

Tobias and Syd: a research-based podcast audio-drama about tobacco

Abstract

We report on an experiment that used podcast audio-drama as a medium to generate impact from academic outputs in a creative, inclusive and collaborative way. *Tobias and Syd* was a serialised podcast audio-drama published in January 2023 based on ideas contained in the book *Anthropology of Tobacco* and personal narratives from the Wellcome Trust funded *Letters to the Breath* project. The series aimed to generate conversations and discussions, rather than conclusions, about the role of tobacco in society today. It was a collaborative project involving contributions from diverse stakeholders. In addition to developing, producing and promoting the play, the educational value and dialogic space of the podcast was enhanced through four recorded webinar events based on key themes in the drama. Podcast audio-drama has the potential to open up new perspectives on contentious public health issues like tobacco use and abuse. We reflect on some of the processes involved and the challenges encountered in this case.

Keywords: Tobacco; anthropology; ethnography; audio-drama; podcast

Introducing Tobias and Syd

*‘Just as the act of academic writing is interpretative,
so too is the process of making data theatrical’*

(Beck cited in Rossiter 2008b, p.136)

This article uses an ethnographic approach to describe the iterative, interpretative processes involved in creating a serialized, podcast audio-drama *Tobias and Syd*. Audio-drama is increasingly recognised as a potent art form for creating impact from health research (Chackochan et al 2022;; Nandhini 2021; Nisha 2013; Salama 2020; Winters et al 2021) and podcast audio-drama opens up new opportunities in this sphere. *Tobias and Syd*, written and produced by Elspeth Penny, is a four-part audio-drama inspired by the book *Anthropology of Tobacco: Ethnographic Adventures in Non-Human Worlds* (Russell 2019). The play also includes personal narratives gathered from the *Letters to the Breath* project (Penny & Malpass 2021; Malpass & Penny 2019), namely letters written to their breath by those living with life-limiting respiratory illnesses. Its engagement with two independent but interrelated research projects makes the play an example of *applied* audio-drama (Vachon and Woodland 2021) although we prefer the looser ‘podcast audio-drama’ as the term to describe *Tobias and Syd*.

In this article we use ethnographic approaches in two ways: first to describe and contextualise the production and delivery of our podcast drama, second to evaluate it. Ethnography helps us understand how aesthetics of production are entwined with the ethics and politics of representing a substance like tobacco that is of both cultural and public health concern. Our aim was to reach and engage the public in new and creative ways around smoking as both a

health-related but also culturally inscribed behaviour. We set out to generate conversations and discussions, rather than conclusions, about the role of tobacco in society today. We wanted to evaluate whether podcast audio-drama is a medium that can generate impact from academic outputs in creative, inclusive and collaborative ways.

The play tells the story of Syd, a doctoral anthropology student. We first meet her sheltering in a disused chapel with Nell. Helicopters circle in the distance and it is clear Syd is in hiding. We travel back in Syd's mind to how she came to be in this predicament - lured into an addictive relationship with time- and shape-shifting Tobias, first introduced unveiling a new product, the Luminette, at a conference in Bristol. The drama challenges perceptions about tobacco, looking at it from new and unexpected viewpoints. Using the 'voice' of tobacco itself (Russell 2018), the narrative spans several centuries and continents. During its time travel journey, the podcast drama also touches on the uncomfortable relationship tobacco has with slavery and colonialism.

Tobias and Syd stands in its own right as a piece of work that opens up new perspectives on tobacco as a public health issue. To the best of our knowledge neither tobacco nor respiration (breath) have ever been the subject of an audio drama on public radio or podcasting platforms before. Two recently published pieces of work suggest audio drama is a very effective and powerful way to transfer health information. Winters et al's (2021) work tested the power of audio drama to counter mis-information about causes of typhoid in low income communities in Sierra Leone. Though Winters et al describe the core messages of the audio drama and its effectiveness in changing beliefs, they do not describe the interpretative process of creating the drama itself. Chackochan et al (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of an audio drama on the knowledge and practice regarding personal hygiene among visually impaired children. The authors use the term audio drama to refer to a brief, 20 minute recording in which two students discuss how to maintain personal hygiene practices. These examples of audio dramas are part of a genre that are frequently produced for audiences in the Global South, funded by the Global North to influence health behaviours. *Tobias and Syd* was produced in the Global north for a global audience. It is part of what Bottomley (2015: 179) calls 'a new wave of creative audio production'. For Vachon and Woodland the new wave involves

resurrecting the form from its origins in radio drama, producing complex, high-concept serial stories for dedicated niche audiences, employing well-known actors and creating immersive fictional worlds through soundscape and story (2022: 4).

Rather than a 'radio disruptor', then, podcast drama 'revitalises established forms' (McHugh 2016:4). Podcasting is 'a platform that has breathed new life into established, and in some cases largely forgotten tropes', (Markman 2015: 241 cited in McHugh). Bottomley (2015: 186) similarly argues that 'the new practice of podcasting is not divorced from earlier media like radio; it is refashioning radio and, I would argue, paying homage to it.'

A few recent publications have begun to pay more attention to the *processes* of creating audio-drama, most notably the edited volume by Woodland and Vachon (2022). Their contributors examine the relationship – actual and potential - between community engaged participatory arts and the cultural turn towards audio, sound, and listening that has been referred to as the 'sonic turn'. For Woodland and Vachon, community-engaged audio drama is an 'emergent form...engaged with process as much as product'. Moreover, 'the resulting production is not limited to specific structures, lengths, or forms; aesthetics are entwined with

ethics and politics; and the work often contains socio-cultural agendas and provocations’ (p. 8). Work that has used podcast narrative story telling in public health education and awareness raising includes Lindgren and Jorgensen’s (2023) six-part podcast series on antimicrobial resistance. Lindgren and Jorgensen link the “primacy of the lived experience” (p.86) with the capacity of serialised podcast narratives to “establish strong connections with their listeners...[and] impact on attitudes and pro-social behaviour” (p.86). The ethics and politics in our production of a podcast drama were based on curiosity about whether *Tobias and Syd* was emotionally engaging and if it challenged or surprised the audience, and whether the play changed the audience’s views of tobacco. If it did, we wondered which parts of the production and listening experience were linked to this shift in views or knowledge. We shall start by describing the iterative, interpretative processes involved in creating the serialised, podcast audio-drama *Tobias and Syd* before going on to address the questions that we were curious about.

Ethnographic approaches to understanding creation and production processes

We adopted an ethnographic approach to recording and analysing the creation and production of *Tobias and Syd*. Ethnography provides a mixed-method, contextual understanding of what may be complex iterative processes and interactions, as well as capturing a diversity in views (Rabin, Salgin, Watson et al 2023). For this reason, ethnographic approaches value working *alongside* and *with* communities, rather than *for* and *to*. The approach of *Tobias and Syd* was inherently collaborative and to a certain extent co-produced, involving as it did a dramaturg, as well as audience and academic feedback during its creation, including a young advisory group representing the anticipated audience of the new play. Ethnographic approaches value giving voice to the less often heard. *Tobias and Syd* included and commemorated the voices of letter writers now dead, as well as the voice of tobacco deriving from current theoretical constructs in material culture studies (for example Tsing 2014; Russell 2018).

Ethnographic approaches can also facilitate reconciliatory processes needed when public health issues - like tobacco – are embroiled in complex and difficult contemporary and historical issues involving inequity and harm. In the case of *Tobias and Syd*, the writing and production needed an iterative, collaborative approach in order to address the sensitive subject of tobacco's links with capitalism, colonialism and slavery. The play is set in and around Bristol, a city engaged in an ongoing process of reconciliation with its violent colonial heritage of trafficking in human beings and tobacco.

Ethnographic approaches were also chosen because they encourage the combination of quantitative, questionnaire-based methods alongside qualitative, co-production methods, including participatory observation. As ethnographer (first author-AM) attended and thus experienced first-hand all the production and delivery stages of the drama and its associated webinar events apart from the recording sessions. Through this ethnographic lens, in what follows we describe preparing the script, producing and disseminating the play in more detail. We introduce the associated webinars we held and recorded as well as the short videos uploaded onto the project website as a way of extending the *dialogic space* and hence the educational value of a podcast drama such as this.

Collaboration, iteration and interpretative processes

What distinguishes the creation and production of *Tobias and Syd* as a fictionalised audio-drama deriving from existing published research is the collaborative, iterative and interpretative approaches we adopted. The creative process involved in writing and producing the play went through a number of stages, each involving collaborative feedback cycles (Table 1).

TIMELINE	CREATIVE PROCESS	COLLABORATIVE FEEDBACK CYCLE
Spring 2019	<i>Anthropology of Tobacco</i> published by Taylor and Francis. Letter to the Breath published in <i>Storytelling, Self and Society</i> .	Two texts which inspired the audio drama are published.
Autumn 2019	Creative Director (EP) encounters Andrew Russell (AR's) work on tobacco over dinner at a 'Life of Breath' project event	EP carried out more research on the topic of tobacco. AR invited to speak at a public event at the Tobacco Factory, Bristol.
January 31 st 2020	AR gives public lecture 'Tobacco: Shape-Shifting Substance from South America' at the Tobacco Factory, Bristol	Audience levels of interest in the topic and theoretical approach noted.

June - September 2021	Improvised ideas for the play with actors	Discussed ideas with dramaturg: feedback
February 15th 2022	First draft of scenes in the script presented at sketch performance at the Puppet Place, Bristol	Feedback from invited audience, including marketeer, as well as core creative team (writer, director, dramaturg, sound editor, composer). Audience chose Tobias and Syd to go forward (one of three sketch plays by EP presented that night).
May 2022	Second draft of script	Day meeting: feedback from academics [AR, AM]
June 2022	Live reading of the play	Advisory Group feedback
August 25 th 2022	Third draft of the play	Feedback from academics [AR, AM]
July – September 2022	Fourth – Sixth drafts of play	Writer and dramaturg work in isolation
October 2022	Recording of play	Core creative team edits

Table 1: *The creative process with collaborative feedback cycles in the creation of Tobias and Syd.* [Key – EP, AR, AM]

Tobias and Syd builds on a long-term collaborative relationship that started with the interdisciplinary, Wellcome Trust-funded ‘Life of Breath’ project (Carel, Macnaughton and Dodd 2015). *Anthropology of Tobacco* was published in 2019 as an output from both that project and a prior Leverhulme Research Fellowship. It aims to provide fresh perspectives on tobacco-human relationships, focussing on the historical and contemporary in equal measure. The sequencing of the narrative mirrors this complexity, involving multiple temporal and spatial settings (e.g. Hollywood actors smoking in the 1930s, an English pub with John Donne present in the 1600s, American shores in the 1500s, a Bristol conference on addiction in the present). Just as Tsing’s representation of a matsukake mushroom spore, ‘is as right as I can make it, based on my readings, observations, and interviews with mycologists’ (2014: 225) so, from the writer’s perspective, *Tobias and Syd* seeks to fairly represent the research outputs while balancing them with the need to compose an emotionally engaging, compelling narrative. AR as the academic whose work was being fictionalised was part of the iterative collaborative cycle to make sure themes were accurately represented, but ultimately:

the story must come first. If the message is too strong the audience will switch off. It could become really dry (Penny, Elspeth 2023, playwright in-person interview with A.Malpass, Bristol).

A related challenge to a shift in academic role and identity was that,

academics sometimes don’t understand the in-depth creative process. The time it takes. An idea (for a scene) can take three days walking about, dreaming. It might not always be a good dream. Those ideas then go through a process of embedding and out

of that comes a few threads for the narrative (Penny, Elspeth 2023, playwright in-person interview with A.Malpass, Bristol)

Academics need to let go of any expectations they have and give their creative collaborators space for artistic license. If they are able to do this and accept doing so as an important phase in the iterative process then ‘that’s what makes a good collaboration’ (ibid). For AR this meant beginning the collaborative process with no expectations and remaining open and curious about how his academic text might be translated into a drama. The way that the relation between tobacco and people was depicted in the play, in terms of a romance between the anthropologist Syd and Tobias as tobacco morphed into human form, was the interpretative decision by the playwright, EP.

Interestingly AR and EP never talked about the play in the very early stages of its development, they just talked about the topic, tobacco; the first time AR found out anything about the content of *Tobias and Syd* was at the sketch performance held in Bristol in February 2022 (Figure 1).

[Figure 1: Andrew Russell, *Sketch performance of Tobias and Syd, Puppet Place, Bristol, 2022*. Iphone photograph.]

However, the writing resonates with the way AR, the academic, identifies three types of non-human/human hybrids in his book: tobacco-persons, tobacco-corporations and tobacco-control. One interesting challenge, however, was a disciplinary mismatch over how much explanation the audience needed about what was happening in the play. On August 27th 2022 the academics (AR and AM) met with the playwright EP at her home outside Bristol to discuss the second draft of the script. In their feedback, AR and AM felt more explanation should be included for clarity’s sake. For EP, however, expositional script of this kind is a tell-tale sign of poor writing and a sure way to disengage an audience. She did, though, take on board some of the comments about what to include and what to leave out. Any disagreements between them about the contents of the play were dissipated by a walk up to the Bronze Age bowl barrows above EP’s village to seek deep historical inspiration (Figure 2).

[Figure 2: Alice Malpass, *The anthropologist (AR) seeks inspiration at a Bronze Age bowl barrow, 2022*. Iphone photograph.]

What this example reflects is the need for academics involved in a project with a creative goal such as this one to trust the artist, whose judgement ultimately trumps that of the academics. This may require letting go of their usual roles and identities as experts who describe, analyse and explain the world to others. From EP’s perspective the creative process is,

a journey combining emotion and spirit with theories and facts...a very difficult journey to make (Penny, Elspeth 2023, playwright in-person interview with A.Malpass, Bristol).

The artist cannot travel as a creative unless her academic collaborators loosen the reins valuing expositional accuracy:

Story, story, story first. Facts get in the way. The story must come first (Penny, Elspeth 2023, playwright in-person interview with A.Malpass, Bristol)

The academics [AM and AR] trusted the artist to create the most engaging fictionalised vehicle to transport their research off the page and out into the audience's imagination. EP's talent is her ability to weave research inside a fictionalised account. Just as Tsing (2014) describes her process as an account guided by a mix of science and creative fiction, EP ensures her value for a high quality creative product is "as right as she can make it", through a co-production and participatory process, which involves multiple turns in which marginalised audience voices, as well as academic truth-checking, can intercept.

The educational values underpinning the work of anthropologists [AR and AM] are not so dissimilar from those of EP, the company director of 2BU Production. For example, 2BU has mutual benefit as one its core values, defined as 'creating work that connects with hearts and heads, inspiring passion, contemplative reflection and a gentle exploration of values'. Ethnographers, with their immersive and embedded approach to gathering data and insights, continually move from experiential, participatory observation to critical reflection. Another example from 2BU's values document is the importance placed upon artful disruption, defined as 'valuing equality and diversity over the status quo. Using humour, collage, texture, storytelling, magic and presence to create pioneering, non-conformist and rebellious performances, publications, exhibitions and events. Involving a continuous reflection on creative process in order to share learning, inspire further creative expression and encourage health services that are informed by lived experience' (Penny 2021)). The ethnographic disposition is one that makes repeat crossings across different value systems. To understand others' ways of being in the world, we have to travel into others' worlds and sometimes we can become lost, merging unhelpfully with what we seek to observe and make sense of. Those whose borderlands we visit, can also become embroiled with us. The repeat crossings of value-laden landscapes mean ethnographers may be better equipped than other disciplines to let go of their academic shorelines when involved in a creative project. As Annette Boaz (2021) suggests collaborative efforts should focus on the practice as an epistemological, rather than methodological challenge through enabling *the creation of academic identities* that allow for authentic collaboration. Letting go of explanatory ways of knowing and the linked academic identity of expert was an important and necessary epistemological shift in the production of *Tobias and Syd*. For AM and AR as ethnographers, it was a familiar shift.

What is interesting to notice is that the narrative device of the play itself mirrors this process of transgressing borders, timescapes and competing (disciplinary) values. Syd, as a doctoral anthropologist studying tobacco and addiction, travels (through time) into the world of Tobias and for a while she loses her grip on her own value reference points. From the moment she ingests Tobias, she allows herself to be cast off from what she values. She is only able to tell the tale [and she *is* the one narrating it] when she is moored once more to her values as a researcher, truth-seeking and critical, in the present moment. Though she ends up as we first find her, marooned and in hiding, she sees the whole story.

It was important that the whole advisory team were aware that, despite the collaborative nature of the enterprise, final decisions about the creative content had to remain in the playwright's domain, and that both writer and dramaturg had to be trusted in their journey (drafts 4 – 6 of the play, Table 1). This included the need for everyone else to take a step back at times, because creative isolation and space is essential to pull together a piece of fictional drama. Not allowing this space risks a less satisfying play written by committee. Such a play risks not having a consistent voice and vision and not holding together in a way that provides

its audience with a satisfactory emotional experience. The importance of creating a satisfactory emotional experience is explored further below in relation to audience engagement, but first we reflect on the dialogic space of applied audio-dramas, such as *Tobias and Syd*.

Associated webinar events – expanding the dialogic space

The atomisation of the listening audience experience (Tierney 2015) separates the individual listener from a wider audience. This may make the experience more vivid, but also creates a problem in that audio-drama is a ‘one-way transaction’ (Woodland and Vachon 2022: 30). It requires mechanisms if it is to develop as a more dialogic space. To accompany the *Tobias and Syd* audio-drama podcast, therefore, we decided to create a set of four associated webinars. These aimed both to draw in new audiences for the podcast-drama as well as to give those who had listened to it somewhere to go to discuss their experience of the play with others. These webinar events were intended to evoke, extend and echo different aspects of the play, three action-based attributes that are explained in Table 2.

Evoked	Each webinar includes an audio clip from the podcast play that evokes the atmosphere of the play and brings the theme to life through the plot and characters.
Extend	The webinars each explore a particular theme from the play, inviting external speakers to relate their work to this theme and move beyond it.
Echo	The sequencing of the webinars follows the narrative arc of the main protagonist in the play, i.e. the highs, lows and concerns of Syd’s character as she moves through the story.

Table 2: *The three action-based attributes of the webinar events associated with Tobias and Syd.*

Each webinar was based on a theme from the podcast audio-drama. The first, *Desire that Destroys*, explored the role of tobacco in making and breaking our most intimate relationships. The webinar examined relationships and the choices we make within them - be they with other people or substances such as tobacco. The second webinar was *Smoke Signals*. In it we looked at the character and meaning of tobacco through an anthropological lens. We explored other (worldly) ways of looking at tobacco - from cultural contexts in which tobacco smoke represents a close connection to spirit and is used to ‘firm up’ the very young (Rahman 2015), to the shape-shifting nature of the tobacco plant across space and time. We wanted to explore with participants how they make sense of shamanic uses of smoke in healing rituals and how they imagined shamans might view contemporary, commercialised uses of tobacco. The fictionalised #FreeSyd campaign wants to free Syd’s research from the clutches of the tobacco industry. The third webinar, *Interference*, explored real life examples of just this type of intimidation and tobacco tactics, drawing out the themes from AR’s work on tobacco corporations. In the final drama-webinar, *Kind or Cruel*, we discussed the close relationship between mental illness, even crisis and the smoking habit. We explored this both from the perspectives of mental health social housing providers, service staff from secure mental health units, and a practitioner who uses tobacco in ceremonial healing rituals.

The development of the themes for the webinars fed into the writing of additional scenes in the podcast-drama. For example, after developing the webinar theme *Interference*, the team carried out research for potential speakers and found various cases where researchers studying tobacco addiction had been intimidated by tobacco companies. This led to the decision to start the play with Syd in hiding. As her connection with Tobias grew, her research became manipulated and mis-used. This storyline was not written into the play at the beginning. In this way webinar development and podcast-drama script writing were iteratively linked.

Other approaches to extending the dialogic space

We employed a graphic artist, Maria Herreros, to produce a flyer/poster for the play suitable for different media and platforms (Figure 3).

[Figure 3: Maria Herreros, *Image for Tobias and Syd*, 2022, Copyright 2BU Productions.]

The recording of Tobias and Syd took place over two days at a recording studio in Bedminster, Bristol (Figure 4).

[Figure 4: Andrew Russell: *Iain Hunter (sound recordist), Genie of Dunstan recording studios, October 2022*. Iphone photograph.]

During this time, the production team recorded and subsequently edited a series of videos of people of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds telling their tobacco-related stories or experiences. A young advocate was paid to produce additional creative video content as well as to create a young voice on social media platforms to further develop the podcast-drama into a larger dialogic space. We used the video content as a promotional tool to draw in new and diverse audiences for the podcast as well as to give those who had already listened to it another way to extend and reflect further on their experience of the play. Traffic to the 2BU Productions' *Tobias and Syd* website increased sixfold in the month following the launch of the play, in large part due to the videos being hosted on the website.

Ethnographic approaches to evaluation

Ethnography encourages multi-method approaches in documenting and evaluating not only the iterative production process itself as described above, but also the extent of audience engagement. We were curious to know whether the audience experienced the play and the related webinar content as dialogic space and the extent to which they learnt interesting new knowledge. An ethnographic approach to understanding audience engagement and experience meant we collected data in multiple contexts and at different time points. Methods included post-webinar-event surveys sent to speakers and participants, analysis of typed communications in real time (chatlog), post engagement communication such as emails about the play or associated webinars addressed to the producer, and periodic reflections and debriefing sessions held between the author and collaborators which includes meeting notes and informal interviews between AM and AR, and AM and EP. We also invited a live scribe (Liam Callebout) to illustrate the content of discussion during webinars and this is included as visual data to explore audience engagement. We also include Eventbrite and Hootsuite analytics on download and site traffic trends, as well as social media posts relating to either the play or webinars. Rapid thematic analysis (Vindrola-Padros and Johnson, 2020) was

conducted on all the data to identify overarching themes which were discussed as a team. Ideas in the literature informed our thinking and fed into some theoretical organisation of these themes. For example, we became interested in data that spoke to the importance of extending dialogic space in order to enhance the educational benefits of the play.

Evaluations of education-related theatre productions have tended to be purely questionnaire-based (Rossiter 2008a, Segedin 2017) and to focus on two questions, (1) did participants enjoy it? and (2) what did participants learn about the topic? Our ethnographic approach enabled us to expand beyond these narrow confines to include issues such as engagement and inclusivity. Table 3 shows the wider range of questions explored, and the types of data gathered to answer them. The findings from this evaluation, based on the three questions posed in Table 3, appear below. When we cite from these different sources of data, we use the reference survey data as [S-123], chatlog data from webinar events as [C-123], email data sent to producer, as [E-123]. Where relevant and available we also share professional and age characteristics.

	Questions	Type of Data
1	Did the audio-drama and the online drama-webinars reach the target audience?	Eventbrite analytics on site traffic and bookings Hootsuite analytics on podcast downloads and site traffic
2	What was the audience experience for the podcast drama and associated webinar? -Who engaged in discussion? -What they expected -What they learnt -What they enjoyed -What surprised or challenged them	Chatlog from online events Anonymous survey sent after events Social media posts on Twitter and Instagram about the audio-drama Email feedback sent direct to creative director
3	In what ways did the audience engage? What types of contributions did participants make, did anyone dominate the discussion, what barriers prevented people from contributing?	Anonymous online survey Chatlog and transcript from online events Live scribed images

Table 3. Questions about the podcast and associated webinars and type of data collected

Reaching the target audience

There were over 500 downloads of the audio-drama in the first six weeks after the launch of *Tobias and Syd*. While much less than well-established bimonthly dramas such as *Welcome*

to *Night Vale* (Bottomley, 2015), this download figure is much higher than what might have been likely for a live online performance. More than half of the downloads (320) were from within the UK and 123 from the USA. The remainder were spread across 27 countries in Europe, South Asia, South America, Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and New Zealand. The webinars did not reach as large a number but the geographical range of the audience was still impressive with 52 participants attending from 7 countries: UK, Romania, France, Spain, Singapore, Peru and Germany. Of the UK-based audience, just under half were local to Bristol, where the podcast's fictional characters were based. We did not collect data on audience socio-demographics or age, but based on observation alone at the drama-webinar events there was a mixed audience in terms of gender, ethnicity and current or past smoking status. Some young adults (16 to 24) were present and engaged at each webinar but overall this group was under-represented. Indeed, despite our young person's advocacy group, reaching the target audience for the play remained a challenge.

The audience experience

The survey results asked the audience about their experience of listening to the podcast-drama as well as their experience of the webinars. Some participants reported lacking confidence to contribute during the webinar but felt engaged in the themes of the audio-drama and enjoyed the discussions. The descriptors 'thought-provoking', 'unsteady', 'disorienting', 'edgy' and 'intrigue' suggest our audiences were pleasantly challenged by the content and they left having learnt new things as reflected in the descriptors 'educational', 'inspiring', 'illuminating', 'absorbing', 'deep-themes' and 'learning'. As one audience participant commented,

I feel enlightened on the history of tobacco [S-5031].

The combination of educational experience with challenging emotive content gives us confidence in our claim that podcast drama can engage audiences in public health debates whilst entertaining them in a satisfying fiction.

Broader arguments about the poetics and politics of sound is relevant to how podcast audio drama is a useful medium for opening up discussion on cultural health histories that involve historical harms. Woodland and Vachon (2022) suggest that making hearing the foremost of the five senses, as one does when listening to a podcast, does something unique in terms of the listening space they offer. The absence of visual performative elements creates conditions whereby the existing preconceptions and power dynamics of socio-cultural elements such as race, gender, and ethnicity can be disrupted in generative ways through sonic based performance. It also enables listeners to connect imaginatively, perhaps more imaginatively and on a deeper level, than other forms of performance, where visuals may take over. Performing data through speaking directly into the ear of the listener shifts how people engage with empirical materials. This is not new to applied theatre practitioners, but it may be new to researchers. Listeners to *Tobias and Syd* described being seduced and 'totally hooked' by the play:

I was completely seduced! *Tobias and Syd* built a momentum and drew me in - you could say in the same way as inhaling that first, illicit cigarette... (E-101-theatre director)

The intensity and intimacy of listening is comparable, for this audience member, to the intensity of inhaling an illicit substance. The audience ingest and are changed by their sound experience, even intoxicated by it. The audience experience of seduction was made possible, our audience told us, by the high audio production quality which enabled an *immersive* listening experience:

The sharp recording really helps with immersion into the drama. The seductiveness really resonated (E-102)

Like radio, podcast drama is a medium where the human voice, as radio producer Jay Allison puts it, 'can sneak in, bypass the brain, and touch the heart' (2010:184 cited in Lindgren p.4). The purpose of the character Tobias is to first seduce and then control Syd. The play works particularly well as a podcast play because the audio medium is (like radio) 'affective resonance and enveloping' (McHugh 2014: 154). As our audience member cited above describes 'the seductiveness really resonated' and they experienced an 'immersion'. In Verma's words, our audience was enveloped, 'the enveloping, listening experience of podcast drama extends it into a theatre of the mind (Verma 2012). In *Tobias and Syd*, the theatre of the mind took the form of Tobias' voice whispering in our ears, the voice of tobacco itself, becomes a menacing, seductive sound. The audience described experiencing the character Tobias as a parasite and a fungus - a presence that is insidiously living off the listener-host. 'Sounds work like viruses between consciousnesses... each sound has a quality of want in its relation to us' (Verma 2017:12). Part of the unsteady experience of listening to the play was encountering the character Tobias and witnessing his seduction then manipulation of Syd:

Tobias is insidious, terrifying at points - he's like a fungus, manipulative... you get the feeling Syd is experiencing it at the same time as you are. (C-103, 16 years old)

The experience of having both protagonist and antagonist characters whispering in our ears, creates competing wants, which impacts our audience response (cf. Dowling and Miller 2019). The emotional tone of the audience experience is captured by the descriptors 'enjoyable', 'warm', 'sensitive', 'intelligent', 'brave', 'enthraling' and 'vivid'. The experience of listening to the play was described as both 'pleasurable' and 'disruptive':

I loved how we were taken through time, both script wise and the sound - pleasurable and unsteady at the same time, just like a cigarette! (E-104, Graphic Novelist)

Here the audience member differentiates the content of the script from the soundscapes of the narrative experience. As a novelist, s/he is perhaps more aware than mainstream audiences of the transition from script to audio-drama. Nevertheless, the audio podcast medium is experienced as both pleasant (and one can assume entertaining) alongside being unsteady – pointing to the wider purpose of applied audio-drama, to inspire critical reflection amongst its listeners, through artful disruption.

Audience engagement

Drama is not only a medium for entertainment but is a way to inspire thought, critical reflection, emotional engagement and personal transformation (Rossiter 2008). Our aims were grounded in ideas as practitioners of how drama impacts its audience. We wanted to engage the public in a creative way around a health-related behaviour - smoking. Smoking as

a behaviour has strong emotional and cognitive components and we felt that audio drama was a medium that could usefully be employed to explore the often contradictory emotional and cognitive motivations described by smokers (Gungen 2022, Besson 2016). The struggle to smoke or not to smoke is often experienced as an internal dialogue (cf. Craze 2003). The purpose of the character Tobias is to first seduce, inhabit and then control Syd, and we may even argue that the podcast drama is able to ‘cast spells, to alter minds, to connect bodies’ (Verma 2017:12) in the mind of the listener.

We wanted the audio drama to be a starting point for conversations about the choices we make in all kinds of relationships - whether with a person, a substance or even a difficult, troubling past:

All dramatised stories – that is all stories clothed in *fiction* – are conversation starters; a call to remember, to think... so that we may take responsibility, consider action and provoke change. (Prendergast and Saxton 2015, 280, italics in original cited in Vachon and Woodland 2022, p.11)

There were mixed views on whether the audience had changed how they thought about tobacco as a result of engaging in the podcast and webinars. Some reported:

To me it [the play] was about seduction, desire, self-doubt, manipulation, addiction. It hasn't really changed the way I think about tobacco, but interesting to dive into these (to me) deeper themes. [S-820]

For this audience member the play was more than a story about a public health issue of smoking and tobacco. As we had hoped, they had engaged with a deeper set of reflections and questions (deeper themes) on our wider choices in all types of relationship. Others had been prompted to reflect more deeply on their specific relationship to tobacco. This applied to both former and current smokers:

‘I’m an ex-smoker - I thought the play really captured the insidiousness of smoking, the desire and attractiveness of it as well as the cynicism of the producers and pushers of tobacco [S-761]

I liked the play. The play and workshop together have made me think more about tobacco, which I had not really thought about since I quit smoking! [S-918]

I’ve not really reflected on my smoking habit very much until being aware of your project, and I recognize, it's hard sometimes to see the effect, when you're so in it... really enjoyed hearing others’ perspectives on smoking (attended drama-webinar, transcript)

It made me think about my own relationship with tobacco [S-945]

These audience responses above illustrate the success of the play to open up a critical space and prompt reflection and conversations. Some members of the audience responded to the way the play spoke to corporate power and the difficult topic of addiction:

Bold and true and loved the idea of tobacco being a parasite. The piece was unusual and brave – very important to keep on tobacco companies’ back as they are getting worse and worse by all accounts. (E-105, film director)

Dynamic and absorbing play which really catches the truth about addiction and the power of tobacco. Wonderfully produced and acted. (E-106, Comedian)

What is interesting in these audience responses is that they comment on three ways they are engaging with the play: the emotional resonance of the narrative: ‘bold, true, unusual’, the listening experience: ‘dynamic and absorbing’, and the high production value: ‘wonderfully acted’. Others described being simultaneously entertained and we can assume, emotively engaged with the creative devices of time travel, alongside receiving some of the research ideas, described as ‘the serious message’:

What an amazingly imaginative and original idea! I like the way it moves easily across time and across the world. The serious message is clear - that tobacco - and the Tobacco Industry - needs us as much as we need it. A sort of toxic co-dependence. (E-107)

In a similar vein, audience members commented on the complexity of the narrative and the wide range of themes the play covers:

The production succeeds in showing a tone of human frailty and addiction-proneness’. Writing, actors, time shifts, romance, ‘data’: it’s all harnessed absorbingly. Donne, Columbus, Raleigh, Colston, Davis, Crawford, Rogers, Grant! *In-spire*. Bravo. It’s really good. You’ve marshalled a complexity here into clear and innovative drama. (E-108, Musician).

The audience have recognised how the artist and researchers have co-created something – romance has somehow been *harnessed* with data. As we cite EP above, ‘theories and facts’, have been told through a narrative of ‘emotion and spirit’. The audience feedback, again another creative, recognises too this is indeed a difficult journey for the writer, one that requires the writer to act as marshal (for the creative must trump the academic).

Moving back into more visual modalities, the results of Liam Callebout’s live scribing of the webinars are shown below (Figures 5 and 6). These provide an excellent and occasionally humorous rendition of the webinar discussions. The images extend dialogic space into another medium, turning audience responses to the themes in the podcast play into visual texts. One NHS mental health nurse, who was a participant at the Kind or Cruel webinar, intended to take the visual text to his staff meeting as a conversation starter on the pros and cons of the smoking ban policy for in-patients living in a secure mental health unit. For him, the visual text was a useful, reflective tool for policy and practice at his institution. For us, it demonstrates the potential for podcast drama and related webinar content to reach and engage audiences in new and creative ways.

[Figure 5 Liam Callebout, *Visual summary of dialogue during Interference webinar*, 2022. Livescribe. Online. Copyright 2BU Productions.]

[Figure 6 Liam Callebout, *Visual summary of dialogue during Kind or Cruel webinar*, 2022. Livescribe. Online. Copyright 2BU Productions.]

Discussion: Drama as a tool for knowledge transfer

The project brought together creative writing, directing and production alongside medical anthropology and applied health research, each with their own menu of professional values and ideas of what the role of creativity is in the transference of knowledge. Our critical lens is ethnographic, both as a means of better understanding creative and production processes and the extent of audience engagement.

In this article, we have championed fictionalised audio-drama as a tool for translating research-based knowledge into an accessible, creative medium. We have charted the various stages in the creation and delivery of both the play and its associated webinar events, reflecting on some of the processes involved and the challenges encountered along the way when disciplinary values don't always align with artistic practice. In doing so we have demonstrated that podcast drama can reach and engage the public in debates on public health-related behaviours such as smoking in new and creative ways. It can also open out the complex, hidden cultural histories that underpin many public health issues.

Rossiter et al (2008a)'s schema for analysing knowledge transfer in theatrical settings through different kinds of performance genres offers a useful tool for analysing how research has been incorporated into art in *Tobias and Syd*. The first genre, non-theatrical performances, relies heavily on the data as script, with little dramatic interpretation. An example is turning fieldnotes or interview data into scripted, performative monologues. Such an approach relies heavily on the data as script, with little dramatic interpretation. The second, ethnodrama, involves the creation of real-life vignettes. These remain similarly faithful to the primary research output, but also offer possibilities for forum theatre and other kinds of participatory audience interactions. The third genre, research-based theatrical performances, has a more artistic goal, moving away from realism to utilise the creative power of theatre as an interpretative tool which 'creates a space for cultural critique' (Denzin 1997, p.100 cited in Rossiter et al 2008a, p.136). The fourth genre consists of purely fictional, theatrical performance.

Tobias and Syd combines the first and third of these performative genres, overlain by the fourth - purely fictional, theatrical performance. *Letters to the Breath* represent fieldnotes turned into performative monologues exactly as they were written by patients. The interpretative and creative process in this genre involved choosing which letters to include and deciding where in the overall script they should appear. Research-based theatrical performance is represented by the time-travelling narrative and the character Tobias playing tobacco itself, morphed into human form to seduce Syd to become a smoker. The morphing of tobacco into human form is a creative device, but only to the extent that western audiences are largely oblivious to the agentive, sacred character of tobacco in its countries and cultures of origin. Russell's work recognises tobacco as a non-human agent and hybrid subject in the guise of 'tobacco-persons' (such as Syd), 'tobacco-corporations' (such as Tobias) and even 'tobacco-control' (an empty category in the play but in its own way as dependent and entwined with tobacco as the two other hybrids identified in the book). Tobias-as-tobacco-corporation takes advantage of theatrical liberty to play with these ideas in metaphoric representations that call for and evoke a willing suspension of disbelief.

It is thus in Genre 4, fictional, theatrical performance, where the value of ‘audio-drama’ comes into its own compared to the many other ways of ‘immersive audio storytelling’ that podcasting permits (Dowling and Miller 2019). EP, as playwright, captures both the eloquence of ‘Letters to the Breath’ and the theoretical gist of Russell (2019) in an integrative way and, through it, is able to create, explain and comment on the intentions and unspoken motives of characters, through the creative exploitation of ‘theatre’s fantastic, imaginative possibilities’ (Rossiter 2008a, p.135). Our audience said their encounter with Tobias as tobacco as a creative device engaged them in the drama, and left an emotive impact on them as listeners. The dramatic spark that ignites this ‘time travelling romance’ (2BU Productions 2023) brings the other two genres together, expanding on them both by using metaphor, fictional narrative, abstraction and creative staging.

Creating *Tobias and Syd* transgressed all these performance genres. Doing so, though, raises interesting questions about the role of the author in the development, production and promotional processes necessary to turn the creative spark into dramatic reality. The features we have identified in this article are (1) the importance of the authorial voice, (2) the principle of collaboration and (3) the need for cyclical, spiralling iterations requiring not just a recalibration of characters, story and outcomes but frequently their reinterpretation.

Conclusion

Using an ethnographic approach this article has charted the creative transformation and dissemination of two academic outputs, *Anthropology of Tobacco* and *Letters to the Breath*, into a podcast-drama, *Tobias and Syd*. Research-based podcast-dramas such as this represent something of a ‘sonic turn’, one that could potentially be used to develop new kinds of arts and health interventions. The aim of our project was to generate conversations and discussions about the role of tobacco in contemporary society – in other words, to extend the dialogic space of an important public health topic. This was done not only through the creative endeavour of the play itself – a time-travelling romance – but by a series of four webinars that explored some of the key themes it raised, as well as short co-produced videos on social media platforms. *Tobias and Syd* provides a model for how podcast drama could be used to open up dialogues in other contentious areas of public health.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our co-production advisory group Charlotte Bailey, Arthur Burston, Andrea Hernandez, Aggie Nyagari, Sol Okasha, Evie Shortman, Jack Owen, Bede Burston, Lois Barton, Miles Chambers, and our Young Advocate Elisha Westmore. Also Sara Davies for Dramaturgy and Executive Production; Iain Hunter for Sound and Editing, Music by Matthew Sheeran, Theatre Orchard for their marketing help and wider guidance, Breath Easy Groups for their Breath letters. All of the Production Team and Illustration by Maria Herreros. Thank you also to the cast - Sion Daniel Young, Ell Potter, Kezrena James, Joseph Tweedale, Gaia Ashwood, Aaron Donovan and Reuben Orr as well as the original theatrical cast improvisers, Chris Pirie and Kirsty Cox. Thank you to David Richmond of Arts in Development, Deasy Bamford and Paul Appleby MBE for their help in the creation of the 2BU Bible.

We would like to thank all the speakers who contributed to the webinars – Ell Potter, Charlotte Bailey, Raffy Van de Wal, Elizabeth Rahman, Andrew Russell, Kate Binnie, Louis Laurence, Alex Gapud, Matthew Chapman, Maitriyoti, James Marlow and Jean Rankin.

Further credits can be found with the podcast drama, and on the relevant 2BU Productions website (<https://2buproductions.org/tobias-and-syd/>).

Declaration of Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding Details

This work was supported by the Arts Council under Grant [2BU Organisational and Creative Development ACPG-00404654]; and ESRC Impact Accelerator Account administered by Durham University [Project 777043: *Tobias and Syd*].

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Citation on deposit: Russell, A. (in press). Tobias and Syd: a research-based podcast audio-drama about tobacco. Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media

For final citation and metadata, visit Durham

Research Online URL: <https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/3222587>

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