Geoblocking and Global Video Culture
ed. by Ramon Lobato and James Meese
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Geoblocking and Global Video Culture is the eighteenth (open-access) volume in the Theory on Demand series of readers published by the Institute of Network Cultures. The topic addressed in this edited collection, the result of a 'collaborative research experiment', has clearly much in common with the research interests to which Lobato has already devoted some important and successful books, such as *Shadow Economies of Cinema* and *The Informal Media Economy*. In this volume, edited with James Meese, similar interests in the informal, alternative, un-authorized, piratical ways of experiencing (digital) video content are considered under a specific light: that of geography. This approach shapes the whole volume, starting from the Introduction, which declares the volume's intent to investigate a 'cultural geography of video streaming' of sorts. In fact, certain observations (some more explicitly geographical than others) on the mappability — and unmappability — of 'subterranean' video distribution and consumption, which 'fall through the cracks of the measurement system and are rendered invisible', were already present in Lobato's previous books.

The volume is divided into two parts: the first, *Perspectives on Geoblocking*, is dedicated to many cultural, legal, historical and theoretical aspects of the phenomenon, and the second, *Circumvention Case Studies*, provides several useful examples of circumvention in nine different countries, both 'unfree' and 'privileged' — China, Australia, Turkey, Sweden, Malaysia, Brazil, Iran and the United States.

The book is very accurate in its understanding of the specificities of the regulations and localized blocking practices (in-line filtering, DNS tampering, keyword filtering, URL blacklisting, broadband speed limitations…), and its outline of their origins in both state and market economy demands. Geo-filtering is not only the aberrant prerogative of authoritarian regimes, but also, for example, an instrument that enables the windowing mechanism at the basis of the global distribution system of audio-visual content, which in turn enforces market segmenting strategies that maximize profit, e.g. by customizing the offerings of video platforms in different territories (Cameran Ashraf and Luis Felipe Alvarez León's chapter addresses this process). The volume moreover includes a detailed description of the relationship between geoblocking and legal compliance – that

is to say, how it can be considered as a way 'to comply with laws that create territorially-limited rights and responsibilities' (see Marketa Trimble's chapter).

The various possibilities of circumvention (VPNs, DNS proxies, location-masking browser plug-ins…) are also attentively examined in the book, from the consumers' point of view; in relation to certain physical precedents from the pre-digital era, from a media-archaeological perspective (in Roland Burke's chapter); and even in comparison to material practices of border-crossing and tunnelling in the literal sense of the words (in Juan Llamas-Rodiguez's chapter). While practices of circumvention are also addressed at length in the first part of the volume (and particularly in the chapters dealing with live-streaming apps and media sport, written by Adam Rugg and Benjamin Burroughs, James Meese and Aneta Podkalicka, and Florian Hoof), such practices are scrutinized and compared in greater detail in the second part through specific case studies of different nations (the authors are Jinying Li, Çigdem Bozdag, Chris Baumann, Sandra Hanchard, Vanessa Mendes Moreira de Sa, Hadi Sohrabi and Behzad Dowran, Fidel A. Rodriguez, Evan Elkins, and the two editors).

The morale of the volume apparently consists in a broad celebration — that nonetheless accounts for the multiple forms and sides of the phenomenon — of the open internet and its liberating qualities, in the framework of an opposition between ground-level (good) tactics and top-down (bad) strategies. That said, Ashraf and Alvarez León's chapter and Lobato's own Introduction argue that this is a narrow interpretation of the question. However, the whole book seems permeated by a sense of antipathy toward blockage practices — intended as forms of closure, control, censorship or surveillance — or indeed any attempt at territorializing cyberspace, that is, at building digital borders equivalent to the offline and physical ones between different nations. At the same time, circumvention and geo-evasion practices appear to gain the editors' and authors' sympathy, and their mainstream diffusion comes across as desirable.

It is perhaps possible to voice a few criticisms regarding precisely this fundamental faith in the emancipatory deterritorialization of the free web, or indeed a similar faith in the possibility to erode 'the link between IP address, location and identity', which VPNs (and other circumvention tactics) seem to promise.

First, we might observe that this negative conception of geoblocking takes for granted a 'geography of domination', a concept we borrow from the French school of geography and sociology of the last century. In the same way that urbanization, after the Second World War, was assisted by the creation and diffusion of a widespread idea of rural backwardness on an imaginary level (and through the 'urban' media), so today the 'soft power' of the nations that enjoy the first market windows of video distribution can contribute to the creation of anxiety and impatience among other 'commercially secondary' audiences. This is a key question: beyond the specific cases of China, Iran, Turkey and Cuba generally, there is a wider perception among those who 'geo-evade' — in the Western world too — that they are doing something progressive if not politically

radical, even though their real motivations lie in a sheer desire to consume entertainment and unhappiness about content unavailability. In other words, these viewers desire to be annexed to the territory of cultural hegemony. In his Introduction, Lobato tends to blur the differences between the demands of political activism and those of consumeristic pleasure; this could be accurate, but this point would doubtless require further investigation. For example, a lack of windowing policies would constitute a little desirable scenario culturally and economically for all but the strongest players in the game, perhaps. Indeed, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings's desire 'to end the geoblocking of their services one day' sounds like the disquieting premonition of a *Pax Romana* of video streaming, made of exclusive and global ownership of video rights, or something similar. It would be the end of geography in precisely the same way that scholars a few years ago speculated on the end of history. In other words, the ideological (geopolitical) notion of a free and frictionless internet (and its intrinsically Western character) should be taken into account in a more direct and concrete way. And before considering VPNs as the true tools of liberation, we should bear in mind Snowden's revelation (recalled a couple of times in this book) that those too are networks which are or can be controlled by the secret services.

Second, the subject of geoblocking needs to be better integrated into the larger frame of questions regarding data, its collection and its use. In the volume, this aspect sometimes emerges (together with questions about privacy, e.g. in the chapter about geo-circumvention in the U.S.), however it is never directly addressed. In fact, geo-localization and the consequent (*possible*, not inevitable) blockage of content and service availability is no more than a specific use of specific data and metadata, alongside the enormous amounts of data that are gathered and used online in more or less transparent ways by public institutions and private firms. In reality, compared to all of these data sets and their uses — e.g. profiling customers for advertising purposes — that of geoblocking is probably the most visible and obvious, and therefore one of the least sneaky and dangerous. In the end, ironically, geoblocking almost provides an epiphany, reminding us that the internet is never frictionless nor entirely anonymous, and that we constantly produce and disseminate data while online.

Of course, these two observations do not intend to diminish the importance of a well-written and solid book, but to show how *Geoblocking and Global Video Culture* could use an even broader perspective, and that its subject merits greater attention and further development still.

Ultimately, the merit of Lobato and Meese's edited volume lies in how it signals the importance of the geographical approach to the study of today's video culture – or perhaps even the geopolitical one — which is revealed to be extremely promising. It is no accident that one of the best, recent books on big data was been written by a geographer — *The Data Revolution* by Rob Kitchin.

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