Chekhov makes a podcast: lessons from literature for podcasters

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Abstract

Podcasting has its antecedents in that most ancient form of communication, storytelling. Still, it is the most contemporary of audio forms, taking advantage of digital tools and the vast and diverse distribution offered by the internet. Like radio before it, podcasting is intrinsically interdisciplinary in both form and content. The influence of literature was imprinted by the seminal Serial podcast drawing a direct line from a format popularised by Charles Dickens in the 1830s — the connection is evident in the name. This article explores the influence and lessons of another literary great, the Russian writer Chekhov, on podcasting. It draws on my experience as both a practitioner-producer of podcasts and a teacher of the form, illustrating my argument with contemporary relevant examples. Not only has Chekhov's influence been strong through the lineage of radio features and drama, but through his six principles for writing — including brevity, audacity and truthful descriptions — he offers a way forward through the contradictions of objectivity and compassion in contemporary journalism.

Keywords

Recommended Citation

More than 160 years after his birth, Anton Chekhov's influence extends through time – to exert an outsized influence on the podcast – a thoroughly contemporary and interdisciplinary digital medium. This might seem like a big claim, but stay with me. A playful article in *Lit Hub*, 10 pictures of young Chekhov, ranked by hotness, highlights the author's enduring modernity – presenting Chekhov as the kind of man who would likely start a podcast. His short stories are widely lauded, his plays are internationally and regularly interpreted – his work has enduring relevance and speaks to modern audiences. In his time, it is important to remember, Chekhov was a known innovator, someone who would be described in today's parlance as a disruptor.

As a young radio feature maker, I found 'Chekhov's Gun' an invaluable principle when considering what details to include. If you've never picked it up, Chekhov's gun is a literary metaphor, a narrative device, and a dramatic principle. His advice:

> If in the first act, you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired.

Now, as a teacher of audio production and writing, I find it elegantly communicates that every element in a story should serve a purpose.

While this principle offers essential guidance for any storyteller concerned with crafting tight, purposeful narratives, many of Chekhov's ideas, transmitted through text, performance, broadcast, and radio, offer inspiration and valuable insights for podcasting. What's remarkable is that within his vast legacy Chekhov managed to synthesise the most applicable lessons for this most modern of audio forms, in a letter to his brother, in 1886. Chekhov shared his six key principles of story writing, and although they are couched in the language of the time, each of these has remarkable relevance for contemporary podcasting:

1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature
2. Total objectivity
3. Truthful descriptions of persons and objects
4. Extreme brevity
5. Audacity and originality: flee the stereotype
6. Compassion

Chekhov's six principles can be applied as guard-rails for producer-practitioners, guides for students learning the art of podcasting, and parameters for those looking to critique the podcasts they listen to.

1. Absence of lengthy verbiage of a political-social-economic nature

Notably, many news and current affairs podcasts keep their episodes concise. For example, consider these Australian shows which follow a common international formula): Schwartz Media's excellent *7 am*, recognises the influence of film (Schwartz Media, n.d.) and embraces narrative, while maintaining a 30-minute format; *ABC News Daily* delivers news in 15 minutes, and the feminist network Mamamia's *The Quicky* often produces news pods of under three minutes' duration.

2. Total objectivity

While objectivity remains a practical and desired aim in media (Scire, 2024), transparency about one's perspectives and experiences is increasingly valued. Sarah Koenig's narration in the seminal podcast *Serial* exemplified this shift, as she grappled with her own fluid position in the story. By openly questioning who and what she believed, and why it mattered, Koenig demonstrated that true objectivity might best be achieved through an acknowledgment of subjectivity and the resulting humanisation of narrative (Dowling and Miller, 2019; Lindgren, 2021).

Just as *Serial* sparked the true crime turn in audio, Koenig's narrative style has left an indelible mark on podcast hosting across genres. This aligns with our evolving understanding of objectivity in media, where transparency and self-reflection are seen as crucial elements of credible reporting – a trope especially embedded in and expected of podcasting (Robertson 2014).

While the tensions between objectivity and truth remain an important and unsettled debate, podcasts further complicate issues of trust and credibility by bypassing traditional gatekeepers and fostering parasocial relationships between familiar hosts and loyal listeners (Schlütz & Hedder, 2021). This is especially so as politicians are becoming more comfortable with podcasts, and world leaders are gravitating towards the podcast interviewee's chair. US President Barack Obama's visit to Marc Maron's garage and podcast was remarkable in 2015 (Larson, 2015) while President Trump's courting of

influential podcasts aimed at young men went largely under-the-radar until the post-election reckoning in 2024 (Redfern 2024). In a first for the Indian PM, Narendra Modi recently appeared on entrepreneur Nikhil Kamath's podcast, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the popular US _Lex Fridman Podcast_. There is more research to be done on the relationship between the trust given to a host and the expectation of truth – from them and the guests they present – which brings us to:

3. Truthful descriptions of persons and objects

Traditional or legacy media is not immune to the potential contradictions between good storytelling, journalism, and truth. Despite a generally impeccable record, _This American Life,_ the powerhouse that spawned the first 'blockbuster' podcast _Serial_, once broadcast fraudulent claims about Apple's factories in China (Glass, 2012). Similarly, the _New York Times_ had to issue a clarification and hand back their coveted Peabody award after their podcast _Caliphate_ was found to have been built around the stories of a fabulist (Whalan, 2020).

There is something to consider, then, in Chekhov, who worked in fiction but was known for his attention to psychological realism, urging us to uphold truth. While this principle should be standard in the media, it becomes critical in the realm of podcasting, where the line between fact and fiction can be easily blurred, and recent research suggests that podcasts garner higher levels of trust than other mediums (Voxtopia, 2024).

In Chekhov's attention to description, there is another valuable lesson for audio, where details paint vivid images in the listener's mind. In podcasting, a host's account of a 'character' such as a real person interviewed in, say, an investigative journalism podcast, might be all the listener has to form a picture and, ideally, a connection. Chekhov usefully advised:

> One must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture.

For example, who do you see when Andrew O'Hagan describes a former British naval officer at the heart of the podcast, _The Belgrano Diary?:_ "He's skinny, covered in tattoos and looked like he'd been on a gap year for life'.

Truth and care in representation bear an outsized importance, with some details — such as a gun laid on a table — standing out. In podcasting, as in Chekhov's writing, these exceptional details can serve as powerful anchors for

the narrative, guiding the listener's attention and imagination throughout the story. In my own memory, more than 20 years after first hearing legendary feature maker Kari Hesthamar's <u>audio documentaries</u> (Third Coast International Audio Festival, n.d.), I am still struck by her narrated descriptions – also coincidentally nautical – of an old Norwegian sailor's 'blue gaze'. For me, two words conjured the image of a man that distinguished and differentiated him throughout the subsequent narrative.

4. Extreme brevity

While podcasting offers freedom from the strict time constraints of radio, an economy of words remains crucial. Podcasting guru Roman Mars, producer and host of *99% Invisible* advocates efficient editing, stating:

> If you have 100,000 listeners and you edit out one useless minute you are saving 100,000 wasted minutes in the world. You are practically a hero.

Brevity should, of course, be balanced with the need for pacing, rhythm, and individuality, however not all of these principles apply to every podcast. There are, you've no doubt noticed, extremely popular podcasts of three-hour durations containing much 'lengthy verbiage'; the chart-topping *Joe Rogan Experience* famously defies 'the Chekov rule' of brevity. Such podcasts largely eschew standard audio pre-production such as research, pre-interviews and written scripts (Evans, 2022) and as such are more aligned with unstructured conversation than with the Chekhovian plays and short stories that influence narrative and pre-produced podcasts.

5. Audacity and originality: flee the stereotype

In an era of artificial intelligence and its endlessly obscured plagiarism, audacity and originality are more valuable than ever. There is little as exciting as the sound of a convention being challenged. George Mpanga's glorious *Have You Heard George's Podcast?* from the UK is a mix of fact, fiction, poetry and music with a "fresh take on inner city life" (BBC, n.d.). It addresses Chekhov's concerns, challenging podcasting conventions to create compelling award-winning and critically acclaimed audio. The idiosyncratic *Everything is Alive* podcast, where host Ian Chillag interviews a different inanimate object in each episode is both original and audacious (and often unexpectedly moving). Importantly, it's hard to imagine this combination of improvisation, comedy and

interview working as well in any other form. Podcasting, through a combination of low production costs and efficiency of production, fosters unparalleled creative experimentation.

6. Compassion

Leading podcast scholar and producer Siobhan McHugh points out that the 'ability to provoke empathy is a cornerstone of audio' (2017) due to the intimate nature of headphone listening and the affective power of voice. Chekhov called for empathy's practical expression – compassion. Compassion, building on empathy, demands action, aligning with storytelling that inspires a response or offers solutions. The unconventional _Heavyweight_ podcast demonstrates this, as its deadpan host, Jonathan Goldstein, unashamedly intervenes in stories which help interviewees deal with regret. His methods challenge traditional notions of objectivity while managing a personal and humorous take on solutions journalism. Despite its unassailed position in the voyeuristic true-crime genre, _Serial_ was similarly inspired by compassion and the idea that a storyteller can offer hope. Chekhov's compassion is both a challenge to a desire for objectivity and a path for those concerned with the future of podcasting.

In his lifetime, Chekhov's innovations were recognised by his contemporaries. Leo Tolstoy saw the young Chekhov as an 'incomparable artist', and Vladimir Nabokov later praised his short story The Lady with the Little Dog for breaking traditional rules and creating, 'one of the greatest stories ever written.' Although Chekhov's influence in literature is undeniable, his legacy also holds value for both students and seasoned podcast producers: By engaging with content honestly and authentically, while not being afraid to test boundaries, podcasters can extend and strengthen the form.

Of most relevance to contemporary podcasters, Chekhov's enduring commitment to truth-telling – his refusal to moralize or prescribe solutions while documenting existing social conditions – offers crucial guidance for an era of polarised media. He challenges podcasters to move beyond false objectivity and reactive advocacy, suggesting instead that we observe and convey the human experience in all its complexity, even when that complexity includes our own doubts and contradictions as storytellers. While we cannot hear the podcast that Chekhov might have produced, his approach to bearing witness – deeply engaged yet refusing simplistic conclusions – provides a model for

podcasters navigating today's fractured public sphere. His writerly voice continues to resonate, offering timeless guidance for this most modern of media forms.

If photographs from back in the day reveal that Chekhov looked like exactly the sort of person who would start a podcast, if he applied his own principles, it would have been a cut above the rest.

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