

From the narrator's lips to yours: Streaming, podcasting, and the risqué aesthetic of Amazon Channels

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Abstract:

This article considers a set of podcasts released under the Channels brand, a paywalled streaming service that offered exclusive narrative-based content produced by the audiobook giant Audible from 2016-18. I explain that as Audible began a campaign to create its own podcasts in earnest in this period, producers focused on themes of privacy and the risqué, and their relation to perceived women's desires and experiences, reflecting broader notions about the listenership of the streaming audiobook market. In a crowded space of podcast networks and affiliations, Audible stood out in the steaminess of its 'streaminess.' By exploring that phenomenon through visual analysis, news reports and close listening, I demonstrate an approach to podcast studies focused on house styles, showing how they rise through evolving fantasies about (and for) listeners. Although networks, associations and platforms like Channels come and go, they nevertheless generate aesthetic models and strategies that exert more influence over the sound of podcasts than has been hitherto acknowledged, something that could have greater importance in the future, as new paywalled platforms such as Spotify and Luminary restructure how listeners experience the medium.

Keywords: Podcasting, Podcast Studies, Audible, Aesthetics, Audiobooks, Risk, Privacy, Networks, Listenership

In the fall of 2014, as Sarah Koenig's *Serial* transformed narrative podcasting into a mainstream phenomenon, no company had a market readier for streaming podcast content than Audible, an Amazon subsidiary hosting some 300,000 audiobooks, many of which it produced itself with A-list celebrity narrators or licensed through a network of independent

gig contributors (Eyre 2016). The company had capital, infrastructure, connections to talent and opportunity. Leaders estimated that two out of five of its existing customers already listened to podcasts (Chokshi 2016). But while Audible had monetized audio storytelling like no entity in history, the company had no narrative podcasts of its own. How could Audible marry its existing subscription model for audiobooks with podcasting *and* create podcasts to be released in a proprietary format that would keep listeners accessing audio through its sometimes-unwieldy app in a growing field of open, free podcatchers? Who would its podcasts be for and how would creators conceptualize what listeners wanted out of this particular medium? The problem of content strategy that Audible faced involved a whole set of imagined affects among its customers that producers sought to mirror and at the same time to shape and to articulate.

In this article I explore how Audible met that challenge with fresh content during the brief life of its experimental 'Channels' service, which began in mid-2016 attached to a newly formed podcasting unit and was rolled up two years later. At that time, Channels podcasts were folded into Audible's 'Originals' brand, where they were repackaged alongside more recent theater-based full-cast audio dramas. I begin by analyzing some images associated with Audible's sense of its audience, then explore the company's place in the market through public reports and statements by executives. Finally, I focus on a wide set of podcasts produced in the short Channels period, especially four podcasts: *Damned Spot*, a show about scenes of tragedy after the tragedy has passed; *Breasts Unbound*, a program about public health issues; *Mortal City*, an exploration of a set of disappearing characters from New York; and finally *The Butterfly Effect*, a podcast that explores the rise of another streaming service, Pornhub, which like Audible sought to disrupt an industry. I show that, although these Audible offerings clearly use public radio conventions, from the storytelling style of *Damned Spot* to the public interest mandate of *Breasts Unbound*, they do so in a way that comes across as risqué, amenable to the secretive listening that earbuds afford and that fit with a concept of who the streaming podcast listener might be. Like many 'new' media, podcasts grew through sensationalistic content, but, in this case, creators seem to have framed their sensationalism around situations of private experiences, particularly women's experiences, amenable to (and intensified by) individuated listening practices. With that in mind, this article explores the connection between imagined listeners and an aesthetics of risk and privacy evident in Audible offerings. In doing so, I hope to link this listener with podcast style and help turn scholarly attention to how groups, companies, platforms, associations and networks drive change in the podcasting world through evolving house styles that attempt to capture a place in a quickly churning market, and thereby help move the medium forward as an artistic form, albeit in a jagged and herky-jerky way.

The Feeling is Audible

In the summer of 2017, podcast listeners in the United States who used the internet likely saw one of several online ads from Audible, a subsidiary of online retail colossus Amazon and the world leader in audiobooks, which was at that time a newcomer to the podcasting

area. Among these ads was a banner featuring the lower half of a woman's face in grayscale, along with the slogan 'the feeling is audible' [Fig. 1].

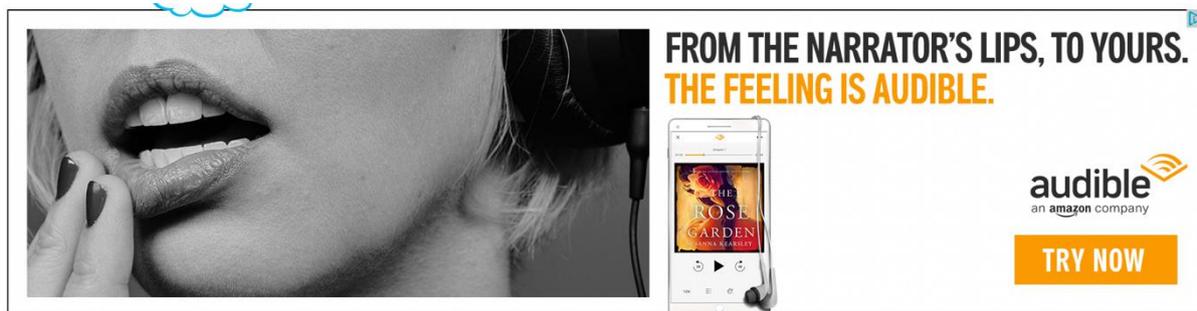


Fig. 1: Banner advertisement for Audible. Image captured circa July 2017.

The image captures a way of thinking about Audible's audience at that time; like trade images, public-facing ads like this one can give a picture of the imagined community that the brand expects and hopes for, even interpellates (Caldwell 2008, 111). The figure is white, blonde, and seemingly affluent, with straight teeth and youthful downy skin on the edge of her jaw. There's a slight chip in her nail polish, as if she may have been gnawing on her fingernails. She wears prosumer-grade isolating headphones, as if she were at work and wanted an immersive, private listening experience aurally sequestered from anyone nearby. The visual rhetoric is tied to auditory secrecy. No one knows she is listening to Canadian writer Susanna Kearsley's time-slip romance *The Rose Garden*.¹ Although no description of the novel is offered in the ad, much is suggested by a set of earbuds draped over a smartphone in the corner of the image with the highly-staged effortlessness of a negligee resting on a corner of a bed. Given that Audible is in many ways a publishing company, it seems clear that the image articulates a version of semi-repressed heteronormative women's sexuality that has historically been captured by and formed through the romance novel market.

The image also models a form of micro-exhibitionism, which is emphasized by the anonymizing omission of the woman's eyes, and the use of grayscale as if from a surveillance camera. This is an image of a rapt listener showing her active listening – auditory absorption so overwhelming it becomes visually theatrical, to use Michael Fried's terms (1980). The image also points to long-held notions revealed by the sociology of leisure reading, echoing Janice Radway's observation that women who read romances tend to view their reading as a deliberate act of escaping the present; the image presents a double temporality, one exterior time we see and another subjective time that we don't see (1991, 90). At the same time, the woman's image is obviously eroticized. The figure grazes her lip with her fingers in a gesture associated with erotica. What is she listening to that makes her touch her lip in a seemingly involuntary, unconscious way? The gesture was apparently a media trend that year, when BuzzFeed noted a marked rise in what it called

‘fingermouthing’ in photos of influential fashion bloggers, tracing it to reality star Kylie Jenner (Notopoulos 2016).

The promise of enthralling escape through Audible was more than just a visual hint. It was an area of business innovation. In the growing audiobook market (revenue exceeded 2.5 billion in 2017, up almost twenty-three percent from the previous year), some fifty-four percent of listeners were identified as female, according to the Audio Publisher’s Association (Kaufman, J. 2019). And Audible was leveraging this market through stereotypes of women’s reading habits. Around the time the banner ad appeared, the company began Audible Romance, a stand-alone service to their core audiobook subscription. This service featured a ‘take me to the good part’ button that let listeners skip ahead to sexy scenes and ranked books on a ‘steamiest score’ purportedly developed by data scientists, who provided listeners with a range from ‘sweet’ to ‘o-o-omg’ (Robinson 2017).

The visual rhetoric of this particular streaming listener can also be unpacked by contrasting it with an image that is more in the tradition of how the radio industry depicted women listeners. Consider an image from the Nielsen *State of the Media* guide on radio that was released around the same time as the Audible banner ad campaign. Like the Audible banner ad, the guide offers an image of a white woman listening alone as an emblem on the cover [Fig. 2].



Fig. 2: Image from *State of the Media: Audio Today 2017 How America Listens*. Published online by the Nielsen Company, Nielsen, 2017.

The report’s contents offered a spirited defense of radio’s continuing reach in the media market. According to the report, old fashioned radio remained the most popular mass medium, reaching some ninety-three percent of adults each week, compared to eighty-nine percent for TV and eighty-three percent for smartphones (Nielsen *State* 2017, 3). In a

quarterly Comparable Metrics Report, moreover, Nielsen found that AM/FM radio also had the greatest consistency among age ranges, races and genders, with virtually no difference between young adults and seniors, something no other medium could boast (Nielsen Q2 2017, 4). Thus, the stock image chosen for the cover of the *State of the Media* publication to represent its content could have justly been almost anyone. Yet, the image chosen was again a woman, white, young, affluent. She is listening privately in a car, pulling out of a parking lot. The scene is clear and visible, with the lighting digitally adjusted to give her face a radiant glow. Her sleeves are rolled up, suggesting she could be tuning in on her way home from work. Her car is a sedan, rather than an SUV or minivan, which suggests an urban over a suburban setting, and, as opposed to the previous image, her smile is chaste as she scans the dial for her favorite commuting music show or traffic report. As a matter of iconography, you could draw a straight line from this photo back to illustrations of radio-listening housewives in 1950s ad firm brochures. As Jennifer Hyland Wang has shown, these illustrations have not only given us historical access to then-contemporaneous gender norms, but also to concepts guiding the industry and its practices (Wang 2002). In the Golden Age of radio in the mid-20th century, it was through such industry images that the very idea of the elusive female consumer was seemingly reified, typically by male illustrators and executives, into a calculable, rationalized, discrete market entity amenable to appeal.

Of course, not all gendered images are alike, even in a particular time period or across the life of a medium. Nielsen's 'listener' is a stark contrast to the Audible 'listener,' with the latter's parted lips, open mouth, wisps of hair hinting at an unconscious thrill silent to the outside world, a theatrical demonstration of power over private feeling. As Mack Hagood has argued, 'orphanic' mediations like the one depicted in the Audible ad fantasize about an approach to the self that is rooted in affect management. When we 'hear what we want' in customizable listening environments, we engage with an aesthetic mode tied to an ideology of self-making, which is often promised by a beguiling consumer product (Hagood 2019, 1-6). Note the Audible slogan: 'From the narrator's lips to yours.' Not from author to reader, but from narrator (Audible) to subscriber. And not from lips to ears, the path we typically think of when it comes to sound, but from lips to lips. Consider the two images together, both addressed to middle-class white women and the purchasing power they represent, and the romance story is clear: radio is free, open and wants to keep you company on your journey, while Audible, behind its paywall, is longing for your kiss.

I raise this contrast to suggest that around the time it began to 'do' podcasting, there was already something specific about Audible's sense of its market for streaming audio – a vision rooted in, and fascinated by, a shopworn heteronormative idea of women's semi-repressed romantic lives buried in hectic quotidian life. By accident or design, that specificity would resonate with many of its podcasts. There is, in short, a remarkable 'steaminess' to Audible's 'streaminess.' I contend that this sense of its market made what Audible would undertake unique to its brand. As a result, the kind of podcasts the company devised were different from those of its competitors. My approach therefore serves to open the issue of what to do analytically with 'house approaches' to content, as distinct from auteurist

studies of star podcasters or speculations of overall medium aesthetics. The ‘Feeling is Audible’ fantasy addressee can help us organize how we think critically about an entire campaign of content that surrounded it.

For this project I listened to seventeen programs of Audible’s ‘Originals’ podcasts, around 113 episodes in total, as well as seven stand-alone audio dramas produced for Audible, in the hopes of finding what makes an Audible show different from those of Earwolf, Wondery, RadioPublic, The Heard, Pacific Northwest Stories, BBC Podcasting, Panoply, Gimlet and other creative shops active at that time. Working analytically at the mid-level of podcasting (neither engaging the medium as a whole nor an individual podcast as a case study) has until now been a marginal practice, because the structuring debate in podcast studies has had to do with how we should consider its relation to traditional radio, either as a relation of continuity or of transformation. In that debate, both sides have compelling cases. Authors such as Andrew Bottomley show that podcasting is older than the 2004 coinage of the term and grew out of internet-based radio (forthcoming 2020). Other writers frame podcasting as a new medium, even a ‘revolution,’ viewing podcast production and listening as inherently fresh – Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann have recently enumerated some eleven features, from earbud-based consumption to decoupling from time scheduling, that make the latter case quite powerfully (Berry 2016; Spinelli and Dann 2019, 7-8). The two sides of this discussion have a hard time moving forward, in part because podcasting as a whole is too amorphous to draw hard and fast conclusions, while case studies can often be too narrow. A focus on networks can help ameliorate this problem of scale.

For my discussion of *network*, I borrow a term used loosely in the industry that refers to groups of podcasts that share a production unit, funding relationship and/or are marketed under a common brand. Networks also often cross-promote one podcast in the stream of another, as well as through their adjacent social media, including Twitter accounts, blogs and Instagram feeds. Networks range in structure from free voluntary associations for mutual encouragement or fundraising and groups of podcasts made by news brands like the *New York Times* or New York Public Radio’s WNYC to production shops that produce a suite of their own podcasts to be distributed across several channels and platform-exclusive collections curated by corporations with budgets in the tens or hundreds of millions. This is not the term *network* as a metaphor used by scholars like Patrick Jagoda, although in what follows we should keep in mind his insight that network-based thinking points both to a barely perceivable infrastructure and to a figurative approach to that infrastructure (2016, 4). Nor is this the ‘network’ of 20th century broadcast giants, often defined either as a group of television stations or companies sharing a medium of transmission or as a central entity feeding affiliates with content as was the case in the flourishing age of the TV oligopolies. I align what follows with the *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication*’s minimalist definition of ‘network’ – ‘an interconnected group of people or objects’ – that is particularly useful here because it doesn’t specify a sense of scale or a directionality of flow (Chandler and Munday 2016).²

If 'network' is an increasingly amorphous signifier, so are terms such as 'radio' and 'podcasting,' which are each individually far more ambiguous than they seem when pitted against one another in binary opposition. Indeed, historically, 'radio' has been used to refer to many different systems used by artists, journalists, soldiers, scientists, politicians, propagandists, advertisers, states, corporations, insurgents and others around the world for more than a century, a point that Kate Lacey (2009; 2018) has trenchantly made. Podcasts likewise are different from one another, varying in genre, structure, duration, popularity, targeting, language, platform and production culture, before we even get to what they sound like. In a paradigm more interested in what makes podcasts different from one another than what may or may not make them different from radio, there will necessarily be a rise in the importance of networks, companies, podcast houses and associations, because that is where the protean moves in format that Shawn VanCour (2018) calls 'mediamaking' actually take place.

With these points in mind, I am proposing here that podcast studies focus on the mid-level of media production, following in the footsteps of Michele Hilmes's (2007) well-known study of NBC as 'the nation's station,' as well as in the tradition of how film scholars have foregrounded the strategies of specific Hollywood studios in competition with one another. In his classic history of the studio system, for instance, Thomas Schatz writes that, 'The quality and artistry of [classical films] were the product not simply of individual human expression, but of a melding of institutional forces.' The style of a director, cinematographer, star or costume designer, he explained, 'fused with the studio's production operations and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy' (2010, 6). Until now, scholars have treated the importance of such individuating network attributes skeptically, either concluding that legacy networks tended at first to use podcasts to extend rather than disrupt existing formats, or that there isn't much difference between one pod network or another (Cwynar 2015; Heeremans 2018). These convincing and relatively clear-cut analyses result, I think, from focusing on individual case studies. A focus on a campaign of production, such as the one undertaken by Audible from 2016-18, tells a more complex story.

In fact, it is precisely at this level where the push and pull between paradigms of 'new' podcasting and 'old' radio aesthetic modes is taking place. Why has *Wondery* made so many crime thrillers like *Dirty John* and *Dr Death*; why has *Earwolf* stuck to comedy? Does it make sense to liken shows of independent grassroots crowdfunded groups like Pacific Northwest Stories or networks centered around cult hits like Night Vale Productions with large, corporate platform entities like Endeavor Audio and Himalaya? What makes WNYC podcasts sound different from broadcasters like KCRW, WBEZ or even ABC and the BBC? How does the independence of Radiotopia compare with that of for-profit producers like Pineapple Street? Is there a 'Brooklyn School' of podcasting, a Pacific Northwest 'style,' a New England 'scene?' Finally, is there a *feeling toward the audience* we can detect in these entities that makes productions recognizable in the way that a music label often has a particular sound? The answers to these questions will be highly contestable, surely, but

creating room for contestation makes sense as a priority for contemporary criticism, because it can offer insights that might easily seem opaque to readers in the future. Besides, following house style puts us closer to a Raymond Williams approach to media – one based on conventions and other ‘comings together’ that occur at the material, aesthetic and dramaturgical level, even when they don’t necessarily produce clear outputs (1977, 173-82; 128-35). In this way, podcast scholars may provide a sense of the medium that has hitherto been missing, one stressing paradigms and representations that connect materials to their audiences, ideas that stretch across shows rather than congealing within specific podcasts, and other sensibilities that remain ‘in solution’ prior to becoming finished products. Chief among these sensibilities, in the Channels case, is a discourse on gender when it comes both to the addressee and the method by which she is addressed.

Amazon Channels

In thinking about house style, Audible presents a challenge. It is neither a hoary old legacy house, such as the BBC or NPR, nor an entity ‘native’ to the podcasting era created from whole cloth, like Gimlet. Moreover, it’s not clear what links its audio together in the same way as, say, Night Vale Productions, which has created several writer-driven minimalist first-person fiction works patterned after *Welcome to Night Vale*, their breakthrough ‘disruptive’ podcast (Bottomley 2015). Night Vale is one of many networks with flagship shows – *WTF with Marc Maron* for Earwolf, *The Black Tapes* for Pacific Northwest Stories – that nurture new talent and later spin them off into new projects. Many podcast networks have this ‘arborescent’ structure, despite the fact that the concept of the network is often seen as antithetical to it. But this is not obviously the case with Audible, which has historically brought in outside established authors and celebrities such as Jon Ronson, Nick Offerman and Joe Biden for podcasts. The brand’s biggest intramurally-nurtured star is iconic therapist Esther Perel, but her podcast *Where Should We Begin*, featuring highly candid counseling sessions, could not easily work as a vehicle to launch other podcasts. Despite these challenges and ambiguities, thinking about Audible remains a special opportunity because it captures one story about prominent podcast creations of the last few years: the way podcasting fuses two cultures, the journalists and storytellers of the public radio world and the designers, entrepreneurs and publishers of the tech industry. Among the many differences between these two cultures is that the first group is traditionally risk-averse when it comes to generating work, while the second practically fetishizes risk, a contradiction whose balance is settled differently from one network to another.

Audible was begun in 1995 by Don Katz, an author with a background in corporate history. Company lore says Katz was jogging one day with a clunky Walkman while he was listening to an audiotape version of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, John Reed’s account of the Soviet revolution, when he had an idea for a digital audio delivery service (Usborne 2014). Basing his company in Newark, Katz won venture capital and worked with several leaders from publishing and consumer electronics, soon devising the 1997 Audible Media Player. This technology competed with Audio Highway’s Listen Up player that year and is

now recognized by the Smithsonian as the world's first portable digital audio device, prefiguring the Apple iPod. Audible launched the device with some 10,000 hours of audio content from sixty audiobook publishers, although its four-megabyte memory could hold only about two hours of audio; in the end, the company only moved 4,000 units (Bottomley forthcoming, 2020, 219). That year, in a forerunner of today's podcast distribution, Audible also partnered with RealPlayer to share internet radio material. But even as it focused on content like a publisher, Audible remained at core a tech company, acquiring more than 100 patents. These patents included Audible Air, a 2005 technology that allowed users to download audiobooks directly to phones, eliminating the need to download to computer first, and Whispersync, a 2012 technology that enabled users to toggle from listening to reading without losing their place on e-readers like the Kindle (by then already in its fifth generation) (Blagdon 2012).

The latter technology, which represented a way of aligning book reading with book listening, made particularly good sense after 2008, when Audible was acquired by bookseller Amazon for a reported \$300 million. After that, Audible quickly became the leading entity providing access to published audiobooks and began building a library of audiobook originals of its own, often with A-list celebrity readers, such as Zachary Quinto, Scarlett Johansson, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Nicole Kidman, Emma Thompson and Colin Firth. The company attracted acting students at Yale and Juilliard, too, offering workshops about becoming narrators in the audiobook industry. Non-celebrity voice artists could make \$1,000-3,000 per book, according to a 2013 *New York Times* story, and amateur and semi-professionals were a big part of the company's expansion (Kaufman, L 2013). In 2011, Audible launched ACX, the audiobook creation exchange, which allows producers and authors to connect on their own and distribute through Audible. Thanks in part to this transformation of traditional audiobook publishing, by 2012 Audible claimed to have produced 10,000 titles directly or indirectly, employing 2000 actors per year; the next year listeners downloaded some 725 million hours of recorded speech (Alter, 2012). ACX was not necessarily welcomed by traditional audiobook publishers, who, as Matt Rubery has explained, suddenly saw their best customer become their biggest competitor (2012, 251). But the company had grown the pie for everyone. In 2013 HarperCollins audio director Jo Forshaw claimed that seventy-five percent of their releases were recorded as audiobooks, compared to ten percent before the boom (Usborne 2014). As of this writing, Audible has its own studios in its Newark headquarters from which it commands a network of sixteen offices around the world, making it perhaps the company best poised to bring creative audio content to market.

Are audiobooks a form of radio art? Narrative radio, news, and radio drama are vococentric formats, although they almost always activate non-vocal sound to position listeners in storyworlds, including atmospheres, effects, music, multiple layers and tenses expressed in a sonic way. That texture is often missing in audiobooks. Typically, offering just one voice in a non-background, audiobook narration creates the audible equivalent of portraiture rather than landscape or montage. But this doesn't mean that Audible book

producers aren't aware of the expressive qualities of voice or confine themselves exclusively to it. In a recent article in *The Independent*, Katz spoke of books as performed literature and has mused about an Audible aesthetic developing through its theatrical and full-cast projects. By 2014, Audible was already exploring the world of audio drama (as were many of its publishers, including Hachette, Palgrave and Random House). The company worked with author Jeffrey Deaver on full-cast thriller *The Starling Project*, a four-hour work with some eighty speaking parts, produced three books by Sebastian Fitzek (*Passenger 23*, *Amok* and *The Child*), and collaborated with Joe Hill, author of the comic book series *Locke & Key*, which was adapted in 2015 by BBC radio legend Dirk Maggs into an audio drama for the company. Maggs also later adapted stories in the *Alien* and *X-Files* franchises. Recent full-cast audiobooks include highbrow works like George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo*, as well as venerable favorites such as *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Black Beauty*. These days, the brand is working with veteran actors in theater, recording boutique readings for tiny audiences whose presence is used to help prompt actors such as John Lithgow (Gelt 2018). Over time, as we shall see, this theatrical impulse in Audible's development would grow and eventually overtake the narrative documentary-driven podcast products that are the primary subject of this article.

But let us first return to what Audible sounded like in autumn of 2014, when *This American Life's* podcast *Serial* debuted and podcasting in the US went from a hobby to a hysteria. Around that time estimates said there were between 200,000 and a quarter of a million unique podcasts syndicated through an RSS feed and hosted by Apple's iTunes service, the most prominent site of aggregation; according to *Variety*, that number had doubled by 2018 (Morgan 2015; Lopez 2018). The rise in listenership was steady. Pew (2018) found that just thirty percent of Americans had ever heard a podcast in 2014, but by 2018 that number was forty-four percent. Companies like Gimlet grew like a weed, so did self-funding networks like Radiotopia and groups with links to other industries like Panoply and Wondery; trade shows and conventions popped up in the US in Seattle, Chicago, Fort Worth, and Los Angeles and also around the world. Ad agencies became valuable. Midroll Media, which pioneered the business of placing ads in podcasts, was acquired by Scripps in 2015. Soon, with the long-anticipated release of new Apple podcast analytics in June of 2017, there was finally a way to measure the reach of the most-downloaded and buzzed about podcasts. Until then, the only way many podcasters knew their ads were working was by distributing coupon codes for listeners to use on the websites of sponsoring meal delivery services, postage stamp printing services, and mattress companies, then waiting to see which ones were used – a method that put this supposedly cutting-edge medium in the Stone Age when it came to listener analysis.

Despite this relatively impoverished situation when it came to data analytics, Audible believed that forty percent of their customers listened to podcasts at this time. Yet the company faced an uphill battle when it came to creating content that would convince people used to listening to *Serial* for free to seek out content behind its paywall. Within a year, Audible had hired a host of pedigreed NPR talent to change the situation, including

Eric Nuzum, former Vice President of Programming at National Public Radio who became Senior Vice President of Original Content Development at Audible. Executives were quoted in the media touting a brand-new subscription-based service called 'Amazon Channels Service' (Gameran 2016). For \$4.95 a month, subscribers could listen to content devised exclusively as podcast originals or get it free if they were already part of Audible's monthly audiobook subscription. In this way the approach both promised new premium exclusive content and worked to keep existing long-form book listeners in the Audible app and ecosystem for their growing diet of short-form listening.

By launch, Channels had curated content from some eighty-four companies, many of them in news and publishing. There was a host of sensationalistic original content, too. In *Presidents are People Too*, historians, comedians and re-enactors played out the history of the presidency; in an episode on Warren Harding we learn that the twenty-ninth president liked to call his penis 'Jerry' (the informality of which offends co-host Alexis Coe, who suggests 'Jerome'), and endure a dramatic recreation of Harding's dirty letters to his mistress. In *Authorized*, authors from Nicholas Sparks to Sophie Kinsella discuss their 'firsts' with host Faith Sallie ('This series contains some *spicy* topics, which, so, you might want to shut the door and tell the kids to knock first'), who also visits Harlequin Romance, talks about body hair removal in depth and explores curious historical sex slang. Eventually Esther Perel's *Where Should We Begin* entered the ecosystem with brutally frank conversations between real couples confessing infidelity, disinterest, sex addiction and childhood abuse. The show also features fascinating asides by Perel who explains in statements to the listener her analytic techniques for fostering communication with her clients. At times it's not clear which of these two elements – the therapy or the lesson in therapy technique – is more voyeuristic. At any rate, the structure was unique in podcasts of this kind, offering us an uncomfortable but seductive sonic intimacy with two vulnerable, suffering, resentful and often antagonistic people, while also regularly stepping outside of that intimacy to let us exhale and experience Perel's own metanarrative that is conceptually vertical to the horizon of the marital dispute. In this way, the show incorporates elements of therapeutic technique as well as social critiques of patriarchal norms that, it is suggested, often subtended marital conflict.

These R-rated offerings distinguished themselves from the types of stories you could hear on terrestrial air or even on satellite services and many other podcasts. They arrived when there was still a sense of open space in the medium at a company eager to try something novel and perhaps open a new market. Speaking to *The Princeton Magazine* in February of 2017, Katz envisioned podcasts that fit a younger listener for whom the audiobook was too great a commitment. He championed 'a short form audio service focused on rising generations who tend to digest the world in ways that will not be served by long arc immersion,' noting that 'most of the many millions of new habitual listeners who come to Audible's service and integrate Audible into their daily lives had never heard an audiobook before' (Smith, T. 2017). In June of that year, Nuzum gave a speech in Sydney that predicted a world of opportunity, insisting that '300,000 podcasts isn't enough,'

because ‘whole slices of life and world views are not reflected in podcasts’ (Ho 2017). The most recent news is that this world of opportunity may soon be wrested away from the scrappy roots of the medium, with the acquisition of Gimlet by music streamer Spotify and the appearance of new network platforms like Luminary that are funded to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars, spurring expectations of a new ‘Netflix of Podcasting’ (Macht 2019). In this environment, the case of Audible’s ‘Channels,’ which lasted only two years, may serve as a cautionary tale. Even a well-financed network that starts out with talent and creates exciting and sometimes outstanding work may not last in the form in which it was initially conceived.

An Aesthetic of Risk

Audible’s original streaming podcasts did not exist in a vacuum but floated within the company’s proprietary app alongside a wide variety of types of programs that emerged from various units of the company and beyond, including podcasts from newspapers and media companies, as well as ad-free licensed material. It was often not clear to the user where content really came from. Even within the Originals, there was variety from documentary to investigative reporting to outright tabloidism: *100:1 The Crack Legacy* is a documentary series that explores the drug war through the lens of infamous racialized US sentencing disparities for possession; *Ponzi Supernova* dives deep into the fraud scheme of disgraced trader Bernie Madoff; and *The Dark Web* examines the underground of the internet, from cybercrime to child pornography. Audible shows could also be gimmicky. *Bedtime Stories for Cynics* presents eight-minute vulgar versions of children’s stories, such as Maria Bamford’s recitation of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, ‘the most adorable home invasion story in history.’ In *Extra Credit*, Neal Pollack discusses the failure of Texas Public Schools and takes his son’s education into his own hands, a journey that takes the pair from learning the histories of slave experience at the Whitney Plantation museum in New Orleans to a meeting with poet Sandra Beasley who recites a poem about capybaras to them at a Brooklyn restaurant. *Sincerely X*, a collaboration with TED, focuses on ideas and experiences that are ‘in hiding,’ billing itself as ‘a safe space for giving talks anonymously’ in narratives illustrated with music and sound effects. Here, we meet a series of people: a burned-out doctor who can’t bring herself to truly care about a patient who is discharged and later dies, a rural woman anxious about social changes and afraid her neighbors might recognize her voice, an executive with experience of the pernicious sexism in the C-suite, and a victim of PTSD who confesses to suffering a maladapted stress response and attacking a roomful of innocent people with pepper spray. A number of dramas were also produced in separate units, including two four-hour series in the *X Files* franchise, with David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson reprising their roles from the venerated TV show. In 2017 Audible announced a \$5 million fund for new scripts for audio, along with a judging board including Annette Bening, Tom Stoppard and David Henry Hwang (Barone 2017). The next year saw the release of the first ‘Audible Theater’ collaboration with the Vineyard Theater in Union Square, a Billy

Crudup-vehicle play *Harry Clarke*, and a full-cast Margaret Atwood drama called *Angel Catbird*.³

To address Audible's 'house sound' at this moment, I'd like to focus on four shows that were often touted in the press in 2016 and 2017: *Breasts Unbound*, a show by Florence Williams about the culture and health issues pertaining to breasts; *Mortal City* about extraordinary New Yorkers by Kathleen Horan, inspired by the work of famed street photographer Bill Cunningham; *Damned Spot*, about properties after terrible things happen on them; and *The Butterfly Effect*, in which writer Jon Ronson charted the unforeseen after-effects of the rise of pornography aggregator Pornhub. In their spirit of experimentation and risk-taking, these podcasts pieces can be heard as a synecdoche for the Channels-originated podcasting unit as a whole.

I adopt a focus on the idea of 'risk-taking' from an opinion piece that Nuzum (2018) published in early 2018 for *Current*, a trade magazine for public broadcasters in the United States. Decrying public radio's tendency to tear down ideas before even pursuing them, Nuzum mused about what made working for a digital media company more satisfying than working in radio – risk tolerance. He explained that, because time and resources are limited in public radio, there is a perceived need to invest in proven winners. In tech, by contrast, risk was 'built into processes and often welcomed as the pathway to better understanding.' Nuzum challenged his peers to fail more often and fail better. 'Why embrace risk?' he wrote, 'Because nothing worth having ever came without a significant amount of it.' Toward the end of the article, he explains further:

Since everyone in public radio is obsessed with making hit podcasts, let's use that as an example. When former public radio colleagues talk about their desire to create a successful podcast, they bring the groupthink mentality to it. 'We are investing grant money or precious listener income towards the podcast. It *has to* be a winner and generate impressive audience and return.'

That's a recipe for disaster. When you start *one* podcast to get *one* hit podcast, your chances of success are incredibly small.

What if you started your process by saying: 'We want to *end up* with one successful podcast'? Then, instead of funding one podcast, you are funding a process. By reverse engineering success, you set the expectation that not every step needs to go 100 percent according to plan in order to meet the goal.

Nuzum's idea is to start with six podcast ideas that might work instead of one that has been cautiously and carefully refined, then shut down those that aren't working. This process resembles how tech products are often developed – with efficiencies through volume of

experimentation – but which is not necessarily intuitive to those who think of themselves as public interest journalists, radio storytellers or artists.

Whatever its merits, Nuzum's concept is a highly useful anchor for what Audible seemed to be trying at that time. What linked the Channels-era podcasts was less of a planned sound with clear evidence of strategic development and more of a sense of *searching* for a sound, an *aesthetic* of risk-taking. And it was risk of a particular kind. Like the image of the imagined romance novel listener described in the first section of this paper, these podcasts tended to focus on issues surrounding women's private experiences in their social and professional roles. While not exactly transgressive or clearly *avant garde*, these pieces offer an amalgam of intimacy, shock and danger that approach a naughty indulgence. Audible indeed took risks that made it particularly different from FCC-monitored and genteel public radio terrestrial radio, but these risks were rigorously circumscribed, as you might expect from a corporate entity with its own need to control outcomes. Indeed, nearly every seemingly 'out there' Audible offering I've mentioned so far profits from an existing property, adapts a bestseller, is produced by a career professional from a big legacy network station, or has a star author or performer attached to it. These are choices that minimize the likelihood of disaster or the failure to find an audience.

As an example, listen to Dirk Maggs' works for Audible and hear signature tricks he pioneered decades ago on the BBC, such as scenic crosscutting by using the contrasting tones of a voice on a telephone line. He also successfully integrated existing sonic repertoires associated with well-established intellectual properties. His *Alien*, for instance, has a Sigourney Weaver sound-alike as its star, and rehashes music and set pieces listeners already know from the films. Aliens, spaceships, airlocks, doorways, drop ships and soundscapes sound exactly like *Alien* viewers would expect. As a result, these dramas feel fresh and exhilarating as listening experiences, yet remain safe and cautious as capital investments. They are the kind of audio dramas that would be easy to justify to a group of decision makers, the kind that require legal workers and sound designers to hash out license agreements and brand identity compliance. While the aesthetic foundations for many of these works seem ambitious, in other words, the business foundations for each are surprisingly prudent. Further, what was true for the drama units was also true for the original podcasts. In a listening culture that prized innovation in 2016 and 2017, the art of being Audible lay in foregrounding the risky side of its moderate practice and thereby producing an aesthetic of the risqué.

Across programs, we hear the same paradox, an attempt to produce sharp and provocative work that's always also eminently legible, saucy stories that echo rules harkening back to public radio conventions. Eric Nuzum's own series, *Damned Spot*, is an interesting example. Although it is among the shortest (just four episodes), it starts with a strong concept as a program that focuses on places 'people whisper about,' places touched by untimely deaths, tragedies and massacres, and what happens to them afterward, such as the site of the Newtown massacre or Heaven's Gate suicide cult. The first episode contains a graphic depiction of a mass murder at a California McDonald's in 1984. Reporters Lina

Misitzis and Will Hunt begin with present-tense narration of victims, who speak about how they survived by hiding in a closet, and then segue to a scene of McDonald's spokesperson Dick Starman hearing the news at a restaurant in Chicago. Hunt and Misitzis trade lines of narration across the interview tape, setting a rhythm. The storytelling has matter-of-fact precision – Starman's favorite dish was the turbot, the shooter sipped soda and played Patty Smyth's 'The Warrior' on the radio while he fired, the blood of victims seeped between the tiles – but it is never grotesque or disrespectful, even though the program itself only focuses on what Hunt calls the 'emotional radiation' hovering over the site. Contrast this with, say, *Love & Radio's* famous 'The Wisdom of Jay Thunderbolt' episode, a Radiotopia show and the first 'born-podcast' program to win a major award at the Third Coast International Audio festival, in which the subject of the piece starts out by putting a loaded gun on the table. Rather than reflecting on the long tail of mortal terror, *Love & Radio* elected to put it dangerously into the very space-time of the recording. In this way, *Love & Radio* does in the kinetic time-space of field production what *Damned Spot* does in the reflective time-space of studio work.

Audible may shy away from one version of 'dangerous' radio, but that doesn't mean its producers are squeamish. In a *Damned Spot* episode about a Nevada home known as La Palazza featured on a 'ghost hunter' TV show, reporter Misitzis decides to investigate a claim about supernatural voices of ghosts heard mocking a woman who once lived there whenever she took a shower.

Misitzis Voice Over: Scott's game to let me use his bathroom to see if I can invoke a ghost. The bathroom isn't under construction. It's pristine, actually. Like instead of Scott's house I'm at a hotel.

Misitzis: Do you mind if I turn on the water, is that going to bother you?

Scott: Absolutely ... You can do it ... there's even towels, those are clean. There you go.

Misitzis: Thank you.

Scott: Okay.

V/O: There are stacks of towels, gold fixtures, two doors leading to either end of the house. Scott leaves me alone. I lock the doors. I stand there, not really knowing what I'm doing.

Misitzis: How do you summon a ghost? Do you tell it you don't believe in it?

V/O: Chris's girlfriend Heather says La Palazza's ghosts only made comments on her body when she was in the shower. So, I take off my clothes and I climb in. For a moment, I leave the water off.

Misitzis: So I'm standing in the shower, um, and I guess I'm just waiting to see if ... I'm going to provoke a spirit. Hellooo spirit.

V/O: Nothing happens, so I turn on the water just to see if that changes anything. [Water sounds begin] When Heather described taking showers on the show, she talked about the voices of men coming out when she wasn't expecting it. It sounded like something sinister, like jellyfish at the beach poking her with venom.

Misitzis: Still nothing. This is so weird [laugh].

Indeed, it is. In the remaining uncomfortable moments of the scene, Misitzis says that in the fifteen minutes of her shower she hears only ordinary sounds. She concludes by reflecting on the absurdity of the scene, soliciting harassment from the dead. 'I'm standing naked in a stranger's bathroom trying to find a ghost I don't believe in,' she says. 'Maybe this is what it feels like when enough people tell you that maybe a place is haunted. This might just be what it feels like.'

Even in today's era of widely practiced first-person radio journalism, it's unusual to hear a reporter do something as personally intimate as shower on tape. The choice is surely risky aesthetically and although the reporter isn't taunted by ghostly voices, she is vulnerable to the listener's ghostly ears. Yet, in another way, that vulnerability is highly controlled. Misitzis' concluding thought comes with a fifteen-second musical passage and pause, a rhetorical framing associated with the *This American Life* mode of storytelling – plot, followed by moment of reflection – which sutures the narrative and tightly constrains our possible interpretations of it. *This American Life*'s host Ira Glass has likened this structure to that of a sermon, which usually concludes with a lesson, as *Damned Spot* does (Abel 2015, 20). The episode ends neither in a decisive result nor in total ambiguity (note how Misitzis's last thoughts are marked by bashful conditionals, two 'maybes' and one 'might just be' in only two sentences) but rather in the production of empathic *feeling* on the part of the reporter, which is the goal toward which many public radio programs reach. Thanks to this traditional, comforting structure and other devices, Audible's pieces come across as risky (and occasionally cloying) but never sleazy.

In some cases, they can even be righteous. Consider *Breasts Unbound*, which breaks new ground in focusing on women's health and sensibilities around their breasts, winning a Gracie Award that recognized its outstanding coverage of women's issues by women producers. Hosted by Florence Williams and produced by NPR veteran Mary Beth Kirschner, the program includes coverage of issues of body image, evolution and cancer risk,

developing over the course of the eight episodes into a public health program about chemicals in the consumer environment. It's a series with a mission. To pursue it, the program relies on a variety of conventional elements. Some episodes use a BBC news feature's clichéd opening (e.g., 'Here we are at the Northumberlandia site,' 'Here we are at the V & A museum'), while others employ Vox pop passages of women discussing their breasts in montage. The podcast uses external retrospective narration or talking-to-tape, a sequence interrogating supposed expert biologist Desmond Morris, and a sit down with celebrity Chelsea Handler, famous for her 'free the nipple' campaign. The last episode has a series of five modular segments on everything from milk facials and trans parenting to breast reductions and bra stores. It could be an episode of *Invisibilia* or *Radiolab*, but it is precisely the use of conventional radio storytelling that makes this piece so unusual, particularly in today's political culture. Unlike radio shows designed to inform or astonish, *Breasts Unbound* seeks to do something at once simpler and more ambitious: to normalize women's health in public discourse, which in itself is already a radical political act.

Some of the most intimate material in Audible's lineup can be found in Ellen Horne's *Mortal City*, which follows reporter Kathleen Horan in her quest to find remarkable New Yorkers before they are gone, including a garbage collector who sometimes finds bodies (but is kind of OK with it), and a hip-hop pioneer who runs an amateur emergency medical crew. These stories justify the podcast's opening warning – 'The following content contains graphic, explicit and vulgar language.' Despite this promise, the series is actually best with its artfully personal touches. In the opening episode Horan records her mother's breathing in her dying days in the hospital after a stroke, with pairs of quick inhales and exhales followed by long pauses embroidered with the microsounds of recorder handling, vague hospital technology noises, and choked-back tears in the voiceover. Near the end of the episode, the dying woman's breathing takes up the entire foreground of the soundscape for more than a minute.

The risk in this series is the risk of the personal, of the private, of being oneself in an interview situation and not merely 'playing' oneself, as public radio personalities are often advised to do. Yet even when *Mortal City* loosens conventions when it comes to material, it also obeys formal elements of radiophonic storytelling, including the tyranny of the beginning, with its insistence on a strong and immediate hook. One episode, for example, begins with a cold-open monologue by a long-time sex worker named Zoe:

Real sex is intimate and it's very *emotional* for women. Work sex, for me, is very different because . . . it was so clinical. My routine would be 'Why don't you lie down, so I can give you a *massage*?' And I've got him now face-down, y'know, in the sheets, so he's not all over me. And he keeps trying to make me move up and turn around, and I keep on pushing him down, but meanwhile I'm getting him extremely horny by running my hands up and down his body and everything and the guy is about ... to ... burst, so that by the time he rolls over and you've got a condom on his dick and you've

jumped up and down on it, he's come. Two minutes (*italics added to signify emphasis in enunciation*).

In her widely-read manifesto about radio writing, veteran radio producer Nancy Updike explains that every opening has to have the same elements: characters, conflict, place, stakes, a story where you want to know what happens next and details that stick in your mind, all conveyed in straightforward, declarative sentences (Updike 2006). This describes the episode's first forty-one seconds rather perfectly. Just like Zoe, a professional radio show creates affective efficiency through economical production of anticipation. Does this feature make *Mortal City* formulaic, conventional? I'm not so sure. I'm reminded of a line in Lauren Berlant's classic study of intimacy. She writes, 'While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way' (1998, 284). Another way of looking at the *Mortal City* introduction is as a form of shock, something suggestive of fragmentation and disruption, a hallmark of avant-garde aesthetics among the sound arts.

If one program gets to the heart of Audible's steamy sonic economy, it is *The Butterfly Effect*. The program is rich in metaphor. Here we have a disruptive streaming service (Audible) using the story of another disruptive streaming service (Pornhub) as a topic through which it would stage its own disruption. In seven episodes, bestselling author Jon Ronson takes a gonzo journey through a series of repercussions that flow from the advent of free pornography on the internet, the brainchild of entrepreneur and data expert Fabian Thylmann. We learn of the drudgery of adult actresses and actors driven to work overtime to create content (some even watching Pornhub while shooting scenes in order to keep aroused in between takes), thanks to the unscrupulousness of web platforms and the ruthless market efficiencies that Pornhub brought to the industry. We hear of a pitiable mentally disabled boy led astray by porn stereotypes and now labeled a sex criminal, of a Pastor's daughter confessing to porn addiction, of the rise of impotence among hitherto virile men ('Free easy access, 24 hours-a-day to streaming videos changed everything' says an expert), of out-of-work porn actors shunned by potential alternative employers and even by their own children. In its pretext of a public health agenda and concern over sex worker deskilling, *The Butterfly Effect* surely belongs in a tradition of postwar erotic recording that Jacob Smith has chronicled, which range from 1940's 'party records' to Masters & Johnson-type sex therapy (Smith, J, 2011, 79-121). Like many of these 'blue' records, *The Butterfly Effect* obviously participates in what it critiques. While ostensibly critiquing contemporary porn consumption, it deploys titillation prolifically. As part of this mixed tone, Ronson's voice conveys an impish delight in reacting drolly to even the most outrageous scenes and people he encounters. The program is delicately balanced to ensure a listener could consider it at once as overly pious and moralistic, childish and exploitative or informative and even-handed. Indeed, compared to masturbation and sex scenes in the feminist sex podcast *The Heart* or to Issa Rae's fictional sports thriller *Fruit*, which includes simulated

fellatio between two men (complete with gagging), the boring gang sex and feeble masturbators of *The Butterfly Effect* seem downright tame (See Verma 2018). Still, the program justly belongs to what we might call an emerging cycle of ‘body radio’ programs that include sonic explorations of the sounds of the wide and sometimes musical repertoire of visceral bodily functions ordinarily excised from terrestrial broadcast.

Perhaps the most compelling storyline in Ronson’s show is something that he stumbles across in the second episode and that returns throughout the piece: a set of interviews with Dan and Rhiannon, veteran porn producers in the San Fernando Valley who try to make up revenue lost to streaming aggregators by creating ‘customs,’ bespoke short films for fetishists, an unforeseen ‘butterfly effect’ of shifts in the industry. One episode begins with the performers Star and Kim playing out a scene dressed as *Baywatch* lifeguards, a scenario requested by an anonymous client. This is followed by a story about a customer who asks a performer to put on a sweatshirt backwards, pie her own face and then act as if a blanket is eating her. ‘I’m not interested in why,’ Kim insists when questioned, ‘It’s a little callous to say, but I don’t care why.’ Through such scenarios, Ronson paints a picture of a hidden industry. As he says, ‘In houses across the Valley, porn people are conjuring into life the niche predilections of distant men. Making porn films, just for them.’ Ronson himself soon becomes obsessed with a legendary custom story about a stamp collector who hires actresses to burn his priceless stamp collection on tape. Over the course of several episodes, Ronson even manages to correspond with ‘stamps man’ and learns the origins of his picturesque philatelic fetish. Had Pornhub not disrupted the adult industry, we are asked to wonder, would this oddly therapeutic fulfilment of a secret, highly particular wish have come about?

In the concluding episode of the series, the show returns one last time to customs producers Dan and Rhiannon, as they receive one of their most unusual requests. A customer asks for a video of a girl sitting in a room on the floor, crosslegged, talking to the camera to convince him not to commit suicide. In a panic about the client’s safety, Dan and Rhiannon scramble to arrange a shoot with a performer named Riley free of charge. Ronson calls it a leap of faith, hoping that the video will ‘be a flap of a butterfly’s wings for [the customer], then everything will start to get better.’ We hear Riley address the invisible customer – we hear it, importantly, as if it were addressed to us – and counsel him to remember the beauty in the world. I wonder if her monologue is really that far from the therapy sessions of Esther Perel, the almost silent breathing of Kathleen Horan’s dying mother, or Misitzis’ empathetic shower at La Palazza? All of these works start out warning (promising?) to be spicy or even offensive but end up rather tender and kind. Ronson reflects that, ‘The more time I spend in the world of custom porn, the more I can see how much the producers and their clients have in common. They’re all working out their issues together by producing these sweet, strange films.’

Isn’t that what Audible promises, too? Riley’s direct address to her anonymous client leads us back to the vision of the imagined listener discussed in the opening of this article – ‘the feeling is audible’ listener hidden behind her headphones at her desk. Indeed, the

Audible woman is very much like the ‘stamps man.’ Both are depicted as raptly engaged and eroticized. Both are emphatically anonymous and locked into the double temporality of the visible time we perceive and a private interior time that’s hidden from us. Both are also marked by gender, and their gendering is bound up with a compulsion toward something sensational, so that neither the sensation nor the gendering can take place without the other. By virtue of their engagements in acts of fantasy, each becomes the object of producer’s fantasies about what they must produce and why. And both Audible woman and stamps man’s fantasies are depicted as tender, and all attempts to meet them as nourishing, generous, even therapeutic. Audible wants to titillate you, to bring risqué content to your ears where no one else can hear. The ‘feeling is audible’ only to you. However, like the bespoke porn creators who fascinate Ronson, the promise is that this feeling will be protected in a cone of privacy as hermetically sealed as a set of noise-canceling headphones. As a matter of affect, Audible’s brand was in this moment about transforming sensational transgression into sweet, replenishing sentiment, as if saying ‘listen to what you like, your secret is safe with us.’

Conclusion

In August of 2018, Audible suddenly rolled up the podcasting unit it initially used to develop many of the podcasts discussed above. This development was due in part to the company’s desire to focus on its original celebrity narration productions, theater-based releases and full-cast audio dramas, many of which have been produced overseas. The move surprised the industry and, together with recent news that the hitherto successful Panoply network was at that moment also retreating from the business of content creation, there were fears that the podcasting bubble had burst. The change at Audible seemed exceedingly ill-timed for other reasons as well. The company had just released its highest-profile journalistic program: Jennifer Forde and Sam Bungey’s *West Cork*, a meticulous and compelling podcast developed from years of research into a famous Irish murder case. *West Cork* was heavily promoted across Amazon’s many platforms that Spring and was well-reviewed in several venues, including the UK’s *The Times* (Nixey 2018). Additionally, numerous other projects were still ongoing. Even today, a few podcasts continue to emerge, such as Esther Perel’s third season and a follow-up to *The Butterfly Effect* called *The Last Days of August*, but only to honor prearranged contracts.

The exact reasons for the change are not clear at the time of writing. A spokesperson for the company told Nicholas Quah of Nieman Labs that the restructuring resulted from an increased focus on theater and narrative storytelling. Noting that the two years of the Channels strategy were generally seen as a success within the industry, at least from the perspective of innovation, Quah (2018) speculated that the company may have been pivoting back to its ‘core relationships’ with book publishing. He also linked to stories in the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Bloomberg* citing the resignation of Audible executive Andrew Gaies, which may have had a cascade effect down at the level of Nuzum’s unit. Whatever the reasons, the sudden strategy change reminds us that podcast production isn’t just a

mode of expression that explores risk, it is a profession that is 'at risk' itself. While Nuzum's unit was trying several things at once, the larger entity of Audible had been doing the same thing all along, only at a higher order of magnitude. That is, while Nuzum's unit was developing its productions of original narrative storytelling podcasts in an experimental way, the work of that unit was just one in a series of 'new audio' formats that Audible itself was trying out, and in time the focus turned elsewhere to other projects. Business agendas change very quickly, often for reasons that could have nothing to do with the content itself. As a consequence, even a successful network campaign may only last for a short time.

Nevertheless, the kind of work producers develop in one context can leave a residue or chart a path. In April 2019, just half a year after the Audible shakeup, ambitious new projects appeared in the industry, such as the launch of the Luminary platform, which drew in podcasts such as *Love & Radio* behind a streaming paywall, an expanded slate of podcast productions from online streaming entities, ranging from the CBC to the *New York Times*, high-profile original content that partnered Marvel Entertainment with Stitcher, and the acquisition of Gimlet by Spotify for a reported \$230 million. Audible alums Eric Nuzum and Jesse Baker, meanwhile, formed a new production company, Magnificent Noise. Ellen Horne and others also began fresh companies.

Tracking personnel shifts and the rising and falling of network house styles is difficult, but perhaps it is the most useful way that scholars can engage with the medium at this moment. In the distant future, it may be far more difficult for historians to untangle these fast, small shifts; from a distance, podcasting may seem like the same production names shuffling from one label to another. But while we are still in the present and able to listen close-up to the 'network-level,' I hope that the approach I've sketched above may be a model that helps to reveal, within a cycle of podcast content, a secret story about the evolution of a network's shared ideas about who the streaming listener is – a strange amalgam of data, emotion, projection and invention – and about what she desires.

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Notes:

¹ The novel begins, interestingly enough, with a woman having auditory hallucinations of dashing men while she is visiting an old English beacon near Cornwall.

² That these networks even exist in this space results from the fact that Apple's iTunes platform, which gave podcasting its first and most important central clearinghouse, did not make podcast creation much of a priority in the early days. As Radiotopia Executive Producer Julie Shapiro observed, 'Apple's benign neglect of podcasting is one reason the industry has been slow to mature, but it's also invited a wave of competition and innovation from startups like RadioPublic to big platforms like Spotify' (Macht 2019).

³ When it comes to star-driven content, it's not clear that Audible had any meaningful competitors at this stage – with the exception of Gimlet – but in some cases, it's conceivable that the premise of a particular work might easily have been taken on by a different network. Consider *Unheard*, an audio drama about the disappearance of a college linguistics student supposedly made by one of her classmates, which has its own unique attributes, including interesting hidden-microphone scenes. But, at the same time, it strongly recalls other groundbreaking audio drama pieces along these lines, such as Two Up's *Limetown*, Pacific Northwest Stories' *Rabbits* and GE's *The Message*.