

Full Transcript of BC Studies Episode One “What is a Scholarly Podcast?”

[Introductory Music: *Mist*, composed, performed and recorded by Devon Throness.
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Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Hello and welcome to the first episode of the BC Studies Podcast. *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, is an academic journal hosted at the University of British Columbia, on unceded Musqueam territory. This podcast itself was recorded and produced on the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and shared territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh First Nations.

My name is Isabelle Ava-Pointon, and I will be your guide throughout this podcast mini-series. I’m the current Podcast Coordinator at *BC Studies* and an undergraduate at UBC studying History and International Relations.

This mini-series is the latest enterprise of the BC Studies Podcast Program, which launched in the Spring of 2020. Throughout this series, we’ll answer four important questions about podcasting. This week we’ll look at the question “What is a scholarly podcast?” Next week, we’ll answer “Who makes scholarly podcasts?” Our third week will examine the question “Why should we make scholarly podcasts?” And finally, our last episode will answer “How do we make scholarly podcasts?” Today’s episode will just be me talking about what podcasts are, but over the course of the next three episodes, you’ll get to hear from scholars and podcasters around North America who have generously offered to share their expertise.

So, what is a podcast? What distinguishes podcasts from other sound media? And what on earth is a scholarly podcast?

The word “podcasting” was coined in a 2004 article by journalist Ben Hammersley. He was writing about the future of communications and proposed “podcasting” as a word to describe the new phenomenon of audio files being shared over the internet. The word itself is a portmanteau of “broadcasting” – the act of disseminating messages to a wide audience, often through audio formats - and “iPod” – the portable music player produced by Apple. Already in the name we can see that podcasts are about disseminating information in an audio format, in a really accessible way.

Podcasts tend to be serialized, intimate, and conversational. By serialized, I mean that they’re released on a regular basis, be that once a month or once a week. By intimate, I mean that listening to someone else speak to you through your earbuds while you go about your day-to-day activities is a very intimate experience, and this is something that a lot of scholars and listeners have commented on. This intimacy, plus the fact that a lot of podcasts have multiple hosts, or a host and a guest, makes podcasting a very conversational medium. This extends to beyond the podcast itself – as lots of listeners try to engage with podcast creators on other platforms like social media.

Not only are podcasts a very engaging medium, but they're also really easy to discover and really easy to access. Although podcasts are ultimately hosted on RSS feeds, most of the world's podcasts find their way onto certain key databases. The biggest database globally is Apple Podcasts. Podcasts are also accessible financially – they're very rarely behind paywalls, making it possible for anyone to listen, without cost being a barrier.

Now that we know the basic criteria of podcasts, I want to talk about three series. Each of these three series made a huge mark on the podcasting world and helped bring the medium to scholarly and popular attention.

The first series I'm going to talk about is *This American Life*, produced by the National Public Radio in the United States of America, and hosted by Ira Glass. This series began as a radio show in 1995, and in 2006 it started releasing its weekly episodes as podcasts. This show is hugely popular, and nowadays between 2.5 and 3.5 million people download each episode.

In 2014, the creators of *This American Life* launched a new podcast called *Serial*, hosted by investigative journalist Sarah Koenig. This podcast became immensely popular and launched the genre of true crime podcasts. Listeners were so engaged that it actually led to a re-opening of the murder case in question, which is a perfect example of how podcast engagement goes beyond just listenership.

Finally, we have *Welcome to Night Vale*. This series became immensely popular in the summer of 2013, and I would describe it as a work of experimental fiction. Not only did it make podcasts an acceptable form of popular culture, but it also sparked a lot of scholarly interest in podcast literatures.

This American Life, *Serial*, and *Welcome to Night Vale* were some of the earliest podcasts to reach such heights of popularity. But over the last few decades, podcasts as a whole have only increased in popularity. According to a study done by The Canadian Podcast Listener, last year 27% of Canadian adults listened to podcasts on a monthly basis.

So now that we know what podcasts are, and we have looked at some examples, what are scholarly podcasts? Of course, this brings up the big philosophical question of "What is scholarship?", and that's an important question [laughs] but we don't have time to solve it right here. We're just going to work with the assumption that 'scholarliness' is a spectrum, and there are some tools we can use to determine how scholarly any given podcast is.

The first question we have to ask is "Who's making this podcast?" Many scholarly podcasts are made by scholars who are talking about their own research and their own area of expertise. Take, for example, the podcast *Witch, Please*, which takes an analytic and scholarly look at the *Harry Potter* series. It's hosted by two scholars with PhDs in English Literature: Hannah McGregor and Marcelle Kosman. Of course, it's really important to remember that not every podcast created by someone with a PhD is a scholarly podcast, and you don't need a PhD to make a podcast that is scholarly.

Another related question to ask is, "Who is funding this podcast?" Now, podcasts can be quite inexpensive to make, but they do take a lot of time and effort, and sometimes

podcasting becomes people's part-time or full-time jobs. This means that some funding is required, and the source of that funding can tell us a lot about the podcast. For example, if a podcast is sponsored or funded by a university or another educational institution, that probably means that the university thinks that the content of that podcast is accurate and a valuable form of scholarship. But, if it's a podcast about smoking, say, that's funded by a cigarette company, we should probably be a bit more skeptical.

A third question to ask is "What is the purpose of this podcast?" Is it meant to entertain? To educate? To sell something? While a good scholarly podcast should be entertaining, its main purpose is to educate or to disseminate research or to start a conversation about a topic that the scholar finds interesting and important in a rigorous way.

Building on that, our last question is "Does this podcast engage with scholarship?" and there's lots of ways that a podcast can do this. Some examples would include citing other scholars – in this case that would look like mentioning them by name and explaining their ideas, or even having them as guests on the show. Podcasters could also define important concepts in a field or explain theories. Basically, we want to know if this podcast is contributing to existing research in the same way that a scholarly article or academic book would.

In the end, your criteria for what constitutes a scholarly podcast might be very different from my criteria, and all that boils down to our own individual definitions of what scholarship is. And that's always up for debate – as well it should be.

I hope that you enjoyed our first episode, and that you maybe learned something new about podcasts and scholarly podcasts, and I hope that you'll tune in next week to learn more about the people who create scholarly podcasts, and how they came to work with the genre. In the meantime, you can check out our website, bcstudies.com for our show notes that include general transcripts, citations, and suggestions for further reading. Finally, I'd like to encourage you all to consider submitting an original scholarly podcast to *BC Studies*. We have a publishing program that you can learn about on our website, bcstudies.com.

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