

# Audio within audio: Phones, Materiality and the Elicitation of Emotion in Podcasting

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## 1. Introduction

This chapter looks at audio storytelling and the elicitation of emotion and atmosphere through the use and recreation of audio technologies such as the telephone and voice memo. Building onto the now established field of radio studies, it also uses Michel Chion's cinematic 'on-the-air' and 'materialising sound indices (M.S.I.)' concepts, which will be analysed as a 'doubling-up' of auditory space in podcasting (1994: 76 & 114).

The concept of 'on-the-air' sound may have been considered in relation to radio before (Crook, 1999: 86-87); yet, podcasting is offering new ways to explore it. The prevalence of headphone listening today and, crucially, the wide use of the mobile phone (also referred to as a smartphone here) as a listening device for podcasts, deliver new exciting parallels and new creative avenues for immersive storytelling. This chapter builds on my previous research into radio as an intimate medium. That research revealed the existence of a number of intimacies deriving from different combinations of two core intimate modes that, I argue, exist in audio media: 'technological intimacy', which is inherent in our listening and recording technologies; and 'performative (or personal) intimacy', which may enhance the medium's inherent intimacy to different degrees, depending on genre, producer, production methods (Karathanasopoulou, 2015).

I look at how telephone conversations and voice memo recordings are used in both fictional and factual narratives in podcasting in order to create immersive, emotive, intimate storytelling. I examine how emotion can be generated by the doubling up of a phone conversation within a podcast when this is being listened to from a listener's own mobile phone. How a voice memo recorded in a protagonist's phone can become an intimate aural object for the audience who are listening from similar devices.

I will be using the drama *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019) and the documentary *S-Town* (Serial & This American Life, 2017), both created in the USA, as short case studies to test these ideas and unpack how audio technologies are used as intimacy invoking, emotive storytelling narrative devices.

## 2. Defining the Context

### 2a. Technological Intimacy

But before I move into this analysis, I must first define terminology and context.

The term 'technological intimacy' is used here to describe a relationship between the medium and the listener, regardless of type of programme, and refers to the ways in which the technology itself may intimately mediate content to the listener (Karathanasopoulou, 2015). Namely, some of these attributes are as follows: a. 'portability', which means audio media can superimpose themselves on more private experiences and situations; b. 'the absence of visuality' which means that the listener is invited to complete messages and create personalised, idiosyncratic mental images; c. audio media being 'ambient and, thus, not sharply framed' allowing for stories to leak into the listener's environment and create immersive, encompassing experiences; d. audio media most commonly communicating to the individual, since people tend not to listen to podcasts or the radio in groups (Karathanasopoulou, 2015). The RAJAR Midas Audio survey in the summer of 2019, found that 'Podcasting is almost always a solo activity, with a share of 92% (Rajar, 2019). In the winter of 2021, this share went up to 94% (Rajar, 2021).

In the case of podcasting, my main concern here, there are additional new intimate characteristics that either expand or strengthen these intimate attributes:

- On- demand listening, which turns the podcast into an intimate, personal object that the listener can own, go back to, and listen to, not only anywhere she wants but also anytime she wants.
- Headphone listening: Rajar reported in 2016 that 90% of podcast listening happens via headphones (Berry, 2016: 13). The technology has been described as intimate in relation to podcasting before by authors such as Martin Spinelli & Lance Dann who talk about headphones, and earbuds in particular, as allowing 'for a hyper-intimacy in which the voice you hear is in no way external, but present inside you' (2019:84). I will be looking at how the materiality of this experience is further extended when mobile phone devices are added into mix.
- Listening on portable mobile phone devices: The RAJAR Midas Audio survey (United Kingdom) in 2018, found that 'Almost three quarters of podcasting hours are listened to via a Smartphone (72%)' (Rajar, 2018). In the winter of 2021 the same survey found that smartphones continued to be the preferred device for listening to podcasts with a share of 77%, a slight increase from previous years (Rajar, 2021). The *Infinite Dial* survey in the USA echoes these finding for the USA context. In 2021 it reported that 'the smartphone continues to grow and remains the most important device for media consumption' (Edison Research, 2021: 67).

This last point is where this chapter aims to devote most of its attention. Namely, in considering the phone as a material extension to aural worlds of podcast stories. Richard Berry, considering the modes of podcast listening described above, proposes that, 'Perhaps by combining a highly personal listening environment with content that has immediate

appeal to the listener and is consumed at a time and place of their choosing, we have grounds to consider that podcasts are capable of a deeper level of intimacy' (2016: 13). This chapter will be looking at another way in which this proposition may be true by focusing on the quirk of the superimposition of listening, recording and telephone technologies, all of which have been concentrated onto one device: the smartphone.

## 2b. Performative Intimacy

'Performative (or personal) intimacy' describes the relationship between the listener and a specific programme and/or producer, voice, audio text. Intimacy here is understood to stem from the broadcaster and the ways she uses voice, audio technology and mediated sound in general. It helps 'identify degrees of intimacy relative to genre and modes of address (or intimacies). Performative intimacy has a role in enhancing technological intimacy' (Karathanasopoulou, 2015). In this chapter, this is relevant in the ways in which podcast creators choose to use audio technologies within their storytelling. Interestingly, we will be seeing in very clear terms how technological and performative intimacies are inextricably linked.

## 2c. Podcasting as a Medium

This chapter examines podcasting as a 'medium' and a 'new aural culture' (Llinares et al., 2018). It looks at the unique ways that different genres and creators within it can combine these two relationships (technological & performative/personal intimacy) in order to create a new set of unique intimacies, only present in this medium. This work aims to add to an already existing conversation about podcasting as an intimate medium (ex. Swiatek in Llinares et al., 2018 & Spinelli & Dann., 2019) and it claims that there is no one 'intimacy' but a multitude of intimacies existing in podcasting, that are worth exploring and unveiling. As such, by homing in on Chion's cinematic concepts of 'on-air-sound' and 'materialising sound indices' (1994: 76 & 114) this chapter aims to reveal textures and modes of signification that are new and emerging in audio media. It aims to observe and describe elements of podcasting's intimacy canon as this is being formulated.

## 2d. 'On-the-air' sound & 'M.S.I'.

Chion's work on film sound has often been useful to radio and podcast studies, perhaps paradoxically as there are no images to accompany the sound. And yet, despite this obvious fact, Chion's concepts translate well into audio-only media, perhaps because of radio's and podcasting's ability to induce vivid and personal mental images in the mind of each listener. McHugh, writing about podcasting, refers to Chion's work (1994) where he divides the soundtrack used in film into three categories: voice, music, and noise – also referring to ambient sound; McHugh remarks (also referencing British audio producer Alan Hall):

‘Whether as film soundtrack or pure audio, the relational layering, timing, and placement of all three kinds of sounds—what might be termed the choreography of sound—viscerally shapes the impact a mixed end product can have on listeners’ (McHugh, 2021: 106). In this chapter, I will be homing-in a little closer into two specific concepts from Chion’s work. These two concepts might be seen to exist in the intersection between voice and ambient sound. In *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Chion defines ‘on-the-air’ as ‘sounds in a scene that are supposedly transmitted electronically as *on-the-air*—transmitted by radio, telephone, amplification, and so on’ (1994: 76). Later in the book he talks about ‘materialising sound indices’ which he defines as ‘the sound's details that cause us to “feel” the material conditions of the sound source, and refer to the concrete process of the sound's production’ (1994: 114). It is the combination of these two concepts that this chapter is interested in and which will allow me to unpack the doubling up of auditory space and the superimposition of an otherwise immaterial world onto a material piece of technology. The phone in my analysis becomes a material, or ‘materialising’, extension to the story/narrative of factual and fiction podcasts.

### 3. Audio Drama – Intimate Fiction

Tim Crook brings Chion’s ideas into radio theory (1999). His discussion is around sound technology and telephones (presumably landline devices mostly, though mobile phones did exist at the time Crook’s *Radio Drama* book came out). He offers some criticism of BBC drama productions at the time for using ‘a console filter to simulate the sound of a telephone’ and mentions that in independent production ‘we use real telephones and the resonances were much more authentic, even down to the gripping sound of the actor’s hand on the plastic handpiece’ (1999:65). Authenticity is key here according to both Crook and Chion for the creation of intimate story-telling. Chion explains that M.S.I.s ‘frequently consist of unevenness in the course of a sound that denote a resistance, breach, or hitch in the movement of the mechanical process’ (1994: 115). Crook, unpacks this notion for radio drama storytelling rather aptly: ‘The effect of materialising sound indices is to mortalise the creation of sound. It makes it a human production in contrast to a perfected, ethereal abstraction’ (1999: 65).

In the first case study I examine here, podcast drama series *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019), these concepts are truly brought into their full creative potential. *Passenger List* is a mystery thriller about a disappeared plane where ‘Kaitlin Le, a college student whose twin brother vanished with the flight, is determined to uncover the truth’ (Radiotopia, 2019). In the piece (which consists of two seasons with eight episodes each), the listener hears most of the story through the point of view of Le who records everything in voice memos and communicates with other characters mostly via telephone and voicemail messages. Much of the sound in the drama is doubly mediated. Namely, before it reaches the listener’s headphones (or speakers), it is first mediated from within the story through electronic

means such as: telephone calls and voice messages/ television news sequences/ the voices of the pilots of the lost plane as they are heard over radios / PA systems and cockpit recordings / Kaitlin's meetings with potential leads and dramatic sequences of her investigations as heard through her phone. When interviewed in 2019, one of the three creators of the podcast, Mark Henry Phillips, was asked about one of his favourite 'sound scenes' in the podcast. His response is illuminating:

There's one scene in episode two where Kaitlin is walking around a huge engineering lab with a jet engine expert looking at how an engine would handle a bird getting sucked into it. There was an enormous amount of sound design involved to make all the footsteps, all the mechanics yelling, the machinery. Once I had it, I just played it on my speakers really loud and recorded it on my iPhone using voice memos, gluing it together with a certain texture (in Cariker, 2019).

This segment, with the distortion created by the phone recording, sounds authentic because of its sonic imperfection. Here, the creators of the podcast are weaving a sonic texture which aims to recreate the way in which a person within the story would listen to the protagonist's recordings. In that way, they immerse the listener into the story in more ways than one: a. Assuming the listener is using headphones, the sound of this engineering lab is leaking inside her head, b. it does so while being pre-mediated as an iPhone voice memo recording and c. as the podcast is most likely to be listened to via a smartphone, it is as though the listener has been given the protagonist's recording to play on her own smartphone. The listener is given access to a material 'reality' of a story that is otherwise immaterial; a sort of backstage access that makes the story feel more real than if the producers had given us a perfect soundscape in an attempt to immerse us into the engine room as though we were walking next to the protagonist. Our point of view is now entirely different. We have been given a sound-object to hold and we can materially connect to the story.

Chion when writing about dialogue in his analysis of 'on-the-air' sound makes a very useful distinction that can be applied here. He proposes:

Imagine a scene in a film where a man is listening to a taped interview. If the sound being listened to has technical qualities of directness and presence, it refers back to the circumstances of its original state. If it has aural qualities that highlight its 'recordedness,' and if there is emphasis on the acoustic properties of the place where it is being listened to in the diegesis, we tend to focus on the moment where the recording is being heard (1994: 77).

The 'recordedness' as it happens within the story is superimposed onto the recordedness of the experience of listening to a podcast on our mobile phone. The effect is somewhat of an

illusion. Layers of separation seem to be getting removed between the listener and the story world as this superimposition happens. Spinelli and Dann, talk about the paradox of radio being considered a disembodied medium (particularly within the avant-garde), when headphone listening is the epitome of embodiment. They write: 'Earbuds push intimacy inside a body—they are, in very real sense, about re-embodiment of the voice. This observation cuts against a discourse familiar to media writing for nearly a century which described radio as a 'disembodied voice'' (2019: 102). But what happens here adds another layer of embodiment and materialisation. The recording device, the phone, materialises on the listener's hand, in her pocket, on her desk, no longer as just a listening device for a podcast, but as a listening device for the protagonist's recordings. The technology here *is* the intimacy – but it is so, because of how the producers decided to use it within their narrative. Creator Mark Henry Phillips confirms these intentions when interviewed: 'I was really trying to come up with a sound that made it feel as real as possible. My thinking was that realism was going to pull in the listener way more than just pure drama' (in Cariker, 2019).

The technology has created a full circle moment, because the smartphone has become our one device to call, leave messages, listen and record (technological intimacy); but this is only realised when these audio creatives decide to use this moment in order to enhance their story-telling (performative intimacy). Our smartphones become intimate, tactile, storytelling devices. They do not only allow us to listen to fiction that contains materialising sound indices, the smartphones *are* themselves materialising sound indices. These devices, however high-tech, remain imperfect (especially compared to professional recording equipment and studios). *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019) creator John Scott Dryden's discussion of the podcast resonates back to Crook's discussion of authenticity through imperfection. Dryden remarks: 'One thing that makes me sit up and listen is when audio sounds like it's been recorded badly and an engineer has had to make it intelligible. It's as if this was something you're not meant to hear. It makes you want to hear it all the more' (in Cariker, 2019). He talks here about creating content that mystifies, brings the listener in as voyeur or even as accomplice, by creating imperfect soundscapes.

Victoria Hoover talks about these concepts in her analysis of the drama podcast *Homecoming*<sup>1</sup> (Gimlet Media, 2016) which relies on the narrative audio format of found footage and phone tapping (2020:3). She notes that intimacy in podcasting can indeed be created by making use of smartphone technology within a story, 'as the audience is ultimately listening to a podcast about phone-tapping on their own mobile devices' (2020: 2-3). In her analysis she briefly mentions *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019) for its similarity

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<sup>1</sup> Created and written in the USA by Eli Horowitz and Micah Bloomberg, the *Homecoming* podcast consists of twelve episodes, across two seasons. It is a psychological thriller that "centers on a caseworker at an experimental facility, her ambitious supervisor, and a soldier eager to rejoin civilian life — presented in an enigmatic collage of telephone calls, therapy sessions, and overheard conversations. It's an innovative, immersive audio experience" (Gimlet Media, 2016).

to *Homecoming* remarking that both podcasts ‘attach to a body following a single character from scene to scene’ (2020: 4). Usefully, she also remarks on authenticity being created through imperfect recordings (2020: 5).

The creators of *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019) use imperfection in more than one way in order to create intimate storytelling through dialogue. They perform intimacy by electing for the voices to also sound imperfect, and the smartphone is part of the illusion again. Mark Henry Phillips remarks:

When things sound too dramatic they just feel artificial, so the process started with the editing and using takes that were a little more understated. It also meant adding weird, awkward pauses at times or taking out a line here or there. After editing, the next step was to really muck up the sound. We recorded every scene with a blend of mics but also had Kelly hold an iPhone while recording voice memos. Then I blended all of those along with sound FX and plugins (in Cariker, 2019).

His description of the creative process echoes Chion’s theorisation of M.S.I.s in voices in particular. Chion writes: ‘An m.s.i. in a voice might also consist of the presence of breathing noise, mouth and throat sounds, but also any changes in timbre (if the voice breaks, goes off-key, is scratchy)’ (1994: 115). Series 1 of the *Passenger List* ends with a soundscape of Kaitlin crying at the back of a taxi, sniffing, her voice cracking, a lot of handling noise as she tries to reach for the tissues from the back of the cab, blowing her nose when all of a sudden her mobile phone rings, she picks up, it is a very bad line, we hear the crackling, breaking up voice of her brother, who we had thought was killed in the airplane crash. It is the sonic imperfection of this call that, indeed, makes the listener ‘sit up and listen’, as *Passenger List* co-creator Dryden remarked about the podcast’s use of badly recorded sound (in Cariker, 2019). The listener is mystified as this broken, full of interference telephone call brings a character of the story back from the dead. As we listen through our own smartphone, the call sounds like it would if the missing brother had called us on our device. Again, we are superimposed onto the protagonist in more ways than one. Not only the protagonist’s voice is re-embodied in our heads (Spinnelli & Dann, 2019: 102), not only is the ambience of the back of the cab transporting us into that imagined environment, but the mobile phone functions as a materialising device that removes grades of separation between us and the story-world. We find ourselves holding Kaitlin’s phone and receiving this call – faraway-sounding, broken up, distorted – hearing for ourselves what it would have sounded like; what it *sounds* like.

#### 4. Audio Feature – Intimate Factual Production

##### 4a. Context: *Serial*, novels and literary journalism

The researcher, when looking for theoretical analyses of factual podcasting, has to begin with *Serial* (This American Life, 2014/ The New York Times, 2020), which Siobhan McHugh describes as ‘a serialized, podcast-first true-crime investigation’ belonging to ‘the crafted or narrative audio storytelling genre’ (2016: 2&5)<sup>2</sup>. The first reason why a researcher would begin from this point is that *Serial* (‘a spin-off from *This American Life*<sup>3</sup> and the Chicago public radio station WBEZ’) was the first podcast to go viral (Berry, 2015: 170). It’s first season was the first podcast to reach five million downloads and streams on iTunes (Dredge, 2014). The second reason, and most relevant to this chapter, is that it invented, or re-invented (Berry, 2015: 171; McHugh, 2016:6)<sup>4</sup> a new genre of audio programming. McHugh notes that ‘*Serial* blended *TAL*’s fast-paced, host-led narrative techniques with the suspenseful episodic delivery of popular television formats’ (2016:2). Theorists describe the work as a ‘new narrative form’, of interest not only to audio creatives but to literature and narrative scholars as well (McCracken, 2017: 1). In the introduction to her edited collection *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, Ellen McCracken remarks that ‘*Serial* created a new kind of intimate storytelling in the digital age. Koenig seems to speak directly and personally to listeners through their earbuds...’ (2017: 1)<sup>5</sup>. It is also of interest here to note that scholars have commented on *Serial*’s use of conventions typically used in fiction, such as serialisation in comparison to older radio dramas (Berry, 2015); or more critically about the ethical questions around the audience being ‘primed to expect a story with *characters* and a *plot*, for which it is important to *listen in order, serially*’ (Haugtvedt in McCracken, 2017: 7) - ideas that remain relevant when exploring *S-Town* (Serial & This American Life, 2017). Hancock and McMurtry wrote about ‘Post-*Serial*’ fiction that has since used *Serial*’s ‘blueprint’ and they note that, apart from its ‘effective radio journalism aesthetic and form’, it was pioneering in utilising and expressing its ‘unique podcast media identity’ (in Llinares et. al. 2018:82-83). It may be argued that *S-Town* (Serial & This American Life, 2017), the factual case study I will be looking at here, is a ‘Post-*Serial*’ media text. McHugh notes that the ‘massive audience response’ to *Serial* ‘spurred the *TAL* stable to experiment with another narrative podcast, *S-Town*’ (McHugh, 2021:105).

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<sup>2</sup> Across 12 episodes, the first season of *Serial*, which established it as medium-defining, investigates the murder of a high-school senior in Baltimore USA, back in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *This American Life* (also abbreviated as *TAL*) is a weekly USA public radio program and podcast created by Ira Glass (who is also the host) and Torey Malatia, produced in collaboration with WBEZ Chicago and delivered to stations by PRX The Public Radio Exchange. It “is heard by more than 2 million listeners each week on over 500 public radio stations in the U.S., with another 2.3 million people downloading each episode as a podcast” (This American Life, 1996/2022).

<sup>4</sup> ‘The premise was, in itself, original for an audio podcast but one that mirrored narratives in the classic serials of radio’s past’ (Berry, 2015: 171).

‘The genre has its origins long before the advent of podcasting. Indeed the first ‘radio features’ emerged at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the 1920s and 1930s. These were imaginative audio works that blended ‘actuality’ (ambient sound, recorded outside the studio) with narrated information usually delivered by actors, so that as Madsen points out (2013: 127), they ‘often sounded more like radio drama than what we today consider ‘documentary’ [...]’ (McHugh, 2016: 6).

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Koenig is the host, co-creator and co-producer of *Serial* (2014).

The above is the context within which this second case study will be considered. *S-Town* (Serial & This American Life, 2017) is a record-breaking<sup>6</sup> ‘narrative podcast’ (McHugh, 2021:102), created by Brian Reed of *This American Life*, and Julie Snyder of *Serial* (a spin-off of *This American Life*) and it has been ‘hailed for inaugurating a new genre, the audio nonfiction novel’ (Waldmann, 2020a:28). It is presented as a true-crime story, told across seven chapters, which starts when a clock restorer from Woodstock, Alabama contacts ‘a reporter to investigate the son of a wealthy family who’s allegedly been bragging that he got away with murder’ (S-Town, 2017). The story takes a different turn when ‘someone else ends up dead, sparking a nasty feud, a hunt for hidden treasure, and an unearthing of the mysteries of one man’s life’ (S-Town, 2017). Ella Waldmann argues that *S-Town* ‘benefitted from the success of its predecessor’ *Serial*, and (referencing a Variety article) notes that ‘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’ (2020a: 30). She also sees the story-telling and narrative form as similar to that of *Serial*, noting that *S-Town* blurs the lines between fact and fiction and packages fact as fiction (2020a: 32).

While a lot of research has been published about *Serial* (This American Life, 2014/ The New York Times, 2020), *S-Town* (having launched three years later) is now beginning to be written about in scholarly work – revealing a fruitful, rich new ground for research. Issues around queerness (Rooney 2018 & Booth, 2019), aural representation and narrative non-fiction (Waldmann, 2020a & 2020b), literary aesthetics and nonfiction ethics (Cardell, 2021), the cultural and industrial positioning of *S-Town* (Dowling & Miller, 2019), *S-Town* as literary journalism (McHugh, 2021), have been explored in relation to *S-Town*. Some of this work will be of use here. The aim of this segment is to add to a growing body of scholarly work around a text that has gained a lot of attention for its unique form and subject matter. ‘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 quoted by Waldmann, 2020a: 29). Brian Reed, host and co-producer of *S-Town* (Serial & This American Life, 2017), confirms the team’s intentions to structure the work as a novel (and explains how the work would be different from *Serial*):

I wasn’t directly involved in the making of *Serial*, though obviously I work with those guys and was around. Julie Snyder made *S-Town* with me and was the co-creator of *Serial*. [When we talked about *S-Town*, we said] ‘It’s going to be something different. We’re going to release all the episodes at once. We’re going to call them chapters. It’s going to be modelled after a novel.’ (in McGrane, 2017)

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<sup>6</sup> *S-Town*, was downloaded more than 10 million times within the first four days of its release — setting a new record in the podcasting world (Passman, 2017).

In another interview with *The Guardian's*<sup>7</sup> critic Miranda Sawyer he goes as far as to mention two specific novels that he and Snyder drew from (in Sawyer, 2017). Interestingly, while a lot of scholarly discussion has been offered around the podcast's similarities to literature, its sound has been less of a scholarly concern so far – with the exception of McHugh (2021) and Waldmann (2020a & 2020b) who offer some insightful discussions, which will be useful here. Creators Brian Reed and Julie Snyder themselves make a point to underline the importance of the sound of this work in the podcast's website. When the user clicks on the transcript of each episode, it is forwarded by this note: '*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, 2017). Despite the literary innovation of the podcast, which Reed and Snyder talk at length about in interviews, it is the fact that this is a podcast/a sonic artefact, that makes it groundbreaking.

#### 4b. Calling Alabama

Here I will try to unpack one element of *S-Town's* (Serial & This American Life, 2017) sonic production – the use of the telephone. The series starts with a phone-call in the first chapter/episode, and it is through the crackly sound of a phone that the listener gets to know the main protagonist, John B. McLemore, a clock restorer from Woodstock, Alabama. Journalist Brian Reed has phoned McLemore a while after he had received an email in which McLemore asked him to investigate a murder. In this first chapter of *S-Town*, Reed reads the email to the listener. In it McLemore asks: 'I would like to talk to you by phone if possible, this is too much to type'. In a piece that is created to function as a novel, the value of the voice, the value of a phone call, is immediately established, 'showcasing the limits of written communication (Waldmann, 2020a: 35).

Reed himself, when interviewed by *Vice* about the making of *S-Town*, remarks about how any story needs the person telling it to be a 'good talker' and how those in the story of *S-Town* all fall in this category (in Golby, 2017). Reed then, poignantly, specifically mentions the telephone: 'It's just the way that they talk to each other. The way they talk on the phone, and they talk when they're hanging out in the backyard or whatever' (in Golby, 2017). He talks here about the two modes of communication present in his piece: the telephone conversation and the location recordings he does with McLemore and other Woodstock locals where Reed often stands around as an observer.

McLeomore is a real person, and yet with his eloquent, humorous, often outrageous, dialogue in a strong regional accent, he does sound like the character of a novel. 'Of course, while the story may feel like a novel, McLemore is not a fictional protagonist' (Cardell, 2021:

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<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian* is a British daily newspaper.

2). I argue that the 'reality' as well as the 'larger than life' characteristics of McLemore are expertly balanced on a tightrope between fact and fiction, partly by creating an intimate separation between Reed and McLemore and, later, those around him. The telephone becomes a device of connection as well as mystification.

The first thing we hear following Reed's introduction to the piece and before we hear McLemore through the phone, is the ringing tone. This ringing tone becomes a staple in the piece; it becomes an important sound, a symbol of connection and distance, and an ominous foreteller later on. Hoover, when writing about similar themes in the podcast *Homecoming* (Gimlet Media, 2016), compares found-footage horror films to found-footage audio storytelling. She talks about the audio recording device itself becoming 'a character as much as anyone behind or in front of it. In *Homecoming*, this is especially clear in moments in which the recorder is explicitly referenced...' (Hoover, 2020: 9). The same may be said about the way that Reed and Snyder use the sound of the telephone tone in this audio nonfiction novel, which borrows so much from fictional literary tropes. These calls are being recorded, and in listening to them, we are also listening to them being recorded. In fact, we often hear Reed inform his contributors that he is indeed recording. According to Waldmann, '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*' (2020a:35). Chion's concept of 'recordedness' comes back to mind here (1994: 77).

Reed often calls from a studio to achieve better sound, but the separation from his contributors, the imperfection of the other side of the conversation creates an atmosphere of authenticity. The listener, most probably listening through her smartphone, is listening to this call as if McLemore had connected with her directly. Waldmann remarks on the significance of the dialling sound in the creation of these immersive, intimate moments:

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' [...] adding authenticity to the scene and contributing to the impression that we, as listeners, are eavesdropping on their conversation (2020a:35).

The story is told partly via recorded telephone conversations and partly with Reed visiting Woodstock, Alabama. The blend of these two modes, makes for a rich tapestry of storytelling. The argument here is that there is a function to these calls which goes beyond convenience. It is a powerful, multifunctional narrative device. For one, these calls accentuate the physical distance between Reed and McLemore during key moments in the story. At the end of the second chapter, the listener is confronted with a shocking,

unexpected development. John B. McLemore has killed himself. The harbinger of the devastating news is the ringing tone of the telephone. The same tone that introduced us to McLemore at the beginning of chapter one – now seemingly a lifetime ago. McHugh remarks about this moment in the piece: ‘That sound has an inbuilt expectancy, as the listener naturally tries to guess the caller’s identity. Tension ratchets upward until, finally, comes tragic news from Goodson’s sister-in-law, Skyler’ (2021: 115). Indeed, the build-up, the suspense, is almost fictionalised. The third chapter begins the way the second ended. The listener hears the beginning of this call again, but now the suspenseful unreality of that ending becomes grounded and real as we hear Reed’s response to the news. McHugh’s analysis of this scene is illuminating and worth sharing verbatim:

There is a certain artifice in how Reed has, as the reporter, recorded the sound of his own distress at the news: as an audio journalist, he would understandably have pressed ‘record’ before he made a phone call to the community, but there is still a cool self-awareness in the technique, as he records his faltering voice and expression of sympathy. The effect is to position the listener as almost an eavesdropper on the scene, compelled to imagine what has happened. Here Reed is deploying what Lindgren describes as ‘sonic elements . . . to create accompanying inner imagery and experiences of intimacy (McHugh, 2021:115).

This scene, for all its dramatic devastation, can be felt as ‘too close for comfort’, as Martin Shingler describes the ‘ultimate intimacy’ when analysing an example from the radio avant-garde in which the producer created an effect of unbearable closeness (2000: 206). We are now indeed, as McHugh and Waldmann suggest, eavesdropping to one of those phone-calls that no one wants to receive. Reed’s breaking, faltering voice through the line, is now that of a grieving friend, not of a journalist, as he tries to take in the news. We hear him sniffing, losing his words. Here, in this factual feature, as if through a mirror, we are reminded of the fictional Keitlin Le, crying in the back of a taxi in *Passenger List* (Radiotopia, 2019), having received a call from her brother who she thought dead. Reed’s call with Skyler is a reversal of this line that connects the dead and the living (Le and her brother who is presumed dead); this call is signalling the end of McLemore’s life - his recorded voice now becoming our only connection to him. Chion’s description of M.S.I.s in voice is apt here as well, as we become grounded on to reality, in an audio text that often, somewhat intentionally, sounds like fiction. Reed sounds devastated and lost for words. Skyler on the phone, is far away from him, in the middle of a family tragedy. The contrast between the studio quality in Reed’s voice and the crackly, imperfect line in which he has called Skyler signifies distance and, now, loss. Waldmann - reflecting on Mildorf and Kinzel’s ‘audionarratology’ (2016) and DeMair’s discussion of ‘acoustic story telling’ in *Serial* (in McCracken 2017) - remarks that *S-Town* ‘lends itself to an (audio)narratological analysis, which takes into account nonverbal clues, such as music, sound effects, fading, silence, and pauses’ (2020a: 34). Pauses and silences in Reed’s voice add to the atmosphere of shock, for which the ground has been

prepared by the use of the ringing tone at the start of the scene - whether recorded raw or added afterwards, this may be classified as a sound effect. The overall effect, despite having been given the brief version of this scene at the end of the podcast's previous chapter, is that we are witnessing 'Reed's reaction to McLemore's death in what seems to be real time' (Waldmann, 2020a: 36).

Despite the sudden and shocking loss of McLemore, the series continues, now becoming a biography of him: 'It is as if, despite John's passing, it speaks immediately to listeners, communicating directly through recorded telephone calls and in-person interviews. This voice from beyond the grave structures the series, but it does so alongside an array of other communicative and/or aesthetic forms...' (Rooney, 2017: 157). The listener's device, most likely a smartphone, becomes now the connecting device, a line through, not only to Reed and *S-Town*, but to McLemore from beyond. Radio avant-garde writer Allen S. Weiss, in his book *Phantasmic Radio*, written before the podcast existed, remarks that radio achieves 'a reification of the imagination' (1995: 6). His is a view of radio that includes an element of the corporeal, often avoided in mainstream radio. Reed may be seen to subvert factual radio's prior avoidance of revealing the corporeal by letting the listener hear bodily sounds like those of a journalist who is crying and has somewhat lost his composure, or of McLemore talking about how he just 'pissed in the sink' while on the phone and being recorded by Reed (*S-Town*, 2017). This intimacy is no longer 'safe', the listener is perhaps too close for comfort.

Weiss' use of the word reification (1995: 6) has another application when considered in relation to podcasting (perhaps only serendipitously): of the phone becoming a material manifestation of an otherwise unseen world. Audio media now becoming more a matter of the body than they ever were. The listeners can now hold the story in the palm of their hands.

## 5. Conclusion

Podcasting affords audio creatives new avenues to create immersive storytelling whether in fiction or factual production. What I have observed here is a very interesting intermingling of intimacy inherent into the technology and the various ways in which producers choose to enhance it. While this relationship between 'technological' and 'performative' intimacy pre-existed in traditional broadcast radio, what I have described here is slightly different: the listening device, the smartphone, becomes a tactile storytelling prop in the hands of a character in a story (fictional or factual), while at the same time it is placed in the hands of the listener. Intimacy here happens not only through the immaterial imaginary but it contains the possibility to materially connect the listener to a story. Perhaps, in the future, audio producers may include interactivity to their stories, where the listener may be able to dial in to listen to elements of the story. This chapter is by no means conclusive. It is meant

as an addition to the conversation about podcasting as an intimate medium. I propose here that there is a multitude of intimacies in audio media and that the themes explored here are only one piece to a big, ever-evolving puzzle. Oliveira, Stachyra and Starkey defined radio as ‘the resilient medium’ (2014). As technology continues to evolve, audio media and podcasting, seem to continue to have infinite scope to shape around it creatively. And while the modes of intimacy might be multiple and different, it is the same magic of the unseen voices and imagined rooms and landscapes, which enchanted radio audiences in the past, that is now propelling podcasting into its golden age.

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