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# True Crime Podcasting and Technical Communication: Exposing the Oppression of Objectivity

Collin Bjork 

Massey University

## ABSTRACT

TPC scholarship about podcasting has much to gain from more thoroughly engaging with the social justice turn in the field. To demonstrate the significance of podcasting as a site for social justice research in TPC, this article examines the true crime podcast *Serial Season 1*. This study illustrates how *Serial* appears to seek justice but actually employs a journalistic notion of objectivity to advance a white supremacist agenda.

## KEYWORDS

Adnan Syed; business communication; professional communication; serial podcast; Sarah Koenig; TPC

*Serial Season 1*—the most downloaded true crime podcast in the world (Quah, 2018b)—begins with a technicality. Koenig (2014–2022) opens the first episode, *The Alibi*, by explaining the seemingly simple problem at the heart of this podcast:

For the last year, I've spent every working day trying to figure out where a high school kid was for an hour after school one day in 1999. Or—if you want to get *technical* about it, and apparently I do—where a high school kid was for *twenty-one minutes* after school one day in 1999.<sup>1</sup> (0:56–1:11)

Not twenty-two minutes; not half an hour. Twenty-one minutes. Police used a combination of forensic science and testimonies to determine that the crime – murder by manual strangulation – occurred precisely between 2:15 and 2:36 pm on January 13, 1999. The podcast revolves around these twenty-one minutes. Where was the primary suspect, ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed, during that time? Who was he with? What was he doing? In an attempt to answer these questions, Koenig pours over a bevy of technical information. She studies architectural plans and affidavits, call logs and cell tower maps, and all along the way she carefully communicates the details of these documents to her devoted podcast listeners so they too can puzzle over the evidence. As Syed later explains, “My case lived and died in those twenty-one minutes.” But in the end, the jury remained unconvinced by his alibi for that window of time, and despite a distinct lack of physical evidence connecting the young Muslim man to the crime, they found Syed guilty of first-degree murder. For the next twenty-three years, Syed served a lifetime sentence in a Maryland correctional facility. And even after his charges were vacated and he was released in late 2022, it's fair to say that those twenty-one minutes had an outsized effect on his life.

Technicalities like Syed's twenty-one minutes are essential to the ways that the US criminal justice system resolves crimes. DNA tests rely on minutiae like hair follicles and bodily fluids gathered from the scene of the crime. Precise timelines often form the backbone of police investigations. And the difference between a guilty and innocent verdict sometimes hinges on how well the evidence from forensic science is communicated to a jury of nonexpert citizens. Technicalities like these are also important to the podcasts that tell the stories of these crimes to the public. True crime podcasters like Koenig sift through mountains of information, much of which is highly specialized knowledge from

**CONTACT** Collin Bjork  c.bjork@massey.ac.nz  School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, Aotearoa 4442, New Zealand

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fields such as data science, computer science, and medicine. Podcast hosts then summarize this information for listeners, sometimes in excruciating detail, and weigh its worth as evidence. They also ask other interviewees about this information and speculate with them about its validity. Often the websites for true crime podcasts like *Serial Season 1* contain even more detailed information that the producers want to share with their audience, including police documents, handwritten letters, architectural plans, photographs, maps, and the like. For many listeners, the communication of this technical knowledge adds excitement, intrigue, and mystery to true crime podcasts. These podcasts also generate further discourse and debate about the crime stories in other venues, including on news websites (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*) and online forums (e.g., *Reddit*). Technicalities like these are thus emblematic of the vital role that technical communication plays in the genre of true crime podcasting.

In true crime podcasting, this kind of technical communication – the recounting of forensic evidence, cellular and online data, police records, and so on – conveys objectivity; it signals a kind of credibility derived from what is perceived to be impartial scientific facts. But in the discipline of technical and professional communication (TPC), this kind of objectivity has a long and fraught history. In her influential *College English* article, “A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing,” Carolyn Miller (1979) explains how this “positivist view” of language was once pervasive in TPC textbooks because technical writing was long viewed as an objective methodology communicating facts through a scientific and technical point of view (p. 610). Although these positivist perspectives are more difficult to find in TPC now, this exaltation at the altar of objectivity was a defining feature of TPC for decades. Of course, the field of technical communication now knows that calls for objectivity in technical communication are normative assertions that preserve the dominance of white, masculine office cultures at the expense of other ways of communicating knowledge and expertise (Haas, 2012). In technical communication, objectivity is not a neutral ideal; rather, it is an ideology that furthers white supremacy and the oppression of marginalized groups.

Objectivity plays a similarly problematic and ideological role in true crime storytelling. Like technical communication, objectivity has long been a central tenet in the kind of investigative journalism that underpins true crime storytelling (Mindich, 1998). And like technical communication, this privileging of objectivity in true crime storytelling also results in oppression. For instance, many white-run newspapers—like *The New York Times*, which did not hire its first Black executive editor until 2014—have a long history of conflating nonpartisanship with a “detached neutrality” (Wallace, 2019, p. 51) on a wide variety of subjects, including on horrific racial violence like lynchings (Wallace, 2019, pp. 39–52). Objectivity, in these cases, is complicit with antiblack violence. Of course, Black journalists like Fortune (1884/2007) and Wells (1970) long ago established a tradition of challenging the objectivity of police reports and insisted that journalism can be independent without being politically neutral. Still, for too long, white journalists have naively accepted police reports of criminal behavior as de facto truth because those accounts were framed as objective. So when today’s true crime podcasters fail to sufficiently interrogate allegedly impartial accounts of criminality provided by representatives of the state, those podcasters allow white supremacy to masquerade as objectivity.

This relationship between objectivity and oppression is precisely why true crime podcasting matters to technical communication. In TPC, the social justice turn has prompted technical communicators not only to challenge power hierarchies in traditional TPC genres and practices (Jones et al., 2016) but also to examine issues of power, privilege, and positionality in less studied sites of technical communication like Black family reunions (Allen, 2022) and Black hair care on YouTube (Yusuf & Schioppa, 2022). This article extends the critical work of the social justice turn in TPC by showing how the commitment to objectivity in true crime podcasting furthers white supremacy. Through this analysis, I further TPC scholarship about podcasting by illustrating how even genres associated with entertainment like true crime podcasting function as an important site for social justice-oriented TPC research.

I begin this argument by summarizing existing podcasting scholarship in TPC and identifying an opportunity for more social justice-oriented research about podcasting. Next, I establish a rhetorical

definition of true crime podcasting in terms of its orientation toward justice. I then examine the most popular true crime podcast, *Serial* (Season 1), and show how the podcast's emphasis on objectivity makes the program complicit with white supremacy. I close by reflecting on what technical communicators can gain from studying true crime podcasting.

## Positioning podcasting in technical communication

In recent decades, scholars have broadened the scope of TPC by identifying technical communication in a variety of new media, including in podcasting. A dozen years ago, Christine Tulley (2011) penned an early analysis of the connections between podcasting, aural communication, and information technologies. Other TPC scholars have examined podcasting pedagogies (Dangler, 2008), podcasting usability (Bowie, 2012), and podcasting transcripts (Chesley, 2021). Podcasting also sometimes plays a minor role in transmedia technical communication analyses that primarily attend to visual and social media (e.g., Baniya & Chen, 2021; Bonsignore, 2023). In addition to research about podcasting, TPC also has a history of producing podcasts. Weber's (2014-present)<sup>2</sup> *10-Minute Tech Comm*, for instance, has released informative episodes, and Bakke's (2021-present) more recent *TC Talk* discusses contemporary issues in technical communication. Technical communicators have, in other words, produced, taught, and studied podcasts in wide variety of ways.

But there is still an opportunity for more TPC scholarship to examine podcasting through the social justice lens that is so important to our field. To date, most research that interrogates issues of power and privilege in podcasting is done by scholars working in neighboring disciplines like communication studies (e.g., Kumanyika, 2015), journalism studies (e.g., Wallace, 2019), media studies (e.g., Florini, 2015), sound studies (e.g., Sterne & Sawhney, 2022), rhetorical studies (e.g., Choong & Bjork, 2023), writing studies (e.g., Burns et al., 2018), and the nascent interdisciplinary field of podcast studies (e.g., Beckstead et al., 2024; Clarke & Bjork, 2023; Copeland, 2018). TPC deserves a more prominent position in this scholarly conversation because, as I will demonstrate, podcasting can be an important site for furthering the social justice aims of the discipline.

Podcasting has many genres that may appeal to technical communicators. Although some of the traditional TPC genres (e.g., instruction manuals, user guides, technical reports, and grant proposals) do not exist as podcasts, many podcasts fall into other genres familiar to technical communicators. There are how-to podcasts (e.g., *Everyday Māori*; *How to Do Everything*), business communication podcasts (e.g., *Black Wealth Renaissance*; *Māori Millionaire*), science communication podcasts (e.g., *Black Tech Unplugged*; *Our Changing World*), oral presentation podcasts (e.g., *TED Talks Daily*), research communication podcasts (e.g., *Rhetoricity*; *Global Rhetorics*; *The Big Rhetorical Podcast*; *CCC Podcast*; *Pedagogue*; *10-Minute Tech Comm*; *TC Talk*), and more. Although these genres of podcasts warrant consideration by TPC scholars, they do not always foreground social justice issues. Instead of focusing on these more common genres, I center this analysis on a less obvious example of technical communication embedded in one of podcasting's most popular genres: true crime.

I focus on true crime for two reasons. First, true crime podcasting foregrounds issues of justice and therefore serves as a prime vehicle for augmenting TPC's social justice efforts by critiquing this genre's complicity with white supremacy. Second, true crime podcasting is a genre often associated with entertainment, which positions this article as an extension of recent research in TPC that locates valuable technical communication insights in entertainment media such as YouTube beauty videos (Ledbetter, 2018) and comics and graphic storytelling (Bahl et al., 2020). This article aims to illustrate how an entertainment genre like true crime podcasting also functions as an important site of technical communication that warrants critique from a social justice perspective.

## Defining the true crime podcasting genre

True crime is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed podcast genres (Latimer, 2020). True crime podcasting draws on a long literary tradition of true crime storytelling and often involves

a heavy dose of investigative journalism coupled with some citizen sleuthing. Podcasts in this genre can be produced by major private media organizations like *The New York Times* (which produced *The Trojan Horse Affair*), public media organizations like the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (which produced *Missing & Murdered*), or independent podcasters like Payne Lindsay (who produced *Up and Vanished*). There are also popular chatcasts in the true crime genre that, like *Crime Junkie* and *My Favorite Murder*, use a talk show format to recount crimes to large fanbases. Typically, true crime podcasts focus on unsolved crimes (e.g., *Stolen: The Search for Jermain*; *The Teacher's Pet*), wrongful convictions (e.g., *Undisclosed*; *In the Dark, Season 2*), or the injustices of the criminal justice system (e.g., *Serial, Season 4: Guantánamo*; *The Other Latif*). Unlike books, documentaries, and television series about true crime, podcasts in this genre often foreground the role of the narrator so much that the narrator becomes a key character – even the protagonist – in the story (e.g., *Serial*; *The Messenger*). Together, these attributes constitute some key features of the true crime podcasting genre.

But genres are more than just a list of textual features. From a rhetorical perspective, genres are also engaged in “social action” (Miller, 1984). As Miller (1984) explains, “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (p. 151). In other words, genres are united by more than their formal features; they are also defined by the rhetorical actions that they try to achieve. What action links podcasts in the true crime genre? Entertainment, perhaps? True crime podcasts are clearly designed to entertain their listeners. But many other media and genres also seek to entertain their audiences. Sitcom television and music videos, for instance, have entertainment at their core. And yet, sitcom television and music videos are different from true crime podcasting. Even among the podcasting medium, there are sports podcasts and pop culture podcasts that also aim to entertain. Entertainment, then, is too broad to be the defining social action that denotes the genre. A strong rhetorical definition of true crime podcasting must identify a social action that not only links various podcasts within the genre but also distinguishes those podcasts from others outside the genre.

I argue that true crime podcasting is linked by the search for justice. Simply put, true crime podcasts are nonfiction audio stories about criminality that seek justice. Whodunit podcasts like *Up and Vanished* seek justice for individual victims of crimes. Although other whodunits, like *The Trojan Horse Affair*, seek justice for a whole community that has been harmed. Wrongful conviction podcasts like *In the Dark* (Season 2) seek justice for people who have been jailed for crimes that they did not commit. Still other true crime podcasts, like *Stolen: Surviving St. Michaels* and *The Lake*, seek justice for historical wrongs done to Indigenous communities by national governments. Even prison podcasts like *Ear Hustle* and *Bird's Eye View* can be considered, according to this definition, true crime. Hosted by convicted criminals, these podcasts recount the everyday experiences of people navigating the criminal justice system. By centering the voices of prisoners, humanizing their experiences, and exposing cases of inhumane treatment, these podcasts challenge dominant ideologies that position convicted criminals as overlooked and less-than-human figures in our society. Prioritizing prisoner's voices is a kind of justice-seeking: These prison podcasts seek justice for those who have been wronged by the criminal justice system itself.

Defined by their orientation toward justice, true crime podcasting proves to be a capacious yet coherent genre. But not all true crime podcasts share the same understanding of what justice is and who deserves justice. These divergent conceptions of justice explain the wide variation of podcasts in the genre. On one hand, podcasts like *Criminal*, *Guilt*, and *The Dropout* tell traditional true crime audio stories about mysteries, murders, and trials. They tend to focus on individuals (who can be labeled guilty or innocent) and their actions (which can be defined as right or wrong). These podcasts seek justice for discrete acts of criminality. But this focus on justice for individuals struggles to account for structural inequalities. An expanded view of true crime, on the other hand, also includes podcasts that seek systemic justice. Podcasts like *Ear Hustle*, *Bird's Eye View*, and *The Lake* seek justice for state-sponsored structural inequities that harm communities of color and Indigenous peoples. Although these podcasts sometimes have different formal features – different hosts, structures, and tropes – than other true crime

podcasts, they all discuss criminality and share an orientation toward justice. The primary difference between these two types of true crime podcasts, then, is that some focus on justice for individuals, while others focus on systemic (in)justice. In this way, the true crime genre makes space for a diverse collection of podcasts but creates coherence through a shared investment in a broad conception of justice. This expanded rhetorical view of true crime podcasting is important because it draws attention to the competing views of criminality and justice that reside at the heart of this popular genre.

But just because true crime podcasts are united in their search for justice does not mean that they are a moral good. On the contrary, true crime podcasting has a reputation as a highly problematic genre. True crime podcasts have been rightly criticized for “lionizing powerful men, sensationalizing violence against women, normalizing police brutality, and misrepresenting people of color as criminals” (Bjork, 2024). Just as rhetoric can be used for good or for ill, so too can the search for justice that animates true crime podcasting. Sometimes true crime podcasters may seek justice but veer off course. Other times, the means of seeking justice may harm others. Viewing true crime podcasting through the lens of its search for justice casts in high relief the challenge of seeking justice in a just manner. True crime podcasting has many stakeholders, and how hosts answer the question “Justice for whom?” goes a long way to explain the shape of each podcast.

This investment in justice is one key reason why true crime podcasting matters to TPC. Like true crime podcasting, technical communication has incredible breadth and variety, but the recent social justice turn in the field underscores how justice has always been important, if overlooked, in TPC. Jones et al. (2016) use the concept of an “antenarrative” in technical communication to divert attention away from “the dominant narrative that technical communication is most concerned with objective, apolitical, acultural practices, theories, and pedagogies” (p. 211). Instead, this antenarrative in TPC “emboldens the field’s objectives to unabashedly embrace social justice and inclusivity as part of its core (rather than marginal or optional) narrative” (p. 212). And yet, despite the large body of work that constitutes the social justice turn in TPC,<sup>3</sup> Walton et al. (2019) note in their subsequent book that “our sites of work . . . remain sites of injustice” (p. 1). The process of seeking justice therefore remains central and unresolved in both TPC and in true crime podcasting. But while TPC has long critiqued the injustices perpetuated by an uncritical allegiance to objectivity and positivism, objectivity remains a central component in true crime podcasting. And as I show in the following section, that problematic commitment to objectivity is complicit with white supremacy and bungles the genre’s attempts at justice. To explicate how objectivity functions in true crime podcasting, I analyze the world’s most popular true crime podcast and one that is representative of the genre: *Serial* (Season 1).

### Interrogating the role of objectivity in *Serial* (Season 1)

“Just toss it all out . . . because it’s subjective” (p. 203) says Koenig (2014–2022) on “Episode 9: To Be Suspected” of *Serial* (Season 1). Here, she paraphrases advice given to her from a homicide detective about how to understand conflicting perceptions of the alleged murderer’s behavior in the weeks following the crime. This performative dismissal of subjective knowledge positions objectivity as a central logic in the podcast,<sup>4</sup> a feature that is common among other true crime podcasts such as *Undisclosed* and *The Trojan Horse Affair*. In popular discourse, journalistic objectivity often signifies impartiality and the absence of bias. But in *Just the Facts: How “Objectivity” Came to Define American Journalism*, Professor David Mindich (1998) argues that the dominant ideology of objectivity in American journalism is more complex. In addition to “nonpartisanship” and “balanced” reporting, he contends that journalistic objectivity also involves centering “facticity” and a kind of scientific “detachment,” all conveyed in the “inverted pyramid” style of writing (p. 8). This five-pointed conceptualization of journalistic objectivity became solidified in mainstream media in the 1890s and continues to play an outsized role in American journalism today.

Because true crime podcasting draws heavily on the American journalistic tradition, this complex kind of objectivity also plays a crucial role in podcasts like *Serial* (Season 1). In “Episode 1: The Alibi,” for example, Koenig (2014–2022) first introduces the crime to listeners in this way:

Almost 15 years ago, on January 13, 1999, a girl named Hae Min Lee disappeared. She was a senior at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore County in Maryland. She was Korean. She was smart, and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete. She played field hockey and lacrosse. And she was responsible. Right after school she was supposed to pick up her little cousin from kindergarten and drop her home. But she didn’t show. That’s when Hae Lee’s family knew something was up, when the cousin’s school called.

About a month later, on February 9, Hae’s body was found in a big park in Baltimore, really a rambling forest. A maintenance guy who said he’d stopped to take a leak on his way to work discovered her there. He’d noticed a bit of her black hair poking out of a shallow grave.

The cause of death was manual strangulation, meaning someone did it with their hands. A couple weeks after that, so six weeks after she first went missing, Hae’s ex-boyfriend, a guy named Adnan Syed, was arrested for her murder. He’s been in prison ever since. (4:00–5:02)

Although true crime storytelling is sometimes linked to “sensationalism” (Wiltenburg, 2004), this opening explanation is hardly sensational. Instead, this introduction exemplifies true crime storytelling that at once appeals to objectivity while also reaching beyond it. The date of the disappearance, the name of the missing person, the location of the body, the cause of death, the prime suspect named and arrested, and the current state of things. These are the facts of the case, presented in impartial language and spoken with a dry delivery that minimizes variations in pitch, pace, or cadence. At the same time, however, the factual description of Lee as a student who played field hockey and lacrosse is swallowed between the interpretive descriptions of Lee as “smart and beautiful, and cheerful, and a great athlete” and as someone who “was responsible.” Similarly, rather than stating the name and workplace of the maintenance guy, Koenig mentions a detail that is totally irrelevant to the case but nonetheless describes the most mundane of human motivations for accidentally finding a corpse: “He’d stopped to take a leak on his way to work.” Tiny details like these, scattered among the objective description of the crime, transform the two-dimensional characters of a police report into three-dimensional “dramatic characters” (McMurtry, 2016, p. 313) with histories, dreams, desires, motivations, and, in murder cases, blunted futures. Thus, while listening publics and academics like McMurtry often remark about these character-building strategies in true crime podcasts like *Serial* (Season 1), these subjective elements always exist in tension with the purportedly objective account of the crime and its victims.

This mixture of objectivity and expanded narrative license constitutes a hallmark of true crime podcasting. In reviews of true crime podcasts, critics often draw attention to the ways that producers weave facts with narrative (e.g., Larson, 2022; Quah, 2018a). For some scholars, this interlacing of subjective storytelling elements with objective facts distinguishes the narrative genre from the practice of journalism (e.g., Punnett, 2018). Yet much research about true crime podcasting skips readily past the objective content and focuses on the narratological elements of true crime storytelling. For instance in *Serial* (Season 1), scholars have investigated the podcast’s “serialized narrative” (Engley, 2019), “narrative structure” (McMurtry, 2016), “narrative levels” (Letzler, 2017), “audionarratology” (DeMair, 2017), “polyphony of narratives” (Stanley, 2019), connections to the thriller genre (Hancock & McMurtry, 2019), and “unsatisfying conclusion” (Ora, 2019). Haugtvedt (2017), in fact, identifies key elements of fictional storytelling in the podcast’s rhetorical strategies and insists that the “rhetoric of fictionality” in *Serial* (Season 1) overpowers the podcast’s news function (p. 12). Clearly, then, narrative matters to *Serial* (Season 1). And yet, passages like the previously mentioned initial description of the crime indicate that these narrative elements are nonetheless built on the bedrock of objectivity. In true crime podcasts like these, the journalistic drive for nonpartisan, fact-based, balanced, and detached reporting hangs in the balance with a literary drive to construct complex characters who navigate an ever-thickening plot. In true crime podcasting, the objective and subjective

reside in uncomfortable juxtaposition, pushing and pulling against each other as the episodes lurch toward a conclusion.

By the time the final episode of *Serial* (Season 1) arrives, listeners have actually spent much more time hearing from Koenig, the journalist and host, than they have from any other participants in the story, including the alleged murderer Adnan Syed. In this sense, Koenig becomes a key “dramatic character” (McMurtry, 2016) in her own investigation, another narratological feature that is common in other true crime podcasts such as *Missing & Murdered* and *The Messenger*. For some scholars, the decision to center the subjective experience of the journalist constitutes “gonzo journalism” (Altheide, 2023). And yet, despite the deliberate choice to make herself the protagonist of the podcast, Koenig consistently returns to the logic of objectivity. At the end of “Episode 12: What We Know,” for example, Koenig (2014–2022) decides to provide her listeners with a verdict by answering the question: Is Adnan Syed guilty or innocent of this murder? But before she does so, Syed, the alleged murderer, urges her to be impartial. He tells her, “I think you should just go down the middle. I think you shouldn’t really take a side . . . in a sense you leave it up to the audience to decide” (49:37–50:06). Syed clearly suggests that Koenig should be balanced and detached. Koenig’s decision to include this quote in the final audio cut deliberately foregrounds again her commitment to journalistic objectivity. But in the end, Koenig does not take Syed’s advice. Instead, she directly addresses her audience:

Based on the information we have before us, I don’t believe any of us can say what really happened to Hae [Min Lee]. As a juror I vote to acquit Adnan Syed. I have to acquit. Even if in my heart of hearts I think Adnan killed Hae, I still have to acquit. That’s what the law requires of jurors. (51:12–51:30)

On the surface, this sounds like the “gonzo” journalist inserting her own opinion to acquit into the story. But by framing herself as a “juror,” Koenig repositions her assertion within the logic of objectivity. Jurors, after all, are supposed to be impartial, balanced, and distanced from the crime, just like the investigative journalist. Of course, immediately after this insistence on objectivity, Koenig goes on to say, “But I’m not a juror, so just as a human being walking down the street next week, what do I think?” (51:31–51:37). Here, Koenig (2014–2022) seems to acknowledge the tension between her role as investigative journalist and her position as the de facto protagonist in this true crime narrative. And in anticipation of her audience’s dissatisfaction with only an objective conclusion, she voices her personal viewpoint: “I can’t say for sure if he’s innocent, but the guy I knew, there’s no way he could have done this” (52:10–52:15). That confession is certainly not impartial or detached, which reinforces again the ongoing tension between objective reporting and personalized storytelling strategies in true crime podcasting. Indeed, many other true crime podcasts that foreground objectivity nevertheless conclude with the host providing their own subjective evaluation of crimes and passing judgment on the alleged perpetrators (e.g., *The Lake*; *Stolen: Surviving St. Michael’s*). Like these other true crime podcasts, *Serial* (Season 1) employs a variety of narrative tactics that push against the conventions of objectivity, but the journalistic commitment to impartiality and detachment remains. As podcasting researchers Spinelli and Dann (2019) contend, Koenig “does not reject objectivity or impartiality” (p. 198); rather objectivity is central to Koenig’s retelling of the crime. Like other true crime podcasts, *Serial* (Season 1) offers a prime illustration of the tension between more subjective storytelling and ostensibly objective reporting.

But like technical communication’s problematic history with objectivity, the connection between objectivity and true crime podcasting also yields oppression. In *Serial* (Season 1), this oppression takes the form of white supremacy.

After laying out the facts of the case at the start of “Episode 1: The Alibi,” host Koenig (2014–2022) says, “So either it’s Jay or it’s Adnan. But someone is lying. And I really wanted to figure out who” (12:27–33). Her commitment to what she perceives as the objective facts of the case – as recorded by police, investigators, trial transcripts, and her own interviews – leads her to believe that one of these two men of color must be lying and therefore guilty. Two months later she doubles down on this belief in the twelfth episode, despite the fact that the case has become murkier not clearer. She says, “My original question going into this whole endeavor, this whole story, was either Jay’s lying or Adnan’s

lying. But what if it's not either or, what if it's *both and?*" (28:26–38). Rather than assuming only one man is guilty, this time she criminalizes both men of color. But she fails to investigate whether any of the state's representatives – the police, private investigators, prosecutors, and so on – might be misrepresenting the facts. Herein lies the injustice of a so-called objective stance in true crime podcasting: suspects' stories are viewed as biased and self-interested, while official statements from the state's representatives are treated as factual and scientific. Under this kind of journalistic objectivity, trust and suspicion are not doled out equally. The lived experiences recounted by men of color are considered dubious, while technical accounts, like those provided by the police investigators and legal teams, are seen as impartial. Yet both are constructed. This kind of objectivity is paradoxical: it disguises partiality as impartiality. In journalism, as in technical communication, "objectivity is the ideology of the status quo" (*View From Nowhere*, 2019, 6:41–6:44). And Koenig's commitment to objectivity in *Serial* (Season 1) upholds a status quo that criminalizes Black and Brown Americans while positioning the state as blameless and beyond scrutiny. But in the case of *Serial* (Season 1), this uncritical adoption of objectivity not only leads to the mistreatment of Jay and Adnan but also obscures the many faults of the state.

In 2022, Maryland Attorney General Marilyn Mosby, a woman of color, led an extensive investigation into the state's actions during Adnan Syed's trial. After months of inquiry and analysis by her team, she decided to vacate judgment on Syed's conviction. In her statement, she explains that it was not Jay and Adnan who deserve our scrutiny but rather a number of the state's representatives who either explicitly engaged in misconduct or did a woefully poor job handling this case. For instance, the lead prosecutor, Kevin Urick, a white man, knew that there was another key suspect in the case but failed to notify the defense and proceeded instead as if Syed was the only known suspect. This is called a Brady violation and constitutes grievous ethical misconduct in the legal field. And yet, prosecutors who engage in such misconduct are rarely punished (Law, 2022). In another example, one of the primary Baltimore police detectives assigned to this case, a white man named Bill Ritz, appears to have manipulated and fabricated evidence during the investigation, though he has not yet been held accountable for these actions. And since Syed's initial trial, detective Ritz was found to have engaged in similar police misconduct in multiple other cases that resulted in murder convictions and decades of jail time for men who were ultimately innocent (Anderson, 2022). As a result, two men of color were wrongly criminalized while the white men who represented the state – and engaged in misconduct – went unquestioned. Thus, the criminal justice system that initially imprisoned Syed and the podcasters who reported the first twelve episodes of *Serial* (Season 1) both leaned too heavily on an antiquated notion of objectivity that failed to sufficiently interrogate the partiality of the stories recounted by the state's representatives.

To be sure, the premise of *Serial* (Season 1) is that the state's representatives who comprise the criminal justice system may have made mistakes in Syed's initial trial. But Koenig consistently frames these potential mistakes as a failure to sufficiently investigate Jay and Syed, both whom she views as liars ("Episode 12: What We Know" 28:26–38). She does not consider in these initial twelve episodes that the prosecutors and detectives could also be liars. As a result, Koenig reexamines court documents and the detectives' interrogations to look for faults in the criminal justice system, but she applies a different level of scrutiny to the words and actions of Jay and Syed than she does to the representatives of the state. Other true crime podcasts, like *In the Dark*, question the objectivity of the state's representatives and thoroughly scrutinize the actions of detectives and prosecutors. Yet Koenig chooses to focus her energy on investigating the men of color and spends little time examining figures like detective Ritz and prosecutor Urick, which signals a tacit assumption that the state's representatives are unbiased, impartial, objective. And as with technical communication, this privileging of objectivity in true crime podcasting leads to racial injustice.

When Koenig (2014–2022) published Episode 13: "Adnan Is Out" in response to the release of Syed in Baltimore, 2022, she quietly reflected on what she learned about Syed's case and the criminal justice system in ways that conflicted with her conclusions eight years earlier in Episode 1: What We Know (2014). At the end of Episode 12: What We Know, she had wondered aloud, "Did we just spend a year

applying excessive scrutiny to a perfectly ordinary case? . . . Is Adnan’s case unremarkable? If we took a magnifying glass to any murder case, would we find similar questions, similar holes, similar inconsistencies?” (41:25–45) At the time, a former homicide detective assured her that Syed’s case was not unremarkable. He insisted that this story was indeed a striking anomaly in its complexity. Koenig, at the time, agreed. “This case,” she declared, “is a mess” (42:03–05). But fast forward to September 2022, and Koenig has now changed her tune. At the end of Episode 13, “Adnan Is Out,” she asserts that Syed’s case is not unique at all:

Adnan’s case contains just about every chronic problem our system can cough up: police using questionable interview methods, prosecutors keeping crucial evidence from the defense, slightly junky science, extreme prison sentences, juveniles treated as adults, how grindingly difficult it is to get your case back in court once you’ve been convicted. (15:27–48)

The same “holes” and “inconsistencies” that Koenig previously viewed as anomalous are actually, she admits, “chronic” and emblematic of the worst flaws in our criminal justice system. “So even on a day when the government publicly recognizes its mistakes,” Koenig concludes, “It’s hard to feel cheered about a triumph of fairness because we’ve built a system that takes more than twenty years to self-correct” (16:20–31).

With this conclusion, Koenig shifts from viewing the criminal justice system as capable of wrongdoing to acknowledging how its very design props up, preserves, and prolongs these unjust ways of doling out justice. And crucially, it is the ideology of objectivity that masks this disfigured system, legitimizes its perverse methods, and shields it from critical inquiry. The next step for Koenig and similar true crime podcasters, then, is to more explicitly acknowledge their own role in perpetuating this distorted objectivity that makes possible these injustices. When police investigations, court proceedings, interview transcripts, and the like are presented by true crime podcasters as unimpeachable factual evidence – as a kind of technical communication – then the systems that produce that evidence go unexamined. Conversely, when the voices of victims and the lived experiences of the marginalized are sidelined by true crime podcasters as less trustworthy subjective accounts, the ideology of objectivity scores another win for the status quo. “Battles against subjectivity and activism have,” transgender journalist Lewis Raven Wallace explains, “too often amounted to being battles against the marginalized and the oppressed” (2019, p. 14). Objectivity furthers oppression, and understanding true crime podcasting as a kind of technical communication highlights the dangers of objectivity in one of the most popular podcasting genres.

## Conclusion

This study augments existing social justice efforts in TPC by demonstrating how this podcast – and, by extension, the true crime genre itself – appears to seek justice but also employs a mode of journalistic objectivity that advances a white supremacist agenda. Although few in TPC openly hold objectivity up on a pedestal any more, this analysis shows how pervasive objectivity remains in neighboring disciplines that often incorporate elements of technical communication like journalism and podcasting. The social justice turn in TPC has prompted technical communicators to examine injustices within our own communication genres, but this analysis shows that we also have a larger mandate to critique and counter the dangerous ideology of objectivity elsewhere in our culture, even in media often viewed as entertainment like true crime podcasting. TPC has decades of experience uncovering the injustices of objectivity, and that expertise is worth sharing, especially in places where objectivity is paraded around as a kind of uncritical technical communication. Put differently: anywhere that objectivity plays a significant role in communication is, I argue, the purview of technical communication.

## Notes

1. The producers of *Serial* do not provide official transcripts for Season 1. Nevertheless, a collection of devoted fans crowd-sourced a single transcript for the entirety of *Serial* (Season 1) and posted it on Reddit. All *Serial* (Season 1)

quotations in this article derive from this transcript with minor emendations made by me to rectify accuracy, grammar, and emphasis of vocal delivery. Emphasis in this quotation is my own.

2. When referencing a single episode, I cite only the year. When referencing an entire podcast, I cite both the start and end date (e.g., “2014–present”).
3. Refer to, for example (Agboka, 2013; Haas & Eble, 2018; McKoy et al., 2022; Rude, 2009; Williams, 2014).
4. Despite the repeated use of the terms *objectivity* and *subjectivity*, this analysis does not seek to reify these terms as binary opposites. To the contrary, if anything, this analysis indicates that the objective and subjective are deeply interwoven in both true crime podcasting and technical communication. But this analysis also highlights the deeply unsettling stakes of privileging objectivity, even when publicly professing to center subjective storytelling.

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## Notes on contributor

*Collin Bjork* is a Senior Lecturer in English and Media Studies at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. His research employs rhetorical theory to examine the mutually informing relationship among media, power, discourse and democracy. His research has been published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Convergence*, and *Computers and Composition*. He is currently working on a book about true crime podcasting. He also operates a podcast about podcasting called Pod Uni. Find out more at collinbjork.com

## ORCID

Collin Bjork  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9918-0758>

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