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Introduction: Audio Storytelling and the Global South

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Introduction: Audio Storytelling and the Global South

Abstract

The Editors introduce this special tenth anniversary issue of RadioDoc Review, dedicated to listening to the Global South.

This special issue of *RadioDoc Review* opens up to the richness of narrative and crafted audio from, or about, the Global South. It is an effort from us, as new Editors of this journal, to begin as we mean to go on. That is, to foster exchange between academics and practitioners who have for too long been situated in the 'centre' and the 'margins' of audio praxis and scholarship. In so doing, our hope is to allow for a South-to-North flow of critique, debate and dialogue. Such flows can be hard to bring about with parity and without falling into modes of extraction or exploitation. This is especially true in academic publishing, reliant as it is on the unpaid labour of writers and reviewers. So we are aware we are asking people in the Global South to donate their time, knowledge, effort and creativity to address the problem of privilege. We don't claim to have found the ideal solution to these issues. But we have tried hard to commit *RadioDoc Review* to not only breaking out of habituated hierarchies – by finding contributors and content that challenge how audio is conceived in the spaces our journal inhabits – but to allow for pushbacks and resistances, for voices to speak on their own terms and of their own truths.

There are of course complex and sometimes contested definitions of South(s), North(s), as well as of audio and narrative. Broadly, we have taken 'South' to mean material conditions and infrastructures tied not to geography but to histories of colonised subjugation and to modern-day realities – ever more apparent with the current conflict in Gaza – of the 'West and the Rest' (Hall, 1992; Medrado, 2023). The South and North are entangled, in many ways of course, with Global North media like the BBC, NPR or RFI benefiting from the audiences, stories and journalistic and creative talent of the Global South. There are programme-makers in the North who come from the South and the same is true for academics working on radio and podcasting, for whom access to recognition and resources can often mean moving to the North. We have tried to prioritise participation of those based in the Global South, to address the relative lack of support they might have in accessing the same resources and academic networks. We note that some of our contributors to this issue might not in the first instance have reached for the Global South label to describe themselves or their work, but it can be a useful term to denote collective struggle against globalised strictures that mute and marginalise. We therefore use the term cautiously and with a keen awareness of our own positionalities.

Based in British academia and overseeing a journal published by an Australian university, we knew we had to begin from a place that addressed our positions in

entrenched systems of privilege and status. That started with a consideration of our own listening and audio-making assumptions, moulded into us during our formative years as BBC listeners and producers. Our ears had been trained from the get-go to hear 'ins' and 'outs' as they go past, to identify voices as fluent, arresting or meandering, to know instinctively – or so we thought – how to marshal speech, sound, and music into story, emotion, and meaning.

When it was founded, this journal's policies, published on the website, stipulated that reviewers must apply to become review panel members and that to be considered they must 'be highly credentialled in their field'. For academic contributors, this meant having 'well regarded scholarly publications' and for practitioners, to 'have received international commendations for their output'. Documentaries considered for review had to have been broadcast on a national broadcaster, podcast on 'an established online forum AND/OR endorsed by a credentialled broadcaster (an individual who meets RDR reviewer standards)' or have won or been shortlisted for a specified list of documentary prizes. This concern for credentialling arose from a sense that a journal about radio documentaries would not inevitably be taken seriously, would not then be read and cited or attract people to write for it. It's important to remember that journals don't just set the agenda for what or who is considered excellent or important but are themselves subject to culturally contingent cultures of value. Together with the journal's editorial board, we took the step of removing these formal barriers to contributions to the journal going forward, to encourage more kinds of people to write for us about more kinds of story.

In addition to anxieties about academic credentialing, the journal's board was keen to promote knowledge about and appreciation of complex, crafted narrative audio, in an age of almost ubiquitous syndicated music and chat radio and the rise of amateur and celebrity chatcasts. In the years up till the founding of the journal in 2014, it seemed as if complex crafted short feature and documentary making was an endangered occupation (as it sometimes seemed to us, as we considered our career opportunities). More expensive than talk and music radio (though always much, much cheaper than TV), public service broadcasters like the BBC, where we both worked for many years, made successive cuts to the production of this kind of content. This is the context in which the journal's board devised that strict policy of quality control of both writers and reviewed content.

Since then, there has been an acknowledged renaissance in complex crafted narrative audio thanks to its popularity with podcast listeners (McHugh and

Lindgren, 2013; McHugh, 2016; Hancock and McMurtry, 2018) and *RadioDoc Review* has been part of a flourishing of academic interest in such content. Concerns remain that more experimental or creative documentary features in the European tradition (McHugh 2016) are being overshadowed by information-led journalistic documentaries (Hall, 2017; Jamieson, 2023), and that many new producers are defaulting to the American public radio-influenced storytelling style (see for e.g. McHugh, 2016). *RadioDoc Review* might then still need to champion the European documentary-feature, but could also be a platform for the sharing of other techniques, styles and approaches, already in existence and yet to be. Attuning ourselves to the Global South(s), we hope to widen the journal's networks of exchange of ideas. But this might mean letting go of some of what we hold to be axiomatic in our understanding of audio storytelling and some traditional definitions of audio 'excellence' concerning appropriate subject matter and creative experimentation.

This letting go did not dovetail into identifying 'gaps' in knowledge construction or in audio-making canons. Rather, as Freya Zinovieff, Milena Droumeva and Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda have recently argued in their excellent article in *Resonance* (2023), we acknowledged the need to recognise and to amplify what already exists. In this sense, it was important to us not to step in but to step back, and to start 'listening to what may already be there from the Global South, and East' (Zinovieff et al, 2023, 338). What we hear in this issue is in part about growth, new beginnings or pushbacks – from Iranian podcast-based activism against child sexual abuse to Pakistan's first hit true crime serial, from the rise of feminist audio production in Brazil to an innovative interactive news podcast in China (see below for details of all the articles). Our call for this issue was answered mainly by women, who in turn wanted to write about the role of women as protagonists, listeners, or as producers. What we saw emerging was a very strong interest in gender, power and the role that podcasting can play not only in describing or reporting but in changing the world through a feminist and intersectional lens. But these writers are not here to sum up the Global South, any more than Global North writers and podcasters are asked to summarise the essence of the North. They have written about what they find important and interesting, and we hope they will be widely read and cited, because that is the way academics 'listen' to each other.

This issue marks various junctures, chiefly in making its appearance a decade on from the very first issue of *RDR*, as well as our arrival as Editors. We owe a

huge debt of gratitude to Siobhan McHugh for starting this journal at a time when audio production in the Global North was changing enormously, and to Neil Verma for stewarding the journal into maturity. As noted, *RDR* began in a period when a new wave of interest in audio documentary and audio fiction was swelling, and part-coinciding with the rise of podcasts often attributed to *Serial* (2014). Since then, we have had the Covid pandemic, the revival of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the sheer scale of the podcasting revolution has become apparent. Aligned to this has been the very welcome scholarly and practitioner attention recently given to the interplays between power, privilege, and audio, and to which we hope this issue makes a modest contribution.

As a journal concerned with the intersections of sound, voice, and longform production practices, we find ourselves in overlapping circuits where the supposed ‘neutrality’ of ‘audiocraft’, to borrow from Axel Kacoutié and Tej Adeleye’s terminology (2024), has been part of the terrain for too long. Where film and visual studies have furrowed paths in tracing the colour line of the racialised gaze, we have felt – as have many of our fellow scholars and audio-makers including Kacoutié and Adeleye – that speech-based audio and sound studies have lagged behind. Although much foundational work has been done on voice, song, film, and music – including *Modernity’s Ear* by Roshanak Kheshti (2015), *Noise Uprising* by Michael Denning (2015), *The Sonic Color Line* by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016) and *Indian Sound Cultures, Indian Sound Citizenship* edited by Laura Brueck, Jacob Smith and Neil Verma (2020) – conceptualisations of the ear, the voice, and ‘the edit’ as mechanisms of race and coloniality in longform audio, and in podcasting, are sorely needed. Radio studies, the discipline most closely associated with our journal, is one where the long history of such inquiry needs to be unearthed and revived. As long ago as 1959, Frantz Fanon – writing on the Algerian resistance to French imperialism – noted that radio’s power was twofold. It could be at once occupier, allowing the coloniser’s language to filter into the very heart of the Algerian house. But so too could it serve as a platform to push back against the ‘old monologue of the colonial situation’, to strip away the power of imperial authority, and to be the speech of a new, emerging nation, a channel for ‘spoken words’ that ‘shape the world while at the same time renewing it’ (1959, 14). We hope scholars and practitioners will look back as they look forward, reclaiming and re-engaging with these resonant histories.

In this tenth anniversary issue of *RadioDoc Review*:

We have two thoughtful reviews of audio documentaries, and we also hear from those who have produced them. **Sara Tafakori (A Responsible Parrhesia?)** reviews *Price of Secrecy*, winner of a 2019 Third Coast Award for Best Documentary in a Foreign Language. Producer **Zoha Zokaei (Podcasting-As-Care: An Exercise in Diasporic Digital Media Activism)** reflects on her making of this award-winning series, which addresses the silence around the issue of child sexual abuse in Iran. Drawing on contemporary feminist scholarship, she finds that podcasting can be harnessed as a form of activism through an affective practice of listening with 'care'.

Novelist **Mohammed Hanif (The Dead Poet and the Non Artist)** reviews *Notes on a Scandal*, often referred to as Pakistan's first true crime podcast. But like so many of that genre, it turns out to be about so much more than 'whodunnit'. One of the producers of the podcast, **Tooba Masood Khan** gives us her perspective with '**Some More Notes on Notes on a Scandal**', where we learn this smash hit was almost a podcast by accident.

Yang Ding (Listening to News, a New Interaction Ritual: An Emotional Interaction Analysis of Jump into the Rabbit Hole) examines the perhaps too often overlooked emotional dimensions of news podcasting, through one innovative Chinese news podcast. The affective relationship with listening is also echoed in **Lucia Vodanovic's** attentive review (**For the Love of**) of Carolyn Birdsall's book *Radiophilia*.

Sana Batool's review (**The Long Game: Aliya Soomro's Boxing Journey**) looks at one of many documentaries that portray women's sport as a heroic quest to take up space and compete.¹ She reflects on the importance of contextual knowledge through the podcast's focus on the history of the Karachi district of Lyari, a story as much about place as well as of our boxing hero. That importance of knowing the place to which you take your microphone is a theme raised again in an interview with Nigerian audio storyteller, **FayFay ('Nigeria's Untold Stories at a Moment of Change')** on the burgeoning audio storytelling scene in Nigeria.

¹ We note this year *Right to Fight* by Georgina Cammalleri appears at the UK's Sheffield Doc Fest, on the pioneers of female boxing; *Audio doc Blade Running Victoriously Through Life* won Bronze at the last New York festival, an Indian feature about para-athlete Kiran Kanojia, joining a long line of docs on the theme, such as BBC World Service's *Women's Boxing* on American boxer, Gail Grandchamp's battle to be allowed to compete.

The limits and possibilities of location recording emerge as a critical point from these pieces. If only we could get more people taking their microphones out into the places they know – with the caveats that space and place are subject to all sorts of classed and gendered boundaries – then what stories we would hear.

We celebrate the growth of podcasting and of women producers' role in that rise, but **Aline Hack (The Feminist Community of Podcast Producers in Brazil: Mapping the Profile of Women)** goes further to ask what it means for women to be podcasting, with a survey of over 500 women podcasters in Brazil. Together with '**The Amplify Manifesto: Rewind, Replay, Reflect**', which puts forward the case for audio as a medium for scholarly research, it thinks about audio documentary as practice as well as text.

Finally, as with the Amplify Manifesto, we have pieces outside of the Global South focus. Audio journalists **Angela Antle** (also RDR Assistant Editor) and **Sven Preger** remember two special figures from the world of audio documentary: Chris Brookes (**The Sound of Fog: Remembering the Audio Artistry of Chris Brookes**) and Leslie Rosin (**On the loss of one of audio documentary's most committed advocates**), who made a major contribution to audio documentary-making internationally over many years.

So this is our special issue, Audio Storytelling and the Global South, and the next one won't be a special edition. But we will keep working hard to seek out interesting audio in the South, and to reach out to scholars and makers of crafted narrative factual audio all around the world. We and our peer reviewers commit to offer constructive and supportive feedback to new writers and writers new to publishing in English, and we hope that our network of contributors and reviewers will grow outwards, so we can even better fulfil the mission of *RadioDoc Review* in its next ten years: by engaging critically and in-depth with audio storytelling wherever it is made, nurturing the diverse and fascinating craft of telling true stories in sound.

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