

## **Mobile TV Roundtable Response**

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*Given the significant take up of cell phones around the world – one of the most adopted technologies to date – how or can this technology shift television viewing practices, gaps, and divides? What challenge does this represent for television? What of other mobile viewing devices?*

“Mobile television” is a remarkably slippery term: as a 2005 *Broadcasting & Cable* article noted, it is used as a catch-all for everything from “programming burned onto a DVD to satellite TV beamed to an auto to a video cellphone or Wi-Fi services that help consumers stream videos.” I’d go one step farther, and suggest that “mobile television’s” meanings are even more ambiguous yet. In everyday usage, “mobile television” functions as a shorthand for much broader cultural fantasies about transporting television’s spectatorial pleasures outside of its traditional domestic context, and about escaping the social and spatial regimes that govern its reception in the home. By contrast, within the context of industrial discourse, “mobile television” describes a set of institutional aspirations geared toward channeling viewers’ movements through referential and representational spaces into patterns shaped by the flow of capital between television networks, telecommunications conglomerates, advertisers, and technology manufacturers. In recognition of this slipperiness, as we consider the questions posed by this roundtable’s prompt, it might help if we talk about mobile TV in more specific terms, honing in on specific attempts to implement these cultural fantasies and institutional aspirations. When we do, we recognize that the many different mobile televisions that exist today differ not only with respect to the portions of the wireless spectrum they utilize, the compression algorithms they employ, and the handsets with which they are

compatible, but also in terms of how their various promoters and users negotiate the breaches between their respective conceptions of the meanings of mobility.

Consider, for instance, FLO TV, the system that powers mobile television services like Verizon VCast TV and AT&T Mobile TV. FLO TV is one of a number of proprietary systems that has been designed to circumvent the bandwidth restrictions that have thus far restricted the development of mobile television services in the U.S.. As opposed to so-called “unicasting” services, which carry video on the same cellular signals used for voice and data, FLO TV transmits twelve channels of “live” television programming over the UHF broadcast spectrum. FLO TV-compatible handsets pick up these signals with retractable antennas resembling the rabbit ear aeriels formerly ubiquitous on domestic television receivers. Since its introduction in 2006, FLO TV has proven attractive to mobile network operators; by sending video out over the UHF spectrum, it reduces the strain multimedia services place on mobile network infrastructure, and therefore lowers operators’ costs. The system holds an altogether different appeal for the television networks that have signed on to program their own FLO TV “channels.” For despite its futuristic trappings, FLO TV takes a rather residual approach to content delivery, one that is modeled after a network broadcasting paradigm characterized by limited viewer choice, linearly-programmed channels, regimented daily timetables, and a dominant ideology of “liveness.” (Fittingly, the system’s moniker – “FLO TV” – evokes “flow,” Raymond Williams’ term for television’s representative mode of textual organization during the high network era.) The result is that programs are delivered on fixed schedules, to viewers who lack the ability to record, pause, fast forward, or rewind, prompting one journalist to observe that the system is “a bit like TV

in the '70s: no VCR-style recording, only eight channels, and in some areas you'll have to raise the phone's antenna to improve reception."

Considered within the context of FLO TV's resuscitation of network-era strategies and ideologies, it seems appropriate to ask what is mobile about mobile television? The audience for mobile television may in fact watch television "on the go." That said, even this we must not take for granted: studies indicate that anywhere between one-quarter and two-thirds of all "mobile" viewing takes place at home. But regardless of where the so-called mobile audience watches TV, from the perspective of television networks and sponsors, restrictive technologies like FLO TV make this audience easier to pin down than the increasingly evasive home audience. As Anna McCarthy has noted, television networks and sponsors often imagine out-of-home audiences to be captive audiences (stuck on busses, trapped in waiting rooms, etc.). Within the context of the industrial discourse surrounding mobile television, the mobile audience is also imagined to be docile, at least in comparison to the time-shifting, fast-forwarding, file-sharing home viewer. In effect, mobile television promises beleaguered media companies a means of *immobilizing* television's audiences, of placing new constraints upon viewers' "movements" through television's post-broadcast, neo-network landscape.

Academics and media industry insiders alike have described the mobile phone as a "post-network technology" capable of shifting the balance of power between media institutions and their audiences. My intention in delving into the example of FLO TV is to emphasize that these shifts are not necessarily the progressive ones they are often made out to be – that rather than challenging television's traditions, the shifts instantiated by mobile television might in fact affirm or recuperate them. As television studies scholars

begin to address questions such as the ones that prompted this roundtable, we confront the massive promotional hype surrounding mobile technologies. But we also come face to face with the influence that de Certeau, Deleuze and Guattari, Bahktin, and other poststructuralist theorists who have equated mobility with transgression, resistance, and the power of the subaltern, have had upon television studies' development as a discipline. Meaningfully engaging with mobile television requires that we interrogate both of these frameworks for thinking about mobility with equal rigor. In the interest of stimulating discussion on how we might begin to do so, I conclude with a question that appropriates a pair of de Certeau's terms: what are the implications of mobility's metamorphosis from tactic to strategy?