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***Narrative Podcasting in an age of Obsession* by Neil Verma: A Review**

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Abstract

Neil Verma's new book, *Narrative Podcasting in an Age of Obsession*, progresses our understanding of podcasting by not only unpacking the aesthetic passions of the medium but also unpacking how audio as a medium is able to combine affect, knowledge and memory. The concepts proposed in the book, like recessive epistemology, mimetic obsession and so on will help researchers, students as well as practitioners develop a critical understanding of narrative podcasts. Even though the book only studies American podcasts, the concepts proposed in the book takes podcast studies a step further and will definitely aid scholars across the globe to further their research in their specific contexts.

Keywords

narrative podcast, aesthetic passion, recessive epistemology, obsession

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As early as 2006, American media theorist Henry Jenkins pointed out that with the rapid growth of the new media industry, the contemporary media landscape is witnessing a profound technological as well as cultural revolution. Being a media scholar from the Global South, I have observed that the rapid advancement in digital technology in the West, as identified by Jenkins, has more or less outpaced classroom learning in many countries in the Global South where these technologies made a late entry, thus largely creating an unequal learning environment. However, in a post pandemic world, where reliance on digital technology became imperative in classroom teaching and learning, regardless of one's geographical location, the gap in adoption of digital technology has lessened relatively between the Global South and the North.

Post pandemic, the lessening of this gap has been most evident in the rapid development of the podcast industry in the Global South. As of 2024, after China and the US, India has emerged as the third largest podcast listening market in the world, according to PWC's Global Media and Entertainment report (2020-2024). In fact, most of the countries in the report belong to the Global South. In such a scenario, Neil Verma's new book *Narrative Podcasting in an Age of Obsession* will help media researchers, practitioners and learners by providing a deeper understanding about the evolution of a new medium like podcasting by analyzing its aesthetics and critically examining the phenomenon of how listening to podcasts transformed into a cultural obsession in America. Although Verma begins his book with the caveat that podcasting is not to be defined as new as he himself and many practitioners believe that it is already old. The book thus steers away from answering 'What is a podcast?', rather the focus of the book is on understanding where podcasting is heading in terms of aestheticization of amnesia, epistemological implications and mapping the phenomenon of obsession.

Verma meticulously studied several thousand episodes of narrative podcasts that were circulated for a period of six years starting from the fall of 2014 till the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020 for writing this book. He studied over 350 American podcasts to underpin his argument about why podcasts were 'obsessed with obsessions'. The book begins with a brief overview of what has been called the golden age of podcasting, where podcasts like *This American Life* and *Serial* became so popular that they influenced the aesthetics of the podcasts that followed. Within an already complex media ecosystem, podcasts quickly went from being niche to becoming mainstream in a matter of a few years. Not only did the podcast creators gain popular success but they also received critical acclaim, making the rapid development of the medium a highly featured issue within the American media discourse.

The book is structured in three parts. The first part of the book focuses on mapping the phenomenon of obsession that narrative podcasters wanted to create and listeners

wanted to participate in. This part also focuses on explaining the forms of obsession and the feeling that is produced with the help of 'surrogate obsessives'. Here Verma expands on his earlier concept of 'surrogate embodiment' (2022, p. 185) in true crime podcasts, to argue that not only does the host embody the setting of their object of obsession but through a surrogate mirror they take part in the process of vicarious obsession, which then serves as a common bridge between the host and his listeners, he calls this process 'surrogate obsessives'. He concludes this part with a discussion on the impact of obsession podcasting and how it became a primary aesthetic response in the creation of narrative podcasts.

The second part of the book begins with an analysis of narrative podcasts as 'structures of knowing', Verma identifies this as one of the central themes that has emerged in his analysis of narrative podcasts. He finds that within narrative podcasts, there is an underlying epistemological quest that is presented as a desire to seek knowledge in many forms, yet the answers are mostly elusive, this is something which Verma has conceptualized as 'recessive epistemology'. The concept of recessive epistemology was earlier proposed by him to analyze a few popular true crime podcasts where 'nobody knows anything' (2022, p. 179). He had then identified a combination of common factors, like the host's preference for periphery or remote locales, structuring 'unclues', glitch sound elements etc. which formed the basis of recessive epistemology. But as this book has focussed on over 350 narrative podcasts, this concept has been further developed theoretically to discuss the desire of the hosts of narrative podcasts to seek knowledge which eventually leads to a mystery that is left unsolved or sometimes it is found that there was no mystery at all. Thus, unlike traditional documentary or crime programmes, where the focus is on providing answers, narrative podcasts follow a dialectical exposition of diverse narratives for increased audience participation. As a result, Verma has found that narrative podcasts have helped cater to a more diverse audience, unlike public radio which traditionally catered to a more normatively white middle class audience.

The last part of the book (p. 156) discusses the concept of 'aesthetics of amnesia' in fiction podcasts. Here, Verma maps the link between fiction podcasts of the present and their long forgotten predecessor, the radio drama format. He shows how the aesthetics of this new medium are built on its tendency to forget its relationship with its predecessor, the radio. In this way, podcasts are somehow able to retain their identity as a 'new' medium. In this last part, Verma draws comparison between the audio dramas of the past and the podcasts of the present to find the commonalities and differences between the two.

The book answers many questions which might intrigue a media researcher as well as a practitioner, like how to understand podcasts in a more critical sense and proceed forward on an epistemological quest or 'what an 'obsessive' approach to reading a podcast might look like' or 'how digital tools and other affordances can help encourage a scholarly comportment that recognizes the multiple ways in which we know what a podcast is and how it works' (p. 27). In many ways this book is a must read for those on a scholarly pursuit to develop an understanding of the phenomenological nature of narrative podcasts and to develop an epistemological understanding of the field of podcast studies more broadly.

The only question that arises after reading the book is the lack of engagement with the simultaneous developments in podcasts in other parts of the world, especially the Global South, where the media landscape did not develop at the pace at which it might have done in America, thus obsession with podcasts might be a relatively newer phenomena in this part of the world. However, considering the complex global political economy and the extent of digital divide in the Global South, this would be an interesting area where further research can be taken up.

In fact the concepts proposed in this book will certainly help researchers in the field of media studies to take up further research on the evolution of podcasts in the Global South as this is an under-researched area. Apart from researchers, this book will particularly help the students in my digital media class who are always looking for new resources to understand the ever-changing media landscape and in the process they will also learn to read podcasts more critically than just for enjoyment or participate in a cultural obsession. Thus, in many ways, this book is a pioneering work in guiding media students critically read podcasts. In fact, the concepts proposed in this book take podcasts studies beyond an exposition of storytelling modes and integrates technological, cultural and political implications in understanding the podcast medium.

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