Book Review: *Streaming Culture:*
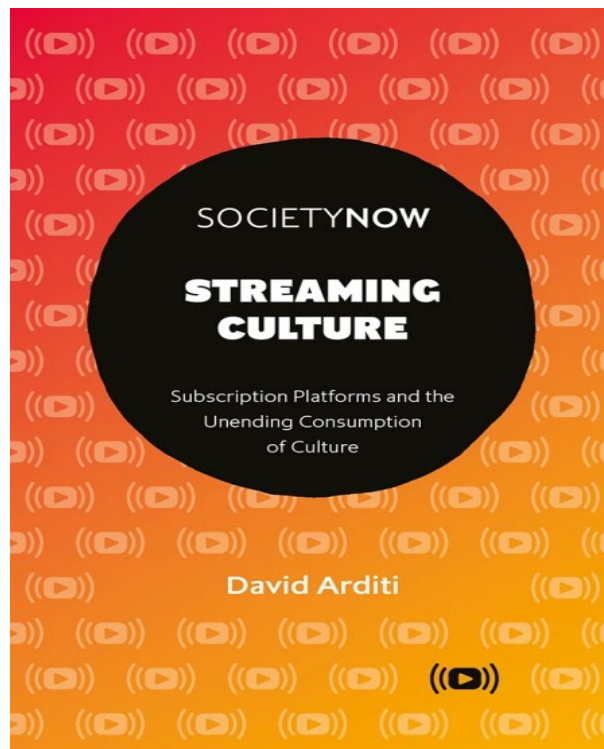
Subscription Platforms and the Unending Consumption of Culture

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David Arditi. (2021). *Streaming Culture: Subscription Platforms and The Unending Consumption Of Culture.* Emerald Publishing. pp. 184

The proliferation of video streaming platforms in our lives has been acknowledged and examined via research over the past few years. Scholarly deliberations on the disruption of media caused by the platforms, both technologically and from the perspectives of evolving business models, have been explored extensively. Further, changes in the viewing habits of audiences have been noted by both the industry and scholars. However, in a first, the theorization of the culture around streaming services has been envisioned and discussed by David Arditi in his book, *Streaming culture:*

*Subscription Platforms and the Unending Consumption of Culture (*2021)*.*

Arditi successfully manages to encompass both the cultural practices around streaming interfaces, as well as the act of consuming such culture using Internet and communication technologies, in his definition of streaming culture. Balanced on the cusp of technology and culture, Arditi's book deconstructs the relationship between media and society in the age of streaming. While a number of critical studies on public reception and public participation across various digital media facilitated narratives exist across a body of scholarship (Jin, 2014), this book seeks to position similar discussions for the streaming platforms from a vantage point of public cultures created by the streaming industry. This book review acknowledges the ecosystem of the platform economy that has come to affect the world, especially the evolving markets of the Asia Pacific region, hence making the deliberations around the book relevant therein. In a departure from discussions around video streaming platforms dominated by perceived utilitarian affordances allowed by the medium unto its audiences, Arditi's book recognizes the significantly evolving consumer cultures within the ecosystem of streaming platforms. The book will also allow public opinion researchers to explore and identify the changing habits and resultant practices of the consumers and audiences of the online ecosystem, which would hold important ramifications for practitioners, scholars, and policy makers alike.

Arditi argues that the emergence of the streaming culture has simultaneously established streaming-led capitalism, where media culture has been reshaped for the audiences and by the audiences. The culture in question is a transition imposed upon the consumers of these platforms by encouraging them to pay more for apparently limitless media content, allowing them instant gratification, and yet, in effect, asking them to "pay more for the same amount of consumptive time" (Arditi, 2021, p. 18).

The chapter on digital retail, which entails discussions on "Disruption, Distribution and Disintermediation" acts as the theoretical framework for the book. Moving intelligently from examples of barcodes and retail points-of-sale, it does not merely restrict itself to the discourses around digital technology. It interestingly captures the concepts of sharing, disruption, distribution, and disintermediation as a means to understanding cultural content distribution, thereby affecting the public

reception of the said culture.

The chapter on music traces the journey of music from "CD to Napster to iTunes and to streaming services" (p. 42), finally leading to current listening practices. As in the section on digital retail, Arditi makes an observation, both of interest and relevance to public opinion researchers, when he discusses the role of dominant players of the music streaming industry in affecting the choice of music for their listeners and shaping public narratives around popular music.

The chapter on streaming film traces the Netflix journey in light of its subscription model, causing disruption-led "problems for distribution and retail [rather] than for content creators" (p. 61). This becomes significant when one deconstructs opinion formation among media business intermediaries in an increasingly streaming-led industry. Arditi takes us though the nostalgia of movie watching experiences and helps contextualize the same when directing for and watching on streaming platforms. He significantly invokes the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on films leading to a phenomenon of collective consumption, thereby highlighting the arrangement of public opinion around the phenomenon

Along similar lines, for the chapter on streaming television, Arditi breaks down a section on "political economy of streaming television" (pp. 86-95) into various factors that influence the viewing habits of the public. He argues that the cultural position of streamed television for the public is a function of "programming decisions" made by a "small group of people" across the world (p. 96), leading to outcomes for programming, such as a certain mix of racial representations, use of violence, sex, profanity etc. In another section on observations of the collectives, he proposes the experience of "collective effervescence" (p. 99) being at the helm of streamed television viewing among viewing communities. Both these arguments are a critique on the agency of the audiences of streaming services, the process of public reception of streamed content, and its role in materialization of opinion in context of consumption practices of the content.

Following from the high of noting collective experiences across all streamed media, Arditi builds a wonderful case for streaming video games. He takes the reader

on a journey of his Nintendo Entertainment System and *Super Mario Brothers* days, leading up to the culture of online gaming, especially community driven, resulting in the formation of gaming cultures both for the games and the players. Arditi highlights the culture of unending consumption created by online gaming platforms via three dominant models used by gaming companies. While decoding the political economy of online games, Arditi explains how games are never really free, and yet this apparent "free" nature dictates how we move from one appealing game to the other, because this allows us to explore newfound positions among social groups with interest in similar games. This highlights the intricacies of opinion formation within gaming and gamer communities.

In a befitting line-up of the chapters, Arditi discusses streaming cultures as emphasized by their temporalities. This is a noteworthy chapter in the sense that it observes how "each cultural moment is informed by what came before it" (p. 124). It is interesting to read Arditi's interpretation of cultural appropriation that happens as new cultural forms develop, including those like the ones generated from streaming practices. Arditi rationally ties together the meanings of streaming cultures, once again positioning public opinion as instrumental in shaping these cultures, whether mediated through marketplaces or assumed by the audiences themselves.

It seemed ideal to situate this review in context of the tremendous growth of video streaming platforms and content thereof in the Asia Pacific region, and the many opportunities this region still has to offer to the global and local industry players in the world of streaming content (Nator, 2022). The reviewers, coming from India, acknowledge the phenomenal growth India has seen in terms of 80 million paid video subscriptions in 2021, fueled by regional content consumption as well as the proliferation of the global giants like Disney+ Hotstar, Amazon Prime Video, and Netflix in India, with the latter still pursuing consumers in an attempt to capture the market with significant price drops. The COVID-19 pandemic further affected the demand-supply dynamics of online content in the platform economy, with India seeing 2,500 hours of original content created for its increasing video subscriber base in 2021 (FICCI-EY, 2022). In these regional contexts, this book provides a well-positioned academic deliberation for the benefit of the scholars and practitioners interested in

studying public opinion within the Asian streaming markets.

Public opinion researchers in Asia would benefit from this book in that they may be able to theorize and/or draw empirically from the description of the perceptions, preferences, and evolving habits of consumers and audiences in the platform ecosystem, as is typical of public opinion research while examining cross sections of a population for its preferences (Lavrakas, 2008, p. 641). Public opinion researchers in Asia, especially, may find it useful to situate their arguments related to the streaming landscape in their geographies by being able to draw from *Streaming Culture* both in terms of the platform-content influence on the publics, as well as the various agendas that the capitalist agencies fulfil via the platform-content ecosystem, with far reaching ramifications on the sentiments of the public stakeholders, viz., the audiences. One would look forward to the inclusion of a critique on identifiable power dynamics, like politics of platforms, in affecting public reception and creation of consumption cultures – which may perhaps be an inclusion in the forthcoming editions of the book. This is an enriching analytical text which academics and practitioners studying new media markets and audience research must certainly engage with to develop a nuanced appreciation of streaming platform cultures.

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