

The Student-Podcaster as Narrator of Social Change?

Abstract

Podcasting has been recognized by many scholars in rhetoric and composition as a means for teaching both ancient and contemporary rhetorical principles. We extend this conversation by examining the genre of narrative nonfiction podcasting and its potential link to rhetorical pedagogies that work toward social change. After exploring the social possibilities of this genre, we suggest a collection of pedagogical principles that amplify the connections between narrative nonfiction podcasting and social change. Ultimately, however, we argue that although narrative nonfiction podcasting provides a framework for a rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change, considerable obstacles remain that inhibit the deployment of such a framework in a way that actually achieves social change.

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Rhetorical pedagogy

Social justice rhetoric

Multimodal composition

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Sonic rhetoric

The meeting room in the public library buzzed with energy that evening. Undergraduates laughed and embraced each other as they took their seats at long tables in the front of the room. A coterie of grad students and professors smiled and chatted away in the back rows. The smell of warm pizza wafted through the room. At a time of the year when students and instructors alike were often short on time and low on enthusiasm, this end-of-semester group was not only in attendance, they were animated. They were all eager to listen to the student showcase for the English department's first podcasting course.

Although podcasting had already existed for over a decade at this point and other universities had been incorporating audio composition into their rhetoric and writing curricula for years, this felt like an important moment not only for a department that was reimagining its rhetoric minor but also for the students who had put in so much work into producing their final podcast episodes. While this second-year podcasting course had a wide array of aims (curricular, departmental, institutional, and so on), from a scholar-teacher perspective, this course presented a prime opportunity to test a hypothesis that had lingered in the back of our heads for a while: *that teaching students narrative nonfiction podcasting through the lens of rhetoric might foster social change.*

Based on this idea, we designed a course that asked students to use rhetorical principles to study popular exemplars of narrative nonfiction podcasts and to examine the impact those podcasts had on the larger social issues that they sought to spotlight. In the same vein, this course then tasked students with creating their own narrative nonfiction podcast episode aimed at similar social initiatives in their local community. Eighteen months of proposing, planning, and teaching had culminated in this moment at the public library. And by all accounts, the night was a success. Attendees heard

powerful student stories that used rhetorical techniques to reframe issues like toxic masculinity, food insecurity, drug use, and systemic discrimination that were significant in this college town. The crowd applauded heartily after each episode played. Students were flooded with praise. Our departmental colleagues commended us. Congratulations were lauded all around.

And yet, as we were packing up, we realized that the students' podcast episodes probably wouldn't be heard by anyone else outside this room. The local community members whom students had worked with for the last couple months had all been unable to attend, and the local media personalities whom we had invited to the showcase also declined. Furthermore, we had been unable to secure approval to circulate and disseminate the students' podcasts on a university-supported platform. So while students might share their podcast episodes with a few close friends or family members, their work would probably never have a wider audience. And as such, the potential for fostering social change dried up. We realized then, standing before the empty pizza boxes, the narrowness of our initial vision. We had planned and taught so much: rhetorical analysis, ethical interviewing techniques, awareness of students' positionality within communities, technological training, and so on. But we also neglected so much: notably, a method for circulating student podcasts, a plan for minimizing the genre constraints of this type of podcasting, and a process for maintaining relationships with local communities. Without those things, the prospects of actually encouraging social change--however small or local--were negligible. This failure prompted reflection and, in true scholarly fashion, more reading. This process of reading and reflection has, in turn, led to this article, which we offer to our colleagues and students as we all continue to move, mindfully, toward more socially-conscious rhetorical pedagogies.

In this article, we argue that although narrative nonfiction podcasting provides a framework for a rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change, considerable obstacles remain--both structural and within the genre itself--that inhibit the deployment of such a framework in a way that actually achieves social change. Rather than grounding our claim in a case study of our particular podcasting course (which might limit its reach), we make our case by interweaving different threads of scholarship in the imbricated fields of rhetoric and composition with a close look at the genre of narrative nonfiction podcasts. While we open this article with experiential insights from our own teaching, we employ that story as an anecdote that succinctly crystallizes the tensions inherent in such a pedagogical practice, the same tensions that we explore in more detail in the body of the article. Ultimately, we aim to underscore both the exciting possibilities that narrative nonfiction podcasting presents for instructors invested in issues of social change while also highlighting the serious challenges that instructors are likely to encounter when designing a pedagogy around this genre and medium.

We begin by linking scholarship about soundwriting and podcasting pedagogy with research about the social turn in composition studies with the aim of more specifically identifying how podcasting pedagogies tend to fit with different formulations of "the social." We then demonstrate how narrative nonfiction podcasting, as a genre, has both affordances and limitations that render it frustratingly equivocal when positioned as the center of rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change. In an effort to mitigate the limitations of the genre, we next identify some guiding principles that might help instructors steer their own podcasting pedagogy toward social change. We conclude by reconsidering the limitations of a narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy for social change and suggesting that, although such a pedagogy makes valuable contributions to socially-oriented rhetorical

education, further roadblocks must be navigated before such a pedagogy can encourage meaningful or widespread social change.

The Rhetorical Possibilities of Podcasting Pedagogy for Social Change

Podcasting is a powerful pedagogical tool for rhetorical education. This medium offers teachers and students alike the opportunity to reflect on the combination of written and oral communication, purposefully arranged to influence listening audiences when circulated through networks of online publics. Podcasting develops students' rhetorical skill in audience awareness and argumentation (Klein 30). It also shows students how audiences can be moved to think or feel in new ways by going beyond written argument and employing instead a combination of voice, music, and other audio (Danforth and Stedman, Part 1.1 00:00:29-00:01:02). As an aural medium, podcasting cultivates multimodal listening habits in students that promote greater sensitivity to the complexities of composition (Ceraso 41). And as a type of audio composition, podcasting offers new ways of conceptualizing ancient rhetorical pedagogies that are attuned to digital media (Detweiler 207-208). Still further, podcasting can be a way to reimagine first-year composition and foreground embodied writing practices (Cushman and Kelly, Part 2). In short, podcasting is a fruitful tool for teaching both ancient and contemporary rhetorical principles in a variety of classroom settings.

Podcasting pedagogies also align with rhetorical education's long-standing investment in social issues. For instance, podcasting pedagogies that emphasize conducting interviews in local communities underscore the social elements of audio composition. The process of interviewing community

members requires students to spend a considerable amount of time and effort researching, meeting with, listening to, and building mutually beneficial relationships with local communities. This kind of community engagement involves establishing what Ellen Cushman calls “networks of reciprocity” that emphasize a complementary relationship between local communities and academics in which both work together toward shared goods (7). In podcasting, these networks of reciprocity are an essential ethical component of conducting field interviews and also a crucial precondition for fostering social change. For Cushman, moreover, social change need not occur at the level of institutional upheaval or cultural revolution to be salient. Rather, she highlights a kind of incremental--and equally important--social change that “can take place in daily interactions when the regular flow of events is objectified, reflected upon, and altered” (12). Podcasting, too, has the potential to generate social change at this day-to-day level through its reciprocal engagement with local communities. And while Cushman imagines ways that academics can affect social change beyond the classroom, a rhetorically-attuned podcasting pedagogy might unite both classroom and community in an effort to foster social change.

Beyond aligning with Cushman’s notion of social change, podcasting pedagogy also shares affinities with more recent socially-oriented scholarship in rhetoric and composition. In *Composition Forum*, Kinney et al. identify three shifts in composition studies’ relationship to the social: the first sees writing as an interactive social process; the second analyzes how language composes subjects and publics; and the third takes on social activism. While podcasting pedagogy connects with all three ways that compositionists conceive of the social, the prospect of situating podcasting pedagogy within the latter social activist formulation seems especially tantalizing. Indeed, like community writing and service learning pedagogies, a podcasting pedagogy based on field interviews involves a significant

amount of carefully negotiated community involvement. Through sharing the stories of their interview subjects, students learn to walk the line between honoring the particularities of their interviewees' experiences and talking about those experiences within broader social contexts. This mediation between the individual and the structural harmonizes with the picture that Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander paint of the most recent "social turn" in rhetorical and composition. For Rhodes and Alexander, the current social turn involves considering "how writing might move beyond the articulation of difference to address questions of social inequity and social justice from more systemic and intersectional standpoints" (481). This is precisely the move that podcasting students make when they shift from analyzing a social issue at a distance to listening to community stakeholders and composing an audio story that responds to some aspect of that issue. In other words, students in a rhetorically oriented podcasting course can--through the podcast composition process--move beyond the analysis of social injustices and open intersectional conversations that work toward addressing systemic inequalities.

At present, much of the scholarship on podcasting pedagogy tends to focus on students' ability to address the social issues of composing with audio. Podcasting pedagogies, for example, provide opportunities for students to design accessible audio projects with transcripts that upend the ways that "disability is virtually invisible in podcasting discourse" (Zdenek). And feminist and queer scholarship about listening can help podcasting students consider the ethics of speaking for another person "as an exercise in unmastery that asks after the unbridgeable gaps and ethical limits that attend imitation" (Detweiler 214). In both of these cases, working with audio texts moves students toward what Steph Ceraso has termed "multimodal listening," which invites "listeners to take 'a stance of

openness' by imagining how bodies different from their own might interpret or experience particular sonic situations" (152). But while podcasting pedagogies like these equip students to address the social issues of composing with audio, they do not necessarily accomplish what Kinney et al. identify as the third social turn of composition studies--namely, that "it takes as its starting point embodied activism" (Kinney et al.). For instance, Michael Burns et al. describe hip-hop soundwriting pedagogies that empower students "to bring wreck to the white noise that masks and normalizes white supremacy." Their description of a "pedagogy of liberation" provides an important model for composition studies, but like other soundwriting and podcasting pedagogies, this framework tends to focus less on social activism and more on students analysing and responding to social issues in their own (sound)writing. In this sense, podcasting pedagogies occupy a liminal space in relationship to the social: educators seem attuned to the potential for social justice activism embedded in the affordances of this online audio medium, and yet, the pedagogies designed for this medium still tend to position social intervention as something that occurs within the confines of classroom work. In the next section, we demonstrate how one specific genre of podcasting is uniquely positioned to foster social change--and that by foregrounding this genre, teachers can create a framework so that students can be engaged in fostering social change. Yet at the same time, like existing podcasting pedagogies, we acknowledge that it also has key limitations that minimize its potential for social transformation in pedagogical environments.

Linking Narrative Nonfiction Podcasting and Social Change

While many types of podcasts may address social issues, the genre of *narrative nonfiction podcasting* is especially suited for a rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change. We define

narrative nonfiction podcasts as those that a) tell stories of people's lived experiences using a range of audio-gathering and -editing techniques and b) aim to alter public perceptions of the characters and issues involved in those stories.¹ Unlike fictional podcasts,² narrative nonfiction podcasts report on the lived experiences--whether historical or contemporary--of individuals, communities, and cultures. Narrative nonfiction podcasts also differ from other nonfiction podcasts that take place primarily in the studio.³ While both studio-based and narrative nonfiction podcasts often involve interviews, the latter require gathering "field" interviews outside the studio and among the communities whose stories they tell. Furthermore, narrative nonfiction podcasts differ from news-based podcasts⁴ that also foreground field interviews. Such podcasts often take a traditional journalistic approach in representing reality "objectively" through facts and quotations; they also typically have little, if any, self-reflection on the framing and (re)presentation of their featured stories.⁵ Narrative nonfiction podcasts, on the other hand, embrace a more "subjective" and self-aware stance in relation to the stories they tell, something made apparent through their emphasis on narrative. Whether the story is self-contained within a single episode (as in *Uncivil* or *Radiolab*) or stretches across a series of several

¹ Jessica Abel notes in the introduction to *Out on the Wire* that "Radio, especially public radio and the podcasts that have sprung from it [...] is the most fertile ground for narrative non-fiction in English-language media" (Abel 2). Our definition of narrative nonfiction podcasts also holds many similarities to John Biewen's definition of audio documentary, which "[uses] sound to tell true stories artfully" (Biewen 2).

² Notable examples of fiction podcasts include *Welcome to Night Vale*, *The Two Princes*, and *The Bright Sessions*.

³ Notable examples of studio-based nonfiction podcasts include *My Favorite Murder* and *Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend*.

⁴ Notable examples of news-based podcasts include *Up First* and *The Daily*.

⁵ In both their book (Wallace 2019) and their podcast, *The View from Somewhere*, Lewis Raven Wallace details how the emphasis on "objectivity" in traditional journalism upholds the social status quo and inhibits progressive social change.

episodes (as in *Serial* or *Heaven's Gate*), narrative nonfiction podcasting positions storytelling at its core. Podcasts in this genre frequently use music and sound design to transition between “scenes” or to evoke emotional responses. Many hosts of narrative nonfiction podcasts also reflect on their positionality relative to the story they are telling, meta-narrating their thought processes and feelings. In sum, narrative nonfiction podcasts emphasize telling self-aware community-based stories that foreground the voices of interviewees, and those qualities make it a genre uniquely suited to speak to issues of social change.

Scholars working at the intersection of rhetoric and race have also noted the importance of narrative when working toward social change. Narratives can highlight the lived experiences of individuals, especially people of color, within unjust conditions, and the use of subjectivity and pathos in these narratives enables those experiences to be communicated in ways that exceed the persuasive potential of other modes of discourse. As Victor Villanueva argues, “The personal [...] does not negate the need for the academic; it complements, provides an essential element in the rhetorical triangle, an essential element in the intellect--cognition *and* affect. The personal done well is sensorial and intellectual, complete, knowledge known throughout mind and body, even if vicariously” (14). The knowledge afforded by narrative also serves as a methodological companion for social justice-oriented scholarship and pedagogy, augmenting them with people’s lived experiences. Aja Martinez extends Villanueva’s work in these ways through her use of counterstory, which involves laying two accounts of the same event alongside each other to critique dominant narratives that exclude the perspectives of marginalized peoples (“A Plea”). Martinez further notes that the use of counterstory is not limited to people of color, citing Frankie Condon’s work as an example of how white people can tell

counterstories that speak back to oppressive master narratives (“A Plea” 51). Condon, for her part, takes up Villanueva’s call by lingering over the difficult questions of how white people can share their stories and work toward antiracist goals without reasserting whiteness over the experiences and voices of people of color. Our attention to narrative nonfiction as a particular genre of podcasting echoes this work from rhetoric and race scholars, affirming the importance of narratives as rhetorically powerful ways of knowing and communicating justice.

Narrative nonfiction podcasts are also united as a genre by the rhetorical work that they do in the world. In “Genre as Social Action” Carolyn R. Miller explains that “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” (151). Rhetorical genre studies has since identified a host of dimensions that matter to rhetorical understandings of genre, but social action remains chief among them.⁶ In terms of action, narrative nonfiction podcasts are linked by their attempt to highlight peculiar social phenomena and--through the community engagement and subjective storytelling involved in their production--to alter public perceptions of those phenomena. Podcasts in this genre may take up any number of issues including histories of racial injustice (*Uncivil* and *Buried Truths*), cult psychology (*Heaven’s Gate*), prison life (*Ear Hustle*), and conversion therapy (*UnErased*). But regardless of the topic of study, these podcasts are united by the goal of moving people to think, feel, and sometimes act differently in

⁶ In *Emerging Genres in New Media Environments*, Carolyn R. Miller and Ashley R. Kelly explain that genres have multiple salient dimensions that often work in tension with each other: form and substance, intention and exigence, action and structure, medium and product, material and symbol. All these elements together comprise genres. In addition to Miller and Kelly, see Bawarshi and Reiff for an excellent overview of rhetorical genre studies.

relation to these social issues. Even true crime podcasts, which are among the most popular narrative nonfiction podcasts, often generate civic debate about race, gender, power, and the criminal justice system. The production of *Serial Season 1*, for example, sparked worldwide dialogue about the United States's criminal justice system, which in turn prompted further investigation into the case and, eventually, a motion for a retrial of the podcast's main character and accused murderer, Adnan Syed. Public response to *Serial Season 1* also contributed to the production of *Serial Season 3*, which more explicitly investigates inequalities in the United States criminal justice system. Put simply, narrative nonfiction podcasting invites public dialogue about larger social issues that can eventually lead to social change.

Crucially, though, narrative nonfiction podcasts *invite* rather than compel particular responses from their audiences. For example, while *Serial* may have sparked conversations about the criminal justice system, the producers did not insist that listeners take to the streets protesting for reform. Narrative nonfiction podcasts like this encourage both rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe) and multimodal listening (Ceraso), two overlapping processes that position listening as a *choice* that people make in relation to people, texts, and cultures (Ratcliffe 17). Likewise, narrative nonfiction podcasts tend to downplay overt persuasion and instead emphasize inviting audiences to arrive at a shared understanding of a social issue, akin to what feminist rhetoricians Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin call "invitational rhetoric" (Foss and Griffin 5). Like invitational rhetoric, narrative nonfiction podcasts eschew a persuasive and patriarchal model of engagement that "not only establishes the power of the rhetor over others but also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others" (Foss and Griffin 3). Instead, narrative nonfiction podcasts invite listeners "not just [to] an understanding of an

issue” but also to “an understanding of the participants themselves [...], an understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equality” (Foss and Griffin 5). In the opening of “The Alibi,” the first episode of *Serial Season 1*, Sarah Koenig models this kind of invitational rhetoric. Rather than overtly arguing that listeners should believe Adnan Syed’s disjointed alibi, she invites her listeners to realise how difficult it is to craft their own alibi by directly asking them a laundry list of questions: “How’d you get to work last Wednesday? [...] Are you sure? [...] The entire day, name every person you talked to. It’s hard. Now imagine you have to account for a day that happened six weeks back” (1:15-1:35). Invitational rhetoric techniques like this lay the groundwork for social change, and narrative nonfiction podcasts often play an important role in that process.

And yet, despite the social potential of narrative nonfiction podcasting, this genre nonetheless faces notable limitations in terms of its ability to influence social change. Narrative nonfiction podcasts often feature compelling protagonists and filter their socially-conscious narratives through the lens of these real-world characters’ experiences. Captivating figures like Adnan Syed (*Serial*) or John B. McLemore (*S-Town*) carry the narratives of their respective podcasts. But as much as these characters drive the stories of complex social issues, they also steal focus from the larger, and problematic, social structures in which these protagonists are enveloped. Public discourse about these podcasts often centers on the ethos of these characters rather than on the structural inequalities that loom ominously in the background. Questions about Syed’s innocence or McLemore’s public image dominate public debate, while questions about racial discrimination, xenophobia, and the

sociopolitical structures that concretize those injustices for marginalized communities remain muted.⁷

At the same time, however, narrative nonfiction podcasts that are non-serialized, such as *Uncivil* and *Ear Hustle*, tend to foreground social issues over individual characters because their protagonists change with each episode. For these podcasts, social inequities form the throughline between consecutive episodes, and as such, they typically do a better job of foregrounding systemic injustices. While narrative nonfiction podcasting thus holds great potential for fostering social change, the extent of that change is nonetheless circumscribed by the popularity of the serialized podcasts that tend to filter their narratives tightly through the lens of their protagonists.

Narrative non fiction podcasts' orientation toward social change can also vary depending on the institutions that produce them. "Major media companies have," as Jonathon Sterne et al. note, "adjusted to the introduction of podcasts with ease." As a result, many of the most popular and award-winning narrative nonfiction podcasts are produced not by individual activists but rather by large media broadcasting organizations, whether for-profit (*NYT*, Gimlet Media) or non-profit (WYNC, NPR). While podcasts produced by these mainstream media organizations may reach a wide audience and also receive critical claim (usually in the form of a Peabody Award), they also raise foundational questions about a storytelling within a corporate broadcasting model that emphasizes "few producers, many consumers, and most crucially limited access to the means of transmission" (Sterne et al.) In

⁷ To be clear, social justice issues do arise in public discourse as a response to this genre of podcasts, but dialogue about the psychology and morals of these protagonists takes a more prominent position. In the context of *Serial Season 1*, for example, journalist Deborah Orr raises important questions about our collective expectations of gender in murder mysteries, and Friedersdorf, et al. highlight the role of racism in Syed's story. At the same time, however, the writings of journalist Jon Ronson along with the *Serial*/subreddit clearly indicate that debate over Syed's innocence overshadows questions of social justice in the public sphere.

some cases, moreover, these structural limitations are further compounded when the everyday business practices of some media organizations actively undermine social justice initiatives. For example, *Reply All*'s miniseries on the structural racism and toxic work environment at *Bon Appetit* magazine was cancelled after Eric Eddings, a former Gimlet Media staff member, accused people working on the podcast of creating a similarly hostile environment at Gimlet Media (Ray). Cases like this underscore the tendency for large media organizations--which dominate the production of the narrative nonfiction podcasting genre--to reproduce the same structural inequalities that many of their podcasts seek to upend. Narrative nonfiction podcasting is thus already largely subsumed by mainstream broadcasting in a way that limits both the array of voices and narratives foregrounded within the genre as well as the genre's potential for encouraging social change.

As a whole, then, the genre of narrative nonfiction podcasting offers tantalizing possibilities for a rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change but also has key limitations that simultaneously undermine its transformative potential. In an effort to attenuate the risks inherent in the genre and concomitantly to amplify its social potential in the classroom, we suggest a collection of principles in the following section that may guide the design of a rhetorically-informed narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy oriented toward social change.

Principles for a Podcasting Pedagogy Oriented Toward Social Change

Helping students recognize the ways that narrative nonfiction podcasting can be directed toward social change requires positioning rhetorical principles at the center of the pedagogy. At least three guiding principles seem essential when working toward this instructional goal: a) a flexible definition of the rhetorical work of podcasting, b) a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation that sketches the intricate relationships between the many people involved in a podcast, and c) an attunement to the rhetorical implications of different audio storytelling strategies. While these principles are not new to rhetorical pedagogy or to multimodal composition, they are, as we describe below, nonetheless specifically tailored to suit the context of narrative nonfiction podcasts oriented toward social change. And crucially, these principles must be buttressed by an exemplary selection of inclusive narrative nonfiction podcasts. Indeed, positioning a diverse and inclusive array of podcasts at the core of such a pedagogy is essential in animating this framework toward social change. Together, then, we suggest that the strategies outlined below align with soundwriting pedagogies that encourage students to “embrace the power of sound” (Danforth and Stedman) and, moreover, hold the potential to empower students to analyze and produce podcasts that foster social change. In the remainder of this section, we describe how these guiding principles operate in tandem to form a cohesive rhetorical pedagogy.

1. An Inclusive Selection of Exemplary Podcasts

Any narrative nonfiction pedagogy oriented toward social change must prioritize selecting an inclusive array of exemplary podcasts. Feminist, critical, and antiracist pedagogies have long

called for university curricula to center texts composed by marginalized authors.⁸ A pedagogy that foregrounds podcasts with marginalized hosts therefore aligns with efforts to decolonize syllabi and to help students develop their critical cultural awareness.⁹ And the fact that narrative nonfiction podcasting grew, in large part, out of public radio programs dominated by white male voices like Ira Glass's on *This American Life* only amplifies the importance of showcasing podcasts hosted by diverse producers (Kumanyika). But, in the genre of narrative nonfiction podcasting, the decision to center audio stories told by marginalized hosts is more than just an effort to work toward a more equitable politics of citation. Because this genre emphasizes storytelling, podcasts hosted by marginalized narrators present students with an opportunity to consider the rhetorical significance of storytelling--and *counterstorytelling* (Martinez, *Counterstory*)--as a critical methodology for exposing injustice. For example, unlike true crime podcasts that foreground the inner psychology of the alleged criminal, the *Missing and Murdered* podcast hosted by Cree journalist Connie Walker prioritizes telling the stories of Indigenous women who are overwhelming the *victims* of violent crimes in Canada. Similarly, the *Ear Hustle* podcast, hosted by inmates of color at San Quentin penitentiary, counters cultural assumptions about convicted criminals and the American criminal justice system by telling "the daily realities of life inside prison shared by those living it, and stories from the outside, post-incarceration" (Ear Hustle website). Spotlighting the work of

⁸ See, for example, Condon and Young; Haas; Lunsford; Palmeri.

⁹ Examples of podcasts in this genre that feature marginalized hosts include *Ear Hustle*, *Missing and Murdered*, *Uncivil*, *74 Seconds*, *Conversations with My Immigrant Parents*, *Dolly Parton's America*, *The Other Latif*, and *The View from Somewhere*.

marginalized podcasters is, in short, vital for a rhetorical pedagogy oriented toward social change.

At the same time, however, centering narrative nonfiction podcasts with marginalized hosts can appear misleadingly sufficient for creating a teaching environment oriented toward social change. For instance, while selecting podcasts with a diverse array of hosts is one important step toward creating an inclusive pedagogical environment, placing too much emphasis on the positionality of individual hosts risks diverting attention from the larger systemic social issues that require the students' attention. And although podcasts created by marginalized hosts tend to be more attuned to structural inequalities, some can still inadvertently obscure systemic injustices through the genre's tendency to privilege character-driven narratives. Furthermore, when podcasts that feature marginalized hosts are produced by large media organizations with financial incentives, it begs the question: is the production company more invested in social justice or in generating revenue and prestige? For example, *The New York Times* produced *Caliphate*, a podcast hosted by Romanian-American immigrant Rukmini Callimachi and Andy Mills that, through its reporting on the Islamic State, worked to tacitly combat Islamophobia in the United States. And yet, when Canadian authorities arrested the podcast's primary protagonist on charges of "perpetrating a terrorist hoax," investigations revealed that the audio division of *The New York Times* had fabricated content and, moreover, had created a hostile and unequal work environment for women.¹⁰ In this sense, mainstream narrative

¹⁰ For accounts of this controversy, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/business/media/new-york-times-caliphate-podcast.html> <https://www.vulture.com/2020/12/new-york-times-caliphate-podcast-controversy.html> <https://prpd.org/news/2021/01/prpd-advocates-your-behalf> <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/12/media/caliphate->

nonfiction podcasting, like other types of podcasting, is often implicated in the problematic power dynamics of large media organizations that make the genre “neither a complete break from broadcasting nor part of any kind of revolution” (Sterne et al.). Indeed, despite the positionality of the host, the organization producing a podcast can seriously undermine the podcast’s work toward social change. Given the potentially problematic power dynamics of mainstream media organizations, instructors invested in teaching podcasting for social change might teach more podcasts produced by local public radio stations, such as *74 Seconds* (Minnesota Public Radio) and *Buried Truths* (WABE Atlanta Public Radio), the latter of which is co-produced with Emory University students. Instructors might therefore conceive of “inclusive” podcasts as not only centering podcasts with marginalized hosts but also privileging podcasts that themselves exist outside the center of mainstream media culture.

2. A Flexible Definition of Rhetorical Podcasts

When working with students, we propose describing the rhetorical work of narrative nonfiction podcasting as *the ways that different audio storytelling techniques change the ways that people think, feel, and act*. While somewhat rudimentary, this definition is nevertheless well-suited for an introductory course about rhetoric and podcasting. In one sense, the simplicity of this definition allows novice students of rhetoric to wield it as an effective analytical tool. Alison Klein, for example, notes in her experience with teaching podcasting that having students listen to exemplary podcasts can open discussion about the podcast’s audience (32). In

addition to the informational content, narrative nonfiction podcasts can also invite discussion of specific audio storytelling techniques such as narrative structure or sound design and how those strategies impact different audiences. This definition is also flexible enough to allow students to explore different kinds of rhetorical influence, including affecting listeners' beliefs, behaviors, and affective responses.

Besides its analytical value, this definition also acts as a powerful guide for rhetorical production. It encourages students to think carefully about what their audience already thinks or feels about their topic and, concomitantly, how they want their audience to think or feel differently about that topic after listening to their podcast. Students, of course, often realize that their rhetorical aims shift as they navigate the many steps of the podcast production process. This definition, in turn, functions dynamically and makes space for new rhetorical possibilities as the serpentine process of composing an audio story unfolds over time. Like the rhetorically-informed podcasting pedagogy that Eric Detweiler sketches, this definition empowers students to “analytically disentangle and practically recombine different components of digital sonic media” (215). Defining the rhetorical work of podcasting in this way thus creates a fruitful framework for students to both analyze and produce narrative nonfiction podcasts while also helping students understand that podcasts are not just consumable content but rather dynamic texts that do important socially-engaged work in the world.

3. A Complex Understanding of the Rhetorical Situation

The above definition also allows for a more complex understanding of the rhetorical situation of narrative nonfiction podcasting. For instance, straightforward definitions of rhetorical

podcasting might, as Klein demonstrates, showcase how producers design podcasts to affect listeners in a one-way relationship. Going one step further, the definition of rhetorical podcasting offered above invites students to consider, more broadly, how podcasting changes the way that *people*--not just listeners--think, feel, and act. By using the word “people,” this definition hints that listeners might not be the only kinds of people influenced by a podcast.¹¹ Hosts, for example, often explain in the final episodes of narrative nonfiction podcasts how the process of producing the podcast has altered how they think or feel about an issue.¹² And sometimes, narrative nonfiction podcasting impacts the local communities from which their stories are drawn, an interaction that underscores the fact that soundwriting “can’t be ethically removed from lived and material contexts” (Burns et. al.)¹³ Listeners are not, in short, the only ones moved by narrative nonfiction podcasts. Indeed, the rhetorical work of narrative nonfiction podcasting extends well beyond listeners and--as the generalized word “people” suggests--often affects a variety of stakeholders throughout the process of production and

¹¹ Although the word “people” clearly emphasizes the human aspects of podcasting, this definition does not presume that humans are separated from the many technologies involved in podcast production. Indeed, many different hardware and software technologies play a role in the audio storytelling techniques that producers use to create narrative nonfiction podcasts. Like many forms of composition, therefore, humans and nonhumans work in tandem to co-produce podcasts. Students, for instance, often become acutely aware of their entanglement with technology when practicing their vocal delivery with a microphone. In a rhetorically-informed podcasting course, moreover, students learn how their voices work in conjunction with the material elements in the room and their proximity from the microphone to co-construct students’ ethos as podcast narrators.

¹² Sarah Koenig on *Serial* and Brian Reed on *S-Town* are producer-narrators who, in one or more episodes, acknowledge how the act of producing and narrating the podcast has modified how they see certain issues.

¹³ *S-Town* serves as an example of a podcast that, through its production, re-configures community relationships in Bibb County, Alabama.

circulation. For a rhetoric and writing class invested in issues of social justice, this awareness of the multidirectionality of rhetorical influence in podcasting is essential.

Finding ways to explicitly teach this complexity in podcasting's rhetorical situation is therefore instrumental in a rhetorical pedagogy for teaching narrative nonfiction podcasts. One way to teach this complexity involves introducing students to the traditional "rhetorical triangle" early in the semester and then discussing how specific aspects of narrative nonfiction podcasting complicate such straightforward models of the rhetorical situation. In addition to author, audience, and issue, students are often quick to identify the important roles that interviewees, advertisers, and other community members play in the production of a podcast. The fruits of these preliminary conversations can then be explored again when students begin the difficult work of conducting field interviews, a hallmark of narrative nonfiction podcasting. In the dialogic setting of an interview, students often find that they oscillate between speaker and listener in a way that complicates transactional models of communication. During an interview, moreover, both interviewer and interviewee are aware of the eventual podcast audience beyond their immediate conversation. Interviewers thus act as stand-ins for the podcast's listeners and, as such, must ask questions that anticipate the needs of the podcast's expected audience, complicating the rhetorical situation as they take on this surrogate audience role. The rhetorical situation shifts yet again during the production process, as students make decisions about how to edit their gathered audio and recorded narration together into a cohesive story that will most effectively anticipate and address the listeners' questions and interests. Students likewise anticipate their audience's needs through

the production of written transcripts for their podcasts, a process that makes visible the otherwise “invisible” (Zdenek) importance of accessibility for podcasting. This complex picture of the rhetorical situation highlights how narrative nonfiction podcasting--with its emphasis on the ongoing engagement between producer-narrators, interviewees, listeners, and the larger communities in which they all operate--is best understood as a dynamic social context in which rhetorical influence often flows in multiple directions as participants negotiate their ongoing relations with each other.

4. An Awareness of the Rhetorical Significance of Storytelling

A third principle that proves central to a rhetorical pedagogy for teaching narrative nonfiction podcasts involves making students aware that each narrative strategy used in audio storytelling shapes the rhetorical imprint of that episode. Scholars have, of course, long been attuned to the rhetorical work of narrative. The concept of “story,” for instance, has proved important to scholars like Victor Villanueva, Aja Martinez, and Frankie Condon who work at the intersection of race, rhetoric, and composition. And the works of Kenneth Burke (*Philosophy*), Walter Fisher, Wayne Booth, and James Phelan all further showcase the rich relationship between rhetoric and narrative.¹⁴ But students often need assistance in recognizing how narratological choices are more than aesthetic whimsy and also have a direct--and sometimes profound--impact on audiences. In a rhetorically-oriented podcasting course,

¹⁴ The ancient progymnasmata also frequently employed narrative, in the form of anecdote and fable, as a teaching tool. For more information about the progymnasmata, see Kennedy. And for connections between the progymnasmata, pedagogy, and podcasting, see Detweiler.

therefore, students can use the methodology of “counterstory” to analyze and produce podcasts that undermine “stock stories” and work toward more just representations of marginalized populations (Martinez, *Counterstory*). Students must learn to identify key audio storytelling techniques, including narrative structure, character development, interview techniques, narrator ethos, script writing, vocal delivery, and sound design. Then, when analyzing podcasts, students can consider the effects that those particular narrative strategies and production decisions might have on various stakeholders involved in the larger rhetorical situation of that podcast. And when producing podcasts, students can use their own rhetorical goals to inform the audio storytelling strategies that they employ in their own episodes. These attunements to the rhetorical consequences of narrative techniques and audio production provide students with a specific framework for discussing how narrative nonfiction podcasting--and associated conversations about which stories to tell and how those stories are told--functions as a powerful cultural force for social change.

With an inclusive selection of exemplary podcasts as the bedrock, these guiding principles build a rhetorically-attuned pedagogical platform that has the potential to empower students to use narrative nonfiction podcasting to work toward creating positive social change. These principles are not, to be sure, “best practices” that presume equal application across institutional contexts. Rather, they are starting points for building a rhetorically-oriented podcasting pedagogy for social change that can take different shapes depending on the specific needs of local students, instructors, communities, and universities. Crucially, these guiding principles also provide a framework that speaks to rhetoric’s dual

function as both a set of tools for critical analysis and a collection of strategies for discursive production. And given how narrative nonfiction podcast producers oscillate between speakers and listeners, writers and reviewers, interviewers and witnesses, narrators and characters, this genre foregrounds the ways that rhetorical analysis and production are deeply entangled activities. In this sense, a rhetorical pedagogy centered on narrative nonfiction podcasting proves useful for introducing students to the twin processes of rhetorical analysis and production while also equipping them with the skills to foster social change.

The Ambivalence of Narrative Nonfiction Podcasting Pedagogies for Social Change

Despite the affordances of a rhetorical pedagogy oriented around narrative nonfiction podcasting to connect students to social issues, the ability of such a pedagogy to actually promote social change remains stubbornly equivocal. On one hand, such a pedagogy has some advantageous propensities. In the classroom, narrative nonfiction podcasting can prompt students to take up social justice initiatives in their immediate communities in a way that aligns with Cushman's notion of small-scale "social change" rather than "sweeping social upheavals" (12). As narrators of their podcast, moreover, students are writers and speakers; and as interviewers, they are also listeners. Negotiating these shifting roles helps students practice a kind of "rhetorical listening" that functions as a kind of "trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct" (Ratcliffe 17). The focus on narrative, moreover, helps students step into a particular relationship with their interlocutors and listeners, a relationship that places both parties on the side of seeking mutual understanding rather than the oppositional frame of argument. Narrative's intervention in these

critical conversations, in other words, occurs through an “invitational rhetoric” (Foss and Griffin pg??) that serves as both an antidote to public discourse that seeks persuasive dominance and a companion to traditional academic discourse (Villanueva 14). In these ways, a rhetorically-inflected narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy resounds Rhodes and Alexander’s articulated mission of the social turn by showing how audio narratives, as a form of writing, “can intervene in critical conversations about cultural, political, and socioeconomic conditions that shape the theoretical and material realities of our work” (481).

On the other hand, however, such a rhetorically-inflected narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy has clear weaknesses. As discussed earlier, serialized narrative nonfiction podcasts can sometimes overemphasize the actions of their protagonists and downplay the larger unjust systems that often constrain their protagonists’ actions. Podcasts in this genre are also often produced by large media organizations, which limits the array of voices and stories that can be foregrounded in such podcasts. And as mentioned in the introduction, for student podcasts to achieve their potential for social change, they must be circulated to listeners. Without dissemination to target audiences, student podcasts will struggle to shape public discourse about the social issues they investigate. Furthermore, when student involvement with local communities fails to extend beyond the end of the semester, the opportunities for creating lasting social change shrink. Thus, while students may share their podcast episodes with family and friends, the limited dissemination of their work and the lack of sustained engagement with local communities necessarily curtails the breadth of their impact. Scholars of community writing and service learning have, of course, long grappled with the challenges of circulating student work publicly and nurturing ongoing relationships with local communities

(Mathieu et al.; Cushman). The podcasting pedagogy proposed here therefore brings constraints like these to the forefront again and underscores the challenges of working toward social change in a single-semester course. As such, this kind of podcasting pedagogy struggles to adequately address the larger structural inequalities--the local policies, state legislation, and public institutions--that underpin injustices in the community stories they tell. Simply put, the possibility of fostering social change through such a podcasting pedagogy is minimal.

So what now?

Conclusion

At the time when we began writing this article, we were also re-reading Ellen Cushman's landmark *College Composition and Communication* article, "The Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change." One thing that stood out to us during the re-reading was her suggestion that social change need not only occur on a massive scale and, moreover, that rhetorically-informed social change could also occur incrementally in quotidian interactions (12). Such a modest understanding of social change seemed to align with our experiences teaching students to compose narrative nonfiction podcasts. The students' podcasts did not lead to the introduction of new legislation, the lobbying of representatives, or the creation of local support organizations. And though the students may have attended protests with microphones in hand, their podcasts did not instigate further protests against systemic injustices. At the same time, however, their podcasts--and especially the *process* of producing those audio stories and counterstories--seemed to have a subtle, but no less important, social value. One student said, "..."

[examples...] These kind of modestly-circumscribed instances of social change, these incremental

shifts, however small, seemed worthy of celebration. They seemed like the kinds of modest social goals that could be achieved in the scant forty-five hours of instruction that many instructors have in a single semester. And our desire to honor those students' stories and their contributions to that kind of humble social change led us to title the original draft of this article, in an homage to Cushman, "The Student-Podcaster as Narrator of Social Change." We felt then, as we do now, that rhetorically-inclined narrative nonfiction podcasting can, if carefully designed, lay the groundwork for positive social change.

And yet, in the twenty-five years since Cushman's article was first circulated, the imbricated fields of rhetoric and composition have changed. In particular, their relationship to "the social" has evolved. Although it is reassuring to take solace in the incremental social change that emerges from our teaching and research (especially when faced with the dispiriting institutional inertia of higher education and partisan grid-lock in Congress), research in antiracist and decolonial pedagogies clearly indicates that we cannot rely on gradual change alone to upend social injustices. Indeed, an over-reliance on gradual change--in our governments, our institutions, and our classrooms--is also complicit with a reluctance to change the status quo that deliberately disadvantages and, in some cases actively hurts, marginalized communities. In this sense, the narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy that we articulate above, however well-intentioned, falls well short of achieving meaningful social change. It does not *activate* its concern for social issues by creating a pedagogical context in which students can *deploy* those concerns in the form of social justice activism. For this reason, in our revisions, we added the question mark to our Cushman-esque title: "The Student-Podcaster as Narrator of Social Change?"

In an early version of this draft, we had a question mark in the title, but we deleted it because it felt as if we were asking a question that we already knew the answer to. We thought, then, that the answer was affirmative. Now, however, we reintroduce the question mark to honor the ambivalence of our response to the question. We do not know the answer to the question. Some evidence that we offer above suggests that student-podcasters can, when carefully guided, narrate their way to a modest notion of social change. But other evidence that we summarize above indicates that there are substantial roadblocks to deploying such a pedagogy in the service of wide-scale social change. And if pressed to answer the question, “Can a rhetorically-informed narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy contribute to meaningful social change?” we feel that, at this moment, we can only provide the infuriatingly vague answer that reflects the question mark in our title: “perhaps.”

So if ambiguity is the best we can offer in response to that question, then what do we have to give the field in this article? Perhaps, simply, a word of optimism and a word of caution. Digital technologies offer an array of new possibilities for socially-oriented pedagogies in rhetoric and composition, and narrative nonfiction podcasting one of them. It clearly has the potential to contribute in a meaningful way to our discipline, to our students lives, and to our social context. But we also take seriously Adam J. Banks’ caution that we cannot rely on “the next new technological hotness that will heal everything that ails us” (275). A pedagogy organized around narrative nonfiction pedagogy is not a panacea for social change. It is, at best, one way for our students to begin the process of entering into ongoing conversations about social justice. Thus, while we contend that the podcasting pedagogy that we sketch above has the *potential* to contribute to modestly circumscribed social change, it is clearly not yet a social activist pedagogy. It does not articulate a mechanism for

deploying its pedagogical framework in the service of social activism. As a result, it will not yet lead to wide-spread social change.

In the end, we believe rhetoric and composition need both kinds of social change: the quotidian and the cataclysmic. Is it possible that such podcasting pedagogy could be incorporated with a social activist pedagogy and contribute to large scale social change? Perhaps. Is it also possible that other pedagogies are better suited to encouraging more expansive social change? Perhaps. Clearly more research needs to be done in this area. Ultimately, the question of whether or not a rhetorically-informed narrative nonfiction podcasting pedagogy can contribute to those twin views of social change remains just that, a question. And we encourage you to pursue answers to that question by iterating on the suggestions that we articulate above into your own socially-oriented pedagogy.

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