Podcasting and Urban Planning

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Introduction

If you haven't listened to the *99 Percent Invisible* podcast episode called *Structural Integrity*, well, put this essay down and go listen to it (listen: https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/structural-integrity/). It's a story that captures the utility and politics of podcasting and urban planning. The podcast starts with a seemingly technical discussion about the design and engineering challenges of the 279-metre Citycorp building in New York. The building was constructed in 1977, and is one of the most distinctive on New York's skyline, due to a uniquely engineered stilt-style base. At the time, it was the seventh tallest building in the world. The podcast opens with the chief structural engineer, William LeMessurier, saying, "what I wanted to know, is when is this building going to fall down" (99 Percent Invisible, 2014, n.p.). LeMessurier recalls that in "1978, I'm in my office, I get a call from a student, I do not know the school, I wish *he* would call me. . . I think *he* was an architectural student" (99 Percent Invisible, 2014, n. p., our emphasis); according to this student's research, the Citicorp building could blow over in the wind. LeMessurier re-ran his engineering calculations to find that the student was right, there was about a 1-in-16 chance the building would collapse in the middle of New York.

But *Structural Integrity* is not just a podcast about design and engineering. Rather, it is more centrally a story about a built environment discipline and gender. In a great piece of radio storytelling (at the 13:45 minute mark) we hear the podcast host, Roman Mars, say, "Okay wait for it, wait for this moment, it's a good one, here it comes", and then we hear a female voice. And yes, we find out the architectural student was, in fact, Diane Hartley; "It turns out that *she* was the student in LeMessurier's story" (99 Percent Invisible, 2014, n.p., 99 Percent Invisible's emphasis).

Structural Integrity shows podcast recordings and podcasting can include discussion of the technical skills of a discipline, such as technical urban planning skills. Or the learning environments within which these technical skills are learnt, such as universities. Or the physical landscapes within which these technical skills are practised, such as offices, streets, neighbourhoods and cities. It also prompts us to consider the social and cultural environments that shape and regulate the discipline and profession of urban planning more generally. For example, the journalists at *99 Percent Invisible* call into question the gendered assumptions of the structural engineers by using the technical skills of the engineers and the fabric of the city as storytelling devices to get to the question of gender. As a listener, you are encouraged to reflect on LeMessurier's assumption that the smart engineering student was a man, and to call LeMessurier out when it becomes evident that the precocious engineering student is a woman.

We argue that podcasting is a political and ethical process and that each stage of the podcast production process—initiating, creating, disseminating, reflecting etc.—should be used to politically and ethically intervene in the socio-political world. In other words, podcasting is not an apolitical nor neutral activity. What we record, how we record it, what we play back to others, and who and what voices we include or leave out are political choices that require our critical attention. Our aim in this essay is, therefore, to open the debate about podcasting and the discipline of urban planning beyond the often-celebratory ideas about the power and utility of this communication medium. We explore the relationship between podcasting and community radio to ask, what is it about this modality of communication that is helpful to urban planning scholars? We start by exploring one way in which podcasting relates to urban planning.

Podcasts, Radio, Journalists and Academics

Academia, journalism, radio and podcasting might be more integrated than you realise. Lecia Rosenthal (2014) recently noted that between 1927 and 1933 the famous 20th century philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote and presented about eighty broadcasts for the then new medium of radio (listen to readings of Benjamin's radio scripts: http://www.ubu.com/sound/benjamin.html). A more recent example is one of our favourite podcasters, Chenjerai Kumanyika. Kumanyika is a host of the podcast *Uncivil* (listen: http://www.gimletmedia.com/uncivil) and a contributor to the *Seeing White* podcast (listen: https://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/). Kumanyika is an Assistant Professor in Rutgers University's Department of Journalism and Media Studies and describes himself as "a journalist, but in my other job I study critical media theory and critical theory, so I'm kinda like a philosopher" (Third Coast Festival, 2018, n.p.). In Sydney, 2ser community radio produces podcasts like *City Road* (our show, https://cityroadpod.org/) and *HistoryLab*, which combine the rigour of academic research and the voices of the researchers with journalistic storytelling formats.

City Road and *HistoryLab* are a response, perhaps, to the increasing pressure that is placed on academics to communicate the social and political implications of their research beyond the academy. In an environment where research outputs are buried behind publisher paywalls, academics are nonetheless required (and evaluated) on how well they communicate their research. Podcast production and dissemination offers urban planning academics a way to make their research more accessible, and the wide public dissemination of research findings is especially important for a discipline with a professional arm like urban planning. The new community radio and university podcasting partnerships in Australia are blurring the line between academia and journalism. For example, several urban planning and urbanism scholars podcast and volunteer in community radio in Australia (such as Dr Elizabeth Taylor, Monash University; Associate Professor David Nichols, Melbourne University; Dr Natalie Osborne, Griffith University; and Associate Professor Kurt Iveson at the University of Sydney), which we will discuss below.

Podcasting has always been a synthesising media. Podcast is a portmanteau coined in 2004 by combining the words *broadcast* and *iPod* (Hammersley, 2004) that is now synonymous with the audio content our devices pull from RSS feeds onto our mobile devices from around the web. In communications and media studies, podcasting is known as 'convergent media' or a 'converged medium', drawing on the convergence culture where "old and new media collide" (Jenkins, 2006). The word 'convergent' refers in this context to the merging of the power of audio storytelling, portable and personal media devices, and globally networked information communication technologies. As a journalistic practice, podcasting is restructuring the media and radio broadcasting

landscape. It might also be changing the way urban planning scholars undertake and disseminate research, or engage with students, professional bodies, the public and each other.

Urban planning academics are taking up podcasting in various ways. For example, a 'podcast' might refer to recording a keynote speaker at a conference and uploading this talk to the conference website, often with little or no audio post-production. Alternatively, at the other end of the audio production spectrum, a podcast might refer to a show that is produced at a radio station, broadcast on the radio and then podcast via ApplePodcasts. Thus, podcasting refers to a broad range of audio recording and broadcasting practices, and podcasting will therefore mean different things to different urban planning academics. Arguably, however, podcasting provides unmediated, or perhaps less-mediated, access to a range of urban planning audiences that had heretofore been mediated and regulated by journalists or university media department gate-keepers working alongside an increasingly hegemonic media (Jarrett, 2009).

Just about any academic can create a podcast (Twist, 2005). You don't need expensive audio recording equipment or access to a radio studio, radio transmitter, broadcast licence and broad-cast slot. Instead of the typical media model, whereby producers create audio content and deliver it to the consumer via the radio, podcasting is suggested to offer a more 'horizontal' approach, where "producers are consumers and consumers become producers and engage in conversations with each other" (Berry, 2006). The podcasting opportunities and risks for the discipline of urban planning are perhaps endless. In terms of risks, Kumanyika reminds us "that power is always present; you're always commenting on power" when you tell a story with a podcast (Third Coast Festival, 2018, n.p.). This means, as journalist Sandhya Dirks suggests, "stories" can be "fucking dangerous" if we fail to take them and our podcasting seriously (Third Coast Festival, 2018, n.p.). We address some of the risks associated with academic podcasting in a five-part series called Podcasting the Urban (listen: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/31-podcasting-the-urban) and will not, therefore, deal with the risks here. Instead, in the next section we highlight three interrelated opportunities incorporating conversations, audiences and impact.

Conversations, Audiences and Impact

Our increased capacity to engage in conversation with each other across vast geographical differences via podcasts—without these conversations being mediated by other institutions, such as universities or the media—is a key advantage of podcasting for the urban planning community of scholars. Some of the conversations that podcasting enhances include recording public lectures or events, making a podcast using journalism interviewing and storytelling models, and using podcasting as a research method. There are, of course, a whole suite of podcasts that are not made by academics, but focus on urban planning issues. *99 Percent Invisible* is perhaps the most famous of these, but we are concerned with academic podcasting in this essay.

In the early days of podcasting, simply hitting record on a lectern, smartphone or built in microphone on a computer was all it took to become a podcaster. Recording a public lecture and uploading it to the web is still one of the quickest and easiest ways to get podcasting as an academic. These *record and broadcast* podcasts serve an important role for the discipline, but their popularity is linked to the status of the speaker, the quality of the audio recording and the promotional strategy. These podcasts appeal to colleagues who missed a talk, but they rarely attract a wider public audience who have been conditioned to prefer *interview-* and *narrative-driven* styles of podcast production. For this reason we are part of a group of academic community

radio makers who are looking to build an audience within and beyond the academy by drawing on the interview and storytelling skills of journalists.

We know from media studies that the democratising power of the media is under threat globally. From liberal democracies to authoritarian states, mainstream media organisations get their content from a shrinking number of large commercial media organizations (Bagdikian, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Australia sits 19th on the World Press Freedom Index, alongside the U.K. at 40 and the U.S. at 45, (RSF, 2019) as threats to investigative and public interest journalism mount (MEAA, 2019). Media scholars criticize the narrowing of media content and the concentration of media ownership, as some of the biggest media companies merge and concentrate their coverage and reporting (Fairfax, 2018). Around the world media organizations are scrambling to adjust as new digital planforms increasingly control the dissemination of news content (ACCC, 2019). In a seminal study on media diversity, Bagdikian (1990) argues that a "private ministry of information" controls what is and isn't news with wide-reaching implications for liberal democracies. Bagdikian's Orwellian analysis has clearly intensified over the last 30-odd years, as a shrinking group of "giant [media] firms… produce an increasingly similar output" (Bagdikian, 1990). As academic podcasting evolves horizontally, and more academics produce interview- and narrative-driven podcasts that target a wider range of listeners, podcasting could become an important political project for the discipline within a media environment of narrowing content and concentrating ownership.

The promise of the internet and the rise of digital media has long been associated with the claim that new media might *save democracy*, facilitating rigorous public debate and movement away from media monopolies by reformulating a public sphere that is beyond state or commercial control (Gimmler, 2001). But these are questionable claims, not least because commercial podcasting gatekeepers are emerging to commercialise and control podcast distribution (Bonini, 2015). Before the advent of podcasting as a *saviour of democracy*, community radio was often asked to fulfil this formidable role. At least in the U.S. and Australia, where we are from, community radio has long been celebrated as an unregulated and accessible medium. Historically, community radio broadcasters have sought to empower local, diverse communities, often by training them and putting them in front of the microphone, which allowed them to talk back to dominant commercial media and political interests (Bosch, 2003). Whereas television production and traditional print media is expensive to create and distribute, William "Bill" Siemering, a founding board member of National Public Radio in the U.S., suggests community radio is not only the most democratic medium in terms of representation, but it is essential to a functioning democracy (Siemering, 2000). We have much to learn, then, from community radio.

Learning from Community Radio

The academic podcasting community we are involved with in Australia has strong ties to community radio, with urbanism podcasts produced out of community radio stations all the way up the east coast of Australia (e.g., *City Road Podcast* at 2ser radio in Sydney, *Radio Reversal* at 4RRR in Brisbane and *The Urbanists* at 3RRR in Melbourne). The relationships between academic podcasters and community radio are not, therefore, solely about gaining access to audio recording equipment and production skills. These relationships are also about shared commitments to social justice, media diversity, democracy and promoting rigorous public debate on issues of social importance. These relationships force us to think about podcasting as a political practice, rather than simply as a set of technical skills or as a new research dissemination medium. The lessons we have learnt from community radio are shaping our podcasting politics.

In South Africa, for example, community radio helped marginalised groups to organize around the struggle to end apartheid (Siemering, 2000). In Columbia, during a time of internal conflict, violence, and political repression, community radio empowered the voices of the marginalized youth (Murillo, 2003). In Sydney, the two young Aboriginal radio makers of *The Survival Guide* provide a "Blak" reading of the urban planning process that is guiding the redevelopment of their community in Redfern (listen to a discussion about the show: https://soundcloud.com/user-283789701/31-podcasting-the-urban). They claim, "Gentrification is Colonisation!". In this sense, community radio provides space, skills and technologies for groups who are not represented in the highly mediated public media sphere to form counter media publics that are set on building a more radical form of democratic participation (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2002; Fraser, 1990; Van Vuuren, 2006; Watson, 2016). In post-Ferguson America, for example, African American pod-casters recreated "iconic spaces of Black sociality like the barber/beauty shop or the church" by "cocooning" themselves in audio that mirrors conversations about their own issues in their own vernaculars that often do not appear in the broadcast public sphere (Florini, 2017). In South Korea, podcasts allowed citizens to engage in democratic conversations to challenge state control (Park, 2017). But community radio is not without its limitations in reimagining a public sphere. In Australia community radio stations are bound by rules and conventions that prioritize a certain kind of normative broadcast talk (Van Vuuren, 2006). For example, borrowing from radio producer Chenjerai Kumanyika again, when Kumanyika started presenting his own content for public radio he realized the voice we most commonly associate with authority and trustworthiness on the radio is white and male: "The voice I was hearing and gradually beginning to imitate was something in between the voice of Roman Mars and Sarah Koenig. Those two very different voices have many complex and wonderful qualities. They also sound like white people" (Kumanyika, 2015, n.p.).

Podcasting on the other hand, frees the politics of community radio and counter publics from the limitations of community radio technology, licencing and broadcast. This allows counter publics to more readily form and create safe social/cultural spaces between listeners and produc-ers with podcasts, although in some countries there are other limitations on people's ability to speak freely. If we conceive of urban planning as a counter public, then podcasting might open new possibilities for the discipline; from sharing information that allows us to keep up-to-date with the latest research, to critically reflect on and interrogate our own discipline (e.g., along gender, class and other lines), to engage in wider public debates about the planning of our cities. Debates that would normally be excluded from traditional media because of political and economic interests can now be heard because of an "unregulated influx of new voices entering the radio-scape"; voices that are not bound by any need for "commercial viability" or broadcast standards (Madsen, 2009). Podcasting does, therefore, have the potential to reach new audiences and create new listeners. But Madsen (2009) worries that the newly empowered voices in the podcasting space will get lost in the crowd. There is now a "vast reservoir of voices" (p. 1207) just sitting in RSS feeds around the web waiting for people to subscribe. Now that anyone can become a *broadcaster*, the question is, will the new urban planning voices be able "to bridge the gap of distance" or will they fail to "resonate sufficiently to make themselves heard beyond their own small niche communities"? (Madsen, 2009, p. 1200)

Conclusion: More than the Mainstream! Building a Counter Public?

The debate about how academics are using podcasting—their methods, motivations, audiences and impacts etc.—is less than a decade old. As an academic pursuit podcasting allows us to

share information across wide geographical and social distances, thereby keeping us up-to-date with the latest research. For some, podcasting can be cathartic, allowing us to critically reflect and interrogate our own discipline along gender, class, racial and other lines. As a methodology, podcasting is deployed as a new way of collecting, analyzing and reporting on data (Murthy, 2008). As a communication tool, podcasting is deployed to talk to each other or to engage with wider professional bodies. Some academics may also choose to build a big public audience while others may not be interested in attracting a public audience at all. More practically, academic podcasts can be recorded in a range of academic spheres, such as the research lab, the classroom, the urban planning office, or in the streets and neighbourhoods of our cities.

In this essay, we took a critical look at how our own podcasting emerged out of our community radio practice, to ask what does this tell us about academic podcasting. Our community radio experiences force us to consider the social and cultural environments that shape and regulate the discipline and profession of urban planning. We are alert to the racialized, gendered, class and other structural forces that underwrite podcast production and public commentary more generally. Therefore, for us, academic podcasting is about dialogue and participation; it is about who is talking, who are they in conversation with, and what are the structures that limit and regulate these conversations? This means "the unique power of the new media regime is precisely its participatory potential", which is furthermore related to, "the number of people who participate in using it during its formative years" (Rheingold, 2008, p. 100).

Disclosure statement

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