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Film Directed Study

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*Bedtime Stories for Woke Children* Reflection Paper

*Bedtime Stories for Woke Children* is a storytelling podcast that aims to discuss difficult social, cultural, and political topics with kids. The podcast comes in two parts - a story and a banter between the hosts Jenna Cariker and me, Samah Meghjee, about how we wrote the story, the research we did, our personal experiences, and more.

I chose to do a directed study for the podcast for several reasons. First, it would give me motivation to actually follow the idea through to creation. Second, I knew that the podcast could be made better with the added element of academic research. Through my Oral History course, which I took concurrently while creating the first season of the podcast, I was learning that a good interview is made better by understanding the subject that you are aiming to speak about. A podcast is no different. Podcasts and interviews are both essentially eavesdropped conversations and an intimate look into a person's life. According to Rosa Tobin of Western Washington University, "rather than sitting and listening to a lecture, it's as if listeners are joining a conversation" (1). The podcast aims to cover many areas of identity, social problems, cultural issues, and political topics - Jenna and I do not have experiences to cover all areas of all social/cultural/political issues, so we need to continually conduct research to greater understand a wider variety of topics and to understand how to create a compelling podcast.

The first question that I aim to answer with the podcast is: why podcasts? There are several reasons that the medium of podcast storytelling makes sense for me and Jenna

personally. Podcasting requires little to no prior expertise - it is not difficult to record and edit a conversation, and we could create a podcast while spending little to no money, making it the most accessible storytelling medium for us. Podcasts have also been gaining popularity in our social spheres, and in the world at large. In 2006, “22 percent of Americans were aware of the term “podcasting” and 11 percent of the population had listened to a podcast at least once” (Quirk 4). By 2014, the percentages increased to 48 percent and 30 percent respectively (Quirk 4). That same year, the extremely popular podcast *Serial* “reached 5 million downloads or streams faster than any podcast before it,” and the number of Americans listening to at least one podcast a month has grown by 25 percent (Hayes). Podcasting is accessible, relatively easy, and popular.

While the second half of each *Bedtime Stories* episode follows a more traditional podcast structure, the focus of *Bedtime Stories* was originally to tell a story. Storytelling podcasts are far more rare, and ones aimed toward children even more so. The most popular fictional storytelling podcast by far is *Welcome to Nightvale*, but the structure of *Welcome to Nightvale* is entirely different to *Bedtime Stories*. Jenna and I are faced with the daunting task of creating a new structure of podcast.

This is surprising for many reasons. Children’s storytelling is not a new medium. Entertaining kids on long road trips or on the way to school in the morning is a perennial problem for many parents. And podcasts for kids, or “Kidcasts” as Stephanie Hayes from the Atlantic has dubbed them, would be seemingly enticing to parents looking for an educational way to entertain their kids without more screen time (Hayes).

The absence of a visual element is certainly daunting. According to Torben Grodal in *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Culture, and Film*, the “physical portrayal of agency” is integral to

creating compelling stories that foster empathy in children (30). Grodal identifies that it is “easier [for children] to distinguish an aggressive character from a friendly one if the aggressor is a wolf or cat and the friendly one is a piglet or a mouse;” children use visual cues to identify emotions, feelings, and good or bad (30). In podcasting, the visual cues no longer exist.

However, there are some suggestions that auditory learning produces more novel ideas, and perhaps more empathy, in children than visual learning does. Particularly when discussing radio learning versus television learning, the Visualization Hypothesis supposes that it is harder for children to generate “novel ideas in response to a television presentation because they have difficulty dissociating themselves from television’s ready-made images” (Valkenburg 35). In response to auditory stories, children have to do more thinking to put together the pieces, allowing for them to more creatively craft novel ideas.

The second question that we aim to answer, which I find far more difficult to answer is: how does one create a compelling, entertaining, and funny auditory children’s story? Mine and Jenna’s fear is that the stories will dip too far into the world of audiobooks - what about a podcast allows for the storytelling genre to become dynamic? Why would someone choose to listen to a podcast over an audiobook?

Our answer came in the form of the second part of the podcast - what we have termed the “banter.” The conversational part of the podcast, which mimics the more traditional form of podcasting, gives a reason for the audience to listen. That does not necessarily negate the importance of the story - stories allow for children to empathize with characters that sound like them, that experience lives like they do. But the banter makes it a podcast, rather than an audiobook.

The third question we asked, which I believe will always remain unanswered, is: how do we create empathy in the children that are listening to our stories? When writing “Timmy Has a Valentine” and “I am a Muslim,” Jenna and I drew on our own experiences and identities to write the stories. When trying to relate them to children who may not have had those experiences, we wondered how to portray the struggles that we feel as people who identify as queer or Muslim. When writing “I am a Muslim,” I thought about writing about a child who is bullied or called a terrorist. But according to the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop (most notably associated with the children’s television show *Sesame Street*), when speaking about differences one may “run the risk of introducing something that was not on a child’s radar” (Clarke). Clarke gives this example:

“In an initial draft of an episode for the upcoming season of *Sesame Street*, one of the characters was sad because her hair could not flip the way her friends who had different hair textures could flip theirs. The message and resolution was intended to be that everyone’s hair is unique and can do different things. But when we tested the segment, we found that is not the message that many children understood. They were focused on the fact that her hair was broken and could not flip.”

Identifying difference can highlight difference, which is not the aim of a podcast that intends to promote inclusivity and empathy in children. If I had spoken about a child being called a terrorist in the story, it may have implanted that idea in a child’s brain who may never have made that association otherwise.

After “I am a Muslim,” the next two podcasts that were recorded and submitted were “Andy is Anxious” and “Home is a Feeling.” Both of those podcasts incorporated guest speakers and guest writers for the first time. Although I highlighted those experiences in depth in the

reflection podcast that I recorded, I would like to note that those two podcasts have definitively changed the course of *Bedtime Stories*. Before, *Bedtime Stories* was mostly about mine and Jenna's shared experiences, but by incorporating guest speakers, the podcast has taken a turn into interview-style conversation for the second part of the episodes. While I believe that the focus of *Bedtime Stories* will continue to remain on the story itself, interview-style podcasts are widely popular, and while we continue to explore with the structure of the podcast, the episodes are likely to continue evolving and changing.

For the future, Jenna and I intend to continue incorporating guest speakers and new experiences in podcast episodes. My goal is to continue to incorporate a heavy research background into all of the episodes, as the episodes that we have researched often feel more focused and educational than ones that just employ personal experiences. For the second half of the episodes, I hope to use the interview and oral history skills that I have learned this semester to improve the quality of conversation in the talkback, which often feels like the most valuable and relatable part of each episode.

## Works Cited

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