Editorial

Cultural Critique
Re-negotiating cultural authority in digital media culture

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This special issue explores how authority and expertise in cultural critique are being renegotiated in the digital media landscape. Over the past decades, digital media technologies, particularly social media platforms, have enabled increased public participation in debates about arts and culture, but they have also challenged intellectual authority, enlightenment and knowledge. Today traditional institutions, such as academia and the news media, which are associated with intellectual and public authority, are not the only avenues for cultural critique. Rather, cultural critique and critical authority are constantly performed and (re)negotiated in various types of digital media by intellectuals, journalists and pundits, vloggers/bloggers and podcasters, as well as celebrities and ordinary people.

This reconfiguration of the critical public sphere has given rise to new forms of critical expression and action. It has made cultural critique the purview of a wide range of people, which might be seen as a democratization of the cultural public sphere. Many scholars, however, frame this change within a narrative of decline. James Elkins, for example, opens his book, *What Happened to Arts Criticism*, with the paradoxical statement that "Arts criticism is in worldwide crisis […] at the very same time, art criticism is also healthier than ever […] So it's dying but it's everywhere" (2003, p. 2). Similarly, Ronan McDonald proclaims "the death of the critic," the title of his book from 2007. This decline narrative taps into broader scholarly and public debates about societal institutions' loss of authority (Furedi, 2013; Inglehart, 1999), the "death of expertise" (Nichols, 2017) and the weakening of public trust in, for example, institutionalized news media (Fletcher & Park, 2017), most

recently epitomized by the "fake news" debates (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). This special issue does not aim to take sides in these normative debates about the current state of cultural critique, authority and expertise but to explore and map out how various new forms of cultural critique are articulated. It demonstrates how established and new voices of cultural critique perform and compete in the digital public sphere, drawing on different types of authority and expertise.

Defining cultural critique, criticism and reviewing

Though the terms "cultural critique", "cultural criticism" and "cultural reviewing" are often used interchangeably, their connotations are slightly different, associated with particular critical *genres* and *institutional settings.* The terms are differentiated by the various forms of cultural authority and expertise characteristic of these settings, as well as by the different *agents* situated within or outside these institutional frameworks.

According to the Oxford Dictionaries, "critique" as a noun signifies "[a] detailed analysis and assessment of something, especially a literary, philosophical, or political theory," while as a verb it means to "[e]valuate (a theory or practice) in a detailed and analytical way." The noun "criticism" has two meanings: "[t]he expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of perceived faults or mistakes" and "[t]he analysis and judgement of the merits and faults of a literary or artistic work." Both definitions are of interest in our context. Finally, "review" as a noun and as a verb has several definitions, including to write "A critical appraisal of a book, play, film, etc. published in a newspaper or magazine." These definitions suggest that 'critique' is a broader or more inclusive concept, while "criticism" involves more demarcated tasks, and reviewing even more so. Overlaps between the definitions, however, also suggest that the boundaries of critique, criticism and reviewing are blurred, explaining why they are at times used interchangeably.

In this special issue, we apply the term "critique" to encompass the wide range of culture critical actions in today's digital media landscape, which go beyond the review and judgement of artistic or cultural products. Rather, these critical actions also involve the ways social media are used to circulate cultural tastes and opinions, to mobilize critical movements, fans and followers and to engage in celebrity activism. Contemporary cultural critique – both within and outside institutionalized frameworks and mediated public spheres – serves to express opinions about societal and cultural trends, issues and artefacts, to perform cultural gatekeeping and taste-making, and to counterbalance or challenge established hierarchies and power structures. Digital media has provided a smorgasbord of critique to the public (Frey, 2015) as well as new means for the public to partake in critical discourses. Hence, in this volume, we take the cultural aspect of cultural critique to include a broad anthropological range of cultural, political and commercial issues and agendas, *as well as* particular cultural expressions and goods.

Old and new forms of cultural authority in the digital age

The digital is an important component in contemporary debates about cultural critique and authority. Digital media has, in significant ways, reconfigured the authority of institutionalized news media and the magazine press and challenged the position of established critical voices as gatekeepers and valorizers of cultural taste. Alice Marwick (2015) highlights the new importance of the logic of social media and the attention economy, as the number of followers becomes a goal in itself and synonymous with critical influence; the larger the audience, the more public visibility and, potentially, the greater impact of the critical agenda. P. David Marshall (2010) draws attention to the individual's use of "presentational media", as cultural critical authority in the digital sphere is tied to personal framing and narrative. Online grading platforms level the authority and voice of professionals and amateurs by using algorithms to aggregate reviews produced by both, affording them equal status as "a quantifiable judgment". In the broader context of cultural production, Hallinan and Striphas (2017, p. 131) speak of "algorithmic culture" and pose the question: "What happens when engineers – or their algorithms – become important arbiters of culture, much like art, film, and literary critics?". This exemplifies how digital technologies – from social media to grading platforms – have provided a new media ecology for cultural critique. In this special issue, the connection between cultural critique and social networking sites is of particular interest.

The contributions are divided into three sections. The first section addresses how new platforms and genres contribute to a broader understanding of the cultural review genre in the digital age. Ryan Gillespie (2012) has proposed distinctions between three forms of reaction in various types of media: *feedback* given by audiences on social media platforms, such as YouTube; *reviews* produced by various agents, from users to advertisers to journalists, which often involve a commercial perspective, as such reviews may become part of a commercial chain of communication; and *criticism* performed by critical authorities, such as professional arts journalists or public intellectuals, who provide evaluation as well as contextualization. While these are useful theoretical distinctions, the articles in this volume testify to the need to rethink such categories further. Two articles by Maarit Jaakkola and by Louise Yung Nielsen investigate how YouTubers perform cultural critique by exploiting the attention economy. Applying a user perspective, Jaakkola analyses how YouTubers provide "vernacular reviewing' or "user-generated-reviewing" not only of aesthetic artifacts but also of a wide range of cultural consumer goods. She suggests a new vocabulary, including new genre categories, for these kinds of cultural reviews in the digital media landscape. Nielsen engages with the clash between the bottom-up and top-town logics of YouTube, taking as a case study, PewDiePie, one of the world's most successful YouTubers who initially became famous for his Let's Play videos. Focusing on videos in which PewDiePie criticizes YouTube's use of algorithms, Nielsen highlights the contradiction between PewDiePie portraying himself as an 'indie' critical voice, afforded

by the platform logics, while criticizing the very same technological and commercial structures that made him a micro-celebrity (the article is in Danish).

The second section addresses how digital media have encouraged intellectuals, academics and professional journalists to step down from the Ivory Tower and engage in new types of intellectual and critical dialogue, such as on Facebook and Twitter. Or put differently, it examines how an online presence in the cultural public sphere has become increasingly necessary for established and institutionalized voices to ensure public visibility. Two articles by Erik Svendsen and by Nete Nørgaard Kristensen and Unni From engage with this change. Focusing on Danish intellectuals' use of Facebook to promote their critical thoughts about contemporary society, Svendsen discusses the role of the public intellectual in the digital age, including the mediation and renegotiation of intellectual virtues and discourses via Facebook's social media logics. While such logics may appear counterintuitive to intellectual reasoning, they allow intellectuals to engage with the public in new ways, beyond traditional media platforms, such as books and the news media; but they also demand that the intellectual engages in a particular type of self-presentation (the article is in Danish). In their article about cultural journalists on social media, Kristensen and From demonstrate how professional journalists, who critique arts and culture in institutional media, now also have a social media presence, e.g. on Facebook and Twitter. They use social media for professional communication in their daily work as journalists and for personal communication in their daily lives, thus mixing professional and personal taste-making in new ways. While this blurring of boundaries may be a challenge to most journalists, it resonates well with the professional logics of *cultural* journalists, who have long practiced their work in a grey-zone between the public and the private, and the objective and subjective. Besides exemplifying established critical voices' media presence beyond the institutional frameworks usually associated with cultural critique, the two articles show that both intellectuals on Facebook and cultural journalists on Facebook and Twitter maintain an asymmetrical relation to the public, or their followers. Their authority and legitimacy as critical voices in the cultural public sphere continue to be based on their cultural capital and institutional affiliations, and when performing on newer digital platforms they do not engage in a dialogue with the broader public. In that sense, they remain in their Ivory Towers, as their online presence mainly ensures a mix of apparent accessibility and outreach by mixing public and private, as in the case of the cultural journalists, or strictly public as in the case of the intellectuals.

The third section in the special issue engages with how digital logics may reconfigure culture critical authority by analyzing "new" types of cultural critics, such as celebrities, who use their fame, media exposure and public – or charismatic – authority to perform cultural critique and activism, usually on social media where they have large followings. Helle Kannik Haastrup examines how Emma Watson, known for playing Hermione in the Harry Potter movie series, performs as a cultural critic. Watson's cultural critique focuses on gender equality by means of her feminist book club, based on her image as a celebrity

and her authority as a UN ambassador advocating for equal rights. She performs cultural critique by recommending feminist books on Instagram and her book club website, thus exemplifying how celebrities as a newer type of critical voice can engage in cultural debates about books as well as gender equality issues. Though her voice does not stem from a bottom-up perspective but from established cultural hierarchies of power, she may, nonetheless, challenge literary hierarchies as well as social structures. At the other end of the fame spectrum, fan cultures with extensive online visibility can initiate collective and connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), as Mogens Olesen explores in relation to football fans and the #walkouton77 case. The article shows how fans mobilize and take action against commercial structures by means of a cross-media strategy, involving social media and live broadcasting. Fan cultures, Olesen demonstrates, can serve as collective cultural critics, counterweigh commercial structures and co-author the narrative of a legendary football club such Liverpool FC.

In sum, the special issue engages with significant trends and transformations of the critical, cultural public sphere. The many perspectives examined in the articles point to the heterogeneity of cultural authorities in the digital age, as well as to how new media logics are reshaping the construction of critical authority. Studying cultural critique in digital media poses new methodological and theoretical challenges for scholars because critiques take many forms and appear across various media. Intellectuals publish books, write essays in institutionalized news media and post on social media. news media and post on social media. Celebrities perform in established cultural productions and maintain their fame and activist agenda on Instagram and Twitter. Professional cultural journalists produce journalistic pieces within institutionalized frameworks and make their personalized professional brand visible across social media. Fans and engaged audiences at times reach beyond the fragmented publics on social media by gaining broader visibility and impact in and through mainstream media. This issue analyzes these new forms of cultural critique using different quantitative and qualitative methods and theoretical frameworks. Thus, the articles provide examples of *how* cultural critique is performed, moving beyond traditional commentary and review genres; *where* cultural critique is available, moving beyond academia, news media and specialized magazines; and *who* has the authority to perform cultural critique, bypassing institutionalised types of critique.

Open section

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This issue also includes one Open Section article and two book reviews. The article "DR3 på flow og streaming – en todelt kanalanalyse" (in Danish) by Mads Møller Andersen is an analysis of DR3's flow-tv and streaming strategies and the development from DR3's launch in 2013 to 2017 based on a quantitative analysis of TV ratings and a qualitative

analysis of DR3's range of programs. The article also contributes to a discussion of Danish TV ratings and the methodological challenges related to these measurements.

In the first review, O. Awobamise Ayodeji reviews Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television (edited by Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson), which is a collection of interviews with leading film and TV professionals concerning the many ways that digital delivery systems are transforming the entertainment business.

The review by Janne Bang engages with Jonathan Leer's Madskulinitet. Kønskamp i TV-Køkkenet (in Danish), in which masculinity in TV shows is analyzed.

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