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From Storytelling to Storylistening: How the Hit Podcast *S-Town* Reconfigured the Production and Reception of Narrative Nonfiction

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Abstract

The 2017 hit podcast *S-Town* has been hailed for inaugurating a new genre, the *audio nonfiction novel*. Drawing from the recent evolutions in the field of media-conscious narratology (Ryan and Thon; DeMair), this article envisions creative nonfiction podcasts as narrative constructs. Previous research has thus far tended to assimilate such original podcast productions to conventional radio programs, seldom taking into account the specificity of the podcast as a new medium. This article explores the implications of this innovation through the case study of *S-Town*. By reclaiming the model of the novel, *S-Town*'s innovative load paradoxically relies on a return to traditional written forms. But in terms of broadcasting and reception, the podcast introduces a change of paradigm insofar as it offers a more immersive and interactive listening experience. This experience is in turn embedded in the creative process, and narrative nonfiction becomes as much storytelling as *storylistening*.

Keywords: podcasting; audio storytelling; *S-Town*; narrative nonfiction.

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Fifteen years after the term ‘podcast’ was coined by journalist Ben Hammersley in reference to the online radio practices that were budding in the early 2000s, podcasts have become ubiquitous.¹ A recent study showed that in 2020, more than one third of Americans listened to podcasts at least once a month (Edison Research). The trajectory of podcasting from niche phenomenon to mainstream medium has been thoroughly documented by a growing body of literature on the subject (Bottomley; Berry, “Golden Age”; Bonini; Llinares et al.; McHugh “How”). Multiple factors can account for this success story, but researchers from the emerging field of podcast studies agree that the medium reached its maturity in 2014, the year that concomitantly saw the launch of Apple’s iOS8 inbuilt Podcasts app² and the release of the *Serial* podcast.³ In the first season of *Serial*, producer Sarah Koenig reopened a murder case from 1999

¹ Podcasts are digital audio files, typically episodes of a spoken-word series, which can be downloaded from the Internet to a computer or a mobile device and listened to at the user’s convenience. Since its early stages as a medium reserved to tech-savvy users, various technological innovations have made podcasting increasingly accessible and widespread. Because of its, generally, low production costs and circumvention of broadcasting regulation and censorship, it is considered a disruptive medium. Most traditional radio networks flocked to podcasting as a parallel way of broadcasting their programs, while simultaneously producing *native* podcasts. Podcasts now cover an extremely wide spectrum of formats and content, catering to virtually all types of audiences.

² By building a *podcatcher* into its iOS8 version, Apple overcame one of the last impediments that was slowing down the process of downloading and listening to podcasts. This technological innovation was instrumental in popularizing the medium, increasing its portability and therefore fully integrating it into people’s daily lives (Morris and Patterson).

³ Readers can access the podcast at serialpodcast.org/

and told the story of her investigation week-by-week. This true crime podcast, a spin-off of the acclaimed radio program *This American Life*, was not only met with unprecedented—and heretofore unmatched—popular success; it is also unanimously considered as the first major creative turning point in the history of this young medium, inaugurating a new era for audio storytelling.⁴

In 2017, producers Julie Snyder from the *Serial* team and Brian Reed from *This American Life* released a new podcast called *S-Town*.⁵ This original production set new records and even higher standards in terms of content and formal sophistication. *S-Town* tells the true story of reporter and radio producer Brian Reed’s encounter with John B. McLemore, a horologist living in the small town of Woodstock, Alabama. McLemore first writes an email to Reed, asking him to come to his hometown—which he describes as a backward “S(hit)-Town”—to investigate an alleged case of covered up crime and corruption. After a year of email exchanges and phone conversations, during which Reed becomes better acquainted with McLemore’s larger-than-life personality and garrulous prose, the reporter travels to Alabama to meet him in person. McLemore’s accusations turn out to be a false lead. Yet, Reed grows more and more intrigued by this man who restores antique clocks, lives with his ninety-year-old mother and a dozen dogs on an estate where he had a gigantic hedge maze built, and who despite expressing his antagonism with Woodstock and its inhabitants in long, flowery, rants, never resolved to leave the place. A few weeks after this first trip, with the podcast still in production, Reed learns that McLemore has committed suicide. He therefore decides to devote his story to this man, the mysteries surrounding his life, and the reasons that led him to end it.

When the podcast won a Peabody Award, the highest distinction for radio and podcast productions, the jury stated that “*S-Town* br[oke] new ground for the medium by creating the first audio novel, a non-fiction biography constructed in the style and form of a 7-chapter novel” (Blanchard). The podcast’s novelistic nature resides primarily in its construction and distribution: the seven episodes were uploaded simultaneously, as seven ‘chapters’ of a finite work—a mode of release that traditional broadcasting would not have allowed for—and in the strong inter- and metatextuality that pervades the entire production. Paradoxically, the jury’s statement implies that *S-Town*’s innovative power relies on a return to the older, more established standards of the novel. By underlining the podcast’s novelistic “style and form,” it confirmed Kris Markman’s statement that “podcasting is a platform that has breathed new life into established . . . tropes and forms” (241).

This article examines the implications of the podcast’s innovation in terms of narrative practices for the genre of narrative nonfiction. So far, research on the links between podcasts and narrative practices have mainly focused on *S-Town*’s predecessor *Serial* and how it revolutionized the medium (McCracken; Baelo-Allué; Hancock and McMurtry; Ora; Berry, “Golden Age” and “Serial”; Spinelli and Dann, *Podcasting*). However, *S-Town* is so explicitly

⁴ Andrew J. Bottomley defines audio storytelling as “a broad category of fiction and nonfiction programming united by the use of narrative and other dramatic techniques, as well as a composed sonic aesthetic” (*Sound Streams* 175), a category that is sometimes also referred to as “crafted audio” (McHugh, “How”).

⁵ Readers can access the podcast at stownpodcast.org

inscribed in the novelistic tradition, and especially in the lineage of the nonfiction novel, that it deserves to be analyzed on its own grounds. Moreover, some of the preceding analyses tended to assimilate podcasts to conventional radio programs without taking into account the specificity of podcasts as a new medium. Yet, podcasting introduces a crucial change of paradigm in terms of production, distribution and reception, which needs to be interrogated when dealing with such works. Narrative nonfiction podcasts in general, and *S-Town* in particular, are not prototypical popular culture products; they are a case in point in the debate around new media textualities in a mass-mediated popular culture.

Most scholars agree with Richard Berry in saying that podcasting reached its “golden age” with the release of *Serial* in 2014 (“Part of the Establishment” 170). Together with Fox and Llinares, he claims that thanks to *Serial*, podcasts “crossed over into mainstream consciousness”⁶ (6). The authors’ implication is that before *Serial*, podcasts were still considered a niche phenomenon, a subculture primarily based on targeting specialist audiences—a practice also known as *narrowcasting*. *Serial* was the first of podcasts to reach a much broader and diversified audience. While it is difficult to assess whether or not podcasts such as *S-Town* and *Serial* belong to the unstable category of ‘popular culture,’ for which many conflicting definitions and criteria coexist, it is worth considering their ambiguous position on the spectrum of popular works.

If we consider their audience ratings, both *Serial* and *S-Town* fall under the category of popular works. *Serial* is still one of the world’s most downloaded podcasts today. Altogether, the three seasons of *Serial* had topped 420 million downloads in December 2018 (Quah, “Serial”). *S-Town* certainly benefitted from the success of its predecessor. Four days after its release, it had been downloaded ten million times—ratings that even *Serial* had not attained in such a short period of time (Spangler). However, as John Storey argues, in his *Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, “a quantitative index is not enough to provide an adequate definition of popular culture” (6). In order to distinguish popular culture from what they perceive as superior or ‘high’ culture, other definitions therefore include qualitative and aesthetic criteria.⁷ According to these conceptions, Storey explains, the main criterion that distinguishes high from popular culture is complexity: “its very difficulty literally excludes, an exclusion that guarantees the exclusivity of its audience” (6). The paradox here is that despite being ranked among the world’s most downloaded podcasts, both *Serial* and *S-Town* retain an aura of exclusivity.

This is partly due to their links to public radio, by ways of their affiliation to the public radio program *This American Life* (TAL). TAL, which started airing in 1995, is credited for inaugurating a new era for public radio, “ushering in . . . the rise of storytelling as an industry and podcasting as a form” (S. Harmon). It introduced a distinctive type of long form journalism for radio and podcasts, primarily characterized by a more personal mode of storytelling. This is

⁶ The phrase ‘mainstream consciousness’ reflects Raymond Williams’s definition of culture as lived experience, “a whole way of life” (qtd. in Barker 51), while also echoing the sociological concept of ‘collective consciousness.’

⁷ The idea of ‘high culture’ as “the best that has been said and thought in the world” was first introduced by Matthew Arnold in 1869. It would later be recuperated by F. R. Leavis’s elitist critique of popular culture (qtd. in Barker 45-46). According to Pierre Bourdieu, the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is by definition arbitrary, subject to change and, ultimately, class-based (qtd. in Barker 57).

achieved through first-person narration and a strong focus on individual stories, which entail a greater degree of proximity between reporter, interviewee, and listener (Bottomley, *Sound Streams* 177-178; Lindgren). *TAL*'s influence on podcasts like *S-Town* is undeniable, if only because their producers learned the ropes with Ira Glass, producer and host of the show. This heritage was summarized by Rebecca Mead for *The New Yorker*: "If a stentorian voice once prevailed on public radio, the model of the host that Glass incarnates, and that Brian Reed embodies on 'S-Town'—a sensitive, hesitating, transparently liberal male—has become equally ubiquitous today."

In the United States, public radio is a "de facto brand" (*Public Radio System Overview*), which is often conflated with one of its main networks, National Public Radio (NPR). Public radio, like other types of public broadcasting as opposed to commercial media, is associated with high journalistic standards, but also thought to be the preserve of a liberal, educated, rather urban (if not elite) audience. For some critics, public radio podcasts are therefore inseparable from this brand image (see, for example, Ty Burr's article for *The Boston Globe*, in which he wonders if "'S-Town' [is] a freak show for the NPR crowd?"). Yet, one of the innovations introduced by podcasting, as opposed to traditional radio broadcasting, resides in its capacity to transcend the highbrow connotations associated with public radio. Since the number of listeners who downloaded *S-Town* is, in fact, much larger than the one it supposedly targeted, it can be argued that podcasting has democratized public broadcasting. At the same time, podcasts tend to be dissociated from the idea of mass media.⁸ In that sense, podcasts deriving from public radio would be best qualified by the adjective 'middlebrow,'⁹ as suggested by Monique Rooney in her analysis of *S-Town* (160). Public radio-podcasts exemplify the notion of middlebrow culture insofar as they share the educational ethos that presided over the creation of public service broadcasting; they are successful, but intellectually demanding, accessible, yet imbued with an aura of selectiveness. In spite of their triumph in the charts, their status as popular works remains ambiguous.

Serial, for one, explicitly inscribed itself in the popular tradition of serialized true crime, which dates back to the feuilletons of the Victorian era (Haugtvedt 8). Unsurprisingly, the producers claimed that they "were experimenting with using television as a model" for the conception of their podcast (Snyder qtd. in Locke). In what appears to be the ultimate pop baptism, the podcast was parodied in a Saturday Night Live sketch (Grossman qtd. in Hancock and McMurtry 82). As a matter of fact, *S-Town* deliberately stepped away from *Serial*'s popular culture aesthetics, by reclaiming the format of the novel. *S-Town*'s critical reception clearly indicated that it would be different, in many ways, from its predecessor. Renowned podcast critic Nicholas Quah described it as an "unnaturally sophisticated creation for the medium, an

⁸ Their supposed independence from the "hit-driven" circuits of the market is only an optical illusion, as pointed out by Richard Berry ("Golden Age" 8). The recent evolutions of their business model, which is becoming increasingly subscription-based, also contradict this idea.

⁹ After bearing mostly pejorative connotations from its emergence in the Modernist period, when it was seen as 'diluted' high culture, the term 'middlebrow' has been reevaluated and now refers to a category between high- and lowbrow culture, or to high culture made accessible and popular.

inventive and emotionally rich step forward that reconfigures the value of its immediate peer group” (“Review”); in an article for *Slate*, Katy Waldman raved: “[f]or the first time, team *Serial* has discovered a mode that transcends pulpy entertainment and edges into literary beauty If *Serial*’s first season pioneered a new genre of emotionally sensitive true crime podcasting, *S-Town* marks an exhilarating turn toward something more like aural literature.” Along with the jury of the Peabody Awards, most enthusiastic critics saw the production’s literary aesthetics as a token of quality. Consequently, Quah and others tended to use the criteria of conventional novelistic criticism to review the podcast: “[T]here are instances when the writing stretches a little too far for an inspired metaphorical connection; a motif of clocks recurs throughout the podcast, which would’ve been a more elegant device were the association not so literal” (Quah, “Review”). The journalist’s use of a vocabulary typically associated with literary criticism shows this shift in critical perception and confirms earlier intuitions that podcasting could by essence be a literary medium (Atlas; Tierney).

Contrary to *Serial*, which was based on the concept of a story told week by week, all seven episodes of *S-Town* were uploaded simultaneously on March 23, 2017.¹⁰ The installments were called ‘chapters’ rather than episodes, as detailed by Snyder (qtd. by Reed in McGrane). This one-shot release of a finite work clearly signaled the novelistic form that its producers ambioned to achieve. In the interviews that followed, Reed and Snyder insisted that their conception of *S-Town* as a novel had had a deep influence on the production process (qtd. in Lobb; Locke; McGrane). Since it is theoretically possible to listen to the seven chapters of the podcast in one sitting, some considered this type of release a commercial strategy inspired by video streaming platforms that encourage binge-watching, calling it “binge-listening” (Sawyer). But for many, the listening experience was closer to that of reading a novel, “parceling it out into chapters and setting it on the bedside table to be picked up the next day” (Vernon). By modeling their production after a novel, the creators of the podcast certainly influenced the mode of reception and oriented their listeners’ expectations.

Consequently, many listeners doubted the veracity of McLemore’s life story and deemed the podcast *too literary to be true*. Blurring the lines between fact and fiction, the novelistic format added to the confusion. In its form and structure, the podcast resembles a novel; but its content is, according to the ethics of its parent show *This American Life*,¹¹ purely factual. In that sense, the reactions that arose from *S-Town*’s packaging of facts as fiction revived the debate around the publication of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. In 1966, Capote’s book had been promoted as the first *nonfiction novel*, a term that sounded contradictory to many critics and raised a number of theoretical and ethical questions. In William Harmon’s *Handbook for Literature*, it is defined as “a classification offered by Truman Capote for his *In Cold Blood* in which a historical

¹⁰ This mode of distribution also nuances Charlotte De Beauvoir’s affirmation that a podcast is “never produced, on purpose, as a one-off piece.”

¹¹ *This American Life*’s emphasis on strict fact-checking is emblemized by the infamous retraction case of an episode entitled “Mr. Daisey Goes to the Apple Factory.” The piece had been presented as nonfiction by the author, even though it contained many discrepancies that had eluded the program’s fact-checkers (among whom *S-Town*’s producer Brian Reed). The episode was withdrawn and replaced by another one called “Retraction,” in which Ira Glass confronted the author of the piece and insisted on the journalistic ethics of the program.

event (a multiple murder in Kansas) is described in a way that exploits some of the devices of fiction, including a nonlinear time sequence and access to inner states of mind and feeling not commonly present in historical writing” (349). Even though the validity of the term is still being debated today, it generated a number of other labels, among which ‘narrative,’ ‘literary,’ or ‘creative’ nonfiction or journalism (Root 243-244). Notwithstanding this terminological debate, Mia Lindgren explains that ‘narrative journalism’ remains the main point of reference for public radio producers: “‘narrative radio journalism’ is a term used by NPR producers to describe a production style and approach utilised in shows produced for podcasts as well as radio broadcasts” (26). She quotes Manuel Fernandez-Sande who describes it as “a genre that applies the techniques of fiction to news production to give the settings, human subjects and topics addressed in a news story a heightened sense of drama, emotion or entertainment value that makes it more compelling to listeners” (qtd. in Lindgren 29)—a definition which resonates very well with that of the nonfiction novel given by Harmon. In the case of *S-Town*, the format of the novel seemed to bring it even closer to its tutelary figures. For Siobhán McHugh, *S-Town* is “aural literary journalism that is as masterly in its evocation of place and character as exemplars by Didion, Wolfe and Capote” (“Why”). The creators of *S-Town* explicitly anchored their podcast in a pre-existing literary tradition. Yet, as McHugh underlines, the innovation relies in the new medium they chose: *S-Town* is not only a work of literary journalism, it is “aural literary journalism,” and the podcast’s purely sonic nature reconfigures the storytelling practices that were inherent to the genre.

A closer analysis of several motives from the podcast proves helpful to understand the implications of this shift. The subtitle to Monique Rooney’s analysis of the podcast, “Reading *S-Town*,” suggests that it is possible to study the podcast as if it were a written production. I agree with this perspective insofar as the creators of *S-Town* openly claimed to be influenced by a written tradition. But the podcast’s script begins with a warning to the reader: “*S-Town* is produced for the ear and designed to be heard, not read. We strongly encourage you to listen to the audio, which includes emotion and emphasis that’s not on the page” (*S-Town Podcast*). It is therefore necessary to *close-listen* to the podcast rather than to close-read it. With this aim in mind, we need to resort to a new, media-conscious frame of reference, following Jillian DeMair’s analysis of *Serial*, whose methodology can apply to *S-Town*. DeMair first justifies that a podcast, even though a piece of nonfiction, can be the object of a narratological analysis. Narratology tends to be understood as the study of narrative structures for works of fiction, but as Gérard Genette had already made clear in his founding works, it also encompasses “factual” narratives (66). Moreover, thanks to the recent evolutions in the field of narratology described by DeMair, it is now possible to study narratives that are not necessarily textual. With Marie-Laure Ryan’s theory of media-conscious narratology, the field of narratology has been extended to include other media, such as films or videogames. Audio productions, if they are narrative, can therefore also be analyzed with the tools of narratology. However, as the term ‘media-conscious narratology’ suggests, the nature of a given medium needs to be taken into account because it shapes the audience’s way of understanding a narrative. A subfield of narratology specifically

devoted to “the relationship between sound and narrative” has hence been developed under the appellation ‘audionarratology’ (Mildorf and Kinzel). In her analysis of *Serial*, DeMair uses this frame of reference to analyze elements of “nonverbal acoustic storytelling” that “goes well beyond the act of telling” (26-27). *S-Town* also lends itself to an (audio)narratological analysis, which takes into account nonverbal clues, such as music, sound effects, fading, silence, and pauses.

Music plays a crucial part in *S-Town*. The incidental music composed by Daniel Hart serves as a punctuation for Reed’s narrative, “an intriguing combination of strings and handclaps” (Larson) that rhythms the pace of the narrative, offering pauses for reflection or to build suspense. The same musical theme opens most episodes, while they all end with a song by The Zombies, entitled “A Rose for Emily,” in reference to William Faulkner’s 1930 short story and as a metatextual nod to the Southern Gothic atmosphere of the podcast. But the production also features other pre-existing musical pieces, such as Andrea Bocelli’s recording of the famous aria “La Donna E Mobile” from Verdi’s opera *Rigoletto*, which serves as a musical and thematic guiding thread through Chapter V. The opera singer is first mentioned verbally in the introduction of the episode, when Irene Hicks, one of the characters interviewed by Reed over the phone, mentions that she listens to Bocelli when she feels sad. An extract from “La Donna” is then blended into extracts from the recorded phone conversation and Reed’s narrative. This specific aria was chosen because it is one of Bocelli’s best-known opera ‘hits’—and another example of middlebrow culture—but also because its title and lyrics (“woman is fickle”) serve as sound design to echo the character’s words: “I can’t make up my mind whether to scold him or love him or something.” (00:05:53-00:05:55) The aria is faded out but still plays in the background of Reed’s studio-recorded narrative, in which he refers to the soothing capacity of music: “a conundrum that has . . . driven all of us at one time or another to salve our exasperation with our own personal versions of Bocelli” (00:06:13-00:06:23); finally, the music is faded in again while the narrator reads the credits. For the duration of this episode, “La Donna E Mobile” replaces Hart’s original composition as the opening theme of the podcast. Later in the episode, the same aria reappears, this time as background music for one of McLemore’s famous tirades. Reed introduces McLemore’s speech as one “of John’s most virtuosic work[s]” (00:47:13-00:48:20), the adjective prefiguring the analogy between John’s oratorical gift and the singer’s musical talent. The grand finale of the aria is, then, faded into the recording of McLemore’s monologue. His breathtakingly long enumeration is heard over Bocelli holding the final note, in a long crescendo until both music and speech reach their climax. This alternation and superposition of music and recorded speech illustrates the importance of sound design for audio storytelling.

Moreover, the centrality of sound and listening is deeply embedded in the creative process of the podcast: aural nonfiction narratives are based on storytelling as much as on *storylistening*. As the narrator of the podcast, Reed appears as a prototypical storyteller; but as a reporter, his creative process is first and foremost based on the act of listening. At the center of his work are the interviews he conducted with McLemore and the people who knew him. Contrary to other

documentary productions that seek to conceal the traces of the interviewing process, the specific situation of communication of the interview is always exhibited in *S-Town*. On many occasions, Reed can be heard informing his interlocutor that their conversation will be recorded, as for example in Chapter III: “I called him from my own phone, but I interrupt and ask if he’d mind me calling him back from the studio . . . Hey, man. All right, so I’m recording, just so you know” (00:11:20-00:11:29). His position as an interviewer/listener is made clear as he insists on revealing the conditions of production. Similarly, in the first episode we are given to hear the recording of the first phone conversation between Reed and McLemore. Before the conversation gets played from its very onset, it is introduced by a line from McLemore’s email, showcasing the limits of written communication:

BRIAN REED: John writes “I would like to talk to you by phone if possible. This is just too much to type.”

[DIALING]

JOHN B. McLEMORE. Hello. Hello?

BRIAN REED. John?

JOHN B. McLEMORE. Hello?

BRIAN REED. Hi, it’s Brian.

JOHN B. McLEMORE. Hey.

BRIAN REED. Here we are. This is happening.

JOHN B. McLEMORE. That awkward moment of silence when you realize, after about a year, it’s finally happened. (“Chapter I” 00:04:55-00:05:10)

The situation of communication is established by non-linguistic clues, such as the dialing sound that can be heard before John picks up. Whether this sound is a raw sound or a sound effect that was introduced in the editing process, it conveys what DeMair, borrowing the term from Roland Barthes, calls a “reality effect” (25) adding authenticity to the scene and contributing to the impression that we, as listeners, are eavesdropping on their conversation.¹² In the first seconds of their actual conversation, we hear a verbal exchange that has a purely phatic function, where language is used non-referentially, only to establish the situation of communication. McLemore refers to these elements of language that are devoid of meaning and to the pauses that can be heard between them as an “awkward moment of silence.” Throughout the interviews, the reporter’s silent, listening presence will similarly be felt and, paradoxically, made audible.

In narratological terms, Reed is a homodiegetic narrator, someone who tells a story he is also a part of. By acknowledging that his knowledge of the facts was only partial at the time of the events, he stages himself as a fallible listener rather than as an omniscient storyteller. He insists on presenting himself as a naïve and unbiased participant; in doing so, he creates a form of connivance with the listener. Moreover, his retrospective narrative is interspersed with

¹² For many, this position is what has made the podcast ethically dubious, because it has turned the listener into an *auditory voyeur*.

recordings of interviews and phone calls. In these analepses, where the timeline of the narration meets the timeline of the plot, Reed is just as (un)knowledgeable as the audience. The news of John B. McLemore's suicide, a climax of suspense and emotion, is conveyed through one of these recordings. Astride the end of the second and the beginning of the third chapter, we hear a taped phone call from one of John's friends, Skyler, informing Reed that McLemore has died. The listener therefore witnesses Reed's reaction to McLemore's death in what seems to be real time. He is in a state of shock and intense emotion, as shown by the long pauses and the tone of his voice. Their conversation ends with Reed's words: "I'm sorry, I'm still trying to take all this in. I'm trying to follow what you're saying, but it's just so shocking. I'm hearing you, but it's not all registering" ("Chapter III" 00:03:07-00:03:15). Reed's position as someone who listens to a narrative—or rather tries to—is underlined by the distinction between "hearing" and "registering."

In the course of the many interviews he conducts with McLemore's relatives, Reed is contacted by McLemore's longtime friend and platonic lover Olin Long. In a five-hour-long interview, Long tells him his memories of McLemore while Reed listens: Long becomes the storyteller and takes the place of the narrator. In a metaleptic twist, Reed lauds his listening skills and memory, when he mentions that "Olin has such a ridiculous recall for the details of these conversations, he could be John's official biographer" ("Chapter VI" 00:13:55). What is more, we find out that Long was a professional 'eavesdropper' during the Cold War:

BRIAN REED [tape]. Let me get a quick level on your voice.

BRIAN REED [script]. He was a linguist in the Air Force, with top-secret security clearance, specializing in German and Russian.

OLIN LONG [tape]. What I did was just listen to Russian pilots talk and send it to the National Security Agency. (00:10:03-00:10:15)

In this extract, we first hear Reed's indications during the interview, another 'behind-the-scenes' moment that exhibits the thematic importance of voices and sound in the podcast. We subsequently hear Reed's studio-recorded voice summarizing what he has learnt from Long's professional background before we return to the interview with Long, in which he gives details about his activity for the NSA. The parallel between Reed, who is recording and listening to him, and Long, who used to record and listen to Russian pilots, points to the interchangeability of storytellers and listeners.

In an article calling for a "critical theory of podcasting," Jonah Weiner stated the seemingly self-evident but central fact that "podcasts are structured around the oral traditions of either storytelling or conversation, which underscores the most obvious formal fact of podcasts: They're driven by voices." Audio narratives like *S-Town*, with their attention to sound, music, and voices, confirm that podcasting offers a return to the oral roots and the literal definition of storytelling. Weiner also asks what "'pure' podcasting might sound like, as distinct from radio repackaged into podcast form. What kinds of stories, and storytelling, might arise from this new

medium?” As a matter of fact, part of the research conducted on audio storytelling so far has tended to deal with radio and podcast content indiscriminately. Some researchers have done so purposefully, using it as a temporary methodology to underline the strong links between the two media. Without denying this continuity, it seems impossible not to distinguish radio from podcasting, following the recent works on the specific impacts of podcasting on audio storytelling (Llinares et al.; McHugh “How”; Spinelli and Dann, *Podcasting*).

One of the most salient elements that differentiate podcasting from radio broadcasting is the liberation from a programming schedule. Podcasting has been lauded for freeing radio from its programming constraints, therefore endowing producers with greater editorial freedom. Consequently, this absence of scheduling also implies a selection principle: listeners need to choose a podcast (and/or subscribe to a feed) in order to access it. Contrary to Tiziano Bonini’s vision of podcasting as a “digital mass medium” (23), Hall suggests the label “opt-in medium” (qtd. in McHugh, “How” 79). Insofar as they require an active process from the audience, the act of listening to a podcast creates a stronger connection and interaction between the consumer and the producer. The degree of activity and creative mental work that is required from a podcast listener increases their engagement with it. Practitioners, such as Jad Abumrad, host of the podcast Radiolab, concurs: “In a sense, I’m painting something but I’m not holding the paintbrush. *You* are.” He calls this process an “act of co-authorship” in which he sees “some potential for empathy” (qtd. in Weiner). This notion of co-authorship confirms that storytelling and storylistening are two sides of the same coin, as shown by the figure of Olin Long, *S-Town*’s listener-turned-narrator. In the *NPR Guide to Audio Journalism*, Jonathan Kern argues that “[t]he art of public radio journalism entails most of the skills practiced by television or newspaper reporters ... plus one that is unique to our medium: *listening*, or ‘reporting with our ears.’” Here, Kern underlines the reversibility of the two processes: if telling a story for an audio medium requires first and foremost to *listen*, then the act of listening to this story is also an act of participation to this story. Furthermore, the act of co-authorship exceeds the space of the podcasts, as these productions become the starting point of a continuing narrative, with listeners reacting on various forums, blogs, and websites. On Reddit, the sub-thread devoted to *S-Town* is a trove of commentaries on the podcast, offering counter-analyses and often insightful developments. What is more, a number of podcasts *about* the podcast were released. As Sonia Baelo-Allué showed in her analysis of *Serial*’s impact on storytelling, these “metapodcasts” create a paratext (124-125) that concurs with Abumrad’s notion of “co-authorship” and even brings it to a new level of interactivity. Podcasts, as digital media, entail a stronger participation from an audience that can now actively participate in the storytelling.

Finally, the deep connection between the speaker and the listener contributes to a heightened sense of intimacy and immersion, as described by Mead: “Podcasting is a peculiarly intimate medium. Usually transmitted through headphones to a solitary listener, or played over the car stereo during a commute, an audio narrative can be immersive in a way that a radio playing in the background in a kitchen rarely is.” Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann have shown that even though radio has also been considered an intimate medium, the intimacy implied by radio

broadcasting is a collective one, which is “more about blurring the line between private and social spaces than it is about empathy and human connection” (“Intimacy”). Podcasts, on the other hand, tend to be listened to individually, and, most importantly, through earbuds. By cutting off or muting the surrounding sounds, earbud-listening enables a sonic immersion. Listening through earbuds creates an intense physical connection, with a voice speaking directly into one’s ear canal, and therefore re-embodiment of the radio’s “disembodied voice” (Spinelli and Dann, *Podcasting* ch. 4); Weiner goes as far as speaking of “the form’s . . . erotics.” Podcasting can therefore be defined as distinct from radio for its propensity to create stronger interactivity, intimacy, and immersion, all three aspects that contribute to the shift from storytelling to *storylistening*.

As early as 2004, Ben Hammersley intuited that “[b]y combining the intimacy of voice, the interactivity of a weblog, and the convenience and portability of an MP3 download,” podcasting had the potential to reconfigure the media landscape. Within a few years, researchers from the field of media and radio studies started gaining interest in this new phenomenon and its various repercussions. In the very early stages of podcast studies, Berry confirmed that “[p]odcasting not only removes global barriers to reception but, at a stroke, removes key factors impeding the growth of internet radio: its portability, its intimacy and its accessibility” (“Will” 143). Podcast studies now converge with many other fields. At the crossroads of podcast studies and literary theory, this case study of the 2017 podcast *S-Town* showcases the shift that podcasting has introduced in storytelling. Indeed, *S-Town* explicitly inscribes itself in the literary lineage of the nonfiction novel, using storytelling devices that are inherent to the genre in order to document factual events. But its innovation lies in the sonic nature of the medium, allowing for a return to the oral roots of storytelling and therefore to its literal definition. Thanks to the purely sonic nature of the medium and its specificity as an interactive, immersive and intimate medium, listening becomes an act of authorship in itself.

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