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Democratic Podcasting: Mediating Subjectivity in Constructive Audio Journalism Practice

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ABSTRACT

Journalism has long had an uneasy relationship with subjectivity. However, when it comes to podcasting personal storytelling is often highlighted as a strength. Top journalism prizes such as the Pulitzer are frequently awarded to podcasts that report through a subjective frame. The common podcasting technique of self-reflexivity has also been highlighted as valuable in transparently revealing elements of the journalistic process, with potential to build audience trust. While there is now a substantial body of research focused on podcast journalism, there has been limited focus on how the prominent use of subjectivity might relate to the medium's democratic function.

Guided by constructive journalism, this study explores how journalistic subjectivity can be mediated in podcast production in ways that enhance the medium's democratic value. It combines practice-led research with mixed methods, with efforts to involve the podcast audience in journalistic production. It demonstrates how attempts to cultivate a journalistic persona and reveal elements the journalistic process can be leveraged to encourage pro-social attitudes. The experimental approach provides a model for future research applying constructive journalism to podcasting, building on Lindgren and Jorgensen's [2023. Podcasting and constructive journalism in health stories about antimicrobial resistance (AMR). *Media International Australia*, 187(1), 73-87] study.

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Introduction

Podcasting has long been celebrated for its personal and subjective approach to journalism. The self-reflexive style pioneered by Sarah Koenig in the hit podcast *Serial* has now become so ubiquitous to be “almost a podcasting cliché” (McHugh 2022, 110). Once identified as “core of the ... DNA” (Dowling and Miller 2019, 168) of the true-crime genre, such personal and introspective storytelling now characterises a range of journalistic podcasts, including many news podcasts that have emerged from 2017, inspired by the success of *New York Times' The Daily* (Newman et al. 2023; Newman and Gallo 2020). Eschewing traditional tropes of detached objectivity, journalists in podcasts frequently appear as “characters”, offering insights into the reporting process and their emotional state (Bird and Lindgren 2024; Nee and Santana 2022).

Podcast listening continues to rise globally. In the USA – a long-time leader in podcast consumption – approximately 135 million people listen to podcasts monthly (Edison Research 2024a). Australia currently has larger per capita podcast listenership than the USA, with 48 percent of the population accessing a podcast in the past month (Edison Research 2024b). Both countries have experienced particularly strong growth in news podcast consumption (Newman et al. 2023), as more news outlets and digital publishers have sought to capitalise on the strong appetite for audio content by launching new, original podcasts spanning daily news and investigations.

Podcast journalism's embrace of subjectivity mirrors broader changes across the journalism field. The destabilisation of the "objectivity norm" has prompted reappraisals of journalism's epistemological foundations (Muñoz-Torres 2012). There have been calls for greater self-reflexivity and an acknowledgment of journalists' positionality in informing truth-claims (Steensen et al. 2022) in an "era of post-factuality" (McNair 2017, 1318). This also attends to a cultural shift prioritising the self in public life – a phenomenon Van Zoonen (2012) terms "*I*-pistemology" to describe the way truth is often mediated through personal experience in contemporary media and politics.

Scholarship focused on the drift away from the normative ideal of journalistic objectivity tends to be concerned with the consequences for democracy (McNair 2017; Schudson 2022). In the globalised public sphere, celebrities, influencers, and citizen journalists can draw large audiences through disseminating public issues content, with limited regulatory oversight (McNair 2017). The *Digital News Report 2023* (Newman et al. 2023) notes that in the podcast landscape "News jostles for attention with lifestyle and specialist shows, many of which also deal with news-related subjects" (48). In popular podcatchers, the "News" category typically includes podcasts produced by partisan political commentators alongside podcasts produced by traditionally more trusted news brands (Bird 2023).

While there has been some focus on the role of high-profile podcasts in spreading mis- and disinformation (Wirtschafter 2023), the democratic implications of a more general shift towards subjectivity in podcast journalism remains under-explored. This is surprising, given the considerable research highlighting the role of personal storytelling in particular podcast formats (Lindgren 2016, 2023; Nee and Santana 2022).

With podcast journalism growing in prominence and popularity, there is a need to examine the specific ways journalistic subjectivity can be mediated, and how that relates to the medium's democratic function. A well-acknowledged feature of podcasting is its intimacy – or "hyper-intimacy" (Berry 2016, 666) – with the experience of listening to people's voices, often through earbuds or headphones, capable of fostering strong parasocial encounters (Lindgren 2023; Zuraikat 2020). However, beyond listening figures that can attest to a podcast's popularity, little is known about how the public relate to first-person storytelling. There is also limited research focused on podcasting practice, and the production decisions made to engage listeners and/or fulfil journalism's public function.

This study aims to explore and extend the democratic potential of podcast journalism through focusing on the mediating role of journalistic subjectivity. It combines practice-led research with mixed methods to involve listeners in the development of a pilot episode for a new podcast exploring issues in Australia's democracy. Constructive journalism provides a framework guiding production, with a focus on examining how first-person storytelling can be leveraged to promote pro-social attitudes. The paper proposes

a model for how to engage podcasting's "listening publics" (Lacey 2013) to enhance the social value of audio journalism in the digital age (Harcup 2023).

The following section includes a literature review situating podcasting within the broader digital media ecosystem. It proceeds by examining subjectivity in podcast journalism, and considers how constructive journalism could help advance podcasting's democratic function. The methodology section outlines how this study applies practice-led research combined with mixed methods. The discussion section then reports on how journalistic subjectivity was mediated throughout the production process to extend the democratic function of the pilot episode. The conclusion points towards the implications for podcasting as a democratic medium, at a time when partisan actors, commercial pressures, and dominance by major technology platforms are threatening its public function (Sullivan 2019).

Podcasting, Democracy, and the digital age

The disruption caused by Web 2.0 had special application in audio media. Innovations in the early 2000s pioneered by internet developer David Winer and entrepreneur Adam Curry made it possible for digital audio content to be delivered directly to the user online via an RSS feed (Berry 2006). Emerging from internet blog culture, podcasting represented a radical departure from mass broadcasting, with users able to create and share audio content without a radio station intermediary. When *The Guardian* journalist Ben Hammersley (2004) suggested the name "podcasting" for this new form of audio media in 2004, the medium was relatively niche. Bonini (2015) locates a critical shift occurring in 2012, with the consolidation of business models to support commercial and independent production marking "the second age of podcasting" (21), when it became "not simply complementary to radio, but an alternative" (21).

Podcasting's democratic affordances have been examined from numerous perspectives. Studies have indicated a capacity for the medium to elevate marginalised voices in the public sphere (Florini 2015; Vrikki and Malik 2019). Hilmes (2022) argues that podcasting has expanded the realm of the political through its ability to leverage personal storytelling, with experiences once deemed "too 'private' for public discussion" (12) in radio programs finding audiences in podcasts. Podcasts about public issues have long attracted sizeable audiences (Aufderheide et al. 2020), and Bird's (2023) research focused on the Australian context suggests that listeners value news podcasts for enabling broader democratic participation.

One key challenge to podcasting's democratic status lies in the growing commercialisation of the sector (Bonini 2015), with competition among major technology and streaming platforms infusing the podcast ecosystem with corporate logic and crowding out independent creators (Sullivan 2019, 2024).

Podcast Journalism and Subjectivity

Scholarship has highlighted a significant influence of narrative journalism on podcasting. Lindgren (2016) links the personal storytelling style that predominates across numerous popular US podcasts to Coward's (2013) analysis of the rise of "confessional journalism", which in turn is traced to the New Journalism movement of the 1960s-70s. In their study

examining storytelling formats and journalistic norms in 40 news podcast episodes related to COVID-19, Nee and Santana (2022) identified narrative elements in all but one. Their analysis was partly informed by Van Krieken and Sanders' (2019) narrative journalism framework, which was similarly applied in Lindgren's (2023) study examining the role of emotion in Australian and British podcasts. Both accounts reveal a tendency for journalists to straddle a personal/private and professional role in podcasts, often switching between these "characters" (Lindgren 2023, 713; Nee and Santana 2022, 1559).

Dowling and Miller (2019) assert that subjective storytelling is "integral to podcasting" (180). In podcast journalism, this frequently appears as the journalist adopting a self-reflexive stance, emotionally confiding in the listener and walking them through their reporting process (Lindgren 2023). Analysing *Serial*, Spinelli and Dann (2019) laud host Sarah Koenig's self-reflexive style for "ushering in a new phase of journalism for podcasting" (198). More than just effective storytelling, they argue that the podcast engages in a productive dialogue about the practice of journalism itself, chiefly through Koenig's meta-commentary about her difficulty reporting on a past criminal case.

Miller, Fox, and Dowling (2022) further highlight how podcasts can provide important insights into the journalistic process. Their study of US daily news podcasts indicated that journalists' readiness to showcase "the ethical dilemmas of reporting" (146) through transparent self-reflexivity could help to build trust in news content – a point that is similarly made by Dowling (2024). In a study of independent podcasters in Australia, Jorgensen (2021) found that they used first-person storytelling, combined with efforts to convey authenticity, empathy, and emotional truth, to build trust with audiences. Schlütz and Hedder's (2022) study based on a survey of German podcast listeners found that the strength of a parasocial relationship in podcasting is partly based on a host's willingness to be open and share private information with their audience. This research speaks to Beckett and Deuze's (2016) broader point about the capacity for journalistic transparency to (re)build trust in journalism, at a time when trustworthiness is "increasingly determined by its emotional authenticity" (p.5). As a medium that is celebrated for its capacity to engage audiences through subjective and emotional storytelling, podcasting presents as a tantalising prospect for redressing some of journalism's problems in the digital age.

There is, however, a need to critically interrogate how subjective approaches in podcast journalism might relate to the medium's democratic function. In their analysis of *The New York Times'* podcast *Caliphate*, Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022) analyse how transparency is deployed through the subjective frame of the journalist/narrator Rukmini Callimachi. Terming her approach "metajournalistic performance" (2311), they argue that such acts of transparency bolster Callimachi's status as a serious foreign correspondent, and in turn elevate *The New York Times'* brand of journalism above others. Across the broader and under-regulated podcast ecosystem, there is an added concern in the capacity for populist commentators to leverage personality-driven presenting styles in podcasting to engage audiences in content that undermines democracy (Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022; Lindgren and Bird 2024).

This analysis reveals a complex relationship between subjective storytelling in podcast journalism and the medium's public function. To properly examine how subjectivity can be mediated in podcasting to bring public benefit, it is helpful to turn to constructive journalism, as an approach that aims to enhance democratic culture.

Constructive Journalism

Constructive journalism seeks to remedy some of the contemporary news media's shortcomings. It responds to the negative focus in much traditional journalism to emphasise hopeful stories and empower audiences to make positive social change (Bro 2024). In a key text, Haagerup (2017) reinforces that journalism's capacity to explore possible solutions to public issues is important to inculcating a healthy democratic culture. The movement has inspired a wealth of academic studies over the past decade (Bro 2024) and informed practical changes to newsrooms' operations, including at Australia's ABC (Ross 2020). Constructive journalism's emphasis on community-building and efforts to be "circular in its interaction with its community of readers and contributors" (Meehan n.d.) also has parallels with community media, and especially community radio, where there are often strong links between broadcasters and listeners.

Hermans and Drok (2018) describe constructive journalism as "public-oriented, solution-oriented, future-oriented and action-oriented" (679). Influenced by positive psychology, it focuses on the role of emotion in encouraging pro-social behaviours, and endeavours to involve the public as co-creators of journalistic content (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). It also aims to discourage social-political polarisation, which has been highlighted as one consequence of traditional reporting approaches prioritising conflict as a news value (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019). There is also an emphasis on the active role of the journalist in interpreting news stories and advocating for possible solutions to public issues, in contrast to the traditional journalistic role expectation of detached objectivity (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017).

Constructive Journalism and the Objective-Subjective Continuum

Often presented as an alternative approach to reporting, constructive journalism has a fraught relationship to objectivity. Van Antwerpen and Fielding (2023) argue that applying constructive journalism techniques can help journalists to "ethically navigate the inherently active judgments they make in their work, while still delivering a truthful account" (117). This gestures towards a view of journalism that sees objectivity and subjectivity not as a binary, but rather as a continuum, characterised by detachment at one end of the scale, and a more active and interventionist approach at the other (Hanitzsch 2007). There remains a suspicion of journalism that leans too heavily towards advocacy or activism, on the basis that it violates the professional standard of impartiality (Hermans and Drok 2018). With its emphasis on empowering communities and involving the public in co-creation, constructive journalism is liable to similar critiques. Acknowledging these concerns and the importance of upholding standards of truth and comprehensive reporting, Van Antwerpen and Fielding (2023) assert that constructive journalism "encourages an active objectivity" (186), characterised by transparency and responsible interpretations of news events.

The trepidation about subjectivity in journalism often attends to whether personal bias is unduly influencing reporting (Van Antwerpen and Fielding 2023). There has been less attention paid to how other characteristics of journalistic subjectivity, such as the expression of emotion, might contribute to the aims of constructive journalism. This is a surprising blind spot given constructive journalism's concern with the audience's

emotional response to stories and its relationship to encouraging pro-social attitudes (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017).

Constructive Journalism and Podcasting

Lindgren and Jorgensen's (2023) study was the first to apply constructive journalism to podcasting. Reflecting on a practice-led research project involving the development of a narrative podcast about antimicrobial resistance, they theorised how constructive journalism could be advanced by leveraging podcasting's parasocial relationship. This was cultivated partly through personal self-disclosure, with the narrator sharing experiences from their life and directly addressing the listener. The host also played an important mediating role, linking the listener with people's emotional lived experiences through common podcasting techniques such as recording via the "hot mic", outside of a formal interview encounter. This was key to advancing constructive journalism's emphasis on presenting people in news stories as "sources of empowering information rather than as victims" (Lindgren and Jorgensen 2023, 84).

Lindgren and Jorgensen's (2023) study affirms that podcasting is a particularly amenable to constructive journalism. It provides evidence for how to effectively use subjective storytelling in a narrative journalism podcast to advance understanding about a complex public issue, and potentially promote pro-social actions. The authors note that future studies exploring podcasting and constructive journalism could focus on the listener response.

This study addresses this gap by linking podcasting practice, and the efforts to cultivate a journalist's subjective persona, with the listening experience. It is guided by the question: How can journalistic subjectivity be effectively mediated in podcast practice to extend the medium's democratic function? A primary aim is to propose a model for engaging podcasting's listening publics in ways that can provide a dynamic engagement with the performance of journalistic subjectivity, taking into consideration issues of trust, authenticity, and the encouragement of pro-social attitudes. This may be of use to practice-led researchers and audio practitioners interested in producing podcasts that deliver civic benefits.

Methodology

This study addresses the research question through experimenting with a range of storytelling approaches in the production of a pilot episode for a new narrative podcast series exploring issues in Australia's democracy. It builds on Lindgren and Jorgensen's (2023) practice-led study, focusing specifically on the mediating role of journalistic subjectivity, and goes a step further to involve the podcast audience as "co-creators" (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019).

With a long history in creative arts, practice-research – variously described as practice-based, practice-led, and action-research, to name a few – has proved fruitful in drawing theory from the tacit knowledge involved in various forms of practice, inspired by Bourdieu (1977). This is also the case in the few but important studies applying practice-research to podcasting (e.g., Jorgensen and Lindgren 2022; Kerrigan et al. 2023; Lindgren and Jorgensen 2023). While researcher critical reflexivity has helped expose the hidden,

arcane craft of audio storytelling (McHugh 2022), this has limitations when considering the broader public implications of media content. To address this shortcoming, this study combines practice-led research with mixed methods. As noted by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), mixed methods both describes a research design and carries philosophical assumptions about the benefits of generating meaning about the social world through multiple data gathering and interpretive techniques.

Incorporating mixed methods provided novel opportunities for involving the listening public in various stages of podcast production. This was done through a three-step process: (1) a survey of news podcast listeners in Australia; (2) follow-up semi-structured interviews with a sample of the survey cohort; (3) a focus group interview to provide feedback on a completed draft of the pilot episode. Combining these research steps with critical reflexivity on podcast practice provided a dynamic means of examining the democratic implications of journalistic production.

This methodology was pursued as part of a larger practice-led doctoral project undertaken from 2020 to 2023. For this study, there is a focus on elements of the research that relate to journalistic subjectivity, which emerged in the semi-structured interviews and focus group. As per other mixed methods research projects (e.g., Len-Ríos, Bhandari, and Han 2019), the approach here is experimental, with the aim of advancing new knowledge into how podcast form intersects with its broader public function. The following outlines how the research project was designed and conducted, beginning with a clarification of my positionality as a podcast practitioner-researcher.

The Podcast Practitioner-Researcher

My ability to embark on this practice-led research project was enabled through my significant audio journalism experience, having presented a live radio program on Melbourne, Australia-based community radio station Triple R for nine years, and produced radio documentaries. With most of my audio experience based in community radio, my approach to podcast production is informed by an independent, alternative style of journalism characterised by a participatory ethic. Nonetheless, throughout my career I have mostly had significant control over how my journalism is produced. This extends to this project; while the pilot episode was co-created with members of the podcast's target audience, I maintained editorial control. In their reflexive analysis of producing the *Canadian Mountain Podcast*, Wilcox and Napier (2024) highlight some important issues for the practitioner-researcher to consider, including the nature of community collaborations, and how community voices can be amplified. The decolonial framework applied in their research differs from this project, but it is nonetheless instructive for how to apply critical reflexivity to expose the practitioner-researcher's relationship to people and issues studied. This critical self-awareness has underpinned this research project.

The Podcast Concept and Production

The pilot episode was devised to launch a new narrative podcast series exploring issues in Australia's democracy, aiming to test how emergent podcast journalism storytelling techniques, including subjectivity, could be applied to engage listeners and bring public benefits. The series aims to incorporate lived experiences of "ordinary people", linking

to contemporary research on salient social-political issues. The pilot episode focuses on the concept of trust. This was inspired by declining trust in politicians, government, and media in recent years, and its relationship to political polarisation (Edelman 2023; Uslaner 2018). It was also prompted by emerging research on trust, personal storytelling, and emotional authenticity in podcast journalism (Jorgensen 2021; Whipple, Ashe, and Cueva Chacón 2023).

The process of developing the pilot aligned with Rime, Francombe, and Collins's (2022) framework of pre-production, production, and post-production. In the pre-production phase, an over-arching plan was developed using an online project management tool, Miro. This was arranged according to a multi-act structure, typical of narrative productions, aiming for a 50–60 min run-time (Preger 2021). The production phase involved gathering audio and assembling it into narrative form using Adobe Audition. The workflow was iterative (Rime, Francombe, and Collins 2022), involving a process of recording interviews, revising the scripted and spoken narration, recording and mixing atmos, sourcing appropriate music, and re-considering the overall narrative structure. There was also regular engagement with the insights from the semi-structured interviews, to ensure listener expectations were considered in the podcast storytelling process, particularly pertaining to my role as host. The focus group feedback session providing an additional means of testing the effectiveness of the pilot in engaging listeners and prompting productive reflections on democracy.

The Pilot Episode

Before indicating how these research steps informed the approach to journalistic subjectivity, it is worth summarising the pilot episode's content. It weaves together multiple stories, all related to trust: vox pop interviews with customers at a skydive centre about to take a "leap of faith"; a First Nations woman who grapples with trusting government during COVID-19; two former prisoners who explain their struggles with social stigma as they re-enter society and attempt to rebuild their lives; a man, Ace Bourke, who was the subject of a viral video on YouTube, where he is depicted lovingly embracing a full-grown lion in Kenya. Numerous experts are also interviewed to provide important information about the relationship between trust and democratic wellbeing: psychology researcher Professor Anne Böckler-Raettig; political scientist Professor Mark Evans; speech pathologist Rosie Martin, who uses literacy training to rehabilitate prisoners; and podcast scholar and producer Siobhan McHugh, who explains how to gain the audience's trust in narrative podcasting.

As is clear, the episode is ambitious in scope, integrating several different experiences and expert insights to explore a pertinent social-political issue. This complexity is well-suited to the narrative podcast format, which often involves listeners in a reflexive engagement with "structures of knowing" (Verma 2024), whereby the research process itself forms part of the story. To bridge these story elements, it was crucial to develop a strong narratorial presence, leveraging journalistic subjectivity. This was also developed with attention to narrative storytelling craft, whereby the narrator guides the listener through multiple "acts" to maintain engagement (Preger 2021). The following sections explain how the survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus group were used to inform the development of the episode and my performance as journalist/narrator.

Survey

A survey was conducted between April–June 2021 with news podcast listeners in Australia. The primary aim was to generate a demographic snapshot of the likely audience for the podcast, and to establish a sample of listeners who would be engaged for subsequent research activities, including semi-structured interviews and a focus group. News podcast listeners were considered a suitable group to target, as they would likely be engaged with pertinent democratic issues that could possibly be explored in the pilot episode. The survey was open to anyone living in Australia aged 18+ who had listened to a news podcast in the previous month. It was distributed via convenience and snowball sampling. Initially, it was posted to my personal social media profiles. An industry partner on the PhD project, Melbourne, Australia-based radio station Triple R, also assisted with distributing the survey via an internal email to the station’s volunteer base of approximately 600 people. Additionally, it was posted to Australia-based Facebook groups spanning podcasting and journalism. The survey informed a stand-alone research article on news podcasts and democratic participation (Bird 2023). Further details around the survey design and findings are explained in the article.

While non-generalisable sampling has limitations in that findings cannot be extrapolated to a larger population, it was deemed that the more targeted approach here, geared towards regular consumers of audio journalism – and community radio volunteers – would deliver benefits given the aim of including members of the podcast’s audience in co-creation. This gives practical application to Sharon and John’s (2019) notion of the “ideal podcast listener”, imagined as “capable of engaging in emotionally and intellectually complex discussions about podcasts” (344), to help guide the pilot episode’s production.

Although non-generalisable, the survey sample ($n = 108$) shared some demographic similarities with podcast audiences more broadly, including in Australia (Sang, Lee, and Park 2020). They were highly educated, with 95 (88 per cent) holding a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 43 (39.8 per cent) holding a postgraduate degree, and a large majority live in major cities (84.3 per cent). There was an almost even balance of genders, with 54 (50 per cent) identifying as female, 52 male (48.1 per cent) and two other/non-binary (1.8 per cent). The sample also skewed young, with half the respondents (50 per cent) in the “Millennial” bracket (born 1981–1996), and 38 per cent “Generation X” (born 1965–1980). Two respondents were aged 18–22, and eleven were aged over 55.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Survey participants were also invited to attend a follow-up a qualitative interview to gain a deeper insight into their experience listening to podcast journalism, to inform the podcast production. From December 2021 to November 2022, eight interviews were conducted with news podcast listeners in Australia. The interview participants were selected via purposive sampling, with efforts to achieve an equal gender balance (four identified as female, four male) and include a range of ages, with four “Millennials”, two “Generation X”, one “Baby Boomer” (born 1946–1964), and one aged 74+. The interviews were semi-structured, exploring participants’ podcast listening experiences and expectations, including their response to first-person storytelling. Participants were also asked about their level of trust in podcast journalism, and what attributes they value in the podcasts they

listen to. This was explored to gain an impression of what makes for engaging, and popular, storytelling in podcast journalism, to help inform production. The interviews were transcribed, using Otter.ai, and then inductively coded using NVivo. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify major themes across the responses.

Focus Group

The focus group was conducted in August 2023. It involved a sample of five people who had also completed the survey. In recognition of the industry partnership with Triple R, it was decided to include participants who had some affiliation with the station, either as staff members, volunteers, and/or broadcasters. This was deemed important in reflecting the ethos of community radio, where members of the public participate in various aspects of radio stations' daily operations. There were efforts to include participants of different ages, with two "Millennials", two "Generation X", and one aged 74+. Three identified as female, and two as male.

Four participants attended the focus group in-person and one joined online via video conference. One week prior to the session, participants were provided a link to a completed draft of the pilot episode, and directed to listen to it fully, at least once. The session ran for 90 minutes and was audio-recorded. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experience listening to the pilot episode, with a particular focus on my approach as host. Questions also explored how listening to the episode made them feel about the state of democracy and their ability to influence change. There was an effort to elicit listeners' emotional response to the episode, recognising the importance of emotion in constructive journalism and effective audio storytelling. There were also questions about how the episode could be improved, and what they would like explored if the pilot was developed into a full series. Audio from the session was transcribed using Otter.ai, with thematic analysis then applied using NVivo.

This model of podcast practice-led research incorporating mixed methods is illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

The following section reports on the listener expectations of podcast journalists/host, as reported particularly in the semi-structured interviews, before then explaining how this informed podcast practice, and how the focus group participants responded.

Listener Expectations of Podcast Journalists

The survey delivered important information regarding the podcast's potential audience, as well as providing new insights into the relationship between news podcast listening and democratic participation (Bird 2023). The full results will not be repeated here, as the questions for this phase of the project did not specifically pertain to journalistic subjectivity.

The semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to gather qualitative insights about what listeners value in podcast journalism, particularly as it pertains to the host role. One participant commented how "there's a bit more space to hold the listener's hand in news podcasts" (Participant 5), while another remarked on the "friendly" presentation style, noting "it's like me and the host are together on a journey of knowledge seeking" (Participant 8). In a similar vein, Participant 3 indicated a preference for news

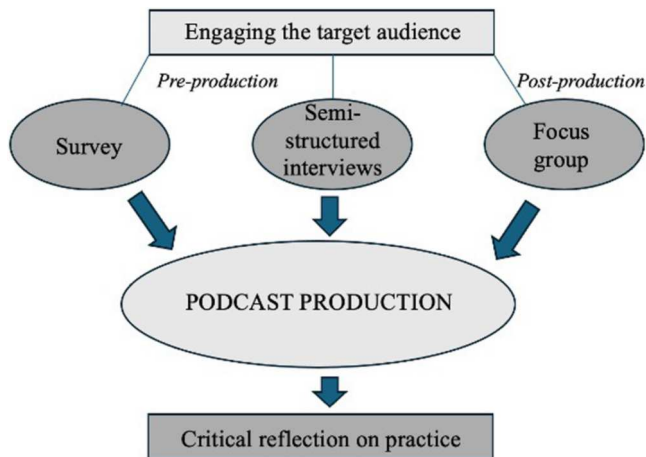


Figure 1. A model of podcast journalism practice-led research incorporating mixed methods.

podcasts where the host exudes “warmth” in their voice. Participant 8 commented how podcast journalism allows more space for the expression of emotion and saw this as beneficial in “showing the human side of the journalist.” However, they said this sometimes felt artificial, and asserted that for emotion and personal self-disclosure to be effective “there needs to be a sense of authenticity.”

The responses also revealed a complex dynamic with regard to trust in podcast journalism. Participants generally affirmed that while trust was not a primary reason for listening to news podcasts, it was a pre-condition for listening. Some highlighted the integrity of individual journalists as important for garnering their trust (Participant 3, Participant 6), while others asserted that the news media “brand comes first” (Participant 5). Participants were generally reluctant to ascribe trust primarily to the storytelling approach adopted by the journalist – such as their willingness to engage in self-reflexivity – however these techniques were valued for their ability to present the journalist as likeable.

Most participants reported that a main reason for listening to podcast journalism was to stay informed, however there was a sense that podcasts could provide something different to other media. Without prompting, three participants identified ABC’s discontinued podcast *The Signal* as a standout example of quality podcast journalism. Participant 5 commented that it was “a good mixture of serious, but also playful” while Participant 3 similarly affirmed: “it was fun ... it had a mixture of serious stories ... but it was light enough in the tone that you could listen to it first thing in the morning.” One participant said they consume a variety of audio news content, but when it came to podcasts, they were particularly “listening for the fun of the story” (Participant 1), hoping to be transported somewhere unexpected.

These insights highlighted some key considerations in how to approach my hosting role, to mediate the audience’s connection with the story. It was clear that journalistic subjectivity was valued by the participants, with a receptiveness to authentic self-disclosure and the appearance of “friendliness”, however they did not want this to come at the expense of journalistic rigour. To engage listeners, it appeared that I would need to straddle a personal and professional role, as is common in podcast journalism (Nee and

Santana 2022), not only in terms of my hosting style and performance but also in the ways different voices would be represented and mediated through my perspective.

Journalistic Subjectivity in Podcast Production

The use of journalistic subjectivity in the pilot episode fell into two primary categories: *constructing the journalistic persona*, and *revealing the journalistic process*. These broadly map onto Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau's (2022) categories for analysing acts of transparency in the *Caliphate* podcast.

A key aim of developing my persona in the podcast was to establish a rapport with listeners, to cultivate a parasocial relationship. This was done in the opening scene, beginning at the skydive centre, as I talk through my fear of heights set against a backdrop of an immersive soundscape featuring audio grabs of customers about take to the sky for a tandem jump:

I really don't like heights. Even the thought of skydiving gives me butterflies.

The scene serves as an exposition for the episode's focus on trust in democracy, using the "leap of faith" people are about to take as an analogy for building public trust. My character is further developed through convivial dialogue with customers:

Host: So you trust 'em, a fair bit, to pull the cord at the right time?

Customer 1: Yeah, trust is the key, definitely.

Customer 2: It goes off automatically anyway, even if they don't pull it.

Host: Yeah right, so you trust the equipment then?

Customer 1: Well, I hope we can trust the guy who's packing it today!

[laughter]

The aim here was to develop a sense of "fun", as well as to convey "friendliness", as two main reasons listeners connect with podcast journalism noted in the semi-structured interviews.

Another way I cultivated my journalistic persona was by explaining my nine years' experience as a radio host. This was done partly to establish my journalistic credibility, but it also served as an important way of mediating the listener's engagement with the podcast content. This is demonstrated in one scene focusing on the low literacy rates in the Australian state of Tasmania, and how it limits people's life opportunities:

Host: Sometimes, when I'm live on radio, I struggle to find the right word, in the moment. And it's frustrating. But, for the most part, probably, like you, I take communication for granted.

This direct address to the listener exemplifies how scripting is central to developing the host-listener connection (Lindgren and Jorgensen 2023). The passage also reflects my efforts to offer self-reflexive insights into my personal experience as a broadcaster, which was done multiple times throughout the episode. Near the beginning, I relay an anecdote about how I received negative feedback from a listener about my reporting on COVID-19; in particular, my decision to interview an academic live on radio about the role of alt-right extremists and conspiracy theorists in a large-scale protest in Melbourne, Australia, directed against the state government's management of the pandemic:

Host: After the show, I got a private message on Facebook from a listener. They'd been at the protest and were critical of the interview. I wanted to know why. Had I got something wrong?

Were they a Nazi sympathiser? Or did we just have very different beliefs about the pandemic and the merits of things like vaccines?

I'd seen others lose friends over this stuff. And I didn't want things to get nasty. So, we exchanged quite a few messages. And then some months down the line, there we were, sitting at my kitchen table drinking tea!

My personal, ethical dilemma is further disclosed through weaving my scripted narration into the interview with the listener, Monica, who explains her criticism of the broadcast, through her experience as a First Nations woman generally sceptical of government:

Monica: The reason why [sic] I got in touch was because I was seeing an imbalance in the representation of voices ... I was feeling frustrated that there wasn't a representation of different voices from community, like the local person on the street ...

Host: Right from the start, Monica hits the nail on the head. I did avoid speaking to people at the protests out of fear of giving them a platform. As a community broadcaster, I try to reflect diverse views – but I also have a responsibility to report the truth, and not give airtime to conspiracy theorists.

This transparent self-disclosure is designed to build trust in my approach as a journalist, leveraging emotional authenticity. It also performs a key function of constructive journalism in discouraging polarisation, seeking to build a more nuanced appreciation for community sentiment at a time of heightened tensions. My journalistic subjectivity is in this way deployed as a mediating tactic to invite a more open orientation towards others.

This example highlights how my reporting through a subjective lens was used to provide an insight into one element of the journalistic process. In podcasting, another common way of revealing the practice of doing journalism is by using the “hot mic” – where exchanges outside of a formal interview are recorded and edited into the narrative (Lindgren 2022). This technique allows the listener to eavesdrop on an authentic interaction, as if a “fly on the wall”, and helps to cultivate the parasocial relationship.

In the pilot, I include dialogue recorded off-mic with a man called Matt – an ex-prisoner who is involved in a program run by a literacy charity, Connect42, which uses speech pathology to rehabilitate people in the criminal justice system. Our background chatter is bridged by my scripted narration, revealing how I encouraged him to reveal deeply personal experiences in the interview through bonding over our shared fandom of an Australian football team, the Collingwood Magpies:

[laughter]

DB: We meet at Connect42 and hit it off straight away. I mention I follow Collingwood in the AFL, and this is partly strategic. I'm about to ask some really personal questions, and to encourage Matt to open up, I want to build a rapport, quickly.

Matt: Nathan Buckley's 1996 centenary match-worn guernsey ...

DB: Well, turns out, he's a Pies fan too. He points to his mouth, a missing tooth, and says “well you can tell, can't ya?!” It's an old, slightly mean joke about Collingwood supporters and dental hygiene.

DB: We're gonna [sic] get along [laughter]

Matt: Yep [laughter]

DB: And, to be honest, now we've started down this track, I kinda [sic] want to keep going.

This scene, including the off-mic banter, serves two purposes. Firstly, it prompts the listener to relate to Matt by bringing them into our jovial exchange, based on a joke that is familiar to Australian audiences. Matt presents as personable and upbeat, before the

formal interview pivots to much more serious terrain involving a decade-long drug addiction, repeated stints in prison, and regaining custody of his children. Similar to Lindgren and Jorgensen (2023), the decision to avoid an explicit focus on the negative aspects of Matt's story reflects an attempt to advance constructive journalism's aim of highlighting empowering narratives. It is also achieved by leveraging positive emotions of hope and elevation, to motivate "people to act more virtuously and want to affiliate with and help others" (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019, 1945) as part of a constructive journalism approach.

The other purpose is to provide transparency into the journalist's sleight of hand in encouraging interview subjects to tell emotional, personal stories. In revealing my tactic for encouraging Matt to "open up", I am at once confessing a certain performative stance, and highlighting an unequal power dynamic, while also signalling that I was earnestly engaged in the conversation and wanted to continue bantering about football. This is a deliberate attempt to cultivate authenticity; although my rapport-building with Matt was genuine, it was also developed within the artificial setting of an interview, with my interactions partially informed by my imaginings for how it would sit within the larger narrative. The off-mic encounter therefore provided an important means of allowing the listener to eavesdrop on an authentic interaction, with my scripted narration then clarifying that this was at least partially manufactured. My subjective and self-reflexive stance in this scene enables an important insight into the ethics of interviewing, leveraged through a journalistic persona previously cultivated as trustworthy.

Listener Responses to Journalistic Subjectivity

There was consensus among the focus group participants that my approach as host was effective. This was partly attributed to the personal storytelling style, with Participant 9 commenting how my trepidation about skydiving and capacity to "[change] as a person" by taking a "leap of faith" helped anchor the story, in the context of the episode's broader focus on trust. A key question pertained to whether my efforts to disclose personal information got in the way of the podcast's larger narrative:

You almost entirely struck the right balance ... I hate listening to stories where the journalist ... slips themselves into the story and kind of makes it [all] about them. There was none of that in this. (Participant 13)

My presentation style was described as "accessible ... warm and engaging" (Participant 11), which participants said helped to both connect them with the story and promote understanding of complex issues. They also reported that humour was important in conveying authenticity, with Participant 9 describing the interaction with Matt, where we both laugh about supporting the same football team, as "a very real experience".

Participants also noted the use of the "hot mic" as effective in cultivating a "lovely natural feel" (Participant 10). This also helped convey authenticity, connecting listeners with personal encounters to help them feel part of the story. The scene involving Matt was noted as "incredibly moving" (Participant 10), with Participant 10 and 11 identifying it as the most emotionally impactful part of the episode:

I was teary. It was really very beautifully done ... I felt like you built rapport with him, and we did at the same time. (Participant 11)

This demonstrates success in developing the listener parasocial relationship, with Participant 11 noting a shared emotional encounter mediated through my journalistic persona.

The interactions with both Matt and Monica were also highlighted for their ability to inspire a more generous orientation towards people who had very different life experiences:

[It] was really quite powerful ... [It] reminded me to make sure that you do think about other perspectives, and not just have this really fixed view ... It made me think I've gotta [sic] get out of my bubble and meet different people. (Participant 9)

Participants also highlighted journalistic self-reflexivity as a strength, particularly in relation to my hesitation in how to report on COVID-19, noting that it helped to develop trust in my reporting and prompt broader reflections on the media landscape:

It [revealing the journalistic process] exposes your own biases, which I think doesn't happen enough in media ... So by you acknowledging it ... it brings us in, and gives us trust that we can see that you're struggling with these complex ideas. (Participant 9)

The focus group insights indicated that I was successful in engaging listeners through my approach as host. While personal storytelling is often deemed a key route to listener engagement in podcast journalism (Lindgren and Jorgensen 2023), I was conscious of this potentially getting in the way of the larger narrative. The insights from Participant 8 in the semi-structured interviews that personal self-disclosure in podcasting could be over-done, and sometimes felt "artificial", made me additionally cognisant of deterring listeners by sharing details of my personal life. It appears that my success in engaging listeners through personal storytelling was at least partially contingent on the ability to connect personal experiences with the episode's larger narrative.

Journalistic self-reflexivity, including discussing ethical dilemmas around broadcasting amid COVID-19, was valued for enhancing trust in my reporting. Crucially, these efforts to reflexively engage with issues of media trust, socio-economic disadvantage, and prejudice were noted by participants as successful in prompting broader reflections on democracy, and their role within it.

Discussion

This study provides evidence for how journalistic subjectivity can be effectively mediated in podcast practice to extend the medium's democratic function. It highlights that podcasting is particularly amenable to constructive journalism, with subjective storytelling capable of emotionally engaging listeners and enhancing democratic culture.

The methodology, combining practice-led research with mixed methods, has proved effective in applying constructive journalism to podcasting. Where Lindgren and Jorgensen's (2023) study showed how journalistic subjectivity was developed in podcast production as part of a constructive journalism approach, this study goes a step further to involve the podcast audience as "co-creators", and incorporate their response to podcast content. The survey was instrumental in establishing a sample of the podcast's likely audience, while the semi-structured interviews and focus group provided important insights to inform how journalistic subjectivity could be productively developed in

podcast practice. This feedback on the pilot episode will be important in guiding the future development of the podcast series.

A key finding was that subjective storytelling can be successfully leveraged to showcase the “ethical dilemmas of reporting” (Miller, Fox, and Dowling 2022, 146), through deploying transparent self-reflexivity. In the pilot episode, my journalistic persona was developed particularly through references to my broadcasting experience. My self-reflexive stance early in the episode – as being willing to engage with critical feedback on my performance on radio – was enacted to convey trustworthiness. This is then consolidated in the revelation about the tactics I used to encourage Matt to “open up”, and reveal deeply personal experiences. All the while, I present myself as relatable and friendly, achieved through my playful rumination on being afraid of heights, and joking with Matt about football.

In *Caliphate*, Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022) argue that Callimachi’s cultivation of a particular persona is an example of “metajournalistic performance” (2311), serving to elevate her professional authority. My approach can also be termed metajournalistic performance in the way a particular persona is cultivated – through highlighting my journalistic credentials and revealing my reporting process – to foster a parasocial relationship with the listener. However, rather than simply reinforcing my journalistic authority, the focus group feedback revealed that this technique was instrumental in mediating a productive engagement with public issues. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that decisions about which elements of my journalistic persona and process to reveal were selective, with efforts to *manufacture authenticity* to appeal to listeners. This is a vexed issue in the contemporary media climate, with the appearance of authenticity routinely commodified and co-opted for anti-democratic ends (Serazio 2023). This study accepts such critiques of the capacity for manufactured authenticity to carry negative social-political consequences; however, it also makes a case for how the performance of authenticity can be harnessed in podcasting to benefit democratic culture.

Constructive journalism’s emphasis on reducing polarisation can be seen in Participant 9’s determination to “think about other perspectives, and not just have this really fixed view [about people].” There is limited evidence for constructive journalism directly impacting people’s behaviours (Meier 2018), and this study makes no claim to the effects of the pilot episode in prompting listeners to take certain actions. However, the focus group responses suggest that the parasocial relationship developed in podcast journalism, leveraged through subjective, emotional, and self-reflexive reporting, can motivate a pro-social orientation towards others. This aligns with Bassel’s (2017) model of “political listening” (Bickford 1996, 147), defined by efforts to avoid damaging binaries and encourage people to see others as “co-builders of a common world” (Bassel 2017, 12). This study suggests that podcasting is a particularly effective medium for advancing such projects, which are especially pertinent at a time of growing social-political polarisation.

A further benefit is this study’s demonstration for how podcast projects can be productively developed in partnership with community radio stations. Where podcasting practice is often viewed as individualistic, community radio is by its nature collective (Anderson and Rodríguez 2019). Finding ways of harnessing the collectivist practices of community radio stations for podcasting is a worthwhile endeavour for practice-led research projects aiming to benefit democratic culture.

One final consideration is how my dual role as researcher and podcast host/producer influenced the study, given the focus group participants were known to me and may have been reluctant to be overly critical – despite my emphasis on the importance of honest feedback. For this project, my existing relationship with some participants was useful for considering how my performance of subjectivity, and cultivation of authenticity, aligned with their expectations of me as a person and broadcaster. As community radio practitioners, they also had an interest in offering feedback to help produce a compelling podcast that the station would publish. My dual role was therefore crucial to this project’s aim of exploring how subjectivity can be productively applied in podcast journalism, in partnership with a community radio station. However, other studies may benefit from separating the researcher and podcast host/producer roles.

Conclusion

In the decade since *Serial*, podcasting has accelerated the embrace of subjectivity across the journalism field. Despite the recognition of personalised podcast storytelling approaches in top journalism awards, including the Pulitzer (Bird and Lindgren 2024), there has been limited reckoning with the democratic value of this genre of audio reporting that so readily defaults to the subjective. Harcup’s (2023) emphasis on the social value of news in the digital age gestures towards one way of conceptualising how podcasting – as a participatory medium capable of inculcating strong parasocial relationships – can provide important democratic benefits.

As this study highlights, journalistic subjectivity can play a powerful mediating role in connecting listeners with others’ perspectives to nurture a healthy democratic culture. Where considerations of subjectivity in constructive journalism tend to focus on the issue of bias (Van Antwerpen and Fielding 2023), this study indicates how in podcasting journalistic subjectivity can be particularly effective in engaging audiences emotionally with different life-worlds, through techniques such as recording via the “hot mic”, which can encourage pro-social attitudes. Accordingly, subjectivity is understood not as dichotomous with objectivity, but rather as reflecting the democratic experience, where questions of identity, perspective, and one’s place in society are constantly (re)negotiated in relationship to others. With its emphasis on nurturing democracy, constructive journalism has much to gain from engaging with this view of subjectivity, wherein the journalistic approach is a form of “engaged citizenship”. Podcasting has unique potential to leverage subjectivity as part of a constructive journalism approach, owing to its popular application of self-reflexive storytelling and ability to cultivate strong parasocial relationships with listeners.

There are of course barriers to podcasting delivering large-scale public benefits. The podcast landscape is increasingly infused with a commercial logic. As with digital media generally, the medium is also liable to be used by populist figures to undermine democracy (Dowling, Johnson, and Ekdale 2022). However, with reputable news organisations continuing to invest in podcasting, and listenership increasing globally, there is reason to take seriously how the medium can enhance democratic culture.

While this study attests to the way subjectivity can be productively mediated in podcast practice, there are limitations. Given the sample engaged for the podcast’s co-creation was relatively small, and non-generalisable, no conclusions can be drawn about how the broader population may experience podcast content. Furthermore, the

ability for journalistic subjectivity to engage listeners, as reported in this study, needs to be understood in relation to a particular time and place, given the propensity for media practices and audience expectations to evolve. Lastly, as an experimental approach, the methodology applied in this study is complex, and may not be applicable to all studies involving podcast production. However, the ambitious scope is also a strength, presenting a model for incorporating the listener experience into constructive podcast journalism practice.

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Ethical Statement

The research associated with this study abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University. It was approved by the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID: 27891).

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