

# **RESEARCHING PODCAST PRODUCTION – AN AUSTRALIAN PODCAST STUDY ABOUT WOMEN AND WORK IN ARE WE THERE YET?**

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The #metoo movement's viral spread across social media in October 2017 drew unprecedented global attention to the issue of sexism in the workplace. Much of the discussions focused on harassment of women, however the debate also highlighted gender equity issues more broadly, shining the light on women's experiences at work. Previously, messages about gender equality in professional life have not usually garnered such interest in the media. The podcast *Are We There Yet?* (AWTY), produced in Melbourne during 2016 and 2017, was a response to the lack of podcast content at the time dedicated to topics about women and work. It was decided that a podcast would be an appropriate format – simple to produce and widely accessible – to discuss gender in the workplace.

This chapter explores the audio production as a site and model for practice-research in podcast studies. Informed by media scholar Robert MacDougall's (2011) work, this case study examines the unprecedented opportunities podcasting affords us to reinterpret and reimagine our personal and professional lives. It looks at how a collaborative podcast production involving two gender equality and leadership consultants and a radio studies researcher in Melbourne developed into a research venture, providing a practice-informed research model for combining production with rigorous analysis. Mapping the whole chain from production to reception engendered a deeper understanding of the podcast's content and, going forward, offers one possible research model for scholars in the emerging field of podcast studies.

The two novice podcast presenters – Melbourne-based leadership consultants Linda Betts and Barbara Dalton – had run face-to-face ('f2f') leadership programs for women for over ten years. However, they had no broadcast experience. The research team wanted to examine if a podcast dedicated to the topic of women at work could provide listeners with a shared experience similar to that established in f2f seminars where current gender and organisational research is discussed alongside participants' own reflections and lived expe-

riences. Extensive research exists on the use of podcasts in educational and business settings (Drew 2017; Fernandez et al. 2015; Hatfield 2017; Moryl 2013; Popova et al. 2014; Thielst 2013) and the research team wanted to investigate how podcasting could add to the conversation about gender and work in accessible and portable ways.

## STORYTELLING WOMEN AND WORK

An initial review identified a small number of international podcasts focussing on gender, such as Slate's long-running (since 2012) Double X Gabfest (Slate 2018). A prominent radio program which is also available via podcast is the stalwart UK-based Women's Hour, broadcast since 1946 and addressing women's perspectives on health, education, cultural, and political topics (BBC 2017). US-based podcasts focussing on women are more common, such as US entrepreneur Sophia Amoruso's *Girlboss Radio*, involving interviews with 'boundary-pushing women who've made their mark' (Amoruso 2018), and *The Rocket Girls Podcast* (Fine 2017), aimed at motivating, guiding, and supporting young women to pursue their passions in science and maths. Since the #metoo movement in late 2017, a number of additional podcasts focussing on women in the workplace have emerged, such as the Harvard Business Review's six-part series, *Women at Work*, which includes "conversations about the workplace, and women's place in it" (Harvard Business Review 2018). There is also US podcast, *Women's Work*, which celebrates stories of "creative women who do interesting work" (Oxenreider 2018). In Australia, the ABC launched *Fierce Girls* in 2018, a podcast about Australian women "who dare to do things differently" aimed at children (ABC 2018). The closest match to the *Are We There Yet?* podcast is *The Broad Experience*, a podcast about women, work, and success (The Broad Experience n.d.) produced by US-based public radio reporter Ashley Milne-Tyte.

Despite its Australian origins, it was envisaged that the AWTY podcast could be attractive to international audiences where personal experiences and storytelling would become a lingua franca that could support and engage transnational audiences and create a shared sense of community. There is a growing body of work focused on podcasting and storytelling (Alexander 2011; Biewen/Dilworth 2017; Dann 2014; Lindgren 2014b, 2016; McCracken 2017; McHugh 2016, 2017; Norrington 2010). Podcasting has been described as a 'pull' medium (Berry 2016; McClung/Johnson 2010), where listeners seek out content that interests them and therefore become genuinely engaged with the podcast. MacDougall argues that podcasts create a strong bond between producers and listeners, one that moves, "beyond the way readers of a novel might report sympathy for (or may empathize or identify with) various characters" (MacDougall

2011: 722). This would support the aim of *Are We There Yet?* which was to produce a podcast that provided the audience with a sympathetic learning space with traits of a classroom or seminar. The production team also wanted the podcast to be solutions-oriented. Presenter Barbara Dalton said she intended *Are We There Yet?* to be “informative (here’s the research) and also pragmatic (this is what you can do)” (Dalton 2016).

## RESEARCH APPROACH

The team produced and analysed the podcast using a practice-research approach, building on this author’s conceptual work into radio documentary forms (Lindgren 2014a) by extending it to the field of podcasting. Adams et al. (2015: 2) describe practice-led research as a “reflexive paradigmatic research structure” led by practice that acknowledges the importance of the researcher’s interaction with the research material. PLR is still a novel approach in radio studies, yet one that offers myriad opportunities for rich and multi-layered scholarly analysis of audio content production providing new understandings of podcast genres and production practices. Four focus groups (N=25) with female listeners were undertaken with an accompanying thematic analysis of the transcripts. Women known to the consultants were invited to listen to the podcast and to then attend a focus group. The main themes identified are discussed briefly later in this chapter. Additional self-reflexive feedback was gathered from presenters Betts and Dalton, as reflective practice is a key element of PLR (Gray/Pirie 1995). The research design allowed for in-depth contribution from the production team and listeners, affording a collaborative and comprehensive approach to understanding both the production and reception of the podcast.

## PILOT EPISODE – GOOD GIRL SYNDROME

The pilot episode, *Good Girl Syndrome*, was funded by Monash University in Melbourne to explore analytical models for talk-based podcast content. The 23-minute episode focused on research and societal discourse surrounding belief systems and expectations of women’s behaviour in the workplace. It discussed how women often feel compelled to ‘do the right thing’ and to be agreeable in workplace settings. The research team used a narrative learning approach (Hatfield 2017) to effectively communicate complex issues about gender equity and the advancement of women in the workplace. Narratives can be powerful tools for making sense of the world as they “draw us into an experience at more than a cognitive level; they engage our spirit, our imagination,

our heart, and this engagement is complex and holistic” (Clark/Rossiter 2008: 65). Stories of women’s experiences in the workplace were shared with listeners as short voxpops, in the interview and by the presenters in their informal dialogue. Short audio clips were included to provide additional story examples, such as where Marge Simpson instructing Lisa on how to ignore her own feelings in order to fit in, from the US television cartoon *The Simpsons* (Groening/Brooks/Simon 1990), created an audio shorthand for the ‘good girl’ culture. This is where women win approval by being helpful and behaving well but at a cost to their agency and leadership potential.

The episode included an interview with Melbourne-based writer and feminist Karen Pickering who shared her personal experiences of sexism in the workplace when she worked in a bar as a young woman. Ms Pickering recounted how a young male supervisor sent her home to apply makeup because she “looked tired”. While this example took place in an Australian pub in the early 2000s, the story remains relevant. Only weeks before *AWTY* was produced, a UK-based consultancy-firm sent home one of their female staff members because she was not wearing high-heeled shoes at work (BBC News 2016).

## **ARE WE THERE YET? ... LESSONS LEARNED**

The format described above for the podcast pilot episode has clear radiogenic traits (Berry 2016) as a talk-style program incorporating talk, audio clips and music. The *AWTY* presenters followed a script with information about relevant gender research and links to useful readings. This dialogue between the presenters ranged from informal ‘banter’ to segments providing evidence-based information to accompany the personal stories. The relationship between the novice podcast presenters Barbara and Linda was noted by the focus group participants. They found that Barbara and Linda’s conversational dialogue signalled a well-oiled team with expert knowledge of the subject matter and long-standing collaborations, bringing their personal – and authentic – experiences into the conversation. Barbara and Linda’s lack of broadcast experience was not seen by focus group participants as an impediment.

Thematic analysis of the transcribed focus groups identified a number of key themes emerging for the listeners of the *Good Girl Syndrome* pilot episode. These are discussed only briefly below due to the scope of this chapter. When

asked about the experience of listening to the episode and the use of podcasting to discuss gender in the workplace, participants noted four main themes:

1. Reflection (encouragement of reflection on self)
2. Identification (application of information to personal experience, reliability, emotional connection)
3. Education (the podcast as pedagogical tool, information tool, mentor)
4. Storytelling (the importance of personal narratives, conversational style, podcast listening as journey)

These themes relate directly to traits ascribed to podcast forms, such as its hyper-intimacy (Berry 2016), personal storytelling (Lindgren 2016; McHugh 2016) and strong listener attachment, a relationship which MacDougall (2011) suggests is specific to podcasting where it “[...] may be part of an evolution in parasocial phenomena and a fundamentally new form of mediated interpersonal communication” (716). Analysis of the focus group data suggests the pilot podcast was successful in engaging the listeners and encouraging reflection. Some listeners recognised shared experiences from the podcast stories and applied the information to their own experiences. According to one participant:

I found it really enjoyable and it’s stuff that I used to do more with that I don’t have time for. I found it terrifically interesting, I found it personally challenging, just to get back and start thinking more like that. And yeah, I found it to be quite motivating. (participant, focus group 4, 2016)

Another participant commented on the informative nature of AWTY and how the audio format provided an engaging form of education:

I think there’s lots of ways you can potentially use it, because the stories engage and I think working again in health, if you look at things like nearly everything’s in print, your clinical practice guidelines are in print, everything’s in print, everyone’s sick of print, it doesn’t engage. (participant, focus group 2, 2016)

The solution-based approach of the podcast motivated one focus group participant to actively change her behaviour when applying for work: “it made me really think about maybe how I need to be not such a good girl in an interview potentially, so coming across a bit stronger rather than that more passive” (participant, focus group 2, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The pilot podcast episode Good Girl Syndrome discussed in this chapter begins with the presenters Barbara and Linda explaining the ambition of the podcast as an aural space where they talk about “[...] how being a woman still impacts on our work, pay, and the opportunities we have”. They continue:

Many women think what they experience in the workplace is just happening to them, but actually, it's part and parcel of being a woman at work. By connecting the dots and sharing experiences about women in the workplace, we want to give you tools to navigate the 'occupational hazards of being female' (Are We There Yet? 2016).

This introduction becomes a three-point 'manifesto' for a podcast about women and work: 1) listeners are part of a community of shared experiences; 2) those shared experiences are delivered through a narrative approach (by presenters and interviewees); and 3) informed by current research and personal experiences, the podcast will provide listeners with solutions and suggestions for actions. All of these points were noted by listeners reflecting on AWTY in the focus groups. Although the main themes noted above could be applied to some specialist radio programs, it is unlikely that you would find in mainstream radio programming schedules a series of programs dedicated to gender equality in the workplace. Furthermore, participants in the focus groups reported a high level of identification and reflection generated by listening to the podcast. This aligns with what scholars suggest is podcasting's ability to create strong communities and engagement with listeners (cf. Berry 2016; McClung/Johnson 2010; MacDougall 2011). Although the audience focus groups only discussed the pilot episode, their feedback support the proposition that a podcast like *Are We There Yet?* about women and work could become an informative platform for globally shared knowledges and cultural learning where listeners are encouraged to reflect on their own gendered experiences and the strategies they can adopt in the workplace to make their working lives better.

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