

Ex-Pat TV

Geoblocking as Ex-Pat TV

Evan Elkins, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Amid breathless pronouncements about the power of streaming platforms to disrupt long-held ways of producing, distributing, and watching television, it's worth remembering the simple fact that access to these platforms around the world is not remotely equal. In many countries, platforms like Netflix, Hulu, and BBC's iPlayer remain geoblocked—that is, a platform detects its users' IP addresses and, if those users connect from a territory where the platform has not been formally introduced, they are prohibited from connecting to the service. More than a mere technological or industrial mechanism, geoblocking asks us to consider the cultural-geographic dimensions of accessing television meant for a different space.

Following this, I want to propose that at the present moment, the experience of geoblocking is a structural, ubiquitous component of transnational television. As online streaming becomes an increasingly dominant means through which viewers around the world watch television, geoblocking becomes central to the television experience for those who do not reside in spaces where their preferred programs are made available. As an extension of how patterns of television distribution shape international access to texts and platforms—established in part due to pre-existing geocultural borders and power relations—geoblocking articulates national and regional hierarchies of difference and discrimination across the global television economy. Confronting and circumventing geoblocking can remind “ex-pat” viewers of their place within these hierarchies of media access.

In doing so, geoblocking points to two related, fundamental characteristics of television: 1) the limitations of its spatial reach, and 2) the ways these limitations still shape and reflect hybrid, transnational viewing communities. At an industrial level, geoblocking indicates how the maintenance of distribution windows informs the technological characteristics and affordances of the digital platforms that many viewers around the world use to access television programming. This continues the age-old practice of limiting broadcasting's “omnidirectionality” (Streeter 1996) in an era marked by the supposed abundance of digital delivery. Culturally, geoblocking thus helps produce what Silverstone (2006) called media's “boundary work,” or the many ways media systems generate and sustain lines of geographic, political, and cultural difference and sameness.

However, there are ways to think about geoblocking as not just restrictive, but generative of certain viewing practices and environments. For instance, consider Hulu's extensive library of what it calls “international” television programming: anime, telenovelas, British programs, and Korean drama. Even as this library is geoblocked to the United States, it is still meant to serve relatively diverse ethnoscapes—here, a combination of US-based diasporic viewers (particularly Latina/o and East Asian populations) and fans of international television. The seeming contradiction between Hulu's restricted spatial logic and its hybrid cultural logic generates a particularly complex “zone of consumption” (Pertierra and Turner 2014)—or a contingent

viewing context that, in spite of its nationally bound technological arrangement, can traverse multiple scales of nation, transnation, and diaspora. Here, geoblocking points toward a tension in streaming television between the hybrid audiences that streaming platforms seek to address and the industrial practice of organizing television distribution operations according to national borders.

There is another, simpler reason that it doesn't make sense to view geoblocking as purely restrictive: viewers regularly use virtual private networks (VPNs), proxy servers, and DNS rerouting services to circumvent geoblocks and fool platforms into thinking the user is connecting from a location where the platform is made available. This practice is far from an obscure secret known only by the extremely tech-savvy; recent news reports have shown that Netflix is the second most popular video-on-demand platform in Australia—despite the fact that it hasn't yet been formally introduced there. Fundamentally, this activity follows a long tradition of amateur hacking, pirating, modding, and DXing practices that long predate digital media's emergence. Like many of these activities, geoblocking circumvention is at once a banal, everyday part of media experience and a potentially powerful means of regaining some measure of control over media's techno-spatial characteristics.

All in all, tracking the transnational accessibility and availability of the online television experiences made available to viewers can tell us about the spatial, technological, and cultural disjunctures that are a fundamental part of global television. So, I'd suggest that our discussion of transnational television takes ex-pat TV's prohibitions into account, in addition to today's seeming abundance of cross-border viewing possibilities. At the same time, I'd ask how we might understand the ways such prohibitions shape television experience at many levels: industrial, technological, political-economic, affective, and cultural-geographic.