

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

“Structures of Transformative Intimacy in Podcasting”

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During a recent episode of the podcast, *The Read*, a listener emailed the hosts to say that she had met her future husband over a shared love of their show. She wrote, “Had it not been for me listening to you all I probably wouldn’t be where I am today.”¹ These moments of gratitude and intimacy are not rare for *The Read*, nor are they for other podcasts. In the following response I survey patterns of intimate exchange between the podcasts, podcasters, and their listeners. My point in doing so is to open up a discussion of how scholars can and should develop medium specific methodologies for podcasting. Thus, with N. Katherine Hayles utilization of the concept of ‘medium specificity’ in mind, I identify four structures innate to the host-led podcast and begin to flesh out how these might produce such an account of intimacy.² While there are numerous examples of such shows, In the case of this study I am thinking of *WTF with Marc Maron*, *Mental Illness Happy Hour*, *Guys We F@#ked*, and *The Read*.

1. Who can be a host?

It isn’t necessary to be well known to produce a podcast. As a result, we’ve witnessed a number of hosts who were, or would have been edged out of other platforms, go on to be incredibly successful at podcasting. Marc Maron might be the most recognizable example of this: a comic who, for decades could not achieve success with his cerebral routines, *WTF* not only allowed an entirely different audience to access Maron, it revived his standup career and led to a television show. Without certain pressures, the podcast host not only focuses on their passions, they often present a self that feels unmasked.

2. Who is important?

Podcast hosts have a certain measure of freedom to pace their show as they see fit. This means that hosts often choose to read and react to their listener’s emails ‘on air’ and in some instances they even return back to the same listener over a period of time. In *The Mental Illness Happy Hour*, host Paul Gilmartin reserves full episodes for this type of intimate exchange. Occasionally, he will invite his listeners to come on the show, giving his podcast a mix of interviews with public figures and audience members. This kind of elastic podcast structure can equal a feeling of closeness. The writer has enough distance to be honest, the host has the power to tell the truth, and the listener is suspended between these vulnerable points of contact.

3. What *can*’t we say?

¹ Kid Fury and Crissle West, “Rap, Lies, and Penis,” *The Read*, Podcast audio, Aug. 11, 2016. <http://thisistheread.com/current-shows/>.

² Hayles, Katherine N., “Flickering Collectivities in Shelley Jackson’s Patchwork Girl: The Importance of Media Specific Analysis,” *Postmodern Culture* 10, no. 2 (2000): 1-18.

Podcasts are not subject to FCC indecency standards.³ As a result hosts openly cuss and tackle topics and themes in a manner that isn't available with other formats. At the end of every episode of *The Read* the hosts, Kid Fury and Crissle, read someone or something to high heaven, frequently having to do with racism, sexism, and/or homophobia. Similarly, they have listeners who write in letters asking them to cuss out their friends or family members who will also be listening to the show. In *Guys We Fu*#cked*, hosted by Corinne Fisher and Krystyna Hutchinson, listeners and guests have opened up about sexual or physical abuse that they had yet to discuss with anyone in their personal lives. A space where anything goes can provoke a kind of trust and when a host isn't bound by regulation it creates a space of care and catharsis.

4. Body of host, listener, and podcast

Podcasts happen everywhere and in spaces where other types of media would not necessarily be acceptable. The host sits in an isolated space conducive to recording, headphones on, frequently around few other people. Similarly, the listener is often wearing headphones with their listening device close to their body. The sound immerses both parties and can produce the sensation that they are speaking or being spoken to intimately by just one or two people.

Semi-Conclusion

I've identified these structures of intimate exchange in podcasting in order to open up questions surrounding methodology. What can academic discourse offer to a form of media that is as equally divergent as it is indebted to other platforms? As sparked by this discussion of intimacy, what should the media specific analysis of podcasting look like?

³ Markman, Kris, "Doing radio, making friends, and having fun: Exploring the motivations of independent audio podcasters," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 4 (2012): 547-565.

It should be noted that hosts often warn about explicit language, and explicit content is banned in some countries.