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*Onion News Network: Flow*

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From the original edition of *How to Watch Television* published in 2013  
by New York University Press

Edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell

Accessed at [nyupress.org/9781479898817](https://nyupress.org/9781479898817)



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## 30

### *Onion News Network*

#### Flow

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Abstract: The “flow” of television segments has long been understood as fundamental to how viewers experience the medium and how programmers direct audience attention from one show to the next. In this look at the *Onion News Network*, Ethan Thompson examines how television’s flow has shifted emphasis to brand identity and catering to audience taste, now that convenience technologies such as the DVR have greatly compromised linear models of flow.

On October 4, 2011, a giant asteroid hurtled through space on a path certain to end life as we know it. NASA launched a mission to destroy the asteroid, but the shuttle blew up shortly after takeoff due to the crew’s complete lack of aeronautical experience—they were, after all, a single mom, a dancer, an unemployed steel mill worker, and three other “dreamers with heart.” Anchor Brooke Alvarez presided over *Onion News Network*’s (IFC, 2011) coverage of “Doomsday 2011” with élan, telling the audience she hoped the segments distracted them from their impending deaths, and imploring them to spend a few of their last minutes alive watching messages from the sponsors. As *ONN*’s thirty-minute block of news programming ended, so did the planet. On-screen graphics reported the asteroid had entered the earth’s exosphere, the set shook, and reception grew disrupted before going to static. Then credits rolled and logos for “The Onion Productions” and “IFC Originals” appeared. Maybe it wasn’t the end of the world after all.

No public panic followed. Granted, those watching *ONN* were a narrow slice of the TV audience. Narrower still was the slice that watched but didn’t already know *ONN* was news parody, or couldn’t recognize its parodic cues. In contrast, when CBS broadcast “War of the Worlds” on its coast-to-coast network of radio affiliates seventy-three years earlier, panic ensued. The front page of the *New York Times* reported “a wave of mass hysteria seized thousands of radio listeners throughout the nation” in response to the dramatic performance that included

vivid reports of Martians spreading death and destruction across New York and New Jersey.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not genuine hysteria was as widespread as reported is questionable. Even the *Times* noted that in order to mistake the performance for “real news,” listeners had to miss Orson Welles’s opening introduction and three additional announcements that emphasized the program’s fictional nature.

But regardless of whether “War of the Worlds” generated panic of the scale described by the *Times* and ascribed to it in the popular imaginary, the performance undeniably struck a nerve when it was simultaneously broadcast to millions of Americans across the country. The perceived verisimilitude (whether listeners thought it was real or just really entertaining) must in large part be attributed to its structure, which consisted of a variety of programming segments. A weather report and a performance by “Ramon Raquello and His Orchestra” is interrupted by news flashes about strange explosions in New Jersey and an interview with an astronomer played by Welles, followed by more music and additional news reports that became more frequent and increasingly disturbing. While a reporter’s description of a “rocket machine” rising from the earth and incinerating a crowd of onlookers might sound utterly unbelievable, the surrounding context of the radio broadcast was perfectly mundane, and thus lent credence to the whole. If listeners tuned in at the beginning or focused on just one segment, they would either know it was a fictional broadcast because they had been told so or they would be skeptical because of the fantastic nature of the individual reports. But by simulating radio’s juxtaposition of music, remote interviews, and announcers’ interruptions, the notorious broadcast was very much a compellingly “real” radio experience.

In 1974, Raymond Williams described the planned “flow” of broadcast segments, like those constructed by “War of the Worlds,” as fundamental to television as a cultural form. Reflecting upon watching a movie cut up and interspersed with commercials, news reports, and network promos, Williams defamiliarized the experience of “watching TV” and posited it was not about experiencing an isolated event, but accessing a multiplicity of events and segments available at the flick of a switch.<sup>2</sup> Historians have blamed prewar tension for the panicked reaction to “War of the Worlds,” but have also pointed to flow, speculating that many listeners tuned in during a musical interlude on Edgar Bergen’s show on NBC, and thus missed the announcements that what they were hearing wasn’t the real news.<sup>3</sup> In today’s convergence era, the chances of similarly stumbling upon the *ONN*’s “Asteroids Headed to Earth” seem slim. Today’s TV viewers don’t switch channels during commercials—they fast-forward through them. And if they do happen to be watching live television while the *ONN* is on, the chances they would flip to it are much, much smaller than in the heydays of network radio or network television. Arguably, the “Asteroids Heading to Earth” episode was

never “broadcast” at all. The Independent Film Channel (IFC), which runs *ONN*, doesn’t distribute programming over the airwaves owned by the American public, but via satellite, fiber optics, and coaxial cable. Secondly, IFC does not program the *Onion News Network* to target a mass or “broadcast” audience. Instead, it is an example of “narrowcasting,” which targets a narrowly defined and from the vantage point of advertisers, “quality” audience. For IFC, that means 18–49-year-old males whom the network’s marketing wonks label “authentic influencers” on the young end and “responsible rebels” on the older.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the media landscape has dramatically changed, flow remains a valuable tool for understanding television. Programming executives have long talked about flow, though they tend to focus on the flow of audiences from one program into the next on a given channel. Both scholars and executives alike have spent significant time thinking about how flow changes now that the switch described by Williams accesses a more expansive “multiplicity” that can start and stop at almost any time or place the viewer wants, giving the viewer much more power than simply turning the flow on or off. The viewer can, for example, use the switch to fast-forward through the commercials of a program his or her DVR recorded the day before or months ago, or else stop, search recorded programs, and begin another entirely. As Amanda Lotz points out, control devices such as the DVR have thus disrupted flow as a fundamental characteristic of the medium, at least in terms of the planned sequence being determined by someone other than the viewer.<sup>5</sup>

To what extent, then, does “planned flow” still matter? A close look at “Asteroids Headed to Earth” suggests that in the convergence era, the concept is still important as a structuring mechanism and branding strategy. When IFC announced it was renewing *ONN* for a second season, it also revealed four new original series, including *Whisker Wars*, a reality show about the world of competitive facial hair growing. IFC executive Jennifer Caserta, explained their strategy: “IFC has been laser focused on creating and presenting original series that reflect IFC’s brand position, ‘Always On, Slightly Off.’ The positioning defines our indie perspective on what’s worth watching, and doing, in alternative culture. It speaks to people looking for smart, clever and authentic programming.”<sup>6</sup> Such PR releases are a boon to the media critic interested in how a channel like IFC frames its audience to prospective advertisers, since they help to explain the decision to program a news parody show (not to mention a reality show about facial hair) on the seemingly misnamed “Independent Film Channel.” IFC’s programs are “smart”; they are “clever”; they are “authentic.” This is the goal of IFC’s flow: not just to keep our attention, but to convince us that the content we are seeing, whatever its generic nature or network provenance, is smart, clever, and authentic . . . just like us.

FIGURE 30.1.

Unflappable *Onion News Network* anchor Brooke Alvarez presides over coverage of the eminent destruction of the earth.



The half-hour of *ONN* on my DVR started with the announcement: “You’re watching the Onion News Network, presented by Acura” over the last seconds of the previous program’s credit roll. Here’s what followed:

0:00–10:30. The first “act” of *ONN* is a hefty dose of programming proper, closely mimicking the flow of cable news—this is parody, after all. *ONN* opens with Alvarez’s quick note about the upcoming end of the world, followed by a preview of other stories, then the opening credits. This is immediately followed by graphics for “Doomsday 2011” coverage and various exchanges with fake journalists, calls to provide feedback via Twitter, and banter between Alvarez and the *ONN* “First Responders,” three pundits who sit behind laptops at a table. The ten minutes ends with a trivia question: What happened to Tucker Hope #8? This is a bid to keep us watching through the commercial as well as a reference to the ongoing joke of Alvarez’s interchangeable and disposable line of co-hosts.

10:30–11:00. An integrated promotion follows, as Alvarez announces that *ONN* is presented by Acura and explains that the car company beat out NASA when *ONN* was choosing an integrated sponsor. A clip shows her talking with the First Responders, whose opinions are sponsored by the company. One sits inside an Acura instead of at the desk, and the sequence cuts to a close-up of him saying, “Exactly. . . that is totally Acura-ate,” with the words also appearing on screen. This promo cuts to a green screen and the announcement “IFC Onion News Network all new episodes Tuesday 10/9 central, presented by Acura. Acura Advance.”

11:00–11:30. Unlike the promo which integrated Acura’s brand name and slogan into the *ONN*’s parodic style, the next segment is a straightforward Acura ad devoid of humor. A female athlete transforms into a glamorous model. “It works with people. It works with cars,” we are told.

11:30–12:00. A fake promo for the nonexistent show *Onion News Network Declassified* follows. Brooke Alvarez talks about her past and ideas about reporting, and also mentions her new fragrance “Brooke Water . . . available in stores now.”

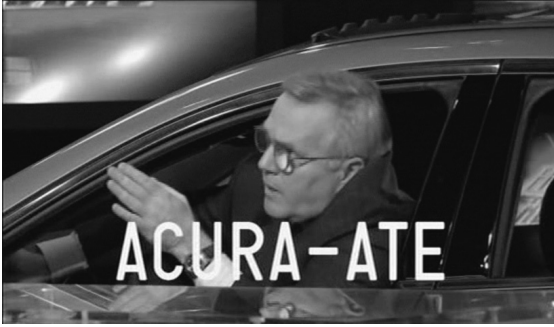


FIGURE 30.2.

As part of a product integration deal with Acura, one of the ONN “First Responders” comments inside a car on the set.

This segment does not include any mention of Acura or IFC. It is presented as a “straight” segment like those within the programming of ONN proper.

12:00–13:00. Three “normal” ads follow: for Twizzlers candy, for Asics shoes, and for Samuel Adams beer. While there are no direct tie-ins to IFC or ONN in the ads, the style and content of each do seem consistent with IFC’s “smart, clever, authentic” brand. The first two ads keep the claims and selling points minimal: the Twizzlers ad includes only one line of narration (“The twist you can’t resist.”), and the Asics ad has no narration at all, just text (“Gravity, meet your archenemy”). The Samuel Adams ad suggests it is no ordinary beer, but a “new seasonal interpretation of the German Märzen style”—that is, a new-yet-authentic beer.

13:00–13:30. In keeping with the “show don’t tell” aesthetic of the previous ads, a promo for another IFC original series, *Portlandia*, features music from the indie group Washed Out and minimal text announcing a premiere months away in January, and a quote from MTV that testifies it is “A charming brand of sketch comedy.”

13:30–20:15. Doomsday 2011 returns and various ONN segments follow, some about the apocalypse (such as “500 sluts and 500 douchebags sequestered in a bunker to repopulate the Earth”) and some not (such as one man’s struggle to overcome his “goddam stupid looking face”). Alvarez promises that when the show comes back, she’ll reveal her one regret, but in the meantime the audience can tweet their guesses about what it might be.

20:15–20:30. An IFC promo for *Malcolm in the Middle* (FOX, 2000–2006) follows, featuring comedian/musician Reggie Watts doing a stream-of-consciousness keyboard and vocal performance about that show. Watts’s stylized look and performance, captured via hand-held camera in what appears to be a dimly lit club, rebrands *Malcolm in the Middle* through “hip” connotations. Additionally, IFC has brought the sitcom into the convergence era by ending its promo with the hashtag “#malcolminthemiddle.” Watching *Malcolm in the Middle* in 2011 on IFC, in other words, is not like watching *Malcolm in the Middle* on FOX, on your parents’ TV, during the first term of George W. Bush.

20:30–21:30. Two thirty-second ads follow. One warns of consequences for “breaking the code” in Las Vegas, which apparently means posting pictures of questionable behavior online. The narrator tells us to “report friends and learn more at [visitlasvegas.com](http://visitlasvegas.com)” in a way that suggests if not outright parody, then perhaps an ironic “double-address” to both those who have or haven’t accepted a culture of perpetual surveillance. Next is an ad for Intuit websites.

21:30–21:45. The last segment before returning to *ONN* is a promo for *The Increasingly Poor Decisions of Todd Margaret*, another IFC original series whose second season is, like *Portlandia*, premiering in January. *Todd Margaret* features David Cross and Will Arnett, two performers currently appearing on IFC in the off-network cult TV show *Arrested Development*.

21:45–25:00. Doomsday 2011 coverage resumes. Alvarez reveals her one regret and reads a couple of guesses from viewers (despite the fact that *ONN* is obviously taped ahead of time). We get an update from Tucker Hope #9 that Republicans are celebrating that the asteroid has fulfilled their goal of making Obama a one-term president, and another segment about a disgraced coupon-counterfeiting mayor. Alvarez checks in with some tweets documenting how viewers are spending their final moments alive, such as “working on the perfect asteroid-destroying-earth joke to post! #asteroid.”

25:00–25:15. Next up is a “real” promo for the next episode of *ONN*, and the on-screen graphics announce IFC’s slogan/brand positioning for the first time during the thirty-minute block: “IFC. Always on. Slightly off.”

25:15–27:15. Five ads follow, and while they advertise a range of goods and services, to different degrees they suggest their products are for the discriminating viewer/consumer. The first features Jimmy Fallon, former *Saturday Night Live* performer and current host of *Late Night* on NBC, pitching the Capital One Cash Rewards card. The next is Hershey’s new “Air Delight Kisses”—not your ordinary chocolate candy, just like Samuel Adams is not your ordinary beer. Next is an ad for the online dating site eHarmony, with a guy in a black sweater looking for a “cool great girl” who “lets me be me” while he will “enjoy her being her.” He is an IFC guy because he is “authentic”! Next up is McDonald’s, which doesn’t go to IFC to sell Big Macs or McRib’s—at least not directly. Instead, it suggests the IFC viewer “discover ‘me time’ anytime” and “McCafe your day with McDonalds frappe.” You, IFC viewer, are smart enough to know McDonald’s is bad for you, but that’s what indulgence is about. Why not be true to yourself (authentic!) and go to McDonald’s for some “me time”? Next up: the [Freecreditscore.com](http://Freecreditscore.com) band sings about a girl who goes to college and spends all her parents’ money.

27:15–28:15. Another IFC promo brings the channel’s different types of programming together. First we see clips from the TV shows, both original and off-network (*Todd Margaret*, *Portlandia*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *ONN*), then clips from films in rotation (*The Shining*, *Sin City*, *Crank*, *Sweeney Todd*, *House Party*), then these



intermingle with clips featuring characters doing some physical approximation of dancing. As we have been told previously, these IFC characters are “always on” and also “slightly off,” but rather than repeat that slogan, the promo ends with a line from Malcolm: “Oh great, so I’m the freak of the freak show?”

28:15–30:00. Domsday 2011 resumes, and Alvarez tells us that the asteroid is just one mile from earth. The First Responders are in a panic, but Alvarez stands strong as the set shakes and “Asteroid Has Entered Earth’s Exosphere” appears on-screen. Static and the credits follow.

Such a segment-by-segment accounting of flow shows that the *ONN* program segments proper are connected via previews of upcoming content, interactive prompts such as trivia questions, and thematic content particular to the episode. But arguably what is most apparent overall is IFC’s strategy of hyper-branding, very much designed to combat the decline of flow, whether within the *ONN* proper, its product-integrated segments, IFC promos, or even in relation to the ads. In the convergence era, flow still exists, but is less obviously pointed in any single “linear” direction of audience experience. To use Williams’ original phrasing, the flow can still be “switched” on, but for programmers the challenge is no longer to count on a linear experience or sequence of events, but to build the network brand so that each segment of flow is consistent with the brand and connects to another branded segment somewhere at some time—even months away. Thus, in this era where “what’s on next” doesn’t matter as much as it once did, we are repeatedly reminded IFC is “Always on.”

Indeed, there is arguably more flow, not less, across multiple platforms. In the case of *ONN*, there are short podcasts one can view online or subscribe to, *ONN* on the IFC television channel, on the IFC website, on IFC video-on-demand, and even in pirated recordings circulating on peer-to-peer systems. This echoes *The Onion*’s own cross-media flow, in that it originated as a print newspaper, then expanded into a website, before beginning the *Onion News Network* video podcasts which are the immediate forerunners to the IFC show. All of those formats continue to exist, and all promise the same smart, satiric take on media and political culture.

In the network, multichannel, and early post-network eras, flow might be likened to a gate being opened on an aqueduct, bringing a steady stream of content down with it. Now it’s more like dumping a glass full of content on a table. The programming segments still “flow,” but in multiple, sometimes unpredictable, directions. Whatever that flow comes in contact with must stay “wet” with the appropriate brand identity. So when properly integrated into the flow, ads and segments become an organic part of what we have deliberately chosen to spend time with. Thus, when Acura-integrated segments are deleted from fan-curated copies of the program available for download via bit-torrent, or if we fast-forward



through them, we feel not only that we may have missed something, but also a kind of betrayal. We should have watched it all, as devoted viewers and fans.<sup>7</sup>

ONN parodies cable news in order to satirize media and political culture, and what ultimately powers a devoted relationship to ONN isn't flow, or any content within the flow, but a taste for such satire. Satire has historically been regarded as a sophisticated cultural form, and that cache is now made part of IFC's "smart, clever and authentic" flow. The parodic news genre specifically is hardly a new phenomenon either, though it is arguably more prevalent in media culture than ever before. While some commentators have suggested the popularity of news parody is a sign of cynicism and disengagement, others have suggested fans of shows such as *The Colbert Report* or *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* experience a sense of community and strengthened political commitment knowing that other "smart people" share the same deep frustrations with the news and what is happening in the world. Viewers may feel that Brooke Alvarez or Stephen Colbert are not only speaking to them and other like-minded fans, but *for* them—fiercely articulating dissatisfaction with the status quo, saying what they don't have the power to say themselves and what no one in the "real" media seems willing to say. Those are powerful feelings, and thus the value of such affirmative satire (it is hoped by the network and advertisers) is that such feelings carry over from the segments parodying the news to the segments selling candy, shoes, beer, and cars.

In assessing the persuasive nature of apocalyptic flow in 1938 or 2011, what matters is not so much whether audiences think that the world is ending at the hands of invading Martians or errant asteroids, but that they *feel* like it might as well be. Audiences in 1938 were subject to "prewar tensions" and rattled by the economic devastation of the Great Depression. In 2011, America was ten years into a "War on Terror" with its state-endorsed anxiety, and also in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the days of the "War of the Worlds" broadcast. News of a quick and fiery death-by-asteroid might seem an ironic end to deep frustration with financial, political, and cultural gridlock. For the responsible rebels if not the authentic influencers, surely there might also be poetic justice in going out like the dinosaurs, currently consumed as fossil fuel in the tanks of Acuras everywhere.

#### NOTES

1. "Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact," *New York Times*, October 31, 1938, 1.
2. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003), 87.
3. Michelle Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2007), 100.

4. Dave Itzkoff, "1990s Return on IFC," *New York Times*, December 3, 2010, C2.
5. Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 34.
6. "IFC Renews Onion News Network," *TV by the Numbers*, March 22, 2011, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/03/22/ifc-renews-onion-news-network-greenlights-four-new-original-series/86693/>.
7. Such strategies are known as "affective economics." See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 61–62.

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