

Social Media and the Unyielding Flow of Cable News in the Age of Trump

Deborah L. Jaramillo, Boston University

An early observation about television's daily architecture warrants a reevaluation as new technologies and shifting viewing patterns call into question its relevance. For all the justified criticism, adaptation, and elaboration of Williams' earliest description of flow, a return to the general concept helps us decode what is happening on cable news in the Trump era. The new routine on cable news generally revels in the sort of disruption instigated by political turmoil, scandal, a renewed investment in investigative reporting, and the decision of cable news producers to include and fixate on Trump's Twitter feed. Information flow, Twitter flow, and programming flow live together now, sometimes uncomfortably. The key to flow on MSNBC, in particular, is the way that this new living arrangement moves not toward denouement and relaxation at the end of the programming day as broadcast flow does. The blow of each revelation snowballs so that flow is not just a sequence of possibly connected stories from dawn through midnight. I argue that the crux of flow on MSNBC is actually about memory and magnitude—not the resolution of but the accumulation of *politically charged* information, crises, and catastrophes across the day and, as we are seeing, across all days. Cable news has created a space where continuity, repetition, anticipation, and disruption commingle; the resulting atmosphere is ripe for continuous, live political catastrophe.

Cable news relies on the relentless flow of time to frame its usefulness for viewers. The constructed liveness of cable news, directly linked to temporal flow, means that breaking news is a built-in feature, an expected surprise. News is always breaking, though, so what is often a surprise is *which* breaking news item the channel gatekeepers decide to (or have the resources to) share and explore. Cable news is a genre equipped to contain and exploit certain breaking news, but the aftermath of the 2016 election forced something of a change. The combination of political catastrophe, the political potential of Twitter, and branding has pushed cable news toward an always-breaking format—a format that launched (and failed) on a short-lived competitor to CNN in the early 1980s.

Breaking news in the Trump era has, in 2017 and 2018, consisted of the standard stories affecting the US—severe weather, mass shootings, immigration/humanitarian crises—and the Trump-specific stories affecting everyone. Even the standard stories have a way of becoming Trump-specific stories. Binding these two sub-categories of breaking news are the President's tweets and/or the anticipation of the President's tweets. From 6 a.m. when the President is watching television and usually begins tweeting to prime time when the President is again watching television and tweeting, the weight of the stories—sometimes exacerbated by Trump's social media output—accumulate and disturb the planned flow of the channel.

The channel's treatment of breaking news and its further incorporation of tweets as additional breaking news result in a type of flow that is not a single stream of information but multiple streams joining up at different points, feeding a larger stream that is heading toward something potentially catastrophic. Viewers are assured the end will be catastrophic because thus far MSNBC has treated most breaking news items in this administration as mini-catastrophes. The crafting of an ongoing, layered narrative rather than the reporting of disconnected events is now the norm on a channel that, through various strategies including promotional spots, has aligned itself with the "resistance." A politically engaged flow unrelentingly pieces together the breaking news with historical evidence and with warnings of plausible negative outcomes for the country. If MSNBC's brand implicitly attaches itself to advocacy, then the accumulation of news at the end of the day must become the knowledge that informs the next day's flow (with or without new tweets).

The model established by CNN and perpetuated by Fox News and MSNBC has been, for the most part, one of top news stories repeated throughout the day, filtered through and refracted according to different programs' perspectives. Not all cable channels approach the new administration in the same way, of course. Whereas Fox News will deliberately ignore a news item that is critical of Trump, MSNBC will report it and remain with it, adding it to past evidence and pulling it back out when the next related story breaks. Accumulation has the potential to situate flow as a political project for MSNBC, just as disconnectedness and omissions can serve Fox News' own political agenda. For MSNBC, which promotes itself as diverse and left-of-center, close attention to how the news accumulates will reveal a larger truth that is being hidden currently. On a day-to-day basis, that accumulation presents itself in the opening monologues of stunned hosts burdened by what they describe as an unprecedented tidal wave of news. This undoubtedly obscures cable news networks' role in defining and delimiting the news as a matter of course.