

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

### **Choose Your Own Flow – Analyzing the Netflix Experience**

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Netflix emphasis on personalization and categorization suggests an almost deliberate attempt to position itself as a media experience beyond flow. Their commercials emphasize not only content, but ways to view that content and tend to promote Netflix as a personal experience that you can take with you anywhere you go. Streaming technologies in general tend to allow for an amount of viewer agency that make it more difficult to lock viewers into a pre-arranged sequence of programming that resembles the one Williams wrote about.

However, instead of thinking of this as an era without flow, as scholars we might want to consider this an evolution of flow to a version that although provides more agency, is not completely free from structure and sequence. In this 'choose your own flow' era we might shift from looking at how media industries manufacture flow and instead look at how the freedoms allowed by new streaming technologies open viewers up to a variety of influences that are beyond the control of streaming services such as Netflix while still acknowledging the structures set in place that attempt to limit the freedom given to the viewer. Here we can look at how individual experience, user interfaces, and outside media sources come together to influence, guide and inform viewers as they choose what content to consume.

Netflix, like most streaming services, is available on multiple devices. In their advertising Netflix highlights how the availability of their streaming app on a wide range of devices creates a world in which your favorite shows are anywhere you want them to be. Flow can now exist anywhere. Moving television from the small screen in a community location such as a living room, to a smaller screen that can be taken with a viewer anywhere, making whatever flow a viewer creates unique to them. In this new mobile flow, flow is influenced by things beyond the screen. Ads on the city streets might mix with content on the screen to create new meaning in the mind of the viewer. This can be accidental in the case of billboards and street noise, or intentional as companies use GPS and viewing data to cater ads to a viewer's location and personal interests. Additionally, various blogs and other media outlets might suggest things to stream on Netflix.

Netflix tries to retain viewers as long as possible through their design. First the interface works to guide the viewer to certain categories. Thumbnails try to appeal to the senses drawing the eye to certain images and highlighting shows that have "new episodes." Future scholarship might look into the work that goes into the construction of categories or the selection of the thumbnails. These are all attempts to create some sort of structure within the freedom provided by the technology. Although advertised as ways to individualize a viewer's experience, these are also attempts to get people to remain within the Netflix experience.

The freedom to choose what you want to watch and when allows personal preference and past experience to play a larger role in the flow process. Do people tend to watch things they are familiar with, or do they take risks on new content? How individuals and families and communities come together to construct their own flow allows us as scholars to think less about how media companies view issues such as race gender and sexuality and instead analyze what individuals make choices that either change or reinforce their own beliefs and values.