

Mary Alice Yeskey

Welcome to the Johns Hopkins University Press podcast. I'm Mary Alice Yeskey with the JHU Journals Division. Joining us today is Molly Robson. Molly is a researcher, writer, and photographer, based in Wellington, New Zealand. She recently completed her master's thesis at Victoria University of Wellington, which explored how listeners engaged with podcasting during the pandemic and sought to understand the affective dimensions of this fast-growing medium. Molly's paper, "Intimacy in Isolation: Podcasting, Affect, and the Pandemic" was published in the latest issue of the journal *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*. She is currently working for an environmental organization as an advisor in science and policy communication.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Molly, I really appreciate your time.

Molly Robson

Thank you for having me, it's nice to be here.

Mary Alice Yeskey

The first question I like to ask all our guests, just to kind of get a little bit of background, is what is your academic origin story?

Molly Robson

So, I'm from Auckland originally, and I moved to Wellington to go to uni with the intention of, like, getting a job, as most people do, but of course, I had no idea what I wanted to do, and so I did a Bachelor's of Arts, which is kind of, like, a general critical arts degree, I guess. So I did film, media, and politics, and I just remember being so captivated by the media studies courses, and I felt really lucky to be able to just, like, sit there and think about ideas and debate ideas and discuss ideas and kind of unpack ideas, and often they were, like, ideas that I, like, kind of considered common sense growing up, and so like I kind of had that, lots of epiphany moments in my undergrad, right. Also, just because of my age, I'm twenty-five, I kind of have an interesting vantage point in terms of, like, being kind of on the cusp of Gen Z and Millennial, from a media perspective, just because, like, the past decade has been so transformative from a media studies perspective, and, like, our media engagement has just, like, proliferated and complicated in so many different ways. And so, I was watching how, like, how these shifts were shaping not only political and economic and social realities but also, like, my own reality. Like, I was witnessing it in my own media engagement, and I feel like, yeah, media studies was such an applicable field for me because I could, like, use those tools to understand and map these shifts that were occurring in my own life.

So, I was really grateful for that, and then podcasting, I was listening to podcasts since about 2015 so it was while I was studying. So, I was an early-ish adopter, not, like, super early but I definitely, like, rode the wave of the kind of, podcast boom, I would say, and at this stage I had just done my post-grad in media studies, my honors degree, which is kind of, like, a more focused, specialized, version of your undergrad. And there were a few scholars, like, floating around, researching podcasting and they were really good but there wasn't, like, a wealth of research into podcasting and when I read about these scholars doing work, I just knew I wanted to research it cause I was like this is going to blow up soon, and it obviously did, and yeah, I just found I was always listening to it while I was doing other tasks, and I was like, there's something really interesting in there. It was kind of, like, giving rise to this concept of, like, living in media as opposed to alongside it, and I was doing that with other media as well, but I felt like podcast was really, like, reflective of this, like, big shift I was noticing in my own media engagements as well.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It must be so different as a scholar to be studying something that's a part of your lived experience every day as opposed to, you know, nineteenth-century English literature or whatever. I'm going to go a little bit out of order, but my other question is when you say, early adopter of podcasts, like many, many people the first podcast I got into was *Serial* because everybody was, but my youngest son was a newborn at the time and I have this very sentimental memory of listening to the first season of *Serial* because he would fall asleep every time I put it on, I think it was just, like, the soothing nature of it and I would just sort of be bouncing, and it's just find it sort of hilarious that I would be listening to this terrible story of murder in Baltimore while my young child was sleeping on my breast (laughs). But it really, that to me, like you said, doing something else while you're listening, to me *Serial* will always be tied to, like, those first few months of my son's life and, like, how that was, like, a weird bonding thing for us. But it's true, it connects to the parts of your life, it's not you go to a movie theater, and you see a movie and that's sort of separate from your life.

Along those same lines, your paper talks about the solitary nature of podcast listening, but I was struck because you mentioned when you were talking about how you got your participants that you sort of recruited them through Facebook groups that are made up of fans of specific shows or of podcasting in general. So, my question is, do you think that fan communities online are kind of creating a real-world or real-world relationships that the parasocial relationships that you talk about sort of just of the giving and receiving of the fans to the people producing the podcasts, do you think those fan communities are kind of filling in that gap and creating more, kind of a constant steady stream of, I don't want to use the word real, but just a more dynamic, dynamic communication?

Molly Robson

Yeah, it's really interesting, I don't really know where I fall on this one, cause I think that there are definitely like lots of intimacies kind of circulating in these communities, there's definitely, yeah, so, my research was definitely more focused on, like, individual listening processes rather than fandom cultures, but I will say that within my interviews I did ask about the groups from which I recruited lots of them, and there was kind of a reluctance to describe themselves as, like, being a part of that community. There was a sense of having shared interests I guess, but in terms of community, it was kind of illusory in a way. I think it comes back to the solitary nature of podcast listening. Like, sure people were aware that others listen to the same content as them, and would engage in discussion about this content with them in these groups, but on the whole, there was kind of still this sense that they didn't know fellow members of the podcast intimately at all. So, there was kind of like, at least in the groups that I recruited from there was not a sense of kind of mutual responsibility or reciprocity, it was kind of these like avatars who were in the group that were discussing these things, and actually often in one of the groups, in particular, there would be a lot of conflict and drama and I think that for that reason people assumed that they would all get along or that they had this kind of connection because they listened to the same content. But in fact, there was not much else connecting them apart from this kind of community, and I feel like obviously there are, like, lots of much, much deeper and much more meaningful, like, podcast communities online, especially with people who are more, like, a part of that fan culture rather than just like discussion groups, I think. In my research I felt like it was more about the feeling of community rather than the actual community in those digital communities. There was an intimacy to them, but they were mediated in ways that could not ever reproduce the dynamics of kind of real-world communities. Does that make sense?

**Mary Alice Yeskey**

It does, and I'm thinking about it now, even though I wrote the question now I'm thinking about it more, and I'm thinking about the timing of it, how you listen to a podcast, and you have your sort of personal experience with it and then after the fact you're discussing it with people, so you don't have like a listening party with people, do you know what I mean? So, it's a this way thing and then it's a this way thing and it's something, the timing of it is, like, you have to listen to it privately and then discuss it later, it's like, again with the movie metaphor it's not like you're sitting at home, and you can pause it and discuss what's happening with your friends. So yeah, that's interesting I think it might be just exactly what you alluded to which is the way that it's taken in is so solitary that it's hard to even grow from that because it is a very sort of one-on-one experience, even if you're listening to six people talk, you're the only other person on the other end of it.

**Molly Robson**

Yeah, I did find, like, there were a few participants actually who reported kind of, like, deepening their relationships in real life through podcasting, so like having kind of a group of friends kind of listen to the same podcast regularly and then they'd have kind of discussions

about the content afterwards, it would kind of be like, kind of functioning as like a book club except with podcast, right?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, I've had, most of the podcasts I've listened to were recommended by friends. But again, now that I'm thinking, we don't listen and then discuss, it's just like hey listen to this podcast and then I'll say oh this episode was hilarious did you hear it, yes, and that's the end of the conversation (laughs). We don't really go into it too too much, but maybe it's, yeah, almost like music, you know, this is a great song and then listen to this song, I don't know.

Molly Robson

Yeah, so there are definitely, like, social elements to them, I don't think that they're entirely individualistic, but I just think, yeah, a lot of the, even the technology, like, associated with podcasts, like, you know, wearable headphones, are about, like, you, yourself.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, the isolation booth nature of it. That's really interesting. So, one of the other things that your paper notes is how podcast hosts, their voices kind of become familiar and comforting to listeners, and as I thought on this and was listening to the podcast, I listen to every weekend I was thinking about the nature of the shows, most of the ones I listen to have certain segments. So, there's, like, the introductory chat, and then there's the meat of it, and then there's, you know, XYZ, and there tends to be sort of a rhythm to it, and so I was wondering if you had thought about that and if you think that that, sort of the conversation having its own set of boundaries and the order of operations being familiar, if you think that's also sort of a comfort and that it's not just the voice and, oh yes it's Sarah the host again, but it's also like I know what's going to happen, and in a time and place in most people's lives where there's so many unknowns and anxieties to have that rhythm is really comforting.

Molly Robson

Yeah, I definitely agree. I think when it comes to media there's just always comfort in anything that's kind of predictable and easy and non-threatening, and I feel like podcasts, like, allow you a lot of freedom to be able to choose kind of what you like or find what you like and then, you know, listen and kind of serialize installations like you describe, and yeah, like you say, most participants that I spoke to and even just most of my friends during the pandemic have described podcasts as serving a deeply comforting function in that sense, in the sense that it's kind of, like, predictable, low-stakes, and also offering an element of kind of social engagement without any kind of, like, sacrifice or effort involved. Yeah, and definitely during the crisis I feel like humans always reach for, I don't know.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Reliability?

Molly Robson

Reliability and comfort and, like, non-threatening media engagement that kind of lulls you into a state where you feel safe and relaxed and understood. Yeah, it's definitely important during crisis.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, and that's again, just as an aside, one of the things I really enjoyed about your paper is because as I was reading, I was sort of, I kind of got to one of your conclusions before it happened, which I was like but are we all just in our bubbles, and are we all just, like, listening to things that make us, like, that's a problem and yes that's a problem with like news media and other things and then I really just loved where your paper went which was, like, yes we are, but we need to right now, like we kind of, everyone needs that comfort and that's okay. Like, it was sort of like, I felt like your paper in strange way kind of gave me permission to just, like, listen to the ones I like and not have to, like, get too far out of my comfort zone right now cause that's okay.

Molly Robson

Yeah, definitely, I think there's, like, huge value in, like, parasocial relationships and there always has been, like it's not a new phenomena, especially when you can't be, like, socially proximate to other people, like, we have to feel kind of understood and heard and social, we're social creatures, and media just expands our opportunities for that socialization to occur, even if it's one-sided, like, it still offers that kind of comfort that we use various media to kind of achieve.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Absolutely. One of the things that most of the podcasts I listen to feature are segments where they're either answering listener questions or even have, like, folks call in and ask questions or are reading things off of you know their Patreon or their Instagram, whatever. Do you think that that is sort of getting more into a more richer back and forth with the audience is that blurring the line of parasocial, or is the fact that it's being curated by the host still keeping it kind of, you know, they're picking what questions to answer, it's not the same thing as a live call-in radio show by any means, its produced and edited. So, I guess I'm wondering if you think that sort of gives the listeners this sense that they're participating even if it's quasi, not entirely?

Molly Robson

Yeah, I think it does, I think, like, segments like that work to enhance the intimacy of the conversation, right, and I think that's also where the sense of community even if it's kind of a mediated community and an imagined community in some ways, like you don't really know the other members of the show or of the audience. I think that that's where that comes in because you get the sense that other people are listening and engaging and have the same fears and

hopes and questions and inquiries that you do. But as you say I think it's still not entirely a genuine two-way friendship because it's still heavily, like, mediated and skewed by those dynamics, like, the host still kind of has the power, but that's not to again, that not to say it's a bad thing, like, there's so much value in parasocial intimacy.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, yeah, I mean that's why I don't listen to live call-in radio shows, because I don't wanna hear people yell at each other, like, that's not enjoyable to me, yeah.

Molly Robson

Exactly, and that's a part of the pleasure that you described in hearing things that are predictable, yeah. There's a sense that you know that, firstly that the podcast hosts know that the audience members have actively chosen to tune into the show, you know there's no kind of forced listening schedule, secondly, the listeners tune into the show expecting a particular, like, structure of content in particular, or a particular topic to be discussed, or even just a particular voice. Yeah, I think that that's a part of the transaction of the podcast medium between host and listener is there's kind of a, so maybe there is a mutual responsibility in a way, but it's just not in the same way that a normal friendship would operate, but there is like a mutual care there or an understanding of some type of reciprocity.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, it's just not on the same time timeline. It's not quite a tennis match, it's more like a chess match, maybe. Did your listening habits change during the onset of the pandemic?

Molly Robson

So, I've always kind of been, yeah, ever since I've started podcasts, and like you I started listening to *Serial* while working a boring admin job in a tiny little office. So, it's funny how you have that association with your child, and I have a completely different association with the *Serial* show (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

We were both trying to kill time though (laughs). So, there was the same objective.

Molly Robson

Trying to make life more bearable.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Exactly, in an unbearable time, exactly.

Molly Robson

Yeah, but no, I think that that actually highlights how my podcast listening changed during the pandemic. Obviously, I wasn't commuting as much, we had, like, a pretty significant lockdown last year and then life kind of went back to normal afterwards for a little bit, and now we're back in lockdown, so it's been a bit tumultuous. But I think I just noticed a tendency within myself to put on a podcast to embellish all sorts of activities, like, no matter how short, you know, doing my laundry or going for a walk or even, like, sometimes brushing my teeth, or even just getting ready in the morning immediately put on someone to talk to, someone to listen to. But I also noticed that during the pandemic, especially during, like, the lockdowns here in New Zealand, I, yeah, had a real craving to listen to, like, kind of bear witness to that chemistry between friends so, like, I became obsessed with a couple of podcasts that I just listened to all the time, and then I kind of felt like I was one of their friends. So, I guess I was using podcasts as a crutch to kind of fulfill social desires that I had caused by kind of the long-term social deprivation that was happening at that time.

Mary Alice Yeskey

When the pandemic, when the lockdown started, and your listening habits sort of changed, were you in the middle of podcast research at that point and then you sort of shifted your focus or did this whole paper sort of come out of that, I guess, sort of, what is the chronology of it?

Molly Robson

The chronology, yeah, it was interesting. So, I'd been listening to podcasts for a couple of years, and I'd just gotten back from traveling, overseas, and I was like, yup, I'm going to do my Master's in podcasting and so I kind of posed it to my supervisor and she was really on board and then I had just started, I think I was like three weeks in when Covid really took off and we were put into a lockdown. I knew I wanted to study podcasting but I wasn't sure, kind of, what angle, and I'd come across, like, affect theory and was really into that idea and then the pandemic happened and I was like planning my proposal, and then I was, like, okay, so I'm kind of plucking at the social effective of texture of this medium, like, trying to understand why people use it and how they use it to fill various emotional needs and then I was like, oh, I wonder kind of what the connection would be, how this shifts during crisis. And of course, I didn't have much choice because I was conducting all of my interviews on Zoom, while most people were just kind of, like, grappling with the beginnings of the pandemic and how scary it was at that time and stuff like that, and so it became kind of, it started off as, like, a study of the podcasting medium and the type of engagement it affords users, and then it kind of inevitably became a study on how we use various media to cope in crisis, and then I think I became hyperaware of my own podcast engagement just because I was studying it all the time and so I was kind of analyzing myself while, yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

That's inevitable, I think.

Molly Robson

Yeah (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

To a degree, but it's a really, I think it's a really great pivot, you know, I mean everybody's had to shift in some ways, but I think to have, to be studying, and it's like we said at the beginning, media studies is so here and now it's great to be able to research and document this as it's happening, and not be, you know, be hypothesizing about something or just reflecting on something that's already happened, I mean, it's very immediate which is really, I find it really fascinating to read stuff that like, I can immediately think, oh wow, I really have listened to more podcasts, just like you, every second of the day, and I'm not alone, I've got small humans yelling at me, but yeah, maybe for me it's more of a drowning out as opposed to, like, a filling the silence.

Molly Robson

Oh, I definitely notice it in some of my other chapters which weren't published in the journal, but people kind of use them to either, like, mask certain scenarios, so say you're, like, on the bus and it's noisy and everyone's commuting, and, like, you just want to be in your own little safe space. People can use it to, like, mask things, but also to fill the silence, say before bed or, like, drifting off to sleep or just, like, in the kitchen and you're feeling a bit lonely. Like, there's so many ways you can use them that you don't always intellectualize them the way I am here, but that kind of, like, yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

It's true through because, I think, thinking about the ones I do listen to a lot of them are definitely not suitable for small ears and so for me it's, like, it's a very, kind of, it's my grown-up listening time, it's like, you know it's like watching a scary movie or something when your kids go to sleep, it's something that you reserve for your own time that gives exhausted Mom some ownership of her two hours of the night.

Molly Robson

Yeah, sovereignty.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah! Thank you, that's a good word, sovereignty, yeah, yeah. So, I have to ask: what are your current favorite podcasts? What are you listening to?

Molly Robson

I always love *On Being* with Krista Tippett, especially, like, during the pandemic, it was just, like, such a gift, and then I've actually recently gotten into one called *Binchtopia* and it's kind of a



light-hearted sociological pop-culture analysis with kind of a Gen Z twist, I guess, between two friends and, yeah, in terms of, like chemistry and jokes and stuff like that and that social craving I've been describing, that kind of ticks all the boxes for me, I'd say those two are my biggest ones at the moment.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, *On Being* airs very, at least here in Baltimore the radio show airs very early on Sunday and it's very appropriate because it feels very much like a little religious, it feels like a service almost, you know, it's quiet, it's early.

Molly Robson

Is that the one that you listen to every Sunday?

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, yeah, and I was saying how, like, on Sunday mornings, like, I frequently listen to podcasts in general but that one is actually on the radio here and it really does kind of fulfill that sort of ritual thing. When I pull up the app on my phone, you know you have the little pictures of the ones you saved, the ones you listen to, and there's a couple that I just adored that have been canceled or ended, and you still see the little icon on the thing and it just, part of me is just, it makes me sad. It's like looking at an ex or something that we don't talk anymore, I'm just like oh, I miss them so much, and I'm, like, part of me has been, like, I should just delete that so I don't look at it anymore, but then it's truly, it's very much in terms of what the beginning of your paper said, it's like these are my friends and I'm deeply saddened by the image of their icon on my phone when I'm not getting anymore.

Molly Robson

Yeah, it is so sad. You miss her, yeah, cause suddenly you don't have access to that part of, you know, you can see her through other mediums like Twitter or Instagram but it's not quite the same as listening to them speak, yeah. I think your point about it being almost a religious service in a way is really poignant because I think there is, like, something really ritualistic about so much about media engagement today in, like, an oversaturated world and I think that also, like, there's something really comforting and human about, like, the amplified voice, whether that's in a, like, religious sermon, or a podcast, or a radio, it's kind of a reminder of one another's, like, humanity and our old testimonies and conversations and speeches and especially, like, on being every Sunday capture kind of, yeah, emotional textures that the written word can't and they're affecting if you incorporate them into a part of your ritual then they can actually be, like, profoundly comforting in the way that a religious service can be as well.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah, even if you're half-listening.

Molly Robson

Yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And I was thinking about it too, there's some where, you know, I, like, sing along to the theme song, and I, like, say the sign off when they say the sign-off, you know what they're going to say, like it is, it's very much like a call and response almost, so it does feel that way.

Molly Robson

And like, even you saying that you, you know, listening to *Serial*, which is quite, like, grim content matter, right, and, like, so many podcasts are I mean, like, the rise of, like, true crime podcasts and how popular they are, like, how bizarre that we all find that sort of content comforting even when it's, like, so objectively grim. I think it just speaks to the power of, like, sound and predictability and ritual in our media engagement and how even when it's something that can be, like, quite unsettling or is meant to scare you or, you know, examines the darkest parts of human beings, it's still comforting.

Mary Alice Yeskey

And like you were saying, the texture of it when it's done in that way where it's in pieces and music kind of comes in and out and they're sort of asking the rhetorical question at the beginning and just the way it's served, if you just read this story of, you know, this terrible crime it would just be an unpleasant read. It's the medium, really, that develops it in such a way that it that it becomes something different all together.

Molly Robson

Yeah, and it becomes part of your ritual, part of how you function, you know.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Yeah. My last question is, you did mention chapters, so that leads to my next question which is, is this paper a part of a larger book or what are you currently researching and working on now? What's next for you?

Molly Robson

So, yeah, this research paper was a part of my Master's thesis, which was on, yeah, podcasting, affect and intimacy and isolation and the pandemic. So, this was, like, one of the chapters of three that I did for that course. I still have not received my grades back for it, so if my markers listening then I hope that they're working on it (laughs).

Mary Alice Yeskey

Hopefully this'll get you an extra, extra couple points (laughs).

Molly Robson

Yeah (laughs). I'm waiting patiently. But, no, so, I finished that in about April of this year and since then I've been taking a break from uni, I've been studying for about seven years now, so I decided to take a break and I've been working for an environmental organization as a communications advisor, so I'm waiting to get my marks back and then I think I'll decide what I'm going to do next, after having a bit of space from academia for a while. But I do miss it, I miss it already, even this conversation is, like, yeah, firing those brain circuits that I haven't thought about in a while.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Thinking of questions you need to ask, to take seven years to answer.

Molly Robson

Yeah.

Mary Alice Yeskey

Well, excellent, thank you so much for your time today, this was such a great conversation, and like I mentioned to you we will post the link to your paper in the show write-up so everyone can read it, it's gonna be freed up for months so everyone will have access to it, and again just thank you so much, this was a delight.

Molly Robson

No, thank you so much. I really, really enjoyed it. It was a pleasure.