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The Radio Phone-in and the Suicidal Caller

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Note from the author:

Please be mindful that this contains references to suicide. We understand that many readers may be impacted by this topic and may find this triggering. Please feel free to skip ahead to the next chapter.

Caller rings up and says ... 'When I finish this call, I am going to kill myself' Now, maybe histrionic, maybe a fake, maybe true. What are you going to do? It's my job to manage this and to decide how long it's going to go on for, and err on the side of caution.

Research Interview, Radio Host

I've had loads of people phoning radio stations threatening suicide. You become quite detached from it.

Research Interview, Radio Producer

At 2.45am, one early morning on 6 November 1971, a 47-year-old man called Michael Valenti telephoned *Radio Unnameable*,¹ a WBAI talk and music show in the USA. He told the host of the show, Bob Fass live on air that he had taken an overdose.

Fass: WBAI.

Valenti: Oh, it certainly takes you long enough. Are you a gentleman? I hope.

Fass: I don't know what a gentleman means.

Valenti: Well, I'm in the process of committing suicide.

For the next forty-five minutes, Fass kept Valenti talking about his life and his personal problems. While the call continued, the New York Telephone Company raced to trace it and find his address:

Fass: How are you gonna do it?

Valenti: I've done it, I'm sorry to say.

Fass: What do you mean?

Valenti: I've taken an amalgam of pills.

Fass: What have you taken?

Valenti: Sleeping pills. Three different kinds of sleeping pills and some anti-depressants. And I think the totality of it will do it. At least, I hope so.

Eventually Valenti's location was discovered, and the police found him at home, unconscious on the floor at 6.30am. His telephone was off the hook and bottles of pills were discovered next to him.²

Decades later, on 7 December 1994, a 29-year-old man called Emilio Bonilla (using the pseudonym 'Prince') called in at 8.10am to *The Howard Stern Show* broadcasting on WXRK-FM in New York City. Bonilla told them he wanted to jump off the George Washington Bridge. Stern initially questioned the validity of the call, telling his listeners:

I don't know if this is real or not, but there's some guy on the phone who says he's about to uh, he's got a cellular phone with him, and he's about to jump from the George Washington Bridge and kill himself.

Stern asked for confirmation from passing driving listeners who should honk their car horns if they saw the man on the bridge to prove it was a legitimate call, rather than a prank. The short, sharp sound of horns came through loudly for all to hear, almost immediately. Continuing to broadcast to his 8-million listeners, Stern and his co-host Robin Quivers kept Bonilla talking for around five minutes until a female listener arrived at the bridge. Later a member of the Port Authority (who had also been listening) arrived and took Bonilla into police custody. Stern said afterwards: 'Once I determined this was a jumper, I said: "I have to keep this man laughing ... until the cops get there"' (Weber 1994).

And finally, to 2018, when a listener, calling himself 'Chris' (not his real name) phoned in to a late-night show on TalkRadio (a national commercial station in the UK) to speak on air with host Iain Lee and his co-host Katherine Boyle. He revealed he had taken an overdose and wanted to end his life. Normal programming was suspended on *The Late-Night Alternative* show, as Iain spoke with Chris for over twenty minutes while listeners waited to hear the outcome. Like Bonilla calling from the bridge, Chris was alone in a public space, on a street in Plymouth using his mobile phone. The production team worked together with the emergency services – audiences heard the police eventually locate him while he was still on air.

Emotional experience is not something any of us can truly identify in others without hearing first-hand what someone has to say (Brown 2021), and so in studying the suicide call – this unfiltered, unedited and unplanned on-air interaction – we further recognize the unique unpredictability of live radio, the trust placed in the phone-in format by their callers, and a strong attachment to the radio host who they have come to depend on. These callers shared one clear thing in common: they wanted and needed to be heard as they experienced their most profoundly dark and desperate moments. Significantly, they all chose to be heard by a host and their listening public, as opposed to friends, family members or trained health practitioners. Here they are entrusting a radio personality (and their listeners) with something that they will not share with anyone else. They are at their most vulnerable, and arguably brave – sharing potentially their last lived, fragile reality with audiences and production teams they have never met. Through these three cases we are able to glimpse into our callers most emotionally raw and usually hidden experiences.

And in doing so, we can start to recognize how this type of conversation is managed by the hosts, and what their questions and answers start to reveal.

So, what could it be about radio as a medium that compels people (and in seemingly the majority of cases, men³) to call in to disclose such personal circumstances to both a host they have never met, and a listening audience of millions? By taking these examples (originating from 2018, 1994 and 1971), I examine archive recordings and transcriptions – seeking to understand how they sounded and how they progressed. This allows us to start to reflect on what we could learn from these types of interactions. I also briefly discuss some of the wider and often complex results of what happens when we do talk about suicide in the media more generally, so we are able to situate radio within this broader environment. In doing so, I articulate some of the restrictions and challenges that the researcher must navigate as we approach such a sensitive and triggering topic. During this Chapter I highlight not only the caller's words (and silences), but those from the host as they look to reassure, understand, detect and connect with the caller, all the while communicating to their listeners and production team. Of course these are rare cases (many more come through that never get to air), but from studying them I hope to learn more about our cultural emotional response to threats around suicide and our callers' relationship with radio presenters.

It is important to clearly emphasize early on that I am by no means an expert in the study of suicide; rather I am a broadcasting historian, practitioner and researcher with a keen interest in studying on- and off-air production spaces, interaction and broadcast talk. I am particularly fascinated by questions of power, storytelling and emotion between host, callers and team. In writing this Chapter I wish to delve deeper into the ways in which radio has been used by those who plan to die by suicide.

Researching suicide

Suicide is a complex, baffling and frightening phenomenon; defined as 'the act of an individual intentionally ending their own life' (O'Connor and Nock 2014: 73). According to the World Health Organisation (2021), over 700,000 people die by suicide each year, and many more attempt to take their own lives. Suicide (at the time of writing), is the fourteenth leading cause of death worldwide and it is estimated that one person dies by suicide every forty seconds. The Samaritans (a UK Charity) reports that in 2019 there were 5,691 suicides in England and Wales, with 833 more in Scotland, while in the USA around 48,000 people take their lives each year and millions more may attempt, plan or experience suicidal ideation.⁴ When we talk about a suicide attempt, this refers to 'engagement in a potentially self-injurious behaviour in which there is at least some intention of dying as a result of the behaviour' (O'Connor and Nock 2014: 73). It is necessary to distinguish between feelings of passive ideation (when people have thoughts about not wanting to be alive), with those who form specific and firm intentions around ending their lives, which is something our three callers share.

I am hard-pressed to think of a more difficult aspect of live broadcasting than the suicide call – for the listener, the host or team and of course the caller. These conversations are with people who have gone one step further than having ideations or plans and are in the process of making a very real attempt to end their life – either by jumping or taking an overdose:

Valenti: I think I'm going.

Fass: Stand up. Stand up, stand up.

Valenti: Trying to stand up.

Fass: Please try and stand up. Do it. You can do it. Just get up on your feet. Pitch yourself up on your feet.

Valenti: My feet?

Fass: Yeah.

The causes of suicide are often complicated and multifaceted – and while it is not possible to outline all the various explanations here, Shneidman (regarded as the father of contemporary suicidology) used the term *psychache* to describe the unbearable psychological pain experienced by those wishing to die by suicide (Leenaars 2010). In his work, Shneidman (1973) came to regard the suicide note as an illuminating way to uncover meaning, detail and life history. Of course this is not always found or indeed written, but can offer an insight into the final thoughts or wishes of someone about to take their own life. The suicide letter is often found later, and may be read by those involved on a personal level, or within the context of a legal enquiry. In contrast, hearing a live broadcast means the listeners and hosts are made to be public witnesses during the attempt itself – we know the intention but do not know the outcome which is a frightening reality for all involved. In studying these live calls (as opposed to focusing on fictional drama or reading memoirs, books or suicide notes) we are hearing *directly* from those experiencing these profound painful emotions in the moment. As Montgomery reminds us 'in fresh talk, we have a guarantee that it is the speakers own experience and reactions rather than anyone else's – first-hand and original, rather than second-hand and a copy' (2001: 404). For the researcher this offers something quite different in terms of suicide research – contributing something additional to transcripts, or newspaper reports, letters or online text. Typically those who are suicidal may often become shut off from the world, closed or constricted in their mind, so the analysis of the suicide call I hope can further start to reveal the thinking process and reality of someone in this position.

I am yet to find much academic discussion about live suicide calls on radio specifically, or around suicide as a subject more generally; possibly due to the lack of audio archive available or the sensitive nature of the content. It is impossible to calculate how many suicide calls have made it onto radio stations across the world (or ones that never made it to air), so I am reliant on the recordings I can trace. Gaining access to a recording of such a call is a challenge (they are not replayed or made available later), and so locating or accessing archives, especially of historic commercial radio recordings, can be an imprecise art at best. There are a few recordings preserved at key locations, but with little funding, staff or physical space, many commercial stations do not hold many accessible archive

libraries or digital collections (see Alexander Badenoch and Richard Legay's chapter in this *Handbook* for more on this). For any historian, access to both potential respondents and relevant archive remains a fundamental concern, while a 'bias of survival', of course, also must be taken into consideration (Biewen and Dilworth 2010: 136). In my case archive recordings online made it possible to find shows, while youtube and podcast episodes also provided material for analysis. The quality of audio is clear, the recording is often in its entirety – so the context is evident too, with advert breaks, jingles, other calls, idents and of course voice giving a depth and feeling to the build-up, not possible by simply looking at transcriptions. This reminds us that media historians can play an important role in the construction of new archive projects, especially where there has been no formal method of display (Fickers and Johnson 2010).

So what might lead a listener to call a talk radio show to reveal they were going to take their own life? Perhaps they simply want a reassuring and familiar voice to accompany them through their darkest time. Conceivably they have nowhere else to turn, or they feel stigma about asking for help elsewhere, they wish to leave an equivalent to a suicide note, or maybe they really do want someone to help them. It would be ethically challenging to conduct research interviews with these callers (or audiences) due to the sensitive nature of the topic, so instead, my research involved primary interviews with a range of radio hosts, producers and phone operators who help create a sense of context, personal experience and background to the production of these types of shows. Conducting research interviews within the realm of broadcasting history is, according to Seaton, a principle way of discovering hidden motivations and experiences, for they 'animate the files, explain the real story and give you a flavour of the people and their concerns' (Seaton 2004: 55). The study of these production processes – of gatekeeping, of backstage dilemmas or off-mic decision-making is essential, and can provide rich and evocative clues to better understanding institutions and our broadcasting history. As Skoog has noted, the 'internal dynamics' and relationships between production team members, clearly has an impact. Skoog maintains that if we are to fully understand programmes or texts, we must, as researchers and historians, 'look at the production and editorial process that is going on "behind the scenes"' (Skoog 2010: 241). We may never truly know the true motivation of these callers, so I seek to understand what did unfold when those calls came through.

Writing recently reflecting on his own research journey into suicide prevention, O'Connor observed that: 'it has given me a deeper appreciation of the darkness of despair, the nothingness of living and the unbearable loneliness even when surrounded by others' (2021: 7). Not only must we be aware of the potential impact of writing or presenting such calls for others to see (considering aspects of distress or benefits), as a researcher we must consider the impact of analysing such calls on our own well-being – since the analysis of trauma can trigger a range of confronting responses. We must also be mindful of the risk of trivializing or sensationalizing the topic. This work has tested me, having known family members, colleagues and friends who have been impacted by suicide. But what I hope to learn from foregrounding this subject matter is that we may further understand this medium in terms of emotional connection, and those that use it in a meaningful way – while better understanding listeners' relationship to radio. Additionally, while these calls

are historical, the timing of this chapter (written during the Covid-19 pandemic) brings to the forefront concerns about the possible rise of suicide rates, and awareness around global concerns about economic hardship, social isolation and physical/emotional fragility in our communities.

There is an active research community consisting of experts across disciplines such as psychology, biology, sociology, journalism, media and psychotherapy (to name a few) who have all produced rich resources, research and guidance on why suicide happens and what can be done to prevent it. While I will not attempt to go into depth around this specific field, it is helpful to include some broad descriptions of key terms. It is relevant here to also contextualize how the media deal with suicide, both in terms of journalistic reporting, representation and public discourse. Media commentary around suicide can be hard to balance between raising awareness among the public while protecting the well-being of those at risk, with common concerns of the copycat effect.

The reporting of suicide in news programming or newspapers, and the representation of it in storytelling (film, television, etc) is much more widely publicized in terms of editorial guidelines. Radio, in comparison with more visual media has received significantly less scholarly attention in terms of representation or reporting of suicide. Instead, it appears that more traditional news media like newspapers, television news and entertainment media (films, stage plays) and newer media (internet, social media, for example) are more often foregrounded. In guides found from The World Health Organisation,⁵ OFCOM (the communications regulator in the UK), or charities like the Samaritans about how best to represent suicide in factual or fictional programming, it also becomes evident that the importance and role of sound is often sidelined at best or forgotten altogether. Images, films and interviews have been rightly recognized for their power to tell stories about suicide – but sound is largely unexplored in terms of production decisions, workflow, aesthetics and ethics. In edited fictional projects, decisions must be made about the script, the choice of sound design, the camera angle, the tone of voice (much has been debated about the 2017 Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* for example). It seems important to further understand and document just how stories involving trauma are treated sonically, either on television, in films, through apps or video games or on the radio. It is my hope that this type of work will help those of us who wish to initiate a space where audios, trauma and suicide may be further considered.

Coming out of the darkness

The unplanned unpredictability of these live phone-in shows is a far cry from the more formulaic, cohesive and controlled productions that take a more central space in our schedules or accessed in our podcast libraries. It will be helpful therefore to momentarily focus our attention on phone-in radio; and in particular how it came to create this more accessible and intimate place for their listeners to share secret, confessional and personal details about their lives. As I explored during my own research, talk radio more widely

can be seen as a more democratic means of broadcasting – awarding access to those with authentic stories or first-hand experiences – allowing a space where the ordinary, untrained caller is given a platform for their opinions or confessions (McDonald 2014). As Crisell observes: ‘however “unaccredited” the caller may be, he acquires a kind of authority merely by being on the air, he becomes a broadcaster, a performer, on par with those in the studio’ (1994: 187). The phone-in, although arguably not as popular perhaps now as in decades before, still remains an important and regular offering of the live radio schedule around the world – heard daily across public service, community and commercial broadcasting. Writers like Coyle have talked about the attraction of the private-in-public discourses of this type of radio, where ‘listeners become voyeurs, fascinated with callers revealing intimate details of their lives or being publicly berated and satirised by all-powerful hosts’ (1990: 34–5). This type of format is relatively cheap to produce (in comparison with drama or documentaries) and gives audiences not only a platform to share their views, but to hear what others think, experience or sound like – especially significant in local areas.

All but one of these suicide calls came through to an evening or overnight show (Emiolio apparently worked on the night shift, so called in after he finished) and both Hendy (2010) and Keith (2001) have highlighted the freedom afforded to night-time radio – a type of broadcasting markedly different to those experienced in daylight hours. Here there is more opportunity for experimental formats and in our case, more free-form call in shows without the potential to damage listening figures in the day, especially for commercial or smaller stations. As Keith remarks:

There’s something special about the voice at night, coming out of the darkness. The contact between the host and listeners is intimate ... it takes the darkness, particularly in the small hours, to provide the context in which that kind of relationship can evolve.

(2001:7)

The late night phone-in affords us a more personal bond between listener, caller and host which can be seen as different from daytime listening. This more intimate ‘club’ relationship of late-night radio makes us feel connected and included in an experience that not everyone is sharing. As Beccarelli shows us from her research on French night-time listening, this type of live broadcasting holds a ‘privileged place for confidences delivered in the anonymity of the night’ for ‘there may be no better moment to listen to the radio than during the hours of the night – when the listener is more available, more alone, and less distracted by external demands’ (2020:16). Radio sound, and the voices from radio envelop us, according to Karpf, in comparison with gaming or television for instance, ‘we seem to look out at the world through our eyes, but take it in with ears’ (2013: 64). In the night-time there is less competition for our attention, a space that hides us, a place that creates conditions for confidential confession – and where a host’s voice may offer the lonely or vulnerable listener constant solace and reassurance. Someone is there – and someone will be there tomorrow. They do not feel like strangers.

As Karpf observes, through their voices broadcasters act as a secure, unchanging and reassuring presence, and through the radio schedule this is embedded into our daily life – and in a world of change, chaos or complexity, we come to rely on the mediated voices of

those we hear. We become accustomed to the tempo, the pitch and the speed of delivery – so attuned that we anticipate and interpret the tone and meaning behind the words. In doing so we come to trust the persona of the broadcaster – we rely on the familiar voice and start to associate the voice with the tasks we do as we listen – getting ready for bed, the start of the nightshift, the school pick up. Many listeners of these phone-in formats come to believe that hosts can be depended upon, fitting into their routines, displaying predictable and reassuring behaviour – this is arguably especially significant for the ‘socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected’ (Horton and Wohl 1956: 215–29). This trust is key and can offer us some understanding to why a person in crisis may wish to connect to the voice of a radio host, rather than an anonymous voice at the end of a suicide support line.

As Katriel (2004) also highlights, the importance of the host is central to the success of this type of format. Presenters like Lee, Stern or Fass have on-air personalities which are considered to be a brand, used to maintain listener loyalty, adhere to the expectations of the network and genre, provide a secure sense of anticipation to their callers and create a sense of familiarity and consistency to the programme: ‘The radio hosts’ ways of performing their role, no less than the topics they choose to address, serve to weave together a credible and recognisable radio persona that becomes identified with the programme over time’ (Katriel 2004: 236). Phone-ins can also be seen to actively advocate public exhibitionism, stimulate consumerism, impose strict restrictions about selection and encourage voyeuristic, performative behaviour or listening habits (see Moss and Higgins 1982). While these claims cannot be discounted – ratings, commercial interests and sponsorship is a reality for many smaller networks around the world – there is also a potential for a real evocative emotional connection between the caller, the host and the listener.

Talking about suicide

The causes of suicide are not clear cut or always predictable. Drawing on the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Van Orden et al. 2010) it can be useful to understand who might (but not always) be more at risk. Those who attempt suicide may experience feelings of perceived burdensomeness (thinking they are a liability, that everyone would be better off without them, doubts around worthlessness or self-hate); of thwarted belongingness (disconnected socially); or hopelessness and entrapment – where things cannot be seen to change or be improved. This is not always the case, but can help us think through the experiences that may lead up to a caller reaching what appears to be an end-point. In our three examples, the hosts all directly ask what could lead the caller to choose to end their own life.

Fass: Why do you want to die?

Valenti: Oh.

Fass: I mean, can you talk – I mean, if dying is so hot, why don’t you try to talk me into it?

Valenti: No, it has to be a very individual decision.

Fass: All I ask you to do is to explain in a manner that I could understand why you were going to do yourself in, so that I would say, oh yeah, that's a logical decision.

Valenti: Well, I'll try.

The accepted cultural response around death is often that it should occur naturally, and we should do everything in our power to avoid it. Suicide, as Luce (2019) shows us, compared with the more acceptable discourse of 'natural death' means a person chooses the time, date, place and method, often secretly. The way suicide is spoken about is often rooted in perceptions that it is a cowardly or a weak thing to do. The word is powerfully situated amongst myths and misconceptions – seated in feelings of sin, shame, or stigma.⁶ Notable here is that the hosts (Fass, Stern and Lee) are all experienced broadcasters and opt to keep the caller on air – there is no cut-off here or move to speak with them off-air instead. And not only did the hosts keep the caller on the air, but they also additionally tried to actively intervene to prevent the caller from carrying out their plans of overdosing or jumping – either by arranging for authorities to intervene: 'If you want to kill yourself tomorrow you can that's another day. But tonight, brother I'm not letting you die,' says host Iain Lee to Chris, his caller. Again, this reveals a great deal about how we culturally view suicide – as something preventable – and the responsibility felt or displayed by the hosts. As a result, to know that these attempts are met with empathy and compassion by the hosts could conceivably help listeners who have similar thoughts or potentially bring awareness about suicide for those concerned about colleagues, friends or family members.

Stations would normally avoid intentionally opening a discussion on talk radio specifically about suicide as this comes with so many potential risks. OFCOM advises that 'methods of suicide and self-harm must not be included in programmes except where they are editorially justified and are also justified by the context' (2021: Section 2.5). BBC Editorial Guidelines follow this position and clarify that 'We should not include explicit details that would allow a method of suicide to be imitated' (BBC 2021). Occasionally rules are not followed. For example, in 2017 the BBC had to apologize after a radio phone-in caller was heard on air being asked at 8.20am one morning⁷ about his preferred suicide method – just after a morning show segment on 'happiness'.⁸ The caller (to local BBC station Radio Coventry & Warwickshire) said he had repeatedly tried to take his life and the presenter asked him 'How do you decide how to do it? What method?' Over the next minutes, the caller then answered with a graphic description, detailing how he would end his life.

This reminds us how suicide requires mindful and sensitive editorial attention, with the risk of triggering copycat cases. This is regarded as the biggest challenge when writing, directing or depicting news or storylines about suicide (see debates about the 'Werther effect').⁹ However, as we can see throughout the examples in this chapter, in the case of speaking with someone *during* a suicide attempt, guidelines may not always be followed or deemed necessary. Trained media professionals would be aware for instance, that they should avoid signposting explicit information about the location of a suicide (for instance a bridge) to reduce possible risk to any other potentially vulnerable listeners. But this is the first thing that the hosts Fass, Stern and Lee do, asking many questions about what the

callers can see and hear, to try to understand their exact location and then send help. In this respect they resemble an emergency responder – trying to identify key details in a race against time to find them alive.

An awareness of triggering listeners and the fear of copycat cases seems to lay at the heart of many policies, guidelines or editorial discussions around how best to tell stories of suicide in the media – with the thought being that those watching or consuming will be more inclined to imitate. This anxiety around this possible causality may also hold back producers, filmmakers, or journalists from discussing the issue at all. The inclusion of pre-recorded content on radio that features suicide storylines in drama or discussion of suicide in a documentary then would always be considered preferable by producers or networks over live production due to the control over the content (involving editing, scripting, trigger warnings, consultation with experts, and compliance approval from senior editorial figures). Hearing from someone who *used to be* suicidal or bringing in expert health practitioners to talk around the subject is markedly different from hearing the voice of someone who is in the process of taking their own life.

Michael and Chris did not reveal their real reason for phoning in until they were on-air and changed their story from the one they told off-air to researchers/producers. All three callers used pseudonyms, or fake names (implying they wish for anonymity). This also implies knowledge around the expectations of the show – they know that they would not be put through to air if the producers knew the real reason for the call. If they had chosen to reveal this information off-air, the phone operators would either contact the emergency services directly on their behalf, or if there was no immediate risk, they would link to charities or signpost local support numbers. Broadcasters and production teams are very aware of their responsibility in safeguarding their listeners and those calling in. An experienced commercial radio host told me: ‘Even though these are people in distress we are still making a radio show out of it. And we can’t do everyone.’ Hearing from these types of callers adds a deeper level of emotional weight for those working ‘backstage’ as phone operators, researchers or producers. During a research interview, a former phone operator revealed that:

You often were in a position where you felt some level of responsibility and you had to find a space between that, you had to say: Actually, this is not my position, it’s not my job. I am taking calls, I am working to full capacity, but I am not a counsellor in any way.

This feeling of duty is felt not only by production teams but by the hosts themselves – going beyond their role or on-air persona. In February 2004 while working for commercial station Magic 1548, host Peter Price left the radio studio in Liverpool, England, while presenting his late-night radio show to search for a suicidal thirteen-year-old caller (also called Michael). Michael had phoned into Peter’s show a few months earlier from a phone-box, sleeping rough following the death of his mother. Price spoke with him for around forty-five minutes when he threatened to take his own life. Afterwards Price said: ‘There was something in his voice that was so desperate. He said, “It’s unbearable now. I can’t take much more of it”’. Price encouraged the teenager to reveal where he was (off-air) so he left his show and drove over to see him. Afterwards he remarked: ‘Whether I was sacked,

suspended, whatever – sod the show. I couldn't have lived with myself if something had happened to him' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2004).

Callers in crisis

For callers, and especially male listeners, talk radio (particularly when it first started) afforded a new opportunity to speak about private or domestic matters – and receive immediate feedback or advice from presenters, doctors or agony aunts/uncles, on topics ranging from baldness to premature ejaculation. These were, according to a commercial radio producer I interviewed, the most common calls during the first years, where the six telephone lines to each phone operator at the station were constantly flashing with calls from men: 'I think a lot of men had nowhere else to go.' This 'confessional' or 'emotional' style of radio phone-in was both revolutionary and controversial when it started. Through the phone-in we are offered the possibility of live, unedited self-expression by unseen and untrained members of the public, who can disrupt, or breach expected norms and conventions.

In the suicide call the callers have succeeded on getting through to air and once this happens all normal expectations and conventions of everyday programming are halted. It's forty-three minutes into *Iain Lee's Late Night Alternative* show on TalkRadio when we first hear from Chris, who has been waiting on the line. Producers and the two presenters were unaware of what he was about to reveal. The poor telephone reception adds a layer of confusion and a barrier to the conversation at the start:

Lee: What have you got for us this evening sir?

Chris: Hello Iain

Lee: Hello Chris!

Chris: Hello can you hear me?

Boyle: Not really.

Lee: Not very well.

Chris: [inaudible]

Lee: I can't really hear what you're saying. Are you on speaker?

Chris: No [inaudible words]. Hang on. Ok is that better?

Lee: Yes man, that's much better, now we can hear you. What you got for us?

Chris: [inaudible.] I don't know but I suffer from PTSD. [Inaudible. Long pause.] And err I've taken an overdose. Er to kill me.

Lee: When did you do that?

Chris: About an hour ago.

Lee: Woah woah woah woah woah woah. An hour ago?

Chris: Yeah, something like that.

Iain: What what what did you take man?

Chris: I don't know. A mixture ...

Their conversation is punctuated by gaps of speech. There is a confusing array of background sounds, the phone signal cutting out and Chris losing consciousness leading

Lee to think he was no longer alive, ‘This is horrendous!’ he exclaims at one point. In the days of Pete Price and Bob Fass, calls would have been made via landlines or telephone boxes. In Emilio’s case, Stern pokes fun at him about having a cell phone, after all back in 1994 this was quite a novelty. At one point Stern jokes that if he is doing so well in life to have a cell phone, then why would he want to die? There is also a battle with time which adds an additional layer of pressure on the host – if the battery dies on these calls, we are losing means to communicate and find the callers – ‘my batteries running low and so am I’, caller Emilio tells Howard Stern.

The voice of the caller is heard over an often-distorted reception. In the case of Chris there are times when he is not responding, or slurring his words – as time continues, he gets increasingly disoriented and confused. The rate of breathing, the pitch of the voice, the accent, the speed of talking, the pauses, the speech modulation, the vocabulary, the grammar, the thought order, the metaphors and the self-reflection all must be interpreted by the presenter and the listener – and now me as the researcher. Listening to all these calls we hear the stumbling, the mumbling and the pain. We hear the people walking past and chatting in the background – a sombre realization that everyday life exists, oblivious to the suffering of one man and gradually we witness his decline – the slurring of his words, the increased silence between each utterance as he struggles to stay conscious. We can also hear the desperation in the host’s voice – trying to stay calm, trying to reassure and trying to divide his attention between Chris, his production team and his listeners. This may have been the first time a listener (and perhaps host) would have been exposed to such a call, since only a few of us may have met a suicidal stranger on a bridge or at a train station – or perhaps known a friend, colleague or family member in need.

The telephone here is the link between Chris and his host and their listeners – reliant on a strong battery, a steady signal, connecting him from a road in Plymouth to the studios in London, to us in our homes, workplace or cars. This is a private tool used for public consumption – the telephone is now portable, anonymous and familiar – something we all use daily. As listeners we are familiar with its shortcomings – battery life, credit or poor reception. More often now, radio interviews (especially since the Covid outbreak) are increasingly visual using video technology, but this call was like many millions of others, just using a phone. As listeners we are collectively joined in a now public quest to find Chris: asking where could he be? Who could be nearby? Will he make it?

Hanging on to life

Silence¹⁰ or the term ‘dead air’ is often regarded as the enemy of speech radio – and tends to be especially unusual on commercial radio. Silence carries with it the danger of being misinterpreted by the listener as a technical fault, so is often treated with suspicion or anxiety. Silence is commonly regarded as an unseen, uncontrollable, uncomfortable act on the radio, and it is widely assumed that listeners tend to feel insecure if it comes with no explanation. Set among the consistent flow of jingles, commercials, news, traffic and talk it

can sound shocking in comparison – but for the listener, once again, this is the very essence of liveness reminding us that we are connected in real time with a station or host. The long gaps between Lee and Chris are telling – it reminds us of the very real threat he faces. The reception during the call between Stern and Emilio also cut out for a few seconds:

Stern: Hello?

[Silence]

Stern: Oh, I guessed he jumped.

Bonilla: Hello?

Stern: Hello I thought you jumped.

Although silence is often regarded as the nemesis of live phone-in shows, hosts dare to be unafraid at times of breaching customary etiquette, ignoring protocol and inviting the caller to share an intimate space. A commercial radio host told me:

I once let a radio silence last for two whole minutes while the caller considered whether her father's suicide really meant that she was worthless. It took nerve on my part (radio is opposed to the idea of dead air) but not as much as she needed in outfacing her demons. People wrote to tell me they stopped their cars in lay-bys just to wait for the outcome.

As Street remarks, silence can be 'a doorway to memory, expectation, anticipation, fear and other worlds' (2012: 40). Silence here means much more than 'dead air' – it became here a place where listener, caller and host are connected in the moment.

At times all three hosts are often direct and confrontational in tone – we assume they may be milder so as to not risk upsetting a vulnerable caller – but the aim was to keep them on the air as long as possible. Afterwards Fass said (when interviewed for an episode of the podcast *This American Life*): 'Well, I thought I was trying to be gentle, but if you lull someone to sleep, that's what you're fighting against. If you can get them to show a little ire, maybe they'll hang on to life' (*Who You Gonna Call* 2017). The caller recognizes this:

Valenti: No, no, no. You're stalling me. You're obviously stalling me. I appreciate it a great deal.

Fass: You're right. I am trying to stall you and trying to talk you out of it. And I think you ought to give me half a chance.

This is a strategy also shared by Lee while he speaks with Chris. Jokes, sarcasm, digs, almost a belligerent and argumentative tone to gain his attention and find something to fight for – all the while to keep him on air. Lee makes comments about cities and television, trying to find common ground and connect, also buying time. Stern and his co-host rarely break from the jokey, 'shock jock' sarcastic style of delivery that will be familiar to listeners and the caller – at one stage he says, 'I might join you, so don't let me think about it for a second.'

Stern: Are you a big fan of mine?

Bonilla: Yeah, of course.

Robin Quivers (co-host): Well, why are you leaving us, we need all the ratings we can get!

This can seem dismissive and risky, but arguably would be the very reason this caller feels he can connect with this host above anyone else and would succeed in keeping him on the line long enough for help to come:

Fass: I'd like to continue talking to you for a while.

Valenti: All right, but only with that promise that you're not going to have the call traced.

Fass: I can't promise that, but I mean, you can force me to, if you'll say that's the only way you'll talk to me. But it's not a promise that I want to make.

The host engages with a variety of techniques to manage these calls. At around twenty minutes into Fass and Michael's conversation it mirrors two friends casually catching up. This extract shows us how informal and open the conversation was – and has a sense of equality between the two parties. It feels like a chat between two colleagues or relatives:

Valenti: I despise Orson Welles, but he's not himself in this movie.

Fass: Why do you despise Orson Welles? Everybody digs it.

Valenti: I find him so hammy.

Fass: Because of those airline commercials?

Valenti: I don't know the airline commercial.

Fass: He was great in *Citizen Kane*.

Valenti: That's like an old Betty Field movie. Did you ever see that? It was called *Tales of Manhattan*.

The host is under enormous pressure to keep the caller on the line, communicate with his production team and not forget the needs of his audience. There are three elements we can hear when listening to Iain Lee – firstly he is talking directly to Chris, secondly, he is addressing his audience, and finally we overhear him talking to his production team. The delivery to listeners and his team is done using a low and almost whispered, muffled, confidential voice. He tells his listeners, 'we've called an ambulance, so you don't have to' and 'they've got him, right, they've got him' – we are hearing what would normally be off-air confirmations now live on air. He then changes his tone and pace when speaking directly to Chris, much louder and energetic. When breaking down this call in its entirety, we see different stages emerge, from start to end:

1. **Disclosure:** 'I've taken some pills' and Lee's reaction to this.
2. **Quest of information:** Lee questions Chris to ascertain his location, what medication he's on, what he's wearing, his age and background – all to try to find him as fast as possible.
3. **Playing for time:** Lee attempts to keep Chris on the line – to engage him, joke with him, connect with him and reassure his listeners, contextualizing events for them and updating them. He tries to understand why Chris would want to end his life.
4. **Despair and relief:** Lee is unsure if Chris is still alive until he hears him speak again 'I thought we'd lost you.'
5. **Resolution:** the emergency services come on the line to talk to Lee, and we know that he is safe 'yeah this is the police, we've got him now.'

6. **Post-analysis:** we return to the familiar format with music beds, jingles along with a post-analysis recap of what was happening on- and off-air. We have self-disclosure around Lee's own struggle with mental health and a link to charities for anyone impacted.

The reaction by the press after all three calls were broadcast is worth noting. Although written across different decades, newspapers presented the three hosts as saviours and heroes. In 1971 the *New York Times* proclaimed, 'Radio Station Helps in Rescuing Suicide Caller' (Clarity 1971), in 1994 we read (also in the *NYT*) 'Now a Caller from the G. W. Bridge: Stern to the Rescue' (Weber 1994), while in 2018 the *Daily Mirror* exclaimed 'Iain Lee Saves Suicidal Man's Life While Live on Air in Harrowing Call' (Saunders 2018). The narrative is resolved, the outcome is positive (none of the men died that day), and our hosts are presented as heroes. The network, audience, host and regulators can all breathe a temporary sigh of relief.

Concluding note

This chapter has started to consider the context of suicide calls, the complexity facing production teams and above all else, the continued powerful role of the radio host. I have tried to bring to light some of the ways radio practitioners have responded to live suicide calls in the USA and UK, while also understanding there must be many more international examples which I am yet to uncover. We start to see why radio as a medium has been chosen by these three callers above any other aspects of public communication and how presenters employ a variety of techniques, under extreme pressure, to keep the caller alive. The para-social connection to the host, the possibility of anonymity and the technical ease of a portable telephone all play their part.

Traditionally, the sound of trauma has been sidelined, and needs to be further researched, as does the way stories or calls about suicide are presented or heard on the radio and podcasts. In their analysis of *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix 2017), Wang and Parris (2021) remind us to recognize the role of the media in educating the public about real risks around suicide and mental health difficulties. There is positive potential here in shaping attitudes, discussion and knowledge around a topic that is often cloaked in shame, guilt and loneliness. By featuring storylines, portrayals, discussions and content on the radio that tackles suicide – be this through their characters, storylines, calls or reporting – audiences could be exposed to more accurate depictions of mental health conditions, learn about professional help or crisis intervention. Some media content can help contribute to suicide prevention and actively help to save lives. Our hosts tread a thin line – keeping in mind their caller as well as their audience, including those bereaved by suicide or who may be vulnerable. They must not glorify, sensationalize or stigmatize. There is then a great deal of pressure and personal responsibility placed on production teams and presenters, with an unknown impact on their tribe of listeners and, of course, the callers themselves. This raises further questions around training and support available for hosts and production teams around how to responsibly report on or represent stories about suicide on the radio.

Notes

- 1 Listener-funded community station which is part of the Pacifica Foundation.
- 2 Michael Valenti (the caller) was taken to hospital, received treatment and lived for another twenty years.
- 3 According to the Samaritans (2020), males aged 45–9 have the highest suicide rates in the UK, while males are 3.1 times more likely to die from suicide than females.
- 4 According to figures from The Samaritans charity in the UK (2020) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA (2020).
- 5 The World Health Organisation has guidelines which are international, and can be used by anyone across the world – as well as one specifically entitled ‘Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Filmmakers and Others Working on Stage and Screen’ (2019).
- 6 This has repercussions on those bereaved by suicide, too.
- 7 Broadcast on Wednesday, 25 January 2017.
- 8 Guidelines advise that specific information around details surrounding a death by suicide should not be released, the language used by reporters must be checked – including the avoidance of the phrase ‘committed suicide’ which insinuates this is a criminal act (it was decriminalized in the UK in 1961).
- 9 The ‘Werther effect’ is the phenomenon where there is supposedly an increase in rates of suicide (or those attempting it) after viewing or accessing it through the media. The ‘Werther effect’, is taken following Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774.
- 10 The term silence refers to non-speech. It is a simulation and cannot exist on the airwaves. See Street 2012: 44.

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