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Book Review
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Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste

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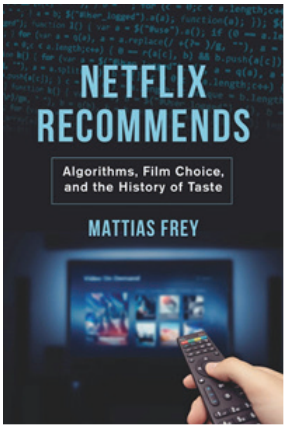

Book cover: Frey, Mattias.* Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste. *University of California Press, 2021

The digital age has initiated many changes in the sphere of media and the way entire society functions, and the two, probably, most specific changes are datafication and algorithmic utilitarianization of those huge databases. In the light of this fact, the book Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste by Mattias Frey presents a very interesting and deep analysis of the modern trend of creating and directing the taste through recommendation systems of streaming services. In this book, the author, professor of Film, Media, and Culture at the University of Kent, analyzes and explains, using Netflix as an example, the connection between collected data, algorithmic processing, and recommendations to users that arise as a result of this automated procedure, but also questions necessity, effectiveness and consequences of recommending systems for media use. Those questions, apart from the introduction, afterword and appendix, are discussed in five chapters.

In the book's introduction, the author emphasizes that modern times are characterized by globalization and technological changes that transform the cultural sphere and expand the possibility of choice, and that transformation is reflected in the sphere of films and series. The introduction of Netflix and other video-on-demand services, with their vast catalogs and offerings, has brought fundamental changes in how these cultural products are perceived, viewed, and chosen by audiences. The way films and series become part of media repertoires changes significantly with the introduction of algorithmic systems based on big data and personalization. The author states that he analyzes these systems, primarily the Netflix recommendation system, but that he replaces the popular technological deterministic approach with an analysis that takes into account all social components and their relationships. Furthermore, he takes the perspective of

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users, their choices and tastes instead of the producers' perspective, which is most often used to analyze digital technologies.

The first chapter, *Why We Need Film and Series Suggestions*, discusses why users of digital media platforms, particularly SVOD services, require algorithmic content recommendation systems. The author focuses on two aspects: quality and quantity. According to Fray, the user's need to choose and obtain what he considers to be of high quality has always existed, but when it comes to media content, the role of filter or gatekeeper is now in the hands of automatic algorithms and their recommendation systems. What distinguishes them from previous models (advertisements, critics and word of mouth) is that they are highly personalized, based on the preferences and needs of each individual user. Their role is to reduce the risk of selecting something that does not meet the user's quality standards. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the importance of the recommendation system in the case of media products, films, and series due to the unique way in which they are consumed. He pinpoints these distinctions by contrasting them with detergents on the one hand and luxury goods on the other: "A consumer may decide on a laundry detergent brand once or vary his or her choice each month according to the price; he or she may take great pains to decide which camera or car to buy but will only purchase such an item once every several years. In contrast, films and series maintain vastly more variety and most people consume them much more frequently". Another reason why we need algorithmic recommendation systems is the hyperproduction of serial and movie content. For example, from 2008 to 2020, the number of films with a theatrical premiere in the United States increased by 41%, while in the United Kingdom, the percentage increased by 71% from 2006 to 2019. The situation is similar when looking at the number of series produced, but also when we analyze the number of SVOD services that are available. In such an environment, users require a tool to help them navigate the chaos of countless potential contents available to them, and recommendation systems are that tool.

The second chapter, *How Algorithmic Recommender Systems Work*, discusses all the specifics and reasons that make system recommendations more distinct than other recommendation systems, such as posters, trailers, or reviews, which the author emphasizes have existed since the beginning of movies and series. Stating that algorithmic recommendation based on data is just an old solution to a new problem, he identifies six key characteristics that distinguish this phenomenon from all previous recommendation models. The first and most fundamental is that it is based on data that is unique to each user and that, through algorithmic processing, it can instrumentalize their data in such a way that it "knows" each user individually. This leads to another feature known as personalization, which makes recommendations of potentially interesting content to users based on a huge database's overall regularities and the specific behaviors and preferences of users. According to Frey, this is the manifestation of Nicolas Negroponte's concept of narrowcasting and hyperpersonalizing information. The third crucial characteristic is that recommendation systems function as a result of scale and aggregation; in other words, by analyzing vast amounts of data and finding patterns among them, they

can become extremely accurate at determining someone's liking without any kind of subjective judgment. Additionally, the fact that these systems are nontransparent, to be more specific, nobody outside the organization is aware of how they work—indicates the significance of their operating procedures for the provision of the service. The issue of credibility, which each system bases on algorithmic objectivity and the wisdom of the crowd, is the fifth point of distinction. The sixth difference is the capability of algorithms to detect potentially new developments of taste within the audience and even to steer him in a specific direction.

The author presents the history and development of Netflix's recommendation system in the third chapter, *Developing Netflix's Recommendation Algorithms*, pointing out that this company does not have the greatest influence when it comes to the distribution, presentation, or production of series and film programs; it is the most significant in the sphere of directing and defining taste through algorithms. It's worth noting that Netflix's Cinematch algorithm was not originally designed for the purpose it serves today. As an online DVD rental site, the company aimed to combat the company's limited supply by providing users with accessible alternative content if their primary preference was not available for rental. Frey not only explains the development of this unique recommendation system, but also analyzes how, as the market has evolved and the transition to the streaming business took place, the task of the recommendation algorithm has become to keep the subscriber on the site for as long as possible. In the chapter's continuation, a special section is devoted to the analysis of the famous Netflix award and how it highlighted the importance of algorithms in the world of streaming, as well as new methods of framing and analyzing user behavior, and the need to always find something new and fresh within the framework of recommendations, which points to the problem of the personalization paradox. According to the author, it represents a departure from echo chambers and filter bubbles into which one can enter with complete personalization and unified taste, by always offering something unexpected. "Guided by viewers' behavioral data rather than stated preferences, the company largely ignores what customers say they want and instead provides them with what it thinks they need".

The fourth chapter begins with an explanation of why it is incorrect to claim that the recommendation system is completely novel and has never been seen before because it is based on quantification of taste and mathematical calculation of recommendations, as many authors claim. The author explains in this chapter, *Unpacking Netflix's Myth of Big Data*, that the belief that algorithmic analyses of big data guarantee objectivity of truth and accuracy is a myth. That myth is largely based on the fact that very little is known about Netflix's data and algorithms, which are strictly kept secret. Conversely, it is precisely on the basis of these analyses that the company argues for the objectivity not only of recommendations, but also of production, as was the case with the first series, House of Cards, which was claimed to have been created entirely on the basis of big data. The author refutes such claims, pointing out that the draft of this series was created long before Netflix's algorithmic dominance, while also raising questions about how the data analysis, which is reliable to that extent, recommended the production of some of this service's

series that received very low ratings, viewership, and criticism. Fray really explains this by saying that the algorithm itself, tags, models on which it operates, as well as interpretations of the gathered data, are the product of people who give them meaning, and that the illusion of Netflix's infallibility is a marketing strategy on which trust is based.

In the final chapter, the author presents the findings of his research on the use of streaming services based on algorithmic content recommendation, which he conducted using quantitative research - questionnaires and qualitative research - in-depth interviews. He administered the questionnaire to 2123 people from the United Kingdom and 1300 people from the United States, and 34 people from various regions of the United Kingdom took part in the interview. The data from these studies revealed that the process of deciding which movie or series to watch is very complex, multi-layered, and can sometimes take a very long time, and that it heavily influences traditional sources, advertisements, posters, and reviews, in addition to the recommendation system. In fact, only 10 to 15% of those polled ranked algorithmic search as one of their top three recommendation and selection methods. Frey questioned how much they understand how algorithmic recommendations work, in addition to how they use it. The conclusion is that the majority of interviewees do not have a complete and clear understanding of how algorithms work, and that the majority of what they know comes from the services themselves and their announcements. It is interesting to note that one of the segment's conclusions is that there is a significant percentage of those who understand how algorithms work to a greater extent, but do not care how much they affect them. The author demonstrates that there are quite strong opinions on the credibility and effectiveness of algorithms, ranging from completely positive to completely negative. The latter, in particular, raise concerns about the filter bubble, freedom, but also the precision of the defined taste and the lack of variation in proportions. Frey classifies several types of users at the end of this chapter based on the responses from the interviews. As a result, he categorizes them as Information Limiters and Information Gluttons, Lazy Choosers, Heavy Users and Light Users, High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Users, and those who prefer algorithms versus those who prefer people for recommendations.

The author pointed out in a lengthy afterword that when it comes to algorithm interpretations, neither utopian nor pessimistic views are complete, and even the segments in which they agree, which are primarily based on technological determinism, are not complete. Primarily, he concludes from the discussions with the interlocutors that algorithmic recommendation systems haven't fully replaced traditional forms of recommendation, that they frequently do not function satisfactorily, and that they are far from omnipotent and omniscient. Their job is to fill the void left by the constant need for a gatekeeper, but not a critic, because human-written reviews currently carry more weight in defining taste than algorithmic recommendations. The author comes to the conclusion that the process of forming taste is ongoing and that, despite being a significant technological and mathematical achievement that will undoubtedly alter the current situation, algorithmic recommendation systems won't completely replace the traditional journalistic and expert reviews and other methods of guiding

taste and attention. As he points out, no new media replaced the old one; rather, it coexisted with it in a modified new media system.

This book has enormous significance in two ways. The first is that it describes the historical origins, the evolution of the recommendation systems, their significance, complexity, and the application of big data extremely carefully, fully, and persuasively in the first three chapters. Without the methodologies, concepts, and other elements outlined in this section of the book, it would be impossible to grasp algorithms and recommendation systems. The author's rejection of the notion of technological determinism and focus instead on the viewpoint of VOD service customers and their experiences with algorithmic recommendations is another crucial aspect. Although it can be argued that such an approach is problematic due to the practical impossibility of users to objectively see how something affects them and give reliable interpretations, especially something that the author admits is very new and unknown, it certainly enriches the theory and our knowledge about algorithms, and contributes to the overall understanding of the processes of datafication and algorithmizing of our societies.

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