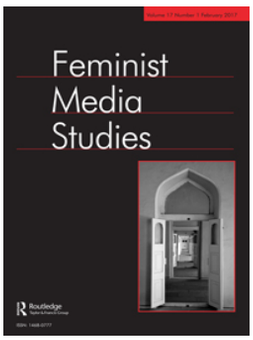

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Feminist reception studies in a post-audience age: returning to audiences and everyday life

Andre Cavalcante[a], Andrea Press[b] and Katherine Sender[c]

[a]Departments of Media Studies and Women, Gender & Sexuality, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA; [b]Departments of Media Studies and Sociology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA; [c]Department of Communication Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

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Introduction

Joke O. K. E. Hermes recently wrote that "Qualitative audience studies have arguably been the best possible expression of feminist engagement in media studies" (2014, 61). It was the recognition that feminist audience research has been constitutive of feminist media studies that led us to edit this special issue, which re-assesses the role of feminist audience study in contemporary media research. Each of us is acutely aware of the strength of the feminist audience tradition, which has been an important influence on the research each of us has produced. Yet in our view the new media environment differs in profound ways from the media environment that gave rise to what has become known as "feminist audience study." The relationship between media and time, and the collapse of what scholars labeled the "separate spheres" between the genders, has shifted so radically that we can no longer think neatly about "women's" daytime media, or Tania Modleski's seminal notion of "women's time" (1982), both of which gave impetus to the paradigmatic early studies of soap operas and women's reception of them.

Concomitantly, we noticed that audience studies had become increasingly less visible in the pages of *Feminist Media Studies,* a paucity that represents the field of feminist media studies more generally. Carolyn M. Byerly (2016), for example, found that at a large, international gender and media studies conference in 2014, only 8 percent of presentations were based on audience research. In this special issue, we set out to prioritize feminist media audience research in the context of rapidly transforming media environments, to investigate novel methods to approach new media engagements, and to reflect on how the tradition continues to be distinctive and important in the burgeoning field of feminist media study.

Feminist audience studies' interrogation of everyday life

In 1941, Herta Herzog published what is often thought of as the first feminist audience study, the classic study of female listeners of daytime radio soap operas published as "On Borrowed Experience: An Analysis of Listening to Daytime Sketches." The first of its kind, the study

CONTACT Andre Cavalcante amc7jc@virginia.edu

centered on the role media plays in the everyday lives of ordinary women. From the one hundred interviews she conducted with women from New York, predominantly housewives, Herzog unveiled how listening to soap operas, or what her participants called "the stories," served diverse functions and offered various gratifications or pleasures, depending upon the model of reception one uses. As the title of her study suggests, Herzog maintained that listeners *borrow* the extraordinary experiences of characters on soap operas in order to, for example, feel something typically absent in their lives such as excitement or desire. Soap operas afforded listeners simple pleasures, "an element of adventure in their daily drudgery" (Herta Herzog 2004, 149). Although Herzog's analysis was steeped in psychoanalytic assumptions, trivialized the soap opera genre, and perceived its female listeners as naïve, it was nevertheless pioneering. It opened a window onto a domain overlooked by academics of the time, mainly the housewife's daily round, replete with its patterns (the routine of housework), pleasures (stolen moments to enjoy a cigarette and the radio), and frustrations (boredom and monotony). This was the study's hidden script, for it was as much about listening to the radio as it was about women's daytime everyday life. In fact, the study reveals that the two are essentially intertwined, for it was through the women's narration of their experiences with media that the texture of everyday life became intelligible.

In Herzog's time, everyday life was often profoundly gendered. For decades, feminist theorists have discussed the division of life into the "public" and the "private," ascribing the domain of the masculine to the former, and the feminine to the latter (Nancy Fraser 1985, 1990; Linda J. Nicholson 1983, 2013; Iris Marion Young 1985). Feminist media studies began during the theorization of this divide between public and private. Given the nature of radio in her time, Herzog's radio soap operas were listened to exclusively at home, in private, during the daytime. This was the domestic, private space within which, it was thought, many women of the time lived their lives—though we now know that this is a class- and race-specific assumption. Nevertheless, for early feminist media scholars, women's everyday life was visualized as taking place in a profoundly different space than that of men, who more often lived their daily lives within the public space of paid labor. Though women labored, of course, even those in the paid labor force worked an unpaid "second shift" of housework and childcare which took place within the private space of the home (and many still do, according to the research; cf. Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung [2012] and Jerry A. Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson [2004]).

Since Herzog's study, everyday life has continued to be fertile ground for feminist and audience research and theory (Ien Ang 1985; Jacqueline Bobo 1995; Julie D'acci 1994; Dorothy Hobson 1982; Andrea L. Press 1991; Janice Radway 1984). One of the seminal texts of early feminist media audience studies built similarly on this assumption of the separate spheres. Like Herzog, Radway's (1984) ethnographic study of female romance readers found that women used their consumption of the romance novel—a profoundly gendered media product, said to appeal primarily to women—to both claim their own private leisure time within a private sphere that represented enormous labor for housewives and mothers, and to concretize their admiration for the strong female heroines who predominated in their favorite books. Romances, previously denigrated as the trash brainless housewives consumed in reflection of their lack of critical thought, were thus re-appropriated by feminist theorists as tools of escape from this drudgery.

The success of Radway's work precipitated an abundance of similarly inspired studies which collectively became known as the tradition of "feminist audience studies." Radway's

publication in 1984 coincided with the rise of feminist research in the social sciences and the humanities. Often this meant simply including women as research subjects, since they had rarely been included before. Sometimes it meant employing more interpretive as opposed to more objective methods, on the theory that "difference" needed interpretation to be understood. Some even went so far as to write about "feminist methodology" as a more sensitive employing of a variety of interpretive methods to study personal issues thought particular to women and other minorities (Shulamit Reinharz and Lynn Davidman 1992).

In this new tradition of feminist audience studies, genres thought to be preferred by women were newly studied. Television soap operas, for example, were widely studied. And the division of television studies into daytime soaps (Mary Ellen Brown 1994) and prime-time soap opera programming (Hobson 1982; Sonia Livingstone Livingstone 2013; Andrea L. Press 1990) reveals a continuing tension in the feminist audience literature between those who think of everyday life in terms of feminist theory's division between the public and private spheres, and those who recognize that these spheres are and have always been porous, with both men and women weaving in and out of each realm. Some feminist audience research investigated television through this lens (David Morley 1986; Press 1991), using the methods pioneered by Hobson and Radway, but complicating the division between male and female media spheres. Andrea L. Press and Elizabeth R. Cole (1999) built upon earlier feminist media work (Fraser 1985; Angela McRobbie 1978) to investigate a gendered "semi-public" sphere for women, within which they debated political and moral issues such as abortion with friends, family, and others, but often within what were considered private spaces.

As the discipline evolved, feminist audience research also began to place the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities under its purview, leading the way for the practice of queer audience research. In the 1990s, the surge of a radical queer politics motivated by the AIDS epidemic and systemic homophobia and the development of queer theory energized media scholars' interest in the work of queer audiences. Queer audience research shared feminists' interests in relations of social power, the politics of sex and gender, and the theorization of public and private spheres, but more fervently foregrounded the question of sexuality, waged a more muscular critique against structures of heteronormativity and the gender binary, and underscored the prevalence of and necessity for ideological resistance. Scholars noted that while throughout media history queer audiences had engaged with texts in complicated and creative ways, mobilizing a queer way of looking or a "queer gaze," queer theory offered a set of theoretical and discursive tools to talk about this activity. Alexander Doty (1993) argued that queer audiences had always performed queer readings of texts, reading "against the grain" and generating transgressive interpretations of media not produced with them in mind (also see Larry Gross 2001). He also argued that queer sensibility was not peripheral to media culture, but rather existed at its heart. One did not have to gaze too deeply to find queerness in popular culture.

Perhaps most evidently, queer audience research highlighted, even celebrated, the role of resistant readings. A central tenet of queer theory, the notion of resistance became a primary lens through which to examine queer spectatorship. Looking at queer slash fiction, Frederik Dhaenens, Sofie Van Bauwel, and Daniel Biltereyst (2008) argued the practice of queer audience resistance is a "politics of transgression," one that generates pleasure and hinges on "subversive or nonhegemonic articulation" (2008, 344). However, some scholars

suggested that outright opposition is not always tenable or desirable. Looking at the work of queer audiences of color to uncover how they survived in a media environment organized not only around heterosexuality but also whiteness, José Esteban Muñoz (1999) advanced the idea of "disidentification." As a complicated reception practice employed by queer audiences of color, disidentification "neither opts to assimilate within a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, [it] is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (2008, 11). It is to desire and enjoy dominant media culture, but to do so tactically and "with a difference" (2008, 15). Disidentification offered a "third way" of discerning queer audience engagement within the context of an everyday life fully organized around media and communications technologies where flat out resistance is not always feasible. More recently, scholars such as Andre Cavalcante (2016) have begun to examine the phenomenology of queer audience engagement, looking to develop "a theoretical framework for thinking through quieter, less heroic, and less politically charged forms of media use, those that often go overlooked by researchers" (2016, 111).

The challenge of the contemporary media environment

In the current media moment, researchers are returning to the meanings of media and "everyday life" that were so important in early feminist audience study. To speak about everyday life is to engage with a complex knot of meanings and definitions. The term was initially denaturalized by Henri Lefebvre (1991) who saw our taken-for-granted routines as offering comfort and predictability within the industrial rhythms of the modern world. Feminist scholars recognized the gendered potential of this for understanding media reception. Everyday life is that inevitable space from which social, cultural, and political activity begins, "the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavor" (Rita Felski 1999). Defined by the dynamics of repetition and familiarity, it is a routine sequence of taken-for-granted experiences. In fact, in order for everyday life to be livable, it cannot require constant and arduous thought and reflexivity, and must, at least on some level, be felt as automatic and granted. However, this unconscious, routinized nature of everyday life is both accommodating and problematic. For example, the classic feminist critique—energized by Simone de Beauvoir's (1952) "second sex," Betty Friedan's (1963) "problem that has no name," Audre Lorde's (1984) "sister outsider," and Dorothy Smith's (1987) "everyday world as problematic"—emerged directly from women's and men's conflicting experiences in everyday life. It is from within this rich earth of everyday experience—a contradictory assemblage of structure/agency, pleasure/pain, routine/rupture, and the ordinary/extraordinary—that audiences engage with media and communications technologies.

Early feminist scholarship moved from Hobson's focus on radio to a preoccupation and interest in the medium of television, which feminists placed at the center of everyday experience. Television scholar Roger Silverstone (1994) notes that television became a central feature of our daily experience in the late twentieth century because it fit so well into the temporal and spatial rhythms of everyday life. Modleski (1982) links daytime viewing, particularly of television soap operas, to the fragmented rhythm of housework. For Paddy Scannell (1996), television and radio were constitutive of everyday life because they structured our daily concerns and organized our shared world. As "world disclosing" (Scannell 1996, 161), broadcasting brought the public world into our private living rooms. Lynn Spigel's groundbreaking (1992) work noted the inherently gendered way television was defined and

introduced into the American daily round. She argued that television, as *the* defining symbol of post-war domestic life, undermined paternal authority, both challenged and reinscribed conventional roles for women, and generated consumer fantasies along gendered lines. Television became central to media scholars' thinking because it offered audiences ontological security (a feeling of comfort and safety in our own skin and in the world as it is); acted as a transitional object (something that supported us through our various stages of life); and could be seamlessly integrated into our cultural myths and social rituals (Silverstone 1994).

However, the post-war era, defined as it was by television and radio, has given way to a new media environment, one where the everyday world is now fully mediatized (Stig Hjarvard 2013). Earlier feminist scholarship understood the consumption of television and radio to occur primarily in specifically gendered spaces, an assumption now open to question. Contemporary audience scholars must be prepared for a new media environment in which our earlier equation of specific media with particular "spheres" of life such as the public and private no longer makes sense. As we seamlessly and habitually migrate across media platforms, we increasingly live a "media life" where "we do not live *with*, but *in*, media" (Mark Deuze 2012, xiii). The technological character of our media life is defined by portability, interactivity, and ubiquity, along with convergence, embeddedness, and "taken-for-grantedness" (Richard Ling 2012). Though media consumption is still gendered, we no longer employ the easy spatial equation of public/private, male/female that characterized earlier work. In fact, even the public sphere has been profoundly altered by new media, which introduced a "flow" of private and public concerns into the media experience of most users of any gender.

In this environment it is fitting that scholarship would turn toward everyday life as a privileged site of audience research and discern the role media plays in how we act out our everyday lives and subjectivities. As central components to work, leisure, and domestic life, the products of the new media ecosystem further demand and multiply our performance of self through voice, text, and image. We create an army of second selves in the digital world, distribute them across space and time, and watch others do the same. In this way, we are more fully and frequently engaged in the social processes of performing and audiencing, of self-presentation and spectatorship in everyday life (Brian Longhurst 2007). Media production is no longer the domain of the media industries proper, and media reception is no longer confined to a specific place and time. Rather, performing and audiencing happen constantly. We take selfies on the subway, and consume streaming video standing in line at the coffee shop. Gender is no longer a determinant of this behavior, although gendered differences are still observable and important.

The stuff of our everyday lives is increasingly becoming the content of our media. As more of us enter into "media life," Graeme Turner (2010) argues we have reached a "demotic turn," where the participation of ordinary people in media culture is historically unprecedented and where audience behavior is inherently interactive. Turner is careful to qualify that the demotic turn in the media industries and in our everyday lives is not necessarily or inherently "democratic." Its myriad consequences are complicated and contingent, and fail to disclose any politically progressive or coherent pattern.

This special issue directs a critical lens toward these evolving trends in media and everyday life and questions their feminist and queer implications. For example, it examines the ways the film *Fifty Shades of Grey* failed to realize the new media's potential to integrate the

everyday audiences they represent into texts. It shines a light on the ways blogs, as everyday resources, help parents discursively negotiate the pressures and politics of raising children, adding to the previously highly gendered private realm of mothering a public dimension. It uncovers how online gossip, as a form of everyday talk, is deployed to both queer and further cement hetero-patriarchal norms in Chinese society. Altogether, this issue investigates the extent to which emergent media forms amplify our gendered and sexual relations in everyday life, challenge them, and introduce new ones.

The research we present here shows that, however highly interrogated a subject, gender remains relevant and important in media audience study, which continues to draw from the distinguished tradition of qualitative feminist audience research to shed light on consumption and interpretation of media in a new era. The same environment that has demanded a reconsideration of media use in everyday life also invites us to review the methods we employ to study this. How have contemporary approaches to reception built upon feminist foundations in audience research, adapted and applied to new media environments? What opportunities and challenges do these new media offer to feminist scholars researching contemporary audience formations and practices? Drawing on evolving contributions from feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory, new media practices demand innovative and ethical approaches to audience research. This volume showcases some highly original methods that address reception in increasingly complex media environments.

Revisiting qualitative methods in feminist audience research

Qualitative research methods have been seen to be both particularly illuminating for and ethically sympathetic with feminist media concerns. These methods have traditionally included fan letters (see, for example, Ang 1985), in-depth interviews (e.g., Radway 1984), telephone interviews (S. Elizabeth Bird 1992), ethnography (McRobbie 1978), and focus groups (Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis 1992; Press and Cole 1999; Radway 1984). Researchers paid attention to both text and context—using ethnographic methods to explore how people make media content meaningful to them both as content and in their domestic, familial, and other social relationships (Ann Gray 1992; Morley 1986). Methodological concerns reflected broader debates in the field, such as: How can we creatively investigate the relationships among textual determination, polysemy, and resistive readings? How can we discover how audiences make texts meaningful? How can we minimize the researcher effects inherent in participatory methods? Additionally, what constituted "feminist" methods was by no means taken for granted: What does it mean to bring a feminist politics to audiences' media reception? Are there particular ethical dilemmas that feminist commitments pose? (see, for example, Reinharz and Davidman 1992; Judith Stacey 1988).

New media do not dispense with these early questions, but frame them within the specific conditions of our contemporary media landscape. The growing complexities of convergence culture (Henry Jenkins 2006) require new ways of thinking about audiences and innovative approaches to conducting research. Our media landscape introduces amazing riches for audience researchers, but with these riches come challenges and responsibilities. The major methodological opportunities and dilemmas for audience researchers include new media's ubiquity, its multi-sited distribution, and its global spread; intersectional, reflexive, and interactive audiences; and questions of privacy and informed consent in online settings. Below we consider feminist approaches to these novel conditions and introduce some creative

methodological responses to them, including those in the works presented in this special issue.

John Ellis's (2000) observation that we have experienced a radical transformation in television availability in the West from scarcity before the 1980s to abundance since the 2000s can be extended to media more generally. This is a boon but also a challenge for audience researchers; never has there been so much content, both in terms of "texts" and in terms of freely available audience-generated data about their media interactions. This massive availability brings with it primary questions about the "field" in field studies, in both spatial and temporal aspects. Where is the field? When and where do we study people's engagement with media? This abundance requires judicious delimitation through careful sampling methods that both capture the range of texts and contexts necessary to address research questions, without submitting to the temptation of "mass archiving" (Annette N. Markham 2013). Sheer volumes of materials do not guarantee diversity within them, and feminist scholars continue to pay attention to selection and focus in order to access gendered dimensions of power and experience. For example, Annemarie Navar-Gill (forthcoming) adopted a mixed-method strategy in her study of women-focused shows' writers' room twitter activity during one month in 2015. She used an automated coding process to identify major themes among sixteen thousand tweets and then focused on these themes in her fine-grained qualitative analysis.

Connected to the abundance and ubiquity of contemporary media is its multi-sitedness: audiences connect with transmedia content across a range of platforms. What are the boundaries of the field? The movements of itinerant audiences across an increasingly complex and seemingly infinite network of new media sites challenge us to consider how we trace these mobilities in rich and nuanced ways. As Andrea Press and Sonia Livingstone (2006) write, "filling in a survey to record an evening's viewing is tricky, but by no means as tricky as recording and interpreting an evening's surfing or chat" (186). Markham (2013) advocates "a more flexible notion of the field is one that allows us to stop thinking about it as an object, place, or whole—and start thinking more about movement, flow, and process" (2013, 438). How gendered audiences are mobile across different media platforms, particularly those of social media, is a fruitful approach to the multi-sitedness of our contemporary media scene (see, for example, Shayla Thiel-Stern 2013).

Multi-sited media environments are no longer contained by national boundaries, demanding that we consider how to approach the global spread of media content. Radhika Parameswaran (2013) argues that audience research should be part of broader intra- and interdisciplinary investigations of the impact of globalizing media systems, including debates about "cultural imperialism, consumerism, neoliberalism, hybridity, postcolonial class formations, gender and nationalism, emerging markets, anti-globalization movements, and multiculturalism" (2013, 10) Yet Sonia Livingstone (2003) argues that studying across cultures is hard to do well, not least because of cultural sensitivities and unequal power relationships among researchers and participants and/or collaborating researchers in different places. For example, Bryan C. Taylor and Thomas R. Lindlof (2016) discuss Aziz Douai's study of Moroccan news media audiences and his struggle to recruit women participants. Douai reflects that Moroccan women were reluctant to meet him in the café he used for interviews because to do so would be socially stigmatizing. Transnational audience research can illuminate the gendered dimensions of globalizing media networks at the same time as posing methodological challenges that illuminate structures of power that underpin local customs.

The growing complexities with which media use and everyday routines are becoming integrated demand that audience researchers reconsider the ethical challenges posed by increasingly slippery public/private spheres online. In some senses, the lower barriers to privacy and media users' familiarity with circulating relatively intimate materials in public settings is a boon for researchers (Thiel-Stern 2013). Yet the shift from the living room to more private spaces of media engagement make contextual field methods, "hanging out," more awkward (Fabienne Darling-Wolf 2013). Online spaces offer new ways to observe social interactions in and with media, for example lurking (Markham 2013). But the boundaries can be very unclear between what is considered private and public online, not only legally but among the members of a particular site, raising issues of consent, anonymity, and personal and social consequences. Parameswaran outlines

> the ethical considerations that must guide the research process, beginning with entering and monitoring chat groups and forums, procuring informed consent, ensuring a fair and dialogic exchange with the respondents, willingness to change research designs, accepting withdrawals and refusals from participants at any stage, and maintaining vigilance to protect subjects' anonymity. (2013, 9)

The power-inflected dimensions of these considerations gain additional weight for researchers committed to a feminist ethics in research.

Communication scholars have also considered methodological approaches to explore intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1991) by investigating the complex interactions among identity categories, media reception, and power. Some early audience researchers investigated dynamics among gender and race (for example, Bobo 1995), gender, class, and age (Press 1991), and race and class (Jhally and Lewis 1992). The plethora of data available for multiply-situated audiences offer new opportunities to audience researchers to methodologically address audiences' intersectional identifications in their textual interactions. Olena Hankivsky and Daniel Grace (2015), for example,

> conceptualize … a flexible, adaptable, and critical research strategy for moving beyond single or typically favored categories of analysis (e.g., sex, gender, race, and class) to consider simultaneous interactions between different aspects of social identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, ability, immigration status, and religion) and systems and processes of oppression and domination (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism). (2)

They suggest various methodological approaches that look at the dynamic interactions among systems of power, including institutional, group, and interpersonal contexts. Even with this welcome focus on increasingly nuanced approaches to audiences and identity position, it is notable that there is still very little research that addresses men, particularly white, privileged men, as audiences. Parameswaran (2013) notes a couple of rare exceptions, and includes a couple more in her audience studies volume, but intersectionality most often is used to describe multiply marginalized positions, leaving privilege unmarked.

New media contexts thus offer both opportunities and challenges for feminist research through changing contours of "the field," more interactive, nuanced, and reflexive ideas of "the audience," and more complex relations between these and with our own subject-positions as researchers. To what extent can traditional qualitative approaches to studying reception be repurposed in new media contexts?

Familiar methods, such as immersive fieldwork and focus group interviews have proven productive especially when considering the everyday contexts for media use. Mary L. Gray

(2009) undertook a deep participant observation study to investigate how rural queer youth mobilized media in conjunction with other local resources to fashion a community, however fragile, in which members could find solidarity and support. Cavalcante (2016) conducted in-depth interviews and engaged in participant observation of discussion and support groups to examine the role of media and communications technologies in the everyday lives of transgender people. In this special issue, Robyn Swink uses focus group research to address how participants wrestled with the tensions between feminism and humor in contemporary women-led comedy shows. Katarina Symes re-examines the male gaze in her textual analysis of *Orange is the New Black*. She reconsiders spectator theory to argue that the show's main protagonist, Piper Chapman, offers a "heterosexual proxy" for straight women audiences to explore same-sex desire.

Some researchers have considered the uses of conventional ethnographic methods in the context of new media environments. Radhike Gajjala, for example, asks, "Can we transpose concerns that arise out of real-life (RL) anthropology or face-to-face ethnography onto the study of virtual communities without considering seriously the very important differences in the nature of face-to-face interaction and virtual interaction?" (2004, 8). Audience scholars have devised novel ways of adapting field methods to new media environments. Adrienne Shaw (2015) spent time watching her participants play single-player video games, sometimes playing with or alongside them as they chatted, in order to understand their identifications—or not—with video game avatars. In audience research focusing on online communities—message boards, for example—Press and Livingstone (2006) note that although these come with the disadvantage of having very little contextual information in which to place participants, "the advantage is that online ethnographies are based on texts which are already written, as opposed to interview transcripts or participant observation field notes generated by the research process" (2006, 188). In this special issue, Jing Jamie Zhao creatively utilizes online gossip to investigate Chinese women's attraction to Danish model Freja Beha Erichsen in the context of Chinese values of femininity, fidelity, and family. Linda Steiner and Carolyn Bronstein analyze comments posted to controversial parenting online articles that struggled with risk, choice, and safety within the context of neoliberal parenting. Rather than treating the blogs and comments according to norms for textual analysis, on one hand, or interviews, on the other, both articles explore online content as specific cultural forms—for example, a moderated discussion not natural conversation.

Media scholars also consider novel affordances for data gathering that new media offer. Markham (2013), for example, asks, "Photography and sketching are traditional methods, but how can we reimagine these activities in social media contexts? How might we combine webcams, video recordings, screengrabs, or video screencaptures with written notes to build visually rich renderings of what is happening?" (2013, 441). In her study of the production and posting of selfies included in this special issue, Katie Warfield presents an innovative use of technologies to transform photo-elicitation in the service of self-reflexivity. Not only does she ask participants to take a series of selfies, she was interested in how participants understood the moment of image-production. In order to lessen the impact of her presence she set up a Google chat conversation while she sat and watched in another location. Warfield thus adapted conventional methods of photo-elicitation to explore the performance of selfhood in the context of what Gillian Rose calls "the hypervisuality of much contemporary everyday life" (2014, 26).

Some scholars have argued that the interactive, multi-sited nature of contemporary media engagements call for multiple and mixed methods to triangulate these increasingly complex media landscapes. Investigating gender and sexual policing on the popular website, the Anonymous Confession Board (ACB), Andrea L. Press and Francesca Tripodi (2014) found that participants were unwilling to discuss in interviews their activities there. The researchers turned to an online anonymous survey to access participants' feminist responses to posts, and followed up with a focus group to further deepen their understandings of posters' motivations and reservations regarding ACB. Katherine Sender (2012) triangulated among reality television series, online message board posts, online surveys, and telephone interviews with fans to understand the various kinds of reflexivity that audiences brought to their understanding of the makeover show genre. Others have advocated mixed methods to address the multilayered experiences of intersectionality. Hankivsky and Grace (2015), for example, recommend combining quantitative approaches that can accommodate large and heterogeneous samples with more nuanced qualitative methods that, together, can understand the multiplicative impacts of various axes of marginalization. To investigate the complex intersections of race, class, and religion among women viewers of lifestyle television, Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood (2012) designed a multi-staged project that included micro-analysis of verbal and physical responses to watching shows (text-in-action), individual interviews, and focus group sessions. Through this multi-method approach, Skeggs and Wood found subtle differences in the articulation of "value" among the participants that reflected their intersectional experiences. In this special issue, Francesca Tripodi investigated BDSM (bondage, dominance, discipline, submission, sadism, and masochism) practitioners' critical responses to the representation of dominance, submission, and consent in the wildly popular *50 Shades of Grey* (E. L. James 2012) series. She accessed the group's ambivalent reception of the novel and new-comers' interests in BDSM by combining participant observation with a local BDSM social group, interviews with its members (some via Skype), and an analysis of discussions on online forums.

Just as the media we investigate aren't wholly new, nor are the structures in which these are produced (economic, industrial, technological, and so on); indeed, Jenkins (2006) notes that as media have become more interactive and perhaps democratic for audiences, media industry consolidation has also intensified. Similarly, the methods we apply to the phenomenon of audiences aren't wholly new, nor are the ethical considerations we need to keep in mind in our design and follow-through of research. The ubiquity, multi-sitedness, and porousness of what we can consider media "fields," along with new forms of audience activity and reflexivity offer feminist researchers new ways to investigate the gendered dimensions of media use. As with "old" media, we need in new media environments to employ feminist approaches at each stage of research: topic, context, design, recruitment, method, analysis, and distribution. Yet digital media landscapes demand that we review the ethical dimensions of feminist audience studies, including the nature of our involvement with participants, the desirability and possibility of collaboration, whose voice we hear and who has the last word, and how to protect vulnerable participants. By doing so we can reaffirm our methodological commitment to examining at all stages of research the gendered and intersectional structures of power and privilege that shape the contexts we investigate, our interactions with participants, and our writing and distribution of research. This special issue presents some of the most innovative work in audience research that centers gender and feminism to understand the changing dynamics of reception in our new media landscape.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Andre Cavalcante is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies and Women, Gender & Sexuality at the University of Virginia. His research and teaching interests include audience studies, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues in media culture, and the practice of everyday life. His forthcoming book examines the role of media and communications technologies in the everyday lives of transgender people. His work can be seen in the journals *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *Television & New Media*, and *Communication, Culture & Critique*. E-mail: amc7jc@virginia.edu

Andrea L. Press is the William R. Kenan Jr Professor of Media Studies and Sociology at the University of Virginia, where she has served as Executive Director of the Virginia Film Festival and founding chair of Media Studies. Her research and teaching focus on feminism, gender, social class, film, and media audiences. She has published several books including *Women Watching Television, Speaking of Abortion, The New Media Environment,* and the forthcoming collections *Handbook of Contemporary Feminism* and *Media and Class,* and she edits *The Communication Review.* Her current research focuses on the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of feminism in popular media. E-mail: apress@virginia.edu

Katherine Sender is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan. Her research and teaching specialize in gender, sexuality, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer media. Her research areas span television, audiences, cultural production, consumer culture, and globalization. Her current research project focuses on sex museums as sites to investigate transnational sexual mobilities. E-mail: Ksender@umich.edu

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