

2010 *Flow* Conference Report

Austin, Texas

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With the aim of accelerating the distribution of scholarly publication on topics related to television and new media, the online journal *Flow* combines the form and voice of popular online magazines, such as *Salon* and *PopMatters*, and academic publications devoted to media criticism, such as *Cinema Journal* and *Screen*. By inviting readers to contribute short pieces, *Flow* provides a platform for academics to start conversations about recent issues in media and culture, and to test out new ideas that may later coalesce as more extended academic essays. *Flow* welcomes comments from readers, requests submissions, and heavily promotes itself via listservs and social media platforms. With its truncated timeline, *Flow*'s articles more quickly delve into current topics than do articles in the paper journals that traditionally circulate media scholarship (although *Flow*, too, has formalized its relationship with more traditional research patterns, with the publication of a Routledge anthology in 2010). Tensions between an abbreviated publication cycle and scholarly rigor, and between easily digestible articles and the scope of in-depth analysis, necessarily structure the debates about academic publication on the internet. These debates resonate even more in the instance of *Flow*. The journal's innovations of form extend to the academic conference it hosts, and the attention paid by both the journal and

the conference to industry concerns and technological shifts yoke it to the very structures and practices that the publication and event attempt to unpack.

Featuring longer sessions but briefer presentations than those found at other academic conferences, *Flow* schedules “roundtables” instead of panels, and “position papers” rather than individual presentations. The relatively small size (eight sessions with three or four concurrent roundtables), generally younger attendees (many are either graduate students or new faculty), and strong focus on digital technology and industry-related topics give the event a significantly different feel than most other scholarly meetings. Perhaps most interesting is the way that the conference, as a whole—its amalgam of roundtables and the debates it generates both at the venue and on social media platforms during and after the meeting—demonstrates some of the growing pains of an evolving, dispersed, interdisciplinary area of study in the neoliberal academy. Proceeding from questions posited by scholars in the field, *Flow*’s roundtables require that participants circulate position papers ahead of time (these are posted within the conference domain at <http://flowtv.org/conference/schedule>) and present a five-minute version at the conference itself; some participants use the time more loosely and pose additional questions or abbreviated polemics to promote lively debates, while others engage in speedy overviews or analyses. The remaining time (just under two hours) is devoted to discussion.

As its title suggests, the “Reality TV: Déjà vu All Over Again?” roundtable was organized via a prompt that encouraged participants to historicize television’s current spate of reality programming by connecting it to the medium’s past incarnations of nonfiction content. Convener Kathryn Fuller-Seeley suggested that the participant humiliation characteristic of contemporary

reality programming points to broader practices of governmentality in American culture during a period of economic downturn. Citing the wealth of literature on neoliberalism, Fuller-Seeley looked back at 1930s call-in radio shows to demonstrate the precedent of cultural forms invoking consumerist agency to downplay the need for federal assistance. She also suggested that 1950s quiz shows—cheaply produced content that mobilized “get rich quick” schemes for participants and audiences—serve as historical precedents for understanding the contemporary context. Inexpensive filler for network schedules, reality television often courts a variety of age groups even as programming characteristic of cable and other media platforms is more likely to reach out to stratified audiences. More than an oddity of the current moment, reality programming’s moralistic, affective appeals to viewers and its imbrication in network television’s evolving business strategies mark it as a recurring mode of cultural production.

Kristen Fuhs used 1950s-era true crime shows to locate a precedent for courtroom programs and the contemporary medium’s modes of interactivity and audience participation. Fuhs devoted her presentation to [*The Court of Last Resort*](#), a show from the 1957–58 season that staged reenactments drawn from wrongful conviction cases. The program centered on legal experts working to overturn unjust decisions. Fuhs connected the program to contemporary programs on A&E and TruTV that involve audiences via civic engagement, making the consumption of popular jurisprudence a viewing pleasure steeped in moral responsibility. Similarly, Eric Freedman compared contemporary programs such as [*Hoarders*](#), [*Intervention*](#), and [*Obsessed*](#) to older instances of the medium’s therapeutic discourse: [*Queen for a Day*](#) and [*Strike It Rich*](#). Across this archive, audiences are courted through what amounts to a showcase of people in various states of trauma. Here, the subject in flux demonstrates the uneasy relation between the

medium's consumerist functions and the therapeutic relations it so often foregrounds. Freedman underlined the flexibility of trauma as an analytical tool, stressing that it can demonstrate the fissures endemic to narrative closure when embattled subjectivities are at stake.

This roundtable provided an instance in which the conference's structure enabled a broad range of responses and a far-reaching conversation. Indeed, the success of the conference depends on such an ability to invert the hierarchy between panelist and audience, because the papers are almost always more productively extended in discussion. These discussions speak volumes about the state of academic discourse, as they highlight points of consensus or contradiction. The participants at the "Reality TV" session amassed a variety of objects and animated new paradigms for thinking about historical analysis. It was rigorous and exciting and, as a result, made for a deeply satisfying roundtable.

Another great roundtable with an energetic discussion, "The State of American Network Television," interrogated the rhetorics of *change*, *failure*, and *death* that permeate discussions of television broadcasting in contemporary American life. Horace Newcomb cautioned attendees to note where conversations about "the end of network television" take place, and to remain attentive to whose interests they serve. He openly worried about the political utility of network television in an increasingly niche-oriented media culture, when viewers don't have to confront different opinions. Newcomb issued a call to attendees to broaden the scope of concerns in the field by better addressing the stakes involved in evolving formations of network television practice. Alisa Perren echoed this, charging that the focus on "quality programming" in trade publications is too often mirrored in the objects of study among television scholars. Perren

emphasized that the “quality” of content is bound to shifting ground, urging attendees to examine the conditions that precipitate industry structures. Her remarks resounded in Jennifer Gillan’s comments about connections between institutional formations and the ideological elements of texts. Erin Copple Smith took up this connection between audience appeals and corporate practices, highlighting how anxieties about the flows of capital and loss of jobs can shape rhetoric about television practice. In the discussion that followed, Ron Becker worried about the relationship between industry endeavors and scholarly ones. He expressed concern that media analysis in the academy too frequently fetishizes change and reifies industry methodologies and determinations of value.

Not surprising at a conference so heavily engaged with media practices and technologies, the social media platform was awash in commentary from attendees. Time and again, though, it seemed that the conversations unfolding via social media were happening in certain locations and not in others. “Sexier” roundtable topics such as “Tweertube,” which mined relationships between Twitter and television (hence the name), and “The New Criticism,” a workshop devoted to media analysis on developing delivery technologies, received a lot of attention out in the e-universe. Other roundtables, most notably those devoted to identity politics, were largely missing from the Twitter conversations. But it is hard to break into existing networks of new media users when one is not much of a user of the favored technology. As such, many interesting tweets got lost in the shuffle, especially those related to Kristen Warner’s point about narrowcasting practices minimizing the “disidentification work” required of minority audiences, and another about Elizabeth Nathanson’s desire to rearticulate analysis of postfeminism in the language of taste cultures to better avoid staid critical binaries. This demonstrates an unfortunate tendency

when media scholarship takes up questions of industry and technology. Too often, issues related to cultural difference get relegated to the proverbial spam folder, subsumed in “the shock of the new,” or consigned to the heap of articulations that never quite register with their target audience or, worse, read with the collective sigh of “oh, that again.”

These attitudes seem uncomfortably resonant with the experience of attending roundtables devoted to race, sexuality, and gender. At times during the conference, such roundtables felt like a cul-de-sac—of interest to only the people there, marginalized from other conversations at the conference. This was a result of both the conference’s design and the conflicted choices required of scholars who do this kind of work. Looking over the choices of roundtables during the pre-conference call for responses, “Pitfalls of Positive Representation” was clearly where scholarship on identity was “supposed to” take place. For graduate students and new faculty—a large majority of the attendees—anxieties about “getting in” to conferences often trump a desire to proactively engage in interdisciplinary dialogue. The practical concerns of being able to attend, often the only way that cash-strapped colleges and universities will provide funding, have to take precedence over storming the fortress. This point came up repeatedly in discussions at both installments of “Pitfalls of Positive Representation” and “New Media and Postfeminist Critical Pathways,” as well as in the hallways at the event location and the cocktail party on Friday night. A development borne of the ways that certain publics and topics are marked *universal* versus *particular*, roundtables dealing explicitly with race and sexuality were further segregated when respondents were, metaphorically speaking, herded into two camps: “the black roundtable” and “the gay roundtable.” Not lost on the scholars participating, it felt like the two “Pitfalls” panels were where “those” people go to do “that” work. However unintentional, it was still unfortunate

and warrants mention here. This may be a problem with the general way that conference paradigms take root, the nature of certain scholarly approaches (that may not connect with the machinations of industry), or simply how some scholarship gets read, but most likely this form of marginalization results from a confluence of forces.

Even if Twitter activity from the conference occluded some of the discussion generated by the roundtables and exacerbated some of the organizational issues at the conference, some of the roundtables were well documented on this platform. Tweets from “Putting the TV Back in Television Studies,” “Television Flows: A Regional Alternative?” and “Interrogating an Anglo-American Context in Media Studies” provided great information for people unable to attend those roundtables. Internet chatter among attendees suggested that conference organizers should provide registrants with a list of Twitter handles. The incitement to discourse this might constitute could imbue an academic conference attended primarily by junior scholars with even more anxiety about proper comportment and additional pressure to “make connections.” It threatens to exacerbate already fraught terrain. At some point, the performance of connectivity—retweeting messages, social chatter, the imperative to demonstrate one’s connectedness and access to knowledge and power—could trump the circulation of new ideas. In addition, the signal-to-noise ratio on Twitter is already way off. As fun as it is to read about what people are eating—Austin’s BBQ and queso are delicious, after all—even a perceived mandate to use the platform might swamp the conference feed with cute, funny, but ultimately less-than-useful commentary.

All of that said, the conference organizers should seriously consider archiving Twitter activity generated there. Who knows what the favored, au courant networking platform and delivery technology will be a few years from now? Twitter's hashtag archiving system is impermanent; underutilized hashtags fall off the platform within a few weeks. This is a particularly glaring shortcoming that could mitigate the technology's utility for future scholarship. In order to make these conversational threads available for future research, archiving this stream of conference discourse someplace on *Flow*'s site feels like a more measured, useful, voluntary use of online networking platforms.

Woven throughout the conference's roundtables, events, and attendant online activity were ongoing discussions about the trials of academic life during an economic downturn, as well as the relationship between *Flow* and more traditional modes of publishing and convening in the academy. At times comforting, though also often anxiety producing, these conversations were shaped by the uncertain fate of a humanities-based discipline in a higher education context increasingly informed by the logics of neoliberalism. In an era when college programs are gradually more expected to generate economic value and find their own sources of funding, many graduate students were talking openly about employment possibilities outside the academy. In uncertain times, the small size and intimate feel of a conference like *Flow*'s can be reassuring, especially in a tight job market.

Nevertheless, this was noticeably attended by an undercurrent of impatience, disdain, and near-Oedipal disrespect for modes of publishing and convening more customary in film and media studies, and at times these sentiments were directed at older generations of film and media

scholars. Several conference attendees took to social media in order to bemoan roundtable talk about “scholars no one’s ever heard of.” At one point, an attendee took to Twitter to compare the anonymity of peer review to “trolling”—snarky, shadowy criticism on internet message boards. Media studies is besieged by funding cuts and structural realignments in the academy, and many young, nervous scholars think they must use every opportunity available in order to position themselves for ever scarcer job openings in the field. Amid these developments, the circulation of quick, concise internet commentary as events unfolded at *Flow* made for some cringeworthy moments. Several times, the cloud of social media activity that circulated in and around the conference contradicted the carefully worded arguments, and specifically the measured, insightful commentary presented at “The State of American Network Television” roundtable. And the casual chatter of the social media landscape lost sight of the conference’s more definitive moments—both high and low—as it often engaged in more reductive generalizations about the conference experience, or expressed more abstract ennui.

The roundtable “Quality TV” was thought-provoking, but also troubling. Michael Kackman took note that scholarly attempts to locate and make sense of anarchic cultural practices have, in recent years, given way to discussions of new aesthetic modes; in doing so, television scholars themselves may be remapping the discourse in a way that is apolitical and a-cultural. His argument rings true with a certain turn in a distressed academy where at times it seems that intellectuals approach the subaltern only as a way to define themselves as scholars (in a rather self-congratulatory manner). In her comments, Rhiannon Bury echoed this quandary, noting that discussions of taste are often performed to demonstrate subjectivity—the means (the appropriation of the work of Pierre Bourdieu) may be valid, but the ends have been corrupted.

Likewise, Andrew Bottomley cautioned that scholarly taste distinctions—deciding what we choose to write about—may be simultaneously understood as forms of exclusion. While successfully revisiting the questionable binary of quality and relevance that has plagued television studies, this roundtable also seemed to be an apology, with each of its scholars taking some responsibility for forging the canon. Yet at the same time, many of those present still prefaced their remarks by confessing their love of particular shows and lapsed into articulating their appreciation for empty aesthetic categories. There was a similar tension evoked in the roundtable “The New Criticism,” where participants spoke incessantly about audiences, yet were not inherently engaged in audience studies research.

Far from being points of failure, these moments of doublespeak are actually the conference’s *raison d’être*. These cracks in the foundation of disciplinary logic showcase the dialogic nature of the Austin gathering. One panel that seemed to speak to points of intellectual and industrial failure and recovery was the session “Remodeling TV.” The panel left the audience to ponder, “What changes do we want in the cultural sphere, and how might we ask television to assist in such revisioning?” Each of the participants worked backward from the cultural register to the medium, rather than centralizing the technology. Yet some of the panelists insisted on a micro-level approach that was not entirely useful, posing rather precise ontological questions that centered the new types of textual systems they wanted to see adopted by industry. Following those panelists on the “Quality TV” roundtable who spoke about the already extant programs they loved (a celebration of connoisseurship), the panelists here who interpreted the prompt from a formal perspective focused on the types of texts they would love to see developed. More successfully, however, Ted Friedman asked significant questions about current intellectual

property models, and explored alternative business practices that might engage more critically with mass culture; although his prompt was simply an open polemic, it nonetheless sought to create a space to critique a fairly defined set of industrial concerns. Following this call to action, Lisa Parks urged scholars to think about television in materialist ways as a means for reenergizing television studies. Both Parks and Friedman raised significant economic and political questions that must inform any revisioning of television and television studies.

Framing the microanalyses that were a part of the *Flow* conference, we might ask, “How can a sophisticated engagement with a text become a strength rather than a weakness?” This seems to be one of the central prompts that frames *Flow* as a transmedia enterprise that can celebrate analyses, analysts, and analysands, while still engaging with complex issues, refusing to reify formal and ideological rifts, and remaining dialogic to avoid some of the pitfalls of rigidly linear approaches to scholarly inquiry. As we look to the fourth installment of *Flow*, let us hope it continues to evolve in a way that encourages rigor even as it champions innovation.

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Published by the Dartmouth College Library.
<http://journals.dartmouth.edu/joems/>
Article DOI: 10.1349/PS1.1938-6060.A.432

