audience, the proliferation of user-generated content, the multiple platforms through which media texts are consumed, and the ongoing war between feminism and antifeminism are presenting new challenges and opportunities for further elaboration of feminist media analysis to the ongoing, explosive changes in our digital environment and how it too is now profoundly shaping gender identity, performance, relationships, and the still elusive hope for gender equality.

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Flow
Derek Kompare

When first formulated in his seminal 1974 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams's concept of flow was a compelling metaphor of the ideological power of television. Focusing on the output of five television channels (from Britain and the United States) over several hours, Williams deconstructs programming into discrete segments, and then explains how these segments, as delivered in a succession of sounds and images, become more than the sum of their parts. In doing so, he expands the scope and vocabulary of textual analysis by showing how the overall flow of the broadcast schedule, with its constant breakup and reassembly constitutes "perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting" (86).

Over the past forty years, the concept of flow has been used in media studies as a conceptually influential, but ultimately limited model for the textual analysis of television content, or more broadly as a metaphor for postmodern culture, of which television is the ultimate exemplar. The former usage shows up in close analyses of television content in the immediate wake of the publication of Williams's work. Scholars trained in literary and/or film theory incorporated Williams's concept into their studies of television as an ongoing semiotic system that reinforces dominant ideologies while inoculating audiences with glimpses of "resistant" perspectives (see Altman 1986; Browne 1984; Feuer 1983; Modleski 1983). Tania Modleski, for example, critiqued Williams's construction of the (ostensibly male)

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prime-time viewer in her analysis of how the frequent interruptions of daytime television's flow (particularly commercial breaks) bolstered the "decentered" experience of women's housework. By the 1980s and 1990s, this usage had evolved into the more general use of flow to describe the depthless circulation of disconnected images and sounds that exemplify the postmodern condition. In this interpretation, flow is less a machinery for ideological reinforcement and more of a description of formless content, fleetingly visible, and devoid of deeper meaning. As John Corner (1999, 60) noted, flow had become unmoored from its origins and was too often used by scholars as a broader synecdoche for TV's semiotic excess, in second- or thirdhand ways that could not "sustain the weight of theory which has often been placed upon it." Media studies had rendered flow into a general description rather than a critical tool; according to the editors of the *Flow TV* anthology, based on the conference and blog inspired by Williams's concept developed at the University of Texas at Austin in the mid-2000s, "though it has acquired the patina of a well-worn theory, flow remains more of a critical provocation than a coherent analytical method" (Kackman et al. 2011, 2).

Given the expansion and fragmentation of television, and the rise of digital media (both offline and online), since the 1970s, it is more than appropriate to revisit and reengage with the concept of flow. While the ten pages in which Williams explains flow have always garnered the most attention, he actually spent most of the book meticulously tracing a broader history of the relationships between communications technologies and their surrounding societies as "a social complex of a new and central kind" (1974, 31). His description of twentieth-century citizenship as increasingly ensconced in the consumerist machinery of "mobile privatization"—best exemplified by television—has proven particularly

cogent (26–27). Through this prism, he even foresaw significant aspects of twenty-first-century media systems, such as subscription and on-demand media. Williams's flow is thus best engaged with today not only as a historic semiotic by-product of the television schedule, but as a productive way to consider the more complex relationships of information, infrastructure, and capital coursing through globalized digital networks.

Williams's claim that "an increasing variability and miscellaneity of public communications is evidently part of a whole social experience" is more apt today than ever (1974, 88). The televisual flow that Williams analyzed in the 1970s was experienced through a citizenship engaged by viewing and listening to mediated local and national spaces. However, the hegemonic flows of the early twenty-first century (in the most technologically advanced societies) converge upon the relatively more instrumentalized "user," a node in seemingly endless online networks. Entry into the mediated citizenship of Williams's 1970s was gained through the private achievement of material class markers (private home, TV set, leisure time, etc.). But an individual functions as a node in twenty-first-century information networks virtually from birth, as key data (name, government ID number, financial information, etc.) are entered and circulated online. The 1970s TV viewer was a relatively anonymous part of a one-way ideological system functioning largely at a macro level, but the 2010s social media user is constantly registered, addressed, and compelled to participate as a series of discrete and distributed data points.

Accordingly, flow today incorporates the very systems that propel global capitalism and determine our positions within it. The consumption of mediated textual sequences is important, but only one small aspect of this grand flow, which incorporates flows of energy, raw materials, labor, finance, and information across

the globe. The very devices we use to access "television" are designed, manufactured, distributed, and consumed by intricate global networks of information and capital. Our individual connections to these networks—registered in IP addresses, user accounts, and time stamps—in turn generate the flows of email inboxes, social network feeds, streaming media queues, and ever demanding notifications. In addition to the temporal flow of the television schedule, we must "scroll through" the temporal and spatial flows of mail, messages, images, videos, and other information. As Douglas Rushkoff observes, keeping up with these flows is the source of "digiphrenia": the anxiety about being out of synch with our online identities and information flows (2013, 69–129). Extending Williams's claim about how television's flow was "the central television experience" (1974, 95) that kept us viewing for hours, regardless of particular content, the many flows of the Internet today draw us in around the clock.

While much of these flows consist of the same sorts of social abstractions that Williams found on television, these information flows have a different and more intimate relationship to our lives: they are addressed directly to us, and often require our response. Moreover, given that it is increasingly difficult, though not yet impossible, to function in advanced societies without access to the Internet, the data we generate fuel flows of capital *from* users *back out into* the global information flow. Without this user-generated flow, culturally and financially powerful media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Google, and YouTube would be empty software shells.

Television's place amid these interactive flows is both more nuanced and less central. The volume and diversity of channels and (now) platforms are much greater than the handful of choices available in most advanced societies when Williams wrote, and their role in the media ecosystem must be put in relation to the rapid rise of the Internet more broadly. Accordingly, in a landscape of old and new television brands strewn about broadcast, cable, satellite, home video, and online platforms, where programming is still accessed on fixed schedules, but increasingly on demand at any time, the deconstruction of textuality that Williams performed has become an effectively pointless task. In the era of audience fragmentation and time shifting, when much (if not most) viewing will take place in the hours, days, weeks, or even years after an initial broadcast, and when program segments are regularly extracted from their original flow and recirculated into others as video clips, what textual sequence could possibly constitute "planned flow" in any broad sense? While there have certainly been some important social and formal analyses of television textuality in recent years (particularly in work focusing, respectively, on reality TV and serial drama), in terms of the wider view that Williams took of "watching television" as part of a larger media system, the parameters and qualities of *particular* forms and discourses matter much less than the extent and functioning of the system itself. That is, *what* flows is secondary to the continuous movement of flow itself. As the *Flow TV* editors argued, and at the risk of metaphorically crossing from physics to biology, while there are genuinely fascinating "trees" out there on television, it's the "forest," as an entire ecosystem, that matters most (Kackman et al. 2011, 2).

In this regard—flow as "the impulse to go on watching"—Williams's concept is neither a fascinating but outmoded critical tool, nor a broad brush to apply to any cultural incongruities, but still a compelling model with which we can analyze how communications systems structure societies (and vice versa).