Media Studies Makeover

By Anne Helen Petersen

Does media studies have an image problem?

We like to think that we don't. We are, let it be said, the sexiest of disciplines. When we tell people what we do, they almost always reply with some variation of "that's cool," even if they do often follow with the question "So do you make movies?"

Point being, movies, television, social networking, celebrities, the music industry — they're all "cool" things to study. Certainly more cool-sounding than, say, math, or sociology, or our disavowed disciplinary parent, *English Literature*. Those disciplines have image problems. But not us: we're the coolest kid in the academy.

Why, then, do we have such problems finding funding? Why did I scrabble together a living during grad school, barely making enough teaching to cover my rent, paying for groceries with loans…..while my peers in the sciences received generous funding packages? Of course, these funding issues have everything to do with a generalized devaluation of the humanities and research that lacks actionable results. Put bluntly, we cannot claim that our work will help find a cure to cancer.

No matter how we tweak our research, we will never produce the sort of articles and books that offer a clear, incontestable way to "make the world better." Science is complicated, but the things that you can do with science (i.e. cure diseases) are easy to understand. Media Studies is also complicated, and the things you can do with our research (i.e. better understand what it means to be a cultural subject) are less obvious, even if equally as important.

In order to make the case for our research, we have to be more than cool. "Cool" is surface-level; "cool" is that kid you actually rather resent. We need to evidence the sophistication, accessibility, and overarching pertinence of our work — and not just to those who allocate grants or distribute funds at the administrative level, but to multiple publics, both in and outside of academia.

And to do so, we need an image makeover.

To be clear, I don't think we need to change what we do on a daily basis. We don't even (necessarily) have to change what we research, or how we

do it, although it would behove us to heed the spectacular work coming out of the [digital humanities](#) and innovative publications such as [Vectors](#). But we must change how we *present* and otherwise *make available* our work.

To better illustrate this concept, consider "image" in its celebrity context. When a celebrity renovates her image, she doesn't change who she, at her core, is — she modifies the type and tenor of discourse circulating her. She changes the conversation: not only the way that she talks about herself, but the way others, including media outlets and individual consumers, talk about her.

If we, too, can change the conversation — change the way that others think of us, both in and outside of the academy — then media studies' reputation won't just be "cool," or "the class where you get to watch TV all the time." Its reputation will be that of an invaluable, indispensable, discipline, one that helps makes sense of culture and the structuring mediums through which we consume it.

[I am](#) by [no](#) [means](#) the first person to advocate for open-access research and publishing. As many have argued, the current [publishing industrial complex](#) is [hegemonic](#), destructively inflexible, and painfully [slow](#), as well as exploitative to the point of [ridiculousness](#). In some cases, we *pay* so that others may profit off of research and writing that we also paid, in many various ways, to complete.

Put bluntly, we might have Stockholm Syndrome when it comes to traditional publication models and the sacrifices they [entail](#). Pay $3000 out of pocket to reproduce one image in my article? That's acceptable! Bankroll the copyediting and indexing? Sure, you're publishing the book! Wait four years between the moment of submission until publication? That's just the way it is! It's true: these are the current realities of the publishing model. But that doesn't mean that those realities are okay, or that we shouldn't push against them — especially if the future of our field is at stake.

Which is why I [blog](#), write in a way that is at once rigorous yet widely accessible, attempt to publish in open-access publications as much as possible, and even write about my research in [non-academic](#) (digital, freely available) publications.

I do these things because digital, open-access publication — on all levels of the research process — is Media Studies' means towards image rehabilitation and, by extension, increased legitimization, funding, and attention. What's more, digital, open-access publication is more gratifying to the author. It might even make you a happier, less lonely

scholar.

In order to substantiate such expansive claims, I'd like to go back to the summer of 2007, the moment I started blogging about celebrity academically. It was a watershed year for academics online: Twitter was first gaining traction, and a small group of media scholars were making connections — across state and national borders, across graduate and post-grad lines — that simply would not have been probable or even possible before.

The media studies blogosphere was nascent but growing. [FlowTV](#) was gaining credibility; [Jump Cut](#) had gone online; Avi Santo and Kathleen Fitzpatrick launched [MediaCommons](#); Jason Mittell ([JustTV](#)), David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson (*[Observations on Film Art](#)),* Michael Newman ([Zigzigger](#)), Kathleen Fitzpatrick (*[Planned Obsolescence](#)*), Jonathan Gray (*[The Extratextuals](#)*), and Chuck Tryon (*[The Chutry Experiment](#)*) were all cultivating regular web presences. There were several other media studies blogs percolating around that time, but those were the ones from which I took cues and after which I modeled my blog. In a special issue of *FlowTV*, Melissa Click and Nina Huntemann addressed "[Gender Studies in the Media Studies Blogosphere](#)," examining why female media scholars blog less, and less "academically" than their male counterparts, calling for "additional spaces; safe spaces for scholars to develop ideas, build networks, accommodate busy schedules, and feel protected by a supportive community that allows everyone to contribute to the development of our field and shape the technologies scholars might use to truly be public intellectuals." My own decision to start a blog was largely influenced by that very call.

I also started blogging out of loneliness. I was a second year Ph.D. student, trudging through my reading lists for comprehensive exams over an endless Austin, Texas summer. Even as I read a book a day, I felt tremendously isolated. Blogging presented itself as a means of connecting the massive amount of historical and theoretical material I was processing with the world around me. I wanted to think about how P. David Marshall's understanding of [celebrity and power](#) related to the *Us Weekly* in front of me; I wanted to actually talk with, as opposed to simply *read*, other scholars thinking about the same issues.

The blog provided a forum for both of those goals. Katie Holmes' appearance on *Dancing with the Stars* was Denise Mann's "[recycled star](#)"; the clickable items in online spreads of reality stars' "cribs" were updated versions of Leo Lowenthal's "idols of consumption." It wasn't that different from the beginnings of the vast majority of seminar papers, which attempt to apply established theoretical frameworks to new objects. But think back to your own forays into paper writing, whether at

the graduate or post-PhD level: you put together the initial idea yourself, make some connections, amass some research, and reach a point of potentially crippling self-doubt. Does it, will it, work?

Most of the time, we don't receive feedback on our work until it's in its full form. Then we cut massive chunks, add equally massive chunks, read more books, add more nuance. Do a lot of work and get rid of it, do more work to replace what's been tossed. This is academic research.

But it doesn't have to be. There is, of course, tremendous value in the process of reduction and expansion. Even if we cut words, we don't cut the knowledge we amassed. But I do think that feedback at multiple stages would help prevent, or at least soothe, the anxieties that many of us experience at various stages in research and writing process. Those with robust academic communities and writing groups know that kernels of ideas can be workshopped. But those of us who are isolated, either psychologically or physically, have few opportunities for that sort of early feedback.

Even as a graduate student, I was able to receive feedback from senior scholars in my field, simply by surmounting my terror at having others read, and potentially critique, my work. The work was not extraordinary. But because I was part of a digital sphere of media studies academics — amassed via my editorial role at *FlowTV* and my general presence on Twitter — I received the discussion and feedback I craved.

I continued this process through the next two years of my graduate career, vetting conference papers, pitches for potential panels, and chunks of my dissertation via my blog. I also wrote about things that interested me scholarly but lacked the heft of an extended article: the [postmodern problem of Ke$ha](), the banality of the [celebrity profile](), the Ryan Gosling ["Hey Girl" meme]().

This part of my story isn't unique. There are dozens of Media Studies academics who have started blogs, created Twitter accounts, participated in listservs, and found them gratifying. Yet something unanticipated happened along the way: I found a larger audience. What started as a few dozen friends and colleagues grew, slowly at first, and then exponentially.

After posting on "[Why Kristen Stewart Matters]()," the *Twilight* fandom found me — some loved the post, some hated it, some trolled it. I amassed a collection of comments that I sorted and turned into a sort of "[meta-post]()," which, linked to by others who had been "victim" to trolling comments by *Twilight* fans, attracted even more comments, effectively forming a palimpsest of reception. Traffic came my way via trade press,

TV recappers, blog components of traditional publications, and traditional gossip sites. I was engaging with fans, anti-fans, trolls, and "amateur" academics on a daily basis. A year after starting my blog, my daily traffic oscillated between one and five thousand hits a day.

I don't say this to brag. I realize there are specific reasons, most of them connected to the fact that I study celebrity, which lead to spikes in my traffic. Yet I don't think readers were led to my blog because it was necessarily brilliant; rather, they were drawn to the concept, crystallized in the very title of my blog: *celebrity gossip, academic style*. My audience, then and now, is composed of men and women who like celebrity, like gossip, but also like to consider those things mindfully, contextually, historically.

As academics, we like to joke about how "real" people aren't interested in our research — that it's too esoteric, too theoretical. But many people, including those far outside the traditional bounds of academia, *love* to think about the media around them. They don't like to be talked down to, they don't like to feel like they can't understand the point being made, but they do enjoy thinking about why they consume (and dismiss) the things that they do.

That's why series like Blackwell's *[Enter Pop Culture Artifact] & Philosophy* sell so well — they promise readers a more complex understanding of a product to which they have formed an attachment, and they're available in most major bookstores at reasonable prices. They may not be at the vanguard of scholarly thought, but they are nevertheless *available*. Readers buy them, at least to some extent, because there's so little else out there, save fan discourse, that truly takes the media product seriously. Media studies masked as popular criticism — manifest in the writing of Chuck Klosterman, David Foster Wallace, Molly Lambert, Lauren Collins, John Jeremiah Sullivan, and others — enjoys an even larger readership, and with good reason. These writers aren't merely validating pop tastes, but explaining, historicizing, and expanding them. They may not use correct MLA or APA format. They do not often perform lit reviews, at least not in the way that we would recognize them. But they get at something essential about the media objects we consume, and readers understand their work as valuable.

We don't need to make our work as popular as Klosterman's, or as intricate as Wallace's. We don't all need to write for *The New Yorker* or *GQ*. But all of the aforementioned writers not only write in a way that was mentally accessible, but literally accessible, either for free or for relatively little at the bookstore or library. If you heard that a writer was going to write an essay on the culture of cruise ships, or Britney Spears, or the roots of Michael Jackson, as these writers have done, you might,

sight unseen, think it absurd. But if you read what they've written, you know that assumption to be false. And therein lies the crux of this argument: few people outside of academia know that the work that we're doing is good and essential because so few have access to it. And that's what blogging can change.

By putting our research process online, by allowing others to comment and participate in the fomentation of ideas, by publishing our more polished work on open-access sites such as this one, we make the implicit and explicit case for our discipline's existence. We change our image, and we change the conversation that others have about us.

In the end, I think of blogging not only as a means to rehabilitate the image of our discipline, but as an ethical obligation. I don't think that the ideas that I like to think about should be limited to those with similar educational backgrounds, or who have somehow finagled the password to access the outrageously expensive journals in which most of our work is published. As work in aca-fandom has underlined, there need be no line between those who consume and those study, and given cultural studies' roots in Marxist theory, we should be wary of the increasing divide between those who can afford to dedicate seven years of their lives to study (and accumulate debt) and those who cannot afford said sacrifice. If we do not change the way we disseminate our own research, that's the divide we are doomed to expand. And that divide will potentially culminate in our own destruction.

Scholars yearn to educate: to share, build, and refine their ideas. Not simply with each other — although that can often be the case — but with others. That's why we teach. Because it's knowledge we feel others will benefit from, enjoy, that it will sophisticate and texture their understanding of their own cultural consumption. I blog to receive, but I also blog to give.

I love what I study — why would I want to keep it for myself? Whether you work with celebrity, television history, or film poetics, there are thousands of consumers who are hungry to read smart, engaged, analysis. If you build the website, however ramshackle, they will come. They will come via Google and Twitter and other websites, they will come by accident and by focused keyword search. And they will lead others there. You may learn from what they add in the comments, you may teach them; both author and reader will most likely think differently after a post shoots around the corners of the Internet for a few weeks. Your blog doesn't need to be flashy, it doesn't need to be updated daily or weekly, it can be curatorial or bibliographical, or filled with kernels of future ideas. But if it's there, it will be read.

Regardless of your content, regardless of your web traffic, I can guarantee that you will think differently about the value of your own work. The overarching, and very attainable goal, is that others will begin to as well.

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