



WE'RE SO META: PODCASTING ABOUT PODCASTING

By Mary Foster, Abram Trosky, Jacqueline Whitt and Ron Granieri,
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Ronald Granieri: Welcome to A Better Peace: The War Room Podcast. I'm Ron Granieri, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of The War Room. It is a pleasure to have you with us. If you're listening to my voice right now, you probably already know what a podcast is, and you probably even have an idea of what makes a good podcast and what general purpose they serve. Here at The War Room, though, we are always thinking about what we do, how we do it, and even more, why we do it. Today, we want to pull back the curtain a bit on those conversations.

To that end, we have gathered some of the people at The Army War College who have been involved, both in producing these podcasts and in encouraging the use of podcasts in educational and professional development. I'm going to let my colleagues speak for themselves to get us started. And so there are three of them with us today. And so the first one in alphabetical order is my colleague Mary Foster. Mary?

Mary Foster: Hi Ron. So, as Ron said, I'm one of his colleagues here at The War College and I facilitate seminars involving international relations and national security and strategy. And I also am a Senior Editor for War Room.

RG: Very good. And it's good to have you here, Mary. And Mary also works together with my next colleague here that I'm going to introduce. Dr. Abram Trosky. Abram?

Abram Trosky: Hey, thanks Ron. Hi Mary. Yep. I taught the Online Presence and Publication special program elective at The War College last year with Mary and I'm teaching again this year and poised to do the same next. But here I have a different role as Applied Communication and Learning Lab, I suppose, co-stander-upper to use the military favorite term. We stood up this lab, which is not exactly a place full of beakers and tubes, but a place to help communication and the science of teaching and learning, supporting faculty, and students.

RG: Great. And the third colleague who is joining us here today is someone whose voice will be familiar to many listeners of A Better Peace, and that is the Editor in Chief of War Room, Dr. Jacqueline Whitt.

Jacqueline Whitt: Hello. So I'm Jackie and I am the Editor in Chief of War Room. I am also a Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. But I started my War Room career as the Podcast Editor, because the original Editor-in-Chief, Andrew Hill, came up to me one day and said "I think you are not boring, do you want to do a podcast?"

AT: A ringing endorsement.

RG: Which does-

AT: And true.

RG: ... And true, no less, right? And which does, sort of... When we talk about, what we do, why we do it, and how we do it, we try not to be boring and we try to have conversations. I want to start a question for you, Jackie, to get us rolling. And that is, you have recorded, participated in many podcasts for War Room and outside of you're trying not to be boring, which I would like to think we manage to accomplish most of the time, if not all the time, what did you think or what do you think a podcast should do?

JW: Yeah. It's such an interesting question because I used to make fun of people who did podcasts. And I thought that's what people do in their basements and stuff. And I didn't really listen to podcasts, so I wasn't really familiar with the genre in many ways. If I did listen to podcasts, it was often the very highly produced ones, put out by NPR and things like that, the serialized, high production value podcasts, or the episodic ones like Moth Radio Hour or Ted Radio hour, things like that.

But we knew we couldn't replicate that, right? We didn't have the budget or the talent. The talent was talent, I'm using air quotes, was me. And I don't feel like I have a good voice. I don't like it. I don't like the way I sound recorded. I still don't. But we thought that a podcast was going to be an important piece of the journal that we were trying to start, because we know that this space is both wide open and crowded all at the same time, right?

RG: Right.

JW: There are hundreds of thousands of podcasts to choose from, but they're also... It's a good way to find a sort of niche audience. And we were hoping to attract an audience that was interested in defense and national security, in international relations, in military and leadership,

and things like that. And we thought that the way that we could do that was by producing articles and essays and by producing a podcast. And we thought that we would get a different set of people interacting with War Room products.

RG: Right. Our omniscient, yet silent managing editor, Buck Haberichter, told me before we started producing, and he's just sent me a text reminding me of this, that there are apparently, if you go by current listings, about 2 million podcasts out there, although only 730,000 are active. So there's a lot. There's definitely a bunch.

JW: So you could probably get through that like Netflix in a weekend?

RG: Right. There we go. Depending on, yeah. Certainly, in the era of COVID, it's quite possible. But this is where I wanted to bring in Abram and Mary. Part of the online OPPSL, right? So, Online... If you can help me fill, I know I heard you say it, and I've written it down a bunch of times. Online-

AT: Presence and Publication for Senior Leaders.

RG: ... Yes, Online Presence and Publication for Senior Leaders.

AT: Yes, Presence and Publication.

RG: And-

AT: Because everything has to be for senior leaders...

RG: ... For senior leaders, exactly. When there's an S, right? It's either strategic-

AT: Or both.

RG: ... Or both. Then I guess would be the OPPSSL, which would be even more confusing. But, how have you in the OPPSL, when talking to students, how have you encouraged them to think about the role that podcasts can play in their presence and presentation and professionalism and other Ps?

AT: We pitch the elective as an opportunity to say things that you may not get to in a class-assigned essay, right?

RG: Right.

AT: And in the strategic research project, there's a longer form and research-intensive version of what you're passionate about or how you might contribute to your branch or agency, but there's rarely an opportunity to have a passion project. And a podcast is one place where you can either talk about something you've written that you maybe weren't assigned, or to make that thing that you wrote actually more interesting and comprehensible to a wider audience. So, that's how we pitch it, the opportunity.

RG: Right. And Mary, what's been your experience with students who've come to you and said, I want to do it?

MF: Well, I think Abram said it well, that it's about passion for them. And sometimes they just, they're at ease explaining something. I mean, we all talk about our ideas and we have a discussion. And it's nice to have someone, your interlocutor, who they're asking questions or able to dig a little deeper into certain aspects of your topic that you perhaps hadn't considered, or to hear students just give examples or tell stories. It's just a more comfortable medium for expressing what their ideas are. And it's very accessible to others.

RG: Right. Well, and I was thinking, one of the reasons why I like doing podcasts other than the fact that Jackie asked me to do this when I started at The War College, was that I always wanted to have a radio show. And I always wanted to talk to people. But I remember that there was a very famous television show for a long time on PBS called Firing Line, which many of you may have heard of with William F. Buckley Jr. And the gentle mocking criticism of the show is it was like a filmed radio show, because there was very little attention paid to any of the visuals. And so the idea that two people sitting with one camera pointing at them is not exactly arresting television. And so, if the idea of, people like it... If they like the conversation, they will watch.

But similarly, a podcast is a radio show without a radio station or with everybody having their own radio station. So you could carry it around with, you can listen to it when you want to. But, as Jackie pointed out, there are different kinds of podcasts, right? There are the ones that are history or that tell a story. And then there are the ones that are interview programs that are trying to make a point.

And then there are those that are more loosey-goosey, conversational. And the sweet spot for a podcast, it seems to me, because so much of it as voluntary, it's not being broadcast at a particular time on the radio, people have to decide when they want to tune in, they have to say when they want to listen, that the goal is to have conversations that have a focus, but are relaxed enough that something can come out of it.

The problem is, and this is what I want to ask all three of you about, is if it's a relaxed conversation, how do good podcasts, in your experience the ones you've listened to, the ones you

would encourage other people to listen to, how well do they manage to communicate something worthwhile, rather than just a, oh, gosh, we've talked for 30 minutes, I guess our time is up? How do you balance that? How do good podcasts balance that?

AT: I can't speak to the ones that probably have the greatest traction, because I don't listen to Mark Marin, for example, but that struck me that he was missing the mark in the little bit I did hear. This is just a conversation. Why is this the most popular podcast in that universe? Or Joe Rogan, a mystery as well, that probably doesn't merit more of our conversation, but I spent a lot of time listening to producers in the NPR orbit and in their spin-offs.

And some people come for the production value in certain of those, the music, the voices, the cultural connections, and then stay for the intellectualism or the storytelling. Or, in other cases, it's just great storytelling. So, in the context of what seems like a conversation, and I'm thinking podcasts... It's a big net here, but I'm thinking once of a slightly different format than this conversationally based one, you gather a lot of good discussion, good back and forth. And of course work the magic that Buck is going to work on us in the background and make it into something that's just very... It's got that combination of engineered richness, but also improvisational beauty. Just those moments that you don't often hear celebrities, or maybe necessarily professors, having in other formats.

RG: Right? Okay. That's great. Mary, what do you think? What do good podcasts do?

MF: For me, for our purposes and what we're trying to do, I think with A Better Peace, is much depends on the interviewer's skill at eliciting the right kinds of themes and things like that from the guest. What I enjoy about it is that, if you have a guest who is knowledgeable in an area and many times, for me, this is the way I use it as a professor, the way I use the medium, is to offer students primary sources. People that have experienced what they're talking about.

They may not have had the chance to write a whole book about it. They may not have... Their lives are full and they may be policymakers or whatever. For example, I just had my students in an Arctic Security Class listen to a podcast from a businessman. And he was talking about the merits of Arctic Transit, whether or not it's profitable or not. And that was a whole different perspective for them beyond the military strategies and plans that they may have to read.

So for me, a good podcast involves getting good answers, getting good questions, and also pursuing those answers if they're not being answered. That's the power of a good interviewer, is to be able to explore and get those nuggets from the speaker.

RG: Right.

MF: Like a doula. A podcast doula.

RG: A podcast doula.

MF: Birthing the great ideas. You don't mind that a description of you, Ron and Jackie?

RG: I wish what I did was as useful to humanity as being a doula, but that's another story entirely, but-

JW: I know, right? Instead, we've made a podcast.

RG: That's right. I've got a podcast.

MF: On your salary.

AT: Well, I mean, we're joking about it, but actually this is what Socrates said he was doing is an intellectual midwife. And to Mary's point, when you have a great discussion in class, that's a privilege. I mean, not everybody gets a seat at this institution. And so, in the best case, these students are replicating and the interviewers are replicating, what a good conversation looks like. Including, as she said, pressing them to make good arguments and defend them. And that's enriching the listener, who feels then the best case is I think like a participant.

JW: Abram, that really brings home a couple of things that I was thinking about as, as you all were talking, which is given the podcast format that we settled on, roughly half an hour, conversational between an expert and an interlocutor or a small group of experts. There's a limit to what you can cover in 30 minutes, in terms of depth, in terms of specifics, and details. And so, one of the things I really hope the podcast does, is give people an entry point for thinking about big complex ideas or important ideas or new ideas, and doing it in a way that they might then go want to find something else out, right?

To go read an essay, or to read a book, or to talk to someone else, to start a conversation. So that I like to think of the podcasts that we're doing as a provocation. We almost never get to a final conclusion in any of our podcasts. We often ask for recommendations or what would you do or what... I love to ask historians what they think the future holds mostly because they hate it.

But this idea of the podcast is provocation is really important to me. And then at the same time, the other thing that I think prevents it from just being dropped into a conversation is, if you are the host, if you're the interviewer, and if you're the expert, you have to have a sense of purpose for why you're having the conversation.

RG: It helps.

JW: And so there has to be... It helps. There has to be a question, there has to be a problem, or a motivation for doing the podcast. It can't just be a topic, right? Topics are too big, but our world, and our world is academics, and as professors and scholars and thinkers, our world, I think, revolves around questions and trying to figure out answers to interesting questions. And so, that's the orientation that we've tried to take, I think, on A Better Peace.

RG: Right. Well, and Jackie, that raises a very good point to continue here. And that is that one of the phrases that we've tried to use at The War College lately, and that we try to think about when we get people involved in podcasts is public scholarship. And this idea that there is a particular kind of work that's involved with bringing complex ideas to a broader public. And yet, the very conversational informality of a podcast, can lead people to think that it's not real scholarship, right? It's not real work. And how do you imagine the relationship? And this is for you, Jackie, but also for Mary and Abram as well. How do you imagine the relationship between public scholarship and a scholarship that doesn't require a modifying adjective in front of it?

JW: Yeah, well, at a basic level, I'll almost guarantee that more people have listened to podcasts where I have been the quote unquote expert, not the host, than have read my book. We can track downloads and all sorts of things. I think, when I talk to people outside of a narrow scholarly field, it's likely that they've listened to podcasts just like we do things like read articles in the Atlantic or read general interest pieces that people are putting out.

And there's really good work there, right? And I think it's important to recognize that. The ability to capture the crux of an argument in 20 minutes and be persuasive and convincing is a very different skill than writing a book or writing a peer-reviewed academic article. But I would posit that it's a very difficult thing to do well.

And it takes practice and it is something that not everyone wants to do. And I think that's fine. I don't think it's a thing that everyone has to do, but if you think you have something to say to a broader public or to a non-academic audience, then podcasting and short form essay writing, I think, can be really valuable tools in scholar's kit bag in order to get their ideas out.

I think about my mom, who is a podcast listener, she listens to A Better Peace. She also likes Ron's voice better than mine. It's just a statement of fact.

RG: Thanks, Mrs. Whitt.

JW: She learns all kinds of things.

AT: Ron's hard to compete with.

JW: I know. She learns all kinds of things and we have all kinds of conversations that we would not be able to have otherwise, because of the podcast.

RG: Right.

JW: And I think that is really important. And I think that's what has kept us going for, literally, hundreds of episodes now.

RG: Right.

AT: Yeah. That's a great case in point, promoting a conversation on topics that wouldn't normally come up through the medium of podcasts, but speaking to why that... That's public scholarship without even having to bill it as such. I mean, because you're having a scholarly conversation or a conversation about the kind of thing that might come up in the classroom on the prompting of this popular medium, and then how popular you already alluded to. There's millions of them out there, as you said. Buck tells me 57% of Americans have listened to a podcast. That's 162 million. And this year there's 80 million regular listeners, weekly listeners, of which I'm one.

I'll say, it's a little bit like the Irishman who was startled to discover he was speaking in prose, though, because I thought I was listening to the radio asynchronously. But I was actually listening to podcasts. So these are things that would be on NPR somewhere, I'd just listened to them on my time. But that did get me. That was the gateway drug into the medium. Let me just say about public scholarship, more generally, it's a refreshing development that our institution has started to acknowledge and reward or award that category.

I served on a committee with some members of this conversation to acknowledge... Not you Ron, because you were up for that. And, I think, will be again because there's some other outstanding work that I hope people will hunt down from Dr. Granieri. But see, the topic of that one is emblematic. If I recall you were talking about making sensible the constitution and its importance. I mean, what could be more important in a medium, like a podcast, where we're beyond entertainment now, when you're talking about using, surreptitiously, this animated thing you made, not exactly a podcast, but it's in the same orbit, to do civics education? I mean, so yeah. Yeah. Pick up where the schools leave off and promote public deliberation on the things most promising in improving the Republic.

RG: Well, do you find, and Mary, I want to bring you in on this because, do you find that when you talk about to the students how they should be thinking about presenting and discussing the

public, do they come to the OPPSL elective already knowing they want to do these things? Or do you shock them to let them know that there are places where they can publish their essays or that they should consider podcasts as part of their public presentation?

MF: We have shocked them in the past. Some of them do come... There's always a presentation of what the course entails. Abram always does a fantastic job of pitching it at the beginning of the year as a special program. So the students understand that they'll have an opportunity to publish. It's not guaranteed. They have to actually produce something that we would care to publish. So, that's part of it. They do have the opportunity and they don't need to publish with us necessarily. They can also take their products elsewhere if they so desire.

Going back to your other question about public scholarship, it occurred to me, this is a very imperfect analogy, but before a certain time in our history, the vast majority of people got their information from some speaker who was giving them, feeding them the information, because they may not have been literate and so forth.

So it's been a medium that's been popular for a while, good storytelling and so forth. And I just see it as another modality that enhances the variety that I can offer my students. Because if I could, for example, show them a hologram of the Sicilian campaign as it's unfolding or something, in Thucydides, I would love to do that, or show them a good movie clip that really captures the hell of that war. It's a very moving portion of the story. On the other hand, sometimes it can limit our imagination. For example, I don't know if you all saw the movie [Lincoln](#) with, I think it was [Daniel Day Lewis](#), portraying Lincoln. And I think he took great care to be very faithful to what Lincoln actually sounded like based on other people's reports.

And, of course, I was horrified. I was like, that's not my Lincoln. He doesn't sound like that. You might not want to hear from certain people, I don't know, but it's a very interesting way to vary up the medium and let people have... And for our students, so many of them are, because they're military members, they are very interested in fitness, for example. So they go to the gym, they can listen to a podcast, they can multitask, they can paint the garage, whatever they need to do while they're listening to it. It just makes for an excellent... Long car drives. My daughter went to Boston University, to Abram's alma mater-

AT: Woo hoo!

MF: And while I was living in Carlisle, every now and then I would drive up to Boston, seven or eight hours, and I could just curate a whole slew of podcasts from Brookings or whoever. Of course, [A Better Peace](#), [Brussels Sprouts](#), and things that I listened to. I can listen to them on one after the other, without interruption, and just get so much material while I'm on the road and have a quiet time to think about it and process what I'm listening to.

AT: Were you comparing A Better Peace to eating your vegetables or is Brussels Sprouts the latest podcast that I need to listen to?

MF: It's a great little podcast on NATO and Europe.

JW: I think one of the things that this idea of different modalities and different ways of engaging brings to mind is we've been seeing people at The War College, but elsewhere as well, putting more and more podcasts on syllabuses as what we would usually call readings, right?

Like requirements for student preparation to listen to or whatever. And it's fascinating to me because people read much faster than they listen. And so in terms of pure information delivered, you can pack more into a reading that will take the same amount of time, 30 minutes or whatever. But the way we process information is so different. And so if I ask people to read for 30 minutes, a complex and dense text, even if I can get them more information, in many cases, not everybody but in many cases, they're more apt to listen for 30 minutes.

You can also speed up podcasts, which I like. I play everything too times, like double speed, which makes everybody sound a little bit like a chipmunk, but it's very efficient. I'm still really sad that I can't listen to a podcast or an audio book and read something at the same time. I keep trying to do it. It doesn't work.

RG: There are limits.

MF: That's what I'm doing wrong. No wonder, I don't understand what I'm doing.

AT: I've been multi-tasking like that this whole time.

MF: Stop doing that.

AT: You're saying it doesn't work? Oh no.

JW: Legitimately, this is the thing. If I could get a superpower, that would probably be it.

RG: See, all I think of is-

JW: This idea that you can-

RG: ... No, I'm sorry. There's a scene in [Broadcast News](#) where [Albert Brooks](#) wants to show how smart he is and he is sitting and he's listening to music and singing along. And then he pulls

out a book and he starts singing out loud, "I am reading while I sing," just to show how smart he is. And I'm thinking of that as Jackie trying to read and listen to a podcast at the same time.

JW: ... What triumph to do. I do, I try it every once in a while. It doesn't work. But this idea that you can engage people in different ways and use different media, videos, podcasts, readings, or whatever it is, to accomplish the same thing. I think that's really important as we think about accessibility, as we think about how to pull people into conversations.

RG: Right? Because that, that is the goal after all right, is that no one conversation, no one reading, no one program is going to teach you everything, even about the smallest subject, right? What we really want to hope for is that it makes people want to learn more, right? You don't seek a balanced book, seek a balanced library. And so, there are different formats, but you don't expect any one thing to provide everything.

But we have more opportunities now, thanks to technology and maybe thanks to our experiences in the age of COVID. We're more familiar with what you were saying, Abram, about that initially you thought of podcasts as asynchronous radio programs, which kind of is how they started. And you know, some of the podcasts I still listen to are radio programs that are not carried by my local station, so I can listen to them as podcasts.

And so to encourage people not to listen, but encourage people to appear, for experts to accept that invitation to come and talk about their work as another way to reach another audience. We are just about out of time for our usual half hour stint here. I wanted to give each of you a chance if there was any last thing you would like to say about podcasting, about this experience, or about what you would want people to take away from this conversation.

AT: I was going to highlight something Mary said about the uniqueness of the medium. Because, I had been thinking about how it's sometimes overlooked in our work where imagination comes in. I mean, creative thinking, you do hear that phrase, but it's all about reason. It's all about rationality, but in this novel medium, this medium is more like the novel. I mean, you make the pictures that go along with radio. And what I find is that I'm incredibly moved by radio voices and experiences being shared that sometimes move me to tears in a way I just don't picture the news doing.

You would think that the more senses are engaged, that the more moved you'd be, but that's not my experience. To make a little bit of that radio magic and move people is awesome. And I'm so happy that Jackie was asked and took it up and that you're carrying this particular torch and that students have an opportunity to themselves engage in our class as a requirement, where they may not usually get to be that imaginative.

RG: Right. Great. Mary, final thought.

MF: Well, I agree with everything Abram just said. And I grew up... I was an Army brat, so I grew up overseas and I remember we didn't have current media over there. We were still watching [Bat Masterson](#) and [Rawhide](#) in 1975. I also, for radio, we used to listen to things like [Chickenman](#) on the radio and also [The Shadow](#) and things like that. So I kind of grew up on these. Just as he said, you had to really use your imagination and, and all of your senses aren't engaged in a way that, today, we're just flooded with sensory stimuli all the time.

And so I think there's something very Zen about listening to a podcast and being able to be at peace, doing something else while you're listening. And so, I encourage students to find good podcasts out there and really exploit them for what they can do for you as you do other activities while you're in the gym, whatever you're doing.

AT: Or reading.

RG: Or reading, if you're Jackie Whitt.

MF: Don't fill in any blanks. Okay. Yeah. So, reading. Reading.

RG: Jackie, boss, do you have final thoughts?

JW: So I want to talk a little bit about being a podcast host and the privilege that it has brought to me to learn so much about so many things that I would never get to talk about or think about in serious ways, even as part of my job as a professor at The War College where we're interdisciplinary and doing all sorts of things. I've learned more by hosting the podcast because it requires a lot of prep, right? You have to read, you have to know about the guest, you have to know about the topic.

But it's challenging to me in ways that very few other things are, and it's interesting every time. And so, the ability to really listen to an expert and to really pull-out explanations and examples and stories has been really delightfully fun for me. And I really hope that comes across in our podcast series that we put out; that we are learning and exploring ideas alongside our listeners. We're not doing it all at the same time. It's not synchronous learning, but it is for us as much as anybody else. It's a process of learning and exploration that I hope is inspiring to people.

RG: Yeah. I could not have said it better. So, obviously, Andrew was right, that you are definitely not boring, Jackie Witt, and you're actually quite good at this whole podcasting thing. And. it's fun to work with all of you.

Unfortunately, as I say, we are just about out of time, but in all of the stats that Buck has shared with me, the one to think about is if you are one of the 80 million Americans who listens to a podcast, or if you're one of the people who listens to one weekly, if you're one of the 40% of Americans of weekly listeners who listen to one to three a week, or that are of the 19% that listened to 11 or more podcasts a week, we hope that you will make A Better Peace from The War Room one of your options.

We thank you for listening to us today. I thank Mary Foster, Abram Trosky, Jackie Whitt for joining us. Thanks so much for being here.

AT: Thank you, Ron.

MF: Thank you.

JW: Thanks Ron. This is fun.

RG: It is fun. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send us suggestions for future programs. We always are interested in hearing from you, and please, after you have subscribed to A Better Peace, because, of course, you want to subscribe to A Better Peace, please rate and review this podcast on your pod catcher of choice, because that's how other people can hear about us too, so that we can broaden this community and bring more people together for the conversations that we have. We look forward to welcoming you all again sometime soon, but until next time from The War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.