

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

"Telling 'The biggest story in the world' – podcasts as alternative storytelling practice in *The Guardian's* environmental campaign"

Melanie Ashe, *Concordia University*

[Note from the author:

In preparation for discussion on the day, I suggest listening to at least the opening episode of The Guardian's 'The Biggest Story in the World']

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2015/mar/16/the-biggest-story-in-the-world>

This project understands the podcast as one example of a storytelling device among other composite 'verticals' or strategies in contemporary journalism. Today I will track *The Guardian's* 'The Biggest Story in The World', a twelve part podcast series produced in 2015 that followed the publication's campaign to divest from fossil fuels such as coal and gas, in addition to pressuring some of the world's richest charities to do so the same. This presentation will briefly outline the complex navigations between this podcast, activism, and the broader media industry and ultimately, will ask the question: 'In an industry – such as online journalism - already saturated with various media forms, what role does the podcast serve?'

The following is not a revelation: many journalistic and public broadcast organisations have gone the way of the podcast in recent times. Broadly speaking, any organisation with a public interface of any kind - whether it be a film festival, museum, university – has embraced digital media cultures and started outputting podcasts alongside other media and social media forms. Focusing on *The Guardian* as an institution, their co-option of the podcast does not come as a surprise. They are a thoroughly established publication, known for their generous open-access online content, and in recent years have expanded their presence to online sites devoted to Australian and US news. More recently they have traversed beyond the traditional forms of written journalism, producing a slew of documentary films made for television, and now have their very own online dating website, 'Soulmates', transforming the newspaper's 'classifies' into their logical digital conclusion. They also currently produce dozens of podcasts every month, on topics such as film, technology and politics. As such, more than simply a print media organisation, they must be considered as media or multimedia production company.

In the case of 'The Biggest Story in The World', *The Guardian* utilised the podcast to tackle what is perhaps the most urgent all-encompassing global story – *climate change*. Topics such as climate change have been notoriously difficult to cover in the media, due to issues surrounding the reporting of major impending risk factors rather than the momentum of solid hard facts - something of which journalism usually thrives. However, 'biggest story in the world' attempts to tackles these issues by serving as an accompaniment to the paper's dominant environmental activist article series, which were published concurrently to the

podcast. This series of written articles, dubbed *The Guardian's* 'Keep it In the Ground' campaign, pushes divestment, a movement sweeping the globe that aims to put pressure on major institutions and corporations to divest from fossil fuels and instead look into renewable energy futures.

In an effort to counter the difficulties of this kind of reporting, the self-referential podcast aims to narrativize and humanize the process of constructing the campaign. Apparently edited from hundreds of hours of audio, collected by various microphones set up around *The Guardian's* office, the podcast serialises and dramatizes the team's efforts to make the campaign go public. This access to the 'fly on the wall' behind the scenes realities of an office (providing characters and motivations) behind the campaign enables a certain kind of intimacy that allows the audience to feel closer to the material – an experience that readers don't experience when just reading the article. In addition, the podcast sets up an overarching narrative revolving around Alan Rusbridger, the *The Guardian's* editor at the time, who is about to retire but wants to do something meaningful as his final project. Placing this renowned character at the centre of the story transforms the global narrative of climate change into something smaller, focusing on Alan and his team. I quote "If Alan and his team do this right, this could change the world. But if they don't, it could bring down the editor and the paper, hitting its reputation and even its finances." Here, rather than staging the campaign online through general environmental activist discourse, the podcast provides a multidimensional access points that add a humanistic bent to an otherwise overwhelming problem.

While the entire campaign is an example of advocacy journalism – *The Guardian* foraying (somewhat controversially) into activism - the podcast attempts to be distinct from the advocacy sentiment by claiming to be a fly-on-the-wall, objective documentation of *The Guardian's* process. As such, the podcast strategically offers an informal entrance point into a highly structured and formal journalistic campaign. Ultimately, in a context that is already laden with stories, the podcast provides an alternative humanistic angle, and perhaps opens up the possibility for potentially transgressive styles of storytelling that can traverse where other journalistic enquiry cannot.