transmitted, the common occurrence it established has been proportional to the magnitude of the events it covered; a regional soccer match could be significant enough to be covered by a local TV station, whereas Ali knocking Foreman out in the 8th round of Rumble in the Jungle was a global event that had to be witnessed by all. Liveness of Twitch or Periscope, on the other hand, is tactically modeled after social media rather than television; it capitalizes on the banality of decisively mundane and insignificant interaction between the broadcasters and their followers, which substitutes ‘publicness’ without attaining to it. Therefore, despite constructing a similar sense of real time transmission, live streaming aims at facilitating a privileged, narrowly shared experience, rather than a common occurrence of any scale.
Not only the *live TV* notion becomes depreciated, but also the *seriality* — which had been another foundational aspect of televisuality — becomes passé. *Seriality* (having the news programming in certain times of the day, the new episodes of the serials on certain days of the week, weekend programming, morning programming etc.) had created a sense of continuity, and constructed a collectively experienced 'social time' regime (Cavell, 1982). *TV serials* had been the narrative form in which the temporality of the narrative overlapped with such social time regime; while the settings of the stories, main characters extended over the *seasons*, and sometimes overarching plot lines gradually developed, every week at the same day and time a new story with a new self contained plot was aired. Episodic narrative was a truly modern form, introduced by magazines and daily newspapers, and inherited by radio and television when broadcast media took over the power of regulating social time from print media. It sat on the cutting edge of the storytelling as a craft; the impossible task of blending difference and repetition, familiarity and newness, continuity and novelty within the same text, within that 40 minutes.

What we understand from business insider reports (Volpe, 2017) is that, the only reasons for the streaming platforms to stick the episodic form and presentation of traditional TV serials are the few remainders of the past TV industry —such as classification criteria for TV awards, the original form of past and new made-for-television serials, and perhaps, the slowly changing habits of middle-aged viewers who grew up with the episodic serial format. The definitive form of audience activity that Netflix and other streaming media platforms bring forth is *binge watching* (or, *binging* as it is commonly used now); a self-determined viewing activity, watching what you like in an uninterrupted fashion, at anytime you like, even independent from spatial constraints due to the immediate availability of the whole ‘seasons’ of the *serials* which used to be broadcasted on
TV over months, on a weekly basis, or entire repertoire of movies in a wide spectrum of genres. Netflix built its streaming media distribution model on binge watching, and set itself apart from linear television by introducing the full drop-release (in which all the episodes, or entire seasons of the TV serials were made available at once) as its publication model. Binge watching appears as a particular platform sponsored hack short-circuiting the episodic seriality of the TV shows, but it does in fact apply to feature films and other narrative forms as well —the platform already lines up what you may want to watch next in a similar genre as soon as the end credits start to roll. Within the practice of watching, the post-play function takes us directly to the next episode, and, at the end of the movies or serials, to a similar one that the spectator may enjoy watching, rather than going back to the home page and making a deliberate choice. The skip intro function even allows us to make the narrative flow feel more seamless and uninterrupted. These interactive features ironically implies a particular form of spectatorship that relies on the insulated and continuous flow of narratives (Glebatis Perks, 2014).

The continuousness of binging perverts the seriality of the TV narratives not only by detaching them from the larger temporal context of the social time regime, but also from their episodic breaks and hinges. Unconstrained by the durational limits of weekly episode format, the overarching plot lines take precedence in the narratives, diegetic settings can be constructed in detail, multiple characters within the story can be developed with certain depth. Episodes, in the continuous flow of binging now, functions more like bookmarks, playlists or chapters of one long narrative. In this sense, the closest relative of binging as an activity is not TV watching, but reading. Like reading, binging is often a solitary, contained and focused experience. In fact, it is precisely because of such modal similarities, we observe that watching streaming media on mobile devices
increasingly replace reading books while commuting, traveling, exercising, or engaging in kinds of other leisure activities in public places.

The limited interactivity of the streaming interface impose upon the viewer to immerse in and interact with the text itself, and the insulated flow of of binge watching reinforces the build-in dynamics of the narratives (Treske, 2013). This form of relation between the narrative and the spectator differs from that of cinema by its solitariness and continuity, and from that of television by its intensity and concentration. As we mentioned above, television spectatorship resembled *monitoring* of the content in most times, rather than closely following the flow of programs throughout the day. Television *accompanied* the everyday routine of the social subjects in their everyday routines both in domestic and public settings, whose attention shifted on and off from the program flow during those routines. Music television, for example, is an excellent example of television as company, remaining always on, but mostly in the background while people do their everyday chores (Kaplan, 1987). The isolated and immersive experience streaming media platforms facilitate precludes one of the most important affordances that made TV an integral part of social life; its *common co-occurrence*.

Growing popularity of hyper-diegetic narratives on streaming media platforms can be associated with this new form of audience activity. Hyper-diegetic narratives are different works of fiction taking place in the same narrative time and space, and sharing or referencing to each others plot-lines, characters, or other narrative elements, such as DC’s *The Flash/Arrow/Legends of Tomorrow* series, AMC/Netflix’s *Breaking Bad/Better Call Saul*, or Marvel’s Netflix franchises, *Jes-
sica Jones/Daredevil/Luke Cage/Iron Fist/The Punisher. Among these, Marvel’s Netflix franchises provide an excellent example of how hyper-diegesis emerges as a new narrative modality that couples with the individualized audience we are concerned in this essay. Although they exist in the same universe, share characters and reference to each others plot-lines, each narrative belongs to a different well-established genre and appeals to the distinct audience of that genre. Yet, the hyper-diegetic connections and threads among the narratives hook all of these distinct audiences into the Marvel Universe, get them consume the genres they would generically refrain from (Treske and Ozgun, 2020).

**Privatization of Audience Activity: A Scheherazade for Every Shahriyar**

While defining the television as a *decentered* postmodern media, Ann Kaplan (1987) argues about a foundational difference between the cinema spectator and the TV audience. She points to the *frame* that delimited the experience of the cinema spectator in a Simmelian fashion (Simmel, 1994). Cinema has been framed temporally by the fixed duration of its narrative that only lasts for so long, and spatially by the darkness of the movie theater that surrounded the image. The never-ending flow of programs on television, on the other hand, creates a continuum that has no spatial and temporal boundaries. Cinema captures the spectator by triggering her/his desires and offering a pleasurable dream, from which the viewer eventually wakes up at the end of the film – to face the actuality of everyday life, upon exiting the movie theater. Television, on the other hand, offers its audience plenitude; there is always something to watch — if not at that moment,
a few minutes later, if not on that channel, certainly on one of the others. For Kaplan, that insatiable desire for plenitude kept the audience watching around the clock, and diverted their attentive enjoyment to the consumer products advertised in the meanwhile.

Streaming media platforms present an amplified effect of plenitude without the advertisements in their subscription based services. In this respect, they seemingly redeem the narrative from the interruption of those consumer products that belong to the everyday banality. Yet, this is a deception that hides the fact that the streaming platform itself is the ultimate consumer product — one that you can never finish consuming, one that always has more to offer than you can ever want, regardless of how different your desires may be — a personal Scheherazade for every Shahriyar.

The illusion of interactivity sustains the semblance of difference and differentiation; we find this show or that movie on the platform, add it to our playlist, and choose to watch it whenever we want — as if those movies and shows are not algorithmically curated for us based on the general consumption patterns associated with our customer profile, and boldly pushed onto the top of the screen towards our attention. Therefore, it seems necessary to consider the streaming media platforms in the context of the global culture industry as portrayed by Lash and Lury (2007), whose products are indeterminate objects that seek to produce differences and differentiations rather than identities. In fact, the impetus is obvious; the platform makes you think that your tastes are different, that you want to hear a different story, that, the story is different. Such promise of difference becomes incorporated into other cultural and aesthetic distinctions that distinguishes bourgeois life-style (Bourdieu, 2007).
The demographic distribution of streaming media subscription statistics clearly establishes such distinction. In US, where we observe severe disparities among the income levels of demographic categories, the subscription ratio of the most popular streaming media platform Netflix remains 59% in white households (Watson 2019b), yet 39% among the Black households (Umstead 2019). The subscription ratios of other streaming media platforms among Black population gives the impression that Netflix’s ratio is in fact disproportionately higher (probably because of its marketing strategies, which includes offering free subscription to T-Mobile customers en masse). For example, Amazon Prime’s overall market share in US, which is approximately 2/3’s of Netflix, falls to 14% among Blacks (Umstead, 2019). It is possible to consider Amazon Prime subscription having a more direct correlation with income level, since it also gives its subscribers certain privileges (such as are shipping) if they are already frequently purchasing Amazon’s other services.

Clearly there is more empirically oriented research to do regarding the structuring of streaming media platforms and markets from a political-economic perspective at a global scale. In the absence of such in depth studies, we can still deduce the economic/class base of streaming media subscription from the demographic distribution, considering the intersectionality between demographic categories and income levels. The demographic distribution is interesting and symptomatic in the context of algorithmic regulation of the content and platform capitalism; it shows that algorithmic regulation favors the economically privileged demographic categories, and amplifies the existing tendency of traditional commercial media channels in this sense (see; O’Neil, 2016). Within the narrowcasting strategies of cable and satellite television, marginal and minor
demographic categories or ‘cultural interests’ could find dedicated channels (BET, Telemundo, etc.) which filled their entire programming accordingly. Whereas while serving to the broadest possible audience, streaming media channels seemingly respond to such special demographic/cultural interests by including such programming in their roster, and leaving it to the interactive choice of their respective audience. Yet, they invest in their productions by acknowledging the economic and demographic composition of their subscribers in a precise manner, and catering to their financially able subscriber base. Netflix, with its global reach, exemplifies such orientation in its production and distribution choices; it offers a majority of local productions along with a variety of ‘foreign’ narratives in the countries/media markets it serves. Besides the content it licenses to offer in each market, the local productions it produces in specific media markets constitute the ‘foreign’ programming it offers in other media markets, altogether establishing its ‘multicultural’ content and outlook. For example, Turkish TV series Netflix produces for the Turkish market (such as The Gift, The Protector, that cater to Netflix’s upwardly mobile, urban, young professional subscriber base in Turkey and construct the distinction of its brand/programming in Turkey’s specific cultural context), become highlighted as its foreign content in US, catering to a similar local subscriber base, who are more open to watching foreign content as a result of their education level, international exposure, metropolitan cultural formation, and socially and geographically mobile life-style. As a result, what appears to be multicultural content at a global scale is a circulation of similar narratives stylistically designed and encoded for appealing to the ‘world citizens’ of the new global bourgeoisie. What becomes excluded in this circulation is the culturally specific, distinctly local, folksy or artistic narratives that characterize or reflect upon the public life in those ‘other’ cultural spheres. The native cultural forms of those who cannot pass the borders cannot pass through Netflix’s algorithms either.
Reconsidering the Audience, Publics, and Public Sphere

Both broadcasting and screening were collectively experienced audience activities; broadcast TV, as a technological form, was ‘regional’ by design, and TV industries operated at local and national scales. Cinema, from its early inception had operated as a form of mass entertainment/public art. Such ‘collectiveness’ of the audience activity in both media forms had been embedded in their economy; public (meaning, publicly owned) broadcast TV channels had to air programs that either appealed to general public, or deemed to serve public good in other ways (by having educational, informational, or artistic value, for example). In private, profit oriented broadcasting, programs were offered to public for free, and the TV stations financed their operations through the revenues they gathered from the advertisement segments in between the programs — thus, appealing to general public had been an economic imperative for private TV channels.

Film industry had been shaped with the same economic imperative; the films had to be shown in movie theaters and watched collectively, thus both as an art and an entertainment form at the same time, they had to appeal to general public. The difference in scale between the general audience of the broadcast TV stations and the spectators in the movie theater allowed certain niches in cinema —special interest films that would never have been a part of public broadcasting could be shown in movie theaters dedicated to such genres. Yet, such niches still depended on the availability of corresponding public interest; one could find such special interest movie theaters only in neighborhoods and towns where enough people that shared such special interests existed.
The term *audience* had always implied multitudes; whatever we watched, we never watched it alone—we watched TV in our living room at the same time with millions of others, we watched films in the dark movie theater together with strangers. *Watching* had never been a passive exposure either; watching together implied decoding, debating, understanding, reacting, and being inspired together. Watching together (what we refer to as *audience activity* in this essay) turned those multitudes into ‘publics’ that share common concerns, ideologies, and inspirations. If print media—books, magazines and newspapers—had been instrumental in the creation of *public sphere* in the 19th century (Habermas, 1989), the modern publics had been woven together by cinema and broadcast media. The *media events* Dayan and Katz (1992) smartly identified and analyzed has been based on the exploitation of the collective nature of audience activity. Media events were preprogrammed coverage of extraordinary occurrences (such as Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969) that broke with the banality of the daily regime of news magazines and serials, made *history* broadcasted live on TV globally, and rendered the watching masses witnessing and being a part of that history.

Through the modern times, in the era of *mass media*, from the first newspaper to the emergence of the multiplex movie theaters, *the audience* had referred to a two-fold entity. It is because of this two-fold reference, actually, we can use the term *audience* in both singular and plural forms in English language. On the one hand, it referred to those multitudes that watched, read, and responded to the news and stories—a corporeal mass of living people, the plural form. Yet on the other hand, it referred to an imaginary collective subject, in its singular form, whose feelings, tastes, values, and psychology (and rarely, intellectual awareness) had been the primary concern
for the editors of the newspapers, Hollywood executives, and TV producers. Audience had been the *ghost in the narrative* as much as the living public, and precognition of its unforeseeable reactions to the stories had been the job of editors and producers (Ang, 1996).

As such, the audience had always been present in the narrative as a *collective being*—if not diegetically certainly indexically, as a collective subject that is physically embodied in every person that listens, reads, or watches. Modern mass media, in its various forms, offered a shared experience to otherwise dispersed strangers who listened, watched, or read together, and turned them into *publics*. Benedict Anderson points to the shared experience of reading the novels and the newspapers (not only in the sense of being exposed to same stories but also being a part of the temporality sustained by the print media) among the origins of *nation* as an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1991). The making of a *public* out of multitudes had been perceived as such a crucial aspect of modern governmentality that, mass media had been considered as a prerequisite of nation building, particularly in the context of the modernization of third world countries (see; Rugh, 2004). Throughout the modern times, *public opinion*, and the *lowest common denominator*, that sweet spot of public opinion where every taste and value meets, had been the curse of liberal democracies that actually somehow made it work. The individualization of the audience has to be considered in this political context too—as the dissolution of the publics as we know it. The platform, the difference engine that constantly detects, cultivates and manufactures the differentials and turns them into flows of demand and supply, replaces the curse it lifts with another one; I is always an algorithmically categorized *other* now.
For the producers of streaming platforms, audience is neither *imaginary*, nor *collective* anymore; the audience has been fragmented into its atoms only in the way that every atom became identifiable and explicable. Chris Marker claims in *Sans Soleil* (1983) that, in the specific cultural context of Japanese TV, the more you watch it, “the more you feel it watches you”. In the context of streaming media platforms, this ceases to be an irony. The producers of the streaming platforms know their spectators individually and feel their pulse with an unprecedented precision. They know what we watch, how we watch, when we watch, what we do before and after we watch—and our other mundane activities, well beyond what we watch. Now, the producers only produce what they definitely know which one of the individual audience members (and how many in total) will watch. We, the *individuals* formerly composing the audience, do not buy this or that TV show or film — we subscribe to the streaming platform, knowing that it knows and delivers what we are interested in watching. Unlike previous media distribution systems, Netflix does not intend to sell individual shows/products. Instead, it aims to sell a service, an experience that becomes a part of a certain lifestyle; a virtual shopping mall of narratives in which a broad range of individuals belonging to a certain socioeconomic demographic (urban, financially able, upwardly mobile, educated young professionals) with somehow varying tastes can find what they consider as ‘their niche’ for their enjoyment.

What does the *semblance of public* that the streaming media networks’ *audience* creates before us tells us about the *public life* in what we can now rightfully call *platform societies* in general? In the past two decades, the emerging social media platforms has been celebrated as means of connecting the people who are geographically separated (and even stranger to each other without such connection) and thus as a means of commoning, community building, and creating *publics*. 
Yet, those commonalities, connections, and communities has been built and regulated by algorithms designed with profit maximization incentives (see; Einstein, 2016). Just as the streaming media platforms sterilize our leisure time by providing us only with what we are predisposed to watch, social media platforms sterilize our connections with the world outside; we selectively friend people who we already know, or familiar with, or who we may like according to Facebook’s (or some other social media networks) algorithms (see; Pariser, 2011). Despite all the problems we can attribute to what public had represented throughout modernity and how modern public sphere worked (Ozgun, 2010), these terms never referred a sterile and homogenous mass; although it had never been all-inclusive, public discreetly signified the others. Public/ness meant brushing shoulders with strangers, encountering unfamiliar and sometimes unpleasant stories, and negotiating and learning from differences. Collectiveness of the audience activity in modern mass media, in the movie theater or in front of the TV screen, virtually and practically imposed constant exposure to differences and emergencies. Streaming media viewership is not only a solitary activity, but also an isolated one, sterilized by the platforms algorithmic controls. Differences and emergencies of the past public life is substituted by the seemingly endless options and novelties offered by the platform, seemingly geared towards the individual choices of its users. It seems possible to us to consider the current rise of populist authoritarianisms, with all their negation of others and differences, as inevitable consequences of such sterile public life in platform societies. Sherman rightfully associates the fragmentation and splintering of audiences (in profit oriented traditional broadcast media as well as the algorithmically regulated social media sphere) with the privatization of cultural commons led by the commodification of communications, and notes that, as a consequence, “Each imagined community grows smaller and more homogeneous,
while the members of different pseudo-commons become incomprehensible to one other.” (Sherman, 2016, p. 183)

The notion of ‘public sphere’ provided the necessary theoretical passage between mass communications and politics, and dominated the intersections of critical media studies and political sciences, since it has been formulated by Habermas with a reference to the emergence of ‘reading public’ after the development of printing press (Habermas, 1989). According to Habermas’s historical narrative, emergence of public sphere was a social effect of mass media; the wide-spread circulation of information through print media generated public debates in literary salons and coffee houses on matters related with public life, and “people’s public use of their reason” (27). Habermas’s notion, while providing a passage between media and politics, also demarcated the separation of these as two different domains in Marxian analysis. Politics was the sphere of critical-rational debate and deliberation, of the formation of ‘public opinion’, whereas media was the ‘precondition’ for such critical-rational debate. The ‘political aspects’ of media itself, following this demarcation, was then left to critical analysis of the economic structuring of media industries on the one hand, and critical analysis of the informational content —the formation of the meaning, the cultural context/circulation of the codes, the field of semiology in general— on the other. The picture we try to describe above complicates both registers of critical analysis. Regarding the first register, the economic structuring of platform capitalism rely on the capitalization of social flows of information and tightly incorporate these within other forms and sources of economic production. Current works on the political-economy of digital media networks, such as Azhar’s discussion on the political economy of pay-per-click business models (Azhar, 2016), and Sherman’s analysis of the privatization and fragmentation of attention economy we mention
above (Sherman, 2016), reflect upon these complications. Regarding the second registry, the blurring of the distinction between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ representational regimes impose challenges for identifying the referential contexts of the discursive practices we encounter today. Streaming media platforms offer mainstream and hegemonic entertainment content together with marginal and alternative narrative forms and styles—in other words, by mixing different representational regimes together, or in case the algorithmically prefigured user profiles suggest, even by fore-fronting the alternative forms and styles—in other words, by prioritizing the alternative representational regimes over the hegemonic ones. For example, Netflix offers a distinct category of narratives in the home screen, titled *Featuring a Strong Female Lead*, for its users whose watching habits display a tendency towards appreciating such narratives according to the platforms algorithmic assessment. The presence of such category would have been a progressive move in traditional media outlets, since the the stories of powerful women would provide a positive identification mechanism for vulnerable women and contribute to the empowerment of women in general. Yet, in the particular context of Netflix’s marketing, narratives of this kind are offered to its subscribers who already possess a certain degree of economic and social power in their lives, and who already indicate ideological dispositions towards watching such narratives. In this case, having the choice and the incentive to watch the stories of strong women becomes a part of the life-style consumption patterns that signify a class distinction, it serves to sustain existing social power relations rather than intervening to them.

Thus, the disintegration of publics we encounter today, which becomes crystalized in the audience activity of streaming media platforms, but also remains inherent feature of social media
platforms in general, eventually brings the long overdue depreciation of the notion of ‘public sphere’ as such. In his criticism of the Habermasian conceptualization, Carpignano suggests that media should be studied as the ‘social relation of communication’ itself, rather than a technology or institution that regulates communication: “… public sphere could be analyzed not only from the point of view of the formation and development of public discourse and actions, but also as the location where the material articulations, the technological mediations of social communication, take place. In sum, adopting this kind of perspective would mean investigating not only what is public in the public sphere, but also how publicity is materially constituted.” (Carpignano, 1999).

We mentioned that, in regards to the narrative forms and the audience activity they bring about, streaming media platform replaces television and cinema by combining them together in itself as a new media form. Yet, following Carpignano’s proposition, and conceiving it as a new *site* of material articulations and technological mediations of social communication, it may be as much relevant to consider how it substitutes the local bookstore or the DVD rental on the corner, without having to talk to the guy at the counter who always disagrees with your choices, encountering your chatty neighbors strolling around the aisles, and the noisy, crowded street you have to walk to get there —in other words, without the actual world and the noise of life that surrounds the narrative. Atomization of the audiences, and sterilization of the audience activity that we have been concerned in this essay in the context of streaming media platforms are not imposed by the technology itself, but rather by the commercial logic inherent to platform capitalism, and can be extended (perhaps with slightly different dynamics) to all the sites of communication the
platforms establish, starting from the domain of social media. Such inherently anti-social logic, unfortunately, appears before us as the logic of our new social relation of communication.

List of References:


Brantner, Chris. "More Americans Now Pay For Streaming Services Than Cable TV", Forbes, 20 March 2019,


Johnston, Casey. "Netflix Never Used Its $1 Million Algorithm Due To Engineering Costs" *Wired*, 12 April 2012,

https://www.wired.com/2012/04/netflix-prize-costs/.


Neiger, Chris. "Netflix's Market Share Is Shrinking, but It's Still the King of Video Streaming", *The Motley Fool*, 27 August 2019,


Waterson, Jim, and Mark Sweney, "Covid-19 leaves news and entertainment industries reeling", The Guardian, 17 April 2020,


Treske, Andreas. *Video Theory: Online Video Aesthetics or the Afterlife of Video*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015.

__________. *The Inner Life of Video Spheres*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013.


https://www.multichannel.com/blog/african-americans-are-leaders-in-media-consumption

Volpe, Allie.”The One Thing That Isn't Evolving With Netflix & Hulu's Takeover of TV”, *Thrillist*, 16 October 2017,

Title: On Streaming Media Platforms, Their Audiences, and Public Life

Authors:
Aras Ozgun
Izmir University of Economics, Cinema and Digital Media Department
e-mail: aras.ozgun@ieu.edu.tr, Tel.: +90 545 287 4044
Address: 2092. Sk. No:24, Iskele Mahallesı, Urla, Izmir, 35430, Turkey

Andreas Treske
Bilkent University, Department of Communication and Design
e-mail: treske@bilkent.edu.tr, Tel.: +90 312 290 1749
Address: Department of Communication and Design, Bilkent University Main Campus, Bilkent, Ankara, 06800 Turkey

Authors Biographies:
Aras Ozgun is a media scholar and artist, teaching at the Cinema and Digital Media Department at Izmir University of Economics, Turkey, and Media Studies Graduate Program of the New School for Public Engagement, USA. He studied Political Science (B.Sc.) and Sociology (MS) at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, and Media Studies (MA) and Sociology (Ph.D.) at New School for Social Research in New York. He writes on media, culture and politics, and produces experimental media, photography and video works.

Andreas Treske is an author, and filmmaker living in Turkey. He graduated from the University of Television and Film, Munich, where he also taught film and video post-production. He teaches in the Department of Communication and Design at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey. His academic work focuses on visual communication and media production, including new media.

Abstract:
Over the past decade, streaming media platforms have emerged as new and natively digital forms of content delivery. For the audience, streaming media platforms appear as the new way of watching TV, or new kind of film distribution at the outset. Yet, they radically transform the spatial and temporal settings of the audience activity, introduce an algorithmically modulated logic of programming that we provisionally call microcasting, and change the way we relate to the entertainment content in general. In this paper, we critically evaluate how streaming media platforms restructure the temporal, spatial, and relational dynamics of the audience activity and strip off its collective essence, and discuss the actual and potential effects this new technological form on public life by referring to certain foundational concepts in television studies, audience studies, and film studies.

Keywords: Platform Capitalism, Algorithmic Regulation, Audience Studies, New Media Studies, Public Sphere