Syndication, Box Sets, & Streaming: Forming the Television Canon

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SVOD services like Netflix and Hulu are inarguably power players in the field of media production and distribution. These "new" media players have impacted the way television is produced and distributed, but how do they impact the television canon? What role do they play in preserving television culture? And how significant are these changes? I contend that while SVOD platforms change the calculus of TV canon formation through algorithmically-derived personalized recommendations and interfaces and the promotion of platform-specific original programming, they largely reinscribe existing canons through well-worn discursive practices and content acquisition decisions.

There are two interconnected ways in which streaming platforms are disrupting traditional television canons. First, each SVOD has developed a proprietary, algorithmically-based personalized recommendation system. These systems take multitudes of user data to construct a behavior profile, which then is used to recommend content of supposed interest to subscribers. Relatedly, this algorithmic recommendation system also helps promote SVOD original content, often foregrounding the exclusive programming through privileged placement in recommendations. The original productions slightly alter the existing television canons by drawing from the vast amount of viewer data to help shape the types of shows that are greenlit. In other words, SVOD datamining is producing more diverse television programming that is imbued with an aura of quality and prestige through the aforementioned discursive practices, meaning historically marginalized groups are now more likely to have access to the canons. In spite of these important shifts SVODs have introduced into television canon formation, the fact remains that in what some have called the 'post-TV era', industrial organizations and critics engage in practices borne out of legacy television.

Like literary canons, television canons are primarily constructed through discourses of authority, power, and prestige that seek to position the canon as universal as opposed to contextual. This has always been the case with television canons, with previous discourses based on critical reviews, promotional materials, and award shows. Perhaps surprisingly, the discursive environment in an SVOD era remains similar to its linear predecessors, emphasizing platform branding, familiar categorization, and prestigious award nominations/wins.

First and foremost, Netflix has worked to unify their brand at the broadest possible level, allowing all of their content to sit under the Netflix aegis, similar to traditional television networks; this allows Netflix to differentiate their content from competitors like HBO, Hulu, or FX. Content creators use comparisons to literature and cinema to elevate Netflix's original programming to art forms that are traditionally seen as more culturally

esteemed than television. What emerges is a discourse that portrays Netflix original programming as high-quality with great production values, replete with literary and cinematic comparisons. This is not, however, revolutionary, as legacy television networks like HBO, FX, and AMC have branded their content similarly for at least two decades.

A second way television canon is discursively constructed is through the categorization of television programming. SVOD television categorization often takes the form of well-known genres like comedy and drama, but also uses what are called alt-genres to create highly specific genres. Netflix frequently uses markers of quality like "critically acclaimed" or "Emmy winning" to describe its programs. The use of exogenous judgements speaks to the discursive reproduction of existing television canons by SVODs, particularly because Netflix avoids describing their original productions as 'instant classics,' instead choosing to focus on their innovative qualities.

Along those lines, Netflix continues the legacy television practice of seeking out and promoting prestigious critical award nominations and wins. Awards and nominations are also important cultivators of cultural capital in contemporary culture and serve as artistic legitimators. In other words, the Emmys and Golden Globes explicitly consecrate those texts that operate within the dominant cultural logic of the American television industry.

Discourse has the power to legitimate, consecrate, or erase art and, by extension, cultural capital. It is no surprise that upstart SVOD platforms have adopted similar discursive tactics as legacy television. Services like Netflix routinely fine tune and manage their brand, such that it exudes quality and prestige while at the same time referencing media more traditionally understood as artistic. SVODs also categorize their programming in ways that reinscribe dominant ideologies, using terms like 'classic' and 'award-winning' to further enhance the esteem of their library. Similarly, Netflix and its SVOD competitors exploit awards for their original programming, following in the well-tread footsteps of their broadcast and cable network antecedents. Put simply, while original content from SVOD services is rapidly entering the conversation of television canon through a variety of discursive practices, those practices remain largely unchanged from past decades, suggesting that the disruptions caused by SVODs are more in the arrangement of power players in the field of television canonization than fundamentally altering the field itself.