

This is an edited transcript of the online chat session for prospective students we held on **Wednesday, November 20, 2002** . We have omitted and combined some questions and answers for the sake of brevity and clarity.

Representing Comparative Media Studies were **Director Henry Jenkins <drJ>**; **Associate Director William Uricchio <William>**; first-year students **Clara Fernandez-Vara <clara>** and **Moneta Ho <moneta>**; and Program Administrator **Chris Pomiecko <chrisP>**.

Topics of conversations are capitalized and bolded.

<Parmesh> I have a question for Clara. Have you changed your mind about your eventual **THESIS** after actually spending some time at CMS?

<clara> About my thesis, I have a fairly clear idea of what I want to do, because it's been a work in progress for about 5 years now. My problem is that my heart is split into two, because I have the opportunity to pursue other topics in which I am really interested

<Parmesh> and you became interested in the second topic after enrolling for the cms program?

<clara> uf! long story!

<Parmesh> :-)

<clara> ok, I'll make it short.

<Parmesh> "uf" is a hindi expression

<clara> my main interest as an undergrad was Shakespeare on cinema (and by extension, cinema and literature) but BEFORE i came here, I started doing work on videogame theory, and videogames and literature, and it so happens that I can do both here...

<alex> hi, william, i am a journalist of many years. i am interested in **TRANSITIONAL MEDIA**, and i am also interested in political communication, does CMS offer classes in this regard?

<William> well, we have lots in the area of transitional media, and the nature of our program is such that **POLITICAL COMMUNICATION** is linked through colleagues in the political science department

<drJ> We do not currently have political communications classes in house, but students at MIT can take Harvard classes and the Kennedy School offers lots in this area.

<William> we have a very collaborative program...one that takes maximum advantage of MIT's relatively open structure

<clara> as a general statement, CMS is flexible enough to cover most interests about media, across media, or media history

<JoannaB> Could you talk a little about the **TECHNICAL TOOL REQUIREMENT** .

<chrisP> The technical tool requirement is basically a requirement that students have a working knowledge of a variety of media software and hardware. It is fulfilled by workshop 1 which teaches dreamweaver, final cut pro, photoshop, digital video and still photography; and by a project for the second part.

<Christina> I am interested to know what you see as the main differences between the CMS program and the **MEDIA ARTS AND SCIENCES PROGRAM [MAS]**. Is there a lot of crossover in terms of interests of students?

<wgh> Is there much collaboration with the MIT media lab?

<William> MAS is an outgrowth from the architecture program, and as such is more production and object oriented than we are. We certainly do production (indeed, it's required in our program) but we are grounded in humanities, arts and social science discourses

<drJ> There are some courses which are co-taught with the media lab faculty and growing collaborations with the research teams. Games to Teach is starting to do some work with Bruce Blumberg's synthetic characters group.

<William> that is to say, we tend to be more critical and content oriented, looking more at social implications etc, but as Henry points out, we collaborate with MAS in several major ways

<Christina> Now the MAS department offers a PHD program...Is it feasible if a CMS graduate student is interested in pursuing further study to apply for the MAS PHD program?

<drJ> Yes, Christina, students from cms could theoretically go on to PhDs in MAS or in the STS program. So far, none of our students have chosen MAS, but two have gone into other MIT-based PHD programs

<Derek> Along the political science lines, I wanted to ask about research currently being performed under the **"INFORMED CITIZEN AND CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY"** theme.

<William> Sarah, one of our students, is working on the post 9/11 'rally' effect

<drJ> Most of the work on Culture of Democracy so far has been done through the collaborations with the poli-sci faculty we mentioned -- but the idea of democracy runs through many of our projects -- such as the site we did after sept. 11 or some proposed work we hope to do with Public Radio international

<William> and on women and democracy in Afghanistan

<drJ> The PRI project would create a global network of student correspondents who would focus on debates about global media, culture, and democracy and linked to the BBC World newscast.

<William> The PRI project has exciting potentials -- taking something like what we did in re-constructions (the web site Henry refers to) and focussing it on news developments of global import --- from a global perspective

<Derek> I was wondering if there was more information available about your PRI collaboration on the web yet.

<drJ> Derek, the PRI thing is still under negotiation, so nothing public yet, but we hope soon.

<Derek> I hadn't noticed much **JOURNALISTIC OVERLAP** from what I've read about the program so far.

<William> I might also mention that journalists come through as part of our colloquium and communications forum series (not to mention our conferences). Helen Thomas was just here --

<drJ> And there's a new science journalism program at MIT and we are hoping to build stronger bridges with them. Also the Knight Journalism program brings interesting journalists to mit.

<alex> do you stress **COMPUTER COMPETENCY**, and knowledge of programming?

<clara> alex, you don't need to know programming, but you certainly must feel at ease with computers. there are many facilities in which you can learn whatever skills you don't have

<Parmesh> i'd like to know more about research being carried out on "**CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN A MEDIATED CULTURE**" at CMS and secondly about the potential to carry out research at CMS on issues of representation pertaining to gay/lesbian youth in cinema and other popular culture.

<William> Henry can fill you in on 'childhood' ... and we currently have a thesis in the works on gay superheros in comics

<drJ> beyond that, we have various media literacy experiments going on to help youth mobilize what they already know about media.

<drJ> and yes, I would be very interested in work on gay teens. I was once the director of gay and lesbian studies at MIT and regularly teach a course on gender, sexualiuty and pop culture.

<drJ> Parmesh, there are a number of us interested in children and adolescents, including myself, Justine Cassell, and Sherry Turkle. We each approach it from different angles. I have been doing work on the history of children's literature and pop culture in the post-War American context, I have also been doing lots of outreach post-columbine to high schools trying to provide a context for youth relations to pop culture

<jasonc> Professor J, is "**HOP ON POP**" out yet?

<drJ> HOP ON POP will come out late this year, early next year.

<Jen> My interests are broad as well, right now I work in media research, but I have a background in **FILM** as well, are there any limitations as to the different types of media platforms that are available to work with? I noticed that the program emphasizes "**NEW MEDIA**"?

<William> We have people working with photography (digital and chemical) and video, plus endless other digital domains. But support for film production per se is minimal in house (though there are opportunities outside). Sound work is something we're interested in stimulating

<drJ> We do however have a steady flow of filmmakers passing through our colloquium, strong ties with local filmmakers which have lead to internship opportunities, and there's a great local production school -- Cityscape -- which might offer opportunities for production training.

<drJ> Cityscape teaches through an apprenticeship process, getting students working on actual films under production.

<alex> well, what areas do you concentrate on regarding new media?

<drJ> I am writing a book right now which tries to identify a range of changes that are shaping the media environment -- ranging from media concentration to the emergence of grassroots media and the development of global flows of cultural content and the emergence on new forms of transmedia storytelling.

And of course, I continue to be interested in the whole space of computer games as an emerging sphere of expressive work.

<Christina> Is it possible to **OUTLINE AN IDEA FOR STUDY** within the CMS program with a professor before applying

to discuss possibilities, viability, appropriate direction, etc.?

<jasonc> I crashed and missed the response to my question about the **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**, if there was one...

<William> yes, Christina ... and indeed , we look forward to seeing your ideas (if you apply) in your statement of purpose -- perhaps the most important part of your application!

<chrisP> jasonc, the statement of purpose should show how the program will benefit you and what you will bring to the program; how your interests mesh with the program

<Christina> ``Is it possible to discuss your statement of purpose BEFORE?? applying?

<drJ> we can't review statements prior to submission , Christina. That would be cheating. :-) Sometimes, though, students have contacted current grad students for feedback.

<jasonc> I asked whether there was any info we should be sure to include other than how our goals mesh with the themes of CMS...

<drJ> the key thing on the statement is to show us how you think, to demonstrate that you can identify a productive line of research which exploits the resources of the program, and have thought it through enough to have something original you want to say or do on the topic.

<Jen> could you just go over the types of **RESEARCH FACILITIES** available as well as collaborative opportunities to work with the media, professional institutes, and research firms?

<drJ> Jen, these are constantly evolving. we have strong outreach to all sectors of the media world and we tend to make the connections needed to help individual students get internships and jobs.

<William> Jen -- this is a big one! we have dozens of relationships with groups like the Royal Shakespeare Company, Microsoft, Sony, the Beijing Film Archive, etc.

<drJ> that's one of the reasons why we keep the program smallish, so we can shape these research ops around what students want to know.

<alex> do i have to define a definite **DIRECTION OF MY RESEARCH**, you know sometime there are only blurry ideas before you actually work on them

<drJ> alex, the statement of purpose is not a contract per se. most students change their ideas about thesis topics once they get here. and you can always list more than one thing. but we do want to get a sense of how you think and what directions interest you.

<Christina> Are graduate students allowed to sit in on **UNDERGRAD CLASSES** as well?

<William> yes, Christina -- we have a number of courses that mix upper undergraduate students with graduate students

<jasonc> Dr. J, after reading some of your interviews, I'm curious as to how much of a background in **SEMIOTICS** you feel is necessary for the more theoretical work of the department, which is where my interests lie.

<drJ> Jasonc, students come to us with a wide variety of theoretical backgrounds. the core media theory course covers a range of different theoretical traditions at what I call an advanced introductory level and then there are opportunities to push in new directions. Semiotics has never been the central focus of my own work, though I do draw on both Russian formalism and British cultural studies.

<Derek> How many (or what percentage) of students are awarded **RESEARCH OR TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS**? What type of assistance packages are generally offered to students?

<moneta> Derek, all of us have research assistantships in 1 of 3 groups: Globalization and Convergence, MetaMedia or Games to Teach

<William> Derek, we've been pretty successful in funding most of our students, but funding is derived from outside sources, and when the economy turns down, so do the funding ops. So the future of funding is very uncertain

<drJ> Derek, the issue of student support is a complicated one. Right now, all of our students receive some kind of RAship support (or at least all of those who don't come with outside funding). With the bad economy, it is going to be a challenge to sustain that level of support, but we are optimistic that we will still have a large number of opportunities in the research groups next year.

<alex> would you please indicate the **AGE DISTRIBUTION** of the students? are there old guys, how old are they?

<clara> the youngest of us is 23, the oldest is around 40

<clara> though 1st years range from 25 to 30-ish this year

<Christina> It says on the website, that CMS prepares students for work in **MUSEUM WORK**. Have many graduates gone to work in this field?

<moneta> In regards to museum work, CMS is what you make of so if you are interested in a specific area, there are lots of classes and people here that can point you in certain direction. For example, one of the 2nd years Stephanie does a lot of work with corporate sponsorship of museum exhibits, including the Whitney museum

<drJ> we also have strong links here on campus to the List Gallery which brings in some of the best contemporary artists and there are relevant courses taught in the Art History program and the Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

<AnnPH9465> does CMS accept **OLDER STUDENTS** who have worked more so than students coming straight from undergraduate schools?

<drJ> we have had a grad student in his 50s and are open to more mature students. in general, students have done best if they come to us with a few years of work experience beyond undergrad, but there are always exceptions and this years class skewed a little younger.

<drJ> again, we look closely at life experiences in assessing candidates, so professional experiences are definitely a plus.

<alex> do you require **WRITING SAMPLES** in addition to statement of purpose?

<William> yes, alex --- something that shows your analytical, argumentative, and presentation skills

<drJ> yes, we do ask for a basic writing sample -- an argumentative essay of some kind -- not necessarily on media but it helps. ideally something from an academic context, not creative writing or journalism, though these can be added to your portfolio in addition.

<William> so usually, something on the analytic side is better than, say, a creative work (although if you do lots of creative work, you may consider including some of it as well....)

<alex> will journalistic work do? news analysis or roundup?

<drJ> ideally not journalism, since the writing protocols are generally designed to strip away the markers of individual thought -- its called objectivity -- and because think piece journalism tends to be too short to fully develop an argument. I love journalism and do a lot myself, but for the writing sample, we need to see something long enough to develop and sustain an argument.

<drJ> we've had people submit poetry for their writing sample and it doesn't really show us how you can marshal evidence or construct an argument.

<Mary-Jo> Is there a maximum length for the writing sample, or can we submit a full thesis?

<William> you *could* send a thesis, but the committee has a lot of reading in front of it, so it's better to target something that makes the point in a clear and efficient way

<drJ> mary-jo, no set length, but realize the longer you get, the less likely we are to read all of the way through.

<jasonc> How exactly should we prepare our **PORTFOLIO**? Particularly if we're applying online, how would we get that to the department?

<drJ> Jasonc, send any additional materials by mail.

<chrisP> jasonc, you can send everything directly to headquarters

<Jen> drJ/william, from what i've read about the program, it is relatively new... are there any plans to expand the program's focus, say combining with other programs and expanding to a **PH.D. PROGRAM** in the near future?

<drJ> We have discussed creating a PhD program, but there's more basic infrastructure and faculty expansion work before we get there.

<drJ> However, we have strong ties to three or four other departments at MIT which do offer PHD work and some of our students have started to graduate and move into those departments.

<William> science technology and society (we just sent two students there...)

<drJ> other relevant ones would be Media Lab, Political Science, Economics, and the History and Theory of Art and Architecture

<drJ> beyond that, reasonably strong ties to Sloan, Harvard Ed., Harvard Law, Kennedy School...

<drJ> we are big on networking at cms, so we believe if connections don't exist yet, they are one or two e-mails away.

<Parmesh> how long would it be before we come to know as to whether we are selected or not? and if selected, by when would we have to revert to you with our own response?

<chrisP> parmesh, the committee evaluates applications in february and we let people know by early march. You have to respond by april 15.

<Derek> What types of **INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION** exists at CMS?

<William> Derek -- all sorts. Already mentioned are the Royal Shakesepare Co and Beijing Film Archive developments, the PRI possibility,

<William> and I'm currently running a large European Science Foundation research project on identity and media in Europe (two years on that one to go)

<drJ> For example, games to teach was interested in doing a game on colonial american history. we contacted Pauline Maier at MIT, who is a prize winning historian on the topic, and then from her, we got a solid link with Williamsburg which is paying off with real collaborations. We've also started collaboration with aboriginal artists in Australia on another game project. the skies the limit.

<William> Plus we have a rich network of internship opportunities, personal connections and relations with other universities (Cambridge and the London School of Economics in the UK, Utrecht in the Netherlands, etc etc

<Sara> I'm coming from French-Canada, although I now study completely in English. I was told by my academic advisor that I can't take **GRE**'s because of the language barrier - is this true?

<chrisP> sara, i dont think that's true, people from all countries take the GREs. you may have to take the TOEFL, depending upon the amount of study you've done in english-speaking institutions. if you've done four years of undergraduate or two years of graduate study in English you can get a toefl waiver.

<clara> sara, GRE is not that difficult. being very proficient in english helps, but it is measuring something else. I myself are not a native speaker, and I think that only interfered in the language part, which is difficult to native speakers anyway

<Joseph_Lo> What type of scores are you all looking for on the GRE?

<drJ> Joseph, we don't have a fixed scale on scores. they are seen as secondary factors in the decision, much less important than writing sample, personal statement, etc.

<alex> drJ, what are your **FIELDS OF RESEARCH**?

<drJ> Alex, hard to summarize my research -- it ranges from work on the aesthetics of popular culture (games, vaudeville, film, comics) to the ethnography of media audiences (especially fan communities) to the social history of children's culture to contemporary debates in media convergence and intellectual property law.

<jasonc> It's something of a digression, but Prof. J, have you done any work on the **LINK BETWEEN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND MARKETING** (e.g. cartoons and toys?)

<drJ> Jasonc, some work on toys and storytelling. I take a somewhat different view on action figures than most media activists -- seeing them as resources for creative storytelling by kids, our first avatars as it were, and am interested that there's now an underground film movement in digital cinema to animate action figures. None of this takes away the concern about commercial exploitation, but we need to move beyond simplistic notions that these toys are somehow outside the storytelling process.

<jasonc> Yes, I read that article...very interesting. I myself have concerns about the circumscription of play via established cartoon "worlds" and whether these limit the imagination.

<drJ> an important question, Jason, and one we spend a lot of time with in the children's media class I teach with Justine Cassell. There's definitely a risk there, though remember that culture has always shaped the narratives of children's play in one way or another. What we really need are much more detailed accounts of how kids actually play with those toys rather than what we fear they are doing. What research there is suggests a more varied response.

<Christina> There is a great photo essay by Takashi Homma and an interesting essay by Douglas Coupland about media effecting how children are "formatted" these days...very entertaining.

<drJ> there's some work being done on the shifting models for branding in a transmedia environment. one grad student is working with Initiative media looking at product placement on American Idol and Survivor.

<Joseph_Lo> have you all done studies of how they play with toys? Comparing them maybe to how they use them at School to Home?

<jasonc> Interesting...I've read "Out of the Garden," a book about children's tv and toys, which I must admit is a bit alarmist, but it makes a few good points.

<drJ> Joseph, some studies have been done in both the home and in schools -- not by me, alas. and not nearly enough given the persistent claims being made by media reformers on this front.

<Joseph_Lo> what type of **INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY LAW** have you been studying?

<drJ> I am interested in the models of creativity underlying IP law and especially in the ways that it impacts production and distribution of culture; for example, the debates about napster on the one hand and fan fiction on the other. We have a collision course between new techs which enable grassroots archiving, annotation, recreation, and circulation of media and a legal culture stressing tighter control over IP and I am very interested in how this plays itself out. We've just had a series of talks on campus on the cultural dimensions of IP.