

Becoming Media Critics

By Samita Nandy

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Introduction:

How to Develop Media and Public Relations

During the Centre for Media and Celebrity Studies' (CMCS) annual conferences, speakers highlighted how models, actors, authors, and athletes are using aesthetics to communicate stories and build their brand persona – including stylizing their profile pictures. Similarly, expressing personal style and taste through clothing has played a key role in publicizing and promoting brands. To be clear, their brand success lies not in the combination of visual and literary expressions of fashion but rather the overall *style* they adopt to raise their *voice* in media and public relations.

The question becomes: How can we – as writers, artists or activists – develop media and public relations to give voice to our artistic or social causes?

This guidebook draws on my experience and practical insights that I have used for successful media outreach and that was shared in my media workshop “Scholars as Critics.” It is aimed at those who are advocating for an urgent cause, where personal values act as grounding principles and go hand-in-hand with competence.

The learning outcomes of this guide include:

- An introduction to media and public relations
- Determining whether you need a publicist
- Understanding why visual and performing artists and writers should become media critics
- Appreciating the importance of using social and traditional media to build your brand

Let's start by taking a look at branding and then media and public relations, where branding figures heavily.

What is a Persona Brand?

A persona brand is a collection of personality traits, values, beliefs, and attitudes – an identity – that your brand consistently reveals to help connect with a target audience. While it may not lead to commercial exchange, it can act as cultural capital (Nandy, 2015).¹ For example, expressions, or content created by the persona (such as art pieces tied to profile pictures, titles, and professional summaries or activism) can hold brand value (Wheaton & Nandy, 2015).² Why? Because branded personas reflect and reinforce individual experiences and resonate with audiences.

Note:

- Professional titles (e.g., author, actor) are markers of a brand persona, whereby the brand is distinguishing and indicates value. Academic and professional workplaces offer a variety of

possibilities to build a persona through acquiring expertise.

In more detail, a brand can foster bonding when the persona is viewed as authentic.³ For example, the CMCS board member, Dr Anita Krajnc bonded with Hollywood actor, Joaquin Phoenix over an animal vigil in Los Angeles. Later, Canadian national media covered his support for her (growing) *Save Movement* in Toronto.⁴ Krajnc's brand persona as an activist did not gain visibility due to a celebrity-led campaign. Rather, her authenticity in giving water to dehydrated animals and winning a related court case built her brand persona and her *Save Movement* that celebrity activists view as authentic and meaningful.



Photography: Jo-Anne McArthur

Alternatively, in celebrity culture, the gap is widening between the *self* and the *persona*. On the one hand, it seems morally permissible to use a certain aesthetic language to develop a personality brand. After all, language is a symbolic mode of communication that does not always lend itself to precision or to a clear understanding.

But when we – as writers and artists – build a brand persona through media and public relations, we have to ask ourselves: What is our authentic message or cause? Through what medium, form, and style can we most effectively give voice to that message?

To build a brand that carries and helps to disseminate that message, we need to:

- Build profiles
- Nurture effective media and public relations
- Showcase our personalities through content and brand surrogates

In building a brand persona, media relations and online identities act as cultural capital to establish successful careers in education, art, and advocacy. When you build a brand through social and traditional media and public relations, it may not offer direct financial compensation but it does offer symbolic value and cultural capital over time.

On a personal note, before I applied for graduate school, I had conversations with faculty members who

In most cases, I did not submit a press release to get on the radar of media representatives and I have never had a publicist. Instead, I simply attended events that I was passionate about and I expressed a willingness to speak up about the main issues when I was asked to comment. Later, I expressed informed opinions on social media where journalists are also present. Even if you choose to have a publicist, you still need to know the basics of media and public relations. You need to know how media relations work, what to expect in terms of interview questions, and why you are raising your voice as a critic.

At this point, you may be wondering: How is this different from being a commentator?

Critic or Commentator?

Being a commentator is more objective than being a critic, as a commentator does not always have an individual voice. For example, the use of “I agree” in the following press clip is an example of a statement that has an opinion but does not have the power to mobilize social or personal change:

“He gave a news conference and he called his phone call with Ukraine’s president ‘perfect.’ Then Nancy Pelosi said, ‘I agree. It was fantastic.’” —
CONAN*Nonan O’BRIENrien*⁵

In contrast, the following arguments (as well as the interview and op-ed at the end of the guide) offer criticism with the help of opinionated words. These