Sounding Out Stories: A Critical Analysis of ***The Prince, How To Become A Dictator, The King of Kowloon,*** Three Narrative Podcasts on Contemporary China

By Siobhán McHugh

There are many ways to ruin a podcast. As a consulting podcast producer and avid podcast listener, I have heard quite the range. Some, unaware that audio is a linear and temporal medium, present unlistenable works-in-progress: turgid, untextured aural stodge. Others serve up a rambling screed where lazy scripting and poor structure undermine nuggets of insightful journalism. Hosts who do have a compelling storyline can sound alienatingly wooden or sarcastic; and music seemingly selected by algorithm can massacre a story's emotional heart.

The good news: skilled producers, story editors and sound designers can rescue these efforts and work with would-be hosts to make audio-friendly content. Narrative sense can be conferred by simple punctuation, as in print—but in audio, you might do this using a beat of silence, music or sound, to switch narrative direction or let a statement land. An interview clip might need to be interpreted by you, the host, to tell us the context, the way this voice fits with the other story elements; or it might sit better as a sharp counterpoint to another voice, the meaning heightened by the bald sequence. These are some of the discussions that inform the collaborative art of creating the kind of storytelling podcast that keeps a listener listening.[1]

The deployment of all these elements—voice, actuality, music, archival sound—in the service of story makes a big difference to how engaging the podcast will be. Underpinning all of this are the script and narrative structure: the host should fully inhabit the script, tweak it till it sounds real, for them. The script also has to link, foreshadow and clarify the various story elements, while the narrative arc works at both a micro level, providing a satisfying journey within each episode, and a macro, whereby thorny details and bum steers are explored, eliminated or developed, and by the end of the series, finally resolved—or at least exhausted.

Non-narrated audio, or montage, in the hands of a deft producer is its own art form.[2] But in a conventional narrative podcast today, the listener is guided by the host. If they let us know their thoughts on what they are uncovering, it's a bonus—we are included now, on this quest. Unlike chatcasts, where listeners are exposed to everything from echoey bathroom-like acoustics to crisp on-mic delivery, technical quality matters in storytelling. Intimacy, that cherished currency of podcasting, starts with a close mic.[3]

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[1] These propositions can seem strange at first, to those new to the medium. E.g. it is because audio only exists in real time that timing is critical in podcasting. It works very differently than the way timing works in video, where sound is perceived in tandem with pictures, both adding up to a synergistic whole. See Michel Chion's *Audio-Vision: sight on screen* (2013) for masterly discussion of this.

[2] Alan Hall's *Saigon Tapes (*BBC Radio 4 2021) is one example; David Isay's *Ghetto Life 101 (NPR 1992)* is another. The IFC (International Features Conference) also showcases the form.

[3] Everyone has their own interviewing technique, but this article (Pagel 2017), summarising the approach of Prix Italia-winning Canadian/Danish producer Stephen Schwartz, has some excellent tips. I have never had somebody lie down for an interview, but it is certainly important to create a relaxed space for a longform or self-revelatory interview. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/docproject/blog/the-schwartz-technique-how-to-get-vivid-colour-and-riveting-detail-from-your-interview-1.3938069

Earlier, before important interviews were recorded, there were probably team meetings to nut out a rough episodic structure. This is often conceived with a taut ending and a slow, unfolding opening—a scene or character to intrigue, lead into the story. Once all (or most of) the interviews have been gathered (and usually auto-transcribed[4]), the host, producer and narrative consultant/producers will shape an episode script and annotate it with sound ideas, from archive to actuality. They will worry away, filleting clips, rewriting a word or phrase for coherence, clarity and flow. Someone might suggest a re-sequence, moving a section around to raise stakes, or add tension. Bits get shifted to another episode or deleted. General ideas for sound design are added, along with suggestions for music and what it's for: a mood shift, a rise in tension, a beat (short or longer) for effect.

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In studio, the host records narration and a first audio draft is built. Sometimes the producers listen without sound design, judging only script and story, flow and feel. Maybe the host sounds lifeless or is getting the intonation wrong; the script might need fine-tuning for the ear. After the sound design is mixed, more adjustments follow. The music might overwhelm or undercut the content: 'over-juicing' someone's speech with manipulative music is a cardinal sin that can turn poignant into mawkish. Sometimes tone is fine but timing is off. An episode that drags needs surgical intervention.

On it goes, draft after draft, for as long as budget and schedule allow. Then one day, it drops online—and listeners decide whether to choose this, out of the over five million podcasts available. A trailer helps get their attention: a precis or titillating taste of what lies ahead. And so, it transpired that I listened to trailers for three narrative podcasts on a China-related theme and opted to press play. My response follows.

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It's unusual and welcome to see not one, but three, well-produced narrative podcasts made in the West about China. All provide strong context on Chinese history and politics but focus essentially on an individual*: The King of Kowloon* (produced by the ABC, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) memorialises an eccentric graffiti artist called Tsang Tsou-choi, his art seen in the context of Hong Kong's shrinking democracy. Both *The Prince* (by *The Economist*) and *How To Become A Dictator* (by *The Telegraph*) zero in on Xi JinPing, President of the People's Republic of China, their release coinciding with the fifth annual Communist Party Congress in October 2022, at which Xi was expected to be anointed as supreme leader in virtual perpetuity (spoiler: he was).

The Prince (also referred to hereafter as *Prince*) and *The King of Kowloon* (*KOK*) both open with a theme of disappearance: in the former, Xi inexplicably goes missing in 2012, just before his leadership takes off. In *KOK*, Tsang Tsou-choi's ephemeral art is here one moment, gone the next. *How To Become A Dictator* (*Dictator*) starts with a more

[4]Audio stories need to be created from sound, not print, but transcripts make it much easier to navigate long interviews and select tentative clips, to be ratified by listening. Auto-transcription software is increasingly reliable (e.g. Otter.ai, Descript, Trint, Whisper and Hindenburg).

conventional 'scene': host Sophia Yan is trying to get a flight back to China, where she has been working for ten years as *The Telegraph*'s correspondent.

All three podcast hosts are female journalists with a Chinese background, but we find them in very different contexts. *Prince* host Sue-Lin Wong was born and raised in Sydney, of Malaysian heritage. Now in her mid-thirties, as a student, she was a notable all-rounder: competitive athlete, volunteer surf lifesaver, debater, musician, dux of her high school. She headed to China in a gap year to learn Mandarin, then to the Australian National University to study Law and Asian Studies. She worked as a journalist with Reuters and the *Financial Times* before joining *The Economist* and having to leave Hong Kong along with other international journalists during protests in 2021, as surveillance increased. Remarkably, *The Prince* is her first podcast.[5]

Louisa Lim grew up in Hong Kong with a white English mother and a Singaporean Chinese father. Raised in an English-speaking enclave, she 'was made by the city. I was shaped by Hong Kong values, in particular a respect for grinding hard work and stubborn determination'.[6] Lim speaks 'basic Cantonese' and was China correspondent for the BBC and NPR for a decade. Her first book, *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* , was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Writing. She co-hosts The Little Red Podcast, an award-winning podcast on China, has a PhD in journalism studies and is senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne. She also hosted an insider 'how-to' podcast, *Masterclass*, in which she interviewed top audio professionals about best-practice audio journalism and podcasting.[7] Her recent book, *Indelible City: Dispossession and Defiance in Hong Kong*, was a finalist in the prestigious Australian Walkley awards for excellence in journalism.

Taiwanese-born Sophia Yan is based in New York when not on assignment. An award-winning journalist who has been a China correspondent for ten years, she previously made the podcast *Hong Kong Silenced* (2021), 'the inside story of how life in Hong Kong was turned upside down in just one year'. In *The Panic Room* (2022), she interviewed people about how they surmounted curveballs and challenges. Like *Prince*, *Dictator* was conceived as a biographical analysis of Xi: inevitably, both cover similar ground. We hear the same archival audio (e.g. Xi giving a bullish speech in Mexico in 2009) and traverse Xi's policy decisions, from his crackdown on corruption, big and small (hunting 'tigers and flies') to his infamous repression of the Uyghur minority. The two podcasts differ, however, in host style and scripting, whom they interview and how they revisit key moments, such as Xi's stint living in a cave as a young man ostracised by the party. Their content is also governed by structure and length: *Prince* has eight c. 35-40min episodes, totalling about five hours, while *Dictator* has four 35–44-minute episodes, totalling under three hours. *KOK* is around three hours, comprising six approximately 28-minute episodes: unlike the other podcasts, produced by newspapers as digital-only content in which an episode can be as long as it needs to be,

[5] However, the team supporting Wong is highly experienced. Senior producer Sam Colbert worked at CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), BBC and *The Guardian*; producer Claire Read previously worked at BBC News; producer Barclay Bram speaks Mandarin and has a PhD from Oxford; EP John Shields is a former senior editor at the BBC's *Today* show.

[6] Lim, Louisa, CHASING THE KING OF KOWLOON, *The Atlantic*, April 19, 2022 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/hong-kong-chinese-calligraphy-democracy-indelible-city/629582/

[7] Lim is supported by an impressive production team. This includes Sophie Townsend (host/producer *Goodbye To All This award-winning* memoir podcast, reviewed RDR 2022), award-winning producer Kirsti Melville (*The Storm*, reviewed RDR 2015), award-winning producer Elizabeth Kulas (host *7AM* and *Days Like These*), Russell Stapleton (sound engineer /composer and multiple Prix Italia co-winner, including for *Children of Sodom and Gomorrah*, reviewed RDR 2014) and Clare Rawlinson (formerly with Audible and Stitcher).

KOK was also broadcast on ABC Radio National and was constrained by a 30-minute broadcast slot.[8]

The following analyses aspects of the podcasts' approach, from production/structure and craft/sound design to editorial/research, hosting and script.

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HOSTING: SCRIPT and SUBJECTIVITY

The more relatable a podcast host is, as a human being and in connection to the podcast theme, the more listeners are likely to engage. Academic research is starting to confirm this anecdotal dictum: a recent Danish study found that listeners 'take comfort in podcast hosts who self-disclose by showing vulnerability, authenticity, and humour, and who share their own point of view'.[9] In practice, the importance of this parasocial relationship in podcasts was emphatically established by audience reaction to classics from true crime juggernaut *Serial (2014)* [10] to *The New York Times'* hit news show *The Daily (2017)*.[11]

Serial host Sarah Koenig was reluctant to bring herself into the narrative at first. But as her colleague, executive producer Julie Snyder explained: 'The story really lived in the details [but] the details, a lot of the time, felt a little dull… And when Sarah told us what she was doing or thinking, and the significance of it, it was "Oh, I see." And then there were also other times when Sarah told us what she didn't know, and I thought it was kind of ballsy and… emotional.'[12]

Koenig developed a spontaneous-sounding style that included little conversational asides, as if she was mulling things over in the moment with a friend (us, the listener). For example, in episode six, she's considering a potential witness, whom she dubs 'The Neighbour Boy'.

> *The Neighbour Boy never shows up at trial. He's never mentioned. So I let it go. But, you know, it is weird. And if Laura's story is true, then there's another witness to this murder. It's one of the things about this case that kind of bobs above the water for me, like a disturbing buoy.*

This offhand language ('kind of', 'you know') is miles away from the stiff newsreader voice of authority. It's beguiling—we feel that she is taking us into her confidence.

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[8] This can be a challenge for broadcaster/podcasters, who have to create content for a dual audience: 'live' listeners, for whom content is bound by regulations on explicit material as well as a set length. Broadcasters could perhaps consider embedding a podcast series in a longer live show, which can at least accommodate a variable episode length, as the material demands.

[9] Lene Heiselberg & Iben Have (2023) Host Qualities: Conceptualising Listeners' Expectations for Podcast Hosts, *Journalism Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/1461670X.2023.2178245

[10] Released in 2014, *Serial* investigated a cold case in Baltimore USA, asking whether Adnan Syed, jailed for killing his former girlfriend Hai Min Lee, was innocent or guilty. After twelve episodes, it remained equivocal. In 2022, a court vacated Syed's prosecution due to procedural and other irregularities and set him free.

[11] Host Michael Barbaro, previously a print reporter at the masthead, was flabbergasted at the audience's attachment to him. 'People who love the show really feel connected to my face, my voice. It's shocking!' he told the podcast longform.org. Asked about an incident where he famously teared up while interviewing a coalminer whose ragged breathing brought home viscerally that he was dying from silicosis (dust disease), Barbaro pointed out that he got emotional when doing print interviews too – it was just that nobody could hear that. 'Audio is a very honest medium,' he reflected. 'You're discovering how you feel as you feel it – and that is very powerful.'

[12] Speaking to John Biewen in *Reality Radio (2017)*, 'One Story, Week by Week', p.81

The charismatic host-on-a-quest is now an established podcasting trope. The tone might be cheeky, such as Marc Fennell in *Stuff the British Stole*, charmingly persuasive, such as Patrick Radden Keefe in *Wind of Change*, or revelatory, such as Afia Kaakyire in *S***hole Country*. But importantly, where the host is conducting investigative journalism, core narration still needs to be grounded in solid fact. 'I don't think you can get away with it if you haven't done your homework', warns Koenig. 'Even when it sounds like I'm kind of casual in my interpretations of things, I'm not. My observations were based not only on my reporting but on the documentation that exists in the case.'[13]

The hosts of *TP, KOK* and *Dictator* have clearly done their homework.[14] The podcasts are rich in historical detail and sharp political analysis, reflecting the hosts' years of immersion in China-related affairs, but their tone and host persona are distinct. *Prince'*s Sue-Lin Wong comes across as infectiously curious and smart verging on sassy. Discussing how the Chinese Communist Party indoctrinates its 100 million members, she asks: 'How do you get them all on the same message—your message?' We hear audio of an electronic device. Wong clarifies: 'It turns out there's an app for that'. After providing detail on how the Xi JinPing Thought app codifies its propaganda, Wong explains: 'Party officials must use the app daily. They get a score—it's a sort of ideological fitness tracker.' These sort of short, snappy sentences work well in audio, and provide a useful contrast to the more subtle explorations Wong conducts with interviewees, who range from journalists and academics to eye witnesses such as a woman who knew Xi as a child. As narrator, Wong talks a bit fast at times, but mostly we are swept along by her energetic approach.

Wong occasionally inserts herself into the story, recalling how she reported from Beijing on the Olympics in 2008, and visiting a home in Muscatine, Iowa (Ep 7) where Xi stayed in 1985 on his earliest American visit, as a lowly regional official. Xi is still recalled with affection by the earthy owner, Sarah Lande, who provided his first encounter with popcorn and who welcomed him back there in 2012, when he was a distinguished guest of President Obama. Besides providing a surprise window on Xi's life and a welcome contemporary scene in a podcast so focused on history, Wong skilfully weaves this incidental detail into a narrative transition that sets up a major expository shift.

> *A lot's happened since Xi Jinping first tried popcorn in Muscatine. In the subsequent years, the Chinese Communist Party watched as America abetted the collapse of the Soviet Union—a seismic event for the party and Xi Jinping himself. The Tiananmen Square democracy protests in 1989 only added to their fears.*

This is assured writing. Throughout *The Prince*, Wong balances authoritative insight with just the right blend of informal aside. ('National Rejuvenation is Xi's way of saying Make China Great Again'.) Only once does she reveal a truly personal moment. In episode five, unable to get back to Hong Kong, she is cooling her heels in Sydney, staying in the family home. Over the sound of a hissing pan, Wong tells us she is 'learning how to make one of my mum's favourite Malaysian dishes, chicken rendang'. Firstly, it's a relief for the listener to know that

[13] ibid

[14] Disclosure: Sue-Lin Wong attended an online masterclass on narrative podcasts I ran for Sydney Writers Festival in May 2022. I did not know this when I first heard and recommended the podcast. Later, Wong told me she and executive producer John Shields consulted my book, *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*. I have never met Wong. Louisa Lim is a professional acquaintance, as are some of the team at ABC RN.

this likeable over-achiever seemingly can't cook. Secondly, the scene allows Wong to reflect on her predicament. 'Do you think it's weird I'm covering China from Australia?', she asks. 'Of course', replies her unflappable mother, adding, 'especially I don't know what's the relevance of my cooking!' It's a very human interlude that leads seamlessly to an incisive point: 'I'm very aware of how lucky I am. As a foreign national, I was able to leave easily, and I was never put in jail. More than a hundred journalists are currently behind bars in China because of their work.' This is what podcasting does so well: a grace note of the personal amplifying the professional.

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Sophia Yan's *Dictator* also includes revealing personal details that both advance the story and cement a bond with listeners. She keeps an audio diary of her 14-day quarantine before she can re-enter Beijing, due to Covid restrictions. We hear her finally insert a key into the door of her apartment, but her sojourn will be cut short by increasing surveillance—'I stayed here long enough to go through a two-litre carton of milk', she tells us succinctly. As the very title of the podcast (*How to Become a Dictator*) makes clear, her attitude to Xi Jinping is deeply sceptical, at times outright hostile. 'China claims it's modernising Xinjang [where over a million Uyghurs have been incarcerated], but what's really happening is the mass torture and suppression of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.' Yan has personal grounds for her scepticism, particularly about Xi's media censorship. In one dramatic scene, as she is visiting the cave where Xi once lived, now a tourist shrine, she realises she is being followed by police. She has been accosted by security forces before—we hear tape of an encounter in Xinjang in which she sustained a cut lip. Now, she sequesters herself in a lavatory to upload her location recordings of the cave to the cloud, in case she is apprehended and made to delete the files. This sort of real-time scene confers great immediacy. We also appreciate her cool-headed resolve.

Yan also retraces Xi's visit to Iowa, meeting another farmer Wong visited, Rick Kimberley. Kimberley told both journalists (almost word-for-word—it must be a well-rehearsed set piece) how Xi had been particularly taken with his tractor and sat aloft for a photo. Yan gets the drop on Wong here: she takes the tractor for a drive. But Wong uses this seemingly insignificant scene to telling narrative effect. Kimberley is still a soybean farmer, decades on from Xi's visit, and he is now directly affected by his erstwhile guest's actions. As Wong narrates: 'A picture of a delighted Xi Jinping on that tractor featured prominently in the Chinese press afterwards too. He was so impressed that he asked Rick to build a replica of his farm in Hebei province, Iowa's sister state. But that wasn't enough to protect Rick and his family from the fallout of spiralling US-China tensions.' Wong goes on to explain how Donald Trump's 2018 tariffs on Chinese imports caused retaliatory action by Xi, including a tariff on… soybeans. 'The price definitely went down and, and that affects us as a family… it was a big hard time for us', Rick tells Wong. This is adept narrative structure, moving constantly from the particular and the emotional to the bigger, dryer political picture.

Louisa Lim is well placed to exploit the same natural flow between micro-moments of her formative years in Hong Kong and the huge transformations the city has experienced over the last 25 years, first with the cessation of British rule in 1997 and then with the increasing crackdowns on democracy of recent years. She is a beautiful writer: her book about Hong Kong, *Indelible City*, drew this accolade from none other than Ai Wei Wei, the celebrated Chinese artist and activist: 'Irresistibly real and emotionally authentic, it shines with a shimmering light rarely seen in political narrative. A truly extraordinary elegy.' Lim's

description of the calligraphic art of her podcast subject, the so-called King of Kowloon, is indicative: 'His words were a celebration of originality and human imperfection with a who-gives-a-fuckness about them that was genuinely inspiring'. But that's from an article Lim wrote for *The Atlantic*. It is not in the podcast script; one can only wonder why not. It can't be that the language was too explicit, given that a contributor quotes the King's vulgar graffiti, 'fuck the queen's ass'. Whatever the reason, it is a great loss to the podcast that Lim does not narrate the story of her beloved, complex Hong Kong with anything like the luminosity of her words in print elsewhere.

Each episode is time-stamped, from 1997 to 2020. The podcast begins with raw, evocative actuality of the 2019 protests by Hong Kongers objecting to an increasing crackdown on democratic freedoms by Chinese authorities. This David vs. Goliath struggle gripped the world for months, and Lim was right there on the frontline. It's a powerful, enticing opening. Over the chants and shouts, Lim tells us:

> *It's nighttime. I'm wearing a yellow hard hat, plastic goggles and a gas mask. Sweat is dripping down my face. It's all so unfamiliar. It feels like a waking nightmare. I grew up in Hong Kong, but right now, I don't recognise my own city.*

As the protesters break into Hong Kong Legislative Building, Lim gingerly follows:

> *Standing there, dazed, I suddenly see it: on a pillar, spray painted in black, a message for Hong Kong's chief executive. In Chinese, it reads: 'It was you who taught us that peaceful protest doesn't work.' In this moment all the disparate pieces of my life suddenly come together.*
> *This text, sprayed on government property, took me back to the real reason I was in Hong Kong. See, I hadn't come back to cover the protests. I'd moved back on a much more obscure mission… to chase a dead graffiti artist.*

Ending the preamble, a montage recounting impressions of Tsang Tsou-choi, the King of Kowloon, interweaves with Lim's deepening interest in him:

> *He led me here. And in return, I'm telling his story. It's a quest that's taken me eight years, a move across the world, and a PhD. On the way, I rediscovered the city I call home…. then I lost it forever.*

After this engrossing introduction I am keen to hear more about this curious figure, to get a feel for Hong Kong's uniqueness as a hybrid, threatened culture, and to understand where Lim fits into it all. The podcast will deliver in spades on the first count—among other things we will learn that this stinking, indefatigable and deluded (if not mentally ill) artist lived in filth, eschewed family and was feted by the international art world from the Venice Biennale to Art Basel. We will also meet a fascinating range of the artist's acolytes and advocates. On the second count, we will get an excellent potted history of the British involvement in and handover of Hong Kong, a strong sense of the commitment and diversity of the protesters and their courageous opposition to Chinese autocracy. But what is jarringly missing is a felt sense of Lim's personal attachment to the place she professes to care so much about.

This absence comes partly from Lim's tone. Her presentation often suggests the BBC/NPR reporter she once was: crisp and clear, describing events with detachment and detail, but without a sense of real connection. The podcast sounds more like ringing reportage than

alluring audio storytelling and is sometimes unduly formal for this in-ear genre. For instance, in episode one, she describes the King's evanescent graffiti as: 'a real-life example of what theorist Ackbar Abbas calls Hong Kong's 'culture of disappearance': a culture that only reveals itself when it's on the point of disappearing.' Lim has chosen an expeditious, but cerebral way of deploying this concept. A slower, but more emotional way might have been to first unpack the reference more, for listeners (like me) not familiar with this academic's work; his fascinating idea could then set up a transition to an auditory and verbal reflection by Lim on what his words mean to her, at a personal level, drawing on her impressionable Hong Kong years. Audio can facilitate just this kind of poetic diversion, and this would give us the intimate backdrop, Lim's own memories, which we crave. Perhaps she recreates a ferry trip, samples a favourite food, recalls a family outing—anything that takes us inside her special city. Instead we are left with a frustratingly obscure reference and little of the host 'self-disclosure' that podcast listeners so desire.[15]

Episode two offers a promising start:

> *In the 1980s, when those negotiations were beginning, I was a child of the colony. My father's Chinese, my mother English. But I had a thoroughly British upbringing in Hong Kong. At my primary school in Mid-Levels, we recited English poetry and staged Victorian era music halls, dressed up in crinolines and top hats. We didn't learn Cantonese at all. In fact, we didn't learn ANYTHING about Hong Kong's own history; it simply wasn't taught back then. We lived in a bubble.*
>
> *Against this backdrop, the King of Kowloon's mania—his ABSOLUTE REFUSAL to forget history—it seems almost valiant.*

But after this, Lim mostly reverts to reporter mode, in both language and tone. She does, however, describe a couple of intense personal moments. One of her interviewees, famous rapper MC Yan, is also a fervent Buddhist. We meet him in episode three, in one of the few locative scenes that takes us to place (rather than protest). It opens with Lim on a noisy street.

> *I'm on a very narrow road, huge industrial buildings either side, lorries thundering past. I've come here to see MC Yan, he's one of Hong Kong's most influential graffiti artists and hiphop singers. And the King of Kowloon was a friend of his...*

The sound takes us inside, as Lim searches for MC, the clanking of a lift cage providing a live feel.

> *Enormous cargo lifts with massive iron doors… cage lift… not sure it feels particularly safe. Right… here we go.* We arrive in an interior, quiet atmosphere. *Oh it's nice in here…* Lim says, sounding surprised. *Smells of patchouli oil…*

In print this might look rambling, irrelevant. But in sound, it anchors us in the moment, builds interest in the upcoming guest, and strengthens our kinship with Lim on her journey.

[15] Heiselberg & Have (2023)

We are experiencing audio's temporal power, accompanying Lim in real time, and developing a physical, sensory sense of place that heightens our connection to the moment.

> *When he arrives, he's a short, compact figure, wearing a burgundy t-shirt and fisherman's pants.* [sounds of dog barking] *And he doesn't go anywhere without his beloved pug, Gudiii.*

This dynamic blend of actuality, sound design and mix of stand-up (in situ) with well-scripted (back in studio) narration implants MC as a character in our mind's eye. We are therefore comfortable when Lim has a bizarre second encounter with him.

In episode five MC suddenly offers to expose her to the mystical 'third eye'. 'It might be the oddest thing that's ever happened in my reporting career', Lim tells us.

> *He says he can do it using polyphonic sound—the combination of two or more tones in harmony all at once. I don't think I actually believe in third eyes. But I wish I could google the risks of him opening mine.*

She gamely agrees.

> *Suddenly… sound is coming at me from three directions all at once… from his mouth, and from both corners of the room behind him. It's so loud I can practically see the soundwaves zigzagging through the air. I'm so shocked I can hardly speak.*

Distorted, trippy sound design cleverly evokes the event. It's an unexpected glimpse into Lim's openness to the weirder end of Hong Kong life, and though it feels somewhat tangential, she deftly reels it in to serve the narrative: 'I'm totally discombobulated… as if the normal rules of physics have been suspended', she begins, then segues to, 'I realise that's how we all feel here in Hong Kong. Everything is upside down. We've lost our footing, to the old, familiar world.' Podcasting can do this—where the host goes, we will follow.

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But somehow a much bigger experience earlier in the same episode gets lost in production. It's 2019 and Lim charts the city's growing rumblings and demonstrations. Then she takes us to this extraordinary moment [17.19–18.19, Ep 5]:

> *One day, I interview some sign painters… a secret collective that makes eight-storey-high protest signs that they hang from the territory's tallest mountains. It's the day before China's national day celebrations… high up on a rooftop, they're painting a really offensive sign. In Cantonese, it basically reads: fuck your national day celebrations.*
>
> *I'm sitting on the sidelines watching.*
>
> *Eventually I can't bear it. I stand up, pick up a paintbrush, and join in. I know I've crossed a line. I've become a participant. A protester.*

> *And I can't deny it… I feel the old King pushing me on, urging me to use my words. It feels powerful. I imagine the young woman from the Lennon Tunnel seeing the banner. I feel the power of the words viscerally… in a way that I hadn't before.*

When I first heard this, I could scarcely believe it. A journalist had JOINED IN a protest?

This was huge: a breach of journalistic ethics to some, a heroic standing on principle to others. Had I heard right? I rewound. Yes, not only had she done this, she acknowledged that she had crossed a line. Mentally, I cheered: I was with the underdog in this struggle, and so, clearly, was Louisa Lim. But as a listener, I felt short-changed. The moment almost passed me by.

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In the production phase, you carefully assemble and distil your raw material: choreograph interview, actuality and music and hone script and delivery to achieve maximum synergistic engagement with the listener. This is the ultimate realisation of your story and ideally, the production team strives to finesse each element so that they are all working together to optimal effect. In this instance, bizarrely, there was no pause after 'I joined in', to let that radical action land. The narration continued without a beat, par by par.

From the start of the scene, understated music builds mild tension. That aligns with Lim's script—but after 'I joined in', listeners need time to absorb its significance. A resonant music bridge, in the clear, would have emphasised the moment, let it sink in. Under 'I've become a participant', there is a tonal change, but the mix ultimately does not allow the whole scene to 'breathe' and settle in the listener's mind.

Another option would have been to have a producer interview Lim about this transgressive or liberating decision, seeking to have her reflect, three years later, on what that choice meant for her commitment (or not) to objective reporting. A probing conversation could have encouraged Lim to divulge some of the swirling, paradoxical emotions we sense in her response, but never fully share. Instead, we segue to actuality of the escalating protests. It feels like a missed opportunity to shift from polished presenter persona to moving human storytelling. 'I feel the power of the words viscerally', Lim says. But because she is doing Tell, not Show, we are kept at one remove.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE and CRAFTING

Xi Jinping was born in 1953, four years after Mao Tse Tung established the communist state of China. Condensing seven decades of Xi's life and contextualising it within the huge political, social and cultural milestones that have framed China's modern history is a mammoth ask, in any medium. Both *Prince* and *Dictator* rise well to the task, adopting a clearly-delineated thematic structure: *Prince*'s eight episodes are roughly chronological, while *Dictator* has four pithily-titled ones. The first, 'Live in a Cave', traces Xi's early years, 'from being sent to a cave to do manual labour during the Cultural Revolution, to his dark family history'. The second, 'Order a Crackdown', looks at his anti-corruption campaign and

human rights abuses. The third, ‘Create a Personality Cult’, examines increased propaganda and censorship under Xi. The fourth, ‘Build a Superpower’, takes us up to date with Xi’s ambitions and influence today. Tellingly, each episode has a sub-tagline that focuses on the host: Yan tries to get back into China, wrestles with quarantine, deals with media censorship and flees China to avoid possible arrest.

Prince makes much weightier use of archive and interview than *Dictator*. It features an impressive range of commentators, from old China hands (journalists, diplomats and officials) to contemporaneous voices such as Xi’s brother and father, recorded in official documentaries. A sublime moment opens episode two. It is the late 1990s and Xi’s (second) wife, a popular singer called Peng Liyuan, is being interviewed on a Hong Kong talk show. Wong sets up the clip:

> *The host says to her: It must be hard for the man you married! I bet most people only know him as Peng Liyuan’s husband. A lot of men wouldn’t be able to handle that.*

Peng Liyuan graciously demurs, saying ‘I wouldn’t marry someone who I really felt was beneath me’. Wong continues: ‘Watching the clip makes me wonder—why did she think that man was Xi Jinping?’ It’s a real jolt: how DID this man go from a political family fallen into disfavour, to the most powerful man in the world? It’s also an excellent set-up for the coming episode, a clever use of sound that has previously entertained us with a clip of Xi being peed on by his infant daughter in another TV show. Both reveal a little-seen human side of the enigmatic Xi, a lode Wong continues to mine over her five-hour show.

Wong buttresses her unfolding picture of Xi with telling personal interviews. In episode five we meet Eric Liu, a former censor of the Chinese internet turned expat whistle-blower. He paints a sobering picture of the increasing authoritarianism that governed the popular Chinese social media platform, Weibo. ‘Every day, unethical and inhumane things would happen and I'd be forced to cover them up by censoring them. I felt I really couldn’t take it anymore’, Liu explains. ‘The list of words deemed sensitive is always changing, depending on what’s trending online; even words that seem innocuous, like “walk” or “disagree”’ can be banned’, Wong tells us. ‘A student was jailed for six months after tweeting a picture comparing Xi to Winnie the Pooh.’

In episode six we hear from a man called Abduweli Ayup, a poet, linguist and teacher from Xinjiang, home to about 12 million Uyghurs. He and his young daughter live in Norway now as refugees, and the episode opens with a beguiling audio scene, as he tries to teach her their native tongue. The girl is recalcitrant, not wanting to have to learn yet another language. His response, eloquent and heartfelt, sets up the emotional stakes for the repression the episode explores, in which Ayub will describe his incarceration, torture and indoctrination. ‘This is the language of love, not the language of school, not the language of your daily life. This is the language of love between us.’

Strong interviews, deployed in these three shows, are the spine of most narrative podcasts. When they are sourced from good ‘talent’ (people who have something important or useful to say and who can say it convincingly), conducted to reveal insights, polished via edits and carefully crafted so as to advance the story, such interviews add considerable heft.

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Yan has her 'scoop' moments too. In episode two, she interviews a Swedish human rights activist who was imprisoned in China (along with his girlfriend) for 23 days and had to sign a forced confession (that he had breached Chinese law) to get them both out. He recounts how his grovelling apology on state television was stage-managed: 'sit straighter, speak slower, look more sombre'. His Chinese colleague was jailed for three years. Yan also tracks down the ex-husband of one of China's richest women, Whitney Duan (also known as Duan Weihong), who disappeared in 2017, two years after he left China with their young son to live in the UK. Desmond Shum, now living in Oxford, is afraid to let their son visit China. 'It's never one person goes down; it's a cleansing, always it's a cleansing', he tells Yan. In 2021 Shum got a call from Duan out of the blue. She asked him not to publish his imminent book (*Red Roulette*) exposing corruption in China. 'Classic Beijing, weaponising your family to get what they want', says Yan, characteristically not mincing her words. 'In this case, for Desmond to shut up.' In the final episode, Yan interviews former Prime Minster of Australia Kevin Rudd, China expert, Mandarin speaker and smooth talker, a surprise omission from Wong's podcast.

Louisa Lim also interviews a wide range of characters in her attempt to understand the King of Kowloon and his art. Some are well fleshed out, like Joel Chung, an acolyte or 'regent', who visited the King weekly for 16 years, and is a prominent collector of his art. Lim paints a memorable word picture: 'Joel Chung is tiny, stylish, eccentric… wearing thick, black, perfectly circular spectacles. His attitude to the King is that of a subject to his monarch.' In episode two we meet 'probably Hong Kong's best known fashion designer', William Tang. He comes after a taut, terrific section on Hong Kong's history of British rule: Lim excels at this kind of reportage and in portraying the recent pro-democracy protests.

But now, the script performs a sudden about turn, from the ending of the colonial era in 1997, to a fashion show.

> *[Ep 2, 17.06] In June 1997 just weeks before Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule, the King undergoes a further transition of his own. This old man with his filthy vests and stinky socks is suddenly a most unlikely fashion muse. The inspiration for the most memorable fashion collection in Hong Kong history.*
>
> *William Tang: No-one will really remember the collections, they remember collection, except King of Kowloon.*
> *LL: Of all the designers in Hong Kong?*
> *WT: Of all.*
>
> *That's William Tang. He's probably Hong Kong's best known fashion designer. He's in his sixties, but when we meet at a crowded coffee shop, I almost miss him… he looks decades younger.*

The section with Tang runs for about four minutes. At one level, it's a fascinating insight into how art, pop culture and politics can collide. Tang had grown up seeing the King's words on his city's streets, Lim tells us, and returning after studying in Canada, was amazed to see the old man was still going strong. 'I couldn't believe after all these years, he was still so

influential… he was everywhere! So I thought Wow! That's really Hong Kong to me. That's really Hong Kong.' As Lim narrates:

> *For his last fashion show under British rule, Tang devotes his entire collection to the King of Kowloon. An arch daubed with the King's characters dominates the catwalk. The models wear evening dresses silk-screened with the King's graffiti, layered over black trousers. It's urban, streetwise, defiant and utterly modern, but with traditional Chinese elements. It's also the epitome of Hong Kong's identity—appearing at the exact moment it's on the cusp of disappearing.*
>
> *The very last dress in his show, the finale of the whole show, has tiny, intricate pleats—and a train the entire length of the catwalk, all covered in the King's crooked characters. It's exquisite.*

This remarkable imagery is not served well by Lim's narration, which, apart from the warmly endorsing 'It's exquisite', has the enunciating tone of a current affairs report rather than someone describing a hugely symbolic and provocative moment. It is also difficult to discern Tang's words some of the time. This is partly because of the noisy café background, and partly due to his Chinese accent and intonation. Culturally-diverse voices are absolutely critical to all of these podcasts about China, and a strong point they share is that we hear a range of Cantonese, Mandarin and other languages, replete with varieties and inflections, in voice-over/translation and in English. But given that the podcasts are aimed at English-speaking audiences, sometimes a speaker will require finessing for Anglophone ears.

There are various ways to address this. One is to use only the clearest sections of a recording: e.g. Tang's intro, *No-one will really remember the collections, they remember collection, except King of Kowloon* could have been shaved to *No-one will really remember the collections.* The words 'they remember collection' are extraneous and while the phrase 'King of Kowloon' is desirable, it's hard to hear. The purpose of the clip is to introduce Tang and that is served by the first line alone.

Another option is to 'float' the voice in and around Lim's paraphrasing /reinforcing narration, rather than use a big unrelieved chunk as below. Interesting as the content looks on the page here, its full force is missing on a first hearing. And when listeners cannot hear, they tend to lose focus, tune out and at worst, turn off.

> *WT: I didn't want to cut it because it's just too beautiful. It's a long story. It's like how the Cantonese say—yut put bou gam cheung—it's like one roll of fabric. It's exactly like the handover, it's so complicated, it's very difficult to explain. So that was the last dress. And people gone crazy about it. And that became the headlines on all the newspapers. It was on the front page.*

Tang now provides a strong twist: his family, one of the five great clans of Hong Kong, are in fact the legitimate owners of the part of Kowloon to which the King has laid claim. They've occupied this land for over a thousand years. Lim ends the episode by spinning this new information into her increasingly tangled narrative web:

> *Knowing William Tang's family history sheds a different light on his collection. It might not be an intentional message, but through it, the man who would be King*

is making a nod to his pretender. Both are equally dispossessed. My search for the truth into the king's claims might be over for now, but his hold on me isn't.

Lim goes down new paths in the remaining four episodes 'like a Russian doll of searches. Every time I think I've found what I'm after, it sets me off in a whole new direction,' she tells us. Her script carefully ties her exploration of the King to her quest to understand 'Hong Kongers… and the identity they've constructed for themselves'. But the synthesis feels forced. The epic struggle by Hong Kongers to withstand relentless authoritarianism and the heroism of proponents of democracy are vividly portrayed, Lim sounding increasingly horrified. But the testimony of the motley array of characters who comment on the King begins to merge and backtrack. Even when Lim scores an interview, on the phone to Belgium, with the King's daughter and her husband, it is strangely flat. There is no catharsis, no small, meaningful moment that makes sense of a life—except the thesis that the artist became mentally ill as a result of an early car accident. In a sense, the King remains as enigmatic in his small 'territory' as that other unstoppable force, Xi Jinping, is in his vast empire.

Ending a serialised narrative podcast is a big call.

Ending a serialised narrative podcast is a big call. Listeners have invested a lot of time and hopefully, emotion in your story, so they need to feel some sense of resolution. Unlike the true-crime genre, which gets pilloried on social media by fans annoyed at the lack of a conclusive ending to a whodunnit, premium investigative journalism podcasts such as these can opt for a more reflective or nuanced finale.

The King of Kowloon builds gradually to a close. Throughout the series, Lim has played with the theme of disappearance, as both a physical (the expunging by authorities of the King's art) and symbolic (the loss of civic and democratic freedoms) act. In the last episode, we learn that a collector of the King's art, Joel Chung, has brought both aspects together, uncovering and repainting some of the King's public works as a kind of homage. 'I use a term in Chinese—*xianling*, he tells Lim. 'It's like a reincarnation. Like rebirth after death.' In fact, Lim tells us, it means 'a ghost making its presence felt'.

This leads poetically to a coda on Hong Kong's capacity for reinvention. An artist, Kacey Wong, who designed the King's exhibition catalogue back in the year of the handover, 1997, gives an incognito TED talk in Vienna in 2019. In a clip, he declares 'my city is dying… it's at war with a much more powerful force than ours. It's a war on culture.' His stance is criticised in the official Chinese press. Kacey's days are numbered, as he tells Lim.

When I saw that article, then I understood my script is already written by the Chinese Communist Party. My crime is already written. And my crime will be collusion with foreign forces. If I stay in Hong Kong, I would not have a chance to defend myself properly.

Kacey escapes to the West, but he makes a video before he goes. We hear him singing, a capella:

Let's say goodbye with a smile, dear
Just for a while dear

It's the opening of Vera Lynn's sentimental wartime ballad, *We'll Meet Again*. The song plays in the background as Lim describes Kacey at the Hong Kong waterfront, looking at the harbour, tears in his eyes. Then he's dancing, alone, in his empty studio. As Kacey sings the immortal words, 'we'll meet again', Lim asks him why that song, which seems an odd choice, not a particularly Hong Kong one. His reply is sober and thought-provoking.

> *I want to remind everybody that this is a war on Hong Kong culture. That's why I've chosen a wartime song. If we understand the context back then, she was saying to the soldiers heading to the frontline of World War Two. And those soldiers, these British soldiers, probably will not come back. So I can see myself kind of like that. I will leave Hong Kong and I probably will not come back.*

The song is reprised by a wistful accordion instrumental version, over which Kacey and Lim muse on loss. Kacey links it back to our eponymous subject: 'the King of Kowloon became this open source for reinterpretation and reinvention', he tells Lim. 'You need to preserve the culture, create and to recreate. And the King of Kowloon is that open source for everybody to recreate Hong Kong.' Lim mines this rich metaphor, throwing down her own gauntlet of protest in a rousing finale.

> *The ghost of the King had guided me over the years. I'd started with such a small aim—to find out whether the land had ever been his. But it turned out that wasn't important. He led me to people I'd never have otherwise met. And they taught me what the King taught them—just how many ways there are to tell Hong Kong's story.*
>
> *There's more to it than the top-down, state-sponsored version of Hong Kong's past, told by its colonisers. This is my personal story of Hong Kong and of the King. Telling that story is in itself an act of resistance. An act that probably means I can't ever return.*
>
> *And this podcast: It's MY wall of dispossession. My own story of Hong Kong.*

Music

> *Which will always be one of persistence and reinvention.*

After ten seconds of the majestic closing theme, Lim rolls the credits. It's a satisfying end to a podcast that had many memorable moments. The series left me feeling informed and concerned at an intellectual level for the citizens of Hong Kong, but rarely moved—perhaps if Lim had been able to find a less declamatory, more confiding tone, I would have been drawn in more.

The Xi-focused podcasts also reached a finale, but through very different approaches. After building tension that suggests she may be detained, *Dictator* host Sophia Yan boards a plane, complete with exit stamp and no apparent minders/snatchers around. As the PA prepares passengers for take-off (a common but effective use of actuality), she (seemingly) ad libs her thoughts on this momentous moment, ending a decade as a China-based correspondent.

> *One thing I realised doing this pod: we don't know where the red lines are anymore. This is not the country I came to in 2012. China has changed in ways*

> *nobody could have predicted. Y'know it's frankly crazy that a country this powerful, of this size, of this influence, that we really know very little about it. And we know even less about the guy in charge. Because for all the work I've done here over the last ten years, for all the work of my amazing fellow-journalists in the China press corps, there's still a lot we just don't know. And we don't know because China blocks access.*
>
> *So, I really wonder, what are we missing? Maybe it'll be like when the [Berlin] Wall fell. Maybe someday there will be a moment like that for China. Maybe then I and the rest of the world will have a chance to know.*

These urgent and heartfelt ruminations round out the very personal sense we had of accompanying Yan on a physical journey back to China, her private experiences a counterpoint to a public turning-point in Chinese affairs. It's a satisfying near-ending. A short music bridge leads to a broader tie-up of loose ends:

> *My hopes aren't high that change will happen anytime soon. After I left, the big party congress finished and Xi got his historic third term. And that's not all. He ejected his predecessor Hu Jintao from the stage, in front of a carefully selected coterie of press. Nobody knows why—but it was humiliating and very symbolic: the New Guard literally ushering out the Old Guard. He also stacked the elite Politburo standing committee with loyalists, getting rid of any possible rivals. That means no potential successor and no threat to his reign. He's finally done it…*

Music fanfare:

> *Dictator Xi JinPing!*

A short postscript explains that the team put all the podcast's allegations to Chinese officials and got a stock response, pointing them to Xi's Congress speech. Yan recaps it, concluding it's 'heavy on ideology and light on policy'. Credits then roll. A punchier finale might have been to let the closing music hang longer (5–10 seconds) after 'Dictator Xi JinPing!', a declarative moment which takes us to the emotional and narrative climax the podcast title has been building towards all along. After that more lasting music bridge, during which we can absorb this key utterance—Xi's assumption as dictator!—now is the time to roll credits, and place the informational backgrounder about the official response post-credits, to be what it sounds like: a postscript to the story proper.

The Prince ends in a very different register. Unlike Yan, Wong has not had the chance to report much from inside China; instead, her podcast has relied heavily on well-assembled and -researched archive and interview, and on her 'ownership' of the material, via a confident, unambiguous script. She has sought to parlay the personal (a cleaner's husband left to die of Covid—'Better to let a man die at home that defy party orders', she explains, with irony) with the Big Picture throughout. Now, to wrap this vast survey of a people and their fearsome new leader, she zooms in. Her focus is on Shanghai, whose 25 million residents suffered a particularly harsh lockdown in early 2022. So often we talk about China in terms of mega-numbers: populace, landmass, economy. It's true, of course, that this is where its influence and power reside. But China is also a country of ordinary individuals, with hopes, dreams, beating hearts. After epic tales of famine and forced marches, socialist zeal and class traitors,

tigers and flies, massive growth and steely repression, this is where we land, at an impromptu street party:

> *In the final days of the city-wide lockdown, residents of Yanqing Road gathered in the street, and they sang.*

The song starts underneath narration and is briefly heard in the clear.

> *It's nighttime in the video. The scene is illuminated by a streetlight—soft, and yellow. Most of the few dozen people are masked, not standing too near each other. They've formed a semi-circle around a keyboard player. There are adults, children, pets. Two people sit together on a skateboard, rocking side to side to the music. The song was a charity single from the 1980s—the Chinese-speaking world's version of "We Are the World" and "Do They Know It's Christmas?"* [16] *It's called: "Tomorrow Will Be Better."*

[More song*]*

> *But will tomorrow be better? And for who? Like the many China correspondents who were kicked out before me, I'm moving on. After this podcast comes out, I'm getting on a plane to Singapore. My new beat will be Southeast Asia. This series might be the last bit of China journalism I do for a long time.*
>
> *People in China don't have this easy option. Xi Jinping's political project is about protecting the many in China at the expense of the few, no matter the cost. And only the Chinese Communist Party, he believes, is up to the task. In Xi's view, only the party should be allowed to decide what the needs of the many are.*
>
> *But maybe you're a Uyghur like Abduweli, or an idealistic university student. Or perhaps you're just unlucky enough to be in the wrong city at the wrong time, like Jin Feng [the cleaner] and her husband. It's not hard to end up on the wrong side of that line—or at least come dangerously close—sometimes without even realising it.*

[More singing]

> *As neighbours in Shanghai sang, red and blue lights were flashing just outside the video's frame. Police had arrived. But they didn't intervene. Online, social media users would later commend the officers for their restraint.*
>
> *They let the song finish before telling everyone to go home.*

Music ends. Roll credits.

It's a superb climax. We feel for these people, for we know the reprieve is temporary.

[16] Video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrN35wP11z4

CONCLUSION

While strong sound, craft, characters, script and structure can all add immensely to a narrative podcast, the most important factor in engaging listeners is undeniably the STORY at its heart: put simply, what happens. *The Prince, How To Become A Dictator* and *The King of Kowloon* all *shape* story deftly for an episodic audio medium. But *The King of Kowloon* does not have quite the lean-in story chops as the others. Yes, the King is an intriguing figure, a compulsive mark-maker who intersects with a fascinating historical time and place: Hong Kong before and after its handover to China. But perhaps because we never meet him, even through archive (the sound of him using a disinfectant spray in a TV ad is the nearest we get), he remains two-dimensional, a mystery even to his own family. We don't care enough about him for a biographical portrait to be satisfying, and the broader symbolic importance of his artistic role is at times sketched too didactically. What Lim does make tantalising is the precarious future of Hong Kong and its risk of being subsumed by China.

The story subject of the other two podcasts, Xi Jinping, unequivocally affects us all. We need to know what makes this man tick and where he is likely to take China: his attitude to geopolitics, the economy, health, human rights, communications and democracy. Both podcasts provide informed analysis, but we've heard plenty of that before. Where they really shine is in bringing to life tiny personal moments that put flesh on Xi's bones. This is not just a potted history of China; it's a deep dive into the machinations and manoeuvrings that saw Xi emerge on top. Learning how he did it ('what happened'), through these podcasts, is like getting Important History You Should Know served up with a generous dollop of delicious gossip.

The final factor in a narrative podcast's impact can be the clincher: the host's presence, as writer, interpreter and guide. The personalised host voice, which I have argued here can be a strikingly positive factor, can also be considered in the light of pressing debates about trust in media. Of course a charismatic podcast host can use their presence for 'good' (e.g. public interest values) or for nefarious means (conspiracy and disinformation, or blatant propaganda). As Heiselberg and Have warn, 'the ability to persuade listeners also comes with great responsibility.' [17]

Subjectivity need not be a dirty word in journalism.

But in a world where crimes inspired by hate speech against racial and other minorities are fanned and facilitated by some corners of the media, even bastions of traditional journalism are rethinking what constitutes fair and balanced coverage. Two eminent US journalists and academics, Leonard Downie and Andrew Heyward, who together have some six decades of experience as cutting edge journalists, recently published a report, 'Beyond Objectivity'. After consulting with 75 news leaders, their report offers 'a fresh vision for how to replace outmoded "objectivity" with a more relevant articulation of journalistic standards'. This might sound innocuous, but coming from journalists who hail from the Watergate era and its long-held sanctity of impartiality in news coverage, it is quite the game-changer. Younger journalists have already shown outspoken support for radical action to increase diversity in media, actively seeking to include representative and minority voices among reporters, across race, gender, disability, sexuality, identity and socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. See for example *The View From Somewhere: undoing the myth of objectivity in*

[17] Heiselberg & Have, p.14

journalism, a book and podcast by independent award-winning journalist Lewis Raven Wallace.[18]

Subjectivity, then, need not be a dirty word in journalism. On the contrary, it can be an influential force, if not for 'good', at least for greater understanding. Well-executed narrative podcasts where the host employs an authentic and personal voice can apprise audiences not just of the facts, but of the emotional truth of an event or issue. Podcasts can touch the heart and get through to the head—the right combination, well executed, can be one of the most powerful forms of storytelling there is.

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[18] *The View From Somewhere* podcast was reviewed in *RadioDoc Review (Boynton 2020)*. Wallace is a transgender journalist and activist, who 'was fired from his job as a national reporter for public radio for speaking out against "objectivity" in coverage of Trump and white supremacy… Using historical and contemporary examples—from lynching in the nineteenth century to transgender issues in the twenty-first—Wallace offers a definitive critique of "objectivity" as a catchall for accurate journalism. He calls for the dismissal of this damaging mythology in order to confront the realities of institutional power, racism, and other forms of oppression and exploitation in the news industry.' (University of Chicago Press book blurb).

SIOBHÁN MCHUGH is a multi-award-winning narrative podcast producer, consultant, critic, author and academic who has won seven gold medals at New York Festivals for podcasting co-productions. She is consulting producer on *The Greatest Menace*, a queer investigative journalism/history podcast about a gay prison experiment, described as 'Australia's *S-Town*.' It won a Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism (Australian Pulitzer equivalent), Best Social Justice Podcast at New York, Signal Best Documentary Award (US) and a slew of other accolades. Siobhán co-produced with *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne hit podcasts *Phoebe's Fall*, *Wrong Skin* (the clash of Indigenous custom and power politics in remote Australia) and *The Last Voyage of The Pong Su* (how a North Korean cargo ship dumped 150 kilos of heroin on an Australian beach). Siobhán's book, *The Power of Podcasting: telling stories through sound* (Columbia University Press, 2022) is described by acclaimed podcaster Marc Fennell (*Stuff the British Stole*) as 'packed with useful insights and ideas—the most in-depth guide to the best audio storytelling around the world.' Her academic articles on podcasting and the affective power of sound are published in anthologies by Routledge and Oxford (forthcoming) and by journals such as *The Radio Journal* and *Oral History Review*. Siobhán is founding director of the Hub for Innovation in Podcasting (HIP) and Founding Editor of *RadioDoc Review*, published at the University of Wollongong, where she is Honorary Associate Professor in Journalism. She has given keynotes and masterclasses on making narrative podcasts in China, Vietnam, Europe and the US, at the Global Editors Network 2015-2019 and at the 2022 Sydney Writers' Festival.

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Six episodes, 26-31mins, RN Presents, ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) 2022
Series reported and written by Louisa Lim.
Executive Producer: Sophie Townsend
Supervising Producer: Kirsti Melville
Original music, sound design and mixing: Russell Stapleton
Studio production: Elizabeth Kulas
Script editors: Michael Dulaney and Clare Rawlinson
Fact checking and production assistance: Wing Kuang
https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/rn-presents/disappearance/13945078

2. The Prince
Eight episodes, 32-41 mins, *The Economist*, UK, 2022.
Series written and hosted by Sue-Lin Wong.
Producers: Sam Colbert, Claire Read, Barclay Bram, Sue-Lin Wong
Sound Design: Weidong Lin
Music: Darren Ng
Executive Producer: John Shields
https://www.economist.com/theprincepod

3. How To Become A Dictator
Four episodes, 35-41mins, *The Telegraph*, UK, 2022
Series written and hosted by Sophia Yan.
Producers Venetia Rainey and Joleen Griffin
Sound Design Giles Gear
Executive Producer: Louisa Wells
Commissioning Editor Louis Emmanuel
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/how-to-become-a-dictator/id1573219640

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