**Flow 2.0: The Struggle between Producers and Viewers for the Control of Television Content**

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As Raymond Williams observed, "In all communications systems before broadcasting the essential items were discrete. A book or a pamphlet was taken and read as a specific item."[i] The advent of broadcasting introduced a flow of content through one discrete medium: the television set. While controlled competition, the financing of television by commercial advertising, and the television experience itself as created and managed by network programmers characterized William's Flow, the introduction of digital media and the internet in particular has complicated his theory by fracturing the medium into multiple platforms and increasingly transferring control of content from network programmers to audiences. In response to the changing medium, the content itself has evolved to a point where providing a basic definition of "television" is virtually impossible.

The Internet, DVDs, TiVo, and OnDemand have made audiences increasingly accustomed to having television content available whenever they want it rather than as "appointment" television. Even with live events like the Academy Awards or the Superbowl where the enjoyment of the viewing depends to a certain extent on participation in the "liveness" of the event, people like myself still TiVo the events and start watching them a couple hours after their live start time to allow for fast forwarding through commercials and any other less compelling spots. This version of television viewing where users have the ability to access and control multiple pieces of content for any one television show whenever and in whatever context they want it, is less a progression of William's conception of Flow than a reversion to the climate he described as existing pre-broadcast television where content consisted of discrete items that users encountered on their own terms.

Meanwhile, network programmers, advertisers, and creators of television content find themselves caught between a desire to appeal to younger viewers and remain ahead of the technological curve, and the industrial imperative to cling to the Flow as described by Williams. Networks work to create more, and more engaging content to appeal to younger viewers, but producers and networks all agree that the main function of online content is to drive tune-in for the on-air broadcast. That's not to say networks and advertisers are in total denial of the implications of new technologies; the introduction of the C3 ratings system signaled a tacit acceptance of the new viewing landscape.[ii] The fact remains, however, that only approximately 20% of viewing households have DVRs[iii] and about a third of those viewers still sit through commercials during playback.[iv] Broadcasters are trying to keep those numbers low by, among other things, thinking about commercial pods as programming time and altering how and when they insert commercials into the broadcast show. MTV, for example, is switching from two long commercial pods per half-hour to three shorter pods. MTV and other networks with younger audiences such as CW and Fox now program the pods with interstitials and other short-form programming designed to keep viewers tuned in.[v]

Viewers who watch entire episodes online represent a totally different challenge for networks. Some networks choose to make their episodes available for download for a fee, while others make some or all of their episodes available by streaming for free. Those streaming episodes often include short commercial breaks that viewers must sit through to get to the show itself. While many networks claimed during the writers' strike that they did not make any money from those commercials or the advertisements placed with their online content, now that approximately half of television viewers watch episodes online, the revenues from those ads could be significant. Ultimately, the fact remains that the success of a show is still measured by its on-air ratings, and that measure of success can not only work to draw more viewers to the show through increased buzz, it also makes the show more financially successful through increased advertising revenue.

The evolution of the use and placement of commercials has serious implications for television narrative and for the experience of these texts by viewers. The pacing and dramatic structure of television shows have historically been constructed around the interruption of the show by commercial breaks, and the changing use of commercials, in addition to the ability to show extended versions of shows either online or via DVD, challenges the classic structure of a thirty or sixty minute broadcast show. These changes, in combination with the addition of the virtually unlimited possibilities for extensions of the show's narrative made possible by digital media, call into question the fundamental nature of television as well as viewer expectations for and experiences with the texts.

In the midst of these massive changes, Flow 2.0 represents a dramatic departure from the smooth Flow as conceived by Williams to an intermediate period of tension between the fractured interests and behavior of viewers on the one hand, and on the other, network programmers' and advertisers continued desire to attract and maintain audiences for their on-air broadcast. Television content itself has been thrown into the middle of this virtual tug-of-war, and whether the audience or the producers emerge victorious will ultimately determine not only what television content looks like, but also what we might conceive of as Flow 3.0.

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[i] Williams, Raymond.  Television: Technology, and Cultural Form. New York: Routledge Classics, 1974. 86.

[ii] The C3 ratings system measures commercial viewing in shows up to three days after broadcast.

[iii] Littleton, Cynthia and Michael Learmonth. "New Rules Roil the Ad Business: DVR, Blurb Viewing Spur Sea Change." *Variety*. 6 July 2007.

[iv] Ibid.

[v] Ibid.