

The Surprise Drop: *The Cloverfield Paradox*, *UnREAL*, and evolving patterns in streaming media distribution and reception

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Abstract:

This article examines the surprise release, a recent phenomenon where albums, films, and TV series are distributed to digital retailers and streaming platforms without notice. This approach to distribution arises out of the modern media ecosystem, where niche consumer groups access vast content libraries on personalized devices. Surprise ‘drops’ aim to redefine the ephemerality of media objects and shift consumers’ shortened attention spans into temporary moments of interest. Utilizing a cross-industry comparison between early surprise releases in music (namely from Beyoncé and U2) and more recent examples in film (Netflix’s *The Cloverfield Paradox*) and television (Hulu’s *UnREAL* season four), this article explores how media conglomerates exploit the technical process of digital distribution for discursive and cultural value. Critical analysis of promotional materials (trailers, interviews, and social media ephemera) reveals how surprise releases make distribution the centerpiece of multi-platform publicity campaigns that aim to leverage fan conversation into clicks, streams, and downloads. More than typical releases, surprise drops are framed as gifts, or ways for artists to give back to passionate fans. The contrast between industries also highlights how the function of surprise releases has evolved from artists’ expression of influence in music to an effort to redefine troubled projects in film and television.

Keywords: Digital Distribution; Streaming Video; Marketing and Promotion; Gift Economy; Affective Cycles; Netflix; Hulu; Ephemeral Media; Surprise Releases

The first trailer for *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018), the third instalment in the J.J. Abrams-produced science fiction franchise known as the ‘Cloververse,’ debuted during NBC’s February 2018 broadcast of Super Bowl LII. *Paradox* joined a host of blockbusters in the familiar barrage of Hollywood promotion during the Big Game, where thirty-second ads cost \$5 million (D’Alessandro 2018a). For the first twenty-eight seconds, the spot played like a

typical teaser – brief ‘entryway paratexts’ (Gray 2010, 18) that toggle between the familiar and unfamiliar to cultivate a ‘horizon of expectations’ based on the ‘promise of pleasure, spectacle, and imagination’ (Biltereyst and Meers 2006, 72). The teaser placed *Paradox* within an ‘elaborate intertextual matrix’ aimed to ‘encircle, entice, and deepen the significance of the film’ (Marshall 2002, 69). Rapid cuts, rising music, and special effects shots connected scenes of monster action from the first film, *Cloverfield* (2008), to *Paradox*’s plotline involving astronauts and alternate dimensions. The tagline, ‘10 Years Ago Some Thing Arrived ... Now Find Out Why,’ confirmed franchise connections and promised fans answers to *Cloverfield*’s lingering mysteries.

The last two seconds of the teaser, however, revealed that *Paradox* was unlike other Super Bowl-promoted films. Rather than hitting multiplexes in the spring or summer, the trailer announced that the film would be ‘Only on Netflix ... Tonight.’ Simultaneous to the spot’s broadcast debut, *Paradox*’s social media accounts circulated the trailer across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.¹ On Twitter, the film made distribution plans more explicit: ‘Something happened. You’ll know why after the game. #CloverfieldParadox.’ Excitement and confusion over the trailer led to ‘Cloverfield’ trending on Twitter throughout the telecast (Brisbee 2018), while trades rushed to confirm the maneuvers that made the release possible (D’Alessandro 2018b; Lynch 2018). As promised, *Paradox* was released on Netflix around 10:30 p.m. EST, ten minutes after the game concluded. Netflix had orchestrated the most high-profile *surprise release* in the streaming video era.

Though film, television, and music projects have always been distributed with little-to-no fanfare, the surprise release is a specifically modern phenomenon where major titles are *purposefully and strategically* ‘dropped’ on digital platforms with no prior public promotional campaign support – no eighteen-month sequence of trailers and promotional posters, no anticipatory Comic-Con panels, and no Top 40 lead singles on radio. On the contrary, surprise releases aim to convert their unexpected distribution into discursive promotional power. The goal is to create an urgency surrounding the release, simultaneously *expanding* the scale of conversation among audiences, and *compressing* the window of consumption. In industry parlance, this urgency is known as buzz or hype. Surprise releases channel the inherent ‘telepresence’ of social platforms, where ‘a constancy of presence is felt through multiplied interactions’ (Murthy 2013, 39). These constructed promotional campaigns hope to translate the ‘digital water cooler’ effect (Tryon 2013, 120) into chatter, spreadable memes and, eventually, a sustained hype cycle. Thus, surprise releases are framed as *ephemeral media events* that must be consumed immediately and collectively – with or without Super Bowl-level promotion.

The origin of modern surprise releases is in music, where, beginning with Beyoncé in 2013, high-profile artists have leveraged their stature to bypass record labels’ extended promotional rollout with singles and radio airplay. As with most plans in streaming video, Netflix has been the market leader in surprise television and film releases. Rather than a fully unexpected drop, Netflix has occasionally surprise-released full seasons of television series that were previously announced – notably *The OA* in late 2016 (Chaney 2016). Netflix

also utilizes its region-specific libraries to ‘debut’ foreign imports with zero notice. Those strategies, however, differ from the more momentous – and more expensive – operation behind the surprise release of *Paradox*, which represents a new wrinkle in sudden distribution. Netflix reportedly paid more than \$50 million to *Paradox*’s original studio, Paramount, for the exclusive first-run release rights. Though Paramount released *Cloverfield* and its loosely related sequel *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) to successful theatrical runs, the studio believed *Paradox* would bomb on its planned April 2018 release, and subsequently turned to Netflix for help (Kit and McClintock 2018). Netflix’s pricey surprise was not just a bold promotional tactic. It was an attempt to salvage a failed product through strategic distribution that could translate to social media buzz.

This article traces the recent emergence of the surprise release strategy across the media industries. It presents a needed industry study about a phenomenon in which viewer interest and social media commentary are strategically used to legitimize a new distribution gambit. Developing a cross-industry comparison between initial surprise drops in music and recent cases in film and television, I demonstrate how media conglomerates exploit the technical process of digital distribution for discursive and cultural value. In all cases, surprise releases attempt to transform distribution into a new media event with ‘artificial scarcity’ (Lotz and Havens 2012, 20). However, my analysis reveals how the function of surprise releases has evolved from an individual artist’s expression of industry power in music to an effort to rescue troubled projects in film and television. To substantiate my claims, I examine two 2018 examples where sudden distribution intended to enhance awareness of projects that were otherwise primed for failure: Netflix’s buzzy release of *Paradox* and Hulu’s less hyped June 2018 launch of the fourth and final season of *UnREAL* (2015-2018), a primetime soap about a *Bachelor*-like reality series that aired its prior seasons first on cable channel Lifetime. The projects made distribution the key part of their respective promotional campaigns and relied on established fanbases to generate conversation and hype on social media.

However, the surprise distribution of *Paradox* and *UnREAL* crucially operated within distinctive ‘industrial intertextualities’ (Herbert 2017, 4). The former was positioned as part of an ongoing franchise developed by Abrams, a Hollywood figure known as much for his ‘mystery box’-style promotional tactics as his actual filmmaking. In pursuing the massive Super Bowl platform and the shock of the sudden release, the rollout for *Paradox* tried to remix the mystery and anticipation surrounding the release of the first *Cloverfield* film. The latter, meanwhile, was the result of classic media conglomerate synergies. Lifetime’s parent company A+E Studios had previously sold Hulu exclusive streaming rights for *UnREAL* (Hulu 2016). While not a ratings success, the series was a popular binge-watching object among Hulu users (Goldberg 2018), which made it lucrative for both the studio and Hulu to debut season four online first.² *UnREAL*’s surprise release thus aimed to celebrate the story’s conclusion in its streaming home, without any mention of its previous first-run distribution on linear television.

Tracking the multi-platform campaigns of *Cloverfield Paradox* and *UnREAL* shows the curious position of distribution in the streaming environment. Distribution determines what we see and when, how, and where we see it; it also controls what we do not see (Lobato 2012, 15). The media industries have long relied on windowing, where content is released sequentially to different channels (from theatrical release to airplanes to home video) and different geographic locations over time (Owen and Wildman 1992; Waterman 2005). Windowing allows media conglomerates to extract as much value from audiences who respond to unique price points. Secondary windows like home video and television syndication have been lucrative for studios, offering a safety net that offsets the risk of \$100 million projects (McDonald 2007, 128). Digital distribution's increased access points are framed as innovative and beneficial for consumers. Yet, digital platforms mostly exist *alongside* prior distribution forms (Lotz, Lobato, and Thomas 2018, 40) and conglomerates can 'exploit' (Lobato 2012, 11) content across channels. Windows have been compressed (Doyle 2016) and platforms utilize exclusive content agreements that require consumers to make tough choices regarding their subscriptions.

It is also important to recognize how distribution is used to create 'aura-like' (Biltereyst and Meers 2006, 81) buzz around certain releases. In this regard, distribution holds significant import in the promotional mix. Studios circulate an 'avalanche' (Biltereyst, Mathijs, and Meers, 2008) of teasers and tidbits for major projects, with the Internet functioning as central hub for Hollywood's 'sustained event'-style marketing blitz (Grainge 2008, 130-150). This avalanche typically *precedes* the distribution of a media product, but surprise releases demonstrate how distribution becomes the key piece of the promotional process. That most of Netflix's releases arrive on Friday recalls traditional US theatrical film distribution, wherein new content is slated to fit inside subscribers' weekend plans. This results in a 'culture of "just-in-time promotion," in which Netflix relies on online economies of attention in order to gain a few days of promotion' (Tryon 2015, 107). Streaming platforms trade on consumers' willingness to binge, and quickly, as a way to develop interest around new releases. The rise of surprise releases is a response to the 'rapid delivery' and 'ubiquitous availability' (Tomlinson 2007, 74) that define modern content libraries, where numerous projects are distributed online every week to countless niche consumer groups. Sudden distribution reconfigures the ephemerality of modern media objects, aiming to shift the audience's shortened attention spans into brief but impactful explosions of interest, conversation, and consumption. While much has been made about the 'long tail' (Anderson 2006) of digital distribution, these releases concede the 'short-lived' (Grainge 2011, 9) period during which most projects draw attention. One form of digital distribution thus aspires to solve problems caused by another. As with the evolutions in windowing, surprise distribution is part of Hollywood's attempt to shape the audience experience amid sharp segmentation and personalization.

This combination of distribution and social media is propelled by *affect*, and hype cycles can also be described as *affect cycles*. The circulation of emotions creates 'affective value' (Ahmed 2014) that aligns individuals with communities across physical and social

spaces. Digital and social platforms enable corporations to exploit the affective labor of users who willingly communicate and collaborate as part of their active enjoyment of culture (Terranova 2000). Surprise releases simultaneously target the emotional connection that consumers have to an artist or franchise, the fundamental reaction of being surprised, and the shared immediacy of conversation on social platforms. The strategy assumes that audiences will do the familiar affective work of raising awareness for new releases. It also, however, assumes that audiences will produce emotion-driven responses to the novel distribution (shock, confusion, excitement, and anticipation) that manifest through modern online vernacular: social media posts with all-caps text and obligatory reaction GIFs. Most importantly, unexpected distribution seeks to create this affective response quickly, ramping up the emotional intensity and 'stickiness' (Ahmed 2014) surrounding releases faster than normal. Unsurprisingly, as coverage of *Paradox* and *UnREAL* shows, affective responses are easily integrated into industry discourses. Consumer response via social platforms becomes data. It is captured in public reporting about 'trending topics' and collected for private analysis by media corporations (Carah 2014).

Moreover, media companies pre-emptively structure affective response by framing unexpected drops as gifts for adoring, patient fans. As this article illustrates, the surprise releases of *Paradox* and *UnREAL* also arrived with secondary promotional discourses promising to cut through the red tape of traditional distribution and deliver answers to lingering franchise mysteries and satisfactory narrative conclusions *more directly* to fans. Surprise distribution, then, serves as yet another example of the media industries' adaptation of the online gift economy. The gift economy framework promises an open, collaborative space where participants forego financial compensation in exchange for 'pleasurable productivity' (Milner 2009, 495). Corporations have astutely learned to mimic the gift economy ideology by directly courting consumers *as fans* with 'free' access to ancillary content like podcasts, social media updates, and deleted scenes that simply inspires further consumption of 'official' narratives (Scott 2009). The manipulation of the gift economy manifests in discourses for paid content as well, with artists promising a more authentic or satisfying experience free from restrictions of standard Hollywood procedure. As in the cases central to this article, positioning content as gifts for fans can, at least temporarily, underline positive affective response and elide production troubles or potential negative reviews. Surprise releases, therefore, demonstrate how the media industries synthesize practical strategies like distribution with discursive schemes that aim to regulate consumer activity. The audience 'only exists as an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of institutions' (Ang 1991, 2), that can be segmented, celebrated specifically as 'fans,' and exploited for affective value.

Still, that both *Cloverfield Paradox* and *UnREAL* were part of existing Hollywood franchises, and that their respective releases were only marginally successful, indicates that the surprise drop is part of an experimental period in distribution. With built-in fanbases but little long-term prospects, the projects were prime candidates for transitory risk. Trial failures are worthwhile subjects because they speak to the iterative nature of Hollywood

strategy, where sweeping change is the result of under-the-radar disappointments. Surprise releases show that digital distribution requires more attention for its role in not only defining the publicity campaigns for media products, but also in shaping their meanings.

Unexpected Releases in Music

It is worth discussing surprise music releases to clarify how Netflix and Hulu pursued similar strategies, and why those pursuits did not succeed in the same fashion as those in the music industry. Early on Friday, December 13, 2013, Beyoncé released her self-titled fifth album exclusively on Apple's iTunes store. While Beyoncé had not kept the recording process for the album a secret, she withheld information regarding its completion and distribution. In fact, Beyoncé had only finalized the tracklist and confirmed distribution plans with Columbia Records and Apple a week before its release (Hampp and Mitchell 2013). Publicly, Beyoncé framed her release as a fan-first reprieve from the industry hype machine: 'I miss that immersive experience, now people only listen to a few seconds of a song on their iPods and they don't really invest in the whole experience. It's all about the single, and the hype. It's so much that gets between the music and the art and the fans' (Hampp and Mitchell 2013). Beyoncé introduced sudden distribution as a solution to technological and industrial problems. In her view, personalized media devices have made too many options available to consumers, who do not spend enough time with complete artworks. Meanwhile, the industry's focus on building anticipation through singles has, Beyoncé suggested, created a barrier of hype that distracts fans from meaningful, 'immersive' album experiences. Harkening back to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1982), Beyoncé conjured visions of collective reception. This deployment of nostalgia is common in the media industries and 'part of a self-promoting discourse – one which touts its own cultural lineage and heritage' (Moulton 2018, 6). Here, Beyoncé positioned her record as part of a lineage of albums that became cultural events at the moment of distribution. On the one hand, *Beyoncé*, like *Thriller*, promised an 'immersive' experience that fans could actively dig into rather than consume passively or quickly. On the other hand, Beyoncé imagined a moment when fans would share their respective immersive experiences. The implication was that immersion begat collectivity; Beyoncé's fans would go deeper into her new music, together. By placing her release within the context of fan reception, Beyoncé moved it away from its underlying industrial purpose to generate immense hype that would translate into record sales.

Beyond this fan-friendly discourse, the surprise release of *Beyoncé* achieved status as a popular culture event. Twitter reported that the release generated over 1.2 million tweets in twelve hours, along with 500,000 direct mentions of Beyoncé's name in a day (Lipshutz 2013). Buzz also translated to sales. *Beyoncé* sold 80,000 units in its first three hours of availability, making it the fastest selling release in iTunes history (Apple 2013). Beyoncé expanded upon this strategy by unveiling her next solo album, *Lemonade* (2016), through a mysterious HBO special that showed a sixty-five-minute film version of the album (McHenry 2016), and later by dropping a collaboration with husband Jay-Z, *Everything Is Love* (2018), with an abrupt on-stage notice during a live performance (Grow 2018). Though

not as historic for their distribution, subsequent Beyoncé records sustained the surprise release trend that she started in 2013.

If Beyoncé's self-titled album shows the potential success of surprise releases, then U2's sudden distribution of its thirteenth album, *Songs of Innocence*, indicates the potential challenges with the strategy. Like Beyoncé, U2 leveraged a partnership and secret plan with Apple for its September 2014 album release. However, the band and Apple expanded upon the *surprise* nature of surprise releases by adding the album to the iTunes accounts of more than 500 million users – immediately and automatically, for free, after U2 finished a live performance at an iPhone and Apple Watch announcement event. The messaging behind *Songs of Innocence* diverged from that of *Beyoncé* as well. While Beyoncé's album lacked pre-release promotion, U2 unveiled its album during Apple's annual iPhone event, which has gained significant cultural status. Apple CEO Tim Cook celebrated the move as 'the largest album release of all time' (Sisario 2014). Bandmember The Edge stressed its novelty: '[It is] incredibly subversive. It's really punk rock, it's really disruptive' (Mayer 2014). The Edge's wording illustrated how the logic of Silicon Valley – where calls for 'disruption' are a common refrain (Rachleff 2013) – infiltrated U2's promotional discourse. Whereas Beyoncé navigated around corporate reasons for her surprise drop and fixated on its impact on fans, U2 explicitly focused on the scale and reach of the release.

Between the unambiguous attempt to create a cultural event and the unease over the album's entry to users' devices without their consent, *Songs of Innocence* received a more mixed reaction than *Beyoncé*. Apple reported that more than 81 million listened during its first month on iTunes (Halperin and Hampp 2014). But the release strategy was critiqued in the press as 'rock-and-roll as dystopian junk mail' (Richards 2014). Apple eventually created a website to inform iTunes users how to permanently delete the album from their personal libraries (Dredge 2014). The technological capabilities that make sudden digital distribution efficient and frictionless backfired. Rather than invite consumers to participate in a surprise event, U2 and Apple *made* consumers part of their campaign. This approach proves how the reported participatory nature of new media is easily warped into processes that consumers do not request. Despite the controversy, U2's album release scored attention for the band, as well as for the distribution strategy.

Hence, the degree of surprise and sustained impact differs across the numerous instances of sudden distribution in music between 2013 and 2018. Still, I would argue in music an artist's ability to circumvent the usual marketing and distribution processes with a surprise drop indicates their status in the industry. Beyoncé had to negotiate with her record label to develop the initial surprise, but she pushed for the plan with confidence because of her fanbase and celebrity status. Even if the release of *Beyoncé* was met with controversy, one problematic album roll-out would not have ended her career. U2 *did* face criticism for its release strategy but still faced no long-term consequences with fans or within the industry. Despite the possibilities of failure, the success of Beyoncé's first surprise release popularized *and* legitimized the strategy, eliminating many potential concerns and exhibiting the potential benefits for other artists.

Musicians also participate in surprise release discourses as a way to extend interest in their music long before any album is released. Artists now regularly unveil teasers to inspire gossip without confirming release plans. This method produces a longer cycle of anticipation but still allows musicians to refer to albums as surprises when eventually distributed. Rumors of a Beyoncé-Jay-Z collaborative album began in November 2017, eight months before *Everything Is Love* was announced (Baquet 2017), and increased significantly when the duo revealed a joint tour in March 2018 (Grow 2018). Frank Ocean likewise claimed that the album that eventually became *Blonde* (2016) would arrive in July 2015, thirteen months before its actual distribution. Ocean teased the album throughout 2016, including with an image on his website mimicking a library checkout card with 'past due' dates, mocking rumored release targets that he had missed (Ivie 2016), before finally distributing it to Apple Music in August (Horowitz 2016). Musicians have learned to exploit the anticipatory and conversational traits inherent in convergent media platforms. By ignoring 'rumors' (in the case of Beyoncé and Jay-Z) or delaying (in the case of Frank Ocean) potential releases, artists enable fans and the press to create an aura that feeds into excitement once their album is 'surprisingly' distributed.

The evolution of surprise album drops demonstrates how distribution can control the context in which media objects are consumed and interpreted. As subsequent sections show, the surprise release has been taken up in film and television not as a reflection of established success but rather as an attempt to generate interest in troubled projects.

The Super Bowl Surprise of *Cloverfield Paradox*

The release of *Cloverfield Paradox* on Super Bowl Sunday was a surprise, but did fit within the historical parameters of producer J.J. Abrams' promotion-driven oeuvre and the horror-film *Cloververse*. Abrams, a screenwriter/director who gained notoriety for his work on serialized series *Alias* (2001-2006) and *Lost* (2004-2010), has long been a proprietor of what he calls 'the mystery box.' He detailed the concept and how it drives his storytelling in a 2007 TED Talk: 'The thing is that it represents infinite possibility. It represents hope. It represents potential ... And I realize that mystery is the catalyst for imagination ... maybe there are times when mystery is more important than knowledge.' Abrams's desire to withhold information as a way to inspire curiosity within consumers converged with the expansion of the Internet. *Lost* benefited from extensive theorizing among fans and critics, who worked collaboratively to forensically dig deep into the series' themes and plot threads. Web interest in *Lost* compelled ABC and Bad Robot, Abrams' production company, to develop an alternative reality game, *The Lost Experience*, that combined traditional advertisements, viral marketing websites for fictional *Lost* touchpoints, and canonical 'answers' to major series questions (Mittell 2013).

Abrams was not directly involved in the creation of *The Lost Experience*, but he and partner studio Paramount were inspired by its viral success while developing the campaign for the then-untitled *Cloverfield*, a found footage film about a monster attack on New York City. To develop interest in the film, Bad Robot and Paramount attached a cryptic teaser

trailer, sans title, to the theatrical release of *Transformers* (2007). The secrecy of the trailer's rollout, combined with Abrams' mystery box nature, inspired extensive online speculation. *Cloverfield's* teaser trailer was supported with an inventory of tie-in websites, including personal Myspace profiles for the film's main characters as well as corporate websites and phone numbers for fake companies Slusho! (which had previously appeared in Abrams's *Alias*) and Taguruato that were tangentially involved in the plot. Fan blogs like *Cloverfield Clues* compiled pieces of the viral marketing puzzle and offered fans the space to theorize about the film's potential story (North 2010, 79-81).

Though a second trailer revealed more of the plot and a title, the fervor around initial teases – and Abrams's brand – kept the aura of mystery alive. The traditional promotion and web alternative reality games (ARGs) 'mixed reality with fiction in a way which appealed to the core audience and resulted in the creation of significant word of mouth' (Kerrigan 2010, 202). Positive word of mouth online, through 'an outpouring of enthusiasm of discussion boards, movie review sites, and fan websites' (Davis et al. 2014, 57), can sustain anticipation as much as studios' procession of publicity. Much like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which rode a campaign of mystery and online buzz to high box office returns (Walters 2007), *Cloverfield* was an immediate success. The film made \$40.1 million on its opening weekend in January 2008, which was at the time the highest grossing January opening ever (Jensen 2008).

Abrams's subsequent directorial effort *Super 8* (2011) mimed the *Cloverfield* approach with a multi-platform viral marketing campaign involving a hidden message buried in the film's trailer (Brown 2010). Bad Robot's television products like *Fringe* (2009-2013) and *Person of Interest* (2011-2016) also featured a formula of 'a central mystery and a multi-layered, hyper-complex narrative full of leads, clues, and red herrings' (Hadas 2017, 95). Even when Abrams only serves as executive producer, the mystery box storytelling is attributed to his auteurist vision. Likeminded collaborators like *Cloverfield* director Matt Reeves or *Lost* writer Damon Lindelof execute their work through the filter of Abrams' 'personal signature' (Hadas 2017, 96). This corporate authorship creates a discursive field surrounding the Bad Robot brand; audiences expect mystery and misdirection.

These expectations influenced the discourse surrounding potential *Cloverfield* sequels. Abrams was regularly asked about a follow-up and had to shut down speculation that the shadowy *Super 8* trailer was linked to *Cloverfield* (Yuan 2010). Rather than develop a true sequel, Abrams and Bad Robot retrofitted *another* secretive project – codename *Valencia* – into a 'spiritual successor' to *Cloverfield* (Sullivan 2016b). Abrams and company made this decision in the middle of production, with star Mary Elizabeth Winstead not learning of the connection to *Cloverfield* until days before the first trailer was released (Sullivan 2016a). The resulting project, *10 Cloverfield Lane*, did not feature the original film's monster or directly address its plotlines. Instead, the second film, which follows Winstead's Michelle waking up in the bunker of a man who claims the outside world is uninhabitable, marked its connections to *Cloverfield* through publicity materials. Fans uncovered 'subliminal images' in its cryptic trailer that revealed GPS coordinates, which led to the

discovery of survival goods ‘buried’ by antagonist Howard Stambler (John Goodman) in an abandoned lot in Covington, Louisiana (Giroux 2016). The film also brought new updates to the Taguruato website that unveiled information about Stambler’s employment at the company and his discovery of something ‘much, much bigger’ when tracking Soviet spy satellites for the US Navy (Sciretta 2016). *Lane* illustrates how promotional campaigns create and sustain anticipation but also establish ‘meanings and frames’ (Gray 2010, 18) for consumers. The cumulative effect of the Cloververse’s mystery box marketing is that fans are trained to enjoy being surprised or confused.

Unlike previous films, *Paradox*’s production was not fully clouded in secrecy, at least for readers of Hollywood trades. Paramount and Bad Robot initially attempted a bait-and-switch with *Paradox*’s release. In early 2016, Paramount announced a February 2017 release date for *The God Particle*, a sci-fi film about astronauts fighting a ‘terrifying discovery’ in space. By late 2016, the studio eliminated *The God Particle* from its schedule and replaced it with a new *Cloverfield* film, suggesting that the original title and premise would fall under the *Cloverfield* umbrella (D’Alessandro 2016). Amid speculation of the film’s franchise connections, Paramount and Bad Robot pushed back its release date *three* times between February 2016 and January 2018. Given Abrams’s mystery box history and past franchise promotion, trade reporters wondered if the schedule changes were ‘just another sneaky *Cloverfield*-esque marketing tactic’ (Ramos 2018). Instead, Paramount pivoted away from theatrical exhibition for the film and sold the distribution rights to Netflix (Fleming Jr. 2018). Post-release reporting revealed that reshoots to morph *The God Particle* into *Cloverfield Paradox* were challenging enough that Paramount viewed the film as a likely failure. Paramount made \$50 million on the sale to Netflix, rescuing the studio even before *Paradox*’s Super Bowl Sunday release (Kit and McClintock 2018).

Most potential viewers who encountered the *Paradox* trailer during the Super Bowl telecast or watched the film on Netflix may not have read the trade reporting on the film’s troubled history. However, this reporting reveals how the surprise release tried to mask its prior failures, minimize risk for Paramount, and generate buzz for Netflix. Deals like this are regularly cut in Hollywood, for troubled and successful projects, and represent different types of cultural and industrial value. As both distributor and creator, Netflix complicates these strategies. On the one hand, its model promises niche consumer groups more library content than they could ever consume. Distributing Hollywood studios’ failed objects is just one part of the massive Netflix library infrastructure. On the other hand, Netflix’s push toward legitimacy and quality discourses (Tryon 2015) requires the investment in high-profile additions that fit with the company’s emergent brand as *the* dominant industry platform. Given the secretive nature of the Cloververse and Netflix’s need to brand its new purchase as more than just a costly library addition, the surprise drop offered all parties a route to reframing the significance of *Paradox*.

The fundamental Abrams *Cloverfield* mystery box strategy remained, but instead of building anticipation over an extended period – creating additional expenses for an already troubled production – it came much faster over one evening. The campaign targeted social

media chatter to create interest throughout the night. Live events like the Super Bowl remain valuable because their ephemerality combats personalized on-demand viewing. The collective nature of a live event translates to social platforms, where users respond to action on the television screen. Unsurprisingly, social activity spikes during the Super Bowl telecast.³ Twitter specifically enables a stream of instantaneous, sentiment-driven reactions that can be directed through hashtags and trending topics – the ideal mechanism for a sudden marketing wave.

After *Paradox*'s trailer was simultaneously released on television and social platforms, the film's social accounts began building anticipation among those seeking out context to the trailer's 'Only on Netflix Tonight' kicker. At 7:36 p.m. EST, eight minutes after the trailer was released, the @CloverfieldPRDX Twitter account posted, 'You're not losing your mind.' It quickly followed this tweet with two more: 'You're just lost,' and 'So are they.' These two tweets were complimented with GIFs from the trailer. 'You're just lost' arrived with a snippet featuring a character looking at Earth from the space station, while 'So are they' highlighted the station twirling in the emptiness of space. The posts traded on confusion, simultaneously assuring viewers that they were not mistaken about the film's imminent release and underlining the mania of not understanding how it happened so quickly.

Though these tweets (and similar posts on Facebook) received hundreds of replies, retweets, and likes, the @CloverfieldPRDX did not directly interact with followers. Instead, the account stuck with a familiar broadcast-style approach to build anticipation. The account circulated text-free tweets with GIFs to communicate the stakes of the film's plotline and its incoming release. Tweets showed two famous shots from *Cloverfield* (the decapitated Statue of Liberty head and handheld camera footage of city-wide explosions) as well as new images from *Paradox* (including the space station exploding and a shaking Slusho! figurine). This is but one example of how Hollywood participates in 'a particular economy of "pastness"' (Grainge 2000, 32) where nostalgia for past film experiences is repackaged as a way to inspire an immediate response. GIFs are especially useful in attempting to foster nostalgia, as they function as 'distillations of pure affect' (Newman 2016). The circulation of moments from *Cloverfield* connected the two films narratively but also aimed to provoke an emotional response in those who remember the experience of seeing the initial *Cloverfield* trailer in 2007 and/or who follow Abrams's mystery box promotion. In this case, then, the tweets direct the nostalgia to the actual *Cloverfield* films as well as the promotional campaigns surrounding the franchise. This nostalgia for specific promotional iconography is most visible in tweets highlighting the Slusho! figurine. Slusho! offers little import in the Cloververse narrative; its value to fans is tied to their consumption of the extended promotional universe.

Twitter users reacted accordingly to the *Paradox* trailer and related social media updates. While tweets or Facebook posts do not represent a unified audience response, users presented shock and excitement over the film's impending release through all-caps exclamations and hyperbolic expressions of desire:

@imfrenchfried: 'i swear if the cloverfield movie gets released today at the end of the super bowl I will shoot myself in the head' (February 4, 2018)

@Rollingfishays: '@CloverfieldPRDX END THE GAME NOW' (February 4, 2018)

@thatswattsup: '@CloverfieldPRDX @netflix FUCK ME UP' (February 4, 2018)

@LaDaniellaRose: '@CloverfieldPRDX OMG YAS THE BEST EVER !!! THIS IS THE NEW AGE! GOODBYE THEATERS!' (February 4, 2018)

Unsurprisingly, users also replied to @CloverfieldPRDX with popular reaction GIFs that function as 'digital slang' in online culture (Eppink 2014, 301): Meryl Streep pointing and chanting 'YES' at the 2015 Academy Awards; Kermit the Frog screaming uncontrollably; Shia LaBeouf clapping emphatically; and *Futurama's* (1999-2003; 2008-2013) Fry declaring 'Shut up and take my money.' These responses demonstrate how nostalgia, surprise, anticipation, and digital vernacular blend together in a real-time affective experience. Ahmed (2014, 220) argues that objects can cause happiness far in advance of their arrival: 'the object becomes available within a horizon of possibility because it has already been given positive affect. The judgment that some things are good not only precedes our encounter with things but directs us toward those things.' The surprise over *Paradox's* release also shows how social platforms encourage a cycle of affective responses that the media industries aim to guide or exploit. The initial shock over the film's distribution inspired social media chatter, while the saturation of that chatter likely inspired further interest, and thus additional chatter, before *Paradox's* post-game release.

Closer to the film's distribution, @CloverfieldPRDX returned to its direct provocation. About an hour before release, it tweeted, 'Think you're ready?' paired with a GIF of the astronauts looking terrified at something off-screen. Three subsequent tweets/GIFs underlined the film's looming arrival with, respectively, a hyperventilating crew member, an eerie stray arm moving toward the camera, and the firing up of the space station. As another trailer aired on NBC to introduce the film on Netflix, social accounts circulated the new clip with 'Right. Now. #CloverfieldParadox.' The new teaser began with a transmission from character Ava (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) looking directly into the camera: 'I have to be quick. Whatever you're doing right now, stop.' The remaining twenty seconds followed typical Hollywood style for teasers in the horror genre, featuring rapidly edited out-of-context action shots of characters screaming or running in fear. As Ava's voiceover concluded, the clip returned to the extreme close-up of her face looking into the camera: 'Right. Now.' Aligned sequentially, the tweets exhibit a growing sense of panic and stakes, a maneuver that climaxed with the film's release. The final teaser crystallized this strategy with the emphasis on *Right. Now.*, and direct address, promising an immediate on-demand streaming experience.

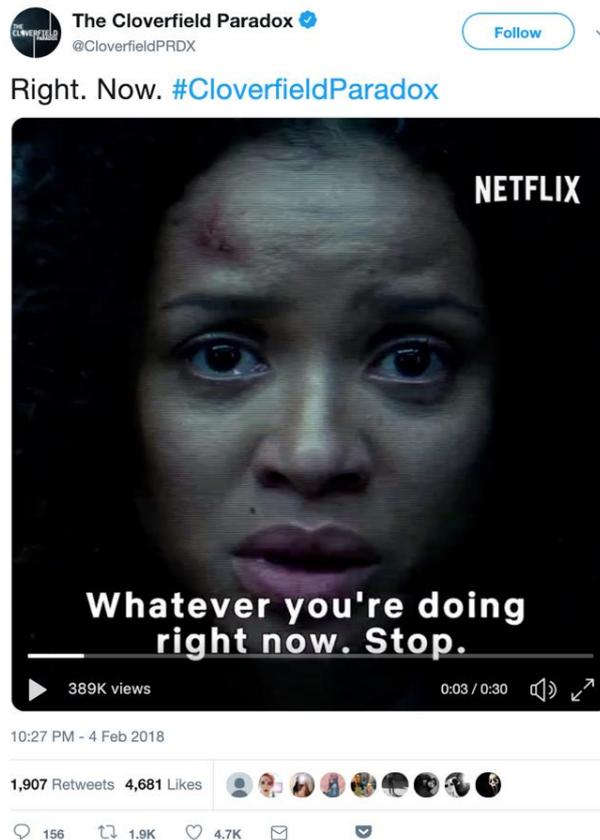


Figure 1: @CloverfieldPRDX's final tweet before *Paradox*'s distribution on Netflix. (Screenshot)

Whereas the first two films in the Cloververse were prefigured with complex, narrative-based anticipation, *Paradox* accentuated an emotional urgency and adrenaline-based ephemerality with its imminent release. The platform of the live Super Bowl broadcast offered the film the opportunity to create a more immediate impact. The connection to a live broadcast – with the defined clock of a sporting event – made for a temporal sensitivity surrounding the film’s release that would not have existed had Netflix released the film in traditional Friday fashion. That the power of live television produced social media chatter about the film’s release indicates how companies use social platforms cooperatively to channel interest and conversation.

Publications extensively covered both the secret Super Bowl trailer and shocking release in the first forty-eight hours. The hashtag appeared on Twitter’s trending topics throughout Super Bowl Sunday (Brisbee 2018). Thousands of people posted about the film’s distribution. However, as more people watched the film, the extensive word-of-mouth buzz that Netflix sought did not materialize. Critics quickly turned around their unkind reviews. Review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes calculated only 18 percent positive evaluations from over 120 critics; the typically kinder fan review score fell below 50 percent (Spangler 2018). Headlines like ‘How Netflix and Paramount Pictures Took a Crappy Movie and Turned It into

Gold' (Kuchera 2018) and 'The Cloverfield Paradox' Is an Embarrassingly Bad Movie ... But Still a Win for Netflix' (Collins 2018) directly linked the film's distribution and its quality.

Although the negative critical response is not a singular indicator of a film's success, the stunted buzz surrounding *Paradox* was evident in how Bad Robot tried to recalibrate the promotional campaign on the fly. On Twitter, the @CloverfieldPRDX account suddenly shifted to more direct engagement with users, including telling one user that 'There's no time for sleep,' simply tweeting the eyes emoji (indicating sly deceit) to a second, and retweeting a third's post stating, 'Wtf is going on..' This approach continued over the next few days, with @CloverfieldPRDX tweeting lines or GIFs from the film, or retweeting positive feedback from viewers and the industry press. In many of the tweets, the account referenced the sentient detached arm of one of the film's characters in what was clearly an attempt to create a spreadable, meme-able moment out of the film:

@CloverfieldPRDX: '@IamAnthonyyy_ *pinches arm to make sure it's there*
(February 5, 2018)

@CloverfieldPRDX: '@BigBoyle All the questions one arm can carry, please'
(February 6, 2018)

@CloverfieldPRDX: '@DrizzyDres Arm still attached?' (February 7, 2018)

Building anticipation for *Paradox* required promotional material that fits within the pre-existing expectations for the franchise. These tweets, however, reveal the ways in which corporations modulate their promotional discourse and consumer engagement on social platforms to improve brand awareness, or in this case, to prolong a film's place within the cultural conversation. Corporate social media accounts are increasingly turning toward a performative authenticity – sharing memes and emojis, speaking less formally – as a way to embed themselves into the endless stream of conversation online. The meme-ification of a media object on some level indicates its penetration in popular culture. Here those running @CloverfieldPRDX tried to create a meme out of the film and convince additional people to watch so they could participate in the conversation on social media. This is an inauthentic promotional tactic to extend the film's hype cycle beyond Super Bowl Sunday disguised as participatory consumer engagement.

Bad Robot also tried to refocus on the novelty of the film's distribution and franchise connections. Three days after *Paradox*'s release, Abrams skirted around questions about the film's rumored problems and instead reframed the surprise release as part of the Cloververse lineage as part of a promotional Q&A on Facebook Live:

[P]eople sort of knew this movie was coming, they knew it was a *Cloverfield* movie and the series had always been so much about surprise, we were literally talking about what was the most fun way we could surprise people

with this. We thought, ‘Well I wonder if this is even a possibility?’ We went and had a meeting with Netflix and it was this totally weird, creepy, top-secret meeting [about] ‘What if this could happen?’ (Schwerdtfeger 2018)

The move to Netflix and the sudden distribution were pitched as ‘fun’ and fan-friendly ways to distribute the film in a manner that evoked previous franchise releases. Abrams’s recollection of the idea as almost *impossible*, and the meeting with Netflix as ‘weird, creepy, top secret,’ stressed how the film’s distribution should be viewed as inspired and innovative. In the Bad Robot universe, even corporate deal-making must sound like it happened in the mystery box.

Abrams and his collaborators also shared how the secrecy surrounding the film was in place during production to connect it to the Cloververse. Much like *10 Cloverfield Lane*, Bad Robot retrofitted an unaffiliated film into the franchise, a process that went ‘through many different iterations’ (Robinson 2018). Director Julius Onah pitched this secrecy as *productive* for the crew and for fans of the film: ‘It was a lot of lying, a lot of keeping secrets from even our own friends and family. It was a lot of fun. It’s so rare to kind of be able to just drop a movie on the whole planet’ (Schwerdtfeger 2018). Star David Oyelowo, however, shared that he found out about the film’s release the morning of the Super Bowl. Oyelowo recalled his mixed feelings on the strategy: ‘those are all things that normally take place over six months, maybe a year, before a film of this nature comes out. So there was definitely something exciting about it, but also – we were all kind of on the call going ‘Yay!’ and then going ‘What? I don’t understand what just happened’’ (Robinson 2018). The response from *Paradox*’s cast and crew reveals how distribution decisions hold complicated significance. These comments sell surprise distribution as a novel approach and one that directors and actors are willing to explore within the proper context. Yet, the discussion of ‘different iterations’ and Oyelowo’s confusion over the release strategy indicates that, on some level, the surprise drop hoped to pre-emptively shape the conversation around the film. This strategy was visible in the Q&A. Though billed as a way for fans to ask questions about *Paradox*’s connection to the Cloververse, Abrams and company ignored user-submitted questions throughout the panel because they were critical or sarcastic in nature (Robinson 2018). Promotional talking points about the ‘fun’ release would not be interrupted by probing fan questions.

In the aftermath of Facebook Live interview and amid negative buzz, *Paradox*’s social accounts kept attention on the film’s franchise ties. On Twitter, @CloverfieldPRDX retweeted fans celebrating not just their enjoyment of the film but also its connection to the Cloververse:

@EyelessTwins: ‘After watching the cloverfield paradox, my mind is blown out. I watched some theory videos to see how the movies are connect. [sic]’ (February 9, 2018)

@2TurntMati: 'Cloverfield paradox is a huge mind fuck and I love it' (February 9, 2018)

The @CloverfieldPRDX account also shared outside media coverage that 'explained' secret connections between *Paradox* and the Cloververse. These tweets, pointedly, did not address the generally negative reviews. Likewise, three of the final four original posts on Twitter and Facebook featured edited videos 'explaining' connections, using clips from the films and Abrams's Facebook Live commentary. One, introduced as 'Welcome to the Cloververse,' boldly claims that *Paradox* 'unleashed a multiverse of fan theories,' followed by a montage of social media content theorizing about the film and its franchise ties. One memorable post in the montage notes, 'What if it's all real, and in the future we messed up time, and now we're f*cked and the ARG is a real mystery that we have to solve to save humanity?'

These posts tried to appeal to fans looking to go deeper into the Cloververse – an action previously facilitated by viral marketing and ARGs. While cunning Reddit users discovered updates to the Taguruato ARG website before *Paradox* was surprise released, the typical *Cloverfield* mystery box campaign fizzled once the film was sold to Netflix and dropped on Super Bowl Sunday. Rather than ask fans to collectively sketch out the latest addition to the franchise, these videos explicitly and quickly explained new connections. This approach shows that the surprise distribution of *Paradox* was intended to serve the primary promotional function for the film. Post-release attempts to re-emphasize the broader complexities of the Cloververse – including references to ARGs – can be read as last-ditch pleas as attention to the film faded.

Though it is impossible to know exactly how successful *Cloverfield Paradox* was with Netflix subscribers, there is evidence that points to its failure. Only a fraction of the 103 million Super Bowl telecast viewers watched the film early in its release window. According to Nielsen, the film was streamed by 786,000 people on Sunday and 5 million people in its first week. Nielsen's reporting on Netflix viewership includes only US surveys of connected TVs and must be taken with a grain of salt.⁴ However, using the same metrics, the biggest Netflix original film before *Paradox*, fantasy cop drama *Bright* (2017), scored over 11 million streams in three days despite similar negative reviews (Spangler 2018). The film's social media accounts painted a stark decline in interest as well. In total, @CloverfieldPRDX sent just seventy-six tweets. Fifteen were sent as part of the pre-release rush of publicity; sixty-two were sent within the first week of release. An overall fewer number of updates were posted to the film's Facebook and Instagram accounts, but none of the accounts have been updated since March 2018. The hype cycle that emerged so quickly on Super Bowl Sunday diminished almost as quickly.

The discourses surrounding *Cloverfield Paradox* display how distribution can be viewed as an indicator of perceived quality, a potential reprieve from financial ruin, and a catalyst in a form of multi-platform promotion. Distribution creates 'framings and reframings' (Lobato 2012, 18) that shape texts and viewing experiences. In this case, a novel

form of distribution intended to reframe the normal viewer experience by compressing anticipation and creating a short burst of interest that fit within the Internet hype cycle. While mystery box branding manufactured an audience for the first two films, the surprise distribution of *Paradox* only offered so much beyond the jolt of release-related excitement. The brief hype cycle for *Paradox* speaks to the complications with social media-driven strategy. By trying to build word-of-mouth interest on social platforms with a unique distribution strategy, Bad Robot and Netflix likely inspired more people than usual to search for the film online, thus discovering the troubling production reports and negative reviews. The film's attempts to become an industry pioneer floundered in no small part due to how it ended up on Netflix in the first place: its perceived poor quality. This relationship between sudden distribution, diminished objects, and audience disinterest is also apparent with the release of *UnREAL* season four.

The Synergistic Surprise of *UnREAL*

UnREAL season four traveled a different road to its sudden distribution in June 2018. While the Cloververse established an expectation of mystery and surprise among fans before *Cloverfield Paradox* came to Netflix, *UnREAL* had no such viral marketing aura surrounding it. The series debuted on Lifetime in 2015 to critical acclaim for its portrayal of the heightened world of *Bachelor*-style reality television and its central relationship between the fictional show's producers (played by Shiri Appleby and Constance Zimmer). Despite its entrenched reputation as 'television for women,' Lifetime has undertaken many shifts in brand and programming focus over its thirty-five-year history. The cable channel is known for its 'women in peril' and low-budget celebrity biography films but has also consistently aired original scripted series to distinguish itself from competition like *Oxygen* and *WE* (Lotz 2006, 57-60). *UnREAL*'s connection to the popular *Bachelor* franchise and its explicit feminist critique of Hollywood's fairytale romance tropes made for titillating comparisons and episode deconstructions online (Nussbaum 2015). It won a prestigious Peabody Award for its 'incisive views on social issues ... and for smartly blending the dichotomy between high and low culture' (Peabody 2015).

However, *UnREAL*'s critical acclaim and interest among media outlets never translated into mainstream public appeal. The first season garnered under one million viewers per episode, a low figure even in the fragmented modern viewing context. Lifetime and A+E Studios were concerned enough about maintaining interest in *UnREAL* between the first and second season that they distributed 'binge-watching survival kits' to media members (Adalian 2016). The studio also distributed *The Faith Diaries*, a short-term digital spin-off series spotlighting a popular lesbian character from season one. This transmedia extension functioned as the 'paratextual scaffolding' (Dawson 2011, 38) promoting the arrival of *UnREAL*'s season two on Lifetime's schedule.

Most importantly, Lifetime and A+E Studios agreed to exclusively license *UnREAL*'s streaming rights to Hulu in February 2016. The content acquisition arms race between Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon inspired an increase in exclusive agreements between Hollywood

studios and streaming platforms, with *UnREAL* serving as one of Hulu's chief additions. Though *UnREAL* struggled to attract live viewers on linear television, Hulu valued the series for its performance across on-demand services and its serialized storylines, which are primed for binge watching. For Lifetime and A+E Studios, the deal with Hulu provided its series with another platform to generate interest that would, potentially, translate into viewership for subsequent seasons (Andreeva 2016). However, unlike the music industry, where exclusive agreements with streaming platforms are a way for individual artists to express their power in the industry, television studios face the necessity of extracting additional revenue through streaming deals.

Nonetheless, as the series escalated its already heightened reality television storylines and live up to its reputation as a sharp critic of representation in media, *UnREAL* gradually lost its support from the critical and awards community. The release of its third season was delayed six months amid changes in its creative team. Linear ratings continued to decline, but the press continued to report on its solid performance in streaming syndication on Hulu (Andreeva 2017). In May 2018, a month after the third season ended, the trades revealed that its already-completed fourth season would debut *first* on Hulu, and then eventually air on Lifetime after Hulu paid 'a larger sum than normal' (Goldberg 2018) for exclusive access. It was also reported that A+E Studios had little interest in continuing *UnREAL* beyond its fourth season, but could be convinced if Hulu were willing to pay even more for another slate of episodes (Petski and Andreeva 2018). Given the speculative nature of Hollywood trade reporting, Lifetime and *UnREAL* did not acknowledge this potential news in any public forum. On social media, where *UnREAL* accounts had been relatively active, the publicity push for the series had gone completely silent since the end of the season three finale on Lifetime.⁵

Then, seemingly out of the blue, *UnREAL*'s fourth and final season appeared on Hulu on Monday, July 16, 2018. A press release primarily stressed the series' importance to Hulu subscribers over the sudden nature of the fourth season's distribution. Craig Erwich, a Hulu executive, said, '*UnREAL* has captivated audiences on Hulu since season one, so when this opportunity came to us, we knew we couldn't miss out. This is a unique way to both satisfy fans of the show and continue to introduce it to new audiences.' A+E Studios' Barry Jossen echoed the focus on viewers, calling the move to Hulu and surprise release a 'huge benefit to *UnREAL*'s loyal fans' (Hulu 2018). The release hammered this point home with vague data points as well, revealing that, on average, viewers binge 3-4 episodes of *UnREAL* per session, and complete their viewing of full seasons in a few days. Lacking any kind of major media platform beyond its own interface, Hulu immediately turned to the series' dedicated – but relatively small – fanbase for support. Whereas Bad Robot and Netflix still operated within blockbuster franchise logic, hoping to acquire a much larger audience as quickly as possible, this approach hoped to rely on the intense passion of a smaller number of fans to drive consumption.

The press release also stressed that the fourth season's release brought 'together the complete *UnREAL* library, all on Hulu,' with series now labeled a 'Hulu Original' (Hulu

2018). Meanwhile, the series' original home, Lifetime, was completely absent from the main text of the release. Lifetime was essentially eliminated from the branding about *UnREAL*, with the deal framed as a celebration of finally unifying all episodes of the series in one place. Although the transition from one platform (linear television) to another (streaming video) played a role in *UnREAL*'s sudden distribution, Hulu strategically minimized attention to that point. The surprise distribution was not nearly important as the final, official homecoming at Hulu. The streaming platform crafted a new narrative: one where *UnREAL* was *always* a significant success among its users, where fans could not wait to stream the new season *on Hulu*, and where the series fits perfectly alongside the platform's 'award-winning originals slate' (Hulu 2018).

UnREAL stars Appleby and Zimmer reiterated Hulu's positive impact in interviews promoting the sudden distribution on July 16. Zimmer expressed how the cast and crew 'were so worried the everyone was going to have to wait another year to see season four, which just feels so cruel.' Appleby expressed how she felt 'incredibly grateful that [Hulu] came in and helped us give the fans what they've been asking for. It just feels like a cherry on top of the entire experience, to be working with them and have them be our home for the end' (Li 2018). Here again, the excitement over the unexpected release is positioned as beneficial for longtime fans. Hulu's surprise distribution both enabled earlier access *and* conclusion to the series' storylines. Appleby and Zimmer's comments also illustrate how the logic of a digital gift economy have filtered into media industries discourses, often with affective underpinnings. The actors underlined the *emotional* considerations related to season four's distribution: their *worry* over the *cruelty* of delayed distribution and their *gratitude* for Hulu's decision-making. Even the reference to Hulu as 'our home' emphasized an emotional connection to the platform.

Hulu's middling treatment of *UnREAL* as a surprise release manifested in the promotion for the series. While news outlets unveiled the news early in the morning on July 16 and consistently referred to the distribution as a surprise (Fernandez 2018), Hulu did not actively promote the release until mid-day. On Facebook and Twitter, Hulu posted a trailer for the new season with the following caption: 'Contestants on this season of #Everlasting All Stars have a chance at fame, fortune, and most of all ... True love. (Ha. Bet you actually believed that last part.) Season 4 of #UnREALtv is now streaming, only on Hulu.' The clip displayed chaos between cast members of *Everlasting*, *UnREAL*'s faux *Bachelor*, as lead producers Rachel (Appleby) and Quinn (Zimmer) noted how great it was to be back. It concluded with the series' traditional logo, now with 'A Hulu Original' above it, and 'the final season now streaming only on Hulu.' Meanwhile, *UnREAL*'s original social media accounts – those mentioning its affiliation with Lifetime – sent a single update about season four's debut: 'Keeping it real, one last time. The fourth and final season of #UnREALtv is now streaming, only on @hulu.'



Figure 2: *UnREAL*'s single promotional Facebook post for its surprise release on Hulu. (Screenshot)

This initial promotion for the program's fourth season points to its precarious position between two different media companies. Hulu's publicity for the release stressed *UnREAL*'s presence on its new 'home' platform as much as the fact that an entirely new season had arrived without warning. The content of both the video and supporting caption played like traditional Hollywood promotion, with minor emphasis on the newfound availability of *UnREAL*'s fourth season. Conversely, the series' main social accounts underlined *the finality* of the proceedings – that *UnREAL* had to come to an end, and did so elsewhere. Importantly, neither account fully embraced the surprise nature of season four's distribution, despite the fact that it was even more of a surprise than *Cloverfield Paradox*, which used the platform of the Super Bowl to jumpstart its hype cycle. The novelty was placed more on the transition from one platform to another, formalized on social media by @hulu responding to @UnRealLifetime on Twitter with 'Now THAT'S a plot twist no one saw coming (eye emoji)' and a GIF from the series tagged 'Hulu Originals.' The corporate transition played out in GIF form.

With *UnREAL*'s original social accounts out of the picture, Hulu tried to evoke the series' cultural touchpoints as a celebration of its conclusion and to draw fans into its surprise release. The streaming platform created a Twitter Moment – an aggregate of related content – spotlighting tweets from noted *Bachelor* production spoiler @RealitySteve, who 'revealed' a new set of spoilers from the fictional set of *Everlasting*. The

Twitter Moment showed that Reality Steve's fake spoiler tweets had been sent before the surprise release of season four, thus serving as minor viral marketing for *UnREAL*. That the series' original Twitter account never addressed these spoilers represents the nebulous state of *UnREAL*'s ownership at the time. The Lifetime-affiliated account seemingly could not share the viral marketing content due to the incoming reveal of the series' placement on Hulu. Nonetheless, the Reality Steve promotion aimed to drive attention among the fans with crossover interest in *The Bachelor* franchise and *UnREAL*. Similar updates across social platforms circulated GIFs from key *UnREAL* moments between Appleby's Rachel and Zimmer's Quinn and the duo's mantra, 'Money. Dick. Power.'

A few days after season four's release, Hulu tried to drum up interest by circulating a character personality quiz on Twitter. Questions vaguely alluded to events from the series. The first asked users how they would respond to a late delivery: 'have the driver fired ASAP or yell at them until they're in tears.' Both answers harkened back to the aggressive managerial styles of Quinn and Rachel, who regularly clashed with subordinates and with one another throughout the series' run. The quiz was also introduced with 'Let's do the damn thing,' a popular refrain heard on recent seasons of *The Bachelor*, again placing *UnREAL* in a familiar intertextual frame. Ultimately, the character quiz aimed to exploit fans' interest in the main characters, at a moment when they might be particularly nostalgic for *UnREAL* given its ending. However, while it is difficult to discern how many people took Hulu's quiz, the initial promotion received only eleven retweets and forty-eight likes, fairly low engagement for a media object in the midst of a publicity push.

There are no real metrics to determine how successful *UnREAL*'s sudden release was. Hulu is as secretive as Netflix with user data, and Nielsen does not track Hulu as frequently. However, much like Netflix's promotion of *Cloverfield Paradox*, the fact that Hulu quickly ceased any major publicity for the surprise drop – and *UnREAL* altogether – indicates that the streaming platform had little motivation or interest in continuing to remind consumers of its new exclusive series. Reviews for the fourth season were middling, but the season was reviewed far less frequently than *Paradox*, or prior seasons of *UnREAL*.⁶

It is important to recognize that, even beyond the absence of a Super Bowl-level platform, *UnREAL* season four operated within a different promotional frame than *Paradox*. The fundamental mystery surrounding the Cloververse has worked to benefit each individual film in the franchise. Potential viewers are kept in the dark – whether for an extended or compressed period of time – to build anticipation for the final product. While compressing that anticipatory climb eventually backfired against *Paradox*, it still positioned the film as a cultural happening, if even briefly. *UnREAL*, conversely, never captured fans' attention through mystery boxes, and instead aimed to capture an ongoing appreciation among fans through the sequential release of episodes across Lifetime and then Hulu. With so many episodes to promote just in the final season, *UnREAL*'s surprise release required more of an investment to get the full experience.

More realistically, *UnREAL* was, like *Paradox*, a depreciating object owned by a Hollywood studio hoping to offset costs through a synergistic partnership. It then, like

Paradox, was migrated to an industry upstart, a streaming platform looking for recognizable content with brand recognition. The fundamental difference in the distribution of *UnREAL* and *Paradox* is one of scale and risk. Netflix's business plan is to get as big as possible, as quickly as possible, and become the premier home for *all* streaming video content. Hulu has more measured expectations because of its joint ownership among media conglomerates. Spending millions on the acquisition and promotion for *Paradox* fits the Netflix brand. Leveraging a precedent and reportedly lucrative relationship with another Hollywood studio to make a moderate acquisition fits the Hulu brand. *UnREAL* season four ultimately failed to make the kind of immediate cultural impact as *Paradox*, but also avoided any significant backlash for overcompensating failure with a novel distribution approach. The surprise distribution was subsumed into the larger promotional narrative of the series' final season. Still, while the promotional discourses framed season four's release as a culminating gift to *UnREAL*'s dedicated fanbase, the muted rollout embodied the series' perilous placement across different corporations.

Conclusion

The trajectory of surprise releases exhibits the shifting ground in the digital environment. What was promoted *and* received as exceptional in 2013 with Beyoncé seemed somewhat passé with *Cloverfield Paradox* and *UnREAL* in 2018. The differing reactions to each release speak to, in part, the brand recognition of the object being unknowingly distributed. Neither the Cloververse nor *UnREAL* can compete with Beyoncé or U2 or Frank Ocean in this regard. Key differences between music and film and television also impacted the surprise distribution of, and response to, *Paradox* and *UnREAL*. While unexpected albums quickly spread globally on digital platforms like iTunes, the international distribution market for film and television is far more complex. Hulu is not accessible internationally and *UnREAL* is distributed globally through many local outlets that did not participate in Hulu's surprise drop of the series' final season. *Paradox*, meanwhile, arrived on some international Netflix libraries, but its promotional push focused entirely on a US popular culture event with minor global relevance. Similarly, American popular music less often requires translation to local languages in comparison to the work required to adapt film and television for local audiences. This may shape how quickly film and television products can be prepared for unexpected release as well as the intensity of consumer response on social platforms. These differences in mediums show that unique distribution strategies alone do not immediately guarantee the emergence of a pop culture event, increased subscriptions, or financial success.

Paradox and *UnREAL* also show how surprise distribution can offer *some* additional level of promotional value, but their broader reputations as troubled or marginalized objects were not forgotten simply because they arrived without forewarning. Compared to Beyoncé, whose surprise release album also had the benefit of critical acclaim and fan appreciation, the perceived issues with *Paradox* and *UnREAL* perhaps only made the gimmickry of their releases more apparent. Indeed, for a film or television series to be a

complete surprise on release requires that smart, active fans and enterprising journalists are not paying attention. That is hard for recognizable franchises to pull off, particularly with public shareholder meetings and multi-year distribution calendars. It is clear that the promotional power of surprise releases intersects with a multitude of industry discourses, from celebrity to branding to ideas of quality and taste.

Still, sudden distribution also speaks to how the media industries continue to recalibrate strategies to structure the consumer experience in the face of extreme segmentation and personalization. Unsurprisingly, the discourse surrounding surprise releases is framed as pro-consumer. Promotional material proposes that this form of distribution offers the efficiency and mobility of typical digital distribution, while also delivering a more generative reception community for 'true' fans sharing affective responses via real-time social updates. The campaigns for *Paradox* and *UnREAL* promised narrative satisfaction – through answers to lingering franchise questions and a legitimate ending – and the personal satisfaction of being able to watch the projects immediately, completely, and collectively. More so than normal releases, surprise drops are pitched as gifts, or ways for studios, labels, and artists to give back to passionate fans. This discourse tries to supersede any other existing chatter about a project like trade press gossip about troubled reshoots or declining Nielsen ratings. It also elides the attempts to translate consumer interest into cost-effective word-of-mouth promotion. However, the brief hype intervals for *Paradox* and *UnREAL* demonstrate that audience affect, on its own, may not generate wider attention for marginal or troubled productions. The tepid response to *Paradox* shows how affective cycles can turn *against* a project, underlining the gimmickry of the distribution strategy. Meanwhile, the muted reaction to *UnREAL*'s final season reveals that gift-driven strategies may satisfy niche fanbases but still remain on the fringes of industry discourse and attention. Thus, like cable, on-demand, and digital distribution before it, the surprise release purports to offer something better than its predecessors. However, consumers are placed within an affective promotional wave that exaggerates what are mostly incremental changes in the actual experience of content.

The biggest challenge facing analysis of surprise releases, or any strategy involving streaming video platforms, is in understanding success. The infrastructure of the music industry, while complex, produces public metrics like the number of albums sold or downloaded and songs streamed. Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, on the contrary, rarely release any information related to individual series or films. Subscription numbers from shareholder reporters point to broader trends, but not the impact of a new addition to the platform. *Paradox* and *UnREAL* could have been successful for their respective streaming platforms – and they might continue to be so for years to come. The ephemeral nature of streaming objects is magnified by an impenetrable, algorithmic data collection process, which only pushes even more ephemeral concepts like 'social media buzz' to the forefront. That these surprise releases trade in that ephemeral sphere is simultaneously compelling and vexing for scholars and worth further investigation.

Nonetheless, that these experiments were centered on release strategies underlines how important distribution is within the contemporary context. Distribution is an extremely contested site; in this article's examples alone, a specific approach to digital distribution was used to combat *other*, more entrenched forms of digital distribution. Consumers are closer than ever to the devices and platforms that function as distributors of content. Hollywood and Silicon Valley are desperate to produce and distribute the content that is selected among the endless scrolling libraries and timelines. These examples show how classic Hollywood studios collaborate with streaming platforms that are rapidly encroaching into the film and television industries. Despite the perceived failures of the content, the kinds of partnerships among factions that aided in the deployment of the surprise distribution strategy will persist. However, Netflix and Hulu may eventually be structured in ways that potentially prohibit the kind of agreements that made season four releases of *Paradox* and *UnREAL* possible. Competing platforms from Disney and WarnerMedia will ensure a more competitive landscape of licensing battles and proprietary exclusions. Meanwhile, these two companies are developing future content portfolios devised to elicit affective hype cycles, from narrative extensions of global franchises like *Star Wars* to nostalgic remakes of popular sitcoms like *Family Matters* (1989-1998) and *Step by Step* (1991-1998). As the deep segmentation of modern media requires that corporations simultaneously pursue mass and niche audiences, affective hype cycles will only grow more relevant in this environment. Netflix, Disney, WarnerMedia, and others will look to create such cycles in sufficient duration to convince consumers to subscribe – and remain subscribed – to their respective platforms. Fully surprise releases might not exactly 'work' yet, but the logic that ungirds their digital distribution and potential affective appeal will play a key role in the future of streaming media.

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Notes:

¹ *The Cloverfield Paradox's* primary social media accounts are as follows: Facebook (www.facebook.com/TheCloverfieldParadox), Twitter (www.twitter.com/@CloverfieldPRDX), and Instagram (www.instagram.com/TheCloverfieldParadox).

² *UnREAL* averaged about 700,000 viewers at its peak in season one (TV Series Finale 2015). The third season, the final one to air on Lifetime, averaged 270,000 viewers (TV Series Finale 2018).

³ In 2018, Twitter reported 4.8 billion 'impressions' (views) for Super Bowl-related tweets, while Facebook claimed that 62 million people generated 270 million 'interactions' during the game (Cohen 2018).

⁴ Determining real viewership figures for Netflix originals is essentially impossible at this stage. Nielsen's projections only account for web-connected TV sets and not mobile devices, where approximately 30 percent of viewing occurs. Likewise, though Netflix has begun to release its own viewership figures – including a claim that 26 million people streamed another original film, *Bird Box*, across one week in late 2018 (Schneider 2019) – there is little any reporter can do to substantiate those data points. Both Nielsen and Netflix also focus on US data, which ignores the platform's increasing prominence in the global streaming environment.

⁵ *UnREAL*'s primary social media accounts can be found on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/UnrealOnLifetime/>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/UnRealLifetime>).

⁶ Season four only has eleven total reviews aggregated to Rotten Tomatoes, compared to forty-eight for season one, and twenty-five for season three. See <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/unreal/>.