Flow 2.0

The question we have been posed in this roundtable is this: if "flow" explains how television as technology and cultural form works, what concept can illuminate how the current Internet-based media as technology and cultural form work? And interestingly enough, the title for the panel, Flow 2.0, I think, contains at least part of the response.

For me, to think though the idea of what Flow 2.0 can mean is also a way to rework Raymond Williams' initial formulation of "flow" as the defining characteristic of broadcasting.

For Williams "planned flow" referred to the internal organization of television, which structured programming not as discrete units (espionage tv drama--advertisement--trailer about forthcoming film about Cold War), but rather as sequences (events and similar events that flow with each other). Thus programming was sequence or flow, which nonetheless was planned, and a single operation (from one to many).

Similarly flow, he argued, related fundamentally to the television experience itself, both in the sense of how we watch tv (sitting down for one show but continuing to watch long after) and how we talk about the experience itself ("I was watching tv" instead of "I was watching news"). In addition, the flow of television was "always accessible, in several alternative sequences at the flick of a switch." Thus for Williams, flow defined how television was organized and experienced.

To take such a concept which is fundamentally about broadcasting—from one-to-many and suture it with the concept of 2.0 which is fundamentally about computer networks, functional Web architecture, creative software solutions, collaborative Web design, information sharing communities and collective social movements, is to really juxtapose two distinct paradigms of media production, distribution and reception as well as critical thinking about them. Such a juxtaposing is useful to the extent it reveals the critical overlaps as well as gaps in deploying Raymond Williams' seminal formulation for new media contexts.

For example, Williams' idea of planned flows that internally structure television can be used to interrogate how for example, online search engines work. Search engines are arguably the most supported commercial enterprises on the Web. They help streamline Internet traffic, they have become the face of "personalization of the Web", and they have opened up unprecedented advertising opportunities. Critics have noted how in the Web industry in the late '90s, the idea of wandering around a "net' was replaced by a "hub and spoke" model in much the same way, as the idea of an "e-commerce" business model replaced the "brick and mortar" model a few years earlier. With a hub and spoke model, Internet traffic is channeled in and out a hub thereby creating nodes of

traffic which are to an extent "planned" and predictable, and thereby attractive to potential advertisers.

In any given search, what one receives is a list of results including a series of sponsored links. While the result links might seem distinct from the sponsored links (and they are in a sense), they are in effect what Williams would call one sequence working in conjunction with another sequence (information seeking and commercial transaction). And while they might seem as discrete units, it is the way the two sequences of information and commerce mesh together on the search engine page that *is* the sequence that shapes the commercial Web. The business logic is that one would not only search for something online but also buy something online (and going by the growing trends in online purchases, they are not entirely wrong!) Furthermore, the advertising fees paid to the search engine determine the order in which the sponsored links appear on the page.

This demonstrates that the internal organizing of the Web: (a) its technologies of search classification systems, hyperlinks and multi-media; (b) its industrial practices of advertising and pay-per-click, and (c) its user contexts of hi-speed connections, consumption, mobility through wired spaces are being collectively harnessed to engender what one might think of as a "planned flow" in a Web context.

Except that it is *flows*, not flow. It is not just multi-flows, but uneven flows, some planned, others unexpected, the latter often emerging from end-user activities. While for example, the technological and institutional convergence between television and the computing industries is creating sets of planned flows, often while marking users as agents of content on demand, the emergence of thriving communities that file share, open source, participate in citizen media/journalistic practices, are just a few instances of media cultures that have through their intervention shifted how media flow.

To conclude, in discussing the idea of flow, one needs to rethink how media flow through time-space. Raymond Williams was writing about change, technology and transition and one of his key observations about television was also that television entered the home in an unprecedented way. Thinking through Flow 2.0 is also to rethink how "home" spaces are refashioned by emergent patterns of media flows.