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Honors Thesis Proposal

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Revising History: The Familiar Essay's Transformation in the Podcast Industry

Project Purpose

Through this project, I will explore the podcast as a relevant medium for the modern essay. I will do so by researching, writing, and producing a podcast.

Project Importance

Though the essay as a genre was invented by a French nobleman, his own merchant class roots and his conversational disposition established the essay early on as a literature for the middle-class.¹ In fact, the essay has always had a place as the common person's form of communication. This is why I believe presenting it in the format of the podcast makes so much sense.

The podcast is rapidly becoming a popular choice of media for Americans. Sixty-seven million Americans listen to podcasts every week.² The podcast, however, is not a genre, but rather it is a medium; an episodic audio (and sometimes video) collection that reaches its audience through an RSS feed. The medium itself can host all kinds of genres. Some of the current top podcasts are political talk shows, educational speeches, and comedy programs. Although the medium of communication for modern essayists is still typically print, recent

¹ Stuckey-French, Ned. "The Genteel Essay and the Gentleman at the Fireside." *The American Essay in the American Century*. University of Missouri, 2011. EBSCOhost, lib.byu.edu/remotearchive?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=439476&site=eds-live&scope=site

² Baer, Jay. "The 11 Critical Podcast Statistics of 2017." *Convince and Convert: Social Media Consulting and Content Marketing Consulting*, Convince and Convert, LLC, 15 Mar. 2017, www.convinceandconvert.com/podcast-research/the-11-critical-podcast-statistics-of-2017/.

shows—like the wildly popular *Revisionist History* by Malcolm Gladwell—are showing signs that the podcast is becoming a medium of communication and distribution for modern essayists.

With such a wide and growing audience and nonfiction reigning in current popularity (and even the essay is making a comeback in the book format³), the podcast would be a fertile medium for the perpetuation and genetic variation of the modern essay. Therefore, exploring the interplay between this historically influential genre of literature and this presently influential format of media is highly relevant. This thesis and project study the connection of the essay as a tried and true genre with the podcast as a current, viral medium. It explores how their combination has the potential to evolve into something widely influential.

Project Overview

In order to prepare to create my own podcast in this style, I will first define the essay genre and research how the familiar essay has been and can be transformed to operate within the podcast industry. I plan to enter and understand the conversation about the role of the essay in general. I will do so through my studies of the essay in Joey Franklin's ENGL 339 course, which will focus on the genre of nonfiction and the American essay. The attempt to define a familiar essay could be a dissertation in and of itself, so I will be cautious in appearing conclusive in this section. However, for the purposes of the rest of this project, it will be important to understand the traits of the familiar essay. For this section, I plan to rely on *The American Essay in the American Century* by Ned Stuckey-French for a general definition of the essay and a record of its influence and the writings of authors such as Anne Fadiman for examples of the familiar essay construct. I will use my research to prepare myself to write a series of essays for my own podcast.

³ Smallwood, Christine. "The Pleasure (and Popularity) of Really Short Books." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 Nov. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/11/14/t-magazine/entertainment/short-books-rebecca-solnit-rivka-galchen-ben-lerner.html?mcubz=1&_r=0.

As I study current podcasts that could resemble the familiar essay, I expect to find that certain podcasts—like *Hidden Brain* and *Planet Money* from NPR, *This American Life*, and *Revisionist History* by Malcolm Gladwell, for example—exhibit traits of the essay, like double-mindedness, in their episodes. I will compare and contrast their literary approach to the podcast with my own. In order to understand the part of the podcast industry that most closely matches my area of study, I plan to meet with representatives and writers for NPR's most essay-like podcasts. I intend to do so because such a visit—which we have tentatively planned for four days in January at NPR's Washington, DC, location—would provide the value of understanding not only a writer's own perceived literary approach to a podcast episode, but also the atmosphere of the literary creation.

I expect the creation of my own podcast in the style of the familiar essay to require a measure of compromise from both genre and delivery format. For instance, an essayist does not typically include the same style of beginning for each of his essays, but a podcast typically begins with a jingle or theme to establish its brand. In spite of such allowances, I anticipate that the essay will not only fit into, but improve the quality of the podcast delivery format. Additionally, I anticipate that, when discussing highly technical matters (e.g. academia or other jargon), the casual atmosphere of the podcast and the format of the essay will enable the material to be more accessible to non-expert audiences than typical methods of information delivery.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of this project, I will be incorporating professors from both my major (English) and my minor (English language) to review my work. Jacob Rawlins will be my honors thesis advisor. Professor Rawlins has a PhD in rhetoric and

professional communication. He is interested in the accessibility of academia and can apply his knowledge of professional communication to this project. He teaches technical editing courses for the editing minor and is familiar with my own work as I have been his student. Professor Rawlins and I have met several times to discuss this project and plan for its execution.

Joey Franklin will be by honors reader. Professor Franklin is one of two BYU English professors who specializes in the essay. He has a PhD in creative nonfiction from Texas Tech University and recently published a collection of personal essays. I took his ENGL 495 capstone course, which focused on the memoir and helped me understand the power of nonfiction. His scholarship on the essay is what I need to be sure my research is accurate and would fit into the academic conversation. Professor Franklin will represent my English background.

Cynthia Hallen will be my honors coordinator reader. Professor Hallen is the honors coordinator for Linguistics and English Language. Professor Hallen has a PhD in rhetoric, composition, and teaching of English. Her rhetoric and communication knowledge especially make her a fitting coordinator. Professor Hallen and I have met regarding how to conduct research and narrow my focus to prepare for this thesis.

Project Timeline

September 2017	Submit thesis proposal Begin research on familiar essays Begin research on cardiovascular disease Begin writing episode 1 (topic: cardiovascular disease)
October 2017	Research and write episodes 2, 3, and 4 (topics carcinogens, Alzheimer's disease, and chocolate) Continue essay-themed research Submit research presentation pitch to SUU's Conference of Undergraduate Research
November 2017	Research and write episodes 5 and 6 with the topics GMO and gluten Continue essay-themed research
December 2017	Record all six episodes of <i>Season 1: Informed and Skeptical</i> Develop bulk of thesis according to what I learn from writing season 1
January 2017	Visit NPR representative about the writing of the podcasts <i>Invisibilia</i> and <i>Hidden Brain</i> Sound edit season 1 Finish first draft of written portion of thesis
February 2017	Publically release <i>Season 1: Informed and Skeptical</i> Begin researching season 2, episodes 1 and 2 (topics: chemical birth control and sugar substitutes) Edit and complete written portion of thesis Present at SUU's Conference of Undergraduate Research
March 2017	Defend thesis Submit thesis for publication
April 2017	Prepare for public release Graduate with honors

Funding

An appointment with NPR representatives is pending confirmation. If it were to be confirmed, this is the budget I've developed.

Air travel	Delta. Outgoing: Tuesday, Jan. 9. Returning: Saturday, Jan. 13 (cheapest fares in Jan.)	\$345
Ground travel	Metro with SmarTrip card; assuming two round-trip metro rides a day	\$100
Room	AirBNB for four nights	\$212
Board	Budgeting \$64 for food a day	\$256
Total		\$913

In addition, I hope to present my research at SUU's Conference on Undergraduate Research. This is the budget I've developed in case my research is accepted for the conference.

Ground travel	Gas reimbursement for a 416-mile round trip	\$50
Room	AirBNB for one night	\$65
Board	Budgeting \$30 for food a day	\$60
Total		\$175

Culminating Experience

In order to test my theories about essaying and podcasting, I will write, record, and produce a podcast. The podcast will follow the tenets of my discoveries about the modern essay and the transfer of learning. This podcast will be published on SoundCloud and/or iTunes.

I will also submit this project to the SUU Conference on Undergraduate Research. Additionally, I hope to publish my findings in a journal like *The Journal of Modern Literature*.