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Netflix's diversity strategy and the politics of representation in the streaming age

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Since 2020, Netflix has regularly emphasized the diversity of representation—such as racial, gender, and sexual diversity—the platform features in its content. This emphasis on diversity has emerged amid increasing social, political, and economic turmoil: from the rise of conservative policies and government worldwide, to global protests against the lack of representation in the entertainment industry. Based on the findings from the PhD project titled 'Netflix and the globalization of difference', this brief presents a series of insights on the role diversity plays in Netflix's transnational strategy, and the ways in which the concept of diversity serves as a key instrument for branding and global positioning.

Highlights

Diversity as competitive advantage: The emphasis on the representation of various forms of differences (e.g., ethnic, sexual, etc.) is strategically tailored to navigate the distinct economic, cultural, and political pressures that the streamer encounters in the market in which it operates.

Diversity as differentiation: Netflix often presents itself as a progressive actor committed to leveling the playing field in the global entertainment industry. This blending of social responsibility and market logic becomes key to how Netflix differentiates itself from its competitors.

Diversity as disruption: Through its emphasis on diversity, Netflix often positions itself as a challenger to legacy media, a player redefining what qualifies as 'local', high-quality content, and who counts as 'diverse'. This approach increasingly redefines benchmarks of quality, relevance, and local success, reshaping local creatives' expectations about what television should look like and whom it should represent.

Diversity: a shared ideal? In markets where the representation of specific identities aligns with public sentiment, Netflix amplifies this message by presenting itself as a responsible and progressive cultural partner. However, when commercial gains and market access are threatened, Netflix's emphasis on diversity seems to considerably weaken.

1. Netflix: A wind of change?

Original productions such as the UK teen drama *Sex Education* (2019-2023) or the French film *Banlieusards* (2019) are often used in Netflix's communication and rhetoric to present the streamer as **the wind of change** in a global film and television industry that has long been criticized for its lack of inclusion.

This narrative of Netflix as a wind of change is especially noticeable following the publication of its first diversity report. The report shows that, in 2021, Netflix is outpacing the global entertainment industry when it comes to the representation and inclusion of marginalized communities, both on and off screen.

This report appears in a critical context: at the socio-cultural level, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed longstanding racial and social injustices, while the rise of conservative policies increasingly targets civil rights and liberties. At the industry level, the streaming revolution is underway, with most business models shifting from advertiser-driven to subscription-based, relying on direct relationships with paying consumers. Meanwhile, Netflix is expanding globally and increasingly using its commitment to diversity and inclusion as part of that expansion story.

Source: [Inclusion Takes Root at Netflix: Our First Report](#). *Illustrations by Ndubisi Okoye.*

The study of Netflix's emphasis on diversity shows that diversity for Netflix is not merely an aesthetic or ethical commitment; it is a **strategic instrument of power** used to drive transnational expansion, consolidate its legitimacy within national industries, and navigate geopolitical pressures.

2. Netflix's diversity strategy as competitive advantage

Diversity sits at the core of Netflix's competitive strategy. The streamer has built a **strong brand around inclusion and representation**, presenting itself as more forward-thinking than legacy media players. In an industry often criticized for being slow to change, this positioning helps Netflix stand out. Netflix's commitment to diversity and inclusion is not merely a statement of values; **it is primarily a business strategy**.

By highlighting representation across genders, languages, and cultures, Netflix differentiates itself from its competitors and strengthens its appeal to a broad and diverse audience.

Embracing diversity becomes a way to attract subscribers, retain viewers, and build cultural relevance.

Importantly, Netflix does not apply this strategy in the same way everywhere. The streamer adapts it messaging and investment in diversity and inclusion depending on the national and political context. In countries with strong local production industries, the emphasis is often on the support for 'authentic' and 'local' storytelling. In highly competitive markets, diversity is frequently framed as creative innovation and openness to new voices.

At the same time, this strategy has yielded **tangible benefits in some contexts**. Expanded commissioning practices have created new opportunities for creators who were previously excluded from mainstream film and television production. Additionally, the emphasis on diverse storytelling has, to some extent, increased the visibility and participation of communities that are rarely represented in global media.

3. Netflix's diversity strategy as a strategy of distinction

Netflix frequently presents itself as a **progressive force** in the global entertainment industry, providing creators from diverse regions with greater visibility and allowing local stories to reach international audiences. This narrative is central to how Netflix distinguishes itself from legacy media and rival streamers.

This approach blends **social responsibility with commercial strategy**. Netflix persistently frames its investment in underrepresented voices, regional storytelling, and locally rooted production practices as evidence of its commitment to social responsibility and cultural inclusion.

Yet, this framing is also a deliberate act of **competitive differentiation**: by claiming to empower creators and elevate marginalized narratives, Netflix constructs an image of itself as an actor capable of widening the politics of representation, where traditional players have encountered structural limitations. This narrative helps the streamer obscure the extent to which these investments are closely aligned with commercial objectives and regulatory constraints.

4. Netflix's diversity strategy to challenge the status quo

Through its emphasis on diversity, Netflix presents itself as a **challenger to traditional broadcasters and legacy media institutions**. It often portrays its platform as more representative, and more in tune with contemporary audiences' expectations. In so doing, it increasingly redefines what counts as 'local', what qualifies as high quality content, and who is recognized as 'diverse'. Local stories are primarily valued for their ability to travel, as success becomes tied to global rankings and algorithmic visibility. At the same time, diversity becomes a **visible and marketable set of differences** that can be scaled across territories.

This reframing reshapes expectations within local creative industries regarding how difference is and *should* be represented on national television. Diversity is increasingly associated with portraying aspects of difference that align with global formats and storytelling conventions designed to resonate beyond national markets. This shift creates a **growing pressure** on legacy media institutions, such as **Public Service Media**, which are increasingly judged against representational standards set by global streaming services.

5. When diversity ceases to be a shared ideal…

In markets where inclusive representation aligns with public sentiment, regulatory frameworks or government priorities, Netflix actively promotes its commitment to diversity, emphasizing

socially progressive narratives and positioning itself as a responsible cultural partner investing in local productions.

However, the consistency of this commitment starts to waver when **market access or revenue streams are at risk**. In several jurisdictions, Netflix has removed episodes, edited content, or limited the visibility of certain storylines following government requests or regulatory pressures.

This pattern becomes more significant as Netflix grows larger and becomes more deeply embedded in national and global media systems. Potential consolidation moves—such as a possible merger with Warner Bros. Discovery—and distribution partnerships with legacy broadcasters like the French cable operator Canal+ may increase **Netflix's sensitivity to political and geopolitical pressures**. Moreover, competition among international streamers to gain a first-mover advantage has led to strong investment in domestic markets worldwide. However, the same pressure to consolidate and generate profit has also meant lower commissions and less willingness to take risks. It remains unclear whether global streamers will show the same level of commitment to equal representation and inclusivity, especially during times of geopolitical strain or market saturation.

6. Key recommendations and lessons learned

The politics of diversity is inseperable from the economics of streaming.
- Local producers and creatives should be cautious about assuming that Netflix's emphasis on cultural conversations and diversity can be directly applied to local productions.   - While the streamer strongly promotes stories addressing identity politics, social change, and inclusion, these conversations are often aimed at **reaching audiences across multiple territories** at once.   - Local conversations about representation are often more complex, rooted in specific political histories, linguistic divides or institutional dynamics.   - Producers should recognize that Netflix's ability to turn issues of representation into global cultural conversations is inseparable from its **global scale and economic leverage**.   - Regional industries, by contrast, must content with much narrower audience bases, and more fragile funding structures.   - As a result, the terms under which diversity and the politics of representation become debated, visible and circulated cannot be separated from **the economics of streaming.**
Balancing universal reach with targeted appeal.
- A key lesson for local broadcasters operating in increasingly fragmented media environments is the need to reconsider **how to maintain universal reach within limited financial margins** while meaningfully addressing **audience segments historically underserved and unreached by national media**.   - The expansion of Netflix's diversity strategy has reshaped expectations within local production ecosystems.   - Many creatives now look to successful productions such as *Sex Education* (2019-2023) as evidence that audience groups historically considered too small or too difficult to reach can, in fact, be successfully addressed.   - For broadcasters operating with limited resources, this does not imply expanding output across an ever-growing number of identity segments. Instead, **reassessing commissioning decisions** and recognizing **the value of investing in audiences**

once considered unreachable can strengthen both public value at home and the wider visibility of national storytelling beyond its borders.

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