

## Books Aren't Dead: Resurrecting Audio Technology and Feminist Digital Humanities Approaches to Publication and Authorship

Emily Edwards <eledwar\_at\_bgsu\_dot\_edu>, Bowling Green State University  
Robin Hershkowitz <robinh\_at\_bgsu\_dot\_edu>, Bowling Green State University

### Abstract

This article explores how the podcast medium as a form of audio technology has facilitated the reimagining of academic publication and feminist praxis. In this case study, we situate the podcast *Books Aren't Dead (BAD)*, an affiliate of the Fembot Collective, within a broader context of digital humanities scholarship and the field's potential to utilize audio technology to realize feminist approaches. *BAD*, as a podcast, serves as an open-access medium that brings authors and reviewers together in a collaborative context. Audiobook reviews allow for a conversation between author and interviewer, whereby the author can place the work in a broader scholastic and contemporary context for listeners as well as actively engage with constructive critique and questions. The result is a dynamic scholarly communication rather than the static textual product of a book review. We discuss the unique role of audio technology within the knowledge production process from a performance studies and archival point of view. Additionally, in the spirit of the project *BAD*, we also provide an addendum to our textual discussion by including a podcast where we discuss these themes as co-producers, graduate students, and young academics, exploring how audio technology can break down barriers to publication and authorship.

Podcast Audio: audio01.mp3

This podcast is an audio supplement to the article.

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As an audio medium, podcasts are undergoing a renaissance in both consumption and production [Bech 2014]. Alternatively, as some writers have noted [Hempel 2015], today's podcast market is saturated with content. Although the mutable form of a podcast may be situated in the historical context of radio broadcasting [Berry 2016] [Menduni 2007], a podcast is distinctively different from the radio broadcast medium in modes of delivery, archiving, and function. Podcasting is a more accessible audio format that has increasingly enabled a broad public to record conversations, interviews, and fictional narratives as well as disseminate audio recordings on various digital platforms rather than commercial airwaves. This article explores the podcast medium as a form of audio technology within the dynamic field of digital humanities (DH). We argue that the podcast as an audio format has the potential to facilitate the reimagining of an academic publication as feminist praxis. As co-producers of the podcast *Books Aren't Dead (BAD)*, an affiliate of the *Fembot Collective*, we offer *BAD* as a case study to discuss how the podcast embodies feminist and critical approaches in the field of DH publication and project creation.

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*BAD* features interviews of authors and creators of books, academic works, and games that are at the intersection of feminism, new technology, new media, and digital spaces [Fembot 2019]. *BAD* was relaunched in the fall of 2018 as part of its mother organization, the *Fembot Collective*. The Fembot Collective was founded in 2009 at the University of Oregon [Fembot 2019]. Today, the Fembot Collective is a vibrant, scholarly community and an open-access publishing platform, supported by Manifold, that is home to the peer-reviewed journal *Ada: Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, featuring the involvement of staff from universities across the country [Fembot 2019]. As a part of the Fembot Collection, the *BAD* podcast does not simply mediate and produce content about feminism, technology, and media, but rather, *BAD* directly intervenes in existing debates in the field of DH by producing a feminist audio archive and foregrounding audio interviews as alternatives to written book reviews.

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To demonstrate how the podcast format expands our definitions of text and therefore, what counts as scholarship in DH, this article begins by examining the *BAD* podcast in the context of feminist DH and the archival preservation of feminist scholarship. We outline how podcasting as a medium and genre allows for the expression and centralization of feminist values and forms of knowledge production. We then recount how podcasting permits the preservation of feminist voices and the curation of an archive of feminist knowledge evidenced by two recent *BAD* interviews. We discuss the significance of performance and mediation between producer, listener, and interviewee in the podcast format. Next, we contextualize how *BAD* subverts and problematizes existing hierarchies in academic publishing and models a feminist praxis. We conclude with encouragement for other DH

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practitioners interested in utilizing this audio format through small-scale feminist DH projects and publications.

## (Critical) Digital Humanities: Debates, Tensions, and Approaches

*BAD* is situated within emerging debates in DH scholarship, specifically the potential for DH projects to be transformative, feminist, and intersectional. Today we witness the increased prominence of technological devices in the toolbox of humanities scholars [Dobson 2019], which is situated within a broader trend of the new “datafied” ways of reading, analyzing, and deconstructing texts. These trends privilege a “big data” approach to information [Dobson 2019, 3] [Kitchin 2014] [van Es and Schäfer 2017]. This “big data” turn marginalizes feminist and critical methods and deprivileges close readings, situated case studies, and the subjective and contingent position of knowledge [Leurs 2017]. Scholars have noted the propensity of DH projects to at best fetishize digital technologies that curate and catalog mass amounts of information [Dobson 2019, 68], or at worst, that inadvertently reproduce dominant, oppressive structures and ideologies onto texts and archives [Risam 2015, 4]. The field of DH has been critiqued as male-dominated and aligned with the neoliberal corporatization of academic knowledge [Allington et al. 2016] [Wernimont and Losh 2018].

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Despite these important critiques of the field of DH, we situate *BAD* as a DH project in the context of a vibrant tradition of feminist DH scholarship, and we draw attention to how *BAD* actualizes what we view as the main goal of feminist DH work, to “...expand our notions of text and context, archive and canon, and code and program” [Wernimont and Losh 2018, xii]. Our intervention in this project of expansion is the reimagining of the academic book review as a podcast, which falls within a longer trajectory of feminist scholarship in DH. As Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips have noted, “archives may be the most legible form of digital humanities production” [Lothian and Phillips 2013, 6]. Our DH project produces the necessary historical archives of feminist scholarship, but also expands upon the use and content of an archive in the podcast format [Wernimont 2013]. We take a broader view of archives, moving away from the primacy of written texts and draw particular attention to how audio recordings serve as living archives. Therefore, in addition to the technology of the feminist archive, *BAD* also draws upon the affordances of audio technology to expand the definition of text, thereby embracing feminist forms of knowledge production that characterize a feminist DH approach.

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Along with the expansion of texts, the importance of affective or mediated connection, collaborative labor arrangements, and centralization of ethical values also shape intersectional feminist DH [Wernimont and Losh 2018, xiii]. Following this call, *BAD* ultimately seeks to produce scholarly knowledge through a transparent, collaborative process, via audio rather than textual means. We host *BAD* in an open-access format — available to stream on Anchor, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and our website *Books Aren't Dead* [Hershkowitz and Edwards 2020] — to bring authors and reviewers together in a collaborative context to reimagine the traditional concept of a book review. As a podcast, the book review interview facilitates connectivity and collaboration between author and interviewer that is not possible through the process of writing a traditional textual book review.

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Our approach is in stark contrast to dominant publication models. Book reviews, in the traditional textual format, often appear in academic peer-reviewed journals, with little interaction between the reviewer and the author. Furthermore, book reviews are often pay-walled and thus inaccessible to a broader public [Brienza 2012] [Logan 2017]. Increasingly, academics at smaller institutions and independent scholars struggle to pay for institutional or individual access to expensive journal subscriptions [Logan 2017] [Sample 2012]. As a result, both the production and consumption of book reviews alienates the reviewer, author, and audience from one another. As Alexis Lothian and Amanda Phillips note, the *Fembot Collective* — through its commitment to collaborative, open peer review and an open-access platform — has “expanded [the] notion of what ‘article’ means” and more broadly serves as an “innovator in scholarly communicative possibilities” within the field of DH [Lothian and Phillips 2013, 19]. Podcasting, therefore, offers an exciting approach that addresses critiques of DH and models how the field can challenge structures and hierarchies of power in the academy.

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Additionally, *BAD* attempts to go beyond an additive approach to feminist knowledge production by emphasizing the scholarly value of podcast interviews not as addendums to textual book reviews, but as an alternative format. Roopika Risam, in problematizing Western biases in existing DH scholarship, notes that for scholars committed to principles of social justice, including feminism, such scholars must “challenge the exclusions in the record of digital knowledge” [Risam 2018, 140]. Risam further argues that the simple inclusion of marginalized voices is not enough; rather, we must “seize control over the means of digital knowledge production” [Risam 2018, 141]. In *BAD*, we not only include feminist voices in the digital culture record, but we also seize the microphone. We create a new archive for a new era of DH scholarship that is feminist and intersectional. In terms of content, this includes the preservation of feminist voices; in terms of structure, this includes the facilitation of mediated connection between listener, producer, and interviewee; finally, in terms of practice, this project revises exclusive definitions of authorship within academic publishing. Therefore, *BAD* functions as an intervention by sharing and preserving feminist voices through its interview format that expands DH's notions of text and context as well as archive and canon.

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## Books Aren't Dead: Archiving Feminist Voices Through Interviews

In line with feminist calls for context and close analysis, we turn to the feminist work of two podcasts. One of *BAD*'s key aims is to curate an audible archive of feminist voices. Risam, in discussing the possibility of intersectional approaches in the field of DH, emphasizes that the "relationship between theory and praxis is integral to the digital humanities. Connections between the two appear in the archives built, corpora analyzed, oral histories recorded, and geographies mapped" [Risam 2015, 4]. Our interview with *Fembot Collective* founder Carol Stabile in *BAD*'s inaugural relaunch interview demonstrates such feminist digital humanities praxis; Stabile is a feminist media scholar and the Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oregon. Archiving Stabile's work as a key figure in feminist media studies [Stabile 1992] [Stabile 1994] [Stabile 2006], makes the knowledge in Stabile's scholarly monographs accessible through the podcast format. The connection between feminist theory and praxis is realized in the content of *BAD*'s archives, and specifically through our interview with Stabile.

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In this interview, we discussed Stabile's most recent work, *The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist* [Stabile 2018], which focuses on how forty-one progressive women writers, performers, and creators working in the American television industry between the 1930s and 1940s were forced out of their professions as targets of the "Red Scare." Stabile's book illustrates how this resulted in a television landscape with a profound absence of progressive, feminist voices that we recognize in the white-washed, conservative "Golden Age of Television" of the 1950s. In the interview, we connect contemporary forms of exclusion and marginalization within audio and visual industries, such as the #MeToo movement to the early 20th century, as explored in Stabile's work.

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In the podcast conversation, we were interested in Stabile's process of connecting the early age of television production to the contemporary media landscape. Stabile noted that "moments when new media get introduced [are] really important moments for studying the history of struggle" [Edwards and Hershkowitz 2019a]. She situates the marginalization and disenfranchisement of progressive women writers in the 1930s and 1940s concerning contemporary trends of racial bias and conservative capture of media institutions, which we have most recently witnessed through the prominence of media figures such as President Donald Trump and conspiracy-theorist Alex Jones [Edwards and Hershkowitz 2019a]. Stabile spoke about the importance of highlighting the legacy of progressive women writers in the television industry during the blacklist. She noted that by archiving the underexplored contributions of progressive women in television, this "makes you understand that you're not the first person to fight against the structures, but that you're part of a history of resistance. And I think that that can be inspiring and sustaining to people who struggle today" [Edwards and Hershkowitz 2019a].

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By curating these conversations with feminist authors such as Stabile, we highlight the existence of a community of feminist media scholars, emphasize the critical work that is being done in our own field, and underscore that resistance scholarship exists, even if not in one's home institution or department. Wernimont and Losh note that within the field of DH, feminist, antiracist work and scholarship are often actively minimized or viewed as superfluous to the field [Wernimont and Losh 2018, ix–xi]. In this scholarly landscape where there are active questions of whether feminist, critical, antiracist, and postcolonial approaches are welcome in the field DH scholarship [McPherson 2012] [Risam 2015], interviewing feminist scholars working in the fields of media, technology, and science is an active response to the erasure of these approaches. Building our archive, we explicitly seek contributions that centralize feminist perspectives to counter institutional and field erasure [Hershkowitz 2019]. Additionally, we structure the interview process to create an open network of scholarly discussions accessible to those who may not have departmental structures that support feminist research. By archiving interviews with authors writing within this intersection of feminism, media, and technology, we create a new community of feminist scholars who are able to listen and engage.

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In our second interview with Polina Kroik about her book *Cultural Production and the Politics of Women's Work in American Literature and Film* [Kroik 2019], we discussed the legacy of women who are cultural producers between the 1920s and 1950s. Kroik emphasized the relationship between changes in technology, such as typewriters and the physical structures of offices, and how these material changes inaugurated new modes and forms of authorship, which forced women to engage in forms of affective, emotional labor. These changes continue to inform emerging power imbalances in the workplace that reverberate in cultural industries, such as Hollywood, with Kroik also highlighting the #MeToo movement [Edwards and Hershkowitz 2019b]. With this interview, we emphasize the significance of not only the preservation of Kroik's voice as a feminist scholar, but the possibility of *BAD* to emphasize the historical marginalization and exclusion of female media producers, creators, and writers in cultural industries.

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While we agree with Risam that an additive approach to critical DH is not enough [Risam 2018], the addition of podcast interviews serve as potential models for alternative recording and publishing of feminist histories. The curation of a feminist digital archive through podcasts is only one aspect of the significance of this type of DH work. The interview does not merely comprise a static archive; rather, the interview can be read beyond its status as a text and publication. The connections produced through the

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mediated performance of producer, interviewee, and listener also underscore the value of podcasts as an alternative form of book review publication that privileges connectivity and affect, key principles in our feminist approach [Wernimont and Losh 2018, xiii].

## Podcaster, Guest, and Listening Audience: A Mediation of Performances

Podcasts can be a site of performance whereby the interviewer and interviewee share affective, aural, and interpersonal intimacy that shapes knowledge creation and circulation. Thus, we consider performance studies an important context with which to locate podcasting in feminist praxis. In one of the first edited academic collections on podcasting, *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* (2018), the editors note that podcasts represent “the possibility, in one ‘space,’ to create a considered yet engaging conversation that merges criticality, scholarship, fandom, and practice, not to mention the possibility of attracting an audience that found value in our conversations” [Llinares and Fox 2018, 1]. Here, the podcast is more than the mp3 file or an audio recorded sound. The space is one of performance, invention, and even resistance. As performance studies scholars Richard Schechner and Sara Brady state, “performance must be construed as a broad spectrum or continuum of human actions, ranging from ritual, play, popular entertainments, performing arts and everyday life performances and to the enactment of professional, gender, race, and class roles” [Schechner and Brady 2013, 2]. As such, we emphasize how the various performances within the production of podcasting underscore the potential for feminist DH praxis.

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Regardless of genre, podcasts are a type of performance where podcasters and guests are performing a certain version of themselves in collaborative communication. In emphasizing the performance aspects of podcasting, we draw attention to the possibility of co-creation through performance, which facilitates forms of affective, dynamic communication outside of the removed and supposedly objective tone of the written book review. Podcasting has the potential for collaborative knowledge production between author and interviewee through the shared experience of performance in the audio conversation. Additionally, podcasts provide a staging ground for feminist conversations through the ease of podcast production and distribution on digital platforms. Using the lens of performance studies, we argue for the possibility of viewing podcasts as a medium that allows for the centralization of feminist DH praxis.

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As an affective form of communication, the act of podcasting a book review connects to feminist DH praxis. The surplus information that the affect of podcasting invites transforms the value of a book review to align with feminist approaches. Podcasts, such as *BAD*, reveal previously hidden elements of academic knowledge, such as the conditions of production, ethics, relationships, and the socio-political context of the work. In our interviews, we are interested not simply in the content of the text but the authors' experience in producing the text. We particularly want to emphasize the fluidity of a podcast performance that facilitates feminist forms of communicative engagement. The audience, while listening rather than reading, experiences a form of affective connection that allows for identification with the voices and the centralization of feminist themes. The audience's experience of listening is now included in the creation of knowledge. Each individualized listeners' decoding allows for and encourages different places of entry and departure within the podcast.

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Just as the listener has the opportunity to engage with the podcast, the author or interviewee has the potential to perform the self as an authoritative voice via co-scriptive interactions and discussions. Typically, the accessibility of an academic publication creates the scholarly authority, specifically if it is behind a paywall and situated within a vocabulary only understood by other academics. However, we contend that this type of scholarly authority is determined by institutional methods that are arbitrary and prohibitive to a broader public. In *BAD*, the interviewer and the interviewee are not just performing scholarly inquiry but also engaging in dynamic communication throughout the interview that redefines scholarly authority. The interviewer prepares written questions, but the conversation may change as she switches her line of inquiry to the author. Additionally, the author can lead the conversation in various directions as part of an ongoing dialogue. Stacy Copeland emphasizes that in podcasts, the changing emotional tone of voice and other background audio allows for the podcast to become a form of affective media. Copeland states that in podcasts, “the material voice becomes a sticky surface to be stuck with multiple decodings, re-workings and affect” [Copeland 2018, 220]. An interview between two people can become “sticky” in the sense that emotional changes in voice, laughter, and unexpected moments can produce the possibility for multiple points of engagement. Stickiness, then, produces surplus affect and creates the conditions for greater dynamic, dialogic engagement, thus providing a facet of connection that goes beyond the formulaic structure of a book review.

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While Stabile and all the authors interviewed on *BAD* are experienced scholars, the relationship between interviewee and interviewer produces a more equitable relational dynamic compared to the structure of the book review in which the reviewer comments on and critiques a text from afar. The ability to ask questions of authors in real-time through the podcast performance for clarification, expansion of concepts, or even constructive critique, produces new knowledge and information about the monographs through dialogue and partnership. The interview not only produces a dynamic product but through the process of the interview performance, the interviewer engages in authorship through performance. This method is directly aligned with feminist emphasis

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on collaborative forms of knowledge production outside of the confines of the academy and the exclusive academic publishing apparatus [Lothian and Phillips 2013, 22].

Our framing of podcasting as performance is an important contribution to feminist DH praxis. To be included within feminist DH praxis, the podcast ought to produce a unique space for dialogue and engagement that was previously limited in the current state of academic publishing. We situate *BAD* to serve as an aural space for feminist scholarly engagement in the field of DH that is, at times, exclusionary to feminist concerns, projects, and critiques [Wernimont and Losh 2018]. Another way in which podcasting as performance establishes feminist DH praxis is that podcasts ultimately represent active possibilities. These possibilities include performance, affective connection, staging, learning, and the extension of the professional relationship beyond the interview. Podcasts have the potential to directly archive emotions and experiences, and therefore feminist ways of knowing, thus serving as both affective as well as physical archives. Affective archives preserve performances, experiences, emotions, and interactions. Thus, the performance of podcasting is crucial to subverting academic hierarchies by creating archives beyond the physical and written form.

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## Subverting Academic Publishing Hierarchies and Podcasting Feminist Futures

Subverting academic hierarchies through podcasting offers dynamic new opportunities for feminist DH practitioners. In our professionalization, we have been informed that in the hierarchy of publishing, book reviews may be lower in prestige and often serve as a way for graduate students to ease into publishing. Therefore, the individuals that do engage with book reviews may find their labor delegitimized and seen as “knowing their place” and “doing their time.” However, we see engaging with the labor of other people’s work as incredibly important to elevate and legitimize one another’s research, especially for marginalized authors in academia. This is important since the work of individuals who identify as Black scholars, indigenous scholars, scholars of color, and female-identified and non-binary scholars, is underrepresented in academic literature and within the academic publishing industry [Mirza 2015] [Roh 2016] [Souto and Ray 2007]. A feminist perspective shifts the focus on padding the reviewer’s CV to supporting the author in the interview space and amplifying feminist scholarship.

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Another intervention is using sound. Podcasting can facilitate a more feminist use of the idea of voice, both literally and figuratively. Like many women, we were socialized into thinking our voices were not authoritative both in content and delivery. Just as marginalized scholars confront an academic publishing apparatus that is biased towards white, male forms of authorship and knowledge production [Mirza 2015] [Roh 2016] [Souto and Ray 2007], feminine voices are audibly policed. This can manifest in the characterization of “vocal fry” as unprofessional and unattractive [Anderson et al. 2014], or a preference among men to listen to higher-pitched feminized voices over average pitched tones [Feinberg et al. 2008]. However, we maintain that a podcast’s performative authorship breaks down barriers to knowledge such as paywalls, and also creates spaces for diverse voices to emerge and claim authority. Podcasts become a way to intervene in the politics of sound.

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Along with amplifying voices, the form of podcasting itself challenges existing hierarchies. The technical and financial barriers to entry are lower than many other DH methods. On the distribution side, platforms for producing and distributing podcasts, such as Anchor, have become increasingly user-friendly. Unlike most academic journals that are behind steep paywalls, listeners can access and download podcasts with financial and technical ease. As a result, one can bypass expensive and narrow publishing models while increasing access and discovery of, in our case, feminist scholarship.

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Furthermore, DH projects should not be viewed as alternatives to traditional academic practices; rather, the academic hierarchies must be changed to accommodate new ways of knowledge production. One example that both incorporates and challenges existing academic frameworks is *Reviews of Digital Humanities*, a journal founded by Jennifer Guiliano and Roopika Risam in 2019. The goal of this open-access journal “is to foster critical discourse about scholarship in a format useful to other scholars,” publishing “project overviews written by project directors alongside peer reviews written by members of digital humanities communities” [Guiliano and Risam 2020]. This project takes the form of incorporating previous academic standards by existing as a peer-reviewed journal but expands upon the idea of what is considered eligible and credible to academic archives. Guiliano and Risam’s initiative demonstrates how creators of DH projects can still be legitimized by their peers through rigorous reviews and evaluation, but with DH projects and publications considered on their own terms, rather than trying to fit into the very evaluative structure of academic journal publishing that DH practitioners are trying to subvert. *BAD*, therefore, synthesizes traditional academic publishing conventions, such as the book review, with the podcasting format to realize the potential of feminist scholarly engagement. The project models how small-scale feminist DH audio projects can realize a different future for DH.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have emphasized the significance and transformative potential of utilizing audio technology to produce alternative

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forms of knowledge. We have situated *BAD* within the scholarly conversation of feminist DH practice, drawing attention to expanding definitions of scholarly texts and the possibility of creating a dynamic archive. *BAD* utilizes podcasting to highlight and preserve the work of feminist scholars writing within spheres of media and technology. Additionally, we have suggested the importance of drawing on performance studies to understand the mediated connection between audience, interviewee, and producer, which is a form of collaborative connection unique to the podcast format. Ultimately, in this article, we have demonstrated how podcasting can allow feminist DH practitioners to produce and publish scholarly knowledge in a way that effectively challenges the hierarchical practices of academic publishing.

This case study contributes to the feminist field of DH and serves as a call to action for other feminist and critical DH scholars to engage with the audio medium of podcasting. There is a burgeoning field of academic podcasts that demonstrate the exciting possibility of producing knowledge from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives using audio technology, including the podcast *Rocking the Academy* from Mary Churchill and Roopika Risam, the *MFAngle Podcast* from Mirna Palacio Ornelas, Bessie F. Zaldívar, and Blessing Christopher et al., and the podcast *Alt! Ack!* from Robin Hershkowitz and Patrick Felton. These are just a few examples of some exciting additions to the field of critical podcasting.

Ultimately, as a truly interdisciplinary field, DH includes ways of knowing that reject arbitrary disciplinary divisions of knowledge and structures of hierarchy within the academy. Technical knowledge has been streamlined by accessible programs and applications. Thus, the opportunity to create is increasingly available to the public and individuals with beginner levels of technical acumen. We believe that podcasting can be a radical interdisciplinary intervention that challenges not only the textual form of scholarly discourse but also its content. We have seized the mic at Bowling Green State University as *BAD* co-producers, and we hope this article serves as an impetus to pass the mic to other DH scholars invested in feminist and critical approaches.

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