

NETFLIX

ACADEMICIANS OPINION

Netflix, Muslims and cultural imperialism

👤 Guest Submission 📅 April 30, 2020 💬 No Comments

By Shafizan Mohamed

What do most people do when in quarantine? They watch *Netflix*. While most businesses are at their wits end trying to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis, *Netflix* is capitalising on people under lockdown.

The streaming service has more than doubled its subscription since the world started to stay home in early 2020.

(<https://www.thestar.com.my/business/business-news/2020/04/22/netflix-doubles-expected-signups-but-warns-coronavirus-boost-may-fade>).

So what is *Netflix* really? It is a streaming service that provides on-demand online entertainment source for TV shows, movies and other streaming content. It provides an alternative to cable and satellite on demand service, often at a lower cost. Some other popular streaming services include *Youtube* and *Hulu* which stream films and television shows; *Spotify*

These new streaming media have rapidly changed the media landscape by providing content that are hyper individualised. In contrast to traditional mass media where the same content is indiscriminately broadcast to the audience, streaming media allows the audiences to choose, design and control their content and viewership.

On the bright side, this offers the audiences more choice and control, hence challenging the negative attribute of mass media where audience consumption is considered a passive activity that mostly benefits the media and advertising companies.

While the streaming media supports the notion of the active audience, it still brings into consideration the long-established concerns about globalisation and cultural imperialism. Streaming media is very much dominated by big American media conglomerates that are profiting from the change in the audiences' media habits. For example, streaming services have increased audiences' access to media content via multiple platforms like their laptops and mobile phones, thus creating audiences that are constantly accessing and demanding media content.

Unfortunately, these media contents are mostly western. Thus, the issue of culture becomes prominent when audiences are given a multitude of choice that actually comes from the same westernised cultural framework. While local contents are sometimes available, they are usually unable to compete with the more popular and attractive western, mostly American content.

Netflix is one case in point. Since it first became available in Malaysia in 2017, it has seen a rise in subscription. For as low as RM17 per month, it offers a much cheaper option compared to ASTRO allowing Malaysians from all walks of life, notably young students to subscribe and consume its enormous content.

Netflix opened up a whole new platform to binge watch Hollywood and European movies and TV shows. Binge watching is a trend popularised by *Netflix*. It is a practice of watching television for a long time span, between two to six episodes or more of the same television show in one sitting.

Researches suggest that binge watching is a form of compulsive consumption, similar to binge eating or binge drinking, and that due to its addictive aspects, it could even represent a form of television addiction.

Binge watching is an unhealthy habit and binge-watching western content is culturally dangerous, especially when *Netflix* offers unrated and uncensored content. Violent and sexually explicit scenes are considered art and entertainment and are available for all audiences disregarding any form of cultural or religious sensitivities.

TV series such as *Orange Is The New Black*, *Queer Eye*, *The Bisexual* and *Sex Education* are series that portray explicit homosexual content and proudly promotes the LGBT agenda. These series are easily available to the Muslim audiences who had been previously protected by local censorship.

While there has been an attempt by *Netflix* to include more locally produced content, these local products are so small in number compared to all the programmes available in the *Netflix* catalogue that their impact is insignificant.

Netflix also offers a special channel for children. While the channel offers kid-friendly content, they are very western-centric. Muslim children who watch *Netflix* are exposed to values and cultures that are most of the time far from their own. The media is very influential in educating children about their cultures and values, and if these children are only exposed to contents that promote modern and western ideals, they will no longer be familiar with indigenous stories and sensibilities that are available in the more conventional local broadcast and cable television.

Therefore, while streaming services offer more options and flexibility to the media audience, it is threatening local cultures and religious values. Children growing up with highly western content will undeniably consider the values offered on these streaming platforms as normal and customary.

Muslims who are exposed to explicit content on a daily basis will eventually become desensitised and will probably be accepting values that are totally against Islamic teaching such as pre-marital sex and homosexuality. While these concerns are old, streaming media intensifies them because of the lack of control and gatekeeping that can contain the irreverent western cultural influx.

Streaming media such as *Netflix* is not culturally sensitive. Rather, it is bias. It is meant to be particularly capitalistic by creating audiences that are very much consumed in commercial media content. Audiences are spoiled for choices they are able to access unlimited media content.

pleasures, escapisms and spectacles that bring the audiences further away from the realities of their own lives. The audiences, instead, become seduced to the lives they see in the media, the lives that most often celebrate the secular western cultures.

Thus, while the streaming media is highly individualised and audiences are now users who have power to control their media choices, its fundamental impact is still cultural. This then makes issues of cultural imperialism and western global media control even more evident now than before.

The world is now more connected and is virtually boundaryless. Traditional media controls and protectionist initiatives such as censorship and media regulations are no longer effective. So, how can local or indigenous cultures be protected? This is something media scholars, cultural leaders and concerned citizens need to discuss. For one, audiences must be equipped with culturally sensitive media literacy competencies so that they are able to truly become effective media users who are able to wisely manage their media usage, at the same time remain true to their own local beliefs and identities. ***

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