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Introduction: Podcasting and Podcasts— Parameters of a New Aural Culture

Dario Llinares, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry

In adopting a new form of media practice, one might be forgiven for a certain level of naivety regarding the technological skills, creative applications, intellectual reflections and socio-cultural outcomes that would result. This is certainly true for two of the editors of this book. Dario Llinares and Neil Fox have produced *The Cinematologists* since 2015, the decision to start a podcast emerging from a fusion of the scholarly and personal pleasures of discussing all things cinema, allied with the sense that this relatively new audio medium could offer the potential to amalgamate the depth and rigour of academic research with the immediacy, openness and distribution power of the internet. Podcasting imbued in us the enthusiasm of possibility. Namely 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. We soon came to realise that working in audio was a different register to writing.

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The processes of production and the creation of content affords new freedoms with regard to the communication of knowledge. The medium's hybridity of thought, sound and text perhaps even fosters a reinvigoration of the dialectic, an exchange of ideas beyond what is possible in purely written form—be it in a magazine or academic journal. Podcasting, for us, taps into something fundamental about oral communication, argument and even the tension between subjective and objective knowledge that has been amplified in the digital age. Perhaps our attitude to working in the medium is somewhat quixotic and idealised but podcasting seems to possess the advantages of the internet while expelling some of the pitfalls. The podcast 'space' engendering a forum for discussion that is not defined by the culture of instantaneous reaction, sound-bite reductionism and anonymous mudslinging.

Undoubtedly our fandom of podcasts more broadly, spanning a range of genres, subjects and formats, was instrumental in inspiring us to create our own. The flexibility of listening and the relative lack of editorial and formal scrutiny in production marks the medium as something different, more radical, and more culturally urgent than radio. Furthermore, the technological specifics of the medium cultivates an autonomy of approach that result in conversational, informal, personal, even supportive, atmospheres. Podcasting also exemplifies the maxim that 'the specific is universal' by creating spaces for niche and cult content that caters for the more idiosyncratic cultures of interest. This openness to specialism, works counterintuitively, imbuing a sense of inclusivity for both producers and listeners. No matter how deep or obscure your interests are, there is a podcast for you, or there is (relatively) little stopping you making your own. Podcasting culture thus manages to be both personal and communal, a sensibility that is related to the active choice the listener has to exercise, and the modes of consumption—through headphones, car sound systems, home computers, mobile phones etc.—which imbue a deeply sonorous intimacy. To be a private, silent participant in other people's interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection. Perhaps such immersion into a simultaneously interior and exterior sonic experience may be the essential reason why podcasts have become so popular: they offer the listener a means to explore the self while simultaneously providing anchoring points in the chaos of a digital and material experience that is increasingly blurred.

Our production and consumption of podcasts has had effects that have gone beyond what we had foreseen, provoking a range of questions related to the very ontology of the medium, its context in the current media landscape, and how it instigates a self-reflectivity regarding one's identity as a mediated and mediating subject. As academics working in the broad landscape of the humanities the overwhelmingly transformational force of 'the digital'

predicates our work. Indeed, researching and teaching in media today requires both a search for apposite angles of analysis and modes of expression that capture the zeitgeist. Higher education is, of course, not immune to the effects of convergence culture, transmedia dissemination and the myriad reconfigurations of digital production, distribution and exhibition. Podcasting has, for us and for many of the authors in this book, inspired and enabled the creation of new avenues of research dissemination, expanding the sphere of influence across platforms and audiences. In this sense, podcasting is a significant part of the growing open-source ethos that challenges the structures of traditional academic publishing, and perhaps even offers the beginnings of a challenge to the hegemony of text and image as the primary communicative modes of the digital age.

We see that there is a level of irony in publishing a book focusing on an audio form that we advocate as disrupting, challenging and possessing the potential to reconfigure the traditions of academic discourse. However, there's no denying that while cultures are changing, they are not quite changed yet. The written word is not only dominant, but also a vital and rewarding way of engaging with all cultures, including new aural ones. In the spirit of being true to the form though, this book has an accompanying podcast that discusses the themes, issues and ideas thrown up by this written collection.

This is the first comprehensive interdisciplinary collection of academic work analysing the definition, status, practices and implications of podcasting within the broader context of digital media and cultural studies. It brings together the research of experienced and early career academics, along with practitioners of various types from a wide breadth of international contexts. Encompassing chapters that span a range of analytical and methodological approaches we envisage the entries here will be of interest to a range of scholars and students in what is an underdeveloped yet burgeoning area of enquiry. While the focus of chapters is diverse, the interrelationship between technological configuration, creative practice and conceptual understanding is an anchoring structure. Furthermore, for many of the authors, the digital milieu that has led to podcasting's current moment of mainstream cross-over has activated a philosophical interrogation of how information and knowledge is communicated. Many of the analyses here challenge the theorist/practitioner dichotomy and explore how podcasting facilitates autonomy and agency over one's mediated self.

The third editor of this book, Richard Berry, joined in the early stages of the process and is a key voice in defining podcasting in relation to its closest familial progenitor: radio. As with the other editors, consumption of podcasts

generated a curiosity in the form, not least in the questions it posed for radio both academically and industrially. Indeed, as time has passed more and more students with an interest in audio are gaining that passion through podcasts. The next section of the introduction maps out some of the core arguments and contextual parameters regarding the radio/podcast relationship from which research into podcasting has emerged. This provides the springboard from which we suggest that podcasting has transitioned into a new phase, a ‘new aural culture’, with its applications and effects requiring wider interdisciplinary conceptual approaches. We introduce some of the formative research that constitutes the starting point of a ‘podcast studies’ before proceeding to set out how the chapters in this volume expand this nascent field. *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media* is not intended as an exhaustive account, rather it offers a series of starting points and trajectories of enquiry which wrestle with podcasting’s technological, industrial, cultural and social dynamics in the context of digital media.

Podcast v. Radio: An Uneasy Paternalism

Despite podcasting being around for over a decade, there is still an uneasiness in defining it as a medium. Richard Berry has spent a lot of time thinking and writing about the contentious connecting tissue between podcasting and radio as the focus of his research. Whilst podcasting shares many auditory codes and production practices with radio, many of the chapters that follow outline the inherent differences that are beginning to emerge and be classified. In many ways, podcasting is a ‘new’ form in that it has facilitated entry into the creative production of audio for individuals and groups with no broadcasting background. In the UK, the monolith of the BBC, the specific structures of commercial radio, and the idiosyncrasies of community broadcasting, present myriad barriers to entry. In the US, public service radio has provided the breeding ground for some of the most popular titles such as *Radiolab*, *The Heart* and *Serial*. Whilst the affiliation between radio and podcasts continues, ideas and talent flowing freely between the two, within this book we examine the complexities, nuances and even distinctions that underlay the symbiosis. In terms of form, podcasts often demonstrate a distinctively different sound aesthetic where traditional rules around language, content, duration and structural conventions are bent if not completely broken. As podcaster and academic Adam Ragusea highlights, ‘The lines between these mediums are both grey and fluid. But the lines do exist, and we need to reckon with them’ (2015).

It is important to note that whilst the comparisons to radio are easy to make, the origins of the medium come from a desire to circumvent the mediated practices of the radio station and to deliver independent content directly to listeners. Whilst some podcasts are remediated radio content, not all podcasts could sufficiently be described as ‘radiogenic’, a term, which is itself under constant flux and contention (Chignell 2009: 93–94). Heise (2014) suggests that podcasting might build ‘on the shoulders of giants’ suggesting that rather than seeking to remediate, refashion or replace radio, podcasting pays homage to it. Indeed, whilst there is some evidence to suggest that podcast addicts listen to more podcasts than anything else (Edison 2017) radio listening remains buoyant (Ofcom 2017), which suggests practices of complementary listening, or replacement listening for audiences under-served by radio. In her work, Markman (2012) suggests that participants were drawn to podcasting out of a desire to ‘do’ radio, a theme she develops in her preface to a 2015 special issue on podcasting by adding that ‘podcasts give producers the freedom to pick and choose those elements that they like about radio, and repackage them for the digital age’ (241).

When discussing podcasting one inevitably has to reach a decision about what it is one is talking about. On the surface, podcasting is a delivery mechanism, a means of distributing MP3 audio files across the internet. However, as various chapters in this collection discuss, the outcome of this is ‘a specific set of practices and cultural meanings’ (Morris and Patterson 2015: 221) where modes of production, presentation, audience engagement and intention become factors through which we can delineate more clearly between podcasts and radio. Just as cinematic practice influenced television, radio practices have influenced podcasts, even if the resultant works bear little resemblance to contemporary forms of radio broadcasting. Excitingly, in this book the authors discuss their subjects as objects in an embryonic field of podcast studies, often without reference to radio at all.

As the chapters in this book outline, the practice of podcasting is not simply another iteration of radio, rather it is a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education. We can further this discussion by considering the consumption behaviours (MacDougall 2011), where listeners make deliberate (and often narrow) decisions over what to listen to and consume intimately (McHugh 2016). It is, as McHugh concludes, ‘much more than a delivery mode for audio content’ (78). The question of how much more, and whether podcasting is an area of study or as we provocatively suggest, a new aural culture, is central to the enquiry of this collection of essays.

Podcasting Studies or ‘New Aural Culture’?

This book emerges at a time when the notion of podcasting’s ‘golden age’ is a prevalent discourse in both academic and wider cultural circles (Berry 2015; Bottomley 2015; Hempel 2015). This assertion derives from the contention that podcasting has crossed-over into mainstream consciousness in a way that has a new cultural significance. Perhaps the two most obvious examples of a heightened symbolic value were the appearance of President Obama on the *WTF with Marc Maron* podcast, and the phenomenal success of the podcast *Serial*, which the New York Times called ‘arguably the medium’s first breakout hit’ (Carr 2014) elevating ‘the podcast medium to astronomical heights’ (Chaudry 2016: 263). A surge of journalistic interest in podcasting’s cultural significance has morphed into a familiar and rather narrow interest in metrics and money (Cellan-Jones 2016; Boboltz 2016). Indeed, as we write this the announcement that iTunes, the digital infrastructure that has provided the basis for podcast distribution since its inception, has introduced analytics for the first time is proving a major talking point (Quah 2017).

Analyses that focus solely on audience numbers and economic potential ignores the vast spectrum of podcast culture, its forms and contexts, the reasons they are made, why they are listened to, and the complexity and diversity of their impact. In many ways, the podcast remains a curiosity sitting on the periphery of mainstream media, an esoteric offshoot of digital culture. Its interest and identity, for us, lay in its practical and conceptual liminality and the play of mediatory possibilities it provokes. However, currently discussions are generally shoehorned into existing narratives already cemented by other forms (although, as Brian Reed, creator of the 2016 hit *S-Town* notes: ‘Podcasting is still so new, there aren’t a lot of rules for how things should be done’ (Reed in McGrane 2017). This kind of freedom makes podcasting, like all other ‘new’ mediums before it, confounding and therefore potentially dangerous for more conservative commentators who downplay its uniqueness and divert conversation into staid realms.

The research and analysis in these essays are in many ways a reaction to, and engagement with, a medium that has now reached a watershed moment, just over ten years after its inception. Positing the notion of a ‘New Aural Culture’ is somewhat of a provocation intended to symbolise the current zeitgeist as a flourishing of digital creativity in terms of aesthetic form, production context, cultural status and social relevance. Previous allusions to the importance of Radio Studies that foregrounded aurality from a broadly

media/ humanities disciplinary standpoint are of course indicative, but one can also call upon the advocacy of ‘auditory culture’ by Michael Bull and Les Back which, among other things ‘aims to counter the assumed supremacy of the ‘visual’ in accounts of the social’ (2003: 3). There is certainly a cross-over of concerns with podcasting offering up new modes of sound utilisation which in turn has fostered novel socio-cultural effects. ‘Auditory Culture’ perhaps offers a socio-historic umbrella term that encompasses disciplinary sub-fields of sound studies, acoustic ecology and soundscape studies. The analyses contained in this book span anthropology, gender studies, philosophy, digital humanities and performance, suggesting that interdisciplinarity is fundamental to studies of podcasting. This results in the key question of whether podcasting demands its own specific disciplinary space—a ‘podcast studies’—or is merely a digital media tool for understanding aspects of other cultural spaces in new ways. It’s early days, but this collection and accompanying podcast is intended to open up pathways of enquiry as the medium matures and parameters of understanding become potentially less nebulous.

Academic study of the podcast does have various conceptual trends already in place and growing. The links to radio we have already touched upon (See also Menduni 2007; Sterne et al. 2008) but perhaps the most in-depth strand of podcasting research followed the medium’s initial emergence in the mid-2000s and concerns the potential applications in pedagogic practice (Campbell 2005; Copley 2007; Frydenberg 2008; Lazzari 2009; Daniel and Woody 2010; Rosell-Aguilar 2013). More contemporary work has begun to examine the motivations of podcast producers/consumers (McClung and Johnson 2010; Chadha et al. 2012; Markman 2012; Markman and Sawyer 2014) and there are increasing textual and contextual analyses of individual podcasts with focus on *Serial*, as the landmark cross-over podcast, undoubtedly at the forefront of such work (O’Meara 2015; Meserko 2016; McMurtry 2016; McHugh 2017). Research has also begun to emerge, to which this edited collection adds, that explores the status of the medium in the contemporary media/cultural landscape (Berry 2015; Bonini 2015; Bottomley 2015; Markman 2015).¹ In the final section, we set out the content of this collection that we hope will contribute to expanding academic focus on podcasting as one of the key digital media cultures and practices of the new century.

The Scope of This Book

When inviting and compiling contributions to this collection we wanted it to reflect the diversity of podcasting as a form and practice. Podcasting is a welcome space for both the amateur and professional, for narrative and non-narrative, for performance and journalism, and we intend this collection to be a welcome space for the established and early-career academic, for cultural studies and ethnography, for interviews and empirical research, for industrial and textual analysis, and all areas in between. In this collection, there are discussions of blockbuster and supremely niche podcasts; articles by scholars and practitioners which represent in microcosm the range of voices and discourses that have emerged in podcasting's short history. The representation of theory and practice isn't merely through the contributions of scholars and producers but through investigations into how podcasting provides a productive space for reflections that actively theorise practice. We believe that a collection that seeks to argue for the fluid, interdisciplinary and diverse nature of podcasting needs to be reflective in its construction and output. The chapters do primarily focus on the United States podcast culture which, in output and listenership, dominates the landscape. Indeed, the international, national and regional dynamics of podcasting is undoubtedly a theme requiring further scrutiny.

Richard Berry begins our collection with an exploration into the doing and being of podcaster identity. Drawing from contextual analysis of the medium's structural development, allied to responses from an online survey of podcast producers, Berry contextualises the innovative outcomes of podcasting, as relative to, but distinct from radio, particularly in manifesting forms of mediated cultural identity. To this end Berry advocates for a discreet 'podcast studies' through which the myriad uses, outcomes and interpretations of the form can be theorized. In Chap. 3, John Sullivan posits the recent expansion of podcast production as a transitional moment in which the medium is morphing from specialist, amateur, niche sensibilities into a commercially viable media industry. The formation of podcast networks is a resultant phenomenon in which entrepreneurialism and monetisation is shifting the aspirations of formally independent producers. Sullivan explores developing tensions in the podcast ecosystem via an investigative analysis of the Podcast Movement Conference held in 2016 in Chicago.

On similar territory, Lieven Heeremans examines the development of podcast networks in the US using a comparative analysis of three case studies: *Radiotopia*, *Relay FM* and *The Heard*. He argues that an economic model has emerged slowly out of the radio infrastructure with individual and independent

podcast titles increasingly joining fledgling networks in a move that has both similarities and differences from traditional broadcast commodification. Using interviews with executives from said networks Heeremans suggests that podcaster motivations for joining networks are borne out of a desire to forge gatekeeping mechanisms for the sector going forward, share resources, optimise audiences and create possibilities for monetisation.

Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry give us our first engagement with the podcast phenomenon that is *Serial*. They explore *Serial's* status as not only a watershed moment for podcasting but how it helped define the parameters and possibilities for audio fiction in podcasting leading to a set of identifiers, particularly in terms of the thriller genre, that can be termed post-*Serial*. The seminal 2014 podcast comes under scrutiny again, this time its relationship to understandings of truth in documentary forms, as the focus of Rebecca Ora's contribution. *Serial* was notable for its mainstream success, the resultant press attention undoubtedly pulling in and gripping audiences, yet Ora argues that it failed to offer a satisfactory conclusion. Audiences therefore engaged in invitational practices through avenues beyond the podcast itself which, Ora suggests, forces a reconceptualization of what we might understand as a 'live medium'.

In Chap. 7, Dario Llinares discusses how the infrastructure of podcast production and consumption has opened up aural practice to facilitate new possibilities of being and doing mediation. Forwarding the concept of liminal praxis, Llinares draws on his own experience and the reflections of other academics and writers, to explore how podcasting disrupts the hierarchy between written and sound communication. He goes on to analyse the discourse of self-reflexivity that underpins much of podcast creation, suggesting that production practices 'provide a mechanism by which producer/ consumers use the medium to define and enact their own agency within the highly fractured subjectivity of the internet age'. Through analysing the 'conversational science' of the *Stuff to Blow Your Mind* podcast, Danielle Barrios-O'Neill examines points of convergence between the sciences and the humanities and how the podcast form can break down complex relations and engage listeners in challenging ecological subject matter, blurring previously fought-over binaries regarding theory and practice, and hard and soft subject matter.

Analysing the *Nobel Prize Talks* podcast Lukasz Swiatek defines podcasting as an 'intimate bridging medium', which forges unique modes of connectivity that cross boundaries between producer and listener. Although, on the one hand, Swiatek suggests podcasting can transverse the knowledge boundaries and also barriers between individuals and group identities, he also suggests that the bridging potential is undermined by many of the traditional

hierarchies that beset traditional media communication. Farokh Soltani furthers ideas put forward earlier by Hancock and McMurtry regarding the potential of podcast audio drama to become something distinct and evolved from its radio precursors. Using Merleau-Ponty's ideas around the phenomenology of perception, he argues that through its unique and intimate components podcast drama can become something sensory and embodied. Audio dramaturgy is thus conceptualised as potentially instigating 'a radical break with the limits placed on it by radio technology'.

Intimacy and the feminist voice in the, now disbanded, podcast *The Heart* is the focus of Stacey Copeland's entry. As a collection of work that explores intimate issues around sex, gender and sexuality, 'The Heart' has made great use of the intimacy of the podcast form. In her chapter Copeland explores this through discussion of a number of episodes and relates them to representations of the voice 'that can challenge visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations by engaging with the listener through the affective use of sound'. Kathleen Collins explores the rise of comedian-hosted interview podcasts, where comics mix personal conversations with comedic personas linking this to Graeme Turner's (2010) term the 'demotic turn'. Collins places this discussion in the context of her earlier work on television and radio confessionals, connecting our current focus on digital media with earlier broadcast iterations of similar formats.

Pille Pruilmann-Vengerfeldt and Johanna Willstedt Buchholtz discuss how collaboration, humour and multiple voices are key to accessing and delivering sensitive material in podcasting. Their analysis of the podcast *Sickboy* takes in audiences, production practices and funding structures as it deconstructs how myriad factors contribute to being able to discuss the lived experience of people with disabilities in ways that are inclusive and non-discriminatory. Following this, Robbie Wilson explores his own use of podcasting as a tool in performance art. Rather than considering podcasts as another iteration of traditional broadcasting, Wilson, using his own practice-based research, conceptualises the role of podcasts as a portable, personal medium, used to locate listeners in the environment once again exemplifying our assertion that podcasting is a liminal medium. In our final chapter Neil Fox interviews the high-profile, prolific British podcaster Richard Herring. Fox's interview is a revealing insight into the cultural development of the podcast from one of its early adopters and the interview covers the theorising of practice, funding structures, audiences, writing and form from the perspective of a committed practitioner with a diverse portfolio of shows.

This edited book is at once a reaction to podcasting's zeitgeist moment, an expansion of academic research and a collation of existing forms of discourse

in this emergent area. In conceptualizing the podcast on its own terms, the chapters in this collection examine its liminal status perhaps even finally dissolving the rather archaic dichotomies of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media and ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ production values, practices and identities. They deconstruct the podcast’s reliance on mainstream industrial structures whilst attempting to retain an alternative, even outsider, sensibility. We believe that this collection has the potential to be positioned at the forefront of an expanding research area, acting as a gateway to what will undoubtedly develop over the coming years. We hope it becomes a seminal text for students, scholars and practitioners seeking to understand and further develop knowledge of the medium who will take this ‘new aural culture’ to heights and places we cannot imagine as we write this.

Note

1. Also, see other articles from the 2015 special symposium on podcasting www.tandfonline.com/toc/hjrs20/22/2

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