

Stranger Tools: Exploring methodological approaches to assessing prominence and discoverability

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Introduction

In recent years, media policy in Europe and beyond has set its sights on the growing concerns regarding the prominence and discoverability of works on video-on-demand (VOD) services (Farchy et al., 2022; Lobato and Scarlata, 2022; Mazzoli, 2020). In the European Union, the promotion of European works has extended from content quotas to requirements for the prominence and discoverability of said works in online catalogues. National regulators are still in the process of implementing and updating these measures, a process that is contributing to ongoing debates over content prioritisation and cultural diversity (García Leiva, 2024). The discoverability of audiovisual works in VOD catalogues presents several challenges, not only for regulators but also for media research. These include the volume and complexity of data and metadata used to organise offerings; the routes to their consumption; limited transparency and accountability regarding personalized recommendations and algorithmic filtering; and unfair competition derived from self-preferencing exercised by powerful players (García Leiva, 2020; Iordache et al., 2023).

In this contribution, we discuss the findings of an exploratory study conducted in October 2023, aimed at developing a set of tools for the assessment of prominence and discoverability of European works. The study concerns the catalogues of four US-based SVOD services: Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV+ and Disney+, both in Spain and in Belgium. To this end, we conducted a mapping of the placement and positioning of European and domestic audiovisual titles, in the week after they were added to the corresponding catalogues (cf. JustWatch). The findings were analysed in connection to the services' content strategies and consumption affordances, to determine potential ways forward in researching factors that influence content prominence and discoverability.

Method

First, we compiled a database of titles that were added to the services in two markets, Spain and Belgium, according to JustWatch. We added more information on the European non-domestic and domestic titles from JustWatch and IMDb, such as title in original language and as shown on JustWatch; release year; format (fiction film, fiction series, docu-series, documentary film, animation series, animation film, entertainment series, entertainment film/one-off); country(ies) of origin (and therefore co-productions); language(s) of production; number of episodes and of seasons added (when relevant).

In the seven days following the addition of these titles, we searched for the European titles added to the corresponding catalogues twice per week. We recorded our search by taking

screenshots of the landing page and the two successive pages that loaded after scrolling twice to the right. The entire page, from top to bottom, was included in each screenshot. These were used for subsequent data collection and analysis.

When one of the titles in our dataset was found on the interface, the placement and labelling were noted in detail, particularly indicating if it was present in the hero-board, in a row, or in intermediary banners. Based on previous research and industry practices, we grouped the most frequently encountered labels for rows and banners according to a series of categories: novelty, recommendations, popularity, originals/exclusives, genre/format, origin, and other special categories.

Finally, titles added to the catalogues according to JustWatch, but not present anywhere in the sample, were sought using the search tool, as well as consulting the Collections tabs/pages in the menu, where available. The titles were first sought in their original language, followed by the translation in the profile language (Spanish/Dutch), and then in English or other national languages (e.g., French in Belgium). This was conducted at the end of the study to avoid influencing placement and positioning of titles being added on an ongoing basis through personalised recommendations. Titles only found by intentionally searching for them were noted together with any peculiarities observed in the process.

We used new user accounts and did not consume/click on any titles, in order to limit personalisation. But, even if a certain level of algorithmic curation occurred, the aim of the study was mainly to detect patterns across the services, considering their diverse contexts, including business models, the organisation of interfaces and technological affordances, catalogue and content strategies.

Findings

Content found: prominence of new releases and Originals/Exclusives

Based on our analysis of titles that were most recurrently found, we identified a series of patterns, including the fact that most were recently released (2023) and found predominantly in the same set of categories of rows and banners. Thus, on all services in both countries, titles were recurrently found in the categories Originals/Exclusives and Novelty, as well as, to a lesser extent, Popularity and Genre/Format. The category Recommendations (e.g., Recommended for you, You might also like) was used, but not widely, as the accounts were not used to watch any content, therefore limiting the degree of personalisation. Netflix distinguished itself as the only SVoD using the categories Origin: domestic (e.g., Belgian movies, series in Flemish, Films and series in Spanish; With a Spanish accent) and Special categories (e.g., BAFTA winners, Women behind the camera) as predominant row locations for European titles.

A closer look at the countries of origin reveals that among the 15 titles made more prominent on the Belgian catalogues, none was domestic. Contrary to that, 10 out of 18 prominent titles in the SVoD catalogues in Spain were Spanish (co-)productions. Since the number of European titles found four or more times in the catalogues was rather similar, a plausible explanation for this difference can be found in the number of titles produced by Amazon Prime Video and Netflix in Spain. Our analysis shows that Original/Exclusive titles are heavily promoted on the landing pages, not only in specific rows and categories, but also in hero-boards.

Based on the titles added in the sample month, the Netflix catalogues displayed the most diversified strategy. Very few European titles were made prominent on Amazon Prime Video and

Disney+, and only one in the case of Apple TV+. Furthermore, we found that Disney+ and Apple TV+ offerings only gave prominence to serialized content, generally a weekly episode of the same title. It is also worth noting that among all the European titles added to the catalogues (domestic and non-domestic), very few made it to the corresponding hero-board in the 7 days after their inclusion. Our mapping revealed a series of strategic decisions to prioritize content, mainly focused on Original/Exclusive titles; US and UK content across services, but also domestic in the larger Spanish market; recently released content; and newly added (older) titles that were likely to be popular (e.g., *James Bond*, *The Martian*).

Content searched: affordances influencing prominence and discoverability

At the end of our sample month, we also considered the existence and placement of so-called ‘collections’ in the menus of the services, and the use of the search tool. These are key dimensions in researching prominence mechanisms, as well as part of policy recommendations for enhancing the discoverability of European titles.

The Netflix menus included one ‘European’ (as well as one ‘Española’ in Spain) collection for series and another for films. European content was also widely present on the Netflix homepage throughout our study, also through dedicated rows that highlight the country of origin and language. Amazon Prime Video had a section called ‘Made in Europe’ in its top menu, whereas collections found on the homepage of Disney+ did not refer to country of origin, with the exception of ‘Películas y series con Ñ’ in Spain. Unlike the rest, Apple TV+ presented a minimalistic interface with no top menu and few collections featured on the homepage, generally not linked to country of origin.

In our final step, we used the search tool for all the European titles we did not find in the screenshots. Surprisingly, a good deal of titles were not easily found. Of the four services, Netflix had the most sophisticated and intuitive search tool, leading to a higher return of (correct) results. The search was not limited to the exact title or profile language. Thus, searches could be made not only for titles in different languages but also by content language (‘French movies’) or other categories/keywords (e.g., directors or actors). Our findings highlight two important considerations for content discoverability: both search results and available offerings vary depending on the profile language chosen on a country catalogue. For example, some of the titles added to Netflix in Belgium could not be found when searching in the Dutch-language profile. But additional searches in the French- and English-language profiles returned the titles sought. On Netflix, this was mainly related to availability determined by licensing deals for the different territories. On Amazon Prime Video this was mainly due to its rather rudimentary search tool, which required the exact title in the language the work was added, in order to return the correct result. This is particularly problematic for multilingual markets and for titles in small market languages (like the Czech series *Vzteklina* in the Spanish catalogue), because the user cannot know the language in which the content was added to the service. On Disney+, a new search page opens automatically showing pre-determined ‘Collections’. On Apple TV+, results always present titles in four rows which include content not necessarily ‘similar’ to the one searched for.

Stranger tools and implications for assessment

Our mapping of European (non-)domestic content revealed a set of key prominence mechanisms, such as: placement in the hero-board—only assigned to titles labelled as Originals/Exclusives, and placement in categories of rows referring to originality/exclusivity and

novelty. Popularity and genre/format featured to a lesser extent. By using new user accounts, and thus ‘limited personalisation’, we believe that the priorities identified in the content made prominent were primarily editorially and location-driven.

Our explorative study revealed a series of strategic decisions to prioritize content. Prominence was given to titles that were likely (or wanted) to be popular, i.e. Originals/Exclusives titles and UK/US content, as well as domestic in the case of a big market like Spain. Recently released content was also more visible on the landing pages, as were new episodes of serialized content. This must also be considered in light of industry practices, as services that generally add full seasons, such as Netflix, may limit their prominence according to novelty and their respective popularity, should prominence be extended by Top 10/Trending categories.

Catalogue configuration remains important, both in terms of composition (number and format of titles), as well as appearance and interface layout. In cases where investment in European content was limited to US/UK (co-)productions, this was generally more prominently featured on the landing page. Once available, the catalogue interfaces, including layout, affordances, and obstacles, continue to play a key role in content discoverability.

Our findings also shed light on a set of constraints that could lead prominence mechanisms to have little effect on the discoverability of content. Among them, the existence of intermediate banners and rows can make catalogue navigation more cumbersome, as is the case with the numerous rows on Amazon Prime Video, which only include content to rent or buy, or serve as ads for additional services. The labelling of collections was often too general and sometimes misleading, as not all the titles in the European collections were of European origin; some may have simply been shot in Europe or included European cast members. Ill-designed search tools that are insufficiently intuitive did not facilitate finding content in different languages. Menu designs did not facilitate an understanding of the offering composition or its organisation. And finally, more dynamic interfaces change their landing page upon loading/refreshing, which could help promote more titles in the hero-board but also the order of rows and tiles.

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