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# The audience strikes back

## Agency and accountability in audiovisual translation and distribution

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Newer distribution models and delivery mechanisms for audiovisual content have, over the years, contributed to the emergence of different dynamics between the consumers (or end-users) of these audiovisual texts and their providers on a global scale. Fans and casual viewers alike have now become more vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction with subtitled or dubbed content that is not up to their standards. In this article, I take a macro-level approach to audience studies in audiovisual translation (AVT) by reflecting on if and how viewers' perspectives are being incorporated into streaming platforms' policies and sense of accountability towards their subscribers. By analysing a recent case study from Netflix Italia – the Japanese anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Netflix 2019–2020) – I consider the ways in which the streaming platform took on board the subscribers' complaints about the quality of the Italian adaptation and modified its offering accordingly. This new dynamic seems to suggest that distributors who are more sensitive to their subscribers' needs may foster a process of co-creation and meaning-making of the localized content that concretely acknowledges the consumers' point of view. At the same time it raises issues concerning the impact that the opinions of viewers who are mostly untrained in the standards and practices of AVT might ultimately have in localization and distribution choices.

**Keywords:** dubbing, subtitling, audiovisual translation (AVT), streaming, audience agency

### 1. Introduction

When the hugely popular TV series *Game of Thrones* came to an end in May 2019 after an eight-season run (HBO 2011–2019), fans worldwide did not hesitate to express their disappointment and outright displeasure at how the series' creators,

David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, had ended the show, particularly when it came to some of the main characters' development. The outcry was such that a petition was started on the website [www.change.org](http://www.change.org) to "Remake Game of Thrones Season 8 with competent writers" (Dylan 2019). The brief motivation for the petition did not mince words: "David Benioff and D. B. Weiss have proven themselves to be woefully incompetent writers when they have no source material (i.e., the books) to fall back on. This series deserves a final season that makes sense. Subvert my expectations and make it happen, HBO!" (ibid.). While HBO reportedly did not give any serious consideration to the possibility of reshooting the final season (Caulfield 2019), the fact that, at the time of writing, over 1 850 000 people have signed the petition speaks to a new kind of consumer agency and entitlement that audiences have begun expressing in the last few years about audiovisual products, particularly – but not limited to – high-profile, high-visibility productions. Viewers everywhere have been claiming the right to have a say in decision-making processes or at least to express their feedback *a posteriori*. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, this also became apparent with the Italian adaptation, with fans criticizing the adaptation choice for the famous line "Hold the door!" in episode 5 of the show's sixth season entitled "The Door" (Bender 2016). As it remains almost impossible to describe the substantial challenge that this pivotal scene posed to audiovisual translators worldwide without incurring spoilers, suffice it to say that the translated line needed to have a rhyming affinity with the name of one of the characters, Hodor. The solution found by Matteo Amandola, the Italian dialogue adapter, was *Trova un modo!* 'Find a way!', which, albeit semantically different from the English version, pragmatically checked all the boxes for a successful adaptation in this case. As Amandola noted in an interview in 2016 (Grossi 2016), while the attention that this incident gained is a sign that the show's viewers are passionate and enthusiastic, the increased scrutiny that AVT professionals undergo because of the opinions shared online about their work undoubtedly "put us under further pressure, which if, on the one hand, pushes us to give it our all, on the other hand adds to the stress of meeting deadlines and to performance anxiety in the dubbing studio."<sup>1</sup>

This increased scrutiny, levelled at both distributors and localizers of audiovisual products, seems to be an inevitable – and hardly surprising – corollary of some aspects of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), particularly the idea that audiences have, in many cases, undertaken the role of prosumers (Toffler 1980), both producers and consumers of audiovisual content. More specifically, newer distribution models and delivery mechanisms for audiovisual content have, over the years, contributed to the emergence of different dynamics between the con-

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1. Unless stated otherwise, all translations of Italian citations are my own.

sumers (or end-users) of audiovisual texts and their providers on a global scale. When it comes to the linguistically and culturally mediated versions of this content, viewers have been progressively more able and prone to compare subtitled and dubbed versions to their source texts, first thanks to the increased access to original and multiple localized versions provided by DVDs and, more recently, with subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) services making this process even easier and more customized.

Until a relatively short time ago – especially in traditionally dubbing countries – audiences had limited simultaneous access to the original and translated versions of a TV series or film and therefore played a seemingly more passive role as receivers of mediated content. However, fans and casual viewers alike now have easier access to both original versions and online tools such as blogs, vlogs, and social media, which have proved to be crucial instruments in their becoming more vocal when it comes to expressing their dissatisfaction with subtitled or dubbed content that is not up to their standards. It could be argued that, similarly to fansubbing, these changes have brought about a new kind of awareness and sense of agency for some viewers (Barra 2009), who often use social media and other online outlets to critique choices made in the translation and adaptation process of some audiovisual productions (Bucaria 2019), thus claiming for themselves a largely unprecedented gatekeeping role. The flip side of this is, of course, whether or not distributors and localizers of audiovisual content on a global scale have become more open to audience feedback and the idea of being held accountable for their role and work in this new paradigm.

In this article, I take a macro-level approach to audience studies in audiovisual translation (AVT) by reflecting on the ways in which viewers' perspectives are being incorporated into streaming services' policies and sense of accountability towards their subscribers. By analyzing a recent case study from Netflix Italia – the Japanese anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (NGE) (Netflix 2019–2020) – I will look at how the streaming platform took on board the subscribers' complaints about the quality of the Italian adaptation and modified its offering accordingly. It will be suggested that this new model seems to foster a process in which the consumers of audiovisual content – if given the chance – can essentially become co-creators of the final output, while at the same time issues will be addressed concerning the impact that the opinions of viewers who are mostly untrained in the standards and practices of AVT might ultimately have in localization and distribution choices.

## 2. Viewers with agency

Audience agency has been a hotly debated issue in the disciplines of media and communication studies for almost a century.<sup>2</sup> One of the first theories to be put forward at the onset of mass media communication in the 1920s and 1930s was the ‘hypodermic needle’ model (Lasswell [1938] 2013), according to which the media are able to inject an idea or message directly into audiences’ minds and to affect them immediately as part of an inescapable process. This theory implies a view of the audience as a passive and mostly vulnerable mass and was subsequently disproved and abandoned as simplistic. In the subsequent decades, the field moved on to more comprehensive models in which “mass communication is understood as a circuit of articulated practices – production, circulation, reception, reproduction – each of which represents a site of meaning-making” (Livingstone 2003, 8). The intersections of audience studies with other disciplines – for example television studies and cultural studies (e.g., Hall [1973] 2007; Morley 1992), and gender studies (e.g., Mulvey [1975] 2003; Ang 1991) – started to create more space to differentiate among kinds of viewers and their engagement with media culture and to address issues such as audience power and resistance (Fiske 1987) versus dominant cultural values and media corporate interests. More recently, Jenkins (2006) redefined the role of media audiences by popularizing the now seminal concept of ‘participatory culture’, which is a “culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (331). In this paradigm, “audiences, empowered by [...] new technologies, occupying a space at the intersection between old and new media, are demanding the right to participate within the culture” (24) in fields as diverse as politics, journalism, and entertainment media.

Attention to audiences as end-users of a translated text is a much more recent trend in the field of AVT. While issues of agency in translation in general have been extensively examined from the point of view of translator agency – most notably in connection with aspects of ideology and power (e.g., Tymoczko 2014) – less systematic attention has been devoted to the receivers of target-language audiovisual texts and their crucial role in the communication, meaning-making process. A notable earlier exception, however, is the study of the fansubbing phenomenon as encapsulating the agency that viewers/fans claimed for themselves and for their community as producers of alternative translated versions that more successfully cater to their needs and expectations. AVT schol-

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2. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a comprehensive review of the field of audience studies and research; however, readers can find a detailed overview of these ideas and sources in Livingstone (2003) and Brooker and Jermyn (2003).

arship has now started to look more substantially at audiences as a crucial component of the audiovisual mediation process, to the point that – no doubt echoing Jenkins’ (2006) perspective on media consumption in general – Chaume (2016) notes that “the days of decisions taken by just a few agents, used to dictating what audiences like and dislike, are progressively coming to an end” (72) and that “we are facing, no doubt, the audience’s turn” (69). Similarly, Pérez-González (2014) talks about “the shift towards participatory audiovisual translation” (233), which acknowledges the more fluid roles of audiences as producers and consumers of media content in general and translated versions specifically. As further evidence of an increased scholarly interest in these aspects, most edited collections and handbooks published in the last few years on the subject of AVT include contributions on audience reception of audiovisual texts. Empirical reception research in AVT started with a few questionnaire-based studies on the reception of dubbed and subtitled products (e.g., Fuentes Luque 2003; Bucaria and Chiaro 2007; Antonini and Chiaro 2009) and in recent years has yielded an increasing number of case studies using eye-tracking methodology (see, for example, Di Giovanni and Gambier 2018) which successfully integrate the point of view of consumers in determining, among others, the quality of the output of different modes of AVT and accessibility. While more often than not reception studies in AVT seem to be concerned with the textual level and perhaps still lack a broader scope, in this article I take a different approach, aiming to address larger, extra-textual, policy issues and touching upon the changing relationship between (corporate) providers and consumers of mediated audiovisual content.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main shifts in this relationship has been the fact that until a relatively short time ago the practice of the linguistic and cultural mediation of audiovisual products tended not to be publicly discussed or critiqued by their main end-users, the viewers. While in the past mistakes and/or inaccuracies might have gone unnoticed – with the possible exception of academics or other experts in the field – the situation is now radically changed, with contemporary viewers being much more adamant in demanding mediated audiovisual content that meets their expectations, both in terms of quality and swift release times. Various factors might have contributed to this raising of audience expectations. It is undeniable, for example, that viewers now tend to have easier, more immediate access to original-language versions of film and TV content. If you own DVDs or Blu-Rays or if you subscribe to at least one TV-on-demand or streaming service, in most cases you will be able to easily switch back and forth between the original version of the content you are watching and the dubbed or subtitled versions (sometimes available in a combination of different languages, depending on the service). The switch to digital terrestrial television has also made it possible for viewers without subscriptions to other services to

listen to the original-language soundtrack for some fictional programming. Moreover, at least until a few years ago, fansubbing platforms were able to systematically provide additional translated versions for the array of options available to the more technologically savvy viewers. Over the years, this availability has probably contributed to creating increasingly higher audience expectations in terms of target-language versions' adherence to their source-language products.

Going hand-in-hand with easier access to source- and target-language versions is the increase in the number of viewers who are fluent – or perceive themselves as such – in English, which is the source language of the majority of audiovisual products distributed globally, despite the recent growth of productions in languages other than English promoted by streaming companies such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.<sup>3</sup> This is likely to encourage a more direct comparison between original and translated versions, particularly – at least in the Italian context – among the younger audience segments. Additionally, while subtitling has been traditionally considered a more transparent or “vulnerable” mode of AVT (Díaz-Cintas 2010, 346) as it allows viewers to simultaneously access both the original soundtrack and the subtitles on screen, dubbing can be said to also have become more susceptible to potential criticism given the ease with which viewers can now switch between versions and their increasing familiarity with English, at least in terms of passive knowledge.

Finally, easier and more diffused access to online communication tools such as social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and ‘new media’ platforms (e.g., YouTube) has provided viewers and fans with tools for sharing their opinions and complaints within like-minded communities, while at the same time offering the opportunity to exponentially amplify their dissatisfaction with dubbing and subtitling choices in a given target language. In other words, online tools have provided audiences with an unprecedented opportunity to have their voices heard, to align or disalign themselves (Zappavigna 2012) with certain stakeholders in the audiovisual distribution chain, and to express – without filters – disgust and outrage, often with a hefty dose of snarky humour and ridicule. On the microblogging website Twitter, for example, disappointed fans can also go as far as tagging in their posts creators, producers, distributors, and providers of the content they are not happy with, thus sometimes calling international attention to the issues at hand (Bucaria 2019).

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3. As a direct by-product of fostering more non-English-language productions across the world, Netflix has also made major and systematic investments in dubbing content from other languages into English, a conscious strategy that is contributing to reshaping the landscape of AVT practices and distribution on a global scale. This phenomenon has recently attracted the attention of both scholars (e.g., Sánchez-Mompeán 2021) and media journalists (e.g., Lee 2022).



This scenario, in which we are witnessing stricter viewer vigilance on the work of audiovisual translators and distributors, begs the question of whether or not – and to what extent – audience empowerment and agency are making the AVT industry more accountable for their adaptation and localization choices and willing to adjust their offering according to viewers’ feedback. From the distributors’ perspective, attention to audience practices and attitudes seems to have become an increasingly crucial piece of the puzzle. One of the most evident examples of the impact that such grassroots pressure has recently had on television distribution is the progressively shorter delay between the release of content in the country of production (usually the USA) and the country of distribution. As far as Italy is concerned, for example, even before streaming services took hold, the on-demand platform SKY started airing the subtitled episodes of highly anticipated and hyped TV series twenty-four hours after their US release and the dubbed episodes only a week later, which was in both cases a considerably shorter time delay compared to a few years earlier. As confirmed by some FOX executives in charge of Italian programme localization, one of the reasons behind this choice was the popularity of fansubbing, which was providing fans with translated content for free and at a much faster pace after the US release, thus potentially ‘stealing’ subscribers from the SKY platform (SKY Italia versioning team, pers. comm.). This example is indicative of how the distributors’ attentiveness to audience consumption attitudes is clearly influenced by practical factors that are at stake in the process, such as marketing and financial considerations and viability. As exemplified in the next section, some audiovisual content providers are indeed paying close attention to viewers’ needs and taking action to accommodate audience expectations.

### **3. Listening to viewers’ feedback**

Audience involvement in the development of audiovisual products is obviously not an entirely new phenomenon. Test screenings used by producers and studios to gauge audiences’ reactions to film endings (Goetz 2021) are just one example of such involvement occurring during the production phases. However, several cases are known of changes made to films and TV products further down the line – specifically during the distribution stage – as a consequence of viewers’ complaints concerning localization and translation strategies and choices. To mention a few examples from the Italian context alone, the first three seasons of the TV series *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS 2005–2014) were originally broadcast in 2008 on the free-to-air network Italia 1 with the title *E alla fine arriva mamma!* ‘And mum arrives in the end!’, which was later changed back to its original title, apparently because of

viewers' protests (Enciclopedia del Doppiaggio 2014). *The Big Bang Theory's* (CBS 2007–2019) Italian adaptation was widely criticized because the adapted dialogues were seen as trivializing or completely ignoring the show's humour, which is heavily based on science and 'geeky', predominantly US, pop cultural references. As a result of public outcry, the members of the localization team responsible for the translation, adaptation, and dubbing direction were replaced nine episodes into the first season (Coming Soon n.d.). More recently, in May 2020, the Italian version of the Netflix production *The Half of It/L'altra metà* (Wu 2020), a teen-comedy revisitation of the Cyrano de Bergerac formula, was initially released on the streaming platform with an Italian dubbed track that appeared to have employed the services of non-professional dubbing actors based in the Los Angeles area, perhaps due in part to the unavailability of Italian dubbing actors and studios because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The amateurish dubbing attracted some attention online (Evit 2020) and a couple of weeks later, on 14 May, Netflix released a new version with professional dubbing actors.

As shown in Section 2, while in earlier-internet times such complaints from viewers probably did not have ample resonance, the online tools widely available today – such as social media, blogs, and forums – can potentially contribute to amplify the opinions of dissatisfied viewers, especially at the international level. The Spanish TV series *La casa de papel* (*Money Heist*) (Netflix 2017–2021) found itself at the centre of a similar controversy when complaints started pouring in about its English dubbing in the first two seasons, with the result that Netflix decided to replace it with a re-dub by a different dubbing studio and with a new cast of voices (TV Series We Love 2020). Similarly, in 2019 *Roma's* (2018) director, Alfonso Cuarón, criticized Netflix's decision to provide subtitles in Castilian Spanish for the portions of his film in Mexican Spanish, calling this choice “parochial, ignorant and offensive to Spaniards themselves” (Marshall 2019). As a consequence of the film's international success and accolades – and no doubt in large part due to Cuarón's remarks – Netflix removed the Castilian subtitles from its viewing options.

Although, as noted in the *The New York Times* article, Netflix's receptiveness in the case of *Roma* was clearly due to the director's first-person involvement – “If you complain to Netflix, the streaming giant listens. At least it does if you're Alfonso Cuarón, the Golden Globe-winning director of *Roma*” (Marshall 2019) – the streaming platform seems to be open to catering to the needs expressed by less prominent viewers as well. In the next few paragraphs, I will describe in detail a case in which Netflix acted on feedback from its subscribers as far as localization choices were concerned. Members of the Netflix localization team have declined to be interviewed for this study.

### 3.1 *Neon Genesis Evangelion*

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* (NGE) / 新世紀エヴァンゲリオン *Shinseiki Evangelion* is a Japanese anime produced by Gainax studios and directed by Hideaki Anno. The series was originally aired in Japan on TV Tokyo between 1995 and 1996 and its genre is usually defined as メカ *mecha* (roughly ‘mechanic robot/cyborg’) and post-apocalyptic. *NGE* takes place in 2015, fifteen years after a world-wide catastrophe known as Second Impact, mainly in the futuristic city of Tokyo-3. Human existence is now threatened by Angels, giant monsters that can only be stopped by the Evangelion bio-machines created by Nerv, a special paramilitary force. One of the main characters is teenager Shinji Ikari, who is pressured by his estranged father, Gendō, the director of Nerv, to pilot Evangelion Unit-01 against the Angels, without any previous training. The anime explores psychological and religious themes and mystical traditions and has achieved both popular success and critical acclaim, gaining a cult following around the world and being credited with the revival of the anime industry after its release in the mid-to-late 1990s.

*NGE* was originally dubbed and released in Italy on VHS by Dynamic Italia (now Dynit) between 1997 and 2001, and subsequently aired on MTV Italia between 2000 and 2002. In June 2019, Netflix released all twenty-six episodes of *NGE* in several languages. Although complaints about the new English version were also raised by fans (Vilas-Boas 2019) – for example, about the fact that the iconic renditions of the song “Fly Me to the Moon” were now absent from the closing credits – the controversy about the new Italian dubbing by Netflix seems to be particularly noteworthy. As sometimes happens when the rights to a previously dubbed version cannot be acquired, the Italian version was presented in a newly dubbed form, which differed from the original late-1990s dubbing both in terms of voice talents and dialogue adaptation, despite having been re-adapted by the same veteran anime adapter, Gualtiero Cannarsi, who had curated the previous version of *NGE* and was already known to fans for the highly controversial adaptations of a number of Studio Ghibli classics. Soon after its new release, the *NGE* Italian dialogues and their author became the object of severe criticism by, among others, fervent fans on social media, blogs, YouTube, and websites dedicated to anime and manga. The sources of viewers’ indignation were, in part, a few translation choices that changed the *NGE*-specific terminology adopted in the previously dubbed version. Two of these are the rendering of the Japanese word 使徒 *shito* as *apostolo* ‘apostle’ and not *angelo* ‘angel’ (Cannarsi 2020) to indicate the villains in the series and the replacement of *Unità Eva-01* ‘Evangelion Unit-01’ with *Unità Prima* ‘First Unit’ as the name of one of Nerv’s giant bio-machines. However, most of the criticism towards the new adaptation was directed at the

extremely unnatural, obsolete, and often ungrammatical language used in the Italian dialogues, which was condemned by Italian-speaking viewers as unnecessarily pretentious, convoluted, and at times even unintelligible. In late June 2019, Twitter was awash with complaints from the *NGE* Italian fandom, which voiced the viewers' demands for the 1990s dubbed version to be reinstated, and their frustration, disappointment, and even indignation. Notably, in many cases fan criticism was accompanied with humorous comments, screenshots from the show, and fan-made memes. One tweet, for example, cleverly remarks on this media phenomenon while at the same time sending up one of the changes made in the newly dubbed version, in which the word *berserk* which referred to the Eva machines was changed to 'state of fury'. In this multi-panel image macro, Italian native speakers can easily recognize the reference to the title of the US TV series *Fury/Brave stallion* (NBC 1955–1960) – known in Italy as *Furia cavallo del west* – whose equine protagonist is pictured in the bottom right panel. The post reads “The only fun thing about the #Netflix adaptation of #Evangelion by #Cannarsi is that it will be an endless source of memes... Berserk becomes “state of fury””.<sup>4</sup>

The controversy over the newly dubbed version was not confined to the *NGE* fandom on Twitter, as other media began to echo it as well. On 24 June 2019, popular Italian comic book artist Zerocalcare (pen name of Michele Rech) parodied the *NGE* incident with a cartoon on his own Facebook page, which had about 1000000 followers at the time of writing. Even allowing for a more recent increase in Zerocalcare's followers since 2019, this cartoon has so far collected over 7000 reactions and has been shared over 1000 times. Furthermore, in an example of an almost unprecedented magnification of an incident concerning AVT in Italy – and one that we would not have witnessed even only a few years ago – the Italian national press picked up the news about Netflix disappointing *NGE* fans, with three of the major Italian newspapers – *La Stampa* (Tammaro 2019), *Repubblica* (Rusconi 2019), and *Il Corriere della Sera* (Triulzi 2019) each running a report on the Cannarsi controversy. One of these newspaper articles, Tammaro (2019), highlighted particularly well the points of view of the different stakeholders. In it, Fabrizio Mazzotta, the dubbing director of both the earlier and the more recent dubbed versions of *NGE*, was quoted as saying that Cannarsi's revision of the 1990s dialogue considerably delayed the dubbing process and the new script was at times so unintelligible and convoluted that the dubbing actors involved in the production threatened to quit. Mazzotta also stated that given the cultural significance of this anime it is the responsibility of the dialogue adapter and other dubbing professionals to make it easily accessible to viewers; according

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4. Roger Halsted, Twitter post, 22 June 2019 11:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/RogerHalsted>.

to Mazzotta, as a dialogue adapter or dubbing director, the goal should be working for the audience and not for yourself.

Cannarsi had in the meantime defended his position in interviews and blog posts. In discussing his reasons for changing some of the *NGE* specific terminology (particularly changing *angeli* to *apostoli*) (Nola 2019), Cannarsi admitted that his intention was to rectify some mistakes and inaccuracies in his own adaptation from the 1990s. When asked to respond to his critics concerning the new dialogues' convoluted syntax and archaic language, Cannarsi stated that he was trying to convey as faithfully as possible the complexity of the Japanese language and culture and that "if I reduce complexity to simplicity, I make the content stupid [...] you can't sacrifice art on the altar of popularization" (Nola 2019). While acknowledging that "the audience is not a passive, uninterested entity" and that it would be offensive to imply that "bending one culture for the benefit of another" is necessary for the viewers to understand an (audiovisual) text, Cannarsi also states that "you can't ascribe too much attention to the audience. Because art remains, the audience fades away" and "if the audience doesn't want to put the work in, they will have to pay the consequences" (Tammaro 2019).<sup>5</sup>

Cannarsi's motivation, therefore, seems to come from a notion of translation/adaptation as an activity aimed at an elite of viewers who should not want to settle for a broader, more target-oriented rendition of the original work as that would necessarily compromise adherence to the Japanese original and, consequently, the audience's own enjoyment of *NGE*. While this seems to be the adapter's philosophy throughout his work, and an endless source of mockery from his detractors,<sup>6</sup> in the case of *NGE*, dubbing director Fabrizio Mazzotta hypothesizes that the problem might have been a mismatch between Netflix's perception of what kind of product *NGE* was, as opposed to the audience's expectations (Tammaro 2019). In other words, the commissioner might have underestimated the significance of this anime for audiences worldwide and erroneously classified it as a niche product instead of the global hit that it was. This, according to the dubbing director, might have caused the streaming giant to agree to Cannarsi's extremely foreignizing adaptation, which, according to Scrolavezza (2019), has the additional drawback of perpetuating the orientalizing stereotypes about Japan as a difficult-to-understand, exotic, and strange culture, "an archipelago populated by samurais and techno-geishas who exchange clever quips using the words 'pochitto' and 'recalcitranza'."

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5. I would like to sincerely thank Motoko Ueyama for her help in identifying the different registers used in the original Japanese version of *NGE*.

6. See for example the Facebook pages "Gli sconcertanti adattamenti italiani dei film Ghibli" 'The baffling Italian adaptations of Ghibli films, and "Cannarsi adatta i classici" 'Cannarsi adapts the classics' in which users periodically mock Cannarsi's modus operandi.

The fact that Netflix paid attention to complaints right from the start was evident from the streaming platform's tweet from 21 June 2019, the very day that the new version was released. In the post, the Netflix Italia social media team decided to acknowledge the fans' overwhelming response to the new adaptation by humorously superimposing the word *apostolo* on the poster of every show appearing in a typical grid of a user interface (except for the *NGE* slot, which remained unchanged). The text of the tweet "Com'è andata oggi a lavoro?" – meaning 'How was work today?' – is a clear nod to the pervasiveness of the fans' protests on the first day of the show's release.<sup>7</sup>

On 28 June – only one week after the release of the new version – Netflix Italia apologized in a post on its Facebook page and announced that both the dubbed and subbed versions would be 'fixed' and that the Italian dubbed track would be removed in the meantime:

*Ci avete fatto capire il vero significato di "STATO DI FURIA". Quel pochitto che possiamo fare è dirvi che ci dispiace e che il doppiaggio e i sottotitoli della versione italiana di Neon Genesis Evangelion saranno presto sistemati (e, nel mentre, abbiamo rimosso il doppiaggio).*<sup>8</sup>

'You made us understand the real meaning of "STATE OF FURY." We can only say that we're sorry and that the dubbing and subtitling of the Italian version of Neon Genesis Evangelion will soon be fixed (and, in the meantime, we have removed the dubbed track).'

The language that Netflix used in the announcement is also worth noting because of the obvious intention to connect with subscribers while at the same time giving a humorous nod to the problems that had been found in the adaptation ('state of fury', *pochitto*).

The new dubbed and subtitled versions were made available on the streaming platform on 6 July 2020. The dubbed version – with both a new dubbing director, Roberto Stocchi, and a new dialogue adapter, Laura Cosenza, working with the same studio as the previous version (VSI) – removed the obsolete lexicon and awkward syntax, replacing these with a more target-oriented Italian rendition, and reinstated the terminology used in the 1990s dubbing. These changes carry through to the subtitled version as well. To the best of my knowledge, no additional complaints have been raised about the new version. Furthermore – perhaps as a way to ride the wave of the controversy – in 2020, Dynit announced the upcoming release of new DVD and Blu-Ray editions of *NGE con doppiaggio storico*, literally 'with historical dubbing', (i.e., with the original 1990s dubbing

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7. Netflix Italia, Twitter post, 21 June 2019 7:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/@NetflixIT>.

8. Netflix Italia, Facebook post, 28 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/NetflixFilmItalia>.

that is so dear to Italian fans). This choice revealingly speaks to the fact that, in today's extremely competitive audiovisual market, providers have already started to exploit localization options and choices as a marketing tool for their products. O'Sullivan (2018b) notes, for example, how the paratextual visibility of both dubbing and subtitling can be used for marketing purposes for DVD releases. As a further example, Bucaria (2019) points out that after a controversy involving the manipulation of the TV series *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014–2020) on the terrestrial Italian network RAI2, SKY decided to use the situation in their favour by confirming that they were indeed airing the same show *senza censura*, 'without censorship'.

Interestingly, the *NGE* controversy brought a number of long-standing issues and debates in Translation Studies to the attention of the general public. The heavy intervention in the target-language dialogues, for example, clearly points to issues concerning the translator's (in)visibility, and foreignizing versus domesticating approaches (Venuti 2017), which in turn might elicit reflections on translator agency, the translator's role in the (audiovisual) translation workflow, and even the potential differences between translating high-stakes, cult, creative works versus more commercial – or perceived as such – fare, for which both financial interests and expectations might be lower. Furthermore, the *NGE* controversy highlights the audience agency factor: the role of gatekeepers that viewers and fans have now claimed for themselves as the ultimate end-users of localized audiovisual products, a role that global providers of audiovisual material can no longer afford to disregard.

#### **4. Viewers as co-creators?**

The process described in Section 3 – in which audience feedback is taken into consideration by a provider and distributor of audiovisual content to the point of concretely impacting its offering – could be viewed as a form of co-creation. The concept of co-creation has been applied extensively in the last few years in fields as diverse as tourism, health and social services, social media marketing, and education. In general, it refers to the collaborative relationship in which the providers of products or services work side by side with the end-users of such products and services in a dynamic process of "co-ideation, co-design, and co-development" (Tajvidi et al. 2020, 477). In a business context, co-creation usually involves companies soliciting and employing user-generated content or crowd-sourced ideas, for example, to develop a product, include customizable options, and foster problem solving and innovation processes. In this "era of consumer sovereignty" (Yadav, Kamboj, and Rahman 2016, 259), companies aim at

developing consumer loyalty and engagement, and to achieve brand value co-creation through highly engaged consumers. A clear shift from passive to more active consumers/customers who can directly contribute to product development and marketing campaigns is visible in this model. LEGO, for example, is often mentioned as one of the companies that have been more successful in applying this kind of approach. Through the company's dedicated website, LEGO Ideas (<https://ideas.lego.com>), customers are encouraged to share images of their LEGO creations, enter competitions, and submit their ideas for new designs, which LEGO will then put into production if the idea reaches the necessary 10 000 supporters. In 2015, PepsiCo India created a successful viral marketing campaign by encouraging customers to co-create a thirty-second video commercial expressing their love for Pepsi (Yadav, Kamboj, and Rahman 2016). The winning commercial, as voted by the YouTube community, was shown during the Pepsi Indian Premier League 2015. These are just two examples of the multiple ways in which companies have been fostering brand co-creation – mainly by means of online community-based tools – through a process of “bottom-up-marketing” (Karpinski 2005, 38), which implies a power transfer from companies to customers/consumers and a sharing of the control of brands with all stakeholders (Tajvidi et al. 2020, 477).

However, as Jenkins (2006) notes more specifically in discussing participatory culture in the media and creative industries, “despite the rhetoric about ‘democratizing television,’ this shift is being driven by economic calculations and not by some broad mission to empower the public” (254). In particular, when considering media convergence, “a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them” (322), Jenkins (2006) addresses some of the practical reasons that lead media industries to rely more and more on such strategies:

Media industries are embracing convergence for a number of reasons: [...] because convergence cements consumer loyalty at a time when the fragmentation of the marketplace and the rise of file sharing threaten old ways of doing business [...] In other cases, convergence is being pushed by consumers who are demanding that media companies be more responsive to their tastes and interests. (254)

Be it originated by media companies themselves as part of a marketing strategy or as a grassroots initiative demanding viewers' experience to be acknowledged, in 2006 Jenkins was already warning that this shift was of such proportions that “producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues. The resulting struggles and compromises will define the public culture of the future” (24).



When it comes to AVT and distribution, one can easily see how a similar model is being applied by distributors who show an active interest in their subscribers' input. The approach is obviously different, as in the cases of the companies mentioned above consumer participation was deliberately elicited and sought as part of a specific design, while one could quite safely assume that Netflix did not plan (and certainly did not hope) for the newly dubbed version of *NGE* to elicit such a negative response from its subscribers. However, as undesirable as the fans' reaction to *NGE* was, Netflix's prompt reaction not only speaks to the need to dampen potentially damaging publicity around this particular anime but also seems indicative of a long-term marketing move. By acknowledging viewer dissatisfaction and promising a replacement for the problematic dubbed version, Netflix likely assessed the long-term commercial viability of 'listening to the audience' in order to retain subscribers – and possibly gain new ones – against the substantial costs of re-adapting and re-dubbing the series. In acknowledging and making space for this circular co-creational process – in which audience input is fed back into the localization chain in order to arrive at a (hopefully) satisfactory final product – Netflix and other SVOD services potentially have the opportunity to build and reinforce brand loyalty. The reward element that viewers perceive after being recognized as active participants able to create change in the localization process is obviously a key factor in this new model. Another important aspect is the fact that this strategy can potentially set the media providers and distributors who adopt it apart from those who do not. In the case of *NGE*, for example, anime fans on Twitter were quick to point out that, unlike Netflix, Lucky Red, the distribution company that owns the Italian rights to many Studio Ghibli productions, has always proved unreceptive to fans' pleas to replace the dialogues adapted by Gualtiero Cannarsi and during the *NGE* controversy actually took the adapter's side by stating their renewed trust in his professionalism (Studio Ghibli n.d.). Going back to Jenkins' (2006) point about convergence culture, given the current scenario it would not seem outside the realm of possibility that distributors who appear to be more sensitive to their subscribers' needs and attentive to their reactions would in the future also fare better than those who do not allow space for some form of negotiation or co-creation – even if just in the form of a *a posteriori* pushback – in the localization of the content they offer on their platforms.

It should be noted, however, that media providers and localizers' increasing openness towards audience feedback does not come without some potential risks. AVT scholars have pointed out that fans' expertise in niche domains – such as a TV series or a specific fictional world for fansubbing or game localization – can be a precious knowledge base to draw from and can potentially exceed the more general knowledge of professionals in the AVT industry (O'Hagan 2009). However, similarly to the concerns expressed by some AVT professionals towards the

fansubbing phenomenon, these newer developments potentially raise issues concerning the impact that the opinions of viewers who are mostly untrained in the standards and practices of AVT might ultimately have in localization and distribution choices. In the case of *NGE*, one could wonder, for example, how many of the Twitter users who criticized the use of the word *apostolo* instead of *angelo* in the 2019 dubbing are fluent in Japanese or to what extent they are trained in, or even aware of, the time and space constraints that dictate translation and adaptation choices in subtitling and dubbing. On a larger scale, one could also wonder about the lengths to which providers will be willing to go in terms of negotiations with the audience. After Netflix released the *NGE* dubbing, some Twitter users thanked the streaming platform, but others had further requests: some asked that the original 1990s and the 2019 Cannarsi dubs also be added to the soundtrack options to further customize the viewer experience, while others complained about the fact that, although other anime available on Netflix also presented a problematic dubbing, since they were not as high-profile as *NGE*, the issue of replacing those dubbed tracks had not been taken into consideration.

On a larger scale, this process of negotiation is also affected by factors linked to the global streaming model itself and to the push provided by more complex, cultural transformations in society. On the one hand, viewers have become accustomed to a significant amount of audiovisual content being delivered to them simultaneously in multiple languages and multiple AVT modes through the global streaming model. This characteristic of this content delivery mechanism has created increasingly higher expectations from subscribers and, as a consequence, puts further pressure on the AVT industry in terms of deadlines. Complaints have been voiced by Italian dubbing professionals about the extremely fast turn-around times required by streaming platforms for the final product and about the increasingly lower costs that Netflix and others are willing to pay dubbing studios, which in turn are both important concerns in terms of quality standards (Ravarino 2021). Paradoxically, then, the very attempt to meet their subscribers' expectations might result in a vicious circle in which audience demands for fast, global releases potentially go against their other demands for quality localization, as evident in the example of the amateur dubbing of *The Half of It* (see Section 3). Furthermore, recent socio-cultural developments at the international level have brought to the fore issues concerning the appropriate representation of identity in audiovisual products as well. Netflix and other streaming services are now requiring that their content be dubbed in the different target languages by actors who match as closely as possible the original actors on screen, for example in terms of ethnic origin, age, gender, and sexual orientation (Ravarino 2021). While embracing the current sensitivity towards identity representation in the localization process might ingratiate streaming platforms to their subscribers, it has also been met with some

resistance by dubbing professionals. In Italy, several dubbing actors have recently noted that, apart from the more practical considerations linked to finding experienced ethnically diverse dubbing actors to cast as required by their commissioners, the streaming platforms' demands also risk prioritizing political correctness over colour-blind casting, which would actually allow dubbing studios to cast the best actors for a role regardless of their identity (Ravarino 2021).

## 5. Concluding remarks

In this article, I have addressed the evolving relationship between providers of linguistically and culturally mediated audiovisual content and their audiences, with particular reference to the increased agency claimed by viewers and the attitude of accountability regarding localization choices displayed by some streaming services. Taking as a starting point the controversy regarding the new Italian version of the Japanese anime *NGE* released by Netflix in 2019, I have argued that Netflix's openness to viewers' complaints and willingness to amend the *NGE* dubbed and subtitled versions accordingly is indicative of a new trend in the current mediascape. In this new, more complex scenario, consumer engagement and participation in localization choices have become valuable tools for media companies and distributors to build brand loyalty and possibly set themselves apart from competitors who are not as receptive to their subscribers' co-creational contribution. The *NGE* controversy, in particular, highlights on the one hand the positive change that audience empowerment can make in the localization process in terms of achieving a new gatekeeping role for viewers, almost bordering on activism. On the other hand, and on a more general note, it also reveals issues related to professionalism in the audiovisual localisation chain and the ever more complex relationship among different professional figures in today's global audiovisual distribution industry.

The aspects illustrated throughout this paper are also tightly connected to issues of visibility in AVT, not just in terms of its end-users becoming a more active, and therefore visible, component of the localization process able to initiate change, but also in terms of translation practice per se. We have seen how viewers' reactions to substandard adaptation and localization choices can be amplified by social media and other online tools and consequently be reported on in the national and international press. As a corollary of viewer agency in the age of streaming, then, we could argue that the visibility of the practice of AVT is increasing and is starting to transcend the boundaries of academic scholarship or fandom to permeate the awareness of the general public as well – a process that is of course facilitated by the inherent newsworthiness of global media companies

such as Netflix and Amazon. In the consumer-centric era of convergence culture that Jenkins (2006) describes, it seems likely that incidents in which a form of provider-audience negotiation of localization choices occurs will become more and more common and, because of streaming services' global reach, will perhaps contribute to raise the profile of AVT also in countries that have been traditionally less open to dubbed and subtitled content.

Perhaps one of the most interesting ways in which we could look at the interaction between audience agency and providers' accountability is in the context of AVT policy (O'Sullivan 2018a), which appears to be a particularly promising sub-field for future research. With reference to the variable range of languages, AVT modes and accessibility options offered by different providers, I have argued elsewhere (Bucaria 2022) that these might ultimately become a deciding factor for consumers to choose to subscribe to one service over another.<sup>9</sup> For example, when comparing Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, Amazon appears to be more inconsistent in its offering, which includes, on the one hand, products with an impressive number of target languages for both dubbing and subtitling, and, on the other, some products that are not even available in the original language. Given the increasing importance of customization and audience engagement, however, I would further argue that increasing attention should be given not just to what kind of audiovisual content distributors decide to import/export and (from) where, and in which language combinations and AVT modes, but also to whether or not the quality of the localized end products meets the favour of the audience, and, perhaps more importantly, if and how these providers are willing to incorporate viewer feedback into their offering.

This reinforces the idea that – particularly as far as the streaming model is concerned, in which the roles of producers, distributors, and localizers of audiovisual content are often conflated – audiovisual localization and policy should also be considered as integral parts of the mediation and distribution process that audiovisual content undergoes in the various local territories (Barra 2013). In terms of accountability, future studies might also want to explore whether subscription services are more open to feedback than other free-to-air platforms or national networks, and also if providers are more willing to amend their own productions as opposed to others of which they are only distributors.

Finally, the case of *NGE* speaks to issues connected to audience agency and expectations when retranslations occur. Because their libraries include not only newer productions but also a considerable amount of older, sometimes cult TV and film content, recently SVOD platforms seem to have become particularly rich

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9. For an example of a UK-based service providing accessibility scores for a number of different platforms see The Big Hack (<https://bighack.org/businesscase/streaming>).

sites for audiovisual productions that have been either re-dubbed or re-subtitled, usually because of reasons linked to distribution rights. In the cases in which the newly translated versions have not been positively welcomed by viewers, it would be interesting to further explore and differentiate the specific reasons underlying such complaints, particularly with respect to a possible emotional component. Indeed, while for some products complaints might very well be due to objectively inferior versions containing mistakes or inconsistencies, the possibility should be entertained that the ‘attachment’ or nostalgia factor might also play a significant role in audience preferences. Such differentiation could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of viewer complaints as far as localization is concerned – for example, through the lens of fandom studies – and might help providers gauge the specific nature of the protests and make more informed decisions regarding their response and future policies.

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