

This paper discusses podcasting in the context of the practice of curation and also as a space that operates as a key tool for what Les Back terms sociological listening. I will discuss how podcasting can be framed as a sociological tool and how it is an act of curation in the arts-practice sense of the term, primarily through the use of and creation of archives. I will discuss how like any medium podcasting contains examples of curation and archive assemblage that seek to fulfil commercial and nostalgic consumer needs but also how, as a largely democratic medium - for the time being at least, podcasts can use and create archives to address historical and cultures erasures and neglect. I will do this by placing podcasting in specific contexts regarding curation, sociological listening and using examples from podcasts, including my own practice, to illustrate how podcasts animate archives, create them and addressing historical oversight in terms of the cultural spaces they are in dialogue with.

To start with, I'd like to talk about curation and sociological listening, how they are connected, and how podcasting relates to both, independently and connected.

Curating is a word that gets thrown around a lot in cultural spaces, particularly online and digital ones, and has come to have negative connotations not dissimilar to the word creator. Digital technology has made everyone a creator apparently, and if we share anything online, which we all do, we are curators. The elevation of participation to the level of active creativity and gatekeeping through language. **Terry Smith** writes that **'the title of curator is assumed by anyone who has a more than minimal role in bringing about a situation in which something creative might be done'** (2012, 18).

In *Ways of Curating*, Hans Ulrich Oberst quotes a conversation with **Stewart Brand**, in which Brand says curating **'has been democratised by the net, so, in one sense, everybody is curating. If you're writing a blog, it's curating. So we're becoming editors and curators and those two are blending online'** (, 169)

These are ideas that will be familiar to anyone with even a cursory engagement with media commentary, but they fail to engage with how, through digital spaces such as those occupied but podcasting, curation as it is traditionally understood has been embraced, energised and evolved. **Oberst** writes that **‘A new generation of younger individuals is beginning to contribute to contemporary art and culture. Born in the age of digitization, this group [...] shares an irreverence for traditional notions of authorship and cultural heritage, something that is manifested in their work. They have instant knowledge and technological know how at their fingertips, and they rely on digital social platforms to showcase their new ideas and culturally iconoclastic approaches ( ,169-170)’**

And

**‘We are already starting to witness visionary acts of digital curating, and curating will surely change as a generation native to digital tools begin to develop new formats. This generation has grown up in an entirely new world. Perhaps by learning from them, we can learn something about our future’ ( , 171)**

It is sage to assume that podcasters fall into this group and that some of those visionary acts of digital curation take the form of podcasts. This is because of the timing of podcasting’s rise to coincide with an explosion of content creation on the internet by a variety of users from the mainstream of old, established traditional media but also from the fringes and from a variety of backgrounds and legacies. The negative result of so much content is noise, an apt term for this paper, a term relating to the amount of content being available online for consumers and a conjoined inability to make sense of it all and find ‘meaningful’ or ‘worthwhile’ cultural experiences. This is where it is important to consider the act of curation as a vital, active endeavour that helps parse from the noise, examples of work that is driven by a desire to provide those meaningful cultural experiences.

**Oberst**, a renowned curator and someone responsible for detailing and engaging with the term and its shifts in the 21st century describes the role of the curator as follows:

**‘To create free space, not occupy existing space [...] the curator has to bridge gaps and build bridges between artists, the public institutions and other types of communities. The crux of this work is to build temporary communities by connecting different people and practices and creating the conditions for triggering sparks between them’.**

( , 154)

This temporary nature is key to **Oberst’s** ideas about curation in the art world. He adds, beautifully, that **‘curating after all produces ephemeral constellations with their own limited career span ( , 58)**. The Internet, the space where podcasting exists, is a space where the temporary is inherent, albeit with the paradox that it also contains permanence. People listen, read, watch, then move on. There’s a beauty in this, in the multitude of experiences available to listeners and users, but some podcasters also understand that the Internet is a record, and through the publishing of podcasts there is the chance to create an archive that is politically representative.

**Fairchild** writes that **‘there is little doubt that popular culture has what we should call a ‘politics’, if only because it is a source of tremendous power, influence and learning’ ( , 01)**.

Later on I will discuss a podcast that is actively political in terms of curation of content, but within all of the podcasts I will discuss today there is the desire to make a statement through their work, and much of this is done through curation.

The noise I mentioned previously also makes it difficult to listen, and now I would like to talk about how podcasts act as a sociological tool, using **Les Back’s** ideas around sociological listening as a basis. In

*The Art of Listening* he writes that **'one of the values of the kind of sociological listening I want to argue for is the importance of living with doubt in the service of understanding, of trying to grapple with moral complexity ( , 14-15).** Sociological listening is connected to the deep listening **Back describes with Bull as 'involving 'practices of dialogue and procedures for investigation, transposition and interpretation' ( , 03-04).** Both of these statements resonate with the potentiality of podcasting at its best, be it conversational, documentary or narrative. With the best podcasts, listeners are invited in to a sonic world where active listening is not only encouraged, but necessary, and the durational and creative freedom possible in the medium only further encourages active participation on the part of the listener in the most imaginative cases. Sociological listening is not passive and is best utilised in collaboration with material that itself, seeks to engage the listener in an active reshaping of culture and the world.

Bull and Back: **'Thinking with our ears offers an opportunity to augment our critical imaginations, to comprehend our world and our encounters with it according to multiple registers of feeling' ( , 03)**

And

**'The kind of listening we envision is not straightforward, not self-evident - it is not was listening.**

**Rather, we have to to work toward what might be called agile listening and this involves attuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound '( , 03)**

Sociological listening, deep listening, agile listening are all part of the process of critical thinking, something that is increasingly required but increasingly rare in both media engagement and media education. **Buckingham** describes it as **'a reflexive process, in which we constantly have to question our own preconceptions, interpretations and conclusions. It means avoiding the rush to judgement, and recognising the limitations of claims we make about what we know, and hence about how certain we**

can really be' (2019, 55). Again, there are parallels here with the language, tone and mission of Back's sociological listening but there are also connections with what **Oberst** is asking of curators. He says that:

**'To make a collection is to find acquire organise and store items [...] It is also inevitably, a way of thinking about the world. The connections and principles that produce a collection contain assumptions, juxtapositions, findings, experimental possibilities and associations. Collection-making, you could say, is a method of producing knowledge' ( , 39)**

Some of these mission statements have been taken up by podcasters, who use the podcast as a space to display and invite critical thinking and reflexivity. Some podcasters of course don't do this, some do it to different degrees and for some it is their reason d'être.

I will now move on to some case studies, that show how these ideas are being put into practice across a variety of different podcasts.

First up I want to talk about some podcasts that animate the existing archives of their creators. This mining of the past can be seen as a purely negative and nostalgic practice.

**Simon Reynolds** asks:

**'Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times?' ( , xiv)**

There is definitely an aspect of nostalgia to this practice, which in my examples often simply repackage existing material under the guise of giving listeners access to a vault. Reynolds adds that:

**'We've become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. Not only has there never been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is *able* to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously' ( , xxi)**

Podcasters, like others in the digital space, can act as gatekeepers and curators to help listeners wade through and make sense of all the 'stuff' and in some cases, have material that feeds nostalgic desire but also has cultural value in and of itself. The John Robb tapes (**Slide**) see the renowned music critic and musician sharing full, unedited recordings that formed the basis of earlier interviews he wrote, particularly for Sounds magazine in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In episode 1, he shares an early interview with Nirvana, recorded in America pre-*Nevermind*, pre-*Teen Spirit*. Here's a clip of Robb setting up the episode and the first part of the interview.

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The audio of the interview is hard to hear, fuzzy, clearly recorded onto tape. This all adds to its perceived authenticity, and coupled with the fact that it's Kurt Cobain talking means the listener feels privy to a special moment, it feels like something lost has been uncovered. Even though it was never lost, it was just in storage. This is aided by Robb's contextual introduction and the fact that we are used to clear, crisp audio on podcasts, the sound of 'now', juxtaposed with the old tape, the sound of 'then'. As **Back** writes **'the past refuses to stay in its place that is behind us, it is unstable. Equally the present cannot simply explain the past from the point of the now'** ( , 23). This highlights the tension that forms a central part of nostalgia industry, a tension Simon Reynolds has noted himself. What is to be done with

the past, how to navigate the commercial and cultural opportunities proffered by the digital age morally and economically? There's no doubt that while Robb is a successful journalist, presenter and musician, part of him giving listeners access to his personal archive is to promote himself as someone with a history of experience that can be counted on to do a good job. The unedited interview with one of the most famous musicians of all time helps that cause, while also providing a service to fans of Nirvana and those interested in pop culture history more broadly. **Reynolds** writes that **'Nostalgia in the modern sense is an impossible emotion or at least an incurable one: the only remedy would involve time travel'** (2012, xxv/xxvi). The John Robb tapes feel partly, like time travel and Robb isn't the only music journalist engaging in this form of time travel. Toure (**Slide**), former print and MTV journalist is using his successful podcast to open up his archives. Here's him introducing The Lost Tapes Vol. 1, a series of full length interviews with Jay-Z, Nas and Kanye West that in edited form, formed part of his MTV show, followed by again, a little snippet from the lost tape itself featuring Jay Z.

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I'd like to move on now to talk about a podcast that animates its archive in a different way. The Paris Review (**SLIDE**) is a famous literary journal that features original writing in the form of memoir, short story and poetry alongside interviews with writers. Their podcast is released in series form, with each episode in a series based around a different theme. Each episode includes the dramatic reading of short stories and poems from the journal's archives, alongside new writing and like Robb and Toure, raw interview material from their illustrious archive, including conversations with personal favourites James Baldwin and Hunter S. Thompson, where the thrill of the language those writers used is matched with the unique cadence of their speaking voices. Elsewhere in the episodes, as mentioned, there are dramatic readings of work from the archive. Guests are invited to read short stories and poems, sometimes with a soundtrack and/or sonic landscape created alongside that builds an atmospheric, world-building

accompaniment. Here is an example, Marc Maron reading Sam Lipsyte's short story *The Worm In Philly*, from episode 4, *Missed Connections*.

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I thought it would be nice to hear a podcast legend doing something different in podcast land.

There is undoubtedly a nostalgic, commercial element to *The Paris Review* showcasing its archive in the podcast space, but as the clip shows, podcasting offers the opportunity, not available when the journal first published a lot of the work in its archive, to create a platform of delivery for material that is dynamic and exciting, attracts new and different audiences and brings to life the stories in unique ways. The combination of material in each thematically curated episode ensures a diverse and vibrant listening experience while also hinting at the impressive depth of the journal's archive. It is an audio equivalent to the experience of reading the journal in a way that feels authentic to the mission of the journal, to provide readers, and now listeners, with access to great writers and great writing.

While those examples may feel only tangentially connected to the ideas of curation and sociological listening as active and political and maybe closer to ideas around commercialisation of archive material and nostalgia, listening to the episodes in depth provides a more nuanced appreciation of how they are all seeking to contextualise their own individual pasts with those of the cultural spaces they inhabit, be it rock, hip hop or literature.

Next I'd like to talk about my own practice, and how what I do on my film podcast, in association with Dr Dario Llinares - hopefully won't make him blush too much, sorry Dario - is an act of curation that



will lead to the creation of an archive that represents our position in the cultural space we inhabit, which is film podcasting.

The CInematologists (**SLIDE**) is a successful film podcast that has been running for nearly 5 years and is and has partnered with BFI, MUBI, Curzon, Club Des Femmes and others. We have carved a niche based on how we discuss cinema - as critics, academics, practitioners and fans. This blend of approaches, rooted in our complex critical identities rather than as intentional avenues or types of discourse has resulted in a large following as the result is both accessible and in-depth. This has also attracted the partners listed above, and others, to give time and consideration to work that more mainstream podcasts may not have or give, while at the same time giving that work exposure to a large, diverse audience. Episodes can also take the shape of long-form interviews with filmmakers or academics, and most episodes feature me or Dario interviewing someone about the content or these of the episode. The podcast is based around the academic year, so it comes out across two seasons, annually. It is also often built around the live event screening of a film that forms the central thrust for that episode. This combination, and the fact that it is a research commitment on top of our full time academic positions means that the podcast is not and couldn't be a weekly show that responds to new releases and trends, not that we would per se be interested in that. It also means that there is a lot of discussion and thought that goes in to what we screen and want to talk about - sometimes aligned with our research interests, sometimes not - that results in a process of curation that is political, because we know that our events and episodes are a statement about our tastes and interests. We are also aware that in the contemporary moment there is a political dimension to curation based on the types of films and filmmakers covered in any regular, popular podcast, one we embrace. Here is Dario on a recent episode that was based around the work of little-known - criminally so - experimental filmmaker Scott Barley, and why dedicating episodes to the kind of work Scott makes is vital for us

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Oberst writes that **'the task of curating is to make junctions, to allow different elements to touch'** ( , 01).

We believe that by placing Scott Barley's experimental work *Sleep Has Her House*, next to Jan De Bont's *Speed*, near an episode on comedy, near and episode on film-philosophy, does that curative work.

We are about to start our eleventh season, which will encompass our 100th episode. There is now a substantial body of material that is an archive of original critical commentary and interview material. It has been curated from a pragmatic standpoint - what will be able to get people to come out and see?

What do we want to talk about? But, it's also an act of curation and archive building that says something about us and our world view and our cinephilia as a cohesive, single entity object. It allows us to reflect and make the future of the podcast a response to what we've done and allow us to further address issues, and erasures, and areas of contention and under-seen work.

Finally I'd like to talk about a podcast that is explicitly about reframing historical narratives and contexts. Programmer and film critic Ashley Clark says that programming is an act of 'narrative correction', a chance to right the wrongs of film and cultural history. This is aligned with **Back's** idea of sociological listening, which he says **'While the scale and complexity of global society may escape our total understanding, the sociologists can still pay attention to the fragments, the voices and stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored'** ( , 01).

The *Black Men Can't Jump In Hollywood* podcast (**SLIDE**) is a successful podcast hosted by three rising black American comedians that explicitly addresses the historical context of representation of black actors and actresses in Hollywood and, by virtue of being a long-form analysis that covers representation

and also industrial and social contexts, implicitly addresses the critical reception of films starring black actors and actresses. The show features a different film in each episode and ranges from the critically lauded, such as Spike Lee's *BlackKklansman*, to the critically ridiculed, their 2019 Christmas special focused on the Brian Levant directed *Jingle All The Way*. The hosts are explicit in their criticisms of the role Hollywood has played in sidelining and misrepresenting black actors historically and by choosing to dedicate often 90+ minutes to work previously dismissed as trash, from an informed and intelligent position, they are reframing the conversation about the labour of the actors involved in those works, if not always the films themselves.

**Racquel Gates writes 'Representations do not do the work by themselves, and, to take it a step further, they may not even do the work that we presume them to do. When we refer to media as either positive or negative, we imply that the images push perceptions of blackness in one of two directions: either forward or backward. But is that their only function? What about resistant reading? And irony? And pleasure? Where do those factor in the equation? (2018, 14)**

Nuance, new contexts, narrative correction, all aspects of the cultural conversation that podcasting has the potential to address.

Here's a fun clip from the episode on *I, Robot*, which indicates somewhat this approach and how it brings perspective to a film that upon release, would have been reviewed from a less sympathetic point of view in terms of race, due to the overwhelming dominance of white critics in mainstream film criticism.

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Similar to The Cinematologists, The Black Men Can't Jump archive has been curated to speak to issues and ideas from a specific point of view, resulting in a body of work whereby the connections and juxtapositions speak as a single entity, one that is political. The Black Men Can't jump podcast reframes history, addressing the production and critical legacy of Hollywood filmmaking. As **Camus** said '**there is no culture without legacy**' ( , 29) and podcasters are working at a time when there is an expectation to address the legacies of the past when discussing history, the future and the contemporary moment. As **Back** puts it '**as much as the here also contains the elsewhere, the now also contains the legacy of the past**' ( , 22)

These are just some podcasts that are engaged with curation, sociological listening and the politics and tensions contained within them, and admittedly to varying degrees. They have picked up **Back's** invitation to engage in the process of sociological listening:

**'In the first instance, the invitation to listen more is issued to sociologists and sociological researchers but it can be extended to include activists, journalists, artists, scholars, publics and even, perhaps, politicians. Its sense of purpose is best summed up as an attempt to remark upon the unremarkable, evidence the self-evident and relate the troubles contained in the smallest story to a larger, more worldly scale'** ( , 22).

All the podcasts I've discussed today take the personal, the unremarkable, the smallest stories and repackage, reframe or represent them as meaningful to a hopefully, actively listening audience. They do a vital job of creating and maintaining valuable cultural archives that define and redefine the cultural spaces they inhabit, vital work at a time when as **Oberst** says '**so many archives are still homeless**' ( , 47).

And who is listening? Admittedly, the most popular podcasts are not necessarily doing this work, preferring instead to rely on brand/star name recognition to lure ears, but the work of curation and sociological listening are both active processes that seek to find and add meaning, context and understanding to the world. They, in the words of Camus **'speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so'** ( , 25-26). They provide conversations, which as Oberst says **'are a way of archiving or preserving the past'** ( , 57). They ask for sociological, deep, active listening, which results in the following, as Back says:

**'The listener's commitment to hearing places us on the side of the story from the outset. Yet, this is not a proposal for blind acceptance or unquestioning agreement. Being a partisan to the human story in all its manifold diversity does not exclude maintaining a critical orientation to it'** ( , 08)

And all assume, that for the particular active, curated, archival experience they are producing, there will be listeners, because, as Fairchild reflected on his research into community radio, which translates to podcasting:

**'The people I spoke to [...] never really knew who might be listening. Most took it on faith that someone was listening closely enough to care about what they were saying. This was enough for them to want to speak to be heard, to speak to make sense and to speak to be understood. In the process they began to hear the unheard and understand the unknown'** ( , 204).