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Pod People: Brave New Worlds of Digital Audio Drama

[Michael J. Collins](#)

I and My Pod

For the last several months I have been lucky enough to have been on writing sabbatical from my university. As such, I have often found myself around and about my hometown during the day. I feel like I am a strange figure, writing in coffee shops, making enemies of baristas, running errands, and looking, to all but the most enlightened of observers, decadently unemployed. In an effort to stave off the effects of my increasingly sedentary life, I have taken up jogging. I am not especially keen on exercise, or the forms of identity-formation that come from being a person who either likes exercise or likes other people to think they like exercise, so to mitigate against this fact I have adopted the ritual of listening to podcasts. Like many, podcasts have become an increasingly large portion of my media diet since the launch of [NPR's groundbreaking Serial](#). First broadcast in 2014, *Serial* was a spin-off from the weekly radio programme *This American Life* and was written, co-produced and narrated by investigative journalist Sarah Koenig. The first season delved into the [murder of high school student Hae Min Lee in 1999](#), with Koenig examining case files, interviewing Lee's convicted murderer Adnan Syed, and tracking down former friends of the murdered teenager. *Serial* was launched to wide acclaim and became the most downloaded podcast with [more than 80 million downloads](#) as of March 2016, launching Koenig to fame and demonstrating the popularity of the podcast: a broadcasting format Koenig and her co-producer had chosen because of its low-key, experimental nature.

In the wake of *Serial's* first season, I have listened avidly each week to an evolving canon of fascinating and brilliantly-conceived new audio dramas for the form: [Yes Paradiso](#), [Within the Wires](#), [Tams](#), [The Bright Sessions](#), [The Black Tapes](#), [Archive 81](#), [Alice Isn't Dead](#), and [The Message](#), among others. [11](#) The rise of these podcasts can be tracked to a notable uptake of the on-demand radio more generally in the English-speaking world. [According to Katie Forster of The Guardian](#), “[p]odcasts are booming on both sides of the Atlantic: on-demand audio grew by 34% in the UK in 2014, while 46 million Americans—17% of the population—listen to at least one podcast a month” (Forster n. pag.). Sponsors have begun to support fiction on the podcast format, which has also been aided significantly by the expansion of crowdfunding for art and creative ventures through services like Patreon.

SERIAL



Brave new world: a new wave of podcasts, such as NPR's ground-breaking "Serial," are re-inventing the audio drama for an "on demand" generation

[Image used under fair dealings provisions]

Whilst listening to one especially amusing episode of Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink's landmark sci-fi/horror/weird-fiction/comedy and cultural phenomenon [Welcome to Night Vale](#), as I jogged, I ran headfirst into man walking his dog in the park. Actually, I ran into the dog as it rounded a bend at speed. The man shouted to warn me but, headphones on, I did not hear him. I apologised profusely and made several concerned expressions as I jogged off in the opposite direction. The incident was embarrassing, but served as an interesting learning experience, since the aggressive look the man gave me spoke volumes about pervasive attitudes to younger people, especially their different sense of work-life balance and temporality, their personalised consumption of media, and their relationship to public space. "You are in your own world," it seemed to say, "why are you not participating in a shared experience of life? Young people are always on their computers, or iPods, or phones. They are everywhere. In coffee shops, libraries, the street. What are they actually doing?". He didn't say these things, but if he had, he would have had a point. Big headphones on, jogging directionlessly around the park, or taking up tables to slowly drink coffee or free water, gazing blankly into the middle distance, or else listening to some shiny rectangle that, like a portable version of [the insentible black monolith](#) from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, GIVES NOTHING AWAY, I must look baffling and a touch ridiculous. Distrust is probably justified.

As recent incidents, including the Brexit vote and the failure of Labour to win the 2015 election against the flow of notable polling trends have shown, the [alternate mediated worlds of Generation X and the Millennials](#) are actually very far from a joke. The well-documented "echo chamber" effect among young citizens has become a significant problem in contemporary political and social life, assisting in the apparent experience of something like social collapse in the Anglo-American world. The sense of cultural and political participation due to the use of new media the young feel is actually failing to register positive political change in the real world. Indeed, as numerous surveys have shown, Gen X and Millennial attitudes and ideals are becoming radically more at odds with the dominant ethos. Younger people are keeping a different beat, living in a different world, a different sci-fi temporality. My accident with a dog may seem a wild deviation from any political point but bear with me, because it served to spur my thinking on a number of issues. Specifically, it galvanised my thoughts on the relationship between the cult media I and many of my generation consume and the idea of not being heard and not hearing politically and culturally. The following essay is a result of these thoughts on the subject of [sound studies](#), generational tensions between Baby-Boomers and Millennials, and politicised concepts of space, which have been effectively captured in the shared sci-fi/horror aesthetic of [a newly emergent body of high quality audio drama](#) that has been made possible by the development of personal digital media players and podcasting. So before I move on from this anecdote I want to note that there is a remarkable irony in the fact the episode I was listening to before my accident was episode 86 of [Welcome to Night Vale](#), "Standing and Breathing," in which the perennially-sanguine narrator, the old-fashioned voice of community radio, Cecil Baldwin, remarks on the arrival in the town of a threatening new presence, a group of figures whose motivations and intentions seem disconcertingly unclear. "The strangers never moved," says Cecil, "other than their steady breaths, even when they sometimes appeared dramatically closer than they were before" (*Night Vale* n. pag.).



Social deafness: Millennials and Generation X seek a state of contented alterity created by digital technology's empowerment of the user to shape their own personalised soundscapes

[Image by [Garry LeDuc](#) under a CC BY-NC license]

The evolving plot-line of the drama comes to centre on these figures whose danger to the town rests on their apparent absence of normative social forms of desire; their continual presence, but unnerving lack of clear, outward intentions. As Cecil remarks in [episode 26](#), “Night Vale, I...I think back to the words of Little League coach and ghost Lucia Tereschenko. ‘They’re no longer coming. They’re here. And we cannot stop something that wants nothing’” (*Night Vale* n. pag.). The figures in question occupy physical space, but are oblivious to the speech-acts of others (in [Louis Althusser’s useful sonic metaphor](#) they cannot be “hailed” and co-opted by the Ideological State Apparatus). They are defined by an extraordinary internality and subjectivism that masks what is actually a destabilising and politicised “closed-circuit” social consciousness. In other words, they share a psychic bond with one another, they are heavily socialised amongst themselves, yet do not operate within the political, social, or physical regimes of space-time as do the rest of the community. To use another sonic metaphor, they are like children that are seen but not heard. They just breathe. Another successful fiction podcast, [Lynchville](#), deployed this metaphor even further by centring its narrative on a town where there is a frenzy for a new piece of technology that allows for silent, telepathic communication. The rising tension between those who possess the technology (which importantly resembles iPod ear-buds) and those that do not results in civil war. In *Night Vale* the strangers’ ability to appear in different locations, or be (like me bearing down on an unfortunate man’s dog) suddenly closer than one expects, are indications that they are denizens of an alternative temporality: an avant-garde threat that the writers have considerable fun exploiting comedically. Yet unlike the avant-garde of the past, they do not express their identities especially outwardly. The forms of communication and “culture” that sustain their bond are publicly invisible. To the people of Night Vale they are both there and not there. What is more, they are associated with a character called Michelle and her friends, the former Night Vale radio interns Maureen and Chad, whose ownership of the obscure record store Dark Owl, rapidly shifting tastes and cool indifference to the fate of the world serve as a clear satire on the excesses of Millennial and Gen X hipsterism.

Social deafness

If [Cecil Baldwin’s position as an old-style community radio presenter](#) in *Welcome to Night Vale* evokes the comforting nostalgia of a residual, technologically-backward social order based on broadcast radio, then the figures [“Standing and Breathing”](#) represent the perceived threat to that social order generated by personal media players, privatised forms of media consumption, and the “cult” (in both its unsettling, religious and media studies senses). Indeed, it is the hip, young, former interns Chad and Maureen that were responsible for summoning the figures. They are, in this sense, representative of a technologically-advanced, cool, sub-culture. The figures are therefore connected self-reflexively with the presumed audiences of podcasts themselves, which, as one producer on [This American Life](#) described it, have, to date, been dominated by alt-media and independent consumers. “Audio is the Shins or the Alt-J of media. It’s great, but it’s also sort of an elite cool kids’ club...” (Foo in Forster n. pag.). This audience, which it should be noted is beginning to change, reflects the origins of podcasting among Generation X early adopters of digital media. As [Jonathan Sterne, Jeremy Morris, Michael Brendan Baker and Anna Moscatelli Ferro](#) have shown, podcasting was born out of the technological perfect storm of the launch of affordable digital media players (the iPod of the term’s suffix), RSS 2.0 online content delivery systems, and the expansion of alternative, internet radio (Sterne *et al.* n. pag.). It was when Apple incorporated RSS 2.0 and podcast listings into the iTunes Music Store in 2005 that the form really expanded.



The fiction podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* literalizes the collapse of social relations between generations in its narrative of the arrival of a threatening new group of strangers to the community

[Image used under fair dealings provisions]

To return to *Welcome to Night Vale*, the failure of the average citizen of the town to understand these figures produces escalating tensions. *Night Vale* may be fiction, but this sense of collapsing social relations among generations and identity groups is a genuine phenomenon with worrying effects. As the rise of controversial “safe space” ideology among young people on campuses in recent years indicates, the sense of alternative, parallel temporalities among dominant and emergent cultures produces a sense of threat that works both ways. As the politically and culturally conservative become distrustful of the progressives, progressive people retreat further into alternative and social media. This phenomenon has much to do with sound, specifically music (although the rise of cult podcasts produces similar effects). Indeed, sound studies as an evolving area of inquiry has much to add to debates about politics and media. The [young researcher Fran Tonkiss](#) has analysed the phenomenon of young people actively refusing to engage with a shared social world they find increasingly hostile to their attitudes and lifestyles, [coining the phrase “social deafness”](#) to describe the sought-out affective state of contented alterity created by digital technology’s empowerment of the user to shape their own personalised soundscapes. Tonkiss writes:

Social deafness offers one kind of urban freedom—the lonely liberty of knowing that nobody is listening, no one likely to speak. In rendering technical what otherwise is simply learned, the mobile technologies of the personal stereo or telephone realise this logic of separation and of indifference perfectly. They reverse the modern intent of the concert hall or public address system as means of organising a collective “culture of listening.” Immersed in a private soundscape, engaged in another interactive scene, you do not have to be in the city as a shared perceptual or social space. No one else can really know where you are. (Tonkiss 304-5)

Sound and new technologies of sound distribution like the iPod have a special relationship to the experience of living, contentedly, within one’s own, privatised universe. Indeed, of all the senses sound has perhaps the most to offer in terms of a subjective experience of homeliness, especially in an alien or alienating environment. Unlike the visual world, sound seems to own us and we to exist within it. It is affectively one with us as individual subjects in a way that makes it a powerful medium for simulating bonds between producers and their audiences. [Michael Bull and Les Back](#) have remarked that:

Walkmans are the iconic urban technology of privatisation, permitting users to construct their own individualized sound world wherever they go. Experience is aestheticized and the world becomes what the user wants it to be. Sound manages the users mood, feelings and sense of time and place. Public space is transformed as users move through city spaces... Sound transforms public space into private property. Home is where my sounds are! (Bull and Back 9)

Critical theory has been slow to catch on to the fact that sound affects us profoundly, differently from [universal Enlightenment discourse usually associated with visibility](#). Indeed, it creates a different relationship to questions of emotion and power in which it is possible to refocus a potent critique of culture. The sense of objectivity evoked by traditions of critique often rely on the subject of sight, whether it be [Benjamin’s theory](#) as critic, [Bourdieu’s sense of the regime of vision](#), or [Althusser’s sense of “the male gaze”](#). But what happens if we orient our critique of modernity towards sound? As Bull and Back have argued “[b]oth the impetuses to objectify and to universalize appear to be rooted in the historical ascendancy of visual epistemologies in Western culture. Of the five senses, vision is the most ‘distancing’ one. In vision, subject and object ‘appear’ as transparent” (Bull and Back 4). Sound, by contrast, blurs the distinctions between subject and object upon which traditions of critique usually rest. We observe at a distance, but sound feels to us as if it enters us. Sound is waves and vibrations, which, as we experience them, become part of our subjectivity. If we are able to hear then we are surrounded by sound, bathed in it in a physical way that is not so for sight. Furthermore, one can avert one’s gaze, but blocking hearing usually requires something more gesturally potent, like covering our ears, or putting on headphones. At a social level, actively not to listen when another speaks to you is a significant taboo. It is hard to imagine something more cutting, which is why in his theorisation of the social demands of politics, Althusser turned to sonic metaphors such as the “hail.” Murray Schafer has remarked that [we have our ears like we are condemned to listen](#) (n. pag.), probing the complex experience of immanence and vulnerability to influence that might emerge from sonic experience. Indeed, the legendary [Hollywood sound designer Walter Murch](#) took this idea further by describing the strangely embodied (even antenatal) relation we have to sound, when he stated that “[w]e gestate in Sound, and are born into Sight” (vii). Sound affects us deeply, primally. It is important to some of our earliest bonds and culture’s earliest forms of expression as oral storytelling. It has a remarkable power to sooth, or to engage us, whilst, in some ways, modern Western mythologies of individual autonomy and objectivity are eroded before it.

The echo chamber

It is clear to see that the same feelings of positive affect, stimulus to subjectivity and “homeliness” that come from being able to resist the control of the outside world and shape one’s own sonic landscape implicit in Tonkiss’s concept of “social deafness,” may lead, by corollary, to the “echo chamber” effect. As the use

of privatised forms of media consumption and exchange that produce false feelings of safety and “protect” people from a threatening external world increase, it may also drive the collapse of the interpretative frameworks necessary for meaningful political action. The collapse of these interpretive social networks between generations in *Night Vale* is highlighted by the final lines of the season in which Cecil ruminates on whether or not the threat has really been exorcised or removed and whether the town’s people really did have any impact at all on the figures. He states:

Night Vale, we live with the illusion of safety, that we can use caution and care in order to preserve our lives. The strangers came and we don’t know why. And then they went, and we don’t know why. We are always in danger. It was just that while they were here, we were made aware of the danger. They simply revealed to us that personal control is an illusion. We live and die, and we never get to learn any reasons for that. In any case, the strangers are gone. And we can go back to living the lie of reason and control once again! And it is a very, very comfortable lie.” (episode 90, part 2)

Several of the high-quality new audio dramas I spoke of above reflect the social experiences of their audiences through their use of sonic aesthetics. In particular, I wish to discuss two recurrent tropes: the use of a socially-precarious narrator whose possession of considerable cultural capital is not matched by political power, and a postmodern political unconscious that oscillates between active resistance and passive complicity.



Self-contained sonic worlds: the allure of the "echo chamber" seduces listeners ever further into their own private worlds

[Image by [Sean A. Huddle](#) under a CC BY-NC license]

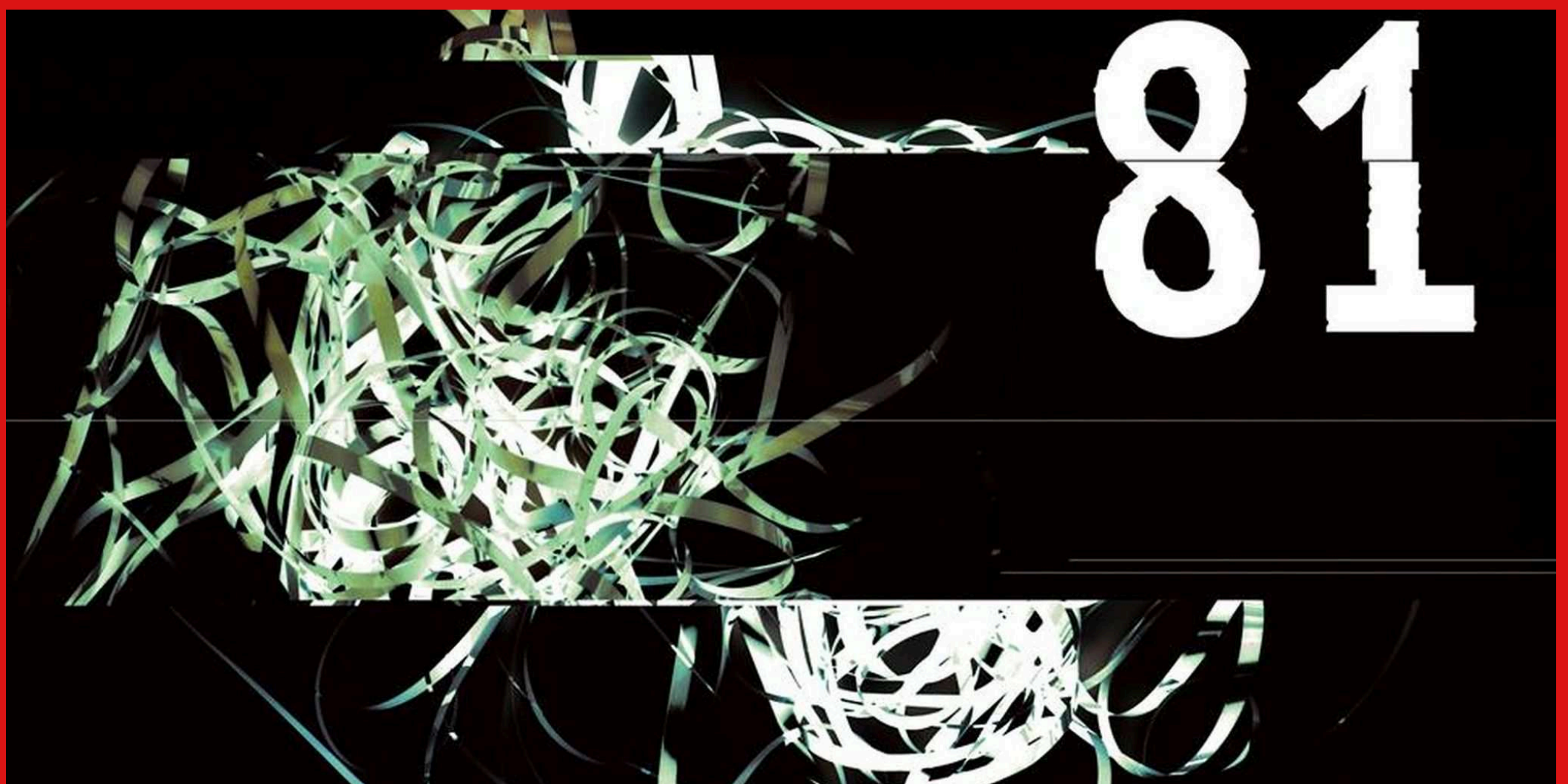
For many commentators the [This American Life](#) spin-off *Serial* is seen as Ground Zero for the recent boom in podcast consumption. Hugely popular (especially in its first season), audiences of the bi-weekly non-fiction podcast were gripped by the reporter Sarah Koenig’s narration, which effectively married an appealing, companionable tone with the dogged pursuit of truth that defines the best investigative journalism. Listening to Koenig was akin to hearing an incredible story coming from the mouth of close college friend—a person of liberal social values, a keen critical sensibility, and a neat turn of phrase. Koenig’s success relied, in part, on the complex melange of disturbing and intriguing subject-matter delivered with this engaging oratorical style. Recent successful fiction podcasts have reproduced the aesthetic of *Serial*, especially the unpretentious narrative style and mystery “plot,” whilst moving the content into the realm of science fiction and horror. Notable examples that followed hot on the heels of Koenig’s work are *The Black Tapes*, *Ars Paradoxica*, *Tanis*, *Alice Isn’t Dead*, *The Message* and, in a different way, *Archive 81*.

In each of the cases above the narrator is either a journalist, an intern, or a person who either by profession or personal circumstances has been placed in a position of uncertainty or threat—especially in relation to a government or corporate conspiracy over which they have little control. Their advanced skills are relied upon completely by their employers, yet they are effectively proletarianised by their labour and so correspond to the new sociological category of the precariat. Their cultural references, idiomatic forms of expression, and lifestyles are carefully drawn so as to resonate as synonymous with Generation X and Millennial social codes. Although, undoubtedly, the choice of narrator also reflects dominant generic traditions in sci-fi, horror and gothic literature (one need only think of Poe’s use of the semi-professional narrator in many of his tales, Brontë’s use of the governess in *Jane Eyre* etc.), the use of this style of narration operates in the new audio drama through clear appeals to audience self-identification. The characters often have non-conventional sleep and working patterns (a major theme in *The Black Tapes*, *Tanis*, *Alice Isn’t Dead* and *Ars Paradoxica* especially), reflecting the lifestyles of overworked, yet unremunerated, Millennials. This group in particular have a [shared experience of precarity](#) (joblessness or underemployment, future uncertainty or feelings of political powerlessness), which may constitute their dominant affective state. However, the use of sound itself (the audio drama’s ontological condition as a sonic art) highlights this experience, transforming it into a gothic or sci-fi hypertrophy. If, as Murray Schafer noted above, sound has within its aesthetic register [the](#)

immersion with powerlessness, the experience of uncertainty or precarity felt by the younger generations socially can be very effectively captured in these audio dramas' sonic landscapes. A recurrent theme across *The Black Tapes*, *Archive 81* and *The Message*, for example, is the sound that once heard cannot be unheard, which upon hearing threatens the safety of the listener. In *Archive 81* the narrator Dan unwillingly unleashes a daemon into the world (a brilliantly-rendered and sonically-unnerving mixture of high volume, extremely close buzzing, flesh slapping, gargling and chortles called "Samuel") by listening to tapes that his employer commands him to listen to. In *The Black Tapes* and *The Message* the mistakenly positive act of communication becomes a vector for disease and chaos. The political unconscious of such audio dramas rests upon a logic of a seemingly "good" character's unwilling or unintentional complicity with evil or corruption that explores psychic anxieties around participation among young and "alternative" consumers. *Ars Paradoxa* explores this theme more fully through a retro sci-fi setting, in which a person from the listeners' immediate future, the physicist Sally Grissom, accidentally invents time-travel and is transported to the 1940s on the eve of Manhattan Project. Her research into time travel, and her attempts to get research funding directed away from the atom bomb to her work in the alternative 1940s then result in the creation of an all-powerful government agency that can control time, which produces effects arguably worse than the atomic bomb. In each case, attempts to do good usually result in more appalling outcomes. In *Tanis*, too, in order to investigate the mystery he has uncovered the narrator Nic Silver must join forces with the Tesla Nova corporation, the potential source of much of the horror he encounters. The aesthetic immediacy and world-making potential of sound are therefore used to mirror real world political feelings of powerlessness stemming from being privy to that which one cannot change and with which one is uncomfortably complicit.

The new narrative form of the fiction podcast

In several respects, [the art of the fiction podcast](#) embodies many of the tensions within the form of podcasting itself, particularly the collusion between alternative media, alternative lifestyles and corporatism that is even evoked by the term itself ("pod" being derived from "iPod). At once a leftist utopian form of media that reaches audiences directly and potentially allows for an extraordinary diversity of content, the irony is that the delivery of that utopian content rests upon the use of material like personal media players, computers etc. that are produced by less-than-wholly ethical corporations. The overall effect is, as with the echo chamber political effect of new media, an emotional sense of participation that is undercut by a real sense of stasis within a corrupt globalised, capitalist order. As the narrator of [Archive 81](#) reasons at the end of season 1, perhaps it is better to go on participating anyway? Listening may have released this evil but if enough people listen will it not also produce that evil's antithesis? Will it not create hope?



How are audio dramas such as Archive 81 drawing our attention to the pleasures, and challenges, of immersive imaginative worlds?

[Image used under fair dealings provisions]

In many of these stories, the overall plot comes to revolve around the protagonists' attempts at damage limitation in the face of inadvertent complicity with evil. The characters seek out places of temporary safety, which are often sonic themselves (as in Dan calling his girlfriend from within the haunted archive, the narrator of [Archive 81](#) speaking to a fictional version of her missing wife over the radio among the comforting, familiar sounds of the road). The characters in the dramas seek out certain sounds, which give them comfort and succour, as avid listeners of the podcasts attest on Twitter and fan-forums to the unbearable experience of waiting for new episodes—a sense of frustration at being cast out from their temporary sonic home. Intrigue drives the listener forward in the hope of the eventual triumph of the characters over evil, yet it also serves to draw the listener into experiencing the very logic of persistence, of keeping on in the face of further entanglement and complicity, that is felt by the fictional characters. Each episode creates a self-contained sonic world that is formally closed off from normal life when experienced by the listener on a personal media player, yet serialisation also produces an ongoing sense of the moment—a repetition that simulates the rhythms of everyday life.

Both sci-fi and horror succeed or fail on their capacity to create and sustain worlds that are imaginatively inhabitable and knowable by the audience. If, as Tonkiss, Bull and Back have shown, sound itself is notable for its power to create and sustain imaginative worlds that give a sense of immersion and possession to the listener, especially when experienced in the privatised form of personal media players, then genre fiction is given an especial potency by podcast drama that, whilst sharing the concerns of postmodern literature and film, is not identical with these other media forms. It is for this reason that the new audio drama represents a new and exciting innovation in the cultural arts. However, we are still left with the problem of politics in relation to this new media form. While it remains cult, it cannot produce the shared experiences necessary to resist the allure of the "echo chamber" effect. And this is where cultural criticism comes in.

No one may know the world I am in when I listen to the new dramas I love, yet this world consumes me totally. So to combat these effects I must engage and I must write and tell people about the world I live my life so much in. Criticism must therefore serve as an act of translation and outreach. This leaves us though in the same position as Daniel at the end of season 1 of *Archive 81*. Our activity may be part of the problem, contributing to the echo chamber, (although I have not to my knowledge released a daemon), yet we must keep telling others about our experience and our thinking to find a way out of this tangle. Well, here I am. Telling you. Now listen closely...

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Notes:

[1] As *Wired* magazine proclaimed on 24 August 2016, "Fiction Podcasts Are Finally a Thing! Thank You Sci-Fi and Horror" <http://www.wired.com/2016/08/found-footage-fiction-podcasts/>. In some ways, the canon has become self-organising, especially since the recent launch of the #AudioDramaSunday group on Twitter.

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