**Becoming Content: The Relationship between Netflix and Subscriber**

Introduction and Overview

This interdisciplinary essay will examine the complicated and revolutionary relationship between the subscriber and the Netflix machine. This argument will focus on how Netflix gathers subscriber data to inform recommendations and design content. As I will argue, through this process, the subscriber becomes part of the medium. Such an exchange reveals Netflix to be ‘cyborg’ as it is shaped by organic users.[[1]](#footnote-1) This concept is further complicated through the silent, almost insidious, gathering of user data to inform recommendations and bespoke content. It is through this process that Netflix is successfully able to predict what content will be popular and how viewers will respond. Not only is Netflix able to give viewers what they want, but they can also give viewers what they did not realize they wanted. The offered content is the product of Big Data – which highlights a chain in which subscriber informs machine and machine then shapes subscriber. In a circular sense, this exposes an intrinsic fusion of the human machine and Netflix machine – a meld of organic and artificial behaviour.

The paper will be split into two interconnected sections. The first section will explore the cyborg connection between Netflix and the subscriber; the second section, will examine how – through this complicated symbiosis – new content is designed for users such as *House of Cards*.

The Cyborg

First, I will discuss the numerous ways in which Netflix gathers user data and how this data is employed to craft recommendations, suggestions, and ‘Picks’. It is interesting to examine how subscriber identity is forged on Netflix, namely how subscriber behaviour shapes the machine’s perspective of the viewing self, and how viewing behaviour is in turn impacted by how Netflix chooses to expose the subscriber to specific content. Philosophically, it could be argued that Netflix seeks to impact user identity while simultaneously studying it.

The idea of the medium impacting identity is not a new observation of course. As I will explore in detail, theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and Allcquère Rosanne Stone have been philosophically discussing how the television and media affect human identity through extended use for years When discussing the television, McLuhan (2001, 125) states: ‘You are the screen. The images wrap around you. You are the vanishing point.’ When McLuhan states that media is totally pervasive this argument has never been more true than today. However, what is different in the case of Web 2.0 and Netflix, is the complication of McLuhan’s idea of the ‘vanishing point’. Today the images are informed by the viewer and rather than becoming the screen, the viewer becomes the content. Such a phenomenon is almost cyborg through the fusion of human behaviour, data, and engineered product.

Co-Creation

Stone (1996, 166-7) speaks of the emerging ‘New Creature’ which is the product of this new co-dependant relationship between man and machine. No longer is the human disappearing into the medium as McLuhan and Baudrillard warned, but instead informing the medium. Consequently, when Carr argues that Netflix ‘gives viewers what they want’, in reality through analysing subscriber behaviour Netflix actually presents subscribers with ‘what they didn’t realize they wanted’ through designing bespoke content – not only recommendations and new genre formations, but new products such as *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*.

In this section, I focus on how and why new content is designed and how Netflix uses subscriber data to craft, shape, package, and advertise new content. In a fascinating shift, the subscriber is unknowingly presented with content they themselves helped to design. Although ideas of the cyborg date back to the 1960s, this is perhaps the first example of how the cyborg connection between man and machine has actively sired brand new content that would not have existed without this convergence.

Conclusion

By reflecting on Tim Wu’s argument that ‘Netflix has a plan to rewire our entire culture’, I will reflect on how Netflix has not only redesigned the parameters of media consumption and the concept of consumer, but has actually reconfigured the viewer as a data source within Netflix’s rating algorithms. Although Reed Hastings claimed that “Human beings are very quirky and individualistic”, the process of “figure[ing] out what they like” (quoted in Thompson) can, in many respects, mechanize the viewing process and convert the viewer into statistical information. Is it then the case that Netflix streams human data while viewers stream media? In a Heideggerian sense, are humans the standing reserve for the Netflix machine? Does Netflix actually create a sense of dehumanization through personalisation?

**Works Cited**

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Wu, Tim. ‘Netflix's War on Mass Culture’, *New Republic*, 2013. Web. 17 Aug 2014 <<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115687/netflixs-war-mass-culture>>.

1. The cyborg does not need to imply a physical fusion been the organic and machine; the cyborg can refer to the significant and intense relationship between human and machine (see: Geof Bowker, ‘How to Be Universal: Some Cybernetic Strategies, 1943-70’, *Social Studies of Science*, 23. 1 (1993), pp. 107-27 (p. 117)). The idea of the cyborg as a representative concept symbolising the close relationship between human and Netflix will be fully introduced through references to material including: N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline, ‘Cyborgs and Space’, *Astronautics*, September 1960, pp. 26-76; David Rorvik, *As Man Becomes Machine* (London: Abacus, 1975); Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, by Donna J. Haraway (Oxon: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149-82; Chris Gray, *Cyborg Citizen* (London: Routledge, 2001); Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs. Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)