

The Missing Narrator:

Fictional Podcasting and Kaleidosonic Remediation in Gimlet's *Homecoming*

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## Introduction

It starts with a rustling. No dialogue, no music, but rustling. In the background, we hear the sound of an aquarium bubbling, and a door opens. The floor creaks as the subject moves across the floor, getting louder as he approaches the focalizing device. And then the audio becomes muffled, the rustling more pronounced. It is a distinct sort of sound, one we quite specifically associate with recordings, especially amateur recordings; it is the sound of someone shifting the device, moving their fingers over the microphone.

And so, from minute one of *Homecoming*, the first fictional podcast from Gimlet Media, the audience is hyper-aware of their position. The story is a collage of audio recordings that knits together recorded phone calls, therapy sessions, and overheard conversations to create something like a completed narrative, unravelling the mysterious dynamic between a therapist, her veteran client, and the company that employs her. Borrowing from two distinct storytelling traditions -- that of the classical radio drama and the found-footage horror film -- *Homecoming* constructs an immersive, narrator-less audio environment. The podcast's sophisticated meld of audio effects, skilled voice actors and innovative recording strategies strives for a sense of audio-realism, an effect that ultimately raises the question of just who might be behind the "found" recordings that make up the story. Thus the podcast ultimately evokes the anxiety of a post-Patriot Act, post-Snowden America, wherein privacy -- even the privacy and security of one's innermost thoughts and memories, is never guaranteed. I argue that like found footage horror, this aural collage muddles the lines between story and reality and exposes the tenuousness of the border between the represented and the real, thereby enhancing the unsettling effect of the story itself. For though it is a science fiction tale, *Homecoming* ultimately feels closer to reality than one might like to think.

As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, “new” media forms, from Renaissance painting to photography to web browsers, always present themselves as “refashioned and improved versions of other media.”<sup>1</sup> The podcast is no exception. Since the premiere of its first episode in late 2016, *Homecoming* has been regarded by critics as revolutionary within the genre both for its thematic and technical features, and for its choice to forgo a traditional narrator-based framing structure. And yet, *Homecoming* marks the podcast’s adoption of a variety of techniques specific to one medium -- classical radio drama. The podcast remediates the radio dramas of old, utilizing a dialogue-heavy format and employing sound effects to create mood and atmosphere. Keeping with the tradition of radio drama, the show also employs the talents of popular screen and stage actors rather than actors better known for voice-work, or simply unknown amateurs, as is the norm in most modern fictional podcasting.

Just as the early podcast charts were packed with amateur, small-time creations, early radio dramas were pioneered by small, local stations, like WGY Schenectady in New York. Within the next decade, CBS and NBC would embrace the audio drama and usher in the “golden age” of radio, which spanned from the 1930s to the mid ‘50s, when television’s rise effectively ended the reign of radio drama. The networks were particularly drawn to horror and mystery shows -- something Neil Verma argues is integrally connected to the audio-centric medium. Verma writes that the tension, suspense, and doubt of a mystery show foregrounded radio’s reliance on imagination and the mind, arguing that “As American broadcasters built a theater *in*

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<sup>1</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 15.

the mind, radio drama necessarily became a theater *about* the mind.”<sup>2</sup> *Homecoming*, then, also borrows from the radio tradition in terms of its genre. What Andrew Bottomley wrote of the cult-hit *Welcome to Night Vale* holds true for *Homecoming*, too: “The mystery, science fiction, horror and fantasy genres that the podcast mixes certainly all have rich histories within twentieth century theater and literature. However, these were also among the most popular types of programming during radio’s ‘golden age.’”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the myriad similarities between *Homecoming* and the radio shows of old, Gimlet CEO Alex Blumberg and the show’s producer Eli Horowitz explicitly reject the term ‘audio drama’ in reference to their creation. As the *New York Times* reported, “They specifically don’t want *Homecoming* to lean as heavily into intentional nostalgia the way, say, Garrison Keillor’s popular *Prairie Home Companion* series did.”<sup>4</sup> Blumberg and Horowitz’s refusal to classify their show as an audio drama is notable. By rejecting existing terminology, they assert that *Homecoming* is part of an altogether new format, one that, though it may draw from familiar genres and forms, is fundamentally tied to the podcasting medium. *Homecoming*’s “found” audio gives its audience the feeling of listening in on private, personal moments -- an illusion crucially maintained by a commitment to sonic realism, achieved through “authentic” communication and the extensive employment of sound effects. In this paper, I argue that the personalizable and portable aspects of the podcast create a listening experience that is

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew J. Bottomley, “Podcasting, ‘Welcome to Night Vale,’ and the Revival of the Radio Drama.” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 22, no. 2 (November 2015): 184.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Hess, “The Story So Far: Fiction Podcasts Take Their Next Steps,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2016, [nytimes.com/2016/11/13/arts/fiction-podcasts-homecoming](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/arts/fiction-podcasts-homecoming).

simultaneously public and private, consumed generally through earbuds on a personal device, but often in a public setting. The podcast form thus generates an intimacy that is key to analyzing any podcast series, and especially important for understanding the impact of *Homecoming's* found-audio format.

### **Podcasting, Form, and the Function of Sonic Realism**

Despite its many similarities to radio -- and the success of many podcasts created *by* radio stations -- the podcast as form is inherently different from typical broadcasting. In 2005, Apple included podcast functionality in the release of iTunes version 4.9, a move that effectively catapulted the form into the mainstream. In 2012, the company separated podcasts from the iTunes store entirely, releasing an independent app dedicated to the form. Podcasting truly became a phenomenon in the second decade of the 21st century with the release of the podcast-specific app and its inclusion in Apple's pre-loaded iPhone apps package in 2014, particularly following the release of *Serial*, the *This American Life*-produced true-crime juggernaut. As a form, podcasting melds the audio-centric entertainment of radio with the participatory culture of Web 2.0. The appeal of the podcast lies primarily in its status as an on-demand commodity, its connection to the notion of choice. Just as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime have done for television, and as streaming services like Spotify and Tidal have done for music, podcasting allows listeners to curate and program their own media schedules, providing audiences with a crucial freedom and flexibility. Listeners can now personalize their media intake, and they can do so with just a few simple swipes.

In many ways, the podcast provides a through-line between video and music streaming; it supplies the immersive stories of visual mediums combined with the ability to multi-task and consume on-the-go. The typical listener consumes podcasts solo, and the near-ubiquity of smartphones has transformed the audio story into an on-the-go form, even more so than car and transistor radios once did. 33% of podcast listeners report consuming shows on public transport, and 50% have listened while driving.<sup>5</sup> Another 46% say they listen while walking outside.<sup>6</sup> We listen in public places, yet we do so through our headphones, confining the consumption to only ourselves. Indeed, as a portmanteau, the very name combines public and private consumption -- the public broadcast, combined with the iPod, the personal music player. Though the name itself may be a bit anachronistic now, as most podcasts are downloaded or streamed on mobile devices rather than MP3 players, the crucial publicly-private form of consumption persists. The podcast is itself a form that inherently blurs the lines between the public and the private, thus reformulating the intimate relationship between broadcaster and audience.

While the podcast may be unique in format, in terms of content, many shows are loathe to stray from established genre conventions. Popular podcasts like *The Joe Rogan Experience*, *WTF with Marc Maron*, and *The Ben Shapiro Show* are clearly heavily influenced by traditional talk radio hosts like Howard Stern and Glenn Beck. And the influence of *This American Life*, the radio show behind both *Serial* and the ultra-popular podcast *S-Town*, is prevalent. The conversational, casual delivery of the show's host Ira Glass has become the style to emulate for many storytellers, effectively transforming the sound of public radio and its progeny of podcasts.

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<sup>5</sup> "The Podcast Consumer 2019," *Edison Research*, April 5, 2019, [edisonresearch.com/the-podcast-consumer-2019/](https://edisonresearch.com/the-podcast-consumer-2019/).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Beyond delivery, *This American Life* has also transformed journalistic audio storytelling, imposing a narrative-based format that often casts reporters as characters in the story's drama, including self-reflective narration or soundbites from a car trip to an interview. Former *This American Life* producer Sarah Koenig further popularized this narrative strategy with *Serial*, the 2014 true crime investigation that is commonly touted as the pinnacle of podcasting.

Upon its release in the fall of 2014, *Serial* quickly became a critical darling and audience favorite. *The New Yorker* called it “the podcast to end all podcasts.”<sup>7</sup> *The Guardian* declared it “the greatest murder mystery you will ever hear.”<sup>8</sup> And the primary podcast demographic, mostly young people who were deeply familiar with streaming culture and steeped in the culture of participatory media, quickly spread the word about the series on social media and in online forums like Reddit, launching it into its vaunted position as *the* podcast to listen to. The series, which boasts more than 420 million collective downloads,<sup>9</sup> became a true cultural phenomenon, inspiring spinoffs, documentaries (including a 2019 HBO series), online investigative forums, and even prompting further legal action in the actual case in question. It's worth noting, too, that the success of *Serial*, and its critical position as the first podcast to become a larger cultural touchstone, is owed in large part to its “old” media origins -- the first installment was aired on

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Larson, “What ‘Serial’ Really Taught Us,” *The New Yorker*, December 18, 2014, [newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/serial-really-taught-us](http://newyorker.com/culture/sarah-larson/serial-really-taught-us).

<sup>8</sup> Miranda Sawyer, “‘Serial’ Review – The Greatest Murder Mystery You Will Ever Hear,” *The Guardian*, November 8, 2014, [theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/08/serial-review-greatest-murder-mystery-ever-hear](http://theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/08/serial-review-greatest-murder-mystery-ever-hear).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Quah, “‘Serial’ Season 3 Is the Podcast’s Biggest Ever,” *Vulture*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/serial-season-3-50-million-downloads.html>.



radio stations across the country as an episode of *This American Life*.<sup>10</sup> While a clear deviation from the radio dramas of old, Koenig's brainchild inspired not just a host of investigative true crime podcasts but also a new genre of fictional podcasts, often supernatural in nature, told through the same narrative and rhetorical structure.

Yet *Homecoming* specifically eschews both traditional radio drama and podcasting staples. Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann note that Gimlet billed *Homecoming* as the company's first "scripted podcast" series, and argue that identifying the show as an audio or radio drama would come across as dated to the company's audience of tech-savvy millennials.<sup>11</sup>

*Homecoming*, they write, "was set up by its creators as representing the inception of a new medium."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the podcast is set apart by its predecessors in a few key ways. Most notably, the story lacks a narrator, a grounding presence whose voiceover guides the story and fills in narrative gaps. It foregoes interstitial and background music, which has been traditionally quite central to audio storytelling, a handy device used to signal changes in time and mood -- making it a prime example of the ways in which remediation fundamentally refashions old media to create something new. Rather than following a typical narration-based construction, the podcast functions as a series of recorded audio segments stitched together in a non-chronological form, presenting the listener with a puzzle. The end result is a mosaic of sounds, an aural environment that I refer to as "kaleidosonic," a concept termed by Verma in his book *Theater of the Mind*:

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<sup>10</sup> Also crucial to the podcast's success was the serendipitous timing of its release. The show's first episode was uploaded on October 3, 2014 -- just two weeks after the release of Apple's iOS 8 software, which was the first iteration to pre-load iPhones and iPads with the user-friendly Podcasts app.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 99.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

*Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama*. Verma defines the term as “the feeling of a shifting sonic world that is accessed through a central point that is itself static and removed from events,” adding that “kaleidosonic plays leap from one mike to another, ‘objectively’ arraying the world before us.”<sup>13</sup> *Homecoming*’s distinctive features are largely used to create a world that is simultaneously sonically rich and yet believably the product of an “amateur” recording format. The muffled noise of a hand over a microphone or cellular interference, then, foregrounds the recorder as device, emphasizing the supposed objectivity and authenticity of the audio.

In order for the format to work, the recordings need to sound fundamentally *real*, like snippets of overheard conversation. Bolter and Grusin write of virtual reality that “in order to create a sense of presence, [it] should come as close as possible to our daily visual experience.”<sup>14</sup> *Homecoming* operates off of this same principle, but strives for an aurally- rather than visually-immersive experience. To achieve this effect, Horowitz recruited sound designer and composer Mark Henry Phillips for the project, citing Phillips’ unique combination of experience in prestige podcasting (season one of *Serial*) and film (Oscar-nominated documentary *Cutie and the Boxer*). Together, Horowitz and Phillips designed a recording process unheard-of among narrative podcasts. Striving for realism, they recorded scenes outside and on location in New York City, added multiple layers of background noise, and even directed their actors to move around during recording, as movement affects voice. For some interior bits, like the nursery home scene in episode 2, Phillips created aural versions of tracking shots, adding footsteps and the rustling of clothing as characters move from one location to another. In food-centric scenes, actors were

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<sup>13</sup> Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Bolter & Grusin, *Remediation*, 22.

even handed plates and silverware to use.<sup>15</sup> “Something I realized early on is, if the characters were just sitting in a silent environment talking, the listener’s brain would stop picturing them as real people in a real place doing real things,” Phillips told one interviewer.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, in crowded scenes, the background noise intercedes into the foreground, muddling the dialogue and compelling the audience to lean in and listen closer, as though in an actual bar or airport, rather than simply listening through earbuds. The effect is an engrossing soundscape that earns its realism by producing a sense of what Bolter and Grusin call immediacy, an immersive experience that facilitates the perceived disappearance of the medium.

The process of listening through earbuds, as referenced above, recasts the podcast as a far more private medium than the radio shows that are its most prominent influence. The solo listening experience is inherently more intimate and isolating, with the potential to truly captivate the listener. And yet the podcasts are often a secondary form of entertainment, something consumed while at work, doing chores, or exercising. 87% of podcast listeners report that they enjoy listening because it’s a format that enables them to multi-task.<sup>17</sup> The very thing that draws audiences in can, however, also be a limitation for the form. Distractions abound, and audio can be easy to tune out. The podcast is aware of this limitation -- its on-demand format accounts for this possibility, allowing for rewinding and fast-forwarding, a function that radio is, of course, lacking.

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<sup>15</sup> Hess, “The Story So Far: Fiction Podcasts Take Their Next Steps.”

<sup>16</sup> Jon Simmons, “Eavesdropping on the Peabody-Nominated Podcast ‘Homecoming:’ an Interview with Mark Henry Phillips,” *Izotope Blog*, May 10 2017, [izotope.com/en/blog/artist-stories/eavesdropping-on-peabody-nominated-podcast-homecoming-an-interview-with-mark-henry-phillips](http://izotope.com/en/blog/artist-stories/eavesdropping-on-peabody-nominated-podcast-homecoming-an-interview-with-mark-henry-phillips).

<sup>17</sup> “The Podcast Consumer 2019.”

As a listener, I commonly find myself backtracking to re-listen to segments I've missed or tuned out while cooking dinner or taking public transit. Spinelli and Dann argue that, in order to account for a secondary, distracted listening experience, podcasts necessarily “strip down” the audio experience for the audience.<sup>18</sup> Yet I argue that *Homecoming* specifically *does not* do this, at least as far as it is able within its audio-centric limitations. It does not pare down its sonic environment for ease of listening but rather overloads it, implicitly asking the listener to make the show her primary focus. While pausing and backtracking is a given for the format, the show also minimizes potential distractions by keeping the episodes crucially short, about twenty minutes each. Muddled dialogue and overwhelming background noise create a fully immersive audio setting, connecting the audience more closely to the story, drawing us in, and implicating us in the narrative. *Homecoming* is *meant* to be fully immersive, and its sound effects are key to facilitating that absorption.

While the audioscape itself is integral to constructing the realism that is necessary for the podcast's success, it is not the only important factor. Plot and dialogue, too, play a fundamental role in producing a believable audio recording. Physical action is notoriously difficult to reproduce in a sound-only format, and *Homecoming*'s status as a primarily psychological thriller largely enables the show to evade that challenge, though there are a few scenes that do feature physical action, most notably the final scene of episode 5, “Hysterical,” in which Heidi runs onto a busy road in a fit of panic. The nonverbal action is signified by a surplus of environmental ambient noises, with brakes screeching and various vehicles honking, as well as by the sound of

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<sup>18</sup> Spinelli & Dann, *Podcasting*, 119.

Heidi herself running -- intimated through her heavy breathing, rustling clothes, and the clicking of her shoes on the pavement.

Generally, though, given the limitations of the form in relation to physical action, the plot is driven primarily by interpersonal relationships and one-on-one interaction. Heidi's communiques with her boss Colin form a substantial proportion of *Homecoming*'s first season, and Colin crucially acts as a foil to her favorite patient and test subject, Walter Cruz. Where Cruz is laid back, composed, and quiet, Colin is manic, often distractedly yelling into the phone as he traverses the globe. For much of the first season, Colin appears solely in flashback phone conversations, a source of comic relief -- he talks to Heidi while in a cab in Dubai, at his daughter's wedding, while running through the airport to catch a flight. Their work-centric conversations are peppered with distractions, non-sequiturs and peripheral crosstalk:

**COLIN:** Hello? Heidi?

**HEIDI:** Yeah -- Hi.

**COLIN:** Ugh, your connection's really shoddy, are you there?

**HEIDI:** I'm here -- can you -- can you hear me?

**COLIN:** Okay, yeah. Just barely, I barely got you. Go ahead.

**HEIDI:** G-go ahead?

**COLIN:** Yeah, go ahead with the update.

**HEIDI:** Oh, uh, you -- sorry. Yes, we're all set with intake, we've got everyone in their rooms, everyone documented --

**COLIN:** Okay, great. Where the hell is...? Wait a minute.

**HEIDI:** Colin?

**COLIN:** I'm in transit here, I'm switching at the airport in Detroit. They, uh -- they did a nice job, actually.<sup>19</sup>

Given the show's abbreviated run-time and its found-audio format, characterizations occur primarily through conversation. Audiences are familiar with the tone of these phone calls -- the

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<sup>19</sup> Eli Horowitz, "Mandatory," *Homecoming*, podcast audio, Gimlet Media, November 16, 2016, [gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/v4hev8/1-mandatory](http://gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/v4hev8/1-mandatory), 07:43.

distractions and cellular feedback feel real and recognizable. The comic nature of Colin's distractedness also softens his demanding, workaholic tendencies, which facilitates the narrative surprise when Colin appears in person in Heidi's restaurant, lying to and manipulating his former employee. Colin's demanding distractedness is simultaneously a key to understanding his character and a distinctive feature of the show's commitment to audio-realism.

The show's narrator-less format means that the audience must depend entirely on dialogue not only for characterization, but also for information -- and so the conversation must propel the plot while also maintaining a sense of authenticity. To construct this naturalistic atmosphere, phone calls and therapy sessions are replete with interruptions, technical difficulties, and asides that seem superfluous to the plot. At one point, our protagonist's boss tries to share an audio file with her, one that is crucial to the development of the plot, as it reveals a soldier's reservations about the program's true goals. The awkward difficulty of the audio sharing process is simultaneously utterly familiar and unbearably tedious:

**COLIN:** Okay, hold on, I'm gonna -- I'm gonna patch in some audio here. Hold on.

**HEIDI:** You're going to patch in --

**COLIN:** Yeah, hold on, I'm putting you on speaker. How do I share a sound file with you? Do I go -- I go to the archive here?

**HEIDI:** Yes, in the archive, you tap it, and then add me, and just --

**COLIN:** This is slow, the interface is --

**HEIDI:** What exactly are we listening --

**COLIN:** Okay, here it is. Now do I - do I add you?

**HEIDI:** Yeah, there should be a prompt, right there.

**COLIN:** Uh-huh, I got it. Heidi, B-E-, okay, Heidi Bergman, I'm sharing it with you now.

**HEIDI:** And now it should just play.

**COLIN:** Nope, I'm tapping it and it's not doing anything. It's not - - *goddammit* -- Oh, here it is. Got it?

**HEIDI:** Yeah.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Eli Horowitz, "Pineapple," *Homecoming*, podcast audio, Gimlet Media, November 23, 2016, [gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/1lhed3/2-pineapple](https://gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/1lhed3/2-pineapple), 03:49.

This dialogue is excruciatingly realistic. There is extensive stuttering and repetition, and the audience, conditioned to sympathize with Heidi as its protagonist and stand-in, is exasperated and exhausted by the amount of time it takes Colin to patch in the audio as well as by his constant interruptions. He's failed to explain just exactly what the audio he's patching in is supposed to convey, and the reveal is deferred by his ineptitude, all of which adds to a feeling of nervous anticipation for the eventual footage. The conversation defies the conventional mode of narrative delivery, foregrounding the "constructed" nature of narrative by exhibiting a supposedly unconstructed speed bump. Were this a television show or an edited recording, this dialogue would undoubtedly be cut -- yet the very fact of its inclusion in the script speaks to the illusion of reality the show attempts to produce. The effect of dialogue-level realism, frustrating and exhausting though it is, lends the podcast the feeling that the audience is in fact on the phone with its characters, listening in.

### ***Homecoming's Found Footage Heritage***

Taken together, *Homecoming's* various "authentic recordings" create an immersive and familiar audio environment, complete with background noise and cellular feedback. Yet the podcast is far from the first artistic product to knit together "found" content. The most notable progenitor of the podcast is perhaps found-footage horror, whose popularity exploded in the new millennium following the success of 1999's *Blair Witch Project*. Perhaps one of the most fundamental features of remediation is the matryoshka principle on which it is built -- if, as

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Bolter and Grusin write, “the very act of remediation... ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced,” then every new medium is always based on an older medium, and so on.<sup>21</sup>

Found-footage horror is itself a remediation of home video, one of the first symptoms of what Sarah Igo calls the “domestication of surveillance.”<sup>22</sup>

Found-footage horror operates on what Cecelia Sayad calls “the desire both to expand the space of representation and to demolish the walls separating art from everyday life.”<sup>23</sup> This filmic approach is almost exclusively restricted to horror films, likely because the raw, “found” nature of this footage suggests the doomed fate of its would-be editor, adding an unsettling insecurity to the format’s affect. In found-footage films, the camera becomes part of the story’s diegesis; more than simply a prop, the device itself becomes a character as much as anyone behind or in front of it. In *Homecoming*, this is especially clear in moments in which the recorder is explicitly referenced, like in Heidi’s sessions with Walter. Sayad argues that in found-footage film, “a character’s gaze at the camera does not break the fourth wall separating the representation from the surrounding real, because the camera through which we see things is *not* external to the diegesis.”<sup>24</sup> The same can be said of *Homecoming*. Without a guiding voiceover

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<sup>21</sup> Bolter & Grusin, *Remediation*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Igo, *The Known Citizen: A History of Privacy in Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 277. While Igo uses this phrase in reference to *An American Family*, I would argue that reality television is in many ways another remediation of home video, a format that truly came of age in the twentieth century. Yet remediation can lead to a two-way process called intermediation; vlogging, a contemporary format of home video, is heavily influenced by talking-head segments popularized on reality shows like *Real World* and *Big Brother*.

<sup>23</sup> Cecelia Sayad, “Found-Footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing.” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (Winter 2016), 48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 54.



presence, the audience's perspective shifts, and the listener is situated *inside* of the recording device.

The popularity of found-footage horror in the first decade of the new century is symptomatic of a larger societal change. As the 21st century dawned, so did a new era of confessional culture, influenced by the ever-increasing access to amateur filming and recording devices, as well as by the rising popularity of reality television shows like *Cops* and *The Real World*. Igo sees the 1990s as a critical juncture in the transformation of the American conceptualization of privacy, citing not only reality television but also a spate of best-selling confessional memoirs. This period, she argues, was marked by the public's increasing awareness of the myriad ways in which they were being monitored, and the subsequent rise of confessional video and blogging culture could be "less about giving information away than about reining it back in -- and publicness a path for reclaiming private life or at least one's own version of it."<sup>25</sup> Regardless, the rise of self-broadcasting lends an allegorical element to the found-footage vogue of the early 2000s -- Sayad writes that "the found-footage cycle is considered a symptom of its time, and a topical one, for the act of filming one's life is widespread."<sup>26</sup> We live in an era of YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat; rare is the digital native who does not have at least one Facebook friend whose passing has turned their profile into a sort of memorial, a personal digital artifact. In a modern media landscape, the utilization of found-footage inevitably compels us to consider the legacy we leave behind. The revolution may not be televised, found-footage seems to argue, but the apocalypse will certainly be live-streamed.

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<sup>25</sup> Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 324.

<sup>26</sup> Sayad, "Found-Footage Horror," 49.

Yet how does the found genre change when it is transferred from a video format to an audio one? The personal audio file is nowhere near as ubiquitous as film, nor is the podcast as popular as traditional video content -- while a Pew Research survey found that 73% of US adults use YouTube,<sup>27</sup> Edison Research found that only about 32% of them had listened to a podcast in the last month. The production of podcasts, the process of recording, editing and uploading to various platforms, is not quite so intuitive or as widely-known, and thus the personal audio file appears far less public-facing than video content. Certainly, we are familiar with the entrepreneurial podcast -- indeed, in the early days of podcasting, amateur creations were the norm. As Virginia Madsen and John Potts write in their book *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, “much of the early excitement surrounding podcasting... concerned the use of these new technologies to challenge or bypass traditional communication and media channels. Podcasting in 2005 was about ‘reclaiming the radio.’”<sup>28</sup> Yet now, with NPR so deeply invested in podcasting, and with media companies like Gimlet and Radiotopia promoting high-quality content with sophisticated paid marketing strategies, amateur podcasts are typically relegated to the bottom of the charts, overshadowed by the giants of audio production. And even acknowledging the past popularity of small-time shows, the personal podcast is an uncommon format when considered in comparison to the near-ubiquity of other forms of personal broadcasting, like social media, vlogging, and home video.

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<sup>27</sup> Aaron Smith and Monica Anderson, “Social Media Use in 2018,” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, [pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/](http://pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/).

<sup>28</sup> Virginia Madsen and John Potts, “Voice-Cast: The Distribution of the Voice via Podcasting,” *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, ed. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 36.

Our familiarity with audio storytelling, then, is largely limited to the smooth, streamlined material of professionally-produced radio and podcasts, and so raw-sounding audio carries a very different association than the unsophisticated personally-produced video. Rather than an expression of personal creativity or small-scale storytelling, we associate found audio with things like phone taps, bugs, and wires on police informants. It brings to mind not personal relics of family life but instead critical moments like Watergate, the Tripp-Lewinsky tapes, and Bush's approval of wiretaps without warrants. It is a radically different medium. Recorded video is a performance; recorded audio is a violation. And so the found-footage podcast must beg the question -- just *who* is gathering these recordings for the audience?

### **“Foundness” and the Curation of Truth**

With found-footage content, the question of authorship is often more a question of curation than one of creation. In particular, “found” works like *Homecoming*, where recordings do not document an event in real time but are instead stitched together, place an emphasis on the significance of editing and selection. In her 2013 book *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, Jaimie Baron writes that:

“Foundness” generates an experience of temporal and intentional disparity in an appropriation film based on the viewer's perception that a document left behind by its maker has been repurposed by another person (or the same person sometime later) who has found and used it rather than created it for the present purpose.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 49.

The inherent constructedness of “found” objects thus not only underscores questions of authorship and editing but moreover interrogates the very nature of truth. If “real” archival footage can be repurposed to establish a coherent story with an archetypal storyline, the reliability of that which is assumed to be fact is called into question. Thus *Homecoming*’s found format serves to reflect the podcast’s broader themes surrounding the nature of truth and the trustworthiness of memory.

The podcast’s found-footage format serves its wider thematic project, which explores and obfuscates the line between reality and representation. Simulation and trickery lie around every corner in *Homecoming*; the false nature of the supposedly real is an issue of continual relevance. The farce executed by the Homecoming Initiative and its employees is reflected in an extended bit about *Titanic Rising*, the nonexistent *Titanic* sequel the troops invent to trick a fellow soldier. The bit’s success relies not on the viability of the ludicrous, convoluted plot crafted by Lesky but in the whole unit’s participation in the prank, the organized gaslighting of one of its own. “Oh yeah, it got really involved,” Walter recalls to Heidi.<sup>30</sup> “Oh, and we all pretended that we’d seen it, too. See, that’s what made it so convincing, we all acted like we’d seen it, and me and Shreyer, we’d throw in all these, like, little parts, and Lesky would take those and run with them.”<sup>31</sup> This story-within-a-story, while serving as comic relief and an indication of Walter and Heidi’s growing relationship, is also a symptom of the key to the Initiative’s success. This kind of manipulation, this organized head-game, is occurring on every level of the narrative -- not only between Walter and Lesky and this soldier, but also between the soldiers and Heidi, between Heidi and Colin, and so on. The secret to selling the simulation as reality, it indicates, is

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<sup>30</sup> Horowitz, “Pineapple,” 22:10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 22:29.

for as many people to be in on the trick as possible. External validation is key to distinguishing the real from the unreal -- but what happens when “reality” is a fabrication?

Constructedness, too, is a prevailing theme in the series. Just as the audio file conversation between Heidi and Colin foregrounds the constructed nature of narrative, so too do the story’s physical landscapes. In the show’s third episode, tellingly entitled “Phony,” Walter and his friend Shreyer leave the Homecoming facility to test Shreyer’s hypothesis that the Initiative is lying to them, that it is not truly the rehabilitation center they think it is:

**WALTER:** We came to a town. There was a little main street with a bank, a barber shop, a park with a gazebo. The street lights were all on -- and everything looked normal at first, but all the windows were dark, and there’s no cars, no people, no garbage in the trash cans. It’s all... it just looked... phony.

**HEIDI:** Phony. How?

**WALTER:** Yeah, like someone’s picture of how things go, of how they’re supposed to be. Shreyer looks in the window of a department store, and all the clothes looked old, like, from the eighties. Even the mannequins looked old. Next door, there’s this ice cream shop -- pink booths, everything’s just completely spotless, it’s all totally empty. Shreyer turns to me and he says, “It’s like Arizona.”

**HEIDI:** What does that mean? Arizona?

**WALTER:** Well just before we were deployed, me and Shreyer and a bunch of other guys, we were sent to Arizona to these model towns, these exact replicas of the towns in North Africa, so we could train under the actual conditions, you know? The furniture, the food, even the cups and plates --

**HEIDI:** Okay, but Walter, what does this have to do --

**WALTER:** Everything, everything was an exact copy. And then when we got over to where we were stationed, when we were operational over there, every single thing they had shown us in the models, it was all perfect. It was like, it was like we’d already been there.

**HEIDI:** So, this town, it was like that?

**WALTER:** Yes, yes.

**HEIDI:** Okay.

**WALTER:** Except for, America. Like a simulation of America.<sup>32</sup>

Walter is right -- the retirement home is the podcast's equivalent to Baudrillard's Disneyland, a conspicuously constructed play of illusions, meant to serve as a microcosm of America. It is, as Walter refers to it later, "all old-fashioned, but also, plastic."<sup>33</sup> And, like Baudrillard's Disneyland, Putnam Village is "presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real.... It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real."<sup>34</sup>

That Putnam Village is a retirement home is, then, quite apt -- a nod to the disappearing memories of the soldiers, reflected in a location at least partially known as a home for those suffering from dementia. Standing in stark contrast to Putnam Village, the rehabilitation facility, like Baudrillard's Los Angeles, is itself a construction. The ultimate function of Disneyland, and of the retirement home, too, is to conceal the absence of true reality, the hyperreal, simulated nature of the wider world. Walter tells Heidi, "And as we were driving back, Shreyer's whole mood was different. He was like, elated. Because we were wrong, you know? We're really in Florida. We're getting help. That's all there is to it."<sup>35</sup> Thus Putnam Village's presence does have this effect on Walter and Shreyer, convincing them -- falsely -- that the Initiative is what it appears to be, a transparent rehabilitation facility.

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<sup>32</sup> Eli Horowitz, "Phony," *Homecoming*, podcast audio, Gimlet Media, November 30, 2016, [gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/o2hoxr/3-phony](https://gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/o2hoxr/3-phony), 03:23.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 07:30.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 12-13.

<sup>35</sup> Horowitz, "Phony," 07:55.

Of course, as the audience soon realizes, that is quite decidedly *not* all there is to it. In his review of Amazon’s television adaptation of the podcast, *New Yorker* critic Troy Patterson wrote that the story suggests “an allegory of the state seizing [Walter’s] body -- a kind of ‘Get Out 2: Military-Industrial Rendezvous.’”<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the mysterious Homecoming Initiative is ultimately revealed to be a program that, rather than reacclimating veterans to civilian life, is aimed at slipping the men memory-clouding drugs to hasten their recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder and expedite their redeployment back into war zones. As the story progresses, we realize that the federal government is tailing Heidi. Their investigation into the program hints at the purpose and origin of the recordings we hear, as they attempt to piece together the story of the program from individuals with little to no memory of the experience.

### **Privacy in the Post-Truth Era**

As *Homecoming*’s narrative advances and tension builds, the cast of characters lie to and manipulate one another to such an extent that our understanding of real and unreal is fundamentally destabilized. Binaries of truth and fiction, hero and villain, and good and bad all begin to collapse. What we do know, however, is this: the Homecoming Initiative was an outsourced operation overseen by a private entity -- an experimental project gone wrong, the result of which the government seems to believe requires the extensive state-run surveillance of its participants. There is a chilling applicability to the issue, something reflected in the age of Web 2.0 and the data economy, where government agents surveil not only over phone lines but

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<sup>36</sup> Troy Patterson, “‘Homecoming,’ Review: Julia Roberts in the Heavy Weather of a Late-Capitalist Dystopia,” *The New Yorker*, November 2, 2018, [newyorker.com/culture/on-television/homecoming-reviewed-julia-roberts-in-the-heavy-weather-of-a-late-capitalist-dystopia](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/homecoming-reviewed-julia-roberts-in-the-heavy-weather-of-a-late-capitalist-dystopia).

across privately-owned social media platforms as well. The obfuscation -- and arguable non-existence -- of truth within the podcast feels relevant, too, as it reflects the misinformation campaigns that have plagued the American political landscape over the last several election cycles, prompting many to declare this the “post-truth” era. Oxford Dictionaries even named “post-truth” its 2016 international word of the year, citing a roughly 2,000 percent increase in its usage over 2015 -- a trend largely attributed to Britain’s ‘Brexit’ referendum and Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. These themes touch on prevalent issues of technological privacy and the question of whether or not our paranoia is justified.

Heidi is the story’s protagonist, and, in her post-Homecoming Initiative ignorance, also the primary audience proxy. We are meant to sympathize with her; we learn as she learns, following her through the story. Indeed, in the first season of the podcast, there is not a single scene that does not include Heidi, further securing her position as the audience stand-in. In our identification with Heidi, we feel the violation enacted through the recording of her personal conversations and the discovery that federal agents have obtained the tapes from her sessions with Walter. That empathy, while facilitated by the podcast, draws on external anxieties regarding our personal communications -- according to a recent Pew Research survey, roughly half of all Americans do not trust the federal government or social media sites to protect their data.<sup>37</sup> In a post-privacy era, where leakers, hackers, and whistleblowers are front-page news, the implications of the government surveillance methods exhibited in the podcast are all the more unsettling.

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<sup>37</sup> Lee Rainie, “Americans’ Complicated Feelings About Social Media in an Era of Privacy Concerns,” *Pew Research Center*, March 27, 2018, [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/27/americans-complicated-feelings-about-social-media-in-an-era-of-privacy-concerns](http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/27/americans-complicated-feelings-about-social-media-in-an-era-of-privacy-concerns).



Yet ultimately, *we* are the ones listening in, eavesdropping as we try to piece together a story from a collection of audio files. The sensation of the overheard conversation evoked by the show's audio format essentially flips the script for the audience, implicating the listener in the violational voyeurism of the recordings. The audience is identified as simultaneously recorder *and* recorded, both Agent Carlos Carasco and Heidi Bergman. We are not free from guilt, even as the recordings, especially the phone calls and overheard conversations, question the nature of the audience's own supposedly private communications. If *we* are being recorded, who is listening, and why? What will they do with the information they gather?

The effect of *Homecoming*'s innovative soundscape is essentially the same as the desired effect of found-footage film. By achieving a sense of realism built out of "low-value" production features like the audible fumbling of the recorder, the meandering and interruption-filled dialogue, and aural signals such as the rustling of clothing, steps on linoleum, and the background noise of a cab ride in Dubai, the podcast succeeds in obfuscating the boundaries between art and reality. The kaleidosonic realism of the series positions the listener as voyeur, implicating the audience in the collection of data while simultaneously exploiting an insecurity about the privacy of one's own thoughts and communications. Found-footage operates on a realism that pushes the boundaries between the real and the unreal, a place where "our confidence that we know where the lines between fact and fiction lie are directly challenged."<sup>38</sup>

In a post-Patriot Act, post-Snowden, post-2016 election America we are constantly aware of being supervised. It's no coincidence that, despite its fabulist elements, *Homecoming* is set in a world so reminiscent of our own, in the very near future. The American government depicted

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<sup>38</sup> Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014), 4.

in the podcast is outsourcing crucial aspects of care to privately-owned companies, granting those entities the crucial power to affect the nation's citizenry. This concept is not at all foreign to us -- services are outsourced every day in the American government. From private prisons to charter schools to government contractors like Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman, private entities influence public policy and affect change in very real ways. The chain of command in *Homecoming* is yet another instance of the matryoshka principle -- Walter answers to Heidi, who answers to Colin, who answers to Temple, who answers to Geist, and the US government is entangled on every level. Our players are all private employees, removed from the government's payroll and oversight even as they provide supposedly public services for the US military.

Beyond just the story itself, the tension of the podcast lies primarily in the voyeuristic quality of *Homecoming's* realistic audio, the sensation that the conversations we overhear could be -- *may* be -- real. This destabilization of the boundaries between audience and character, between fiction and reality, serves to heighten the fears already sown by government-affiliated whistleblowers like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, as well as by our own increasing awareness of the vast stores of data collected by companies like Facebook and Google. If our lives are quantifiable, able to be distilled into data sets and audio files -- and if the companies possessing this data are selling advertisements and sponsorships based on the evidence of their ability to "create" us as consumers and citizens -- how does this affect the notion of the essential self? In a contemporary data economy, is self-determination of a myth we tell ourselves, an impossible dream within the framework of the state apparatus?

## **Conclusion**

Perhaps the most terrifying facet of *Homecoming*'s story is that, ultimately, no character is free from manipulation, and no one -- except absent, damaged Walter -- seems to have a pure or selfless motive. As the plot progresses and the ties between Colin, Temple, Heidi and Geist become more and more intertwined, it becomes increasingly unclear who is telling the truth -- or if there even *is* a truth to tell. The dynamic between them is a quagmire of manipulation and deceit. And as Temple's secretary tells Heidi, any sense of order is an illusion:

**BECKY:** Heidi, listen to me.

**HEIDI:** Uh-huh...

**BECKY:** These people -- their only goal is to get you thinking that you don't know what you're doing. If you're doubting yourself, you're not doubting them. B-but you know the truth about the whole thing, right?

**HEIDI:** What?

**BECKY:** Nobody has any idea what they're doing. Ever. Any appearance of order -- that's an illusion.<sup>39</sup>

What Becky says reveals the chaos of the power structure under which *Homecoming* operates. But then, if no truly competent leader exists within the system, who propels the surveillance complex? Is it the state, or is it private entities? The organization or individual citizens? Becky's comment explicitly acknowledges the complete absence of the real -- and advocates for Heidi's individual, willful creation of the unreal, the illusion.

As the game turns, Heidi takes Becky's advice to heart. After Walter's mother cuts together tapes of Heidi's and Walter's sessions and sends them to the burner phone on which Walter has been known to leave messages, Heidi decides to adopt the strategy. She gains the upper hand by manipulating existing recordings, patching together bits of voicemail to create a seemingly new message. Again, the podcast form influences the narrative itself, and vice-versa --

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 05:35.

what Heidi does is essentially a kind of sound-editing, something specific to the audio-based format of the podcast. As Mark Henry Phillips told one interviewer, “One of the biggest roles I had was as the editor -- in the film editor sense. Going through all the takes and combining them to make one believable performance was particularly touch with just audio.”<sup>40</sup> Yet the podcast format meant he “could get super fine-grained in the edits -- taking one word from this take and one word from that take. You can’t do that with video editing because that would look crazy.”<sup>41</sup>

Heidi’s Frankenstein voicemail marks the creation of sonic cohesion out of kaleidosonic chaos, the ultimate manipulation of the real in the service of a false narrative. In her consideration of the rise of confessional culture, Igo posits that self-broadcasting represents a reclamation of the self in a new era of data commodification -- that as the public became aware of “both the failure of political rights to protect individuals from exposure and the inevitability of classification by opaque bureaucratic operations,” citizens began to redefine the notion of privacy -- “Whereas privacy had once been conceived as a retreat from public view, in some domains it was being rethought as a matter of very public self-definition.”<sup>42</sup> The confessional genre marked the beginning of a media era defined by the willing disclosure of personal information by citizens. Yet the very public nature of self-broadcasting can in some senses be considered a reclamation of one’s public identity, a way for average people to control the narrative built around them.

Heidi’s voicemail is just this -- a reassertion of agency in the face of extensive and extraordinary government surveillance. Acting as an independent individual, Heidi turns

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<sup>40</sup> Simmons, “Eavesdropping on ‘Homecoming.’”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Igo, *The Known Citizen*, 308-309.

government surveillance tactics back on the authorities, thus creating a space for Walter's freedom. While *Homecoming*'s memory-altering drugs may be the product of science fiction, the outsized impact of private companies on our personal and national identity is not. As technology continues to advance, so too do our personal definitions of privacy continue to shift, and the question of who we can trust with our data -- if anyone at all -- becomes more fraught. While the public has balked at the use of facial recognition software for security purposes, we willingly submit to the same software to tag friends on Facebook or in our iPhone camera rolls.

*Homecoming*'s found-footage has bleak implications; it enmeshes us in the story's massive surveillance net and catches us in the act of consuming the private information of others for our own personal entertainment. Heidi's voicemail may offer a tentative solution to the datafication of the individual, arguing that the self can be reclaimed through small acts of resistance, reversing the positioning of the observer and the observed. But it also troubles the notion of the autonomous individual. With our lives so entangled in the data economy's web of external validation and determination, perhaps genuine self-determination is an impossible goal -- for if companies, governments and even solitary citizens can "create" an individual, then is there truly any inherent fixed self? "Heidi, these people -- they remember what we *tell them* to remember," Colin explains to our heroine, and the statement is chilling.<sup>43</sup> In a post-privacy America, where no information can be considered truly exclusive, the disclosing of our most personal data, the podcast argues, endows the powers that be with the ability to manipulate even our most personal and sacred information -- that which constitutes our memories and our experiences; in short, that which constitutes our selves.

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<sup>43</sup> Eli Horowitz, "Timeout," *Homecoming*, podcast audio, Gimlet Media, August 16, 2017, [gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/2oh956/11-timeout](https://gimletmedia.com/shows/homecoming/2oh956/11-timeout), 24:57.

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