Public Intellectualism and Popular Culture: A Vision for the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*

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Whether scholar or journalist, marketer or politician, we do not just call something – be it digital or material, mediated or not – "popular culture" based solely on how many people like it. Rather, the term can and should be applied to anything produced by the people for the people, an idea pioneered by Ray Browne. In 1997, Browne defined popular culture as "the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live. […] it is the voice of the people – their likes and dislikes, their habits and attitudes – the lifeblood of their daily existence, their way of life." If we cede control of our culture to the few, to those who understand how to control information and communication, then we lose the resonance of why it is popular. By extension, we lose control over ourselves and our lives. Again, per Browne, "The popular culture is the democracy, democracy speaking and acting, the seedbed in which political and cultural qualities grow. Popular culture democratizes society and makes democracy truly democratic." Popular culture studies, then, provides more than a "fun" outlet for emerging and established scholars to apply their more "serious" disciplinary perspectives to those things they love; popular culture studies offers a means by which to understand and preserve the power of the people over their own lives.

To that end, popular culture studies should not reside siloed from other disciplines, nor from those outside of academia. Popular culture studies should be an open forum, an agora space in which everyone can consider, critique, fawn, deconstruct, and understand the things that permeate our lives, provide solace and respite from reality through individual and communal sense-makings, and promote the co-construction of that reality through the production and consumption of popular texts. In other words, everyone should possess some working knowledge and applicable skills endemic to popular culture studies to utilize them in their everyday lives and the political discussions and activities therein. Thus, popular culture studies should, at its very core, involve the development of public scholarship from the actions of public intellectuals.

At this moment of reflection for the journal on its tenth anniversary, I am considering how the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* operates toward this ideal of

public intellectualism. The oral histories present in this special issue hopefully demonstrate this democratizing approach to understanding popular culture studies by reflecting on the co-constructive nature of the journal, our affiliation with the Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association, and the more general understanding of academia. First, this brief essay argues that popular culture studies provides the scholarly space in which to engage with different forms of media literacy considered important to the development and maintenance of democracy. By analyzing the texts, contexts, and reception of popular culture, this discipline can present the skills needed for everyday life in the post-Internet world of the 21st century. To do this, however, popular culture scholars need to approach their work from the philosophical grounding of public intellectualism.

Public Intellectualism Briefly

After producing the *Pop Culture Lens* podcast with Christopher J. Olson, I became editor for this journal based on a mutual desire to engage in more public intellectualism and public scholarship: to engage various publics with ideas from the humanities and social sciences to demonstrate how these abstractions can have concrete impacts on people's everyday lives. While in the past a public intellectual may have been a scholar from an elite university whose status allowed for a certain degree of celebrity (Dallyn, Marinetto and Cederström), today the public intellectual is less a media persona and more an approach or temperament that informs a desire to do such outreach. At a basic level, professors engage this temperament in their teaching practices, but the presence of the Internet allows professors to extend their classrooms to larger publics and more diverse communities. For example, YouTube provides professors with channels to reach more than their own students, through video essays, animations, vodcasts, video lectures, and more (Young). Such "personal broadcasting" (Wolf) has risen due to the social media capabilities of Web 2.0.

Media and popular culture studies scholars are experts well-suited to using digital communication technologies for their scholarly communication and intellectual performances. Such scholars engage with these technologies in their classrooms already, whether they teach students how to construct or deconstruct texts, and they are experts constantly engaging in the translation of abstract concepts and theories into analytical and creative work. Additionally, many scholars and educators deal with texts that are important in the lives of different

publics and communities, meaning that they already have a built-in audience for public scholarship. It should come as no surprise, then, that Avi Santo and Christopher Lucas found interest among such scholars to blog, write for online magazines, produce podcasts, and moderate online discussions as part of their approach to scholarly communication.

The *Pop Culture Lens* was an attempt at such a podcast, and the journal has sought to expand its multimedia offerings in recent years with the *Beyond the Article* podcast and the livestreamed webseries *Popular Culture Dialogues.* Such projects intend to expand the audience brought into the conversation on popular culture texts, contexts, and audiences. These multimedia offerings extend the journal's philosophy of being open access and free to all online through the utilization of a research communication style "reflecting how people communicate everyday" to "talk to/with them instead of down/at them."[1]

The Four Media Literacies

As a popular culture, media, and fan studies scholar and teacher, I am interested in media literacy and see the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* as way to address Joshua Meyrowitz's three types of media literacy: media content literacy, media grammar literacy, and medium literacy. The most common understanding of and approach to teaching media literacy focuses on "media content literacy," which involves educating people about mediated content to encourage their ability "to access and analyze messages in a variety of media." (Meyrowitz 97) This media literacy focuses on deconstructing texts using different theories and concepts to understand that which is communicated. Addressing, and even teaching, this skill is the primary goal of the journal. Each article analyzes different movies, television shows, comic books, musical albums, and more using theories and concepts from communication, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics and so forth to understand what the text says about a people, a time, a place, or a practice. As such, this primary goal aligns the most with what we do in our classes, while addressing texts that may not have received much academic scrutiny.

While this media literacy represents the primary goal of the journal, we also hope that our conversations can educate others about how media texts are constructed. According to Meyrowitz, "when content is the focus, not much

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[1] For more on our Aims and Scope, see mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal.

attention tends to be given to the particular characteristics of the medium through which the messages examined are conveyed." (99) To add to a media content literacy, we also broach issues related to "media grammar literacy" (99) as the language of the medium, or the production and aesthetic aspects relative to specific medium, and "medium literacy" (103) on how the technological characteristics of the medium impact the content regardless of production and aesthetic aspects. The conversations in the journal make connections between the text's content, production and aesthetic aspects, and the medium's technology by bringing up production histories, political economic contexts, and/or the impacts of adaptation or transmedia storytelling. Thus, we intentionally structure the journal to be as informative as possible by touching on these different forms of media literacy.

Focused more on text and context, Meyrowitz's classic taxonomy requires updating and expanding with the addition of another form of literacy that more directly connects media studies to popular culture studies: media fan literacy. Popular culture consists of texts, often mediated, and structural policies and practices that develop them, such as media industries and government regulations. Along with these two areas of study, popular culture scholars also analyze the individuals, groups, and communities that engage with these texts within these structural contexts. Media audiences and reception are not discussed by Meyrowitz as a form of media literacy as the assumption was the need for such people to learn how to engage the texts and contexts in appropriate ways, such as to generate an informed and critical consumer and citizen. As a subset of popular culture studies, however, fan studies repeatedly demonstrates the necessity for audiences and individuals to learn how to engage one another about these texts and within these contexts.

"Media fan literacy" operates as a subset of social literacy that focuses on helping individuals learn how to appropriately interact with one another (see Arthur and Davison). This conceptualization of the importance of teaching social skills reflects a movement to develop newer literacies beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic.[2] Social literacy recognizes the importance of learning how to interact with others in mediated and non-mediated communication situations. Given the complexity of social and cultural lives and identities, children in post-Internet societies need to learn how to navigate a range of situations that involve

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[2] For more on newer literacies, see Joanne Larson and Jackie Marsh's *Making Literacy Real: Theories and Practices for Learning and Teaching* (Sage, 2016).

encountering different types of people and problems. Social literacy involves more specific foci on emotion, communication, collaboration, and other literacies that provide knowledge and strategies.[3] Media fan literacy, then, is a focused approach in teaching the social interaction skills involved in respectful, productive audience and reception practices, such as those that develop and maintain a fandom, political discourse, citizenry, and so forth.

Conclusion

Our hope for each issue is to keep the tone conversational yet informational, and to explain any jargon as we would in our classes. We want to be clear, professional, entertaining, educational, and understandable. Our goal is to bring this scholarly conversation about media and pop cultural texts to people other than academics but in a way that does not "dumb down" such scholarly conversations. Our goal is to elevate, to treat everyone like students, and to learn from them as much as they learn from us. Everyone is an intellectual of their own lives: everyone makes and tests theories as they make sense of their everyday lives (Dervin). We hope that having these conversations can help our readers add these ideas to their attempts to make sense of their lives and their world. Thus, we want to create a space in which everyone can share their views on these texts, their lives, and our world.

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[3] I wrote on the need for communication literacy in *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan Communities* (Lexington, 2018).

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