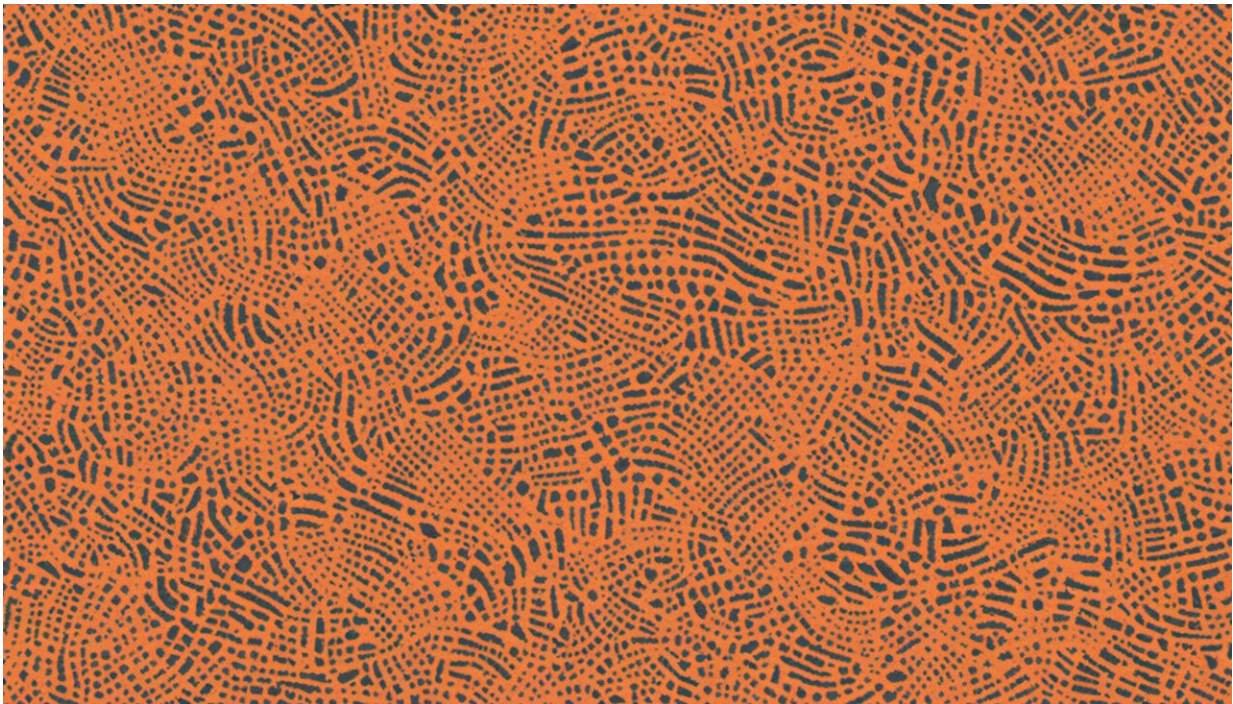


Are we streaming into political participation through a personalized, on-demand TV diet?

October 31 2016, by Jacob Groshek



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Media and scholarly reports have linked the binge-watching of streaming television to personal health problems. The effects of heavy use of platforms such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime have been reported to include [depression](#), [chronic illness](#), [weight gain](#), [sleep disorders](#) and even a [suffering sex life](#).

In addition, media researchers have specifically suggested that watching Netflix has potentially serious consequences for the [health of democracy](#). Their findings indicate that spending more time with online entertainment, such as streaming television, posting selfies, listening to music and playing video games online can entrench authoritarian attitudes and reduce citizens' interest in politics.

But don't forego the last several episodes of "[Stranger Things](#)" to switch over to the news just yet. In a recently published study, we found that streaming television may actually facilitate important forms of human interaction, like participating in politics.

Our research found that [people who stream television more frequently](#) were more involved in politics, both online and offline, than people who streamed less TV. No matter what they watched, whether comedy or drama or fantasy, streaming-video viewers were more engaged politically than people who watched the news on broadcast or cable TV. This included making campaign contributions, donating to or volunteering for a campaign, subscribing to a political email list, writing letters to the editor or blog posts, or attending organized political activities like public hearings, town hall meetings or rallies.

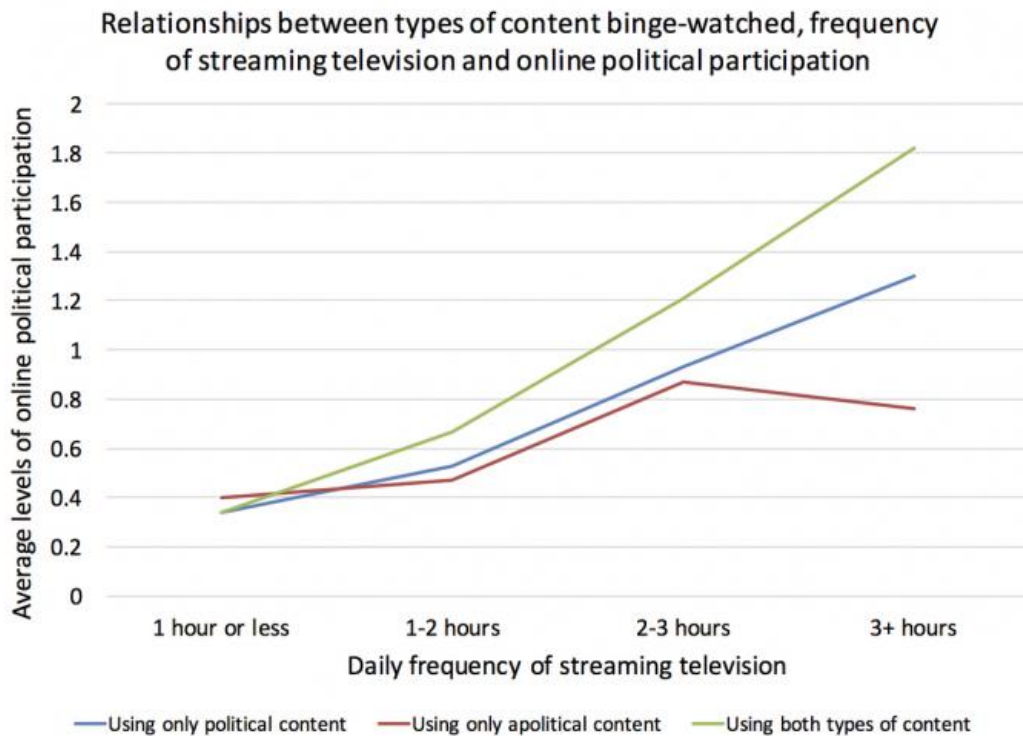
Active selection and viewing is key

In our generally representative nationwide online survey of just over 1,100 American respondents, more frequent streaming of television was not significantly related to any demographics other than age. While we did find that younger people tend to stream more TV than older people, we found active streamers among people of all income and education levels, both genders and varying political party affiliations.

These findings suggest that engaging with streaming platforms, which use algorithms to personalize content options to users, is a substantively

different activity from simply seeing "[what's on](#)" broadcast or [cable television](#). Rather than simply watching in the more passive model of traditional TV consumption, streaming viewers are using a system that lets them watch whatever they want, whenever and wherever they choose (assuming they have a suitable internet connection). They must, therefore, more actively choose what they watch. They also have more control over their options, unlike traditional TV, where broadcasters decide what to show.

Our study asked respondents not only whether they had binge-watched streaming television, but also what programs they had watched. If they reported bingeing on certain shows, namely "[House of Cards](#)," "[Orange Is the New Black](#)" or "[Homeland](#)," we grouped them as streaming "political" content. Likewise, if they indicated watching three or more episodes in a row of "[The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt](#)," "[The Walking Dead](#)" or "[Game of Thrones](#)," we grouped them as watchers of "apolitical" content. Of course, if individuals reported bingeing on both types of shows, we added them to a "both" category that comprised the heaviest users of streaming television.



Credit: Jacob Groshek, Author provided

We found that individuals who streamed content – of any type – more frequently also reported higher levels of political participation. Only when people were streaming apolitical content for three or more hours did their online political participation decline, and even then only slightly. This means that those who stream television more frequently are actually more active politically than those who stream television less frequently or not at all.

Entertaining TV can facilitate political action

Our results align with previous research. Scholars have found that watching reality TV actually [triggers political talk online](#), for example. Studies on [late-night comedy](#) and [political satire](#) have also indicated that entertaining television content can encourage people to be more politically interested and engaged.

This connection between streaming television and political participation, we feel, certainly warrants more attention in our [hybrid media system](#) where television experiences are increasingly on-demand, nonhierarchical and highly personalized. Users now decide what, when and where to watch television via an array of algorithmically informed and internet-enabled devices.

Online streaming is therefore part of a sea change in the creation and consumption of television. In the last year alone, Netflix reported that its subscribers cumulatively streamed over [42.5 billion hours](#) of content. (This does not take into account the millions of subscriptions to Hulu, Amazon Prime and other services.) But even at this level of viewership, media itself is rarely just "good" or "bad" for democratic politics. And with relatively few studies done so far, it is simply too soon to say whether streaming online TV displaces or [enhances](#) civic and political engagement.

This point is especially important in this election season, when the [presidential debates were the most-watched political live streams ever](#) and users are streaming [more](#) than ever before. Moreover, streaming television itself is also becoming a primary source of original news and political content through apps like [Newsy](#) and [Local Now](#).

Our evidence thus leads us to believe that how people access and engage television content is as important as what they watch. We do not argue that streaming television is causing [political participation](#) to increase: Our data are too limited to prove that at this stage.

But we do argue that streaming television benefits from a [social media logic](#) in a media ecosystem where recommendations, popularity and sharing determine user experiences. People who use communication technologies, namely social media, in this way tend to consistently participate [more in civic and political activities](#).

Therefore, from a political standpoint at least, feel free to binge-watch another episode or series. Odds are that you'll still participate politically and probably to a greater extent than others who stream less or simply "watch" the news on broadcast or cable [television](#).

More information: Jacob Groshek et al. Netflix and Engage? Implications for Streaming Television on Political Participation during the 2016 US Presidential Campaign, *Social Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.3390/socsci5040065](#)

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Are we streaming into political participation through a personalized, on-demand TV diet? (2016, October 31) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-10-streaming-political-personalized-on-demand-tv.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.