

The New Criticism? Academia, Journalism, and Digital Critics

Laura Crestohl

The Critic 2.0

The saying “everyone’s a critic” has taken on new meaning in today’s web 2.0 world. Participatory culture and web 2.0 technologies have allowed everyone to not only have an opinion, but to disseminate it widely, at a very low cost and with few skills required. Thus, cultural criticism has gone from being a field ruled by scarcity to one overwhelmed with abundance. The public has started to look more to their peers for guidance than to experts on cultural production, a fact illustrated by the popularity of sites such as Yelp! that amalgamate reviews from users and sites like Amazon that incorporate user product reviews. This cultural shift puts into focus the role of the critic, the expert on cultural production. I believe that participatory culture does not make the critic obsolete, but instead makes him or her occupy a new role in society. The traditional role of the critic has been to help navigate the popular culture landscape, to help the public make an informed decision when investing time and/or money in a cultural product. Now that the public has taken on this role itself, where does this leave the critic? I believe the solution is in working together and sharing information. The critic gives in-depth information, while the so-called amateur gives a wide variety of opinions and novel ideas.

I think the issue of the new critic can be seen in an analogy to a horizontal axis and a vertical axis. The “expert” delves deep into the subject with their wealth of knowledge and “expertise”, while the amateurs provide a variety of opinions and viewpoints, all valid. I think that one does not exclude the other, but that both must learn from each and work together to form a more informed public dialog. Both together can inform the public, in-depth and widespread, on the status of the cultural landscape. What has come about in the digital age is a collective intelligence, where members of the collective correct misinformation more quickly than they disseminate it. Everyone is an expert on something, and no one is an expert on everything. By pooling this expertise, we can devise a collective truth. I think that if “experts” and “amateurs” come together, we will get a fuller idea of the wealth of opinions that exist. Both positions are beneficial to our cultural development, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The “cult” of the amateur does not make the expert obsolete. Each role holds a specific purpose. People watch YouTube videos for a different experience than that of going to see an HD 3D film, just as people read expert reviews in the paper for a different purpose than reading Joe Anybody’s movie blog. Each provides a different experience to the user. By reading both, the user gets a better overview of opinions and the topic.

The issue that is really brought to the forefront in the age of the new critic is the importance of media education. In the digital landscape, where accountability is hard to enforce, users need to learn to do their own research and to figure out whom to trust. We should not blindly trust an “expert”, whether they are a blogger or a CNN anchorman. Many critics of participatory culture argue that there is no accountability online. However, I think this lack of accountability should teach the user to be more aware of all their sources of information. For many years, there has been a crisis in the field of journalism, and this goes back to before web 2.0 even existed. The new critic just puts this problem into sharper focus, something that can be a benefit, if we take advantage of this opportunity to put more importance on media education. Web 2.0 technologies have made cultural criticism a dialog instead of a broadcast, and with the proper education, we should all be able to work together and navigate this new landscape.