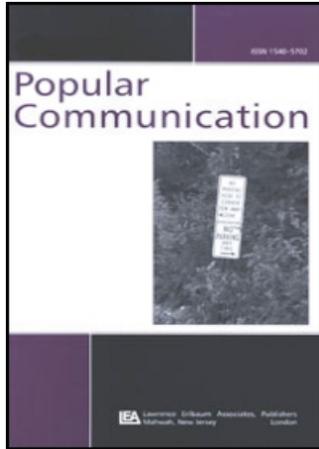


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### On "Television Criticism": The Pursuit of the Critical Examination of a Popular Art

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## On “Television Criticism”: The Pursuit of the Critical Examination of a Popular Art

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“Television criticism” occupies an uncertain place relative to other critical traditions and the sociological frameworks through which critics’ roles have been studied relative to cultural production. Those who write daily columns about television play an important role in cultural production despite the differentiation of the television critic, the outlets in which they write, and the challenges of writing about a predominantly commercial form. This article examines the historical development of journalistic television criticism in the United States, including the establishment of the Television Critics Association (TCA), which has served as a significant organization in countering networks’ efforts to control critical assessments of television. The article draws from a rich early literature that examined the work of critics in television’s initial years as well as interviews with critics who have written about the medium for the past two decades, and a three-week participant observation of the TCA press tour.

The job and mission of those called television critics differs substantially from other forms of artistic criticism. This statement may seem exceedingly obvious to some, particularly those who might deride television programs for their “popular” or “commercial” attributes rather than acknowledging their range of aesthetic characteristics or powerful cultural engagement. The work and role of the television critic, defined here as those newspaper and magazine journalists who write about television for general audiences on—in most cases—a daily basis, does indeed diverge from that of literary, art, and many other cultural critics, although these variances do not diminish the importance and relevance of their work.

U.S. television is commonly at once an artistic and commercial form. Intellectual traditions that tend to separate these motivations typically fail to embrace the complexity that transpires, and the artistic potential and accomplishments of television are often dismissed as insubstantial because of its simultaneous commercial mandate. Hundreds of journalists throughout the United States function under titles such as television critic, writer, or editor and produce columns that reach thousands daily that do far more than announce what is on television each night or make cursory recommendations of viewing. Their writing differs considerably from the work of criticism in other traditions, which makes it difficult to utilize the scholarly insights and theories developed for other forms of criticism in understanding the role, purpose, and importance of television critics. The norms and status of popular writing about television have varied significantly throughout U.S. television history, with perhaps the least consideration of its last 25 years.

As in the case of other critical traditions, television critics occupy an important role in the production and circulation of cultural goods. Existing scholarship on television critics tends to examine the contents of their columns with little attention to the role of the critic within the circuit of cultural production. Consequently, this article first explores the questions of what is the role and function of television criticism as it might be understood as an extension of the critical traditions of literature, art, and more recently, film, and how the particularities of television require a distinct theoretical framework. The analysis traces the history of television criticism in the United States, and scholarship about this criticism, since the beginning of the medium and proposes that three distinctive phases characterize this history and that we may be on the precipice of a fourth. The article enumerates factors that distinguish contemporary television critics and the cultural and institutional structures of power they negotiate in the pursuit of developing a more sophisticated explanation of their role in cultural production. Their work is circumscribed by the specific attributes of the medium they examine; in the United States, a medium with a complicated dual status as a primarily commercial form that is intermittently held to expectations of providing some sort of public service. U.S. television is nevertheless widely pervasive and perceived as vastly influential due to its ubiquity and engagement by large audiences. In addition, the publications that employ television critics affect how they pursue their work, as most write for what would be considered "popular" outlets, rather than the more specialized venues common to other forms of artistic criticism. These particular industrial attributes of television, the publications in which critics write, and the audiences common to these publications may considerably circumscribe the activity of television criticism, but these features by no means diminish the relevance and importance of this work by either cultural or industrial measures. In addition to conventional academic and industry trade sources that document the history of popular U.S. television criticism, this paper draws from a three-week participant observation of the July 2003 Television Critics Association (TCA) press tour and interviews with many of the critics.<sup>1</sup>

### CAN THERE BE "TELEVISION CRITICISM"?

In some ways, this paper begins from what may be a problematic assumption for some, that is, that there exists such a thing as television criticism. Although "criticism" is the most accurate way to categorize much of the writing that the nation's television journalists contribute to popular discussion of the medium, its content, and its role in culture, there are various features of the medium that make it difficult to assert that television criticism can be equated with the critical traditions of other forms of artistic criticism. The questions explored in and norms of "high art" criticism—to adopt, but not accept a distinction that remains salient in cultural understanding—required a particular intellectual training and elite vocabulary that resulted in

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<sup>1</sup>Every effort has been made to verify the recollections of individuals, but the lack of recorded organizational history in some cases has required reliance on unverifiable personal memories. Critics interviewed include: Ed Bark—*Dallas Morning News*, David Bianculli—*New York Daily News*, Eric Deggans—*St. Petersburg Times*, Gloria Goodale—*The Christian Science Monitor*, R. D. Heldenfels—*Akron Beacon Journal*, Noel Holston—*New York Newsday*, Tom Jicha—*Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Charlie McCollum—*San Jose Mercury News*, Kay McFadden—*Seattle Times*, Mark McGuire—*Albany Times-Union*, Rob Owen—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Scott Pierce—*Deseret News*, Matt Rousch—*TV Guide*, Dusty Saunders—*Rocky Mountain News*, Diane Werts—*New York Newsday*.

the circulation of this writing outside of the “mainstream.” Criticism of art and literature has functioned to create significant assessments of value and worth in these cultural industries, while the critical writing itself persists as work meaningful separate from the object of analysis. Assumptions distinguishing among high and low art function crucially in the norms of what type of literature warrants criticism, and the objects of criticism are rarely expected to reach a vast and heterogeneous audience, long an inherent and defining feature of television.

A sizable scholarly literature about the nature of artistic criticism exists, studies that often assess the effect of critics or the nature of their writing. Most of the contemporary work emerges from the field of sociology and operates under Bourdieu’s (1993) theories of cultural production or Peterson’s (1977) “production of culture” perspective. This work tends to focus on traditional high art and cultural forms such as fiction and literature (Janssen, 1997; van Rees, 1983, 1987), art (Shrum, 1996), theater (Levo, 1993), symphonic music (Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005), and more recently film (Baumann, 2002). In addition to the cultural capital afforded to these forms, they share particular modes of production that distinguish them from what Hesmondhalgh (2002) identifies as the core cultural industries of contemporary societies. Cultural industries—broadcasting, film, music, and advertising—are more directly implicated in the production of social meaning and necessarily must reach a vaster audience than typical of “high art” forms. Despite the key differences of a cultural industry such as television from cultural forms afforded high art status, some have recently begun considering television criticism through this intellectual frame (Bielby, Moloney, & Ngo, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

The activity of popular television criticism has been significantly differentiated from other critical traditions since the origin of the medium. Even in its early days, television encompassed a vast array of fairly ephemeral new content each day that thwarted the conventional function of the critical review for many other arts that enabled audiences to attend performances or purchase a book after the publication of the review. But perhaps more significant, television criticism differs from other “high art” criticism because of the unavoidability of the commercial mandate of its object and, at least in the case of broadcasting, its particular requirement to “serve” the public. These requirements structure the possibilities available to medium—as do its technological features, characteristics of distribution, and norms of production—yet the medium can still be assessed and evaluated for how it succeeds and fails within these constraints. These features require that we consider television criticism differently from the critical traditions of literature, art, and music, and allow us to acknowledge that television has the capability for artistic accomplishment despite the significant differences in the nature of the medium from many of these other cultural forms.

Television criticism dates to the origins of the medium and once was the subject of ample scholarship. Rather than the sociological traditions used to study the previously mentioned art forms, scholars in the developing field of communication took different foci and applied disparate theories in their examinations of critics and their writings in the 1950s and 1960s. Studies often focused on calls to the profession regarding the practice of criticism (Kreiling, 1966–67; Magnus, 1966–67; McGrath & Nance, 1966–67; Steinberg, 1974), surveys of the characteristics of certain columnists (Lichty, 1963; Mayeux, 1969–1970; Rossman, 1965;

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<sup>2</sup>In another recent study, DeWerth-Pallmeyer (2003) conducted surveys of “media arts” critics (including those writing on art, books, film, music, television, and the Internet/popular culture) to better understand their contemporary role.

Young, 1966–67), surveys of the critical characteristics of certain publications (Shelby, 1966–67); or assessments of the effect or importance of criticism (Rossman, 1975; Shelby, 1973). These studies predominantly used textual analysis of critics' columns rather than the more sociological methods and theories common to the "production of culture" assessments of other critical traditions.

Fewer studies have assessed television criticism written after the 1960s, perhaps related to significant shifts in the medium and nature of this "beat" that occurred at this time (Himmelstein, 1981; Littlejohn, 1976; Scher, 1974; Shelby, 1973; Rossman, 1975; Vincent, 1980). Spigel (1998) traces the connections between popular writing about television and the emergence of academic television studies in a detailed examination that addresses the tensions among perceptions of aesthetic value, industrial machinations, and the development of television criticism. Television studies scholarship, which is more isolated to academic journals or specialized publications, now produces assessments of television more comparable to traditional criticism such as that of art and literature (that is, when employing textual analysis) than do journalistic critics. The writing of those still identified as "television critics" whose columns appear daily in regional and national newspapers, nevertheless provide an important contribution to popular understandings and assessments of television's creative enterprise.

Unlike the sociological research based in the theories of Bourdieu or Peterson, communication research typically has not attended to understanding the work of critics as part of cultural production, although some scholarship of the past decade offers tools that might be applied to television criticism. Media studies research has broadened the understanding of "production" to include all aspects of the creation and circulation of cultural texts, including the work of critics. This perspective emerged from increasing attention to the role of industry in cultural studies research evident in the late 1990s and the model of the circuit of cultural production and theories broadly identified at the time as cultural economy (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; du Gay & Pryke, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Such models and theories drew renewed attention to the broad industrial factors relevant to study of media and their role in culture.

Another way to theorize the work of critics can be derived from the various and multifaceted power roles that Turow enumerates as common to the cultural production carried out within media systems (1997). Although Turow's taxonomy is particularly useful for illustrating the varied and often unexpected locations in which agency and power can be identified—he diligently acknowledges the importance of "craft-services" (meal catering) to the smooth running of production operations—he excludes journalistic critics from the power roles he enumerates. This oversight is both understandable and revealing. Television critics are awkwardly positioned relative to the industrial object they study; they are members of the media yet also usually external to the particular medium about which they write. Critics arguably perform what Turow delimits as the "facilitator role," which is characteristic of those who "initiate, carry out, or evaluate mass media content," such as talent agencies, law firms, consulting firms, or market researchers (Turow, 1997).<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the facilitators Turow identifies receive payment from the producer or distributor of the media, while most critics are

<sup>3</sup>Cultural economy has since taken on a different focus.

<sup>4</sup>It is also possible to consider critics in the "linking pin" role. Critics certainly perform the cross-media fertilization typical of this role, but Turow's description does not account for the autonomy and independence characteristic of critics.

financially autonomous from the industry they cover, and their freedom from industrial payrolls is crucial to their perceived legitimacy and consequent status. The position of critics as part of the media industry juxtaposed with their dependence on yet independence from the medium they write about contributes to their complicated and perhaps overlooked role in the process of cultural production.<sup>5</sup>

Although studies of media industries often focus on major power roles such as those of producers, distributors, and creators, examining the contribution of facilitators such as critics is valuable for illustrating the complicated negotiations involved in cultural production. Many of the institutional readjustments of the television industry throughout its history have redefined critics' roles, and such alterations underscore the ephemeral, shifting, and constantly renegotiated status of the power in cultural industries. Critics' power, following Turow's definition of power as "the use of resources by one organization in order to gain compliance by another organization," must be constantly negotiated with others involved in the cultural production of television and their publication outlets (Turow, 1997, p. 22). Critics negotiate their power with the networks and conglomerates exhibiting the programming, as detailed later in the article's discussion of contemporary practices. The networks can enable or disable critics by varying their level of access to creative personnel and other individuals and sources beneficial to the critics' proper performance of their job. Critics also negotiate their power with their audience of readers, as they are beholden to represent the aesthetics and sensibilities of their audience to maintain readership. Alienating or disrupting the relationship with either those they write about or their readership can compromise their role in cultural production, while the whims of their editors also play an important role in determining their micro-level autonomy. Relationships with those they evaluate, those who read them, and those for whom they work lead television critics to perform their jobs in particular ways that both mirror and contrast with other forms of artistic criticism based on the norms of such relationships common to these art forms. The particularities of the television industry also serve to distinguish the task and role of television critics and their work from other forms of artistic criticism. Changes in the television industry have varied the degree to which the work of the television critic compares with that of other art critics and are responsible for initiating the shifts among the phases of television criticism that characterize U.S. history.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF TELEVISION CRITICISM IN THE UNITED STATES

The role of the television critic has changed throughout television history in response to the status of television as a cultural medium, as a result of technological developments, and because of changes in the expectations and practices of journalism. Three distinct phases characterize this history, with transitions defined by various industrial, technological, and sociocultural factors. In its first phase, which spans television's origins and into 1960s, television criticism mirrored theater reviews and primarily provided readers with evaluations of the previous night's

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<sup>5</sup>Media studies is also adopting more of the theoretical insights common in European sociology, particularly using the theoretical insights of Bourdieu. Critics consequently might also be considered as the "new cultural intermediaries" briefly mentioned by Bourdieu (1984), although the cultural politics of the U.S. critics and the considerable competence many bring to their writing diverge from the norm Bourdieu suggests.

programs. Much of the most significant programming of this era took the form of live anthology productions (*Playhouse 90*) and live vaudeville-style variety shows (*Texaco Star Theater*) that disappeared once they aired. Although critics could review live series based on previous episodes, advance reviews of live specials was impossible. The particularities of the medium at the time—specifically, its ephemeral nature and viewers' inability to capture it—consequently distinguished the function of television reviews from other art criticism. Unlike the extended run of theater or film, readers could not use perspectives gained from the critic to elect to view the program, as early television disappeared as soon as it aired. Because it was likely that many newspaper readers did not see the program the critic wrote about, critics' reviews needed to tell a story or provide information in such a way as to make the column meaningful even for those who had not viewed the program.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its inability to function as a tool viewers might use to aid their selection of viewing, the television criticism of this era may bear closer resemblance to other critical traditions. In addition, the industry attempted to mobilize the thoughtful assessments critics provided as a way of conferring value on the medium, particularly in the 1950s, during which considerable fluidity existed in production norms (Spigel, 1998). An important difference of the readership of television criticism at this time and of television relative to other arts, however, was the audience of policymakers and industry decision makers upon whom Frank (2002) asserts the writing of critics exerted greater influence than the viewing audience. Frank argues network executives and industry regulators carefully regarded critics' evaluations because of their concerns about how television was being integrated into U.S. culture, while Spigel's research of CBS during this time supports this thesis.

Television criticism of this first phase consequently pursued the twin goals of commenting on the emergence of the medium and developing an appropriate language to discuss its visual and narrative forms. Most scholarship examining television criticism emphasizes the writing produced in this earliest era and the writings of those at the top of the cultural hierarchy such as Jack Gould (*The New York Times*, 1947–1963), John Crosby (*New York Herald Tribune*, 1946–1961), and later Michael Arlen (*The New Yorker*, 1966–1981).<sup>6</sup> In addition to daily or weekly publication, the columns of these writers were also republished in collections of the columns of individual writers or collections of top criticism.<sup>7</sup> The columns of many of these critics were also widely syndicated to reach a national audience, while a 1958 study reported that 79% of daily newspapers with a circulation greater than 50,000 employed television editors (a percentage higher than the 59% with business-finance, real estate, garden, or education editors). This suggests the ubiquitous status of writing about television in national and regional publications by this early date despite the complicated relationship of the two media (many surmised television might replace newspapers, thereby positioning them as competitors and leading some papers to embargo coverage of television so as to not aid in its promotion) (Deutschmann, 1958, cited in Hazard, 1963).

<sup>6</sup>Numerous dissertations have explored the criteria of individual critics, but little of this work has been published (Greenberg, 1965; Jakes, 1960; Lasky, 1989; McConnell, 1983; Peiblow, 1971; Talbert, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>For the most part, republications of the network era's major critics only recently have appeared in published collections (or recently have been reprinted) (Arlen, 1966, 1997; Gould, 2002; Powers, 1990; Slide, 1987). *Variety* published a 15-volume series of television reviews dating from 1923 to 1988 in 1989 (Prouty, 1989); *The New York Times* began what was supposed to be an annual compendium of all television criticism in 2000, but this is the only volume published to date (*The New York Times*, 2000).

## Second Phase

The transition to the second phase of television criticism results from changes in the business of television, and consequently its programming norms, once the medium became established and adjustments initiated by critics' expanded opportunity to preview content. By the end of the 1960s, Americans had widely purchased televisions and engaged in routinized nightly viewing, and industry players had established the basic industrial practices of production, distribution, and financing that would dominate for the next 40 years. After achieving substantial penetration rates that indicated audiences were convinced of the necessity of television, the aspirations of the industry became more subdued and its mandate shifted to maximizing commercial potential, which led to programming of decreasing ambition. Shifts in the nature of programming that resulted from changing goals and attention to profitability, such as the transition to filmed instead of live programs and series instead of anthologies and specials, likewise affected the manner in which critics wrote about and assessed the medium. Further, the establishment of regulatory and industrial norms by the late 1960s decreased industry workers attention to critical assessments, diminishing the importance of criticism for this audience that Frank argues characterized the previous era.

The advent of previewing and networks escalating emphasis on series programming enabled critics to more frequently attend to offering recommendations of viewing before shows aired. Critics first previewed shows through closed-circuit screenings at local television stations beginning in the early 1970s. Networks initially forbade previewing, and critics and networks battled for a number of years before the networks relented (Steinberg, 1974). Senator John Pastore even held hearings of the Congressional Subcommittee of Communications on the matter before CBS and then ABC consented to allow previewing (Steinberg, 1974). NBC resisted the practice the longest and did not allow previewing until 1974. Closed-circuit screenings were replaced later in the decade as the home videocassette recorder technology developed and networks began sending preview tapes directly to critics enabling them to preview with greater ease. Even if critics were unable to preview a particular episode, the networks' increasing use of series (as opposed to specials or anthologies) allowed critics to attend to viewing recommendation because their week-to-week consistency afforded critics with an ample sense of the series.

Critics' ability to write and publish assessments of programs before they aired changed the nature of television writing because of the promotional potential of positive reviews or attention. This arguably increased critics' relevance to the production process; however, the location of their columns in general and popular publications continued to circumscribe their work distinctly from other art criticism that was aimed at a more specialized audience and found in specialized publications. Although the networks were initially hesitant to enable actual previewing at the critics' discretion, they recognized the promotional potential that critics' columns could provide for series and sought to exploit this opportunity throughout much of the 1960s. The networks developed extravagant network-funded events to introduce critics to series programming and their creative staffs as well as those working on specials in development. The networks invited select critics to attend events that sought at least a superficial appearance of symbiosis—networks could provide critics with access to celebrities and creative teams for interviews that would aid the critics' writing, and such access might increase the likelihood of coverage of the network's programs, ideally in a positive way. These events were best

characterized as junkets, for which the networks selected the attendees and flew approximately thirty television journalists to various locations and paid all their expenses (Waxman, 1998). Critics often attended dinners at stars' homes and had the opportunity to talk with stars and creative personnel in small, roundtable style chats. In these early years, norms developed gradually; some critics report attending as many as four tours annually in locations as varied as Los Angeles, New York, London, Hawaii, Arizona, and Las Vegas.

Exceptional largesse on the part of the networks in accommodations, entertainment, hospitality, and even expense payments led to the characterization of these events as junkets. Networks effectively passed out cash by calling far more extravagant sums than necessary "laundry money" or "cab fare," and several critics that I interviewed recounted a story of one critic who brought his draperies along each year because he could send them out for dry cleaning at the networks' expense. At this time, journalists' standards often mirrored the compromised junket atmosphere, as reports that networks prepared lists of questions and provided fully written articles were not exceptional. *Chicago Tribune* critic Gary Deeb published a scathing critique of the dominant practices among his contemporaries in the industry trade publication *Variety* in 1974 (which followed *Variety* critic Les Brown's [1965] publication of a similar screed nine years earlier). Deeb took exception to journalists' tendency to reprint network press releases verbatim (often at the expense of the truth), the practice of asking celebrities for autographs during work-related events, and the refusal of papers that owned television stations to criticize those stations and of a general embargo of political commentary about television by many major papers.

A confluence of adjustments in television production, newspaper writing, and broader cultural forces, however, soon eroded these relatively short-lived norms. The creation of institutionalized events such as the junkets and the opportunity to preview programs contributed to making television criticism a more formalized professional pursuit—or at least for more papers to devote a reporter or writer to television. Various critics who came to the beat in the 1970s recalled that a transition in the characteristics of those assigned to cover television also occurred as those primarily interested and trained in the arts—the critics of the first and second phases of criticism—gave way to those trained in journalism for whom reporting rather than writing criticism was perceived as a central task. This happened at the same time veteran television critic Mike Duffy, who began writing about television for *The Detroit Free Press* in 1980, recalls that television became a "legitimate news beat" for papers and the attention to Watergate led many to enter the profession with a romanticized view of the role of the journalist (Watson, 1985).

### Third Phase

As a result of their training in the post-Watergate world of journalism, many of the new cadre who began careers as television critics in the late 1970s and early 1980s adopted the mythology that journalists could bring about significant social change. These new critics, who were also the first to have grown-up with television, increasingly attended to investigations, reportage, and considerations of the business operations of this highly commercial industry, which deviated from the dominance of reviewing and emphasizing the artistic and aesthetic aspects of the medium that was more characteristic of their predecessors. A breadth of writing became a requirement as the columns of these writers diversified beyond detailed criticism of particular shows characteristic of other critical traditions. It may be more accurate to classify

the work as “television reporting” than as “television criticism” in the third phase of popular writing about television that begins in the late 1970s, even though many still also produced more conventional criticism and reviews as well. Because of the clear connection of these new writing duties with the television writing that preceded them, I continue to use “critics” as my subject despite the breadth of their writing.

The post-Watergate culture also led to introspection about the appearance of impropriety of network junkets and the relationships the networks sought to foster with the journalists. Some papers began paying for their critics’ attendance of network events as a result of such internal criticism and ethical introspection, and the critics subsequently began to organize in 1977 in order to wrest control of the press events from the networks. The formation of a collective body, established as the Television Critics Association, provided a crucial step in the transition of annual promotion events characterized as junkets to the current incarnation known as “press tour” and significantly contributed to inaugurating the third phase of U.S. television criticism. The industry was also on the precipice of considerable change as the “network era” of U.S. television, as it was characterized by competition among just three networks, eroded into a period of multi-channel transition brought about by the development of national cable networks and widespread availability of technologies such as the remote control and VCR that provided viewers with new control over their television viewing.

The creation of the TCA resulted from the critics’ desire to increase the professionalism of the network-controlled junkets and to revise them into a formal press tour environment in which they could practice critical journalism instead of merely reporting the verbatim directives provided by their network sponsors. Importantly, they recognized the potential of collective action, which was particularly significant for journalists writing for papers in smaller cities that had more limited budgets and who often did not have the critical clout to ensure access to information on their own. The formation of the TCA resulted in the elimination of network-controlled junkets and the establishment of two annual press tours organized by the TCA. The main tour takes place in July and lasts nearly three weeks, while a shorter, approximately 10-day tour occurs in January. Journalists pay their travel expenses to come to and stay in Los Angeles, while whatever network is presenting material each day pays for meals and the costs of the presentation space (Lotz, 2005).

#### VALUE OF THE TCA FOR CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

The TCA vets the membership list that enables tour attendance—an important difference that allows the tour a much more professional atmosphere than that characteristic of junkets that require network or studio invitation. Television critics consequently can ask tough questions and write unfavorable reviews without fear of a network’s reprisal of cutting them off from press events. The collective organization of the television critics has enabled them to transform the press tour into a venue far more akin to a political press conference than the junkets many other entertainment critics experience—where studio hosts expect, and even require softball questions. In contrast, Waxman (1997) notes that film critics can find themselves uninvited to film junkets subsequent to a negative review or even after asking a particularly probing question in a press conference atmosphere. In the contemporary incarnation of press tour, no network executive introduces certain topics as off-limits, a common practice at film junkets according to

Waxman, who also reports that film "journalists allowed access to A-list stars may be requested to sign waivers specifying taboo subjects and where the story may run" (1997, p. 36). She also recounts stories of film critics being banned from studio functions for "lukewarm reviews" and of studios threatening to cancel advertising in response to poor reviews. Although some television critics reported receiving angry calls in response to their writing, the networks lack a mechanism to discipline them in comparison with their counterparts writing about film.

Television critics also have far more formal access to executive decision makers (in this case, network executives) than critics of other cultural industries; for example, no definitive regularized practice provides film critics with access to studio executives. In contrast, each television network conducts an executive session at each tour, and the executives are often available for one-on-one formal and informal conversations throughout the day and during evening parties. Television executives know the critics expect their presence at each tour and that critics will ask tough questions. The press conference environment of a room full of reporters makes it difficult for executives to avoid questions, as critics will pick up each other's unanswered questions, as in the norm of other journalistic contexts. The readers of many local papers may have little interest in these executive sessions, but these encounters inform critics' assessment of the leadership and creative environment of the networks, which subsequently informs their sense of the creative direction of a network's programming. In addition, members of the trade press also attend the tour and their readers are interested in reports of flustered or evasive executives. The convention of the executive session emerges from television's particular industrial and commercial organization and may not have a meaningful counterpart in other artistic critical traditions that lack a corporate executive responsible for shaping creative decisions for a vast range of content.

The significance of the critics' collectivity in ensuring a forum in which they can interrogate industry executives was illustrated in 1981 when Bud Rukeyser, then executive vice-president of NBC's corporate communications, attempted to assert network power over the critics by removing his network from the July press tour. Rukeyser's action came in response to a panel at the tour the preceding January in which he objected to what one critic recalled as a civility issue. The critics had been so persistent (and perhaps antagonistic) in pursuing an answer to an evaded question—reportedly regarding the sexuality of the lead character in *Love, Sydney*—that Rukeyser refused to allow his network to participate in the subsequent July tour in an effort to punish the critics and alter the power dynamic. His attempt failed, as the following July the other networks simply filled in the days NBC abdicated, and as a result of having nothing to cover, the critics reported that they wrote more extensively about the other networks. NBC returned to the following tour. This event illustrates the limited recourse available to networks if they are displeased with the critics. The competition from other networks for critics' attention and column space leaves the networks with little leverage.

Still, the nature of press tour and its many aspects that remain financed by the networks continue to complicate the relationship among the networks and journalists. Although most papers began paying for the travel and hotel expenses of their critics in the late 1970s, some critics, particularly those working for smaller-market papers, continued attending at the networks' expense into the 1980s. Many critics were staunchly opposed to this practice, but some would have been unable to attend otherwise. Critics continue to express concern about the appearance of impropriety network funding of any aspect of the tour indicates and whether these expenditures influence the critics' evaluations and column content. The organization considered

having the journalists pay for the meals, but hotel meal costs are beyond those most journalists could afford on already strained budgets (Waxman, 1998). Most significantly, it is difficult to argue that the California cuisine provided by NBC on Wednesday leads critics to review the network better than the California cuisine served by CBS on Thursday, but still, many critics continue to express ambivalence about the arrangement, despite the unlikely reality that the networks effectively buy influence through these meals.

### Serving the Readers

Critics are very aware that they constantly negotiate their role in this system of cultural production not only with industry executives, but also with their readers—a much different sentiment than that likely to characterize critics of literature or art. Television critics generally view the practice of using a column as a soapbox or a space to only explore personal favorites without regard for community tastes as a negative practice, a sentiment that clearly differentiates their perception of their task from other forms of criticism. Ed Bark of the *Dallas Morning News* and Tom Jicha of the *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, who both started writing television columns in 1980, expressed a perspective echoed by many other critics. The critics acknowledged they take industrial factors, such as the need for commercial viability, into account in assessing programs; Jicha explained that “you can’t impose your own standards, you’ve got to look at it [programming] with an open mind,” while Bark conceded that many of the programs he watches are not made with him in mind as the target audience. Such sentiments indicate critics’ efforts to balance the commercial realities of U.S. television with its artistic success.

In assessing programs, critics also balance an awareness of broader audience pleasures and evaluations with an understanding of the institutional and economic processes that circumscribe the production of this industry—as *New York Newsday* columnist Noel Holston explains it, criticism “based on the aspirations” of the program. *TV Guide* critic Matt Rousch succinctly describes the complex balance of factors critics consider and notes, “People complain a lot about how bad TV is, but I’m always surprised by how good TV is,” a sentiment that acknowledges the many industrial factors and commercial determinants that limit and constrain the medium and its potential for creative excellence nevertheless.

## CRITICISM AFTER THE NETWORK ERA

The creation of the TCA considerably shifted the relationship among critics and networks, but substantial adjustments in the television industry and newspaper journalism also continue to affect norms of television writing and now suggest that we may be on the precipice of a fourth phase of criticism. Just as the opportunity of previewing, Watergate, the formation of the TCA, and generational transitions previously altered the role of critics, a variety of technological, industrial and cultural factors continue to adjust critics’ role and the way they negotiate complicated industrial power relations. The exponential growth in programming enabled by the advent of cable and the development of the web for the distribution of conventional and new forms of criticism have been modifying critical norms over the last decade, while greater transformations resulting from the massive changes in how viewers watch television and shifts in the culture of critics portend more extensive coming adjustments.

### Too Many Channels, Too Many Shows

Even at its origins, television produced an unmanageable breadth of content. By the 1980s, the regular daily flow of programming from three networks expanded to include programming from nascent cable channels and eventually three additional broadcast networks. This growth in programming taxed both critics and viewers and required critics to reassess the criteria they used to determine what to write about. The expansion of programming content consequently has decreased the homogeneity of television criticism as the proliferation of content available for review now well surpasses that which a single critic can address. In the days of a three-network system, the range of content was narrow enough that critics were likely to review the same shows regardless of their national location. The topics of columns are now more diversified, while a broader range of critics now contribute to the national discourse on television, a development aided most recently by online access to various newspapers that enables viewers to easily read the columns of critics around the country. Although many critics still emphasize the programming available on the broadcast networks, as of 2003, American homes received an average of 100 channels, indicating an amount of programming about which neither the audience nor critic could possibly keep abreast (Nielsen Media Research, 2003).

The consequent heightened competition of this era has enhanced the critics' importance to the networks that increasingly seek them more emphatically as adjunct promotional agents to help audiences find programs. In a multi-channel era of profuse programming, the critics' focus on and immersion in the content of the medium take on added importance. Even critics, whose vocation entails viewing hours of programming daily, can no longer watch every show they are sent to review. David Bianculli, television critic for the *New York Daily News*, reported that he receives an average of 20 FedEx shipments from networks per day during "sweeps" months, and each package might contain anywhere from one half-hour sitcom, to a 12-hour miniseries, or episodes of six new shows.

Critics remain an important part of networks' expanding promotional efforts. Until the early 2000s, networks primarily limited their promotion activities to using time during commercial blocks on their own networks. As audiences fragmented among the multitude of offerings, it became more difficult for networks to promote shows in this way because so much of the potential audience was viewing elsewhere. In the early 2000s, networks began spending extensive sums on promotion outside of television (e.g., imprinting promotions for the new show *Desperate Housewives* on dry cleaning bags). As it became increasingly necessary for networks to reach viewers outside of regular network viewing, critics' columns derived more value because of the "promotion" they offer and the manner in which many critics writing about a single show can create buzz—or word of mouth within the culture in general.<sup>8</sup> Critics do not organize their column topics collectively, but a series overlooked by viewers and unsupported by its network often will capture their collective imagination, even in this environment of vast programming proliferation. The critics' column space contributes to creating buzz and also acts as "free" promotion that possesses a perception of unbiased opinion and authority.

Readers too have increased need for viewing recommendations and direction. This environment of program saturation makes critics' ability to cut through the voluminous offerings

<sup>8</sup>This is where networks' costs in conducting press tour and in producing and mailing preview copies are returned.

to find a series that viewers might not be aware of particularly valuable. Many excellent and innovative programs air on less-regularly viewed cable networks, have not been widely promoted, or deviate from the conventional programming of a network and consequently make standard promotion practices of little utility.<sup>9</sup> Just being on television no longer guarantees an audience, and shows need buzz to stand out among the vast offerings.

A number of critics acknowledged that one consequence of the amount of programming they now must consider is that they give fewer negative reviews. Rather, those series and specials that they do not regard highly slip into the vast programming oblivion, as column space is too valuable to waste on negative reviews given the abundance of programming. One critic reflected on the superfluity of panning programming on networks that have comparatively small audiences: “there is no upside to trashing a program on the Discovery Health channel . . . it’s going to have fourteen viewers. What are you going to do, knock it down to nine?”

The multi-channel era has introduced new challenges for critics who balance their own standards and assessments of programming with those of their readers. Variant access to programming has become an issue critics must also consider because significant discrepancies exist among the channels different viewers receive depending on whether they subscribe to cable, basic or expanded analog and digital programming tiers, and a variety of premium cable networks. Many critics make efforts to be responsive to the situation of their readership and generally acknowledged that they did not cover cable programming to the extent they would like because some of the channels were located on expensive digital tiers or were likely to be beyond the interest of the average reader. Others noted that they were (thankfully) located in markets in which the readership subscribes to premium cable at above average levels or the community was generally more technologically savvy or engaged by unconventional programming types.

### New Venues, New Opportunities for Criticism

Just as the Internet has fundamentally changed the television and newspaper industries, it has also adjusted the activity of criticism by creating new venues for publication and opportunities to interact with readers. The distribution and communication opportunities of the Internet have vastly increased the reach of individual critics and created new forums for the distribution of critical assessments that are not vetted by an established media organization. The advent of e-mail also has enabled critics and readers to correspond more easily, while web republication of print columns has expanded the audience beyond the geographical range of the regional or local paper. A number of critics noted they receive e-mail from many readers located outside of their print circulation, indicating the degree to which interested readers are no longer bound to a singular local or syndicated national critic. The Web site TV Tattle ([www.tvtattle.com](http://www.tvtattle.com)) provides a daily-updated digest of links to critics’ columns from around the nation, which makes it easy for readers to target columns of particular interest, increasing the range of topic options available with only a few clicks.

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<sup>9</sup>Networks normally promote their programming primarily on their own network. If the network is part of a conglomerate, advertisements for one network’s programming also may be found on a sister network, but if viewers do not regularly view a network, they are unlikely to encounter much promotion for that network’s programming.

Critic R. D. Heldenfels affirmed that the Internet has enhanced the immediacy and accessibility of the relationship critics and audiences share, and he predicted even greater influence on the way they perform their jobs in the future. Heldenfels is one of an increasing number of critics who write columns specifically for the web (in addition to their newspaper columns that are republished online) and he also files stories for a blog. For example, Heldenfels filed two or three stories on the blog on September 11, 2001 in response to his viewing of the television coverage of the day's events. The blogs finally provide the "old" medium of newspaper with a tool to compete in providing news, information, and criticism with great immediacy, in addition to expanding readers' accessibility to critics beyond those in papers to which they can subscribe. By the summer 2006 TCA press tour, many critics published blogs in addition to filing stories for their papers' print editions. The blogs in many cases offered a more immediate and much more casual account of events and provided the opportunity for critics to experiment with a different style of writing. Many continue to publish blogs throughout the year as a supplement to regular stories and columns, and the blogs typically feature a more informal and irreverent tone of writing than characteristic of print stories. Most blogs also offer readers an opportunity to post responses, creating an online conversation about the topic and critics' assertion.

The expanded readership arguably enhances critics' individual contribution as cultural agenda-setters and pundits. Some critics also noted using e-mail for correspondence with readers when readers seek to engage rather than berate them. One critic maintains a list of readers to whom he sends regular inquiries when he is curious about viewers' general response to programming or trends. Such pursuits enhance the columnists' perspective while breaking down the one-way transmission model traditionally characteristic of newspaper writing. Notably, such correspondence is not the norm for readers and is limited to those with time, access, and interest—a very particular segment of the audience. Few newspapers likely have identified ways to use this expanded online readership to substantially increase their commercial base, but proof of broader readership might be helpful for critics as they consider their role and relationships with their papers. As newspapers struggle to reinvent their content and financial structure in an online era, the position of dedicated television critic has been one a number of papers have chosen to eliminate, contrary to the factors suggesting the increased value of this role (Adalian, 2007).

The growth in the Internet has also created new venues for television criticism. Although the costs of publication and circulation may make the creation of sophisticated television criticism difficult in the off-line world (and it apparently does given the lack of such a publication), the cheap production costs and easy national and international distribution of online spaces have created new venues for critical and interactive discussion of television. Such fora have expanded the opportunities for fan culture, but even outside of these exclusive and focused communities, sites such as Pop Matters ([www.popmatters.com](http://www.popmatters.com)) have made insightful columns and criticism available, while Television Without Pity ([www.tvwithoutpity.com](http://www.tvwithoutpity.com)) has explored more creative and interactive commentary. FLOW ([www.flowtv.org](http://www.flowtv.org)) features a more academic, yet still generally accessible discussion of television. All of these sites also expand the range of those who might write criticism, as many of the sites feature commentary more akin to that of the first phase and less characteristic of the television reporting of those writing for newspapers. In addition to the previously mentioned links collected at TV Tattle, sites such as The Futon Critic ([www.futoncritic.com](http://www.futoncritic.com)) and Zap To It ([www.zaptoit.com](http://www.zaptoit.com)) include a mix of criticism,

review, and detailed industry coverage. The net result has been an expansion in opportunities to read and engage in serious discussion of television, and *Square Off*, a weekly television show on the TV Guide channel hosted by *Variety* critic Brian Lowry and *The Hollywood Reporter* critic Andy Wallenstein, even began offering a televised forum for television criticism in 2006. These sites also potentially establish a feedback loop, as various reports and anecdotes of industry executives and creative staffs monitoring such sites have circulated in publication and by word of mouth.

### Coming Changes

I identify the period of television criticism since the creation of the TCA as a third phase in television criticism, but it is likely that the changing landscape of the newspaper, television, and online media industries will usher in subsequent industrial and cultural norms that will necessitate a new phase of conventional critical practice. Countless norms are in jeopardy of alteration as the rise in on-demand technology and digital video recorders (DVRs) threaten the hegemony of networks in organizing television exhibition. Many have long forecast the demise of newspapers, yet the medium continues to adapt to the competition within the broader media field, and the growth in online media may be either the final injury or the tool that reinvigorates the medium. Distinctions among media continue to blur as newspaper and television content converge online and conglomerated media corporations seek ownership of outlets in all media forms. In addition, some evidence exists that another generational shift in the body of critics is occurring. Many who came to the beat in the 1970s are now retiring and being replaced (if they are replaced) with writers who never knew an era in which the Federal Communications Commission pushed license holders to pursue their potential as a public trust. Television has been granted more artistic legitimacy since older critics came to the beat, but many expressed concern that younger critics seem decreasingly concerned with the social and cultural implications of a medium featuring fragmented viewership and conglomerated ownership.

The case of television critics and the TCA provides some valuable examples of how those outside of the cultural industries can intervene in cultural production and discussion of commercial cultural products. The success the TCA experienced in transforming a once-network-controlled junket into a space for critical and engaging journalism is particularly noteworthy. The complicated financial arrangements of the tour and constantly shifting relationships between networks and critics who seek mutual benefit but disparate ends from the tour indicate that the status and access the critics achieve is by no means permanent or secure. Nonetheless, the collectivity of the group has aided the whole and helped to increase the significance and role of critics in the promotional practices necessary to cultural production. The substantial changes resulting from continued newspaper consolidation, the reorganization of the television industry, or changing patterns in television and Internet use, however, could diminish or reassert the importance of the critics' collective. The institutional readjustments characteristic of the transition away from the network era have substantially altered all aspects of cultural production for the U.S. television industry and the roles of all involved. The increased importance of promotion has resulted in networks seeking to maximize all promotional opportunities, further solidifying the critics' facilitator role in the complicated and unpredictable process of creating and circulating artistic and informational products that bear important commercial and cultural contributions to the societies that consume them.

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