

But What About Flow?: Programming Structures in the Post-Network Era

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Flows are still relevant as they continue shaping people's viewing experiences. As a characteristic of broadcast television, flows create that continuity of fragments that immerse audiences in the experience of watching as a passive receiver, and that would simultaneously allow content producers and advertisers to capture viewers and keep them watching. Digital platforms have transformed the viewing experience, with audiences playing a more active role, deciding what to watch, when, and how to do it. Now, people do not passively receive from broadcasters, but they can put together their own viewing sequences. The possibility may feel empowering, even if those sequences are still constrained by a finite catalogue offered by a specific platform. But as flows have changed, the needs of the digital media platforms are not much different from those of traditional broadcasting: capturing audiences and keeping them watching.

Streaming services have adopted features that aim to replicate traditional flows, in the case of popular platforms as Netflix, autoplay algorithms that select and line up the episode of a series or a film over the rolling credits of an ending TV show, and more recently, previews that start playing when hovering a title while browsing. Those increasing efforts to influence on the selection and individualized watching experience of its users, reflect the need to not only create a viewing continuity that encourages people to maintain a subscription, but also to lead audiences to consume specific content. This is especially true in the case of video services that operate simultaneously as producers of some of their content such as Amazon and Netflix.

While users do expect suggestions and guidance from algorithms that keep a detailed record of their viewing behaviors, they also expect accurate predictions based on their tastes and an enjoyable, non-disruptive browsing and watching experience. That is still an ideal, and some platforms have managed to do it better than others, even if users do not find those experiences as refined yet. But platforms do not seem concerned about disruptive strategies as loud previews playing unexpectedly when opening an application or trying to read the summary of a TV episode, as they know that even if some subscribers may not enjoy those features, some will appreciate them, and the majority will just accept them as a part of a more "interactive website". The efforts invested by streaming services to create a continuum of images, previews, and TV episodes that allure audience and get them immerse in viewing, speaks of the effectivity of flows to serve the needs of the media industry even nowadays. While technologies have changed forms of viewing, and flows have transformed from a collective, unidirectional and passive reception, to a more personalized, selective, and active watching experience, there's still a decisive influence of the media industry shaping those forms of viewing.

Autoplay and recommender algorithms have created more personally refined experiences that work as new or re-arranged flows, and as empowering as they may feel for users, they are still highly restricted by the interests and the options available on each specific platform. Data-driven platforms have learned their users' preferences and have mastered the best form to present to them the available content in a personally appealing way. Users are still free to take that suggestion, to give it a try, to stop it, or keeping it playing, but the options have already been selected and filter in advanced. The re-structuration of flows, even on highly data-driven platforms, does not necessarily mean access to more content or programming, sometimes it means access to a constrained and selective catalogue. Whatever strategies used by digital television and how technologies have transformed the production and distribution of content and audiences' viewing practices, flows continue to be an effective way to keep attracting viewers.