

This is an edited transcript of the online chat session for prospective students we held on **Wednesday, November 16, 2004**. We have omitted and combined some questions and answers for the sake of brevity and clarity.

Representing the program were

Director **Henry Jenkins <Professor>**; Acting Associate Director **Thomas DeFrantz <tommy>**; Program Administrator **Chris Pomiecko <chrisP>**; Administrative Assistant **Susan Stapleton <susan>** and students **Brian Jacobson <brianj>**; **Parmesh Shahani <Parmesh>**.

Topics of conversations are capitalized and bolded.

INTRODUCTIONS

<teboho> Teboho from South Africa

<leticia> Leticia from Mexico

<ivan> Ivan, from outside of Washington DC

<bernhard> Bernhard from Vienna, Austria

<mikerand> my name is Michael Rand. I am from New York and have a background in computers and education.

<tommy> Hello all, Tommy here, Acting Associate Director of CMS this term.

<brianj> my focus is film studies, particularly in relation to notions of space and subjectivity

<teboho> Is CMS specifically looking for **OLDER STUDENTS**?

<chrisP> hi teboho, the program certainly values real-life experience and a common profile is an applicant who has three to ten years of work experience.

<vivian> I'm an applicant from China. I'm very interested in the theme of **MEDIA IN TRANSITION**. Can you give me any information on it?

<Professor> Sure -- Media in Transition is a subject which focuses on media change across historical periods. Its principle nodal points are the shift from orality to literacy, the emergence of print, the emergence of modern mass media, and the digital revolution. We think comparatively across periods and to a lesser degree national contexts trying to understand what these earlier periods of media change can tell us about the present era of transition. It is most often taught by William Uricchio whose work focuses on media at the turn of the last century or Jeff Ravell whose focus has been on print and theater, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries

<mikerand> What if your study encompasses **MULTIPLE THEMES**?

<Professor> the themes are intended as an indication of the range of interests. We don't channel students according to the themes and while you are here, you will end up working on a full range of topics and projects in any case. What we've found is students come with one set of interests and after swimming in CMS for awhile, they end up pursuing something very different. The ideal student is someone who has a strong sense of direction but one which doesn't fit neatly within traditional academic programs -- someone who can make meaningful choices on their own across a range of different disciplines and fields of knowledge. I would say if your interest fit our themes precisely, you might not be taking full advantage of what we offer.

<ivan> how much potential is there to **WORK WITH CMS AND ANOTHER DEPARTMENT** (science, tech and society) concurrently?

<chrisP> We do not at the moment have a dual degree, but students can take electives from other departments at the institute and at Harvard or other universities, and most students select thesis committee members from other MIT departments and other institutions

<Professor> MIT is an incredibly flexible place, not a lot of firm walls between programs, so it is easy, as Chris just posted, to take courses from multiple units, a bit harder, but probably not impossible, to do a double degree. We've just never done one before.

<vivian> My former study is on the interaction and competition between **NEWSPAPERS AND THE INTERNET**. Do you think it match your program?

<Professor> There is certainly an interest among our faculty in those topics. I've written one essay, "Bearings," which can be found on the Media in Transition homepage which explores in broad strokes how the internet is changing news.

<mikerand> Well the area I am now doing research in: the use of **GAMES AND SIMULATIONS** to teach about the holocaust is certainly one that "doesn't fit neatly within traditional academic programs -- someone who can make meaningful choices on their own across a range of different disciplines and fields of knowledge."

<Professor> But of course, through the work of the Education Arcade, we are developing more and more focus on games and education. Not specifically on your topic, but we would love to think about the specific issues there.
<mikerand> Sounds good, as a person who went to the education arcade conference in LA this year I am glad to hear that.

<ivan> I know **CMS** only offers an M.S right now, **AND STS** only offers a PhD... Is it possible to do the degree that each program offers, but kind of work between both departments the entire time?

<chrisP> If you were a CMS student you could take electives in STS. A couple of our students have gone from an MS in our program to the Ph.D. program in STS

<ivan> Also, is there any **COLLABORATION BETWEEN CMS AND THE MEDIA LAB?**

<tommy> In terms of Media Lab, several of our faculty have projects with researchers and faculty in the Lab. And it is possible to take courses at the Media Lab as part of your CMS work.

<Professor> Not so much formal collaboration between the Media Lab and CMS. We've been focusing on our own branding, but lots of informal exchange. MIT is an incredibly flexible place, not a lot of firm walls between programs, So it is easy, as Chris just posted, to take courses from multiple units, a bit harder, but probably not impossible, to do a double degree. We've just never done one before. We are also adding several courses which deal specifically with games and game design -- it's a growing area for us in terms of student demand and outside interest and we are trying to respond as quickly as we can by developing new courses and opportunities for our students.

<teboho> Are **FILMS CREATED** at MIT?

<chrisP> There are no film production facilities at MIT, but there are video production facilities in CMS and at MIT, though not at a professional level.

<vivian> My experience both in **MEDIA INDUSTRY AND RESEARCH** are abundant but not related to each other. My goal is to combine all these experiences in graduate study. But a lot of universities in America don't want this kind of student. What's the attitude of CMS?

<Professor> I would say, Vivian, that many of our students meet your profile. We really value real world experience and our assumption is that only about a third of our students will go on to PhD programs. The rest will enter industry or education or policy or journalism or the arts

<mikerand> If admitted, how does a student **HOOK UP WITH PARTICULAR PROJECTS/PROFESSORS** in the program?

<tommy> MIT is a place where people engage collaboration. So a CMS Faculty member will help you meet particular people who engage your interest.

<Professor> We hand select a small number of students. It is really hard to get into CMS but once you are here, we work hard with you on an individual basis to link you with projects and people. We are launching a new mentor program that will assign you to someone who shares some of your interests before you arrive and will help you make those links

<chrisP> ...Through courses, and sometimes through informal interaction among the academic community which CMS works to foster

<vivian> Is it even more difficult for **INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**? I want to go back to china to pursue my career goal.

<Professor> About a third of our students are internationals. Many of them return to their country of origin to continue their work

<mikerand> Also are there any **ALUMS** you could mention to give us an idea of specific things students end up doing when they graduate?

<Professor> Mike -- our alums go all over. As I said, about a third end up in PhD programs across a range of disciplines. We have students working in nonprofits helping kids; we have alums in consulting firms on Madison Avenue; we have filmmakers and game designers and web folks; we have journalists. We have people in policy think tanks and arts curator ships

<chrisP> ALUMNI NOTES: go to CMS website - go to people- students-alumni notes. Here's the url:

<http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/alumninotes.html>

<ivan> How are the **GREs** factored into admissions? (Quantitative in particular... I hadn't done math for about five years, and was a little rusty, and am trying to decide whether to retake it.)

<chrisP> GREs are required. The two most important factors in the application are the statement of purpose and the writing sample; then the letters of recommendation; then transcripts and test scores. The more personal material is weighed more heavily.

<Professor> We do not filter students by hard numbers but the GRE scores do play a role. The most important thing is

a personal statement which pulls together who you are, what you've done, why you want to come, and gives us some sense of a project you would do while you are here. It isn't a contract. Projects change. But we want to see about how you think about your work, what kinds of questions you ask, what kinds of case studies you identify, etc. so the m

<teboho> Could we submit say a documentary film?

<Professor> you can submit a film as part of your **PORTFOLIO** materials. we would not look at it unless you were at the semifinalist level, but as we try to decide which of the last 30 or so applicants to accept, such materials can and do play a solid role in the decision making

<ivan> Does the faculty itself handle **ADMISSIONS DECISIONS**, or is that done by another department who then informs you as to who will be joining the department? I know some schools work that way... :(

<Professor> it is a faculty decision who to admit.

<ivan> *nods*

<Professor> we have a committee of faculty members representing various fields. Each folder gets looked at by two faculty and then we discuss, winnowing out, and then everyone reads the last 30 or so finalists

<ivan> Is there much of a **SENSE OF COMMUNITY** within the department? I mean, I know there aren't too many students at any one time.

<Professor> We work to achieve a very strong sense of community. We emphasize collaboration rather than competition between students. We have a weekly gathering at my apartment where we eat, talk, laugh, and share things with each other. this is after our weekly colloquium where we bring in speakers to share real world perspectives. The office space is limited so this means all of the students work from a common area and there are lots of conversations. Students do lots of events on their own outside formal activities -- though this varies a lot from cohort to cohort. and we make various efforts to introduce you to students from other programs who might share some of our interests -- media lab, STS, the arts programs, urban studies, etc At any point in time CMS has 18-20 masters students, 20-25 undergrads (many working our research projects), 40 or so faculty, and 10 or so visiting scholars. So we are small on one scale but diverse in another.

<Parmesh> we're small enough to be a large Bollywood type joint Hindu family

<ivan> that can often be a lot more inspiring than a lot of people in isolation.

<ivan> with or without singing?

<Parmesh> singing, dancing, the works

<Professor> and yes, we periodically break out into song and dance for no real reason

<brianj> parmesh does all of the singing ;)

<ivan> *awesome*.

<Professor> but Brian has some good dance moves. :-0

<Parmesh> Brian does all of the risqué dancing

<ivan> that should provide a possible source of financial aid, right there.

<brianj> *exactly*

<Parmesh> but to get back to the question, the strong sense of community was one of the highlights of CMS for me, when I came visiting.

<vivian> When can the applicants get the **ADMISSIONS RESULTS**?

<chrisP> The committee reads applications in February and announces decisions in early to mid-march

<bernhard> I visited the campus earlier this year. I met Dr. Fendt and, if admitted, would be very interested in joining the Meta Media Project. At which point in my application should I identify that (statement of purpose...)?

<Professor> You should certainly describe your interests and relevant background in your **PERSONAL STATEMENT**.

<bernhard> I have studied in the U.S. for three years now. Would I still be required to take the **TOEFL** test? (Given that English is not my native language)

<chrisP> If four years of your undergraduate studies, or two years of graduate studies were in English, you can request a TOEFL waiver.

<ivan> I've been really interested in the whole question of how performance changes in the film era, as we move toward digital enhancement of actors (like Gollum in LOTR, and now the polar express' entire cast). I have this sense that it forces a redefinition of the terms we use to discuss and think about the notion of performance and "authentic performance"... is that something that would be a logical area of inquiry within CMS?

<tommy> My work is in **PERFORMANCE STUDIES**, so I would look forward to hashing some of this out with you.

<ivan> fantastic. :)

<tommy> There seems to be plenty of room to think through performance studies - which is concerned with the live -

and media studies - where we might think through performance as an aspect of film

<ivan> (Benjamin's "work of art" was one of the bigger turning points of my undergrad education, cliché as that might be.) also, I'm pretty intrigued by the potential for video games and interactivity to redefine other media forms -- like crossover between film narratives and game plots.

<tommy> there are several projects around performance/video capture at the media lab in process. I am working with two faculty there on work with robotics and children's education, and motion capture algorithms that can "predict" movement ideologies.

<ivan> Tommy, is that something I could e-mail with you about, regardless of admission to CMS? it would just be nice to have people to bounce ideas with.

<tommy> Ivan, contact me anytime to chat. defrantz at mit dot edu

<ivan> thanks, Tommy. :)

<mikerand> when it comes to **HOUSING** do students live in MIT housing or find their own apartments etc.

<chrisP> there is a housing lottery whereby most students who want to live on campus are assigned housing; there is also an off-campus housing office, and several bulletin boards (like craigslist.org) where students find off-campus housing

<mikerand> also what type of **COMPUTER SKILLS** do you expect incoming students to have/are you looking for?

<Professor> we do not expect any specific computer skills. Some students come with none. Some come with extensive professional level experiences such as doing feature film special effects work. We try to create a space where each can grow and learn through the workshop program. it helps to have some hands on experience since you don't start from scratch. But when people hear MIT they assume we are all rocket scientists and that's not the case at all.

<ivan> How "**FOCUS**ed" do we need to be in CMS? I tend to be interested in a LOT of topics at once, and to perpetually find new things that interest me... in some settings, that's strength, and in others, it's a weakness. Are we expected to largely choose a single goal and stick with it?

<Professor> This is a space of exploration. We want to give students the space to grow in different directions. God, I sound like a high school counselor.

<ivan> that's good to hear.

<Professor> What we find is students who have TOO MANY interests can get lost and have trouble settling on a topic; students with TOO NARROW a range of interests can be frustrated or confused by the flexibility. So there is a sweet spot in the middle

<ivan> not the counselor bit, but the general idea.

<tommy> at some point in grad school you'll have to focus on a thesis that mobilizes evidence to prove a point of view. Until then, though, MIT is well-suited to the curious and easily excitable.

<Professor> students often end up working on very different things term by term, year by year, but in the end it needs to cohere into a thesis.

<ivan> but 1-3 topics of constant interest could be workable, as long as we focus enough to complete a thesis?

<Professor> yes, Ivan, that's about the right range to get you through.

<ivan> fantastic.

<tommy> your experience will probably allow you to shape an idea that crosses these seemingly separate areas.

<ivan> and what is the balance of emphasis on classes-to-**INDEPENDENT RESEARCH** and writing?

<vivian> do we have a lot of time to do our own research?

<Professor> It differs from student to student. You typically take three courses per term for the first three terms, some take more, and then you tend to focus the last term fully on the thesis. How much time beyond that for personal projects depends on whether you want/get an RAship and how efficiently/hard you work.

<Professor> About a third of your subjects are open electives -- and that doesn't include your thesis time and there is some flexibility within core subjects to allow you to do your own topics, etc.

<teboho> Perhaps a few word to the **WRITTEN COMPONENT** of the application (a fine art student's fears...).

<Professor> two written components -- personal statement (which I discussed earlier) and writing sample. Writing sample should be something that constructs an argument and uses evidence, ideally dealing with media but we are more flexible. It is to show us how you think, etc. we don't want creative writing, journalism, business plans, etc. though you can submit these for the portfolio. We need to see that you can do an academic paper since this is ultimately an academic program.

<ivan> ah, so writing sample is NOT the GRE writing sample?

<chrisP> No..

<vivian> my writing sample is one of my published research paper, it's long. is it ok?

<Professor> The only issue there is length. If you send a longer work, it is unlikely to be read in its entirety. So you

may have less control over which part we look at.

<bernhard> Is there a desired length for the **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE** ?

<Professor> Not a prescribed length. Most run from 3-5 pages single spaced. Some shorter. Some longer. The meatier the statement, the stronger your chances. It really is the decisive piece in our process. But meaty does not mean longer. It means substantive.

<bernhard> and for the writing sample ?

<Professor> That varies enormously -- something written for a class, so typically, in America, for undergrad work, 10 pages or so, but you can submit something longer. Just assume that the faculty reviewing your file will have to deal on the first round with 30 or so files and think how long he/she will devote to each

<ivan> so the average student takes about to **GET THROUGH CMS**, from start to finish? if there is an average.

<Professor> Ivan, most students complete in two years -- though some need the second summer to finish.

<chrisP> The curriculum currently consists of four required seminars, two workshops, four electives and a thesis. Generally the first semester is two seminars, workshop and colloquium; then one seminar, workshop2, and elective; then seminar, two electives; then thesis. As you see there is a progression from requirements to electives to thesis.

<ivan> are there ever **COLLABORATIVE THESES**? or is that always a solo endeavor?

<Professor> We have not had a collaborative thesis yet. Not sure how we would handle that. We certainly encourage collaboration at every other level. Lots of group projects, collaborative lab work, etc. At some point, American universities tend to want a student to demonstrate a unique perspective and body of knowledge. This may be hard to get at with a collaborative thesis BUT we rarely want to close the door on anything without thinking through. We try to keep to the spirit of the program and not a fixed set of rules. if something hasn't happened yet, it is likely because a student hadn't wanted it.

<vivian> I feel the education I've received in **CHINA** is quite different from yours. I didn't know a lot of things about theater and film. :(

<Professor> as it happens, Vivian, we have a faculty member -- Jing Wang -- who is very familiar with Chinese education practices which are different from ours and helps us assess candidates from your part of the world. We really hope to get strong Chinese candidates as we have several China-focused projects we want to pursue. But, also, don't believe that all Americans study film and theater. Many of our students do not have strong backgrounds in that area.

<Tyler> Do students generally utilize some **HARVARD CLASSES** for some of their electives?

<chrisP> students commonly take Harvard courses as electives.

<tommy> Yes, Harvard courses are almost always added to the mix of CMS coursework. It is a terrific opportunity to work with thinkers there and here, and practitioners here.

<Tyler> I guess to expand on the Harvard course question - has there ever been any interest in collaboration between students in CMS and their peers in Film Studies/Art History/etc. who happen to be at Harvard?

<tommy> The possibility to collaborate with Harvard students is entirely open, waiting to happen. The "entrepreneurial thrust" of MIT education is real.

<ivan> Is CMS an organizational member of **DIGRA**?

<chrisP> what is DIGRA?

<ivan> sorry - digital games research association.

<Professor> DIGRA is the Digital Games Research Association. We do not have an organizational membership but I am part of the planning group for this year's conference. Basically the group grew up while I was on leave. I wanted some time to get to know it better before suggesting a CMS membership per se. but we certainly support its work

<ivan> thanks, professor.

<vivian> to **CHOOSE AN AREA** is so hard for me now! Can I decide it later?

<Professor> Vivian -- you don't have to choose now, certainly not from the set of themes we identify. but for the personal statement, you should describe one project you MIGHT want to pursue -- just to show us that you can break things down into an achievable project and to give us some sense of how you think about media.

CLASS SIZE

<ivan> how many people are in a normal class?

<Professor> 10 or so in each entering class, 20 grad students at any time

<ivan> professor, how many in a class session, for the purposes of a discussion?

<Professor> ah -- the grad prosem has the 10 entering students plus a small handful of others from other grad programs or visiting scholars, no more than 16 or 17. And mine are the biggest of the grad prosems. Some faculty

restrict just to the cohort.

<bernhard> have you had many students from **EUROPE** ?

<Professor> we had an Australian guest speaker in my class last night who got responses from students from Lebanon, Belgium and Bulgaria and visiting faculty from Netherlands, Taiwan, and Spain.

<chrisP> Yes we have a large number of international students -- from Europe and Asia, South America, Canada...

<Professor> so far from Spain, Bulgaria, and the UK, primarily, though visitors from elsewhere

<chrisP> this year we have students from Germany, Moldavia, and India.

<bernhard> wow, from all over :)

<AJ> Hi, I'm interested in **VISUAL PERCEPTION**

and how that affects art and media, does this sound like it's in the realm of your department?

<brianj> AJ--definitely sounds in the realm

<bernhard> I would be interested in your **THESIS TOPICS** - parmesh & brianj...

<Parmesh> my thesis topic deals with the negotiation of sexuality, identity and community in an online/offline gay world in Bombay.

<brianj> my thesis focuses on cinematic representations of (urban) spaces, specifically what devices filmmakers use to construct spaces, and how identities are formed within such spaces--and then relating these representations to notions of audience reception

<bernhard> thanks :)

<ivan> Can i ask a sort of **BIZARRE EXISTENTIAL QUESTION** to the professors and students currently in CMS?

<brianj> Bizarre existential questions are fine by me

<ivan> Thanks, Brian. :)

<ivan> I guess what I'm struggling with a bit, is why go to CMS, or spend your life on this material at all? I mean, what is it you hope to accomplish through the work you do in CMS? personally, or any other scale?

<Professor> Because media change effects every other aspect of our society. you can study nothing that matters in the humanities or social sciences without coming up against media.

<ivan> And what do you hope to accomplish or effect through the study of media change/

<Professor> On a personal level, because it what gets you up in the morning with a smile on your face.

<ivan> (I ask this as devil's advocate, not because i don't believe its worthwhile.)

<Professor> Anything you want. This cuts to the spirit of what we mean by applied humanism. The idea that we take what we learn about media, culture, and society and apply it to the world. For some it means designing a better game. For some it means teaching a kid to see the world through photography. For some helping the democrats take back the white house.

<ivan> what was it for you, professor?

<Professor> I want to do it all. I LOVE popular culture and I care deeply about the people who consume it. For me, the moment of truth was when I got a call after Columbine to speak before the U.S. Senate about youth's relations to popular culture -- and the question was whether I would go to Washington, confront my real fear about the culture warriors, and tell the truth to power or pass the buck. I went. And I have used the experience to raise real questions about media and from there, I have kept on trying to engage with and transform our culture

<ivan> On some level, I've been trying to reassure myself that academic pursuits are not "frivolous".

<Professor> they don't have to be, Ivan. We just often choose to make them so.

<ivan> Yeah... it's something I was less worried about before i graduated and got a job.

<Professor> at CMS, we try to show ways to move beyond the academy

<ivan> but I still believe. ;)

<Professor> keep the faith. Good luck one and all.

<chrisP> the hour approaches, and i just want to remind everyone that if they have **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS** they can email us at cms@mit.edu

<chrisP> thank you all for your lively participation! If you have any questions about the application procedure email me at cpomieko@mit.edu

<Parmesh> and feel free to mail any of the graduate students. You can find out our emails from the CMS website.