Towards Best Practices for Podcasting in Rhetoric and Composition

Charles Woods & Devon Fitzgerald Ralston

Abstract: As research across disciplines abandons a sole print focus and recognizes the importance of podcasting for making meaning and understanding the world, scholar-podcasters in rhetoric and composition create podcasts that extend the field’s reach to new audiences and impact research trajectories. In this article, we expand the “Heuristic for Reflective Research/Data Collection” (the Heuristic) posited by Amber Buck and Devon Ralston to examine the research methods of re:verb: A Podcast about Politics, Culture, and Language in Action podcast. We offer guidance towards best practices based on feminist principles and methods for podcasters podcasting in rhetoric and composition.

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Keywords: feminist methods, online research, podcasts, podcasting

Introduction

The turn towards multimodal composing in rhetoric and composition has inspired researchers and practitioners—including in the sub-field of computers and writing—to create and circulate various scholarly digital genres including blogs, documentary films, videos, and podcasts, which are available online. Many of these projects continue to increase in views and downloads each year and are emerging as popular digital spaces for scholarly discourse and academic research across disciplines. The podcasters producing Pedagogue, Rhetoricity, The Big Rhetorical Podcast, and re:verb: A Podcast about Politics, Culture, and Language in Action (re:verb), among others, have demonstrated that podcasting in rhetoric and composition is a sustainable, legitimate method of knowledge creation and circulation. The affordances of podcasting and podcasts—and thus, listening—coalesce with feminist research values, including narrativity, collectivity, inclusivity, accessibility (Ratcliffe; Ratcliffe; Royster and Kirsch; Ceraso; Ceraso; Hocks and Comstock; 9 Podcasts have been awarded prestigious awards in the field of rhetoric and composition, including the Michelle Kendrick Outstanding Digital Production Award presented by Computers and Composition and the John Lovas Award from Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy.

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McGregor; Easter and Marquardt; Woods and Wood). In this cluster conversation, we argue podcasters should use feminist research methods in developing their podcasts, including: enacting collective knowledge making, prioritizing stories as a site of that knowledge, and creating best practices for podcasters in rhetoric and composition, which includes valuing collaboration, accessibility, and feminist citation practices. In this article, we interrogate the research methods of a single podcast as an example of this argument and suggest that further research on podcasts be conducted to further develop this scholarly conversation.

Podcasts maintain the potential to “shift the ecosystem of scholarship so that new forms of thinking become possible” (McGregor). But podcasters must think through their research methods when developing a podcast that will extend across multiple arenas simultaneously. Podcasters do not rely on the guidance of editorial boards unless they are directly associated with an academic journal or organization, nor do they rely on traditional peer-review infrastructures that support content quality through scholarly oversight. How, then, do podcasters choose who to cite in show notes and which sources to lean on for audio clips for topics which reach academic and public audiences? Each podcaster or team of podcasters determines their own approach to online research as well as how to balance scholarly expectations with the expectations of wider audiences. How do podcasters archive audio data amid expanding ethical concerns as policies for different platforms, software, and cloud-based technologies impact the privacy and confidentiality of recordings? Each podcaster creates their own methods of data storage and destruction without explicit guidelines. We offer advice on how podcasters can negotiate these complex questions using feminist research methods to develop their projects and hope this cluster conversation piece leads to larger discussions about podcasting in the field.

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) updated their ethics guidelines in 2019, which researchers can use as an interdisciplinary guide to ethical online research. Since individual understandings of research ethics vary, the “under-construction” foundation of research methods for podcasters remains an issue as their methods are emerging, increasingly networked, and, in many cases, undocumented. This murkiness leads to questions such as: do podcasters performing interviews sift through various qualitative data (e.g., subject-specific bibliographies and author biographies) online before booking guests? If so, how do they perform it? Do podcasters consider how the “prevalence of the digital in rhetoric and writing affect[s] the questions we ask, the methods we use to answer these questions, the knowledge we make, and the teaching practices we employ”? (VanKooten and Del Hierro 3). Furthermore, digital rhetoric scholars have considered the issues researchers face when moving feminist practices online, asking: “how should feminist researchers handle the politics of location, interpretation, and publication when working in increasingly networked and mediated online spaces?” (McKee and Porter 170). Technofeminists were correct that profound technological achievements like the Internet did not

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“make it any more possible for women to find virtual landscapes for re-inventing and re-representing themselves” (Blair and Takayoshi). This is true of all technologies, including podcasts. Yet, the collaborative nature of podcasts avails itself to a more equitable “negotiation of the power dynamics at play with redressing access biases and reimagining more just technology design” (DeVoss, Haas, and Rhodes). Podcasts could lead to more robust, diverse, and accurate narratives of and about the field. However, unless podcasters pay careful attention to their research methods—and utilize feminist research methodologies—then “more traditional mass cultural representations will have simply found a new home in a new medium” (Blair and Takayoshi). Therefore, podcasters should apply Digital Black Feminist approaches by “centering voices and thoughts of community members across non-academic and academic spaces,” (Haywood 34) as they offer spaces for “engagement with complicated histories and complex arguments” (Steele 16) as a way of establishing equitable podcast research and production.

Accordingly, feminist scholars performing research in digital spaces have focused on online research methods by theorizing about podcasts (McGregor; Tiffe and Hoffman); composing with sound (Comstock and Hocks; Rodrigue and Stedman); designing for accessibility (Butler) and considering the implications of big data (Buck and Ralston). Amber Buck and Devon Ralston describe a “Heuristic for Reflective Research and Data Collection,” (the “Heuristic”), a multipronged approach that serves as an ethical guide rooted in reflexivity for researchers collecting data online. We believe the Heuristic can serve as a prototypical guide for podcasters that helps them work toward establishing best practices for producing podcasts outside the purview of journals, which follow editorial standards. Our work here moves towards such practices informed by the Heuristic to provide guidance in podcasting. To illustrate feminist values applied to research methods and podcasting, we examine re:verb.

Expanding the Heuristic to Account for Podcasting

re:verb launched in 2018 and is produced by a team of podcasters, including Alex Helberg, Calvin Pollak, Sophie Wodzak, and Ben Williams. The primary focus of re:verb is on American culture, and recent episodes have focused on artificial intelligence (AI) and writing, pronoun usage in the public sphere, and the films of Jordan Peele. Re:verb demonstrates that developing a podcast is more than just uploading a sound file to an RSS feed: a podcast includes producing and editing audio, running a website and social media management, and creating digital artwork to promote episodes. Analyzing these aspects of re:verb reveal how podcasts are a feminist research method and examining how podcasters think about research ethics further highlights podcasting as a feminist method.

Technofeminist researchers often emphasize digital ethics due to the intuitive usability and growing prevalence of tools to collect data from Big Technology companies (Markham, Tiidenberg, and Herman; Mehlenbacher and Mehlenbacher). Additionally, feminist scholars are considering

11 Catherine Knight Steele’s Digital Black Feminism (2021) traces the history of Black feminist technoculture in the United States through blogs, tweets, and social media posts to critique algorithmic racism, influencer culture, and other forms of digital aggression.
how bodies are impacted in the act of digital making. Trisha Nicole Campbell makes the case for what she calls “a practice-based model for beginning the process of [digital] empathy” where she analyzes the experiences of recording voices and the labor involved in sound editing and learning audio platforms and describes how “digital recording technology enlists our bodies in speaking, but also listening, and in speaking and listening simultaneously” (“Digital Empathy”). Podcasting is laborious. However, the value of making collective knowledge more mobile and accessible compels us to view podcasts and podcasting as worthwhile.

There are many approaches to guide digital research methods (see VanKooten and Del Hierro), but they are not usually about podcasting. This includes the Heuristic, which is designed as a feminist methodology concerned with how privacy is conceived among different communities who may be unclear about how online researchers use public data (e.g., data scraped from Twitter). Yet the Heuristic is primed for expansion for podcasting since it focuses on a primarily image-heavy and text-based platform, with podcasts introducing the sonic mode. In the following table, we utilize the Heuristic to examine re:verb’s research practices and demonstrate how to expand the Heuristic to account for the practice of podcasting.
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<th>Heuristic Research Questions</th>
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<th>Questions for Podcasters</th>
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<td>What are you studying?</td>
<td>What is re:verb podcast studying?</td>
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<td>Meaning making in American culture. Emphasizes analysis on culture, but not solely focused on the American political arena, and includes popular culture. re:verb makes their focus clear in the tagline, which is centered on the website and the cover image seen on podcast apps. Additionally, the “About” section of the website includes information about the creators, re:verb’s purpose, and how it fits into the scholarly landscape.</td>
<td>What is the topic of the podcast? How does your podcast enter into or extend scholarly conversations on its topic? How is a podcast useful for researchers, instructors, and students who are interested in this topic? Are you positioned, ethically, to enter into ongoing conversations on this topic?</td>
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| Who are you reaching?        | Who is re:verb podcast reaching?  
Listeners in rhetoric and composition. Other listeners include general audiences, undergraduate and graduate students, podcast browsers who are educated or want to be educated on the topic. | How does the podcast merge academic and public discourse?  
How does the content of your podcast, including the guests booked, topics covered, and projects promoted, center traditionally marginalized voices?  
What different protections (e.g., closing comments, protecting anonymity) do you utilize to protect guests, particularly those from marginalized positions, from potential harassment? |
| What are you collecting?     | What is re:verb podcast collecting?  
Sound files, online images, and listener data. Podcasting platforms allow data collection about listener demographics, downloads, website hits, etc. | What do you want to know about your audience? Why?  
Are you following Intellectual Property (IP) guidelines for collecting media online to develop the podcast?  
How does listener data influence the development of your podcast? Does your podcast project need IRB approval to account for transparency about the data you are collecting? |
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| What are your study’s boundaries? | What are the limitations of *re:verb*’s podcasting research?  
Primarily sonic modes can be limiting for expanding podcast listenership. Temporality is crucial since *re:verb* comments on American culture. Additionally, *re:verb* must account for podcasting research (e.g., booking, sound editing), including labor concerns and constraints of podcasting tools and platforms. | Are you being reflexive in acknowledging your own limitations as a researcher as your attitudes and opinions change over time?  
How will you maintain the sustainability of the podcast as research ethics evolve over time? |
| Are you complying with all terms of service (including tools being used)? | Is *re:verb* podcast complying with all terms of service (including the tools being used)?  
Listeners can inquire to *re:verb* podcast to learn about their compliance practices via links on their website and social media pages. | Have you considered the complexity of complying with all terms of service, even beyond the primary podcast hosting platform?  
Are you complying with the terms of service of the third parties that web-based podcasting tools (e.g., Spotify), website platforms (e.g., WordPress), and social media accounts engage? |
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| What about ephemerality?      | How does *re:verb* podcast handle ephemerality?  
Access to episodes could change or *re:verb* could stop recording and publishing episodes. Their podcast or website host platforms could close. For the podcasters producing *re:verb*, reactions to specific contexts; feelings, ideas, opinions might change over time. | Have you considered how to maintain an archive of your podcast so you and your collaborators can write about what you produced, and researchers can analyze what was created?  
Are you collaborating with other podcasters and their students in research studies as a method of building community? |
| Is there an opportunity for participants to respond to your analysis? | Is there an opportunity for participants to respond to *re:verb* podcast?  
*re:verb* listeners can interact with the podcast on various social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook. Additionally, a form and comments function are available on the “Contact” page of the website. | Are you creating an open dialogue by inviting critique of your podcast?  
Do you provide clear instructions to listeners about the ways they can engage with your podcast?  
Is your podcast accessible, including transcripts of episodes, alt text for online images, and a website compatible with screen readers? |
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<td>How are you representing the context of circulating information?</td>
<td>How does re:verb podcast represent its context?</td>
<td>Are you being reflexive about how your podcast exists among other scholarship in and beyond research in rhetoric and composition?</td>
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<td>re:verb publishes show notes with each podcast episode as a way of demonstrating the scholarly context of their content. The podcasters introduce interviewees, scholars, and scholarship, during episodes. They provide a bibliography and links to accessible transcripts for listeners on their website. Additionally, re:verb produces different categories of episodes, including “re:joinder,” “re:blurb,” and “re:read.”</td>
<td>Are you practicing ethical citation by emphasizing where references (e.g., hyperlinks, show notes) for your project are located for audiences who want to learn more about a topic or trace the scholarly or cultural conversations?</td>
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<td>How are you representing participants and their data?</td>
<td>How is re:verb podcast representing interviewees, scholarship, and online media? It is unknown if re:verb producers allow interviewees and guests input on editing or if the podcasters retain final cut. Citations are included in the re:verb show notes on their website as are links to online resources for sound files (e.g., news outlets, YouTube). Photographs and images of interviewees and guests accompany the podcast artwork (e.g., thumbnail).</td>
<td>Are you establishing ethical standards for collaboration (e.g., conducting interviews, inviting contributions) with a foundation in feminist editorial practices? How do feminist citation practices guide who you cite in your podcast? How will you amplify references to the scholars, scholarship, and other projects you cite? Which style guide works for the content of your podcast?</td>
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The first few questions in the Heuristic (What are you studying? What are you collecting?) are foundational for all research studies, especially for feminist researchers. Podcasts prove useful in providing vocal space to amplify feminist topics and research (Tiffe and Hoffman). The questions developed in the third column (“Questions for Podcasters”) expand the Heuristic to account for feminist values like reflexivity and community. For example, reflexive podcasters constantly negotiate their limitations as scholars who balance multiple research projects, teach several classes, and serve their department on top of maintaining a personal life beyond their job. Additionally, the complex technical elements of learning about innovative podcasting technologies and the newest recording software can compound the pressure podcasters feel to produce quality content that feels like research. As such, it is laborious and time-consuming for a scholar, who is also a podcaster, to balance all these roles and stay current on topics in the field, let alone beyond it. Together, these questions provide a robust framework for podcasters to create ethically aware work.

**Toward Best Practices for Podcasting in the Field**

In this section, we work toward establishing best practices rooted in feminist values for podcasting in rhetoric and composition through analysis of re:verb podcast. As explained earlier, podcasters working in the field have demonstrated sustainability proving the digital genre is a
valuable way of making and circulating collective knowledge. *re:verb* is a model podcast to use to analyze how feminist research methods can be central to a podcast’s evolution and sustainability because we understand *re:verb* as podcasting with feminist tenets in mind, even if implicitly, as evidenced by its approach to different aspects of podcasting, including collaboration. Thus, best practices for podcasting in rhetoric and composition must amplify collaboration (as described above), value accessibility, and utilize feminist citation practices.

*re:verb*’s attention to accessibility involves using high contrast design (white text on a black background) for episode thumbnails. And while red is a component of the overall color palette for the podcast, using white text contributes to readability. Providing thumbnails with guest photographs for certain episodes on the website makes it easy for audiences to quickly gauge the content of each episode. Clicking on the title of the episode or the thumbnail hyperlinks the audience to an episode-specific page featuring show notes detailing the context of the episode more thoroughly, and highlighting information about the guest. Additionally, *re:verb*’s show notes include a list of citations for each episode and a link to a transcript (if available) that is compatible with a screen reader.

*re:verb* includes transcripts for most episodes. For some episodes (like the *re:joinder* series) a transcript is not provided. Access to the digital transcription tools can be tricky for grassroots podcasters depending on funding, recording methods, and content. However, providing a transcript is a best practice for an accessible podcast, many of which include interviews with scholars, activists, and other subject-matter experts. Interview podcasts are a popular format in the field and individual podcasters develop their own interview techniques over time. Yet there are some interviewing methods which align with feminist approaches to qualitative research, including providing questions to guests beforehand and offering a collaborative approach to developing questions. This approach allows for interviewees to address concerns with or provide additional information to podcasters. Such collaboration contributes to a better conversation and provides a structure for the episode that acknowledges appreciation for the guest’s time and labor.

A component of citation practices, and thus a best practice for podcasters, is building ethos by introducing guests using official titles and institutional/organizational affiliations, as well as by offering an overview of their research and professional accomplishments. *re:verb* hosts introduce guests and establish rapport early in each episode, allowing space for full responses. The podcast website draws attention to episodes featuring interviews by highlighting guest names both in the episode title and on the thumbnail and including either photographs of the guest or information about their most recent publications. But what protocols are in place for protecting collaborators from dissenting or hostile audiences of a podcast? Establishing methods to protect the identity of collaborators in advance of interviews is an essential component of cultivating a vocal space. Identifying scholars—particularly feminist scholars—participating in polarizing and politically charged debates can lead to concerns about privacy and retaliation. Thus, podcasters must caution col-
laborators that they will identify their voices and institutional affiliations in their introductions and that audio metadata could detail geo-location, leaving them in a potentially vulnerable situation. Indeed, while these concerns for research collaborators seem new because the podcast remains an emerging digital genre, they mirror the concerns that feminist scholars writing about justice and equity have faced and continue to face.

Reflexive podcasters should practice inclusivity as they consider how their podcast exists among other scholarship in and beyond the field. Since podcasts reach audiences beyond traditional academic venues, podcasters should center diverse and even polarizing perspectives which challenge authoritarianism and hegemony. Thus, who a podcaster chooses to cite matters. Sara Ahmed explains, “Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (17). Podcasters have the opportunity to offer a space for uncomfortable topics and must acknowledge the potential vulnerabilities of their guests. This inclusive approach amplifies attention to names and pronouns as well as a consistent awareness for citing trans scholars without using deadnames (Thieme and Saunders, 84).

Practicing inclusivity means conveying a willingness to be an accountable source for scholarly debate. One way podcasters can think through what it means for a new venue to join ongoing scholarly conversations is through citation practices. re:verb provides “Works and Concepts Referenced” for each episode using APA documentation as well as hyperlinks to contextual resources and information about where audiences can find a collaborator’s scholarship, including their books, articles, and digital work. This practice demonstrates awareness of the positionality on the part of the re:verb team as they create worthwhile collaborative opportunities. As podcasts try transition to publishing venues that consistently include credible academic discourse in our field, and across disciplines, it will be important for podcasters to engage with their audience via direct messaging, email, and website contact forms as these forms of communication offer more immediate dialogue than traditional academic venues (e.g., books, articles). Although best practices will evolve over time, these tenets can provide a foundation to guide podcasters in the near future.

Conclusion

Rhetoric and composition has embraced podcasting as a valuable method for composing and circulating knowledge in the field. Podcasts and podcasting are popular now, but inevitably new digital tools will be created that press scholars to rethink the kinds of multimodal projects that can best advance the field. As mentioned earlier, while podcasts like re:verb continue, and new podcasts debut, questions about research ethics will require further attention. For example: how do listeners incorporate ideas from re:verb into their own scholarship? How do podcasts influence research trajectories? And what methods do podcasters employ to perform research as a project
evolves? The best practices outlined in this cluster conversation serve as a foundation on which future podcasters can work to answer these questions as they develop their podcasts.

But there are other aspects of podcasts and podcasting for future podcasters to consider. For example, how can a podcast count as scholarship? How can podcasts help scholars fulfill tenure and promotion benchmarks that require them to explain how and where their work has been amplified? Podcasts are valuable scholarly contributions that deserve attention during tenure and promotion review because they have the potential to be cited more often than journal articles behind paywalls. Additionally, we encourage podcasters to choose topics substantiated by current rhetoric and composition research. And we hope podcasters choose engaging topics with the potential to merge public and academic discourse. For re:verb, their focus on the intersections of culture and rhetoric maintains an immediacy that allows for commentary on cultural moments, including those related to social justice, and invites intertextuality across genres and mediums.

In this article, we have offered guidance that podcasters can take up and use practically throughout the development of their podcast. We have expanded the Heuristic, originally focused on social media sites like Twitter, to account for podcasts as we work toward best practices anchored by feminist principles and methods for podcasting in the field. There is enormous flexibility in the Heuristic’s guiding questions, and podcasters can return to them throughout the lifespan of a podcast project. Indeed, we hope they do as we understand practicing reflexivity as a best practice for podcasters. Ultimately, this approach embodies a feminist praxis that acknowledges an awareness of a podcast’s and/or podcaster’s positionality and demonstrates collaboration through sharing knowledge of trends and research interests currently defining rhetoric and composition.

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