NICHOLAS L. BAHAM III • NOLAN HIGDON

THE PODCASTER'S DILEMMA

Decolonizing Podcasters in the Era of Surveillance Capitalism

WILEY Blackwell

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Nicholas L. Baham III
California State University
Hayward, CA

Nolan Higdon
California State University
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Introduction

Having a radio meant seriously going to war.
Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (1965)

Broadcasting from Oakland, California, "the center of the known universe," Alicia Garza's podcast *Lady Don't Take No!* begins with the pronouncement: "This show is pro-Black, pro-Queer, proudly Feminist, and pro-Do-Whatcha-Like. Every week, you are going to get the best of what goes on in my head, what we're lovin' on, what we're hatin' on, what we might be and what we aint gon' do."[1] Garza, a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement along with Patrisse Cullers and Opal Tometi, brings unfiltered community-based perspectives on everything from pop culture to politics. With broadcasts that elevate the voices of local and national Black activists, thinkers, and artists (e.g. Erika Huggins, W. Kamau Bell, Davey D., Lateefah Simon, Angela Rye, Laverne Cox), Garza's broadcast, "recorded with whatever was lying around,"[2] embodies the spirit of media freedom. Opening against the alternative hip-hop beats of the Bay Area-based duo Latyrx, every broadcast sounds like a paradigm shift. Emerging in a summer of protest that followed the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the midst of the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic ("'rona and rebellion"), *Lady Don't Take No!* is an audio brick thrown at the plateglass window of corporate misinformation, as Garza and her guests take back the narrative. Speaking as a member of the loving communities that she advocates for, Garza urges her listeners: "We do it for the culture, so the podcast is free 99 because we know, with the country in chaos, the least we could do is keep you from putting your money anywhere else than where it's needed."[3]

Garza's *Lady Don't Take No!* is emblematic of the hundreds of podcasts that we have undertaken to review and critique in this book. We are interested in understanding how contemporary voices in digital media are built upon the legacy of post-World War II revolutionary radio in places such as Algeria, Cuba, and Angola. We pay attention to the seamless flow between the home studios where so many of these broadcasts are recorded and the communities of voiceless and underrepresented people, who now have a public forum where

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they can express the unadulterated truth of their lived experiences. We are interested in the pro-Black, pro-Brown, pro-Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), pro-indigenous, pro-queer, pro-working-class voices, which critique, interrogate, deconstruct, and engage in a revolutionary struggle of ideas against the slant and spin of corporate news media that manipulate fear, resentment, and division in order to manufacture consent. We are interested in the broad explosion of intersectional voices in dialogue about everything, from political organizing to plant-based diets. We are interested in the myriad coalitions that are formed behind the microphone. We are interested in alternative and anti-capitalist funding models that emphasize cooperation and collaboration over competition. We are interested in podcasting as a medium of decolonization.

Podcasting has exploded as a form of communication in recent years. In 2021 there were over 1 million active podcasts that contained more than 30 million podcast episodes.[4] In 2018 these numbers stood respectively at 550,000 and 18.5 million.[5] A 2019 study found that over half of Americans had listened to a podcast and over one third listen to a podcast monthly.[6] These nascent media makers draw in sizable audiences, which range in the hundreds of thousands to millions.[7] The phenomenon of podcasters increasing audience size is part of a broader trend, in which audiences abandon legacy media in favor of digital content. Indeed, television, radio, and newspapers have seen a precipitous drop in audience size over the last two decades.[8] Meanwhile, from 2016 to 2017, the numbers of Americans who receive their news from online sources increased from 38% to 43%, while the number of viewers who receive their news from television decreased from 57% to 50%.[9] Over that same year, the proportion of Americans who rely on social media for their news surpassed the proportion of those who rely on newspapers.[10] By 2020, YouTube was steadily increasing as a news source for 26% of Americans.[11] In fact recent data reveal that even old generations, which have constituted the majority of legacy media audiences for decades, are increasingly depending upon digital spaces for their news.[12]

Podcasts are digital files with audio or video content that, once accessed, allow users to "timeshift and place-shift their listening and viewing habits through the downloading of content onto a personal computer or a portable media player for immediate or future viewing."[13] Podcasts should be understood as a continuation of auditory media such as radio. Podcasts and radio are similar but differ in audio quality, program advertisements, and time limits on broadcasts. Furthermore, podcast production is relatively affordable by comparison with recording in radio studios, and podcasts can be disseminated through the Internet rather than through traditional radio broadcast networks. As a result, they are easier to create than radio programs and more accessible to audiences.

Radio and podcasting also differ in terms of their target audience. Where radio producers have traditionally focused on developing content that would attract the largest audience possible, podcasters tend to develop content for smaller or niche audiences. For example, rather than marketing themselves as concerned with any and all issues, podcasts are dedicated to specific themes. Thus, *Speak Out with Tim Wise* is a podcast focused "on racial and economic justice in the age of Trump." Another one, titled *Mansplaining*, describes itself as "a gender-aware explication of hyper-masculinity in popular films." Where radio and other traditional media offer milquetoast content that avoids controversial topics for a litany of reasons, including fears about alienating audiences, or about Federal Communication Commission (FCC) violations, podcasters are more edgy, both in their use of ribaldry and in their content. For example, they have titles that would be forbidden in traditional media, such as *The Manwhore*, *Guys We Fucked*, and *CockTales: Dirty Discussions*.

As critical scholars and podcasters, we were aware that media producers use the podcasting space for decolonization. Upon closer examination, we discovered that there is a dearth of research concerning the ways in which underprivileged communities utilize podcasting as a space of decolonization. Most of the scholarship on podcasting so far has focused on uses in educational settings.[14] The present study seeks to contribute to the field by advancing our understanding of podcasting as a space of decolonization across a broad spectrum of social, cultural, and political settings.

Literature Review

Our review of the scholarship revealed that podcasting holds an important place in the long and well-documented history of radio.[15] This is particularly clear in the work of Gretchen King, who applied a "de-westernizing and internalizing" framework for mapping the historical evolution of the global community's radio projects from the early 1900s to the present. King organized her research into four stages: the experimental stage (1900s–1940s); the wildfire stage (1950s–1960s); the solidarity stage (1970s–1980s); and the resurgence stage (1990s to the present).[16] King's experimental stage features the early days of radio broadcasting history, when individuals who experimented with community-based broadcasting contested statal (or military) and commercial domination over the airwaves.[17] The wildfire stage covers the rise of unlicensed, clandestine political radio.[18] The solidarity phase is characterized by the growth of community radio associations "that shared resources, built up sector capacity, and collaborated in policy advocacy initiatives at the regional and national level."[19] The resurgence phase sees the return of both licensed and pirate community radio, in a direct response to neoliberal budget policies.[20]

Podcasting

Podcasting and digital media are not only contemporaneous with the resurgence phase of community radio: they are a digital extension of modern community radio, particularly given their shared critique of and resistance to neoliberalism. Additionally, similar legislation and the growing accessibility of technology, which provided fertile ground for the resurgence of community radio, exist in the space of digital communication.[21] With respect to technological access, King notes:

> An additional factor aiding the rapid growth of community radio during the Resurgence period was the increasing accessibility and affordability of radio production and distribution technology. Prior to the 1990s, radio stations or producers wanting to share content either required an expensive connection (typically via satellite or high-grade phone line) or relied on shipping recordings through the mail. With the spread of the internet, new websites were launched like Radio4all.net and Archive.org, which went online in 1996, and Indymedia.org, created in 1999, for the free uploading and immediate distribution of audio files.[22]

Here King acknowledges the significant overlap between community radio and digital technologies, justifying not only the governing analogy of our project but also the notion that decolonizing podcasts are a contemporaneous outgrowth of the resurgence phase of King's model, in technology as well as in substance.

Our insistence on the analogous nature of radio and digital communication is supported in much of the emerging critical literature on digital communication. For example, Tiziano Bonini's analysis of the polymedia intermingling of radio and social media during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey suggests profound continuities between old and new technologies in resistance and decolonization movements. Bonini writes:

> Radio has been employed as a communication tool during all the social movements and protests of the last decades of the past century, from the student movements of May 1968 in Paris and Mexico City to the 1999 Seattle WTO protests, while the political protests and uprisings at the beginning of the twenty-first century have mostly been supported by social media ... Is Twitter the radio of the twenty-first century? Another, more complex, reality lies beyond the surface of the representation of the protests shaped by the mainstream media: the mediascape in which political movements such as Occupy, the Arab Spring and the Indignados have emerged is a mixed one, a mediascape where old and new, mainstream and underground media co-exist, interact and shape each other.[23]

In 2020 Andrew J. Bottomley documented the stages of podcasting in his book the *Sound Streams: A Cultural History of Radio–Internet Convergence*, just as King had done for radio.[24] Bottomley argues that there are three waves of podcasting. The first wave, from 2000 to 2005, witnessed the unnamed practice of podcasting emerge as an auditory version of the unconventional practice of blogging. The second wave, from 2005 to 2010, introduced repurposed radio content, user-generated round table discussions, and comedic content as podcasting. And the third wave, which began in 2010, saw more in-depth storytelling, which Bottomley credits to the investigative journalism podcast *Serial*.[25] Bottomley argues that in the second wave the term *podcasting* was coined as a result of an association with the iPod, coupled with Apple's monopoly of podcasting content at the time.[26] Beyond Bottomley, the existing scholarship has been limited to multicontributor volumes about podcast culture and about the popularity and format of podcasts, and to methodological texts for research on podcasts.[27]

Decolonization

Critical scholars remind us that power relations are not fixed and that liberation from dominant ideologies is possible through a critical examination of media and power, in a process known as decolonization.[28] Chantal J. Zabus explains that decolonization "refers to the shedding of colonial relics inherited from colonial history in all spheres (not only the socio-economic and political), accompanied by an inward-looking, autarkic movement that will lead to the decolonization of mentalities and is tied to economic de-linkage from Western Powers."[29] As Last Moyo notes, in media "the aim of decolonial turn is not to reproduce a new Hegelian hierarchies or new knowledge power structures in the field, but to give birth to a truly multicultural critical media theory that emerges from intercultural and trans-epistemic dialogue between the geographic Northern and Southern epistemologies."[30]

As a field of study, decolonization is rooted in the experience of indigenous peoples.[31] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that decolonization "brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and school."[32] Colonization is brought about by imperialism, and the malignant settler mentality of empire is anathema to decolonization.[33] A colonial mentality is an attitude of ethnic and cultural inferiority that results from colonization.[34] Colonial mentalities are hegemonic forces that cause the colonized to internalize the belief that the culture of their colonizer is more valuable than their own.[35] Indeed, psychologists have found that the adoption of colonial mentalities is associated with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.[36] Critical media scholars explain that cultural hegemony enables the ruling class to break the psyche of the colonized and enable the internalization of colonial mentalities.[37]

Scholars have noted that decolonization produces counter-knowledge through the process of interrogation and critique.[38] Similarly, Antonia Darder notes:

> Central to the qualitative labor of a decolonizing interpretive approach are radical processes of social inquiry, critique, and cultural reformulation (or reinvention, as Paulo Freire would say) that strike at the very heart of dominant ideologies linked to persistent asymmetrical practices – practices that, wittingly or unwittingly, reproduce classed, racialized, gendered, sexual, abled, religious, and other social and material formations that sustain fundamental inequalities and exclusions.[39]

Indeed, rather than remaining bivouacked, the podcasters we surveyed confront dominant ideologies through a process of inquiry, critique, and cultural reformulation that focuses on the expressions of power invested in identity. In this sense, to critique is to interrogate the values and beliefs that legitimize power and reveal its often hidden or opaque logic at work.[40] "Interrogation" is a term often narrowly applied to discourses about law enforcement or state agents asking tough questions of captives.[41] But, insofar as it relates to decolonization, the process of interrogation involves questioning sources of power rather than individuals.[42] Decolonization uses interrogation as a means of deconstructing dominant power structures for the purposes of liberation[43] – or, as Darder explains, interrogation "functions in the interest of deconstructing and reconstructing conditions for transformative practice and social empowerment."[44]

This process of deconstructing dominant cultural concepts and of stripping the colonizer's language "of its negative connotations" necessitates more than interrogation and critique. It demands the production of counter-narratives that displace dominant ones.[45] It involves moving concepts of the oppressed and the colonized from the margins to the center of the public square. A counter-narrative is "a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect."[46] Scholars have noted the critical association between counter-narratives and decolonization. For example, Darder observes that

> critical research must be linked to emancipatory efforts to dismantle oppressive theories and practices, in an effort to transform existing conditions. This calls for a research process that can support the creation of intellectual and social spaces where alternative readings of the world can exist in the interest of liberatory practice and social justice.[47]

The literature on decolonization emphasizes that decolonization is a process that ultimately leads to transformative "action."[48] Decolonization research is grounded in indigenous peoples' demanding self-determination and using the decolonization process to achieve indigenous utopianism.[49] Indigenous utopianism is an aspirational concept that refers to an ancient past, which activists seek to bring about in the present in the form of freedom and self-determination.[50] Media are a powerful cultural force and, just as they can reinforce colonial mentalities, they can also offer a space of liberation from them.

Methodology

To understand how podcasters were using their programs as spaces of decolonization, we randomly surveyed over one hundred podcasts that were identified through word searches in major podcasting websites such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify. We looked for podcasts that used concepts, themes, and language identified in the scholarship on decolonization. We then surveyed a sample of programs from each podcast and coded them to determine how, if at all, they engaged in the processes of interrogation and critique, counter-narrative, and action. We listened to a handful of their programs and read their descriptions, their host bios, and their listener comments. In addition, we had our interns help develop profiles for the podcast hosts so we could better determine who was behind the approaches to decolonization in the podcasting space.

We analyzed the content through a critical lens. Critical theory posits that dominant ideologies result from power inequities that are strengthened and fortified through media and communication.[51] Critical scholars contend that identities – such as class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability – are an expression of power because they are primarily shaped according to dominant structures that maintain power imbalances. In fact isms such as sexism or racism are often incorrectly attributed to individual behavior rather than to the systemic forces that solidify power relations by reinforcing colonial mentalities.[52] We used a critical lens because we are critical scholars and power is the defining feature of colonization. As a result, power makes for a useful lens in deciphering the dynamics of colonization in the podcasting space.

In order to help frame the narrative of podcasting as a space of decolonization, we fundamentally build on Frantz Fanon's analysis of the decolonizing potential of radio communication in *A Dying Colonialism* (1965), a groundbreaking study of the methods employed by the Algerian resistance (FLN) in its armed struggle against French colonialism. We find that the appropriation

of digital broadcasting technologies by marginalized groups engaged in decolonization is analogous to the appropriation of radio technology in 1954 in Algeria and in other significant decolonizing revolutionary movements from the post-World War II era to the present. Indeed, since Fanon's work, a host of studies have examined radio as a tool for decolonization.[53] Fanon's work helps contextualize the revolutionary potential of podcasting.

A Word on Language and Citations

We have done our best in this text to provide direct citations to the content we reference. However, one of the issues we noticed is that many of the podcasts are accessible on webpages that are updated daily and weekly with new podcasts, and this may cause the podcast we referenced to be buried on another page. Furthermore, it means that we cannot directly link to a particular episode, but to an entire library. Where possible, we have tried to provide direct citation content or sources for our quotations. However, the messy and haphazard nature of podcasting, where the user-friendly ability to post and remove content is privileged over scholarly referencing, did present some difficulties that readers are sure to recognize.

Readers may have some difficulty with the language as well. For example, rather than discussing podcasting as "alternative" media and mass media as "mainstream," we refer to the mass media as corporate media, in order to highlight the fact that they are funded by corporations and their messaging reflects the interests of corporatism. The present book is not the space to investigate this concept. That work has been accomplished by organizations such as Project Censored and in monographs such as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* and Nolan Higdon's *The Anatomy of Fake News: A Critical News Literacy Education*. We encourage readers who are interested in the influence of corporate funding on media content to explore the suggested titles and organizations. Similarly, we refer to "decolonial" podcasts. This is a term by which we describe the podcasters who are using the podcasting space to interrogate, critique, and offer counter-narratives to colonial mentalities – which include ones from corporatism, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, Islamophobia, and ableism (among the more prominent categories).

Outline of the Book

This text chronicles the dynamic rise of podcasts that seek decolonization from the dominant ideological structures. In order to identify the podcasts participating in decolonization, we did an Internet search of podcasts that specifically