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How To Get a PhD Position

Peter van der Putten & Maarten Lamers
Media Technology MSc program



Preface

Media Technology is a creative research MSc program and many of its students are interested in pursuing a PhD position. Many alumni have been successful in doing so.

That said, *how to get* a research position is clouded in mystery. Is it all about searching for jobs online, filling in application forms and obtaining recommendations letters? Or does the research tribe actually hunt for their candidates and make their decisions in much more informal ways, behind the scenes?

In a workshop hosted by [Peter van der Putten](#) and [Maarten Lamers](#), we ignore all the formalities and talk about how the game is really played, assisted by Media Technology program alumni that landed cool research positions.

This booklet contains experiences from Media Technology MSc alumni that landed a PhD position. We asked them for advice to those who aspire to do the same. Hopefully this inspires you to dream, look forward, take action, and make that first important step in a scientific career: becoming a PhD candidate.

Peter & Maarten, February 2016

Media Technology MSc program, Leiden University



Myriam Traub

PhD candidate at Centrum voor Wiskunde & Informatica, Amsterdam, NL

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I investigate what kind of tool-induced bias digital humanities scholars need to be aware of when performing research tasks in digital archives. Such a bias can be in the data (OCR errors that lead to wrong word counts) or in the software tools (retrieval systems that favor long documents over short ones) and heavily influence the research outcomes. Being able to estimate the impact of these types of bias will allow the scholars to perform “tool criticism” or “data criticism”, the digital variant of the already established concept of source criticism.

Currently, I work on assessing how document features in a large historic newspaper archive influence the accessibility of documents and what role the retrieval model and parameters in the setup play.

How did you land your PhD position?

I landed several positions. :) The first one was pointed out to me by one of my professors and I applied via the “official route”. In the end I didn’t accept it, as it turned out that they weren’t as flexible concerning the topic as I had hoped. The next position I successfully applied for was again the official route: The position was advertised online, I applied, got invited, presented my graduation project to the research group, was interviewed and a week later, I had the offer. The third position was created as a result of a successful cooperation between my employer and a research institute, which I had initiated together with a colleague.

I found my current position on academictransfer.com and applied. At the same time, I found an outdated offer for a PhD position on a website and contacted the professor (my CV attached) if there was a chance that she would offer a similar position any time soon. She replied that she had just landed funding for a position that was very close to what I wanted. Unfortunately, I was not able to go to the interview and I had to turn them down as CWI urged me to accept their offer. I met the professor who would have been my co-supervisor two years later at a conference, and he told me that they really wanted me, so I guess I can count this position as “landed” as well.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

In my research group at CWI we regularly (co-)supervise graduation projects. The students usually get a desk at CWI, which grants them easy access to the group members, but also to other research groups. This is not only good for networking, but also to get an idea how PhD life really is. On top of that, we do our best to make sure that the graduation project results in a published paper, which is a good basis for finding a position. I know at least two cases where a successful graduation project led to a PhD contract.

If you're already working on your graduation project and could use some advice, don't hesitate to get in touch with researchers in the field. Senior researchers are usually very busy, but I've never heard that my fellow PhD students turned down such a request. Many national research programs, such as CATCH or COMMIT/ organize public events on a regular basis. I think this is an ideal occasion to get an idea of current research agendas and network with the people in the field.



Hanna Schraffenberger

PhD candidate at Media Technology group, LIACS, Leiden University, NL

creativecode.org

Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

My PhD research examines the fundamental characteristics and potential manifestations of augmented reality (AR). More specifically, I investigate those unique AR scenarios and experiences that have no equivalent in a purely physical world. My thesis focuses on the multi-modal qualities of the virtual and the real as well as on new forms of interaction between the virtual and the real.

There are two main contributions of my research: On the theoretical side, it provides a better understanding of what augmented reality is and potentially could be. On the practical side, it suggests novel forms of AR that do not imitate or simulate reality, but truly provide new experiences and interactions.

How did you land your PhD position?

During the last period of my MSc study I informed my teachers that I would like to continue doing research and that I am looking for a PhD position. Once a research position became available, they knew I was interested and ultimately, I got the position.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

- Let your teachers and your network know about your plans.
- Check this website regularly: <http://acm-sigchi.1086187.n5.nabble.com/HCI-acm-org-Jobs-f9543.html>

- When applying for positions, sometimes you get the chance to submit your own research proposals. During your study, you might think of many topics that you would like to research further. Make sure you collect your research ideas. When you are applying for positions, revisit your ideas and check whether they are a good basis for a research proposal.



Dr. Marije Kanis

Associate professor at Digital Life Centre, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, NL

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

Positive expressive technologies for social wellness. Technology has advanced to the point where tools can help people meet their social and emotional needs. My thesis argued that computational media offers a great promise for contributing to social wellness through mediating positive affect. Building on social psychology, positive psychology, HCI research and PosiPost applications (custom-built, pre-Twitter like tools), my thesis explored the design and (social) effects of positive expressive technology.

The long version

Drawing on research from the fields of HCI, social and positive psychology, this thesis investigates the design of technologies that encourage the expression of positive emotions. In parallel, it details the deployment of effective design steps to guide, frame and eventually support understandings of positive mental and social usage effects of technology. Different artefacts termed PosiPost have been iteratively developed as exemplars for the discussion and exploration of the ways in which technologies can support positive communication and social sharing. Studies with these technologies have been conducted to explore how these can encourage positive communication and understand how these contribute to social wellness. Specifically, the studies undertaken validate the hypothesis that the sharing of positive emotions as mediated by technology has beneficial social and mental effects.

The first stage of the research examined whether and how social technology can be designed for positive affect. A theoretical framework, named THE Medium model was developed to support the design process. Furthermore, design considerations were produced for technologies that encourage the sharing of positive emotions. This latter involved two studies, paper-based and online, which showed the potential for a prefix based elicitation of positive emotions and drove the design and development of a mobile tool called PosiPost Me (Mobile edition). The second stage of the design process focused on how positive emotions can be mediated by technology in a mobile context and how such tools were used and understood.

The iterative design study process continued, resulting in PosiPost Be, a Bluetooth edition, which allows sharing of positive messages with people in close proximity to explore the social and potential positive effects of contextualizing posiposting by adding location as a factor. Results suggest that by using a prefix-strategy, messages of a positive and mundane nature can be shared and mediated by mobile technology. Analysis of the shared messages provides insights into people's pleasant moments in daily life.

A questionnaire instrument named SPOT was developed and used for the measurement of the effects of sharing pleasant moments with the developed mobile expressive technologies in further detail. The results suggest that lightweight positive expressive technologies can have beneficial social wellness effects. In particular, the study showed significant beneficial effects in reducing depressed feelings and increasing social interest in others. Participants also believed that the mobile PosiPost applications supported social connectedness, socio-pleasure, social and positive awareness, and positive thinking.

How did you land your PhD position?

I wrote my research proposal (common in the UK) in one night, and got hired in a week (at Brunel University, UK). As back then, I was working at Electronic Arts in the UK and did not have much time before the advertised deadline. Though I did not have a lot of time and did not know the university, having previously worked as a research fellow at MIT Media Lab Europe (Dublin), really helped me to engage with a great research community, learn about common practices and build up a modest publication and research portfolio. Looking back, a bit more time to fully engage with the choice of university might have been better. However, my supervisor turned out great, which is crucial when pursuing a PhD. Also, not having been living in the UK for the minimum of four years, made my funding options very limited. Thus, I can consider myself lucky with this opportunity as it was one of the few fully funded.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

- Keep an eye on the academic university and job websites if we have an open research position, that is how we usually advertise.

- Actively write and/or contribute to a research program proposal to obtain your own funding (this is a difficult route, particularly for a beginning researcher. However, if you succeed, it will likely grant you the position of your choice)
- Conduct relevant and reliable research (particularly/ already during your Master's)
- Work on your (academic) English language skills
- ***Publish or perish***
- Publish (so you can go to conferences, get acquainted and learn from the research community)
- Find a (committed) supervisor and topic (with funding!) that you actually like.



Alice Schut

PhD candidate at TU Delft, NL

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

The aim is to develop guidelines and tools (Toolbox) that enable primary school teachers to guide children during the design process in a way that stimulates the development of empathy, of divergent and convergent thinking and their self-direction, and that facilitates communication & collaboration in heterogeneous groups. These skills are important enablers (or disablers if they lack) to reach creative solutions that are valuable for professional designers.

Research questions: *What are the enablers and obstacles in children's development of the key 21st century skills empathy, divergent thinking and convergent thinking and communication & collaboration in heterogeneous groups during design processes?*

How did you land your PhD position?

Too be honest I was never really that interested in getting a PhD. After finishing MT I got a really nice job as a teacher and curriculum developer at a creative MBO. Yet a friend of mine (the lovely Bernd!) sent me a link to the TU Delft website with this PhD position. The description really fitted my background and was related to my graduation research.

I decided to give it a try. Since I already had landed a job in which I was really happy, there was less pressure on writing the letter and going to the interview. I think me being relaxed definitely helped with getting the position. Yet what really helped was that I called the contact listed with the vacancy to ask for information and tell something about my background. I wanted to know if my background would fit, even though I didn't have a direct education in

design. This conversation was really informal from the start and I guess me and my (now) supervisor just clicked instantly. When I put down the phone I already knew I made a really good chance of getting the position. When she contacted me after the interview and told me I got the position she mentioned that they doubting between me and one other person. I am almost sure that my call and me sending a good motivation letter no later than 2 days after the call really secured my position.

So I guess my advice would be to try and get a social connection with the people working there. They will be working with you for at least 4 years. You can be really smart and really awesome, but if you're a pain to work with it just doesn't work out. For me it's the same the other way around. If I would have felt really uncomfortable with them I wouldn't have taking the position, but that's just me. I want to be in a working environment in which I feel comfortable.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

Let people know you are interested in a PhD position. Not just your friends, but also teachers from your electives. I think this can really help you. Then again to me it just sort of happened, so I don't really have good tips and tricks for this one.



Beryl Noë

PhD candidate at Cardiff University, UK

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I've only just started so the topic of my PhD is not completely defined yet, but for the moment it's going towards using a smartphone app to monitor mood states and link that to smartphone use and addiction.

How did you land your PhD position?

My PhD supervisors are the same as my external supervisors I had for my Media Tech graduation project, which I got in contact with through my sister who just started a PhD at that point. They were interested in the research proposal I made for the graduation project and suggested I should apply for a PhD position that was starting half a year later as well. I applied with a research proposal, motivation letter, recommendation letters, interview, and everything, and I got the position. I'm quite lucky since I could directly go from master to PhD (officially, I even had a month of overlap).

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

The graduation project is a great opportunity to explore post-Media Tech options and network (you can go abroad too!). It's also a good 'trial period' for yourself to know if you want to continue doing research and getting to know your supervisors and other research staff (if you didn't know them beforehand) and consider if you would like working with them for another 3 years at least. You also can already show of your enthusiasm and research skills. For me, it was a big advantage that I was planning on getting a publication from my master thesis, prior to the PhD.



David Graus

PhD candidate at University of Amsterdam, NL

graus.co

Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I work in a research group specialized in Information Retrieval (aka “Search engine technology) and machine learning. I am funded by a NWO project named “Semantic Search for E-Discovery,” which is about enabling semantic search (i.e., search “beyond keywords,” through making computers better understand written language) in the domain of E-Discovery (discovering digital (forensic) evidence in text data). My work focuses on information extraction in user-generated content: in practice most digital material used for forensic evidence are email databases, forum postings and online collaboration platforms.

How did you land your PhD position?

Social media! I was actively blogging about my master thesis: every once in a while I posted short updates — usually after meetings with my thesis supervisor. At some point I got a follower who was at the time a postdoc at the University of Amsterdam. He noticed how my project was similar to the work he did in his (my future) research group. When the group had a new opening (a new project got funded), he contacted me to ask whether I was interested in the position. I still had to go through an interview, but it was very informal. I guess the blogging already made my profile clear to them, and they saw a clear match.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

Reach out! As soon as you’ve found a topic/area you’re interested in, it’s easy to find people (geographically close if need be) that do work related to whatever you’re interested in. You can always email/tweet people, ask for meetings,

or simply share thoughts. Talking to “random” people with similar interests or interesting ideas is a practice deeply embedded in academia.

Also, publishing *REALLY* helps. If you manage to publish your master thesis in a respectable venue/journal, you have a very clear proof that you’re interested in/dedicated to academia. In my experience motivation is usually a very strong feature for getting accepted for a position. So: talk and publish — which is actually quite an accurate description of what you’ll be doing the next four years during your PhD, too :-).



Jan Jaap van Assen

PhD candidate at Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, DE

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I work as a PhD student at the department of Experimental Psychology at the Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany. I'm studying the perception of liquids and in particular the perception of viscosity. We humans are not perfect but very fast in visually identifying and estimating properties of deformable materials like liquids. We can do this despite the highly mutable shapes of liquids, which are visibly influenced by both intrinsic properties (e.g. viscosity, velocity) and extrinsic forces (e.g. gravity, object interactions). The physics behind it is very complex so it is safe to assume we don't use an 'inverse optics' approach. I'm trying to model which visual cues of optical and mechanical properties of liquids we use to make these judgments. The final goal is to validate this model by 'teaching' it to computational systems to identify a wide range of liquids and even synthesise new liquids which perceptually behave similar.

How did you land your PhD position?

I found out about my current job through my graduation supervisor Sylvia Pont from TU Delft. She is part of an EU funded Marie Curie Initial Training Network which started when I graduated and job positions had to be filled (nice timing). She strongly urged me to apply for the job at the lab in Giessen which of the open positions would fit me best. Because she was member of the network I had a strong character reference (together with a nice reference letter from Fons Verbeek) and was quickly hired by Roland Fleming, the network coordinator. My experience is that professors try to fill these positions first through their own networks with people they know who will vouch for the candidate.

I don't know anything about creating a PhD position. I think it is quite hard as a master student to be responsible for gathering your own funding except if you have a nice professor you like to work with that can co-write on the grant proposals.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

There are two ways of getting an existing PhD position, the supervisor already knows you and is aware of you and your work, or you know of a position and make the supervisor aware of you and your work (can be through a third party, in my case Sylvia Pont). Here in Giessen most positions are filled with master students who were already here and got in the spotlight by performing well during their graduation project. Therefore I think it is very important to graduate on something where you would also like to spend a three/four/five year PhD on. If you then excel in this graduation project you get noticed and have a nice project in your portfolio that could give you the advantage over other candidates.

Have a clear website with an overview of you capabilities through projects. A CV is normally not really speaking to the imagination and not communicating a complete insight of your capabilities. If the person who should hire you can also visit a website with descriptions/videos of some of the extremely cool projects you worked on during your Media Technology master they get a better idea of your capabilities. So make of each project short reports with photos and video like with the NMNT class (if they still do that) and place them online (be selective and pick a few you want to highlight). I also added my graduation paper to my application. Nice that we do it in paper format and not a full thesis now they might actually look at it.

To be aware of open positions on stuff you like to work on is quite hard. You can be selective and for instance check if certain authors of papers you liked have open positions in their lab. Look here for the last author which is normally (in my field) the supervising professor with the funding for positions. Another way is to look which editors and

reviewers work for a journal of a specific field you like (often mentioned on the webpage of the journal). These are normally scientist with high credibility in their field, running their own labs and have access to funding.

A less selective approach is to find certain mailing lists in a field you like and sign up for them. One example is the *visionlist* (visionscience.com/mailman/listinfo/visionlist). Through email around five PhD positions get announced here per week in the field of vision research covering backgrounds in psychology, neuroscience, physics, mathematics and computer science, plenty to pick from.

The luck factor is mostly the timing. There must be funding and an open position available you like at the moment you are looking for a position. The rest you have control over.



Dr. Alwin de Rooij

Assistant professor at Tilburg Center for Cognition and Communication, Tilburg University, NL

alwinderooij.com

Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I developed and tested experimentally two novel approaches to interactive systems that can be used to influence the link between positive emotions, cognitive flexibility, and idea generation. These approaches can be used to help people to get more out of their own creative capabilities.

How did you land your PhD position?

I wanted to do my own project which limited options for landing PhD position quite a bit. First, I worked with the media technology program to prepare an NWO funding bid. However, we ran into some issues that made it unlikely to develop a successful funding bid (e.g. a lack of potential business project partners in NL).

Second, I tried via vacancy websites and my own network, but that only led to offers on existing projects (and generally nothing I thought would be worth spending 4 years of my life on).

Third, I found an ad on the [SIGCHI forum](#) about a competition for fully funded PhD positions at City University London. I entered that competition with my own research proposal and made sure that the project I wanted to do fitted with some of the departments they had. The proposal was well received so I landed a PhD position there at the Centre for Creativity in Professional Practice and the Centre for Human-Computer Interaction Design.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

If you don't mind being on someone else's project your best chances are your network. Most people I know go from their MSc to a PhD position because of MSc supervisors or someone in their supervisors' network. Choosing a supervisor that actively and successfully pursues research grants is going to help you a lot.

If you try to land a PhD position via job ads and/or competitions there are many people to compete with. But it's not impossible! However, you need to tick all the boxes, so publish during your studies, develop a great portfolio, graduate top of your class, have some teaching experience, and - you need to find something that makes you stand out from all the others - probably your innovative and interdisciplinary ideas!

Finally, persist! It took me over a year to find a great PhD position that I really wanted to spend 4 years on.



Robin de Lange

PhD candidate at Media Technology group, LIACS, Leiden University, NL

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Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

In my current research I focus on the educational possibilities offered by developments in Virtual Reality. Part of my method is a research course where we explore this potential by developing VR prototypes.

How did you land your PhD position?

Part of my graduation research was a PhD proposal, instead of a more traditional paper. From the start I wanted to continue my research as a PhD student. After an attempt to get funding from Microsoft I became a 'buitenpromovendus' (loosely translating to 'external PhD candidate') and started my research part-time. Since then I've received a small grant from the LUF and the Gratama foundation.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

I think the possibility of being a 'buitenpromovendus' is often overlooked. All you really need is professor who is willing to be your promotor. This does of course requires other sources of income. I think the best advice would be to collaborate with many different scientists during Media Tech projects and just reach out to people who you find interesting.



Zane Kripe

PhD candidate at Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Leiden University, NL

www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/staffmembers/zane-kripe

Describe your PhD research in a couple of sentences

I research the culture of technology startups in Singapore - how people come up with ideas for their startups, how they try to build them, search for funding and what meaning do they find in the process. At a more theoretical level I research how digital economy relies on particular assumptions about the future.

How did you land your PhD position?

Officially I applied for a PhD position, wrote a research proposal, had an interview, and got the PhD position. It was part of a research project that the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology had just gotten funding for and they had an open call for the PhD candidates.

More unofficially, a professor whom I knew encouraged me to apply for that position because he thought it related to my interests and skills. The reason he thought so was because I had followed a course he gave earlier. I had chosen it as my elective during the second year of Media Technology. I really loved the course - I felt like the literature and each class were the highlights of my week. I was certain that the field of technology, culture and society was something I would like to explore more after Media Technology. Aside from being active student in the class, I also discussed with the professor the possibility to do another MA in Anthropology. Instead he suggested the PhD call. If he hadn't encouraged me I would have not even thought I could apply for that.

Do you have any tips and tricks for Media Technology students?

Aside from following forums and academic job advertisements, if you have an area or topics that you are interested in, then pro-actively explore it - attend courses, events, conferences and workshops related to it.

If the conferences are expensive to attend, email the organizers and ask if they need volunteers. This way you'll not only know what is relevant thematically, but more importantly, get to know the people who are also working in this field.

From there on different options can be developed - either you find the collaborators to write and submit a project for funding to institutions like NWO, or you find that someone is searching for PhDs for an existing project that has already received funding. Either way, through this you will already be involved in doing the thing you like. PhD is just one way of doing it.

A word of advice - don't underestimate the role of personal relations not only in getting the PhD position, but also having the necessary support to finish the PhD.



And finally

Thanks to our alumni who kindly sent us their experiences and advice! May the force be with you in your scientific careers.