

Unreliability and Communal Meaning-Making in Narrative Podcasts

This paper explores strategies of aural meaning-making and the inherently unreliable narrative structure and content of audio narrations. The three chosen case studies, *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Malevolent*, and *The Silt Verses* are free-to-access narrative podcasts featuring a mixture of horror, science-fiction, and fantasy elements. Utilising social platforms like *Patreon*, *X*, and *YouTube* to receive support from their audience and allow listeners to directly impact the narrative, they offer diverse blends of scripted and improvised storytelling. Their unreliability is both part of their narratives and a source of their overarching discourses on identity and community. Rather than exclusively destabilising any sense of Self, the podcasts evoke comfort and connectedness through reiterative instances of characters, narrative structures, and usage of dis- as well as misinformation. Their contextualisation of unreliability and utilisation of aural to present stories about ambiguity allow for novel insights into the workings of unreliable narration in today's mediascape. As narrative podcasts continue to flourish as sites of (social and discursive) alterity and divergence, the paper attests to a collective embrace of the uncertain in sounds and stories.

1. Introduction

From the contradictory instructions whispered in *Malevolent* (2020–2026) to the fanatic invocations of *The Silt Verses* (2021–2024) and the comical reversals of expectations in *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012–today), narrative podcasts are a contemporary phenomenon whose productions share a decisive literary device: unreliability. As an audio-exclusive medium, it seems like a tedious and rather inefficient ambition to present a narrative by invoking, even centrally relying on, uncertainty, ambiguity and/or a fragmentary *discours*. Equally central to understanding podcast as a medium and audio-exclusive presentation of a narrative are the intimate relationships between producer and recipient. The narrator, commonly also the voice that performs the narrative, is directly delivered into the listener's ear. It is a 'personal' experience, commonly involving one who voices the narrative and the other who consumes it by listening. Julia Hoydis (2020, 2) describes this parasocial relation fittingly as "fostering an isolated individual's (the listener's) connection with others through shared emotional experiences and a sense of authenticity and openness that remains, however, hard to pin down theoretically." The following paper is not an attempt to 'pin down' such affective responses and effects to an aural narrative, but to approach these media-specific properties of podcasts through their unreliability. This paper will investigate whether an unreliable narrative in podcasts facilitates or disrupts the sense of intimacy that podcast scholarship considers pivotal. I will approach this potential interrelation through three case studies that present differing types of unreliable narration. These examples consist of the titles mentioned at the beginning of this article: *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Malevolent*, and *The Silt Verses*. The narrative podcasts have been selected based on their substantial utility of unreliability, which coincides with a tendency to draw from horror and fantasy sub-genres. As these examinations will demonstrate, community might lie at the heart of their reception just as much as their narrative structures and rhetorical strategies.

Narrative podcasts' allure can be found, at least in part, in their accessibility, both in terms of their production and consumption: anyone can produce and record a narrative podcast as long as they have a microphone and internet access. Its versatility results in a heterogeneous selection unbound by corporate regulations and commonly sustained by its consumers/listeners. "As the world of podcasting continues to expand" (McGregor 2022) we can only ever consider a fraction of what can be discovered under the banner of 'narrative podcast.' Hence, this article's resolution is to select examples which showcase a specific, yet representative phenomenon. Podcast studies have nonetheless recently put forth different definitions of the medium, one of which is Andrew J. Bottomley (2020, 175), who considers narrative podcasts as "a broad category of fiction and nonfiction programming united by the use of narrative and other dramatic techniques, as well as a composed sonic aesthetic." They are built on methods developed during the so-called 'golden years' of radio in the 1930s and 1940s (Edmond 2015, 1568), which already strategically employed a range of sound effects, soundscapes, as well as jingles to enrich and accompany aural narration. However, in contrast to early radio productions, 21st-century podcasting utilises auditory storytelling not only to affirm what is spoken, but to subvert it. As a postmodern phenomenon (Spinelli / Dann 2019, 13), it 'speaks' to the post-truth landscape. This is most indicative in the popular sub-genre of true crime podcasts, which introduced "new human journalism" (194) as a subjective, yet 'honest' mediation of information. As a result, the uttered word in narrative podcasts is deconstructive; flexible and bound to shift, bend, and be entirely negated, along with everything that can be assumed about the podcasts' fictional worlds. Yet there is a cohesive approach to the presentation of aural narratives. As the following will show, certain patterns permeate narrative podcasts, keeping them from falling into verbal and contextual illegibility.

As a point of reference, I will refer in my engagement of unreliability to Dan Shen's (2014) mediation of various categorisations of the phenomenon. Among them, he points to James Phelan, who identifies two overarching types, one of which is based on the falsification of information – "misreporting, misinterpreting and misevaluating" – and the second caused by an omission or lack of information – "underreporting, underinterpreting, and underevaluating" (897). Similar systems are addressed, but for the sake of this paper, I will mainly refer to Phelan's approach. Shen also suggests two main effects resulting from such narrations: estranging and bonding unreliability (897). Either the lack of information alienates the reader/recipient from the narrator or fosters a sense of community through a shared sense of frustration and intrigue. The latter will be particularly important to my readings, as we will encounter characters whose responses to unreliable communication vary widely, and so do their social behaviours. Prior to the first case study, it should be noted that all three podcast cases belong to the horror genre. The paper will refrain from exploring genre properties and how they are employed by each, but the analyses are conducted with awareness of a tendency of narrative podcasts to incorporate, or even centre on, supernatural, gothic, or horror themes.

2. *Welcome to Night Vale's* Local Community

The first case study is also the oldest amongst them, yet the only one that is still ongoing: *Welcome to Night Vale* is a bi-monthly narrative podcast that focuses on a fictional broadcast station in an

equally fictional small town in the US American desert. Initially released in 2012, it has since garnered international attention, as it was also among the initial podcast sensations to tour live shows (Spinelli / Dann 2019, 43-47). In the town of Night Vale, conspiracy theories are part of the daily routine of its citizens, who include humans, apparitions, and posthuman beings. The narrative is delivered by a radio host named Cecil, who reads the local news, horoscopes, weather, and community event calendar. All these sections fail to provide the information they are supposed to, thereby reversing the listener's expectations that every part of the podcast is meant to enrich and solidify its story world. The weather is, for instance, an intermission song by independent artists – a circumstance the producers have maintained until today –, the daily affirmations consist of ominous warnings, and advertisements are either indirect descriptions of supernatural murders or absurdist allusions to postcapitalist practices. The podcast nonetheless sustains a sense of continuity and unreliability that, through repetition, is rendered into a familiar pattern.

To achieve a sense of a continual narrative, *Welcome to Night Vale* relies on recurring characters as co-narrators who, despite their non-human depictions and ephemerality, become stable presences. With the radio host mostly remaining at his station and the city being located within an impenetrable desert, the narrative orbits around its local community. It therefore comes as no surprise that the city community is the main (re)source of information for Cecil, who, in turn, disseminates the information city-wide. This notion of co-dependence is highlighted early on in episode 19 (Part A), “The Sandstorm.” With a sandstorm approaching the city, Cecil receives phone calls from citizens who observe the weather phenomenon and reiterates their impressions during the show. This process dislocates the event from a single narrative vocal point to multiple. Along with the character's immediate impressions, the listener also gains insights into the significance of the social dimension of the fictional collective and their recurring relevance to the podcast's narrative. In episode 19, the first call during the sandstorm that Cecil receives is from Larry Leroy, a farmer who lives on the outer skirts of town and is often among the first to notice supernatural happenings due to his peripheral location. Cecil presents his report to the listener as follows:

We're getting word that the sandstorm has already begun to hit. Larry Leroy, out on the edge of town, called moments ago to say that the sand was thick and really flying fast, but that when it touched his skin, he could hardly feel it. He could hardly feel a thing, that the past was a fiction and that consequences were a choice. [...] He shouted a bright confirmation of life up toward the sand-covered sun before gasping and screaming “No! Not you! Not you!” and then hanging up the phone. Well, thank you Larry, for that informative report. (Fink / Cranor 2013)

There are three intersecting rhetorical strategies one can notice in this narrative: first, the report is set up as a personal sighting that anticipates a subjective yet generalised impression of the sandstorm's visual appearance. The character's sighting, however, eschews any such description and focuses on an abstract sensation, which descends into existential musings. The ominous ending of the call is diffused by the host's unironic description of the report as ‘informative.’ Second, while it is unreliable due to the caller's questionable mental state, the listener can nonetheless form an impression of the sandstorm's (supernatural) properties. Third, the radio host treats this and every other report as equally un/reliable. He is therefore not claiming any authority over the narrative, despite being the central narrator of the podcast, nor does he impose a hierarchy on the characters' impressions, regardless of their degree of ambiguity or unreliability. The ambiguity of the character's narratives – in this case, the farmer's musing on the linear experience of time – further

allows the listener to consider the co-existence and validity of several narratives simultaneously without them necessarily contradicting one another.

The same episode also features an email by Steve Carlsberg, another recurring character, who argues that the sandstorm is a “government-created project,” to which the host retorts that “[o]f course, the sandstorm was created by the government. The city council announced that this morning” (Fink / Cranor 2013). Even as the host might disagree with their statements and cut them short, they are presented as intermediate messages, allowing the listener to reconsider the narrator’s biased position and limited perspective in this aurally mediated story. As the podcast relies on the instatement of the townspeople to familiarise its absurd story world to the listener, it employs an audio-narrative model that evokes community. The narrative’s unreliable mode is thus defused rather than escalated by its multiplicity. As the farmer phones in to the radio station each time, apparently being overwhelmed by the supernatural phenomena, and while Steve Carlsberg always provides rational reasoning that does not hold in this absurd story world, the podcast establishes a rhythm of various kinds of narrativised impressions that a listener can anticipate. Even as *Welcome to Night Vale* presents horrifying events for its characters, its unpredictability and unreliability allow the listener to rely on the predictable multi-vocality of its fictional citizens.

3. Control and (Reluctant) Cooperation in *Malevolent*

Malevolent’s main social model is not based on a local community but on the dualistic relation between two narrators: Arthur and John. With the circumstances unknown, Arthur finds himself at the beginning of this podcast blind and bound to a supernatural entity, who is shortly after named ‘John’ and can see through Arthur’s eyes. With Arthur eager to restore his sight and John desiring to recover his memory (and his own body), they must henceforth rely on each other to navigate their story world. The question of control, its embodiment or disembodiment, and its intricate relation to human morality permeates the podcast. While the two narrators share a body, the unreliability is predominantly due to John’s undernarration. Not only Arthur but also the listener relies on a set of brief, selective impressions delivered by an authority that is decidedly presented as non-human and whose ambiguous interests remain elusive. In the first episode of the podcast, John’s first and only description of Arthur is an early and exemplary instance of this narrative mode: “Look into the mirror. I want to look at your face. You can’t see this, but you have the cold, calculated demeanour of someone not to fuck with” (Guthrie 2020). It offers no details on Arthur’s outer appearance but draws the listener’s attention toward one of the character’s key traits. Arthur does not object to the description and merely replies that he is not someone who “likes to be pushed around” (Guthrie 2020). The instance, similar to the local reports in *Welcome to Night Vale*, is not intended as a descriptive assertion but as a subjective, introspective impression. It is not unreliable because it deliberately misrepresents, but for the sake of maintaining the dialogic, conversational mode of the podcast, it foregoes certain narrative strategies, including descriptive instances. *Malevolent* thus assures the listener that it does not intend to deceive, but that reliability can be anchored in the agreement and disagreement of two simultaneous narrators.

As the dangers and stakes rise in each episode, John’s undernarration condenses into two interrelated strands of information relay: reactions to the ‘indescribable’ and means of asserting

control. During their ongoing investigations into their shared predicament, Arthur is faced with supernatural occurrences, most of which take non-human forms that elude any conventional frame of reference. In certain cases, the lack of natural light also obscures John's 'vision,' and both characters have to react based on their limited sensual or embodied impressions. One of such instances occurs in episode 11 of season 1. Unable to see what lies ahead in an unlit corridor, John describes a potential threat ahead of them as follows: "It's obscured by some old building equipment, pipes and whatnot, but I see it moving ever so slightly, as if it's maybe eating something. I can only see the rise and fall of its back" (Guthrie 2021). Danger lies, in these moments, in the 'unperceivable' that may take more concrete shapes as the two narrators' approach them or remain obscure. *Malevolent* derives from these strategies its continued affordances of inciting horror and fright in the listener. Unreliability also serves as a means of controlling the narrative. John's undernarration ensures that only information beneficial to his own interests is conveyed, which does not always align with Arthur's. Arthur, in turn, repeatedly questions his partner's credibility and ambitions, at times hesitating to act due to John's presumed unreliability.

Since this distrust cannot be resolved, and the narrative remains fragmented, the narrators and the listener alike are equally invited to rely on aural signals. The sound of footsteps, the bark of a hound, and the hissing of an incorporeal being are among the recurring diegetic sounds of the *Malevolent*'s story world. They might affirm or undermine John's narrative and generally serve as recognisable and reliable signals to the listener. This circumstance accentuates how podcasts employ media-specific strategies that work with or against the narrative authority. The soundscape introduces an alternative narrative to that presented by the two narrators, inviting the listener not only to distrust John but also to consider the underrepresentation of knowledge from both characters. Nonetheless, the unreliability, diegetically caused by the imposed bodily limitations of both characters, has a bonding effect. Arthur's initial distrust, which arguably could mirror the listener's scepticism towards the entity in control of their 'eyes,' eases into a familiar argument that never settles into unquestioned submission. Quite the contrary, the communal sense the podcast promotes is grounded in mutual distrust and, at the same time, in an acknowledgement of a mutual interest in proceeding with the unfolding narrative despite their discrepancies. The community presented in *Malevolent* is arguably more tightly knit than in *Welcome to Night Vale* and oscillates between two characters who hold authority over the narrative with ever-shifting degrees of (embodied) control and reliability.

4. *The Silt Verses*' Antagonistic Authorities

The Silt Verses, a narrative podcast focusing on followers of a forgotten river god, could be considered a combination of the narrative strategies of the two previous cases. The narrative authority is comprised of its two central characters, Faulkner and Carpenter, thereby limiting the listener's perspective and the information available based on their individual impressions. Embarking on a road trip through an alternative vision of the United States, the story world is established through the characters' highly lucid, ambivalent recounting of their journey. Both are part of a sect that worships an unsanctioned river god within a theological system that favours deities tied to modern inventions, such as the Saint Electric, whose domains include electricity and

radio. The river god, called the Trawler-Man, is an allusive apparition described as a force of nature manifesting in a human-like being with several faces and mouths. Faulkner and Carpenter not only narrativise their travels to seek out more followers of the Trawler-Man through journal-like entries but also reminisce about events in their respective pasts. The radio is featured as an omnipresent diegetic soundscape, audible to the characters and the listener. Their vocal scrutiny of media outlets in their narration signals dissonance between their perspectives and public reports, accentuating their unreliable position as narrators. It specifically clarifies their unreliability, as misnarration resulting from their individual interpretations of events based on their belief system.

In contrast to the two previous cases, in which the undernarration arguably had a bonding effect at both the intradiegetic – character-to-character – and the extradiegetic – character-to-listener – levels, the blatant inconsistencies in the narratives presented by the characters of *The Silt Verses* alienate them from one another and potentially from the listener. Their differing dispositions are set up early on in the narrative, with Carpenter venting her frustration in the first episode, stating:

Co-existence isn't working out between Faulkner and I. [...] And he brings out the worst in me, as well: I catch myself slapping his suggestions down before they're even out of his mouth. He keeps giving me these anxious, searching glances, wondering if he's said something idiotic, and I'm already smirking unpleasantly as if to confirm that, yes, he has. He's begun to irritate me. There's no other way of putting it. (Ware / Hussen 2021)

Carpenter's impressions are shaped not only by their moral standpoints and interpretations of their deity but also by their everyday conversations. The dialogues, even when selectively reiterated, are marked by misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The dissonance is projected onto the mode of unreliability that the podcast utilises and anticipates the narrative's general trajectory: while Carpenter recognises the potential fallibility of her illegal god, rendering her journey into one of critical introspection, Faulkner considers their road trip as a rite of passage into their cultist community and manifestation of his belief. By the end of its first season, Carpenter absconds from the Trawler-Man, whereas Faulkner is on his way to rise in the ranks of their church.

The aurality of its medium allows, in the case of *The Silt Verses*, the employment of unreliability to showcase acute moments of emotional and mental instability. The final section of its first episode is particularly emblematic of how the relation between deity and devotee manifests in its story world. Travelling out onto a river in the night, they witness the brief 'descent' of the Trawler-Man, who appears and disappears as an untouchable apparition. The instance is narrated by Carpenter, who details Faulkner's appraisals and prayers and notices details of the god's non-human appearance that are revolting to her. Strikingly, the sight of the Trawler-Man is treated as a deviation of Carpenter's sense of reality, yet the sounds of the boat, the creaking of wood and the splashes of the oars are treated as irrefutable signs of the god's manifestation: "I catch hold of myself. Correct my balance in the rowing boat. Reassert my own stable reality, as firmly as I can. [...] We stand there, in the shared terror of our silence, gazing out at what is unquestionably a miracle" (Ware / Hussen 2021). The silence of the onlookers is further contrasted by the non-human sounds of the Trawler-man, which began "to moan an organ-pipe psalm" (Ware / Hussen 2021). Those psalms, as well as Faulkner's following devotions, are not audible to the listener. The absence of a soundscape after the god's arrival accentuates the uncertainty mediated by Faulkner's narration, which echoes the narrator's uncertainty about the tangibility of her reality and her belief in it. *The Silt Verses* gradually estranges its characters and listeners alike. Instead of instating a pattern of multiple authorities and any aural signals that might offer a sense of certainty, its misnarrations

epitomise the podcast's approach to theology: it is not a question of what one can perceive, it is a matter of what one decides to listen to.

5. Unreliability and Narrative Podcast's Heterogeneity

According to David Hendy (2008, 137), the significance of sound as the base of communication and narration cannot be understated: "What we listen to – and how we listen to something – are two important parts of what makes us modern, sentient, sociable, human beings." Radio and later podcasts are still considered invisible, omnipresent, yet secondary media. Audio-exclusive mediation of information and stories makes them highly accessible and passively consumable. The listener can engage in a different task while still being loosely entangled in the narrative; this circumstance can be considered an advantage, as mentioned above, as well as a disadvantage since it appears to disqualify podcasts from being considered 'proper media.' However, the three case studies demonstrated that narrative podcasts employ unreliability to call for our undivided attention. First, the obtrusiveness of narrative authorities requires the dissemination of 'voices' with varying positions, presented edited, commented on, or simply unfiltered. To follow the narrative, it is essential to consider each narrator despite their clashing stories. Second, the soundscape is an integral feature that oscillates between diegetic signals and non-diegetic cues. This circumstance also differentiates narrative podcasts from audiobooks. As Spinelli and Dann (2019, 13; original emphasis) aptly remind us, "*a podcast is more than a mere audio text*, it is a relationship invited through an audio text between people involved in making and listening to that text and beyond." It comes down, again, to a community that is either established through a shared sense of uncertainty or foregrounds the disagreements between them. Considering its potential impact beyond the soundwaves, fans of *Welcome to Night Vale*, *Malevolent*, or *The Silt Verses* come together on various online platforms to share their interpretations, make predictions about future episodes, and showcase their understandings of the story worlds through fan content. The less a narrative is considered certain, the more it appears to invite engagement among fans and even with the creators of these podcasts. Third, the listener is encouraged through soundscapes, the deliberate gaps left in the information provided and the introduction of other 'voices' to consider how the narrative represents a non-normative perspective and identity. Maria Risanti and Sotirios Bampatzimopoulos (2024, 9) foreground the medium's so-called "expansive on-goingness," which, among others, implies that it is an exceptionally well-equipped medium to "make room for previously non-/under-heard voices [...] room for existing tropes, genres and forms to find new grounds of creative re-sprout." Narrative podcasts still hold great potential, not just in granting voices to the underrepresented and challenging notions of a uniform perspective, but also in how narratives can be presented in an audio-exclusive format. Unreliability in narrative podcasts is one of its essential means of pursuing its 'vocal' heterogeneity and sociality, working with and through the uncertainties and paradoxes of its narratives, rather than mitigating their potential.

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