

Are podcasts the future of investigative journalism?

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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CCI501 Assessment Item Three – Research Proposal

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Project Title

Are podcasts the future of investigative journalism?

Abstract

Present journalists in modern society have more freedom to investigate topics that, in the early days of journalism, were quashed by governments in fear of radical or revolutionary opinions (McLean & Gorman, 2009, p. 7). Now, social and economic societal changes have allowed the evolution of journalism, and in particular, investigative journalism. This research project will examine the effectiveness of digital investigative journalism presentation techniques, through the use of a single case study analysis of the true crime podcast series 'The Teacher's Pet'. Investigative journalism is constantly evolving as digital media develops, however, there is limited research on the emerging approaches to disseminating investigative journalism, such as podcasts. An in-depth analysis of the 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast, in conjunction with examination of relevant and scholarly literature will build on previous research about the societal impact of investigative podcasts, and highlight their status in the journalism industry. 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast is an ideal case study due to its worldwide notoriety and significant societal impact.

Background Introduction and Aim

The American true crime podcast series 'Serial' has been described as a breakout hit for the industry, and its success has influenced scholars to analyse the role podcasts will play in investigative journalism in the future (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018; Berry, 2015). This research project will attempt to further this knowledge by conducting a single case study analysis of the Australian true crime podcast series 'The Teacher's Pet'. In addition, this analysis will assist scholarly understanding about the influence of digital journalism presentation techniques. Investigative journalism stories published via television broadcast have been revealed to be more successful than those from traditional media platforms (Lanosga & Martin, 2016), therefore an in depth examination of podcasts - a recent form of digital media - will extend current literature on investigative presentation techniques. 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast series has over 28 million downloads, reached a worldwide audience and had a direct investigative impact on a missing persons case. Research on true crime podcasts has been recommended in previous literature, to shed light on presentation strategies in investigative journalism (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018, p. 196), and this research will fill that gap in knowledge, as well as provide constructive improvement in the journalism industry.

Literature review/conceptual framework

Journalism is not immune to the growing impact of technology, with most scholars suggesting the need to develop the industry in order to continue to stay up-to-date with societal changes (Burns & Matthews, 2018; Newman, 2019; Ureta & Fernández, 2017; Felle, 2015; Bruns, 2014; Carson & Farhall, 2018). There is no doubt advancements in technology have disrupted the way reporters disseminate news to audiences, with various challenges, such as fake news, arising from technological development. Research acknowledges that because of these technological challenges, the relationship between the audience and the journalism industry has become complicated (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012, p. 868). But that it still plays an important role in journalistic practice, as it is also described as an enabler for better journalism and a tool to help reporters uncover the truth (Newman, 2019, p. 12).

The urge to discover the truth and to disseminate that truth is a trait any good journalist has, but it is most clearly evident in investigative journalism. Scholars agree that investigative journalism is a significant industry branch that encourages journalists to act as watchdogs on those in power (Felle, 2015; Landert & Miscione, 2017; McIntyre, Dahmen & Abdenour, 2016; Bruns, 2014; Carson & Farhall, 2018; Lanosga & Houston, 2016). Due to the rise of fake news and a decline of trust in media, research into the technological advancements in the industry found a crucial need for the continuation of investigative journalism (Carson & Farhall, 2018; Landert & Miscione, 2017). It is therefore clear that this type of reporting, which seeks to serve the public, still wields significant social influence in a digital society. However, there is currently limited research on how best to present investigative journalism stories, and whether presentation methods influence the outcome of the investigation.

A review of modern journalism literature suggests a focus on technological changes in the industry. For example, research into industry theoretical perspectives highlights a shift in how journalism as the Fourth Estate is perceived in a more digitised society, and discusses how that shift affects journalists' role as the gatekeepers of information (Felle, 2015; Landert & Miscione, 2017; McIntyre, Dahmen & Abdenour, 2016; Bruns, 2014). Additional investigative journalism research centralises on the financial health of the industry with particular focus on the most effective way to fund it, as we head into a digital future (Rodríguez Gómez & Sandoval-Martín, 2016; Scott, Bunce & Wright, 2017). This research provides significant foundation information about the industry, but a focus on digital presentation techniques in investigative journalism will further knowledge about effective methods of communicating investigations.

Podcasts are a product of this digital age, and they have been adopted by particular online news publications, offering an exciting new medium for both the journalist and

the audience (Burns & Matthews, 2018; Berry, 2015). Podcasts have been in the media sphere for over a decade, but have only recently experienced a spike in popularity, finding a fast growing audience (Burns & Matthews, 2018; Berry, 2015; Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018). In its annual consumer survey, Edison Research and Triton Digital found that 32 per cent of those surveyed had listened to a podcast in the last month, and 22 per cent of respondents had listened in the past week ("The Podcast Consumer 2019", 2019). News publications have taken advantage of podcasts' rise in popularity, with various investigative teams embracing true crime cases and creating long-form nonfiction series, engaging mass audiences all around the world. Despite this growing trend and an audience adoration for podcasts, there is limited research on their impact of communicating investigative stories to a wider population, as well as how successful they are in tackling injustice.

American true crime podcast series 'Serial' proved to be a breakout hit for the industry, arriving at a "golden age" of podcasting (Berry, 2015). Research into the series proposed the podcast could serve as a starting point for what transmedia journalism would look like in the digital age (Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018, p. 184). Further research concluded 'Serial' and podcasts in general, present a viable alternative platform for content creators and storytellers (Berry, 2015; Burns & Matthews, 2018), because of their convenient and instant means of communicating with a mass audience. A report into the current trends of the journalism, media, and technology industry, predicts podcasts will become an important part of publishers' content and commercial strategies (Newman, 2019, pp. 5-6). Therefore, continuing research into the medium would benefit the wider journalism industry by determining its productiveness in engaging with audiences.

The aforementioned findings make it clear that the constant evolution of technology will continually influence the journalism industry, therefore, there is a need to ensure the next generation of reporters fully utilise these opportunities. According to recent research in this area, there is a need to close the gap between academia and industry by continuously updating journalism programs, to fit the need of industry and society (Goodman & Steyn, 2017, p. 106). The importance of forging digital relationships with the audience has become a key journalistic trait and as a result, these skills are beginning to be taught in journalism and communication university courses (Carson & Muller, 2017, p. 26). A significant amount of research in this area focuses on the rise of social media as a news source, and the importance of increasing skills in this area from the outset in journalism education (Wilkinson, Grant & Fisher, 2013; Carson & Muller, 2017; Deloitte, 2018; Matsa & Shearer, 2018; Burns & Matthews, 2018; Newman, 2019; Larrondo Ureta & Peña Fernández, 2017). Scholarly literature on the significance of using social media in journalism proves it's an undoubtedly crucial aspect in developing the industry, due to the increase of news consumption coming from these platforms (Matsa & Shearer, 2018, p. 2; Deloitte, 2017, p. 17). Further research into diverse presentation methods, such as podcasts, and their relationship with social media journalism will largely benefit

university courses, specifically in communication, because it will reveal the most productive way to communicate long-form investigative stories to a mass audience.

The past 20 years of Australian investigative journalism awards outlines a noticeable trend of a technological shift in the presentation methods of successful investigations ("Walkley Winners Archive", n.d.). The trend coincides with the development of technology, as investigations presented through video become more prevalent as the years' progress. The podcast 'The Teacher's Pet' was the winner of the 2018 Investigative Journalism Walkley award, due to its fierce audience engagement and real-world impacts (Fletcher, 2018). Scholarly analysis of this extremely significant podcast is absent. By undertaking an in-depth analysis of The Teacher's Pet podcast, this research will build on previous studies into true crime investigative podcasts (Berry, 2015; Gambarato & Alzamora, 2018), and shed light on the influence they have on investigation outcomes.

Research Objectives/Hypotheses/Research Questions

The following research questions have therefore arisen from the literature review:

RQ1: Why was 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast an effective way to communicate an investigative news story?

RQ2: How successful was 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast in tackling injustice?

RQ3: How important was the use of interactive journalism and social media in 'The Teacher's Pet' investigation?

Proposed Methodology

The literature reviewed for this project produced a wide variation of research methods which differed between qualitative, quantitative, or a mixture of both. In general, much of the literature followed an epistemology of social constructivism (Patton, 2015), to obtain knowledge about trends in journalism research and technology, digital journalistic presentation methods and podcast audience interaction. Social constructivism proposes that knowledge, understanding and meaning are constructed through human relationships, communication and how people use language to construct their reality (Crestani, 2019).

In order to achieve a greater understanding of whether podcasts are an effective investigative journalism presentation technique, I propose approaching my research under the subjective communication paradigm of social constructivism. This paradigm encompasses the view that multiple realities are constructed through experiences, cultural and historical background and interactions with people (Creswell, 2013, p. 36). The nature of a constructivist inquiry is interpretive (Farzanfar, 2005) and the purpose of inquiry is to understand a particular

phenomenon, not to generalize to a population (as cited in Tuli, 2010, p. 100). This framework is suitable for my research project because it will allow me to further understand whether the podcast 'The Teacher's Pet' was an effective presentation method of communicating an investigative report, through a contextual ontology.

A constructivist perspective is a popular theoretical framework for most qualitative research (Tuli, 2010, p. 100), because it's often applied to real-world situations. As such, I propose a qualitative methodology for my own research, because it allows the study of real-world settings, generating rich narrative descriptions and constructing case studies (Patton, 2005). A qualitative research methodology will also allow the analysis of both digital and traditional media mediums, such as audio podcasts, public forums, journalistic and scholarly articles within real world contexts. Due to the objective of qualitative research involving the understanding of experience, this approach is particularly necessary as investigative journalism topics are often sensitive.

Various scholars and theorists (Creswell, 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) describe case study research as a versatile form of qualitative exploration appropriate for comprehensive and in-depth investigations (as cited in Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2017). It's a method used when the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 543), which reinforces my own judgement of undertaking a case study analysis about the effectiveness of podcasts in investigative journalism. The selection of 'The Teacher's Pet' as a case study, is both interesting in itself due to its worldwide notoriety and real-world impact, and it will be able to facilitate further understanding of investigative journalism presentation methods (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2019). By using an instrumental case study type (Stake, 1995), I am able to take an in-depth look at 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast, and it would play a supportive role in helping me explore a broader idea relating to investigative journalism (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549).

The theoretical perspective that will underpin this research project, focuses on the opinion that journalism, and in particular, investigative journalism, is considered as the Fourth Estate; a term first attributed to Edmund Burke, by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (Schultz, 2003). This perspective is a particularly appropriate lens for my research on digital investigative journalism presentation methods, due to its evolution in conjunction with the rise of digital media (Felle, 2015; Landert & Miscione 2017; Bruns, 2014). In addition to this lens, I will also be applying the Social Responsibility Theory (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1984, pp. 73-104) to my research, which argues that the press has a responsibility to the public to portray the world accurately and to contribute to society's well being. The theory outlines the responsibility journalists have in assuring news clarity to prevent miscommunication (McIntyer, Dahmen & Abdenour, 2016, pp. 1670-1671). The origin of my chosen case study 'The Teacher's Pet' was to investigate an alleged miscarriage of justice,

therefore, the application of the Social Responsibility Theory corresponds to my research project in accordance to that particular case. Journalism as the Fourth Estate and the Social Responsibility Theory are similar in nature, and combining them will strengthen the theoretical lens for this research project.

The use of multiple methods to collect and analyse data is encouraged when undertaking a constructivist case study research approach, to produce a comprehensive view on what is being studied (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2019). I propose an in-depth analysis of the 'The Teacher's Pet' podcast, including an examination of secondary data about the case, as well as relevant scholarly material on investigative journalism and podcasts. Using secondary data will benefit this research because of its accessibility, breadth, and ability to generate new insight from previous analysis (Allen, 2017). I will also be considering publicly available comments about 'The Teacher's Pet' from social media websites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to gain insight on public perspective about the case. I organise my data through the software tool, NVivo, which is widely used to organise and analyse qualitative unstructured data such as text, video, audio, and social media (McNiff, 2016). Using technology to organise, analyse and store my data in favour of a manual approach, will be more time efficient and reliable.

As with any method, using secondary data does have its limitations. The data I will be collecting about investigative journalism, podcasts, and the 'Teacher's Pet' podcast was originally collected for a different objective, for this reason, there is a risk of inappropriateness because such data may be dated or have a different scope (Allen, 2017). There are also challenges to the collection of online social media data, such as the risk of generalisation and possible bias by the researcher. Whilst data obtained from public forums are easily available, if taken out of context, it has the potential to be misleading because the overall interpretation of the data depends on the researcher (Allen, 2017).

Due to the above limitations and challenges, I intend to acquire formal ethics clearance before undertaking any data collection about people, or their data.

Proposed Timeline:

Maybe break it up in phases

Data gathering phase

July to oct data analysis

Upper heading – break down in phases.

Big phase teacher’s pet

Small phase other mats

Draft

Milestone

The following schedule is based on the beginning of Charles Sturt University Session Two to the end of Session Three.

Month	Task	Notes
July	Fix up any inconsistencies from research proposal. Begin listening and taking notes on the teacher’s pet	Adapt literature review/abstract/background information according to assignment feedback
August	Research Question One:	
September	Research Question Two:	
October	Research Question Three:	
November	Mid subject project review.	1st November - end of CSU Session One
December	Big Picture: Investigative journalism and podcasts	
January	Conclusion/limitations/Further study recommendations.	
February	Finalise research project, to submit by 15th February	

Notes: 8 Hours of supervisor contact for each session

Resources

'The Teacher's Pet' has been acquired via a VPN, as the podcasts are currently unavailable in Australia, due to an ongoing court case.

In installation of NVivo, a qualitative data collection and storage software tool, has been obtained through my project supervisor, Dr David Cameron.

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Appendices Not included in word count

Include as an appendix a draft or accepted HREA if required. Project Description etc

AIM:

It's ok just to contribute to current knowledge

Journalism practice contribution

Maybe swap journo ed and walkley – bit more in the middle.

All of that considered.. here is why I'm doing this.