

Trace Team Talks Tactics: What do we learn about podcasting as a platform for investigative news?

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June 2020

RESEARCH DISSERTATION

Submitted to Charles Sturt University for the Master of Communication degree

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Contents

Certificate of Authorship.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Introduction	6
Chapter 1 – Background information to the Trace podcast	11
<i>Participants List</i>	11
<i>The Maria James murder case</i>	12
Chapter 2 – Murder and investigative journalism: A review of relevant literature	15
<i>True Crime: A genre</i>	15
<i>Literature review</i>	19
<i>Research Question</i>	23
Chapter 3 – Methodology	24
Chapter 4 – Analysis.....	31
<i>Results</i>	31
<i>Discussion</i>	32
<i>Giving a voice to the voiceless.</i>	35
<i>Audience voice and the use of its mobilisation</i>	38
<i>Journalistic voice and representation</i>	40
Chapter 5 – Conclusion and suggestions for further research	45
<i>Suggestions for further research</i>	46
References	49

Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the dissertation. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to express a huge appreciation to my supervisor Dr David Cameron for his valuable and constructive suggestions during the planning and development of this research project. Your patient guidance and useful critiques kept me grounded when challenges struck.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr Colette Keen. The completion of this research could not have been accomplished without your proof-reading assistance.

Finally, I wish to thank my caring, loving and supportive partner, Shane Butcher. Your unwavering encouragement throughout my study is hugely appreciated

Abstract

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's true crime investigative podcast *Trace* can certainly be considered a success. The podcast won a Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism in the Innovation category, revealed a drastic mistake by the Victorian Police Force, and supported the reopening of a new coronial inquest into the 1980 cold case murder of Maria James. Traditionally, a true crime narrative will conclude with the apprehension of a killer, however, this did not occur in *Trace*, which raises questions about why the podcast resonated with audiences. This study aims to establish what made the podcast effective as an investigation, despite not solving the decades long murder, through the application of a qualitative single case study research methodology. It is clear the investigative journalism inquiry served as a positive experience for the James family, therefore, it is crucial for the continuation of research in this area to establish efficient methods of the communications of such stories. An in-depth textual analysis of the podcast, with an emphasis on a special event episode, indicated *Trace* possessed several qualities of effectiveness; commitment to technical storytelling, providing a platform for marginalised groups, audience mobilisation and a journalistic dedication to morality. The podcast epitomises the potential use of the medium in future investigative journalism inquiries of a similar nature.

Introduction

The history of news media is one of change and adaptation and this project explores one of the latest digital formats impacting on news and journalism. As with all industries, the constant progression of technology requires journalism to evolve to ensure the effective dissemination of news and current affairs to the wider community. Stephens (2007) says that at its most basic, the exchange of news requires an indicative or declarative statement to accomplish the informing of others, the entertainment of others, and the protection of others. Oral news systems arrived in the early stages of the development of language and form the roots of the journalism we practice today (Stephens, 2007, p. 17). In the nineteenth century, the increase of industrialisation, urbanisation and technological innovation forced the growth of print journalism with a wider circulation of newspapers (Gorman & McLean, 2009, p. 8). Next came the introduction of radio in the twentieth century, which Conboy (2004, p. 170) states added an extended reach to audiences and status to journalism's repertoire. By the early 1960's television journalism had become the dominant medium for news and current affairs due to its superiority towards disseminating the news of the moment (Conboy, 2004, p. 181) and by the 1990's journalism had spread to the Internet (Arnold, Preston, & Kinnebrock, 2020, p. 7). This project focuses on a new addition to journalism's repertoire in the form of podcasts, specifically for the dissemination of investigative projects with a focus on true crime stories.

Li et al describe podcasts as portable and on demand forms of spoken word audio content, with topics ranging from comedy, to education and wellbeing (2020, p. 1920). Unlike the medium's older siblings of radio and television journalism which require years of education and experience, not to mention luck, there is little standing in the way of the average person making a podcast. This ease of content shareability has enabled the medium to enjoy a wide variety of topics which serve very different purposes. For example, the well renowned British comedy podcast *My Dad Wrote a Porno* has a clear intended objective of making its audience laugh. However, the medium also allows room for educational content like *Hardcore History* as well as podcasts on wellbeing such as *Feel Better, Live More*. Additionally, true crime has enjoyed considerable success in the podcasting industry, despite the genre being almost 150

years old. Bestselling crime writer Ian Rankin attributes the genre's popularity to a human fascination with evil, with the consumer able to "stand at the shoulder of monsters without being endangered" (Lawson, 2015).

The American true crime podcast series *Serial* has been described as a breakout hit for the industry, with around 420 million downloads since it first aired on October 3, 2014 (Mautner, 2020). Its creator, Sarah Koenig admitted she didn't understand why the series went viral, attributing its success to its true crime origins (Berry, 2015, pp. 170-171). This success has influenced scholars to analyse the role podcasts will play in the future, including Porlezza, Benecchi and Colapinto (2018) who said the series demonstrates the potential revitalisation of longform journalism, particularly regarding investigative journalism (p. 184). Their case study analyses *Serial* from a structural point of view and its user engagement, the latter of which is arguably why the podcast resonated so remarkably throughout the global community. The success of *Serial* paved the way for news corporations to utilise the medium to disseminate stories of corruption and wrongdoing, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Australian newspaper.

The use of podcasts in investigative journalism has proven to be a powerful tool for the industry due to their potentially global audience reach. The Australian newspaper's *The Teacher's Pet* podcast, first aired on May 15, 2018 has been downloaded 28 million times and won the 2018 Gold Walkley Award. However, the establishment of a participatory audience, which became a key element in its reputation, as well as the biased tone of the podcast caused some commentators to call into question the effectiveness of the investigation (Quinn, 2018; McGowan, 2018). Due to the nature of the current unfolding criminal investigation into the central figure of *The Teacher's Pet*, it would be inappropriate to begin such research into that case at this time. However, to help understand how podcasts can effectively contribute to investigative journalism inquiries, research in the area is still required, so that they can be used efficiently in the industry in the future. Podcasting in the respect of non-fiction storytelling is still relatively new and a gap in literature is clearly evident

with Porlezza et al suggesting further research into investigative journalism podcasts and their audience engagement (p. 196).

This study will explore the ABC's *Trace* podcast, first aired on June 21, 2017 as the news corporation's first attempt at a serialised true crime investigation, which examined the 1980 cold case murder of Melbourne bookshop owner, Maria James. Upon release the podcast quickly made its way to the top of the Australian iTunes charts ("iTunesCharts", 2017) and following its conclusion, it won the 2017 Innovation Walkley Award. Key qualities that emerged from the podcast include its innovative approach to giving victims of child sexual abuse, people with disabilities, and victims of crime a platform to share their stories, and similar to *Serial* it also amassed a large participatory audience which played an active, and indeed crucial role in the investigation. Furthermore, the podcast's influence in effecting legislative change and the establishment of a new coronial inquest into the murder of Maria James demonstrates an additional quality of effectiveness in conveying an investigative journalism news story. Therefore, research focused on this series, particularly on a special event episode titled *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James' killer*, aired on October 19, 2018, will help facilitate a broader understanding of how podcasts can efficiently contribute to investigative journalism inquiries in the future.

Watchdog reporting covers an array of misconduct from personal scandals to financial wrongdoing, political corruption and institutional abuse. It is arguably journalism's most celebrated form, due to its exposure of public interest secrets from those in powerful and influential positions. Matheson states that Watergate, the story by two junior reporters from the Washington Post who pursued the political espionage of the 37th U.S President Richard Nixon, stands at the centre of the idea of investigative journalism and symbolises its continued importance (Allen, 2009, pp. 82-85). Carson and Farhall also describe the preservation of watchdog journalism, especially in the midst of technological societal changes, as increasingly vital because without it, corruption and immorality would go unchecked (2018, p. 1909). The *Trace* podcast is a product of the ever-evolving media landscape and as an investigation explores complex issues such as murder, institutionalised

corruption, including by the Catholic Church and the Victorian Police Force, and child abuse. However, that exploration also provided an opportunity for the victims of crime to be acknowledged and heard. The continued application of investigative journalism in society is necessary to ensure past, present and future victims of corruption do not endure the silence of their stories never being told. Therefore, the ongoing research into the effectiveness of podcasts as a means of investigative journalism communication is also necessary, to ensure those stories are told as efficiently as possible.

It is also important to note the current popularity of the true crime genre, especially in the form of podcasts, and the potential ethical challenges it faces in the dissemination of stories. The audio medium invokes a sense of intimacy due to its personalisation of both subject matter and listening spaces, and true crime stories while based on fact, capitalise on human fears and fascinations. It is reasonable to expect journalism organisations to be interested in exploring the podcast as a form of investigative communication and as a means of attracting new audiences and maintaining old ones. However, ethical considerations must also be taken into account in order for the podcast to function as an effective means of communication of an investigative news story. *Serial* absorbed several traditional true crime attributes, causing it to be criticised for allowing a non-fiction investigation to turn into entertainment. Research into whether the ethical boundaries set by investigative journalists during such inquiries support the effectiveness of the story, will also be necessary.

Serial acquired a mass following which then developed into an active and participatory audience, which Porlezza et al say was crucial to its rising reputation (2018, p. 190). However, they add that as a journalistic podcast, the involvement of fans in the process of expanding the investigation led to a complex position of collaboration, which has the potential to blur the lines between entertainment and informing the public (p. 196). *Trace* also gained an audience that quickly became intertwined within the investigation, with leads coming in “hard and fast” following the first episode, according to Brown. Loosen and Schmidt say the relationship between journalism and the audience has always been complicated but that it still plays an important role in journalistic practice (2012, p. 868). The exploration of that role,

with reference to *Trace* and the decisions that were made to engage its audience, will facilitate understanding about how effective the involvement of listeners can be during investigative journalism inquiries.

This research aims to contribute to scholarly material on investigative journalism communication methods, specifically on the efficiency of podcasts in conveying inquiries. Due to the *Trace* podcast being considered a successful investigation, the objective is to thoroughly analyse the special event episode, *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James' killer*. In this episode, Rachael Brown, Ron Iddles and Mark James reflect in front of a live audience on the podcast production process, the outcomes of the investigation, and discuss the potential future of using the medium as a collaborative tool for both the journalism industry and the police. In addition to this analysis, the investigative and production decisions made by Brown and the ABC throughout the podcast's development and dissemination will also be examined in order to highlight its effective attributes as an investigative news story. It is hoped the identified attributes could then be applied to investigative journalism podcast projects of a similar nature in the future.

The following case study examination will first introduce the reader to the podcast *Trace* and the story behind the murder of Maria James. Chapter 2 will present a contextual literature review on the true crime genre, as well as a comprehensive analysis of the current position of investigative journalism in today's society. The next chapter will establish the project's theoretical perspective, of journalism as the Fourth Estate and include a thorough explanation on the reasoning behind the chosen research methodology. Concluding statements and suggestions for further research will follow an in-depth discussion about the research findings in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1 – Background information to the Trace podcast

To assist with this study of a complex and evolving narrative both within the podcast and around the production itself, a brief biographical list of participants and producers was developed. It is provided here as additional background to the *Trace* podcast and for the reader to refer to throughout the project for recollection. This section will also provide a succinct overview of Maria James' murder, the police investigation that ensued and the investigative journalistic inquiry that occurred subsequently.

Participants List

Rachael Brown: An investigative journalist working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). She is the creator, investigator, and host of the ABC's first true-crime podcast *Trace*.

Maria James: A Melbourne mother of two who was found murdered in her bookshop in Thornbury, in 1980. Her killer has never been found. She was set to confront a Catholic priest about the abuse of her son, Adam James, on the day that she was murdered. Her murder is the topic of the podcast *Trace*.

Mark James: Maria's eldest son. He worked closely with the *Trace* team during the investigative and production elements and features heavily throughout the podcast.

Adam James: Maria's youngest son. He had been abused by two Catholic priests when he was 11 years old. Maria was the only person who knew of the abuse, before Adam told his brother, Mark, and the police in 2013. He has Cerebral Palsy and Tourette's Syndrome.

John James: Maria's ex-husband. The two were on good terms and would often talk about the children. He was the last to speak to Maria on the day she was murdered and the first to discover her body. He died in 1996.

Ron Iddles: Known as Australia's greatest detective. Maria's murder was his first case as a homicide detective and remains one of his only unsolved mysteries. He features heavily in the podcast, as well as behind the scenes, with Brown relying on his inside knowledge of police investigations and procedures. He retired from the Victorian Police Force in 2017.

Father Anthony Bongiorno: An assistant priest who worked at St Mary's Presbytery in Thornbury, in the 1980's. He is accused of sexually assaulting Adam James in 1980. He was never considered a suspect in Maria's murder until after his death in 2002.

Father Thomas O'Keeffe: A parish priest who worked at St Mary's Presbytery in Thornbury, in the 1980's. He is accused of sexually assaulting Adam James in 1980. He had been accused of involvement in violent and ritualistic abuse while at the Doveton Parish in south-east Melbourne. He was never considered a suspect in Maria's murder in the original investigation and died in 1984.

The Maria James murder case

Maria James was a working-class, single mother living in Thornbury, north of Melbourne's central business district. She ran a bookshop on High Street and lived in a conjoining house with her two sons, Mark and Adam. She was on good terms with her ex-husband, John James, who also lived near the city centre. The church nearest the bookshop, St Mary's Presbytery played a significant role in the life of the James family. Maria was a frequent church goer; Mark was an altar boy and Adam would often be supervised there after school.

On June 17th, 1980, Maria was found murdered in her bedroom and her killer has never been found. Photos of the crime scene illustrate the brutal murder. Maria had been stabbed a total of 68 times and her hands had been bound. The white shaggy carpet in the bedroom had been stained red with blood, which was also found splattered on bedding and other pieces of furniture in the room. Ron Iddles, the homicide detective in charge of the case, established that Maria was likely killed by someone she knew, due to several clues from the crime scene and on her body. There were two coffee cups left on the kitchen table, suggesting she felt comfortable inviting the killer into her home and there were no self-defence wounds, implying she had been attacked from behind. It is also suggested that multiple stab wounds are typical in frenzied murder attacks, where the victim knew the perpetrator. Initially, there were several suspects interviewed for the investigation, but all turned into dead ends. The best lead came from a woman who said she was driving past the bookshop at the time of the murder and had to brake violently to avoid hitting a man running across the road. In the weeks following the murder, no significant breakthroughs had occurred; leads dried up and the case went cold.

In 2013, Adam James confessed to his brother, Mark, that he had been sexually abused by one of the parish priests that worked at St Mary's in 1980. Adam said that he had told his mother, on the day prior to her murder, that Father Anthony Bongiorno had been touching him inappropriately. Adam made a statement to the police about the abuse and said Maria had planned to confront Father Bongiorno on the day she was murdered, but in the following two years, the priest was eliminated as a suspect. In 2016, the *Trace* investigation was told Adam had also been abused by Father Thomas O'Keeffe, another priest who worked at St Mary's. Father O'Keeffe had a documented history of ritualistic violence and sexual abuse and becomes a key person of interest in the *Trace* investigation.

In 2017, the *Trace* team came across information that changed the entire investigation. The DNA that had been extracted from the crime scene, had been part of an evidence mix up and had nothing to do with the Maria James murder case. The police admitted the mistake to the James family and said it meant Father Bongiorno and other suspects were no longer

eliminated. The development, as well as data collected by the *Trace* probe, gave the James family enough evidence to apply, and succeed, for a new coronial inquest into Maria's murder.

The above-mentioned contextual information has been included at the outset to provide an essential framework to the following research project on the effectiveness of using a podcast as a platform for an investigative news story. Chapter 1 will discuss the development of true crime as a genre, as well as literature on investigative journalism and podcasts as a communication medium. This chapter has been included to provide further context on why an in-depth exploration into an investigative journalism true crime inquiry is an appropriate research topic.

Chapter 2 – Murder and investigative journalism: A review of relevant literature

To investigate what is learnt about why the podcast *Trace* was effective in its communication of an investigative news story, it is necessary to review current literature on the topics of the true crime genre, the digitisation of journalism and audience engagement in journalism. The structure of the chapter is as follows: a thorough review of the true crime genre and where it now sits in modern society, before moving to a literature review which covers the broader current position of investigative journalism and the use of podcasts in the industry branch. The chapter concludes with the research question to be examined in this study.

True Crime: A genre

True crime podcasting has emerged as the latest form of a popular genre that has been extensively developed over decades and to grasp a better understanding of the topic, a detailed analysis is needed. This section will examine true crime as a cross-over form between hard journalism and ‘whodunnit’ fiction and considers how this contributes to the understanding of the presentation techniques used in podcasts such as *Trace*. This section discusses the origins of the true crime genre, popular modern examples, the challenges the genre faces and a brief interpretation of how *Trace* utilises traditional true crime characteristics but also refrains from using others.

Whilst literature about murder narratives and nonfiction crime dates back centuries, modern true crime first made an appearance in the 1940s and 1950s in the form of the *True Detective Magazine* (Murley, 2008, p. 2). Literary true crime then grew in popularity exponentially and as technology advanced to introduce new mediums of presentation, so did the genre. Bruzzi (2016) claims in recent years the genre has experienced a veritable explosion in the form of documentaries and podcasts, for example Netflix’s *Making a Murderer* and *This American Life’s Serial*. The growing ease of content access, like streaming services for audio and visual, has helped true crime experience international multiplatform success and paved the way for

investigations such as *Trace*. As heard in the bonus episode, *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James' killer*, investigator and host Rachael Brown said she had the benefit of learning from the ethical criticisms that had followed the true crime genre in recent years (Brown, 2018b, 37:25¹). The awareness of past investigative projects' mistakes and triumphs, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the true crime genre helped *Trace* become a successful investigative journalism podcast.

Traditionally, the true crime genre marries the investigation of a real-world criminal act into a fictional-like narrative, with a non-neutral literary voice rich in colour and detail (Boling & Hull, 2018, p. 92; Punnett, 2018). *True Detective*, an American magazine published between 1924 and 1995, is arguably the first mass produced and modern true crime magazine (Murley, 2008, p. 13). The magazine articles were written in a narrative that would follow the police investigation to an eventual apprehension of the suspect, often matched with graphic photographs of victims and sensationalist headlines (Marr, 2015). According to Murley, true crime magazines started to lose popularity in the 1960s, but the genre lived on through books and television shows (2008, p. 71). However, the traditional sensationalised narrative remained present. Punnett (2018) puts forward the theory that the tone of true crime is often pro-justice, but also includes action outside of the law such as street justice or vigilantism that is not always pro-police. The American television show *Forensic Files*, which revealed how forensic science is used to solve real violent crimes, enjoyed considerable success since its debut season in 1996. In the show, each episode employs a "whodunit" tone and follows the aforementioned narrative of investigation, conviction, and legal resolution. As suggested by Dowler, Fleming and Muzzatti (2006, p. 837) crime entertainment has cemented its place in popular culture with people now exposed to countless sources of the genre through various mediums. Technological progression has seen streaming websites, like Netflix, take advantage of the true crime genre's capacity to captivate audiences, with series like *Making a Murderer* and *The Keepers*. In addition to streaming services, true crime is now also well established in audio mediums like podcasts. Boling and Hull (2018, pp. 92-93) say the

¹ I have cited references to content in the Trace podcast using the following format: (Brown, year, timecode).

podcasting industry experienced an increase in creation, expansion and investment following the 2014 release of *Serial*, a true crime podcast by *This American Life*. The advent of the Internet and rise of discussion forums contributed to podcasting offering a more interactive true crime experience for the audience. As Boling and Hull state, podcasts have a very cultivated participatory online audience, with hosts often responding to and including audience members in the investigatory process (2018, p. 106).

However, the genre also has endured countless criticisms about the ethical acceptance of murder and crime as entertainment (Murley, 2008, p. 2). The evolution of technology brought with it what Buozis calls “up-market” true crime producers who distance themselves from the sensationalised narrative of traditional true crime (2017, p. 255). Producer of *Serial*, Sarah Koenig, insists the podcast series is less exploitative than the true crime genre in general (Remnick, 2016). However, consistent with considerable interest, the podcast also garnered critical condemnation, with commentators weighing in on the ethical considerations of Koenig reporting a story she had not finished (Engley, 2017, p. 87). Engley states much of the criticism levied against *Serial* takes issue with its format, or its “seriality”, because that genre of storytelling allows for inconsistencies and audience speculation of the investigative process (pp. 87-88). The podcast’s revolutionary audience engagement developed into an online space on the forum website Reddit, where listeners were “obsessed” with the quest to solve the murder case (Porlezza et al., 2018, p. 194). This obsession led the murder victim’s brother to make a statement on Reddit, accusing the *Serial* audience of treating his family’s real-life tragedy like a murder mystery or crime drama (brotherofhae, 2015). While the crowdsourced investigations into the case contributed to an appeal into the podcast subject’s criminal investigation (Buozis, 2017, p. 266), the ethical shortcomings of the project remain and continue to be noted in recent investigative journalism literature (Dowling & Miller, 2019; Porlezza et al., 2018; Durrani, Gotkin & Laughlin, 2015).

Investigator and host of *Trace* Rachael Brown took the ethical considerations of the true crime genre into account before undertaking the investigative analysis of the murder of Maria James. During the special event episode, *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James’*

killer, Brown talks in depth about the precautions she took before and during the investigation to ensure the project was carried out ethically. She explained her self-imposed restrictions of approaching both the police investigator at the time of the murder, Ron Iddles, and Maria's two children, Mark and Adam James, before undertaking such an inquiry.

"I wouldn't have been surprised if Mark had said to me at the start 'I'm sorry, I just don't want you to do this... My caveat was Mark James and Ron Iddles saying, 'I think this is a good thing to do', and had they not, I wouldn't have done it" (Brown, 2018b, 14:43).

This initial precaution of building a relationship with the family and asking permission to investigate such a tragic and deeply personal part of their lives helps lift *Trace* above traditional true crime narratives. In addition, Brown does not attempt to entice the audience by withholding information to ensure it tunes in to the next episode. In fact, the podcast features lengthy delays, up to eight months at one stage, between episodes. As seen in the podcast's iTunes review section, the audience challenged the *Trace* team once the gap between episodes got longer with comments questioning where the story had gone ("Trace on Apple Podcasts", n.d.). However, that delay in episode production supports the opinion that *Trace* differs from the traditional hallmarks of true crime, with Brown revealing, while she wanted to give further updates, she "can't invent an ending - it's real-life nonfiction" (Brown, 2018, p. 261). Furthermore, the cross-platform news collaboration of the investigation by the ABC meant news articles written about the case had the potential to become "spoilers" for the audience who had not yet listened to the podcast episode. However, since the investigation rejected the entertainment value of the true crime genre, accidentally "spoiling" an episode through the ABC's multiple other platforms held little significance to the *Trace* team. A great deal of care was also taken in ensuring responsible reporting was being undertaken throughout the podcast, with Brown recognising the importance of her role as purely the vessel to tell the James brothers' story (Brown, 2018b, 38:22).

The podcast does embrace some traditional characteristics of true crime, in the form of captivating language, which is used to hook and maintain audience curiosity. However, *Trace* was not made to glorify a horrific crime or told at the expense of the people involved. It was created to give a voice to the voiceless and to attempt to bring justice against transgression.

This section has examined literature on true crime fiction as a genre and identified key techniques which are traditionally employed to popularise a narrative. It was revealed *Trace* utilises some of these techniques but avoids the genre's problematic traits, which suggests why the podcast resonated with a far-reaching audience. The next section will discuss a wider examination of the impact of new digital storytelling forms on the journalism industry, with reference specifically to podcasting. It will identify current gaps in investigative journalism literature on the study of podcasts and the significance of undertaking a research project on the topic. The research question that underpins this dissertation will follow thereafter.

Literature review

Journalism is not immune to the relentless impact of technology, with most scholars suggesting the need to develop the industry in order 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 that advancements in technology have disrupted the way reporters disseminate news to audiences with various challenges, such as a lack of public trust in news, arising from technological development. Research acknowledges that due to these technological challenges the relationship between the audience and the journalism industry has become complicated (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012, p. 868). However, 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 and disseminate the 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 various challenges in the 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 using new digital media forms, and whether the emerging affordances of these presentation methods can shape the outcome of the investigation itself.

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 et al., 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 (Rodríguez Gómez & Sandoval-Martín, 2016; Scott, Bunce & Wright, 2017). Whilst this research provides significant foundation information about the industry, in order to establish the most effective way of communicating investigative journalism stories with a mass audience, a focus on recent presentation techniques is needed.

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 more than a decade but have only recently experienced a spike in popularity, finding a fast-growing audience (Burns & Matthews, 2018; Berry, 2015; Porlezza et al., 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 percent 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 around the world. Despite this growing trend, there is limited research on why the use of a podcast is an effective communicative method to disseminate investigative news stories to a wider population.

American true crime podcast series *Serial* arrived 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 (Porlezza et al., 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.

As mentioned in the section, *True Crime: A genre*, the popularity of *Serial* and its extraordinary audience interaction resulted in criticism of the ethical considerations regarding the podcast's production. Porlezza et al describe this interaction as "a hybridization between traditional fandom practices and citizen journalism" (2018, p. 186). The journalism industry has consistently relied on citizen journalists to provide information or assist with footage during such times as terror attacks or natural disasters but as noted by Mythen, they are not as self-regulated in their output compared to professional journalists (2010, p. 52). With new technology endlessly expanding and the ease of content shareability, there has been a shift in the journalist's role to disseminate news and information (Landert & Miscione, 2017, p. 19). This shift has enabled the industry, particularly digital media forms such as podcasts, to work collaboratively with the audience. This new form of audience/journalist relationship is present in other true crime podcasts, such as the Australian's *The Teacher's Pet*. Investigative journalist and creator, Hedley Thomas, said the audio format galvanised audience interaction with the inquiry better than had it been disseminated in print (Prendergast, 2018). Many

scholars agree that the nature of evolving technology calls for further research into the establishment of new forms of gatekeeping to consider the now intertwined relationship between audience and industry (Wall, 2017; Goode, 2009; Lindner, 2016).

The aforementioned findings make it clear that the constant evolution of technology will continually influence the journalism industry and 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 needs 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).

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. Scholarly analysis of *Trace* is absent and by undertaking an in-depth examination of presentation and literary techniques, investigation and journalistic outcomes, this research will build on previous studies into true crime investigative podcasts (Berry, 2015; Porlezza et al., 2018) and shed light on their influence in investigative journalism.

The reviewed literature has revealed a need for the continued technological development of the investigative journalism industry, thus research into that development is necessary. As indicated by the success of the podcast *Serial*, the audio medium has been established as an effective method of communicating an investigative news story, due to its audience mobilisation and traditional true crime narrative techniques that ensnare the listener. *Trace* has seen similar success in an investigatory sense and through its listener engagement. However, research into this area is recent and incomplete, therefore, the following case study

analysis of why the podcast *Trace* was an effective platform to communicate an investigative news story has been carried out to add to that knowledge.

Research Question

This inquiry seeks to bridge the gap between traditional forms of true crime investigation and the emerging form of podcasting with an emphasis on the presentation techniques and production decisions used. It focuses on a case study of the popular podcast *Trace*, particularly on its special event episode consisting of a panel discussion about its pre-production choices and post-production success. The central research question for this study is:

- Why was podcasting an effective platform for a true crime investigative news story like *Trace*?

This question will examine both the technical elements of the podcast, as well as the impactful themes that feature throughout the series.

The next chapter explores the theoretical analysis of the chosen methodology for this research dissertation. It discusses the selected research paradigm, framework, theoretical perspective and data collection methods, as well as explaining why those choices were appropriate for such an inquiry. Additionally, the chapter also includes the limitations of the chosen research methods and how they will be addressed.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

In order to create a clear explorative path forward, a comprehensive overview of the research paradigm and theoretical perspective that underpins this research dissertation is needed. This chapter discusses the associated research methods of the following investigation, as well as the limitations that exist within those chosen techniques. This chapter also outlines a legal and ethical obstacle encountered during the early stages of the research which could inform the design of future research into the field of true crime podcasting.

The literature reviewed for this project identified a wide variety of research methods used to analyse investigative reporting which varied between qualitative, quantitative, or a mixture of both. For example, Carson and Farhall (2018) use mixed methods in their analysis of the development of collaborative investigative journalism, via the use of qualitative sample sizes and interviews, as well as quantitative data research. Lanosga and Martin (2016) use data from entry materials for an annual investigative reporting contest, and using quantitative research, examined primary documents of investigative reporting projects from 1976 through to 2012. Fell (2015) examined the impact of digital data reporting on the traditional role of journalism as the Fourth Estate, through the use of a qualitative research method. The author used a small and purposeful sample size, and conducted interviews with specific data journalists from various countries, all of whom placed their work within the sphere of investigative journalism. In general, much of the literature followed an epistemology of social constructivism (Patton, 2014), with aims to obtain knowledge about trends in journalism research and technology, digital journalistic presentation methods and podcast audience interaction.

Social constructivism allows for an investigation into complex views, as well as the freedom to acknowledge a self-interpretation of data (Creswell, 2012, pp. 24-25). Hamilton states social constructivism seeks to account for beliefs, roles, organisations, and systems as ongoing processes rather than established and stable things (2015, p. 612). In the context of journalism research, Paulussen and Ugille say social constructivism has become a more

popular approach because it sees the technical advances of the industry as the outcome of complex interaction between professional, organisation, economic and social factors (2008, p. 28). This research examines why the *Trace* investigation was considered effective in communicating an investigative news story, which involves self-interpretation of the podcast's focus areas, and discussion about interaction with listeners, which alters the traditional relationship between the audience and journalist. Social constructivism is, therefore, an appropriate epistemology for this research project, as journalism is an ever-evolving industry with continuous theorising and analysis.

To find out what is learnt about the use of podcasting to convey an investigative news story, this research project has been carried out as a qualitative single case study as it allows the analysis of real-world settings and the generation of rich narrative descriptions (Patton, 2005). A qualitative single case study analysis follows the framework of research by Porlezza et al, which focused specifically on the analysis of the investigative journalism podcast *Serial* (2018, p. 183). This text proposes the podcast to be the beginning for further projects of similar nature and explores what the investigation's success means for the future of investigative journalism. The authors recommend further study in this area of research, and the framework served as inspiration for the following analysis of the ABC's *Trace*, with particular focus on the themes presented in the special event episode. A qualitative research methodology enables the analysis of multiple digital and traditional media platforms, such as audio podcasts, public forums, journalistic and scholarly articles. The podcast *Trace* addresses sensitive topics such as Catholic Church corruption, child sexual abuse and police transgressions and due to the objective of qualitative research involving the understanding of experience, this approach is particularly necessary. Initial planning for this research project also considered the use of social media comments as data, to help achieve a greater understanding of audience interaction and involvement in podcast investigations. However, concerns over mechanisms to obtain informed user consent and to de-identify social media contributions were flagged by Charles Sturt University's (CSU) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and with further time constraints imposed by the session study schedule framing this study, the project was revised. Future research in this area could utilise this approach for further exploration of audience engagement with investigative journalism podcasts.

Harrison et al (2017) draw on a range of scholarly theory to support case study research as a versatile form of qualitative exploration appropriate for comprehensive and in-depth investigations, including Creswell (2014), Flyvbjerg (2011), Merriam (2009), Simons (2009), Stake (2006) and Yin (2014). It is a method used when the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 543), which reinforces the judgement to undertake a case study analysis about why the podcast *Trace* was an effective platform for the communication of an investigative news story. The use of an instrumental case study type (Stake, 1995) supports the following considered analysis of *Trace* and encourages the exploration of investigative journalism in a broader sense (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549).

The selection of *Trace* as a case study followed legal factors identified by the CSU HREC, that arose late in the research design phase. The investigation that was to form my original case study, *The Teacher’s Pet* podcast, moved into live criminal proceedings against a named individual. This gave rise to a number of concerns that had not been anticipated when the proposal was initially developed and submitted, including that the podcast itself was no longer legally available in Australia after being voluntarily taken down by the producers in response to concerns raised by the trial judge. However, the *Trace* investigation readily provides a strong substitute for such an inquiry due to its real-world impact, and capacity to facilitate further understanding of investigative journalism presentation methods (Harrison et al., 2017). As a result of the changes made to the method and the chosen case study, the HREC felt there were no longer any elements of the project that required further ethics approval.

The theoretical perspective that underpins 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, 2009). 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, the Social Responsibility Theory (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1984, pp. 73-104) is also applied, which argues that the press has a responsibility to the public to portray the world accurately and to contribute to society's wellbeing. This theory outlines the responsibility journalists have in assuring news clarity to prevent miscommunication (McIntyer et al., 2016, pp. 1670-1671). The origin of my chosen case study was to investigate a piece of evidence that may have been overlooked in the Maria James murder mystery, therefore, the application of the Social Responsibility Theory corresponds to the following research project in accordance to that case. Journalism as the Fourth Estate and the Social Responsibility Theory are similar in nature and combining them strengthens the theoretical lens for this research.

The use of multiple methods to collect and analyse data is required when undertaking a social constructivist case study research approach in order to produce a comprehensive view on what is being studied (Harrison et al., 2017). This approach is displayed in similar research projects to my own, including Berry (2015) which investigated *Serial* through the history of podcasts, their technical change and listenership. Berry's study utilised multiple methods to collect data, including a heavy reliance on secondary research about podcasts, a textual analysis of the podcast and a small-scale survey on why the medium had recently become popular. Landert and Miscione (2017) also followed this method in their study on the roles of journalists as intermediaries between data and the general public. They relate two widely familiar whistleblowing cases using a comparative case study methodology, whilst drawing significantly on previous studies. The success of multiple methods, especially the use of textual analysis and secondary data, to collect material in the journalism research field, validates the following project's approach. A textual analysis of the podcast *Trace*, in particular the special event episode, has been thoroughly conducted to gain information on the communicative messages presented throughout the series. The textual analysis of the special event episode established specific themes such as voice and listener mobilisation, whilst a broader examination of the entire podcast revealed the significance of maintaining audience engagement and trust. Particular consideration was taken to understand what the

creator, and the representative body of *Trace* wanted to communicate through the formation of a true crime investigative journalism podcast. Secondary data such as news articles, as well as relevant scholarly material on investigative journalism and podcasts has also been examined. The use of secondary data was beneficial due to its accessibility, breadth, and ability to generate new insight from previous analysis (Allen, 2017, p. 1579).

Textual analysis and secondary data collection through a case study analysis does have limitations, such as inaccuracy of personal interpretation, which has also been considered. Allen writes that both the creator of a text and its audience can hold varying interpretations (2017, p. 1755), which means the messages and themes established from a subjective analysis of *Trace* may not be the intended communicative message from Rachael Brown and the ABC. Additionally, the creation of *Trace* and the data collected about investigative journalism and podcasts was originally collected for a different objective, therefore, there is a risk of inappropriateness because such data may be dated or have a different scope (Allen, 2017, p. 1579). However, through the application of the philosophical assumption of qualitative research put forward by Merriam (1997), it is assumed that meaning is embedded in experience, therefore, the perceived meaning of the data collected for this analysis can be discussed through my own perceptions as the researcher (Simon & Goes, 2011).

Furthermore, the trustworthiness of qualitative research and the personal interpretation of *Trace* has also been considered through the adoption of Guba's criteria for assessing trustworthiness (1981); credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. To obtain trustworthiness in the data that is collected from the *Trace* podcast and the special event episode, many of the provisions on Guba's criteria discussed in Shenton (2004) were applied. To ensure credibility, the adoption of a qualitative single case study as an appropriate and well recognised research method was implemented, debriefing sessions between my supervisor and myself were regularly undertaken, and a thorough examination of previous research was conducted to frame my findings. I supplied background data to establish context to the following discussion to ensure transferability, and addressed dependability via the description and application of a research design. Confirmability was ensured through the

admission of my own assumptions, recognition of shortcomings in the applied research methods, and an in-depth methodological description to allow scrutiny of results.

Technical limitations were also a factor to consider for this research dissertation, as the majority of collected data came from audio files. Whilst many qualitative studies collect audio data, they are often transcribed into written form to invoke closer study, however, the task involves a meticulous level of detail including interpretation and representation of data (Bailey, 2008). Due to the time constraints involved in a master's dissertation, transcribing the entire *Trace* podcast series including the bonus episodes would not have been an efficient research method, due to the need to capture both emotional and vocal accuracy during the transcription. Therefore, the data collected from the audio files was reliant on self-regulated notetaking to identify the key themes to be discussed. However, the *Trace* audio files are available to download for free and are cited in this research project's references to enable the reader to follow this interpretation back to the original data.

Since this research is based on a qualitative single case study research model, with the use of textual analysis of the *Trace* podcast, scholarly material and news articles, it is subject to the assumption that the data is correct and accurate. Pierce (2008) states that the validity of information marks its relevance and appropriateness in research. According to market research company Roy Morgan, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is Australia's most trusted news source (2019), therefore, it is assumed that the content presented in the podcast and subsequent news articles about the investigation is reliable data.

In summary, the methodology of this research project has been carried out to help establish the effective attributes of the *Trace* podcast. These attributes include the use of voice throughout the investigation, as well as audience engagement, which will help to answer my research question of why the podcast was considered to be an effective platform in communicating an investigative news story. It conforms with an epistemology of social constructivism and holds a theoretical perspective of journalism as the Fourth Estate coupled with the Social Responsibility Theory. Data collection comprised of a textual analysis of the podcast, with particular focus on the special event episode, as well as an analysis of secondary

data on investigative journalism and podcasts more broadly. Chapter four introduces the research findings into what is learnt about why podcasting was an effective platform for a true crime investigative news story such as *Trace*. This section includes an in-depth discussion on my interpretation of the findings.

Chapter 4 – Analysis

Following the establishment of the purpose of this research through my literature review and the methods which have been undertaken to complete this study, chapter 4 will outline the results of why *Trace* was considered effective in communicating an investigation news story. This chapter includes an overview of the core results of this dissertation and concludes with an in-depth discussion on the representations of effectiveness found in this analysis of *Trace*.

Results

The fact that the *Trace* podcast concluded without a definitive answer on who killed Maria James did not constitute whether it was effective as an investigative journalism inquiry. This analysis identified that the podcast found representations of effectiveness through other communicative domains. Through an examination of the production itself, in particular the special event episode, as well as associated scholarly and journalistic articles, the subject of “voice” was discovered to be the predominant theme featured within the podcast and surrounding its broader objective. A surface analysis of the technical decisions made by the production team, such as sound effects, a conversational tone and descriptive language, provided an essential framework to the investigation. Imagery inducing techniques were found to better engage the listener, as well as support the initial formation of a relationship with the audience. The podcast’s significant recognition of groups marginalised by society, such as child sexual abuse victims, people with a disability, and victims of crime emphasised its effectiveness in the promotion of voices that had been historically denied. This analysis found that the dissemination of these delicate stories was not only relevant to the *Trace* investigation but also invoked a sense of acknowledgement, therefore, assuming another representation of effectiveness as an investigative news story. The typically accepted concept of investigative journalists consists of reporters in trench coats asking questions in the interest of the public, but this analysis found the public now holds a key voice in the investigative process. As its predecessor *Serial* did before it, *Trace* seized the opportunity to bridge the gap between the media and the audience by actively engaging with its listeners. This analysis found the audience developed into a crucial character in the *Trace* investigation, which

helped reveal new leads and uncover evidence. By encouraging active participation of the audience, the *Trace* inquiry became more effective in an investigatory sense. However, it also clearly demonstrated the influence the public can have on investigative journalism projects, therefore, showing the potential for its use in the future. In addition, the representation of a journalistic gatekeeping voice throughout the production supported the podcast's effectiveness as an investigative news story. This analysis found extensive evidence of adherence to journalistic integrity, which in turn, helped *Trace* achieve the traditional investigative journalism objective of effecting change.

Discussion

To expand on the above findings, the following is an in-depth discussion on the themes that emerged from my analysis of the *Trace* podcast and the special event episode. This section further demonstrates why the medium was a suitable platform for a true crime investigative news story, with representations of effectiveness portrayed through the technical elements of the podcast's production, the recognition of marginalised societal groups, audience engagement and journalistic accountability.

Imagery through sound effects and language

The production team behind *Trace* integrated various special effects and language techniques throughout the podcast which helped establish the setting and engaged the listener. As cited in Rodero (2012, p. 462) sound effects enable a listener to identify with two fundamental aspects in auditory processing: content and location (Bregman, 1990). The technical components of *Trace* are apparent from the outset and the production team made specific decisions to help transport the audience back to 1980, into the home of Maria James and her two young sons. The first instances of environmental sound effects are heard in episode one, which focuses on recounting Maria's final hours, introducing her family, describing the murder, revealing potential suspects and outlining the police investigation. During this introductory commentary, the audience hears clattering trains moving through a station,

whilst Rachael Brown explains that the suburb of Thornbury, at the time, was a working-class area (Brown, 2017a, 2:13). As Brown narrates the bustling morning before the murder, where Maria is making her sons breakfast, the audience hears the gas stove being turned on, scrambled eggs being cooked in a frying pan and cutlery clanging on plates (Brown, 2017a, 2:54). The decision to include imagery inducing sounds effects throughout every episode of the podcast was an important storytelling technique, by the producers, because it gives the listeners a way of understanding the intended environment. The production team also includes ambient sound effects to ensure the audience maintains engagement and that the context of the combined commentary is well known. In episode three, Brown follows up on information she has heard about Father Thomas O’Keeffe and his involvement in satanic rituals, by verifying the allegations at the Victorian State Library. Footsteps that are walking across a street and into a building are heard, as well as quiet conversations and the flipping through of microfilm (Brown, 2017d, 7:50). In episode seven, Brown uses air travel to fly to South Australia to get evidence tested at a low copy DNA laboratory at Flinders University. Ambient sounds of waiting at the airport, boarding the plane and inflight announcements are featured (Brown, 2018c, 5:56; 6:48) which allows the audience to feel as though they are travelling right next to her. These ambient sounds are also imagery inducing and help the listener understand the context of the combined commentary, as well as evoke the intimacy of radio reporting. Rodero cites the “context availability” and “elaboration” model (Atwood, 1989) which states that by providing the listener with context in accordance with sound effects, a phrase can be better understood because it connects with information that is already stored in the listener’s memory (2012, p. 463). The samples of sound and atmospheric effects used throughout *Trace* are examples of using familiarity to help connect with an audience, which promotes why the audio medium served as an effective platform for an investigative news story.

Strong descriptive language in the podcast’s script emerges as another imagery inducing technique the *Trace* team used to help effectively communicate its investigation. In radio journalism, there are a number of language guidelines that are designed to create better news writing. This includes basic language and grammar techniques, such as contractions, that are unique to broadcast journalism, compared to print journalism (Chantler & Stewart, 2013, p. 56). Starkey and Crisell state that audiences focus better on abstractions and concepts when

they are aired on the radio than on television, because there are less distractions, such as images, which can introduce irrelevance into the viewers mind (2009, p. 20). This is especially relevant for radio news bulletins. However, in longer form journalism such as podcasts, additional language techniques like graphic and expressive words are added into scripts for maximum engagement. In the first episode of *Trace*, Brown describes crime scene photos from the murder case, by using illustrative words to help the audience draw on their own previously stored memories of images, to support her commentary.

“The first photo is of the front of the book shop. Every square inch of the front window is plastered with book covers. In the photos of the kitchen, on the bench, there’s a newsletter with a reminder of an upcoming dinner dance. Below it, the cutlery drawer hangs open... Then I come to the photos of Maria’s body, she’s lying face up. It looks like she has white crumbs on her black jumper, then I realise those are the knife marks. Her right leg is tucked under her. Her wrists are bound and rest on her stomach. Two pillows have been pulled down and they lie beside her head and feet. Blood stains speckle the floral carpet” (Brown, 2017a, 14:41).

In addition to descriptive language, the podcast script is also written in a conversational style, where Brown sounds as though she’s engaging in a discussion with a friend. This approach is customary in radio news reporting, as described by Boyd (2001, p. 58), due to the importance of conveying a message with clarity. Radio listeners have one chance to decipher the message and if the audience is lost with muddled, multisyllabic words, then there is the risk of complete audience disengagement. Lindgren (2016, p. 27) says podcast presenters often employ an informal presentation style and tone in order to sound like ordinary people engaging in a relaxed conversation. Throughout the *Trace* podcast, the audience experiences both the triumphs and awkward bumbling of the investigation as a result of Brown’s transparency. In episode one, the decision is made to share with the audience an investigative error of pursuing the wrong suspect (Brown, 2017a, 21:50). Episode four showcases another investigative bungle by Brown, when it was revealed she used plastic bags to handle evidence which may contain DNA, instead of paper bags, however, the mistake was colloquially brushed off as a “rookie error” (Brown, 2017e, 25:37). These slight mistakes could have been excluded from the podcast, in order to sound more professionally competent, but in highlighting them instead, Brown is seen as relatable and honest. The conversational style reporting is an example of traditional true crime reporting techniques, which employs a non-neutral literary

voice, and it helps establish a trusting relationship between Brown and the audience. However, despite the adoption of a relatable reporting style, an overall authoritative tone is also present throughout the entire production. This surface analysis of *Trace* reveals how the technical and narrative components that formulate the podcast both strengthen its engagement with the audience, and its effectiveness in communicating the story of Maria James' murder.

Giving a voice to the voiceless.

This examination of *Trace* found the podcast goes beyond the aforementioned surface analysis; it also includes the providence of a platform for people to share their own stories. These stories were often dark and sensitive, with Brown required to endure harrowing interviews discussing the trauma of child sexual assault and the devastating impact of murder. Brown says the exploration of such material led to horrific nightmares, which prompted the assistance of a counsellor during the investigative process (Courtney, 2018; Valentish, 2018). However, despite this experience, there is no impression of hesitation to help the victims of these crimes reveal their stories, with a journalistic commitment to storytelling evident throughout the investigation. The adoption of a tenacious attitude is discussed in the special event episode, with Brown attributing her consistent perseverance to the fighting spirit of both the James family and Ron Iddles, as well as the men whom she had interviewed about their own horrific experiences.

“I felt either real, or imagined responsibility to help find answers... You meet so many good human beings and you think ‘why did this happen to you?’... I kept fighting because the James family has kept fighting and Ron Iddles has kept fighting; the sex abuse survivors have kept fighting, so you just have to keep going” (Brown, 2018b, 41:38).

Historically, when Catholic Church sexual abuse survivors spoke up, they and their families were often offered “hush money” in order to prevent a scandal (King, 2017, p. 121). Since 2002, when the Boston Globe’s investigative journalism team revealed the extent of the sexual abuse crisis, there has been various attempts by the Catholic Church to address these crimes, however, their response has largely focused on the Church itself, while the victims get

swept under the rug (King, 2017, p. 122). The establishment of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, reflected increasing recognition of the damage caused by childhood sexual abuse (Wright, Swain & McPhillips, 2017, p. 1). *Trace* provides this same recognition, by offering a platform for clergy abuse victims to share their stories and allow their voices to be heard. The anonymity of the audio medium gave many of the men who had been interviewed for the podcast, a way to both publicly announce the institutional sexual abuse inflicted on them as children, and a way to protect their identity. Episode two introduces “Rex” who shares his story about his experiences with Father Anthony Bongiorno, his failed court bid against abuse allegations, and his suicidal thoughts. This story, despite its anonymity, is included to not only provide contextual information on the Maria James murder case, but to also provide recognition to a story that is similar to so many other people’s experiences (Wright, Swain & McPhillips, 2017), therefore, encouraging the potential for other survivors to speak up. The *Trace* investigation identified a solidarity among survivors, shown particularly by the documented motives of James Shanahan, on disclosing the abuse he suffered by Father Thomas O’Keeffe, during his involvement in a ritualistic cult (Brown, 2018, p. 116). This type of engagement and active acknowledgement of people who in the past had their recognition stripped away, demonstrates why the podcast resonated so effectively within the wider community.

The disclosures of Adam James’ sexual abuse in episodes two and three, aren’t only included as additional evidence for the Maria James murder case, but are included to restore the power he lost after the abuse took place. The recounts of his experiences with both Father Bongiorno and Father O’Keeffe, were traumatic and upsetting for the listener, but the decision to let him verbally recount those stories meant his voice was finally given the weight it was denied in the initial police investigation. As an investigative podcast into a cold case murder, *Trace* also inadvertently served as a reminder that victims and witnesses with disabilities must be considered and taken seriously, as discussed in the special event episode with Mark James saying he was proud of his brother’s involvement throughout the investigation (Brown, 2018b, 8:48). While the podcast focuses on the investigation into the death of Maria James, where the abuse of Adam plays a central role, Brown also includes the voices of other men who have been victims of sexual assault by the Catholic Church. These inclusions were added for contextual value to the case, as well as to act as a vessel to further

highlight child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, with *Trace* providing the platform for greater acknowledgement for these victims. As distressing as these stories were to tell and to listen to, they prompted an extraordinary audience reaction, with listeners immediately willing to share information with the *Trace* team (Brown, 2018, p. 198). This response, therefore, allowed the podcast to progress in both an investigational sense and helped develop the relationship between the audience and the media, forming additional grounds on why the platform is considered effective in the communication of an investigative news story.

Additionally, the podcast gave victims of crime a platform to communicate their stories. The James family have not been given any conclusion to the brutal murder of Maria, but the creation of the podcast ensured her voice was heard, even after death. In the special event episode, Mark James said *Trace* was an opportunity to get to the bottom of his mother's death (Brown, 2018b, 8:46), purporting that the telling of her story to a wide-ranging audience could provide the notion of justice. While the serialised investigation is built around that case in particular, Brown included additional voices that had been victims of crime, which strengthens the podcast's overall framework. Episode six details the long and gruelling process of applying for a new coronial inquest into the murder of Maria, which subsequently introduces the audience to Fay Spear, who is also trying to navigate the legal black holes of the criminal justice system. Fay had obtained new evidence about a police incident which saw her brother shot dead in his car in 1988 and was seeking a fresh coronial inquest like the James family. She said she had "lost faith in the system" (Brown, 2018a, 22:47) due to the lengthy delay for a response to her request. Though the story of Fay and her brother had no direct link to the Maria James murder, the additional investigation into these stories inspired legislative change, which allowed coronial findings and cold case investigations to be reopened under new laws in Victoria (Bachelard & Baker, 2018). This journalistic commitment to challenging institutions, forms further evidence on why the podcast platform is an effective method of investigative journalism communication, as it shows the potential investigative and effectual outcomes of inquiries such as *Trace*.

Audience voice and the use of its mobilisation

Podcasting is growing exponentially with broadcasters and newspapers using the medium as a means of attracting a wider audience to their publication (Lindeberg, 2019, p. 37). Journalism organisations are investing in the industry to better engage with their listeners and consumers, as shown through the news, current affairs and politics genres remaining a popular choice across demographics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019, p. 18). This American Life's *Serial* marked a significant moment in the history of podcasting and saw an extraordinary mobilisation of its audience which became involved in the investigation, instead of acting as passive listeners. It was arguably the beginning of a new era into the utilisation of podcasts in investigative journalism, with similar true crime productions such as *Trace* and *The Teacher's Pet* emerging thereafter. The *Trace* podcast enjoyed similar audience engagement to *Serial*, with the audience induced leads coming in "hard and fast" following the release of the first episode (Brown, 2018b, 9:56). These audience guided investigative leads prompted the creation of a bonus episode, which featured discussions about the case with *Trace* listeners. This type of engagement reinforces Boling and Hull's (2018, p. 106) suggestions that podcasts attract participatory audiences, with listeners emerging as a crucial element to such serialised audio investigations. It is clear the *Trace* team were eager to harness the power of audience mobilisation in their investigation, with Brown ending each episode with a call out to listeners to get in touch if they had information. Episodes four and five in particular revealed how influential the podcast was in activating audience involvement, with listeners contacting the *Trace* team to provide objects that had the potential to prove useful in the investigation. In episode four, Brown reveals that a friend of the O'Keeffe family had offered her an object, that may hold DNA from Father O' Keeffe's twin brother, which could be matched to DNA from the crime scene. The object, which remained unnamed to protect the listener's identity, was the first genuine instance of active audience involvement in the investigation. In episode five, the audience was introduced to "Chris" who offers Brown an old magazine taken from the crime scene, which could hold DNA in what appears to be a blood splatter on the cover. Whilst the objects acquired during the inquiry hit dead ends in an investigatory sense, their procurement is a clear indication of the effectiveness a podcast can have in prompting a participatory response from listeners. Brown discusses this in the special event episode, saying the audio medium not only gives the audience the option to

engage with the investigation, but that engagement is, in fact, crucial in investigative journalism projects.

“The phenomenal audience mobilisation we saw, that the ABC has never seen before, I get excited thinking about using that mobilisation again... Imagine the type of things we can do, not just us as broadcasters, but when we bring the audience in to say ‘well, help us’. Imagine the change we could effect by working as a team” (Brown, 2018b, 59:44).

The fact that listeners were able to play such an active role during the production of the podcast, as well as the commitment by the *Trace* team to meaningfully engage with the audience, forms the grounds as to why it resonated within the community. Allowing the audience to assume a key role meant the investigation effectively uncovered new leads into Maria James’ death and *Trace* also functioned as a bridge between the audience and the media, with the two entities working collaboratively on behalf of investigative journalism.

However, a voice from the Victorian Police Force throughout the investigation was noticeably absent, despite attempts by the *Trace* team to collaborate and share acquired evidence. In Ellis and McGovern’s (2016) study, it is established that the relationship between Australian police and the media is increasingly complex and multifaceted, especially due to the impact of digital media, social media and mobile technology. Additionally, they state that investigative journalism inquiries into police misconduct and corruption puts further pressure on that relationship (p. 945). Such an inquiry was present in *Trace* with the revelation of the DNA bungle which caused investigative and audience speculation that the police may have been involved in a cover up of evidence. Publicising the mistake ensured Brown adhered to the acknowledged ethics of investigative journalism; obtaining the truth where the truth is obscure (Burgh, 2008, p. 19), but further strained the relationship between the *Trace* team and the police.

“For the whole month, I’ve woken feeling nauseous. Week 1: introduce listeners to the case, and hope they’ll be invested enough to offer leads, Week 2: link a priest to the crime scene. Week 3: hit listeners with satanic cult rituals. This week, Week 4: reveal the DNA bungle that’s hamstrung this case for decades, I can probably kiss goodbye any future support from Victoria Police, if any was ever going to come” (Brown, 2018, p. 225).

This historic strained relationship between police and investigative journalists is a discussion topic in the special event episode, with all three members of the panel agreeing more collaboration would have been beneficial. Ron Iddles told the audience the utilisation of new media platforms, such as podcasts, could be a progressive way for Victoria Police to dig further into investigations, but that the current culture between it and the media is obstructing any substantial cooperation (Brown, 2018b, 18:17). Brown agreed with that opinion, sharing her frustrations that the police weren't prepared to compromise on their "old culture of keeping secrets internal" to reach a new audience on a much larger scale (Brown, 2018b, 20:30). This strained relationship between Victoria Police and the overall inquiry worked against the effectiveness of *Trace* in an investigatory sense, with repeated efforts to access specialised files thwarted, because of the case being active and ongoing. However, due to the abovementioned formation of a relationship bridge, the sense of unity between the audience and the *Trace* team was evident. In an interview with the Guardian, Brown stated that the audience not only provided new leads into the investigation, but also offered support, such as pro-bono legal aid for the James family, or a proposal to set up a memorial for Maria James (Valentish, 2018). Since the podcast acts as a voice for victims of crime, it also provides solidarity for those who have been let down by the criminal justice system. Despite police engagement in the investigation being less than forthcoming, *Trace* was able to overcome those barriers and achieve a positive investigatory outcome, with a fresh coronial inquest granted in November, 2018. These outcomes, despite the challenges caused by a lack of police collaboration, shape the further understanding of why podcasting acted as an optimal platform to disseminate the story that underpins the *Trace* investigation.

Journalistic voice and representation

Scholars mostly agree that journalism has an explicit public interest function, and by reporting and carrying out investigations, journalists ensure a steady check on those in power (Fell, 2015). Landert and Miscione (2017) conclude that this journalistic gatekeeping is still an essential element for the proper communication of stories despite technological advancements in society. The *Trace* podcast is a product of these technological changes, and while audience contribution helped develop the investigation, it's success must also be

attributed to the authoritative gatekeeping of its creator. The decision by Brown to withhold from the audience her own opinion on who killed Maria James, despite audience suggestions that she do so, is clear evidence of journalistic gatekeeping. This is addressed in the special event episode, where Brown explains that it is not her job as a journalist to reveal her position on who committed the murder and is instead to lay out the information and evidence as she found it.

“On the basis of what I know, I’ve given you the strongest motives, but I also included other people that came up in discussions... I didn’t throw these in as interesting red herrings for audience titillation, I wanted to paint a picture of how many dodgy characters surrounded this seemingly simple woman who ran a bookshop” (Brown, 2018b, 50:37).

There is extensive evidence of Brown adhering to this objective position throughout the podcast. The first significant instance occurs in episode two, which revealed the sexual abuse suffered by Adam James, as well as key information about his alleged abuser, Father Anthony Bongiorno. In order to remain objective, Brown does not make any personalised comments about Father Bongiorno, with any descriptive commentary instead made by those who knew him and had interacted with him. For example, the police officers who said he had been defiant during the original investigation into Maria’s death, as well as his alleged victims of sexual abuse. However, Brown also included in the episode, interviews with the priest’s friends and supporters who say while he was loud and obnoxious, he was harmless (Brown, 2017b, 13:52). This objective stance is also seen in episode three, where scepticism creeps into the investigation during discussions about the documented sadistic allegations levelled against Father Thomas O’Keeffe. In this episode, Brown lays out evidence against Father O’Keeffe, including his participation in child sexual assault, alleged involvement in a murderous cult, and claims of murder threats with a knife, relating it back to the Maria James murder case. However, to maintain journalistic integrity, it is also stressed that there was no sound evidence to link Father O’Keeffe to the murder, with Brown saying his suspicious behaviour “could just be a coincidence” (Brown, 2017d, 25:05). Additionally, episode five discusses the DNA bungle of evidence exhibits, which resumes the suspicion of possible police corruption. The introduction of former Victorian police officer Dennis Ryan is included in this episode as an example of a mishandled case from inside the institution. The former detective was effectively forced to resign from the force in 1972, after having been ostracised by his

colleagues following an attempt to investigate a paedophile priest in the regional Victorian town of Mildura. This interview is not provided to suggest the Maria James murder was similar to that type of corruption, in fact, Brown also explains that evidence tampering would be extremely complex and compared to a human error, is highly unlikely for such inquiries (Brown, 2017g, 13:36). However, the sharing of his story with the *Trace* audience functions as a demonstration of the type of collusion that was possible between the Church and the police during that time. The inclusion of different perspectives in these instances, protects the investigation of a biased journalistic opinion, whilst also demonstrating why an authoritative gatekeeping voice is needed to help disseminate the story holistically. This type of objective podcasting reporting style proves essential when undertaking a true crime investigative journalism inquiry, in order to achieve a higher purpose than just telling a story. In 2018, the Victorian Coroner reopened the investigation into the murder, following the exposure of new information through the podcast. In comparison to Brown's objective position throughout her investigation, Hedley Thomas, author of *The Teacher's Pet* podcast, openly and often accused Chris Dawson of murdering his wife, Lynette (Thomas, 2018). This different approach to reporting a true crime inquiry hindered the outcomes of that investigation, with concern that it was prejudicial against Dawson (McKinnell, 2019; Wiedersehn & Reason, 2019). The stance taken by Brown during the *Trace* inquiry outlines the importance of objectivity in relation to the outcomes of investigations and forms further evidence on why the podcast was considered effective in its communication.

Gatekeeping decisions about production and content made by Brown and the ABC are also a testament to why *Trace* resonated as an effective method of investigative journalistic communication. Brown states the illumination of the failings within the Catholic Church and Victoria Police, as well as the potential to reopen the Maria James murder case as the initial reasons to pursue the investigation (Brown, 2018, p. 174). The decision to deliver the investigation as a podcast, however, was made to set a precedent within the investigative journalism industry, and to strengthen the current working relationship dynamic between the audience and the media (p. 175). By presenting the investigation as a podcast, the *Trace* team took advantage of the audio medium's ability to provide both a forensic examination of the Maria James murder and harness a widespread compassionate audience response, as outlined in the previous findings section. Moreover, production decisions such as content

script editing encouraged the podcast's investigative effectiveness. In an interview with *The Walkley Magazine*, Brown discusses gaining content inspiration from podcasts such as *This American's Life's S-Town*, which involved detail-dense episodes, however, the exclusion of extensive character detail in *Trace* helped maintain a clear narrative for the audience (Courtney, 2018). *Trace* served as an example of cross collaboration by the ABC, with a conscious effort made by the production team to ensure the investigation reached a wide-ranging audience, disseminating information across every platform available including radio and television broadcast, social media and online articles. This commitment to the investigation by the ABC, ensured the story reached various audiences, including "people who didn't know what the hell a podcast was" (Brown, 2018b, 10:30). The podcast also attracted interest beyond the ABC, with other media outlets both reviewing and promoting it (Brown, 2018, pp. 187-191). This attraction to the case can be attributed to its unavoidable relation to popular true crime narratives, but it is also evidence of Brown's passionate duty of care towards the overall investigation. The podcast addresses delicate subject matter in the forms of murder, Catholic Church sexual abuse, and criminal justice corruption. The moral responsibility adopted by Brown enabled those topics to resonate throughout the wider media community, with the ABC finding allies in what are usually its competitors. The fundamental journalistic elements used by Brown to address such sensitive material, is discussed in the special event episode.

"I think journalists should think of themselves as storytellers, not story takers, that's really important. And be compassionate. I interviewed a lot of sexual abuse survivors... I tried to give them some power back by saying 'you steer, what would you like to tell me, what would you like the world to know'" (Brown, 2018b, 38:40).

Brown did receive criticism on the use of the podcast medium to review a cold case, with one commentator claiming the sole investigative impact of *Trace* was mere serendipity with the revelation of the DNA bungle (Gans, 2018). However, Brown's duty of care and compassion for Maria James, her family and sexual abuse survivors, is evident throughout the investigation and it is clear from the above findings, on providing a voice to marginalised groups, that the medium acted as an optimal platform to tell those stories.

In summary, this section has supplied a detailed response to the research question of why podcasting was an effective platform for a true crime investigative news story like *Trace*. It included in-depth representations of effectiveness including the technical elements of sound effects and script, acknowledgement of victims and giving them a voice, integration of the audience into the investigation and authoritative journalistic gatekeeping to ensure the story was disseminated creditably. These findings both broaden the understanding of why the podcasting medium was effective for the *Trace* investigation and serve as suggestive attributes to apply to future investigations of a similar nature. The next chapter will conclude this research dissertation with a reflective understanding of what was learnt about podcasting as a platform for investigative news, in relation to the *Trace* podcast and its special event episode *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James' killer*. Suggestions for further research into this topic area will also be discussed.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion and suggestions for further research

The initially stated overarching aim of this research was to contribute to scholarly material on investigative journalism communication methods, specifically on the efficiency of podcasts as a platform for such inquiries. The objective was to analyse the ABC's podcast *Trace*, with particular focus on the special event episode *The Trace team talks tactics for finding Maria James' killer*, to learn why the decisions chosen by Rachael Brown, her team, and the ABC made the investigation effective. While recognising the limitations of this analysis, I believe this objective has been largely achieved with the discovery of several representations of effectiveness including the technical elements in the production of the podcast, acknowledgement of marginalised groups, use of audience mobilisation and employment of journalistic morality. The development of these representations has highlighted important contextual information about what makes an investigative podcast effective, which had not previously been prominent in literature. This analysis also found that despite existing as a true crime narrative, *Trace* has been lifted above the problematic traits often found in that genre, due to the commitment by Brown and the ABC to ensure the podcast remained as an investigative journalism inquiry, and not entertainment. The use of the audio format to tell the story of Maria James' murder, and the subsequent stories that arose thereafter, facilitated an emotional impact on the audience which both immersed fans deeper into the narrative and encouraged them to be more than mere passive listeners.

The results from this research demonstrate some of the attributes needed for an investigative journalism podcast to be effective in its communication. In a family dynamics analogy, *Trace* exists as the younger sibling of *Serial*, with the mistakes and criticisms that that had been made with the eldest, considered and addressed for the youngest, resulting in a better understanding of what is required to bring up children (or, create an investigative journalism podcast). The effective attributes found in *Trace*, as well as its rejection of traditional true crime narratives, epitomises what investigative journalism podcast projects could look like moving forward. Reporters should take advantage of the popularity of podcasts and current societal obsession with the true crime genre because it is, as established in this analysis, an effective way to further the investigation through the mobilisation of the audience.

Podcasting offers a promising way forward for reporters who want to disseminate longform stories, attract large audiences, and adhere to the core of investigative journalism's purpose: revealing wrongdoing. However, for a podcast to function as an efficient method of communication for an investigative news story, the attributes for effective storytelling revealed in *Trace* should be considered.

The literature reviewed for this research revealed a demand for further exploration into the technical development of investigative journalism. However, despite podcasts existing as a product of this development, there is a clear gap in knowledge on their use in the industry. While authors such as Porlezza et al (2018) and Berry (2015) have conducted research into the podcast *Serial*, similar research projects about other podcasts are noticeably absent from scholarly material. As was indicated in the introduction, the continuation of investigative journalism is vital to ensure the voices of victims of injustice can be heard and corruption can be challenged, therefore, research into where podcasts can be accommodated within an industry that is inevitably changing to keep up with technological trends, is required. This analysis into the effectiveness of the podcast *Trace* in conveying an investigative news story helps close that gap in knowledge, whilst also maintaining the option of being built upon in the future.

Suggestions for further research

Initial planning for this research project considered the use of social media comments as additional data on audience interaction and involvement in investigative journalism podcast inquiries. However, privacy concerns by Charles Sturt University's (CSU) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) delayed that process due to the requirement of a participant information sheet and consent form, and due to the time constraints involved in a master's degree, the idea was shelved. Future research in this area could utilise this approach for a further exploration of audience engagement with investigative podcasts, particularly focusing on the impact of social media on true crime investigations, provided that it is conducted within privacy considerations. With the implications of *Serial's* ethical Reddit dilemmas

continuing to run deep, it would be interesting to investigate the influence of social media on investigative podcast inquiries. As discovered through this analysis, audiences can become a crucial element in the effectiveness of a podcast in an investigatory sense, therefore, exploration into the communication between fans would significantly build on this research.

As stated in the methodology section of this dissertation, the Australian newspaper's *The Teacher's Pet* podcast had been my initial case study concept, however, due to the legal concerns accepted from CSU's HREC that idea was impractical. Nevertheless, I do believe a case study analysis on that podcast, as well as the subsequent affairs that followed thereafter, would form a highly interesting research project on the effectiveness of podcasts in investigative journalism. With reference to what was considered in the discussion section of this dissertation, there are concerns about a possible prejudiced approach to *The Teacher's Pet*, therefore raising the potential of the podcast harming the criminal inquiry into main suspect of the journalistic investigation. Any research into this case should expect to wait until criminal proceedings conclude, however, an inquiry into the effectiveness of the podcast's tone and global audience reach would likely form insightful perspectives on whether the medium is an efficient method for investigations of such nature.

Continued research of the effectiveness of podcasts in conveying an investigative news story could also involve the additional inclusion of surveys of community members and working journalists. This suggestion is influenced by the mixed methods approach by Berry (2015) who conducted a small-scale survey on the popularity of listening to podcasts (p. 175), in addition to his qualitative research approach of an analysis of *Serial*. Data collected via survey research would help form current attitudes towards investigative journalism inquires presented through the podcast medium. Such attitudes have the potential to inform about the popularity of investigative journalism stories presented through podcasts, as well as the ethical considerations of using the medium to convey nonfiction stories. These perspectives could then, in turn, support the next phase of efficient communication of investigative news stories through the podcast medium.

Based on information examined in the discussion section of this dissertation, future research into the use of podcasts as an investigative journalism tool could also consider an examination into the relationship between the media and the police force. This research suggestion was provoked following the disclosure from former police officer, Ron Iddles, that greater collaboration between the police and investigative journalists undertaking a podcast inquiry could improve the possibilities of solving unresolved cases. A direction for further research could include investigating the culture of police forces, to help understand why a collaborative relationship between it and the media is not as productive as it apparently could be.

Whilst the end of this research project approaches, the story of Maria James remains open, and at the time of writing, still an unsolved murder mystery. However, the effective storytelling techniques by the *Trace* production team, the empathetic approach to the acknowledgement of marginalised groups and the investigative decisions made by Brown and the ABC will continue draw in new audiences, any of whom may have the secret that unravels this cold case. Even though the podcast concluded without an apprehension of a murderer, unlike traditional true crime narratives, the investigation successfully accomplished positive change for the James family, through both an advancement in a new coronial inquest into the murder and allowing the opportunity for previously silenced voices to be heard. This is indeed an example of the nature of podcasts in the true crime investigative field and the continuation of such journalistic podcasting has the potential to help the countless other cold cases find their missing link or help tell the countless other stories of victims of corruption.

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