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Photini Vrikki & Sarita Malik

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Voicing lived-experience and anti-racism: podcasting as a space at the margins for subaltern counterpublics

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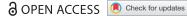Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Almost 18 years after the podcast medium first emerged, 2018 has witnessed its resurgence. With approximately six million (11%) of the UK population now listening to podcasts in an average week, the podcast renaissance raises new questions about the relationship between cultural production, consumption and representation. This paper explores the significance of the new wave of podcasts, specifically with regards to racial politics in the UK and its potential power as an anti-racist tool. Through a series of interview and focus group discussions with black and Asian podcasters in the UK, it asks what role podcasts play in providing an alternative space for 'communities of resistance'. These issues are examined against the dual contexts in the UK of an intensifyingly hostile environment for black and minority ethnic groups and a digital and creative sector marked by social and cultural inequalities.

The article suggests that in a 'post fact' international climate of disinformation that bolsters populist rhetoric around minority cultural groups, podcasts have become a rare space for articulating the lived experiences of these groups, whilst also challenging broader patterns of racialized disenfranchisement, including in the creative industries. Podcasts facilitate new forms of social affiliation and anti-racism; which we analyse through Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics" to unveil the interruptive potentiality of the medium for marginalised communities seeking to make accessible alternative representations and perspectives on the relationship between race and society.

Podcast renaissance, Brexit and the cultural and creative industries

While podcasting has been growing in popularity over the past decade in the USA (Florini, 2015), the UK has been slower to catch on. Only since around 2017 have we witnessed a rise in UK podcast production, with a notable interest in politics, humour, popular culture, and storytelling. After their debut in 2001, podcasts' streak of success declined by 2009 with many blaming the creative industries' indifference to the medium, and the sector's struggle to monetise it. By 2015, however, podcasts enjoyed higher production values, full-scale production teams, healthier budgets and sponsor support, and were thus able to create a niche but powerful space in the US digital sector. Developments in technology and audience markets, the wider adoption of smartphones as well as the ease of access to download and listen to

podcasts 'on-the-go' have facilitated podcasts' now prominent position in the digital cultural industries. With approximately six million (11%) of the UK population listening to podcasts in an average week (Rajar, 2018), the podcast renaissance raises new questions about the relationship between cultural production, cultural representation and the creative industries.

In this paper, we argue that it is not just the convenience and advancement of technology and production circumstances that have helped this resurgence in the UK; but also, the civic urge and ability to tell stories emanating from routinely marginalised lived experiences. Podcasts enable the production of long informal discussions and a new space that brokers the relationship between marginalised communities and wider publics. Exploring the UK's renewed podcast industry offers insights into the tensions and complexities at play when we consider which mediums historically marginalised groups select to represent themselves, and how this relates to wider issues of cultural production and representation in the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs). Our concern in this article is with how the recent rise of podcast production led by young BAME (the term used in the UK to refer to those of non-white descent, although we offer a specific focus on black and Asian) podcasters has coincided with a growing body of evidence signalling deep inequalities in the CCIs, including those that are organised around race and class (Bazalgette, 2017, p. 42). Socio-political and structural developments have reified processes of disenfranchisement for BAME communities in the UK. We address this problem through an examination of the possibility of BAME podcasters as 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser, 1992) that firstly create media content that refutes dominant racialised representations and, secondly, that form structural oppositions to CCIs by utilising a form of media to tell their stories, albeit one that still remains at the margins of the sector.

We situate these concerns in this critical moment of political, cultural and digital flux. On the political spectrum, 'Brexit' has opened up critical public debates about national identity, race and difference and can be understood as a retreat from globalisation and the politicisation of Englishness (Virdee & McGeever, 2017). With regards to the digital sector, podcasts are part of a creative industry that is imbued with inequalities and degradations of the cultural work they embody (O'Brien, Laurison, Miles, & Friedman, 2016). We explore precisely these tensions around the precarity of this re-emergent mode of popular communication, with podcasters treading uncharted territory as they navigate the logistics involved in podcast production and in a particular moment of ambivalence about the role and value of podcasts within the CCIs. Our research involves examining the cultures of podcasting production: how podcasters define their own engagement with their podcasts, co-hosts, and listeners, how they describe their motivations, and how they envisage the future of podcasts.

Our primary argument is that podcasts are an emergent space for a diverse and typically marginalised range of UK citizens to mobilise as a counterpublic against the grain of dominant racialised representations and narratives produced by mainstream media. Our qualitative analysis also reveals tensions and complexities at work in how processes of cultural production actually intersect with the CCIs. Our data suggests that podcasters are both willingly and unwillingly imbricated in the wider corporate media environment, thus revealing the messy, 'sticky' ways in which we might understand counterpublics in the CCIs. In so doing, we find a complex picture that casts some doubt on the seemingly uncompromised freedom that podcasters appear to have, even based on some of their own assertions.

Racism and anti-racism in the UK context

Against the popular belief that the creative sector in the UK has been purely meritocratic, CCIs are blighted internally by prejudices and inequalities (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013; McRobbie, 2002). Banks (2017) and Littler (2017) have pointed to a range of examples that unveil various forms of discrimination, including non-acknowledgement of work, inequalities in terms of access and education, and wages that marginalise certain groups of cultural workers. Notably, the Warwick Commission (Neelands et al., 2015) uses analysis of the 'Taking Part' data to demonstrate how, despite an overall increase in the numbers of ethnic minority people taking part in the creative industries between 2005/6 and 2012/3, the gap between majority White and ethnic minority participation is widening. More recently, O'Brien et al. (2016) analyse social origin data from the 2014 Labour Force Survey and offer a large-scale, representative study of Britain's creative workforce class structure. All of these studies identify an under-representation of BAME cultural producers across the sector; yet paradoxically "racial and ethnic differences become qualities used to distinguish products within a hypercompetitive market" (Saha, 2017, p. 7). These marginalisations are reinforced by the culture of exclusion that exists within the creative industries that prevent ethnic minorities and other subgroups from participating.

In the digital industries specifically, scholars such as Pasquale (2015) and O'Neil (2016) have stressed the involvement of algorithms in generating inequalities, disenfranchisement and racialisms. Algorithmic curation allows platforms such as Apple Podcasts, Soundcloud, Acorn, or Spotify to control the lists of podcasts that would fit each listener's preferences. These algorithms remain corporate secrets leaving us "in the dark about critical decisions" taken by these digital empires (Pasquale, 2015, p. 4). More specifically, algorithms strengthen race and class inequalities, automating and reinforcing them through digital data processing (Eubanks, 2018). Where people, with their own prejudices, racisms and biases, may previously have served as gatekeepers to the CCIs, now algorithms have replaced them in the digital space, with no guarantee that systems of representation or inequalities are addressed.

Podcasts give a sense of directly listening to other people, with seemingly no mediators, no regulatory constraints, and no top-down editorial control. But podcasts exist in a digital realm where racial prejudices, inequalities, and structural disenfranchisement shape content dissemination and popular representations. With wider reference to the frameworks of the CCIs in which podcasts necessarily operate, we suggest that digital media, and specifically podcasts, cannot contribute to social progress until there is a sustained resistance to the racialised power structures that govern them. Our research suggests that podcasts facilitate new forms of social affiliation, which we analyse through Fraser's "subaltern counterpublics" to unveil the interruptive potentiality of the medium for marginalised communities. In an international climate that bolsters populist rhetoric around minority cultural groups, podcasts occupy a rare marginal space for articulating the lived experiences of these groups, whilst challenging broader patterns of racialised disenfranchisement, including in the digital creative industries. We go on to discuss the dynamics of this idea of counterpublic at the level of content-based and structural intervention. Relatedly, we address how effectively podcasters are able to operate outside of dominant discursive and institutional paradigms.

Our particular focus on how a black and Asian youth demographic are using podcasts as an empowering tool, suggests both an important form of political resistance (or what might be regarded as a counterpublic formed through radical content), as well as a form of

cultural resistance against the otherwise exclusionary practices to be found in the UK's CCIs (or what might be regarded as a counterpublic formed through structural opposition). We address these overlapping concerns by empirically analysing the specific racialised disenfranchisement that young black and Asian podcasters face as cultural producers, exploring the role of podcasting in responding to such inequalities, as well as those in wider society. The specific UK context on which we focus adopts an inclusive approach to 'Black' by considering also the podcast politics of South Asian ethnic minorities because of the deep historical connections shared by those of African, Caribbean and South Asian descent in the UK who in the 1980s assembled under the umbrella political term 'Black'.

Podcasts as a space at the margins for subaltern counterpublics

Through their intimate, nonchalant, and sometimes humorous nature, podcasts provide us with a window into the lives and minds of their hosts. Their often-confessional nature depends on the act of "giving an account of oneself" (Butler, 2005), of lived experience and of voicing one's experiences, opinions, and ideas. Our examination of the perspectives of podcast media practitioners reveals the podcast space as "much more than a site of deprivation […] that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (Hooks, 1989). Podcasts formulate a critical space at the margins that accommodates the ways in which black and Asian youth can express themselves. Podcasts do more than just open public windows of expression; their location at the periphery of the CCIs, and yet as easily accessible, renders them a potentially radical space for counter-hegemonic discourses of meanings of 'race'.

Considering that those at the margins of mainstream representation have struggled for decades to be able to represent themselves in the public realm (Eddo-Lodge, 2017, p. 1–23), podcasts can make audible struggles for representation, challenge institutional colonialisms, and traverse both the political landscape and lived experiences of racialised oppression. Thus, the podcasting space differentiates itself from mainstream CCIs, both in terms of its culture of flexible production (predominantly self-organised, low-budget, content-led, and operating outside traditional regulatory structures), and in terms of its potential to produce narratives that oppose exclusionary forms of representations and politics found in in talk radio, opinion journalism and current affairs programming.

Here we identify the potential for marginalised communities to be regarded as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1990, p. 124). Fraser describes these as 'subaltern counterpublics', following Spivak's notion of the 'subaltern' (1988) and Felski's concept of 'counterpublic' (1989), as spaces "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). The black and Asian youth demographic is a social group that has been subordinated, fuelling our concern with how they use podcasts to circulate counter discourses about their everyday lives as well as with how they build loose networks that can produce strong connections and identification, a characteristic of counterpublics that Fraser highlights in her work.

Podcasts serve as cultivating site for public politics. In stratified societies, such as Brexit Britain, Fraser reminds us that counter publics are necessary and inevitably rise to foreground political and social inequalities, giving voice to those segments of the population that are or feel excluded. The culture of production that resides at the centre of the CCIs, for example in public service broadcasting or in the mainstream film sector, can limit the

autonomy, creative freedom and alternative perspectives that minority practitioners can have. Our data suggests that the experiences of BAME podcasters in the UK create two counterpublics: one which refutes dominant racialised representations and one which forms structural oppositions to CCIs by using a medium that is revived at the margins of the sector. These two notions of counterpublics unsettle any perception of 'tidy' counterpublics that are able to operate independently from the cultural industry in which they necessarily reside.

Researching black and Asian podcasters

We conducted nine focus groups in addition to two semi-structured interviews with 31 black, Asian and mixed heritage podcasters aged 18–34 across the UK. We set up focus groups with those podcasters who were able to attend the interviews with their co-hosts – the majority of podcasts have 2–8 hosts each. We conducted two semi-structured interviews – one to accommodate hosts that could not attend and another for a podcaster without co-hosts.

We used focus groups as our method to investigate why the participants produce podcasts and how the participants understand the role podcasts play as a tool for representation. The sessions took place in a casual environment with minimal intervention from the researcher. This allowed for a relaxed conversational mode designed to maximise the interaction between participants and minimise our direction of the open thematic questions, encouraging group participants to discuss inconsistencies between their views, rather than between the group and the researcher. All participants are of black, Asian or mixed heritage and agreed to be named under the names they use for their podcasts for the purpose of the research (some are real names, some are pseudonyms). However, parts of some interviews have been anonymised to avoid identifying podcasters' identities.

Podcast communities and the subaltern

The typical multiplicity of voices on a podcast and its audio basis can make the voices of host(s) and guest(s) difficult to discern, creating a sense of a medium that is less about the individual voice and more about the group discussion. As Table 1 shows, most of the podcasts have two or more hosts, with just one hosting alone. Similarly, only Imriel's podcast belongs to a network/corporate platform, with the rest of our participants identifying as independent and choosing to co-host with close friends. Examples here include *90s Baby Show*, led by Fred and Temi who met at school in Year 8 and *Surviving Society* whose hosts, Chantelle, Saskia and Tissot met at university. In other cases, the hosts are siblings such as two hosts of *The Not Everyday Podcast*, Diana and Wavey, as well as Juliana and Stephen, who until recently hosted *Artistic State of Mind* together. All the podcasts have varying production values (all with a budget of below £100 per episode) and none of those we interviewed had production values that correspond to mainstream-funded radio shows, TV programmes, or even successful US podcasts. For the purpose of our research, we have categorised the podcasts under a wide-ranging number of genres that the hosts themselves identified at the group discussion stage or that can be found in their podcast descriptions, and we take note of their regularity and editing processes.

As Table 1 shows, most of the podcasts discuss current affairs, life, popular culture, or culture and society more broadly. The multiplicity of genres across podcasts and the variety of topics covered within a show highlight the heterogeneity of the podcasts as well

Table 1. Details of the podcasts this paper has engaged with.

Name of Podcast	Number of hosts	Gender of Hosts	Genre	Regularity	Edited/ Unedited
90s Baby Show	2	Male	Entertainment Life Music	Weekly	Unedited
A Seat at the Table	4	Male	Entertainment Music Current Affairs	Monthly/ Irregular	Unedited
Artistic State of Mind	2	Male & Female	Arts & Culture Music Current Affairs	Biweekly	Edited
Brown About Town LDN	3	Female	Politics Pop culture Life	Biweekly	Edited
Brown Girls Do It	2	Female	Race Religion Feminism Current Affairs	Monthly	Edited
DMD podcast (Dem Man Dere)	3	Male	Current Affairs Entertainment Life	Weekly	Unedited
Rice At Home	3	Male & Female	Business Finance EntrepreneursCurrent affairs	Weekly	Edited
Stance	2	Female	Arts & culture Current affairs	Monthly	Edited
Surviving Society	3	Male & Female	Politics Society Current affairs	Weekly	Edited
The Not Everyday Podcast	6–8	Male & Female	Current Affairs Pop culture Life	Weekly	Unedited
Wanna Be Podcast	1	Female	Business Entrepreneurs Life stories	Weekly	Edited

as the variety of thematic discussions, ranging from Brexit to knife crime in London, and from Beyonce's music to relationships. At the same time, the presence of BAME women hosts is a strong feature of these podcasts, with 16 women in our 31 participants and 15 men.

We begin this analysis by exploring podcasting as a community building exercise. Podcasting strikes a community sensibility that is shared between podcasters across different podcasts, between the podcasters as the hosts of a podcast, and between the hosts and their listeners. Indeed, many of the podcasters know each other and promote one another by inviting them as guests or mentioning them during their episodes. Imriel, from *Wanna Be Podcast*, suggests that the podcast community can be very "supportive and pushing other people's shows and listening to other shows and critiquing it, give it feedback". Counterpublics formed through these podcasts do not imbue a single reinforced identity, but they are bolstered by forms of collegiality such as mutually following each other on Twitter or podcast platforms such as Soundcloud or Stitcher. And even though there is no single nucleus of podcasters who everyone links to and not all podcasters know each other, they share common ground whilst also being able to pose challenges to each other, including by critiquing the

structure and content of others' podcasts. As B.O.A.T. from the *DMD Podcast* points out, "We're all competing with each other."

In community formations, frictions are always present, but the support and the awareness of a community's existence was recognised by all our participants. Similar podcast articulations appear in the USA and are described by Florini as "audio enclaves" "where Black Americans gather free from the policing of the white gaze, and as such, function as important arenas for Black social, cultural, and political life" (2015, p. 214). Ruth, from *Rice at Home*, described such an experience by observing how many people "don't have the people around them to have these conversations with, so they use the podcast as a medium to access these conversations and feel connected." The medium hence brings hosts together to create a safe space in which they can discuss issues that emanate from everyday lives, politics and culture. Therefore, podcasting is not just about finding like-minded people who share their beliefs, but about creating and maintaining a space in which to share concerns (often between friends), knowing that these recorded conversations will eventually become public. Occupying a space between public and private spheres, podcasts, as any other counterpublic, are private enough to provide a safe, open, credible site for hosts, while public enough to allow the spread of information and the amassing of listeners.

Podcasts help connect the experiences of hosts to others. Hosts tend to build episodes based on friendships and what they describe as common experiences. All hosts conduct research on social media and mainstream media to collect themes and assemble a flow for each episode's discussion. Listeners often witness disagreement among the hosts, as well as consensus and deep identification punctuated by laughter and validation remarks. As discovered by Chantelle, who works with Saskia and Tissot on *Surviving Society*, "It's not always agreeing. Our common ground is that we respect each other, and I think I've definitely learnt a lot about listening more to people with opposing views." Others point to this balance as one of the motivating factors for podcasters: podcasts become the space where opposing views can co-exist, rather than the 'echo-chamber' associated so closely with social media or mainstream media.

The physical and intimate togetherness of the hosts therefore creates the bonds that are required for strong communities to form. In Florini's research, Black US podcasters compare their podcasts to "historically significant Black social spaces like barber/beauty shops and churches" (2015, p. 210). Interestingly, the 'barber shop' is a metaphor sometimes used by UK podcasters to describe the podcast style of male-dominated podcasts. When asked to describe the *DMD podcast*, co-host Skribz said, "It's like at the barber's shop, you're just in there talking about absolutely everything." Similarly, one episode of *The Not Everyday Podcast* titled *The Barbershop Episode … Quotes, Morals, Principles, Values & more* (S3 EP6) featured only the male hosts. This cultural site of community conviviality allows, as Florini suggests, "the podcasts to reproduce a sense of being in Black social spaces" (2015, p. 210). Despite the obvious gendered parameters of this aspect of the podcasts as community spaces – which we engage with briefly below – these spaces first and foremost create bonds and strong homophilic tendencies between the hosts, irrespective of their gender.

Some of the podcasts studied here are entirely female and focus on notions of 'the female experience,' while others are mixed gendered or entirely male. These variations create different, nuanced conversations between the hosts and different inflections of subaltern counterpublics. For instance, in podcasts such as *Brown Girls Do It, Surviving Society, Wanna Be Podcast*, or *Brown About Town LDN*, where feminism and/or women

empowerment forms some of the core podcast themes, hosts use these spaces as discursive feminist domains. Here, patriarchal and gender hegemonic public spheres are circumvented and resisted, recalling Fraser's assessment that "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). These counter discourses are apparent in some of their episodes. Episode 1 of *Brown Girls Do It* was titled "Badass Black Women, Big-screen Representation and Black Panther." *Surviving Society* have a frequent "Surviving Society Alternative to *Woman's Hour*" (*Woman's Hour* is a long-standing BBC Radio 4 series) during which the two women hosts discuss gender and feminism either alone or with guests. And *Wanna Be Podcast* focuses on the professional achievements of female guests. These are just some of the ways in which BAME podcasters offer perspectives rooted in their experiences but provide a platform for others to contribute to and engage with them.

Audience engagement is a source of motivation and responsibility as podcasters work to produce content that might be used to break the bounds of exclusion commonly experienced by BAME communities. From Ruth's perspective, podcasts like *Rice at Home* are produced to "shake up the current generation" and "promote financial literacy in the black community and underprivileged communities". Akin to *Wanna Be Podcast, Surviving Society, Brown About Town LDN, Artistic State of Mind, Brown Girls Do It*, and *Stance*, their efforts suggest a direct attempt to change the *status quo*, addressing what they perceive to be gaps in financial knowledge and lack of entrepreneurial ethos in certain communities, whilst simultaneously tackling systemic patterns of exclusion in mainstream media, arts, and culture. In these instances, we can trace the creation of a counterpublic that resists dominant structures such as patriarchy, financial inequality, class, and race.

Podcasts can serve as a barometer for contemporary issues of race in the UK and help us gain insights into how young BAME podcasters see the world, themselves, and their cultural work. Tissot from *Surviving Society* emphasized the need for "nuance" in discussions of race. All the podcasters we spoke with stressed the importance of bringing in guests who can offer alternative perspectives by talking about their own experiences and unveil new forms of knowledge that will enrich their listeners' experience. In Alicia's words, these conversations provide "the opportunity to get to hear somebody's story".

These podcasts illuminate the formation of black and Asian cultural production and representation today, and advance knowledge about the lives and experiences of those who are routinely relegated to the margins of mainstream media representation. For Mike, from *NED Podcast*, offering alternative representations is key: "the media don't portray what's going on in our community positively enough, it's always they're portraying it in a negative way (sic). We're here to portray it in a positive way." The counterpublic created here not only counters the representation of BAME communities in the dominant fields of communication but also brings together communities through direct knowledge rooted in lived experience.

Although the CCIs are not always regarded as a space of mutual support, our discussions suggest the coupling of subaltern counterpublics and the interruptive potentiality of podcasting, specifically for marginalised communities seeking to create anti-racist discourses in times of social political turbulence and division. Anchored in these contexts, podcasting affords a safe environment for those that feel disenfranchised to discuss contemporary concerns and form communities. We identify a symbiotic relationship

between the current wave of black and Asian youth-led podcasts and forms of anti-racist resistance in the UK. The rhetorical practices of doing something together, or supporting the same cause, empower participants' narratives and sense of community membership.

Podcasting for fun, podcasting for inclusion

Hall (2001) spoke of the "living archive of the diaspora", useful here because it insists on 'living' as a continuous experience in the present that is always "unfinished, open-ended", which also helps us to understand the relationship between podcasts and their location in the CCIs' peripheries. Moving to the second dimension of a 'subaltern counterpublic' that we identify, podcasts can be regarded not simply as newer (anti-racist) media forms replacing older (anti-racist) media forms. Instead, they are a revived medium with the potential to add to and change the archive of creative anti-racism in the CCIs. The considerable and fast changes in media technologies related to social media, misinformation and hate speech have played a major role in the resurfacing of podcasts as a mode of communication in the UK. Current mainstream narratives around knife 'culture', gang-crime, and closed borders have led BAME UK youth to search for alternative media sources or mediums of expression. In this section of the paper, we unveil how BAME youth use podcasts as a counterpublic for inclusion and gesture toward that aspect of identity politics that dominates the work of the podcasters but that rarely surfaces in mainstream media representations.

Our podcasters connect the lack of BAME decision-making capacity within mainstream media production–and by extension within the State and the CCIs–to what they consider to be deeply negative racialised content. Their podcasts offer otherwise unheard perspectives on topics ranging from police brutality and knife crime in London, to the intense margin-alisation of BAME communities in towns and centres outside Greater London. *Surviving Society* engages with these concerns in multiple episodes, including "E24 F*** the system: BME, white genocide and austerity", as does *Stance* in, for example, "Stance Takes: Black History Month – The Debate". Many of these episodes overtly challenge the circulation of negative, heavily racialised tropes in the mainstream media, State provisions, and dominant racialised structures, while seeking to intervene in the circuit of negative images, policies and narratives.

The explicit project of many of the podcasters is to offer diverse listeners insights in order "to understand [the podcasters'] struggles," as Smokez from *DMD Podcast* summarised. Similarly, Kneemah, from *Brown About Town LDN*, as well as Iqra and Alicia, hosts of *Brown Girls Do It*, argued that they share their experiences in order to break down, diagnose and have conversations about race and racism, belonging and identities. Thus, podcasts are used as a counterpublic intervention, resisting the emergent, mainstream, racialised politics that have surfaced in a post-Brexit referendum UK. Although many of these podcasts refute the label of 'political podcast' because it alludes to politicians, the government and state struc-tures, they are clearly political and enact the building of awareness, solidarity and trust. Those who do not define their podcasts as political identify with a politics emanating from being black, Asian or mixed heritage, rather than with a political party affiliation. These podcasters catalyse debates about local, global and popular issues, highlighting concerns that otherwise go unnoticed, are discounted, or limited by the surfeit of hegemonic representations.

Rather than channelling their creative content through formal discussions on racism, or by inviting popular figures to discuss racism as mainstream media tends to do (usually in an attempt to disavow the presence of racism), podcasters commonly filter such discussions through a focus on current affairs, political events and popular culture. As Juliana confided, "within the black community especially, we enjoy popular culture, it's what drives us." For example, many podcasters in their USA May 2018 episodes focused on Kanye West's problematic comments about slavery "as a choice" during his appearance on the American entertainment site TMZ. For others, like Heta from *Stance*, the focus on popular culture underscores who gets to speak *for* and *about* culture and who has been "predominantly excluded from conversations around ideas that can shape our society"; for this group of podcasters, talking about popular culture and current affairs, often from a progressive and intersectional perspective, was an important part of their anti-racist project.

Podcasts as a marginal space with grassroots structures grant total editorial control to their podcasters. This includes the freedom to choose themes, direct discussions, and make production choices about length and regularity of episodes. In contrast to mainstream media shows, many of the podcasts air at sporadic intervals (see Table 1), depending on podcasters' school, work, social or other life commitments. Some appear weekly or biweekly in order to establish a regular presence, sustain listener numbers and achieve continuity. Several podcasters are aware that their editorial control serves as an antidote to the 'misinformation', and racialised content transmitted through both mainstream and social media. However, the heterogeneity of podcasts' editorial processes unveils limitations and tensions that some of these counterpublics necessarily encounter: by existing in and adjusting to a heavily corporate environment, a counterpublic is, willingly or unwillingly, ambiguously resistive to some of the dominant structures they stand against.

One example of this ambiguity emerges in the podcasters' relationship with social media. Even though they acknowledge the importance of having a presence on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, podcasters often considered these platforms as expedient but 'time consuming' forms of publicity. They further argued that short text bursts such as Twitter posts are not appropriate platforms through which to express rigorous opinions. Moreover, they feel that their ideas might be misconstrued or trigger critiques of so-called "political correctness" given the growing toxicity to be found in some social media platforms. Our research found that most podcasters associated social media with misinformation and inaccuracies, compared to their podcasts which they believe generate a counterpublic, which in Ruth's words is "a community of people who are just trying to change the world really".

This desire for 'real world' impact takes shape not just via thematic content but through editing (Table 1). Podcasts are edited to include theme music and exclude awkward silences and sound irregularities, but the slick structures of mainstream entertainment shows are avoided in favour of a more casual, spontaneous and intimate style that resembles a free-flow conversation between friends. According to Smokez' of *DMD Podcast*, "we don't edit, so from the time that record [is pressed] to the finish, you're getting everything, if there's mistakes, you get 'em." For Ruth of *Rice at Home*, "You just speak your mind and be free and that's the content." All argued that their editing processes do not mimic the heavy editing of mainstream media; they only edit for quality purposes, aiming to be "raw", "remain true" to their content and "honest" to their listeners. As such, they can incorporate audience expectations as they develop over time, a point noted in Eckstein's analysis of podcasts (2014), which suggests that

a podcast's "tactical deployment of sound" is a force that can influence the listeners' standpoints (2014, p. 38).

The medium creates a counterpublic that retains the advantages of digital media with all their negative characteristics we mentioned earlier, e.g. spreadability and access, while eliminating some of their biggest drawbacks (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2018) . Podcasts appear to have the potential to cultivate a future for digital media that foregrounds a multiplicity of voices, marking a departure from the culture of instantaneous dominant mainstream communication and reactionary social media one-liners. However, as we go on to discuss, it is still contained to a degree within the power structures and forms of marginalization that prevail in the digital cultural industries. At a time when public racist discursivity and hate speech are being facilitated by digital media platforms that refute their role as content editors, the chain of responsibility that they are necessarily implicated in is being obfuscated. We ask whether the autonomous and representational values of these podcasts are strong enough to challenge the relative power of the cultural and creative industries, particularly when the podcast medium depends on the sector's validation. In the next section, we discuss some of the hurdles when attempting to evade the commodified, corporatised and managed processes through which the CCIs operate.

Podcasting for the future or for the industry?

In our focus group with *DMD Podcast* hosts Smokez, Skribz and B.O.A.T, we explored the importance of being likeable in the podcast community. The response from Smokez was, "Do you know what the real answer for this is? I'll give you a real definition of dis ting though [sic], we are not for the industry, we're for the people. It's as simple as that." For him, as with so many other participants, it is not the industry–with its fame, money and contracts–that guides them, but their relationship with the people who listen to them, follow their journey, and connect with them. Chrystal, for instance, who had previously worked in the mainstream media, confessed: "I find that actually the way that we critique our stuff and how hard we are on ourselves is key to our podcast; to really have integrity." This fascination with being "real" and "true" to their listeners and to themselves appears to be a primary motivation for their cultural labour, even though they do not earn anything from all the work and hours they put into the production–most of them work full time or part-time jobs, are students or are stay-at-home parents.

Yet, through this "aspirational labour" (Duffy, 2017) they hope to become successful, (economically and socially), build credibility and turn their podcasts into recognised cultural products. Recent studies of cultural work and the digital creative industries, such as Duffy's analysis of gender, have pointed to a new mode of entrepreneurship or 'aspirational labour' organised around the 'promise of social and economic capital', which promises digital cultural workers will be rewarded if they do all the work voluntarily (Duffy, 2017). All but one of the podcasters contacted had not signed with a commercial podcast network or radio production studio, or owned a big, successful blog. They demonstrated recognition and respect for those BAME podcasters who have managed to sign with commercial networks and who have tapped into podcasts' income-generating potential. These include *Mostly Lit*, a podcast about books and popular culture, which teamed up with Waterstones, a British book retailer, in 2018 for a yearlong partnership to create a new series of events and online content for *The Bookseller*, a British magazine that reports news on the publishing industry. Another example that has

'broken through' and was mentioned multiple times was *Off the Cuff*, a podcast on music, entertainment, politics and popular culture. Some have tried to follow in the steps of these 'success stories,' building interest by organising live podcast sessions where they can interact with the audience, by spreading to as many podcast platforms as possible, or by uploading content and organising it in such a way to ease searchability and thus heighten visibility. But, to successfully break into the industry is also recognised as highly difficult, and most argue that if the only way to be signed is to change the way they conduct themselves, interact or design content, then it is too high a price to pay. Independence, 'freedom' and relative invisibility is valued more highly than belonging to a network and generating money.

The independence and do-it-yourself approach that podcasts accommodate is significant when we consider the more formalised means of cultural production required in other parts of the CCIs, typically involving large budgets, top-down directives and institutional hurdles that still form a largely impenetrable 'glass ceiling'. Some black and Asian youth-led podcasts have addressed these issues as they relate to race in the UK CCIs, with their hosts outlining institutional barriers. For instance, Juliana, who works in the CCIs in addition to co-hosting the *Artistic State of Mind*, sees podcasts as a means to break the racial barriers in the CCIs. As she confided to us, "the podcasting world is a space for black and brown young people to speak openly and freely, if that makes sense? Because if you wanted to do that on TV there's so many doors that you have to get through." Still, several podcasters reflected on the exclusionary characteristics that also pervade podcasting platforms. One podcaster pointed out that "the funny thing is a lot of podcasters believe it's meritocratic, it's not, genuinely not". The racial disenfranchisement of these platforms mirrors the lack of diversity in the industry, because as a different participant said, "normally those people are white, heterosexual, heteronormative, everything is just very like by the book, they're just all created largely by straight white people." As young black and Asian podcasters trying to amass a following or listenership, the chances of finding it within these power structures remains limited.

Similarly, as a female co-host sharply described, podcasting helps them to get "listeners from all over the world" but, at the same time, "you've got all those blokes still running the podcast scene". She argued, as did many other women we talked with, that the cultural industries are dominated by white men, exclude people of colour, and even alongside a spate of diversity initiatives in the CCIs, are indicative of how forms of structural racism persist and shape the sector, including the digital cultural industries. There was also reference in our discussions, to podcast award ceremonies where the majority of winners are white and the recognition of minorities is minimal. Consistently sustaining the power structures that seek to govern, while othering and vilifying those who live at the margins, the digital cultural industries do not simply disrupt the traditional CCIs; they too can exclude those who are routinely marginalised.

The fact that such lack of representation happens in this renaissance period of podcasts, and across varied media contexts, suggests that there are patterns of ongoing discrimination that work across different sectors of the CCIs. The power of podcasts as a counterpublic, "as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1990, p. 124) is evident, but their power to break dominant structures of representation is called into question. Even if this counterpublic makes possible alternative forms of self-representation, this does not equate to a state of equality. Even if black and Asian young people feel empowered by their access to innovative digital opportunities such as podcasts, systemic issues of inequality in the sector remain unchallenged. We argue that the rise of

podcasts, as an expansion of the digital cultural industries, does not automatically mean more inclusion or less marginalisation for black and Asian creative labour. Viewed in terms of hooks's notion of the radical and conscious decision of 'choosing the margins' as a site of struggle and resistance but also a space of belonging, it seems that these podcasters use podcasts as a means to create "the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (Hooks, 1989); yet, their worlds are restrained within a CCI environment blighted by inequalities. This highlights the wider complex contexts of cultural production in which our research participants are imbricated.

Conclusions: voicing anti-racism in the digital age

Podcasts offer a new space at the margins (Hooks, 1989) for voicing the self and community, and for constructing subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1992) in ways that seek to both highlight and challenge recurrent processes of racially-formed modes of disenfranchisement. Black and Asian youth are motivated to "create spaces within the culture of domination" (Hooks, 1989) to represent themselves and, as they themselves describe it, their "communities". The most obvious motivation is the curation of experiences, a contemporary way to build a space, assemble, engage one another in discourse, as well as to create a resilient platform for creative work. Existing between the public and private worlds, this counterpublic space is private enough to grant podcasters a safe venue to express their identities in their preferred manner and to build trust, while public enough to be spreadable to audiences who can choose what to listen to. The intertwined dimension of public engagement and personal visibility of podcasts creates a deliberative cultural counterpublic for black and Asian youth that is simultaneously personal, collective and raw.

Described as an open platform for communication, podcasting is seen as an extension of the everyday discussions between the hosts of each podcast and as a space where, alongside guests, they can explore issues that interest or concern them. The presence of the audience offers new opportunities for public, personal and political articulations that often go unheard. In today's highly racialised political climate, podcasts serve as a public sphere for anti-racist consciousness and create a framework for progressive political activity. Mainstream media, the State, and prevailing structures of power have long created a hostile environment for minority communities, legitimising their actions based on either meritocratic policies (Littler, 2017) or through policies that do not protect and advocate for meaningful diversity and equality interventions (Malik, 2013). Against these limitations, podcasts are being drawn upon to produce a creative, digital space at the margins of the CCIs that is potentially interruptive.

However, as we have been arguing, there are also recurring contradictions that form the experiences of our research participants. The benefits of podcasting–the nonchalance, the accessibility, the challenging of hierarchical norms and hegemonic structures – can also have limits. First, the elitism governing the CCIs creates opportunities for marginalised youth to make their voices heard, but also creates an environment that is hard to break into and rise in, including up to the upper echelons of decision-making within platforms such as Apple Podcasts. The podcasters we have interviewed are necessarily implicated in the wider corporate media environment, for example in terms of their relationship with social media and in terms of distribution services such as Spotify. Furthermore, in terms of content, not all podcasts can be regarded as resistive, as we have seen from the diversity of

interests, perspectives and thematic concerns amongst the podcasters that we have interviewed. Whilst we might regard podcasts as attempting to create a structural counterpublic space within the CCIs, the 'radical' (deeply politicised, anti-racist) discursive dimension typical of a counterpublic movement is not always a discernible feature.

Podcasts are part of a history of media-making linked to historical and ongoing systems of oppression. In their research Omi and Winant (1986) remind us of the socially formed instabilities of 'race'. Whilst this suggests the possibility of reconfigurations of race, studies like Nakamura's work on digital racial formations have cautioned against idealistic readings of the digital sphere in which ethnic minorities simply roam free, become enfranchised and are able to self-express because, "in the spirit of neoliberalism, being permitted to exist is not the same as equal representation" (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012, p. 206). Recognising these limitations, we suggest that podcasts provide a degree of autonomy, openness, and new opportunities, but they cannot debilitate the wider contextual articulations circulating in Brexit Britain and the racialisms they produce and sustain. Specifically, the racial disenfranchisement that is reproduced by the CCIs interferes with social inclusion aspirations (Warschauer, 2003), thus generating disadvantages that exist outside of the digital realm.

Through our research, we can see how podcasts function as a tool to connect, communicate and build solidarity. Investigating podcasts as both lived-experience and anti-racist tool reveals how young black and Asian cultural producers do not simply constitute 'marginalised communities' but are inaugurating a form of deliberative culture that is producing and processing self-defined narratives across communication channels. Rather than seeing podcasts through the cyber-utopian lens of absolute freedom from physical and social or cultural constraints, this paper has argued that the importance of publicly voicing identity politics, beliefs and ideas can have real and empowering effects and outcomes for marginalised people, communities, and causes.

Notes on contributors

Photini Vrikki is a Research Fellow in Digital Humanities at Brunel University London. Her research spans from data politics and (digital) inequalities to social change and resistance movements.

Sarita Malik is a Professor of Media, Culture and Communications at Brunel University London. She is interested in questions of social change, inequality, communities, and cultural representation.

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