

Reconsidering Digital Distribution

Retail Rules

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Digital distribution has ostensibly changed the landscape for television, from “binge watching” on the consumption side to the creation of new industrial heavyweights, like Netflix and Amazon, on the production and distribution side. Yet what is being called “distribution” in this context is, in fact, linked to a history of *retail* practices. By retail, I simply mean the concrete activity of selling goods or services. If we think of media distribution as consisting of the movement of commodities from producers to consumers, (a functional but overly simplistic definition), then retail constitutes the conclusive market activity that makes consumption possible. As the point of purchase, retail is a vital mechanism for the distribution of television content, whether delivered digitally or otherwise.

Indeed, the market mechanics of digitally distributed television are largely anticipated by the retailing of television programs on previous home video formats. Although television programs appeared on VHS at the very beginnings of the home video era, such material was marginal within the overall video market. With the advent of DVD in the late 1990s, however, the retailing of television exploded. Partly this resulted from the material properties of DVD. Because DVD players could not record television broadcasts like VHS, rights holders felt emboldened to sell their programming in this parallel market. Further, the small physical size and significant storage capacity of DVDs allowed for a large amount of programming to be included on individual discs and multiple discs could easily be packaged together. Entire seasons of different television shows, old and new, now appeared as easily portable material commodities.

This shift in the condition of television content, from broadcast flow to discrete commodity, facilitated a shift in the sites where television could be accessed. Specifically, TV-on-DVD proliferated through the retail landscape, including video rental stores and, even more importantly, at big-box stores like Wal-Mart, Target, and Best Buy. Simultaneously, Amazon entered the video market in 1998, selling VHS tapes and DVDs alongside the books and musical recordings they already catered in. In this dispersal of television throughout retail space, we see two phenomena that continue to define the digital delivery of television. First, these retailers treated television programs as discrete commodities that could be purchased (or rented) *a la carte*; even bundled seasons were now disconnected from their originating network. And both brick-and-mortar locations as well as “long tail” online retailers provided access to a huge number of different programs – of different genres, from many different broadcasters – all of which were made equivalent through their bulk presentation alongside one another. This quantitative expansion facilitated a qualitative shift in the cultural conception of television, one that persists in the digital retail environment.

Second, the detachment of television content from television sets (i.e., on to DVD) situated the retailers that sold this content as new and crucial players within the “television industry.” If media distribution consists of “middlemen,” then by the 2000s Wal-Mart, Target, Best Buy, and Amazon were integral television content distributors. Thus, the proliferation of pipelines and industrial players in the realm of digital distribution has a precedent that is rarely acknowledged or analyzed. Indeed, it is no accident that all of these companies have been active players in the move to digital delivery, from Amazon Instant, to Wal-Mart’s Vudu, to Target Ticket. For these companies, digital delivery merely represents an expansion of the retailing activities they already engaged in.

For media scholars, this history of television retailing raises important questions and presents interesting research challenges. Although we cannot sidestep the questions raised in the prompt for this roundtable, we should also take a sidelong glance at what could otherwise be considered “peripheral” industrial and cultural activities, namely retailing and shopping. Viewed from this perspective, even platforms such as Netflix and iTunes appear relatively ordinary. Yes, digital distributors allow people to view television programs in many different places on many different devices. Just as importantly, however, they serve as retail sites for television programs, marketplaces that also appear in many different places and on many different devices. They make television appear perpetually and ubiquitously shop-able.

This fact should prompt media scholars to examine retail and shopping as distinct objects of analysis, and not only in the era of digital distribution. Although the links between television and consumerism have been thoroughly detailed, considerably less attention has been paid to the ways in which people search for, discover, and purchase television programs. Retail is a routine aspect of social life, and it may be this very routineness that kept it from our scrutiny. But how and where we shop for television is just as important as how and where we consume it.