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COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

Changing methods for feminist public scholarship: lessons from Sarah Koenig's podcast *Serial*

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Against some claims of post-feminism, feminist public scholarship continues to run an amplified risk of public backlash. Consider for example Anita Sarkeesian's Feminist Frequency project, a series of YouTube videos contesting the sexism and poor representations of women and girls in film, television, comics, and games. The accessible videos served as public discussion tools until Sarkeesian found herself the target of a massive, misogynistic, hate campaign, where all of her online and social media sites were flooded with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, and even murder. Public discussions of her work now spark backlash and controversy, rather than an actual engagement with the social issues. The importance of Sarkeesian's case has been treated with scrutiny in various pieces in *Feminist Media Studies* (e.g., Karen Boyle 2015; Sophie Mayer 2015; Eve Ng 2015), but what we have learned from her case, and others like it, is that the agitative model of feminist activism is not always productive as a method for feminist public scholarship.

Our driving questions, then, are how can we improve our methods for feminist public scholarship, and move beyond critique, in order to foster greater public engagement? How do we "do" feminist public scholarship without alienating the very audiences that would most benefit from this work? To answer this question—and as part of a graduate seminar on feminist methodologies at Penn State University—we met with Sarah Koenig, creator of the award-winning (and incredibly popular) podcast *Serial*, to discuss some of her methods for successful public engagement. What drew us to Koenig's work was her ability to raise controversial questions about social justice without alienating mainstream audiences. In this piece, we explore how the intersection of the podcast medium and public scholarship can move our feminist methods beyond critique.

We sat down with Koenig to find out more about her methods in developing, hosting, and producing *Serial*. Koenig herself identified as a feminist in our conversation with her, yet does not brand her work explicitly as such. Koenig described herself as a reporter who is interested in asking questions about interesting human stories. *Serial* does, however, employ feminist methods—Koenig investigates highly politicized issues around social justice, a key area of inquiry in feminist research. In season one, Koenig examines the case of Adnan Syed, who was convicted of murder by circumstantial evidence, and in season two, Koenig focuses on Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who faced public scrutiny and came under investigation by the United States Army Forces Command for leaving his post, which led to a

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five-year captivity by the Taliban. *Serial* has reached over 220 million downloads and as such, has created immense visibility for topics of feminist interest, including challenging claims to objective truth and institutional power structures.

A core strategy Koenig uses in *Serial* is to raise questions rather than to author conclusions. Koenig told us that she refrains from pushing a particular agenda herself; instead, she feels as though she moves between narrator and character through the process of investigating each case. Koenig's journalistic method intersects with a core principle of feminist methodology in challenging positivist epistemologies by emphasizing the representation of multiple perspectives. Koenig's questioning opens the possibility for a critique of criminal justice or military policies without foregrounding a critical tone or confrontational position. In effect, she challenges notions of objectivity and "facts" by positing alternatives, thus bypassing the negative mode of critique. Koenig's rhetorical style engages listeners and encourages them to think critically without a direct imposition of her own ideology.

Unlike traditional forms of reporting that privilege a few dominant voices, audio media can foreground the voices and perspectives of nearly all individuals in the story. In *Serial*, Koenig incorporates the actual voices of the people involved in the story whenever possible. Feminist methods similarly aim to destabilize power hierarchies by representing many different viewpoints, rather than subjugating others by telling their stories for them. *Serial's* representation of multiple voices and viewpoints decenters any single authoritative truth in such a way that pushes listeners to question the very notion of authoritative voice.

Podcasts with dramatized audio structure have been shown to yield higher listener immersion and to produce more vivid mental images than podcasts with single narrators (Emma Rodero 2012a, 2012b). Similarly, *Serial's* narrative structure may amplify the emotional transport into the storyline while giving listeners the "freedom" to imagine. Koenig herself emphasized the importance of making sure the audience is entertained and engaged. Here we make a fine, but critical, distinction between feminist public scholarship and activism. Activism routinely confronts rather than invites, it agitates for justice, and its goal is to disrupt, not to entertain. In feminist public scholarship, however, we think it is important to maximize engagement, both to reach a larger audience and to get people interested. This engagement should not undermine what is at stake but should spark an investment in the topics of social justice.

Audio media such as *Serial* are accessible to the public, often available for free online, and reach a diverse listenership. Scholars can engage the public with multimedia pieces that then serve as catalysts for discussions of social justice topics, without presenting a preformed criticism or ideological stance. One of Koenig's final points emphasized the importance of keeping her own politics out of *Serial*, despite the temptation to include them. Just as we run up against "the limits of critique" within academia (Rita Felski 2015), we seem to be running up against those same limits in public scholarship. With media audiences exhausted by ideological polarization, methods employing open questions, multiple voices, subtlety, and humility—all feminist techniques—appear to be more effective in sparking critical thought than confrontations or accusations of hegemonic complicity. As the wide reach of Koenig's *Serial* suggests, public scholarship may be most effective when presented neutrally, in a way that encourages people to critically think and to keep the conversation going. Counterintuitively, it seems, subtracting ideology from our public scholarship may be the best way to actually engage with those very questions of ideology.

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