

**What are the primary issues popular television critics must deal with in the post-network era? What challenges do they face as a result of labor disputes, conglomerate ownership, and online programming? How is online publishing affecting popular TV criticism?"**

First of all, I'm not sure I agree we're "post network" yet, though we're moving in that direction. Efforts by media coalitions like DECE are working to make it possible for media watchers to access content anytime, anywhere, for viewing on any device. But I also believe "network" is being redefined in another way, turning from studios and TV networks to the "network" of content by auteurs (Joss Whedon, David Simon, Amy Sherman-Palladino come to mind). Viewers don't watch *Lost*, for example, because it's on ABC. They watch it because they like J.J. Abrams and his creative team's work. They seek this work, wherever it appears.

In terms of challenges, the biggest is keeping track of what's going on, where. For example, Scholastic recently announced that they were spending a large chunk of change to launch *The 39 Clues* across several media platforms with hopes that it will be another *Harry Potter*. In other words, Scholastic is throwing something on the great media wall and seeing what sticks (remember when *quarterlife* tried to migrate to TV?) A concurrent challenge is developing an ongoing idea of what "it all means." How does an event in one media realm effect the others? Everything is connected and disconnected at the same time.

Labor disputes, conglomerate ownership, online programming — it all filters in. The recent WGA writer's strike certainly had an impact on the way critics work. The biggest fallout from that being that pre-screener for fall TV series premieres were delayed or unavailable. The CW went so far as to tell media reviewers it wanted us to be as breathless with anticipation about their reincarnation of *Beverly Hills 90210* as the rest of the world and did not release advance screeners for review. In the end, media critics were hardly left with nothing to write about. I turned my attention to online content, reading and writing about TV books, online sites like Hulu.com, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, *The Jace Hall Show*, *DadLabs*, and other online fare.

Conglomerate media ownership is a big issue in my mind. My first concern is in how it affects news and information coverage, particularly in this election year. Because of the demands on news programs to be profitable, it is now "infotainment," short on substance. It's increasingly difficult to find alternate sources of news and information that do not bang the same drum or pander to the worst in us. On the entertainment side it's a constant exercise to determine how much opinion is shaped in ways you may not realize. Good media critics step outside the first response of viewing to examine the layers the general viewer might not approach. For me, this means addressing race, class, and gender. It's not something I always do, but it's not far from my consciousness because of the way I view the world. While the vastness of the Internet can make us feel secure that there is a gateway to broader content, threats to its openness are of concern to many watching what's happening there. Using pornography and other boogey men as a weapon, those who would like to see the Internet heavily regulated could ultimately shape what we see, how we see, and when we see information and entertainment. While

this, “for the good of the children” approach is at first glance, hard to argue with, the trickier mission is to advocate for free speech in a culture that is becoming increasingly insular.

Online publishing has had a profound impact on popular TV criticism. I would venture to say it is “the” form of popular criticism, because work posted there can immediately address changes and events in TV. However, in the lather to post hard and fast, sometimes the time necessary to fully digest is lost. Some online criticism goes for the fast quip, the clever bon mot, and the snarky retort. In my mind, it brings into question: what *is* criticism — is it a thoughtful critique or merely a place for a cheeky response? Who is the audience? And for both online and offline sources, what is the purpose — entertainment, knowledge, or both? At least there’s plenty of material out there to choose from. You can sign on to Television Without Pity or Salon or Alternet and get three, very distinct perspectives with snark or analysis, sometimes both.

Overall, I think popular TV critics are overwhelmed. We’re expected to be ahead of the curve while the curve is shifting and have something to say about it. It’s exhausting, exhilarating, maddening, and mostly thankless work. But what the hell? I get paid to watch TV. My elders cleaned offices, broke their backs in rail yards, sustained repetitive stress injuries doing factory work, and watched other people’s children while their bodies aged exponentially. Who am I to complain?

—Belinda Acosta, Austin, Texas