

“They Can Now Be Seen”: Netflix and the Cost of Transnational Audiences for Independent Film Producers

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Although relative newcomers to the television industry, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) portals like Netflix and Amazon Video quickly grew from aggregators of licensed film and television programming to transnational producers and distributors of film and television. As these companies have moved beyond the borders of the United States, the strategies SVOD portals employ in their programming decisions have also shifted to a global mindset.

Due to the complex nature of funding films and television shows (ranging from co-production strategies to international pre-sales), portals have found that funding and licensing independent media productions provides a simple way to bolster their global libraries with original programming. While the licensing of content globally by SVOD portals expands the potential reach of many types of media content, portals especially aids independent producers and media workers in reaching a transnational audience through a formal distribution network. Independent media producers have long found difficulty in formally distributing their content nationally, let alone internationally, often relying on informal networks of distribution to reach new consumers. Through the funding, production, acquisition, and distribution of independent films and television shows, portals bolster the potential reach of independent producers globally. Despite providing these media workers with a potential international audience for the first time, the commodification of independent productions often takes programming rights away from producers, making SVOD portals the main entity profiting from the productions. This Marxian movement separates producers from the products of their labor through portals' profit on their products.

Netflix works with independent media producers through a model similar to the model employed by legacy media industries. In 2016 and 2017, Netflix actively sought out the acquisitions of independent film content at international film festivals like Sundance and Cannes. These acquisitions typically take place at major film festivals, which often face their own difficulties in representing diverse groups from around the globe. In addition to acquiring content at film festivals, Netflix Studios also finances and produces independent films, ranging from documentaries to dramas. Through this more traditional model, Netflix represents an expansion of media industries' traditional relationship with independent producers without drastically changing the ways the two parties interact.

Amazon Video employs similar traditional relationships to independent producers but additionally offers independent media workers an informal, participatory framework to access the portal's distribution network. Amazon Video launched their Prime Video Direct service in 2016 as a way to help producers reach Amazon Video subscribers. "Amateur" producers can easily upload content to Amazon Video in a similar fashion to YouTube. Anecdotally, my homepage for Prime Video is full of television uploaded to prime from web series originating on YouTube, including *Minecraft – How To Discipline Your Dragon*, *Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis*, and *Funny or Die Presents*. Amazon focuses the Prime Video Direct service at independent film producers because it allows them to increase the size of their library for free (or for minor compensation as seen at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival). Users subscribe to streaming video portals because of the content the service continues to offer through its accumulated library; they continue to pay a monthly fee to access content they are interested in watching in the future. By acquiring content for free through Prime Video Direct, Amazon Video benefits by building the size of their product at little-to-no cost to their core business, effectively minimizing the financial risks typically associated with expansion. For independent film producers, Prime Video Direct provides an opportunity to formally distribute their products to large audiences if their content is not acquired outright at a film festival. Simultaneously, these producers give up some of their rights to their production to Amazon and take on additional risk in their production breaking even or profiting financially because they only receive compensation when their product is consumed. Prime Video Direct represents new ground for independent media producers because it allows them to potentially reach global audiences for the first time while taking on the risk of a lack of compensation for their work.

Taken together, the practices of Netflix and Amazon Video highlight the ways digital distribution networks for film and television increase the number of ways independent producers can distribute their content while simultaneously raising new risks for the producers.