

Confessional journalism and podcasting

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Abstract

Broadcast reporters are trained to report on a story and not express opinions. Staying impartial is fundamental to their role and forms part of the UK broadcasting regulator Ofcom's code, but what happens when the reporter is the story? In 2017, I was diagnosed with an extremely rare form of abdominal cancer. Medical literature quotes just 153 recorded cases of cystic peritoneal mesothelioma in the world. Apart from a few tentative tweets to see if I could find any other people with the same cancer, I didn't tell my story. This is in complete contrast to my fellow news presenter on BBC Radio 5live, Rachael Bland - when diagnosed with breast cancer, she told her story. She blogged, tweeted and posted on Instagram as well as presenting an award-winning podcast. She wanted to report on her cancer to help as many people as possible know the facts. Sadly, Rachael died in September 2018. In the many tributes following her death, many said she had changed the conversation around cancer, normalising the talk about the disease.

With the rise of the podcast, there is a new type of confessional journalism. Broadcasters are expressing their opinions and telling previously untold stories in a new

way. Newspaper columnists have done this for years but for impartial broadcasters, trained not to express opinions when reporting on a story, a fundamental change is taking place as they start to tell their own stories adapting to a new storytelling genre. Using Rachael Bland and others as case studies, this paper focuses on podcasts and their potential for opening up new, more intimate and subjective spaces in contemporary broadcasting, challenging the accepted rules of objectivity and impartiality and telling those untold personal stories to new audiences.

Introduction

Confessional journalism allows journalists to share deeply personal stories about themselves. Rosalind Coward (2010, p.224) describes it as “autobiographical writing exposing intimate personal details [which is] part of [a] rapidly growing cultural trend towards the inclusion of “real life” stories in the media and linked to exposure of ever more intimate personal details.”

Most often the domain of newspaper columnists, increasingly, broadcast journalists are reporting on themselves in a way not seen before. Broadcast reporters are trained to report on a story and not express opinions. Staying impartial is fundamental to their role and forms part of the Ofcom code “News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.” (Ofcom, 2017)

With the rise of the podcast, there is a new type of confessional journalism emerging as broadcasters are expressing their opinions and telling previously untold stories in a different way. Original, more intimate and subjective spaces are opening up in contemporary broadcasting, challenging the accepted rules of objectivity and impartiality and telling those untold personal stories to new audiences.

This paper will examine the phenomenon of confessional journalism and the growth of podcasting. Using one British journalist and her podcast as a case study, it will explore the increase in popularity of this new form of media and the potential for broadcast journalists to express themselves in ways they were previously unable to because of Ofcom regulation of radio and television broadcasts. It will also look at the change in audience behaviour and the interaction they have with a podcast host through social media, contrasting it with the traditional way an audience would interact with a programme broadcast on television or the radio. It concludes by examining the ethics of confessional journalism and asks whether broadcast journalists are “crossing a line” when they podcast about personal experiences.

Methodology

Interpreting the storytelling nature of certain podcasts whilst drawing on my own experiences demands an autoethnographic approach. By describing and analysing my personal experience as both a BBC news broadcaster and podcast guest, I am able to evaluate the narrative nature of certain podcasts. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, Section 1, para. 3) describe autoethnography as “one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than

hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist". Thus, the research method is qualitative rather than quantitative and allows for reflection. As Mendez (2013, Section 3, para.2) says "autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture."

Several interviews were conducted with podcasters and a commissioning editor as original research, these were then analysed and evaluated to understand both the confessional nature of those podcasts and their audience impact.

Discussion

Many newspaper columnists write about themselves but with confessional journalism, marriage break ups, eating disorders, health issues, bereavement, family problems are in the spotlight. Zelizer and Allen (2010, p.23) say they often share "emotional responses to the trials and tribulations of everyday, usually middle-class life" and are "thought to help draw attention to underreported topics, such as issues concerning self-esteem, raising children, eating disorders, sexual relationships and financial problems." Liz Jones writes about her life in the Daily Mail, according to Gold (2009) "there are many confessional journalists in Britain, but none as forensic or as self-critical as Jones." Topics she covers have included her anorexia and marriage break up. The Times columnist Melanie Reid broke her neck and back whilst horse riding and is now a tetraplegic, her weekly column "Spinal Column" is about disability and her life as a disabled person. Rosalind Coward herself became interested in this area of journalism after writing a column in the Saturday *Guardian's* Family section. Her "Looking After Mother" column, which was about the problems faced by those caring for people with dementia, was published between 2005 and 2008.

I became interested in this area of journalism following my diagnosis of cancer in 2017. My type of cancer, cystic peritoneal mesothelioma is extremely rare; medical literature always quotes just 153 cases in the world. The treatment was extremely gruelling as I underwent surgery to remove several organs before I was washed out with chemotherapy heated to 42 degrees Celsius. By any standards, this is a news story, it's so rare and yet I felt, initially, that I couldn't tell my story.

A cancer diagnosis hasn't stopped other journalists. John Diamond wrote a column in the Saturday edition of The Times newspaper about his experience with throat cancer between 1997 and 2001. He was awarded Columnist of the Year at the "What the Papers Say" Awards in 1997 and featured in a BBC documentary called "Tongue Tied" which followed his treatment through surgeries and radiotherapy. He subsequently published an autobiography called "C: Because Cowards get Cancer Too" in 1998 before dying in March 2001. Ruth Picardie wrote five columns for the Observer's magazine "Life" about living with breast cancer. It culminated in a book "Before I say Goodbye" published posthumously after her death in 1997 which was culled from her columns and from her personal correspondence. Her writing secured the British Press Awards Columnist of the Year in 1998. The citation at the awards (1998) said she "faced her tragically early death with an exemplary fortitude reflected in a series of moving articles written with great honesty and a conspicuous lack of sentimentality." Deborah Orr wrote about her breast cancer in The Guardian after being diagnosed in 2010, having previously talked about her diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder in 2017. An obituary published after her death in 2019 said "her smartness, vivid personality, serious edge, willingness to tell it as it is and bravery shone out to the end." (Brown, 2019)

It's not just confined to newspapers, Steve Hewitt, the presenter of the Media Show which is broadcast on BBC Radio 4, chronicled his treatment for cancer of the oesophagus in a series of interviews for the network radio station. Victoria Derbyshire reported on her own treatment for breast cancer. The broadcaster had her own television show on BBC television called simply "Victoria Derbyshire" which was described by the BBC as a morning news and current affairs programme with original stories, exclusive interviews, audience debate and the latest breaking news. In 2015, after undergoing a mastectomy, whilst still in hospital she filmed herself just after the operation, sitting up in bed with two homemade signs. One said "HI, THIS MORNING I HAD BREAST CANCER" whilst the next she held up said "THIS EVENING I DON'T!" It was the start of a series of films which she made herself following her journey as she underwent post-operative chemotherapy. These were shown on her BBC mid-morning television programme and posted on YouTube, whilst she also posted updates on Twitter. It culminated in a book published of the diary she wrote for her children while undergoing treatment called "Dear Cancer, Love Victoria". Filming her treatment, Derbyshire (Personal communication, August 7, 2019) says: "felt really completely natural, it felt like a really normal thing to do. I'm quite open, I'd tweeted about having cancer.... I literally felt like I was chatting

to my mobile phone. I didn't keep anything back." When asked about impartiality, she said she was reporting on a story as a broadcaster, even though the story was about herself "I don't go on air and talk about my family and what I did at the weekend or whatever but....because it was medicine and the NHS and science it didn't feel like me commenting on politics or a national news story, that's why it felt natural."

Cancer columns demand a particular type of raw honesty. Talking about treatment and death can make for uncomfortable reading and yet it can also allow for an intense emotional connection with the reader. As Coward (2014, p.626) says "Cancer columns demonstrate the positive attributes of confessional journalism writ large – the lifting of repression and silence, the sharing of experience which can be otherwise isolating, the engagement of readers in new democratic ways."

Sharing her experience is exactly what the BBC Radio 5live news presenter Rachael Bland wanted to do when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She started a blog called "Big C, Little Me" as she wanted to report on herself, to help others and chronicle her treatment. In one text to me she said (Personal communication, November 22, 2017) "I always feel lighter for getting it down on paper."

She then approached BBC Radio 5live to launch a podcast called "You, Me and the Big C" in March 2018. With her co-hosts Deborah James and Lauren Mahon they wanted to show that cancer can affect anyone; the traditional pictures of grey faced thin cancer patients with shaven heads don't tell the whole story.

Podcasting has seen a huge boom in recent years. Ofcom (2019, p.99) in their 2019 annual report "Media Nations" describe podcasts as "episodic speech-based pieces of content, primarily audio-based though some also have accompanying video content." The latest figures from the website Podcasting Insights (Winn, 2019) show there are now over 750,000 podcasts with over 30 million episodes world wide. Blubrry which tracks podcasts by monitoring Apple Podcasts and other sources, says there are about 3,000 new titles per month. In the UK, figures from Radio Audience Joint Audio Research (RAJAR), show almost seven million adults said they listened to a podcast in June 2019. Ofcom's survey (2019 p101) published in August 2019 found in the UK, 1 in 8 adults now listen to a podcast every week with the average age of a podcast listener being forty years old, around ten years younger than a typical radio listener.

Podcasters can create content specifically tailored to individual communities. As Llinares, Fox and Berry (2018, p.5) say in their book on podcasting "the origins of the medium come from a desire to circumvent the mediated practices of the radio station and to deliver independent content directly to the listeners." Podcasts are not constrained by clocks and can explore topics in greater depth than a radio programme would sometimes be able to. "Podcasts may take on forms that simply would be inappropriate for linear broadcast due to content, duration or format in many cases." (Berry, 2016, p.666) Importantly, podcasts can cover all topics and all genres from comedy, current affairs, and health to technology, travel and films and all things in between. McNally (2019) says "podcasts lend themselves to the current era of convenience: they are generally relatively short and can be consumed as and when it suits the individual."

As the digital commissioning editor for BBC Radio 4, Rhian Roberts, (personal communication, June 4, 2019) says "you're establishing a world here that you really want the listener to feel they're part of because the act of putting on headphones takes you even closer to the sound and I think that you have to feel, the audience has to feel close to you. It's a very strange relationship, its different from radio."

This intimacy and ease of access to audio really highlights the difference from radio. The same audio production techniques can be used to create, say sound effects in a drama, but the listener is choosing when to listen. They can start and stop when they like and crucially they are not listening at the same time as someone else. This highlights why social media is so important for podcasts to create a community where listeners can interact, to discuss and comment and share reactions. "Podcasts are interwoven into social media and as such have a heightened capacity to enhance engagement with and activate an audience." (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p.8) It is no longer a linear activity as the "audience" (or community of listeners) interacts and continues the conversation about the podcast content on social media long after the podcast has been released. Podcasts are not constrained by time in the same way a set programme broadcast on the radio is. As people are listening to the podcast at different times but still wanting to comment, the social media platform Twitter is a natural home for the conversation to take place. This conversation is no longer curated by the presenter in the same way as a radio programme, as people are free to express opinions as they wish without them first being filtered through a producer before being expressed on air. A 2002 study of online journalism in the Netherlands (Deuze and Dimoudi, 2002, p. 97) concluded that online journalists were "perceived to empower people and further democratize the relationships between consumers and producers of content (be it news or information)." The same can now be said of podcasts.

So what of confessional journalism and podcasting? Podcasting gives broadcast journalists a platform to be more intimate than is possible on the radio or TV - to share personal stories and observations which are

not possible when reporting on a story. In effect they can become “columnists” in the traditional sense of talking about themselves but on a new digital medium rather than television or radio. In the UK, the 2003 Communications Act prevents people providing a service on television and radio from expressing views and opinions on “major political or industrial controversy and major matters relating to current public policy.” Broadcast journalists are trained to be impartial and objective when reporting on the news, podcasts can allow for more subjective stories and opinions to be aired by broadcast journalists.

Jane Garvey who presents *Woman’s Hour* on BBC Radio 4, also hosts a podcast called “Fortunately” with her fellow BBC Radio 4 presenter Fi Glover. The format consists of them chatting about their week before interviewing a guest, usually a well-known broadcaster or journalist. She says the podcast allows her to be herself in a way she can’t when she is broadcasting on Radio 4 (personal communication, July 2, 2019) “Sometimes we are thinking out loud and reacting to each other’s inner most thoughts.”

The BBC news presenter Clive Myrie appeared as a guest in one episode of “Fortunately” (ep. 83). He told the story of reporting for BBC News on Barack Obama being elected President. He says as a black man he became very emotional, his exact words were “I crossed the line” as if journalists shouldn’t show emotions. Podcasts can allow this type of emotional response in a way traditional broadcast media can’t. Rhian Roberts highlighted a BBC Radio 4 podcast called “Beyond Today” which looks at some of the stories behind the big news of the week. She said “quite often with some news radio programmes we’re told a story or we hear an interview which is genuinely moving and absolutely the BBC’s normal way of doing it, the neutrality is about moving on then to the next item and doesn’t allow an emotional response but within the podcast we’re trying to allow space for feelings, allow space for a response to the storyteller which isn’t necessarily about being partial but it’s about responding as the listener would respond.” In one of the episodes, the presenter Matthew Price cried when discussing the grief surrounding the loss of a sibling.

Roberts continued to say in podcasts, presenters are “showing their emotions and I think it’s fine and there are some things that as human beings we have collective response to and I think it’s OK. It’s really interesting, it’s a whole developing new space for the BBC, it’s interesting and some presenters find it really tricky.”

In her podcast “You, Me and The Big C” Rachael Bland was completely open and honest about her treatment and the effect it had on her, her hopes and fears and the impact the cancer was having. She wanted people to know the reality of living with cancer. The last podcast was recorded just weeks before she died. Her husband Steve Bland (Personal communication 2019, May 21) says she took an enormous amount of comfort from the hundreds of messages she used to get; “for someone who didn’t have a huge amount of confidence that was just massive for her, the amount of people who were pulling for her like that and not only pulling for her but saying she’d helped them....it really, really, really helped Rachael.” As Coward (2014, p.625) says “it is generally agreed by confessional writers that writing autobiographical columns is therapeutic, allowing writers to put down and order their life events and connect closely with readers who reflect back one’s experience.”

The impact of Rachael’s podcast was huge - “You, Me and the Big C” reached number 1 in the iTunes Podcast charts the week she died and her legacy has continued to have an effect. The podcast has continued after her death in September 2018 and regularly gets fifty thousand listeners an episode. Steve Bland says a lot of doctors and nurses tell him they use the podcasts for patients and that it has helped them understand patients a lot better. Steve was contacted by one listener whose cancer care plan given to her in hospital included the advice “listen to ‘You, Me and the Big C’”.

After my diagnosis with peritoneal mesothelioma, I was a guest on the podcast in an episode on rare cancers. The resulting story written for BBC News online received more than 960,000 hits and the podcast episode itself in the following month had close to 25,000 plays and downloads. The online community of listeners was evident in the number of interactions with Tweets about the podcast. Eight separate Tweets had more than 124,100 impressions which is the number of times people saw the Tweet on Twitter, showing a high level of engagement. This reinforces the view expressed by Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Buchholtz (2018, p.533) that podcasts must be considered from a cross-media perspective “where various social media technologies are integrated and, through that convergence, the affordances of the podcast and audio broadcasting more generally are expanded.” The comments on social media showed many listened to the podcast as a source of information about cancer or because they themselves were going through treatment. The podcast was also discussed at a conference in Vienna run by the European Society of Surgical Oncology in a discussion about the type of surgery I underwent, showing engagement from the medical community. The dialogue amongst listeners on social media and wider at the conference, demonstrates how the act of listening is interactive, the individual is not just feeding a comment back to the presenter but participating in a wider community on social media. As Spinelli and Dann (2019, p.67) say, “podcasting can provide a space

where the listeners can begin to communicate with one another.” As previously discussed, the conversation is no longer curated by a presenter and is not time limited. Once it is started on social media it can continue without an end date as people listen or search for information on certain topics, in my case, mesothelioma.

But what of the ethics of confessional journalism? Particularly when podcasting? How much should be shared and what can the impact be on the lives of those around you? Julie Myerson was the anonymous author of a column for the *Guardian* newspaper published on Saturdays called “Living with Teenagers” based on her family experiences. The column was stopped when one of her sons was identified. Myerson had previously denied being the author of the column. She also wrote a book called “The Lost Child” in which she detailed her son’s use of drugs, telling how she had thrown him out of the family home and was estranged. Her son reacted angrily to the publicity, giving a series of interviews. She had, he said “taken the very worst years of my life and cleverly blended it into a work of art, and that to me is obscene.” (Walker, 2009) All this raises the question Coward (2013, p.6) poses “How much right does an autobiographical journalist have to include material of living members of family, especially if there is a background of conflict or dispute? Whose life is it anyway?”

HG Wells writing in 1922 (as cited in Harcup, 2015, p.212) in a message to fellow National Union of Journalist members said: “We affect opinion and public and private life profoundly” Affecting opinion can bring a great responsibility to a podcaster, particularly a broadcast journalist sharing a deeply personal experience. Not only must the effect on a community be considered, in the case of a cancer podcast - on the cancer community, but also the effect on close family and friends. As Jake Lynch (cited in Harcup, 2015, p.213) discusses “In this information age, journalists are not disconnected observers but actual participants in the way communities and societies understand each other.” He mentions the “ethic of responsibility” of being a journalist. This is brought into sharp relief when sharing personal experiences which could affect others, whether it be in an autobiographical column in a newspaper or in a podcast. Frost (2011, p.10) says “all too often the right to know is used as an excuse to publish circulation-boosting journalism” Is this the case with personal columns and podcasts? Could these outputs be created without friends and families being mentioned?

With her podcast “Fortunately”, Garvey (personal communication, July 2, 2019) says: “I would never overstep the mark, I protect my nearest and dearest whilst also being quite open....I’m happy to be confessional about myself and my lived experience but I don’t do in my own children for example. I will reference my elderly parents but I don’t say anything they wouldn’t be happy to hear.” She is, in effect self-editing, referencing her family but remaining acutely aware of the effects the content of her podcast could have on the lives of those closest to her.

With cancer, ethical issues are brought into even sharper relief as death is confronted. As Coward (2014, p.618) says “All confessional journalism raises stylistic and ethical issues, but taking the trend of baring all to its logical conclusion, writing that focuses on extreme illnesses raises those issues in a more extreme way.” Rachael Bland was the mother of a young son and frequently mentioned him in her podcasts and the blog she also wrote. In one blogpost (Bland cited in BBC 2018), she described the moment she received a telephone call telling her the cancer was terminal as she watched her two year old son on a day out: “I watched my little Freddie innocently playing away in a tyre in the barn and my heart broke for him. I scooped him up and dashed home and then had to break Steve’s heart with the news that my cancer was now metastatic and therefore incurable.” Rachael’s husband (Personal communication 2019, May 21) says the decision for Rachael to blog and podcast was a joint decision - “the blog and then the podcast were partly my suggestion. I knew it would help her so much.....everyone was fully on board with what she was doing and how much it was helping her”. In this instance, Rachael was recounting her life experiences and the effects on those around her as she came to terms with her own impending death.

Conclusion

So, are broadcast journalists crossing a line when they podcast? It can be argued that podcasts have opened up a space for news broadcasters to more freely express opinions and share personal experiences. From the examples shown, it is certainly true they are revealing things about themselves in a podcast which they wouldn’t when broadcasting. They are observing but also commenting and being subjective. Podcasts can give freedom to explore issues in greater depth, be more graphic or honest. As Garvey (personal communication, July 2, 2019) says “If you’re going to do a podcast and you’re going to ask people to buy into it, then

you need to be prepared to offer them something that they wouldn't hear on radio, otherwise don't do one." In a speech at the Cruncie Awards in San Francisco in 2010, the CEO and co-founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg (cited in Frost 2013, p.328) said "people have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people." The same could now be said for journalists who host autobiographical podcasts.

In conclusion, podcasts provide a new platform for confessional journalism. By connecting with listeners and the podcast community through social media, it allows for personal experiences to be shared and reflected.

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