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Intimacy and Emotions in Podcast Journalism: A Study of Award-Winning Australian and British Podcasts

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ABSTRACT

As news podcasts increase in number and popularity, conventions are emerging for how this genre of audio journalism constructs compelling storytelling that takes advantage of the specifics of the medium.

This qualitative study examines 11 shortlisted and award-winning journalism podcasts in the 2019 Australian and British Podcast Awards through a narrative journalism framework, with a focus on the use of emotions and techniques to build experiences of intimacy. The analysis is done through the lens of Hilmes soundwork concept to understand both the impact of audio on journalistic storytelling and podcasting as an emerging journalism genre.

This study demonstrates that award-winning podcasts feature personalised journalism that is afforded by the intimacy of the audio form. In contrast to journalistic norms of objective, disembodied reporters, podcast journalism uses narrative elements forged around emotions and first-person reporting to build intimate relationships between the journalist and the listener. The study also supports Dowling and Miller's findings that self-reflexivity and transparency of the reporting process have become "staple ingredients" of podcasting.

KEYWORDS

Podcasting; podcast journalism; intimacy; immersive journalism; storytelling; narrative journalism; Podcast Awards

Introduction

As news podcasts increase in number and popularity, conventions are emerging for how this form of audio journalism engages large audiences. While scholarship about podcast production, consumption and distribution is well established (Berry 2016; Bottomley 2015; Llinares, Fox, and Berry 2018; Spinelli and Dann 2019) studies focused specifically on news and journalistic content are still emerging. Newman and Gallo's (2019; 2020) mapping of news podcasts in five countries is the first comprehensive examination of the growing ecosystem. The success of the New York Times' *The Daily*, averaging 4 million downloads per day (CNN n.d.), demonstrates the significance of podcast journalism. Other print/digital-born publishers like *The Guardian*, with its podcast *Today in Focus*, and *The Economist*, with *The Intelligence* podcast, have taken to podcasting to expand audiences, build loyalty to brand, and drive revenue. Audiences for the *Today in Focus*

podcast are now greater than those of the newspaper. Newman and Gallo (2019) report podcasts attract younger and loyal listeners.

Approximately 68 million people, or 24 per cent, listened to podcasts weekly in the USA (Edison Research 2020) and in the UK, podcasting continues to increase its weekly reach to 18 per cent or 10 million (Rajar 2020). Of those, 91 per cent listen alone, mostly in headphones attached to a smartphone. In Australia, 17 per cent have listened to a podcast in the week (Edison Research 2020).

With podcasting becoming an increasingly popular source of news internationally, more needs to be known about both listener motivations and how journalists utilise audio storytelling to develop compelling content. Emerging data explains why news consumers choose podcasts as their preferred media platform. Sang, Lee, and Park's (2020) study of global podcast trends shows news consumers in Japan and Korea turn to podcasts as a convenient and entertaining form of news, while in English speaking countries, news consumers opt for podcasts for variety and depth of subjects and perspectives not available in existing media. Top charts like the Apple podcast episode chart also provide some insights into listeners' preferences, however, lack of publicly available data and fragmentation of podcast distribution platforms make it difficult to understand podcast consumption.

Freed from broadcast schedules, conveniently available on-demand via smartphones, podcast journalism has become a place for experimentation with journalistic practices, forms and conventions, at a time of contestation and transformation of journalism. This study demonstrates award-winning podcasts feature personalised journalism departing from journalistic norms of disembodied reporters and highlights self-reflexivity and transparency of the reporting process as "staple ingredients" of podcasting, especially in true crime reporting (Dowling and Miller 2019, 172). Journalists reporting their own emotions as part of podcast journalism narratives is a significant diversion from Wahl-Jorgensen's (2013) study of Pulitzer Prize winning print journalism, where, in order to comply with normative objective journalism, journalists outsourced their emotional labour to interviewees and other sources.

Like other podcast genres, podcast journalism comes in many forms, from serialised highly produced content to deep-dives into a single daily news item per episode and other varieties. Newman and Gallo (2019) identify five types of news podcasts (in order of popularity): talk/interview; one-off narrative series; daily news/current affairs; documentary; and audio long read. The five categories feature in both native podcasts and catch-up radio. News podcast producers borrow reporting techniques from other journalism and radio genres, such as radio features and documentaries (Dowling and Miller 2019), investigative journalism, and narrative (Lindgren 2016) and confessional journalism (Coward 2013).

This study contributes to the expanding field of podcast journalism by critically analysing 11 finalists and winners of the 2019 Podcast Awards in journalism in Australia and the United Kingdom. It examines narrative elements and how podcasting extends attributes of narrative journalism to create intimate listening experiences, applying van Krieken and Sanders (2019) narrative journalism framework and Hilmes' (2013) concept of "soundwork" to accommodate diverse production styles, industrial contexts and journalistic audio sub-genres. Hilmes defines soundwork as "employing the three basic elements of sonic expression—music, speech, and noise" (2013, 177). The study also examines how

podcasting supports personal storytelling and self-reflexive presentation to enhance listener immersion, following Dowling and Miller's (2019, 180) understanding of podcasting as a "cultural product of public radio and immersive online storytelling". The article adopts Wahl-Jorgensen and Schmidt's (2019) definition of storytelling as using narrative modes common to various journalistic genres and mediums.

The following sections cover a review of literature on podcasting in the broader context of narrative journalism, examine intimacy in soundwork and outline the critical analysis of the podcasts in question.

Literature Review

The practice of podcasting is described by Llinares et al. (2018, 5) as "a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education", signalling the breadth of the field. As Bottomley (2015, 165) notes, such convergence makes "identifying a podcasting 'sound' or 'style', or even a distinct podcasting audience or industry, exceedingly difficult". Despite this diversity, we can identify common attributes that aid our understanding of podcast journalism as distinct from other media forms, and how it manages to attract and retain listeners.

Narrative Journalism and Podcasting

Emerging scholarly work (Dowling and Miller 2019; Lindgren 2016; Nee and Santana 2021) examines how podcast journalism involves a reappraisal of traditional journalistic values such as objectivity. While podcasting raises new considerations about how sonic elements and headphone-based listening practices might serve to create particular impressions in the listener, the subversion of journalistic norms in the reporting of news is not new, and can be situated within the broader tradition of narrative journalism—a genre which eschews the inverted pyramid model in favour of a more evocative and compelling storytelling style that borrows elements from fiction writing (Johnston and Graham 2012). This "literary turn" is associated with New Journalism that developed in America in the 1960s–70s, however the incorporation of novelistic techniques in news writing can be traced to the 1800s (Campbell 2004, 5) before the inverted pyramid became institutionalised as a journalistic norm, privileging the most important information first. In contrast, podcast logic builds on a linear consumption model with a beginning, middle and end enticing listeners to stay engaged. In serialised podcast storytelling, staying tuned means listening to multiple episodes, and seasons, covering a story in minute detail. This extended exposure combined with the interplay between the human voice and listening, provides a unique opportunity to build relationships between podcast host and listener which Spinelli and Dann (2019) refer to as reciprocal.

Narrative journalism engages audiences more effectively than standard journalistic news writing; studies reveal a greater identification with particular characters and social groups (Oliver et al. 2012; van Krieken, Hoeken, and Sanders 2015). It has also been noted that creative, narrative-driven journalistic approaches can invite a more complex and nuanced appreciation for socio-political realities than in more traditional news models (Baym 2017; van Krieken and Sanders 2019).

Narrative storytelling approaches have also been found to strengthen listener engagement in audio journalism by harnessing the power of audio to create storyworlds. Rodero's (2012) psychological empirical studies show how radio storytelling techniques, such as narrative development and the use of sounds, can retain listeners' attention. Rodero shows that dramatized audio narratives stimulate listeners' imaginations more than an impersonal news voice, traditionally understood as objective journalism where news is presented by an unseen third-person narrator. Dramatized storytelling and first-hand accounts generate more vivid images in people's minds, with listeners more emotionally aroused and interested in the story.

Narrative journalism's ability to engage audiences is extended in podcast journalism, as evidenced by the fandom forming around podcasts such as *Serial* (McCracken 2017) and *The Daily* (Schneider 2020). van Krieken and Sanders (2019, 12) definition of narrative journalism "as a genre that employs the narrative storytelling techniques of voice, point of view, character, setting, plot, and/or chronology to report on reality through a subjective filter" can be applied to podcast journalism, reinforcing how podcasting adapts and builds on elements of narrative journalism. These are also familiar elements in documentary production. Newman and Gallo (2019, 40) found broadcasters producing narrative news podcasts were "reusing documentary-making skills". Recognising the influence of seminal radio programs like *This American Life* is essential for this study, their use of soundwork and narrative approaches, an innovative mix of journalism and immersive lived experiences told with documentary aesthetics that influenced audio producers worldwide (Lindgren 2014). The podcast *Serial* was a spin off from *TAL*, borrowing and extending their storytelling techniques, demonstrating podcasting's "radiogenic" history (Berry 2016) whilst showcasing emerging genre-specific conventions, and reflecting the creative potential of a serialised format.

In their analysis of *S-Town*, another spin off from *TAL*, Dowling and Miller (2019) describe the podcast as immersive journalism employing subjective and fictional narrative techniques. Their study found reporters self-reflecting on podcast production had become a hallmark of narrative podcast storytelling and argued that a dedication to journalistic transparency and metacommentary had become "the core of the genre's DNA" (Dowling and Miller 2019, 168). It makes the journalist a character of the story with self-reflexivity an additional narrative strand, putting the emotions of the journalist on display. In a content-rich media environment, podcasting has demonstrated its competitive edge of keeping listeners tuned in, with 80 per cent of US podcast listeners listening to all or most of each episode (Edison Research 2020). Podcast immersion is achieved by a combination of aural, technological and aesthetical storytelling factors. McHugh's (2019) description of podcasting as "extreme narrative journalism" reminds us how the particular affordances of soundwork (Hilmes 2013) build on the strengths of print-based narrative journalism to create immersive experiences for the listener.

A comfortable space in podcasting fosters a repertoire of radio's performative "para-social interaction" with "the characteristics of intimacy in face-to-face interaction (sincerity, attentiveness, empathy, caring)" (Chignell 2009, 86). This feature of "intimacy at a distance" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 215) has been shown to engage listeners in particular ways depending on the audio media format. MacDougall (2012, 171) traces the para-social phenomenon of sound media back to the earliest experimentations with radio, and

concludes that the individualised, mobile listening experience engendered by podcasting may constitute “a fundamentally new form of mediated interpersonal communication”.

The following section goes deeper into how intimacy is created, and emotions expressed in podcasts through the sonic element of “voice” and podcast listening practices.

Emotions and Intimacy

Wahl-Jorgensen has written extensively about emotions in journalism. Her study of award-winning Pulitzer Prize journalism demonstrated a “strategic ritual of emotionality” (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013, 129) running alongside the strategic ritual of objectivity. Although emotions were central to the award-winning journalism, the study showed how journalists outsourced emotions to interviewees, in order to conform with journalistic norms of objectivity. Wahl-Jorgensen argues that emotions have long been embedded in journalism, but “emotional ritual” has been implicit and hidden. Her study established that emotions were presented in carefully managed ways, appearing in “different forms across genres, signalling distinctions between narrative modes as form of storytelling” (Wahl-Jorgensen and Schmidt 2019, 265). Research into emotions in journalism has established that journalists use emotions in crafting stories (Peters 2011) as a way to engage audiences and assist understanding. Focusing on lived experience can help audiences connect with abstract news issues and facilitate compassion for others.

This study builds on Wahl-Jorgensen’s seminal work by extending it to podcast journalism, highlighting the links between emotions, podcast intimacy and voice. Intimacy is a key theme in emerging podcasting literature (Berry 2016; Copeland 2018; Lindgren 2016; Markman 2015; McCracken 2017; Spinelli and Dann 2019). The audio medium encourages personal storytelling focused on personal experiences of both sources and journalists. Storytelling techniques creating an intimate listening experience, the hallmark of the radio medium, have been supercharged into “hyper-intimacy” (Berry 2016, 14) in podcasting. Despite the expanding scholarship on podcast intimacy, there is, as Spinelli and Dann (2019) point out, a lack of consensus around what podcast intimacy means. They define podcast intimacy as,

efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in the *comfortable space* between interviewers and interview subjects, between producers themselves, and between listeners, producers, and subjects (Spinelli and Dann 2019, 77, *my italics*)

In podcast journalism, intimacy is established in the editorial production process, in approaches to sound recording and during podcast listening. As this article argues, the emerging podcast journalism convention of journalistic self-reflexivity is an example of the shift towards subjective first-person reporting. This focus on personal and intimate experiences, including that of the journalist, aligns with the growth in confessional and personal journalism more broadly (Coward 2013).

Voice and Listening

Although produced to be consumed by many, podcasts are commonly listened to alone, with a human voice speaking to one listener at a time. Hearing a voice in proximity, recorded close to the microphone, is an intimate experience. For podcast listeners, the

experience of intimacy is further extended by listening through headphones or earbuds. Spinelli and Dann (2019, 70) argue that the “aural mechanics of podcast listening”, provide “routes to intimacy” that extend beyond other listening technologies. Through close listening via headphones, listeners can hear “eardrops”—a term coined by the two researchers—to describe tiny fragments of speech that would otherwise be missed listening through speakers, increasing the experience of closeness. Close listening heightens content that deals with subjects that are personal, with the voice’s capacity to carry a nuanced sense of human presence. Listening in real-time to the voices of an interview can create a “pact of intimacy between speaker and listener and an accompanying sense of “liveness” not found in print” (McHugh 2012, 206).

Podcasting thrives on personal and conversational presentation styles, in stark contrast to Schudson’s (2001, 150) argument for objectivity that “guides journalists to separate facts from values and report only the facts” by using “cool rather than emotional tone”. First-person reporting builds on radio conventions of presenters adopting a radio persona of an “ordinary and friendly person” (Chignell 2009, 85). This style previously reserved for popular and entertainment radio content has been adopted by journalism podcasts. The podcast host can create an intimate atmosphere using a “chatty” tone of voice, appearing to be speaking without a script. It has made journalists like Michael Barbaro from *The Daily* into podcast superstars, noted for his voice and slow, deliberate style.

Radio and podcasts both rely on the human imagination. Listeners create their own imagery, their own versions of the characters and the story. Crisell’s (1994) point about imagination being a prerequisite for radio storytelling is also true for podcasting,

... so integral does the imagination seem to be to the way in which we decode virtually all its messages, whether factual or fictional, that when we speak of its “appeal to the imagination” we mean in effect its basic ability to communicate (Crisell 1994, 13)

It makes for personalised content that is constructed to be immersive and engaging, produced for on-demand listeners accustomed to in-depth and serialised storytelling and leads to what Nee and Santana (2021) identify as an emerging genre that values narrative storytelling as much as the “content” of news. To understand the role of narrative journalism, emotions and intimacy in podcast journalism, the following research questions are posed to guide the analysis of finalists and winners of the 2019 Australian and British Podcast Awards:

- To what extent are storytelling elements of narrative journalism (voice, point of view, character, setting, plot and chronology) present in the news podcast sample?
- How are personal voice and self-reflective reporting approaches employed to enhance listener immersion?
- How is podcasting extending the key attributes of narrative journalism to create intimate and emotionally resonant listening experiences?

Methodology

Informed by Hilmes’ (2013) concept of “soundwork” and analysis of the storytelling elements of narrative journalism (van Krieken and Sanders 2019), this research utilised close analytical listening similar to Spinelli and Dann’s (2019) work. This methodology

specific to analysing audio content involves stopping frequently to take notes about the content, noting sonic elements, storytelling techniques, and how the researcher responded to listening. The approach adapted earlier analyses of long-form audio journalism (Lindgren 2016), which in turn were employed in a podcast study by Dowling and Miller (2019). The aim was to critically analyse and detail how news podcasts are constructed and the key strategies used by journalists to create compelling journalistic podcasts.

Podcast Awards

The study includes winners and shortlisted entries in the 2019 Australian and British Podcast Awards. The Australian podcast *Teachers Pet* was included in the original sample but later omitted due to an Australian court case. Consequently, 11 podcasts were analysed: five Australian podcasts and six British podcasts. Both Australian and British Podcast Awards were established in 2017 and include categories that are not journalistic in style, such as Comedy or Literary, Arts and Music, although some may include journalistic content. In order to analyse podcast productions aligned with journalistic practices and conventions, the following related categories were selected: Investigative Journalism and True Crime in the Australian Podcasting Awards, and Best Current Affairs Podcast in the British Podcast Awards. This is not a comparative study, rather, the podcasts illustrate journalistic podcast styles and genres in two English-speaking countries with longstanding cultural and media ties, shared media conventions and podcast listening trends. The analysed podcasts may not reflect all podcast journalism production practices, especially in an emergent field, they do however help identify practices deemed by the industry as gold standard (Wahl-Jorgensen 2013).

The 2019 Australian podcasts:

Podcast name	Produced by	First episode published	First episode titled
Wrong Skin [WINNER]	The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald	July 14, 2018	<i>Richard and Julie</i>
Lost in Larrimah	The Australian	April 27, 2018	<i>Never</i>
Unravel: Blood on the Tracks	ABC Podcasts	May 28, 2018	<i>Blood on the Tracks</i>
Background Briefing	ABC Radio National	September 2, 2018*	<i>Burning Down the House</i>
My Father the Murderer	Whimn.com.au	October 7, 2018	<i>Seeking Answers</i>

The 2019 British podcasts:

Podcast Name	Produced By	First episode published	First episode titled
The Grenfell Tower Inquiry with Eddie Mair [WINNER]	BBC Sounds	May 14, 2018	<i>Holborn Bars</i>
Stance	Chrystal Genesis and Heta Fell	January 20, 2017	<i>White Racial Identity; Alix Wilton-Regan; The Rise of the Demagogue</i>
The Intelligence	The Economist	January 29, 2018	<i>Deal, Delay or Dither</i>
Beyond Today	BBC Radio 4	October 29, 2018	<i>Do we have enough money now?</i>
Today in Focus	The Guardian	November 1, 2018	<i>How dangerous is Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president?</i>
Have you Heard George's Podcast?	George the Poet	September 1, 2019	<i>Listen Closer</i>

A majority of the analysed sample are produced by professional journalists with public service broadcasters or with print/digital-born publishers. Three of the 11 analysed podcasts are produced by independent producers. *My Father the Murderer* is produced by a freelance journalist, *Have you heard George's podcast?* is produced by a spoken-word performer, and the *Stance* is described as a transatlantic conversation between two friends.

The Podcast Awards recognise a podcast series rather than a specific episode. Following Wahl-Jorgensen's (2013) sampling method, each shortlisted podcast was traced back to its earliest known episode. Where selected podcasts were part of a long-standing radio program series, with hundreds of episodes, such as the *Background Briefing* current affairs program, the oldest available episode online at the time of research was selected.

Results —Podcast Award Winners

Both winners in the Australian and British Podcast Awards can be classified as single topic narrative series (Newman and Gallo 2019), where listeners can follow a story unfold in detail over multiple episodes. The Australian winner, *Wrong Skin*, follows investigative reporter Richard Baker as he uncovers the mystery behind the cold case death of Looma resident Julie Buck and the disappearance of her lover. The title *Wrong Skin* comes from the phrase used in the remote Kimberley region to describe relationships that are forbidden under Indigenous Australian tribal law (Baker 2018b). The British winner, *The Grenfell Tower Inquiry with Eddie Mair*, reported daily from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry hearing evidence and stories from survivors and victims of the 2017 inferno of Grenfell Tower.

All but one of the Australian podcasts analysed are true crime native narrative series (Newman and Gallo 2019) on a single topic. *Background Briefing* is the only catch-up podcast in the sample from the national broadcaster's flagship investigative current affairs radio program. The British podcasts are more diverse in format. There are three daily news podcasts *Beyond Today*, *Today in Focus*, and *The Intelligence*. These are single topic, deep-dive podcasts where each episode is dedicated to exploring current news events through interviews and reports. In style they can be described as following storytelling conventions drawn from current affairs reporting common to public service radio. *The Intelligence* is an extension of reporting from the publication *The Economist*, targeting new audiences.

Narrative Journalism—Setting, Plot and Chronology

The analysed podcasts utilise a mix of sonic elements and narrative approaches to create captivating audio journalism. This section presents results from the analysis of the narrative techniques of setting, plot and chronology (van Krieken and Sanders 2019) and the use of sound (Hilmes 2013). The podcast production elements comprise scripted voice-overs, interviews, sound effects, and on-location recordings. The podcasts with high production values, produced over an extended period have more complex mixes of sonic elements to awaken the listener's imagination and encourage engagement.

A common storytelling technique in the serialised narrative podcasts is the use of "scenes" where the listener listens in on an event or setting. In the first episode of the

Australian podcast *My Father the Murderer*, listeners join journalist Nina Young and her reporter friend Bec Day when they find out the details about how Nina's father murdered a young Aboriginal girl in 1977. In this scene the two friends read a police report together. The emotional impact of the discovery is palpable, both in the words used and their voices:

Bec Day: "He then pointed to a small mound of earth about seven yards to the west and said, 'that's where her clothes are buried'. Again, from the same spot he pointed to the south east and said 'you'll find her over there. I won't go with you. I can still hear her screaming'"

Silence.

Nina Young: " ... Shit"

Bec Day: Groans from last paragraph read, goes to read again "Appro ..."

Nina Young: "I ... I need a minute"

Bec Day: Yeah. "I"- *exhales*

Silence. (Young 2018)

In the British *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* the narrative is developed from George's poetry, presented in scenes which are located—and recorded—in different geographical settings. George the Poet takes the listener from a school yard where he is watching his nephew, to the inside of a car. He self-reflexively explains to listeners the narrative approach of moving between scenes, speaking directly to the listener using cinematic concepts:

George the Poet [voiceover]: "You got that outside shot but now we're *in* the car. You're [the listener] in the back watching me sing my heart out." (George the Poet 2019).

Not surprisingly, the true crime podcasts follow the journalist-as-detective plot, where the plot evolves following a chronology as the journalist discovers more information about a cold case. The Australian *Unravel: Blood on the Tracks* podcast begins with the journalist narrating from the perspective of the train driver, as the train leaves Sydney. Sophisticated editing combines suspenseful music, sound effects of a fast-approaching train and a scripted reporter voiceover to create a powerful sonic re-enactment of the death on the tracks of Mark Haynes. For listeners, the image of the train hitting the body is painfully clear without the need for any visuals.

In the first episode of *The Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, the setting where the inquiry will be held is painted by using sound and words all written in the genre's conventional present tense, introducing the people involved in the podcast, highlighting sensory experiences to listeners and setting the scene for what will be emotional listening in intimate proximity with the families affected:

Eddie Mair [voiceover]: "In a building that doesn't scream modernity - it's over a hundred years old - the enquiry room itself smelled fresh. Polish, paint, and sawdust from the desk construction. Big windows allowing in plenty of light. That's the place families will spend many months hearing evidence about the deaths of their loved ones." (Mair 2018b)

Through recorded ambient footsteps and movements, and the description of smells, listeners can imagine the space and being on-location with the Inquiry.

Both the Australian and British podcast winners are stories with unknown outcomes, with meandering narratives that follow leads that are discovered, explored and sometimes abandoned. Despite uncertainty of story outcome, following the reporter's hunt for information is compelling plot, moving the story along a timeline aimed towards a conclusion. The listener is brought into the chase and expected to share the emotional toll of listening to confronting stories, such as the Australian winner *Wrong Skin*,

Richard Baker [voiceover]: "This is more than just another true crime style podcast. Like me, you're going to have to get out of your comfort zone and come to a part of Australia few of us know enough about." (Baker 2018a)

In the *Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, Mair shares with the listeners his uncertainty about the success of the plot, of what he calls a journalistic experiment following formal proceedings about a traumatic event. This is an example of affordances of the podcast format, unshackled from broadcast schedule limitations. In an act of transparency, Mair (2018a) shows "warts and all" of the journalistic production process, admitting they might make mistakes, but will learn as they produce the podcast. Similar to *Wrong Skin*, Mair warns listeners of the expected emotional toll of listening, "It will not leave you with a smile playing on your lips. Some of it will be gruelling and harrowing".

Narrative Journalism—Voice, Point of View and Character

This study provides further evidence that podcast journalism can be understood as a form of immersive journalism, where the journalist becomes a character in the story, employing self-reflexivity as a core storytelling element (Dowling and Miller 2019). A majority of podcasts in this study comprised aspects of reporters building in metacommentary about the journalistic production process. Demonstrating an emerging genre convention of self-reflexivity in journalistic podcasts, the format also references live news radio conventions where reporters talk about their experiences in an informal, friendly "chat" with a podcast host. In the British podcasts *Beyond Today* and *The Intelligence*, reporters are interviewed by the podcast host, telling the host—and the listener—about a news event. They provide their own point of view and share not only factual information but also their personal experience of reporting. In *Beyond Today*, the host shares with listeners in a conversational voice that they wanted to play the song "Tax Man" by The Beatles in an episode about money but did not have music rights to the song. Instead, a BBC colleague is recorded in the bathroom, singing "Tax Man", with the sound effect inserted in the episode. It creates an intimate atmosphere where the listener is invited into a performed conversation using inclusive and companionable language. In the Guardian's *Today in Focus*, journalist Tom Phillips recounts his reporting experience in Brazil. This provides both a scene (in a "super-hot" hotel in the Amazon) and a companionable reporter, speaking to the listener like a friend recapping a travel adventure.

In some of the analysed podcasts, the involvement of the journalist (or host) in the story transcends self-reflexive metacommentary on journalistic practice to focus on the journalist as a private person. The journalist takes on dual roles as professional and private characters in the story. In *Unravel*, *Blood on the Tracks*, journalist Allan Clarke tells the listener why they should care about the death of Mark Haynes by explaining his own family connection to country and the story. This subjective scripting approach

provides an authentic voice of the reporter transparently declaring his own involvement with the story—and his expertise linked with this personal position.

Allan Clarke [voiceover]: “I’m also Gumilroi and Muruwari ... I’ve now spent so much time with Mark’s family, that they feel like my family. Like mob. If Mark were alive today, I’d call him Uncle.” (Clarke 2018)

The personal storytelling approach is an effective way to open an intimate connection, where an individual journalist speaks directly to the individual listener—a performed podcast monologue disguised as a dialogue between host and listener (Lindgren 2016). Listeners are invited to care about the journalist and, by extension, the story. In *My Father the Murderer* much of the podcast documents Nina Young’s personal story in her quest to learn about her father’s crime. The podcast is infused with emotions, in the voiceovers describing places and people and in the intimate conversations between Nina and her friend. Whilst a personal storytelling approach is used to establish intimacy with listeners, Nina admits the confessional journalism style comes with an emotional price tag (Young 2018), describing how telling her own traumatic story makes her feel sick to her stomach.

In *Wrong Skin* Richard Baker reflects on his own position as a journalist, he explains that shifting to podcast writing using first-person voice was difficult, “[t]his goes back to formative training as a print journalist, where it was frowned upon for young journalists to have the temerity to believe anyone would be interested in what they think” (McHugh 2019). The journalist becomes a personal—one could argue a subjective—storyteller whose own thoughts and emotional expressions become part of the narrative. This is a significant shift in journalistic approach from Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2013) study demonstrating that journalists could stay outside the emotional frame. In contrast to Wahl-Jorgensen’s findings, and explored in more detail below, podcast journalism thrives on intimate connections and emotions expressed explicitly by both sources and journalists.

Discussion—Narrative Journalism to Build Intimacy and Scaffold Emotions

In one-off narrative series, such as true crime and the British Podcast Awards winner *Grenfell Tower Inquiry*, all six narrative elements (voice, point of view, character, setting, plot and chronology) are incorporated into the production, extending key attributes of narrative journalism to create resonant listening experiences. The daily deep-dive news podcasts, with shorter production deadlines, all contain one or more of the narrative elements.

The narrative aesthetics developed in podcast journalism can transform subjects like administrative processes, fiscal policies or cold case murders into compelling audio storytelling over multiple episodes. The building where a formal inquiry is held can become a physical and emotional audio space to hold human stories of loss and anger. Narrative journalism with its focus on storyworlds is enhanced by the affordances of audio. Rather than reading a description about a place or how the interviewee feels, listeners can be brought into proximity of the story, to an intimate conversation through close-up audio recordings. The sounds of cockatoos on a river with a dog panting paint a picture of the blistering hot Australian bush. As this study demonstrates, these audio

storytelling techniques are skillfully applied in the creation of award-winning journalistic podcasts to connect and engage listeners over multiple episodes, relying on listeners to bring their contribution to podcast production—their imagination.

The true crime podcasts in particular follow a “filmic” approach (Kellie Riordan¹, quoted in Newman and Gallo 2019), with rich character development over multiple podcast episodes, allowing listeners to “get to know” and become invested in the people featured in the story. This includes the journalist who commonly becomes a central character in the story, self-reflexively sharing how they think and feel about the production. Over time, reporters and interviewees emerge as sonic friends, whose experiences matter to the listener. However, unlike fictional characters, the “characters” in journalistic podcasts are real humans whose lived experiences are the plot of the story, told through narrative journalism techniques. Podcasting’s personal approach and informal style are proving popular with audiences, providing a subjective reporting style as alternative to traditional forms of journalism.

Intimacy is a core theme emerging from the analysis. The listener’s experience of being intimately—and emotionally—connected to the story and its characters is constructed through soundwork elements, narrative approaches, and scripting techniques. The capacity to hear a person’s voice speak directly into the ear of the listener, sometimes embedded through listening in earbuds, is a truly intimate experience. Spinelli and Dann’s (2019) note about podcasting providing listeners with opportunities to “listen in on intimate listening”, is demonstrated in all the true crime podcasts, for example in *My Father the Murderer* as the two friends unearth information about Nina’s father. The recorded conversations mimic radio’s “liveness”, with the impression of listening to an event unfolding in real-time, of eavesdropping on an intimate and private dialogue. Recordings of the friends talking on the mobile phone, another intimate medium, further emphasise the intimate relationship being performed for the listener listening in.

A phone is ringing while on speakerphone

Nina Young: Hey. I got news

Bec Day: How you doing?— oh, okay! Give it to me.

Nina Young: So, I’ve got an email from the prison people.

A beat

I haven’t opened it yet

Bec Day: ... Open it! (Young 2018)

The British podcast *Have you Heard George’s podcast?* enacts intimacy between George the host and the listener through use of space. The listener hears the sound of the car’s satnav instructing George. The imaginary inside of the car creates an experience of being together in a confined—and physically intimate—space. This is further emphasised when listening to the podcast in earbuds or headphones, as stereo recordings create a spatial listening experience with sound moving between right and left channels (and earbuds). George the Poet speaks directly to the listener as a friend, as he interrupts himself to sing along to a favourite song.

George the Poet: “One second, this is my favourite bit now—”

George starts singing along with the music from within the car. The song picks up in volume, then fades to find George still singing alongside it. (George the Poet 2019).

Conclusion

Close analytical listening to 11 shortlisted and winners of the 2019 Australian and British Podcast Awards demonstrates how podcast journalism, as an emerging genre, values narrative storytelling as much as the “content” of news. The study reinforces Nee and Santana’s (2021) findings that news podcasts (in their study relating to the pandemic), depart from the use of traditional, objective journalistic storytelling techniques. The analysed podcasts represent a diverse line-up of journalistic formats, however both winners are serialised single-subject, richly textured narrative podcasts. The aim is to make podcasts that are both informative and entertaining to meet the expectations of the audience, supporting Newman and Gallo’s (2019) point that documentary traditions are influencing news podcast production, drawing on narrative journalism elements to create narrative tension, with character development, scenes and plots to tell non-fiction stories. Sonic elements such as voice and recorded ambient sound are used to appeal to listeners’ imaginations to create accompanying inner imagery and experiences of intimacy.

This research finds an emerging trend of personal and subjective journalism in these podcasts, with reporters using first-person voice, reflecting on emotions and how they feel, their motivation and the storytelling process, ultimately becoming an important story character in their own right. Unlike Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2013) findings that journalists outsource emotions, in this study journalists embrace and explicitly report their own emotions.

Journalistic self-reflexivity is a core element of true crime podcasts (Dowling and Miller 2019); however, this study demonstrates a broader use of this narrative approach. Despite diversity in topics and variation in formats in the two-country sample, a majority of analysed podcasts include self-reflexive elements with journalists providing metacommentary on the journalistic production process. The study demonstrates that narrative approaches common in true crime podcasts can also provide effective storytelling models for public affairs journalism, such as journalistic coverage of politics and policy. This is illustrated in the British current affairs samples of the study.

Podcasting’s distinct features, as opt-in and time-shifting medium with committed and engaged listeners consuming podcasts through headphone/earbuds, provide an optimal space for audio journalism infused with intimacy and emotions. Journalists and interviewees can be heard in conversations, recorded as if live and happening with the listener close by. Furthermore, the analysed podcasts enhance listeners’ intimate connections and emotional involvement with the content through serialised storytelling which provides time to develop relationships with people in the stories, addressing listeners in direct, present-tense conversational language, and creating audio spaces where listeners can “listen to intimate listening in action” (Spinelli and Dann 2019, 70).

As an audio medium, podcasting relies on sounds and voice, as sonic elements in what Hilmes calls soundwork (2013). The simple statement that podcast journalism has audio at its heart has profound impact on its journalistic storytelling practices and potentials.

Podcast journalism is produced to be listened to—not read or watched. The interplay between the human voice speaking and the human ear listening extends the key attributes in narrative journalism to create a distinct form of intimate journalism, infused with personal stories, shared feelings, interesting ideas and surprising plot twists.

This study is explanatory in nature and extends similar studies identifying emerging podcast journalism storytelling conventions. More work is needed to understand the role of narrative journalism in creating compelling podcasts from the perspective of the listeners.

Note

1. Quotation from Kellie Riordan, then leading Audio Studios at the public service national broadcaster, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

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