

MEDIÁLNÍ STUDIA

MEDIA STUDIES

JOURNAL FOR CRITICAL MEDIA INQUIRY

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(Book Review: McHugh, S. (2022). *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*. Columbia University Press.)

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To cite this article:

Skalický, M. (2023). Why do we all love podcast. *Mediální studia*, 17(1), 93–98.

ISSN 2464-4846

Journal website: <https://www.medialnistudia.fsv.cuni.cz/>

WHY DO WE ALL LOVE PODCASTS

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McHugh, S. (2022). *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*. Columbia University Press. ISBN 9780231557603, 396 pages.

It has been an alluring academic conundrum for the past couple of years: where did they come from and why does everybody love them? Living in the interconnected, information-flooded, and super-fast digital world of the 21st century, it's impossible to miss at least the occasional mention of what's been called the harbinger of the audio revolution: the podcast. The liquid barriers of our converged media universe now allow anyone to start producing podcasts, and the trend expanded rapidly over the internet: the White House has one, your local store definitely has one; actors and actresses, historians, police officers, politicians, celebrities, and journalists, they all eagerly joined the podsphere. Making a podcast can be fun, or it can be a great responsibility. Podcasts are the new flagships of leading media houses around the globe, and everyone is wondering what is the secret of their seductive allure. Siobhán McHugh, a long-standing audio researcher, podcast enthusiast, creator, producer, and honorary associate professor in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, allows the readers to understand the appeal and reveals the mesmerizing, and enthralling power of telling stories

through sound. McHugh's latest book *The Power of Podcasting* aims to uncover the magic of podcasting over the course of ten thematic chapters followed by an appendix of podcast recommendations and reviews. It attempts to sum up theoretical as well as practical knowledge of the riveting phenomenon of podcasting.

The book is mainly intended for a broad audience of media-interested readers, which is clear from the beginning. The first chapter welcomes everyone who is new to the field by answering the basic questions: who, why, and what. It provides a basic overview of the podverse, showing the plethora of possible podcast genres, while also debunking the prototypical motivations for doing a podcast. Following the boom of the blogosphere and the rising power of social media, casual people now have the opportunity *to be heard* (p. 19). From hobbyists to professionals, podcasters such as the ones affiliated with *The Daily* from *The New York Times* look for the most suitable genre or medium for their storytelling. All you need is to have the passion for it and to be ready to let the cat out of the bag. McHugh (p. 24) invites you to *harness* the power of podcasting by saying: "Is it a story you're bursting to tell, an undying obsession, maybe a biopsy of your own life?" McHugh is aware of the perks of podcasting for narrative storytelling. In one of her previous papers (McHugh 2016, p. 27), she already concluded that podcasts are not just a delivery mode for audio content, but that they might change the way the storytelling genre is perceived, e.g. by making it possible to experiment with the form or embark on other creative

adventures (ibid., p. 13). There is also one more and similarly important facet of liking podcasts: the host. Establishing friendship or a para-social relationship with the podcaster is a repeated motif in the book, rigorously elaborated on in the following chapters.

The entire aesthetic of storytelling in podcasts ultimately goes back to radio. As already noted in the prologue, the sound is elemental (p. 16), and podcast is a “flirty first cousin of radio” (p. 5). McHugh sums up the beginnings of radio production and looks for the pillars that form the backstory of the radio and the podcast: intimacy and empathy (p. 40). The process of crafting a podcast requires sound handling skills that have been developed in radio, as recently studied by Lindgren (2021), Adler Berg (2021), and others. Additionally, the prologue and the final subchapter emphasize the role of emotions in podcasting, as illustrated by two different personal stories in which McHugh shows the power of storytelling in podcasts. Everything is based on the development of classical linear radio broadcasting and its programming. The historical chapter is quite thorough, even though a European reader might appreciate a deeper delve into the context of non-English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, it was the digital revolution in the US that led to experiments with storytelling through sound (e.g. *The American Life*), which in turn transformed the way audio is used as a medium.

Previous academic research on the processes of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) and convergence (Jenkins, 2006; Jakubowicz 2013) laid the

basis for understanding the genesis of podcasting: it started with RSS and first on-demand content right after the millennium; then came time-shifted radio and the first native podcasts (for the distinction between catch-up radio and native podcasts, see [Newman & Gallo, 2019, p. 9]). Surprisingly, the amateur beginnings of podcasting are an echo of the first non-professional steps of radio – the only variable that had changed was the power of the internet which allows people to share, download and listen wherever and whenever they want to. McHugh (p. 62) ingeniously uses the metaphor of “kissing cousins” to connect the radio and podcasting eras, underscoring the huge impact of Sarah Koenig’s true-crime podcast *Serial* which was a major factor in the rise of the podcasts. In 2013, because of *Serial*, the world of audio fell in love with podcast storytelling. Intimate listening creates a bond between the host and the audience, and in some sense, helps establish a para-social relationship. Targeting a younger audience, changing the language used in broadcasting, being able to talk freely about sex or minority topics, and many other aspects enable podcasts to be “to radio what series on Netflix are to live TV” (p. 67). Here McHugh comes with another burning question: how to deal with the episodic format, and could some of the topics be more intriguing in podcasts than on the radio? She answers by sharing her own story about a “crystalline, linear storytelling” radio feature about women’s experiences with abortion laws in Ireland, and discusses the possibilities of doing a multi-episodic podcast of “labyrinthine depth”. While

this is still audio storytelling, there is a rather marked difference in how the story is told.

Somewhere around the fourth chapter, readers will realize that the book they are immersed in lacks any consistent structure. While this may be confusing for an inattentive reader, it would be a mistake to close the book. Instead of a clear structure, it offers a *mélange* of major milestones in podcasting history, seminal podcasting concepts and the author's personal stories and experiences. The more you read, the more of them you discover. The next one is in the following chapter, in which McHugh deals with the artistic craft of aerobic (attentive) listening and interviewing. How should I record a podcast? What questions should I ask? How to focus on the interview, and how to make my listeners focus? McHugh shares her tips, from finding a driveway moment (p. 101; something you are so immersed in that you can't turn it off) to a symbolic moment of exchanging gazes (p. 92; the affinity or disinterest between the interviewer and interviewee). She looks for her own stories to tell that would zoom in on the everyday struggles of journalists. Using their own stories from the recording of interviews, McHugh thoroughly describes what kind of questions to ask, where and how to record the interview, and how to distinguish between truth, opinion, misinformation and lie. She also offers advice on how to get both the emotions and the story from the respondent. While there are few charts and images in the book, the author includes transcripts of interviews, lists of tips and explanatory boxes

(such as the one about the monetization of podcasts and four subscription models [p. 149]), which help the reader to navigate the world of podcasting.

For journalists who are just starting with podcasting, many of the audio-related techniques may seem to be new and different from the traditional broadcasting procedures they have been used to. To explain the differences, McHugh recounts the twenty years of development of podcasting in a chapter in which she discusses the most notable moments, from the adoption of the name "podcasting", through the advent of loquacious chumcasts (or chatcasts) to the breaking point in podcasting history that was *Serial*. The author defines two podcasting eras, one before *Serial*, and one post-*Serial* (p. 128), and provides a very helpful analysis of the podcast's structure by using excerpts from several episodes. Just as *Serial* was very transparent in its investigation of Hae Min Lee's murder, McHugh is perfectly transparent in her approach to analysis and interpretation. The chapter explains how *Serial* became a cultural phenomenon and talks about the post-*Serial* production that benefited from its success. The author does the same thing with *The Daily*, a news podcast introduced by *The New York Times* in 2017 and hosted by the former newspaper journalist Michael Barbaro, which changed audio journalism in general. *The Daily* has a unique style of intimate storytelling and authentic interviewing by Barbaro. For instance, McHugh notes the use of Barbaro's characteristic "hmmmpf" (sort of a verbal nod in the conversation) and his short summaries of the guests' answers as some of

the “extra flourishes” that Barbaro adds to the podcast. The Daily has become an iconic news podcast in the past few years, and today it has a “gaggle of imitations” (p. 141).

In the following chapters, McHugh concentrates on analyzing well-crafted narrative podcasts – the ones with a powerful story to tell. The first one is the award-winning series called *S-Town*, a literary journalism piece by the producers of *Serial* and *The American Life*. Over the course of seven episodes, the podcast tells the story of a horologist who asked a journalist to investigate a murder in Woodstock, Alabama. Eventually, the small remote town becomes a stage for other kinds of drama. McHugh describes the podcast’s unique storytelling practice combined with the tradition of literary journalism and audio experiments. In this chapter, McHugh goes beyond standard analysis and shows a great appreciation for what she considers one of the masterpieces of podcasting. The reader can detect many similarities between the classical style of literary journalism and *S-Town* – mainly in the subjective and immersive reporting, clear structure, and omnipresent symbolism (every little detail in the story has its own meaning). For those who aren’t familiar with the literary journalism style, the authors adds a brief history of the concept; European readers, however, may feel a little disappointed by a complete lack of references to the Polish reportage school.

The deeper review of *S-Town* also opens the door for a subsequent analysis of McHugh’s own podcasts from top to bottom. The analysis of *Phoebe’s Fall*

(which follows a homicide detectives’ investigation of the death of a young lady who fell down a garbage chute), *Wrong Skin* (investigating reasons why a couple banned by traditional Aboriginal law disappeared) and *The Last Voyage of the Pong Su* (Australian police officers investigating smugglers bringing in heroin from North Korea) is the most valuable part of the book. As the adviser for both script and audio storytelling approaches, McHugh can reveal the production practices that shaped these stories into the final podcasts. She describes what could have been done better, reveals excerpts from the script, provides commented transcripts from all three successful and award-winning podcasts and includes an analysis of their impact and reception, with particular emphasis placed on *The Last Voyage of the Pong Su*. This podcast is analyzed thoroughly in Chapter VIII, which includes original notes passed in the team to suggest possible changes in the script and ideas for sound effects. McHugh even compares the before and after versions of the script to explain why the team made specific changes (ethical, grammatical, wording, etc.) so other podcasters can avoid making similar mistakes. In this chapter, the book becomes more of a manual drawing from experience than an academic volume.

In the penultimate chapter, McHugh discusses the topical questions of inclusion, diversity, and equality in podcasting. Even though the medium itself is open to everybody with a mobile phone and an internet connection (e.g. via low-cost chumcasts), the author reminds us that it still lacks international voices. In

this chapter McHugh briefly abandons the description of podcasting in English-speaking countries to introduce and contextualize the scene in China, Latin America and Europe. She pinpoints the lack of equality and discusses the concept of “whiteness” (p. 279) as well as the need to engage non-mainstream voices in the world of podcasting. But as McHugh predicts in the next chapter, the dominance of English-language podcasts is likely to diminish over time (p. 314). The future of podcasting in general, however, remains unclear. The podcasting phenomenon has become so huge that even podcast platforms are now buying the hosts and shows (p. 300), podcasts are being adapted as TV shows, and the debate about monetization becomes more and more intense. McHugh argues that the branding and marketing aspects are seminal by showing (once again) some of the examples of her podcasting production.

McHugh’s latest book is a wonderful contribution to the global research of podcasting. In its many insightful stories about well-known podcast series, it acts as a manual of what a narrative podcast should be and how to make one. While the book eschews pure scholarly language and its lack of quotation style makes it less acceptable in traditional academia, it is ultimately also much more enjoyable to read. While the lack of a consistent structure could be a problem for some order-loving readers, it shouldn’t be an obstacle for any aspiring podcast enthusiast. In some of the chapters, the content might seem too oriented on the Western world, which makes its focus a little too narrow; it

would be very inspiring if a potential sequel could expand upon this. But there are mentions of podcasting from other parts of the world, and it is true that English podcasts are still the most accessible to anyone around the world. The analysis of the author’s podcast series is the most valuable part of the book, revealing the behind-the-scenes procedures of making an award-winning podcast. By showing the characteristics of intimacy and authenticity, the specifics of narrative and storytelling, the evolutionary development from radio broadcasting, and the triumph of targeting the younger audience, McHugh allows the reader to truly understand the power of podcasting. The questions of why everyone loves them so much and how to make them are not so mysterious anymore. McHugh shows the power of podcasting and allows the reader to *harness* it, as promised; everyone who reads the book will fully understand what a complex, yet flourishing phenomenon podcasting is. And what is more, as McHugh notes, it is also God’s gift to ironing.

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HEALTH AND ILLNESS IN DIGITAL PARTICIPATORY CULTURES

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Vicari, S. (2021). *Digital Media and Participatory Cultures of Health and Illness*. Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469145>

Throughout what some people now call "covid years", the press media in the Western world somehow felt obliged to present the public with daily numbers of new covid-19 infections, deaths, and eventually, recoveries and vaccine applications. This trend of providing information on a single topic practically non-stop was evident particularly at the beginning of the worldwide pandemic. However, it was not only the press that seemed obsessed with data and personal stories of the sufferers or survivors. It was also the general Western society public who demanded and then devoured news through both traditional and new media and participated in campaigns including mask or anti-mask-wearing¹, vaccine communication and "anti-vax" movements, and other forms of active and passive participation while dealing with the worldwide pandemic. It is precisely the time of the

1 One example is the "How to Significantly Slow Coronavirus? #Masks4All" video by the Czech content creator (Petr Ludwig / Konec procrastinace [CZE], 2020), which as of January 23, 2023, has over 5.7 million views on YouTube and which has been shared and commented internationally. The latter saying, "I protect you, you protect me," and its alternations (e.g., "I" being replaced by "my mask" and "you" by "your mask") comes from this video that has been critically acclaimed by scientists and other professionals, particularly in the first months of the covid-19 pandemic.