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Before the Algorithm: Human Content Acquisition, Rights Metadata, and Taste-Making in Streaming Platforms

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Abstract

Streaming platforms are often analyzed through the visible operations of their recommender systems: personalized rows, rankings, thumbnails, search results, and ”because you watched” prompts. Existing scholarship has shown that such systems participate in algorithmic taste-making, influence aesthetic choice, and shape the cultural visibility of audiovisual works. Less attention has been paid, however, to the upstream professional and institutional processes through which content becomes available for recommendation in the first place. This article introduces the concept of pre-algorithmic acquisition infrastructure to describe the human, legal, commercial, and metadata-based practices through which audiovisual works are selected, licensed, classified, localized, positioned, and made operationally available before algorithmic recommendation occurs. The term pre-algorithmic is used as an analytical distinction rather than a strict chronological claim: acquisition and commissioning may themselves be informed by platform data, but they still perform the infrastructural work of making titles legally available, metadata-enabled, and operationally actionable for future recommendation. Using a structured analytical review and conceptual framework development approach, the article proposes a five-layer model of streaming curation: acquisition curation, rights curation, metadata curation, algorithmic curation, and interface curation. It further introduces recommendation-readiness, exploitation content, exploration content, and bridge content to explain how acquisition strategy shapes what platforms can recommend, personalize, and monetize. The central argument is that algorithms personalize choice, but acquisition infrastructure produces the conditions of choice.

Keywords: streaming platforms, content acquisition, recommender systems, rights metadata, taste-making, OTT services, algorithmic curation, media industry studies

1. Introduction

Streaming platforms are often understood through the visible operations of their algorithms: personalized rows, “because you watched” prompts, ranked search results, adaptive thumbnails, and recommendation feeds. Netflix, in particular, has been widely analyzed as a paradigmatic case of algorithmic culture, where viewing behavior, ratings, user data, and computational models are converted into personalized cultural pathways (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Pajkovic, 2022). Yet every algorithmic recommendation depends on a prior catalogue condition: the audiovisual work must first be acquired, licensed, classified, localized, described, and made available. Before a streaming platform can personalize visibility, it must construct the universe of content from which visibility is possible.

Netflix's own technical account describes recommendation as a central business and product function designed to help users navigate abundance and sustain engagement (Gómez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015). This article therefore asks: How do pre-algorithmic content acquisition decisions shape what streaming platforms can recommend, personalize, and monetize? It argues that streaming taste-making is not produced by algorithms alone. It begins earlier, at the level of content acquisition, rights architecture, catalogue strategy, and metadata classification.

The term pre-algorithmic is used here as an analytical heuristic rather than a claim of strict chronological separation. Contemporary streaming industries increasingly use platform data, audience analytics, and prior recommendation outcomes to inform commissioning, licensing, and acquisition decisions (Navar-Gill, 2020). Even when upstream decisions are data-informed, however, they still perform a distinct infrastructural function: they determine which works become legally available, metadata-enabled, and operationally actionable for future recommendation.

Existing research has made algorithmic mediation increasingly visible. Vicente and Burnay's systematic review of OTT recommender-system research identifies recurring concerns around data management, viewer experience, cultural production, bias and inclusion, and platform power (Vicente & Burnay, 2024). Pajkovic (2022) shows that the Netflix Recommender System participates in taste-making through personalized rows, artwork, genre categories, and feedback loops. Chapman and Abraham (2025) argue that streaming recommendations may influence aesthetic choice through repeated low-stakes decisions that accumulate over time. These studies are essential, but they tend to begin once content is already inside the platform. This article shifts attention to the upstream professional processes through which audiovisual catalogues become algorithmically actionable.

The article introduces pre-algorithmic acquisition infrastructure as the human, legal, commercial, and metadata-based practices through which audiovisual works are selected, licensed or acquired, classified, localized, positioned, and made operationally available before algorithmic recommendation occurs. This infrastructure includes rights windows, territorial availability, platform-specific permissions, exclusivity arrangements, localization assets, genre and thematic classification, metadata enrichment, promotional usability, and assessment of a title's fit within catalogue strategy.

The central claim is that acquisition professionals function as upstream cultural intermediaries. Their work does not simply add content to a library. It defines the catalogue universe, structures the legal boundaries of circulation, and supplies item-level information through which algorithms and interfaces can later act. The framework is intended to apply across SVOD, AVOD, FAST, TVOD, and hybrid streaming services, while recognizing that the relative weight of rights, metadata, advertising, and monetization layers varies by business model.

2. Literature Review

2.1. OTT Recommender Systems and Algorithmic Mediation

Research on streaming platforms has increasingly centered on recommender systems as mechanisms for organizing audiovisual access. OTT services do not simply provide digital libraries; they structure how users encounter those libraries through search, rankings, categories, personalized rows, thumbnails, and automated suggestions. Technical accounts of large-scale recommender systems show that recommendation commonly involves multiple stages, including candidate generation, ranking, personalization, and business-oriented optimization (Gómez-Uribe & Hunt, 2015; Covington et al., 2016).

The literature has shown that recommender systems are cultural, economic, and institutional systems as

well as technical tools (Vicente & Burnay, 2024). Yet it remains heavily oriented toward algorithmic and user-facing layers. Studies often ask how recommender systems personalize content, how viewers respond to suggestions, or how recommendation affects cultural consumption. These questions are essential, but they often assume that the catalogue already exists as an available dataset. The upstream question is different: how do audiovisual works become available, classifiable, and actionable for recommendation in the first place?

2.2. Algorithmic Culture, Platformization, and Taste

The concept of algorithmic culture provides a foundation for understanding why recommender systems matter culturally. Striphas (2015) defines algorithmic culture as a condition in which computational processes increasingly participate in sorting, classification, and valuation. Hallinan and Striphas (2016) show how the Netflix Prize framed cultural recommendation as a computational problem: the prediction and personalization of taste through data. Gillespie (2014) similarly emphasizes that algorithms are embedded in institutional choices, commercial priorities, classifications, and assumptions about relevance.

Algorithmic mediation should also be situated within broader debates on platformization. Platformization refers to the penetration of platform infrastructures, economic models, and governance mechanisms into cultural and social domains (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019). Streaming platforms therefore do not simply distribute audiovisual works; they reorganize the conditions under which such works become visible, valuable, measurable, and monetizable. This also complicates the separation between acquisition and recommendation, because platform data can influence commissioning and production decisions (Navar-Gill, 2020).

The question of taste has long been central to cultural sociology. Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes taste as socially structured and connected to distinction, while Hennion (2001) emphasizes taste as active and situated performance. Streaming platforms complicate both perspectives because taste is repeatedly performed within environments structured by catalogues, metadata, interfaces, recommendations, and business models. If aesthetic choices accumulate over time (Chapman & Abraham, 2025), then upstream catalogue and metadata decisions also participate in taste formation.

2.3. Metadata, Discoverability, and Distribution

Recommender systems rely on both user data and item data. Item data describes the audiovisual work itself: genre, cast, director, language, country, release year, duration, themes, mood, format, franchise relationships, localization assets, and availability conditions. In content-based recommendation, item attributes are especially important because the system recommends works based on similarities between title properties and inferred user preferences.

The concept of discoverability is useful for understanding this process. McKelvey and Hunt define discoverability as a form of media power produced through platforms that coordinate users, content creators, and software to make content more or less engaging and visible (McKelvey & Hunt, 2019). This article extends that logic upstream by arguing that discoverability also depends on acquisition, rights, and metadata decisions made before algorithmic recommendation occurs.

Media industry studies further show why acquisition matters. Streaming platforms are distribution institutions that organize access through business models, catalogues, interfaces, and rights arrangements. Lotz (2017) emphasizes libraries and subscriber models in internet-distributed television, while Lobato (2019) shows that Netflix's global circulation remains shaped by geography, licensing markets, regulation, and national media contexts. Johnson (2019) similarly foregrounds how technology, rights, interfaces, and algorithms together control access to audiovisual content.

This argument also draws on the infrastructural turn in platform and media studies. Hesmondhalgh et al. (2023) argue that digital platforms should be understood not only as interfaces or markets, but as infrastructures that organize cultural circulation, access, and dependency. In this sense, acquisition systems, rights databases, and metadata workflows are infrastructural because they structure what can circulate through the platform before it appears as a user-facing recommendation.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

This article uses a structured analytical review and conceptual framework development approach. It is not presented as a systematic review: it does not use PRISMA-style screening, exhaustive database searches, or quantitative coding of a complete body of literature. Instead, it synthesizes relevant scholarship and industry-facing materials for the purpose of conceptual framework development. The goal is not to measure recommendation outcomes statistically, reverse-engineer a proprietary recommender system, or evaluate a specific streaming platform, but to theorize the upstream professional and institutional conditions that make recommendation possible.

3.2. Source Selection

The analysis draws on three categories of sources. The first consists of peer-reviewed academic literature on OTT recommender systems, algorithmic culture, platform television, aesthetic choice, media industry studies, cultural intermediation, and discoverability. The second consists of industry-facing materials on metadata, content discovery, rights management, advertising-supported delivery, and catalogue operations. These sources are used as documentation of professional and operational conditions under which audiovisual works become available on digital platforms. Where appropriate, the article refers to technical and industry standards, such as EIDR for audiovisual identifiers and VAST for digital video advertising metadata, as examples of how operational metadata becomes standardized across platform systems (EIDR, n.d.; IAB Tech Lab, 2024).

The third category is practice-informed professional knowledge from audiovisual content acquisition and licensing. This standpoint is not used as autobiographical evidence and does not replace scholarly analysis. Rather, it functions as an interpretive lens for identifying industry processes that are often underrepresented in recommender-system literature, including rights negotiation, platform-window assessment, localization availability, genre positioning, metadata enrichment, and catalogue strategy.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure consisted of three steps. First, the article identified what recommender-system literature treats as necessary for recommendation: catalogue availability, structured item data, platform classification systems, interface presentation, user behavior, and commercial objectives. Second, it mapped upstream professional practices that produce this environment: content selection, licensing negotiation, rights-window construction, territorial and platform availability, localization, metadata enrichment, editorial positioning, and promotional usability. Third, it developed a conceptual framework linking upstream acquisition infrastructure to downstream recommendation and taste-making. The framework is relational rather than strictly sequential: platform data can feed back into acquisition and commissioning decisions, but the analytical distinction identifies the infrastructural work that makes titles available for recommendation.

4. Results: A Framework of Pre-Algorithmic Acquisition Infrastructure

4.1. Defining Pre-Algorithmic Acquisition Infrastructure

Pre-algorithmic acquisition infrastructure refers to the human, legal, commercial, and metadata-based practices through which audiovisual works are selected, licensed, classified, localized, positioned, and made operationally available before algorithmic recommendation occurs. The term does not imply that acquisition is disconnected from algorithms or data. Rather, it identifies the upstream work that determines whether a title can later be surfaced, personalized, and monetized.

From an industry perspective, recommendation begins before the user watches. A title must enter the catalogue; be licensed for a territory, platform, business model, language, and time window; and be accompanied by usable metadata, localization assets, technical files, artwork, rights information, and promotional materials. It must be classified in ways that connect it to genres, audience segments, moods, viewing occasions, editorial collections, and similarity models. Only then can the title become part of the recommendation environment.

In AVOD and FAST environments, this infrastructural work also includes advertising-related and channel-related requirements: ad-supported sessions, linear-like channel flows, contextual advertising, brand-safety considerations, and ad-insertion constraints. These requirements do not replace acquisition, rights, and metadata curation; they modify how those layers function in advertising-supported streaming models.

4.2. Five Layers of Streaming Curation

The framework identifies five interrelated layers of streaming curation. Acquisition curation determines what enters the catalogue and which genres, countries, languages, formats, production cultures, and audience segments are represented. Rights curation determines where, when, how, and under what commercial model a title can circulate. Metadata curation transforms audiovisual works into machine-readable and user-intelligible objects. Algorithmic curation ranks, clusters, personalizes, and connects available titles. Interface curation frames the user's encounter through rows, thumbnails, rankings, categories, and promotional prompts.

These layers are analytically distinct but operationally connected. A weakness at an earlier layer can limit the effectiveness of later layers. A title with strong audience appeal may remain invisible if its rights are restricted, metadata incomplete, or genre positioning unclear. Conversely, a title with modest brand recognition may become discoverable if it is supported by rich metadata, appropriate rights, localization, and strategic catalogue positioning.

Curation layer	Main professional logic	Key question	Effect on taste-making
Acquisition curation	Selection and catalogue strategy	What enters the platform?	Defines the universe of possible choice
Rights curation	Legal and commercial availability	Where, when, and how can it circulate?	Defines the legal boundaries of visibility
Metadata curation	Classification and operational description	How is it made legible to systems and users?	Shapes discoverability and recommendation-readiness
Algorithmic curation	Personalization and ranking	Who sees what, and in what sequence?	Converts catalogue conditions into personalized pathways
Interface curation	Presentation and framing	How is the title visually and contextually presented?	Frames aesthetic expectation and user choice

This model shows that streaming taste-making is distributed. It emerges from the interaction of catalogue

strategy, rights architecture, metadata systems, algorithmic ranking, interface design, and user behavior.

4.3. Recommendation-Readiness

The framework also introduces recommendation-readiness: the extent to which an acquired title can be discovered, classified, connected, surfaced, localized, promoted, and monetized within a platform's recommendation and interface systems. In traditional acquisition analysis, a title may be evaluated by price, audience demand, genre, cast, production value, rights availability, territory, exclusivity, and competitive positioning. In streaming environments, these criteria must be supplemented by operational visibility: can this title be made recommendable?

Recommendation-readiness includes metadata depth, rights completeness, localization availability, audience pathway clarity, promotional usability, catalogue connectivity, and monetization flexibility. Technical and industry standards illustrate this operational dimension. EIDR supports consistent audiovisual identification across partners and systems, while VAST structures advertising metadata for video delivery in AVOD and FAST environments (EIDR, n.d.; IAB Tech Lab, 2024). Recommendation-readiness therefore reframes acquisition as a forward-looking platform function: the question is not only whether a title is good, affordable, or available, but whether it can function inside a platform environment.

4.4. Exploitation, Exploration, and Bridge Content

The framework distinguishes between three catalogue functions. Exploitation content refers to familiar, high-performing, genre-led, franchise-driven, star-driven, or otherwise predictable titles that reinforce established viewing patterns. It reduces uncertainty and supports retention by giving users more of what they already know they like. However, a catalogue overly dependent on exploitation content may narrow aesthetic choice and reinforce popularity bias.

Exploration content refers to niche, international, independent, festival, local, cross-genre, documentary, or culturally unfamiliar works that expand the user's aesthetic horizon. Such content can support cultural diversity, differentiation, and serendipity, but it often requires stronger metadata and clearer interface framing because users may not immediately recognize its relevance.

Bridge content occupies the space between exploitation and exploration. It connects familiar preferences to less familiar cultural objects: a familiar genre with an unfamiliar country, a recognizable actor with an independent production, a popular theme with a niche perspective, or a mainstream format with culturally specific content. Bridge content makes exploration less risky by providing recognizable entry points into unfamiliar works. Acquisition strategy therefore shapes recommendation possibilities before personalization begins, while later recommendation outcomes may feed back into future acquisition choices.

4.5. Rights Metadata as Infrastructure

Rights metadata deserves special emphasis because it links legal structure to cultural visibility. It tells the platform what can be shown, where, when, in what language, under what business model, and with what restrictions. A title may be relevant to a user's preferences, but it cannot be surfaced if the platform lacks the necessary territorial, language, platform, or window rights.

In global streaming environments, the appearance of seamless access depends on complex rights arrangements that remain invisible to the viewer (Lobato, 2019). Rights metadata therefore determines not only monetization but visibility itself. It is not merely a legal or administrative category; it is a pre-algorithmic condition of streaming taste-making.

5. Discussion

The framework suggests that recommender systems should be understood not as the origin of streaming taste-making, but as downstream systems operating on upstream catalogue conditions. This downstream language is analytical rather than mechanical: acquisition teams may use platform data and recommendation performance to inform future catalogue decisions. The framework's contribution is to identify the infrastructural function of acquisition and metadata work while acknowledging recursive data feedback loops.

Algorithms are powerful because they convert catalogue conditions into personalized pathways at scale. They decide which available titles become visible to which users, in what order, and under which interface frames. Yet the range of personalization depends on what has already been made available, legally usable, and informationally legible. A recommender system cannot create catalogue diversity where acquisition has not supplied it, cannot recommend content that rights restrictions make unavailable, and cannot create rich similarity pathways when metadata is thin or inaccurate.

Taste-making in streaming platforms is therefore distributed across acquisition professionals, rights agreements, metadata databases, localization workflows, recommender systems, interface design, and user behavior. This distributed view avoids both technological determinism, in which algorithms alone determine what users watch, and human exceptionalism, in which professional judgment alone shapes circulation. Streaming platforms operate through the interaction of both.

The concept of cultural intermediaries is useful because it directs attention to actors who mediate between production and consumption, shaping how cultural goods are classified, valued, circulated, and made meaningful (Maguire & Matthews, 2014). In streaming platforms, acquisition professionals perform this mediation upstream. They determine whether titles enter the catalogue, under what legal and territorial conditions they circulate, whether they can be localized and promoted, and whether they can connect to existing or new audience pathways.

Rights metadata should likewise be understood as both operational and cultural infrastructure. Following recent work on digital platforms and cultural infrastructure, infrastructure is understood here as the underlying systems, standards, dependencies, and organizational arrangements that make cultural circulation possible (Hesmondhalgh et al., 2023). Rights metadata is infrastructural because it does not merely describe content after the fact; it structures whether, where, when, and how content can circulate through platform systems.

Metadata is central to the construction of relevance. A film or series must be described through attributes that allow the platform to connect it to users, genres, moods, occasions, collections, and similar works. Metadata does not merely describe a work after the fact; it helps create the conditions under which the work can be recognized as relevant. Incomplete metadata can narrow recommendation pathways, misleading metadata can distort expectation, and strategically structured metadata can support bridge pathways between familiar and unfamiliar works.

The framework also has implications for aesthetic autonomy. More content does not automatically mean more autonomy. A viewer's practical freedom depends on how choices are organized, described, surfaced, contextualized, and made intelligible. Personalization should therefore be understood as only one layer of choice architecture. Aesthetic autonomy depends not only on whether the platform can personalize, but on whether catalogue and metadata infrastructure support diversity, intelligibility, discovery, and trust.

For platform studies, the framework suggests that analysis of recommender systems should move beyond visible outputs and include upstream catalogue conditions. For media industry research, it offers a way to theorize acquisition as cultural work. For professional practice, it suggests that acquisition evaluation should include not only price, rights, demand, and competitive value, but also recommendation-readiness. Cultural value and operational visibility are increasingly intertwined.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This article has several limitations. First, it is conceptual rather than empirical. It does not analyze proprietary platform data, internal recommendation models, confidential licensing contracts, or platform-specific metadata schemas. The framework should therefore be understood as an analytical model, not as a description of any specific platform's internal architecture.

Second, the article does not measure recommendation outcomes. It does not test whether titles with richer metadata are recommended more frequently, whether broader rights packages produce greater visibility, or whether bridge content increases exploratory viewing. These questions require platform data, user-behavior data, metadata records, or controlled experiments.

Third, although the framework is designed for audiovisual streaming platforms, different business models weight the layers differently. SVOD may prioritize retention and catalogue depth, while AVOD and FAST may prioritize session length, ad inventory, channel flow, and advertising metadata. Future research could compare platform models or use interviews with acquisition executives, rights managers, metadata specialists, editors, and recommender-system designers to test and refine the framework.

Finally, future research should examine the ethical and policy implications of pre-algorithmic acquisition infrastructure. Debates about algorithmic transparency often focus on how recommendation systems rank content. This article suggests that transparency should also include catalogue-level questions: which works are acquired, which are excluded, how rights restrictions shape availability, how metadata frames cultural identity, and how business models influence visibility.

7. Conclusion

Streaming platforms are commonly associated with algorithmic personalization. Users encounter platforms through rows, thumbnails, rankings, search results, "because you watched" prompts, and personalized recommendations. These visible features make algorithms appear to be the primary engines of streaming taste-making. This article has argued that such a view is incomplete. Before algorithms can personalize taste, platforms must first acquire, license, classify, localize, describe, and operationalize audiovisual works.

The article introduced pre-algorithmic acquisition infrastructure to describe the practices that make content available for recommendation. The framework shows that acquisition professionals play a more significant cultural role than is often acknowledged: they define the universe of possible choice, while rights decisions determine legal boundaries of visibility and metadata decisions make content machine-readable and user-intelligible. Algorithmic systems then personalize this prepared environment, while interface design frames the user's encounter with content.

The article also proposed recommendation-readiness, exploitation content, exploration content, and bridge content as concepts for explaining how acquisition strategy shapes not only what platforms can offer, but what users may discover. Bridge content is especially important because it connects familiar preferences to unfamiliar cultural objects, making exploration less risky and more actionable for recommendation systems.

The central conclusion is that algorithms personalize choice, but acquisition infrastructure produces the conditions of choice. Recommender systems are powerful, but they are not self-sufficient. They operate on catalogues shaped by human professionals, legal agreements, commercial strategies, metadata structures, and distribution constraints. The algorithm is not the beginning of streaming taste-making. It is one of its downstream expressions.

Declarations

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