

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## ‘Home is where your Netflix is’ – From Mobile Privatization to Private Mobilization

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**Abstract:**

The article unpacks the implications the development of the streaming service Netflix has for the relation between home and media. To this end, it reframes Raymond Williams’ notion of *mobile privatization*, first coined in his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) in terms of *private mobilization*. In the following, I will analyse promotional materials and ask how Netflix mobilizes home in three ways. First, Netflix seeks both to upset and reclaim the intricate relationship between the domestic, mobility and television. Secondly, I will highlight instances where Netflix thereby promises a feeling of belonging through linking personalization to diversity and social change, thus mobilizing home as a narrative resource for storytelling about social inclusion. Thirdly, I want to problematize how Netflix’s aim to evoke a homely feeling of belonging is also a central element of a neoliberal market that can be characterized by mobile privatization. Netflix therefore negotiates home as a location of media consumption, a space of belonging and a resource for both powerful storytelling and data-driven commercialization. Revisiting Raymond Williams makes it possible to trace the spatio-temporal dynamics of Netflix as a contemporary cultural form and its socio-cultural ramifications.

**Keywords:** mobile privatization; Raymond Williams; home; mobilization; television; Netflix.

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## Introduction

In 2016, a digital montage circulated online as part of a Netflix social media promotion. Captioned with the slogan 'Home is where your Netflix is', it read 'Netflix sweet Netflix' in vintage-styled, red cross-stitches on a wood-framed white fabric.<sup>1</sup> This image humorously meshes ideas about the spatiality, temporality and affectivity of homely environments: virtual and material geographies are stitched together, as it were – and a warmly appreciated nostalgia for a particular version of the domestic is articulated with the digital twist of personalization and the flexibility of online streaming. The montage claims home-making as a central experience afforded by online streaming technology and thus plays with binaries like the familiar and the new, the past and the contemporary, offline and online, locatedness and mobility.

In the following, I want to discuss how Netflix 'mobilizes home' in three ways. First, I will ask in how far discourses about Netflix's non-linearity and mobile consumption upset but also reclaim spatio-temporal assumptions about television and the domestic. Secondly, I will highlight instances where this spatio-temporal flexibility is also linked to emancipatory questions of belonging, diversity and inclusion. Finally, I will show that these forms of mobilization also need to be related to a neoliberal commodification of the private as a resource that relies on datafication and surveillance capitalism.

My analysis resonates with the conception of home as material, imaginative, open and multi-scalar, as proposed by critical geographers Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 21-9). It considers the many different affective spaces and practices of establishing belonging afforded by media practices, but it also asks how home and belonging are related to economically and technologically conditioned forms of consumption and production. I understand Netflix not as monolithic, but as a cultural form that becomes meaningful in different ways through the material, discursive and affective trajectories of home.

In theoretical terms, I will build on the broad conceptual scope of Raymond Williams' notion of mobile privatization. First coined in his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), this concept has been influential for considering the spatialities and mobilities involved in media consumption and production, as well as their political implications. Revisiting Williams for an analysis of Netflix is then, on the one hand, a decidedly retrospective move. It allows me to trace and thus emphasize why the intricate relationship of the domestic, mobility and television continues to persist as a defining feature despite dominant media discourses that repeatedly position Netflix as a game-changer and pioneer, or, in less celebratory terms, as destroying television. On the other hand, Williams' socio-political perspective on mobile privatization points to the present and the future, raising questions about technology and the commodification of the private in the context of neoliberalism. For example, while I will discuss instances where Netflix's aim to grant a homely feeling of belonging to everyone seems to construct empowered, participatory subjects and visionary notions of home as a site of both individualization and social engagement, I will also show how such narratives need to be problematized. They can be understood as central elements of a marketing strategy where diversity drives the

product, thus pushing a neoliberal business model rather than a sustainable model of social change that would link television to a participatory democracy, as Williams envisioned it.

By reframing Williams' original notion of *mobile privatization* in terms of *private mobilization*, I want to address how, within a contemporary digital context, the private can be mobilized as a valuable resource in the interplay of spaces, technologies, affectivities and structures. Thus, I want to contribute to assessing the complex relations between home, the private and mobility in a digitalized and globalized world.

### **Understanding Netflix through television and the domestic**

My analysis of how Netflix mobilizes home starts out from engaging with television. However, to understand Netflix *through* television should not be confused with understanding Netflix *as* television, which could be quickly challenged by a number of scholarly, legal or cultural arguments that address the transformative significance of online streaming as a novel phenomenon. Netflix certainly upsets institutionally grown demarcations and conventions within the legacy media industry that uses the label television to signal particular modes of production, distribution, and contracting. Programming, advertising and certain types of content are usually seen as distinctively televisual practices. Instead of scheduled, linear programming with commercial breaks as well as live content like news or sports, Netflix features a curated catalogue of binge-able shows, movies and documentaries across many genres, accompanied by social media-friendly promotional campaigns of the service, but no third-party advertising. The affordances of Netflix are also geared towards a different viewing behaviour because all content can be accessed on-demand, via a comparatively small monthly subscription fee, on almost any device connected to the internet through an app or a website. Media scholar Amanda D. Lotz (2017), nevertheless, makes a strong case for calling Netflix 'internet-distributed television'. She recognizes online distribution as a new mode, but also highlights the similarities to the television industry, such as 'high-cost of long form, scripted production, and the strategies of businesses built on circulating intellectual property' (10). On the one hand, this refers to licensed TV content, but on the other hand also to the so called *Netflix Originals* – exclusive content that is officially only available through the service and which has turned into a unique selling point. Shows like *Orange is the New Black* (2013–2019) and *House of Cards* (2013–2018) have boosted Netflix' image as a premium streaming brand, similar to a TV network.

At the same time, the growing number of these film-like productions also position Netflix as similar to a Hollywood studio. The recent efforts to break into the prestigious film festivals and the awards circuit testify to an increasing orientation towards Hollywood in both cinematic and symbolic scope. Another aspect that makes the application of the label 'television' problematic is Netflix's dynamic corporate history, which reveals few ties with the television industry: originally merging a video store with a software company, Netflix was founded in the US in 1997 as an online DVD rental website through which DVDs could be ordered and mailed to subscribers. On-demand streaming of licensed video was only introduced in 2007 and gradually expanded over the next ten years in terms of reach and type of content as well as in the ways it was eventually integrated into the

services and devices of Pay-TV providers. As of the beginning of 2019, the streaming service is available in all but four countries in the world, with 139 million subscribers and more than 300 million profiles, generating one third of the internet traffic in North America (Roettgers 2018a). Officially registered as an internet entertainment service, Netflix (as of today) is not subject to the same legal frameworks and policies that regulate television and licensing nationally and transnationally. Controversies over Netflix's launch in tightly media-regulated countries such as Kenya or Cuba further illustrate its unclear status, and taking such a non-US-centric perspective is a valuable reminder that that television practices of both institutions and audiences can vastly differ.

Given the problematic status of television as a stable point of reference, my approach to understanding Netflix through television is not an attempt to offer an ultimate solution to the question of how to categorize the service, or to define television as a category, but to use conceptualizations of the relation between television and home to make sense of Netflix. In order to explore the socio-historical, material, imaginary and discursive aspects of this relationship I draw on approaches based on Raymond Williams' notion of mobile privatization. This is an insightful concept for highlighting how place-making – and home-making in particular – is always entwined with different degrees of virtual and physical mobility, technology and socio-economic relations.

### **Mobilizing home: the spatialities and mobilities of mobile privatization, television and Netflix**

Williams first explicitly uses the concept of mobile privatization in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974). This book earned seminal status within Media and Cultural Studies for the foundation of Television Studies in Britain – most notably, however, for introducing planned flow as a central characteristic and analytical concept to the television experience. The idea of flow is a reminder not to analyse a TV show on its own, but to consider how it is embedded in the larger processes of planned programming and advertising. It also introduces a metaphor of movement to describe television. In a similar vein of contextualization and metaphorisation, the idea of mobile privatization results from Williams' cultural materialist approach to understanding television as a historically contingent cultural form. Williams blends literary and socio-historical analysis in order to argue that television developed as a technology and cultural form by serving an 'at once mobile and home-centred way of living' (Williams 2003 [1974]: 19). Williams' analysis of communication technologies is informed by his engagement with the realist drama of Ibsen and Chekhov, whose 'centre of dramatic interest was now for the first time the family home, but men and women stared from its windows, or waited anxiously for messages, to learn about forces, from out there (...)' (21). Accordingly, private consumer durables like radios, photo-cameras, cars and eventually television sets negotiated 'an imperative need for new kinds of contact' (20) that was effected through the institutional separation between work and home in the wake of industrial capitalism. Williams groups these technologies together because they allow physical, virtual and social mobility in a time marked by alienation and the emergence of new spatial and social stratifications. The increased geographical movement of labour, goods and people established a desire to

improve, among other spheres, the home as a discreet, private sphere. Privatization and forms of mobility therefore condition each other in an industrial-capitalist society, both being 'at once an effective achievement and a defensive response' (20). This led Williams to postulate that, by the end of the nineteenth century, mobile privatization had become the dominant set of social relations, shaping technology, media practices and family life in the urban middle-class.

In contrast to an understanding of home as hearth (Tuan 1971) or one's first universe (Bachelard 1994 [1958]), as it was developed in areas such as humanistic geography and phenomenology, Williams contributes to an understanding of home as a contingent space, informed by mobility and consumption within socio-historically conditioned material production and signification. Williams' cultural materialist perspective shifts attention to the role of economic systems, technology and culture in the place-making of home. He thus counteracts essentialist and universalist ideas about home.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Williams champions a non-media-centric perspective on television, because he foregrounds the socio-historical link between home and television and locates television in the culture of the everyday. Instead of media-inherent characteristics, he emphasizes the social developments and spatio-temporal contingencies to which television, understood as a means of communication, caters.

This approach has also inspired a lineage of inquiry in Media and Communication Studies that looks at home, and in particular the household, as a location of media consumption and asks about the domestication of technology. For example, it is interested in how the materiality of objects such as TV sets or mobile devices is formative for everyday practices at home. This body of research acknowledges how media use and home-making condition and shape each other. Based on an anti-determinist stance regarding the possible ways in which technology and the domestic are entwined through different practices and spaces with permeable boundaries, such approaches nevertheless operate with spatialities of the private as a key dimension and thus also conceptualize mobile privatization in spatial terms. Anne Kaun (2016) points to the temporal implication of such an understanding of technology and mobile privatization, as the cultural form of television 'synchronizes the time of the home (family life, subjectively experienced time) with the on-going flow of world events (actualities, the news cycle)' (5208). Television's integration into both the spatial and temporal structures of the everyday earned it the status of the 'grand organizer of daily life' (Miller 2010: 11).

By contrast, Netflix responds to an ongoing deregulation of labour and working hours and thereby seems to favour fragmentation and individualization rather than the overall synchronization of time, space and home as the type of 'early TV' (Chambers 2016: 23) Williams had in mind. Via a website or an app, content can be accessed on almost any device connected to the internet, offering the impression of virtually limitless flexibility and choice. This idea is exemplified by Netflix's main slogan: 'See what's next. Watch anywhere. Cancel anytime.' The popularized consumption mode of binge-watching, consuming multiple episodes one after another – which Netflix further facilitates through automatically starting the next episode as the previous one ends – is here associated with innovation, freedom, mobility and flexibility. Subscribers are given more control over the time and location of consumption. Under the category 'lifestyle', Netflix's official

promotional pictures iconically demonstrate such an untethering from the living room as central organizational unit.<sup>3</sup> In showing images of people using laptops, tablets or mobile phones while on public transport, at airports, in a café or on the treadmill at the gym, Netflix associates its services with leaving the spatial confines of the home.

When Williams used the image of the shell to describe mobile privatization, he anticipated how television and mobile media (and in other accounts the car), in fact, share the same function of going places in a privatized manner:

It is private. It involves (...) a good deal of evident consumption. Much of it is centred on the home itself, the dwelling-place. (...). At the same time it is not a retreating privatization, of a deprived kind, because what it especially confers is an unexampled mobility. You may live in a shell of this kind in which you and your relatives, your lovers, your friends, your children – this small-unit entity – is the only really significant social entity. It is not living in a cut-off way, not in a shell that is just stuck. It is a shell which you can take with you, which you can fly with to places that previous generations could never imagine visiting. (Williams 1983: 16)

Especially those promotional pictures that feature people using headphones are instructive in indicating how, on the side of consumption, the spatial modalities of the ‘flying to places’ and the shell have changed through the portability and connectedness of the communication devices. They signify an idealization of not being trapped in, overwhelmed or hypnotized through media consumption. The privatized experience represented here is therefore an optimized experience achieved through motility, the ability to move. Stylish beach picnics, cafés, gyms and travel lounges are, however, often spaces and markers of mobile elites, who can make choices about where and how to feel private in a public setting. Such class markers in Netflix’s promotional strategy can be interpreted in the light of Williams’ argument that a desire for mobility and contact is conditioned by the bourgeois formation of the private home, and that it needs to be seen in the context of a class-related anxiety about ‘tight places’ – the theme Williams analysed early on in his dissertation on Ibsen.

This interrelation of mobility, home and class is also echoed in Lynn Spiegel’s interpretation of mobile privatization in her media-historical work on representations of television and changing imaginaries of media homes, where she traces socio-cultural relations of class, gender and home (e.g. 1992; 2001). Her analysis connects the discourses evolving around the set-up of home theatres, the advent of portable TVs and remote controls, to the rise of mobile homes and eventually smart homes. She argues that these discourses negotiate fantasies of mobility, freedom and individuality as much as middle-class family values. Chuck Tryon’s work on ‘platform mobility of entertainment’ (2013) takes up this point to argue that while the respective promotional discourses often construct a new mobile and solitary viewership, eventually this still taps into desires for stabilizing family harmony within the home.

In that vein, it is interesting to see how in the case of Netflix, ideas about quality time at home coincide with a claim to delivering ‘quality TV’, a term that has been popularized in the wake of US channel HBO and its original programming.<sup>4</sup> Analysing the

use of the concept ‘television’ in Netflix’s own press releases, promotion and self-descriptions, one can find a distinctively affluent middle-class imaginary of the domestic, especially since the service’s global expansion in 2016, when it started calling itself a ‘global internet television network’.

The current vision statement is formulated in reference to enhancing the television experience, but I want to argue that it is just as much about saving and enhancing the domestic experience through personalization. On the Netflix website it is claimed that ‘[p]eople love TV content, but they don’t love the linear TV experience, where channels present programs only at particular times on non-portable screens with complicated remote controls. Now internet entertainment – which is on-demand, personalized, and available on any screen – is replacing linear TV’ (Netflix 2019). Television is here discursively constructed as immobile, located, inflexible and complicated, a construction that purposely overstates the physicality of TV sets. However, this example also shows how ‘television’ can be utilized as a familiar and relatable reference point to evoke a familiar image of the domestic as a safe and comfortable shelter.

Such an image is made palpable by promotional pictures that re-construct homely settings in spacious houses, featuring parents and their children gathered on a sofa in front of a centrally mounted flat screen to watch a Netflix show together. In other, more humorous social media promotions, staying at home and watching Netflix is represented as part of a solitary self-care, rendered as a spa-like environment, where one is being ‘warmed’ by Netflix. Netflix, these images suggest, can be used like a hot-water bottle, to cure a hangover, a sickness, or an injury. Or again, watching Netflix is rendered like going on vacation while staying at home. Netflix, then, is represented as providing emotional comfort and quality time, like an idealized family, within the spatial confines of the home. The rhetorical function of television is therefore not just to provide a contrast, but also to reclaim familiar, local and residual spatialities and mobilities for Netflix and online technology, which signify quality, comfort, care and harmony.

While Netflix has been notoriously quiet about numbers, it is also interesting to see which do get released. Statistics about global viewing behaviour made it into the headlines because in 2018, apparently 70 per cent of the streaming content worldwide was still consumed at home, via a Smart TV connected to the internet (Kafka 2018). Another piece of information that was worth mentioning in press conferences and ended up in news outlets was the introduction of a remote-control that features a separate Netflix button, so that the service becomes accessible like an additional TV channel (Roettgers 2018b).

What may at first glance seem to contradict Netflix’ promotion of mobile affordances can however be described as a re-domestication of new mobile technology. As Morley (2003) observes, ‘the dynamic of making technologies consumer-friendly in practice often means inserting them into recognizable forms from previous eras. To this extent, technological innovation often goes along with a continuing drive to make the technofuture safe by incorporating it into familiar formats, icons and symbols’ (449). In the case of Netflix, one of the forms of re-domestication relies on repeating and reclaiming the spatialities and mobilities of television, as much as the affectivity connected to these, even if Netflix allows for a detachment from the living room.

When media analyst Matthew Ball claims that Netflix ‘doesn’t want to be a leader in video, or even *the* leader in video – it wants to monopolize the consumption of video; wants to *become* television’ (Ball 2018), his statement further testifies to how television’s dominance in the everyday serves as significant role-model. To this end, Netflix also seeks re-domestication through re-modelling television’s early work of synchronization: for example, features that give information about shows trending in your area invite users to join local consumption patterns, and orchestrated global social media campaigns for releases of new shows aim to create global attention and a simultaneous online experience comparable to old-school ‘communal television and water cooler conversations’ (Grandinetti 2017).

This, however, clearly deviates from the centralized national project that television has often been seen as supporting. David Morley argues in *Home Territories* (2000) that early public broadcasting with its few programmes allowed one to experience national life in domestic space, but that at the same time it involved ‘a domestication of the national’ (107). In that sense, it forged ‘imagined communities’, particularly on a national level, as Benedict Anderson (1991) envisaged them in relation to the almost clocked consumption of newspapers. If one conceptualizes Netflix mainly or merely as a decentralized and decentralizing form of television, a kind of ‘niche TV’ (Lotz 2017) or ‘narrow-casting’ (Novak 2017) that advocates the primacy of the individual comfort zone as an organizing principle, one risks overlooking how the national re-appears as a crucial reference point in the ways in which Netflix is made meaningful.

In fact, the national remains a central category for understanding Netflix’s transnational layout, as Mareike Jenner in *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (2018) and Roman Lobato in *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (2019) both argue. Translations, subtitling, multilingual and non-English productions are among the strategies Netflix uses to insert itself into existing national media systems across the globe. This process is not without tensions. Incidences like Kenya’s film board calling Netflix a threat to ‘moral values and national security’ (Barnes 2016) and the Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, claiming that ‘the White House fully understands that through Netflix, they can get into every home, every television and then — into every head’ (The Moscow Times 2016) conjure up discourses about American cultural imperialism and a cold war rhetoric. These cultural frictions result from the ways in which the spatio-temporal mobility of content and distribution can be constructed as practices imbued with power, precisely because they build on the legacy of television as entwining the personal, the national, and the spatial ramifications of home.

I have shown that Williams’ concept of mobile privatization provides an important framework for asking how Netflix navigates the complex material and symbolic relationship between the micro and macro levels of home. As a symbolically and materially permeable and mobile category, home is not just about space, but also about identity and belonging and therefore bound up with sociocultural questions of inclusion or exclusion.

In the next section, I therefore want to discuss how Netflix promotes social inclusion and claims to ‘make room’ for diversity in storytelling and corporate culture. This taps into the desire of audiences and creative talent to ‘feel at home’ with narratives, characters and perspectives in a more convenient way. Such a take on home-making adds a sociopolitical



and emancipatory dimension to Netflix's efforts of spatio-temporal mobilization of television on the one hand and the (re)domestication of technology on the other.

### **Mobilizing home: diversity, belonging and personalization**

While diverse cultural and critical expression has always had a place in cultural life, it has often been practiced in venues like arts festivals, the indie scene or small-scale stages rather than on television and if there, then in less prominent slots, or as Jenner (2018) argues for the US, since the late 1990s and 2000s in particular, on branded channels linked to quality TV like HBO and Showtime. In the US, the argument that centralized television only serves hegemonic and normative narratives of national identity has therefore already lost some force since the advent of cable television. Now, with internet-based streaming and the participatory affordances of social media engagement, Netflix claims to offer even more general and easier access, availability and choices within the private sphere, especially for those who have felt underrepresented in television. This could be seen as another form of domestication – not just of technology, but of usually dispersed and risky cultural spaces with which, through Netflix, it is more convenient and safer to feel at home.

It has in particular been the recent push into original productions in the genres of documentary, stand-up and complex TV series that has gained recognition by groups such as the black and LGBT communities for giving space to previously marginalized storytelling and for enabling them to take control of their narratives on and off screen. One among many, the award-winning filmmaker Ava duVernay praises Netflix for 'understanding artists and diversity' (Setoodeh 2017). This refers to creative decisions to 'bring many different voices into the writers' room' (Viruet 2017), allowing more artistic freedom in promoting multiple perspectives and complex characters, especially in the case of those who are often represented in stereotypical ways. Netflix thereby claims to offer alternatives in terms of media production and to counter rigid gatekeeping in the media industry and structural constraints like scheduling times and standardized programme formats.

In the following I want to highlight instances where such questions of structure, agency and belonging are woven into promotional storytelling and thereby blur the line between branding and social engagement. Campaigns like #theFirstTimeISawMe bring together personal testimonies of creative talent working for Netflix with those of audiences who reflect on matters of media representation of, for instance, black, Latino and LGBT characters, as well as on their own viewing experiences at home. The clips, shared on social media, stimulated a conversational mode of critical engagement, drawing on a usually privatized childhood memory of watching television at home and thereby emphasize how matters of representation relate to questions of belonging and home-making. Twitter threads about identifying with characters in TV shows were triggered by Ava DuVernay and others. She voices her excitement about living in a world where walls are breaking down and about the way in which television is experiencing a renaissance as stories of marginalized people are becoming accessible, juxtaposing childhood memories of watching television and not feeling represented with how she approaches working in current productions for Netflix. The campaign addresses the ambivalent potential of watching

television at home: it can present an early stage of establishing one's otherness, but it can also become a resource for feeling at home with characters, stories and oneself. With this campaign, Netflix positions the service itself as a positive force granting homely feelings of belonging to everyone in the inclusive Netflix family. It is a promotion that at the same time mobilizes for and domesticates matters of diversity, inclusion, and solidarity.

In another campaign, Netflix mobilizes connotations of home through what could be referred to as home stories about the company and its female employees. The campaign #sherules features an ongoing series of clips that was first launched in context of the release of *The Crown* (2016–present), a dramatized show about the life of Queen Elizabeth II. These clips seek to link the representation of strong women on screen with people behind the screen by showcasing the role of women in Netflix' corporate culture. The service has been praised for making inclusion and diversity an important point in the so called 'culture deck' – a publicly available document that describes the values, behaviours, and skills informing Netflix's employee and recruiting culture (Rodriguez 2018).

The #sherules series portrays female employees who relate their personal history of being marginalized to Netflix, presenting the latter as an empowering means of identification. The clips imply that Netflix has become a second home, especially to those who had not felt at home before: it offers opportunities to thrive and a place of belonging. In this sense, the clips construct a narrative about mobilizing home: home (like linear television) used to be not only spatio-temporally inflexible but also socio-culturally static. Netflix, by contrast, fosters socio-cultural inclusion and diversity through valuing individual taste, input and achievements. Here, Netflix's aim to grant a homely feeling of belonging relies on constructing empowered, participatory subjects that envision and practice social change. Diversification on a corporate level is therefore linked to social inclusion through social mobility. The campaign aims at bridging the experiences of employees and viewers – especially for those who have felt excluded. In presenting itself as championing diversity, flat hierarchies and social acceptance, Netflix fashions itself as facilitating a redistribution of space and social status.

Both these campaigns are interesting in how they rely on the impression of gaining access to usually private experiences at home. They operate with constructions of authentic experiences of viewers and employees, but at the same time they construct an idealized spectator who is liberated through Netflix. In this way, Netflix mobilizes home not just in spatio-temporal terms, but also as a narrative and creative resource that brings the power of artistic expression, participation and identification to the forefront.

### **Mobilizing home: Mobile privatization and neoliberal commodifications of the private**

At this point I want to return to Raymond Williams' notion of mobile privatization to pitch it against the following warning formulated in *Television* (2003 [1974]): 'under the cover of talk about choice and competition, a few para-national corporations (...) could reach farther into our lives, at every level from news to psycho-drama, until individual and collective response to many different kinds of experience and problem became almost limited to choice between their programmed possibilities' (157). Christopher Prendergast (2003)

points out that Williams was sceptical of ‘a pluralized postmodernity that comes in the shape of multicultural consumer spectacle’ because catering to cultural difference does not per se guarantee democratic cultural politics (131).

Indeed, social relations in the context of mobile privatization favour multicultural consumer spectacles that appeal to one’s taste over developing an awareness of their overarching socio-political conditions. Netflix’s campaigning for inclusion and diversity can therefore also be seen as seeking to create a comfort zone, where what is supposed to look like critical engagement through media consumption is, in fact, part of the consumer spectacle. Mobilization, diversification and inclusion are significant achievements in the cultural sphere, but in the case of Netflix, they have also been utilized for a corporate model that aims at market-penetration and expansion.

Williams’ own emphasis on mobile privatization as an ‘ugly phrase for an unprecedented condition’ (Williams 1985: 188) makes clear that mobile privatization is neither a media-inherent characteristic of television nor just a theoretical rendering of place-making. His political commitment as a left intellectual leads him to conceptualize mobile privatization in socio-political terms, especially in his later works.<sup>5</sup> In the political essay ‘Problems of the Coming Period’ (1983), Williams refers to mobile privatization in the context of Thatcherism under the headline ‘The Decline of Community and the Future of Socialism’:

And why I think [mobile privatization] is ambivalent is this; because it has given people genuine kinds of freedom of choice and mobility which their ancestors would have given very much for. At the same time the price of that space has never been accounted. The price of that space has been paid in terms of the deterioration of the very conditions which allow it. I mean that it all depends on conditions which people, when this consciousness was formed, thought were permanent. Full employment, easy cheap credit, easy cheap petrol. (...) And the consciousness that was formed inside them was hostile, in some cases understandably hostile, to anything from outside that was going to interfere with this freely-chosen mobility and consumption. (Williams 1983: 16)

Williams’ mixed assessment of mobile privatization here pairs the improvements of a consumerist freedom of choice with a decline of an awareness about those socio-economic conditions that are hostile to ideas of equality within a social totality. He sees mobile privatization as socially problematic because it does not tie choice to a participatory democracy. Instead, the social relations of mobile privatization promote a withdrawal from a more general political engagement that, for example, neglects class privileges and the political measures that commit to equalizing them. In that sense, the danger of mobile privatization does not come from a media-induced isolation of individuals, or a lack of face-to-face interaction, or an interpretation that would continue a deterministic and culture-pessimistic view, where television leads to social disengagement and forms of escapism or individualized excess of passive entertainment. The problem with mobile privatization is that it promotes a belief in the power of free markets to solve social problems. It is the loss of a more general sense of a political or, in Williams’ eyes, socialist

structure and the responsibility to think outside one's own comfort zone. Along these lines, Jim McGuigan (2013) concludes that with mobile privatization Williams ultimately characterizes the dynamics of neoliberalism.

For my analysis of Netflix, this means that we ought to consider how the enthusiasm about the social impact of Netflix's production, distribution and consumption is underwritten by a neoliberal mode of self-realization and optimization. As Gerald Sim points out, writers 'are codifying a history where Netflix and, by extension, Reed Hastings [CEO of Netflix] are institutional and individual change agents within a narrative laden with individualist tropes favored by neoliberalism' (Sim 2016: 186). Netflix produces a 'false promise of creative autonomy' (189) because it offers very limited agency that is blind to its conditional factors. The aim is to improve the private comfort zone only for some, and this, in fact, reinforces an exploitative and unsustainable system with ultimately anti-democratic tendencies. When change, choice and social engagement happen under the premise of commercialization and the dictates of growth, there is still a long way to go for Williams' vision of 'the long revolution'. Williams' holistic approach to culture and society is diametrically opposed to Netflix's corporate focus on personalizing and commodifying the private, of and for the middle class. His vision of changing a social totality implies the democratic growth of public goods instead of heightening inequalities through free market idealism on a global scale.

In this understanding of mobile privatization, it is also necessary to consider how Netflix monopolizes and exploits certain cultural spaces, as Anita Bennett (2018) argues with regard to stand-up comedy. In the world of stand-up comedy, Netflix has become an increasingly important platform, boosting the popularity of comedians onto a global scale through streaming and related social media activities. Australian queer comedian Hannah Gadsby or Indian-American Hasan Minhaj are cases in point. The availability of a diverse range of stand-up comedians provides home screens all over the world with valuable commentary on social and political issues that are often tackled via narratives that allow intimate glimpses into the comedian's life (or at least that of their onstage persona). However, this double domestication of and through the genre can also have a negative economic impact on those places where comedians have traditionally been learning their craft, taking their first steps and making their names, namely the smaller stages that cannot compete with Netflix and thus have to close down due to competition and lack of public funding. Netflix's interest in bundling and giving access to a certainly broad but already established range of big names is refreshing and convenient for viewers all over the globe, because it simplifies their access to a cultural sphere. But in the long run, this might be problematic, because Netflix at this point does not present a reliable system to sustain and build up these spheres and agents of production.

This example shows how the efforts of 'homely' personalization render invisible some of the antagonisms and inequalities at stake. Netflix provides opportunities for some, but also contributes to the inequalities of others, such as low-paid workers at the US Netflix DVD-by-mail branch, who cannot claim the same benefits (take paid parental leave, for example) as the highly skilled staff in the tech and creative departments (Becerril 2015). Netflix's refusal to participate in regulating policies like the 'inclusion rider' proposed by

Frances McDormand during the 2018 Academy Awards (Graham 2018) is glossed over by the celebratory accounts of creative diversity and inclusion.

On a larger scale, this also means that we ought to consider the very tangible inequalities inherent in the material conditions of communication technology and its distribution in general. These rely on the exploitation of workers and natural resources to build the devices and the necessary infrastructure for streaming Netflix. Contemporary communication technology is therefore mired both in industrial capitalism, as it is practised, for example, in the case of mining cobalt in DR Congo for batteries, and in newer forms of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls ‘surveillance capitalism’. Big data-mining, boosted in Silicon Valley, produces new markets that are based on the private as raw material that can be put in motion through, for example, micro-targeting, behavioural prediction and even modification, as the controversies over Facebook’s involvement with Cambridge Analytica and other alleged interferences in election campaigns illustrate. Matthew Hindman (2018) has pointed out that the outcome of the 2006–2008 running *Netflix Prize*, a one-million-dollar open submission to improve Netflix’ recommendation algorithm, significantly advanced and inspired the model for Cambridge Analytica’s data mining. The close relationship with other tech and data-driven giants is also reflected in Netflix being bundled on the stock market with Facebook, Amazon, Apple and Google under the shortcut FAANG, and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings serving on Facebook’s board of directors. When at Netflix the investment in machine learning, algorithmic processes and datamining is sold as beneficial for diversifying the media and entrepreneurial landscapes, improving the individual media experience, or convincing upcoming talent to work for them, it also boosts the capital of data gathered in the private sphere.

My argument here is that Netflix’s assertion of technological and data sovereignty also needs to be understood as a form of domestication because it contributes to a knowledge formation that normalizes the impact of technology and data through its homely context. We have increasingly become aware of how, in other fields, such as finance and the executive or judicial branch, access to private data processed by algorithms systematically contributes to disadvantaging and harming those members of society who are already vulnerable and at risk: Frank Pasquale (2015) and Safiya Noble (2018) point out how algorithms reinforce discriminatory power structures in hiring, granting a bank loan or assisting judges to decide on bail sentencing. The realities of home-making are thus shaped to different degrees for different social groups through an increasing entanglement of information technology, data and the private – an entanglement that Netflix also relies on, advances and normalizes.

Revisiting Williams’ critique of mobile privatization, then, can serve as a valuable reminder to inquire into the conditions under which convenient personalized access to media at home, control over connectivity and social inclusion are not equally distributed and granted to everyone. The comfortable or empowering practices of belonging and domesticity can obscure the fact that in a digital context, the private is also turned into a datafied resource that furthers inequalities, especially in class terms. The way Netflix promotes inclusion, belonging and the enhancement of television’s spatialities and mobilities needs to be critically examined as to the exclusionary and deflating mechanisms which have conditioned, but can also result from these efforts.

### **Conclusion: From mobile privatization to private mobilization**

I have made Williams' notion of mobile privatization productive for examining the way Netflix reclaims and upsets the domestic and static imaginary of television and connecting it to wider sociocultural concerns regarding the private and belonging. Understanding Netflix in terms of mobile privatization, I have argued, makes visible the extent to which it needs to be placed in a continuum with television and mobile media, but also with neoliberal relations that are realized through different forms of private mobilization. Netflix's potential spatio-temporal mobilization evokes promises of socio-political change, highlighting personalization, comfort and diversity. This dynamic also involves an economic rhetoric of endorsing the private as a resource that can be put in motion. The private might be a mobile place of consumption, but it is also utilized as an artistic resource for more and better storytelling. The private is a linchpin for promotional and entrepreneurial strategies that blend personalized media consumption and production with activist micro-politics of self-empowerment and artistic expression, as the #theFirstTimeIsawMe and the #sherules campaigns illustrate. At the same time, the aim of social change that creates a homely feeling of belonging for everyone is part of a business model that subscribes to and promotes a neoliberal free market idealism that ultimately is not committed to sustainable equality, but competition.

In the case of Netflix, this is particularly obscured through forms of domestication that signify convenience, comfort and safety. 'Domestication', a concept popularized by Television and Audience Studies, has served to show how Netflix re-imagines television and tames new mobile technology by tapping into discourses on the connection between home and television, but also how dispersed cultural spaces are thereby distributed more comfortably into the private sphere. The securing effects of (re)domestication are double-edged: they foster a feeling of belonging and safety through normalizing diversity, choice and flat hierarchies for some, but they thereby also portray mobile technology and especially data driven processes and neoliberal dynamics as safe, beneficial and comfortable, while obscuring exclusionary and surveillance mechanisms.

And yet the bottom line maybe does not look quite so bleak. Netflix' aspirations of reaching into as many homes as possible, as well as becoming a home to as many people as possible is, for one thing, a well-designed and profitable promotional and business strategy. In light of Raymond Williams' writings, it is, however, also possible to assess the way Netflix mobilizes home in a different way, as a 'resource for hope' (Williams 1989). Even though Netflix needs to be understood in the context of a neoliberal system that promotes competitiveness, self-realisation, and surveillance capitalism, benefiting only some, the artistic achievements and experiences of inclusion should not be completely nullified. It is important to point out that Williams criticises the social and economic relations of mobile privatization, but never the cultural work that tries to provide interventions into these social relations.

Such a point of view shifts the emphasis away from Netflix as a business to foreground the artists, viewers, their experiences and their productive potential in responding to social relations by participating in ongoing processes of cultural and political work. A rearrangement of mobile privatization into private mobilization can therefore also

project a more general sense of how through and in the private an impetus for change can unfold. Overall, then, private mobilization updates two of Williams' major concerns, concerns that are both analytic and programmatic: the private as a set of experiences of inclusion and exclusion, which also has served as a major resource for Williams' own political, literary and critical work; and mobilization in its interventionist sense, which has been at the heart of his theoretical and political project.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Netflix (2016) *Home is where your Netflix is*. Tumblr. [Image] [Accessed 6 June 2018] <http://netflix.tumblr.com/post/117126835706/home-is-where-your-netflix-is>.

<sup>2</sup> In his work, Williams generally questions fixed categories, borders or boundaries by emphasizing how experience, language, material relations and power are crucial in constructing these. This relational way of thinking about culture has not only influenced Media and Communication Studies, but also inspired European cultural geography (cf. Longhurst 1991; Oakes and Price 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Netflix (2018) *Company Assets*. Netflix Media Center. [Images] [Accessed 6 June 2018] <https://media.netflix.com/downloadCorporateAsset?assetId=100427>.

<sup>4</sup> See Tryon (2015) for an analysis of how Netflix positions itself against HBO.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Groening (2010; 2013) points out how such a socio-political scope of mobile privatization has been widely ignored in media-related research.

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