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# 'I Know What a Podcast Is': Post-*Serial* Fiction and Podcast Media Identity

## Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry

## Introduction

*The Black Tapes Podcast*, *TANIS*, *Rabbits*, *The Message*, *Limetown*, *Archive 81*. What do all of these fictional podcasts have in common? In the simplest terms, all of them are popular post-*Serial* podcast thrillers. But what does it mean, to be a post-*Serial* podcast thriller? Let us take each term one at a time. If podcasting arose in 2004, it can be said to have become 'mainstream' in 2014. This is partly due to the phenomenon of *This American Life's Serial* (2014). As podcast-advertising specialist Måns Ulvestam explains, *Serial* 'completely changed people's perceptions of podcasting' from being techno-centric and niche (cited in Bergman 2017). Hosted by long-time *This American Life* audio-journalist Sarah Koenig, *Serial* is the emphatically 'true life' investigation of a 1990s murder case: a week-by-week re-evaluation of the evidence that saw 18-year-old Adnan Syed imprisoned for the murder of his ex-girlfriend Hae Min Lee. While self-admittedly far from unique or pioneering in its underpinning concepts of either serialisation, or stylised audio-documentary

D. Hancock (✉)
University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK
e-mail: Danielle.hancock@uea.ac.uk

L. McMurtry
University of Salford, Salford, UK
e-mail: l.g.mcmurtry@salford.ac.uk

(Snyder cited in Biewen et al. 2017: 78), and although a number of previous podcasts had achieved cult success (Hancock and McMurtry 2017), *Serial* stands alone as the first 'mainstream' podcast.

*Serial* undeniably broke records: the fastest-ever podcast to reach 5 million downloads (within its first month); 40 million downloads in its first two months (Dredge 2014); holding the #1 rating on iTunes' download chart for three months; the first podcast to win a Peabody Award. By Christmas 2014, *Serial* claimed such broad popularity, and iconic status, as to warrant a (highly praised) *Saturday Night Live* parody, the significance of which is epitomised in *Time* magazine: '"No way", some people thought, "a podcast could never be big enough to get the SNL treatment"' (Grossman 2014). For many commentators, *Serial* breathed new life into an otherwise niche, and somewhat dwindling media form (Zurawik 2014). As podcasting authority Richard Berry notes, ten years after podcasting debuted, 'the world was suddenly talking about podcasting again' (2015: 170).

## Defining the Post-*Serial*

The post-*Serial* brings with it more elements than simply following *Serial* in chronological terms. Alongside bringing non-fiction podcasting to the public eye, and despite being explicitly built around notions of truth and reality, *Serial* represents the most influential force upon podcast *fiction* since Old Time Radio drama (OTR).[1] Since its release, *Serial* has been accredited with a wave of 'copycat' fiction: a developing sub-genre of highly popular fiction podcasts which seem consciously to follow what podcast veteran Alasdair Stuart terms '[t]he *Serial* model; "bad thing happens, crusading journalist investigates, interviews and discussion ensue"' (2016). These programmes have received mainstream media attention, as much due to questions of media identity as to their popularity. As Nino Cipri (2016) observes:

> There seems to be a growing subgenre of 'intrepid female journalist uncovers a supernatural conspiracy.' Well, if not a subgenre, then at least a trope in the making. *The Black Tapes, Limetown*, and *The Message* all share this same basic premise: *Serial* goes full-on *X-Files*.

Never before has podcast fiction, as a genre rather than a one-off hit, been so visible. Yet while numerous press commentators have branded such podcasts derivative, or as 'trying too hard to be like *Serial*', (McFarland 2015) we argue this overlooks the crucial fact that *Serial* is not just an extension of effective

radio journalism aesthetic and form, but rather offers an inherently and importantly successful, sympathetic utilisation and expression of its unique podcast media identity. Furthermore, this ignores the extent to which such shows expand upon *Serial*'s blueprint. From *Serial*, we may see audio-drama take a new and critically important shape as the first explicitly podcast-oriented audio-fiction form.

Some audio scholars anticipated the podcasts above, as fictional thrillers, identifying *Serial* as having 'component parts [which] break down to form the spine of a recipe that audio dramatists can use', while Berry asserts it 'presented podcasting as a viable alternative platform for content creators and storytellers' (McMurtry 2016: 320; Berry 2015: 176). This chapter expands such predictions, arguing that what in fact appeals so much in *Serial*'s 'blueprint' is its understanding and exploitation of its own podcast medium. If, previously, fiction podcasts often depended upon radio's frameworks, conventions and even aesthetics (Hancock and McMurtry 2017), *Serial* established a narrative style which was informed by, and exploratory of, podcast media identity, and its properties of mobility, fragmentation, and integrated multi-platforming. That *Serial* perhaps emerges as the most notable podcast to date may be less to do with its 'rubbernecking spectacle' (Livingstone 2017), and more that it was among the first podcasts to recognise and harness the distinctive narrative potentials of its own media form: to show us the new ways which podcasting enables us to tell and hear stories.[2] This chapter thus explores a range of post-*Serial* podcast fictions, asking to what extent these utilise and develop *Serial*'s model to offer a new audio-fiction form explicitly built around, and exploratory of, podcasting's unique media properties. Specifically, we example the Pacific Northwest Stories (PNWS) podcast network (whose output comprises of *The Black Tapes Podcast*, *TANIS* and *Rabbits*); *The Message* (General Electric Podcast Theater); *Limetown* (Two Up Productions); and *Archive 81* (Dead Signals). After briefly exploring the deeper significance of aesthetic and formulaic repetition, we will address three main aspects of these programmes: distribution, platforming and mediation.

## Repetition

The similarities between *Serial* and those fictions which follow it are often acknowledged by their creators, if not directly, then through reference to the show's 'parent-figure' *This American Life* as a strong influence (McFarland 2015; Powell cited in Prina 2016). Indeed PNWS' co-creator Terry Miles depicts *Serial* as a creative time-bomb: '[w]e thought when we were doing this

that someone else was going to do it … I remember calling Paul and being like, 'Man we have got to hurry, do you understand?'' (cited in Shaw 2016). Shortly after, *The Message* was commissioned as '*Serial* with aliens' (Sims 2015). However, not all post-*Serial* fictions follow from *Serial* in their conception: despite its later release, *Limetown* was reputedly envisioned roughly 'a year before *Serial* debuted', suggesting an almost inevitability to the programme's structure and style (McFarland 2015). Perhaps then there is something more meaningful at play in the podcasts' emergent conventions— a formula, of sorts, in whose understanding we may glean an insight into the unique potentials and properties of podcast media as a narrative medium. 'Radio is rich in conventions' as Guy Starkey observed (2004: 29), and while podcasting as a form has proved far more flexible than much of traditional radio, conventions still abound to frame audience expectations. This is highly evident when performing close comparisons between *Serial* and post-*Serial* podcast fiction thrillers. This is more than mere slavish mimicry. The conventions of Ira Glass' *This American Life* give the WBEZ Chicago/American Public Media an aural signature, which Glass likens to two basic components, of plot and moments of reflection (2017: 70). The terms Glass uses for nonfictional storytelling are not unique—plot, story—but they do suggest an affinity with fictional narrative. 'I think the biggest thing is that people responded to this journalism as if it were entertainment,' something writers Sarah Koenig, Julie Snyder and producer Dana Chivvis consciously constructed, suggests Koenig as regards *Serial* (cited in Bernard 2017). While several of the post-*Serial* fiction podcasts respond explicitly to the *Serial* script and style, none of the podcasts is more explicit in its emulation than *The Black Tapes Podcast (TBT).*

Cipri (2016) defines *TBT* as referential 'possibly to the point of parody: even the show's theme song is extremely similar to *Serial's*, with a voicemail in the place of the announcement of a collect call'. Indeed, *TBT* emulates *Serial* throughout its opening audio-collage: a mash-up of 'found-footage' style soundbites and voices interspersed with a catchy, moody theme tune which both establishes narrative trajectory and aesthetic. *Serial's* opening segue reads almost as a TV transcript, with a sponsor segment, and a theme song 'so catchy and distinct that just a few notes of it set the mood and a level of expectation in the listener', interspersed with a 'previously on *Serial*' clips section, and a richly textured 'hallmark' opening sequence comprised of Syed's and the prison automated call system's voices (DeMair 2017: 29). If *TBT* mirrors *Serial's* opening 'sounds', it also borrows almost literally from *Serial's* script, with the hosts' self-explanatory establishing frames echoing one another:

| Koenig: | For the last year, I've spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999 … ('The Alibi') |
| Alex Reagan: | For the last two months, I've been immersed in the fascinating world of paranormal investigation. ('A Tale of Two Tapes: Part 1') |

Although *TBTs*' initial near-perfect reproduction of *Serial*'s aesthetics dissipates as the show progresses, a clear duplication of form is maintained throughout the seasons.

This emulation of form and acoustic style is present throughout post-*Serial* fiction; indeed all of the shows discussed employ near-identical opening sequence sounds and structures, featuring 'found-footage', theme and audio-clips of the show. Through emulating *Serial*'s recognisable form, podcast fiction becomes intelligible to an unfamiliar audience: '[w]hen a fiction podcast uses a nonfiction form, there's a set of contexts that makes sense to you, as a listener,' explains *Archive 81* creator Dan Powell (cited in Locke 2016). Comparing *Serial* to the popular 'real life' murder dramatisation TV programme *Dateline*, David Letzler posits that, 'for the broader audience captivated by *Serial*, its appeal rests in the narrative construction, not the events of the murder' (2017: 39–40). This recollects 'television's sequence of diverse fragments of narrative, information and advertising [which] defines the medium's fundamental structure during the network era' (Butler 2012: 17). However, there are also recollections of radio and audio-book form. Salvati (2015) characterises fan (non)fictional podcast *Dan Carlin's Hardcore History* (2006–) as using a combination of broadcast liveness/paratextual flow and the narrative voice familiar from audio-books as well as the use of Web syndication (if not outright serialisation) in its Web 'pull' (Butler 2012: 233). This sequence may be TV-like in structure, but acoustically it asserts the vividness of sound, and the podcast's pre-recorded, 'time-shift' properties. The rich, kaleidoscopic sounds of *Serial*'s opening frames emphasise that '[t]he documentary genre within audio's renaissance of storytelling has striven to make sound an *experience*' (Salvati 2015: 234, italics original). In seconds, the sequence establishes a sense of varied locations and times, a continuity of programming, and, in Glass's authoritative broadcast voice and the introductory advertising segment, a defined listener positioning of anticipation and attentiveness. The opening sets the scene for an hour or so of devoted listenership, more akin to TV's 'primary' entertainment position than radio's long-held secondary status.

As *Serial*'s iconic structures become applicable to, and recognisable within, podcast media more generally, a new media identity emerges. The podcast no longer operates merely as re-played radio, wrenched from another media form, or as an assortment of eclectic one-offs, but rather as a media form which is increasingly recognisable as consciously self-contained, pre-recorded, play-on-demand acoustically complex, and formally sponsored. The repetitions of post-*Serial* fictions make bold steps toward forming a unified podcast media identity.

## Distribution

What ultimately distinguished podcasting from Internet radio was its portability, its user-control options, its lack of overarching gatekeeper or censorship system/s, and its accessibility (in terms of distribution). It is this last feature that reached its zenith with *Serial.* Besides aping *Serial*'s style and public radio context, post-*Serial* fiction further appropriates the show's groundbreaking use of serialised release. Of course, serialization has always exerted a strong pull on audiences. What John Cawelti calls 'resistance to closure' (2004: 347) characterises the 'endlessly deferred narrative' that Matt Hills identifies in *Fan Cultures* (2002: 128). Though far from the first podcast to tell a single story through instalments, *Serial* is among the first to promote this aspect as beneficial: important enough, even, to earn its namesake. Nathan Matisse asserts, 'Serialization may have always existed, but [*Serial*] demonstrates that an audio-only audience is not only open to it, they crave it' (Matisse 2014).

'Crave' is an apt term. *Serial*, and the fictions which succeed it, have been described as 'addictive', 'drug-like' and with listeners needing their next 'fix' (McCracken 2017: 54; Locker 2015). There is an obvious parallel with Netflix binge-watch culture: when interviewed in 2017, *Serial*'s writers/producers Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder noted that they pushed the 'previously on' tag in *Serial,* which they said they had acquired from TV (cited in Biewen et al. 2017: 78). However, unlike television fiction, which is created as a block series, and/or traditional radio, which must adhere to wider broadcast scheduling issues, podcasting allows for genuinely up-to-the-minute delivery of extra material, divergence and update, as fast as the producers can mix and upload it. This all appears on the subscriber's podcast RSS feed immediately, ready to be heard on any mobile listening device, from the moment of release. Moreover, as podcasts are increasingly accessed through personally integrated (technologically convergent) devices like Smartphones, the concept of 'listening time'

becomes less constrained. The podcast medium enables a serialised story that may be heard anytime, anywhere, that may be added to almost instantaneously that delivers itself and any updates to its audience, and often to its audience's most intimate and often-utilised technologies, and which in doing so continually reminds listeners of its presence. A podcast can tell a never-ending story that follows listeners anywhere.[3]

However, what post-*Serial* fiction does is develop *Serial*'s unsustainable 'reality-audio' model. As *Serial* attempted extended if not eternal life, aping the endlessly deferred narrative, (with Season One's ending being repeatedly 'prolonged' with audio-updates on Syed's ongoing legal battle) audience attentions dwindled. This occurrence teaches much about the importance of pace and dependent anticipation. Though *Serial* Season One continued to release material, such information was no longer drawn from the ever-available well of the past: it was contingent upon events beyond the *Serial* team's control, and thus could not meet the same steady, reliable, just-fast-enough release schedule of the podcast's regular episodes. Koenig iterated that her journalistic integrity precluded her making the conclusions that furnish satisfying drama (cited in Biewen et al. 2017: 78). Some fans disagreed; they complained, lost interest, and branded Season Two a flop.[4] A Reddit post summed up the fan response: 'I, like pretty much everyone else, loved S1. But I got an episode or two into S2 as they were coming out and I just didn't like it as much' (MorboReddits 2017). For many, the season's central mystery was upstaged by 'more tenuous' ethical conversations, 'riveting for some and dull as dry toast for others' (Locker 2016).

In the realms of fiction, however, such complaints never need be. Post-*Serial* fictions evidence an understanding of the need for both continuance, control and conclusion. In fiction, hyperdiegetic universes provide a sense of breadth and depth in the text's setting, a sense that any one story being told is only the tip of the iceberg in a larger universe. In a seminal study, Ien Ang called the TV soap *Dallas* 'television fiction without end', (1985: 6) an apt categorisation of *Serial*'s fictional progeny. Found-footage horror *Archive 81* develops specifically around this concept. The show tells the story of missing archivist Dan, who has recently disappeared after being hired to record himself listening to a collection of audio-cassette tapes titled 'Archive 81', ostensibly to digitise the collection, but with the unsettling caveat that he must never turn his recorder off. As one of an unspecified but seemingly vast collection of audio-tape archives, 'Archive 81' holds a potentially inexhaustible trove of mysteries to investigate and can feed its audience's insatiability in ways that *Serial* cannot. Furthermore, the show's serialised, steady drip-feed format is

intentionally mirrored in its narrative premise: the archives being broadcast are, in fact, the re-embodiment of a demonic entity, who is seeking to find form through an unending, and compelling, story. This point is emphasised frequently, as when, on realising the archive's unsettling nature, protagonist Dan attempts to abandon the project. Herein Dan's 'project manager' explains:

> when a natural storyteller like you hears something as powerful as what's on those tapes, you get invested. And because you care so much about what happened, well, it's difficult for you to leave without hearing the whole story. ('A Body in a New Place')

The 'binge-listen' audio-culture that *Serial* tapped into is darkly mirrored: just as Dan is compelled to continue listening to the supernaturally charged recordings, so too are his listeners seemingly compelled to listen to him listening.

Similarly, the 'black tapes', from which the eponymous Pacific Northwest Stories show derives its name, are in fact a shelf of VHS cases, each containing the details of an unsolved paranormal case. When radio journalist Alex Reagan first discovers the tapes, there is a strong inference of a 12-part programme structure coming to fruition, as she explains:

> Dr. Strand eventually agreed to let me take a look at one of the unsolved, he would say unsolved yet, cases from that mysterious row of plastic black VHS containers ... It looks like there were around a dozen or so VHS cases on that shelf. This birthday party is from what we're calling tape number one. ('A Tale of Two Tapes: Part 1')

In numbering the tapes, and dealing with the first of the twelve in the show's first episode, Reagan sets in motion a measured 'monster-of-the-week' system which suggests a twelve-episode limit to the show. In one sense, this is delivered, as each of the first season's episodes orients itself around the opening of the next 'black tape', and the season finale offers a clear sense of denouement in the opening of all of the tapes. There is a narrative satisfaction in this conclusion which *Serial* could never supply. However, when Reagan asks paranormal sceptic Richard Strand, 'Are the Black Tapes all connected?' she unconsciously reaches out to the longevity of *TBT*'s narrative; Seasons 2 and 3 will not detail more tapes, but tap into the rationale behind their connections to one another and to Strand's personal life (*The Codex Gigas*). As *Limetown* creator Zack Ackers notes:

*Serial* had to stay nonfictional. At the end of the show, it didn't necessarily mean that it had a conclusion. That's the biggest advantage we have: We're making it up. So we can give you an ending. (Cited in Owen 2015)

Unlike *Serial*, post-*Serial* fiction can have its cake and eat it, offering listeners a clear sense of narrative culmination, while extending the same story's life onto an equally plentiful, and methodically-released, new season.

This appropriation of the podcast's fluidity and intimacy of distribution is continued, as post-*Serial* podcasts frequently send listeners diegetic updates and teasers, building on *Serial*'s initially effective delivery of Adnan's trial updates in a more reliably sustainable, and dramatic, manner. In *Limetown*, podcasting's unique distribution method allows a unique realism, with the show's creators enforcing an unpredictable release schedule:

We need to get them out at a pace where people don't forget what's happening, but at the same time, I do think the consistency [of traditional public radio] is a little archaic … Having an inconsistent release schedule is more like what happens in the real world. If Lia is exploring this story in present day, well, sometimes an episode might just be 40 seconds of breaking news. (Bronkie cited Owen 2015)

Yet while, in the immediate delivery of such material to subscribed listeners, the podcast may develop a 'real-time' narrative tension and pace that radio may not, there is also notable fan appreciation for, and adaptation to, the more individualistic 'listen-on-demand' podcast format. Many post-*Serial* fiction fans report 'hoarding' episodes for a binge listen, and indeed, several report feeling that the shows' narratives are designed for such engagement:

I suspect I'd enjoy them all a lot more if I'd waited a year and listened to them all in one sitting, rather than trying to keep up with them in serial form. Hopefully in a couple years I'll have forgotten enough to do that with fresh ears. (eotvos)

Beyond being merely long-running, post-*Serial* fictions are demanding of listener attention. Just as *Serial* requires 'our fullest mental commitments to parse what we can and cannot understand' (Letzler 2017: 160), post-*Serial* podcasts require full, immersive audience attention, in a way that radio has seldom been credited with since the Crystal set's demise. As David Chang (2016) observes:

Tanis … demands your full attention. Let your mind wander for just a minute, and you may miss a vital clue. Skip an entire episode, and you could be lost at sea … listening to this podcast is like drinking out of a wonderful, amazing yet very powerful fire hydrant. Your brain is FLOODED with information.

Information-overload is indicative of the broader genre. Joseph Farrar of *Archive 81* similarly explains: 'It all gets a little *Inception*-esque, and if you space out during podcasts you're likely to get tripped by the rabbit holes.' (2016) Sandy Tolan notes, '[t]he documentary functions best when it is not merely a long piece of fact-jammed journalism but a nonfiction drama set on an audio stage with scenes, characters, narrative arc, dramatic tension, and even silence' (2017: 195). Increasingly, as a facet of new modes of engaging with podcasting, it seems that 'soundwork' (to use Michele Hilmes' phrase) requires some level of careful listening: this is not confined to *Serial*, but, again, was popularised by it. Whereas traditional radio was ephemeral and fleeting, podcasts may be paused and replayed, allowing listeners to follow more complex plots. Rather than passing from one story to the next, the listener must juggle many strands of the same story, over 12 or so installments.

The complexity of these shows is a source of listener fascination, with Reddit fan communities producing detailed plot-maps, and many listeners admitting to pausing, re-playing, and repeating episodes or even entire seasons to maintain their understanding. The required listening skills are now entering mainstream digital culture, a reminder of a time when radio was the solo broadcasting medium. This tendency is highlighted, and encouraged, as in all opening sequences when both Reagan *TANIS*' Nic Silver direct new listeners to head to the shows' first episodes and catch up before continuing listening (as does Koenig in *Serial*).

Thus with the mobile MP3 player's revival of headphone listening (Bull 2007) comes a renewed emphasis on complex and demanding audio-fiction—a far cry from the BBC's '[p]lays to hoover to' (Scotney cited Wade 1981: 222). This is also a far cry from the multi-tasking, mobilised, on-the-go listening culture which new audio-media has thus far been tied to. It would be difficult to navigate city streets, or busy traffic, and not fall into 'rabbit holes'. Perhaps post-*Serial* fictions are built for less taxing mobility; headphones do allow for a more directed, undisturbed listening experience and certainly many listeners report catching up during commutes. However, this overlooks a concurrent rise in domestic and shared listening, reported both in the 2017 Next Radio Conference held in London (Lazovick 2017), and by post-*Serial* fiction listeners themselves. In direct opposition to Michael Bull's depictions of lonely listeners, many post-*Serial* fans report listening at home, either alone or with friends and family. In 2017, due to the use of Smart Speakers, audio

is now being consumed in group settings (Lazovick 2017). While Smart Speaker use is currently confined to about 7 per cent of the total US population, 40 per cent of those who own a Smart Speaker use it to listen to podcasts (NPR/Edison Research 2017). In a digital take on radio's Golden Era families grouped at the wireless, listeners are now gathering around the digital speaker, and such focussed attentions are increasingly being met. Rather than continued adherence to a form of radio most closely associated with formatted music (with chatty DJ hosts), which are often affiliated with radio's 'secondary' media status, in post-*Serial* fiction, podcasting's properties of temporal manipulation and isolated listening are finally harnessed. Thus we find more complex, vast and demanding narratives than audio-drama has, by and large, previously undertaken.

## Platforming

A crucial means by which post-*Serial* podcasts further maintain such complex serialised narratives is through the development of audio-visual narrative. Podcasting is often conceptualised similarly to radio, which was originally defined as a solely auditory media bearing no visual identity. Hilmes (2013) has rechristened podcast/ radio as 'soundwork' and 'screen medium', suggesting that podcasting is accessed through screens 'both mobile and static, using tactile and visual and textual interfaces' (p. 44). Visibility plays an important role within podcasting, with website imagery, logos and show/episode 'posters' comprising integral aspects of a podcast's reception.

Pre-*Serial*, such visual paratexts frequently shaped and informed a podcast-listening experience, imbuing the listening material with a particular aesthetic or solidifying an otherwise 'invisible' space or appearance (Hancock and McMurtry 2017: 4–5; Jaynes 2017) Yet *Serial* evolves this, using its website as a 'base-camp' of sorts for the show's investigation and integrating its audio form with the materials displayed there. On the website, listeners may peruse evidence and information pertaining to Syed's case (such as phone records and trial transcripts), labelled the 'visual stuff *in* this story'. To consider *Serial*'s visual material as additional rather than composite overlooks the extent to which Koenig refers to and directs listeners to the website material, and the extent to which having such material allows the podcast to tell such a complex story. As Erica Haugtvedt notes, Koenig is 'sometimes monotonously pedantic about the details of the years-old case [*Serial*] chronicles'; without making the records available to the listener, *Serial* risks losing its intelligibility (2017: 26). Only by appropriating the podcast's audio-visual properties and creating a multi-sensory, multi-platform narrative, may the story function adequately,

as the website 'has taken peculiar pains to present corporeal evidence, as if the story as presented aurally by Koenig is not enough; there must be physical, written, seen traces' (McMurtry 2016: 308). Indeed, the extent to which this is true is evidenced in the website's 'introduction' to its documents section as 'This is the place where we'll collect all the visual stuff in this story' ('Maps, Documents, etc.'). Herein, the audible voice is reconciled with the visible 'voice'. Koenig's presentation style contrasts strongly with 'the ingrained style of most NPR-ish features, a style that could be characterized as largely disembodied, as if reporters are merely a pass-through, a conduit' (Michel 2017: 213). Acknowledging this, *Serial* must be understood as an audiovisual experience, with Koenig's spoken narrative being intertwined throughout with various visual elements.

Just as *Serial* displays phone records and blueprints for the audience's scrutiny, so too does *TBT* offer audiences visual testimony on its website. Captioned: 'FOUND BEHIND A PAINTING IN A HOTEL IN VICTORIA, B.C., CANADA,' is a handwritten list of number configurations on a (perhaps digitally) sepia-ed piece of paper. *TANIS* and *Rabbits* both significantly extend this trope, dutifully displaying email correspondence, news-clippings, photographs, artworks and screen-grabs referenced in each episode, and creating a story form which is throughout dualistically audiovisual. These visual elements take audio drama from the highly individualistic, nebulous realms of the imagination, and into the more concrete, shared realms of the object. Post-*Serial* fictions further replicate *Serial*'s audio-visual narrative by including 'real', 'findable' materials alongside fictional storylines, forging a narrative form 'which is acutely aware of the audience's ability to fact-check and research that which is presented as true-life' (Hancock and McMurtry 2017: 6). That listeners may Google the artifacts, news stories, characters and histories discussed in the shows underpins narrative tension in such scenes as *TBT*'s *Codex Gigas*, wherein Reagan Googles 'The Devil's Bible':

| | |
|---|---|
| Carmichael: | You can look [The Devil's Bible] up online. |
| Reagan: | Really? |
| Carmichael: | Yes. It's called *The Codex Gigas*. You should Google it. I'll stay on the line. |
| Reagan: | You don't mind? |
| Carmichael: | Not at all. |
| Reagan: | Okay, great. [pause] Oh, wow. There's a huge drawing of the devil in it. |
| Carmichael: | Quite something, yes? |
| Reagan: | Yeah, that's... something. |

While initially this may seem an over-long segue to Reagan's discovery of a Satanic image, in fact by delaying such discovery the scene allows, and encourages, the listener to Google alongside Reagan, reinforcing the notion that soundwork and podcasting are extensions of screen media. In doing so, the listener will discover reams of information on the factual *Codex Gigas*, and may examine the book's illustration alongside Reagan's subsequent description of it. Here we find a fruitful exampling of Henry Jenkins' 'convergence media', wherein 'consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content' (2006: 3).

If 'convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others', then we may further argue post-*Serial* fictions to complicate 'first wave' concerns regarding new audio-media's antisocial properties (Jenkins 2006: 3). In allowing audiences to double-check, study and dissect, such materials, audio-visual podcast narratives coax acts of armchair detective-work and interactivity, as listeners not only discuss and argue the various podcasts' mysteries, but, on fan forums like Reddit, work collaboratively to solve them. Furthermore, many post-*Serial* fictions operate upon the premise of their respective journalist/ narrator characters having chosen the podcast media form specifically because of its potential to allow uncensored collaboration and communication between speakers and audience. *Archive 81*'s host (missing man Dan's friend), Mark Sollinger, explicitly aligns his choice of mediation with the podcast's ability to allow him to reach out to the world for help, saying, 'I will be releasing all of his audio to everyone, to *everyone*' ('A Body in a New Place'). Sollinger further suggests the podcast medium's word-of-mouth culture and its integration with screen cultures, asking listeners to contact him if they have any knowledge of his friend's whereabouts, or of 'Archive 81'. Likewise— in a playful narrative/ marketing device— Solinger implores listeners to help and 'just get the word out' by sharing the story of Dan's disappearance on social media, and through boosting the podcast's iTunes' rating (ibid). *Rabbits* operates upon a similar awareness of the podcast medium's sociability and connectivity, and openly encourages listeners to join in the hunt for 'reporter' Carley Parker's missing friend Yumiko. Parker explains that 'I started this podcast because I want to find out what happened to my friend', further qualifying the show as 'a way of eliciting assistance, engaging the hive mind, a way of asking you, our listeners, for help.' ('Game On'; 'Concernicus Jones').

That listeners are kept almost on an even-score with the investigations again springs from *Serial*'s innovations of form, which crucially used the podcast medium's immediacy of distribution and reception to further assert a temporal immediacy between listener and speaker which podcasting has previously

been considered to deny. 'Koenig … wanted the podcast to sound different than *This American Life* and have a live vibe' (Koenig cited in Anonymous 2014). *Serial* episodes were thus written and produced no earlier than a week before broadcast, and were subject to constant last-minute change and update, creating a story which was constantly developing and seemingly self-directing. Herein pre-ordained narrative and biases were supposedly denied, as Koenig emphasises: 'I don't know where it will end actually' (cited in Raptopoulos). Responding to listener-requests for block-release, Chivvis explains:

> We're reporting this story as we write it. We're still pinning down information, doing interviews, following leads. So when you listen each week, the truth is that you're actually not all that far behind us. ('A Question of Binge Listening')

The show's on-the-go construction is further presented as bringing listeners almost as close to the story as the producers and reporters. As Glass sold it: 'each week, we will go with Sarah on her hunt to figure out what really happened. And we will learn the answers as she does' (cited in Larson 2014). Podcasting's fast production and unrestricted distribution process are thus pivotal to narrative, allowing the story to be updated and diverted at any minute and enabling a more immersive and interactive narrative than traditional media might allow.

The emulation of such pace and supplementation is integral to post-*Serial* fictions, with all of the shows presenting their episodes as airing alongside ongoing, unscripted and unpredictable investigations. *TBT* purportedly begins as an anthology-documentary of various 'interesting lives, remarkable occupations and amazing stories' before 'unexpectedly' focusing on Dr. Strand and his black tapes. Like *Serial*, the story is suggested as organically self-directed, as an 'interesting, confusing, and occasionally macabre story that had started spilling out around the edges' of Reagan and her producers' 'original vision' ('A Tale of Two Tapes: Part 1'). Thus, rather than presenting a sculpted, 'designed' documentary series, Reagan explains:

> … we decided that we would let things play out exactly as they happen to us. You will experience the events just as we experience them. I'll step in every once in a while to help guide you through it. But other than those interruptions, we're going to let things play out exactly as they happened. ('A Tale of Two Tapes: Part 1')

Like Koenig and Chivvis, Reagan suggests an almost shoulder-to-shoulder closeness between her investigation, and the listener's reception. In *Limetown*,

even the show's production methods promote a sense of co-discovery between narrator/journalist and listener. Annie-Sage Whitehurst (Haddock) is given little plot-information before her recordings, describing herself as 'learning along with Lia', and— like Koenig— having no idea how the show would end (cited Framke 2015).

The extent to which the listener is co-opted into the post-*Serial* detective narrative recollects Jenkins' discussion of massively multiplayer online games (MMPOGs), in which '[g]ame designers acknowledge that their craft has less to do with prestructured stories than with creating the preconditions for spontaneous community activities' (2006: 164). Given the extent to which PNWS in particular facilitates and prompts online collaborative detective 'game-play', it is all the more significant that *Rabbits* explores a mysterious (eponymous) MMPOG, in which players disappear. A common fan-theory is that the podcast is developed its own MMPOG or Alternate Reality Game, which listeners may join if they decipher the show's clues correctly (blank-tracks; pnb0804; LPLoRab 2017). As post-*Serial* fictions weave together fiction and fact, the podcast's social potential and aspects of multi-platform and integrated-media listening are brought to narrative fruition.

## Mediation

Throughout *TBT*, *TANIS* and *Rabbits*, preoccupation with media form is an explicit, even thematic, concern—this is also the case with *Limetown* (conceived before *Serial* was released) and *The Message*, and remains leitmotif throughout *Archive 81*. If *Serial* gave podcasting a mainstream identity, then this is a concept of which these podcast fictions are particularly (sometimes painfully) aware. *TBT* acknowledges explicit dependence upon *Serial* for identity as one interviewee responds: 'Cool, I love podcasts—have you listened to *Serial*?' (cited in Hancock and McMurtry 2017: 6). Likewise, in *Rabbits*, interviewee Harper Billings links *Rabbits* to *Serial*, and to *TANIS* and *TBT*:

Billings:   This is for one of your radio stories?
Parker:     A podcast, yeah.
Billings:   You know Ira Glass?
Parker:     You know I don't.
Billings:   You know Nic Silver and Roman Mars?
Parker:     I don't know Roman Mars.
Billings:   Roman Coppola? ('Concernicus Jones')

In querying whether Parker knows Glass, Billings clearly connects the notion of podcasting with *Serial*/*This American Life*, before conflating PNWS with both Glass' work and with public radio network KALW's popular podcast *99% Invisible* (presented by public radio podcast visionary Roman Mars).[5] Furthermore, Billings conflates radio and podcasting--a point which Parker subtly 'corrects'. Throughout *their* shows, Reagan and Silver frequently define podcasts for their interviewees, often having to extrapolate podcasting from other media types, and usually framing podcasting as an extension of radio:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tina Stephenson: | So this is for the radio? |
| Nic Silver: | It's a podcast, actually. |
| Stephenson: | A what? |
| Silver: | It's a kind of radio on demand. |
| Stephenson: | I don't know what that is. |
| Silver: | It's basically the radio. (*TBT* 'Name That Tune') |

In *Rabbits*, Parker explains podcasting as radio's digital incarnation:

| | |
|---|---|
| Parker: | I'm producing a podcast. |
| Aimee X: | What's that? |
| Parker: | It's kind of like radio on demand. |
| Aimee X: | On the internet? |
| Parker: | Exactly. ('Concernicus Jones') |

Interestingly, both interviewees' confusion, and Silver and Parker's somewhat simplified explanations – 'it's basically the radio'; 'it's kind of like radio on demand'—respond to a key debate within radio studies—how elastic *is* the term radio? Radio, some would argue, 'perpetually sidesteps the question of definition' (Dubber 2013: 10); Hilmes has comprehensively defined it as a litany of forms (2013: 44) which include podcasting, both fictional and non-fictional.

A sense of exasperation often underlies these moments, suggesting the fragility and apparent anonymity of podcasting's identity in the face of mainstream media. However, *TANIS* suggests an alternate picture. Herein Silver begins his podcast-explanation spiel only to be quickly, almost jokingly, rebuffed for its redundancy:

| | |
|---|---|
| Silver: | It's actually a podcast. .. like radio and the Internet. |
| Geoff Van Sant: | I know what a podcast is. (*TANIS,* 'Radio, Radio') |

Clearly, listeners know that *TANIS* knows that they know what a podcast is. This reflects changing US listening habits; of those surveyed in Edison Research's 2010 *Infinite Dial* study, only 23 per cent had ever listened to a podcast (Arbitron/Edison Research, p. 40). By 2017, 40 per cent of those surveyed reported listening to a podcast that *month* (Edison Research/Triton Digital 2017: 40). Indeed, the extent to which the shows explain their media identity to an almost-implausibly clueless American and Canadian public generates frequent parody on the shows' Reddit fanforums:

gttlb:                         … TBT is easily my favorite podcast right now!
tedsmitts:                 A podcast?
Mehmeh111111:   You know, like radio for the internet.
TheEpiquin:            Oh, like radio on demand… (BigBassBone)

Such Reddit jokes, and the exasperation of characters like *TANIS*' Van Sant, highlight that podcasting may have become mainstream to a certain group, identifiable by its relative youth, tech savvy and affluence—but not to the population as a whole. This is suggested in a presentation made by Megan Lazovick of Edison Research, which ostensibly frames podcasting consumption by ethnically diverse consumers interested in a wide variety of podcast content—yet likely from a similar socio-economic background (2017).

By contrast, *Limetown's* host Lia Haddock (Annie Sage-Whitehurst) draws less attention to working in the podcast medium, but she remains a radio journalist in the mould of Sarah Koenig, Ira Glass, and many reporters working in public service broadcasting in the United States. For example, Katie Davis, whose work has appeared on NPR's *All Things Considered, This American Life* and *The Story,* suggests that a certain kind of journalistic, socially conscious reporter emerges as a 'commentator' once his or her sense of self is more deeply invested within a story—a new kind of journalistic identity which stresses the personal and eschews neutrality (2017: 99). This identity describes Haddock, whose investment in her journalistic quest is apparent from the start of *Limetown:* Haddock is a podcast commentator, to use Davis's term. Haddock works for the quasi-fictitious American Public Radio (APR). APR was a Minnesota-based group of stations from which *A Prairie Home Companion* arose in the 1970s, financed by the Radio Fund on a model based on PBS. However, the group changed its name to Public Radio International (PRI), under which it operates today. While the US public service broadcasting tapestry is threaded through with many elements (including American Public Media, NPR, PRI and Public Radio Exchange), public service radio has gained a cachet for trustworthy reporting, usually conflating all PSB radio

journalism into NPR and its credibility. As De Mair notes, 'Listeners who associate [*Serial*] with the journalistic endeavours of NPR would be likely to start with the assumption that the narrator is reliable and unbiased' (DeMair 2017: 107), despite the fact that *Serial* and its parent-show *This American Life* emerged from Chicago Public Media and is distributed by PRX, not NPR. PRX began in 2003 'as a means of encouraging and enabling independent producers to place their material on public radio stations' (Mitchell and Sterling 2010: 62). Moreover, PRX bypasses network gatekeepers in a way similar to podcasting (Tolan 2017: 202).

*Serial* thus emerged from a US PSB environment often conceptualised as monolithic (emanating from NPR) but in fact threaded through with many strands. While Lia Haddock's home network (American Public Radio) does not explicitly connect her with *Serial,* they were perceived as emanating from the same tradition (Framke 2015). Haddock's foray into podcasting with regard to her 'parent' network is somewhat unclear, though the relationship with the network is tied to Haddock's ability to present more 'daring' content in her podcast, content that evidently endangers not only her life but results in others' deaths as well. This prompts formal rebuffs from station management ('Scarecrow'), which Haddock promptly ignores—something that could never be countenanced on real-life PSB. Haddock reinforces that part of her podcast's appeal is her reporting freedom: she is a lone commentator on an offshoot project, taking a story into her own hands.

Nicky Tomalin (Annapurna Sriram), the podcast host of *The Message,* pushes this idea even further from its radio journalism/ *Serial*-prompted roots. Indeed, the diegetic title of Tomalin's podcast is not *The Message* but *CypherCast*, and it is more closely related to fan podcasts than PSB networks (fictitious or otherwise). As a quasi- 'revival' of OTR branded sponsorship by the company General Electric, *The Message*'s roots are both with historical radio drama and with *Serial* (Francisco cited in Toonkel 2015; Rogers 2015). There are many layers to Tomalin's character as 'amateur' podcaster, removed from journalistic ethics debates unlike the *Serial* and *TAL* teams (Barnwell 2014). *CypherCast,* in its storyworld, would appear to compete with PSB radio programming/ podcasting of journalistic integrity; Tomalin's integrity is called into question several times, not without justification.

Yet Tomalin's fan podcasting, even without its explicit link to legitimising journalistic frameworks like American Public Radio (Haddock), PNWS (Reagan and Silver, see below), and Chicago Public Media/PRX (Koenig), is tolerated, even encouraged. As the host of a fan podcast for Cypher Center for Communications (a fictitious cryptography consultancy), Tomalin's presence

is accepted by the resident cryptographers, who are analysing a mysterious message from space, as part of the documentation process and even as a public relations venture. Cypher Center and General Electric are both for-profit entities using, respectively, *CypherCast* and *The Message* as extensions of their brand; this is a one-upmanship from commercial sponsorship of the OTR era. Tomalin's reporting prowess is an illustration, less of her journalistic integrity, her sterling ability to discover and present stories, than being at the right place in the right time, and yet the fact that she is a podcaster and very much on trend legitimises her presence within a corporate environment, where podcasts are an expected paratext (Geiger Smith 2017).

To conclude this section, the podcasts of the fictitious PNWS network (*TBT, TANIS*) return to a more PSB-based notion of the journalist host. The presentation of PNWS as an NPR (or PRI, or Chicago Public Media)-like network, with real offices and real staff, is an important aspect of these podcasts. The real-life *This American Life* is famously hosted and produced by Ira Glass, who mentored Koenig (a former *TAL* staffer) through *Serial*'s first season. Indeed, during its creation, *Serial* identified itself through its association with *TAL*, as Koenig explains:

> For a lot of the interviews, I was just saying, 'I work for a public radio show called *This American Life*,' because *Serial* didn't exist yet and frankly, until a few weeks before we existed, I wasn't sure it was going to exist! ... And I figured the harder thing to tell people is, 'Look, you might be on the national radio.' I wanted people to be prepared for that versus explaining 'There's this podcast, it [sic] on the internet … '. (Cited in Raptopoulos 2014)

*Serial* maintains a pervasive sense of a parent/child relationship between the show's radio roots, and its podcast offspring. Although *Serial* sought throughout to establish its unique, novel podcast identity, it was bound inextricably to the media form which financially and creatively enabled it, both for economic viability and public recognition. *Serial*'s 'debt' to WBEZ Chicago and *This American Life* was acknowledged at each episode's start, and this is aped with *TBT*'s fictitious networks and shows. The PNWS network symbolises WBEZ and PRI, recollecting the institutional-like gravitas engendered by *TAL/Serial*'s parent companies. Tellingly, interviewees in *TBT* and *TANIS* often express enjoyment/recognition of (fictive) PNWS-produced shows. While this extended invention may provide verisimilitude, or character background, it also[6] serves, as in *Serial*, not to undermine the podcast's unique identity, but rather to highlight it as emergent from, but distinct to, 'traditional' radio media.

The relationship between radio and podcast form develops through *TBT*'s real-life mirroring of *Serial*'s in-house podcast production. Like *Serial*'s off-shoot podcast *S Town*, *TBT* produces *TANIS*, and *Rabbits*. This generation of brand identity and network distribution is a key aspect of podcast history, and the method is highlighted and formalised as Reagan names it: '[w]e launched as a podcast. Well, a podcast network, actually' ('Their Satanic Monastery's Request'). In self-identifying not simply as a podcast, but as 'a podcast network', *TBT* gives credence to podcasting's developing media identity. The podcast is no-longer a side project of radio, but a self-regulating and generating media form in its own right. Both 'in-universe' and out, *TBT* and *TANIS* example well *Serial*'s provision of a blueprint by which podcast fiction may eschew radio drama's shadow, and begin to develop a unique audio narrative-form constructed around, and developmental of, its own media identity.

## Conclusion

In identifying and investigating *Serial*'s development in podcast fiction, we assert podcasting's claim to a distinct, and rapidly evolving, form of audio-fiction storytelling. The post-*Serial*, we posit, is not just a genre of spin off copycat fictions, but rather an exploratory, and highly fruitful, creative cycle which develops a new form of audio fiction based consciously within the podcast media form. Post-*Serial* represents a crucial evolutionary step in audio fiction. The properties of podcast media are not simply used to deliver narrative, but also to shape and inform the storytelling mode itself. Through acts of repetition and appropriation of *Serial*'s structure and acoustic style, we contend post-*Serial* fictions have developed a recognisable, unique, podcast form. Through assertion of podcast media's independent, immediate, and on-demand properties, new understandings of podcasting's unique properties of narrative pace, tension and immersion emerge. Furthermore, detailed and prolonged audio-narrative forms which traditional radio-drama seldom allowed also surface. In emulation and extension of *Serial*'s multi-sensory and multi-platformed design, we assert audio-drama for the convergence era has resulted in post-*Serial* fiction. Finally, in their self-reflexive reference and discussion of form, post-*Serial* fictions assert themselves openly to *be* podcast fiction. More than mere extensions of *Serial*'s success then, the post-*Serial* represents the next movement in audio-fiction form.

# Notes

1. See Hancock and McMurtry (2017) for a more detailed discussion of fiction podcasting's genealogy.
2. Indeed, it is worth noting that the show's Peabody was awarded on the grounds of its 'innovations of form and its compelling, drilling, account of how guilt, truth and reality are decided' (Peabody Awards 2014).
3. This companionability of the podcast is, for Ulvestam, a key component to its future development: 'We see a future where you can start listening to a podcast on your walk to work, get into your car and have it immediately start playing from where you left off and get home and have your Amazon Echo continue. It'll learn with you and continuously play content that it knows will interest you, in different formats. That's how we'll make podcasts as easy to listen to as radio, and that's why we'll continue to grow.'
4. According to Snyder, the difference in storytelling (and indeed, a different way of relating to Koenig as a character, is due to the fact that 'The structure of the story didn't necessitate it [in series 2], so Sarah is not as much of a character' (cited in Biewen et al. 2017: 82).
5. Similarly, in *Archive 81,* Dan's new boss compares the audio-archive to both NPR, and perhaps *This American Life* more specifically, stating, 'You like NPR, right? They're like these little radio-documentaries, the uplifting ones' ('A Body in a New Place').
6. This technique is not new per se; take, for example, *The Columbia Workshop's War of the Worlds* (1938) whose creation of verisimilitude was second-to-none. The journalist Carl Phillips, played by Frank Readick, represented the CBS network's respected news staff, even if never formally identified as a CBS correspondent. Indeed, CBS's reputation as a respected chronicler of news was only reinforced during World War II and in particular, with the techniques of Edward R. Murrow. It seems only CBS could believably offer a programme where its news team went back in time to cover important events in history, play-by-play, minute-by-minute, sometimes not even surviving as in the Pompeii episode of *You Are There* (1947–50). Now, the new kind of radio journalist voice, transposed to podcasting, is signified by Koenig and her imitators.

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