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Balancing personal trauma, storytelling and journalistic ethics: a critical analysis of Kirsti Melville's *The Storm*

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Abstract

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This critique analyses the award-winning documentary through a lens of personal and confessional audio journalism, drilling deep into lived experiences of the human condition. It highlights the power of this type of intimate journalism in creating compelling storytelling with a clear journalistic purpose and a call for action. It also highlights the ethical and emotional challenges of the journalist being a character of the story and the complexities of producing radio documentaries that document human trauma without exploiting the subject.

Keywords

radio documentary, audio feature, child abuse, sexual abuse, confessional journalism

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Balancing personal trauma, storytelling and journalistic ethics: a critical analysis of Kirsti Melville's *The Storm*

By Mia Lindgren

Journalism involves storytelling. I'm not sure if all storytelling involves journalism. (Melville, 2015)

The documentary *The Storm*, broadcast on 14 December 2014 on ABC Radio National's now defunct program *360Documentaries*, opens with the main character Erik belching into the microphone and Kirsti saying 'I might have to use that, you know...' This statement by the producer Kirsti Melville helps us understand this documentary, which has won the 2015 UN Media Peace Award for Best Radio, the 2015 Human Rights Award for Best Media and the 2015 Amnesty International Award for Best Radio. The burp illustrates the closeness that exists between Erik and Kirsti, and the intimacy they share with each other and with the listeners as the documentary unravels the fallout and life-long trauma from child sexual abuse. Kirsti's response is directed at Erik but also at the listener, reminding us that what we're hearing is a carefully crafted mediated account of Erik's life. *The Storm* is a story about Erik's experience, painted through his eyes, his mother's and a former partner's. However, it's also a story about the journalist as she painfully realizes the full impact of Erik's trauma on her own past. Kirsti Melville and Erik are ex-partners and have a child together. Their relationship is central to the impact of *The Storm* and the documentary is built around intimacy and trust.

The Storm can be understood as part of a growing trend towards personalised approaches to journalistic storytelling. Subjective and confessional journalism is becoming more popular, pointing to first-person writing as a main area of growth in journalism (Coward, 2013). Rosalind Coward maps the history of personal and confessional journalism from New Journalism in the US in the late 1960s via tabloidization in the 1980s to today's self-reporting in online environments. Coward (ibid) describes personal and confessional journalism as stories where the subject's lived experience takes centre stage and/or where journalists themselves become characters in their stories.

The Storm illustrates both aspects of Coward's (ibid.) definition of personal and confessional journalism: it focuses on one person's lived experience of sexual abuse to explain a current news issue and it also involves the story of the journalist. Kirsti Melville believes the conversational, intimate and personal style of *The Storm* is what made it so compelling to listeners: child sexual abuse hadn't been

journalistically framed quite in that way before in Australia (Melville, 2015). This type of fact-based personal radio storytelling isn't new. It has been successfully produced by *This American Life* for over 20 years and through podcasting, it has entered the mainstream, attracting millions of downloads globally. Jeff Porter (2016) describes the new wave of personal narrative storytelling prominent in many US podcasts as an audio version of literary journalism, reminding us of the New Journalism's literary traditions. Although *The Storm* can be understood through a lens of the narrative radio journalism style prominent in many US podcasts, which drills deep into lived experiences of the human condition (Lindgren, 2016), the documentary is different from the heavily presenter-driven tightly scripted first-person style of many productions by current and former producers with National Public Radio (NPR). It can be conceptualised as a hybrid form pinned on a spectrum somewhere between first-person narrative storytelling and conventional long-form radio current affairs journalism (for example *Background Briefing* on ABC Radio National); as a fact-based documentary built on empirical facts and statistics but told in a personalised and intimate way. Kirsti Melville is clearly a character in the story as Erik's former partner; however she plays a less dominant narrator role compared with many US podcasts. Instead she appears like a companion in the story, simultaneously supporting both Erik and the listener as the trauma of Erik's experience is told.

The Storm raises questions about ethics of journalists telling their own stories. What are the issues to consider when a story is told in a highly subjective way, as the reporter self-consciously includes their own story, voice, intuitions and doubts in the unfolding narrative? Moreover, what are the risks for both Erik as the subject and Kirsti as the journalist in producing a story exploring deeply traumatic and personal experiences? Coward (2013) warns that 'journalism's appetite for personal stories' is putting ordinary people at risk of exploitation, as 'their reactions and feelings have become interesting to the public' (p. 11). These journalistic challenges specific to personal audio storytelling have so far received limited critical attention.

Objectivity is a central concept in journalism. Steven Maras (2013) notes that 'few ideas are as contentious in the world of media and journalism as the ideal of objective journalism' (p. 22). The concept of objectivity can be seen both as a professional aspiration of journalists themselves and a product of history ensuring a free, reliable and independent media. However, exactly what objectivity means is difficult to agree on. Stephen Ward (2010) argues that professionalism and objectivity are two central journalistic standards being questioned in a changing digital media landscape. According to Ward (ibid) traditional objectivity sees journalists "'just reporting the facts",' without any interpretation or opinions. A more pragmatic approach to objectivity understands journalism as 'an active inquiry into, and interpretation of, event' (p. 93). Questions of objectivity are especially

problematic in the context of radio and audio journalism where the voice of the reporter is included in the story. As a result many radio journalists, especially in news, strive for a neutral and authoritarian presenting voice. It's a detached, disembodied and of course, invisible voice. In response to aspirations of objective or neutral radio journalism voices, Ira Glass, presenter of *This American Life* argued that broadcast journalists must start sounding 'like human beings on air', as a way to ensure survival of fact-based journalism (Glass, 2011).

This paper explores these questions by combining reflections by the producer Kirsti Melville¹ on production challenges, journalistic subjectivity, ethics, and trust; with a critical examination of the documentary text using the analytical framework established by the online journal *RadioDoc Review* (RDR) (RadioDoc Review, 2014). RDR aims to be a forum for critical analysis of radio documentary forms by building a framework and language for assessment and analysis. This framework includes ten criteria to guide reviewers in their critique of radio documentaries and podcasts. Six of those criteria will be used for the analysis of *The Storm* in this paper (some have been collapsed into combined headings below):

- Originality and innovation
- Emotiveness and empathy
- Audience engagement
- Public benefits
- Ethical practices
- Craft and artistry

(ibid)

The Storm

Erik was sexually abused over many years as a child. In 2011 he started contacting close friends to tell them about what had happened to him. He wrote up his experiences and reported it to the police. As part of 'a kind of "coming out"' (Melville, 2015) he asked Kirsti Melville to produce a story that he felt was a 'topic that most people just don't want to know about' (ibid).

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was underway in Australia investigating how institutions had responded to instances of child sexual abuse. Over 5000 people have shared their stories so far with the Commission, with the aim that stories can 'contribute to a better understanding of the consequences of child sexual abuse on the lives of survivors and their families and help us all to make our institutions safe for children in the future' (Royal

¹ This interview is part of a bigger study into audio storytelling genres with ethics approval #2013001224 from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Commission into Institutional Responses to Child sexual abuse, n.d). Erik had made submissions to the Royal Commission and the Victims Compensation Tribunal. However, he also wanted his story to be heard in the media. Kirsti Melville discussed with her editors at ABC Radio National how to approach an issue which at the time had been frequently covered in the media. What differentiated this story was their personal relationship. It wasn't until she read his submission that she understood how deep and traumatic the abuse had been and how much, in retrospect, this had impacted on their relationship (Melville, 2015). Her own experience contributed significantly to the power of the story.

Originality and innovation

Kirsti Melville's *The Storm* is an example of what Coward (2013) describes as confessional journalism. Confessional journalism is focused on emotions and feelings, where the 'personal voice matters...a personal voice about real personal experience' (ibid, p. 93). As an experienced radio producer, Kirsti Melville realized that their intimacy and her own experience, as his former partner, would add depth to the story and allow her to explore places in the story where,

I wouldn't be able to go with a stranger [...] for a listener it would sound, in a way, almost as if they were eavesdropping on us having a conversation and [...] thinking through and analysing, the impact on our relationship and some of his behaviours. (Melville, 2015)

Listening in to Erik's and Kirsti's personal reflections on their shared and individual experiences is an intensely raw and moving - and in parts very difficult - experience. The purpose of the program is clear: both Erik and Kirsti want listeners to fully engage with their experiences. This is not a story that you can dip in and out of. It requires your full attention and commitment. Erik begins by detailing in an almost detached way 'a storm of sexual abuse' (Melville, 2014) starting when he was eight years old and continuing over many years with further abuse by seven male perpetrators. Erik's childhood story is juxtaposed against the distinctive sounds of the Australian bush as they explore the two-acre property where Erik has partly finished building a house. His voice moves from cataloguing the physical and emotional impact of the abuse to giggling with Kirsti as he teases her about being a princess struggling to stay with him in a house in the bush without running water, toilet and electricity. 'Oh shut up', responds Kirsti affectionately, signalling to the listener that we're in a personal space with two people who know each other well.

Building empathy and audience engagement through intimacy and voice

The international movement towards personal audio narrative journalism is intrinsically linked to what many scholars describe as the intimate nature of radio as a medium (see for example Berry, 2006; Crisell, 1994; Douglas, 2004). The rapid

growth of this storytelling style, best illustrated by an explosion of narrative-driven podcasts and their growing download metrics² is not surprising considering radio's capacity to privilege the unique and emotional qualities of the human voice sharing personal experiences. The affective power of stories told through sounds and voice has the capacity to create strong bonds between the listener and the subject in the story. By listening to detailed personal experiences of 'others', listeners become connected to the people whose stories they share. Siobhan McHugh (2012) points to the powerful qualities of the individual voice on radio, which can convey the speaker's life experience through its very sounds.

carrying within it the influence of age, gender, cultural origin, education, lifestyle, psychology ... in addition to an individual's particular speech patterns, mannerisms, vocabulary, volume, pace, habits, creates a very distinct vocal-print... as unique as an individual's fingerprint. (McHugh, 2012)

Melville believes that what touched people so deeply was specifically the personal aspect of the story, both hers and Erik's, and the intimacy of the voice through the medium of sound. Erik's voice carried his pain in a way that a written text couldn't.

When you just hear all those nuances of tone and voice, it just brings with it such enormous power and intimacy and so I think it's a combination of it being radio, being that intimate medium, and then compounded by the fact that so much of it was pretty much a very personal conversation between an ex; my ex-partner. (Melville, 2015)

It's Erik's naked voice that has us hanging off his every word as he steps us through the details of his life. It's authentic and brutally honest. He articulates systematic abuse by men who he should have been able to trust: from the church, school and health professions. This is very challenging listening. It's when his voice and words fail him and he retracts into his own world unable to bear the memories that the full impact of his experience is felt. In the end, we need no words to understand and share his pain.

Public benefits

Kirsti Melville has had a long and distinguished career in radio journalism, starting with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1994. She studied journalism at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, Australia, and later Human Rights at postgraduate level. Her work has been broadcast internationally and she has won several awards including Gold and Silver at the New York Festivals, the Human Rights

² The *Serial* podcast has been downloaded over 90 million times (Quirk 2015, p. 9)

Award and the CBA/Amnesty International Award for Human Rights. Kirsti Melville defines herself as a journalist (Melville, 2015). In 2013 she was awarded WA Journalist of the Year at the West Australian Media Awards. She has also been a finalist for the Australian Walkley Awards for excellence in journalism.

Many of Melville's documentaries focus on human experiences and explore emotionally challenging issues, such as euthanasia, paedophilia, children with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and dementia in Holocaust survivors. The human experience is central to her work, as highlighted in Melville's biography on the broadcaster's website:

Her love for radio is driven by an insatiable need to hear and share people's stories, a strong sense of social justice and a desire to pick apart the complexities of human relationships. (ABC, 2011)

Kirsti Melville argues that the relevance, purpose and approach of telling Erik's story make it a piece of journalism. Walh-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2009) posit that journalism, particularly news, 'shapes the way we see the world, ourselves and each other' (p. 3). Ward (2010) summarises the main views about the purpose of journalism:

to report and disseminate information; to interpret events and trends; to act as watchdog; to advocate for reform or revolution; to be an activist for certain causes; to educate the public and guide public opinion; to serve the public, the party, or the state (p. 73)

In telling Erik's story, Melville was motivated by the desire to explain and raise awareness about the impact of sexual abuse on individuals and on society. The radio documentary contributed to a public debate about sexual abuse after it was broadcast and hundreds of listeners commented on the Radio National website and Facebook pages, many of them expressing how deeply moved they were, praising both Erik and Kirsti for their bravery and honesty in making the documentary, and remarking that Erik's personal story helped them understand the issue better. One listener, called Cass in the online comments, said that she hadn't realized the depth of the effect of such mistreatment: 'of course I knew that it had lifelong consequences, but having it spelt out by Erik was an eyeopener for me' (ABC, 2014). Many listeners specifically thanked Erik, his family and Kirsti for sharing their story: a listener called Siyu thanked Erik and his family for making 'the public aware of this serious problem' (ibid).³ Another listener who had worked on the Royal Commission taking people's accounts of abuse commented to Kirsti Melville that Erik's story was the single most important piece of journalism she'd heard on the issue, making her understand the life-long impact of child sexual abuse (Melville, 2015).

³ Listeners' comments are no longer available online at ABC Radio National

In addition to expressing their gratitude for the documentary, many listeners offered to help Erik. One listener, Neroli, suggested in the online commentary thread a crowdfunding campaign. Another listener, Rachel Green continued:

One of the most compelling pieces of radio I have ever heard – can we not all help Eric to stay where he feels safe and not have to sell his house? He has been let down by his country, by our government and by the Catholic Church – we need to restore his faith in humanity and help, and give him and his mum hope. How can we contribute money so he can stay in his home? (Melville, 2014).

As a result, listeners donated AUD\$21,000 to help him secure his property, his bush sanctuary. This is an example of the narrative effect, (Sillesen et al., 2015) described as ‘transportation theory’ where the listeners feel empathy and a strong connection to the extent that they reach out to the people in the story. Coward (2013) argues that confessional journalism involves writing that ‘addresses the reader as if confiding emotionally intimate details directly to another individual’ (p.93). According to Coward this type of writing can provoke strong engagement with the audience who may contact the journalist to offer ‘sympathy, advice and criticism’ (ibid). Listening to Erik’s story not only helped create understanding of his experience, it motivated listeners to take action. The notion that stories told using audio can change our perception of the world and our own place within it is supported by the radio critic Gillian Reynolds, who when interviewed by poet and radio scholar Sean Street, described the power of radio to ‘bypass the critical filter and make direct connections. It appeals to the inner eye, it seems to light up a valve in the back of the mind, and I see things differently’ (Street, 2012, p.33).

Ethical Practices

Stephen Ward (2010) argues for the importance of ethics for journalists as their profession affords them unique opportunities to both do ‘substantial public harm and substantial public good’ (p. 44). He highlights how journalists can ‘add to the trauma of vulnerable people’ (ibid). Kirsti Melville was concerned about Erik’s welfare and the potential impact that recording the story might have on Erik’s fragile mental health. Telling his story might retraumatise him and make him even more vulnerable. His mental health had deteriorated since he started writing about his past. She felt a duty of care for him and spent six months discussing with Erik before beginning recordings, ensuring he understood that doing the story could exacerbate existing trauma. They discussed what types of responses he might get from listeners and how he would cope with it. However, Erik was ‘absolutely insistent’ that he wanted to go ahead with the interviews so people would understand the human cost of sexual abuse and he saw his story as ‘a gift’ (Melville, 2015) to the listeners. The

Australian Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance's Code of Ethics states that journalists must not exploit a vulnerable person (MEAA, n.d). As the documentary clearly shows, Erik's traumatic experience had left him vulnerable. However, he insisted that he wanted to tell his story, and during those difficult interviews Kirsti had to remind herself of his conviction and the purpose of the story as she watched him fall apart. He trusted that she would not exploit him and his story:

The dilemma we all face, you know, "When do you turn the mic off? When do you leave it on? I guess I left it on more than I may have otherwise because I knew he wanted me to capture all of this and I knew he trusted me completely. (Melville, 2015)

Journalism ethics place special attention on the relationship between journalists and their sources (Ward, 2010). Journalists have to balance the tension between reporting the truth and potentially causing harm to their sources. For personal and subjective journalism involving the journalist's own life experience, these risks also extend to the journalist. They risk 'alienating their friends and family' (Coward, 2013, p.11) or being accused of exploiting others. In producing *The Storm* Melville was concerned with the potential impact of the documentary on their 20-year old son. However, she felt that he was emotionally resilient and would be able to cope with hearing the story (Melville, 2015). She was also aware of the emotional toll telling the story would take on her. Melville described how she fell to pieces for weeks after she returned home and just cried for him. She says that she can always 'deeply feel the pain of someone I'm interviewing' (ibid), however this was harder as it involved someone she personally cared about and who was the father of her son.

Trust is central to this story: the trust between Erik and Kirsti; the trust between the journalist and the listener. Melville's previous track record shows her capacity to produce extraordinarily intimate work that requires her to establish a high level of trust. However, this was the first time in her journalistic career that she told a story with her own life as material. The connection between Erik and Kirsti is so strong that it comes through in every aspect of this program. They banter, they hold hands, and they sit close together with a cup of tea talking as the sun is setting. As a listener I feel reassured by that trust. I trust Kirsti to be there when Erik's memories catapult him back into very dark places. This is an important point to explore, as the premise for audience trust in journalism is that journalists can be trusted to represent reality fairly, without being unduly influenced by subjectivity. However, for personal and subjective forms of journalism involving the journalist as a character in her own story, subjectivity is unavoidable, and in the case of *The Storm*, it's what makes the documentary so compelling. I believe it would have been unbearable for listeners to witness Erik's suffering without knowing that Kirsti was there to support him and

share the suffering, in a way that we ourselves would have wanted to do. Kirsti Melville believes that *The Storm* showed that you can't just move on from such traumatic experiences, therefore as a society 'we need to maintain our compassion and understanding' (ADDIN ZOTERO_ITEM CSL_CITATION {"citationID":"liVPsF21","properties.

The value of storytelling as a method of collecting personal experiences and assisting sense-making has long been acknowledged, especially in areas of illness, with narrative therapy highlighting potential therapeutic values of telling your story (see for example Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Charon, 2006; Hurwitz et al., 2004; Kleinman, 1988). Melville was concerned that producing a documentary might retraumatise Erik. Although the process has been difficult for everyone involved, Kirsti can see the therapeutic effects on Erik to have been able to tell his own story and to have it acknowledge, and in this case, literally heard:

Writing this story and producing The Storm has been excruciatingly difficult for Erik, his family, our son and me, but words have been spoken that have never dared be, understandings reached that never have been. Wounds are slowly closing over. (Melville, 2015)

Melville immersed herself in the recording of the program. For five days she stayed with Erik in the bush, recording their conversations, walks, reminiscence. She kept the recorder with her the whole time, enabling her to collect many hours of diverse and detailed audio material. She had to balance the role of being the journalist 'getting the story laid down' with facts and timeline (Melville, 2015) with being an ex-partner and a friend. One of those poignant moments was one night as the sun was setting. Erik was talking about the impact of the dark and how hard it was for him when the night was falling. It's a confessional and intimate conversation that is far removed from what is commonly heard in journalistic interviews. By this time of night, the journalist has usually left and gone back to the hotel after a day of recording. Instead, Kirsti, the ex-partner, was staying the night with Erik.

Also during editing she had to balance between being a character of the story and being a journalist following editorial and ethical guidelines. She relied on her extensive professional experience; as she was editing, she had the 'voice of objectivity' sitting on her shoulder:

Obviously it's subjective because I'm telling the story and it's a very personal one but my role as storyteller and as a journalist is to tell the fairest story I can and to represent my subjects and the story as fairly and as accurately and as ethically as I can and so that's what I did. (Melville, 2015)

Craft and artistry in *The Storm*

The Storm is mostly told through the voice of just one person, Erik, with his mother and Kirsti contributing their experiences. It's chronological and simple in structure, starting with his abuse as a child, followed by further exploitation, as Erik describes growing up, and then mapping his life as he tries to survive his experiences. Erik, his mum and Kirsti lead the listener through the trauma of the experience and the heartache shared by all. It's heartbreaking to hear the honesty of Erik's mum as we understand how little Erik's mum knew of the abuse and how her guilt has dominated three decades of her 80-year-old life.

Erik is closely miked so we hear his voice intimately as he recaps his broken life. This technique is commonly used by producers documenting personal stories as it foregrounds the voice of the main character (see for example *The Kitchen Sisters*, 2010). His voice tells the trauma and the physical and emotional toll it's taken on his life. His mental health condition results in him being unwashed, smelly, picking scabs off his arms. He hasn't brushed his teeth since he was a child. In many ways, *The Storm* is the perfect example of how visual the sound medium can be. We don't need to have a visual representation of him because we 'see' him by bringing our imagination to what we hear. His voice paints the picture for us. Radio producer Alan Hall (2010) writes that all listeners experience radio documentaries differently as they 'tap their own vast individual libraries of visual imagery' (p. 101). This allows for diverse listening experiences of *The Storm*. Melville juxtaposes intimate and closely miked interviews with Erik with 'wide-shots' of them in the bush looking for wombats. As listeners we hear the bush that is an important part of Erik's present life. He loves that bush and it creates a context that allows us to understand Erik as someone who is closely connected to his environment and is more than 'just' a victim. The sound of the cicadas locates the time and sets the scene for listening in to the conversations:

For Australian audiences, it just takes you immediately to a calm, quiet sort of part of the day where the world is winding down and you're becoming reflective on your day and here's someone who's very closely miked, where you can hear everything in their voice and I think that is just really, really powerful. (Melville, 2015)

Conclusion

Radio and audio forms have long privileged the human voice and the emotions of living. In *The Storm*, the intimacy of sound and the intimacy of former lovers together create a powerful but harrowing listening experience. *The Storm* is also a call for action where Erik, the subject, and Kirsti, the journalist, in unison challenge listeners to engage, to stay active, and to care. The 2015 UN Media Peace Award

highlighted the journalistic purpose of the documentary stimulating ‘public awareness of the long term and wide ranging impact of childhood sexual abuse’ (United Nations Association of Australia, 2015). Capturing and sharing stories that deal with deeply personal experiences carries a great risk of exploitation. Walt Harrington suggested in his book *Intimate Journalism* (1997) that journalists telling intimate stories about ordinary people’s lives ‘must adopt a hybrid ethical outlook’ (p. xxxiv). That outlook is, according to Harrington, more akin to that of an anthropologist who protects the welfare of their subjects and ‘honor their dignity and privacy’ (ibid). For journalists this means explicitly explaining the process of recording and the full meaning and potential risks of sharing a life story publicly. Focusing on the personal requires stringent attention to potential ethical pitfalls to ensure the protection of both the people who share their lives and the journalists who record them. It also requires attention to the listeners to ensure their trust is maintained. *The Storm* highlights the relevance of journalistic ethical guidelines when producing personal narrative audio journalism. It’s Kirsti Melville’s journalistic experience, considered approach and acute awareness of the ethical challenges that won the trust of both Erik and the documentary’s listeners and earned her three national awards for her work.

The Storm

Producer: Kirsti Melville

Sound Engineer: David Le May

Broadcast 14 December 2014, 360 Documentaries, ABC Radio National

Duration: 50mins

[AUDIO LINK:](#)

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/360/the-storm/5947618>

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