

# Conceptualizing the Experiential Affordances of Watching Online TV

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## Abstract

This article investigates the experiential affordances of watching online TV as outcomes of the material underpinnings of online TV and the actions taken by viewers. Potential experiential changes derive from how online TV services can be considered libraries of content affording self-scheduling action possibilities. Such changes need to be situated in the slow-to-change conditions of television viewing. We draw on a qualitative study of how viewers respond to the action possibilities and constraints of online TV services. We argue that potentials for individualized viewing are counterbalanced by television viewing as a social activity. Next, self-scheduling ties in with viewing as a deliberate action, appropriated to create experiences where attentiveness is tailored to what is narratively required. Finally, flow schedules are replaced with programed paths constraining the agency of viewers.

## Keywords

affordances, audience studies, experiences, online TV, streaming video, television

## Introduction

The history of television is commonly narrated as one marked by continuous technological and cultural transformation. Such accounts are reflected in how the development of television is depicted according to techniques of distributing content; from the broadcast/TVI-era, via the cable/TVII-era, to the digital/TVIII-era (Dunleavy 2017; Johnson 2019). These eras are characterized by different logics (from scarcity to abundance; from mass to niche audiences) and adherent branding

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strategies. The emergence and increasing use of online TV services may in this context represent a distinct phase, requiring re-thinking definitions of television as a medium (Jenner 2016; Johnson 2019).

The trivial observation that television content is increasingly consumed online might have consequences for how audiences relate to and experience television. Yet few scholars examine present transformations and continuities in viewing experiences from the perspective of audiences, and the changes in how people watch television signal a need to revive audience studies (Gray 2017; Turner 2019). Lotz et al. (2018, 42) likewise note that audience studies are required “before we can theorize the experiential dimensions of internet-distributed television in ways that are conceptually robust.”

In this article, we follow the leads of Gray (2017), Lotz et al. (2018), and Turner (2019), and ask, *how can we conceptualize the experiential affordances of watching online TV?* We frame our analytical object according to Johnson’s (2019) definition of online TV as a subset of internet-distributed television services. Online TV, in Johnson’s framework, includes SVOD services and online players from legacy broadcasters; these are closed environments offering editorially selected content oriented toward the creation of viewing experiences. Applying affordances as the analytical notion allows us to attend to experiential outcomes as positioned between the material underpinnings of online TV and the actions undertaken by viewers (Chemero 2003; Gibson 1979; Lüders 2019; Nagy and Neff 2015). Affordances are hence not properties of an object, but refer to the relational space between the material features and the perceiving and acting being. The materiality of online TV is understood as imbued with values and interests reflecting the economic and political contexts within which services are designed and marketed. An analysis of affordances consequently needs to be sensitive to how action possibilities and constraints reflect ideological positions. Brand rhetoric accentuating user choice may for example reflect a move from considering viewers as citizens toward considering viewers as customers (Johnson, 2019). Relatedly, Burroughs (2019, 11) argues that streaming companies promote a conception of algorithms as “just delivering to audiences what they have already told the algorithm that they want to consume.” Netflix has re-branded itself as “the future of television” aligned with natural and inherent audience needs (Tryon 2015, 107). Such rhetoric discourse should be addressed critically, since they are often promoted by actors who have an interest in their realization (Enli and Syvertsen 2016).

We first address the material level of online TV in order to identify experiential aspects related to action possibilities and constraints. Next, we explicate and develop these components through an analysis of interviews conducted with twenty Norwegian study participants. We start from the metaphor of online TV services as libraries of content affording self-scheduling possibilities. Our findings delineate how individualized viewing patterns are counterbalanced by the continued social position of TV; how self-scheduling ties in with deliberate watching; and finally, how service providers create programed paths through content libraries, constraining the agency of viewers.

## **From Schedule to Library: The Changing Materiality of Television**

Online TV represents a technological transformation whereby “the television set is transformed into an internet-connected device that carries simultaneously its earlier associations with viewing linear television schedules and newer associations with on-demand and interactive engagement” (Johnson 2019, 17). Herein lies a fundamental question for our objective: what can we expect to change and what can we expect to stay the same when viewers turn to online TV services?

From a high-level perspective, potential changes derive from the materiality of online TV, while potential continuities relate to the established context for watching television. The schedules of linear television structure viewing patterns, with programs and between-slots (announcements, advertisements) sequenced into a flow of continuous television (Bruun 2020; Ihlebæk et al. 2014; Williams [1974] 2003). Internet-distributed television, however, offers content libraries instead of schedules (Lotz 2018, 117). Although the materiality of television changes, we cannot simply infer changes in viewer behavior, but need to consider long-established viewing practices, as well as how the material level of technologies shapes but never fully determines experiences (Bucher and Helmond 2017; Lüders 2019; Nagy and Neff 2015). Failures to attend to the experiential outcome as partly constituted by human agency or failing to consider continuities of practices risk resulting in exaggerated visions of change.

Television as an online library affords self-scheduling. Yet how self-scheduling is appropriated needs to be situated within “our knowledge of the slow-to-change conditions that underpin identity, sociality, and community,” which next implies the need “to map the changing media environment in relation to prior communicative practices which, in turn, shape that environment” (Livingstone 2003, 338). Viewers may for example have opportunities to watch shows that fit their individual preferences but may still experience a pull toward the social role of television: watching together with family and friends and talking about the same shows (Lull 1990).

Within this context of what changes and what remains the same, there are some more disputed consequences of online TV. We will next delineate how these services are discussed regarding the agency of the viewer.

### ***Agency, Control, Flow***

Human agency presupposes an acting subject, but this subject is always placed relative to other people and to her or his surroundings: the subject is always a socially and culturally entangled entity (Mansfield 2000). An analysis of how viewers experience watching online TV therefore needs to place the viewer relative to what is materially enabled and constrained. On the surface, being able to self-schedule signifies a viewer-centered notion of agency and control, making self-determined experiences possible (Bruun 2020; Enli and Syvertsen 2016; Lotz 2018). Positioning viewers as in control also reflects how Netflix, in particular, uses terms such as “user freedom” and “active

audiences” rhetorically to promote itself as the future of television and as a service in tune with user needs and demands (Burroughs 2019; Tryon 2015).

Propositions of how agency is potentially recalibrated predate online TV services, evident for example by Uricchio’s argument that the remote control signaled a shift toward “flow as a set of choices and actions initiated by the viewer” (Uricchio 2004, 170), implying the conditions of flow shift toward agencies as imbricated into viewer-program interfaces. Similarly, scholars have posited that digital video recorders and digital television represent a move away from logic of broadcast flow (see Johnson 2019, 122 for a discussion). Williams’ ([1974] 2003) notion of flow captured how the television experience is planned as sequences of programs, where each program item is subordinate to how items are stitched together to lure viewers into an evening of “watching television”. Williams’ flow leaves the viewer with limited agency and instead positions the viewer as submissive to clever programing.

Williams’ notion of flow holds a prominent position in television studies, including how flow is reconceptualized to account for online TV (Cox 2018; Gray and Lotz 2019). Yet whether agency has shifted toward viewers is a disputed claim (Van Esler 2020), and as argued by Gray and Lotz (2019, 132), “the structuring forces Williams gestured towards persist.” That is, we should direct our attention toward how interfaces, algorithms, and menus work to create streaming flows, replacing the sequenced scheduling-flow of linear television. Likewise, but more radically, Johnson (2019) and Cox (2018) position user agency more as an illusion than a reality. Certain programs are made more visible than others, search functions are downplayed in favor of pre-organized catalogs, and while recommendation algorithms depend on patterns of use, viewers cannot determine the criteria informing how algorithms work (Johnson 2019). Cox (2018, 439–440) reasons that the types of interactions facilitated “foster a sense of *user control* that often downplays the *industrial control* exercised on users through these very same interactive features.” Johnson and Cox question to what extent viewers are liberated from structuring forces, but also, as Johnson contends, the success of online TV services may derive from their structured and closed nature (Johnson 2019, 43).

### Self-scheduled Viewing Experiences

Online TV services may steer our attention, by, so to speak, how the library shelves are organized and with certain titles prominently facing the viewer. But they also appear to enable undisturbed viewing. User agency, at least regarding when to watch (and without scheduling sequences and advertisement breaks), may here entail potentials for being immersed in the viewing experience (Steiner and Xu 2020). We here contrast the viewing experience with Ellis’ ([1982] 2001) depiction of the television glance as sporadic rather than the sustained cinematic gaze. The glance does not imply any effort of being “invested in the activity of looking. . .” (p. 137). The TV-looker is no cinephile, but instead a casual onlooker with lazy eyes hoping for relaxation and diversion (Ellis [1982] 2001, 165).

Our argument follows a long-standing critique of Ellis’ chasm between the cinematic gaze and the television glance. Television has always also been a gaze-medium (Wheatley 2016), and the distracted glance of the inattentive viewer does not accurately portray

television viewing (Caldwell 1995). Moreover, notions such as “Quality TV,” emphasizing the lineage to cinema and art cinema (Feuer 2007), narrative complexity (Mittell 2006), and complex dramas (Dunleavy 2017) allude to the gazing and attentive viewer. Mittell’s and Dunleavy’s accounts point to how at least segments of contemporary television productions appear well suited for the viewing experiences enabled by online TV. The complex serial, with ongoing stories and plot developments, diverse settings, and dynamic characters, demands attention from viewers, who (are at least assumed to) turn to these narratives with commitment (Dunleavy 2017; Mittell 2006).

Narrative complexity and immersive viewing are to some extent included as predictive factors for binge-viewing (Perks 2015; Pittman and Sheehan 2015; Steiner and Xu 2020; Tukachinsky and Eyal 2018). Online TV certainly affords opportunities for sequential viewing. But since most studies of on-demand viewing revolve around understanding why viewers feel compelled to keep watching, binge-viewing ends up serving as a proxy for knowledge on the new television experience (Turner 2021, 229). Binge-viewing, with its implicit link to high-profile quality shows, additionally aligns with the branding rhetoric of online TV services. These services have a strategic interest in associating “binge-worthiness” with “quality” and “cult” texts (Jenner 2017, 312). However, online TV services have become mundane and normal (at least in a Norwegian context), and viewers turn to them for a variety of television genres. Complex serials are far from exclusive for online TV services, and neither do these only offer programs that demand attentiveness. Viewing practices may consequently be more varied than what is captured with binge-viewing, encompassing different levels of attentiveness depending on the intricacy unfolding on the screen.

## Method and Data

In order to explore and sensitize the experiential affordances of watching online TV, we rely on interviews with twenty users of online TV services. Interviewees include ten men and ten females between twenty-one and seventy-two years, with a median age of 33.5. The objective to investigate the conditions underpinning experiential affordances implies a small-scale sample is advantageous, enabling a hermeneutical analysis whereby the interview material is continuously monitored in relation to theoretical developments (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). Participants were recruited using printed fliers, sharing of a Facebook-post, and snowballing from personal and professional networks (avoiding interviews with persons in own networks) and were interviewed between 2017 and 2019. Interviews lasted between one and one and a half hour and were transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were coded in NVivo 12. The analysis combined inductive and deductive approaches. First, codes were inductively identified by reading through the transcripts. Next, these codes were linked with theoretical sensitizing concepts of relevance for our objective of investigating and conceptualizing the experiential affordances of watching online TV.

Table 1 presents the participants and the types of online TV services that they use or have used previously. HBO refers to the SVOD-service HBO Nordic, launched in the Nordic countries in 2012. The NRK player refers to the on-demand service from the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK.

**Table 1.** Interview Participants (Pseudonyms).

Participant	Age	Education	Online TV services
Kevin (m)	21	Higher	Netflix, HBO, Viaplay, Dplay, TV2 Sumo, NRK player
Bård (m)	24	Higher	Netflix, NRK player, HBO*
Richard (m)	25	Higher	Netflix, HBO, TV2 Sumo, NRK player, Viaplay*
Sara (f)	26	High	Netflix, NRK player
Ruth (f)	26	High	Netflix, Viaplay, NRK player
Annette (f)	27	High	Netflix, HBO, NRK player
Erik (m)	27	Low	Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, NRK player, Viaplay, Dplay*
Vilde (f)	31	Low	Netflix, HBO, NRK player
Camilla (f)	31	Higher	Netflix, HBO, NRK player, Amazon Prime, TV2 Sumo*
Maria (f)	31	High	Netflix, HBO, Dplay, NRK player, Viaplay*
Markus (m)	36	Low	HBO, Amazon Prime, Viaplay, NRK player
Kristian (m)	36	High	Netflix, HBO, Amazon Prime, NRK player, Viaplay*, Dplay*
Thomas (m)	43	Higher	NRK player, Netflix*, TV2 Sumo*
Morten (m)	46	High	Netflix, HBO, NRK player, Amazon Prime, Viaplay
Lars (m)	49	High	Netflix, NRK player
Nina (f)	52	Higher	Netflix, HBO, NRK player, Viaplay*
Heidi (f)	56	Higher	Netflix, NRK player, Viaplay, TV2 Sumo*, HBO*
Anne (f)	57	Low	HBO, NRK player
Jan (m)	67	Higher	NRK player
Ingrid (f)	72	Higher	Netflix, NRK player

Note. Services marked with \* refer to discontinued subscriptions or use. Camilla and Kristian are married and were interviewed together (two and half-hour interview). Education: Low = upper secondary education; Higher = higher education less than four years; High = higher education four years or more.

## Analysis: Continuities and Transformations

We first address how the social position of television viewing counterbalances individualized viewing patterns. Next, experiential affordances of watching online TV are different from linear experiences in how television is adapted to the temporalities of life with patterns of deliberate watching and immersive modes of engagement. Whereas deliberate watching ties in with a sense of agency and control, the final part of the analysis delineates experiences of limited viewer agency in how online TV providers device programed paths through content libraries.

### *The Ritual and Social Role of Television*

Participants portray the position of television an integral part of everyday life, facilitating ways of being together that largely reflect the persistence of established conditions for viewing television (Livingstone 2003). In place of settled flow-schedules, participants co-schedule watching together as a leisure-time ritual taking place in front of the television. Hence, while online TV may have a stronger component of individualized

viewing, viewing as a collective activity remains central. The allure of watching television an activity that lends itself well to pursuit togetherness (Lull 1990) does not change substantially.

As a social activity imbricated with rituals, watching together appears particularly salient for couples sharing the same TV-preferences:

Kristian (36): When I get home [from work], we usually watch something on Netflix or HBO, or whatever we're currently watching. We don't have much dinner-culture, so we end up in the couch watching Netflix together. That's pretty much a ritual actually.

For Kristian and his wife Camilla (interviewed together) busy work-lives are paused by these at home opportunities to rewind, share, and cultivate their largely overlapping taste in television. Maria (31) similarly depicts how watching together with her partner represents time off, though in her case, scheduled later in the evening once their new-born baby has been put to sleep: "I don't think I actually ever want to watch anything alone. We're currently watching *Handmaid's Tale* on HBO. And, oh my, we watched *Chernobyl*. . . We were a bit late to *Handmaid's Tale*, so we have this total binge." If anything has changed regarding watching together, it is the opportunity to adjust viewing to diverse temporalities of lives.

Watching television has always also been a social activity but settled program schedules structured when we gathered to watch together. On-demand viewing, however, impose a sort of contract, where watching the next episode alone is to be avoided. Ingrid (72) states that for programs she and her partner both like, "we're not unfaithful, we watch it together." Possibilities to decide what shows to watch when and where are kept in balance by self-imposed social arrangements, safeguarding shared experiences when structural schedules disappear:

Vilde (31): We're now watching *Taboo*, and he can't watch without me. It's about partnership in a way to watch together and talk about it, because a lot is art and ways of telling stories. . . Overall, we share the same taste when it comes to TV. . . . Watching TV is part of our everyday life, it's part of my life.

The continued importance of watching together does not imply that all participants always watch television together with partners, family members, or friends. Idiosyncratic preferences are saved for moments of solitude. Annette (27) explains how she uses home alone time to watch programs her partner is not interested in. Other participants largely watch alone because they live alone or because they do not share the same taste as partners or family members.

The ritual and social role of television extends beyond watching together, to talking about television as a way of social bonding. Vilde (31) states that she needs to know what her friends are interested in, "it's a way of knowing them, right. If I have no insight into their life, then they have this community where I'm lost." Richard (25) reasons that keeping up with what friends watch "is about close relations with friends.



When people you know watch the same show, it gets this social function. Like watching the same as your friends becomes a social thing.” The notion that online TV facilitates fragmented and individualized viewing is not only too simplistic due to the continued programming control of services providers (Cox 2018; Johnson 2019), but also because of a human need for belonging, pulling viewers toward shared repertoires of programs:

Maria (31): You share the same references. It becomes this common culture, or culture bubble. . . . At one point, you could almost take for granted that everyone had watched *Game of Thrones*. We can still meet people and have a good time together without having watched the same programs. But it’s nice also because you can discover new things. Like, if you liked *Making a Murderer*, you will probably also like these true crime shows. It’s a way of having a shared media life.

As an experiential dimension, social appears as an unlikely condition to change rather than a “slow-to-change condition” (Livingstone 2003, 338). Online TV, if considered primarily materially, enables a form of individualized viewing aligned with industry conceptions of the algorithmic audience (Burroughs 2019), but the social and ritual roles of television pull toward the continued importance of togetherness.

### *Self-scheduled Deliberate Watching and Re-watching*

Self-scheduling has experiential outcomes related to how television is adapted to life schedules rather than life adapted to television schedules. This change ties in with viewing as a deliberate action and a need to control how everyday time is spent. Finally, self-scheduling combined with the materiality of online TV as a library implies windows to revisit selected television productions.

Adapting television to life schedules represents a continuum from slightly adjusting when programs are watched to catching up with productions that “everybody” talks about. Regarding slightly adjusted time-shifting, Jan (67) reflects, “It used to be very fixed, like at 6:00 pm, it was *Dagsnytt Atten* [daily news magazine]. But now I watch it when I want to.” Current affair programs such as *Dagsnytt Atten* are still released at certain hours of the day. Likewise, HBO has largely retained the structure of weekly releases of episodes. Yet, once programs are released, they remain accessible:

Nina (52): I’ve been watching *Handmaid’s Tale* lately. And *Girls*. And like, when you need to wait for next week. And you still don’t miss it [the next episode]. I’ve never been able to follow series before.

Interviewer: Like before you needed to sit down by the TV every Tuesday at 9:30 pm to follow a series?

Nina (52): Exactly. I never used to watch TV-series. . . Like with *Twin Peaks* early 1990s. I watched it, but not all episodes. It was impractical, because sometimes I was busy elsewhere.



For Nina, adapting life to television schedules was never really an option, and while she still had to wait for the next episode of *Handmaid's Tale* (since she watched it while season one unfolded), she could adjust the pace to her own life.

Conceptually, this sense of agency depicts how viewers tune in to watch specific programs. As stated by Bård (24), “You sit down to watch a series or a film. You don’t sit down to watch TV, like random crap. It becomes the activity.” Bård here offers a different perspective compared to how the flow model of broadcasting contrasts with watching discrete units of content (Williams [1974] 2003, 89). Online TV may seem to represent a return to specific programs rather than “what’s on.” Kevin (21), who is an avid gamer, depicts a Williams’-like flow of linear television and Twitch (see Spilker et al. 2020 for an analysis of Twitch-experiences as flow) compared to the focused viewing experience of online TV:

I find Twitch and [linear] TV to be much more similar than Netflix, HBO and YouTube because there you are specifically looking for something good, whereas Twitch and TV in general is more like, you can just keep it on in the background even if it’s not particularly good, just to have something to talk about.

Kevin continues by elaborating how he pauses the video if being interrupted, since he cannot allow himself to miss out on the intricacy of what unfolds on the screen. We may here distinguish between the considered decision to watch a specific item (deliberate watching) as a general tendency across genres, and the specific viewing experience as more or less immersive depending on genres. When Kevin and his buddies decide to watch comedy series, which they regularly do when together, this is a deliberate action, but the viewing experience is not of the kind where Kevin needs to pause the video due to interruptions.

An underexplored feature of online TV concerns the value ascribed to “a show that becomes part of a library in perpetuity” (Lotz 2018, 146), or the “afterlife” achieved “through unprecedented succession of exhibition and consumption ‘windows’” (Dunleavy 2017, 11–12). Opportunities to look back and revisit old productions highlight the archival function of on-demand services (Tryon 2015). For some, such as Anne (57), re-watching old favorites relates to a sense of personal history and cultural heritage. She enjoys going back in time and find programs that were once part of her life: “I’ve done that quite a bit. Watched Nitimemordet [crime series from the 1970s] for example. And other old series. And there was this old children’s show that was made from my hometown.” Whereas reruns of productions have been a central part of linear television schedules (Weispfenning 2003), online TV represents a media ecology where back catalogs are made available for viewer-initiated reruns. Among the participants re-watching old favorites is common, whether this is revisiting sitcoms such as *Friends* and *The Office*; Kristian’s (36) and Camilla’s (31) annual indulgence into their “ultimate guilty pleasure, *Buffy*”; or as Erik (27) describes, re-watching *The Wire*, which he used to follow with his dad.

*The Wire*, being an epitome of the complex serials of the last twenty years (Dunleavy 2017; Mittell 2006), may be considered to warrant re-watching in order to follow and

detangle multifaceted story arcs. For Morten (46), one of the participants with the most affection for complex serials, the quality of a production explains his re-watching patterns. He lists numerous favorites and genres that he regularly watches. Yet when he mentions serials such as *The Wire*, *Fargo*, and *True Detective*, he adds that he has watched these “at least twice”:

To me quality is that I can watch it again, and discover something new. . . I’ve watched *True Detective* two-three times. I still find it fantastic. You discover new patterns all the time. I don’t mind watching series that don’t talk to me in the same way, but that’s more entertainment, and feels more like a waste of time.

While far from all participants are as involved viewers as Morten, sentiments related to time are common. Participants may still watch television to pass time, but deliberate watching ties in with how to spend time prudently. Maria (31), for instance, reckons online TV has made her watch more television, and that time therefore needs to be well spent: “since screen time adds up to quite an amount, I try to be critical to what I’m watching, compared to oh well this is what’s on TV2 at the moment.”

### *Programed Paths through Content Libraries*

Our notion of self-scheduled deliberate watching denotes watching discrete programs and not the interface experience, or how providers device paths through content libraries by way of organizing and recommending content. Yet the agency associated with self-scheduling could influence the interface experience, partly explaining why some participants refrain from considering the structure of interfaces and (various levels) of personalization as influencing what they watch. Other participants contest the notion of user agency characterizing the rhetoric of online TV services. Such oppositional interpretations relate to three concerns: how content is organized; the inadequacy of recommendations; and how interfaces appear structured to inhibit diversity of content. We structure this final part of the analysis accordingly, but also include sentiments that help discern the subtleness of programed paths.

Wariness with how content is organized relates to a sense of being steered toward a fraction of available content, corroborating Van Esler’s (2020, 7) portrayal of online TV interfaces as shepherding viewers in certain directions. Metaphorically, most parts of the library are gated off in low-level and hard-to-reach bunkers. Finding content can nevertheless, or exactly therefore, be challenging. Some participants convey irritations, but do not detail much beyond expressing annoyance. Anne (57) laments how “there is a lot to browse through.” Erik (27) likewise points to the experience of “swiping through Netflix to find something new to watch, it can be hopeless.” Kristian (36), however, addresses similar issues by underlining the control exercised by online TV providers and Netflix in particular:

I think Netflix is a bit too aggressive with categorizing content. It’s more difficult to just browse than to be served what Netflix believes you want to watch. . . . What they push

you towards in the first ten categories is just a small spectre of what they have. Which means it's difficult to use Netflix the way I use Tidal [music streaming service] where I end up with weird stuff that other people have never heard of. We rarely do that on Netflix.

Kristian, who has a background in computing, continues by considering why online TV services appear to push viewers toward a small spectre of content, querying whether this relates to the larger data files involved in streaming video and the need to cache content in servers near end-users. Such domain-specific considerations are evidently not common among the interviewees. However, the organization of content is but one of several centripetal forces shepherding viewers toward the same content. Certain productions are prominently positioned in the television library, but these are often the same blockbusters that serve as common cultural references among peers and in society.

Prestigious series need cultural critics to prioritize them, creating what Tryon (2015, 107) terms a "culture of 'just-in-time promotion'." Reflecting back to the analysis of the social and ritual role of television, we add that peers contribute in a similar manner. Markus (36) states that he often watches programs peers recommend: "I've just watched *The Man in the High Castle*, an Amazon-production. And that was also because someone recommended it to me." Kevin (21) similarly says, "I definitely think something is worth watching if there's a lot of coverage in the media. And if my buddies recommend something, and you hear a lot of people talking about a show." Two productions, in particular, came across as television "everybody" talked about: *Game of Thrones* and the Norwegian "teen-drama" *SKAM*. Both shows were prominently featured on the interfaces of HBO and NRK, but participants express how the buzz surrounding these shows was more influential. Thomas (43) and Ruth (26) stated that they would sign up for HBO to experience for themselves why "everyone" talked about *Game of Thrones*. Vilde (31), Markus (36), and Erik (27) mention *Game of Thrones* as the reason for initially turning to HBO. *SKAM* similarly raised the awareness for the NRK player among the younger participants. Bård (24) never used to consider NRK interesting, but then "*SKAM* happened, and I realized they have some really good programmes. . . . Like they produce content for my generation. *SKAM* had a positive effect in the sense that I now use the NRK player." It should be noted that *SKAM* was widely brought up and commended by participants regardless of age, and it certainly represented a shared cultural reference recommended and talked about among peers. For HBO and NRK, *Game of Thrones* and *SKAM* served as flagship productions that attracted viewers to their services.

If prime time depicts the scheduling slots of content that appeals to a mass audience, then online TV services similarly organize their libraries with prime shelves. Since prime shelves feature the most popular content, delineating the extent to which decisions on what to watch are influenced by how the interface is structured or by a general buzz around certain programs becomes difficult. Discomfort rather relates to perceptions that there is nothing but prime shelves, or if these are experienced to hide the full catalog of content.

Relatedly, the extent to which online TV services personalize interfaces and algorithmically recommend content (which varies between service providers) does little to open new paths but is instead experienced to provide more of the same. Some participants consider recommendations in a neutral or affirmative manner. Ruth (26), for instance, notes how she does not “mind recommendations. . . as they are recommended based on what you’ve watched.” Vilde (31) finds personalized recommendations “alright, although they don’t always match what I like.” Perceptions of personalization and algorithms are hard to discern since they represent invisible frames (Johnson 2019) that often escape people’s awareness (Gran et al. 2020; Lüders 2020). Gran et al. (2020) find that highly educated exhibit higher levels of algorithmic awareness and more critical attitudes toward recommendations. Our study includes few participants with low education (see Table 1), but our aim is to extrapolate analytical generalizations concerning the mechanisms at play. To this end, what some participants do not say is telling. Participants who do not refer to recommendations as influencing their attention might be interpreted as resistant to being guided, or as not “seeing” how these interfaces work. Other participants recognize how service providers exert control by devising attention-steering paths. Among these, portrayals of resistance are quite common and tie in with reflections on how they are categorized as viewers. As Morten (46) asserts, “When HBO and Netflix try to tell me what I like, I’m like, ‘no, I won’t, I’m certainly not watching that’. I get a bit cranky; they don’t know me, and they try to compartmentalize me.” Lars (49) avidly keeps track of algorithmic recommendations in Spotify, but when it comes to Netflix, “I don’t think the recommendations are accurate at all. It may be because my oldest son tends to use my profile and hence disturbs everything.” In this case, “more of the same” becomes a problem since what is recommended is not calculated based only on the data input from what Lars prefers to watch. However, as Camilla (31) suggests, data input can be contaminated also by one’s own viewing patterns:

My Netflix is kind of crazy. Because with programmes we watch together, we usually watch using my husband’s profile. Whereas, when my head is really knackered, I watch *the Lego Batman Movie*. And get recommendations for children’s TV. So, I’ve tried to watch more of what I’m interested in.

Camilla’s reaction aligns closely with the if, then-structure and the “you-get-the-infrastructure-you-deserve-logic” of algorithms (Gran et al. 2020, 14): if she wants more accurate recommendations, then she needs to realign her viewing behavior in order to feed Netflix with better behavioral data. Since there is no way to backtrack past behavior, for example by signaling what programs should not be considered when predicting recommendations, the only remaining option is to get recommendations back on track by refraining from watching content that would pollute data-input.

Discontentment with how content is organized and how recommendations work ties in with perceptions that content libraries are more diverse than what surfaces as immediately accessible. Reflecting on how online TV services tailor interfaces and

recommendations to match her viewing patterns, Sara (26) points to how the result is a feedback loop where she is never challenged:

What I miss is like, “try something new,” right? It’s not the amount of content, which is the problem, it’s the sorting of content. Most places have these equations for what you’re likely to want, and they give you that so that you’ll return. It works, but it also limits what people come across. It’s comfortable to get what you expect and what fits with your perspectives. But you lose the opportunity to widen your horizon.

Sara illustrates the tension between the *industry’s* interest in guiding viewers in certain directions (for instance toward prestige shows that generate buzz and promote critical acclaim) and *her* interest in exploring diversifying paths. Sara’s quest for programs that “widen your horizon” can even be seen an argument for a television schedule and challenges the prevailing market discourse of online TV (Burroughs 2019; Johnson 2019; Tryon 2015). Participants who contest the notion of infrastructures as objective and neutral do not so much react to the control service providers retain in guiding their attention, but rather to *how* they are categorized as viewers. Sara’s reflections align with a yearning to at least be treated as a viewer with complex and unpredictable preferences.

## Toward Experiential Affordances

Our conceptual framework and analysis portray how the experiential affordances of watching online TV are relationally contingent on technical materiality, viewer agency, and social context. Our study first suggests that self-scheduled action possibilities for individualized viewing are counterbalanced by the continued social position of television. Viewers tailor online TV situations to mirror linear ways of watching together (Livingstone 2003; Lull 1990). Togetherness extends beyond watching in the company of others, and television retains its social position as a means for bonding and keeping up with what peers watch.

Second, viewing practices are characterized by what we term deliberate watching, denoting the considered decision to watch, and sometimes re-watch, specific programs. Whereas deliberate watching applies across genres, viewers additionally adjust their attentiveness to the social setting and what is narratively required. Self-scheduling combined with the uninterrupted viewing experience of online TV situates the viewer in a potentially immersive viewing position well suited for what complex storytelling requires.

Third, interfaces and recommendations create paths through content libraries, yet in ways that elicit varied perceptions and reactions: from not considering these paths as influential to explicitly recognizing these mechanisms and adjusting or resisting to adjust viewing behavior accordingly. Some viewers hence appear cognizant of the shepherding strategies of online TV providers in directing them along certain paths. If Williams ([1974] 2003) recognized how broadcasting services sequenced program items as flows with the aim of retaining viewers for an evening of watching television,

then at least some demonstrate an awareness of how the programing of services and interfaces device paths guiding their attention as viewers.

In the flow model of scheduled television, the viewing experience is intricately interwoven and almost inseparable from the sequencing of program items (Williams [1974] 2003). For Williams ([1974] 2003), watching television inherently encompassed tensions between choice (selecting another program, channel, or turning off) and flow. Yet, the scheduled flow defined watching television: “even when we have switched on for a particular ‘programme’, we find ourselves watching the one after it and the one after that” (p. 94). Online TV seems to require separating the viewing experience from the interface experience at least as analytical categories. The viewing experience relates to discrete programs, and in our study, we sensitize this as deliberate watching. The interface represents a different layer where service providers device attention-guiding mechanisms when viewers navigate (or are navigated) to find new items to watch.

While our analysis substantiates a continued need to scrutinize how structuring forces persist (Cox 2018; Gray and Lotz 2019; Johnson 2019), we also note how these forces appear interwoven with peer recommendations, to the extent that separating between agency, peer recommendations, and programed paths becomes impalpable. This may seem unhelpful if the aim is to demarcate the power of online TV providers, but points to the placement of the subject relative to its surroundings. First, the subject placed within a technology-saturated world finds her/himself in-between choice, being in control and being controlled. The flow model of online TV may as such be contingent on viewers transposing self-scheduling agency to a sense of control on the interface level, and by a juxtaposition of programs prominent in interfaces, peer conversations, and popular discourse. Second, the subject as socially and contextually embedded points to the inadequacy of investigating the power of media without including the perspective of audiences and the meanings and values they ascribe to their experiences. By inquiring the experiences of audiences, this study depicts accounts of social embeddedness, agency gratification, annoyances, and to some extent resistance. These accounts elucidate how neither audiences nor service providers are in complete control. The power service providers have in directing viewers is elusive and relational.

Johnson (2019) concludes that online TV services are epitomes of how the interests of citizens and democracies have been replaced by commercial, neoliberal notions of user choice; replacing public service with services designed to enhance the experience for the viewer as a customer. It is consequently noteworthy that some participants reflect critically on how content is organized and object to how they are categorized as viewers. Their objections reflect an ideological stance that services should refrain from addressing viewers merely as easily categorized customers. If considered from the branding rhetoric of the algorithmic audience (Burroughs 2019, 10–11), services that feed on behavioral data position the viewer with the co-responsibility to sway recommendations by acting like a viewer who wants to be challenged. Ultimately, “improving” recommendations entails “improving” viewing behavior, adjusting to the co-responsibility logic of algorithmic infrastructure (Gran et al. 2020). Positioning the viewer as in control comfortably

alleviates service providers from responsibility, and conceals how viewers meet interfaces and mechanisms designed to guide their attention. Our affordance approach does not explicate to what extent programed paths are reflected in what participants watch (which our interview data moreover cannot elucidate). However, our analysis depicts how online TV as materially “the same” for all participants encompasses experiences conditioned by levels of interface and algorithmic awareness. A robust conceptualization of watching online TV hence needs to recognize the material level as well as acting human subjects.

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