Streaming and the Return of Williams' Flow

A Flow By Any Other Name

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In the years since Raymond Williams' explanation of broadcast flow in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, the media experience has seemed to shift away from his concept of a "sequence transformed by the inclusion of another kind of sequence."[1] Increasing numbers of television channels, home video (including home taping and production), and, especially, the internet, all ostensibly indicated a general movement away from passive viewer acceptance of centrally-disseminated broadcast sequences and towards active user choice. I presented a paper 12 years ago, at the cusp of the BitTorrent era, arguing that the discrete "file" was supplanting sequential "flow" as a default media experience, and that media industries would have to accommodate nomadic consumer tastes.[2]

However, now that we're well ensconced in the digital era, it's clear that Williams' flow has never really gone away. Its industrial logic (i.e., the need to channel viewer attention) remains just as critical to the media industries today as it was in the 1970s. Despite legitimate uncertainty and upheaval brought about by digital technologies and economies, media industries have largely adapted to new distribution regimes. Their key adjustment has been to apply increasingly sophisticated data analyses to their content flows, and then transforming that information into complex forms of capital ("monetizing" it, in other words).

In his content analyses of 1973 UK and US television, Williams struggled to make sense of the aesthetic and ideological experience of broadcast flow. In today's hegemonic rhetoric of ad-skipping DVR usage and streamed binge-viewing, the textual "disruptions" that Williams explored seem now, for many viewers, to be a relic of the past. Thus, the critical focus has shifted to analyzing the seemingly intact television text (e.g., *Game of Thrones* or *Breaking Bad*), rather than television itself as fragmentary sequence. However, this perception disregards both the continued viability of the "disruptive" broadcast flow model--the US commercial broadcast hour has 80% more commercial time than it did in 1973, and advertisers currently purchase time on more channels than ever before--and the ways in which new flows are incorporated into digital platforms.

Williams defines flow as a "planned sequence," "perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting."[3] Flow today is still defining, but its key transactions occur largely behind the scenes: even if viewers watch without "disruption," subscriptions are still paid for, advertising is sold, and licensing deals are made. These flows are not only cultural (Williams' primary concern) but economic: from our wallets into media service providers.

[1] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 90.
[2] Derek Kompare, "Flow To Files: Conceiving 21st Century Media" (paper presented at Media In Transition 2, Cambridge, MA, May 11, 2002).
[3] Williams, *Television*, 86.

Forty years ago, with the exception of license fees in many countries, television was "free." Since then, we have overwhelmingly accepted the premise of direct payment for television content in multiple flows, including subscriptions and on-demand downloads.

The full description of one of these new flows, what we usually call "streaming," is "subscription video [or audio] *on demand*." Streaming seems more deliberate than flow: we control the stream, choosing our content, rather than letting the sequence wash over us. But streaming services never end on one choice, and always prompt us to continue to the next episode, or a similar title, replicating Williams' pre-remote control viewer "ruefully...watching the one after it and the one after that."[4] Moreover, unlike the 1970s broadcast flow day, which at least eventually ended with a sign-off, our streams are endless today: we talk of "falling down YouTube holes" of infinite kittens.

Granted, some of the new flows are generally not as robust individually as the old reliable mega-flows of guaranteed broadcast audience shares. The difference today is that there are many more flows, operating simultaneously, continuously monetizing attention in ways inconceivable just a few years ago. Search engines, social media likes and retweets, clickbait slide galleries, and streaming queues and playlists generate constant flows of saleable data.

However, one flow is quite dominant: subscriptions, primarily of broadband internet access, but also of media services (e.g., subscription TV, radio, and games). There's a reason the proposed Comcast-TWC and AT&T-DirecTV mergers are so daunting: they would allow the merged companies a massive increase in their internet and/or television subscribers, in an already largely non-competitive market. Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu are also significant in the subscription flow, channeling their comparable fees into different strategic flows (large audience base, consumer exploitation, and advertising facilitation, respectively). Meanwhile, as Tim J. Anderson explores, subscription-based audio services like Pandora and Spotify (recently joined by Apple, Amazon, and Google) have rendered what used to be a market of discrete objects into a much cheaper (and therefore less lucrative for content creators and owners) stream.[5]

Regardless, all digital flows are still dependent on access to broadband networks, which is now the primary flow. We could thus amend Williams: "the fact is that many of us do *click* there, and much of the critical significance of *media* must be related to this fact."[6]

[4] Williams, *Television*, 94.
[5] Tim J. Anderson, *Popular Music in a Digital Music Economy: Problems and Practices for an Emerging Service Industry* (Routledge, 2014).
[6] Williams, *Television*, 95-6; italicized terms added.