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WOMEN’S WORK

Affective labour and convergence culture

This essay raises the possibility that participation in convergence culture may not enhance women’s recreational pleasures, much less prepare them for public forms of political activity. Taking the Dr. Phil multimedia self-help franchise as a case study, we argue that women’s ‘interactivity’ can be mobilized as a gendered requirement of neoliberal citizenship, that is, an ongoing, mundane regimen of self-empowerment that does not intensify the pleasure of the text as much as it intensifies and extends a ‘second shift’ of familial and affective labour historically performed by women in the home. The gendered labour of actively participating in the Dr. Phil television show, website, books and workbooks prohibits the fleeting pleasures and temporary distractions associated with earlier phases of domestic labour, such as soap operas and romance novels.

Keywords media convergence; gender; affective labour; self-help; democracy; citizenship

The place of women’s participation in convergence culture remains unclear. On the one hand, women are not its primary subject. As Henry Jenkins notes, if the increased ‘flow of content across media platforms, cooperation between media industries, and migratory behavior of media audiences’ are spawning a more participatory media culture (Jenkins, 2008, p. 2), the gains are not universal. Individuals who chase ‘down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience’ (p. 21) are primarily white, male, young and college-educated. The hope is, of course, that similar dispositions and skills will spread to broader constituencies — women, people of colour, the aged and the underprivileged — and eventually usher in a new era of democratic participation and political empowerment.

On the other hand, when women’s participation in convergence culture is explicitly addressed, it is usually done so through the lens of fandom, which remains the focal point of convergence culture studies. In a recent collection, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and Lee Harrington Gray suggest that fan studies is entering an exciting third phase, where fandom is understood to be generalized (‘We are all fans’) and entrenched in ‘the fabric of our everyday
lives’ (Gray et al. 2007, p. 9). While this broadening of scope and method promises to raise new questions about women’s involvement in convergence culture, we are concerned that the sustained focus on fandom will overshadow other, more mundane dimensions of female participation in the contemporary mediascape. Gendered practices that are not imagined to be marked primarily by pleasure may fall from view, and with them the broader social trends and contexts in which these practices occur.

Our modest aim in this short essay is to correct for the ‘disproportionate attention’ given to facets of convergence culture such as ‘youth media, activist media, and political mash-ups, which are indeed important but do not represent more typical usage by millions of people’ (Manovich 2009, p. 321); and, second, raise the possibility that participation in convergence culture may not enhance women’s recreational pleasures, much less prepare them for ‘serious’ or public forms of political activity. On the contrary, we suggest that women are already integral to gendered manifestations of convergence culture, which in turn activate gendered templates for ‘active’ citizenship. Taking the US-based Dr. Phil multimedia self-help franchise as a case study, our research suggests that women’s interactivity can mobilized as a gendered requirement of neoliberal citizenship, an ongoing, mundane regimen of self-empowerment that does not intensify the pleasure of the text as much as it intensifies a ‘second shift’ of familial and affective labour historically performed by women in the home (Hochschild 1989/2003). In other words, while the multi-platform Dr. Phil television programme, website and publishing empire certainly encourages sustained, rigorous and devoted participation in convergence culture, its insertion into the ‘the fabric of our everyday lives’ looks less like a ‘richer’ media experience and than the ‘women’s work’ upon which political regimes of privatization and personal responsibility depend.

Our intervention is partly a matter of re-stating an argument that feminist scholars have been making for some time: ‘real’ democracy does not exist independently of feminized private spheres such as domesticity and self-help media, but is produced through these domains. We also highlight the sexual division of labour as a neglected dimension of convergence culture and the participatory ethos it is assumed to engender. Unwaged women’s work has always been integral to liberal democracy, and remains indispensable to post-welfare strategies of privatization and governing at a distance that presume the autonomy and self-sufficiency of families. At the same time, the crisis of the nuclear family and rising expectations (codified by welfare reform legislation) that contemporary women be providers as well as caretakers for themselves and their children have brought rising pressures to bear on the traditional sexual division of labour. The Dr. Phil franchise, like much contemporary lifestyle and self-help media, flourishes within the resulting tension. Conjoining active and intense media engagement across technological, temporal and spatial boundaries to personal empowerment in the service of familial responsibilities, the Dr. Phil phenomenon can be seen as eliciting and
facilitating women’s work ‘all the time’. However, it also valourizes feminized labour as enterprising citizenship. Exemplifying a burgeoning swath of convergence culture aimed specifically at women, it takes us beyond the viewing, discussion and remixing of media texts to the implementation of a mediated regimen for successful self-management and family governance. The transition from women’s television designed to be watched in a state of distraction to the purposeful, multiplatform, ‘on demand’ domestic media exemplified by Dr. Phil is not self-evidently progressive. However, as we suggest, it is indispensable to the operations of a post-welfare democracy in which women are already active participants.

Families first: domestic governance and convergence culture

On 16 September 2002, Dr Phillip McGraw introduced his services to millions of daytime television viewers. From a gleaming studio stage, he promoted his new television programme as an expanded platform for ‘changing attitudes’ and helping viewers ‘get their chaotic lives in order’. The broadcast provides a national forum for diagnosing less-than optimal ‘human functioning’ and applying the self-empowerment techniques dispensed in McGraw’s bestselling line of books, audio recordings and workbooks. It also provides a bridge to the Dr. Phil website, where TV viewers can sample McGraw’s Life Laws, practice self-tests and exercises, post-online diaries, discuss problems and solutions, and purchase resources to pursue McGraw’s regimen of ‘successful and strategic living’, including all McGraw’s print merchandise and DVD copies of every Dr. Phil episode.

The broadcast operates as a hub for the multimedia Dr. Phil franchise by bringing McGraw’s product into the home as serialized edutainment. As the mass cultural ‘interface’ (Lury 2004) to the multimedia Dr. Phil brand, it anchors unprecedented linkages between the self-help publishing industry, broadcast television and the Web as an interactive resource and marketing tool. Fusing the how-to orientation of popular self help books with daytime television’s long-established codes of domestic realism, Dr. Phil brings McGraw’s tutorials to life, taking ‘real’ people as the basis for on-air interventions that often coalesce around the disintegration of the contemporary family. The premiere episode set the stage by tailoring the Dr. Phil regimen to the problems besetting ‘Families Under Stress’ (16 September 2002). Juxtaposing raw video footage of an ‘angry and exhausted’ mother with McGraw’s diagnosis of the conduct captured on tape, the broadcast offered self-help techniques in the service of ‘optimizing’ family dynamics. Since then, marital unhappiness, chronic household tension, failed parenting and rampant divorce, have been presented as recurring problems to be managed using McGraw’s techniques. Learning to ‘take charge’ of one’s health, self-esteem,
finances, weight, romantic relationships and other staple Dr. Phil topics is also often promoted as a means of restoring functionality to heterosexual family unit. As the presumed caretakers of domesticity and the target market for McGraw’s products, women are called upon to perform this role.²


McGraw has thrived across print, broadcast and digital media, using his converged media presence to move women from one platform to the next, and back again. Harnessing old and new media technologies, he programmed opportunities for interactivity and cross-promotion into his franchise, resulting in the most pervasive brand of self-help the US has ever seen. While tied to a fortuitous exploitation of new developments in digital capitalism (Schiller 2000), the Dr. Phil regimen for ‘programming yourself … into well-being’ (McGraw, P. 1999, p. 41) did not take hold in a sociopolitical vacuum. Rather, it facilitates and profits from the civic currency associated with ‘self-empowerment’ in neoliberal societies.³ McGraw specializes in providing women the knowledge and skills they need to ‘maximize themselves’ and achieve the ‘results they want’ in a competitive world. In this sense, his products gender self-help as a technology of citizenship, a tactic that can be traced to self-esteem programmes developed by the State of California to move
women off welfare rolls in the early 1990s. As Barbara Cruikshank (1999) documents, female welfare recipients were required to participate in ‘empowering’ forms of self work, expected to become ‘experts of themselves’ in consultation with professionals through diary writing, personal narratives, self-exercises and related assignments. The impetus was to wean the women from public sector dependency and transform them into ‘proper’ citizens capable of managing their futures. While the Dr. Phil franchise is not affiliated with any State agency and does not specifically address welfare subjects, it does claim to empower women who choose to participate in a rigorous self-work regimen involving television, print media and the web. Operating on the cultural market not the public sector, Dr. Phil sells multimedia resources for achieving what Nancy Fraser calls a new care of the self in which ‘everyone is an expert on herself, responsible for managing her own human capital to maximum effect’ (2003, p. 168).

While the State of California mobilized self-help to move women from welfare to paid work, Dr. Phil presumes that female viewers/readers/users are already participating members of the ‘double income society’. McGraw takes for granted that today’s women work outside the home to provide for their families, evoking Fraser and Gordon’s (2007) observation that post-welfare societies (such as the US) now hold women equally accountable to the historically male breadwinner ethic. Yet, ‘careers’ are downplayed and only minimal attention is devoted to paid jobs. The bulk of McGraw’s advice focuses on personal relationships, family and domestic life. Within these domains, the process of female self-empowerment is simultaneously individual and other-directed, construed as rules and techniques to be continually applied to oneself in the service of familial relationships bound by affective ties. A woman must not ‘neglect herself’, explains Robin McGraw, echoing her husband’s credo; she must ‘become an active participant in the creation and maintenance of her own well-being and that of her loved ones’ (McGraw, R. 2006, p. 184). What Foucault calls governing through freedom works through women in a double sense, as Dr. Phil customers are offered customizable advice for managing themselves as a means to stable marriages, children and families.

The family, as Nikolas Rose points out, has long been ‘fundamental to the government of the social’ (1987, 1989/1999, 1996). Stable families are also integral to post-welfare societies, providing the foundation for self-enterprising citizenship and expected to ‘step in as the state cuts back on social security, public schooling and other civic-minded (and civic-minding) programs’ (Duggan 2003, Becker 2006, p. 175). The constitution and maintenance of married, two-parent families among disadvantaged and ‘at risk’ populations in particular has been a major aim of US social policy since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 (‘Working Toward Independence’ 2002). George W. Bush further intensified this objective by promoting ‘marriage an essential institution in a successful
society’, establishing a National Family Week and a Marriage Protection Week and launching the Federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, an education programme described as a Head Start for marriage and families. Through this programme, the federal government funds publicity and training programmes to help couples ‘gain access to the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages’ and practice ‘responsible child-rearing’ (‘Healthy Marriage Initiative’). Goals include helping ‘low-income couples better handle conflicts in their relationships’ and encouraging ‘those who are single to get married and those who are married not to divorce’ (Campbell 2004). According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, healthy marriage is promoted not as a moral issue but as a mechanism for helping citizens to help themselves, on the grounds that ‘married couples seem to build more wealth, on average, than singles or cohabitating couples, children from ‘broken families are twice as likely to be poor and require government services’, while those who live in a two-parent, married household ‘enjoy better physical health (‘Healthy Marriage Initiative’). Stable marriages are also believed to contribute to general health and well-being of society by bolstering college attendance and ‘reducing the risks of adults and children either perpetuating or being victimized by crime’ (‘Healthy Marriage Matters’, Feldhahn 2004).

While Dr. Phil is not affiliated with the Healthy Marriage Initiative, he does market complimentary skills and resources for sustaining families. ‘We’ve stopped thinking about this core unit of family’, says McGraw, who often describes his television programme, website and books as a platform for marriage and parenting education. Both the Healthy Marriage Initiative and the Dr. Phil franchise exemplify the pursuit of ‘social security’ through family regulation and governance (Donzelot 1979/1997), a process that has historically involved a dispersed assemblage of State institutions, social workers, professional experts and women as domestic guardians. Donzelot traces this mode of governmentality to the birth of public welfare systems. Since the 1980s, most Western capitalist democracies have sought to downscale public investment in human welfare with the exception of bridges to self-sufficiency (such as federal marriage programmes), preferring to adopt a supportive posture to private initiatives. As one such venture, Dr. Phil promises to empower women to create and sustain their own ‘phenomenal families’ through ongoing participation in an expansive multimedia regimen. ‘The very society that has taught you that it is good and right natural to share your life with another person, the same society that in large part defines and measures success by how you manage your relationships and your family, never bothered to teach you about how you are supposed to do that’, McGraw explains (2000, p. 9). Dr. Phil promises to fill this gap.

All Dr. Phil books present stable marriages and families as ideals to be achieved through practical work on the gendered self. Relationship Rescue, Love Smart and Families First are marketed as resources for finding a man, maintaining
a marriage and running a family, with tie-in workbooks providing tests and exercises to help women achieve successful outcomes in those areas. Broadcast episodes with names like ‘Roles in Marriage’ (11 June 2002), ‘A Family Divided’ (25 September 2003), ‘Suriving the First Year of Marriage’ (14 October 2003), ‘Real Desperate Housewives’ (8 November 2004) and ‘The Biggest Mistakes Moms Make’ (13 December 2005) present the crisis of the nuclear family as behavioural problems that can be brought under control with McGraw’s micro methods of self-management. Unlike earlier soap operas and talk shows in which domestic problems and tensions were routinely displayed but never resolved, Dr. Phil episodes are tightly structured around the diagnosis and reform of ‘dysfunctional’ individuals and families. While these interventions are shown to involve particularly needy subjects, TV viewers are also encouraged to empower themselves using McGraw’s techniques, a process that includes reading and rereading his books and regularly visiting the Dr. Phil website in addition to watching the television broadcast (‘The work begins once we stop taping’, McGraw often reminds). Media convergence enables intense engagement with the Dr. Phil franchise, but this engagement is not necessarily pleasurable and is difficult to characterize as leisure. We contend that it should be seen as an elaboration of the pursuit of social security through women’s laborious role in family regulation. Dr. Phil invites women to use media in a more purposeful and empowering manner by linking media reception to the practice of self-work and by integrating ‘passive’ old media (books and television) with ‘active’ new media technologies. McGraw facilitates women’s entry into a converged media culture — not as means of intensified textual pleasure or enhanced cultural participation, but as an ‘enterprising’ new facet of their caretaking labour.

Entrepreneurs of the home: affective labour and women’s citizenship

Dr. Phil addresses women as the principal conductors and caretakers of family life, reproducing the traditional sexual division of labour in the home. Since women are also assumed to work outside the home, the time they spend with the multimedia Dr. Phil regimen is situated within a ‘second shift’ of affective and familial labour performed for free. Affective labour is not limited to domestic chores, but encompasses a whole range of emotional, caring and maternal labour performed within families. This care work is an ‘act that, for the most part, women do; it is a gendered activity’ (Meyer 2000, p. 6). While this work is unwaged, feminists have long characterized ‘women’s work’ as foundational to the social reproduction of capitalism (Spigel 1992). More recently, Michael Hardt has theorized women’s caring and kin work as a bottom-up dimension of biopower, indispensable to the ‘emerging forces of
governmentality to create, manage and control populations – the power to manage life’ (Hardt 1999, p. 98, Hardt and Negri 2001). Following this formulation, we might also theorize women’s affective and familial labour as crucial to the production of ‘social security’ and human welfare, a role that has become more urgent in light of the State’s retreat from social service provision.

The Dr. Phil franchise inserts new forms of media engagement into the domestic structures of women’s work. In doing so, it reconstitutes the ‘second shift’ as an enterprising and self-‘empowering’ activity – making the feminized labour of caring for others more compatible with the self-enterprising ethos demanded by today’s neoliberal policies and reforms. This point is worth dwelling on, for it helps to explain how media convergence can position the female self-helper within the valourized sphere of ‘active’ citizenship, even as it simultaneously extends her domestic burdens. As Micki McGee points out, ‘the labors of women’s daily lives’ have historically been incompatible with self-help programmes. The very idea of ‘self-invention and self-mastery hails from a culture where someone else’s labours (that of wives and enslaved persons) would provide for the necessities of everyday life’, she contends (McGee 2005, p. 9). Dr. Phil overcomes this exclusion by bringing elements of strategy, competition and reward into traditional women’s work. The self-interested disposition of the ideal (white, middle class, male) citizen subject is brought to bear on the gendered responsibilities of creating and sustaining ‘healthy’ families. In this way, the Dr. Phil franchise extends the discourses and intensifying requirements of post-welfare citizenship to women – including those marginalized by inequalities of class, race, age and other differences.

Exemplifying a neoliberal turn in domestic advice, McGraw applies market rationalities to the problems of dating, marriage, parenting and family. His products translate corporate practicum and skills into life strategies for achieving the ‘results’ women are assumed to want as wives, mothers and the ‘CEOs of their families’. Success involves practicing the ‘techniques of the self’ explained in the books, TV show and website, from incentive planning to personal audit. The self-helper must also double as her own ‘life manager’, responsible for supervising, motivating and rewarding herself with the resources Dr. Phil provides. Such advice begins with the behaviourist contention that all human behaviour can be effectively modified with the right tools. Women are to make ‘small, deliberate modifications in the way you live’ as a matter of self-empowerment, utilizing the regimen to ‘keep you safe and secure from foolish risks, create opportunities for you to get what you really want in this life, take care of your health and well-being... require more of yourself in your grooming, self-control, emotional management, interaction with others... and in every other category you can think of’ (McGraw, P. 1999, pp. 169–170). This strategic approach to living is, significantly, promoted as a ‘results-oriented’ alternative to psychobabble: ‘You’re trying to pay the rent and get your kids to go to college instead of jail, and they want
you to play with your inner this or inner that...’ states McGraw (1999), p. 23). On one hand, this discourse presumes women’s capacities to empower themselves independently of traditional experts (psychiatrists, social workers, doctors). On the other, it assumes a greater reliance on lifestyle coaches and gurus (such as McGraw) and the ‘converged’ commercial media networks through which they operate. Moreover, while the hypothetical patient of talk therapy can be theoretically cured, McGraw’s regimen for ‘programming yourself into well-being’ requires a permanent process of self-diagnosis and strategic self-management, facilitated of course by the ongoing consumption of Dr. Phil products.

Conceived as a ‘personal responsibility’ and an entrepreneurial investment with payoffs for the individual, self-work is crucial to contemporary discourses of post-welfare citizenship. When citizens are to live their lives as ‘self-managed projects’, then the self becomes a site of labour as well as governmentality. While all citizens are expected to work on/for themselves, Dr. Phil exemplifies the extent to which women’s self-work is simultaneously other-directed, applied on behalf of spouses and children as well as oneself. This double burden speaks to the sexual division of labour as well as the persistent gender dynamics that prevent women from achieving the status of self-interested individuals (Brown 1995). While both men and women are expected to succeed in the socio-economic sphere, the resilience of the family within neoliberal social policy places women in a double bind. We are addressed as subjects of capacities (McRobbie 2008), yet the ‘gender paradox’ of liberalism identified by Wendy Brown is perpetuated. As Brown argues, the ‘autonomous’ and self-reliant citizens associated with theories of liberal democracy have always been understood to be ‘made possible through the family—harbored, grounded and nourished’ in a domain that is still presumed to be ‘natural to women’ (Brown 1995, pp. 160–161). The naturalization of families in this way means that women can never become the ‘possessive individualists’ that men are imagined to be, for they are contradictorily positioned as selfless subjects who exist to care for others (Brown 1995, p. 148). Women may now be addressed as equal – and equally accountable – citizens, but they are still called upon to ‘naturally’ perform the affective labour that holds families together and makes strategic individualism possible. Of course, women cannot be counted on to perform traditional women’s work – hence the need for marriage and family training.

The Dr. Phil franchise does not ease or eradicate the gender paradox, but it does provide techniques for self-managing its psychic toll. The broadcast episode ‘Overscheduled Moms’ (28 October 2003) exemplifies a recurring effort to present women and mothers who have ‘worn themselves out to a frazzle’ with market-based technologies for functional living. Women with mounting marital and parenting responsibilities are instructed to envision themselves as human bank accounts that require ‘regular deposits’ of maintenance and self-care in order to offset ‘withdrawals’ and avoid the
looming crisis of a ‘zero balance’. While scholars have shown how feminized affective labour has been dislocated from traditional familial realms and transformed into commodities and post-industrial service sector job requirements (Hochschild 1983/2003) McGraw’s advice exemplifies the reverse trend in domestic and self-help media — the diffusion of market logic into home. ‘If your job description includes long hours, very little sleep, endless requests to open your pocketbook, then you got to be a mom. As the CEO for the household and the chief boo-boo kisser, your work never ends. You know that’, McGraw told TV viewers of the episode. Coaching women to practice ‘emotional management’ and ‘caring with currency’ across media platforms, his regimen does not offset the gendered burdens of affective labour as much as it re-casts them as an entrepreneurial (and thus valued and ‘empowering’ activity). Mobilizing women as enterprising and selfless, as entrepreneurs of the home and domestic labourers, the Dr. Phil regimen enables women to conceive of themselves as capable subjects and self-sufficient, active citizens without de-gendering kin work.

This enablement complicates claims about the democratic possibilities of media convergence in several ways. The Dr. Phil case shows that active cross-platform media participation does not necessarily lead to ‘serious’ political expression and action. On the contrary, it can (and does) facilitate mundane processes of self and familial governance that are integral to contemporary democracy, and reliant on women’s unwaged labour. Dr. Phil also demonstrates that ‘empowered’ leisure — particularly the pursuit of meaning and pleasure associated with media fandom — is not and will never be an equal opportunity as long as women are envisioned as the managers and caretakers of the home. If the fans discussed by Jenkins and others harness convergence culture to enrich their experience with commercial media, Dr. Phil extends women’s work into every corner of daily life — including media reception. This becomes more clear when we compare today’s domestic and self-help media, exemplified by Dr. Phil, to earlier forms of women’s television and mass media.

The converging labours of self-help

For women in particular, the interactive circuitry of media convergence can extend and intensify the ‘belabored self’ posited by critics of the burgeoning self-help industry (McGee 2005). Dr. Phil illustrates this well, by constituting reading, TV watching and Web surfing as interwoven dimensions of perpetual self-work, caretaking and family management. Success can never be achieved through passively watching the broadcast; TV viewers are continually incited to visit the website for additional tips, keep diaries on line, consult McGraw’s books, watch and re-watch episodes of his show, audit their actions through
self-tests, and participate in online message boards and discussion groups. While McGraw provides resources and templates for self-empowerment and successful domestic citizenship, the labour of ‘mass customizing’ the regimen—of endlessly adapting the advice and techniques to meet one’s particular needs and situations—also falls on his female customers.

New media are crucial to this ongoing process of customization, and to the Dr. Phil experience as a whole. In addition to using the website to promote his books and recruit guests for the television programme, McGraw uses a digital platform to foster mediated and controlled self-work practices in conjunction with the wider Dr. Phil ‘community’. Users of Dr. Phil.com not only comment on particular episodes; they also practice Life Laws together, offering advice to one another, often explicitly or implicitly fashioned after the teachings of McGraw. Sometimes, users instruct others as to which Dr. Phil books to read or self-tests to take in order to deal with a particular issue. In this sense, the franchise encourages what Jenkins calls ‘collective intelligence’, encouraging women to pool knowledge and experience within the political rationality and commercial structure of McGraw’s self-help enterprise. Through these structured forms of interactivity, however, Dr. Phil also mobilizes already belabored women to produce both neoliberal ‘social security’ and value for the Dr. Phil brand. For example, Dr. Phil’s Family First Initiative included the book Families First, a series of ‘Families First’ themed broadcast episodes and follow-up episodes, message boards and advice pages hosted on DrPhil.com, through which users could adapt and apply the advice to their specific situations, and community-based reading and support groups organized online. To participate fully was to take responsibility for one’s self and family, while also practicing collective intelligence and contributing to aims of social stability and family regulation. The ‘ethical surplus’ (Arvidsson 2006) generated through these activities is useful to the Successful Marriage Initiative, even as it is commodified and sold back to women by the Dr. Phil franchise. McGraw has set up shop in the ‘managed heart’ of a female domestic workforce, mobilizing unpaid women’s work as empowerment, in the service of neoliberal family policies and commercial gain.

Scholars have yet to adequately address the gender dynamics of ‘free labor’ in the changing media environment. Mark Andrejevic theorizes interactivity as a powerful marketing strategy that allows corporations to gather more specific information about their consumers, turning their participation and engagement with media into ‘productive surveillance’ or ‘the work of being watched’ (2003). Drawing from Tiziana Terranova’s (2000) writing on the ‘social factory’, he situates voluntary participation in an ‘increasingly interactive media economy’ within a broader shift of work processes ‘from the factory to society’ (Andrejevic 2008, p. 30). This is a useful intervention, in that it reveals how new media de-differentiate ‘sites of production, domesticity and leisure’ and fans ‘enrich texts not just for themselves, but for those who
economically benefit from the added value produced by the labor of viewers’ (2008, p. 28). Yet, this line of reasoning overlooks the persistence of the sexual division of labor, and its media-enhanced productivity for emerging forms of ‘social security’, citizenship and governance. This gendered blind spot is epitomized when Andrejevic compares the unpaid labour of fans to that of traditional housewives – a social grouping that presumably exists outside the domain of contemporary media fandom. While he sees convergence culture ‘universalizing forms of exploitation associated with unpaid female domestic labor’, so that women and men seeking a ‘compelling’ leisure experience are similarly exploited by media corporations (2008, p. 42), we are making a different argument. Taking Dr. Phil as an example, we are suggesting that women’s relationship to convergence culture is closely bound to a second shift of domestic and affective labour that is still performed for free.

McGraw gets much more out of his female customers than the fan sites debated by Jenkins and Andrejevic, as the forms of interactivity enabled by the Dr. Phil franchise extend beyond the ability to register online in order to ‘vote’ or ‘discuss’. Converging media technologies and platforms facilitate an expectation that women make enterprising use of books, television and the web as interconnected resources for self-work and successful family management. Women’s ‘active’ participation in the evolving media landscape – including the mastery of new technologies such as the Web – does not liberate us from top-down cultural control or parallel the labour exploitation of the traditional housewife. Rather, in the case of Dr. Phil, it more accurately extends a ‘second shift’ of affective and domestic labour into women’s media reception practices. The implications of this extension are not only limited to the sexual division of labour and the gendering of citizenship but also include the forms of leisure, fantasy, pleasure and escape available to women in a ‘can-do’ enterprise culture. In this sense, it is worth comparing the purposeful and interactive media use engagement of elicited by Dr. Phil to a longer history of women’s reading and viewing practices.

In her landmark study Reading the Romance (1984), Janice Radway characterized women’s ritualistic romance novel reading as a ‘temporary declaration’ from family responsibilities. For full-time housewives, in particular, the practice of reading allowed women to immerse themselves in fantasy, signal their unavailability for caretaking and domestic chores, and stake out ‘time for themselves’ on a regular basis. While the romances did not challenge gender hierarchies or domestic roles, they did provide a welcome respite from housework and caretaking. Dr. Phil, on the other hand, situates the consumption of books as a resource for designing and achieving ‘outcomes’ in women’s lives. McGraw’s self help books are not only a resource for mastering women’s work, they are also a form of work entailing self-study, learning, application, discussion, participation and review. The point we are making – that active media consumption is not necessarily progressive – is even more suggestive in the context of women’s daytime television.
Lynn Spigel shows that women’s TV viewing has historically been ‘co-determinous’ with their labour at home (Spigel 1992, p. 75), as suggested by the appearance in the 1950s of a combined appliance, the TV-Stove. Similar to radio, noted Dorothy Hobson’s study of 1970s ‘housewives and the media’, television structures the temporal boundaries of women’s work, providing an ‘enjoyable’ compliment to repetitive chores (Hobson 1980/1992). Tania Modleski similarly argued that soap operas – the long-time staple of daytime television – offered fragmentary pleasure in a ‘milieu of distraction’, so that TV watching was compatible with the rhythms of cleaning, childrearing and other domestic work. ‘Since the housewife’s leisure time is not… demarcated, her entertainment must often be consumed on the job’, explained Modleski. The ‘typical fan is assumed to be trotting about her daily chores with her mop in one hand, duster in the other, cooking, tending babies, answering telephones. Thus occupied, she might not be able to bring her full powers of concentration to bear…’ (Modleski 1984, p. 102). In turn, daytime soaps habituated ‘women to distraction, interruption, and spasmodic toil’, enabling them to function as housewives and caretakers: ‘Unlike most workers in the labor force, the housewife must beware of concentrating her energies exclusively on any one task – otherwise, the dinner could burn or the baby could crack its skull…’ (Modleski 1984, p. 100). Today, when women are expected to be enterprising subjects who work for pay well as caring for families, new forms of convergence culture may similarly acclimate us to the contradictory demands of the second shift.

The surge of behaviourist daytime programming like Dr. Phil is indicative in this regard. When women entered the workforce en mass in the 1980s, time-shifting technologies (and eventually digital platforms) allowed them to watch soap operas in a more deliberate and therefore focused manner. Yet, these new viewing options did not prevent the genre’s demise. Lifestyle and self-help programmes such as Dr. Phil demand concentration, intentionality and agency from the TV viewer, making them more synchronous with current rationalities of social security and active citizenship than ‘off hours’ soap opera viewing. This compatibility is further accentuated by a convergence of self-help books, television and the web that assumes women’s capacities to keep up with an intense and technologically savvy TV/print/web based self help regimen. What have been lost are the little pleasures and momentary breaks structured into women’s work by earlier forms of women’s television. In the Dr. Phil regimen, our affective and domestic work is active and highly strategic – but also relentless and never done.

Notes

1 For example, in 2007 Jenkins organized the Fan Boy/Fan Girl Detente, an online ‘conversation between leading male and female researchers’ designed
to ‘better understand the common ground and gender differences’ that constitute fan studies. Some of this material is archived at: http://community.livejournal.com/fandebate

2 Our research draws from all McGraw’s books and workbooks, family-themed transcripts and DVD episodes from the first five seasons of Dr. Phil (2002–present), regular viewing of the programme since then, and the Dr. Phil website.

3 Self help has always been integral to capitalist democracies that govern through freedom (Rose, N. 1996, Cruikshank 1999, Rimke 2000). Self help governs ‘at a distance’ in the dispersed sense implied by Michel Foucault’s theory of governmentality (1991), by circulating the pedagogies and skills – what Foucault called techniques of the self – through which individuals are to regulate and reform themselves in consultation with experts but independently of official rulers (Burchell 1996). From the perspective of governmentality, self-help does not dupe its subjects but activates and guides their productive capacities in sync with particular (and potentially contradictory) political rationalities: ‘To dominate is to ignore or to attempt the capacity for action of the dominated. But to govern is to recognize that capacity for action and to adjust oneself to it. To govern is to act upon action’, explains Nikolas Rose (1999, p. 4). The governing dimensions of self-help have intensified under neoliberalism as strategic care of management of the self take on heightened currency and urgency (Rose, N. 1996, 1999, Ouellette and Hay 2008).

4 In the second season, ‘troubled’ families were tracked over multiple episodes, resulting in an ongoing ‘parenting 101’ sub-series called A Family Divided. While studio-based interventions remain the norm, some multipart Dr. Phil episodes fuse the conventions of primetime reality entertainment by subjecting couples and families to instructional competitions, experiments and games (‘Newlywed Challenge’ 2005), or by sequestering them in a house, camp or group facility where they can be monitored by surveillance cameras and intensively coached by McGraw (‘Relationship Rescue Retreat’ 2004, ‘Premarital Boot Camp’ 2005, ‘Dr. Phil House’ 2006, ‘Man Camp’ 2007). In all instances, the people who appear on Dr. Phil are positioned as representatives of the audience, which is also expected to ‘take away’ life lessons: ‘We are working today on a family that is in crisis... A family that is in chaos. And I know behind so many doors in America there are those problems’, explained McGraw of a typical episode (‘Family in Crisis’, 14 February 2004). The Dr. Phil website is crucial for extending the learning begun on the programme to TV viewers at home, who are encouraged to download additional resources and partake of the customizable self-exercises and interactive discussion possibilities available to them.

5 In some respects, Dr. Phil’s regimen appropriates and updates strategies circulating within the self-help literature since the 1980s, when the application of market values to every ‘corner of one’s experience’ emerged as a theme
according to Micki McGee (2005). Until then, the individualistic image of success promoted by self-help excluded women: ‘Men were deemed self-made, while women, lacking the appropriate masculine characteristics for success, were, ironically, designated as the self-made man’s invisible helpers’ (McGee 2005, pp. 13–14). With the ‘success’ of liberal feminism and the expansion of the female labour force, women emerged as a viable commercial market and the books began to address them as individuals capable of achieving what men had been striving for — with an important caveat. Self-help for women recast ‘competition with external figures to competition against one’s personal best’, creating an interior playing field in which women facing structural inequalities could more conceivably succeed, says McGee. Bestsellers like Having it All by Helen Gurley Brown also turned the game inward by applying ‘unabashed business metaphors’ to intimate relationships, paving the way for the ‘returns and investments’ approach of the co-dependency movement. Until recently, however, self-help has been unable to reconcile the logic of ‘winning’ with the caretaking demands associated with family and child-rearing: ‘Caring for others constitutes a significant problem for the entrepreneurial bottom line unless one is willing to imagine the home as part of one’s market calculations, factored into one’s personal profit-and-loss statement’, explains McGee (p. 87). While Dr. Phil has not completely achieve this reconciliation, his regimen goes much further than other self-help brands in giving an ‘enterprise form’ to the so-called haven in a heartless world.

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**References**


