

RadioDoc Review

Volume 9 • Issue 2 • 2024

2024-10-25

¿Quién mató a Anna Cook? A conversational review

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Abstract

The Chilean podcast *¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?* (Who killed Anna Cook?) tells the story of Anna Cook — a DJ found dead in her home in Santiago in August of 2017 — and those suspected of murdering her. Her death had a significant impact on Chilean society, and her name became a slogan during a series of massive protests that swept the country beginning in 2019. Within a month of the podcast's release, it had been listened to more than 350,000 times. In this review, audio producers and journalists Tomás Uprimny and Charlotte de Beauvoir analyse the podcast in conversation and reflect on its storytelling, sound design and unusual use of fictional hosts.

Keywords

true crime, narrative podcast, serial, fiction, sound design

Recommended Citation

de Beauvoir, C. & Uprimny, T. (2024) “*¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?* A conversational review”, *RadioDoc Review* 9(2). <https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.1494>

One evening in August 2024, audio producers and journalists Tomás Uprimny and Charlotte de Beauvoir sat together and analysed the Chilean podcast *¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?* (Who killed Anna Cook?). The podcast tells the story of Anna Cook — a DJ found dead in her home in Santiago in August of 2017 — and those suspected of murdering her. Her death had a significant impact on Chilean society, and her name became a slogan during a series of massive protests that swept the country beginning in 2019. Within a month of the podcast's release, it reached more than 350,000 plays¹. The following transcript of Charlotte and Tomás's conversation has been translated from Spanish and edited for clarity.

Charlotte: There are a lot of grey areas in the Anna Cook case. Defendants that change their declarations, flawed police work, facts that are open to different interpretations. There are holes in the case, so there's also a lot of space for doubt and speculation. This fuelled the court case itself and the discussion in Chilean society around this death, and it also fuels the podcast's narrative. The podcast exists thanks to these doubts and explores them, but, in the end, its purpose is not to solve the crime, despite its title.

Tomás: What caught me at first was that title. I thought: "Oh, this podcast is really trying to solve a crime." But, as you say, when you start listening, it seems the podcast is not actually looking to answer that question. It's more interested in looking at what happened around the case, how it got there, and its impact on society. And that's at odds with the title. That's why, from the outset, I didn't like the title. I find it too catchy, too much like the gringos' 'whodunnit' podcasts². It gave me the feeling of: "come here, I'm gonna lure you with, with..."

Charlotte: ...with a fake promise.

Tomás: Yes! Then I learned that in the Chilean protests of 2019, this question — "¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?" — became a slogan for the feminist movement. People spray painted graffiti of it on the walls of Santiago. But this context comes late in the podcast, around episode 6 or 7. For a non-Chilean listener, this was not clear until then. I think that they should have included the social impact of the case from the first chapter.

Charlotte: I agree. I'd like to talk about the great diversity of sounds used in the podcast — a plus, in my view. It has two hosts, interviews, field recordings, ambi³,

¹ <https://www.futuro.cl/2023/07/episodio-final-quien-mato-a-anna-cook-revela-pistas-claves-del-caso/>

² Tomás refers here to the many investigative true crime series from the US that focus on suspects, not unlike detective fiction sometimes known as the 'whodunnit'. The term gringos is used in Latin America to refer to North Americans.

³ Ambient sound of the recording location, sometimes also known as atmos or wildtrack.

archival material from radio programmes, WhatsApp voice notes, sound effects, music. I thought the use of all these different narrative tools was very resourceful.

Tomás: True, but sometimes it seems like they were trying to use everything all at once, and it became a kind of frenetic potpourri. I wished I could have heard more often just a single voice, with no other sound layers.

Charlotte: The constant noise made you tired.

Tomás: Yes, I sometimes got the impression that they just wanted to fill the podcast with sounds. But, at the same time, the variety of sounds does help to hold your attention. Your mind wanders less.

Charlotte: Yes, it helps to keep your attention. I didn't feel they were trying to overstuff the narrative. In general, I think this podcast shows a good grasp of audio storytelling. Of course, there are flaws, but overall, I think it's a very creative podcast in terms of "how do I tell this story with sounds," and the use of multiple layers of audio is an important element of this creativity. As is the music. You can tell it was composed for the podcast, and it becomes another narrative tool. It's electronic music, like you'd dance to in a club: something you don't usually hear in podcasts, and even less in true crime podcasts. And it works very well! Of course, in this case, the victim was a DJ...

Tomás: And they use her own music. In the first episode they mention it, and they play an extract of one of Anna's creations. But then it's not clear if the rest of the music —the bumpers, the credits music and so on— is by Anna Cook or not. I was left with that doubt. I think the podcast should have been more explicit about this. And it's a shame, because if one knows from the beginning that all the original music is by Anna Cook, it gives the podcast another dimension. Anyway, I also appreciated the way they used the music.

Charlotte: In episode 10, for example, they mix the untz untz of electronic music with piano notes of Bach, because two of the characters were listening to Bach. I thought it was really beautiful, like a moment of grace in the podcast.

Tomás: Yes, I also liked that Bach thing. In general, I think the music they composed for the podcast gives it a sonic identity. And it also gives us a glimpse into Anna's world. It was risky to use electronic music, but they dared to do it, and it worked out well. I really liked the music from the bumpers and the credits. Some transitions within the episodes were weaker. Sometimes they used strident violins, and it did not sound good. One other criticism: in general, I believe the music would have shined even more if it hadn't had the sound of the heartbeat accompanying it all the time.

Charlotte: That was exasperating! Let's talk about that heartbeat. That thump thump ... thump thump is all over the podcast, not just in the music. It's in every episode, at the foreground or at the background, behind the voices. It's also in every

bumper. In fact, the podcast even starts with the heartbeat. They also split it in two and use a single thump instead of the thump thump, but it's the same sound. The use they make of it is really excessive. Personally, I am strongly against it. Although the heartbeat is a natural sound, it is a sound that one never actually hears because the heart isn't audible from a distance. So, it's artificial to use it. Artificial and clumsy. It's as if the producer wanted to push a feeling in the listener, like: "A strong emotion is coming!" or "Beware, there's a danger!" The other narrative tools used at that moment should be enough to get that feeling across. It's a real narrative clumsiness. Would you mix a very sad violin with the voice of a woman crying? It's the same. It's not necessary, it's repetitive, and it ends up being counterproductive: The sound is so annoying that the listener ends up focusing on it instead of anything else.

Tomás: Agreed. I don't know where this comes from. I wonder at what point the producers said: "We're going to use Anna Cook's music" — which loads the podcast with strong emotions — "and then on top of that, we'll put a heartbeat" — a very emotionally flat sound that overshadows the strength of the music. It's one of the first things you learn, isn't it? It's like the baby steps in podcasting: You try to use a heartbeat sound, and then you realize it's actually what should not be done. And your editor tells you: "No, this doesn't work, it sounds very amateur". The heartbeat is one of the biggest flaws in Anna Cook's podcast, a slip up.

Charlotte: We should talk about the other big flaw of the podcast: technical quality.

Tomás: Audio quality.

Charlotte: Yes. Recording and editing. The sound quality of the interviews is really poor. If you look at it, I think they make every technical mistake one can possibly make when you tape an interview, from low gain level to choosing a location with loud ambient sound. That's what happened with Anna's mother, for instance. She was taped in a street next to a jackhammer! You also find loud reverb, handling noise, mics far away from the interviewees... you name it. And they even commit the unforgivable: using audio that cannot be understood. I noted it in at least three episodes. This is another basic podcast 101 rule: If you can't hear the tape, you ditch it.

Tomás: I don't think they used any professional gear in this production. I looked into it and, apparently, this investigation was not initially intended for podcasting. This option only came later. I think many recordings were done with basic pocket recorders.

Charlotte: Okay, but then when the podcast becomes a reality, you retape the interviews. And it looks like the producers don't want to take responsibility for the poor audio quality of their podcast. At the beginning of each episode, a voice announces the name of the podcast, mentions the investigative work behind it and warns: "Some of the audio is not in optimal quality, but we have decided to play it

as it was originally recorded.” I first figured they were referring to audio they somehow obtained during their investigation, like old recordings of Anna. But then I realised they were talking about their own tapes!

Tomás: Yes. I read an interview with the scriptwriter in which he said they preferred to keep the unique sound of these recordings and the natural sound of their surroundings. It’s a very unfortunate decision. All that noise overshadows the voices.

Charlotte: And, during post-production, they could have fixed some things, such as the lack of gain in the recordings, which eventually generates a loud shhhhh behind some voices. Using fade-ins and fade-out, you can reduce this sensation for the listener, so that that audio doesn’t clash so much with other audio that doesn’t have the same shhhhh. But they didn’t care in the post-production process either.

Tomás: That’s right. You can hear a lot of cuts, too.

Charlotte: I don’t get how podcast producers can pay so much attention to audio and music composition but neglect quality like this. It seems contradictory.

Tomás: Well, there are voices that were carefully taped: the hosts. You can tell they were taped in a studio.

Charlotte: That’s for sure. Their voices sound very clean compared to those of the interviewees. Let’s talk about the hosts now. There’s a lot to say. First: they are fictional characters! I believe I had not heard that before in a non-fiction investigation. In this case, producers made up Diana and Kike, the hosts.

Tomás: They have names? I didn’t realize.

Charlotte: They just mention it in the first episode, if I remember correctly. What I found difficult to understand was Kike’s gender. During the first three episodes I wondered if he was a man. And if he and Diana were a couple.

Tomás: This is unclear at first: Who are they and what is their relationship? Then you get to realize these two women are friends and journalist colleagues who have come together to investigate Anna Cook’s death. But this should have been crystal clear from the first episode.

Charlotte: Each one has a particular point of view in this case, though, this is clear. Kike is the skeptic: At first, she does not want to investigate the case. And later she doubts what Diana intends to demonstrate. Diana is an ultra-feminist who tries to prove the culpability of the three suspects in the case, who are all men.

Tomás: They are very stereotypical. If Kike and Diana were real people, this would be criticised. But using fiction allows this: The listener accepts the stereotypes and the part each host plays in the narrative.

Charlotte: And it’s clear from the beginning they are fictional characters. There’s no deception here. An implicit listening contract is established between the

producers and the audience: Fictional characters are being used as a narrative device to help tell this story, because it's a difficult story to tell. There are a lot of people involved, the timeline is confusing, the story takes many turns. Again, this is a risky narrative bet, but I believe the fiction trick does help. You have the character that asks and the character that sums up and explains...

Tomás: Yes. It allows the producers to anticipate some of the listener's doubts. For instance, in episode 1, they introduce a key character in the story: the person who rented the house where Anna died and sublet her a room. He is called El Gato but he has a name... Raúl something. It was confusing. Then Diana mentions El Gato by his nickname and Kike asks: "So, that's what we're gonna call him?" Diana answers: "Yes, because it helps to follow the story."

Charlotte: That's a good one. Actually, I did identify Kike with the listener. She asks questions one might ask as a listener. In episode 1: "I'm lost, how many were there in the room?" or "Did Anna get quick attention in the hospital?" That kind of question. And Diana treats Kike as she could treat the audience: "Listen," "Focus," "Give me ten minutes and I'll explain." All the way up to a revealing "I need you!"

I noticed another example of how the fictional hosts are key to help narrating the story: in episode 4, when they review Anna's autopsy. Diana obtained the document and introduces it to Kike. She asks her to read it. Kike starts reading, but Diana interrupts: "Not there, below." And so on, several times: "Below." While Kike gets to the part Diana has in mind, the listener gets to learn key context information: Anna's age, her height, a tattoo she had in honour of her aunt. It seems to me a clever way to introduce this context. Because... what are you supposed to do with a 60-plus-page document like the autopsy? In audio narratives it is very difficult to "translate" written documents and use them without losing the listener's attention. Here, they overcame this difficulty in a creative way, thanks to fiction. I kept very attentive during this episode.

Tomás: True. But I also have my doubts regarding the fictionalized hosts. I believe that it can be dangerous to introduce fiction in journalism podcasts because who will take responsibility for what the hosts say if they are made-up characters? Let me give you an example. In episode 8, Diana explains she interviewed a lot of doctors about a key point in the investigation: Semen was found in Anna's mouth after her death. Since Anna was a lesbian, Diana interprets this finding as proof Anna was raped. But she adds that the doctors she interviewed looked strangely at her when she insisted on this point, as if they were doubting her rape thesis. Diana sees something there: rampant male domination in society. This fits perfectly with her character, a feminist who fights for LGBT rights. Now, of course, Diana did not do these interviews; she does not exist. But I would like to know if this really happened, if the doctors gave the real interviewer an odd look, or is this just a

fictional device that helped frame Diana's character? And, from there, what is the limit? Can anything be done with those characters? Is everything ok, because this is fiction, and we cannot criticise what the hosts say, because it is invented anyway? And no one takes responsibility for this.

Charlotte: I can see the credibility risk it represents for you. But this did not bug me. Listening to the podcast, I never wondered what was fiction and what was reality. And I believe that, in this case, the risk they take is justified by what it achieves for the narrative. I see it as an interesting bet, because I also have my objections to the use of the omniscient narrator... that producer voice that is mainly used in nonfiction podcasts. It's all over the place, like some almighty God: I investigated, I interviewed, I picked, I wrote, and I tell. Sometimes, it feels like an obstacle between the story and the audience, and I prefer podcasts with no host, but they are fewer and they're harder to produce. So, the fictional host can be an alternative.

Besides, Kike's character somehow reinforces the credibility of the podcast, because she always doubts what Diana says. What those two characters represent, in my view, is the high polarization in Chile's society, in the context of the cultural war that is being fought there, like in other societies. Diana is clearly more progressive, from her gender perspective. She talks with strength and determination. She's genuinely convinced that one of the three male suspects killed Anna, and she builds up her case against them, one after the other. Kike has no aspiration to change the established order, and she distrusts Diana's position. She plays the devil's advocate and picks up every inconsistency in Diana's thesis. So, this is something else the fiction brings us: the possibility to bring to life Chile's polarization.

Tomás: Yes, but there is a better option. You can also show that with a classic non-fictional narrator. In the end, this is the only honest option. That kind of narrator has the authority to narrate, because he did the investigation. And you can have a second narrator, too, as with the podcast *In the Dark*. They have two hosts, both journalists. One tells the story to the other, who asks questions. I happened to have listened to the last season of *In The Dark*⁴ just before I listened to *¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?*, so afterwards I thought: "Oh, of course, that's what Anna Cook's podcast needed. It would have been better that way."

Charlotte: Mmm... I can see another flaw in the use of fiction. Kike and Diana keep fighting, yes? Because they mirror those two irreconcilable poles in Chile's society... In fact, those fights they have and their somehow toxic relationship fill a lot of narrative space in the podcast. Half of it, maybe? It's like a parallel story that hooks the listener. Now, this also allows the audience to identify with one of the

⁴ In The Dark, The Runaway Princesses: <https://www.newyorker.com/the-runaway-princesses>

poles. As a journalist, I felt more inclined to follow Kike. I guess other listeners, closer to feminist causes, will identify better with Diana. But do you think the producers took sides?

Tomás: It seemed to me they used Diana to dismantle the arguments that had been heard from some feminist groups in Anna's case. In Chile, the podcast was criticised, and I can see how some feminists felt caricatured in this podcast. Diana and Kike are fictional characters, and it's ok that they have their personalities, but it feels like Diana brings it on herself. For instance, she asks rhetorical questions that end up weakening her position, while Kike keeps to the facts. Kike doubts but at some point tries to see the case through Diana's eyes, while Diana is inflexible and goes forward like a bull. There is not much balance in the treatment between the two characters, and this does not work out well for Diana.

Charlotte: Ok. Look, I also believe the producers somehow favour Kike. Between them, the fight escalates and escalates, up to episode 9, when the conflict bursts, and they split. In episode 10, they are not together, but in episode 11, the closing chapter, they get back together, though they can't agree. I wonder if Kike ends up winning the fight. One of them has to win. It feels like Kike manages to convince the audience, in the end, that neither of the three suspects actually killed Anna. Is that what the producers wanted? Here is the other flaw I see in the use of fiction: If you're going to use two characters to bring to life a polarized society, you cannot take sides. You have to keep a neutral position up until the end. Otherwise, you'll shoot yourself in the foot and alienate half of your audience.

Tomás: I also think something else was missing: There are almost no official voices...

Charlotte: A woman from the prosecution is interviewed, right?

Tomás: Yes, but very briefly. The producers got carried away because they implicitly picked sides, and, beyond that, they didn't investigate the investigation. They didn't interview any cops.

Charlotte: It's true; they don't focus on that. They applied themselves to showing the holes in the case, like the broken ribs in Anna's body, which may indicate an assault, but can also be the result of the resuscitation process in the hospital. Anyway, there are other flaws to notice. For example, often, one hears an interview and doesn't know who is talking.

Tomás: This is a serious problem.

Charlotte: I was also left with doubts after I listened to the last episode. How did they get Anna's chats? Did the police interrogate the other suspect that visited El Gato that night? Why do we hear so little about a fourth suspect, the drug dealer? And what about that mysterious text message Anna sent her mother that night, the last one she sent in her lifetime? Yes, many doubts. That last episode is confusing.

But it's a tough story to tell, so I'll give them that. To end with, I'd like to know if you would recommend the podcast.

Tomás: Yes, yes. I believe it has many of the virtues of good podcasts. Above all, it achieves something hard to do in a crime narrative: it brings back the victim. I felt they brought something of Anna's presence alive. She's there, in the podcast, although we almost don't hear her voice. This is kind of magic: being able to bring back someone who's dead.

Charlotte: It's true, Anna's very present in the podcast. You can feel her. I hadn't thought about it, but yes, after listening to the podcast, I can say that I knew her a little: her world, her beliefs, her aspirations... her fights and fusses, as well. Well, I'd also like to recommend the podcast. I wish to highlight the creative job the producers did. The small world of investigative podcasts in Spanish is expanding. This is good news, but as you listen to more and more of these podcasts, you realise they all tend to sound the same: classic non-fiction omniscient narrator, interviews, ready-made music... and that's it. It's an easy solution that is starting to bore me. I believe there is still a lot of space to explore and be creative in audio narratives. So I'd like to recognise the producers of *¿Quién mató a Anna Cook?* for having the courage to be creative, and I recommend their podcast for the pleasure of a novel approach.

Tomás: And for the story itself, as well.

Charlotte: Yes. In the end, we neither know how Anna died nor if someone killed her, but this is not what matters. I'm not sure if knowing exactly what happened would bring the listener much more than the podcast already did.

Tomás: Yes. Justice is important for Anna's mother and for her friends. But, for the listener, what was important was to get to know Anna. And now I feel like I know her.

¿Quién mató a Anna Cook? From Podium Podcast Chile, Original language: Spanish. 11 episodes, June 2023. Script: Rodrigo Fluxá. Winner of Onda 2024 Prize for Best Script. Listen to the podcast: <https://www.podiumpodcast.com/podcasts/-quien-mato-a-anna-cook--podium-os/>

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