

FEATURED NEWS

Newhouse Professor Breaks Down Success of ‘Heated Rivalry’

Melissa Martinez shares lessons that can be learned from the show’s runaway success.



Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie in a scene from “Heated Rivalry.” (Photo by Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max)

By **Dialynn Dwyer**
Published on Feb. 12, 2026

 SHARE  

Chances are, by now, you’ve probably heard of “Heated Rivalry.”

The television show, based on a 2019 novel of the same name by Rachel Reid, tells the romance of rival NHL players who—secretly—fall in love with each other. The slow-burn, enemies-to-secret-lovers series was released in late November and has become a runaway hit. Each week, new [headlines](#) appear related to the show, [its impact](#) and [stars](#) (who recently served as [Olympic torchbearers](#)).

Made with a modest budget for the Canadian streamer, Crave, the show’s success [reportedly surprised](#) even the TV executives involved. [According to The New York Times](#), the show had roughly 30 million streaming minutes in its debut week. By late December, the streaming time had increased tenfold, more than 324 million minutes.

The show’s momentum comes as no surprise to [Melissa Martinez](#), assistant teaching professor in the television, radio and film program in the Newhouse School of Public Communications.

Martinez says there’s much showrunners and executives can take away from the show’s meteoric rise into an influential—and far-reaching—cultural moment. “Heated Rivalry,” like “KPop Demon Hunters,” before it, can serve as a reminder to those creating media about the importance of trusting audiences, specificity and being true to the story you are telling.

Audiences Are the New Stakeholders



(Courtesy of HBO Max/Crave)

The triumph of “Heated Rivalry” illustrates a key message Martinez says she always emphasizes to students.

“Audiences are the new stakeholders, and they’re the most powerful ones,” she says.

The series is the perfect example of the power of audiences, since fan conversations, not traditional marketing, have driven the show’s growth, Martinez says.

“Fans are an increasingly important part of every conversation,” she says.

The book, part of Reid’s “Game Changers” hockey romance series, has its own dedicated [fanbase of readers](#). The show got picked up by HBO Max just over a week before its release on Nov. 28 in part because of the conversations fans were already having about previous casting announcements and clips released.

But, Martinez says the show’s rapid audience growth has not just been because of BookTok or Bookstagram, the subcommunities on TikTok and Instagram dedicated to books and reading.

“Now this whole new legion of fans is discovering the show,” she says.

The best marketing for the series has been fan-led conversations online, where people share their love for the production with their own followers and communities. This has allowed multiple fandoms—hockey fans, romance readers, LGBTQ+ communities—to discover the show through their own entry points, with conversations about the show growing beyond specific platforms and demographics.

Fan-edits, where people take clips from the show and pair it with a trending song or a message about why they connected with the story, have become crucial marketing, serving as “gateway content” for new show viewers, Martinez says.

“Those things promote it more effectively than anything else a marketing team would have come into the picture and done,” Martinez says.

[Read more](#)

Related news

Newhouse in the News

Media outlets regularly consult with experts at the Newhouse School for context about what’s happening in communications and why.

[Read more](#)

2026 Newhouse School Marshals and Scholars

The Newhouse School is proud to recognize these students for their dedication, ingenuity, academic excellence and creativity.

[Read more](#)



Alumna Wins Grammy for Engineering Best Folk Album

Gillian Pelkonen G’21, a graduate of the audio arts master’s program, was part of the team behind I’m With Her’s award-winning “Wild and Clear and Blue.”

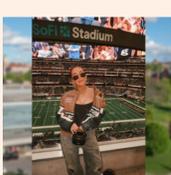
[Read more](#)



Center for the Creator Economy Ramps Up With New Space, Initiatives and Tour

The groundbreaking University initiative unveils plans for a fall 2026 academic minor, student-produced content series and more.

[Read more](#)



From Syracuse to Stylist for NFL Stars: Newhouse Graduate Gets A Different Shot Working in Sports

A graduate of the Newhouse master’s in communications program, Kylie Gelfand G’21 has parlayed the public relations and strategic communications skills she learned into building a successful wardrobe styling business.

[Read more](#)



Super Bowl Ads Enter a New Era With a Crowded Playing Field Ahead

Assistant Professor of Advertising Beth Egan says the days of a monolith audience on one channel are long gone, creating new challenges for commercial producers and ad executives.

[Read more](#)