

## **Streaming and the Return of Williams' Flow**

### **The Internet, Flow, and a Case of Mistaken Identity?: From Streaming to De-Streaming**

*Andrew J. Bottomley, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

The metaphor of streaming has taken on an almost common sensical meaning in industry, popular press, and colloquial discourse about the so-called post-network or convergence media environment, as it refers to television, radio, and other media content delivered instantaneously over the internet to end-users without downloading. Within television and media studies, many have turned to Raymond Williams' concept of flow as a means of understanding theoretically this shift in media distribution and consumption. Admittedly, there is a simplistic, compelling logic to the correlation. After all, "stream" and "flow" are synonyms in their dictionary definitions, both invoking a steady, continuous movement of something.

There is a problem with trying to apply flow to contemporary media practices, though, which is that for Williams flow referred specifically to the audience's experience of live television as one long, uninterrupted text. If we are to liken that flow to a "stream," then the internet (and platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Spotify, et al) are actually best described as *de-streaming* technologies, since they treat most content as discrete, distinct units which the audience accesses in an individualized, on-demand fashion. This is quite the opposite of the traditional broadcasting model on which Williams' flow is based. Indeed, contemporary streaming practices seem to be returning us to a media environment defined by what Williams called "programming," wherein audiences experience specific, disconnected media programs at specific times; this was the very phenomenon against which flow was developed in contradistinction.

Part of the problem is that the commonplace contemporary usage of "streaming" refers purely to a technological function, whereas Williams' concept of flow is, first and foremost, cultural. For Williams and media epistemologists like Paddy Scannell, broadcasting is principally about cultural communion and the act of the viewer/listener connecting socially in time (i.e., live) with the surrounding world – a process that is largely interrupted by isolated, time-shifted online media consumption. What's more, Williams was particularly enthralled by broadcasting's perpetual presence and the everyday experience of casually tuning in to a diverse, miscellaneous mix of often very banal programming. It was through this continuous, never-ending flow and sheer ordinariness that broadcasting became so closely connected to "the real." Contemporary streaming breaks up that continuity, as well as eliminates the seeming randomness that accompanies it. (The flow is, of course, planned by producers, however the sequence is experienced by viewers as largely disjointed and unconnected.) Furthermore, streaming content is no longer jointly witnessed live by a collective audience, thereby violating one of the most fundamental, defining features of broadcasting.

Thus, for this roundtable discussion, I am arguing that internet streaming is *not* flow, in terms of how the concept was formulated by Williams and how it has long been understood in media studies. Among the political and cultural impacts of this shift in television's technology and cultural form is the loss of immediacy, along with the loss of the sense of community and co-presence that is gained when a mass audience experiences a transmission simultaneously. Media today may be always accessible (a defining characteristic of flow), but the experience of engaging with it is radically altered. It is individualized; the flow is less externally determined, and much less miscellaneous and casual. While some producers and audiences attempt to recreate the directness and presence of live broadcasting through social media, these are specialized practices utilized by relatively small populations. Still, audiences' desire to engage in so-called "connected viewing" suggests that there is something lacking in isolated, on-demand streaming: people want to experience television and radio in unison with other people, be they friends or strangers. Yet, "connected viewing" only really works effectively when audiences revert to traditional live viewing practices. In other words, the social connectivity and interactivity that connected viewing seeks to develop is only really achieved when contemporary streaming practices are jettisoned for good old-fashioned flow.