

Challenges to Writing as a Humanities-Based Media Studies Scholar

Commentary

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Pablo J. Boczkowski and Michael X. Delli Carpini write about the transformations in writing that have affected our field over the past few decades, many of which are corrosive to the pleasures of research and writing. These have disproportionately burdened younger scholars with increased expectations for number of articles published when they enter the job market and, later, when they stand for tenure. Young scholars face pressure to have both high-quality and high-quantity publications; increased pressure to have public-facing publications, which do not count when standing for tenure; shortened length limitations in journal articles and books (and often very rigid formats that must be followed); and the need to attend and present earlier and earlier at conferences during their graduate training. The latter is an expectation constrained by limited funding; if you're not presenting, you usually can't go. One could add the fetishizing of quantification schemas like impact factors (a term I never heard until the early 21st century), the dreaded h-index, and Google Scholar citations now policing us all (and all of which, numbers aside, have various problems and can be gamed). Yet, the authors note, little attention is devoted to the craft of writing or to all the potentially different styles of writing that scholars might engage with throughout their careers. And they bemoan that much of this has taken the joy of writing away from so many.

I would note a few other challenges, especially for humanities-based media studies scholars. When choosing a dissertation topic that might eventually become a book, the candidate and his or her adviser have to anticipate what might be trendy, a "hot topic," three or four years out (whereas social science candidates can pounce on trends with collaborative studies and articles, despite the glacial pace of the review process). And our field, not unlike others, has indeed become gripped by trends given the ongoing digital revolution—there was that "big data" moment a few years ago, and now it's digital everything. In this environment, young scholars who have found an understudied and important aspect of media history fear they won't be able to survive on the job market given the presentism in the field. Also, when standing for tenure in a department that has both social scientists ("article people") and media studies scholars ("book people"), some "article people" have little appreciation—or even respect—for how long it takes—often five to six years—to write a well-researched and well-written book. On the publishing side, many university presses want shorter books—say, 150 to 200 pages—when the author needs more space to do a decent job. Many presses also hope for crossover books, which tenure review bodies may disdain. The young scholar who might want to write such a book better have a tenurable, academically bulletproof monograph first before writing something for a broader audience.

My other pet peeve is about the academic review process, whether double-blind or not. There are two kinds of reviewers: those who take the manuscript at face value and while reading it think about

how the author could make it better and stronger and those who treat the manuscript as something they know more about than the author, and so give advice on what they would do with the topic rather than what the author is seeking to do. These latter kinds of reviews are often both worthless and crippling, especially to a first-time author. Having gotten such a review of my first book (which made me decide not to go with that press), I have vowed to try to never write one like that. Another pet peeve is the overly intrusive copyeditor, who doesn't just correct minor grammatical or punctuation errors but seeks to substitute his or her prose for yours. Again, we need to mentor first-time authors about all these challenges and help them manage them.

So what do we do about these transformations confronting our field, and especially confronting young scholars? Sure, it would be great to have a cease-fire in the ongoing publication arms race, with expectations relaxed, publication in public-facing nonrefereed journals mattering, and (for me anyway) an elimination (with extreme prejudice) of impact factors. But which major university is going to blink first? Penn? Northwestern? Michigan?

Boczkowski and Delli Carpini have issued a call to arms to try to confront this increasingly demanding environment, and to better mentor scholars just starting out. One of the hardest transitions—again, especially for qualitative scholars confronting the dissertation-cum-book (as opposed to the more recent “three-studies” model in the social sciences)—is that “book people” work alone. The work is solitary, which one can learn to love, but when you're just starting out, figuring out how to manage your time and how to break the thing down into its manageable parts can be daunting. We need to help young scholars with this as well as with processing negative (or counterproductive) reviews, dealing with the conflicting or constraining demands of journals and presses, and giving them hard-nosed, realistic advice about what to publish when.

But we also need to demystify the writing process. Sometimes our graduate students think the work we do comes out of us as fully formed pearls, as if we don't slog through revision after revision, or never have a day when we sit in front of a blank computer screen and nothing happens. We need to emphasize the importance of what the writer Annie Lamott called “shitty first drafts”; they are a crucial start. We need to assure young scholars that sometimes we don't have a clear idea of what we're thinking until we actually start writing. And we especially need to reassure them that starting a new project is often the worst; we have an idea of what we want to do, but there we are, flailing around, trying to figure out sources, arguments, framework, and scope. And then we need to reassure them that, despite all this, once you get in the groove, once you begin to know what you're doing and why, you enter the zone; the pleasure of thinking and writing takes over, and that is a true joy we are privileged to experience, despite all the changes and pressures weighing down on us.