**Introduction**

Richard Herring is a writer, stand-up comedian and podcaster. In recent years he has found sustained success as a podcaster, particularly through the podcast *Richard Herring’s Leicester Square Theatre Podcast* (RHLSTP), on which he interviews a renowned comedian, broadcaster or celebrity guest in front of a live studio audience. RHLSTP is released in both audio and video versions. He also uses the podcast form to explore improvisational aspects of his writing and stand-up through the *As It Occurs To Me* (AIOTM) and *Richard Herring’s Meaning Of Life* (RHMOL) projects. Then there’s the surreal performance art of *Me1 vs Me2 Snooker* that finds Herring playing himself at snooker and taking on the persona of both players and also commentating on the frame as it happens, in audio form. Due to the variety of podcast forms he engages with and his high profile through them, Herring is an appropriate practitioner to provide a case study interview for this book. His work cuts across several types of podcast – live, pre-recorded, comedy, interview/chat etc. and podcasting is central to his work. It is the area where he gains the most recognition of the varied work he does and also, as he discusses in the interview, podcasting provides the opportunity to drive audiences and consumers to the other areas such as his stand-up shows. He is also a reflective practitioner taking the opportunity to discuss podcasting as a form on his RHLSTP podcast when a suitable opportunity arises, for example with fellow podcaster Adam Buxton on episode 138[[1]](#endnote-1).

This interview was conducted via email in two exchanges in March and April of 2017. Herring was very generous with his time but following the second, follow-up set of questions declared ‘that’s your lot now’. This is the full transcript, edited only for typographical errors. In it Herring explores his feelings regarding the podcast medium, his myriad approaches to the form, how podcasting relates to the rest of his output and where he feels the medium, and his relationship with it, is headed. This interview is intended to showcase and critique the role of podcasting in contemporary British media culture from the perspective of a practitioner whose work in the medium has crossed over into wider public consciousness. This was the case with the episodes featuring Stephen Fry and Stephen Merchant that are discussed in the interview, which were featured in and on a variety of mainstream media outlets. Arguably, Herring has brought knowledge and discussion of podcasting in the UK to a wider audience than was previously the case.

The interview presented here explores a number of the themes arising throughout the varied academic contributions to this book, including the form, funding, creative practice and the audience. The majority of the interview is concerned with RHLSTP, which at the time of going to press was in its fifth season. Episodes are released fortnightly and seasons run a couple of times per year.

**Interview**

**Interviewer: The RHLSTP podcast is released in audio and video versions. Do you class them both as a podcast? What is a podcast to you?**

Richard Herring: I don’t think it really matters what you call them. They are self-generated audio or video shows. Podcast covers it quite well but aside from having no outside interference or executives to commission them I don’t see them as any different from radio or TV shows that just happen to go up on the internet - as many real ones do nowadays anyway.

**Does podcasting tap into a particular desire for catharsis and communication for you that can’t be reached in stand-up or your other writing, and if so how?**

Podcasts are like stand-up in that they are self-generated works. I like both as a medium for comedy as I have autonomy, am uncensored, can try out anything I like and reach consumers directly [Herring’s podcasts are free but act as drivers for purchase of tickets to his stand-up tours and merchandise]. With stand-up you have to persuade people to come to a venue and give you some money but podcasts are more direct and have a bit more scope in what you can do with them. My attraction to them initially though was that they were an immediate way to get ideas to an audience without interference or censorship.

**How liberating has the freedom afforded by podcasting been for you? I’m thinking particularly around the ability to discuss the process within the form and the potential for commentary and/or self-reflection?**

It’s very liberating to not have to wait to be commissioned or be in fashion, and also to have an idea and be able to get it out to people as soon as you wish rather than wait for a gap in [the] schedule. It gives me control over when something starts and finishes, has no time limit and lets me do stuff that no broadcaster would ever commission - *Me1 vs Me2* *Snooker* being a prime example. So for expression and ‘art’ these [aspects] are more valuable that anything. Of course you don’t directly get paid either but that was not a concern for me. Or at least, getting stuff out there was more important to me.

**As someone who has worked across radio, television and podcasting what are the differences between the forms in terms of what is permissible, and might be termed ‘political correctness’?**

You obviously have freedom to do what you want at any time with podcasts but your audience can still express discomfort or anger with material so it’s not a carte blanche. It’s exactly the same as with stand-up [where] only you and the audience decide what is acceptable. Comedy is partly about being incorrect in all different kinds of ways and I think TV and radio allow for a certain amount of this stuff but obviously it depends [on the] time and place [that] work is available. Just as in life. A joke that would work with your mates in a pub might not go so well at your Grandma’s funeral. The good thing about podcasts is that the audience choose to download them and they aren’t beamed into people’s homes [without their permission]. So it’s fair that you have more liberty. [With] stand-up too, generally, the audience know what they are letting themselves in for, but that does not give you blanket permission to say *anything* [*emphasis added by interviewer*]. Your audience lets you know if you have overstepped a mark and if you do it too much or too often then you won’t have an audience. Political correctness is a pejorative term and I don’t think it’s something that exists in the way that people who use it seem to think it does. You are, as the success of many politicians show, allowed to say what you like. The idea that you’re not is what fuels that kind of politics [and] it’s just bullshit.

**To what extent do you feel that podcasting is secondary to television in terms of aspiration and artistic satisfaction? Do you think podcasting has the ability to ever change this?**

It depends what you want. If you need fame and adulation and affirmation from the mainstream then you need to be on TV, but if you are interested in the ‘art’ of it then it doesn’t matter where you are performing. The downside of podcasting is that you’re unlikely to be able to achieve the kind of budgets that mean you can have the production values or scope of TV. But you have autonomy and your own channel. So if money and fame are less important than self-expression and the ideas, podcasts are not secondary at all. You have a potential audience of anyone in the world with Internet access. I think in a few years there will be little distinction, as people will just download the content they want and the only advantage of a broadcaster or Production Company is the budget and PR that comes with that. But make something that’s good and people will hear about it. The quality of TV comedy in general is not so brilliant that it eclipses what the best people are doing online.

**It has been said, by comedians amongst others, that there is a distinct relationship between comedy and podcasting, especially stand-up. Is this something you concur with? How would you explain the attraction for comedians within podcasting?**

Autonomy again. Not being told what to do, or hammered into a different shape to fit a certain hole. These are the things that should appeal to any decent stand-up [comedian].

**Why do you release audio and video versions of RHLSTP? To what extent is it easy to do because of the form the podcast takes, and to what extent is it to cater to different types of audiences?**

Partly [I do it] to see what’s possible within the medium. If we can film these and learn from what we’re doing we can move on to bigger things. But, seeing what’s going on provides another aspect to it and gives us potentially more scope to expand – get the show on Netflix or [an]other platform. Basically we give people the choice. We can do the audio for free, if they want the video they can Kickstart [Kickstarter – a crowd-funding service] it. So far they have Kickstarted [paid for it through the crowd-funding service] it. But we’ve moved on to more ambitious stuff like *RHMOL* and *AIOTM* and I’d like to push on to film sitcom[s] and movies too if we can get the necessary backing from the people who like it.

**How does podcasting play into your creative identity? To what extent do you feel you are regarded as, and/or see yourself as a podcaster?**

I think it works for me and my ‘character’ of wanting to be on the telly and being a bit of a nearly man. So to do it myself works on a couple of levels. I think I have had most of my successes within podcasting and many people view me as primarily that. I still view myself as a writer/stand-up though. Occasionally I wonder if it’s counterproductive to these careers. The podcasting stuff has to be a bit improvised and slapdash by necessity as I do need to earn some money and so can’t put too much time into the stuff I do for free. My stand-up shows are much denser and more sophisticated than the riffed opening monologue of *RHLSTP* [at the opening of each episode Herring can be heard doing a short ‘bit’ for the live audience]. Does that lead people to underestimate me as a stand-up? Perhaps. But also my stand-up audience has grown as a result of the podcasts, so it’s probably a positive overall

**How interested are you in pushing the limits of the podcasting form? For example, *Me1 vs Me2* Snooker feels more like surrealist art than anything else.**

Very much so. I think the sky is the limit both in terms of surreal ideas and ambition of scope. I hope to be able to explore more stupid ideas and bigger production values over the next twenty years of my career.

**Are guests aware prior to recording that the recordings are generally edited minimally and go out as if ‘live’ to a certain degree? Have there been instances of guests wishing to considerably edit the recording?**

[I am ] aware that the long-form interview can lead to people saying stuff they don’t necessarily mean to reveal [so] I give every guest 100% control beforehand, letting them know we will edit out anything they want and indeed not put the podcast out if they don’t want us to. Because of this they speak freely and rarely ask for any cuts.

**Where does the decision to leave so much in come from? For example, in the Stephen Merchant episode[[2]](#endnote-2) [where an uncomfortable tension grows between Herring and his guest during the interview], were you ever tempted to cut around it or edit it to relieve the tension?**

We did edit a little bit out of that one actually, for that reason, but I’d rather leave everything in because it’s real, and also for the occasional awkward and failed bits there are much more in the way of hits. By keeping everything in you are showing the people at home how high the standard of this show actually is. I think the increasingly sophisticated viewers of TV know how much editing and filming goes into making a tight 30 minutes. So I prefer not to patronise them and show it warts and all. I have only ever taken stuff out at request of guest[s] and there are more awkward bits than that one that I’d happily have put out.

**There is a strong degree of honesty and frankness on the *RHLSTP* podcast. I’m thinking here of the now infamous Stephen Fry episode[[3]](#endnote-3) [where Fry admitted publicly for the first time that he had in the past tried to commit suicide]. In your opinion to what extent does the live-ness of the recording facilitate this?**

It’s not just the live-ness, it’s the trust in me and the audience and the fact that the guest knows stuff is not going to be edited down to sound-bites and that they’re going to get to tell the whole story. The live audience in the Fry one certainly contributed to him opening up. The love in the room was palpable and he felt comfortable, and justifiably so. None of those 400 people even tweeted what had happened in the room before broadcast. No one went to the papers to break it.

**How do you regard those moments when the recording captures something primarily visual – for instance Simon Munnery[[4]](#endnote-4) taking to the auditorium, then engaging you in an arm wrestling match - knowing that those moments will feel very different when listened to? This goes back to the idea of the surreal mentioned earlier.**

Don’t mind. Like it. You can watch it if you want of course too. Or come and see it live. Only way to be certain you see everything.

**Could you discuss your feelings on funding for podcasting. The relative freedoms you’ve discussed seem to be offset by a precarious funding model and you are constantly seeking financial support to keep the show going. It seems that greater funding could be possible but would come with compromises that would restrict the freedoms and change the identities of what you do? Is this a fair assessment or is it simply that podcasting hasn’t yet proven its worth in the same way that radio or television has?**

I was never bothered about making money from this, just [in] getting ideas out there. I didn’t want to lose tens of thousands of pounds, so with the more ambitious ideas we ask for money and then if people don’t want those ambitious ideas they won’t happen. But accidentally the regular free podcasts are a good business model providing you can cope with not being paid directly. It’s publicity for tours and DVDs. Producers and executives hear you. You build up a loyal audience – all these things help. In an attempt to be able to afford the more ambitious stuff I do ask for occasional or monthly donations. In an ideal world my 150,000 listeners would all give me a pound a month and I would make a feature film a year (or whatever). In reality it’s so far a much smaller hit rate, but we raised £100,000 for AIOTM via Kickstarter and we do make some money selling tickets [and so on]. If we can convince more people that we’re using their money to make more content and not to make ourselves rich then that would be amazing.

But personally, through increased ticket sales on tour and maybe a bit more interest from radio and TV, I am making as good a living now as I ever did. So like I say, I am not a businessman, but through my desire to get ideas and good comedy out there I have chanced across a good business model. And most people will at some point want to put their hands in their pockets to thank me for all they’ve had, especially if they are getting more content out of it. On the Internet a lot of people giving a small amount could [result in] amazing things. But I like the fact that my [podcast] stuff is free for everyone and that those who can afford to pay [generally] choose to do so, so that those who can’t afford to pay can still enjoy it.

**Since you started writing and publishing everyday you’ve kept it up despite the increase in popularity and presumably workload of the podcast, plus your Metro column, stand-up career and family life. Are you similarly committed to podcasting? For example, should a return to television happen would you continue with your podcasts?**

It’s hard to balance everything, but as you say, I’ve managed to keep up the blog through some very busy times. At the moment *Me1 vs Me2* *Snooker* is on hiatus [because] there is too much going on and I want to make sure that I get enough time to enjoy my family and be around for my wife and daughter. But I can’t see me giving up podcasting entirely if I get more success elsewhere. In fact why do something like *RHLSTP* on TV if you’re a success? I can keep doing it myself and retain control over what it is. *RHLSTP* is so easy to do. It takes a day out of my week - though booking guests is a bit of a hassle - that I think I would keep doing it. And if I were a ‘TV name’ too then it would mean we’d sell more tickets and it would be worth doing financially anyway.

It’s like the Edinburgh Fringe. In the 1990s some journalists suggested I would only do it until I was on TV and then leave it behind, but through all the ups and downs of my career I have only taken 4 years off since 1992 and am about to go back there with my 40th show for my 30th anniversary Fringe.

I do things because I think they will be good, or will teach me something or help me get better at what I do, not for the money or fame. I am happy to make money if it comes along, though less keen on being famous as I’d like to retain my relative anonymity so I can go out with my family and listen in to people’s conversations in cafes without them noticing me!

Podcasting has been good for me, and good to me, and I think it has more potential for me than TV anyway. But if a good TV job meant I could spend six months with my family doing not too much else then I’d have to think about that too. I think I probably need to keep working and would be a pain in the arse if I stopped, so it might be good for my family that I will always have this outlet.

**Have you noticed people coming to your work via podcasting and staying for all the other, different outputs, particularly your stand up?**

Yes definitely. My live audiences more or less doubled in the first couple of years I was podcasting and plenty of people tell me how much the podcasts mean to them after the shows. So it’s one of the things that has helped me keep on doing the live work - though I employ a multi-pronged attack so also get some sales from newspaper articles, radio shows [and so on]. I think if you’ve enjoyed 50 or so hours of free stuff a year, you will probably want to give a bit back, but also if you’ve enjoyed them you will seek out more.

**You could argue that your work is very much steeped in a UK context. To the best of your knowledge do you get much of a non-UK audience? Would you ever think about doing something that might be more suited to a specific international audience, say the US?**

There are certainly listeners all over the world and I get emails from Afghanistan, Antarctica, Africa and other places that don’t begin with A. I don’t know if it’s enough to sustain work out there. There’s certainly a core of US fans. I am not that interested in cracking the world before I have cracked the UK. I like the fact that the podcasts can reach everyone on the planet, but I don’t really target any specific demographic with my work so wouldn’t really fancy doing something specific in this regard.

**Your podcasts, particularly *AIOTM* and *RHLSTP* feel like they have a very British sensibility. Do you see any differences between US and UK podcasts that to an extent could be said to mirror differences between US and UK comedy?**

America is much bigger with more potential listeners which I think makes it easier for a niche podcast to get loads of downloads. I don’t really think of my stuff that way. I am just doing what I think is funny. US podcasts seem to be more professionally produced and more targeted to sponsorship, but I don’t listen to enough to be able to give you much [more] of an answer.

**In closing, do you have a sense of how podcasts might expand – for example will they become mainstream or will people see them as just a derivative of radio and other media?**

I think the Internet gives us all the chance to be our own production company and broadcaster. I think soon we will consume all our media from the same basic device, selecting what we fancy and having a big name like BBC or HBO might make people gravitate to those things, but they will also be able to pick out podcasts or radio and TV shows made online. I’d ultimately like to use the platform to make my own sitcoms and films. I don’t think I have quite enough time to make this happen, but out there somewhere is the Charlie Chaplin of the internet who will be both able to produce the material and galvanise enough people to give him or her a dime a throw and become a millionaire.

**Conclusion**

This interview has provided an introduction into how a podcast practitioner thinks about the form in relation to their career and other forms of creative and professional output. It also engages with the key area of funding for and revenue from podcasting and from Herring’s answers it is clear that it can be an expensive and precarious business even at what might be termed the elite, or most visible at least, level.

It is difficult to engage in detailed discussions around listenership and impact of the podcast when the main podcast platform iTunes refuse to release data on listenership to either creators or consumers. As a result any discussion will be missing vital data. Discussions around revenue for the podcaster and how the revenue from podcasts compared to say, stand-up comedy touring, are complicated given the self-employed nature of Herring in this case, and those in a similar position. No doubt this will change if and when data on listenership becomes more transparent and podcasting as a viable commercial endeavour become more commonplace. Despite these limitations, this interview case study has provided important insight into the thought and creative processes that go into podcasting practice, into podcasting in terms of funding, brand and product building and into the value and worth of podcasts and podcasting to one of the form’s most successful UK practitioners.

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