

# An Archive Utopia

Attempts and illusions of the Studio Portals Catalogues

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## ◀ ABSTRACT

Streaming market evolution saw a notable emergence of so-called “Studio Portals.” These portals are developed by producers as a downstream vertical expansion, enabling Studios to directly reach their viewers without the need for distribution intermediaries. This shift empowers Studios with complete control over their audiovisual content. Disney+, followed by HBO Max, and subsequently Paramount+ are the three primary market entities that have consolidated as Studio Portals, constructing their catalogues in a dual direction. On the one hand, they have released original direct-to-streaming titles, and on the other hand, they have populated their portals with legacy content from their intellectual property portfolios. This second direction has been the focus of Disney+ at the start. Initially, the portal was regarded as a potential digital repository for the whole corporation’s production. However, over time, the practical limitations of maintaining an archival model led to a more manageable “collection” configuration. Here we seek to delineate the limitations of the archival potential of Studio Portals, particularly in relation to the effects of the homogeneous dimension of digital streaming content. We will illustrate how the three predominant players contend with the utopian archival vocation, frequently propelled by market imperatives, between pushes, missteps, and total disinterest.

## KEYWORDS

Digital archives; media heritage; media studies; streaming platforms; studio portals

## **Introduction**

In the context of on-demand culture, there is the expectation and the illusion of unlimited access to a vast array of content, organized systematically within easily identifiable catalogues (Tryon 2013). Nevertheless, the evolution of streaming logics has rendered this aspiration impracticable, as the initial market entrants have predominantly functioned as aggregators of licensed titles, curating catalogues whose volatility has frequently proven to be unpredictable.

This has led to a push for vertical integration, which resulted in the development of Studio Portals. These portals can label their catalogues as unequivocally proprietary, thereby raising legitimate hopes for easier identification of titles by users. The global expansion of the market has, of course, complicated the situation (Lotz 2021), as has the development of on-demand discourse in relation to the integrity of cohesive catalogues.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the evolution of studio portals archival vocation within the streaming market. The discussion will start with an examination of Disney+, highlighting the transition from an initial archival push to a significantly divergent model of catalogue organization.

The study then examines the approaches adopted by two other major players in the field – Paramount+ and HBO Max – in addressing the legacy content of their respective catalogues. The analysis concludes with an examination of the reasons why the archival aspect appears to be somewhat distant from the dynamics of on-demand functioning, partly due to the inherently digital nature of content.

### **1. The Studio Portals**

The global expansion of the first two US streaming portals – Netflix and Prime Video – which have been able to lead the development of the stream-

ing market (Lobato 2019), consolidated in 2016. This has led major audiovisual content providers to speculate about moving beyond intermediation in the on-demand distribution of their titles, thus initiating a proliferation of new OTT entities that come under the Studio Portals label (Lotz 2017).

The inaugural major player to exhibit its proprietary on-demand front end was Disney with Disney+. Following a period of providing content to other market players and intellectual properties for original productions – notably the Marvel/Netflix series – in 2019 the Walt Disney Company inaugurated its own streaming portal. This portal comprises a substantial proportion of the company’s content and franchises. In early 2020, Disney+ expanded its global launch, rapidly attaining a market share comparable to its two primary competitors and establishing a precedent for the future development of Studio Portals.

The concept of a Studio Portal emerges when considering vertical expansions from upstream to downstream, (Brembilla and Mollona 2015), wherein a predominantly producing entity chooses to incorporate a proprietary distribution component within its industrial asset, thereby circumventing the intermediary phase between product and user.

In the case of Disney+, the Walt Disney Company, having acquired a variety of production lables since the early 2000s, also integrated the streaming portal within its distribution channels, thereby maintaining direct control over the market’s newest and most direct distribution window (Doyle 2016).

The pandemic period has led to an evolution of Studio Portals logics: firstly, Disney has begun to consider its streaming portal as a priority release window for strong movie titles;<sup>3</sup> secondly, other players such as Warner Bros. Discovery have begun to enhance and push on vertical integration toward on-demand. HBO Max has, in fact, experienced an increase in subscriptions in the US as a result of the distribution strategy implemented by Warner to mitigate losses incurred due to the closure of cinemas. In this instance, however, HBO Max has not yet undergone a comprehensive global expansion due to ongoing distribution agreements across multiple territories, including Italy, which are yet to be resolved.

The third case, Paramount+, experienced consolidation as a streaming portal between 2021 and 2022, with a significant expansion into the global

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<sup>3</sup> Then quickly backtracking (Lindahl 2020).

market at the conclusion of that year. It is also designated a Studio Portal, yet it exhibits a brand identity more closely associated with the array of networks comprising Paramount Global portfolio (Villani 2025).

## 2. Disney+: from archive to collection

The disintermediation and opening of proprietary front desks in content distribution also legitimately leads to the consideration of Studio Portals as potential digital archival embodiments of the audiovisual assets made by proprietary corporations. In the context of brands with a strong legacy, such as Disney (Wasko 2020) and Paramount, it is evident to observe a self-narrative thrust that employs the provision of the companies' historical products to convey their values and the importance they have held over decades.

In this instance, Disney+ initiated its market presence by introducing a robust and explicit archival emphasis: the segmentation into thematic areas associated with the various franchises owned by the corporation (Brembilla 2023) and the presence of the collection *Disney through the decades* demonstrated the initial portal's objective to establish itself as the digital counterpart of the Disney Archive (Fieconi 2022). In accordance with the theoretical archival conformation (Didi-Huberman 2009), each section of the platform exhibited evident lacunae, primarily attributable to the inaccessibility of the complete distribution rights for all the products involved. This resulted in a progressive tension to the fulfilment of the Disney historical image as a whole.

However, this was soon replaced by a shift towards the "collection" model, which differs significantly from the archival model and is more consistent with Disney+ adherence to the prevailing principles of the streaming market (King 2024) and which also consolidated its discursive conformation (Villani 2023).

The collection model, in opposition to the archival model, facilitates the association of content by thematic concordances and the reiteration of expectation through the reoccurrence of anticipated titles within a prescribed totality, which aligns with the necessity for subscription renewal. This liberates the viewing paths from chronological constraints, thereby facilitating the creation of modulable circumstantial juxtaposition effects.

Conversely, the collection model diverts attention from the historical dimension of media objects contained in the catalogue. For a corporation

such as Disney, which engages with multiple decades of audiovisual history, this implies an endemic decontextualization of production and social phenomena, and languages that are problematic today. The proverbial presence of disclaimers in seemingly historicized titles contained in streaming catalogues (Press Association and Guardian staff 2020) on Disney+ translates to overlay warnings related to disrespectful depictions of different ethnicities or the presence of tobacco, even in products intended for children.

### 3. Studio Portal approach to archive

As observed in the case of Disney+, this approach aligns with the strategies employed by the two other major studio portals in the market, in their construction of content catalogues. Both Paramount+ and HBO Max are the property of corporations with a strong legacy in the audiovisual landscape, reporting respectively to Paramount Global and Warner Bros. Discovery.

However, neither corporation appears to have identified a viable opportunity in its streaming services to establish a digital archival repository. The Paramount+ case is of particular interest due to its already established global reach and the presence of a diverse portfolio of brands – primarily television networks and cable channel – such as to overshadow the significant historical impact that Paramount movies have had on film history (Villani 2025). A perusal of the Paramount+ catalogue reveals a scarcity of titles that reflect the production significance of the Studios over the decades. It is evident that the portal provides space for a mosaic of titles, predominantly associated with the brand identities of linear channels. These channels utilize Paramount+ as a vehicle for global distribution of content, independent of intermediaries. The portal serves as a “showcase”, offering a uniform organization of content almost without the utilization of metadata.

It is premature to assess the viability of HBO Max at this juncture, as the platform is still in the process of its full global market opening. However, there is already an indication of a lack of interest on the part of the portal to become an archive of Warner’s portfolio, with a preference for an extension approach to streaming akin to that of the HBO model, as evidenced by the return of the premium cable channel’s brand in the name. Premium and exclusive products have been given greater prominence within the portal, which has undergone significant development in the U.S. as a substitute for the theatrical release of Warner films during the recent pandemic period.

## 4. The digital archive utopia

The initial experiment with Disney+, and its subsequent change of course, thus led subsequent Studio Portals to abandon their possible archival vocation. This underscores the inherent tendency of streaming catalogues to effectively neutralize the possibility of true archival organization within them, favoring the collection model.

Once again, Disney is instrumental in elucidating the concept, largely due to the substantial success of the VHS reissues of the Animated Classics from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. It seems highly improbable that any individual who, during their childhood, had multiple Disney titles on their shelves would have been aware of the considerable time span between *Pinocchio* (1940) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). These films appeared to a child as much historicized as they were when they first arrived in the home video collection. The paratextual, commercial and objective components of Disney VHSs were almost identical, which made it impossible to apply any archival connotation to them. The result was that an actual *collection* of homogeneous objects was configured for each viewer.

In the context of Disney+ and analogous streaming platforms that offer a multitude of titles from a single production brand, the paratextual structuring of titles and their homogeneous digital nature serve to neutralize any archival potential and historical configuration, a scenario that bears a striking resemblance to the experience with VHS. Titles on Disney+ are, in effect, no older than their own portal release, a fact which forces the editorial component to construct paratextual elements that contextualize their content, especially when sensible and problematic.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the characteristics and developments of Studio Portals in the streaming market have been outlined here, with a focus on Disney+ embrace and denial of its archival potential. This has revealed how the two other major Studio Portals in the market have chosen to limit the digital archival potential of their legacy portfolios. While this has not been completely frictionless in its meaning effects, as in the case of the Paramount brand, it highlights a peculiarity of the on-demand market that encourages mutation and volatility in catalogues at the expense of their consolidation.

While on-demand culture may appear to be compatible with the archival potential of portals with strong legacy components, the way in which they respond to broader market logics, as well as the digital nature of the media objects that constitute their catalogues, seem to render any archival endeavors contingent upon specific events, such as celebrations or anniversaries.

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