

Write First, Ask Questions Later: Publishing and the Race to Tenure-Track

Joshua Gleich

Joshua Gleich is an Assistant Professor in the School of Theatre, Film and Television at the University of Arizona. His work has appeared in *Cinema Journal*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, and *The Velvet Light Trap*. His current book project explores how changing practices and aesthetics of Hollywood location shooting from 1945-1975 transformed the filmic image of San Francisco.

This essay examines how a highly competitive job market impacts publication strategies for graduate students and early career faculty. Aspiring film and media scholars feel pressures to publish from the moment they enter graduate school or even earlier. Quickly adapting new concepts and topics into published work has become the norm for a generation of prolific scholars fighting to secure tenure-track positions and in turn, reshaping the field. Such an environment breeds young academics that are both generalists and specialists, providing a boon for an expanding field with contracting tenure lines, but potentially favoring immediate takes over longer views.

The term “Assistant Professor” implies that one only becomes a true professor after demonstrating the ability to put the earned wisdom of a graduate education into action, through scholarly publications met with the rigorous review

of one's peers or, more accurately, the tenured faculty whom a recently minted PhD aspires to join. Graduate students, recent PhDs, and young faculty often struggle to imagine this historic conception of tenure, not due to a naiveté about the realities of "publish or perish," but because many of us have been publishing or perishing since we were Masters students. And the dizzying rate at which those of us left standing have converted recently acquired knowledge into every type of published work, ranging from academic branding on Twitter and Facebook to peer-reviewed articles and published manuscripts, will continue to have profound implications for the future of film and media studies in the university system.

As early as 1998, Leonard Cassuto sounded the alarm over the growing professionalization of students forced to publish frequently during graduate school in order to compete not only for tenure-track jobs, but also admissions into top graduate programs. He suggested, "The contraction of the academic job market over the past several years has led young would-be faculty members to present themselves at hiring time not as apprentice scholars, but rather as fully formed professors..."¹ Consequences included a longer time spent in graduate school by students seeking additional time to publish articles and perfect their dissertation, as well as a movement towards rapid specialization among young scholars. The continued contraction of the academic job market in the humanities, coupled with other forces like adjunctification, declining graduate school funding, and rising student debt has eroded the cold comfort of a lengthy stay in a PhD program for most students. And securing a tenure-track job as an ABD has become increasingly rare, incentivizing students to complete their doctorate even without employment

prospects in sight. In these circumstances, many graduate students finish their degree as quickly as possible while publishing as frequently as possible along the way. And with fewer faculty members covering the growing span of film and media studies curricula in most departments, young scholars must prove themselves to be generalists as much as specialists.

Before proceeding, allow me to offer the requisite disclaimers on the tricky subject of academic publishing (and employment). I am thrilled and very fortunate to work as a first-year, tenure-track assistant professor of film and television. I will not try to offer strategies on how to do the same, because as I will get to later, frequent publishing before tenure-track is a current reality, not a guarantee or necessarily a condition of employment. Finally, I do not want to add yet another lament or rationalization for the current state of academia. This is a fraught climate that nonetheless shapes rising scholars and continues to generate remarkable new work and precocious new thinkers. Rather I want to emphasize the unique challenges and opportunities for young media scholars who must simultaneously establish themselves within and without the contemporary media landscape.

Currently, one can become a public intellectual well before they become a private one. Opportunities for online scholarship, from popular criticism to more rigorous blogs and websites, are available even to undergraduates who may have just discovered formal analysis in their first college film class. Upon entering a masters program, less formal but academically curated online publications, like *Flow*, *Antenna*, and *In Media Res*, provide opportunities for established scholars to test out ideas and explore topics outside of their current specialization or book

project. For the graduate students who help run and contribute to such journals, these serve a different purpose as ports of entry into their own academic writing. Another early career opportunity is reviewing books, as many of us did at UT-Austin while editors of *The Velvet Light Trap*, perhaps a more traditional half step towards a full scholarly article. In other words, graduate students can incrementally write their way from more popularly accepted formats, blogs and reviews, to the traditional format of the peer-reviewed article, at the same time that tenured faculty may be pushing the boundaries in the opposite direction from a scholastic to a more popular, conversational style. This can be a confusing landscape, and its boundaries grow even more fluid as former graduate students and PhDs outside of academia popularize more careful and theoretically informed media criticism on sites like BuzzFeed, Slate, and the now shuttered Grantland.

Social media adds another layer to a young scholar's identity. While few consider a tweet or a Facebook post an academic act, this nonetheless provides an early and ongoing tool for graduate students to develop an online presence as experts in their field before they have a CV to match. Some young scholars build impressive networks of like-minded thinkers and only later fill in the blanks of an established identity with published work. These networks can often lead to chapters in edited collections that help flesh out an identity previously established through conferencing and social networks. Furthermore, with academics at every level facing the pressure to publish, graduate students and pre-tenured faculty serve as some of the most eager and reliable participants in collaborative work. (I certainly

did not hesitate to take part in this *In Focus*, nor did the opportunity come from outside of my broadening academic network.)

With so many opportunities to slowly wade into academic publishing, there is an equally strong incentive to jump in headfirst. While the pressure for ABDs to publish is well known, a similar pressure builds from the moment one enters graduate school. Most PhD cohorts have at least one student who secured a book contract for a project separate from their dissertation—they may not have even chosen a dissertation topic before embarking on their first manuscript. Masters students compete for spots in the PhD programs of their choice, often by attending SCMS, submitting articles for peer-review, or publishing in peer-reviewed journals in order to stand out to the selection committee. I attended a phenomenal masters program in Film Studies at Emory, but knowing there was no PhD program there, I realized I had less than two years to establish my bona fides in the larger field to reach the next program. I fortunately found a rich topic of research there, Jim Brown's film career, and the dedicated faculty support to help eventually turn my first final paper as a graduate student into my first peer-reviewed journal article.² I pushed to learn how to publish before mastering a number of other critical skills, but as job competition in academia remains fierce, is it fair to save this lesson for late in a graduate student's career?

Blind peer-review lets younger scholars test their professional prowess before they have earned almost any of the necessary credentials to become a professor. Publishing in general offers the rare sense of controlling ones own destiny, of entering a fair market of ideas like Marx's proverbial worker at the open

labor market.³ This is a guiding myth that often drives today's aspiring professors, hoping that they can outwork or out-publish their peers to earn a coveted spot in the program of their choice and, later, a tenure-track position.⁴ Is the program a great fit as a graduate student or as a job applicant? Questions like these cause cognitive dissonance for the prolific aspirant. Candidates with shorter CVs getting jobs or admissions must be the occasional flaws in the system, right? Enough publishing, particularly in multiple areas of film and media studies, should overcome the reality that there are too few positions and each one comes with unique institutional needs. Publishing, though, cannot outweigh experience, even if experience now comes at the steep cost of years of nomadic work as a visiting professor, post-doc, or adjunct instructor. Job calls seeking candidates who may not exist, mythical figures equally adept as filmmakers, theorists, historians, and new media scholars, drive young academics to further publish and publish further afield of their most focused research and expertise. Only rare luck or a rare dissertation topic prepares a graduate student for the range of preferred qualifications in a typical job call; additional publications help certify additional skills.

In short, I am part of a generation of academics incentivized to write while they learn, to read new works and ideas, and to quickly adapt them into polished scholarship. We take our uncertain or unfinished ideas and turn them into exploratory pieces for online journals and less-formal academic forums. We discover our academic identity after trying on several hats, and then creatively incorporate our previous work into this identity. This is what quickly professionalized academics look like, although, to our credit, most of us entered

with our eyes open. We saw an opportunity to combine a love of knowledge, research, writing, and of course, media, into a rewarding career and fought to get there before that opportunity for a tenured life disappeared.

A rush to publish early and frequently has its advantages. Graduate students who write their way through new concepts and coursework tend to become both generalists and specialists, figuring out how to professionally address a range of topics before choosing where to deeply focus. This process is an asset for any department, preparing new faculty members to teach a range of courses and find a wider array of publishing opportunities. With my dissertation, I shifted emphases from racial representation to urban representation, but my teaching responsibilities at University of Arizona cover both topics and several others, as may future publications. The need to always expand one's public profile among academics and wider audiences encourages scholars to continue writing and refining their identity. Serving on my first search committee, we hoped to find someone who could cover a number of different areas, as the breadth of what film and television studies must cover expands, but oftentimes, the number of faculty members does not. One of the redeeming aspects of becoming a young generalist is moving closer to the work of mentors who preceded the trend towards hyper-specialization. At Texas, I worked with scholars like Tom Schatz and Janet Staiger, whose writing has spanned the silent era to the present, who have changed methods, and who have provided broad and comprehensive works of history and theory. The ability to write big and wide may be returning, albeit due to a far different academic economy of fewer tenured faculty and more intensive publication for a wider readership.

There are also clear dangers to spending one's graduate studies and early career actively publishing. The most common complaint, the loss of pure intellectual engagement and enjoyment as students, is the least relevant. This ideal is both impossible in the current competitive environment and disparaging to the young academics that remain passionate and rigorous thinkers amidst professional pressures.⁵ A more fundamental challenge is that frequent publication publicizes ones' intellectual development. In other words, in order to quickly establish a professional identity, rising scholars have to begin before they fully learn what that identity will be, or how further research will reshape their ideas.

Crossing the line into over-publishing is impossible to discern for a young scholar, in part because there is no consensus among job committees at different institutions where media studies occupies such different places. A long list of articles on different subjects may prove attractive to social scientists in a Communications department but may seem unfocused to faculty in the Liberal or Fine Arts. Other departments may simply prefer post-graduate teaching experience, inaccessible to ABDs who may overcompensate with further publishing. Early career academics have limited control over what subjects they teach, and publications may provide the only opportunity to demonstrate certain areas of expertise. On the surface, emphasizing quality over quantity is the best strategy, but this can delay an accelerated process and requires a formidable amount of confidence for someone trying to find an academic voice; it also falsely presumes that standards of quality are consistent across departments.

Getting one's first article accepted can be as inspiring as it is potentially misleading. It is easy to credit the topic over the execution as the defining factor, and as a student editor on *The Velvet Light Trap*, this was a common point of debate. Was this excellent scholarship or just an important or novel topic? Graduate students often only figure out in retrospect that they chose the wrong journal rather than the wrong piece. With the palpable anxiety of a shrunken job market it is only human to follow positive feedback, hoping to let the market choose the best direction for one's work. This creates legitimate fears among established academics about younger scholars' intellectual conformity and dogged pursuit of new trends in a particular field.⁶

The breadth and mutability of film and media studies creates peculiar challenges for choosing a path of specialization early in one's career. SCMS Special Interest Groups and similar structures provide graduate students with welcome introductions to like-minded thinkers and sympathetic audiences for their budding scholarship. Serving as the graduate representative for the Urban Studies SIG was an invaluable experience, allowing me to build a close network of peers and senior scholars to engage with, critique and promote my research, and, later, offer publishing opportunities. Ironically, this can be an ineffective audience for a job seeker, as departments rarely hire two professors with the same specialty, particularly with a broad spectrum of film and media studies to cover. A supportive group cannot always prepare someone for the often highly generalized audiences of search committees, tenure and promotion committees, and academic presses.

Pursuing a trending topic, particularly after early encouragement, can be treacherous considering that even an efficient graduate student faces nearly a decade from starting a masters program to hopefully landing a tenure-track job. One inevitably tries to read the tea leaves of a given hiring season, and particularly scrutinizes apparent spikes in a growing area of study, such as social media or digital humanities, nearly ruining the course one set years beforehand. This sentiment reveals another fine line between professionalization and “pre-professionalization.” Choosing a topic pragmatically can be hard to distinguish from letting a popular topic choose you. While adapting your work post-facto to changing conditions in the field and the academic market may seem like a shallow rebranding, it may not only be necessary but may actually improve it. Fighting for the relevance of one’s research in a shifting media and media studies landscape has centripetal force—it has the potential to bring fields back into conversation that have drifted apart.

As a film and television historian, perhaps the most deeply felt danger of frequent publishing is the relative ease of falling into presentism. Posting a piece for *In Media Res* struck a strange chord for me. On the one hand, I was thrilled to be able to immediately add historical context to *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012), a film referencing black Westerns of the 1970s, whose titles like *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (Martin Goldman, 1972) have precluded wide circulation on video, and thus severed access to this history for most contemporary viewers.⁷ Yet writing before *Django* premiered, with only a trailer as a text, I waited in horror to see whether the film’s full text and popular reception belied my conclusions. And when a *Slate* piece raised a similar point, for the first time I questioned whether I had

crossed the line from scholarship to journalism. Of course, the title *In Media Res* is an aegis for scholars to join relevant, current discussions of emerging media objects and trends without worrying if their quick take stands the test of time.

But I do worry, not about *In Media Res*, which is a productive and unique opportunity for scholars, but whether the current speed and volume of publishing by pre-tenure scholars inevitably leads to an overemphasis on the present. Like journalists, the pace and competitiveness of current academia leads to fears of getting “scooped” or pushed off of the front page. It trains us to anticipate the next trend and respond as quickly as possible. Contemporary topics provide new data each day, always bringing new publishing opportunities for a quick hand. New sub-disciplines provide enviable opportunities to establish expertise in yet-to-be overcrowded discussions.⁸ The growing range of academic publishing in film and media studies, whereby scholars regularly engage informally with broader audiences, whether in shorter form on academic sites or in community engagement that helps establish a department’s branded identity, has changed the entrenched over-specialization of scholars. Both by publishing on various topics and by generalizing one’s specific research to larger audiences, there are more opportunities to speak beyond an elite niche. But the ability to generalize beyond the moment, to connect ideas across an amoebic film and media studies field and beyond a moment in history, has arguably gotten harder. I certainly lack such a long view of scholarly publishing, but hopefully this perspective from a new assistant professor provides a new perspective to those who do.

¹ Leonard Cassuto, "Pressures to Publish Fuel the Professionalization of Today's Graduate Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Nov. 27, 1998, B4.

² Joshua Gleich, "Jim Brown: From Integration to Re-segregation in *The Dirty Dozen* and *100 Rifles*." *Cinema Journal*. No. 51. Fall 2011. 1-25. Emory also provided tuition waivers for Masters students, reducing the student debt that further drives frantic publishing, as graduate students invest tens of thousands of dollars before even securing entry into a PhD. program.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London: ElecBook, 2001), 252-255.

⁴ For a recent invocation of this myth that reveals much of its psychological hold on young academics, see Brian Ray, "Confessions of a Young, Prolific Academic," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 61, Iss. 17, Jan. 9, 2015, D12-D13.

⁵ Choosing to pursue a PhD. in the humanities in their current state is a rather strong commitment to the world of ideas, with few illusions of an inevitable cozy future.

⁶ See Leonard Cassuto, "The Problem of Professionalization," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 23, 2015, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Problem-of/228633/> (Last Accessed Oct. 31, 2015).

⁷ Joshua Gleich, "Django Unchained Signifier", Dec. 18, 2012, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2012/12/18/django-unchained-signifier> (Last Accessed Nov. 20, 2015).

⁸ Anecdotally, my article on Luc Besson, a contemporary figure, brings far more traffic on my Academia.edu page than any other article or review. See Joshua Gleich,

"Auteur, Mogul, *Transporter*: Luc Besson as 21st Century Zanuck," *New Review of Film and Television*, Vol. 10, No.2, June 2012, 1-23.