

Transcript of BC Studies Podcast Episode Two: “Why Should We Make Scholarly Podcasts?”

[Introductory music: “Mist” by Devon Throness]

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Hello and welcome to episode three of the BC Studies Podcast: “An Introduction to Scholarly Podcasting.” My name is Isabelle Ava-Pointon; I’m the Podcast Coordinator at *BC Studies*, and I’m also your host today. I’m speaking to you today from the traditional, ancestral, unceded, and shared territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, who have always practiced oral literatures on these lands. In today’s episode, we’re exploring the question: “Why Should We Make Scholarly Podcasts?” The answers I’ll be giving are based on my research into the subject, and you can find all my sources and citations in the Show Notes. We’ll also get to hear from some of the scholars we heard from last week.

Today we’ll look at three of the most common arguments in favour of scholarly podcasts. First, their wider audience, second, their increased accessibility, and third, the different forms of engagement that they elicit.

Let’s start with Brenna Clarke Gray’s take on why appealing to a wide audience is really important for scholarly podcasts.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I’ve always wanted the scholarship that I do engage in to be as accessible to everyone as possible. I work at a publicly-funded institution, I feel like it’s my responsibility to take the public money that funds the work I do, and create something that members of the public might actually want to interact with.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

This idea of creating scholarship that’s accessible and appealing to the public is something that Charles Woods believes is one of the most important contributions of scholarly podcasts.

Charles Woods:

Podcasts bridge the gap between academic discourse and public knowledge-making. I think that gap is closing faster than ever, but it’s still a problem, and always will be. Podcasts can contribute to shrinking the magnitude of this issue for sure.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Part of the reason that scholarly podcasts are so much for appealing to members of the public than traditional forms of scholarship is because they are so much more accessible. This accessibility comes in terms of discoverability, cost, time, and language. So let’s break those four terms down.

When I say discoverability, I mean: “How easy is it to actually find this work?” Many scholarly works like journal articles or academic monographs, are not only expensive, thus

making cost a barrier, but they're also very difficult to find. If you don't have access to a university library search engine or the many databases that store the all lists of articles, you might not even know that this work exists. On the other hand, podcasts are really easy to find. You can use basic internet search engines, or you can go on databases like Apple Podcasts to search for podcasts by theme, by category, by maker, and you can see what others have said about this podcast through ratings and comments. This makes it a lot easier for folks without access to academic resources to find podcasts relevant to their research or interests.

Another barrier is cost, which I already briefly mentioned. Traditional forms of scholarship like journal articles and scholarly monographs tend to be very expensive, and institutions or individuals need to pay huge subscription fees to access those journals and books. These makes research a lot more difficult for researchers or members of the public who don't have institutional affiliations. On the other hand, podcasts are almost always free to listen to. This means that you don't need institutional affiliation, and you don't need to go through a university library in order to access the information. Michael Faris highlights how this financial accessibility is one of the key benefits of scholarly podcasts.

Michael Faris:

Traditional scholarship, right, it's in a print journal, it's only accessible at a university library, or it's an expensive university press book. It's harder for people to access that, especially for academics who are not at an R1 institution with a big library budget, but also for general public who might be interested in these issues.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

While cost is a major barrier, time is another one that's often ignored. A lot of folks trying to balance family, careers, and a social life, don't have the time to sit down and read an entire scholarly monograph or an article. This is especially true for folks whose careers don't include paid time for research. Because listening to a podcast doesn't require your eyes or your hands, you can listen to them and consume that knowledge while going about your day-to-day tasks, doing household chores, or getting exercise. This means that podcasts are accessible not only in terms of discoverability and cost, but also in terms of the time required to consume the information they contain. In fact, David Gaertner testifies that the possibility of multitasking means that scholarly podcasts are also beneficial for busy scholars.

David Gaertner:

To be quite frank, the majority of my information I get right now is through podcasts and radio, and it's because I can do other things while I do it. So I can be in the kitchen doing the dishes while the kids are doing their homework, or running around screaming, and I can be listening to Mark Turin give a paper, or Sarah Hunt delivering a talk in a way that I never can. So just in terms of efficiency [laughs] podcasting is also a really important way to think about knowledge dissemination.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Finally, many traditional forms of scholarship assume a certain level of background knowledge of their readers. And, based on that, they use complicated language and specific

jargon that makes sense to people within the discipline, but is very confusing to people who are not well-acquainted with the field. Not only does this reduce a reader's understanding, because they literally don't understand the words, but it's also very discouraging to read a paper and not understand half of what the author is saying. On the other hand, podcasts, even when they are doing rigorous research, always explain theories and concepts and terms to their listeners – and they don't make any assumptions about background knowledge.

For example, I enjoy the podcast *Future Ecologies*. This series examines ecological issues in the Northwest Coast. But I'm not an ecologist – I'm a historian. I would never be able to understand a scholarly article about ecology, but I can understand and appreciate and enjoy this podcast, because everything is explained in a very accessible way.

Despite their benefits, podcasts aren't a magic solution to all of academia's accessibility problems. Here's Charles Woods explaining some of the barriers that still exist.

Charles Woods:

We need to talk about issues of technological access when we talk about podcasts, first and foremost. Not everyone can get them, especially if they're only available on services that requires a subscription. So in this way, podcasts mimic academic journals, whose knowledge lies behind paywalls unless they are open access. So the issue then is also open access. And podcasts are the perfect genre, medium, whichever approach you take, to deconstruct that system.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

In terms of cost, time, discoverability, and language, scholarly podcasts are a much more accessible way for scholars and members of the public to consume new knowledge. But accessibility isn't their only benefit. Podcasts are also an audio format, as we've discussed, which means that listening to them is a very different experience than reading words on a page. There's more affect, and it leads to a different form of listener engagement. David Gaertner also pointed out that oral forms of scholarship speak to Indigenous traditions of oral literatures.

David Gaertner:

For me, for somebody who works in Indigenous Studies, where academic writing for so long has been this extractive technology, thinking about sound and podcasting and how that might be another space to think about knowledge dissemination and how we get that work out there that speaks to oral traditions or that speaks to storytelling and gets us away from the tones of academic writing, I think is a positive step.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

David Gaertner also points out that podcasts are unique in their ability to transmit and convey emotion.

David Gaertner:

I think the first one for me is just affect. It is the intimacy of the medium, right, to have this voice in your head, and there is so much that can be communicated through sound that

can't in text, right? It doesn't matter how gorgeous a writer you are, there is something in the human voice, in the tremor of our vocal cords, and in the way we enunciate certain things that communicates so much.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Kyle Stedman agrees that podcasts are an emotive genre, and insists that emotion is important when communicating scholarly research.

Kyle Stedman:

We need to remember that there's a real person behind this. I've read articles... I taught an article last semester, or the semester before that, where this guy was talking about remix. He was mashups and the artist Girl Talk, and he was writing and writing and writing, and by the very end, you still didn't know if he really liked Girl Talk or not. You didn't really know if he liked mashups. And I just thought it was sad [laughs]. I was like, if this is the thing you're listening to every day, and you're so pumped to be able to talk about it, it'd be cool to let that out somehow. And I think any kind of multi-modal production, any kind of pushing yourself beyond just straight words, gives you a lot of opportunity to do that. Of course you can do it in words too, as we were saying before, there are lots of ways to bring "I", to bring the personal in. Personally, that's what I love, I love hearing people's speaking voices, I love hearing where they're excited. I love when they add music or sound effects, or some other kind of, you know, poignant pauses. I like that those are ways that they're trying to tell me their affective experience of what they are talking about. That they're feeling emotion, and they want to express emotion in some way, related to what they're saying at that point. Even as I say that, part of me hesitates, cause part of me is like "does it sound scholarly enough to say 'I like people and I like emotions!'" [laughs] But that is, for me, a lot of it.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

All of these factors mentioned by David Gaertner and Kyle Stedman, so vocal tremors, sound, tone of voice, music, pauses, all of these combine to create a different sort of learning experience from reading words on a page. Jentery Sayers has explored how these different learning experiences might translate to different forms of engagement with the material.

Jentery Sayers:

It may appeal to or engage an audience differently, and different audiences, than other types of scholarly work. And so, I for one don't underestimate the embodied experiences of the way we do work. Just the act of listening, and how it may differ in terms of engagement. So, I think there is the engagement issue, and there's just, the way in which, when you compose things that are meant to be heard rather than read, you're gonna get a different kind of traction.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Meanwhile, Brenna Clarke Gray has seen how the particularities of listening to scholarship translate into different, and often more intense, forms of listener engagement.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Podcasts are incredibly intimate, that's the gift of podcasts. You know, you put your headphones in, and you go for a walk by yourself, or you do the dishes and clean the cat litter and put out the garbage, but like all these intimate domestic spaces where we tend to meet our podcasts. And that's great, I mean it's wonderful, it's exactly what's beautiful about the medium. But it also means that your listeners, if your podcast is good, your listeners are going to expect some venue to connect with you, and they're going to have some sense of ownership or possession over your content. This is not a medium if all you really want to do is lecture – it's a conversational medium.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Because podcasts are so conversational and so intimate, it's very common for listeners to form a sort of community. Charles Woods argues that this community also extends to groups of scholar-podcasters themselves.

Charles Woods:

Be a part of the community of podcasters. Whether that's online, in social media groups, with your friends, or in your subject area. Seek out other podcasters, connect, collaborate on projects. This year, I hosted the inaugural Big Rhetorical Podcast Carnival, which included scholar-podcasters from around the world coming together to produce episodes on a specific topic. It's just like a blog carnival. We need more of this collaborative spirit as podcasts extend their reach to become a more viable mode of communication and a more popular way of publishing in higher education.

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

Kyle Stedman also reflected on the benefits of this scholar-podcaster community.

Kyle Stedman:

Yeah, we have a good community. It feels kinda new. I mean there were people probably fifteen years ago starting to talk about sound, but just in the last ten there's been a big growing. So when we go to conferences, we see each other and we're like "oh you're one of my sound people, you're one of my sound people!" It's really fun!

Isabelle Ava-Pointon:

So, it's clear that podcasts have many advantages when it comes to increasing accessibility, appealing to a wider audience, and forming scholarly communities. Nonetheless, many academic institutions are still wary of accepting and acknowledging podcasts as a legitimate form of scholarship. But it does look like things are changing. Academic journals like *Kairos: The Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* have been publishing scholarly podcasts for many years, and other journals, like *BC Studies*, have recently joined the trend. Meanwhile, Assistant Professor of Publishing at SFU, Hannah McGregor teamed up with Siobhan McMenemy, Senior Editor at the Wilfrid Laurier Press, to create a peer-review system for Dr. McGregor's scholarly podcast *Secret Feminist Agenda*.

While questions still remain about the best ways to publish and peer-review different forms of scholarly podcasts, it's inescapably clear that this medium has certain advantages which traditional forms of written scholarship simply cannot match.

And one last benefit: podcasts are relatively easy to make! Tune in next week for a step-by-step, nuts-and-bolts guide to making your own podcast. In the meantime, be sure to check out our show notes which include transcripts, citations, and suggestions for further reading at bcstudies.com.

As always, we encourage you to consider submitting your own scholarly podcast to *BC Studies* for publication in our podcast program.

Finally, we would like to thank musician Devon Throness, for providing the music for this podcast. The song is called “Mist,” and it was composed, performed, and recorded by Devon Throness, Copyright 2021 ThronessMusic.

[Concluding Music: “Mist” by Devon Throness]