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Introduction: Streaming and the re-education of the audience

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In May 1999, in an early digital experiment with feature-length films, Edward Vilga's low-budget neo-noir *Dead Broke* premiered simultaneously at New York's Tribeca Film Center via digital file and on Ifilm.net, an early online film distributor, for users equipped with Windows Media Player. Unfortunately, all did not go as planned. Critics complained about glitches in the theatrical presentation that included the then familiar herky-jerky images and muddy soundtracks that ensued from uneven delivery of the compressed data involved in transmitting large data files. Meanwhile, many logging on to Ifilm.net to watch the movie were similarly vexed – either unable to stream the film or subjected to other technical difficulties resulting in a heavily pixelated picture. One month later and with more success at least on one of these platforms, George Lucas arranged for the digital projection of *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace* in a handful of specially-equipped theaters and then went on to shoot *Star Wars: Episode 2 – Attack of the Clones* (2002) using high-definition digital cinematography. Uncertain commentators asked whether such pioneering experiments might signal the dawn of the digital era in cinema production, distribution and exhibition (Nickell 1999). Twenty years later, we know that the answer to this particular question is a resounding yes.

More broadly speaking, traditional media industries like music, television and film have each had their own complicated history with respect to the emergence and increasingly pervasive dominance of digital technology. This includes media streaming – the continuous flow of audio and video data from the Internet to computers and digital devices – as it enables consumers ideally to have immediate access to listening to or viewing media content. During a rocky period in the 1990s and early 2000s, traditional media industries contested the online streaming of content (notably in the suit filed by major record companies against file-sharing music service Napster), while the delivery itself of that content, particularly of video files, could be fraught by technical difficulties owing to insufficient broadband capabilities, among other causes.

However, the first two decades of the 2000s have seen streaming, by virtue of the growth of new companies, workable business models, technological advances, increasingly willing consumers, and other factors become an influential new norm in developed nations. In the United States, this shift is signaled, at the very least, by the emergence of commercial streaming services iTunes in 2001 and Netflix in 2007, Apples' introduction of its iPhone and iPad in, respectively, 2007 and 2009, and an explosion in content creation and distribution across a growing array of services. This emergence has affected nations around the world, some of which have not only adopted services like Netflix but have also initiated their own streaming companies. Today, streaming is coin of the media realm in many countries, with global and national streaming services large and small comprising an intervention into business as usual and into audience engagement with media. Those able to stream television, music, radio, podcasts, books, films, videos, games, and other content from online services have seen their access to media and their media experience substantially transformed.

While it is still defined by fluctuating possibilities and directions, streaming has thus become a commanding presence in the mediascape. Given its prevalence as a new media phenomenon that has both altered and drawn from the strategies of traditional media industries, it has extensive implications for the scholarly examination of changing reception paradigms and audiences in the 2000s. Offering insight into the continuing mutability of the streaming enterprise, this Themed Section of *Participations* joins ongoing discussions in television studies, sound studies and new media studies on the diverse businesses, distribution models, programming forms, texts, technologies, and kinds of reception that characterize the streaming era today. Focusing primarily on television, podcasting and/or social media, the articles here research a particular dimension of streaming media: the interrelation of industry practices with texts and modes of consumption. These practices generate discourses about audiences as a fundamental part of their business operations, while also exerting discursive pressure on or otherwise instructing audiences on how to interact with streaming content. Although unable to furnish a picture of the complexities of actual response, industry evocations of listeners and viewers are not completely abstract. The industry's discursive constructions of audiences and attempts to shape media reception have visible traction in our experience of texts and hence consequential insights for reception studies.

To wit, media industries' 'imaginings' of audiences have long drawn from market research and audience measurement tools to identify their constituents, including the kind of taste tracking that streaming media services and other companies employ today. At the same time, social media sites offer plentiful forums in which industry figures interact with consumers, attempt to sway them through publicity and commentary, and discover their favourable and unfavourable reactions to products. Through such means, consumers become known to media companies, a valuable calculus with which to launch and formulate business strategies. In the process listeners and viewers also become partially embodied, leaving discursive traces of their tastes and prerogatives through their tracked online textual

preferences or social media feeds, an aspect of reception that cannot totalize their responses, but can enter into a continuous feedback loop to industries. For companies this is part of a survival strategy in a competitive marketplace, as they depend on notions of the audience that they have produced or culled from various sources to conduct essential operations, such as programme development, scheduling and promotion.

Moreover, as Ien Ang has argued in her work on television, the industry's knowledge production about its viewers has a defining rationale: the '"television audience" is constructed as an objectified category of others to be controlled' (1991, 7). From this foundation, the industry attempts to craft forms of viewer control that respond to and support its strategies as a means of striving for market stability. In observations that we can update to extend to other media industries as well, Ang's distillation of this 'institutional point of view,' a point of view that is always precarious, factors into the processes by which audiences are 'disciplined' in their consuming habits (4). Knowledge production about audiences does not simply circulate, then, in an internal industry sphere. To accomplish disciplinary measures, industry strategies must achieve the kind of discursive leverage that comes with cultural visibility.

Industries and intermediaries – sources that further negotiate the relationship between media companies and their consumers, including newspapers, trade journals, and social media – create publicly visible profiles of users (as reported in demographic breakdowns, for instance), while issuing a body of instructions meant to inform them on how to consume content. Jason Mittell's argument regarding the function of pilot episodes of TV series as tutorials that teach viewers what to expect generically, narratively, stylistically, and thematically from shows and John Ellis's treatment of TV interstitials, like episode recaps, as 'messages or declarations addressed to the viewer from outside . . . diegetic worlds' that function 'as little instruction manuals on how to read TV,' help us to recognize the expansive and myriad signals that media industries more generally deploy to guide, attract and discipline their consumers (Mittell 2015, 55-85; Ellis 2011, 60, 63). Other essential aspects of media experience, like streaming sites' interfaces, also carry abundant signals in this regard. For each beginning user, these interfaces offer challenges of navigation and legibility that require learning through trial and error and/or a site's guidelines and FAQ. More to the point, interfaces objectify a company's figuration of audiences, from its choice of display ads and promotions to its recommendations regarding genres and programmes that users, based on their prior preferences, might enjoy. Interfaces also more muscularly instruct consumers on how to interact with content through features like 'post-play' that, in order to encourage binge-watching, automatically advances users that have just completed an episode to the next episode or show. Meanwhile, innumerable sources, both corporate and grassroots, circulate consumer-oriented instructions, from help guides that provide advice on how to address streaming problems to critics that suggest the best podcasts, TV series, and movies to binge.

For consumers, then, everyday life involves a learning curve addressed by such vernacular 'courses' in 'media school,' a process heightened by the introduction and

mainstreaming of new media and technologies. With streaming's emergence and increasingly normative role as a means of accessing and experiencing media content, such instructional practices offer a process of continuous re-education that aims to edify media consumers as they adapt to and achieve facility with its many dimensions. Media companies involved in these practices deploy them to apply discursive pressure to a user's online behavior and choices as a means of attempting to secure their markets. In this way, a company's construction of its audience is essential not only to its operations, but also to establishing material parameters and touchstones, whether observed or breached by audiences, that supervise the public's relationship to media.

The group of essays that follow in this Themed Section advance wide-ranging approaches to studying the interrelation among industries, texts and audiences and the 'schooling' that both subtly and more overtly informs it. Each author offers a different sense of the chemistry among these elements, with areas of emphasis that include company practices, distribution strategies, technologies, and texts as well as the aesthetic, affective, cultural, historical, and ideological considerations involved. Each author also proposes a different sense of how industries and texts imagine, address and instruct audiences and how these audiences may respond to these overtures.

Although no through-line can capture the intricate choreography of elements in each essay, the articles are organized on a spectrum of text-centered to industry-centered studies, beginning with those that are most textually oriented. Within this organizational flow, successive pairs or trios of articles share associated concerns. Thus, Tanya Horeck, James Elrod and Jana Zündel argue that streaming television and its interfaces make us rethink how we analyse, respectively, programmes, genres and paratexts, particularly with respect to seriality and binge-watching. Zündel and Xiaoran Zhang explore transnational dimensions of streaming television content, while Zhang and Cory Barker concentrate on the implications that modes of streaming distribution and social media have for how programmes are made available to and received by audiences. Barker, Neil Verma and Mareike Jenner consider industry developments that have led either to failed programming experiments or to long-term patterns of historical continuity between old and new media that rest on certain projections of and assumptions about audiences. The listeners and viewers discursively figured or embodied in these pages are similarly wide-ranging. They include teens and young adults, women, queer fans and fans of particular auteurs and programmes as well as more general categories of TV watchers, podcast listeners, serial narrative bingers, social media users, and neo-liberal subjects, existing in different national contexts that include China, Germany, the UK and the US.

More specifically, through a lens that marries feminism, television studies and new media, **Tanya Horeck**'s 'Streaming Sexual Violence: Binge-Watching Netflix's *13 Reasons Why*' examines this series, controversial for its graphic depiction of teen rape and suicide, as revealing the implications that serial narrative form, the full-drop binge-watching imperative, and related social media reactions have for representations of this kind. Countering both the moral panic that erupted around the series and more conciliatory

approaches that saw long-form drama with its extended temporality as better able to treat sensitive subjects, Horeck investigates the show and its presentation as deeply defined by Netflix's priorities of seriality, binge-ability, and promotion and further framed by social media discourses. These activities establish digital era viewing protocols that school the viewer, illuminating, as she contends, the manner in which 'new technological and networked modes of delivery and response are shaping audience's affective encounters/engagements with images of sexual violence.' Although research often emphasizes historical continuities between old and new media, Horeck calls for feminist media scholars to reckon with the current transformative conditions, particularly with respect to how 'fictional narratives and images of rape and violence – as well as the public responses to them' are influenced by 'the technosocial interfaces and streaming platforms on which they are exhibited.'

James Elrod's, 'Navigating the Nebula: Audience Affect, Interactivity and Genre in the Age of Streaming TV' also addresses the impact that serial content delivery in a streaming television economy has had on viewing and affect, this time in relation to genre and fandom. He addresses the fate of TV genres and their fandoms – especially narratively complex, speculative genres like science fiction and fantasy – in a full-drop, bingeing era that abrogates television's once customary weekly gap between episodes, a gap he sees as critical to the success of speculative genre fandoms and their collective identities. While considering original programmes in this genre streaming on other services, like Amazon Prime Video, Elrod ultimately analyses the queer fandom of Netflix's Wachowski/Straczynski-created science fiction series *Sense 8*, a series with LGBTQIA characters and associated themes of identity. Throughout, he meditates on concepts of genre and fandom that can best speak to 'an era in which streaming services' curated categories seem to supersede traditional definitions of genre – yet in which structuralist theories are not adequate to capture the dynamism of genre and its interactions with viewers.'

In 'Serial Skipper: Netflix, Binge-Watching and the Role of Paratexts in Old and New "Televisions",' **Jana Zündel**, writing in a German context, analyses Netflix's multiplatform presentation of original and binge-able serial TV content and its impact on viewing expressly through its interface design and playback modes. These features have minimized or omitted typically recurring televisual paratexts or interstitials, such as episode recaps and opening and closing credits, to maximize the viewers' uninterrupted bingeing and commitment to the site's offerings. Because paratexts subtly instruct audiences on how to watch television, their altered function here encourages viewers to be 'serial skippers,' to pass over seemingly extraneous recurring material so as to engage in marathon sessions. While offering a window onto how Netflix's core programming strategies operate abroad, Zündel defines Netflix's binge-oriented strategies in relation to television and new media theory and history. She questions whether the company offers a concept of flow and use of paratextual materials that is radically different from that of traditional linear television or

whether the 're-educated "serial skipper" [is] a product of television's ongoing efforts to tweak media consumption in favour of long-term audience commitment.'

Zündel and **Xiaoran Zhang** both delve into the media distribution of foreign content overseas and the streaming company strategies that characterize its presentation and negotiate its reception. Zhang's contribution to this themed section, 'From Western TV Sets to Chinese Online Streaming Services: English-Language TV Series in Mainland China,' focuses more explicitly on industry practices that localize transnational TV content in cultural context. The author studies the legal distribution of original UK and US TV series in Mainland China on major Chinese streaming services – the only licensed outlets on the mainland for this foreign content. Against the backdrop of cultural policies that regulate the distribution of this content, Zhang pursues the multiple means by which UK/US television becomes localized, analysing streaming services' content libraries, interfaces, programme scheduling, and subscription models, as well as company and audience activities on social media. With HBO's *Game of Thrones* as a prime example of globally distributed foreign TV, Zhang demonstrates that, 'in the age of multi-screens, China, as the second largest TV market in the world, is witnessing how streaming – the newly emergent means of accessing both traditional and innovative television content – reconstructs a country's audience consumption habits.'

Focused as well on modes of media distribution, **Cory Barker**'s article, 'The Surprise Drop: *The Cloverfield Paradox, UnREAL*, and Evolving Patterns in Streaming Media Distribution and Reception,' concentrates on a particular cross-media phenomenon in streaming today in the US: the unexpected, 'out-of-the-blue' appearance of a work on a digital platform. Barker discusses cases of sudden online distribution from music, television, and film (e.g., respectively, Beyonce's 2013 self-titled album, Hulu's 2018 release of *UnREAL*'s fourth season, and Netflix's 2018 *The Cloverfield Paradox*) to understand strategies behind and reception contexts for projects that forego the long promotional pre-sell common to media release. Barker develops the concept of the gift economy in relation to this phenomenon, wherein media industries frame the surprise drop as designed especially for devoted fans and their social media discussions. He remarks that the 'promotional material proposes that this form of distribution offers the efficiency and mobility of typical digital distribution, while also delivering a more generative reception community for "true" fans sharing affective responses via real-time social updates.' As his study shows, however, outside of the music industry, this gambit often fails, revealing the continuing experimental and ephemeral nature of some corners of the streaming era.

In his article, 'From the Narrator's Lips to Yours: Streaming, Podcasting and the Risqué Aesthetic of Amazon Channels,' **Neil Verma** further explores the uncertainties and shifting sands of digital media in relation to an unsuccessful, but still influential, development. Contributing to sound and podcast studies, he investigates podcasting not by engaging in an auteurist perspective, but by focusing on house style – on a production company's aesthetic – in the case of Audible's short-lived Channels service (2016-2018), a part of Amazon's overall digital audio offerings. Verma offers a history of Audible before

studying its 'aesthetic of risk,' a circumscribed kind of risk drawn from podcasting's relationship to public radio storytelling traditions and an emergent, seemingly more adventurous digital platform's affordances. In the case of Channels, this combination produced a genderized 'steamy sonic economy' as house style and mode of audience enticement. Studying several of Channels' podcasts in detail, including *Damned Spot* and *The Butterfly Effect*, he elaborates on the fantasy of the listener at play in the Channels' brand that was used to ground and promote their operations, especially its development of a risqué aesthetic infused by a sense of privacy and intimacy. As he writes, Channels' 'cycle of podcast content' ultimately produces 'a secret story about the evolution of [its] shared ideas about who the streaming listener is – a strange amalgam of data, emotion, projection and invention.'

The concluding article in this themed section, **Mareike Jenner**'s 'Control Issues: Binge-Watching, Channel-Surfing and Cultural Value,' returns us to Netflix, bingeing, serial narrative, and the place of *13 Reasons Why* in the streaming-scape. Jenner explores TV history to address cycles of technological innovation and the viewing modalities that these innovations enable and encourage. Specifically, her account investigates the relationship of cultural discourses that define binge-watching and its cultural dissemination today to the earlier development and spread of the remote control and practice of channel surfing. Among her concerns in tracing this history is the intimate association, within a neo-liberal context, among issues of viewer control, quality TV programming, and the fluctuating cultural legitimacy of the medium as 'good' or 'bad.' As Jenner observes, 'the narratives of (individual) self-improvement linked to ancillary technologies of television often expose assumptions about how self-governance and freedom to determine television viewing through self-scheduling will lead to a "better" form of entertainment.' Yet, as she argues through the remote-control era's figure of the couch potato and the bingeing era's figure of imperiled youth elicited by *13 Reasons Why*, a technology's broader dissemination often threatens these narratives, engaging with discourses of class and age that have repercussions for how TV and its constituencies are culturally valued.

The issues analysed by authors here illuminate diverse industrial and narrative strategies, programmes and social milieus that contribute to our understanding of this particular moment in streaming media's history. The different audiences that media industries, their texts and cultural intermediaries address and attempt to control may slip in and out of the 'coherent discursive identity' that these forces seek (Ang 1991, 14). However, as the essays robustly demonstrate, the broadly circulating public visions of consumers that these forces generate establish agendas and benchmarks for reception that help us to decipher how audiences in this period are imagined and to identify the codes and conventions of viewing and listening in play in the process of their everyday media education. I am very pleased to present a series of distinctive voices that offer innovative research to current and future discussions and debates about the transformation of the media landscape currently underway.

Biographical note:

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