

The New Criticism? Academia, Journalism, and Digital Critics

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Newspaper television criticism and the View from Nowhere

I believe any consideration of where television criticism stands in the new media age has to start with a look at how newspapers deal with television criticism. I suggest the newspaper industry doesn't take television criticism seriously. Two prime examples of what I mean can be seen in the writings of Alessandra Stanley in the New York Times and Tom Shales in the Washington Post.

Stanley's writing have become mostly known for the frequent and consistent errors in her reviews. Many have been so thoroughly embarrassing it's hard to understand how she still has a job. To name just a few: describing the WB as a cable network; claiming Geraldo shoved someone on camera when he did not; referring to Colbert's "truthiness" as "trustiness" (which Colbert gamely pointed out is not a real word); and incorrectly calling "Everybody Loves Raymond", "All About Raymond". One piece, an obituary for Walter Cronkite, lead to seven corrections. All these errors were read by Times editors who again and again failed to catch them, leading them to end up in print.

In a Public Editor's column about the Cronkite controversy, Stanley is described as "a prolific writer much admired by editors for the intellectual heft of her coverage of television". The Times editors seem to see no connection between Stanley's mundane and pedestrian (yet "intellectual") criticism and the fact these damning errors suggest her editors and her don't actually know anything about television. It's hard to imagine the Times editors defending the insight of an architecture critic who describes a gothic design as arts and crafts or a film critic discussing Hitchcock's uses of "MacGyverisms" in the same terms.

Meanwhile, Pulitzer Prize winning television critic Tom Shales is involved in a bizarre series of attacks on Christiane Amanpour, the new host of ABC's Sunday morning public affairs show This Week. Shales panned the announcement of the Amanpour choice because of unsourced worries about her objectivity and a strange concern she would bring foreign policy to the Sunday morning format. When the show premiered a few weeks ago, Amanpour acknowledged "all of those who died in the war" along with American troops killed in the show's "In Memoriam" segment, which caused Shales to ask if Amanpour was suggesting "our morning extend to members of the Taliban".

Shales and Stanley writings represent what journalism professor Jay Rosen has called in reference to political journalism as "the view from nowhere". Rosen explains that political journalists' fear of taking sides causes them to speak for a middle ground position that doesn't actually exist. By taking no side, the voice of most journalists come from an artificial third space where there are no core convictions, and is directed towards an imaginary audience that believes the same, that is to say nothing. The "view from nowhere" in television criticism is in how it deals with television as if it comes from another planet that needs to be translated for readers that are the kind of people who love telling you they don't own a television and/or only watch PBS. For example, at the time

where the future of the television news as a genre is up in the air, Shales's formless fixation on Amanpour speaks more about his own issues than provide any kind of insight for readers into television news. At the New York Times the head television critic not only gets the basic facts of her beat wrong, her editors aren't even reading her material carefully enough to notice. These issues don't matter if you are writing criticism from nowhere to no one who actually watches television.

I find television criticism online is much less likely to provide the "view from nowhere". Obviously being online with the instantaneous of response with readers and "unlimited" space plays a part in this, but I think these purely formal reasons don't go far enough in terms of an explanation. I would like to end with a counter example of the "view from nowhere" found in the writing of Heather Havrilesky at Salon.com. What makes Havrilesky's reviews of television so evocative is in addition to reviewing specific shows, which she does very well, she often is writing about the experience of watching and reviewing television. Sometimes she does so with humor, like when discussing a flood of narcissistic reality shows, or with disgust, as she did with the recent Dexter season finale. A particularly moving example of this was her obituary to Gary Coleman ("Gary Coleman: Damn By A Catchphrase", May 28, 2010). I think the article, along with its selection of youtube clips, captures what is possible with online television criticism and why it greatly surpasses what is available in daily newspapers. Her criticism comes from the very real space of a television viewer writing for other viewers about watching television, which is vastly different from a writer who watches television to write about it for an audience that doesn't watch television.