

Intimacy, inc.

By Robert S. Boynton, New York University

Book Review of:

Siobhan McHugh, [The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022)

Mia Lindgren and Jason Loviglio (eds), [The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies](#) (New York: Routledge, 2022)

In 2001, software developer Dave Winer sent a *Grateful Dead* song to a friend, using a new version of his RSS feed. He had written the code to provide a “free, democratizing force, available to any individual”¹, in the utopian spirit of the early days of the internet. That fall, Apple released the first iPod and opened the iTunes Store in 2003. In 2004, a *Guardian* writer considered the phrases “audio blogging” and “GuerillaMedia” before settling on “podcast” as a name for the audio files so many had begun listening to. By 2005, the word “podcast” had been searched 57 million times,² and later that year Apple CEO Steve Jobs called podcasting “the next generation of radio”³. In 2007, Apple released the iPhone, which combined the communicating function of a phone with the listening function of an iPod. Apple began pre-installing the Podcasts app on its phones in 2014, and that same month the show *Serial*—as of this writing, still the most listened to podcast in history—launched its first season.

The details of this history matter because the way one describes podcasting’s “birth” depends on whether one views it through a technological or a cultural lens. In other words, is podcasting merely radio distributed via more efficient technology, or is it a new form of expression. Was podcasting born in 2001, with Dave Winer’s RSS feed, or in 2007 when the iPhone made listening to podcasts easy? In 2004, when a journalist coined the term? Or in 2014, with the success of *Serial*?⁴ Depending on how you answer these questions, “podcasting” (audio produced for the purpose of being consumed on a listener’s schedule, usually in private) is somewhere between nine and 22 years old—no longer a child, but hardly a mature adult. Podcasting has enjoyed some early success, and has, as parents say, “potential”. Too old to be “new”, it is too new to be “over”, as some recent accounts have argued.⁵ I think it is fair to say that podcasting is somewhere between its late adolescence and its early adulthood.

It is time for members of the communications-industrial complex to think hard about how podcasting fits in the culture. Should podcasts be streamed or summoned up individually on one’s podcast app? Each system has different economic implications and will encourage and discourage different kinds of ambitions. We are at an inflection point in the short history of podcasting where the academy can make a real contribution.

Routledge’s new *Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies* is a follow up to its *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, published in 2000. In hindsight, we know that the *Reader* came out at precisely the moment when podcasting began to undermine radio’s audio

¹ *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p 100

² McHugh, p 101

³ [Press Release](#), “Apple Takes Podcasting Mainstream: Discover, Subscribe, Manage & Listen to Podcasts Right in iTunes 4.9,” June 28, 2005

⁴ As Siobhan McHugh writes in *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, “Podcasting’s short history falls into two categories: pre- and post-Serial.”

⁵ [“Podcasting Hasn’t Produced A New Hit in Years.”](#) Lucas Shaw, *Bloomberg*, January 9, 2022

hegemony. The assumption that podcasting emerged from radio was obvious at the time. Since then, the relationship has shifted, and one imagines Routledge's next attempt at audio canon-formation will require two separate volumes. The vexed relationship between radio and podcasting is the new collection's fault line. The first chapter's title, "But Is It Radio?", sets the tone, unintentionally questioning the project's presuppositions. What if, despite their sonic and technical similarities, radio and podcasting are entirely separate endeavours, fuelled by different aesthetic, professional and economic logics? What if the transition from radio to podcasting is a paradigm shift, the new medium posing challenges different from radio and closer to those faced by journalism, literature and film?

At 482 pages, the new Routledge *Companion* tries to paper over these questions. For all the editors' talk of decentering "technological categorization, in favor of cultural forms and practices"⁶, the collection's leitmotif is a technological question: are radio and podcasting the same? The collection fits neatly under the rubric of "radio studies"; of the 46 chapters, only seven of their titles refer to "podcasting". One wonders whether it is still intellectually fruitful to dwell on the radio/podcast divide. Although there may be sound disciplinary reasons for continuing to do so, it isn't a discussion that seems to have much relevance to the audio world beyond academia. There it is understood that audio exists on a continuum, with live radio on one end, time-shifted radio in the middle and authentic podcasting at the other.

Some of the essays are aware of this tension and suggest ways to resolve it. As Tiziano Bonini argues in "Podcasting as a Hybrid Cultural Form Between Old and New Media," podcasting was born twice. "The first time as an extension of earlier radio practices... and the second time when it set out on a path that enabled the resources it had developed to acquire an institutional legitimacy that acknowledged their specificity."⁷ Bonini classifies podcasting as "a specific cultural form", whose discrete, hybrid nature he distinguishes from radio. "Radio is flow and podcasting is text", he suggests, using the rhetoric of literary theory. Podcasting is less a "stable ecosystem" than "an evolving network of different clusters of actors (producers, listeners, platforms, distribution technologies, and internet infrastructures) competing with each other". When considered as a "text", podcasting's advantages become clearer; a text is a defined, stable entity that can be analysed in its own terms. As such, Bonini and others argue that it has revitalised several forms that have languished on radio, such as the sound documentary and audio experimentation.⁸ Podcasting has recovered some radio forms that may no longer thrive in a "flow" economy, like long-form interviews or quirky shows like "My Dad Wrote a Porno" "What is striking about podcasting is the sense that many of the medium's biggest hits are formats that traditional radio institutions (or environments) would have rejected", writes Richard Berry in "What is a Podcast? Mapping the technical, cultural, and sonic boundaries between radio and podcasting".⁹ In this reading, podcasting revives the traditions that radio no longer supports; it re-invents radio by breaking with it.

That one of podcasting's greatest strengths is its capacity for "intimacy" has become a cliché. And, like most clichés, it contains an element of truth. But how does its intimacy differ from that experienced via radio? On a material level, people tend to listen to podcasts in a distinctive way. "iPods, smartphones and noise-cancelling earbuds have made the human head its own audio cocoon. Every moment a Driveway Moment", writes Jason Loviglio in "The Traffic

⁶ "Introduction," *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 1

⁷ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 26

⁸ "But is it Radio? New forms and voices in the audio private sphere," Michele Hilmes, p. 10

⁹ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 401

In Feelings: The Car-Radio Assemblage”.¹⁰ In addition, Bonini argues that the quality of podcasting’s intimacy is “more complex than earlier concepts of intimacy and has much more potential to generate sympathy”.¹¹ Michele Hilmes describes this complexity, likening it to the atmosphere of a church confessional: “a space where intimate details of life are revealed in whispers in a darkened cubicle that obscures its occupants from each other and protects the identities of the individuals on both sides of the barrier”. There is something slightly elicited, even titillating, about these kinds of podcasts. “We are invited eavesdroppers”¹², she writes.

Another cliché is that podcasts are dominated by true crime. This isn’t so much wrong, as a shallow understanding of the best true-crime podcasts. And it isn’t surprising, since true crime has long been a staple of books, magazines, television and movies; in a 2022 poll, 35 per cent of Americans say they consume true-crime content at least once per week, including 24 per cent who say they consume it multiple times per week.¹³ The first season of Sarah Koenig’s *Serial* re-investigated the murder of Hae Min Lee, raising doubts about the guilt of Adnan Sayed, who was convicted of her murder in 2000. The 13 episodes have been downloaded over 300 million times and won a 2014 Peabody Award. Its combined popularity and prestige inspired a lot of imitators, who hoped that true-crime podcasts guaranteed success.

But this calculation stemmed from a misreading of *Serial*, which is as much a work of true crime as *Hamlet* is an academic study of adolescent angst, which is to say that one can look at it that way, but it misses the point. *Serial* is nothing like the kind of *Law & Order* true-crime-inspired procedurals that are a television staple. The brilliance of *Serial* was in the writing, the plotting and the script¹⁴. Koenig & Co. are some of the most seductive storytellers in the business. The first episode begins with Koenig describing the challenge of memory itself: “For the last year, I’ve spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999...” As much as *Serial* is about who murdered Hae Min Lee, it is a work of epistemological investigative reporting, an exploration about how—or whether—we can know anything for sure. True crime before *Serial* largely took a linear narrative approach, teasing the listener with clues before solving the crime in question. For Koenig, the process *is* the story, and the conclusion—any conclusion—isn’t certain. “The Syed case was set in Baltimore, but *Serial* ‘took place’ in Koenig’s thoughts”, writes Neil Verma in “A New Way of Knowing”¹⁵. Verma labels this “recessive epistemology”, by which he means a way of knowing that underscores the impossibility of certainty. It takes a messy podcast to capture the messiness of reality. In this kind of “true crime” story, the pleasure is in following the actors investigating the crime, “an approach that emphasizes structures and narrative framing more than it is a show for exegesis”¹⁶. Its success wasn’t because Koenig found a “good story”, but because she used it as an occasion to explore important philosophical questions. As befits a carefully-crafted work, Verma performs a close “textual” reading. How precisely does *Serial* work? He cites the role sound design plays, specifying the role of “glitch sounds,” “unclues”, “soundscape-forward

¹⁰ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 233

¹¹ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 3

¹² *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 14

¹³ “Half of Americans enjoy true crime, and more agree it helps solve cold cases,” YouGovAmerica [poll](#), January 14, 2022

¹⁴ *Serial*, season one, [transcript](#)

¹⁵ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 182

¹⁶ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 183-4

mixing”. In this way, the best podcasts represent “a return to the roots of radiophonic experience”¹⁷.

This is also the approach taken by Siobhan McHugh in *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*. With her informal, anecdotal style, McHugh represents a kind of podcast-first, back to basics approach. She begins the book by observing that we often underestimate the psychological and emotional appeal of “what sound can do in some deep, subconscious place we all carry within”.¹⁸ In other words, she begins from a place of sheer wonder.

For McHugh, podcasting is a process, not a technology, and much of the book is a lively description of the various podcasts she has produced in Australia. She takes us into the bowels of the production process for *The Last Voyage of the Pong Su*, a 10-episode podcast about a North Korean ship that tried to smuggle heroin into Australia.¹⁹ We see pages of the script, before and after group edits.

She provides a close reading of the 2017 podcast *S-Town*, which she compares to the very best works of literary journalism, declaring it “a contender for aural nonfiction royalty”²⁰ She dissects its techniques, structure and symbolism, examining the podcast in the context of one of William Faulkner’s Southern Gothic landscapes²¹. “With exquisite choreography, the music ends in a crashing coda that adds dramatic resolution. There is an audible sigh from McLemore, exhausted by his own tirade, then, in a starkly contrasting tone, he mutters: ‘I gotta have me some tea’.”²²

McHugh writes as a practitioner with an insider’s understanding of how podcasts are made. More importantly, McHugh considers podcasting as a cultural phenomenon, embedded in the practices of journalism and nonfiction storytelling; the book is audio-first, with little thought to podcasting’s connection to radio or other media. While the book is largely anecdotal and based on her own experience, it brings the reader in the process of creating a podcast, with all the economic and social challenges that entails. If one could produce a hybrid of McHugh’s close-to-the-bone reporting and Routledge’s academic rigour, one might have the perfect podcast primer.

Robert S. Boynton directs NYU's Literary Reportage concentration. He is the author of *The New New Journalism* and *The Invitation-Only Zone: The True Story of North Korea's Abduction Project*, and is writing an intellectual history of American urban literary journalism.

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¹⁷ *The Routledge Companion of Radio and Podcast Studies*, p. 186

¹⁸ *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p. 7

¹⁹ *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p. 183

²⁰ *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p. 132

²¹ *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p. 147

²² *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound*, Siobhan McHugh, p. 145