ARTICLE

"Cycles upon cycles, stories upon stories": contemporary audio media and podcast horror's new frights

Danielle Hancock[1] and Leslie McMurtry[2]

ABSTRACT   During the last ten years the ever-fertile horror and Gothic genres have birthed a new type of fright-fiction: podcast horror. Podcast horror is a narrative horror form based in audio media and the properties of sound. Despite association with oral ghost tales, radio drama, and movie and TV soundscapes, podcast horror remains academically overlooked. Podcasts offer fertile ground for the revitalization and evolution of such extant audio-horror traditions, yet they offer innovation too. Characterized by their pre-recorded nature, individualized listening times and formats, often "amateur" or non-corporate production, and isolation from an ongoing media stream more typical of radio or TV, podcasts potentialize the instigation of newer audio-horror methods and traits. Podcast horror shows vary greatly in form and content, from almost campfire-style oral tales, comprising listener-produced and performed content (Drabblecast; Tales to Terrify; NoSleep); to audio dramas reminiscent of radio's Golden Era (Tales from Beyond the Pale; 19 Nocturne Boulevard); to dramas delivered in radio-broadcast style (Welcome to Night Vale; Ice Box Theatre); to, most recently, dramas, which are themselves acknowledging and exploratory of the podcast form (TANIS; The Black Tapes Podcast; Lime Town). Yet within this broad spectrum, sympathies and conventions arise which often not only explore and expand notions of Gothic sound, but which challenge broader existing horror and Gothic genre norms. This article thus demonstrates the extent to which podcast horror uses its audio form, technology and mediation to disrupt and evolve Gothic/horror fiction, not through a cumulative chronological formulation of podcast horror but through a maintained and alternately synthesized panorama of forms. Herein new aspects of generic narration, audience, narrative and aesthetic emerge. Exploring a broad spectrum of American and British horror podcasts, this article shows horror podcasting to utilize podcasting's novel means of horror and Gothic distribution/consumption to create fresh, unique and potent horror forms. This article reveals plot details about some of the podcasts examined.

[1] University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK [2] University of Salford, Manchester, UK Correspondence: (e-mail: danielle.hancock@uea.ac.uk)

Introduction

If you have ever heard a footfall when you were sure of being alone, or a strange sound in the dead of night, or a voice with no discernible source, then you know the horror that sound can bring. Although often conceived of as a background or supporting feature of Gothic and horror fiction, sound carries its own distinct narratives, potentials and aesthetics of terror. These are currently undergoing an increasingly rapid evolution in the guise of horror podcasting, particularly within American culture. "Horror podcasting" is a pre-recorded, audio horror fiction form, which is available for on-the-go download and listening through mobile audio devices such as iPods and Smartphones. It is one of the fastest-developing horror forms, representing a dramatic shift from a supposedly visually dominated culture and entertainment industry and opening up new potentials and meanings of Gothic and horror fiction. Furthermore, through podcasting's unique properties of audio/visual mediation, temporal disjuncture/on-demand play, and mobility, we assert a fundamental development of audio horror, which distinguishes podcasting from not only cinematic horror but, crucially, from radio and oral horror forms also. This article seeks to generate awareness of, and encourage critical attention to, this fascinating new field. Primarily, this article argues for podcasting's novel means of horror and Gothic distribution/consumption to create fresh, unique and potent horror forms. It does so by investigating how horror podcasts alter, reanimate or innovate upon the horror traditions which have come before it. How is podcast horror different to listening to a horror show on radio, or on a cassette through a Walkman? We would argue four main (though not exhaustive) points: consumption; visibility; community; and new media-identity. We example and assert these points through a broad sampling of American horror podcasts and an ongoing case study of one such highly popular podcast. Herein, then, we may begin to acknowledge the progression and potential of podcast horror's unique chills, and its position as a new, and steadily growing, horror industry.

Horrible from the start: the beginnings of podcast horror

Given the Gothic and horror genre's intrinsic (if at times under-valued) relationship with sound and voice (LeDoux, 1998; Hand, 2006; Coyle and Hayward, 2009; Coyle, 2009; Hannan, 2009; Sipos, 2010; Street, 2011; Briggs, 2012; Verma, 2012; Hand, 2014; Saglia, 2014; Van Elferen, 2014; Whittington, 2014), it is perhaps unsurprising that new audio media technologies led to a new Gothic form. Just as horror represented one of Old Time Radio (OTR) drama's earliest and most popular genres, so too did early narrative podcasting generate a rapidly proliferating Gothic horror genre. Indeed, the darkly comic horror series *Welcome to Night Vale* (Craynor and Fink, 2012), represents the first narrative podcast to boast substantial commercial success and international notoriety (Hancock, 2016). *Night Vale,* ostensibly a public service broadcast from a local radio station somewhere in the American Southwest, departs from reality in framing the bizarre and troubling events of its community within the guise of mundanity. While *Night Vale* has received considerable critical attention, and has elsewhere served as a useful initiation in horror-podcast study (Hancock, 2016), to understand the import and meaning of the wider genre, it is crucial to explore the enormity of its horror podcast contemporaries and precursors. It is often suggested that *Night Vale* emerged from a vacuum, before which podcast fiction simply did not exist (Locke, 2016; Locker, 2016). In fact, many horror fiction podcasts predate *Night Vale*, including *Pseudopod* (August, 2006-), *The Drabblecast* (February, 2007-), *19 Nocturne Boulevard* (October, 2008-), *We're Alive* (May, 2009-), *Tales from Beyond the Pale* (October, 2010-), *The*

NoSleep Podcast (June, 2011-), *Campfire Radio Theater* (December, 2011-) and *Tales to Terrify* (January, 2012 -). *Earbud Theater* narrowly follows *Night Vale* with a release date only a week later (Earbud Theater, 2012).

While these shows have not yet achieved the international critical and popular success of *Night Vale*, they have wide circulation, critical acclaim and popular appeal. Their sustained production and steady increase in downloads suggest a horror genre that has been growing from the recognized advent of podcasting. In 2015, *NoSleep* reported 600,000 downloads; in 2016, *We're Alive* reached 50 million downloads. All of the above-listed titles are either nominees or winners of audio-fiction awards such as Parsec or Audio Verse. Indeed, while decrying media claims of *Night Vale*'s "creation" of podcast fiction, Tee Morris argues that "Podcasting Fiction is not some 'new trend' or literary revolution that occurred overnight. Authors were sharing speculative fiction audio within the first year of podcasting's inception" (2016). Podcast horror has existed almost as long as the podcast itself.

Locke's claims that new horror (and sci-fi) programs are leading the way in developing and popularizing the form are persuasive. Locke cites a flurry of emergent horror podcasts in recent years, which are bringing fiction podcasting increased cultural and critical recognition, including *The Black Tapes* (September, 2015-), *Archive 81* (April, 2016-), *The Deep Vault* (September, 2016-), *The Bright Sessions* (October, 2015-) and *Within the Wires* (June, 2016-). We would add *TANIS* (October, 2015-), *Lime Town* (July, 2015-), *The Message* (October, 2015-), *The Box* (August, 2016) and *Rabbits* (March, 2017) to this list. Jason Boog asserts that 2015, when many of the above podcasts debuted, "will be remembered as a major year in horror podcast history" (2015). Rising interest in podcast fiction may be attributed not only to *Night Vale*'s continued success, but also to the hugely popular narrative-journalism podcast *Serial* (2014-), which, though not Gothic in aesthetic, was certainly a program focussed on murder and mystery. Yet we may also conclude that this outcome was somewhat inevitable, given that horror podcasting has now been building, evolving and spreading for over a decade.

In an effort to shift critical gaze from *Night Vale*, we will offer (alongside samplings from the broader horror podcast genre) a running case study from the popular and well-established podcast *TANIS*. In particular the show's second episode, "Radio, Radio", explicitly addresses podcast horror's difference from, and relationship to, traditional audio horror forms. *TANIS* further promises an insight to podcasting's developing modes of production, distribution and convergence, being the sister podcast to the also highly popular *The Black Tapes*. Both shows claim to derive from the fictional Pacific Northwest Stories (PNWS) "network," itself clearly modelled on NPR (National Public Radio) (Hancock and McMurtry, forthcoming 2017).

TANIS elegantly illustrates the new Gothic horror podcast paradigm. This is apparent both in terms of production, which is consummately professional, highly self-aware in its podcasting context, and attuned to the serialistic potentials of its form; and thematically. In its first episode, the appearance of Aleister Crowley, William Blake, Dante and nineteenth century fur trappers being ripped apart by werewolf-like creatures all signal a deep affinity with the Gothic. Furthermore, this is a Gothic rooted very much in place: Washington state and its surrounding areas. Host Nic Silver is, throughout, as well-versed in the Gothic tradition as in the OTR horror tradition/nostalgia, while still firmly exploiting *Serial*-esque conventions. Steeped in past audio drama traditions, *TANIS* is also highly aware of changes in audio drama consumption.

How a podcast is typically listened to innately charges the horror podcast form with new aspects of intrusion upon the everyday. From Freud's Unheimliche on, the Gothic has been recognized to implicitly disrupt and engage with the "ordinary" world. Podcast horror is a Gothic mode, which permeates the everyday experience in a manner arguably more effective than any other Gothic form. This facet develops from the podcast's mobile, privatizing, acoustic properties. Unlike other Gothic forms, the horror podcast moves with us, occludes the external aural world, and speaks to us wherever we may go: a companion for traversing a mundane world.

The podcast's role as a portable, "invisible" acoustic alter-world is paramount. Michael Bull's study of iPod music-listening culture repeatedly notes the distancing effect of mobile audio-media. "Geographical space becomes recessed, as the speaker inhabits 'another space,'" yet it also becomes charged with the mood or thematic of the mobile listener's audio content (2007: 84; 41). When we alter our acoustic environment, we alter our perspective upon, and perceived place within, the surrounding physical space: we alter the everyday. If Michael Bull's interviewees reported their music-listening as affecting their perceived world, making the environment around them move in time to their music, or reflect their chosen soundscape's emotional flavor, then the horror podcast can be understood to operate with similar infiltrating habits. *NoSleep* producer David Cummings notes that:

> Most people listen (to horror podcasts) via their phones through headphones and that sense of audio isolation and immersion into the sound and music creates a potent environment, which can make listening even on a crowded bus or in a sunny park a frightening experience. If a particular story matches the listener's real-life setting, (for example, a story about a security guard in a haunted building being listened to by an actual security guard alone in a building) the overlap being fiction and reality can be particularly unnerving. (cited O'Donoghue, 2016)

The horror podcast both offers "refuge" from the real around us, yet also potentializes a Gothicization of that world from our perspective.

OTR horror filtered auditory Gothic worlds into the listener's physical space, and early Crystal set earphones potentialized acoustically divorced perspective on that space. However, such experiences were not only physically static (being tied to technological apparatus), but also temporally static. If, by horror radio's popularization, Crystal radio's isolating technologies were giving way to communal, "wireless" technology, such programs were also ingrained within wider broadcast protocols of scheduling. Thus, listeners were offered acoustic horror experiences, which were also constrained within protected parameters of space *and* time. Indeed, notions of set scheduling were often paramount to OTR horror aesthetics. The opening segues of shows including *Appointment with Fear* (1943), *Suspense* (1943) and *Lights Out!* (1934) all enforce awareness of the temporary interruption of the non-Gothic "everyday" with the commencement of the show's particular "witching hour." OTR horror broached the mundane, domestic space, but only for and at a set time and in a static space.

TANIS' "Radio, Radio" explicitly addresses the distinctions between podcast and older audio-mediation from the start. The episode begins with aligning radio broadcast with a horror aesthetic: an SFX tuning dial, static undercutting OTR-style chatter, saying "Something too strange to comprehend, unworldly." The episode's introduction of characters Carl Van Sant and his brother Geoff cements a strong, almost visceral sense of podcasting's audio-history. Geoff characterizes his deceased brother as "a crazy person," and takes Silver to see his preserved basement suite. Silver explains that Carl Van Sant's subterranean lair is filled with:

> so much audio … cassette tapes. They were everywhere, hundreds of milk crates filled with numbered cassette littered the floor, and the walls were covered floor to ceiling in cassette tape shelving. It looked like there were tens of thousands of them. There were also hundreds of radios: short wave, AM/FM, radios of all ages, shapes, and sizes. (*TANIS* "Radio, Radio")

While we cannot *see* the environment evoked here, we can hear a budding technostalgia. Technostalgia is a preservation and resurrection of "dead" technology. As Mark Katz notes, this may be a loving preservation, but it also suggests perversion: "Analogue is *supposed* to be dead, long ago swept into obscurity by digital technologies. But it never did quite die, and in fact the past decade has seen the resurgence of analogue technologies and media" (Katz, 276 emphasis added). This may initially be dismissed as a harmless eccentricity or "hipster fad"; indeed, earlier in the episode Silver recollects his own love of pre-digital recording: "I grew up with the radio. I used to sit in front of my tape recorder for hours." Yet in Van Sant's legacy of cassette tapes and radio sets, technostalgia becomes unhealthy, almost monstrous; a dead weight of real world poundage, filling up the cramped home of a dead madman. Here, audio's vast, clunking and hissing past forms an oppressive figure in comparison to the sleek, digitized podcast.

The podcast liberates the audio horror experience from its analogue tethers, allowing listeners to alter any space at any time. Indeed, the mobility of podcast Gothic and horror extends beyond the simple ease with which a mobile audio-device may be transported—it relates also to the seeming autonomy with which new material uploads itself (generally for free) to such devices through the podcast's RSS stream, and the capacity of new audio players to hold vast amounts of audio content. Cummings notes "the immediacy of the podcasting medium as an advantage, where people haul their phones and iPods around with them and consume media constantly as opposed to in discrete chunks" (cited O'Donoghue, 2015). The podcast is always with us, and may play and replay whenever and for as long as we desire, bringing audio horror beyond the parameters of radio scheduling, and also beyond the constraints of how many cassette tapes/CDs we can carry or afford to bring along with us.

Cummings observes that the vast majority of his program downloads occur early on Monday mornings, in anticipation of the work week beginning (pers. Comm., October, 2015). Jason Boog describes "sneaking bits of a horror podcast like a sly cigarette smoker" (2015). Likewise, the clandestine nature of the podcast's interpolation upon the mundane is acknowledged in several horror shows' opening segues, a trend described in *Tales To Terrify* host Larry Santoro's first opening frame:

> Welcome, welcome children of the night, welcome to Friday the 13th. Well, it may not be night, it may not be Friday the 13th where you are. It's probably daytime, you're probably sitting in your office, boss unawares. But let's pretend; that's the heart of storytelling anyway, isnot it? (*Tales to Terrify*, "No. 1: Martin Mundt", 2012)

Instead of temporarily anchoring the "witching hour" to a certain chronological certainty, the horror podcast enables listeners to smuggle the Gothic aesthetic into the everyday work

space. Santoro artfully encourages his listeners to imaginatively "leak" the interior podcast world into the space which surrounds.

This leaking into space is similar to the conceit of *TANIS*, that, hidden in/beneath a reality of increasing Googlization, is a world of ancient and dangerous mystery termed "Tanis." If Gothic horror podcast consumption is rooted in the Gothicization of everyday life, while simultaneously adhering to notions about the function of iPods (insulating listeners from the outside world), *TANIS* is a self-aware example. Its mild-mannered host Silver and his secondary host, the hacker known as MeerKatnip (MK), provide intimate yet reassuring guides through layers of folk and internet conspiracy theories. Here the internet is cast as a dark, foreboding and omnipresent life-force, which pervades and threatens Silver's life through hacking and surveillance. MK in particular, who seems to be online/"inside" the Internet all the time, and able to delve into the deepest, most insidious parts of the "Dark Web", provides an icon for the new Gothic horror podcast consumption model. In the cyber-era, Gothic horror is now present, accessible, and accessing, anytime, anywhere.

Alongside mobility and privacy, podcasting, and new audio media generally, is increasingly defined through its "invisible" or transparent properties. Mobile audio-players travel with the listener, nearly weightless, perfectly mobilized and updating podcast content seamlessly, suggesting immediate and direct intimacy between user and content. This recollects Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's claims that "[o]ur culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation" (1999: 313). The widespread use of headphones in the late 1980s prompted Evan Eisenberg to link them with the belief "that the kingdom of music is within you," which has become infinitely more true in the intervening decades (1987: 65). Headphones have given way to more corporeally intertwined earbuds, allowing the sense of mediated sound "appearing" immediately within our bodies—"[t]he listener often times literally sticks the show in his or her ear" (Harold, cited O'Donoghue, 2015). New wireless headsets, sold on the premise of "it's just you and your music," transmit sound through the body, allowing listeners the experience of their own bodies being mediatory devices and ensuring that they "never have to reach for their device" (Bose Corporation, 2016). However, these aspects neglect one of the idiosyncrasies of podcast form: that it is dualistically acoustic and visual. Subscription to a podcast's RSS feed does allow "untethered," transparent listening experiences, but first the podcast must be sourced through the highly visual contexts of a home or host website. In many horror podcasts, this multi-sensory facet innately informs and shapes the acoustic horror experience. Logos, artworks, interactive and narratively tied webpages create paratexts and contexts which extend beyond, and often integrate with, the acoustic. Thus, while (beyond the listener's imagination) "nothing that (radio) deals with is visual," in podcasting the visual dimension frequently represents a deeply meaningful aspect of the horror experience (Crisell, 1986: 9).

Often the visuality of a horror podcast's website simply supports the show's acoustic aesthetic: *The Drabblecast, Tales to Terrify* and *Earbud Theater* all offer accompanying artworks to their podcast episodes, generally depicting a scene thematically related to the story contained within the download feed. Yet even these apparently simplistic and experientially discreet forms of horror may be deliberately incorporated into the acoustic realm. *Tales to Terrify* host Larry Santoro often refers to an episode's artwork in his opening segue, re-situating them not as online reproductions, but as original pieces of art, hung in the "nook" from which he speaks, and into which he invites listeners for the evening's entertainment. The visual realm thus forges a gateway of collectivity between otherwise disparate listeners and Santoro,

allowing for a shared imaginative experience as all listeners may follow Santoro's appraisal of the "painting" together.

As another example, *Tales from Beyond the Pale* (Glass Eye Pix, 2010) uses its visuality to locate the listening experience within an unsettlingly archaic domesticity. The show's website is a richly interactive, visual experience which explicitly situates the podcast within the reanimated corpse of OTR, and the listener within a particular virtual listening space. Battered wireless radios, a rotting hand holding an outdated mic, black and white film reels and invitations to drive-in movies suffuse the website's home-page, recalling a consciously exhumed, "(un)dead" American culture. Clicking on a glowing wireless radio takes the visitor to the listening room, a space dominated by two wireless sets, whose dials must be turned (that is, clicked upon) to begin podcast play. The room's radios, cassette tapes, long playing record, cinematic apparatus and books create a collage of horror-sound history, reminding us both of the Gothic's tendency to disrupt linear temporality, as "Gothic atmospheres … have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents," and also that "the history of sound contains multiple temporalities, and a varying of intersecting chronologies" (Botting, 1999: 1; Sterne, 2003: 341). These ephemera lay upon a table which visually extends from the listener's keyboard, linking the physical and virtual listening spaces and—as the audio begins to play—surrounding the listener within a visual *and* acoustic horror space. With a Frankensteinian mix of electricity and exhumation, the web page brings OTR culture and technology disturbingly and disruptively back to life, and places the listener explicitly within it.

TANIS utilizes its podcast visibility in two ways. First, in common with other Gothic horror drama podcasts, it leaves a visual trace through its website. However, it also embraces a visual aesthetic that distances it from a more OTR-linked theme of horror podcasting and links it more explicitly with nonfiction podcasts like *Serial,* supporting *TANIS*' presentation as factual journalism, allowing listeners a sense of shared reality with the show's content. *The Black Tapes* website hosts a link to show character Dr Richard Strand's own website, wherein he accepts listener submissions of suspected paranormal experience and promises to return contact, should the reported case be deemed interesting enough (several fans have reported receiving such replies). Beyond the contact page, the "Strand Institute" website is frustratingly sparse, re-enforcing the character's inaccessibility and mystique. That the podcast refers to the "Strand Institute" website, and the journalist-protagonist's initial contact of Strand through that source, further empowers this visual paratext with narrative meaning. *TANIS*, meanwhile, uses its website to supplement the show's audio narrative, offering listeners visual access to materials discussed within the podcast and developing a multi-sensory story form which audio-horror has hitherto been denied (this is further discussed in Hancock and McMurtry, 2017).

Podcast horror further revises the horror genre through its development of marginal/"amateur," collective, and community-based oral storytelling. If radio horror is incumbent to the restraints of censorship, timetabling and editorial acceptance, podcasting largely lacks a unified or "official" gatekeeper, is uncensored and (largely) independently produced. For Lombardo, "[w]hat makes the podcast most interesting as a communicative practice is … the proliferation of unique, often individually produced, content that could not have come into existence another way" (Lombardo, 2008: 217, 226). Indeed, popular zombie podcast *We're Alive* emerged from a television show pitch that could not secure funding. The horror podcast genre is a space that delights in the collection and dissemination of amateur voices and tales, allowing for the return and reinvention of folk or campfire tales as both highly individualized,

personal and homemade horror, yet also as (through its recorded format) stabilized, transcribed and globally shared.

If "[t]he campfire story, as with so many other things, seems to have migrated to the internet," we may argue it to have set-up base-camp in the horror podcast genre (The Navigator, 2016). *The Drabblecast, Tales to Terrify* and *The NoSleep Podcast*, among many others, operate explicitly on the premise of showcasing listener-contributed and/or performed content. In the spirit of open communication and contribution, *The Drabblecast* aligns itself with and often showcases works from a fan-operated sister podcast, *The Dribblecast*, wherein "[e]veryone is invited to participate, regardless of talent or experience" (thedribblecast. com).

Likewise, *NoSleep* originates from a text-based Reddit.com forum, entirely comprising amateur, "true-life" personal horror stories: "an online version of telling spooky stories around the campfire" (thenosleeppodcast.com). This recollection of the campfire tale spurred Cummings to translate the stories to oral form (pers. comm., October, 2015). While early *NoSleep* podcasts were sourced from the Reddit forum, as the podcast's popularity grew, listeners submitted their own ideas and/or voices to the podcast directly. Upon episodes' upload to these shows' websites, feedback is sought on all aspects of production, allowing listeners and tellers an established mode of immediate and shared, public dialogue. This diverges drastically from hegemonic, revenue-driven and controlled US radio industry norms. Arguing from a "hypodermic" media perspective, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer attest that what we may now term "traditional" radio

> turns all participants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programmes, which are all exactly the same. No rejoinder has been devised, and private broadcasters are denied any freedom (1997: 122).

Thus, whereas radio horror (albeit certainly influenced by fan response), must adhere to sponsor and broadcaster censorship and artistic vision, these horror podcasts offer (at present) a less restrictive means of oral and acoustic horror production and dissemination in which any story may be told, by any voice. While this censorship safehaven may be temporary, as podcast networks, host sites and sponsors (which we discuss below) may eventually demand more control over the shows they support, it is certainly central to understanding the horror podcast genre's development.

The notion of collectivity is paramount to these programs, emerging both through the shared, listener-led development of an audio-horror corpus and group discussion of the shows, and also in the aesthetic suggestion of physically co-present group listening. Discussing horror podcast trends, David O'Donoghue suggests an acceptance of the form as inherent to a sense of physical collectivity: "the intimacy of the podcast medium provides a great environment for people to gather round and tell stories of things that stretch the boundaries of belief" (2016). Jeffrey Sconce argues that the spoken spooky story is necessarily anachronistic and collective, as "[b]y telling a tale, in the traditional manner, the storyteller draws themselves and their listeners out of the modern world of print or media and back into an older way of relating to society" (2000: 37). Listener-led podcasts all engender an aesthetic of sparse acoustic-framing and aesthetic dependence on a lone, storytelling voice reading out the submitted stories, rather than sound-rich acoustic world-building. The reading voice is not necessarily authorial—it could belong to the tale's author, another show fan, or a member of the show's staff, and indeed *Pseudopod* has a policy disallowing authors to read their own works—thus adding a further sense of co-ownership or sharedness to the horror experience.

While *TANIS* and *The Black Tapes* do not constitute fan-led fictions, both programs encourage and support fan-interactivity and input. *The Black Tapes* invited listeners to "phone in" with voice-mail messages asking questions and presenting theories, which Silver and Reagan then answered "on air". Likewise, the hosts have made several "ask me anything" live appearances on the PNWS' Reddit fan-forum. Despite the faux professionalism of PNWS, *TANIS* thus adheres closely to, and even develops, the podcast horror campfire community. Indeed, PNWS increasingly suggest a "breaking of the fourth wall" horror-type, with the materials which they air proving, in later revelations, perhaps dangerous when heard. Through, say, hearing a song which supposedly kills within a year, that hear it, the listener becomes uncomfortably integrated within the show: rather than submitting storylines or voice-over, PNWS's listeners contribute themselves as potential victims of the narrative.

Notions of sharedness and collectivity are frequently instilled within these podcasts' opening frames. New audio media (and their cultures) have been discussed as "anti-social" (Pitt, 2006: 161); potentially destructive of "the social fabric" (Levy, 2006: 121); and "the archetypal privatizing media" (Bull, 2007: 65). On an external level new audio-media culture "represents a world in which each person is locked into their own interiority" (Bull, 2007: 29). Yet horror podcasting often reveals a starkly connective, social and traditionalist interiority wherein listeners leave one, perhaps less inviting, social environ and enter another. *NoSleep* host Cummings always addresses his audience as a group, and frequently refers to the sense of community engendered in the show's listenership and online discussion, inviting listeners to speak to himself and one another. *Tales to Terrify*'s earlier-cited opening frame is indicative of a wider formula in which host Santoro (and hosts subsequent to Santoro's death) "welcomes" listeners into his domestic space and bids them to sit by the fire, as a collective of "friends" or "children of the night," all co-present to hear the story in a shared time and space. This opening mimics earlier OTR host frames, yet in doing so achieves more than foregrounding podcasting's radio ancestry; it overrides notions of separation and isolation to provide a sense of physical and temporal togetherness to the sharing of community-produced stories. Historical horror podcast *Lore*, which takes horror folklores and facts to create verbal essays, defines itself as being "in a style that's similar to a campfire experience" (lore.com). Likewise, horror-drama anthology *Campfire Radio Theater*'s host always bids listeners welcome and instructs them to "take a seat by the fire" for the night's story. *Welcome to Night Vale* conceptualizes listeners as a collective township. *The Drabblecast* similarly induces a sensation of collectivity, as host Norm Sherman often speaks to his listeners as an amassed group, and from the first episode always explains the podcast's purpose in "bringing strange stories by strange authors to strange listeners, such as yourself" ("The Coughing Dog," 2007). A clear sense of homology is created in this community of "strange" people, one which is tied particularly to a "campfire tales" tradition in the show's sounding of a brief banjo tune before the stories commence. Both *TANIS* and *The Black Tapes* are explicitly addressed to a collective audience, with the hosts regularly referring to listeners as "you guys", and "you all", and frequently acknowledging their growing fandom's online collective presence.

Thus, we find a unique development of more traditionally collective oral horror modes, which transforms new audio media's supposedly isolating and anti-social properties into a polyphonic, organically-developing "campfire" space. In the shared voices, stories and forum-comments of these podcasts, speakers and listeners may engage with one another, if not face-to-face, then mouth-to-ear-to-eye. That this media is global and

transcribed offers great promise to both the consumption and study of horror folklore—a previously ephemeral, localized form of horror is now becoming a viable corpus of mass entertainment and study.

While podcasting, as a broader medium, exhibits highly varied types of content, form, address and presentation, highly popular journalistic and ostensibly non-fictive programs like *Serial* have arguably contributed to a dominant, or at least recognizable, podcast identity. Although it has been noted that *Serial*, and the podcast dramas which followed the show, are far from representative of the beginnings of horror podcasting, Sarah Koenig's documentary undeniably influenced a new form of fictive horror podcasting often self-identified as "docu-drama." These programs are presented as non-fictive, on-the-go journalistic podcast projects, wherein a lone researcher will deliver a weekly or bi-weekly podcast about his/her ongoing investigation. If journalistic, "live," and "true-life" radio horror seemingly originates with *The Mercury Theatre on Air*'s "War of the Worlds" (Welles and Houseman, 1938), *Serial* presents a more definite catalyst for journalistic audio-horror fiction, which explicitly identifies itself as "podcast."

Uncertainty regarding podcast identity is often addressed head-on in docu-drama horror podcasting, with host characters repeatedly explaining the concept to their interviewees, as a form of radio for the Internet. *The Black Tapes* acknowledges explicit dependence upon *Serial* for identity as one such interviewee responds: "Cool, I love podcasts—have you listened to *Serial*?" ("A Tale of Two Tapes Part II", 2015). As much as "War of the Worlds" took from its own era of audio-reporting to create a radio horror based in liveness, and the domesticated audience's trust in on-the-scene reporting, podcast horror fictions such as *The Black Tapes, TANIS, The Message* and *Lime Town* equally draw upon conventions of podcast journalism established and popularized in *Serial*. These conventions operate around notions which are implicitly aligned with podcast form: interactivity, intimacy and immediacy.

One key to *Serial*'s success is its interactivity as a mystery story. Host Koenig poses the investigatory drive as innate: "We act as detectives all the time gathering evidence … and then we act as judge … it's just a human thing" ("Rumours," 2014). From the start, listeners are encouraged to join Koenig's investigation of Adnan Syed's murder trial, a point made clear as Koenig states: "If you wanna figure out this case with me, now is the time to start paying close attention" ("The Breakup," 2014). Each episode is accompanied by online visual documentation: while Koenig charts Adnan Syed's murder trial, listeners may peruse the evidence that she discusses. Yet listeners are not simply invited to think alongside Koenig, but to speak—both to one another and to Koenig herself. Several points of Koenig's investigation hinge upon the testimonies of listeners, who having heard the podcast have "called in" with their personal knowledge of the "characters" or trial. The program's Reddit page was overwhelmed by fan theories and opinions. This escalated, with trial witnesses being repeatedly harassed by listeners who had discovered and shared their home addresses, Facebook pages and family details. With increasing ardor, *Serial*'s listeners adopted the roles of judge and jury.

The horror podcasts which follow *Serial* allow a safe arena for the investigation impetus which *Serial* revealed. Topics of investigation vary from paranormal research (*The Black Tapes*), extra-terrestrial communication (*The Message*), cyber-folklore (*TANIS*) and an abandoned research community (*Lime Town*), but all are presented as true stories, evolving in real-time with the podcast's release, and in which the listenership is invited and reported to contribute to the investigation. This point is emphasized in *TANIS*' concluding "tagline": "We'll be back again next week. Until then, keep looking" ("Radio, Radio"). Like *Serial*,

these podcasts frequently make use of their website platforms as a means to share "evidence" with listeners, and "listener" call-ins and tips are frequently adopted into the storyline. The listener is purposefully co-opted into the mystery, and it becomes a community endeavor, with fans posting theories and insights onto forums and piecing the mystery together. Part of the rationale behind this demand hinges upon digital culture; whereas in 1929 WMAQ Chicago could offer listeners interactivity in the form of letter-writers' solutions to detective puzzles, the Internet has enabled everyone to play detective within seconds and with minimal effort.

Thus is born an audio horror form which is acutely aware of the audience's ability to fact-check and research that which is presented as true-life. *TANIS* and its contemporaries offer horror narratives that are woven from fact and fiction, allowing a Google search to take enthused listeners so far into the realms of history and/or reality, and then pick up from the eventual dead ends. *TANIS* co-producer Terry Miles explains, "The fans of *TANIS* are super engaged … I get emails everyday with crazy theories and videos and pictures. There are the wildest theories" (cited in Locker, 2015). The docu-drama podcast is thus both a fragmentary and almost a fractal form. "Radio, Radio" presents a complex narrative including elements both aural and visual/new media that recalls the fragmented narratives of many Gothic texts, particularly the sometimes confusing attributions in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1821), which is further confused when characters stand in for other characters. In the case of the missing Tara Reynolds in "Radio, Radio," there are at least two "Taras," one whose voice is "actually" her own, and one who is represented, albeit briefly, by Alex Reagan. Investigation of narrative detail frequently brings forth—for the "super-engaged" fan—another clue, story or mythology. Such enabled research allows fans both to burrow deeper into the story, creating a realism of narrative depth and historical root, and also to branch out from its origins, allowing for "wild theories" by which the central narrative becomes splintered and multiplicitous. The existence of the fan-made "Extremely Spoilery Cheat Sheet" for *TANIS* highlights, however, that listeners are enthusiastically unravelling *TANIS*' clues much like listeners of *Serial* did.

From the beginning, Gothic has dealt in fragmentary and often contradictory narratives. Through "interwoven episodes and insets," Gothic texts as diverse as *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) and *Dracula* (1897) have developed a labyrinthine structure in which "frame might itself contribute to the tension between natural and supernatural explanations" (Briggs, 2012: 179). The so-called "found footage" trend in cinematic horror is a natural progression of this aesthetic; "[t]he viewing of the films themselves necessarily begs the question of how, and most importantly why, anyone would show their contents publicly" (Reyes, 2015: 129). Audio fiction, however, got there first, and it continues to be a fruitful technique in docu-drama horror podcasting. Because audio drama has no universal equivalent of the quotation mark (Verma, 2012: 61), the often torturous and contradictory qualities of Gothic frame narrative are implicit in many horror fiction podcasts, and it is not always clear what is quotation and what is speech. Whose voice do we actually hear when Alex Reagan reads a letter on Silver's *TANIS* podcast?

> Something ancient, something hidden behind the thin veil between worlds threatening to bleed over into our world, to destroy and sicken, to ream and cleanse by the one who watches, the one who waits, the one they call Eld Fen ("Pacifica," 2016).

While the multi-vocality of Gothic literature has become a hallmark of its aesthetic untrustworthiness (Chaplin, 2011: 181–

182), such uncertainty is measured, both through textual codification of quotation, *and* the inability of text to allow multiple voices immediate, visceral, co-presence. Audio-form is different, its voices "whisper in our ear, like a friend at the end of the telephone," and these intimately co-present voices can swiftly become discordant and unclear (Hand and Traynor, 2011). Docu-drama horror podcasting is characterized by cacophony. Ceaselessly merging and juxtaposing voices and found-footages form a disruptive, unstable collage: "cycles upon cycles, stories upon stories," in which the original speaker is frequently obscured, interrupted, edited or ventriloquized, and the listener left to discern, imagine and decipher their own understanding of who said what and when (*Archive 81*, "A Body in a New Place," 2016).

However, docu-drama horror podcasts frequently offset their form's instability with a seemingly trustworthy, hyper-candid host figure: a refreshing twist on Gothic fiction's unreliable narrator. Discussing post-*Serial* fiction podcasts, O'Donoghue asks "what is up with this crossover of NPR fans and horror junkies?" (2016). O'Donoghue refers to a dominant, and Gothically significant, trend within these podcasts, wherein host characters are normatively identified as NPR journalists. Traditionally recognized for its unbiased, credible reporting (Eggerton, 2005; Magee and Fisher, 2014), NPR has a niche in trustworthy, amiable hosting— a style referred to in-house as "Minnesota Nice." Indeed, a 2005 study named NPR as among America's most trusted news sources (Eggerton, 2005).

Transparency is key to docu-drama horror podcast's style. "Full disclosure," a phrase borrowed from Koenig, is a mainstay in the genre, as docu-drama hosts frequently take us "behind the scenes" of the creative process; incorporating production discussions and bloopers, acknowledging edits and cuts, and maintaining throughout a confessional, overtly-candid demeanor. They speak to listeners as companions on their journey, whispering quick observations into their dictaphones, and relating their later reflections from their bedrooms and offices. As these hyper-innocents wander into ever darker, dangerous situations, the Poe-esque madmen are replaced by wide-eyed, earnest but potentially naive Radcliffean heroes, figures with whom we may identify, and fear for. Like Jane Austen's parodic version in Catherine Morland, these narrators are often so busy looking for danger at every turn and attributing darkness where there is none, they fail to accurately assess reality. As the intrepid journalists travel deeper into the hearts of darkness, their innocence is often revealed to *be* their untrustworthiness. Seasons of *The Black Tapes, Archive 81, TANIS* and *Limetown* all culminate in the naive, amiable journalist unwittingly unleashing evil forces upon their listenership, most often through having broadcast cursed or demonic sounds to them. Indeed, this trope is so recognizable now that *The Message* appropriated it to subversive effect, having their young, perky reporter figure unravel, first to an alcoholic fraudster, and second to an alien agent, who purposefully used their podcast to transmit lethal sound waves to the listenership. In the docu-drama horror podcasts, then, we find an unreliable narrator for the podcast age.

Conclusion: the birth of an industry

Despite its critical oversight, horror podcasting is a very present, popular and diverse genre. It is not newly emergent, claiming a history of at least ten years, and a heritage extending to and beyond Golden Era radio, into the birthplace of canonical Gothic texts in prose, stage and cinema. Within this history, we have seen that these shows offer unique contribution to the horror genres, allowing for a varied expanse of horror experiences and aesthetics, either through the re-appropriation of wireless or oral horror facets, or through the direct acknowledgement of new

audio-media. Besides such innovation, podcast horror seems to offer a surprisingly traditionalist horror experience, one which is based in notions of connectivity, interactivity and community— words often imagined as divergent from the "silenced and silencing" worlds of headphone or iPod culture (Bull, 2007: 68). This social function seems only primed to grow: Hancock notes *Welcome to Night Vale*'s online fan collectives' and live tours' social import as a meeting point for an otherwise disparate community (2016; 2017). Such tours are becoming popular in the horror podcast genre, providing an essential revenue-source, but also a clearly desired social forum for the listening communities.

As the genre moves past its first decade, it only gathers speed, with programs of increasing popularity, notoriety and quality emerging. In 2016, *Welcome to Night Vale*'s creators produced *Night Vale Presents*, a platform for original podcast fiction which "continues Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink's mission to encourage new, independent podcasting from writers and artists who havenot worked in the format before," and which echoes *Welcome to Night Vale*'s eerie, surreal aesthetic (www.night valepresents.com). In the same year, *We're Alive* released its follow-up show *Lock Down; Tales from Beyond the Pale* released its third season and announced fresh live performance dates; *NoSleep* announced its first live tour; *Pseudopod* celebrated ten years of operation; *Tales to Terrify, Drabblecast, Campfire Radio Theatre, Earbud Theatre, The Black Tapes, Archive 81, TANIS, Lime Town* and *Night Vale* all continued to release new episodes, with many garnering Parsec and Audio Verse awards/nominations along the way.

That these programs are beginning to make money is the final assertion of the genre's prowess. Alongside fan funding, many shows now create revenue through merchandize and live shows, and, increasingly, sponsorship. Post-*Serial*, Bond notes renewed interest and technological development in podcasting as an advertising medium, as "digital audio networks in the USA and Europe are signing up big name advertisers and publishers eager to reach engaged listeners on mobile devices" (Bond, 2015). Perhaps most innovative of all is the horror podcast as advert: sci-fi/horror show *The Message* is, in fact, a creative advertisement for General Electric. The company's global creative director Andy Goldberg explains, "Coming up with a fictional narrative around the idea of listening, something that's inherent in a lot of our devices, especially in healthcare and ultrasound, felt natural because we could bridge that gap into what's happening." (cited Laura Rosenfeld, 2015). While corporate sponsorship may curtail the genre's long-held freedom from censorship, it may also develop the form beyond hobbyist-status. Finally, then, we may say there is a horror podcast industry.

References

Adorno T and Horkheimer M (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Verso: London, pp 120–167.

Boog J (2015) Antique Nightmares. Los Angeles Review of Books online publication 31 October, available at: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/antique-nightmares/#, accessed December 2016.

Bolter J and Grusin R (1999) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Bond S (2015) Podcasting Wins Ear of Advertisers. Financial Times online publication 6 March, 2016, available at: https://www.ft.com/content/d8ff920a-c38b-11e4-9c27-00144feab7de, accessed December 2016.

Bose Corporation (2016) Wireless Headphones. Bose.com online publication 2016, available at: https://www.bose.co.uk/en_gb/products/headphones/wireless_headphones.html, accessed December 2016.

Botting F (1999) The gothic production of the unconscious. In: Byron G and Punter D (eds). *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*. Macmillan Press: Basingstoke, pp 11–36.

Briggs J (2012) The ghost story. In: Punter D (ed). *A New Companion to the Gothic*. Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, pp 176–185.

Bull M (2007) *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience.* Routledge: London and New York, NY.

Chaplin S (2011) *Gothic Literature.* York Press: London.

Coyle R (2009) Spooked by sound: The blair witch project. In: Hayward P (ed). *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound, and Horror Cinema.* Equinox: London, pp 213–228.

Coyle R and Hayward P (2009) Texas chainsaws: Audio effect and iconicity. In: Hayward P (ed). *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound, and Horror Cinema.* Equinox: London, pp 125–136.

Craynor J and Fink J (2012) Welcome to Night Vale, 15 June 2012- [podcast]. Available at: www.welcometonightvale.com, accessed December 2016.

Crisell A (1986) *Understanding Radio.* Routledge: London.

Donnelly KJ (2010) Hearing deep seated fears: John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980). In: Lerner N (ed). *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear.* Routledge: Abingdon, pp 52–67.

Earbud Theater. (2012) Earbud Theater, 21 June 2012- [podcast]. Available at: www.earbudtheater.com, accessed December 2016.

Eggerton J (2005) Survey Says: Noncom News Most Trusted. Broadcasting and Cable online publication 10 November 2005, available at: http://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/news-articles/survey-says-noncom-news-most-trusted/108687, accessed December 2016.

Eisenberg E (1987) *The Recording Angel: Explorations in Phonography.* McGraw-Hill Book Company: New York, NY.

Glass Eye Pix. (2010) Tales from Beyond the Pale, 26 October 2010- [podcast]. Available at: www.talesfrombeyondthepale.com, accessed December 2016.

Hancock D (2016) Welcome to Welcome to Night Vale: First steps in exploring the horror podcast. *Horror Studies Journal*; 7 (2): 219–234.

Hancock D (2017 forthcoming) In: Weinstock J (ed). *Our Friendly Desert Town: Alternative Podcast Culture in Welcome to Night Vale.*

Hancock D and McMurtry L (2017 forthcoming) I Know What a Podcast Is: Serialesque Fiction and Podcast Media Identity.

Hand RJ (2014) *Listen in Terror: British Horror Radio from the Advent of Broadcasting to the Digital Age.* Manchester University Press: Manchester.

Hand RJ (2006) *Terror on the Air! Horror Radio in America, 1931 - 1952.* McFarland: Jefferson, North Carolina and London.

Hand RJ and Traynor M (2011) *The Radio Drama Handbook.* Continuum: London and New York.

Hannan M (2009) Sound and music in Hammer's vampire films. In: Hayward P (ed). *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound, and Horror Cinema.* Equinox: London, pp 60–74.

LeDoux J (1998) *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life.* Wiedenfeld & Nicolson: London.

Levy S (2006) *The Perfect Thing: How the iPod Became the Defining Object of the 21st Century.* Ebury Press: London.

Locke C (2016) Fiction Podcasts are Finally a Thing! Thank You Sci-fi and Horror. Wired online publication 24 October 2016, available at: https://www.wired.com/2016/08/found-footage-fiction-podcasts/, accessed December 2016.

Locker M (2016) David Schwimmer: 'I Would Make an Excellent Sociopath'. The Guardian online publication 22 November 2016, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/22/homecoming-podcast-david-schwimmer-oscar-isaac, accessed December 2016.

Lombardo M (2008) Is the podcast a public sphere institution?. In: Wittkower DE (ed). *iPod and Philosophy: iCon of an ePoch.* Carus Publishing: Chicago, IL, pp 215–228.

Magee S and Fisher H (2014) Talking to ourselves: A content analysis of NPR's use of journalists as sources. *The Journal of Radio and Audio Media*; 21 (1): 51–65.

Morris T (2016) The Journey to Night Vale: the Foundations of SFF Podcast Fiction. Tor.com online publication 31 August 2016, available at: http://www.tor.com/2016/08/31/sff-fiction-podcasts-you-should-be-listening-to/, accessed December 2016.

O'Donoghue D (2016) Why Podcasts are the Hottest New Medium for Scary Stories. Cultured Vultures online publication 6 April 2016, available at: http://culturedvultures.com/podcasts-scary-stories/, accessed December 2016.

O'Donoghue D (2015) Inside the Insomnia-inducing World of Horror Podcasting. Wired online publication 20 February 2015, available at: https://www.wired.com/2015/02/geeks-guide-horror-podcasting/, accessed December 2016.

Pitt J (2006) Don't talk to me. In: Wittkower DE (ed). *iPod and Philosophy: iCon of an ePoch.* Carus Publishing: LaSalle, IL.

Reyes XA (2015) Reel evil: A critical reassessment of found footage horror. *Gothic Studies*; 17 (2): 122–136.

Rosenfeld L (2015) Podmasters: GE's New Podcast 'The Message' Blends Sci-fi with Sci-real. Tech Times online publication 2 October 2015, available at: http://www.techtimes.com/articles/90513/20151002/podmasters-ges-new-podcast-the-message-blends-sci-fi-with-sci-real.htm, accessed December 2016.

Saglia D (2014) Gothic theater, 1765-present. In: Byron G and Townshend D (eds). *The Gothic World.* Routledge: London, pp 354–365.

Sconce J (2000) *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television.* Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Sherman N (2007) The Drabblecast, 21 February 2007- [podcast]. Available at: www.drabblecast.org, accessed December 2016.

Sipos TM (2010) *Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear.* McFarland & Co: Jefferson, NC.

Street S (2011) The Sound of Fear [radio documentary]. Prod. J May. BBC Radio 4.

Sterne J (2003) *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound and Sound Reproduction.* Duke University Press: Durham and London.

The Navigator. (2016) The NoSleep Podcast and the Art of the Scary Story. The Navigator online publication 6 April 2016, available at: http://www.thenav.ca/2016/04/06/the-nosleep-podcast-and-the-art-of-the-scary-story/, accessed December 2016.

Van Elferen I (2014) Sonic gothic. In: Byron G and Townshend D (eds). *The Gothic World.* Routledge: London, pp 429–440.

Verma N (2012) *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama.* The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.

Welles O and Houseman J (1938) The War of the Worlds. *The Mercury Theater of the Air.* [online]. Available at: https://archive.org/details/OrsonWellesMrBruns, accessed December 2016.

Whittington W (2014) Horror sound design. In: Benshoff HM (ed). *A Companion to the Horror Film.* Wiley Blackwell: Oxford, pp 168–185.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed.

Additional information

Publisher's note: Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.