# The Role of the Audience in OTT Flows

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At first glance, over-the-top (OTT) portals have introduced television audiences to a non-linear flow model that has seemingly granted them the upper hand in the industry-audience dynamic; they are now free from the fixed universal distribution points of linear flow in exchange for a more personalized distribution of on-demand mobile content. Within this digital milieu comes the added bonus of being able to publicly communicate in real-time with other fans, celebrities, and content producers via social media, share and create user generated content (UGC), and gain access to supplemental interactive short-form content such as games and applications.

However, a closer look reveals that non-linear program flows may be nothing more than the repurposing of linear programming strategies; and that these flows also include omnichannel data tracking, which results in additional benefits for media companies and a more laborious experience for viewers, further complicating the industry-audience power dynamic.

The primary strategy behind flow has long been to keep the audience engaged on a particular channel as long as possible. History has shown that the industry will often attempt to harness an audience's agency if it means retaining them in a flow. The invention of the remote control led linear programmers to institute the strategy of seamlessness where a new program begins immediately following another in order to induce viewing inertia. Today, this same strategy is at work on OTT platforms in the form of binge viewing. In what is essentially linear programming, viewers can initiate a seamless, automated, *linear* flow of episodes.

However, there is one primary difference: the viewer is now sharing in the work of a programming director. To initiate flow, viewers must search an on-screen library where choice is confined to the breadth and depth of that particular portal's walled garden. Instead of programmers serving content on a fixed schedule, viewers must first decide on a portal to download/purchase/watch before they can take on the additional work of scanning and selecting from a library. Algorithms attempt to steer viewers to certain media content based on personal data collection; but in exchange for this convenience, viewers must work even harder to circumvent artificial intelligence if they wish to discover content outside of their profile.

The intensity of labor is only magnified when you consider that audiences are often simultaneously promotional marketers, research subjects, content contributors, and data creators for the content in which they are engaging. Interactions on social media relating to programs can often times be considered a form of promotion and may provide insights that would otherwise require focus group research. Programmers can adapt UGC into their own content and often obtain it for free. Measurement firms scrape all of this audience activity for ratings calculations resulting in an audience commodity. Above all, these actions create data trails at scale, which are quickly captured, analyzed, and monetized for advertising and marketing purposes.

This hyperactivity often results in the exploitation of audiences, who are not only being sold to advertisers, but can also be considered dual-action laborers by creating content and producing data that are equally valuable. This places the exploitation squarely within the engagement economy, where emotion is the primary currency for viewers in exchange for their labor, all while the industry converts it to monetary capital. Although no one is forcing the audience to accept this work, it is the altruistic nature of their emotional investment that is being manipulated, captured, and exploited for monetary gain (and often without their knowledge).

Ironically, in order for audiences to become an integral part of content flows, they must first pay for the privilege to do so. In addition to the high cost of Internet service, viewers may also be paying for tiers of linear bundles and an even higher premium for OTT portals such as Netflix or HBO. The counter argument that some portals are higher-priced because their content is commercial-free begins to wilt under the realization that product integration is quickly becoming a standard for commercializing content while simultaneously collecting subscription fees – similar to the commercial model of cable and satellite networks. Additionally, the work of content consumption results in a data commodity, which holds high value in helping target audiences in a fragmented marketplace, but also something in which viewers may not necessarily know exists. Privacy laws are attempting to curb these practices to protect consumers, but work must also be done in the area of media literacy.

Over-the-top flows have given viewers a lot more choice; but guiding strategies appear to stem from their linear predecessors and focus more on the bottom line. More concerning, however, is the additional work audiences take on and the resulting data those actions create that are ultimately served right back to consumers in the form of target marketing for emotional engagement.