

# The Contradictions of Modern TV Flows

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While flow indeed remains a “defining characteristic” of television, the US television industry illustrates how the modern networks’ strategic planning of flow is riddled with contradictions. No matter the executive commentary about +7, +21, or +30 DVR ratings and streaming figures, networks still rely heavily on basic advertiser support, and thus still rely heavily on live viewing. What we continue to see are strategies that attempt to bridge the gap between traditional and new viewing habits, to varying degrees of success—and complex forms of flow.

Take ABC’s “Thank God It’s Thursday” (or TGIT) programming block for instance. For five seasons now, ABC has utilized familiar promotional strategies—auteur- and star-driven branding, cross-promotion and franchise building, and lead-in scheduling—to construct a flow between the 8, 9, and 10 p.m. primetime timeslots. The network—through the creative style of TGIT’s architect Shonda Rhimes—has supported these promotional strategies with an equally familiar (if heightened) primetime soap opera narrative formula predicated on big twists and significant cliffhangers. These maneuvers are so familiar that the naming convention of the programming block is itself a self-referential nod toward ABC’s TGIF programming block of the 1990s.

ABC has also succeeded by integrating more modern promotional strategies into the familiar maneuvers noted above. Like most networks, ABC deploys on-screen chyrons and/or hashtags prompting fans to engage with the action unraveling on the primary screen (the TV) by commenting on it via the second screen (the device of their choosing), typically through Twitter. Although many networks or individual shows had intermittently attempted this live tweeting strategy before *Scandal* star Kerry Washington and Rhimes began heavily pushing it in 2012, the dedicated buy-in from these stars has paid major dividends for the TGIT programming block, and ABC as a whole.

And yet, many of the activities key to TGIT’s social TV footprint are still quite recognizable to previous generations of industry promotion, narrative construction, or viewer experience. ABC has regularly promoted cross-promoted “interactive” sweepstakes with targeted products—like the 2014 theatrical release of *Gone Girl*—and established the idea of a Shondaland universe, both through commercials featuring the casts of *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Scandal*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*, and various social media updates indicating that the cast members and producers are literally *watching together* while tweeting alongside the fans. Social media platforms like Twitter occasionally make those cross-promotional maneuvers *seem* more organic, but they still serve the same publicity function.

Nonetheless, the intended effect of this combination of familiar and modern is a reconceptualized vision of flow. The strategic planning of flow and the phenomenological experience of flow now, in some form, must refer to the flows *between screens*. Given the hoopla surrounding second screens, mobile television, cord cutting, and more, networks increasingly assume that most viewers are dividing their attentions between the TV and at least one other device. In this framework, while the traditional television flow still exists, viewers are participating within flows of content on their devices or social media—pulling up content on-demand, refreshing their timelines, or searching a particular hashtag.

Consequently, multi-platform strategies like ABC's TGIT assume that these distracted or divided viewers can *still* be guided from one screen to another with the right combination of programming and promotional content. Depending on the context, the content on one screen is synchronized—or least in conversation with—the content on another screen. Viewers are channeled from the structured flow of primetime television to the equally structured flow of time-sensitive tweets from actors, contests, and basic “interactive” features. Networks hope that television flows and social flows interact but do not compete, instead invigorating the overall experience of consuming television.

There's never a guarantee that these strategies will be effective, particularly in an viewing environment with so many choices, or that even half the regular viewing audience will participate in these new forms of cooperative flow between screens. Indeed, networks generally celebrate supposed forms of engagement or interactivity as a way to be perceived as engaging, interactive, or collaborative.

However, for those viewers that do participate in this modern cooperative flow, the experience is similar to and different from Raymond Williams's experience in the Florida hotel room. Viewers have the opportunity to be more active or as engaged as they want between screens. Ultimately, the flows on television, on social media, and between the two are still heavily structured by the media industries to encourage simple, monetizable forms of live viewership.