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Truth to power: how podcasts are getting political

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Abstract
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Podcasts are becoming a powerful socio-political force: from crime to social justice, they are changing the debate on some of the key issues of our times.
The Australian podcast The Messenger, which describes the life of a detainee on Manus Island, recently won a prestigious Grand Award at the 2017 New York Radio Festival. Bowraville, about the unsolved murder of three Aboriginal children from the same small Australian town, has led to calls for a retrial of a prime suspect. And Phoebe’s Fall, about the bizarre death of a young woman in the garbage chute of a luxury Melbourne apartment building, triggered a review of the Victorian Coroner’s Act.

In a move that links podcasts expressly to activism, Audible Australia recently funded, in partnership with The Equality Campaign, the podcast Listen to Love. Its six episodes, hosted by gay comedian Tom Ballard, advocate marriage equality via well-produced audio storytelling, including segments from TV presenter Osher Günsberg and a short story from writer Catherine Cole.

Racism, mental illness, sexuality and climate change are all issues that have found new voices through podcasts. While it’s too early to say if all of these will have a genuine impact on political debate, crime podcasts such as Serial have affected legal outcomes. This can be traced to the unique qualities of podcasting’s form and its focus on personal storytelling supported by solid, journalistic research.

In the US, Serial and Undisclosed (a separate podcast hosted by three lawyers, including one close to convicted killer Adnan Syed) adduced new evidence that won Syed a fresh trial. In Sweden, the podcast Spår helped see a man freed after spending 13 years in prison for a murder he did not commit.

Like radio, podcasts are an intimate medium that can powerfully convey emotion. Radio still attracts way more listeners: latest data shows over 90% of Americans over 12 have listened to radio in the last week, compared to only 40% who have ever listened to a podcast. Pioneering data from respected Edison Research shows only about 30% of Australians have ever listened to one, while a meagre 17% have listened in the last month (compared to 24% in the US). In both countries, podcast listeners tend to be more educated and affluent than average.

But it’s about audience quality, not quantity. The nature of the engagement is different thanks to the relationship that podcast hosts form with their listeners. As Manoush Zomorodi, host of WYNC Studios’ Note to Self put it at the ABC’s OzPod2016 conference, her pod fans come up and hug her - something that never happened when she was a radio journalist.

She put that down partly to podcasting’s portability: “I walk home from the subway with them, I’m WITH them.” The lack of gatekeepers also allows the podcast host to be more uninhibited, which further bonds listeners. “We are buds. We are friends.”

Voice to minorities

These qualities have seen podcasts give voice, literally, to minority groups and activists of every hue. The tragic recent events at Charlottesville derived from the US’s legacy of slavery and racism - a topic...
innovatively and expertly tackled by the Scene on Radio podcast series, Seeing White.

There's the revelatory Ear Hustle, from inside San Quentin prison, and The Hilarious World of Depression, in which comedians describe how they cope with mental illness.

Sydney Opera House's Deadly Voices gives a platform to Indigenous Australians, while their It's a Long Story features artists and intellectuals of all hues. There are podcasts on identity, gender, disability, human rights and innumerable other topics among the 400,000 podcasts on iTunes at last count. Try Nancy for queer themes or How To Be A Girl about raising a transgender daughter.

Personalising the political

Personal storytelling has long carried political weight: think of the impact of Frederick Douglass' 1845 memoir of his life as a slave, or of Hitler's Mein Kampf. The progressive oral history movement of the 1960s recognised the force of the personal voice; it sought to up-end power structures by recording witnesses “from the underclasses, the unprivileged and the defeated”, as British historian Paul Thompson urged.

But it's not enough merely to publish personal stories; that risks creating ideological echo chambers, easily dismissed by opponents. To gain traction, activist podcasters need to buttress raw story with information or interpretation - while still sounding conversational. Refugees' Stories, a multicultural, NGO-funded podcast that tells the stories of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, finds perfect pitch.

In Australia, two current initiatives are harnessing personal story to political effect. Listen to Love's broadly accessible content might help it tap into the inspired #RingYourGranny campaign that saw young people in Ireland convince grandparents of the need for marriage equality, by helping them relate to personal stories of gay relatives and friends.

And over its eight episodes The Messenger, a collaboration between refugee support group Behind the Wire and the Wheeler Centre, challenges the dehumanising treatment of more than a thousand detainees on Nauru and Manus Islands.

It tells the story of one man, Abdul Aziz Muhamat, a Sudanese refugee on Manus Island who is 24 when we meet him, courtesy of smuggled audio sent by WhatsApp to journalist Michael Green. That audio – thousands of disjointed, 30-second recordings – provides the miraculous connectivity of voice. Aziz is instantly an individual – no longer detainee QNK002. Historical context deepens his message.

While The Messenger sees itself as “opening a new space for informed public conversation” rather than campaigning for a political outcome, for many listeners, the posturing between president Donald Trump and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull about whether the US will take some of the men on Manus is no longer abstract policy.
Audible Australia's head, Matthew Gain, told me it is committed to investing in original content. With one of the richest men in the world, Jeff Bezos, funding Audible's endeavours, and other media formats undermined by scepticism around “fake news”, podcasting could increasingly shape the political landscape. Only time will tell if this adds nuance to complex debates, or just more noise.