

Head in the Cloud: Rethinking Distribution in the Digital Age

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Digital Distribution and Regional Lockout

In my response, I want to think about what can be gained by regarding digital distribution as a cultural process that functions heterogeneously around the world. So, as is academic custom, I begin my response to the proposed question with more questions: What role do the disjunctive patterns of global cultural distribution play in the constitution and sustenance of cultural and transcultural identities, publics, and communities, and in what ways do digital networked technologies impact these processes?

My comments in response rest on two underlying premises—premises that I suggest should be fundamental to studies of digital distribution writ large:

- 1) The distribution of cultural products is a significant factor in the constitution and definition of hybrid identities, cultures, and publics around the world inasmuch as it helps set the conditions for our everyday engagement with media. So, if media represent sites where users negotiate meaning, identity, and community, distribution is an important cultural process in that it makes these experiences possible.
- 2) The distribution of cultural products and services to users and consumers across space and time operates as much through exclusion, prohibition, delay, and failure as it does through accessibility and availability. For example, we can think of territories that have been historically left out of major media companies' distribution patterns and as a result have formed informal distribution economies. Or, consider that for a variety of reasons, major streaming platforms such as Hulu, Netflix, and BBC's iPlayer remain unavailable in many parts of the world, even as they increase their international presence.

These points will perhaps seem banal and even obvious to many of us. After all, the first represents a chief concern of media and cultural studies (and in particular those that have taken on a self-conscious "global" approach) and the second constitutes a central element of media industry studies: understanding the practice of distributing excludable cultural commodities and services to geographically, temporally, and/or culturally defined markets. Despite this, some (much? most?) popular and academic discourse regarding digital networked technologies still articulates the internet as a singular, ubiquitous, and globally connected one-stop shop for interpersonal connection and the consumption of an infinite diversity of cultural goods. So, it stands to reason that scholars studying digital distribution have a responsibility to continue to be skeptical—to counter explanations of digital distribution that simply presume a uniformity to the practice across diverse global territories. One way to do so is to remind ourselves that even when understood as a phenomenon that exists across the global network of networks that comprises the internet, and even as digital networked technologies expand opportunities for faster connections across large spaces, the global circulation of media and culture remains uneven.

In my own work, I locate the disjunctive cultural logic of global digital distribution in the practice of regional lockout, or the technological prohibition of access to media texts, platforms, or technologies based on the user's geographic location. Generally shaped by territorial licensing agreements and enforced through pressure from media industries, content owners, and intellectual property regimes, region-locking media technologies and platforms represents one way that content industries have maintained spatial and temporal dimensions familiar to broadcasting and film (such as dissemination models, staggered release patterns, and segmentation of global markets) even as the affordances of new technologies potentially allow for alternative spatial/temporal organizations. As a mechanism of global division and geographic scale-making put in place by various industrial stakeholders, regional lockout articulates ideas of cultural difference inscribed onto usually national or regional geographical territories. If using a mechanism of technological regulation as an entryway into questions about culture, sociality, and users' experiences seems a bit backward, I would suggest that it indicates that "hard" issues of technology, regulation, and power are in fact inseparable from putatively "softer" questions regarding textuality, cultural identity, and the everyday practices of media consumption. Studying distribution in the digital age requires an understanding of the ways these methods of industrial and technological control inflect issues of culture and identity.