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EDITORIAL: Subjectivity and Objectivity in Storytelling Podcasts

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Abstract

In this issue, storytelling podcasts and audio works from the US, UK, Australia and Canada receive in-depth critiques from expert reviewers in Latin America, Australia and the UK. The subjectivity-objectivity spectrum is one focus, along with ethics and aesthetics.

Keywords

subjectivity, objectivity, podcasts, podcast reviews

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EDITORIAL:

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Storytelling Podcasts

When we listen via earpods and headphones, as survey data reveals many of us do, podcasts become an innately personalised format, where we tend to bond with the host speaking into our ears. This has led some podcast newcomers to develop a subjective writing style they would never use in other media formats, such as print. Thus, veteran Australian print journalist Richard Baker, host of the award-winning podcast *Wrong Skin*,¹ told me:

For the listener, you are a main character whether you think you are or not. They want to know what you think or feel about crucial elements of the story. I think if you as a host are unable to show that you also are affected by the real life drama then you risk alienating your audience and appearing inhuman.

This concept, which I explored in some detail in a recent [piece](#) for Harvard's Nieman StoryBoard site, emerged as a common theme in the storytelling podcasts reviewed in this issue of *RadioDoc Review*, but as the reviews reveal, the producers adopt a broad and fascinating range of approaches.

No Feeling is Final by Honor Eastly sits squarely at one end of the spectrum. 'Taking place almost entirely within her mind, *No Feeling is Final* is a six-part memoir show about Honor's life experiences struggling with mental health and what one mental health professional diagnoses as "too many feelings –

¹ Disclaimer: I was Consulting Producer on *Wrong Skin*.

about four times as many as the average person,”” notes reviewer, producer and PhD candidate Britta Jorgensen. Listening through headphones gives listeners a sense ‘of what it feels like to be stuck inside both Honor’s head and the Australian mental health system’.

Eastly deals with her own take on her own trauma, including her suicide ideation: her podcast is entirely based on her subjective experiences. Elsewhere on the spectrum, *Consent: Walk the Walk*, is an artful ‘landscape journalism’ recreation of a sexual encounter between a young woman and a police officer and the sexual assault trial it triggered, that sets out ‘to emotionally engage the listener while signalling that the content is based on factual materials’, writes reviewer and geo-locative audio specialist Jeanti St Clair. ‘This includes applying normative ethical ideals of truthfulness and accuracy, fairness and objectivity, and to remaining fact-based, and not editorialising on the trial.’ But co-producer Chris Brookes, an acclaimed Canadian audio maker for four decades, does not take objectivity to mean lacking in emotional impact – he is after the opposite effect: ‘I want people to be involved with the material, to be right there when the assault is happening and to be horrified by it.’ St Clair’s analysis conveys in great depth the swirling ethical, aesthetic and editorial complexities behind how he and co-producer Emily Deming address this.

The American Public Media investigative podcast *In the Dark* is ‘dedicated to producing high quality reporting on issues that are often shrouded from public view’. Series 2, critiqued by award-winning Australian investigative journalist Sharon

Davis, examines the case of Curtis Flowers, a black man who has been tried and convicted six times for the same crime. Davis notes that host Madeleine Baran sets clear boundaries, focussing on deep research and data-driven evidence to reveal miscarriages of justice, but never crossing the line to becoming an advocate for Flowers. Impressively, Davis writes, the podcast takes us ‘beyond a vicarious fascination with true crime stories, into a forensic and essential look at deep-rooted biases, corruption and systemic failures that prevent justice from being served.’

From the UK, the podcast *Tara and George* traverses not crime but poverty, homelessness and health, via a two-year portrayal of a homeless couple living on the streets of London. Their story is captured by Scottish journalist Audrey Gillan, who ‘brings a quality of frank disclosure and decency. In her own nuggety way, she neither judges Tara and George nor brooks any crap’, writes reviewer and award-winning producer Hamish Sewell. She avoids the temptation of putting story impact before the lives of the people she represents and negotiates the ‘tricky ground’ of her obvious affection for Tara and George with the implicit power imbalance: ‘Gillan neither portrays Tara and George as archetypes nor as helpless and needy. She knows she is the one working for the BBC, delivering ‘their’ story to us in its very skin and bones. She knows she holds the cards here.’

The Habitat, a podcast from Gimlet Media in the US, offers an usual blend of subjective experiences mediated by external production strategies into a compelling narrative. It is based on ‘fly-on-the-wall’ accounts of how six would-be

astronauts cope with being holed up for a year in a 'fake planet' on Hawai'i that simulates life on Mars. The six inmates record their own experiences, which are selectively edited and narrated by host Lynn Levy. Reviewer Charlotte De Beauvoir, audio producer and scholar, argues that here, the *seriality* of the podcast form crucially enables the producers to maintain narrative tension and build character to a degree that a one-off documentary format would not permit. Craft also plays a key role in the subjectivity /objectivity framing, subliminally affecting listeners' perceptions of the six imitation astronauts. 'What kept me listening episode through episode is the pleasure I knew I would feel discovering the next creative invention the producers would pull out of their hat,' writes De Beauvoir, who is also the latest addition to *RadioDoc Review's* Editorial Board.

The final podcast reviewed takes us full circle to the highly subjective personal voice, but in a remarkable, genre-bending way. *Have You Heard George's Podcast* is hosted by twenty-something Nigerian-British poet and Cambridge graduate, George Mpanga. 'Stylistically, the eight-part series is a mash-up: poetry, sketches, interviews, archive, music, performance and sometimes off-mike chat with his producer. It's often difficult to know what's real and what isn't', writes reviewer Hugh Levinson, who is head of current affairs at BBC Radio. The podcast has won awards in both fiction and factual categories, an indication of its 'wildly inventive' nature. George and his producer 'have demonstrated again that the only rule of creativity is ... that there are no rules,' observes Levinson.

Thankfully, creativity is abundantly evident in works reviewed this issue, which come from the US, UK, Australia and Canada. In an increasingly manipulated media world, where dis/misinformation is rife, the authenticity and honesty inherent in the exemplary podcasts we analyse is more important than ever. The significant contribution the best podcasts can make to journalism will undoubtedly be further recognised next year with the recent [introduction](#) of a specific ‘audio reporting’ category to the prestigious Pulitzer Prizes. It’s an excellent note on which to end 2019.

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NOTE:

All reviews for this issue available at *RadioDoc Review*’s open access site, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/>.