Netflix, 'show-verload', and the paradox of choice in the streaming age
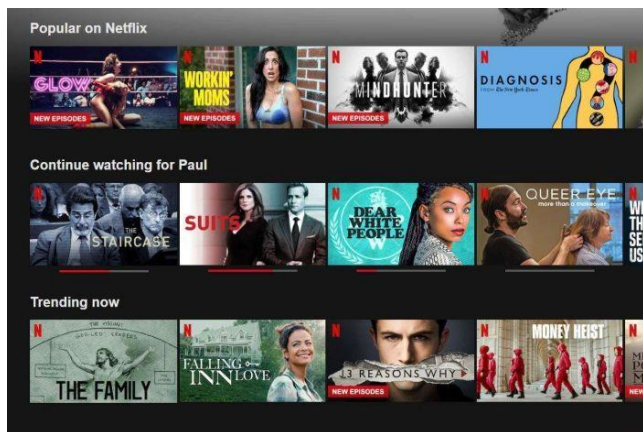
By music and pop culture reporter Paul Donoughue

Recently, I had half an hour allotted in my evening for Netflix.

I scrolled through My List, the place where you save things that look good so you can watch them later on. I scrolled through Because You Watched A Star Is Born (mostly sad Oscar-nominated dramas). I scrolled through Because You Watched The New True Crime Thing Everyone's Talking About (mostly stories about women killed by men). I scrolled through Because You Watched This Thing You Can't Remember Watching But You Definitely Did Cuz It's In The Data. I scrolled left, right, up, down. I watched a few auto-roll trailers until I got sick of auto-roll trailers and had to scroll faster, trying to outrun them.

By the time I had scrolled through what felt like the entire recorded history of video entertainment, my half hour was up. I turned the TV off and went to bed.

Too much choice can be anxiety-inducing. Choice is an extremely now thing.

In 2019, content farms aren't just St Petersburg office buildings weaponised by the Russians. They are any streaming service you care to subscribe to.

Go back 20 years and your cultural diet was metered: by how much of it you could afford, by how much of it you could store in your house. The television dealt you what it had, and you got no more.

These days, as streaming services multiply and research suggests nearly half of us subscribe to more than one, we are spoiled for choice, and I use that cliché because the adjective feels appropriate.

Last week, I put a call-out on social media asking if anyone else was experiencing what my sister refers to as **"show-verload"**.

Do you ever sit down to watch TV at night and spend the whole time scrolling Netflix/Stan/something else, and flip through all 112 million titles and recommendations, and never actually find something, and then just go to bed?

About 80 per cent of the hundreds of responses were affirmative. "Yup." "That's me." "Doesn't everyone?" Several people said it was the reason they watched so much ABC News, which was … bittersweet. There were people who scoffed, and more than a few variations of "read a book".

But many more said it was a regular occurrence — "often", "three nights a week", "most nights". Some people suggested it was reassuring to find there were other people out there like them, and to be honest, I feel the same way.

In 2004, the American psychologist Barry Schwartz released an influential book called The Paradox of Choice, which went on to become a popular TED Talk.

The gist was that when presented with too many options, we become paralysed by the fear that we will make the wrong choice. It is anticipatory regret. That fear detracts from whatever pleasure we get from choosing what we reckon is the best option.

"Consumers want to avoid feeling regret," says Adrian Camilleri, a consumer psychologist and senior lecturer in marketing at the University of Technology, Sydney, who studies judgement and decision-making. "Regret comes from choosing to invest in an option such as a new TV series that turns out to be unsatisfying. Unfortunately, consuming video is what marketers call an 'experience' good, which means that it is very hard to assess the quality until you actually experience it."

Dr Camilleri said one issue streaming services faced was not so much that they are giving viewers a mind-numbing amount of choice, because consumers generally like to have options. It's that they aren't very good at helping you choose. The search functions are poor. And while the algorithm might push things towards you based on the genre of your viewing habits, it doesn't tell you which movies are worth watching and which aren't. "Unfortunately, video streaming services rarely integrate with online reviews that consumers might use as a filter," he said.

Netflix's 'curation problem'

By not making an editorial move to highlight its best titles, TV critic Dan Barrett argues Netflix is doing little better than a Blockbuster Video, forcing its customers to wander a vast space of loosely categorised content in search of quality.

He uses the example of Mindhunter, the Netflix original crime drama from director David Fincher, the Oscar winner behind Fight Club, The Social Network and House of Cards. "David Fincher is a big deal. A David Fincher show attracts interest," Barrett wrote recently in the newsletter Always Be Watching. But you wouldn't know that as a Netflix subscriber," he says, when Mindhunter is placed in a scroller alongside a half-dozen other crime dramas, some of them buy-ins of much lesser quality.

No-one at Netflix was available for an interview, but a spokesperson said a user's individual offering was based on what they indicated they liked when they signed up, what they watch and what they give the thumbs up or down to on the service itself.

"This gives our members more control and lets them browse less and make viewing decisions faster," she said.

Work your list

Kaama Joy, the 56-year-old owner of a content marketing agency, was one of the people who replied to my cry for help. She reckons she has a Netflix hack to solve the paradox of choice. "The trick is you go in once a month and you spend an evening just putting everything into your wish list that looks vaguely doable," she told me. If she finds herself with an evening alone, that's what she does. She preloads. "That's why you need a curated list," she says.

"You know how dissatisfying it is when it's a point-of-least-resistance night, when you just need to veg? You always go to bed feeling really dissatisfied.

"My time is very precious; I work very hard. If I do that one of those nights, I just get so furious, I won't turn it on for a week."

Netflix, the biggest service of its kind in Australia by a significant margin, appears to be listening to these kinds of complaints. As it faces increasing competition for your video-on-demand dollars, it is trying to improve the way it serves up content it thinks you will like.

That may include using a set of collections curated by Netflix staff that go deeper than just genre — for example, "short and funny", "prizewinning movie picks", and others. Last month, Netflix said it was testing this new feature on the iOS app.
It's a simple idea (…) but It won't solve the problem of show-verload — there will still be too many things and not enough time — but it might make the endless scroll feel a little a less endless.