

Enunciative Fan Production and Social “Flow”

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Raymond Williams’ analysis of televisual “flow” describes television programming patterns designed to prolong viewership. As time-shifting technologies allowed viewers to create their own flow (and most troubling to advertisers, skip over commercial breaks) networks have begun to produce interactive programming that rewards live viewing. Interactive fan talk shows like Bravo’s *Watch What Happens: Live!* (*WWHL*) extend viewing hours by offering a live on-air space for audiences to discuss network series. Fan-driven “after shows” are both cheap to produce and cross-promotional, functioning as an immersive network commercial animated by fan discourses. More important, the interactive format provides evidence of fan engagement that networks can use to attract sponsors. In the context of Bravo’s women-oriented, soapy reality fare, *WWHL* promotes feminized forms of participation to showcase their target consumer [demographic](#)—trendy, upscale women.

WWHL first appeared online as an interactive after show hosted by Bravo executive Andy Cohen. In 2009, *WWHL* premiered as a once-a-week, late-night talk show that solicited fan input via phone calls, text messages, Facebook and Twitter. Now, *WWHL* airs live five nights each week, and is structured almost entirely around fan participation—viewers are asked to send in questions, play games, vote in polls, and comment on social media. In order to sustain viewership, *WWHL* airs directly after the primetime lineup of pre-recorded docu-series (*The Real Housewives*, *Top Chef*, etc.). Most often, the Bravo celebrities (Bravolebrities) that are most entangled in the preceding show’s dramatic events appear on *WWHL* to answer viewer questions and offer behind-the-scenes gossip. By providing immediate commentary, *WWHL* appears to facilitate an unmediated conversation between fans and Bravolebrities.

While this strategy has delivered high [ratings](#), it is not just the call for participation that captures viewer’s attention. By marketing *WWHL* as a cozy and spontaneous [cocktail party](#), Bravo fosters a feminized form of interactivity that trades on the promise of an intimate and affective sociality. During each episode of *WWHL*, viewers are invited to “hang out” with celebrity guests in Cohen’s “Club House,” a stylized living room decorated with colorful rugs, paintings, and bookcases overflowing with pop culture paraphernalia. The intimate familiarity of the set paired with Cohen’s direct mode of address (referring to the audience as “you,” “us,” and “we”) creates a shared sense of community around branded content. Further, Bravo establishes a devoted fan following through the use of melodramatic storylines and highly charged, vacillating emotions. By provoking on-screen reactions and editing for maximum effect, Bravo [docu-soaps](#) generate relationship turmoil to maintain series viewing and to push audiences to their after-show. The range of feelings that arise from docu-soap drama fuel fan discussions on Bravo’s interactive platforms.

WWHL opens with a set of invitations for viewers to participate: First, the “drinking game alert” notifies viewers of the nightly word that signifies when they should take a sip of

their alcoholic drink. Then the “poll question” calls for viewers to weigh in on a particular controversy or argument that came up in the preceding docu-series. Throughout the episode, viewers participate by calling or tweeting in questions and comments for celebrity guests. While these interactive structures appear to empower audiences, they also support industry imperatives to gather in-depth profiles of their audiences that can be sold to advertisers. Given that calls for participation rely upon viewer’s expertise in Bravo’s five areas of interest (food, fashion, beauty, home décor, and pop culture) and their intimate familiarity with network content, Bravo constructs their ideal viewer by foreclosing opportunities for participation. By limiting fan engagement to feminized interests and brand material, Bravo can define their audience as a cohesive and desirable consumer demographic.

Interactive fan spaces allow networks to forge new relationships with advertisers by delivering an ostensibly coherent audience that can be targeted across multiple online and television platforms. Thus, fan activity has a renewed function in the niche market of cable TV. Through the development of interactive live television, networks appear to value fan talk while guiding fan activity to bolster brand value. For many cable networks, this means repackaging audiences as easily identifiable stereotypes with clear consumer desires. At stake, then, are the social norms that are reproduced through interactive programming trends. For Bravo, fan activity is structured by the illusion of intimacy, emotional appeals, and gendered forms of expertise. In this case, the convergence of interactivity and gendered industry logic promotes feminized forms of participation that require women develop skills in emotional performance, sociability, and gossip. The production of gendered tastes and affects on *WWHL* reveals how interactive platforms re-entrench social hierarchies in order to increase consumption.



Image [Credit](#)