

Seventeen Days in July at

Examining the Television Critics Association Tour

By AMANDA D. LOTZ



Stephen Hillenburg (left), creator of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and Tom Kenny, voice of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, with *SpongeBob*.

Abstract: Through collective organization, the Television Critics Association forced the networks to evolve what were once network-funded and network-controlled junkets into a rich journalistic opportunity that the TCA controls. The author explores the TCA tour and continued challenges to the organization and the place it has established in cultural production.

Key words: journalism, popular criticism, television, television criticism, Television Critics Association

In the late 1970s, television critics gathered at the Century City Hotel in Los Angeles and altered their role as new intermediaries in the circuit of cultural production by creating the Television Critics Association (TCA). These critics wrote for newspapers from across the United States and were in L.A. for a press tour sponsored by the broadcast networks. These events, best described as junkets, left the critics weary of the win-

ing-and-dining characteristic of these affairs, during which the networks attended to them as extensions of their promotion departments.

Many of those at the helm of the new group were part of an emerging generation of television critics. Fresh out of journalism schools that had been reinvigorated with a sense of possibility as a result of the Watergate hearings, the young critics were trained as journalists rather than in fields such as art, as had been characteristic of many of their predecessors. These journalists did not want to be spoon-fed news releases by networks; they sought to report, investigate, and ask questions. Many returned a spirit that had been characteristic of some of the first television critics, such as Jack Gould, who had used his column to hold broadcasters to their mandate to operate in the public interest.

Twenty-five years later, press tours continue but in a substantially revised form from the norms common before

the creation of the TCA. By organizing collectively, the TCA was able to revolutionize network-controlled promotional junkets into a journalistic event that features panels and conferences akin to political press conferences, indicating that the organization has proved to be a successful experiment. The group remains relatively small, with just under two hundred members, and is an organization of print journalists, primarily those who write daily columns about television for newspapers with regional circulation.

In this article, I draw from participant observation—the seventeen days I spent sequestered with the critics at the Renaissance Hotel at the intersection of Hollywood and Highland for the summer 2003 press tour—as well as interviews with critics and network promotion staff. Years of reading coverage of the now biannual press tours in the trade press piqued my interest in this relatively unknown yet substantial

Hollywood and Highland

event for television promotion. I explain the evolution of this promotional event and the consequences of the creation of the TCA. In addition to exploring the conventions of the event, I investigate those issues that continue to challenge the organization and the status of the tour as an important and legitimate promotional event.

Recent theoretical models for framing institutional study, such as the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh) and cultural economy approaches (du Gay and Pryke), are useful for examining the varied production processes of “complex, ambivalent, and contested” media industries, such as that of U.S. television. Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus frame institutional study within an interrelated “circuit of culture” that recognizes the significance of often understudied processes, such as promotion (3). Ritual promotion events, such as the TCA tour, always have played an important role in cultural production, but arguably they have taken on additional importance as the number of programming providers and the amount of content have expanded in the past few decades. In her research on media promotion, Eastman argues that changes in the media industry, such as rising costs, expanded channel options, the development of online media, deregulation, and new technologies, have contributed to the increased importance of promotion for television networks (5).

Promotion is a comparatively underresearched component of cultural production, yet promotional practices contribute to the success and failure of cultural texts in significant ways. The amount of promotion and its skillful construction can be a significant determinant of a series’ success, thereby contributing to what texts and ideas circulate within the culture. The role

the critics play in the process of cultural production is complicated by their outsider status (they are not paid for their services by the networks as part of promotional campaigns), but their columns facilitate promotion, and they serve the function Bordieu theorizes as that of “new cultural intermediaries” (325).

Researching the work of critics and their construction of popular criticism about a popular medium derives importance by other measures as well. Journalistic criticism of television has important consequences for the medi-

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um’s role in the culture and greatly affects how it is understood and how notions of its status, strengths, and contributions are communicated. Most of the television audience never encounters academic criticism; consequently, popular criticism provides the primary frame through which many people come to think about television. Understanding how critics and audiences talk about television informs our perspective of what “television” is, which is particularly important during periods of profound institutional change, such as that beginning in the mid-

1980s and continuing over the past two decades.

TCA Press Tour, Then and Now

The critics formed the TCA as a collective organization to help them assert their desire for a more professional and formal journalistic event instead of the junket atmosphere maintained by the networks. Before the creation of the TCA, the networks selected attendees and invited the critics to regionally located events or presentations in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and London. Networks paid for all of the expenses of these events: flights, plush hotel rooms, Bloody Marys available with breakfast, and dinners at the trendiest spots in town or in stars’ homes. The junkets were small, typically including no more than fifty critics, and provided an intimate setting for the promotional activities. Like contemporary film junkets, the schedule included “roundtable” discussions of eight to twelve journalists who had thirty minutes to an hour with a rotating cadre of stars and creative personnel. Despite the compromised nature of the event’s financial underpinnings, the tours provided exceptional opportunities for critics to talk with leading television stars and producers.

A number of forces combined in the mid-1970s to introduce reform. Not surprisingly, the networks’ largesse did not sit well with a Watergate-inspired generation of journalists, and the introspection of journalistic practice caused by the hearings led some papers to refuse the network handout and at least pay the travel and hotel costs of their critics. Self-pay had become the norm for most major market newspapers by the formation of the TCA in January 1978, perhaps contributing to their activist spirit, which aimed at wresting control of the event

from the networks. In addition, this was a time of generational transition on the beat, as a new crop of critics who grew up with television began attending the tour and questioned the status quo practices. The appearance of impropriety suggested by complete network financing of extravagant events was cause for reform, but even more ethically dubious practices, such as critics receiving envelopes with “laundry” money or “cab fare” far in excess of what might have been needed, suggested the extent of the pre-TCA norms (Waxman, “Spoon-fed News”). One critic recalls a *60 Minutes* story on the television junkets in the early 1970s, which included video footage of a critic opening an envelope of cash; public questioning of the practice contributed to reform efforts already afoot, such as the creation of the TCA.

In creating the TCA, the critics wanted to eliminate the appearance of impropriety suggested by the financial arrangements, but they also sought to use the tour as a venue for serious and critical introspection of the medium and its function as a business. They sought more control over the schedule of the tour and wanted the networks to approach them as journalists rather than as adjunct promotional agents. Both items have remained a source of struggle for the TCA, but the establishment of a trade organization has been crucial in obtaining the gains achieved.

The current arrangements of the tour deviate significantly from the earlier practice, yet they retain the complicated, somewhat symbiotic nature of the tour. The TCA tour meets for approximately three weeks each summer and ten days each January. The TCA board works with the networks to organize the tour schedule, during which ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC typically have two days to present material; WB and UPN are allocated one day each; PBS receives two to three days; and all the cable networks compete for time in three to four “cable days” that are organized by the National Cable and Telecommunications Association (NCTA) (the amount of

time available in the January tour is roughly half that noted here). In addition, the schedule includes “TCA Days” that feature non-network-specific content, such as panels on changing technology or children’s television and visits to sets and other out-of-hotel events.

The critics’ experience is not dissimilar to that of a sequestered jury. The tour uses one or two ballrooms within the hotel, and critics primarily move between the ballrooms, their rooms, and a press room that features office equipment to aid them in daily story filing and maintaining contact with their papers. Each network remakes the hotel ballroom space for the duration of its presentations and brings the various talent and executives to the critics at the hotel. The networks organize the day in a series of panels that typically begin with breakfast before 9:00 a.m. and continue throughout the day and through most meals. The last formal panel of the day ends around 6:00 p.m., although there are usually off-site evening dinner events hosted by the networks, so that a typical tour day lasts well over twelve hours. The July tour features the new shows set to debut in the fall, and the January tour emphasizes mid-season replacements and often provides an opportunity to revisit long-running shows preparing their final episode.

Networks usually devote forty-five minutes to an hour to each panel and focus them on specific programs. The networks typically present only prime-time series, but those that also own syndication arms have used the day to present new syndicated series. (The tour had included an event called Synditel that featured syndicated programming from various studios, but poor planning and scheduling by the group led the TCA to disinvite the group from the tour; Pursell, “Synditel,” “No Syndication.”) The networks follow a standard panel organization, often beginning with a video clip from the series and the introduction of the panel participants—typically the primary creative staff and lead actors—who may make a few introductory comments. The remainder of the session is



Diane Werts, former president of the TCA, with Michael Chiklis, star of *The Shield*.

spent in a question-and-answer format. In the few minutes between panels, critics with unanswered questions or questions they did not want to ask in front of the entire group storm the stage in a phenomenon known as a “scrum” (undoubtedly taken from its use as a rugby term). Although usually civil, scrums feature a pack of critics, with tape recorders extended, haphazardly questioning a series’ creator or actor.

Depending on how many series or thematic panels (news, sports, daytime) the networks have to present to the critics, they may schedule back-to-back sessions and often make use of group meals to provide more presentations. The fact that most journalists must file stories daily exacerbates the intensity of the schedule and leads critics to miss some panels if the networks have not built a few hours of writing time or more flexible meals into the schedule.

Even the evening events often require the critics to work, as these parties sponsored by the networks provide critics with their primary one-on-one access to creative talent and actors. The parties include a broader array of network talent, whereas networks reserve the panels for new series or, in rare cases, a returning series that the network is particularly promoting. (For example, in 2003, ABC included panels for *The Practice*, which was returning with a signifi-

cantly altered cast, and *L.A. Dragnet*, which had been reconfigured into an ensemble series.) The one-on-one opportunities provided by the parties are particularly valuable for the critics to meet industry workers who they may profile or interview at a later date. Many critics reported that the individualized contact helps ensure that their calls are returned later in the year.

The tour schedule continues to evince the tension between the networks' original version of the tour and their desire for critics to promote new programming and the critics' desire to make the tour akin to a press conference or political convention. During the July 2003 membership meeting, many critics asked that the board request that the networks bring representatives from their news divisions and include panels on news at all tours, which previously had been the norm in years past.

Some of the accomplishments of the creation of the TCA as a collective body and the practices it has initiated can be seen best in comparison with similar venues that exist for other entertainment critics. The television critics have far more access to network executives than most entertainment critics, and the tour setting and culture permit the television critics a degree of rigor and a journalistic tone uncommon on film junkets (see Lovell; Waxman, "Fade"). Film critics, for example, have no definitive regularized practice that provides access to studio executives. In contrast, each television network conducts an executive session at each tour, and the executives are often available for conversations throughout the day and attend the evening parties. At the 2003 tour, NBC President Jeff Zucker basically held court in a large booth at Loggia where NBC held their party. Zucker chatted informally for at least four hours with constantly shifting groups of journalists who either queried him or took note of the questions asked by colleagues. Such executive accessibility indicates the networks' understanding of the cultural power that critics possess and suggests the success that critics have had in leading the networks to

view them as legitimate journalists rather than as associate promotional agents.

Points of Negotiation: Twenty-Five Years Later

The organization of the TCA and the conventions of its tours suggest that the group has successfully negotiated its position in the process of cultural production to address many of the concerns that plagued the profession in its early years. Nonetheless, a number of new and residual issues continue to challenge the function and operation of the organization.

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A network's position on the schedule has been an issue and likely has taken on greater importance in recent years as newspapers have cut travel funding, forcing many critics to attend only part of the tour. A network's position on the schedule indicates its cultural capital and a hierarchy among the various entities, such as basic cable, premium cable, commercial broadcasting, and public broadcasting.

Second, critiques about what the networks provide—hospitality and meals that amount to thousands of dollars—as well as the volume of promotional gifts (free paraphernalia typically imprinted

with a network or series logo) remain issues for the organization.

Finally, as outlets for popular television criticism become more diverse, the dilemmas regarding TCA membership become more intense. Although it remains a relatively small organization, a number of constituencies make up the TCA membership, and their variant interests challenge the collectivity the group has achieved.

Schedule

Networks seek particular positions on the schedule that they perceive to be more beneficial or more likely to ensure a larger audience of critics. A typical schedule locates cable and PBS at the beginning or end of the tour because these are the portions of the tour that journalists with limited budgets often exclude. Consequently, the annual schedule indicates a clear distribution of power and also informs questions about what critics identify as the most important aspects of television.

The critics do not necessarily determine this allocation of importance. The issue of what content is of greatest concern to their audience of readers often leads them to prioritize their panel attendance more than their own preferences. Here, the need for some critics to skip the PBS portion of the tour might not be so much a function of the critics' interests but the reality that PBS draws only 2% of viewers nationwide. The varied configuration of cable networks into "cable days" and their relegation to briefer presentation slots reassert the less-dominant status of cable (although the aggregate cable audience is now greater than the aggregate broadcast audience; Dempsey). As in the case of PBS, many critics might prefer to give more coverage to cable, but they also must be responsive to the range of channel options to which the majority of their readers have access. This leads them to devote the majority of their coverage (and press tour time) to the broadcast networks; however, the fact that more than 85% of those with televisions at least subscribe to basic cable or satellite channel tiers might indicate the erosion of this hierarchy (Initiative Media).

Nevertheless, because cable viewing is so disparately spread into comparatively small audience groups, it is difficult for critics to cover specific networks regularly. The exception seems to be premium cable channels, particularly HBO. Although only 26.9 million homes nationwide subscribe to HBO and 13 million to Showtime (out of a universe of 106.7 million homes), the critics prefer attending these presentations (“Keeping Up with the Networks”). (However, they may not write about these networks to the degree suggested by their panel attendance.) This discrepancy likely results from the tendency of these subscription networks to provide much of what is perceived to be the best in television content during the years of this study, if Emmy and Golden Globe awards and nominations are any indication.

Network Financing and Gifts

The degree to which the networks finance tour events continues to distress many of the critics. Although critics now pay the expense of airfare and hotels, the networks host most meals, provide the costs for ballroom space, and cover most other related expenses, such as transportation costs for off-site events, session transcripts, and help in subsidizing the press room. A two-day network summer press tour can cost a network a half-million dollars or more (Schneider 3). The extravagance with which the networks finance the events concerns those critics who want the tour to be a journalistic event more akin to a press conference than the promotional event the networks desire. Reconciling the needs of both critics and publicists through this event has required extensive and continuous negotiation.

As much as half of the networks’ budgets can be spent on the elaborate “all-star” parties they host, typically at the conclusion of their portion of the tour. These parties often include creative and star talent from returning series as well as the new series emphasized in the press conferences. The parties require intricate planning for the networks to get their talent there,

requiring the coordination of shooting schedules, as well as more mundane costs and organization, such as ordering cars to pick up and return talent.

Both critics and publicity executives have expressed ambivalence about the parties. Despite the planning and expense, a variety of complications can prevent the parties from serving their intended function. Loud music can make conversations among journalists and talent difficult. In addition, many stars bring an entourage of family and friends with them to the events, and such groups can make it difficult for critics to approach them. Although a

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variety of complications can prevent parties from maximizing their potential as promotional events, critics and publicists agree a good party can be very beneficial. Even if critics cannot conduct a good interview in the party atmosphere, they may be able to make a preliminary introduction that leads to a subsequent phone interview or set visit.

The parties also provide an informal forum for the critics and publicists to interact. This can be particularly valuable for critics new to the beat or for those writing for smaller market papers. Building a personal relationship with network publicists often helps

critics when they need interviews or information later in the year.

Despite the extravagance of the star presence and the venues of the network parties and dinners, the primary point of conversation among the critics was who they were able to interview at the party and how conducive the atmosphere of the party was for finding the people they needed to talk with and for conducting interviews. Throughout the 2003 press tour, there was far more discussion about the fact that CBS had successfully encouraged its talent to wear nametags than of the retro bowling alley venue they secured. Similarly, the discussion and evaluation of the WB party centered on the fact that the venue made it possible for stars to shut themselves in small rooms and not talk with critics, not that they were impressed by the swanky White Lotus location, which was the hot new Hollywood restaurant of the moment. From dinner at Robert Evans’s Hollywood mansion to bowling with the CBS stars, the networks put their own imprint on events to make them distinct.

In addition to the parties, the gifts and promotional items the networks offer to critics have been a similar cause of concern for those worried about the appearance of impropriety. One of few amendments to the TCA bylaws since their creation in 1978 involves the creation of Standards of Conduct and a formal request to the networks that they eliminate the practice of providing the journalists with any gift that was not fundamental to the task of reviewing the series. The prohibition against promotional items arose, perhaps not coincidentally, during a tour that a journalist from the *American Journalism Review* attended as part of research for an article on the TCA (Waxman, “Spoon-fed News”). In the years preceding the ban, the volume and extravagance of network gifts had become exceedingly outrageous, including leather jackets, watches, and inflatable rafts that bore the logo of the series but served little additional purpose. The prohibition allows items such as books and soundtracks, which many networks continue to exploit. I returned home with no



(Left to right) Peter Krause, Lauren Ambrose, former TCA president Diane Werts, and Frederico Diaz, from HBO's *Six Feet Under*.

fewer than thirteen books, three tote-bags, various CDs, DVDs, T-shirts, and the *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* soap-on-a-rope. Again, the influence of a tube of sunscreen from the Travel Channel or a logo-emblazoned pen, T-shirt, bag, mug, or notepad is debatable, but the appearance of impropriety remains.

The standards of conduct enumerate appropriate behavior for critics, primarily that members should refrain from actions designed for personal gain, such as pitching script or show ideas, requesting memorabilia (autographs), and monopolizing the time of talent when others seek access. This was another step on the part of the TCA to help ensure that its members behave in such a way as to cultivate a professional atmosphere at the tour.

Membership

The issue of who is included in the membership and the existence of multiple constituencies within the TCA body contribute to the complexity of the organization and have led to struggles over the composition of the group. Because of the various publications critics write for, many have different agendas and needs. Critics who write daily columns for a major market newspaper compose one constituency; this group holds most of the leadership positions on the governing board and is arguably the core membership for whom the press tour is essential. Changes in membership norms over the years and the grandfathering of members who began attending dur-

ing years when other norms were in place have led the group to include some critics who write for different kinds of publications, including quarterly magazines.

The various readerships of different publication outlets also lead critics to have very different emphases. A primary tension existed between traditional critics (those who write daily columns and reviews) and writers whose readership is more interested in celebrity culture. Much of the celebrity press is Los Angeles-based, which enables them to commute to the hotel daily and consequently eliminates most of the tour expense. Some traditional critics were disconcerted by those who took up question-and-answer time with trivial queries, worried that more celebrity- or fan-based questions had diminished networks' respect for the "room," were frustrated to share their space with weekly and quarterly columnists, and consequently harbored some animosity toward the L.A.-based celebrity press.

The tension over membership has been an ongoing difficulty for the group, with some "traditional critics" threatening to secede at one point. As an outside observer of the event, the concerns of the traditional critics seemed reasonable, and I was particularly struck by the inappropriateness of some questions about celebrities' personal lives rather than that there was enough time for "serious" questions, as some had suggested.

Those traditional critics who expressed concerns about the membership (and by no means was this the response of all) had some evidence that the level of professionalism exhibited by the critics correlated with how the networks treated them and perceived the function of the critics and the tour. One critic noted the loss of regular presentations by news divisions and corporate level executives (Disney CEO Michael Eisner as opposed to ABC President Lloyd Braun), which previously had been a tour norm; he believed these changes were related to the more celebrity-driven nature of some of the questions and the culture of the room.

Issues of membership are likely to continue to plague the organization. In the late 1990s, the arrival of many Internet-based publications led to expanded TCA membership rolls as the Web created new outlets for television criticism. In 2002, the TCA initiated an annual vetting process by which even existing members had to submit clips of their work, and by 2003 this had eliminated some tour attendees who were no longer writing primarily about television or were using outdated publication information. One network publicist noted that the efforts the TCA had made in recent years to vet attendees more stringently had paid off by reducing "ridiculous questions" from the "fringe press," which might suggest that traditional critics' concerns have been addressed. The existing membership structure does affirm a hierarchy that privileges traditional newspapers in a way that has consequences for alternative weeklies and free papers that often express less hegemonic perspectives because they exist outside of mainstream institutions.

In addition, the fact that the press tour costs \$50 for those who commute from home and upwards of \$3,000 for those traveling from around the country also introduces disparity and access issues. Importantly, however, a number of the nation's top television critics do not belong to the TCA by choice and consequently do not attend the tour, indicating that the job can be performed well regardless of tour participation.

Conclusion

In many cases, journalistic television critics possess an intricate and comprehensive knowledge of the complicated artistic and commercial nexus characteristic of the television industry. Many television critics spend decades on the beat and, consequently, develop a vast knowledge of series, network norms, and executives. Their charge is to write about issues, programs, and events of the moment, and they often do so from a richly informed perspective. Certainly, not all critics bring such an expansive understanding to their columns, but those

who do provide readers (and researchers) with an exceptional resource. As such, contemporary journalistic criticism provides a resource that has gone largely unconsidered by academic television research in recent decades.

The role of television critics as commentators and adjunct promotional agents is significant in the process of cultural production, and the increased importance of promotion in the ever more competitive U.S. television industry also affords the biannual TCA tours greater significance. Critically reading promotional artifacts and presentations, such as those evident in venues such as the TCA tour, provides valuable information about the industry. Although networks carefully orchestrate the tour and fill their presentations with rhetorical flourish and deliberate spin, many cracks in this artifice appear that can be mined for information and analysis. The tours also produce valuable artifacts for those researching contemporary television. The promotional materials given to critics provide information about the network's construction of the series, and the panel sessions often yield valuable and detailed information from the creative team. (All of the sessions are now transcribed, and some critics have kept decades of transcripts, although few, if any, formal archives or libraries exist for researchers.)

The role of journalistic critics as opinion leaders and agenda setters takes on added social, cultural, and institutional significance in a television environment of ever-expanding channels. Viewers cannot possibly keep abreast of the range of new programming available, which makes the space of newspaper columns even more important for informing viewers of content and its evaluation. As the institutional transitions caused by changes in larger political and economic concerns, such as ownership and regulation, also alter the industry, critics' role as watchdogs and advocates remains crucial. Various industries with

vast capital and lobbying power seek to secure status in the new television economy, but few take an interest in the needs of citizens and television consumers. Journalistic television critics are most likely to apprise their readerships on why practices such as product placement and sponsorship are re-emerging or of the consequences of the transition to digital and high-definition television standards.

As was the case at the organization's creation, the body of critics is experiencing another generational transition as those who invigorated the beat in the 1970s begin retiring. This now old-guard expresses concern, however, that the "younger, more recent additions to the critics' corps tend to grade TV by the industry's standards rather than hold it to higher expectations of what the medium could be" (Holston 11; paraphrasing Bianculli).

The broader media environment is also changing in significant ways as Web-only publications focused on television criticism now exist and competition from on-line forums force continued innovation by the newspaper industry. Like the industry they cover, the composition of the critic corps and their status as cultural intermediaries are in the midst of substantial change.

Although much research has examined the role of television critics up until the late 1970s, little work has considered their role since the creation of the TCA. Critics continue to play an important role in the process of cultural production, and "internal" promotional events—those that precede the promotion of texts to audiences—exist as crucial and rarely studied components of production. The business of the television industry relies on many other promotional events that serve practical economic purposes and ritual cultural functions in the industry. Examining these sites adds depth to understandings about industrial operation and new insight into the players and practices of the television industry.

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