

## **The New Criticism? Academia, Journalism, and Digital Critics**

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This roundtable emerged from a number of thoughts I had last spring and articulated publicly in draft form on my blog in March. The first catalyst for my blog post was reading one-too-many lamentations on the “death of film criticism” in the digital age. Whether or not I agree with such laments (spoiler: I don't), my main reaction is to embrace some medium-specific *schadenfreude* – even if you think the internet does portend the death of a golden age of film criticism, it has undoubtedly had an opposite effect on television criticism. More people are writing, reading, and talking about television today than any other moment in the medium's history, and the quality of that discourse is undoubtedly quite high, at both its peak and average levels.

In part, this growth in critical quantity and quality stems from the parallel growth of television that is worth critical engagement – there is definitely more television worth discussing today than ever before, an observation that's only partly due to the fact that there's a lot more television overall. As television has broadened its scope, ambitions, possibilities, and modes of viewing, online television culture has flourished as a site of critical engagement. (And arguably any perceived decline in film criticism might be attributable more to the decline of film itself as a vital medium, not due to an army of novice bloggers.)

For all of the good stemming from this sphere of television criticism, it does pose a challenge to our traditional categories surrounding the practice of critical writing about television. I don't have answers to these categorical crises, but I think posing the questions for conversation might help us work through these definitions, and perhaps even raise the question as to whether such boundaries matter at all.

### **Where is television criticism being published?**

In the network era, television criticism faced a scarcity of venues for publication that could match the frequency of weekly or daily broadcasts of any given series. Newspapers dedicated little space to television criticism, reserved for new shows, special events, and occasional sensations. Interestingly, the level of perceived critical value rose as a publication's frequency dipped – daily newspaper TV previews is trumped by weekly criticism magazine columns (whether in *The Nation* or *TV Guide*), which are beneath journals like *Television Quarterly*, all of which are bested by the book of collected critical writings.

Today, the bulk of television criticism is written and read online, distributed on blogs and daily sites. There are huge differences between the types criticism being written online, but the site of publication no longer serves as the primary marker of those distinctions. The frequency of publication has also ceased to carry hierarchical weight, although the distance from the object of criticism still does, making the morning-after review seem less valid to some than one published months after-the-fact (although I'd challenge any critics-of-critics to dismiss the morning-after insights offered by critics like Myles and Noel and their companions in the TV critical sphere).

### **Who is the audience for criticism?**

In the age of periodicals, audiences were defined by a publication's market share and demographics. In the online era, the readership for criticism is not only vast and fluid, but participatory. Reading the writing on a critic's own site or a publication like *The A.V. Club* starts with the critic his or herself, but expands to the often-lively comment sections that build community around critical conversation. The shift from critical monologue to dialogue makes some people uncomfortable, but it has already occurred within the sphere of television criticism. And the linking aesthetic of online criticism and Twitter allows promiscuous boundary crossing, as academics reference bloggers and journalists even occasionally drive traffic to academic sites.

### **Who is doing the criticism?**

Regardless of our critical object, the term “critic” has always seemed to have a catch-all quality, including academic analysts, journalistic reviewers, aficionado experts, and skeptical nay-sayers. What often distinguished between these different critical commentators was both where the criticism was disseminated (academic journal versus newspaper versus bathroom wall) and the assumed audience for the criticism. Critic has never required licensing or formal training, and many of the best critics, regardless of medium, emerged from the self-taught amateur sidelines. The online critical sphere has rewarded critics with more of a meritocracy than traditional publications, as bloggers with the energy, opportunity, and talent to write high-quality criticism tend to get recognized, read, and sometimes even hired for their critical output. For academics, a key question to ask is what our particular training and expertise adds to the critical discourse, especially where typically scholarly questions of history, representational politics, and industrial context are often already integrated into much of the better online criticism?

### **What is the object of criticism?**

These issues seem to be the more vital ones to discuss, not handwringing over the death of something that never was alive, or lamenting that the proliferation of critical voices might drown out traditional sites of authority. I hope we can come to some tentative answers in our discussions around the table.