But What About Flow?, Pt. 2: Analog Flows

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In discussing applications of flow to television and media content today, I am interested in the development of various narratives through streams of engagement across platforms. I am invested in assessing narrative engagement—the ways we interact with programs and platforms—through a discursive analysis. In other words, how various industries and programmers are managing the flow of specific narratives and how viewers and users are also actively shaping it.

We can see this playing out in different types of programs and events, including television shows, sporting events, and award shows among others. Start, for instance, with the second-screen experience that came about in the past decade or so, which had networks or show producers offering supplementary content on computer and smart devices as people were watching TV shows. This has taken a more stable form in network-promoted live-tweeting nowadays, when a show's principle actors and/or showrunner are live-tweeting new episodes. Of course, viewers are always live-tweeting content regardless of industry-managed social media experiences. Flow, then, includes not just attention paid to the broadcast content but also the discourse around it, shaped most by the viewers, expressed through what starts trending, which shots are instantaneously turned into gifs and memes, and any consensus takeaways which will then trickle into the trades and recaps in the following days. Flow here becomes more than sustaining attention for networks, advertisers, and showrunners; it is also about how audiences quickly shape the discourse about these programs.

I want to extend this notion of flow further to include long-form narratives from more "reality"-based programming, like broadcast sports, award shows, and even political campaigns. These three major "seasonal" phenomenon seem to be sprawling into longer and more involving narratives that play out not just through the narrative engagement—flow—of a single game, ceremony, or event, but rather programming that lasts for months and sustains engagement through a host of social media platforms, different TV programs (think cable news for politics, recap shows for sports, and entertainment programs and red carpet coverage for award shows), and different types of media, including print press, magazines, and their online components. It is important to consider the ways these different industries all try to manage flow by narrativizing more and more aspects of these programs into an unfurling reality-TV style narrative, but I also want to focus on the ways engaged users also tend to direct the flow of that content.

To get more specific, I'd like to think a bit more in depth on the discursive flow of "Oscar season," a months-long series of events that seems to unfold on the stages of the growing number of award shows from fall to winter, culminating to the Oscars. The narrative—or rather, the multitude of narratives, including studio campaigns—that

develop throughout an Oscar season, though, are shaped more by the transmedia-like flow of non-televised content, like trade and amateur podcasts, industry press, online forums, film festivals, and critics' awards, which are usually live-tweeted and set the tone for the season. Consider, for instance, the discursive power of April Reign's #OscarsSoWhite tweet in 2015 and how it shaped popular and organizational response and engagement. On a lighter note, consider the clip of Leonardo DiCaprio's face at the 2016 Golden Globes as Lady Gaga passes him by to claim her award, and how online networked culture transformed it into an infamous gif.[1] DiCaprio himself was the subject of a long-gestating narrative as a perennial Oscar loser until he won that very year. Many of these narrative threads coalesce in an independently produced satirical video game called "Leo's Red Carpet Rampage,"[2] in which you use simple keyboard controls to lead Leo through a frenzy of paparazzi, other Best Actor nominees, icebergs, and Lady Gaga as obstacles and Golden Globes, SAG awards, and MTV Movie awards as points towards the elusive Oscar. The game offers mini interlude games, chock-full of intertextual treats, including one where the instructions direct you to "find the Black nominee" in a sea of only white pixelated bodies.[3] "Leo's Red Carpet Rampage," then, becomes part of the flow of engagement itself as it spreads online through social media and press coverage.

There is, of course, much more to cover, including the role of red carpets and industry practitioners themselves shaping narratives through their speeches and statements on stage. All this is to say that there are competing flows of narrative engagement. These long-form interactive narratives shape popular culture. I want to close with a couple more examples that deserve more thinking and analysis: consider the way we follow #MeToo from journalism to social media to the award show stage, or #TakeAKnee from the televised game to social media and then cable news. Overall, I mobilize flow here, ultimately, less as a way to analyze algorithms and more to track mediated flows of attention, engagement, and cultural narratives.

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[1] https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/01/leonardo-dicaprio-lady-gaga-golden-globes-gif
[2] http://redcarpetrampage.com/
[3] See a five-minute walkthrough of most of the levels and references:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5-J7Hza_W0