

## Left Behind Karen Petruska

### Negotiating the Digital: The Television Critic Then and Now

My original abstract for this conference highlighted two television critics who demonstrate the different career paths chosen by critics in the industry today. My first example was Alan Sepinwall, who left his position at New Jersey's *The Star-Ledger* in May to join online venture *HitFix*. Sepinwall garnered quite a bit of online fame during the now infamous "Chuck-pocalypse," an incident in which fans reacted poorly to one of Sepinwall's reviews of *Chuck*. At the recent Comic-Con, fans sported TV shirts featuring Sepinwall's tagline, "What's Alan Watching?". In other words, Alan Sepinwall has achieved a rather remarkable degree of fame for a television critic. His departure from print, therefore, was no small event in the world of television criticism.

My second, contrasting example, was Maureen [Mo] Ryan, who, in my proposal, I claimed represented one of the few critics continuing to write for a print publication. Already, this claim is out of date. On August 14, Ryan announced via Twitter that she had left the newspaper to join the team at *AOL Television*, who are "all as obsessed with TV as I am." Ryan's announcement prompted many a hearty congratulation on Twitter from fellow critics, but those that work at newspapers tended also to include a question about what her departure means for print. With figures like Sepinwall and Ryan departing the world of print for online publishing opportunities, the example of the television critic becomes an ideal lens through which to consider what is being left behind in contemporary media.

My contribution to this conversation offers a perspective on television critics, figures with multiple stakes in old media, including the newspapers that have historically employed them and the television medium about which they write. I will examine the strategies of several critics as they approach new technologies. Within the industry today, there are critics bridging the seeming-temporal divide between a print past and a digital future. James Poniewozik of *Time*, Aaron Barnhart of *The Kansas City Star*, and Tim Goodman of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to name just a few, continue to write both for print and for online publications, in the process expanding both their audience and significance. Through analysis of the different types of criticism produced by critics and through interviews with critics employed by print and online publications, I will offer a fuller portrait of how these prominent voices in the television industry struggle to adapt to a changing media environment.

Television critics who reviewed and analyzed TV in past decades also play a large role in the shaping of my argument. Referencing the thoughts of critics from the pre-Internet age, writing for such publications as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, I will examine past moments of technological change to identify precedents and key moments of rupture. For example, in the late 1950s, television was increasingly recorded on tape rather than airing live, facilitating the airing of programming across national time zones, introducing the practice of replaying earlier moments in a football match, and lowering the costs of television production. Despite his initial preference for live programming, Jack Gould of the *New York Times* acknowledged these benefits for

the television industry in 1958. He also described how taped TV facilitated the work of television critics.

Before taped television, critics reviewed programming the day after it aired or wrote a review of a dress rehearsal for programs with a theatrical model of production. The latter option seemed an improvement, but it also created a disconnect between the critic and the audience since the critic wrote about a performance different from the one that would air live on a later date. With taped programming, the critic was able to write, in the words of Gould, “the sole form of television criticism that is worth having,” one that provides the audience with information to guide their viewing choices. Comparing critical response then and now to similar moments of technological change, I will seek a more nuanced understanding of how media practices adapt, transform, and persist in times of dramatic upheaval.

The title of this panel employs the past tense, suggesting that the leaving behind has already happened. Yet when one considers the historic function of television criticism with the craft as it is practiced today, it is unclear that television critics have been left behind—though their address may now have a .com at the end of it.