

What's Stopping the (Global) Flow of TV?

Katheryn Christy

As early as the 1980's there was global trade in pirated VHS copies of international television programs. Although this early television flow was largely ignored by television distributors, the advent of digital technology has increased this trade exponentially, making it impossible to ignore. Yet many television distributors still have not adapted to a global media environment. Distributors are stuck in a mindset where those who consume their products via unauthorized methods are enemies, and few attempt to reach out to these often devoted potential consumers. Only once television distributors fully embrace the simultaneous broadcast possibilities inherent in the digital media age will the trend in media piracy finally begin to slow and—perhaps—reverse.

The global flow of television started around the 1980's with a brisk trade in VHS copies of international programs. Fans used the postal service to exchange tapes and kept records of who had access to what. However, this method had three limitations. First, the analog format of VHS cassettes meant that there was loss of quality each time a tape was copied; thus, there were limits to the number of quality copies that could be created. Second, fan networks were a word-of-mouth phenomenon that relied on personal contacts, greatly limiting the number of individuals with access to the copies. Third, this distribution network required a great deal of time to reach any kind of saturation. These three limitations kept early global flow behaviors from causing a significant financial impact, leading the television industry to largely ignore the growing exchange of programming around the globe. In some cases these behaviors were even viewed benevolently, as they allowed industry executives to identify which programs were becoming popular in new markets.

However, digital technology has removed most of these barriers from the equation; television programs can now be reproduced without any quality loss, are distributed through online networks that can easily number in the thousands and hundreds of thousands, and can be available to the entire network within hours of the initial screening in the country of origin. A roomful of college students in the United States can watch a new episode of the latest anime craze with almost as much ease as those who first saw it a few days ago in Japan and all around the world fans can hop on a forum to discuss the latest episodes of *Supernatural*, regardless of whether or not it was officially released in their countries. These viewers are often staunch fans who resort to piracy in order to access programming that is simply unavailable or has large gaps between the original airdate and the official release dates for their countries.

Of course, an exponentially increased global flow makes the financial impact of these behaviors much more significant. Companies that once ignored the vast majority of this behavior have begun to take legal action against fans. This is, without a doubt, the wrong move to make. As noted above, many of these pirates are dedicated fans who have resorted to piracy in order to take part in a global television environment. Legal prosecution will not stop these behaviors, as they have had the better part of thirty years to become ingrained in fan culture, acquiring an inertia all of their own. Fans are accustomed to accessing the shows they want to watch when they want to watch them. They will not be content to wait weeks, months, or even years for the official versions of international programs to air in their own countries—if ever—and will

strongly resent attempts to cow them into submission via legal threats, especially when these threats seem so sudden after years of silence.

Instead of expending energy and money to prosecute—and ultimately alienate—these individuals, television distributors need to consider looking at the problem from a different direction. These fans are a vast and untapped audience, most of whom would be happy to consume the programs they love via a legal channel. Television distributors must realize that the global television environment is already *here*, that television has long ago surpassed national and political boundaries. Clinging to outdated concepts of “regional” television is only hurting the industry and inspiring piracy. If they wish to slow or reverse the piracy trend, distributors must welcome global television viewers with open arms and provide methods of quickly and legally distributing programming to a global audience. Several experiments in online digital distribution methods (e.g. micro-transactions for single-episode downloads, ad-supported streaming video, etc.) have proven that fans will happily utilize such distribution channels. It is now up to television distributors to make the leap and finally bring themselves up-to-date with the global television viewing environment.