

Critics and Players: Audiences, Trust and Reality in Mediated Markets

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1 Introduction

“It’s amazing: this kid obviously knows nothing, but he’s getting a huge audience—huge. How does this happen?”

As veteran journalists lose jobs to bloggers who are generally younger, many are asking questions like the one above. What makes this particular question interesting, however, is that it was asked by Drew, a blogger who follows the hip-hop music scene in Los Angeles. Even as he poaches readers of music criticism at outlets like the Los Angeles Times, Drew faces competition from bloggers who are still sneaking out at night and showing fake IDs to catch the shows they cover. When one of them attracted an audience with opinions that he and other experts widely regard as uninformed, Drew asked, “How does this happen?”

Unlike journalists, bloggers are not bound by the constraints imposed on reporters by norms of the journalism profession as it developed over the twentieth century (Schudson 1978). Unlike journalists, bloggers do not answer to editors who send their copy back with comments like, “Opinion—rewrite with facts or quotes.” Instead, they write their own views, and they answer to readers by allowing them to comment publicly on their stories, often with minimal moderation. Also unlike journalists, bloggers are not required to maintain strict independence from either their sources or sponsors. Rather than committing to avoid the appearance of any conflict of interest, bloggers make no such promises. In stark contrast to journalism’s norm of reporter independence (Schudson 2001), bloggers make no pretense of being disinterested bystanders without any stake in the commercial, cultural or political interests they cover.

The new conversational style of social commentary is winning audiences over: there are 400 million readers following more than 20 million active bloggers. In the language of marketers, blogs are “stealing share” from conventional print and broadcast news outlets. As they do, bloggers are developing new practices and organizational forms that constitute new approaches to reporting the news and managing the news business. In addition to mounting serious challenges to institutions of the journalism profession, these developments exaggerate inconsistencies that contradict a central tenet of organization theory that explains the role critics and journalists play in markets: the idea that market critics are mediated by observers of market developments (Hirsch 1972), not arbitrated by observers who are also players in them.

1.1 Mediated Markets

In the literature on mediated markets, third party evaluators such as journalists, critics and analysts are viewed as operating outside the system of interests set up by industry and market categories used to allocate their attentions (Zuckerman 1999). As critics in the broadest sense of the word, they are viewed as mediators of a two-way sensemaking conversation in which producers and opinions sort out what to make of new innovation (Rosa, Porac, Runser-Spanjol, and Saxon 1999). In markets where critics are influential, they are even seen as not only reporters of demand, but as arbiters of quality whose judgments directly influence audience tastes and demand (Negro, Hannan, and Rao 2008).

While organizations have a hand in shaping the categories people use to make sense of markets and demand (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Lounsbury and Rao 2004), the job of constructing new market categories resembles a social movement (Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003). Social movement organizers use framing strategies to mobilize support and resources (Benford and Snow 2000), and the media plays an important role in passing these on or holding them up (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Hoffman and Ocasio 2001). For would-be innovators, media attention affects not only whether they are seen as legitimate, successful, or as high quality (Deephouse 2000; Pollock and Rindova 2003; Rindova, Petkova, and Kotha 2007; Tellis and Johnson 2007), but also whether their innovations are seen as real (Kennedy 2008).

2 Research Question

In this research, we ask when and why critics are also players in mediated markets.

3 Method

To engage this question, we are using qualitative research methods to explore a collection of practices crucial to innovation journalism. We are asking, what are the practices ...

- innovators use to solicit the favorable attention of important influencers?
- content providers use to select the topics or stories they will cover?
- content providers use to handle sources' attempts to solicit coverage?
- content providers use to solicit reader feedback and select what to share?
- audiences use to follow news and developments that matter to them?

To address these questions, we are interviewing and observing knowledgeable players in a collection of distinct roles in the innovation journalism ecosystem: conventional journalists, bloggers, branded analysts, event producers, producers and hosts of web TV shows, and venture investors. These roles span traditional journalism and the so-called new media world.

4 Preliminary Findings

Our findings to date indicate critics are neither as independent as previously theorized nor as free as the rhetoric of the new media suggests. The innovations in journalism that create Drew's predicament are also forging new approaches to the classic problems any set of innovation journalism institutions must solve: the problems of trust and credibility. That is, how do audiences know whom to trust, and how do they determine the credibility of an expert or outlet? Though solutions will change, these are timeless problems that transcend media epochs.

5 References

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