

## Introduction: New Waves – Feminism, Gender, and Podcast Studies

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1 Taking its cue both from discussions about the ‘fourth wave’ of feminism that largely takes place in digital environments and from the growing interdisciplinary interest in podcasts, this special issue sets out to explore the aesthetics and politics of this medium with regard to matters of gender and sexuality. The field of podcast studies, advanced by pioneer Richard Berry (2006) and first substantial critical volumes such as Llinares et al.’s *Podcasting. New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (2018) and Spinelli and Dann’s *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (2019), evolves out of (digital) media and cultural studies, with increasing input from fan studies in particular. It thus partakes in a tradition of inquiry with close ties to feminist scholarship and concerns with agency and power. While podcasts engage with a huge array of topics across all spheres of pop culture, including erotic fan fiction as well as LGBTQ+ issues, they are seen as a medium characterized by orality and audience participation, offering intimate and authentic settings for commentary and information (still relatively) free from the constraints of editorship and commercialism of other media.

2 As such, podcast and gender and queer studies appear to be a ‘natural’ fit – not least because podcasts, as oral medium, draw our attention to a constitutive part of ‘personhood’: If one considers its etymological roots, stemming from the Latin ‘personare’ (“to sound through”), it captures, Stacey Copeland reminds us, “the human understanding of the sound of voice as an indisputable part of both an embodied self and performative identity” (222). Following Copeland’s argument further, podcasting also “offers a powerful platform for a listening experience that can challenge visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations by engaging with the listener through the affective use of sound” (210).

3 Before delving any deeper into the relations between the medium’s affordances and gender and queer studies, a brief definition seems necessary (avid fans and seasoned scholars may skip this paragraph and the next): podcasting refers to a means of distributing MP3 audio files across the internet and to “a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education” (Llinares et al. 5). Taking its name originally from a combination of broadcasting and an Apple product (iPod), podcasts are technically defined by their online-subscription feature (to a webpage’s RSS feed – meaning ‘really simple syndication’) which allows easy access and listening to from everywhere. As statistical research shows, this ‘everywhere’ is typically either ‘on the go’, that is while traveling, walking, or working out, or at home in bed or on the sofa. With the initial

gender gap between listeners now closing<sup>1</sup>, the majority of podcast listeners are in their twenties, studying to obtain or already have academic degrees; they also mostly listen on their smart phones using in-ear headphones (see Statistica, 2019). This creates a predominant reception situation in which “the person speaking is literally inside the head, inside the body, of a listener” (Spinelli and Dann 83), a fact that sustains podcasts’ characteristic affordance of offering “intimacy as beyond sex” (77), fostering an isolated individual’s (the listener’s) connection with others through shared emotional experiences and a sense of authenticity and openness that remains, however, hard to pin down theoretically.

4 With podcasts – in comparison to other forms of cultural expression such as theatre or print literature – being easy to make and consume, and (still) largely free of charge, “there’s no lack of free advice on how to get started” (Campbell 36). Any quick literature research will produce, first of all, a plethora of “how to”- instruction manuals, concerning podcast production, online (self)marketing and technical guides (see, for example, Hagedorn, 2018), followed by statistical data analyses, prognosis of the development of the medium and its potential for branding and advertisement (the figures are generally expected to double in the near future), and, furthermore, the medium’s potential in educational contexts. The latter has been emphasised and explored (see, for example, Campbell, 2005; Rosell-Aguiar, 2013; also Llinares et al. 7) even prior to the current moment which arguably ushered in what Maximilian Alvarez calls a “golden age for educational audio” (Alvarez n.p.), even if this is due to necessity rather than ‘organic’ development or choice. This label evokes the earlier proclaimed “golden age” of audio and podcasting in general (see Berry, 2015; Ganesh, 2016; Llinares et al. 6). It refers to the period from the medium’s first emergence in the mid-2000s, from the inclusion of a podcast app on every iPhone, to it turning mainstream somewhere around the year 2014, which saw, aside from a number of facilitating changes in social sharing, produced content, and technologies, the live tour of *Welcome to Night Vale* through North America and Europe and the launch of the podcast success *Serial* as “identifiable landmark” (Berry 171).

5 The idea for this special issue was born in late 2019, and thus just before the onset of the global pandemic which was and will continue to irrevocably change medial practices and speed up digitalization. Now it is hard to imagine a timelier moment than our present one to engage with questions of how to foster knowledge, intimacy, and tolerance across distance. Podcasts offer a strange experience of ‘liveness’ – even if clearly, and in most cases very carefully, scripted and consumed remotely; they combine social distancing with intimacy and

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<sup>1</sup> A least in the US, nearly as many women as men now listen to podcasts, see Lazovick (2018).

shared parasociality with comfortable ease, potentially exceeding what streaming series, reading eBooks, or other forms of remote knowledge transmission and teaching can offer. As the present crisis has taught us with regard to all online tools or digital practices, however, this still doesn't make podcasting as democratic and widely accessible by default as one would like. Yet podcasts's value in the context of higher education and their general appeal seem hard to dispute, as they "fit our lives in a way virtual reality headsets may never [do]", Ganesh writes, and "[t]hey liberate our eyes" (n.p.). For they work instead through the "magic" of the human voice, creating shared consciousness and intimate communication aurally (see Campbell 40); and therefore one might agree with Llinares et al. that podcasting generally "seems to possess the advantages of the internet while expelling some of the pitfalls" (2).

6 Especially fictional podcasts share much in terms of narrative forms and performative aspects with radio drama, theatre, but also prose fiction and film (see Sulimma in this volume), meanwhile the advent of interdisciplinary podcast studies signals the medium's recognition as an art form, "with its own unique modes of not just dissemination but also production, listening, and engagement" (Spinelli and Dann 2). Though one might debate how much 'newness' it brings and wherein exactly it lies, podcasting has no equivalent prior to the internet and is typically seen as an "ecosystem" or "distinctive culture" (Ganesh n.p.) within the realm of 'new' digital technology.

7 Dario Llinares (2018) has offered a useful, more specific conception of podcasting as a liminal practice, situated between convergence culture, transmedia storytelling and the dynamics between old and new media (see 127). His emphasis on podcasts' liberating potential, offering freedom from genre and identity constraints, "from disciplinary regimes and traditions, and from sanctioned modes of communication and knowledge production" (Llinares 125), underlines its relevance for gender and queer studies. As do several of the major features of podcasts listed by Spinelli and Dann, in particular that podcasts work through an intimate mode of listening; that they can "thrive on niche global audiences"; that they "are interwoven into social media and as such have a heightened capacity to enhance engagement with, and activate, an audience" (7-8). Added to this is the fact that there is significantly less editing, gatekeeping or censorship and, as a consequence, one finds podcasts dealing with all sorts of issues that would prove much harder, if not impossible to find in other mainstream media. In contrast to radio, for example, Spinelli and Dann explain: "The podcast edit is racier and bolder, and podcasts often contain material most national broadcasting regulators would rarely sanction. Where radio might suggest and allude, podcasting is full frontal" (69).

8 From the perspective of cultural studies, it is especially the engagement with marginalized voices, deviant opinions, or what we might deem narrative transgressions, that reveals podcasting's socio-cultural potential. It lies in the decentring and thus reopening for exploration of relations between text, image, and sound (see Llinares 141; Spinelli and Dann 63). Despite the isolation and loneliness of the podcast listener (due to individual consumption and asynchronous delivery), emotional involvement and personal storytelling are perhaps *the* twin key features of podcasts. Along with the medium's omission of visuals and the customary listening through headphones, this enables a particular kind of deep listening<sup>2</sup>, which bears huge potential for empathy. Moreover, Podcasts have proven to be remarkably successful to date in building a shared sense of intimacy and closeness among fan audiences. In comparison to radio – the customary point of reference in critical studies – podcast audiences are more knowledgeable and actively choose what to listen and subscribe to (rather than frequently and randomly switching channels); this often leads to intense fandom and off-line manifestations of a “hybridized media fandom” (Spinelli and Dann 61; see 13-14; 47), where hosts and listeners get to interact in live events. Podcasting's creation of fan communities which thus might cross over from imagined into ‘real’ ones, presents rich grounds for research, as do the processes of communication between listeners as well as between producers and audience (see the articles by Euritt and Seymour in this volume).

9 Increasingly, one finds successful podcasts being turned into live tours or books, for example the award-winning British podcast *The Guilty Feminist* (published by Virago in 2018), hosted by comedian Deborah Frances-White and marketed as dealing with issues that “all 21<sup>st</sup> century feminists agree on”. Explaining the evolution of feminism to her audience, the *Guilty Feminist's* author/host emphasises that fourth wave feminism “is like the third wave but with added Twitter and podcasts” (Frances-White 17), meaning that feminists are still deeply concerned with intersectionality but have now taken greater control of means of (online) production of cultural and political content. While thus relating her own political agenda and media practices, she also argues that there is already a fifth wave forming:

All we know so far is that it is about action. It will promote the ideas of the intersectional movement from the third wave, which will allow us more of a mainstream, influential platform. It will take the social-networking capability from the fourth wave and use it to organise and galvanise and turn hashtags into consequences. (17)

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<sup>2</sup> Spinelli and Dann describe it as “an active form of listening that lies between the casual experience of merely ‘hearing’ a radio broadcast and the immersive listening required for a soundscape or montage” (65).

10 Rather than dispute what wave contemporary feminism is currently on – the main question here being if the “increased usage of the Internet is [...] enough to delineate a new era” (Munro 23),<sup>3</sup> even though new technologies are widely seen as central to current feminist debates and activism (25), it seems productive to explore podcasting’s role and contribution to it, with this issue being a first small step that might inspire others. With regard to content, there is no shortage of podcasts that address feminist and female topics, for example *Girl Boss*, *Call Your Girlfriend*, *How to be a Girl*, *The Guilty Feminist*, *Stuff Mom Never Told You*, all titles taken from a list recently compiled by Katy Cowan (2019), which suggest, however, a much stronger lean towards liberal feminist issues than concern with intersectionality or trans\* identities. While so-called ‘fourth wavers’<sup>4</sup> commonly define themselves as intersectional feminists and describe their agenda, firstly, as the “attempt to elevate and make space for the voices and issues of those who are marginalized” (Cochrane n.p.), a second major branch of twenty-first century feminism is the ‘leaning in’ variety, popularized by Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg, geared towards self-promotion and professional success (see Pruchniewska 25; 28).<sup>5</sup> The articles in this volume engage with both aspects, without this being the main analytical focus.

11 Considering podcasts’ increasing move from the margins of entertainment culture and knowledge transmission to mainstream centres, they present ample and suitable spaces for “the rapidly expanding conversations about women, feminism and gender equality taking place around the world right now” (Cowan n.p.). Like other popular online formats, such as ‘mommy’ or ‘sex blogs’ for example, especially the “chumcast” variety of podcasts epitomizes the medium’s potential to tackle controversial topics in intimate, casual settings and easy conversational manner (see Korfmacher in this volume). In this way, podcasts engage with and reveal the political potential of digital practices focussed on personal and everyday experience (see Pruchniewska 33), echoing, in fact, the slogan of the second feminist wave: “the personal is political”. This catchphrase captures what podcasting does and it doesn’t. One might argue that the (collective) political risks being obscured by an overemphasis on personal stories, but

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<sup>3</sup> Geographical and national differences are, hugely important here. In countries like Turkey, women make up almost three quarters of social media users (see Munro 23; and Zorlu and Özkan in this volume).

<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, also a podcast with engages specifically with female empowerment and fourth wave feminism, *The IV Wave Podcast* (2017-2018), co-hosted by author and poet, Mirtha Michelle and entertainment attorney Jamie Baratta.

<sup>5</sup> See Pruchniewska (2019) for a study of the use of social media in connection to feminist politics of the fourth wave.

the affordances of the medium, undoubtedly foster close listening practices to voices one might otherwise hear differently, or not at all. The central aspect in this context, emphasized by Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo, is that “[t]he privacy and safety of the podcast closes the distance between listeners and hosts’ experiences” (271). While certain subjects might have special affinity for podcasting, “such as sex and psychological play and manipulation” (Spinelli and Dann 10), it is, above all, the often evoked deep “sonorous intimacy” (Llinares et al. 2) of podcasts that makes them an ideal vehicle for dealing with and object for the analysis of gender and LGBTQ+ issues. For it seems inevitable, Llinares et al sum up, that being “a private, silent participant in other people’s interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection” (Llinares et al. 2). The experience of affective connectivity is the prerequisite for challenging and overcoming borders of all kinds.

12 Beyond thematic content in podcasting and narrative forms that share concerns and lends themselves to analysis from a contemporary feminist vantage point (which I take here explicitly to include intersectionality and queer studies), there is strong medial/metaphorical relation between the waves of feminism and podcasting. Critics usually set the beginning of the fourth wave around the year 2008 (see Munro, 2013; Cochrane, 2013), which coincides with the emergence of podcasting. Meanwhile other voices, prominently among them Nancy A. Hewitt (2012), have argued for the need to reconsider the popular and pervasive metaphor of feminism’s waves<sup>6</sup> – that is, their perception as grand sweeping oceanic waves, which does little, in fact, to capture historical realities of the struggles, progression, and achievements of (global) feminisms. As Hewitt suggests, the wave metaphor might be regenerated by drawing on another, more adequate model, namely radio waves. The radio wave analogy introduces greater human agency, as radio waves appear less as ‘natural’ events, nor as a single, unified powerful surge: they are composed of long and short waves, determining the frequency of the broadcasted signal. They disseminate information and “their use involves the intervention of women and men to shape, transmit, and listen to the messages” (Hewitt 660); this also entails recognizing the potential of a once new technology (radio) rather than of an old force of nature (oceanic waves) “to enhance the civic knowledge and participation of ordinary men and women” (659). Hewitt’s reconsideration of the feminist wave metaphor, when applied to podcast studies, a new medium that is seen as the continuation of radio, reveals them as an important part of digital and twenty-first century intersectional feminist practices.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Jo Reger’s *Different Wavelengths* (2005) and Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves* (2010).

13 The focus on disembodied voices, so central to podcasting, bears potential for feminist studies not only to move beyond “visualphilic tendencies” (Copeland 209), but to explore how voice becomes “a site where gender is naturalized and denaturalized at the same time” (Schlichter 47), how sound production and material voice might challenge and ‘queer’ perceptions of gender and sexuality (see Copeland; Gregory in this volume – and, as a counter example, Zorlu and Özkan’s study on female streamers using video). Furthermore, the confrontation with disembodied voices and the activity of “listening in”<sup>7</sup> – which is akin to eavesdropping and specially compatible with thrilling or taboo subjects such as crime, eroticism, pornography – fosters a particular narrative intimacy, as cognitive research suggests that the brain works harder to engage with audio stories than with visual ones (see Spinelli and Dann 74). In different ways, depending on their genre, podcasts can potentially aid the overcoming of boundaries (though long-term impact studies of their effect are lacking). This specifically includes barriers created by (however unconscious or deliberate) judgement by heteronormative listeners with regard to the identity of a podcast’s characters, hosts, or guests (cf. 87). Lukasz Swiatek (2018) captures this in his notion of podcasts as intimate “bridging medium”, which highlights, once more, their ability to generate a sense of intimacy despite a lack of physical proximity, to facilitate access to new knowledge, and to bridging socio-cultural divides between individuals and group; which is why LGBTQ communities have employed podcasts to unite and achieve communicative and educational goals (see 173, 179-180)<sup>8</sup>.

14 Fascinating as the medial specificity of podcasting and their potential ‘reach’ are, as a contribution to the expanding research field of podcast studies, this special issue also takes seriously the critical warning uttered by Julie Shapiro, executive producer of the podcast network *Radiotopia*, in an interview in 2016. Aware of the increasing hype surrounding podcasts as a new digital media, she said: “That’s a dangerous place where it is all function, no form” (cited in Spinelli and Dann 1). Indeed, we might be better off substituting the designation of podcasting’s “golden age” with that of an important “transitional moment”, but also a moment, as Spinelli and Dann note, “in which established practices are finally beginning to crystallize” (15). The time has come to look at forms as well as functions, at their interactions and to seek critical approaches which present “close analytical listenings” (5) without losing site of podcasts’ cultural situatedness and their special affordances. The contributions to this

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Grace Gist’s fascinating study of intimacy and voice in *Welcome to Night Vale* (2018).

<sup>8</sup> An early case study of this aspect is King and Sandquist’s (2008).

issue, by early career and already more established scholars, all break new ground in trying to achieve this.

15 This brings me, finally, to the overview of the contents of the six articles. Anne Korfmacher looks at the porn review podcast *Girls on Porn* (2019-). This first case study, an example of a popular “chumcast”-style podcast, centres around the question if and how pornography can be an ethical expression of sexuality. The analysis explores how the podcast medium’s aural form – diametrically opposed to the voyeuristic visuality of mainstream pornography – shapes and enables the female hosts and their guests’ assertion of sexual agency, in their commentary of pornographic videos and the negotiation of personal erotic experiences. The article makes visible the characteristic tension in the medium’s creation of both private ‘safe space’, anonymity, and shared, public sociability. Alyn Euritt approaches the creation and conception of intimacy, almost reflexively referred to as a key affordance of podcasts, from a different angle. Analysing the first season of *Within the Wires* (2016), an alternate reality fiction podcast which takes the form of instructional relaxation tapes, her contribution focuses on how repetition (of specific lines, phrases, and memories by the narrator’s voice) and aural recognition (by the listeners) interact and form a means to construct intimacy and connections among a fan public. Acts of listening and recognition are also central to Chase Gregory’s reading of a 2014 episode of the popular storytelling podcast *The Moth*, which uncovers how gender, race, and class might attach to certain voices. Performer Sarah Jones, who tells her personal story of racial stereotyping and the dangers of West Coast jaywalking in a myriad of different voices, literally speaks these categories of identity into being on the podcast, only to challenge the fixity of these signs, showcasing the simultaneously disruptive and productive potential of speech.

16 With *Alice Isn’t Dead* (2016-8), the focus remains on the particular affordances of serialized, but in this case fictional, podcast storytelling. Maria Sulimma explores how the narrative represents (female) mobility and queer love, paying special attention to intersectional resonances and intertextual echoes of the literary and filmic trope of the ‘road trip’. While the podcast successfully develops queer temporalities and a capitalist critique over the course of its three seasons, its ending brings an inconsistent turn toward homonormativity. Another trope popularized through contemporary film and Tv series, though a much less enabling and instead discriminatory one, is at the heart of Jessica Seymour’s analysis of the actual-play comedy and adventure podcast *The Adventure Zone* (2014-). The “bury your gays” trope captures the disproportionate frequency with which LGBTQ+ characters suffer stereotypical representations and are being ‘killed off’ in contemporary mainstream media. The portrayal of queer characters in *The Adventure*

*Zone* changed from adherence to subversion of the trope, due to criticism by the podcast's audience. According to Seymour, this shows the potential of the podcast medium to instigate reciprocal change and to offer education in gender and sexuality for creators and listeners alike.

17 Deniz Zorlu and Nazlı Özkan examine the experiences of female streamers and podcasters on *Twitch* Turkey through interviews conducted with 35 respondents, thus adding a welcome empirical perspective and a focus on a different, specific national context. Their case study also broadens the focus to include online practices and narratives crucial to contemporary feminisms beyond podcast studies and the premise of oral media. Considering *Twitch*'s status as one of the currently most widely visited social media sites and biggest online game streaming platforms, Zorlu and Özkan ask how gender identities and geographical location shape streamers' experiences and usage of *Twitch* Turkey. While also carving out spaces for the formation of female solidarity, the streamers are affected by a combination of patriarchal pressures and a neoliberal, postfeminist thrust for aggressive competitiveness amongst themselves for viewership and income opportunities.

18 Jointly, the contributions to this issue testify to the diversity of podcasts and the critical approaches to this digital medium, bringing together cultural and media studies, fan studies, sociology, and narratology. Above all, they demonstrate podcast studies' manifold intersections with the concerns and political struggles of contemporary feminisms and gender and queer studies. They probe the medium's disruptive potential inherent in the forms, subgenres and narrative strategies of the selected examples. While these can offer no more than a glimpse into what more 'is out there', still awaiting discovery and recognition, this issue will hopefully spark further research at the intersection of digital feminism, narratives, and podcast studies.

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