

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

### **Myles McNutt**

Self-Definition = Critical Division: Legitimacy and Community in the TV Criticism Blogosphere

In the world of television criticism, Twitter is generally accepted as the great equalizer, a common language spoken by journalists, scholars, students, and fans which places them on the same level and encourages interaction between them. However, before Twitter's popularity, blogs would have likely occupied its space in this conversation: as more journalists took to blogs to expand on their critical observations, so too did academics and individuals who wanted to expand their involvement within this community, which made the "blogosphere" a shared space of television criticism.

That being said, I think that the conversation would have been quite different: while blogs and Twitter may be similar in terms of the various groups who utilize them, I would argue that blogs emphasize the divisions between these groups more than they unite them under a common purpose.

While we tend to stress the openness of Twitter, in many ways it is a rigid structure: with only 140 characters per tweet, the site forces you to represent your personality within the briefest of statements. It asks you to express yourself, but the limitations make defining yourself all but impossible: while a Twitter feed is an extension of an individual, it does not - or, more accurately, cannot - *define* that individual. As a result, communication between students and scholars, or critics and fans, becomes comfortable because there exists a common understanding that what happens in Twitter is a limited - if not *limiting* - discourse.

However, by comparison blogs are a tremendously open discourse, a blank canvas waiting for each individual to make their own mark. Even when there is a common subject of discussion like television, there is an expectation that a blog will be a reflection of an individual's point of view, and the most agonizing part of the blogging process is deciding who you are in relation to your chosen subject.

This process of self-definition is quite easy for those with established professions: they become critics with blogs, or scholars with blogs, carefully positioning their blogging as an extension of a pre-existing career. Where this self-definition becomes problematic is for those who lack such a clear claim to legitimacy: this includes students ('wannabe scholars'), amateur reviewers ('wannabe critics') and television bloggers ('wannabe journalists'), groups whom are often seen as aspiring towards the work of their professional brethren. I want to make clear that is not problematic from the perspective of personal development. While some may view blogging as a means to an end, it is just as often a process of self-discovery, and can help amateurs get closer to becoming professionals through experience gained and lessons learned.

The problems start to emerge when this personal development does not match up with professional-oriented definitions of legitimacy. While not as prominent as within film, where the battle between critics and bloggers frequently brings forth claims regarding the death of film criticism, there remains some pushback (see: [Tim Goodman of the San Francisco Chronicle](#)) against amateurs infringing on professional territory within television criticism: as bloggers gain access to the same screener materials and set visits as critics, for example, some question whether they deserve that access when they lack the credentials of established journalists. While the medium may be the same, and in some cases the content is fairly similar, these similarities only serve to heighten the tension between these different groups. What does it mean if amateur reviewers become part of the critical conversation, or if ‘bloggers’ sit alongside critics at a press event, or if students are more active in critical communities than their professors?

There is no clear answer to these questions, which is precisely the problem: with no accepted definition of legitimacy, the intermingling of these critical forces within the self-definition expected within blogging serves to emphasize, rather than erase, the differences between these groups. Blogs offer the promise of community, uniting various groups within the same environment and potentially bringing them together through with blog comments or pingbacks, but that community is more meritocracy than democracy, and with no clear definition of what constitutes legitimacy it heightens the same tensions which Twitter makes disappear on the surface.

This is not to say that television criticism is not better off for the rise of blogs (and the post-air analysis they help facilitate), or that there are no critics or other professionals who are open to the democracy of the blogosphere, but rather that a shared form of communication does not necessarily break down pre-existing definitions within this critical community. In fact, I’m skeptical that Twitter’s inclusiveness will last: as it becomes more widely adopted, I suspect that who you follow, and how many people follow you, could become defining characteristics for members of this community.

And with definition comes complication.