

# Editorial: Producing Popular Culture

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con·text (kän·tekst) noun: context; plural noun: contexts ...

Definition: The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood and assessed.

Over the last handful of years, content marketing has become the rage among public relations, advertising, and marketing professionals as a method for engaging with consumers. In a social media-dominated world, content marketing is viewed as a way to creep around the public's often hair-trigger "being sold to" monitor.

From a strategic perspective, content marketing works and is a hot topic because it is basically a fancy term for storytelling. In other words, do not "sell" customers on products, goods, and services, tell them stories that illustrate and exemplify values, emotions, and ideas that relate to their lives. People like stories; human beings are hardwired for storytelling.

One of the keys to storytelling is that it enables us to put events, ideas, and issues into context. For my money, I think the context aspect is more important than the actual story. For example, I find the story of Donald Trump as a person significantly less interesting than the context – the "why" questions – surrounding his candidacy and appeal to countless millions of people.

The relationship between topic and context is critical for people deeply engaged in interrogating popular culture. Often the icons, music, films, literature, and ideas we study and write about have countless fans and critics who all weigh in on whether or not they like or dislike something.

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As a result, social media basically exists for two reasons: provide a quasi-public platform for people to react to popular culture and to sell things. This relentless environment that constantly judges everyone and everything is the consequence of our “thumb’s up, thumb’s down” society. People crave constant recognition: look at the way “news” organizations now quote Twitter and other social media feeds as sources or validators on stories.

Our value to the broader conversation is to introduce and illuminate the context, pushing ideas past the “gut reaction” that drives so much professional and layperson commentary today. Providing the “why” is what separates us from the common criticism that popular culture scholars have faced for decades – that we are just glorified fans, masquerading fan-ship as scholarship.

Yet, while many popular culture scholars are really good at tearing down and assessing an issue or topic, many become so fixated (or stuck within) their disciplinary silos that they have difficulty understanding or conveying context. The plea for thinking about context is more than just a veiled quest for interdisciplinary, that administration-pleasing notion that is shouted from the Ivory Tower rooftops, but much less frequently accomplished. Rather, it is an appeal to look at all the factors that surround a specific or group of films, television shows, actors, and topics to really probe the larger and/or related issues at hand.

For example, no author is simply the content of her book, just as no actor is his specific role. Both are actually mini-organizations. They rely on other organizations to produce content, from the designer who creates her book cover to the public relations agency that works to set up his radio and television interviews. On an even more intimate level, she is edited by one or many people at her publisher’s office, while he is coached, directed, and edited. In either case, the best bits could end up in the deleted ether or cutting-room floor without the creator having much or any say. Imagine, asking for example, who is *Mad Men’s* Don Draper...Jon

Hamm, the actor; Matthew Weiner, the director; one of the dozens of writers; someone else; all of them?

As we go about our business of researching, writing, and contemplating popular culture topics, my plea is to not forget context. Our analysis and ability to provide that work to audiences is crucial. Content marketers have much at stake in the phrase they have popularized: “Content is King.” However, as popular culture scholars, we know that really “Context Rules.”

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Before signing off, I would like to thank Jennifer Dunn for her wonderful work as *PCSJ* Book Review Editor. Over the last several years, Jen has produced the finest set of popular culture book reviews anywhere on the planet. Often, such editorial work can feel like a task more than a reward, but under Jen’s steady hand, the book reviews in this journal have been a treasure (as our readers would attest). If you happen to see Jen at a conference or have the opportunity to chat with her, please don’t forget a warm, well-deserved “thank you.”