

CONSULTING PODCASTERS: PROTOTYPING A DEMOCRATIC TOOL FOR MULTIPLE VOICES, STORYTELLING AND SOLUTION FINDING

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This Anthro Life Podcast
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Introduction

“Podcasting is the process of capturing an audio event, song, speech, or mix of sounds and then posting that digital sound object to a web site or ‘blog’ in a data structure called a Real Simple Syndication (RSS) 2.0 envelope (or ‘feed’)” (Meng, 2005). Podcasts arose in the early 2000s as new technologies allowed producers to easily create content outside of the traditional broadcasting sector like public radio or syndicated television, and then share it via emerging internet technologies without the need for traditional terrestrial equipment.

Similarly, notions of audience and consumption changed as listeners, and early adopters were able to take advantage of this new mode of distribution by listening to the podcasts when and where they wanted, as opposed to having to listen in real-time like traditional radio. Lindeman (2000) calls this “the self-serve audio evolution”. This trend was further enabled as a result of the rise of mobile media devices like Apple’s iPod and services like iTunes, which served as the first repository and branding space for what became known as “podcasts.” These happenings helped to create a convergence between audio and the

internet, in a new personalized way than had previously existed. As a result of shifting dynamics related to production, distribution, and consumption, podcasts have been called disruptive to the traditional radio format, which is proving to be true (Berry, 2006). Recent statistics support those claims.

In a 2017 Edison Research report which surveyed 2000 people aged 12 and older in the United States, it was found that an estimated 112 million listened to a podcast, 67 million listen to podcasts monthly, 42 million listen to podcasts weekly, and monthly listeners are growing from 21% to 24% year over year. However, consumption is demographically unequal with most consumers being predominantly 18-54, highly educated, full-time employed, and affluent (Edison Research, 2017).

Given these trends, and based on the experience as anthropologists and podcasters for This Anthro Life (TAL), we ask, how can we work collaboratively to generate shared knowledge for shaping sustainable futures? We hypothesize that one method is to intentionally leverage the podcast medium as a democratic, educational, and social technology.

This Anthro Life

TAL was started in 2013 by three anthropology graduate students as a roundtable conversation offering a cross-cultural and time-spanning perspective on all things human - from objects and ideas to countless possibilities encountered in everyday global life. Since then TAL has grown and formalized into a more intentional production that has sought to provide space for multiple voices through storytelling and conversation with the goal of co-creating knowledge - of, for, and most importantly, with all people. - something we share with the spirit of design anthropology (Gunn, Otto, & Smith, 2013).¹ We now regularly work

¹ Design Anthropology is a hybrid, collaborative research means and interventionist strategy that links the time-depth sensitivity, theoretical rigor, and value orientations of stakeholders from anthropology, and the solution-oriented, interventionist, and practice based collaborative and participatory work of design.

with practitioners, thought leaders, and media producers as well as multidisciplinary academic voices.

Though always a public-facing, or public-first focused anthropology podcast, more recently TAL has intentionally moved further in the direction of business and design anthropology, with some episodes having an overt applied or practitioner aspect to them, such as the design + business anthropology, ethnographic storytelling, and diversity and inclusion in higher education series.

On the business and design anthropology episodes, anthropologists such as OCAD University Dean of the Faculty of Design, Dr. Dori Tunstall, corporate anthropologist Dr. Andi Simon, enterprise software and UX professional Dr. Natalie Hanson, and work practice specialist Alexandra Mack have joined the TAL team on air to discuss how they apply their training, skills, and specialties to helping people define and solve problems today.

TAL Goes Applied

But it should be stated, that we don't believe that simply declaring something "public" or "applied" makes it so. Practice matters. Thinking of it through a design anthropology lens, which is concerned with the collaborative defining of problems worth solving and co-creating and testing solutions with other stakeholders, we co-create stories with our guests that are reflexive and prescriptive. Thus the public-facing character of TAL is demonstrated by the fact that we are intentionally finding space in the conversation to uncover narratives of meaning and allow these professionals to share how they have applied their anthropology training to their consultative, and even academic engagements.

Furthermore, we seek to apply critical thinking and the anthropological lens through conversations in plain language so that anyone could tune in, follow, and take something applicable away from any episode, be they anthropologists or not. The applied anthropological aspects build on this conversational approach by collaborating with not only

the guests, but the TAL community at large to shape those conversations around problems or issues deemed worth paying attention to, and that people have a stake in wanting to solve. Conversations thus help define the contours of social problems or issues as well as approaches to their solutions.

Building on that trajectory, we seek to prototype the contours of “consulting podcasting,” as the recasting of needed public-oriented business conversations that occur through a design anthropology infused participatory lens to collaboratively generate, and shape, sustainable public futures.

Design Anthropology

Increasingly in business, Human Centered Design (HCD), Design Thinking, and other people-first methods are starting to be employed in innovation and design research. These methods, which one could argue take their inspiration from design anthropology, are recognized for their flexibility and ability to generate new ideas within an organization. As people-first methodologies, they bring in the perspectives of stakeholders, particularly the users of products and services a company offers, to uncover unmet needs and opportunities as opposed to historical business-first methods.

Design anthropology grows out of the confluence of multiple disciplines which include design and anthropology but is by no means limited to them. This trend of blending disciplines seems to have arisen in its modern context with information technology in the early 1990s as a result of the new challenges it presented. At that time, design consulting firms like IDEO, Fitch, and frog were starting to bridge industrial design and engineering. Similarly, larger research labs like Xerox PARC, Microsoft Research, and Bell Labs technologies had been bringing together communication designers, usability and human factors engineers with social scientists from anthropology, linguistics, and sociology.

The goal was to "understand how people thought machines worked, to understand the interactions between people and technology, and the reciprocal impact of organizations, practices, and technologies on one another" (Clarke 2017, 57). Building on the foundations of these earlier movements, pioneering design firm E-Lab helped to bring design anthropology into its own right by fostering a model of collaboration between designers and anthropologists, thereby bringing together design and ethnographic practice (Wasson and Metcalf 2013). The emphasis on participatory multivocality in pursuit of defining problems and design solutions is the foundation for the TAL model of consulting podcasting.

Consulting Podcasting

The simple idea behind the notion of consulting podcasting is that we are using the podcast format to intentionally bring together professionals to co-create meaningful conversations that provides expert advice through the anthropological paradigm of the emic and etic. Consulting podcasting applies the flexible, digital recording techniques of podcasting with a process of in-the-moment of real-time discovery. To that end we askew rigid preconfigured narratives or storyboards in favor of an open-format conversation that mimic the methods of semi-structured interviews. We allow room for the conversation to breathe.

With openness we let guest stories speak and allow them to unfold along their own path, on their own terms, without imposing our own worldviews or narratives. In the process, we learn of a speaker's insider perspective, their motivations, and methods. We then compliment the insider perspective with our outsider perspectives - as voices that encourage deeper reflection and context building around issues of key importance to the guest, to co-create a larger meta-narrative that makes up the consultative engagement.

The value of storytelling from this human-centered design perspective is that we bring to the table our shared cross-cultural competencies and interview skill sets that allow

us to craft rapid, thick descriptions of business problems and solutions in the course of podcast production. By doing this, we create a level of understanding that is increasingly sought after by businesses across multiple industries.

At the core of this podcasting mindset, is an appreciation for the theory and methods of anthropology, with its holistic focus and use of ethnography as a tool that binds us together through descriptive and interpretive narratives. Likewise, ethnography is crucial to the process of consulting podcasting because it is a deliberate and incredibly effective method for gathering multiple narratives. Thus, by intentionally practicing ethnographic thinking, (Hasbrouck 2017) each podcast episode or mini-series is empowered by a powerful set of tools for harnessing and molding those narratives into a coherent, multi-sided, and context-rich story that centers on collaboratively understanding problems and paths to solutions.

Through this co-creation process, we focus on helping practitioners, organizations, and their stakeholders connect, learn, and innovate by uncovering previously unknown realizations and unmet opportunities.

Speculative Fiction

Because consulting podcasting does not yet exist, we draw on the field of speculative fiction to help frame what it could be and do. Consulting podcasting represents what Joachim Halsie and Laura Boffi call “interventionist speculations” that blend the techniques of invention with the techniques of description. Interventionist speculations, they argue, are a form of inquiry particularly relevant for investigating phenomena that are not very coherent and consistently underspecified because they are still in the process of being conceptually and physically articulated (Halse and Boffi 2016: 89).² This concept, which we find mirrors

² They contrast interventionist speculations with the dominant image of scientific research methods that aim for clarity and precision, illuminate sources of bias, and strive for unambiguous outcomes, epitomized by the “random clinical trial” (Halse and Boffi 2016: 89).

the nature of messy or wicked problems so often discussed within a business context, requires the type of prescriptive interventions of design anthropology.

To them, an intervention literally means “coming between” and for us, our model of podcasting is a form of speculative intervention that comes between the emic and etic through the collection of multiple interlocutors, business problems, brand strategies, organizational norms, design solutions, and most importantly, individual’s experiences.

If we consider this kind of work speculative fiction, it is in the sense of ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch’s inventive notion of ethnofiction. Rouch regularly pressed the boundaries of what ethnography and cinema were by blending the boundaries of filming as a form of note-taking with improvisation, provocation and giving the camera to his interlocutors and asking them to imagine things with the camera. This allows production itself - whether video or audio - to also be a tool of co-creation between podcasters and guests, offering another layer of content and perspective building. Being playful and open with narrative structure through the course of podcast production could include asking guests to speculate on a proposed solution to a problem they are working with, or asking them to brainstorm some possible reasons a problem exists. Other possibilities could be a longer project in which we give guests recording devices and ask them to record their thoughts on a particularly idea consecutively each morning and evening for a few days, or recording their reactions to particular events or engagements. These speculations serve more than one purpose. On the one hand, they would allow us as podcasters to co-create forms of ethnofiction that can reconfigure the bounds of ethnographic description, imagination, and invention. On the other, they offer possible framing and contours of what the future of This Anthro Life or other podcast endeavours may look like in the future. In short, we apply imagination as part of problem definition and solution proposing, and we enfold creating as part of practice.

To channel Halse and Boffi (2016) again, our aim is to produce not a prefigured solution to a defined problem like a prototype but to enable new forms of experience, a dialogue in awareness about problems as they emerge. Through gathering multiple narrative threads, half-cooked ideas, utterances, silences and pregnant pauses, aspirations, and admonitions from different voices, consulting podcasting is a new form of ethnographic inquiry that draws on design anthropology and speculative fiction for staging new experiential possibilities and creating newly applied outputs.

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