Must-Click TV: Flow 2.0 Response

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When The WB used an online interactive universe (Dawson's Desktop and linked sites) to create a lifestyle experience connected to a TV show, it extended flow (NBC's Must See TV Thursdays) into what Brooker calls overflow. The WB, the network that went off air in 2006, has reappeared in 2008 as The WB.com, the "online video network" ("it's TV online"). The general manager claims that those viewers/users who congregate on the site consider their accessing of WB-produced TV favorites and its original programming via the media player to be "watching TV." In doing so they are subject to some of the sponsor and "network" promos that would also be part of on-air flow (and to co-branding and product placement). They are still offered structured connections between story segments and the ads and promos that run between or are placed around them. Yet, instead of carrying viewers along a linear scheduling grid or even a series of linked sites, With its own linked FaceBook site, The WB.com expects viewers to carry its products with them across the social networking sites (among others) that they frequent. As they move across and around the web, onto other platforms on which Warner Brothers' products are available, viewers/users encounter pitches for sponsor and media conglomerate products. Returning to The WB.com, they are expected to "snag" original short-form programming, series footage or other content and post it on FaceBook or MySpace or even use it in their own mashups or other creative reworkings of that content. Instead of preprogrammed sequencing, this structure assumes the risk of allowing undesirable content use (or feedback on forums/ boards). The majority of viewers/users are expected to be brand advocates who, perhaps enticed by the *idea* of fans as co-producers, will interact with the site, click on its links, click away from the site, and eventually come back for more content access and "snaggables." Not just an alternate content delivery platform like Hulu or simply a way to repurpose content and provide sponsor contact points on an alternate platform, The WB.com is a circulation platform. Every click on it, even one that leads away, is assumed to enlarge The WB by keeping it in ever-expanding circulation loops that together have a ripple effect on the bottom lines of Warner Brothers, its media conglomerate, and sponsors.

Many aspects of this "internet destination" are worth discussing, but one larger concern for this Flow 2.0 roundtable is that The WB.com points to the way unstructured continual circulation has displaced (but not replaced) unidirectional flow and evolved from bi-directional overflow (from show to site and site to show). That does not mean flow no longer matters, as U.S. broadcast networks invest in on-air flow and even employ the concept in other platforms on which TV shows now appear. As the lines blur between content production and promotion, owner-produced and fan-produced convergence, we need to discuss the impact of the change in attitudes toward fans and the new media through which much of their interaction takes place, not to mention the ways in which networks and media conglomerates are now monetizing fan activities and changing their relationships with sponsors. Recent multiplatform TV products (e.g., *Heroes* and *Lost*) also plug into pre-established on-line cultures/ communities and transform viewers into brand advocates. Unlike the on-air linear flow model, this Must-Click TV programming adopts an interlocking gear model in which the content on all platforms is created simultaneously to click together seamlessly and become interlocking pieces of a whole experience; the on-air, on-line, and on-mobile content must click together to make the product move (as well as "move" sponsor products and encourage viewers to move around within the divisions of a media conglomerate). The idea here is to get viewers/users to engage with a network and its sponsors though watching on-air shows and accessing, either simultaneously or asynchronously, their online and mobile incarnations. This programming increasingly seems to be less about containing viewers and their activities within established boundaries than about allowing viewers/users to shape new strategies. Of course, it may be that what is being exploited is the *idea* that fans are shaping the paradigms and the texts so that their emotional investments can be transformed into economic investments. Whatever the implications, flow and overflow now coexist with structured and unstructured circulation of the interconnected parts of TV franchises in the revenue streams of networks and media conglomerates. This kind of circulation has become necessary in a media environment in which it is not clear where viewer demand for content will be met; where and how TV shows are accessed; and what it even means to watch and/or follow a TV show.