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Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste, by Mattias Frey. University of California Press, 2021, 282 pp.

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"Is it on Netflix?" now seems to be the most frequent response to a film or TV recommendation. Thus, in a world of ever-diversifying streaming platforms, it makes perfect sense to investigate this most influential global streaming platform and the functioning of its algorithms, particularly regarding its influence on the shaping of cultural taste. In *Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste*, Mattias Frey delves deeper into the "recommendation" algorithms, how they function and how they are received, and, significantly, examining whether these algorithms can replace the more traditional methods of film recommendations and criticism.

In order to provide a satisfactory answer to this research question, the author employs an interdisciplinary methodology. This unorthodox approach involves a novel way of applying various research methods traditionally used in the fields of business, trade, or commercial research, as well as the practice of methods more familiar to social sciences, such as questionnaires. Such a mixed method approach benefits the book's research as it allows the reader to comprehend the unavoidable effects of commercial and business mechanisms on culture and the shaping of taste. The book provides a valuable in-depth analysis of the technological aspect of these algorithms and a broader commentary regarding the perceivably increasing influence of technology on our daily lives and cultural choices. In addition to the technological functions of the algorithms employed by Netflix, the social functions of the streaming service are also examined.

Chapter One introduces the reader to the curation of one's taste, attention and concentration in the contemporary world of abundance and availability of film and TV content. The comparison between recommendation algorithms of streaming providers and more traditional methods of developing taste is the highlight of this chapter. In the second chapter, the author enters into a deeper discussion on how the recommendation algorithms are deployed and operated. While there is an abundance of information on how these algorithms and streaming platforms work throughout the book, it is mainly concentrated in this chapter. Although of interest, the dense amount of information here occasionally tends to divert the reader's attention from the main subject matter. Chapters Three and Four narrow the focal point of conversation to Netflix in particular, putting the evolution of Netflix's recommendation and self-branding systems under close scrutiny. In the final chapter,

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focusing on data obtained from interviews and surveys, the author presents us with his findings and closing arguments regarding the actual impact of algorithm-based recommendation systems on the acquisition and development of taste by users of streaming platforms.

The more comprehensive observations made by the author regarding the influence of technology on our lives and tastes is worth mentioning in more detail. While taking the reader through his arguments, the author refuses to be drawn into a binary comparison between technological celebration versus technological doomsdayism, notably moving away from the very prominent metaphor of the "era of algorithms".[1] Instead, he focuses on the intertwined experiences that technological advances have brought to the population. He reminds us how the development of streaming providers and the use of cloud technologies to make audio-visual media accessible without tangible products was hailed as the utmost act of cultural democratisation and, rather than getting caught up in this tide, patiently establishes a wider viewpoint and grounds his arguments from there. The individual chapters also include extensive literature reviews on the respective subjects they are dealing with and thus can be substantially important jump-off points for readers who have a particular interest in the respective topics.

The book moves away from the classical scholarly approach that treats consumers as passive subjects, focusing rather on how and why specific algorithms are used. For this reason, the author also conducted studies in the UK and the USA to explore consumer behaviour first hand (209–216). By including these studies, Frey employs a critique of former academic approaches and gives agency to the users of these streaming platforms. The studies that are examined in detail throughout the chapters concentrate primarily on the experience of those users. The author proposes that we should not merely ask what the algorithms signify and pass normative judgement, but instead aim our attention at how they are received and used by consumers who have their own tastes (13). As a result, this study helps move the discussion on the field from abstract conversations to a concrete, data-based one.

Through the extensive research carried out, the author finds that the actual impact of these new technologies on the shaping of taste is much more limited than society perceives, and the recommendation algorithms are unable to substitute the more traditional methods of cultural recommendation and criticism. According to Frey's research, word of mouth remains the most influential manner of recommendation by a distance. However, these findings should not allow us to be complacent when assessing the impact of these new technologies. The book tends to overlook certain points that deserve more detailed examination. For example, while the author is successful in avoiding the extreme level of pessimism occasionally displayed by some scholars of the field, he downplays the potential long-term pitfalls of the development and widespread employment of these algorithms. Should the streaming platforms continue to increasingly utilise these technologies, there is a real risk of new cultural works being produced to fit a uniform formula that is deemed to be profitable by media producers. Even though, according to the author's research, the audience might not put too much weight on the reliability of the recommendation systems, the echo chambers that they might create within the entertainment industry can influence production and, as a result, reshape the cultural taste of populations in a negative way.

While the author's methodology is explained in a detailed manner throughout *Netflix Recommends*, one notable issue arises in the final chapter. The findings in Chapter Five depend on

studies conducted on 2,123 adults in the UK and only 1,300 adults in the USA (122–79). It is important to note that the number of participants, especially in relation to the overall sizes of population in the two countries, falls slightly short of the amount of representation it claims to have. Additionally, focusing on these two countries only omits a significant part of the world, whose answers to the same questions could have skewed the results towards one way or another. Even if, for the sake of feasibility, the target group were only users of streaming platforms from Anglophone countries, the inclusion of participants from countries such as India and Nigeria, with their large populations and widespread use of streaming platforms, would have provided the author and the readers with more concise data.[2]

Despite the shortcomings mentioned, *Netflix Recommends* is an important book about recommendation algorithms and the future of cultural criticism which is based on robust research. In addition to being particularly useful for scholars working in various related fields, it also provides researchers with potential avenues for future research. One possible suggestion could be to investigate the impact of websites such as Letterboxd which combine features of social networking and audiovisual media at the same time. Although research about the influence of platforms such as Letterboxd compared to VOD systems like Netflix exist (Edmond), it remains rather scant. Moreover, there are various ways researchers could potentially approach such a website. An intriguing question could be to examine how the fact that Letterboxd uses open-source TMDB instead of the Amazon-owned IMDb for its database could point us to an alternative against the ever-rising trend of corporatisation of culture and media. Ultimately, interdisciplinary research on recommendation algorithms in our ever-changing technological landscape may provide us with much needed insights into the presence of technology and the co-existence of traditional and modern methods in our lives. The future of Netflix, recommendation algorithms and streaming services in general remains to be seen; nevertheless, their impact on our social behaviour is relevant today and deserves to become a larger research area in the future, while books like *Netflix Recommends* are paving the way.

Notes

[1] For further reading, see Rich.

[2] As an Anglophone country with a large population, Pakistan also comes to mind as a potential target country for this research; however, since the use of Netflix is significantly lower in Pakistan than in the other countries mentioned, its exclusion from this study is logical. Nevertheless, as Ejaz notes, Netflix subscription is on the rise there, especially in urban youth, which could pave the way for its inclusion in future research.

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