

The New Criticism? Academia, Journalism, and Digital Critics

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While newspapers and websites across the country have been slashing book-review sections and firing movie critics, the number of writers doing episode-by-episode reviews of television shows for those same media outlets has been proliferating, and even thriving. There are a number of reasons why, though the biggest may be the way audiences consume television, which is significantly different from the way they consume movies, books, or other media. Though networks sometimes send out preview screeners to critics, for the most part critics and their readers are watching any given television episode at roughly the same time, which means that readers can share an immediate, informed opinion in the “comments” section of a review, and feel more a part of the cultural discussion that they might when reading an advance review of a movie that opens days later, for example.

Smart critics have been playing to this strength, and engaging in conversations with readers both on the websites where their reviews run and elsewhere: on Twitter, on Facebook, and in e-mail exchanges. This helps build an audience; with dozens of websites running recaps of an episode of *Fringe* or *Mad Men*, whatever a writer can do to establish a bond with readers makes a difference. Even one cleverly worded Tweet about a show can get passed around dozens of times, reaching new people, who then become regular readers. The new wave of TV critics have used social media to network with each other as well, and promote each other’s work; and have even been able to communicate directly with the people who *make* television, many of whom are active on Twitter.

With these new advantages though come new concerns. While interactions on Twitter and elsewhere have helped build a supportive community of critics and readers, they’ve also created virtual friendships between critics and TV creators that blur some of journalism’s traditional ethical lines. If a writer exchanges pleasantries with Shawn Ryan on-line, can he or she write completely objectively about *Terriers*? If fostering a relationship with fans of a television show is one of a writer’s primary objectives, does he or she feel free to pan that show if it produces a bad episode?

Of course, the best critics can take their own biases into account, and can put them aside if necessary. And of course there’s more to criticism than merely assessing quality. If seeing a show through the eyes of its creators or biggest fans helps a critic appreciate the show in a new way—and if the critic can convey that appreciation incisively—then the influence of social media on criticism can prove beneficial. Still, these are issues that need to be thought through a little more, lest the craft of television criticism become dominated by chummy boosters.

Another concern: while there’s something to be said for the immediacy and future archival value of episode-by-episode recapping of television series, where 2000-word reports often get written and posted in under two hours, TV critics need to make more time for reflective, carefully crafted “long view” pieces as well. And that’s not “long view” as in “looking back over a whole season,” but “long view” as in “how does this show fit into the past 60 years of television?” Many TV critics came to their assignments in a roundabout way, as quality writers interested in a particular show, and not necessarily as students of the medium, and so many may not have studied the history and art of the medium as closely as they should. It’s the obligation of any critic who writes for an audience to try and educate him or herself, to provide that audience

with insights and context that they might not be able to come up with on their own.

Given the rising popularity of television criticism, an opportunity has arisen for the form to become recognized in its own right, as film criticism has been. But for this to happen, TV critics need to be more than just passionate, well-spoken fans. The great leveling off between creators, critics and readers has been good to each in many ways, but some boundaries need to be maintained, lest the term “critic” cease to lose its meaning.