

TAKE US WITH YOU: DISCLOSING NEWSGATHERING IN INVESTIGATIVE PODCASTS

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

Audio excels at immersing the audience in a story by creating scenes in which natural sounds, reporter observations and interviews can be intertwined to replicate the feeling of being in a certain environment. Audio features, longform reporting and documentaries have been utilizing this type of scene building for years to make the audience feel as though the listener is standing next to a reporter in the field.

Investigative podcasts have capitalized on melding audio storytelling techniques, like scene building, with reporting and newsgathering transparency. This is done by building scenes that aim to immerse the audience in the reporting while simultaneously showing the audience how the team found facts and voices by disclosing the reporting and newsgathering process. This trend of disclosure is relatively easily achievable because reporting and newsgathering occur whether or not the process is included in the piece of investigative journalism.

During the reporting process the investigative team records audio for a few reasons. First and foremost is for the team to tell the story they are reporting. This tape is the audio version of what would be gathered during the reporting process no matter the medium. For example, this would include normal interviews with sources for the purpose of obtaining information.

The second reason audio is gathered is for transparency purposes. For example, this can be tape gathered in the field by reporters digging through files. Or observations of what a certain place looks like to help corroborate a source's experience. Or a scene of the reporters conducting an experiment to prove a claim presented during the reporting. This tape can manifest in a lot of different ways, but the overarching intent is to provide transparency to the audience.

The third reason to gather audio during the reporting process is to create an immersive listening experience. Scenes allow the audience to visualize events while characters help the audience track the story. Investigative podcasts have been using the reporting process as a way to build scenes to immerse the audience and create a more active storyline. Some podcasts have been utilizing the reporters as characters to maximize effect. For example, this audio can sound like reporters knocking on sources' doors. Or color narrating an event they are at. Or interacting with a source in the middle of an interview, showing the humanity, reactions and methods of thinking for both the reporter and the source, painting a more complex picture of the interview.

The interesting part of collecting tape is that the purpose of one piece of audio isn't mutually exclusive. One piece of audio can help with the storyline while providing additional transparency.

Once the audio is gathered, the journalists act as gatekeepers determining what audio and parts of the reporting and newsgathering process are included in the final podcast. They also use the gathered tape and combined it with storytelling techniques while producing to enhance the narrative arc and provide additional transparency.

Research

In order to understand the role of reporting and newsgathering within investigative podcasts, I listened to more than 20 investigative podcasts to hear what aspects of the newsgathering process were being disclosed to the audience and how the information was being conveyed. Then I spoke with eight journalists across seven investigative podcasts, a total of nine seasons, to learn about the storytelling techniques they used and the intention behind their decisions.

I found that journalists include the reporting and newsgathering process in investigative podcast to provide transparency and active, engaging storytelling. Journalists wanted to show the audience how they know what they know. Transparency can serve proof of reporting as well as a way for the audience to understand how the sausage is made. Since the journalists are operating in a creative, longform format, the reporting and newsgathering process can manifest in elements like active scenes, first person narratives from reporters included as characters, and even journalists conducting their own experiments on tape. These elements are often flushed out, compared to an audio feature running in a newscast. Transparency within that scenario will often be a quick citation like, [fact], according to [record] obtained by [news organization] from [source]. Within the podcast's elements, there are storytelling techniques like color commentary or explanations that provide additional transparency.

On a broad level, the transparent inclusion of the reporting and newsgathering process seemed to be intentional. But when it came down to specific storytelling techniques, transparency seemed to be an added bonus but not the main reason a certain piece of was included in the podcast. For example, a lot of podcasts use signposting or montages at the beginning of an episode to help the audience track where they are in the

story. While the inclusion of this element can increase transparency by clearly outlining what pieces of an argument will be addressed within an episode, transparency isn't the driving factor.

The analysis also found that there is a debate between journalists interviewed about how big of a role should the reporter play within the podcast. Traditional journalistic practices advise journalists to stay out of the story so the focus can be on the subject. But utilizing the reporter as the main character can also help the flow of the episode and give the audience stakes since they are often following the reporter over multiple hours of storytelling.

- ***Bear Brook*** is an investigative podcast produced by New Hampshire Public Radio. The show investigated a cold case. A barrel with two bodies were found in the 1980s next to Bear Brook State Park. For years, the police were hung up on identifying the Jane Does. Then another barrel was found years later with two more bodies. It wasn't fresh. It had been there in the woods, only 300 feet away, when the first barrel was found. Moon follows along as investigators and citizen sloughs begin to crack the case with new methods to identify both victims and suspects. Jason Moon is the reporter and host of *Bear Brook*.
- Season one of ***Bundyville*** looks into the Bundy's influence in the political landscape of the West, specifically the discussion of self-governance, federal oversight, and constitutional interpretation. Host and reporter Leah Sottile looks beyond the family to understand violent events inspired by the Bundy's ideology. Season two, ***Bundyville: The Remnant***, looks at the wider impact of movements

and attacks spurred by anti-government rhetoric. Peter Frick-Wright was one of the producers for both seasons of the show.

- ***Chapo: Kingpin on Trial*** dove into Chapo's upbringing, rise to power and influence within the drug trade - up through his trial. Keegan Hamilton was a reporter and host for the series produced for Vice News.
- ***In the Dark*** is an investigative podcast from APM Reports. Season one looked into the death of Jacob Wetterling. Season two investigated the case of Curtis Flowers, a man who had been tried six times for the murder of four people in Winona, Mississippi. Natalie Jablonski produced for both seasons.
- ***Last Seen*** told the story of the characters, events and investigation surrounding the Gardner Heist in Boston where millions of dollars' worth of priceless art was stolen and had yet to be recovered. Stephen Kurkjian was a consulting producer for the podcast. In the years following the heist, Kurkjian continued to report and investigate for the Boston Globe and for his book on the heist.
- ***The Pope's Long Con*** investigated Danny Ray Johnson, a Kentucky preacher and politician with a penchant for embellishing qualifications and spewing controversial perspectives from the pulpit. He also allegedly assaulted a minor. R.G. Dunlop reporter and produced the story.

- Jacob Ryan also reported and produced *The Pope's Long Con*.
- *White Lies* investigated what caused Reverend James Reeb's death in Selma, Alabama in 1965. Reeb, a white civil rights supporter, came to Selma during the civil rights movement. The podcast also addresses the south's ongoing reconciliation with the past. Chip Brantley reported and produced the show.

Why Podcasts?

Serial is widely credited as the show that put podcasts into the mainstream. It's viral success not only spurred audio storytelling within the medium but its entertainment and reporting blend created an opportunity in the podcasting market for other investigative reporters to package their work into podcasts and have an audience. *Serial's* viral success also seemed to set the storytelling style for investigative podcasts. As a *This American Life* spinoff, *Serial* combined investigative journalism and compelling storytelling into an episodic narrative that "the audience could engage with intellectually and emotionally," according to Richard Berry whose research looks at *Serial's* impact on podcasting.

"One story told over the course of a season of episodes really allows people to get into the story, feel connected to it," said Natalie Jablonski, *In the Dark* producer. "[The audience] wants to know what happens week after week. They seem to get really invested in the story and the people in the story."

Creating compelling narratives and disclosing how a reporter finds information isn't new, Chip Brantley, *White Lies* reporter, pointed out.

Nonfiction writers, like Robert Caro, have talked about their process within their stories, Brantley explained. Documentaries, both audio and video, have scenes showing the journalist following the story. Television news has reporters out in the field talking to sources or reporting live from a scene. Investigative podcasts take narrative cues and storytelling techniques about information disclosure from a variety of mediums.

But for Brantley, the ability to recreate a scene that captivates an audience is where podcasting as a medium excels.

“The ways in which the reporting process shows the thrust of the story [creates] really interesting narratives that work really well in audio,” Brantley said. “Especially if the stuff you are looking for is in secret basements, airplane hangars and people’s garages are stock full of stuff.”

Audio storytellers paint these visuals by combining narration, interviews, natural sounds, archive tape and sound design. And with the lax time restrictions allotted to longform audio storytelling in podcasting, journalists can form extensive, creative scenes. Following the action through scenes lets events unfold within the audio, according to Jablonski.

“I think the podcast is actually a really great format for investigative journalism because you do have more expansive amount of time to go on a journey with the reporter,” Jablonski said. “We have more time and space to show the process behind what we do and the process of finding stuff out.”

When *Bear Brook* reporter Jason Moon was told his feature would be turned into a podcast, he capitalized on the additional space by expanding his reporting and reaching out to sources that he wouldn’t have time to include if the story was being packaged to

run on the radio during a newscast. There are multiple ways to tell a story and the method of delivery tends to outline reporting boundaries. This doesn't mean Moon wasn't doing his due diligence when he began reporting. Instead, it acknowledges that there is a base level of reporting needed to accurately tell a story. Depending on the story's deadline or time restrictions, a reporter will meet the base level of reporting. But if the reporter has additional reporting time, resources and time for the piece, they can explore additional avenues by interviewing fringe sources or digging into additional data.

While podcasting can give reporters the time to reach out to additional sources, how does the medium impact a source's willingness to speak on the record? On one hand, the voice is identifiable - especially when combined with a name and description. The *Last Seen* team experienced difficulty asking sources previously cultivated for Stephen Kurkjian's reporting for the Boston Globe or his book, both print mediums, to come on the record. Especially since newspaper reporters do their work through whispers, Kurkjian explained.

It's "hush, hush hush, you know? And you test their account, try to confirm it with other people because they don't want to be on the record," he said. "But if you're going to play in this game, you're going to have to use that tactic of allowing people to be on background, and therefore not named."

Even though Kurkjian was a part of the *Last Seen* team, it was a big ask to go back to sources and request they tell their story again, this time on mic. Especially since the sources for this story "were not accustomed to speaking publicly" about their involvement in potentially shady dealings.

“It was tough to go back to them and say, "Listen, you did great for the book, but I'd like you to speak up." And I would say, probably a third of them would. Two thirds wouldn't... the lawyers all would. But not their clients.”

If the sources refuse to go on tape, the investigative reporters shouldn't disregard the source just because they won't be a useful voice. It is still the investigative journalists' responsibility to report the truth. As Kurkjian puts it, “voice is important - but not as important as getting to the bottom of things.”

There are a few ways investigative podcasts can deal with a source not wanting to appear on tape. One, the reporter can summarize the source's information in the narration, citing them to provide transparency. Two, if the source wants to speak on background the information can still be used. But anonymity creates an issue of transparency for the reporters. Three, the reporters can attempt to obtain and corroborate information given to them off the record with other sources, so the same facts are usable. If the information is corroborated, then you can potentially go back to the off the record source and see if they want to re-evaluate. The *White Lies* team did that with sources. Sources gave them information that helped shape their reporting, so they independently reported and confirmed information that they could take back to the source. One of their sources wanted to protect another person involved with the beating. The source only went on the record after the other person was no longer alive. But after he passed, they followed up and were able to persuade her and got her voice on tape, which was more compelling and transparent than having the reporters summarize the interview in the narration.

On the other hand, audio's lack of visuals can persuade sources to speak on record. Sources may feel more comfortable going on the record during an audio interview rather than a video interview. The lack of a visual component allows for a layer of privacy. Depending on the investigation, reporters may be dealing with apprehensive sources.

“The only reason that [Chapo's mom and sister] agreed to talk to us was because it wouldn't be on camera, said Keegan Hamilton, *Chapo: Kingpin on Trial*. “That it would be their voices and not their faces.”

Trading in video equipment for audio equipment allowed the Vice News team to be more “low-key” when reporting in places like Chapo's hometown. The team didn't hide equipment or attempt to sneak around.

“Anybody who was there and looking around could see what was going on,” Hamilton said. “Certainly, Chapo's family knew right away that we were in town and wanted to talk to them.”

Video forces a simple narrative. Simplicity helps the audience the plot and the characters, he explained. Despite the immersive quality of video, it is rather constrained to what the journalist can capture on camera. While podcasting “allows you to step back, add some context, and really tell the story in the same nuanced way as written content but in a way that it is a little more dynamic” for the audience.

For Hamilton, the dynamic storytelling comes from compelling scenes with reporters that allow a somewhat ‘playful’ or conversational tone with reporters that drops the fourth wall.

“It’s like ‘hey, we’re reporters. This is how we are doing our story. Come along with us. Sit shotgun with us as we go out into the mountains to Chapo’s hometown. Or go to Juarez and go to the morgue.’ You want people to feel like they’re there with you,” he added.

Access to sources is extremely important during the reporting and newsgathering process. Besides information and interview gathering, audio access helps journalists obtain tape for transparency and tape for storytelling. Audio storytelling can both help and hurt the journalists’ access, which in turn impacts the tape gathered. When it comes down to it, podcasts’ strength as a compelling medium for investigative reporting stems from the ability to create immersive scenes, which provides transparency when the scenes include the reporting and newsgathering process.

Technique: Tape it All

Scene creation is a cornerstone of narrative storytelling within investigative podcasts. Scenes are how journalists immerse the audience into the story. The way to ensure you have enough tape to bring the audience into the moment is by taping other parts of the reporting process the journalists don’t have to rely on splicing together interviews and studio tracking.

“We recorded everything,” Ryan said. “We recorded us just driving around looking for people to talk to. We recorded ourselves before and after interviews. We recorded faxing stuff and we recorded printing things off. Just because you never know what you’re going to want to use in the end. We taped everything that we could possibly tape. And then we whittled it down to what you heard.”

Reporting trips are investments and can't always be repeated if it wasn't caught the first time. *Chapo: Kingpin on Trial* featured a lot of traveling. The audience heard reporters at the airport, arrive to locations, and testing levels prior to interviews and in between narration. The Vice News team deliberately captured the small moments, according to Hamilton.

"It's little touches like that," he said. But the podcast needs to strike a balance "because people want to feel like they're there, or make it feel immersive, but you don't want to bore people with the actual like process of reporting too much."

Those moments are captured by taping everything. That production philosophy also applies to things like reporters looking at documents for the first time. Genuine reactions are hard to recreate. Besides, recreating moments can get into ethical gray areas. So it's best to err on the side of rolling.

"You never know if there's something good in there... we want [the reporter] to just talk about it on tape," explained *Bundyville* producer Peter Frick-Wright. "And if it's not good, then we just don't have to use this tape. There's nothing lost."

Caliphate mastered this. Producer Andy Mills followed around reporter Rukmini Callimachi to capture her while reporting. She narrated what she was doing in the moment and there was dialogue between Callimachi and Mills when they discussed why she was doing what she was doing. As a result, *Caliphate* had a lot of active scenes and moments where the audience experienced a moment of reporting alongside Callimachi.

White Lies also used this trick. It took reporters Brantley and Beck Grace months to track down the fourth attacker. They ended up talking to him the week before he passed away. The attacker's passing was a crucial piece of information but also had

implications when it came to the question of justice. Brantley had gone down to Selma to follow up with sources while Beck Grace was in his office that day when Brantley contacted Beck Grace and said they needed to record themselves. The audience experienced Beck Grace's genuine reaction when he learned that the man they'd been tracking down, one of the only living people from the night of the attack, had passed away.

In the Dark also taped quite a bit of the reporting process. The audience heard as reporter Madeleine Baran walked the route the suspect, Curtis Flowers, would have taken as he walked to Tardy Furniture, where the murders took place. They listened as she was waiting to speak to DA Doug Evans. They heard Baran knock on doors of potential sources. Tape of the process adds "storytelling and drama," according to Jablonski.

"We do want to show our process. I think people, our listeners respond to that well," she said. "We want them to know that we've put a ton of work into this finding and like you could trust us because here's tape of us in this factory, digging through documents."

Jablonski added the tape also proves that *In the Dark*'s reporting is thorough and that the team "goes to great lengths to find stuff out," which is something their audience likes knowing.

Tape for Transparency

Recording the newsgathering process can serve as a record of the investigation's reporting process. This can be helpful to reporters when trying to fact check. It can also help prove that they did try to reach out to a source, in case there was a complaint or a

legal challenge. But it can also be used for transparency within the final product. By including this tape in the podcast, the team is giving the audience proof of the reporting.

“Any type of proof... especially in the world that we live in where everybody thinks that any type of news story that holds someone accountable is fake... is incredibly important,” Ryan said.

Reporting conveys what information was obtained and to a certain extent who or what it was obtained from. But transparency of the reporting and newsgathering process allows the audience to understand how the reporters obtained information, when they obtained information and why they obtained information from certain sources.

For Moon, transparency surrounding the reporting and newsgathering process can act as “virtue signaling that we did our due diligence” and can “show the public how journalism works.”

Transparency upfront preempts potential questions about how a reporter knows something is factual or where a reporter obtained a piece of information.

“We try to answer those questions before we ever put it on the air or went on our website with stories, to make sure that we told our listeners or readers how we knew what we knew,” Dunlop said.

To Hamilton, listeners are “savvy” and understand that published journalism traditionally is a “polished” product. But, he said, the audience wants “the ability to understand how the sausage is getting made.” Which is a decent point in a time where public trust in media isn’t high. Perhaps the public will trust a report if the reporters allow the audience to understand the reporting process.

While it isn't a storytelling technique, another way to deliberately provide transparency is by releasing information that couldn't fit into the podcast. Investigative podcasts are often produced in tandem with news organizations that have an online platform.

For example, *The Pope's Long Con* set up a website to publish a written story along with pictures, evidence mentioned in the podcast and other documents used in the investigation. The audience could dig through documentation themselves if they wanted to verify a piece of information. Plus, documents act as proof of reporting and backup statements.

"All the documents [on the website] are strictly for transparency's sake," Ryan said. "We want to be able to prove everything and have the receipt. Some of those receipts come through in sound waves."

Last Seen released Kurkjian's reporter's notebook on its website in part due to the fact that the case was still open and the podcast's aim was to lay out what happened during the heist, the state of the investigation and theories both current and debunked - instead of trying to solve the crime. The podcast couldn't thoroughly cover all of the theories, even theories that were covered in Kurkjian's book, so his reporter's notebook was published as a way to provide the audience with a way to obtain that information.

Whether it be providing additional information during the podcast or on an additional platform, transparency helps the audience understand the story and the newsgathering and reporting process.

Tape for Narrative Storytelling

Narrative storytelling is the other main motivation for taping the reporting and newsgathering process. Ira Glass pointed to the unfolding of events, chronologically, as a way to hook people into a narrative, in the book, *On The Wire*. By telling a narrative story event by event, the audience can easily follow what happened – implicitly providing more transparency of how an event happened than a brief summary. Essentially, the audience gets a granular understanding of how events went down while helping to increase tension.

“If you know that I called 30 wrong numbers and knocked on 10 wrong doors, by the time you finally hear this person's voice, you're sort of yearning to hear it,” Moon said.

Frick-Wright approaches narrative storytelling as if the story was an audio screenplay. When he is piecing together the story, he's looking to add narrative tension and figure out the drama happening within the series, during individual episodes, and down to singular scenes.

“You have your opener, and then you have your first complicating action,” Frick-Wright explained. The audience should be able to “visualize all these things as much as possible... your story will be stronger the more [the audience] can visualize what's happening.”

The way this is accomplished, according to Frick-Wright, is through active tape.

“If you listen to something like *Caliphate* which is 90% active tape, or off the cuff conversations, that one is so compelling because it's all happening there, you're hearing these things, you're with them in the process, you've just got scene after scene after scene of active tape. And it's beautiful. It's an excellent, excellent podcast,” he said.

Active tape can be collected by following a reporter around gathering natural sound of them interacting with sources or the environment. Or it can be recorded by having the reporter and producer narrate what they are doing in the moment. The effect of this technique can sound like observation or color commentary.

For example, the *Last Seen* team was down in Florida following a lead on the location of the missing art pieces. They ended up having to sneak around because, though this was their lead, they passed the information to the proper law enforcement channels and then proceeded to get shut off from communication. The reporters staked out at the neighbor's house across from the lot where the FBI was digging. The reporters narrated where they were and what they could see going on in the lot. The color narration helped to heighten the tension of the moment. Instead of just telling the audience that they tracked down a lead but it turned up empty, the audience was waiting with baited breath as the excavator uncovered the septic tank instead of the missing art.

To summarize, collecting tape during the reporting process is beneficial when attempting to show your work and narrate the story. The purposes of the scenes aren't mutually exclusive. The same active tape can create tension, raising the stakes of an interview, while providing the audience with enough information for them to feel as though they are embedded with the reporter.

Technique: Making the Reporter a Character

Collecting tape to create scenes often requires a character to tether the audience within the moment. This can either be the source or the reporter. Traditionally, journalists refrain from becoming a character in the story because the story they are telling isn't

about them. However, some investigative podcasts combine the events of the story being covered with the journalists' reporting journey. It's in those podcasts where the journalists end up becoming characters.

Caliphate is good example of journalists becoming characters within the story. Callimachi's reporting is integral to the whole narrative since she is currently creating the story. She is investigating who the members of ISIS are, how ISIS operates and the motivation behind the organization. Episodic and longform reporting exists surrounding the group's creation and attacks they carry out. But investigating ISIS isn't the same as investigating a murder or a theft where one definitive account of what happened can be pieced together based on research and reporting. Instead of hooking onto one source or one event, Callimachi is the main character guiding the audience through the story.

Since she is the main character, quite a bit of the active scenes feature her reporting and newsgathering. The producer, Andy Mills, is helping to create active scenes and dialogue by talking to her during parts of the reporting process where there normally wouldn't be dialogue. These scenes serve multiple purposes within the story. One, they are active scenes that allow the audience to feel as though they are in the room, similar to Mills, observing Callimachi's reporting process. Two, that window into her process provides transparency for the audience. Three, the combination of those two purposes creates a captivating narrative. The inclusion of the scenes causes the audience to get to know Callimachi on a more personal level, as the audience would with a main character, instead of the reporter being largely faceless. As the audience becomes familiar with Callimachi, they begin to have a vested interest in her as a character in the narrative. Once the audience has buy in or a reason to care about the character and/or the subject

matter, then it seems as though the podcast can be a little bit more creative with the narrative arc.

Furthermore, journalists can also help the audience contextualize events within the story through the main character's reactions and interactions. For example, near the beginning of the podcast Mills asks Callimachi if she is scared as they are waiting for a former ISIS member to show up for an interview. She cuts the mic in the moment but retells the story during a sit-down with Mills. The story centered around how she dealt with the potential danger of investigating ISIS while contextualizing the gravity of her beat. She called 911 in a panic after someone knocked on her door after a credible threat was made on her life by ISIS. And though the FBI informed her local law enforcement agency, the 911 operator didn't believe her. It turned out to be a city worker knocking on her door to deliver a message. But in the moment, she didn't know that and the potential of danger was very real to her. The anecdote was impactful not only because of the drama, but it also orientated the audience to her perspective and the way she acts in certain situations. That character knowledge base can be tapped into throughout the podcast to quickly spark tension if she deviates from the audience-understood norms.

“There's something to be said for listeners connecting with the host and the voice that they're hearing most, but usually that person is just not as intriguing as the story that they're trying to tell,” according to Hamilton.

Chapo: Kingpin on Trial had a similar narrative style to *Caliphate* where the plot moved along through active tape. Interviews, narration, and explanation were frequently combined with the active scenes. The closest thing the *Chapo: Kingpin on Trial* got to a reporter as a main character was fixer, Miguel Angel Vega. Vega was supposed to be in

the podcast as a source and in the active scenes during the reporting trips. But Hamilton said Vega's voice ended up being throughout the whole show in a way that almost rivaled a host's position to "tell the story the way that it needed to be told - from two sides of the border." Hamilton and producer Kate Osborn were very present within the podcast's active scenes since the scenes comprised of their on-the-ground reporting. Similar to reporters stepping into a main character role, they provided observations, color narration during their travels and even directly disclosed their reporting plan to the audience.

Yet, they weren't the central characters in the story. The audience didn't learn much about their personalities or how they react in certain situations. There was an introduction at the beginning outlining Hamilton's reporting background as a way to qualify him as a trusted source who knows what he is talking about based on years of reporting. As a bonus, building up the reporter's character can establish trust with the audience, which is something that can be transferred from season to season, even if the topics change.

Moon agreed. "If you're going to spend this much time with the narrator, you need to know, 'why them?' Who is this person and why are they the ones that are telling the story?"

Besides providing the audience with qualifications and a description, Moon suggests having the reporter address their view of the story before they started reporting.

For example, this can sound like: 'Before I started working on the story, I thought [topic] was all just [assumption]. But then I learned [information].' This signals to the audience that the reporter set aside any initial bias and learned while reporting. By signaling the reporter's change of opinion, the audience's interest may spike because of

the potential for surprising information or information that may change their assumptions. Besides, Moon said, the description helps to ground the reporter in detail.

But an introduction isn't the same as getting to know Hamilton or Moon as a character. They chose to make this distinction, Hamilton said, because including the reporter's feelings in the moment or how the reporter got to a particular story can distract from the story they are trying to tell.

In the Dark and *White Lies* struck a balance between having a majority of active scenes featuring the reporter and keeping the reporter predominantly out of the narrative except when necessary.

"We want to show our process, but we also don't want it to kind of dominate the story," Jablonski said. "We do want to be restrained because the story is fundamentally not about us."

White Lies included Brantley's and fellow reporter Andrew Beck Grace's backgrounds in the narrative because their perspectives influenced the reporting. Brantley said they needed to fill the audience in on the fact that they were two white men from the south reporting on a civil rights story. Their upbringings informed the "strategy of silence" they encountered while reporting. Though they grew up with the story of the civil rights movement and "strategy of silence, [which] is still a part of Southern culture," they weren't from Selma nor were they personally attached to anyone involved in the crime. All of which is important to disclose. Especially since their race may have potentially been a factor when sourcing. In the podcast, a fellow Southern, white male investigative journalist got KKK members and white supremacist to talk to him and give

him information, despite his work, because he wasn't seen as a threat. The color of his skin created potential access to men that would be unreachable if he wasn't white.

Not addressing their demographics and perspectives was out of the question. But since they had to address the elephant in the room, they also ended up using the reporters as characters when trying to balance the podcast's tone.

"It is a heavy story and we didn't want it to feel heavy all the time," Brantley said. "One way to mitigate that heaviness or at least operate in a different register, going back to the album idea, was to include these moments when we are just being ourselves over the course of reporting."

Dunlop also "wasn't too keen on injecting" themselves into the storyline and their narrative style, in turn, focused more on creating scenes with interview, narration and archive tapes instead of following the reporters around. Appearances by Ryan or Dunlop were "kept to a minimum" and only used when its "really important to the narrative as a whole" because the story wasn't about them. And inclusion in the story can "deflect attention from what the story is really about," he said.

Ryan agreed. "We weren't the story. We wanted to take people on a story, not be part of it."

In the end, it wasn't up to *The Pope's Long Con* team whether or not the journalists appeared in the story. The subject of the feature refused to talk to them, so they included scenes where the reporters tried in person to talk with him. Unfortunately, the journalists became part of the real-life story and played a larger role in an update episode because the subject of their investigation ended up taking his own life.

“Reporters better get it right because if we had gotten it wrong in this case...if people had been able to show ‘hey, you misrepresented this, this was false, this was misleading, it would have been a disaster,” Dunlop said. “As it turned out, really nobody laid a glove on us in terms of our reporting and the accuracy of it... The issue was he's dead. We're all sorry he's dead, but we're not responsible.”

Despite the size of the narrative role the journalists plays in the podcast, they will still be linked to the story by nature of reporting. Because of this, the onus is on the journalists to make sure the reporting is thorough, fair and accurate.

There have been a few podcasts that live in the ethical in-between when it comes to the reporter's role within the podcast and the intention of the podcast. *Missing Richard Simmons* and *S-Town* were both spurred by a personal connection between the reporter and the subject of the story. In terms of news judgment, one was dealing with a public figure while the other was a private citizen. However, there was the slight hang up of the subjects of the podcasts not wanting there to be a podcast about their lives. Nevertheless, both podcasts focused heavily on the personal connection while the reporter served as the main character and guide throughout the investigation. *Up and Vanished* also lives in an ethical gray area. Not only did the host tell the audience he was looking into the cold case because he wanted to create a show like *Serial* but he also was releasing episodes as he was reporting. It was a live investigation where he published theories and interviews that he was still in the process of corroborating, which is dangerous for the host and the subjects of the investigation.

Transitioning from Reporting to Production

Outlining the story can occur during reporting to determine where the story's holes are and inform the continued reporting. Often teams will sit down together to review the reporting and begin making decisions about the structure of the story. The *Last Seen* team sat down at least once a month, Kurkjian said, to track progress and potential content landing in each episode. But once most of the reporting is complete, the teams will move on to storyboarding.

“We scripted out what we thought was the story and then whatever fit in there, fit in there,” Ryan said. “There's a lot of editing, a lot of cutting out certain bits and redoing certain bits.”

A lot of hours are spent writing, editing and piecing together the narrative. For Frick-Wright, a successful investigative podcast comes down to storytelling.

“If you do an investigation, you have something really interesting,” Frick-Wright explained. “But if you tell the story poorly, people almost hold it against you... it's almost worse to tell a story badly than to not tell it at all.”

What helps the writing and editing process is knowing where the story ends, Jablonski said, before putting together the first episode. This can be a failsafe to ensure the team's understanding of the story doesn't change in an impactful way causing surprise during publishing.

“We do a lot of story-boarding and outlining before we start actually putting the episodes together,” she said. “One of the tricky things about doing this sort of serialized narrative podcast is that, if you change something in episode one, like you decide to add a scene or like subtract it, it might have a ripple effect down the line in your structure.”

Brantley and Beck Grace were told to approach the structure of the podcast as if they were making an album. The episodic narrative needs to be cohesive but individual episodes can “operate differently than others. They don’t need to follow the same pattern and registers of sequencing...as long as they are strung together with enough of a through-line,” according to Brantley.

Story structure is where journalists can act as gatekeepers. It’s the journalist’s responsibility to tell an accurate story. But how that story is told is up to their discretion and editorial judgment. This means the journalists decide which voices the audience will hear, what to cover in narration, which parts of the story merit an in-depth explanation.

“It’s important to have the reporting drive the story...the narrative versus including a bunch of tape or scenes that don’t go anywhere,” Jablonski said. “It all needs to be in service of the reporting and findings.”

In terms of figuring out a story structure that balances the investigation’s journey and the finding, there are a few different approaches and techniques the interviewed journalists pointed towards. One type of podcast, like *Believed*, *The City*, *Midnight Oil and Chapo: Kingpin on Trial*, *ect.*, “reverse engineer” the story. They started out with an event or a person whose story was somewhat known and then shaped the reporting around the known narrative.

“A lot of these podcasts are built where someone basically knows what the story is going to be, what everyone’s going to say before they got the skills to be interviewed,” Hamilton said.

Quite a few podcasts follow this structure to some extent because investigative podcasts tend to be a more comprehensive retelling of a story. Often some, or all, of the

story is already known. Through research and media archives, the journalists can get a grasp on the key moments or figures in the story. Then, through reporting and newsgathering, they go deeper into the story, find additional voices and advance the plot. This is why the investigative process is often intertwined with a narrative retelling of the original story. Furthermore, this type of podcast seemingly relies more on chronological storytelling within the structure.

While other podcasts, like *Caliphate* and *Bundyville*, structure a podcast by trying to answer open ended questions. Each episode focuses on “trying to understand a facet of that overall thing,” Frick-Wright said. It often follows the journalist’s investigation more than the original story’s timeline. Because of this, scenes with reporting or newsgathering are used to move the plot forward and the background, explanation and archival media is used during the narration.

“Getting access to information is both what we would like to do to tell the story and also an interesting process,” Frick-Wright explained. “And interesting processes are narratives.”

Reporters and producers working on this type of investigative podcast rarely know absolutely everything about the story they are covering due to a limitation of access and information, he continued. Filling in those information gaps with voices often comes down to a matter of access. If voices aren’t available, then the host’s narrative tracking will fill in important information.

“Every complication has to have a resolution,” Frick-Wright said. “The overall complication of the series is one thing and then, sort of like chapters in a book, each

episode kind of has its own complication and its own resolution. And ideally those things fit within each other.”

Frick-Wright thinks about the structure like this: “If you say, ‘Okay, the Bundy’s, what’s the deal?’ The deal is multifaceted and interesting because it’s been evolving for decades, and so then you just that, “Okay the relationship with the federal government, let’s look at that and sort of find a complication and resolution within that.” And then taking each one of those facets and finding a way to both ask and answer a question within an episode and move onto the next question by the end of the episode is kind of the narrative structure that we were working with for the series.”

Then there are podcasts, like *In the Dark*, *Last Seen* or *White Lies*, that are focused around one event or issue but are structured to address different theories or to breakdown certain arguments per episode. These targeted breakdowns are structured in a way that still follows the overarching original storyline as well as the investigation by law enforcement agencies and the investigation by journalists. This structure often requires quite a bit of signposting and recaps to help the audience track what they already know and the characters they will have to focus on during the episode.

Signposting is widely used in public radio. Similar to a road sign, it indicates what’s ahead. When applied to storytelling, signposting signals to the audience where the episode, or the larger storyline, is going. It’s a hint as to what is coming ahead. Episodes are often split into acts with the climactic action often coming at the end of the second, beginning of the third act. The issue is the audience has to continue listening to the episode to get to that part. A quick signpost at the end of the first act can tease the climactic action while laying out a path for the audience to follow throughout the episode.

The cliché example is [shocking information]. ‘But before we get to that, we need to [understand how] and [why].’

One issue that both *In the Dark* and *White Lies* ended up dealing with during reporting, which they utilized in their narrative, was the issue of counternarratives. Conflicting accounts of events forced the journalists to get to the bottom of what happened. But it also provided an argument that they needed to debunk through their reporting. The counternarrative in *White Lies* helped to explain why the case remained largely unsolved decades later. It’s partially how silence allowed the attackers to escape justice even though realistically; the attackers should have been convicted.

“I got really interested in dueling narratives and why some people choose to believe the counternarrative that Rev. Reeb got killed on the way to Birmingham and really felt like the only way to dispel it was to hold it up and fact check,” Brantley said.

Though the *White Lies* team did debate how much credence they should allocate for the counternarrative because they don’t want to validate something that is clearly false. The way to walk that line, for Brantley, was to fact check everything and let people who are “espousing what seem like counternarratives...tell you what they think happened so you can understand why they think the way they think.”

This technique for understanding and addressing counternarratives can also be included in the reporting and newsgathering within the final product to explain this alternate perspective to the audience while the podcast’s narrative is working to debunk the counternarrative.

Storytelling Techniques

There are quite a few storytelling techniques that the podcasts have employed to create compelling narratives while highlighting the reporting and newsgathering process. The first technique was already touched on in the part of the analysis talking about the reasons the reporting and newsgathering process needs to be captured on tape. Scene building is integral to capturing the audience's attention, dynamically moving along the plot, and helping the audience understand how the journalists know what they know.

“Those types of scenes allow us to show our work, the process, and the work that goes into some of these findings,” Jablonski explained. “If we just come out and tell you we found this document that says X, Y, Z, that can go by fast, and often be a little dry.”

Example: Scene from *Caliphate*. Appendix p. 102

Whereas scenes allow the journalists bring the audience along while reporting and brings the reporting process to life. Since the reporting process can take a long time and interviews aren't always set up within active scenes, Moon valued bringing the audience along to developments or events in the storyline. Creating scenes around the more recent events in the reporting process give the audience a sense of development.

“You can sort of be brought into that moment and sort of feel the story unfold like the same way we were, Moon said, “which seemed like a cool thing to try to do.”

Besides building scenes out of following reporters, investigative podcasts also look to animate the document gathering and research processes.

“Scanning documents on its own is not necessarily inherently interesting,” Jablonski said. “But when you talk about all the different places, we had to go to find the

documents and like all the weird situations we got it to find these documents, that kind of thing. It helps bring some drama and story into that aspect of it.”

Example: Scene from *Caliphate*. Appendix p.106

As mentioned before, color commentary and observations are a great way to help recreate these reporting scenes. Color commentary usually happens when the journalist is in the field speaking either directly to the audience or speaking to a colleague for the benefit of the audience. It is especially useful when trying to create that chronological unfolding of what happened when. Think of it as a play-by-play of sorts. Whereas observations are useful within the narration that is tracked later in a studio. They often sound like reflections and can fill in context needed to visualize a certain source, atmosphere or environment.

Example: Scene from *Last Seen*. Appendix p.107

Example: Scene from *Caliphate*. Appendix p. 112

Another storytelling technique is to include interactions with the reporter and source within an interview. This can be a follow up question asked within the tape or a humanizing back and forth between the two. These interactions can be pertinent to the context of the interview but don't have to be. Instead, these moments can provide levity and a break for the audience to process information.

Occasionally podcasts will conduct their own experiments as a way to gather evidence or negate an argument. For example, *In the Dark* was trying to figure out if District Attorney Doug Evans really had a pattern of striking people of color from juries after hearing anecdotal evidence from sources. The team then gathered and analyzed Evans' record and could show that Evans had a pattern of striking people of color from

juries. When the team combined this evidence with information about the jurors, he struck compared with the jurors he kept, they presented a strong argument that Curtis Flowers wasn't granted his constitutional right to be tried against jury of peers - which the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with. Another example of this experimentation on tape was *Atlanta Monster's* attempt to figure out if a body of a certain height and weight really could have been thrown from a bridge into the river below without people on either side of the bridge hearing. The reporter ended up testing this claim by creating a makeshift body of similar weight and proportions, shutting down the bridge to throw this test body into the water and have people standing where the police were stationed that night to figure out if they would have been able to hear a splash.

Example: Scene from *In the Dark*. Appendix p.114

Explanations or asides can be really helpful when the journalists need to quickly fill the audience in on information. Often times this will be a brief history of how something got to where it is today or what the cultural impact of something. It's a way to take a step back and fill the audience in before moving on. *Chapo: Kingpin on Trial* had to navigate a lot background information while trying to intertwine Chapo's story with the current investigation. In terms of structure, they started off with strong, immersive scenes to signal to the audience that they were going to go on a journey with the reporters.

"But then we also had to step back and be like, "All right, what do people know about El Chapo?," Hamilton explained. The team assumed a baseline knowledge and then worked to fill in the gaps "in a way that fits the narrative arc and will allow listeners to

understand what's going on...before they're too lost and tuning out because they don't really understand who Chapo is and why [they] care about this guy.”

Or the explanations or asides can be used to fill the audience in on what the reporters are thinking during a certain moment in time. It's almost as if the reporters are justifying their actions directly to the audience.

Example: Scene from *White Lies*. Appendix p.116

Investigative podcasts will supplement explanatory sections of the narrative with archival tape. This is done for a few reasons. One, it provides variety in a section that may border on sounding like a monologue. Two, archival tape can help recreate what something felt like in a certain time or place. Three, archival tape is often news clips formatted in a montage. This can be a form of proof for a claim or argument that the podcast is making. Outside, trustworthy sources reinforce the explanation's accuracy.

Example: Scene from *Bear Brook*. Appendix p. 117

There are also a few storytelling techniques used predominantly during the production stages that help the audience track plot points, characters and findings.

Signposts tend to be placed at the beginning of an episode or after a cold-open before the meat of the episode's plot begins. It's also usually very straight forward: 'This episode is about [topic]. So far, we know [evidence], [evidence], and [evidence]. Last time we heard about [character's] involvement, which led to [outcome]. Today we are going to talk about [theory].' By giving the audience a map of the episode, the episode can be more creative in its structure.

Example: Scene from *In the Dark*. Appendix p.118

It's just sort of explicitly saying: it might not make sense, but trust us that it's going to go somewhere," Moon said.

Signposting essentially mitigates the audience's potential confusion and allow the episode to start from a beginning that seems unrelated but will eventually lead back to the original plot, Moon explained. This signaling of a slight deviation from the current narrative might sound like: 'Before we get to [plot point], we need to talk about [issue]. Moon also warned against using apologetic language when signposting, especially if the signpost is for an explanatory section, because it cheapens the section and dissuades the audience from finding value in what they are about to hear. When in reality, the explanatory section is often an essential part of the narrative.

Another way producers help the audience track where they are within the plot is to provide recaps and teasers. Similar to some forms of signposting, recaps can help catch the audience up with what they need to know to properly comprehend the episode they are about to listen to. There is a trend in investigative podcasts to create a "waterfall" of voices from the previous episodes. The waterfall hooks the audience back in since often the most shocking moments are included in the voices. Whereas the function of the teasers is to hook the audience into listening to the next episode. It signals that there is information or a part of the story that you don't know - but need to. It usually sounds like: "Next time on..."

"Everyone has stolen from Serial," according to Brantley. But creating a teaser "forces you to think about the momentum at the end of each episode carrying forward. So you are giving a listener [a hook], even if it isn't fundamental to the ultimate outcome of the story."

Sound design is also used strategically within investigative podcasts, which is a departure from traditional radio storytelling. Sound design is separate from mixing natural or ambient sounds within a scene. Instead, sound design is often the strategic addition of music used to set the show's tone.

“There's actually a whole musical vocabulary in [Bundyville], Frick-Wright explained. “Riffs and notes of things that happen and certain characters have certain sounds associated with them. It's subtle, we'd probably be doing our job wrong if anybody noticed.”

It serves to further immerse the audience within a scene, help with the atmospheric delivery of information and pull people along the plot. It can also help with the pacing of the narrative.

Conclusion

Investigative reporting podcasts are held to journalistic standards of accuracy, fairness and handling of truth when created by a journalist or a news organization. In some ways, it's even more important for journalists to approach a story with care since investigative podcasts are often comprehensive and have the ability to set the narrative surrounding a particular topic, especially if the podcast conducted a lot of new reporting. With that power comes the responsibility of the journalists to prove how they know what they know. Essentially providing proof of their reporting process.

This proof comes in a variety of forms within the podcast. On a basic level, the journalists will cite sources of facts to disclose where they obtained the information they are relaying. But journalists have begun intentionally incorporating the reporting and

newsgathering process into investigative podcasts to provide transparency. The audience doesn't have to wonder how the reporter found a source if they heard the reporter make calls, talk to a source who referred the reporter to another source who, in turn, who provided information in an interview. This is done intentionally on a broad level and in the newsgathering phase of reporting. Journalists tape themselves during the reporting process and sometimes creatively think about audiofying parts of the newsgathering process that isn't typically sound rich.

However, once they get into the producing phases, the story isn't built with the sole intention of transparency. Instead, the journalists focus on getting the story right. Then certain elements can be added to create active scenes or show the audience how the journalist know a certain fact.

One of the more widely used techniques within investigative podcasts is making the reporter a main character in the story. Not only does this provide the audience a guide through the plot, an additional level of transparency is provided to the audience by creating a step-by-step narrative of the journalist's reporting process. There is debate among journalists about how much this technique should be used. Some journalists feel that the inclusion of the reporter as a character pulls the audience's focus to the reporter, not the subjects.

By utilizing storytelling techniques during the reporting and production stages, the reporting and newsgathering process will end up helping the narrative by creating active scenes that allow the audience to feel as though they are investigating alongside the reporter, which serves to engage the audience while providing transparency.