

RadioDoc Review

## Outside Ears: What Media Scholars Offer Podcasters

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### Abstract

From a distance, it might seem as though academics and podcasters have little to offer one another, save when one side hopes to promote a book, or the other side wants to interview an “expert.” The two occupations operate under very different institutional frameworks, time constraints, and professional codes. But after working with academics and writers as a podcast story editor — and reading new media scholarship about podcasting itself — Julia Barton argues that both podcasters and academics need one another. When their collaborations and alliances go well, they create not only new avenues for knowledge production, but crucial perspectives that no one else can provide.

### Keywords

podcasting, scholarship, radio, academia, history

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In my work as executive editor at Pushkin Industries, and on my own as an editorial consultant, I've had the good fortune of helping academics create their own podcasts and I've edited other interview shows and narrative series that rely heavily on the voices of scholars. Because the demands of podcasting and academia are so different, I've often found myself a cultural diplomat between 'team sound' – the producers, and 'team text' – the scholars, whether they are hosts, guests or sources.

It's helpful to understand the extent to which academics and podcasters – especially those making commercially-supported podcasts – operate under very different institutional frameworks, time constraints, and professional codes (although the definition of 'podcaster' is by now so broad that it renders even the notion of a 'professional code' laughable.) But these two groups, however you define them, actually need one another – and when collaborations and alliances go well, they create not only new avenues for knowledge production, but crucial perspectives that no one else can provide.

One way I've found to help bridge the conceptual divides between academia and my profession is to read more scholarship about my field. Fortunately, academic presses are publishing a bevy of new works that offer insights both to media scholars and podcasters. In return, I have been trying to bolster producer interest in these academic works, which ironically face a real challenge finding the readers who would most benefit from their insights.

Foremost among these recent works are *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, edited by Michele Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomly (2024); Siobhan McHugh's *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (2022); and all the books in Bloomsbury's ongoing Podcast Studies series.

As part of that series, Bloomsbury published *Empathy Machines: This American Life, Podcasting, and the Public Radio Structure of Feeling*. The author, Jason Loviglio, is a professor of media and communication studies at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. I met him at a conference prior to his book's publication, and I asked him if I could feature it in a newsletter I write called [Continuous Wave](#). He agreed, and the chapter excerpt we published (see Barton & Loviglio 2006) was one of the more popular I've posted.

*Continuous Wave* emerged from a Nieman Fellowship I did at Harvard University. It has become both a personal media archaeology project to understand my own profession through the lens of history, and an attempt to bridge some of the divide between media scholarship and my professional life. To that end, I've read and absorbed hundreds of books and articles by media scholars, most of them focused on the technologies, regulation, personalities and programmings of radio's pre-television era, the so-called 'Golden Age.'

I never would have pursued this newsletter project had I thought my peers already knew what I was discovering in the library stacks. But I asked many of them, and no, they had no idea how much the rise and (partial) fall of commercial podcasting in the US has followed the broad outlines of radio's early trajectory.

Yet why should they know such a thing? We in American radio and podcasting have been too busy making our own work to read about the history of our medium – which we flatter ourselves to think we've invented anew. The long perspective is the province of academics, and very dedicated ones at that, given the lower prestige traditionally offered to scholars of the audio arts as compared with cinema or even television studies.

It's been gratifying and fascinating to bring a historical perspective to an audience of practitioners (and listeners). But one thing I don't do is contemporary criticism. I addressed the reasons why somewhat obliquely in my introduction to Jason Loviglio's chapter excerpt:

I would call a large percentage of audio producers congenitally modest — if not in private, at least in public. Producers are not behind the mic; they are behind the people who are behind the mic, which makes production work doubly unseen and often overlooked. It takes a certain type of person to be OK with that.

In addition, it's not always a great idea to be outspoken about the industry you work inside (which makes this project...uh, let's not think about that). Anyway, this is all to explain why I think academics play such an important role in audio culture.

What I mean here is that there isn't a strong ecosystem to promote genuine independent criticism of podcasts, because many the people best equipped to understand the nuances of the audio industry are also beholden to that industry for their livelihoods. Scholars do not face those same pressures – but as I note below, I do understand why podcasters unused to academic scrutiny might find its critiques challenging to absorb.

I found Loviglio's book a timely and interesting one to bring to the small audience of my newsletter, many of whom came from the US public radio tradition into podcast production. Loviglio explores the origins of overarching structures that, he argues, inform many popular forms of narrative podcasting today. In his book, he traces the prioritization of listener emotion in public media, starting with the rise of audience research in the 1980s and 1990s, the experiments of a proto-podcast network called alt.NPR in the 2000s, and the creation of popular shows such as the NPR podcast *Invisibilia* (which explored human psychology) and *Planet Money* (a narrative show featuring economic-themed stories). But the main focus of *Empathy Machines* is on *This American Life*, the juggernaut narrative programme that recently observed its 30th anniversary.

In the chapter I featured in my newsletter, Loviglio considers the frequent leitmotifs of strangers and magic at TAL, and he is fascinated by similarities between the radio show and the magic show: 'The standard unit of measure for feelings on the show is the moment. They are produced in and by stories in the moment of telling,' Loviglio writes. 'In that way, the magic trick is an apt metaphor, as they are produced, serially, in moments, typically before a room full of strangers' (110). This prompts Loviglio to think about the

at-times ruthless formula that produces stories on a theme. The strangers theme is a bit of a procrustean bed, now stretching this story to fit the criteria, now lopping off a bit of that story that doesn't quite fit. This stretching and trimming can be likened to sleight-of-hand, making things appear not quite as they are, or to editing (i.e., the cutting and splicing necessary to produce a desired effect).

I found Loviglio's explorations of TAL's wider context and themes fascinating, but here I feel obligated to note the wider response on podcasts and radio shows to the release of his book thus far: Utter silence. Following the release of *Empathy Machines*, I have not found evidence that Loviglio was invited to speak about his book on any podcasts other than one hosted by an academic colleague of his, Sunil Dasgupta (see *I Hate Politics Podcast*, 'Harvesting Empathy' Feb. 27, 2026).

We might attribute this to the lacklustre publicity efforts that accompany most academic book releases. But, at least anecdotally, I have other theories. In pursuing my own writing about contemporary production issues radio and podcasting for publications such as *Nieman Storyboard*, I've encountered two types of resistance from my colleagues in talking about their own work the way a scholar might. One is a fear of being seen as 'navel-gazey' to audiences. Another form of reluctance speaks to the magic-show metaphor Loviglio writes about his book. Like magicians who closely guard the secrets of their techniques, many producers I've spoken with express anxiety that listeners will feel betrayed if they knew how human voices are altered, edited, listened to and above all spoken about in the production process (i.e., the editorial judgments inherent in describing someone as a 'slow talker' or 'boring'; or exposing the sound of interim stages of narrative production such as the 'scratch mix' or 'dry mix,' which are the audio equivalents of rough drafts.)

While we want the outside world to value our work, as producers we've also come to rely on the affordances that invisibility offers nonfiction audio production as a short-cut to notions that our work represents 'authentic' access to reality. Apart from shows like *On the Media* from WNYC Studios, few podcasts draw attention to their own editorial processes on a regular basis. But this insecurity about the artifice of our own work ultimately leads, as producer and audio historian Sarah Montague lamented in 2017 ('Towards a Poetics of Audio'), to a field in which 'we are missing two important components of a vital culture: a critical language, and with it, a critical practice.'

I have never worked on *This American Life* or other programmes made by the show's many alumni, so I cannot speak to internal reactions – if any – to Loviglio's book. But I have had the experience of feeling exposed and somehow implicated by the critical eye of scholarship. This happened while I was reading Northwestern professor Neil Verma's 2024 excellent study *Narrative Podcasting in an Age of Obsession*.

In his first chapter, Verma considers the conceit of obsession as a rhetorical tool that emerged in many podcasts following the success of *Serial* in 2014. As he cites many examples, from true crime to whimsy, Verma turns briefly to a pair of episodes in season three of Malcolm Gladwell's *Revisionist History*. Those episodes centered on a story Gladwell regretted pursuing when he was a young reporter at the Washington Post. Verma describes Gladwell's overall vibe in these episodes as one of 'high dudgeon':

In the first episode, he uses the term 'obsession' each time he indicts his own former practice, his voice trembling in bitterness. In these examples, obsession is presented as an undisguised fissure in the edifice of reliability, the concomitant curse of a journalist's appetite for knowledge. In this way, the podcast hosts a well-worn melodrama of professional journalistic ethics and the temptation toward its subversion. (54)

I edited these episodes (produced at Panoply Media) back in 2018 and was present for all the host tracking sessions. After reading Verma's critique, I wondered: did we somehow encourage too much 'well-worn melodrama' in our production edits? Was I the one who insisted on repeating the word 'obsession'? (I honestly can't remember but went back and checked the transcript – variants of the word only appear three times in one episode, which is a fair amount but perhaps not overdoing things.)

My initial, self-critical response to Verma's citation was understandable, but it entirely missed the point. A scholarly work is not a review; it is something much greater, and something I appreciated much more by the time I completed Verma's book and felt the novel sensation of learning many things about my profession I'd never considered. As just one example, Verma offers a trenchant theory as to why many narrative podcasters all seemed to reach for the trope of obsession at the same time. It isn't that we were trying to copy the commercial success of *Serial*. Instead, Verma hears how we were responding to the sudden absence of the constraints that had shaped our previous work in radio:

Decades ago, stories were shorter, they had to fit into predefined time slots, and their production time's workflow had to obey the time schedule of a live feed from a radio station, according to a long-standing and tyrannical apportionment system of time, one that was never designed to serve storytellers or their public but instead to accommodate federal regulations and the requirements of commercialism.

Podcasting, by contrast, seemed to have no externally imposed map delimiting length, segmentation, release schedule, or anything else when it came to the overall rhythms of production and expression.

But that didn't mean many podcasts were truly 'free-form.' On the contrary, it was in many cases obsession itself that took on these very mapping functions (74).

Where I, as a story editor, worry about questions of writing for the ear or host delivery, Neil Verma hears the construction of a map, one that we producers needed to create for ourselves in an era of media disruption.

This is the kind of insight only a scholar can offer: With a deep knowledge of broadcast history and radio programming going back more than a century, Verma can apply his ears and curiosity to new forms of audio storytelling and make an argument about lineage. And this is only one of many thought-provoking arguments in his book.

Scholars of podcasting and its practitioners operate in different worlds in many ways. Certainly scholars use much bigger words at times. But when we hear one another clearly, in my experience, new ways of mapping knowledge and mutual understanding can emerge – if we are wise enough to listen for it.

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