Streaming media production, interfaces, content and users

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Editorial

Streaming media
Production, interfaces, content and users

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In this special issue of *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, we focus broadly on how streaming affects different kinds of media. Streaming has become a collective concept for depicting changes across (and beyond) media industries. Streaming has consequently become central in theoretical and empirical research within numerous subfields of media and communication research. There is a continued need for media-specific studies of streaming, but we also note the need for insights into the similarities and differences of how streaming affects different media. Our aspiration has consequently been to create a shared space for the many varieties and approaches for investigating streaming media. Such comparative approaches of how streaming is interpreted within different types of media and media industries are almost non-existent. One way of creating this knowledge exchange is to support a broad dialogue about streaming in general, which this issue does.

Streaming denotes a way of transmitting and receiving digital data over the Internet; a process distinguished by the end-user being able to watch, listen or read content while the file is being transmitted. Streaming as a mode of distribution mediates and intervenes in the relationship between media producers and media users, where a streaming platform can bypass traditional distribution patterns and reconfigure the use of media content. By streaming media, we refer to media forms such as film, television, gaming, music, podcasts, radio, e-books and audiobooks, all of which streaming has already affected profoundly. As media scholars our interest is in the structures, relations and practices

that surround streaming platforms as distribution systems. This encompasses studies of media industries and production, interfaces, content and use of streaming media. We have seen the emergence of many new streaming services from global superplayers as well as national streaming providers and small local services. The amount and size of these streaming services is so substantial that we have yet to analyse them thoroughly. With this special issue, our aim is to gather empirically grounded, conceptual and methodological contributions regarding the changes and continuities represented by streaming media.

Our issue contains seven original contributions that all offer different perspectives on streaming media. Most of these articles represent the common position that considers streaming as a *challenge* for media researchers, archivists and industry professionals. One such challenge is how we can analyse and interpret the enormous amount of media content that is accessible through streaming – either freely or by subscribing. However, streaming in some cases also allows for a greater cultural exchange and increased access. In the case of podcasting, streaming can even give small, independent, and sometimes unconventional producers the opportunity to bypass traditional gatekeepers and voice their opinions, potentially reach a substantial audience and possibly create strong connections with users. As an obvious contrast, major media corporations and their streaming services undoubtedly dominate many local and global markets for streaming media today. These circumstances make streaming research an immensely contrasted and often complex field.

Streaming media?

We casually and commonly refer to (media) streaming services in everyday contexts, yet streaming is a rather contested scholarly notion in communication and media research. The main problem is how media streaming services cannot be precisely and rigorously defined, but instead encompass a wide array of services with distinct differences regarding technology, industry configurations and practices, types of content, business models, and user/audience practices. What then, could possibly be the point of considering all types of "streaming media" within the same framework?

In their exploration of the implications of streaming across the film, television and music industries, Herbert, Lotz, and Marshall (2019) conclude that comparative endeavours reveal "[…] insights into the consequences of streaming normally obscured without the impetus to look for parallels in other industries" (p. 362). Herbert and colleagues largely confine their comparative analysis to the domains of legacy media industries, yet streaming can also be conceived more broadly and beyond a media industry approach. And perhaps an open approach is needed exactly because streaming cannot be precisely and rigorously defined. In their effort to conceptualize streaming as evolving and multi-faceted, Spilker and Colbjørnsen (2020) argue against confined definitions. They discuss the dynamics of streaming along five dimensions: (1) professional versus user-generated; (2) legal versus piracy; (3) on-demand versus live streaming; (4) streaming on focused

versus multi-purpose platforms; and (5) niche audiences versus general-audience streaming. Spilker and Colbjørnsen proficiently unfold the streaming concept and delineate a comprehensive conceptual space wherein the many manifestations of streaming fit. Tellingly, about a third of the 30 abstracts that were submitted to this special issue concerned user-generated, live streaming, multi-purpose and/or niche audience modes of streaming.

Spilker and Colbjørnsen conclude by stating that "more cross-industry and cross-practice research is needed to get a better understanding of streaming as a phenomenon and how it evolves" (Spilker & Colbjørnsen, 2020, p. 14). For both Herbert et al. (2019) and Spilker and Colbjørnsen (2020), comparative and cross-industry research appears to denote efforts to scrutinise streaming as a phenomenon across domains within the same research project and contribution. Such endeavours are valuable, but also challenging because of the specialized characteristics of different media industries as well as different fields of media (industry) research.

Sundet and Colbjørnsen apply a cross-industry approach in the first article of this special issue. In "Streaming across industries: Streaming logics and streaming lore across the music, film, television, and book industries", they provide a highly relevant cross-industrial analysis of how media executives perceive and approach streaming as a phenomenon. By interviewing 39 different executives from the Norwegian music, film, television and book industries, their study points to how these media executives express a great interest in learning general lessons about streaming from each other's industries. However, when their informants describe how they actually deal with streaming in their daily work, they mostly stick to the familiar industry logics and institutionalised practices within their own industry. Their study suggests that while we as media researchers might consider streaming as a cross-industrial development with many general similarities, for the people in each of these media organisations, the best solution is not necessarily "one size fits all".

Streaming music

The music industry was arguably the first media industry that streaming fundamentally affected and transformed. On the one hand, music streaming alleviated severe economic challenges resulting from years of illegal file sharing and declines in CD sales. On the other, streaming represented a point of no return, quickly becoming the dominant mode for accessing recorded music and consequently changing the rules of the game for musicians and industry stakeholders. These developments have been paralleled by efforts to study the music streaming experience, investigating, for example, the practices and personal significance of playlists (Hagen, 2015; Siles et al., 2019) and algorithmic recommendations (Lüders, 2020; Werner, 2020). Given the increasing importance of curation of playlists, algorithms and personalisation for services such as Spotify (Eriksson et al., 2019), music streaming services frequently feature as key examples in critical studies of algorithmic power (Drott, 2018; Prey, 2018).

Norway, like other Nordic countries, represents one of the first markets to adopt streaming (Maasø & Hagen, 2020). In "Views from the boundaries, music streaming revisited", Daniel Nordgård reports from a study of how Norwegian record label managers consider their positions and possibilities in a context where they have had several years to adjust to how the music streaming market operates and evolves. By interviewing four managers who represent different types of labels (major/independent; genre-focused/commercial), Nordgård conveys how and why streaming affects these stakeholders differently, and also how experiences and opinions among managers have become more nuanced over time. The article vividly portrays the shift in power relations between labels and global streaming services.

Streaming television and films

Television and film scholars have published a large and growing number of contributions about video on demand and video streaming services. Existing research describes how the production, distribution and consumption of television and films are characterised by continuity and change, and how the rumour about the television medium's imminent death due to streaming is exaggerated (e.g. Bruun, 2020; Enli & Syvertsen, 2016; Evens & Donders, 2018; Johnson, 2019; Lotz 2014, 2017; Lüders & Sundet, 2021). While some scholars engage with local streaming services, most tend to focus on big global players and particularly on Netflix and its dynamic catalogue of film and television titles (see e.g. Johnson, 2018; Lobato, 2018; Matthew, 2020; Plothe & Buck, 2019; Wayne, 2018). This large scholarly interest in Netflix reflects how it is a well-known and widely used global service. Its powerful position within the global streaming market gives us good reasons for scrutinising its algorithmic curation and for criticising its problematic lack of openness towards researchers. Another popular topic, especially for European television scholars with an interest in streaming, is how public service media institutions and broadcasters engage with the opportunities and challenges presented by streaming (e.g. Andersen, 2019; D'Arma, Raats, & Steemers, 2021; Lowe, Van den Bulck, & Donders, 2018; Ramsey, 2018; Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014; Sørensen, 2014; Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018; Woods, 2018). Public service media (PSM) could be well-suited cases for future comparative and cross-industrial studies since many of these PSM institutions are currently developing their streaming offers within both television/film, radio/podcast, music and gaming *at the same time.*

The abstracts submitted to this special issue would suggest that streaming is a particularly hot topic for television studies. 14 abstracts in some way or another concerned television streaming services, and authors of three abstracts were invited to submit full papers. Small nations, global platforms, and public service media constitute the context for the third and fourth articles in this special issue. In ""If you can't beat them, be them": A critical analysis of the local streaming platform and Netflix alternative Streamz", Tim Raats and Tom Evens turn to how legacy media players in the Flemish region of Belgium – after

years of continuous policy pressure to collaborate – joined forces as a strategic response to the competition of global platforms such as Netflix and Disney+. Their case study of the domestic SVOD service Streamz demonstrates how traditional media players combine the response strategies mimicry, diversification, differentiation and collaboration to provide a domestic and competitive alternative to Netflix. Global streaming platforms certainly challenge national media players. Raats and Evans thus provide a much-needed analysis of the challenges for domestic players to retain their market positions.

The next article, ""What's on the interface tonight?": A longitudinal analysis of the publishing strategies of public service video-on-demand platforms in the UK and Denmark", by JP Kelly and Jannick Kirk Sørensen, compares two VOD platforms: BBC's *iPlayer* and DR's *DRTV*. Their comparative and transnational analysis of these two platforms and their evolving interfaces over a period of 14 months reveals some interesting and perhaps unexpected differences. By using a supermarket metaphor, they find that *iPlayer* behaves like a small shop with short and time-limited offers, whilst *DRTV*'s interface is more like a large supermarket selling bulk goods. In terms of the content on the shelves of these two platforms, *iPlayer* has more fresh produce with a limited shelf-life while *DRTV*'s interface exposes a much wider selection of content for a longer period of time. One might expect the BBC to provide a supermarket and DR to provide a smaller selection but Kelly and Sørensen's analysis reveals that, in reality, it is actually the opposite. These findings lead to a necessary discussion of the political landscape and public-service contracts that influence these legacy media institutions.

In "How streamification challenges the Royal Danish Library's collection of cultural heritage", Andreas Lenander Ægidius engages in some key discussions surrounding streaming and particularly the concept of streamification. At the same time, the article points to some of the significant methodological issues that arise when researchers, archivists and libraries wish to collect and archive the streamed content from streaming services. In discussing these issues, Ægidius's article highlights the advantages and disadvantages of various collection methods such as stream-ripping, screen capture (image or video) and going into research collaborations with producers and distributors of born-digital content. Additionally, this contribution gives a rare voice to the libraries in the larger discussion of streaming media by providing a perspective from The Royal Danish Library and their obligations to collect and archive media content during this period of profound technological change.

Streaming audio

We have briefly accounted for music streaming, but streaming appears to gain a stronger traction within audio more generally. We now turn to streaming of audiobooks and podcasts. A recent report from the Danish publishing industry reports a 58 per cent increase in turnover from audiobooks from 2019 to 2020 (from 100.8 million to 159.2 million DKK)

(Danske Forlag, 2021). While this increase may partly be related to the Covid-19 lockdown, it likely also reflects a more general tendency. The act of listening, often combined with the use of headphones, seems to represent much-needed opportunities to enter secluded soundscapes.

Some book streaming services, such as Storytel/Mofibo, offer a selection of book titles both as e-books and audiobooks, yet overall, the primary allure of book streaming seems to concern having a convenient and flexible access to audiobooks. In this sense, streaming leads to a remediation of literature while also allowing readers to experience literature in new ways and to create new reading practices (see e.g. Burkey, 2013; Have & Pedersen, 2015; Rubery, 2011; Thompson, 2012; Wallin & Nolin, 2020). Whereas adoption of e-books has been slow (Bergström & Höglund, 2020), subscription-based audiobook services offer a reading experience that represent a shift in how and when books are read (Wallin & Nolin, 2020). This could imply a continued growth for book streaming services. Sundet and Colbjørnsen (this issue) include the book industry in their study and depict how book industry executives are optimistic yet also relatively modest in their perceptions of the opportunities represented by the streaming model. None of the abstracts submitted to this special issue focused on book streaming exclusively, but given the developments toward streaming also for accessing and reading books, we expect to see important contributions to this field over the next few years.

Another aspect of streaming media is how radio and podcasts have embraced the opportunities provided by audio streaming. A key discussion in this field is the relationship between radio and podcasting, which in some instances will be two versions of the same content (recorded radio published as a podcast) and at other times is two separate forms of audio production. Here the differences between live radio as "pushed" and podcasting as "pulled" are particularly important, as well as the two different sets of legal, historical and financial conditions and industry logics that accompany radio and podcasting, respectively. Due to these dissimilarities, some scholars have stated that podcasting should indeed be treated and studied as a medium in itself (e.g. Berry, 2016; Saabye, 2020; Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

This relates to the sixth article, "Independent podcasts on the Apple Podcasts platform in the streaming era", in which Freja Sørine Adler Berg provides an overview of the variety of Danish-language podcasts that are distributed through Apple Podcasts. By conducting a quantitative content analysis of 552 independent Danish podcasts, her study finds that this market contains an oversupply of podcasts with conversations and interviews about personal stories and mainstream hobbies, such as football, movies and TV. These findings also situate independent podcasting as a somewhat derivative medium, where podcast content can act as a companion to existing media content, for instance within particular fan communities. This work is helpful in giving an overview of a somewhat chaotic content area where podcasting happens without passing through

traditional institutions or gatekeepers and shows that there are in fact distinct patterns across the kinds of content that independent podcasters choose to make.

Streaming live

Central to the above forms of streaming is the conception of on-demand access to catalogues of content, available at the convenience of the individual media user. An intriguing and increasingly popular mode of streaming over the past few years, however, is completely different. Live streaming – the live broadcasting of video content online – has become a central part of video game culture, but any type of play and pastime activities can be, and are, live streamed. From a video game and a viewer/audience perspective, studies have examined why people watch live streams of game plays (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017), and how live streaming represents a more active and selective form of liveness (Spilker, Ask, & Hansen, 2020). Although most streamers are amateurs, academic work addressing streamers seems to focus on professional or aspiring-professional streamers and to critically investigate live streaming as a form of contemporary digital work (Guarriello, 2019; Johnson, Carrigan, & Brock, 2019; Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). T.L. Taylor's *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming* (2018) is a particularly important contribution on live streaming, internet culture and gaming practices. Taylor succinctly summarizes her book to be about what happens when people transform private play into public entertainment.

Similar objectives guided the abstracts we received on game live streaming, and we invited the authors of three abstracts to submit full papers. Unfortunately, two submissions were withdrawn due to time issues, and the third paper did not make it through the review process. We hope to see all of these published in *MedieKultur* or elsewhere at a later time.

T. L. Taylor's core interest – private play as public entertainment – is malleable: In live streaming culture, play is not confined to live streams of gaming. In the final article, "Streamer-Interface-Viewer entanglement: An analysis of the discursive and affective live-streaming chatroom interface", Zhen Ye examines how the Chinese social media platforms Douyin (TikTok) and Momo are designed to normalise, commodify and establish highly gendered live stream interactions. Ye combines a critical walkthrough analysis of the entry and everyday use stages of the app experience with an observation study of the activities that occur in live streaming chatrooms. Her analysis reveals how interaction mechanisms (such as commenting, virtual gifting, competitions) seem to establish two types of subject positions: the female streamer and the male spectator.

Open section

Stinne Gunder Strøm Krogager

This issue also includes an open section article and three book reviews. In the article "What is visual intimacy? Mapping a complex phenomenon", Katharina Lobinger, Rebecca Venema, Seraina Tarnutzer and Federico Lucchesi address practices of visual intimacy in mediatised relationships. The article builds on a literature review of theoretical concepts underpinning visual intimacy and maps the different roles that visuals can play in intimate practices. The author argues that the content of visuals is not always vital for creating and upholding intimacy. Different practices related to producing, sharing and talking about pictures as well as practices of seeing are also necessary to take into account when we discuss visual intimacy.

In the first book review, Robert Saunders reviews *Nordic Noir, Adaptation, Appropriation* by Linda Badley, Andrew Nestingen and Jaakko Seppälä. This Palgrave Macmillan volume gathers a wide range of contributions examining the septentrional crime story. The collection builds on literature engaging with Scandinavian, Icelandic and Finnish crime drama as a significant cultural export, and it investigates the role of Nordic noir as a mirror of the troubles that northern Europe is faced with.

In the second book review, Gunhild Agger reviews Ib Bondebjerg's *Screening Twentieth Century Europe. Television, History, Memory*. The book outlines how central themes and events have been reflected and mediated in historical documentaries, docudrama and historical dramas in the UK and Germany from the late 1960s until today and favouring productions after 1980. The scope of the book is broad, and it provides the reader with functional tools to assess the special character of the productions and their cultural impact.

In the last book review, Ana Margarida Coelho reviews Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare*. The book considers issues that have conveyed the achievement of gender equality, and the analysis constitutes a great contribution for feminist media studies as well as scholars in cultural studies and social sciences.

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