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Complicit in the Murder Program: Podcasting Dystopia in *The Intercept's Evening at the Talk House* (2018)

Abstract. Podcasting is an increasingly popular audio-only, on-demand narrative form that draws millions of listeners, both within the U.S. and worldwide. While podcast scholars are excited about podcasts' potential to create content that finds no place in the mainstream media, they have not yet investigated how contemporary fictional podcasts can create societal critiques. This paper investigates the political potential of critical news platform *The Intercept*'s special feature audio play *Evening at the Talk House* (2018) by analyzing its content, form, and funding model. I will argue that *Evening at the Talk House* effectively uses the affordances of both the podcast and the dystopian narrative mode to expose the U.S. empire for American citizens by collapsing the distinction between the 'good' and safe homeland and the evil 'other' abroad. *Evening at the Talk House,* thus, raises questions about the complicity of regular citizens in enabling 'murder programs' (e.g. drone strikes, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) as citizens actively take part in and become the victims of imperial violence. However, consistent with *The Intercept*'s daily reporting, *Talk House* fails to address a major motivation of the U.S. empire: establishing and maintaining global capitalism. This neglect can be explained by considering how the platform was established, as tech billionaire Pierre Omidyar provided its funding.

Keywords: podcasts, dystopia, ideology critique, American empire, drones, investigative journalism

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1. Introduction

Podcasting is an audio-only, on-demand narrative form that currently draws millions of listeners both in the U.S. and around the world. Statistics show that in 2019 seventy percent of the American population was familiar with podcasting, and more than half of the population had listened to one (Edison 2020). Mark Sweney wrote in 2019 for *The Guardian* that "[p]odcasting is experiencing a Netflix moment" and that with a hit podcast like the true-crime series *Serial* (2014) and the dystopian thriller *Homecoming* (2016), large corporations are preying on exclusive content. All this suggests that podcasts are no longer a niche-medium, but that they have become a commercially productive practice.

Until now, podcast studies focused primarily on explaining podcasting's affordances, for example, the intimacy provided by the human voice and consumption via headphones (Berry 2018; Spinelli and Dann 2019; Soltani 2018; Copeland 2018; Swiatek 2018). While podcast scholars are excited about podcasts' potential to create content that finds no place in the mainstream media, they have hardly explored how these podcasts respond to and play a role in society. Fictional podcasts especially make full use of podcasting's affordances. While scholars of podcast fiction have remarked upon podcasting's communities and representation of minorities, they have not yet investigated how podcasts can provide an ideology critique (e.g. Weinstock 2019; Spinelli and Dann 2019; Hancock and McMurty 2018), leaving many questions concerning the podcast's creative and critical potential unanswered. I will investigate the political potential of *The Intercept*'s specially featured audio play *Evening at the Talk House* on three levels: content, form, and production. To be clear, while *Evening at the Talk House* was originally a theatre play, the play itself was adapted into an audio-only format for the podcast *Intercepted*, which means that I consider it a podcast.[1] This paper therefore is careful not to claim that *Evening at the Talk House* is representative of all fictional podcasts, but rather focuses on the affordances and limitations of audio-only fictional storytelling. I argue that the fictional podcast can offer a productive space for challenging current American hegemonic ideologies, as *Evening at the Talk House* uses the dystopian mode and podcasting's affordances to create a timely critique of the American empire. However, *The Intercept*'s funding model also provides limitations to the kind of critique it can voice, as its main investor is tech billionaire Pierre Omidyar. As a case-study, *The Intercept* offers a unique insight in the desired effects of political fiction: *The Intercept* has a clear political commitment, and *Evening at the Talk House* (*Talk House* hereafter) provides a strong case of how to convey that in a fictional podcast. The dystopian fiction and *The Intercept*'s reporting, thus, complement each other, as the journalism sets the stage for the social and political environment in which the dystopia operates.

[1] When comparing the fictional podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* to the 1930s radio play, media scholar Andrew Bottomley suggests that "[t]here is little about podcasting that is truly new, when the full range of radio's history and forms are taken into account" (180). What differentiates podcasts from audio plays is then not the narrative form or the sound-only aspect, but rather how it is presented, disseminated and consumed.

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2. 'Holding the powerful accountable:' *The Intercept*'s politics

As a news organization *The Intercept* is, in their words, "dedicated to holding the powerful accountable through fearless, adversarial journalism" (*The Intercept* "About" 2020). This slogan holds up when considering *The Intercept*'s founding journalists: Glenn Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill. Their work is indicative of the kind of journalism *The Intercept* values: Scahill had published *Blackwater* (2007) and *Dirty Wars* (2013), two books that critically evaluate American undercover operations and involvement in the Middle East; and Greenwald became famous for reporting the leaks of Edward Snowden that revealed the NSA had illegally gathered telephone and internet information from millions of people.[2] Following its founding members, *The Intercept*'s reporting focuses particularly on the intensification of American empire and increasing government surveillance after 9/11. In a *The Intercept* video (2020) Greenwald describes his concerns:

> (…) the aftermath of 9/11 and the fear mongering was successfully exploited to do things like introduce the Patriot Act with almost no dissent and then ultimately a 19 year war in Afghanistan and invasion of Iraq, powers of detention without due process, creating prisons in the middle of islands. Things that had previously been unimaginable that were justified in the name of terrorism.

Indeed, many of the U.S. foreign and domestic policies after 9/11 extended the authority of the president and government agencies to act, leading to the invasion of Iraq and detaining and torturing prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. Aside from military interventions, the controversial Patriot Act dramatically extended the laws for government agencies to surveil and capture communications. *The Intercept* regularly reports on the problematic aspects of the Patriot Act (or the revised version, the Freedom Act), and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The claim that the U.S. is an empire is no longer controversial (e.g. Immerwahr 2019: see 14; Panitch and Gindin, 2015; Bacevich 2004). Daniel Immerwahr elaborates how the case of the U.S. as an empire can be made in numerous ways: the dispossession of native Americans, the subordination of African Americans, U.S. military interventions, its economic power abroad, and the actual territories that the U.S. occupies and controls (see 14–15). Immerwahr's argument mostly focuses on the last point, as he suggests that new technologies such as airplanes and radio allowed the U.S. to move its goods, ideas, and people into foreign countries without annexing them, and the standardization of American objects and practices gave the U.S. influence in places it did not control (see 17–18). This made the American empire less recognizable, which means the nature and

[2] Even though Greenwald by now has resigned from *The Intercept* and started publishing on crowdfunded journalism website Substack, he has been highly important to the news organization as one of its founding members.

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scale of an American empire is difficult to grasp for regular American citizens. As Immerwahr suggests: "Empire might be hard to make out from the mainland, but from the sites of colonial rule themselves, it's impossible to miss" (15). This validates the project of *The Intercept* to expose American empire.

3. Bringing the war home: *Evening at the Talk House*'s critique of empire

Talk House effectively brings the War on Terror home to the American subject. *Talk House* is a remediated theatre play from Wallace Shawn which is adapted for audio-only use and featured in its entirety as a three-part special feature on Scahill's podcast *Intercepted. Talk House* depicts a dystopian future in which the state has installed a "Murder Program" that recruits citizens to "target" and kill those who oppose the U.S. *Talk House* lays bare the type of reasoning that for the 'good' civilians to be safe, government oversight is desirable or even necessary, and shows how every American is complicit.

For most American citizens, war is usually something that happens outside of the national borders. As American Studies scholar Caren Kaplan argues: "[i]n the United States, we could be said to be 'consumers' of war, since our gaze is almost always fixated on representations of war that come from places perceived to be remote from the heartland" (2006: 693). Indeed, since the 1970s, for Americans, war has mostly been mediated through screens: the Vietnam War was also known as the "televised war" (Kaplan 2017: ix; Sontag 2003, see 21), and even 9/11 was mostly encountered through the images broadcasted by the media rather than direct experience (Kaplan 2006: 693). American culture has therefore come to play an important role in shaping the public perception of war. Contemporary portrayals of war, such as Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), sharply contrast the safe American homeland with sites of war. Deborah Cohler (2017) and Brenda Boyle (2021) demonstrate how movies like *American Sniper* reinforce this distinction. Through the discourses of sniper Chris Kyle as a 'lone wolf' abroad and a family man at home (Boyle) and the figure of the military spouse (Cohler), *American Sniper* casts the American homeland as a safe, good, domestic space and Iraq as dangerous, 'other,' and evil. The film, thus, justifies the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as "loathsome but necessary interventions by good against evil" (Boyle 2021:77). As such, Boyle and Cohler emphasize how domestic American citizens are complicit in justifying and perpetuating imperial violence. *Talk House*, unlike *American Sniper*, consciously blurs the lines between the American 'good' citizen and the 'threat' abroad: American citizens in the homeland can no longer claim innocence from imperial violence as they actively take part in the extended War on Terror by voting for and participating in the "murder program."

Talk House revolves around the reunion of a theatre group in the venue called the Talk House, but what is supposed to be a joyous evening takes a dark turn when they discuss the government's murder program. After the suspicious death of President Bark-

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ley, "everything changed" (Part 1) and the society of *Talk House* takes a dystopian turn: with the murder program regular citizens can no longer dissociate themselves from the violence of empire as they have voted for or taken part in the program while they live in constant fear of becoming a target. From the outset, *Talk House* draws a clear distinction between the 'old days' and the present dystopia. Hostess Nelly remarks that there are no more "lively people" with daring outfits (Part 1). Theatre has disappeared, and Bill and Tom agree that "[t]he world moves on" (Part 2). The murder program, which is supposedly a program that aims to target and kill people or 'threats' abroad also has severe domestic implications, as people who act against government interests are mysteriously dying. Friends of former actor Dick have severely beaten him up as a "warning" that his current lifestyle would put him at risk of being killed. Jane describes a present-day lynching when "friends" of former actor José Renfield "cut him with knives" and "hanged him on the streets" (Part 3). As such, the former theatre companions are constantly anxious and afraid to say something suspicious. The group praises the two successful people, actor Tom and producer Robert, whereas disgraced actor and alcoholic Dick faces contempt. Dick walks around in his pajamas, seems to have given up on life, and is the only person who dares to voice an overt critique on the murder program.

In *Talk House*, the murder program is presented as a humane alternative to full-scale war. When Bill carefully voices some concerns about the casualties of the murder program, Annette corrects him by suggesting that it is not that many lives, but rather that the government is "dropping a few bombs on people that are a threat to us" (Part 2). The program is rooted in real-world concerns: Caren Kaplan illustrates how the practice of "targeting" and drone warfare are part of the "precision doctrine," which creates the fantasy of a more humane warfare (Kaplan 2006: see 698–702). Immerwahr shows this is a part of the changing face of American empire: "[w]hat the revolution in military affairs promised was immaculate warfare: precise strikes, few civilian casualties, and, above all, no occupying armies" (2019: 385). *Talk House* builds on this idea, as it takes the precision doctrine to its logical next step where it has become the main weapon the U.S. wields to maintain its power.

What *Talk House* obscures, however, is how targeting is not only a military practice, but also American citizens are already targeted on a daily basis through marketing. Kaplan problematizes how "the military sources of the technologies that people enjoy or feel required to use in everyday life" (2006:707) are 'forgotten' and mystified. She argues that citizens/consumers, through their volunteering of information by using these military originated technologies, are *mobilized* as militarized subjects (see 707–708, emphasis mine). This process normalizes war as these modes of identification "militarize and thus habituate citizen/consumers to a continual state of war understood as virtual engagement" (Kaplan 2006, 706). Therefore, the practice of 'targeting' is inseparable from the modes of consumption in global capitalism. Targeting establishes how regular citizens/consumers of the American 'homeland' voluntarily become militarized subjects through target marketing vis-à-vis the military targeting of those who oppose this American way of life abroad.

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The drone is another military technology that shows the discrepancy between its domestic voluntary and enthusiastic consumption and its violent deployment abroad. Drone warfare neatly fits the doctrine of a precision and is steadily expanded. As Scahill writes in *Dirty Wars*: "[t]he day Obama was sworn in, a US drone strike hit Yemen. It was the third such attack in that country in as many days. In the year leading up to the inauguration, more people had been killed in US drone strikes across the globe than were imprisoned at Guantánamo" (Scahill 2013, 513). J.D Schnepf demonstrates how, in American mass-media publications (e.g. Martha Stewart's blog or a *Vogue* shoot), the drone is presented as a helpful and fun technology, especially for women, to make aerial photos of themselves or their perfectly maintained garden (2017, see 270–272). Schnepf points to the tension here, as the *Vogue* shoot suggests that: "technology developed for state violence abroad may simplify a woman's day-to-day routine" (277). Schnepf and Kaplan thus demonstrate how the American citizen/consumer is already militarized through its consumption of military technology, as well as how these citizen/consumers are privileged in their use of these technologies (drones, GPS), easily 'forgetting' their military origins, while men, women, and children abroad live in constant terror of drone strikes.[3]

The rhetoric used to defend the program is familiar. Annette's and Ted's arguments show how the U.S. creates a culture of fear:

> [Bill:] 'But how do you know that people who live thousands of miles away from will ever even get lose enough to you to harm you at all?'
> [Ted:] 'I'm not saying he'll harm me, I'm saying he'll harm us. And I'm not saying he'll do it all by himself, maybe he'll help some of his friends to do it, he'll do whatever he's able to do, and what that might be I don't possibly know. What I do know is that he happens to be a member of that particular group of people that would like to harm us. And so if we get rid of him and if we get rid of all of the people in that particular category, then there won't be anyone left who'd like to harm us and so no one will harm us. Is that so difficult to understand?'
> [Annette:] 'You have to wonder, what would happen if the people we're targeting were ever to learn our techniques and start going after us? What if everybody started targeting everybody and little bombs were flying on everybody and everybody.' (Part 2)

This fear-inciting rhetoric used to justify the targeting and killing of people, creates a shock of recognition, as it is frighteningly similar to the post-9/11 rhetoric of the Bush administration to justify the War on Terror. In a speech shortly after 9/11, Bush asked about the terrorists "[w]hy do they hate us?" His answer was "[t]hey hate our freedoms:" "our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other" (2001). Bacevich (2004) argues that with this

[3] I want to thank J.D. Schnepf, as both her academic work and her graduate course 'Domestic Cultures of US Imperialism' helped me better understand the connections between the domestic sphere and American empire.

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rhetoric, "Bush relieved himself (and his fellow citizens) of any obligation to reassess the global impact of U.S. power, political, economic, or cultural" (229–230). The rhetoric in *Talk House* serves the same purpose.

The 'little bombs' Annette talks about are a reference to the drone program the Obama administration pioneered. Indeed, *Talk House* writer Wallace Shawn had the policies of Bush and Obama in mind, showing a direct connection between the dystopian fiction and daily reality.[4] In an interview, he says:

> Under Bush, torture became normal and most Americans accepted it. First they were shocked, and then they accepted it. And sadly, under the very likable Obama, these assassinations have become normal, and people have accepted that. In the case of killing Bin Laden, it was boasted about by apparently nice people. I'm not sure we understand the implications of that yet, the normalization of killing individuals.
> (Soloski, 2017)

Shawn's occupation with the "normalization of killing individuals" points to the crucial problem in *Talk House*: the complacency of citizens in normalizing these killings.

Talk House thus effectively brings American empire home: the characters can no longer remain ignorant of imperial violence. The murder program is pioneered and acted out by two elected presidents, Ackerley and Rodman. Robert remarks on the program: "I think they got into all that because they found it attracted an awful lot of voters. I mean that's all very popular in the rural areas, isn't it?" (Part 2). Eventually, it appears that most of the theatre group are actively involved, and Annette and some others describe their experience of targeting people. Jane, albeit reluctantly, went to Nigeria and Indonesia to work as a professional murderer. When Jane is talking about her activities (i.e., stinging people with poisonous needles), she starts to describe what the "bad way" was for people to die. However, the rest of the group prefers to remain ignorant, and Robert interferes: "[p]lease don't tell us, we don't wanna know" after which he starts to laugh uncomfortably (Part 2). In an interview, Shawn notes that "complacency is a very serious problem," and he warns about the dangers of turning the other cheek (Soloski 2017). *Talk House* ends with the murder of the kind hostess Nelly, showing that no one is safe and making clear the horrors of targeting for an American audience.

However, while *Talk House* effectively criticizes U.S. military interventions as part of the American empire, the audio play hardly recognizes the role of capital. Following Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2015), it is impossible to understand American empire without addressing one of its main goals: producing global capitalism. Panitch and Gindin emphasize how the state and capital are inherently linked, as the U.S.

[4] Lyman Tower Sargent insists that with utopian and dystopian texts, the intention of the writer is of critical importance, as he argues that "it may not always be possible to establish intent, but the attempt is essential" (1994: 13).

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has played a "vital role in managing and superintending capitalism on a worldwide plane" (2015:1). As such, Panitch and Gindin define contemporary American empire as an "informal empire," a distinctly new form of political rule: "instead of aiming for territorial expansion along the lines of old empires, U.S. military interventions abroad were primarily aimed at preventing the closure of particular places or whole regions of the globe to capital accumulation" (2015:11). Therefore, solely focusing on military interventions only conveys a part of the story.[5]

4. Dystopian audio theatre: *Evening at the Talk House* and form

The dystopian form immediately makes clear that *Talk House* provides a social commentary. While there are vibrant discussions about the dystopia's critical potential, one thing that most scholars seem to agree on is that the dystopia has a potential for critique: they contain warnings about the future (see Sargent 1994; Moylan 2000; Fitting 2010). Peter Fitting, for example, writes, "[t]he critique of contemporary society expressed in the dystopia implies (or asserts) the need for change" (2010: 141). It is important to distinguish the dystopia from the anti-utopia: whereas anti-utopias are critical of the very idea of utopianism, the dystopia works *between* the utopia and anti-utopia (see Moylan 2000:147). In other words, there is always a utopian dimension within the dystopian text. In his foundational paper, Sargent suggest utopias and dystopias share a general sense of "utopianism" he calls "social dreaming:" "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (1994:3). Frederic Jameson is skeptical about dystopia's potential for critique, as he maintains that the dystopian text is mostly a narrative "which happens to a specific subject or character," whereas Utopias are not "lingering upon the kinds of human relations," but rather describe machines and mechanisms, and imagine different futures (1994: 55–56). Moylan and Baccolini are more hopeful. While they admit dystopias often focus on a single character, they "identify a deeper and more totalizing agenda in the dystopian forms insofar as the text is built around the construction of narrative of the hegemonic order and the construction of a counter-narrative of resistance" (2003:5). This counternarrative of resistance gives the dystopia its critical potential.

How does the dystopian mode function in a podcast? The dystopia causes the reader/listener to oscillate between the fictional dystopia and the social reality from which it originates. The podcast – unlike the novel – directly connects the listener to the 'real' world visually. In *Talk House*, the audio-only medium also opens up different ways of

[5] Panitch and Gindin here offer a different explanation of American Empire than for example Noam Chomsky, who also saw American empire as the furthering of capitalism, but Chomsky cast the main conflict as a conflict between the countries from the 'core' and the 'periphery' whereas Panitch and Gindin suggest that the main conflict is within countries (see Maher, 2014).

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engaging with the content: human voices, loud noises, and background music sonically immerse the listener in the podcast's dystopia. Podcasts have additional means to build up and release tension, and to address, scare, and estrange the listener. Furthermore, *Talk House* specifically departs from the traditional literary dystopian form, as there is not a single protagonist, but a large group of people who we encounter only through their conversations with each other.

Phenomenologically, a dystopian podcast is very different from a novel. *Talk House* creates on the one hand a certain intimacy and closeness to the actors as their voices are broadcasted directly into the listeners' ears, and on the other hand, it produces a sense of distance made possible by the large cast and conversational style. Many podcast scholars have remarked on intimacy as an important attribute that distinguishes the podcast from other media forms, emphasizing the centrality of the human voice and the embodiment of this intimate sound through consumption via headphones or earbuds (see Berry 2016; Spinelli and Dann 2019; Soltani 2018; Copeland 2018; Swiatek 2018). Spinelli and Dann explain: "[e]arbuds in particular, placed as they are within the opening of the ear canal, collapse the physical space between a person speaking and the listener; the person speaking is literally inside the head, inside the body, of a listener" (2019: 83). In *Talk House*, the intimacy of the human voices gives the listener the sense that they are 'listening in' to a private conversation in which they hear every breath, sigh, and hesitation in the actors' voices; it generates a particular closeness to the actors. The audio-only nature of the podcast, creates an intimate and immersive sonic experience. The narrative structure, however, complicates this. *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley notes: "Talk House' is a group portrait, which allows its audiences to sustain a greater distance and to discern more clearly the play's polemical machinery" (Brantley 2017). In this way, *Talk House*'s narrative structure differs from the single-protagonist format of most literary dystopias Baccolini and Moylan trace, as well as from most fictional podcasts that usually rely on a single narrator (*Welcome to Night Vale*, *Homecoming*, *Sandra*, *Tanis*, *Wolf 359*, and *Rabbits* to name a few). At the same time, the sonically denser fictional podcast *The Leviathan Chronicles* is comparable in structure with many characters and storylines that collide. This narrative structure, as Brantley noticed, is critically productive because it focuses the audience's attention on the message. It also demands the listener's attention, because missing a single line can have detrimental implications for understanding the plot. The podcast's on-demand format allows for this complexity, as listeners can pause, rewind, or re-listen. The affordances of the podcast, thus, provide a fertile ground for *Talk House*'s critique as the intimacy immerses the listener in a dense and complicated audio play, while the narrative focus on the group creates a critical distance and a focus on the political message.

In u/dystopian texts, the political potential hinges on making the reader or listener oscillate between their lived realities and the u/dystopian story world, creating a sense of estrangement. The traditional literary dystopia usually follows the narrative form of a "dystopian citizen moving from apparent contentment into an experience of al-

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ienation and resistance" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003:5). As such, the dystopian form builds on estrangement and recognition: initially the reader will recognize the world, but as the story progresses both the reader and the protagonist become increasingly estranged.[6] To anchor its critique, the dystopian text should therefore establish how the dystopia and the 'real world' are alike. As Moylan puts it: "Since the text opens *in medias res* within the 'nightmarish society,' cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy, the normality, of the location" (148). Indeed, in *Talk House* starts off in a familiar setting: a group of people that comes together to drink, eat and reminisce about the old days. However, the shocking revelations about the murder program, brutal beatings, and poisonings are discussed in a similarly casual tone, which creates an estrangement effect that breaks the immersion. These shocks of recognition force the listener to take a step back and consider more closely what is said. Because *Talk House* is a podcast, the connection between the imagined dystopia and the real world is more immediate: listeners are actively engaged in the real world. Podcasting is a "secondary activity" (Spinelli and Dann 2019: 10), and prevalent modes of podcast consumption include doing housework or chores, driving, relaxing before going to sleep, cooking or baking, walking outside, running or exercising and riding public transportation (Edison 2020: 25). As I have shown, this does not mean that listeners are inattentive: to understand the content they must listen closely. Therefore, the listener is constantly in touch with the real world (at least visually), while at the same time, the use of headphones collapses the distance between the listener and the content. The content, as Farokh Soltani (2018) suggests: "becomes the [auditory] field itself" (203). This automatic or intensified oscillation facilitates critical reflection.

The podcast also allows for other estrangement effects. Darko Suvin remarks that in dystopias "the attitude of estrangement – used by Brecht in a different way, within a still predominantly 'realistic' context – has grown into the formal framework of the genre" (1972: 375). For *Talk House*, however, Brecht's use of the estrangement effect is helpful as it is a remediated theatre production. For Brecht, the alienation effect or estrangement effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) has a political objective: to alter the "*weltanschauung*" or the worldview of the audience. He suggests that this was a necessary effort to create the conditions for social change. Brecht's (1978) definition is the following:

> [t]he A-effect [alienation-effect] consists of turning an object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected. (143–44)

[6] This also is the case for dystopian films, as Peter Fitting remarks in *Dark Horizons* about films such as *The Matrix:* "in their preoccupation with artificial, illusory worlds we can detect a growing awareness that something is wrong with the reality offered us by the media" (2004:163).

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As such, an estrangement-effect causes a cognitive disruption for the listeners and estranges them from their present reality. One of the ways in which the estrangement effect can be achieved is with 'breaking the fourth wall,' or directly addressing the audience. *Talk House* breaks the fourth wall in Part 2. When Tom is talking to Jane, suddenly he puts a large emphasis on the "YOU," which can startle and estrange a listener. While breaking the fourth wall has become a common feature in contemporary theatre, film, TV (notably, Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards*), and even in fictional podcasts (*Welcome to Night Vale*'s "A Story About You"), it works effectively as an additional means to connect the dystopian fiction to the real world of the listener.

The biggest shock comes at the very end: Nelly's death. The scene is viscerally uncomfortable to hear; Nelly starts making weird sounds and we hear glasses shatter. More importantly, the whole play has been primarily talking about the murder program, but Nelly's death materializes it. Nelly is *Talk House*'s most sympathetic character; she is a selfless and caring person, interested in others, a theatre enthusiast and a good cook. In Robert's words: "Everyone loved Nelly, and she was really the reason why people had started going to the Talk House in the first place" (Part 1). Her death is the sudden end of the podcast, and as such it violently brings its listeners back to the 'real world,' leaving them with something to think about, anchoring *Talk House*'s central critique about complacency. This also illustrates the value of dystopian fiction like *Talk House*; if Scahill made a regular podcast in which he would accuse every American citizen of being complicit in imperial violence, listeners could easily dismiss it. *Talk House shows* how complacency works in a situation that listeners can relate to. When that escalates, leading to the death of an innocent and friendly woman, the stakes are immediately clear.

Literary critic Tom Moylan suggests that the critical potential of the dystopia lies not only in pointing at problematic symptoms of contemporary society, but also that a successful dystopia can offer a Jamesionian 'cognitive mapping' of society. Moylan links Jameson's cognitive mapping to the imaginary process of the dystopia:

> [its] textual mechanics therefore invite, or at least enable, a cognitive mapping process that runs from the stated information of the alternative worlds to the absent paradigm that informs the text, back to the page, and outward again to the reader and the realities of his or her own historical moment, then back to the text, and inevitably out again in a feedback spiral that can be properly shocking, enlightening, motivating. (2000: 60)

Jameson characterizes the current historical period as "late-stage capitalism" in which there is a "growing contradiction between lived experience and structure" (1988: 349), which means that the individual is no longer capable of grappling the totality of the system of global capitalism. The political potential of art, for Jameson, rests in its aesthetic representation of a cognitive map that helps individual subjects situate themselves in the vast and unrepresentable totality of late-stage capitalism, which means unveiling the real class relations and showing who holds the means of production. For

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both Jameson and Moylan, a worthwhile artistic endeavor, thus, maps out contemporary global social totality – i.e. the mechanisms of global capitalism. While *Talk House* presents valuable insights about the military nature of American empire, it completely obscures the role of global capitalism, providing an incomplete and even harmful cognitive map.

5. *The Intercept*'s funding model: embracing capital

The Intercept's lack of critique on the role of capitalism can be explained by taking a closer look at how the organization gets its funding. At a first glance, *The Intercept* seems to sustain its independent journalism with a membership-program, but the story of its founding depicts a different dynamic. Pierre Omidyar, the billionaire founder of eBay, funded the initial project with 250 million dollars. Omidyar, together with Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Scahill started the non-profit organization First Look Media, of which *The Intercept* was the first project (First Look Media 2020). The fact that all of this happened in 2013, only months after Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos acquired the *Washington Post* for exactly 250 million dollars, places Omidyar's generosity in a different perspective. Omidyar says in an interview with media critic Jay Rosen that after being approached to buy the *Washington Post*, he "began to ask himself what could be done with the same investment if he decided to build something from the ground up" (Rosen 2013). Omidyar's collaboration with the journalists responsible for the Snowden leaks seems to be a power move. Omidyar mentions that he wants to create a new "mass media organization" in which he aims "to find ways to convert mainstream readers into engaged citizens" (Rosen 2013). Omidyar's prime concerns are echoed in *The Intercept*'s reporting and politics. Indeed, *The Intercept* actively promotes itself on the basis of giving journalists the "editorial freedom and legal support they need to expose corruption and injustice wherever they find it" (*The Intercept* 2020). However, *The Intercept*'s reporting shows a bias. The question one can ask is who are 'the powerful' that *The Intercept* holds accountable? 'The powerful' in the eyes of *The Intercept* appear to be the military and the authoritarian state, not capital.

In conclusion, this essay investigated the political potential of *The Intercept*'s dystopian podcast *Evening at the Talk House* on three levels: *content*, *form*, and *production*. In terms of content, *Talk House* effectively produces a critique of American empire, drone warfare and the "precision doctrine." In *Talk House* everyday citizens/consumers can no longer remain ignorant of imperial violence as they themselves actively take part in perpetuating it. Furthermore, Nelly's murder in her own house breaks the imagined distinction between the safety of the domestic 'good' home and the dangers of the war waged abroad. As such, *Talk House* brings home the War on Terror and everyone becomes a target. The form of the show is beneficial for creating this critique as the podcast immerses its listeners in this dark and complex audio play, while its form as a group portrait draws the listener's attention to the political message. The lack of a visual dimension

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in the podcast is a helpful feature for creating estrangement effects that drive the critical potential of the dystopia: it leads to an intensified oscillation between the listener's lived reality and the dystopian world, stressing the connections between them. However, as the literature on American empire suggests (see Panitch and Gindin 2017; Immerwahr 2015; Bacevich 2003), it is impossible to understand American empire without an account of its economic side: the US does not merely want to gain military control, it does so because it aims to establish and manage global capitalism. In addition, as Kaplan and Schnepf demonstrate, an important contemporary aspect that obscures of the complicity of American citizens is how their frivolous consumption of military technologies means that they already are mobilized as military citizens. The uncomfortable truth is then perhaps that American citizens already live in the dystopian reality of *Talk House*. In that sense, the podcast obscures the operations of global capitalism and the implications of it, providing an incomplete cognitive mapping. This is symptomatic for *The Intercept*'s reporting: while it is critical of the state and the military, it poses no real challenge to capital. This can be partly explained by the importance of the funding model, as billionaire Omidyar is *The Intercept*'s main funder. To end on a more positive note, the case study of *Evening at the Talk House* shows the many possibilities for the fictional podcast to create engaging dystopian narratives. Bringing together features from radio, theatre, and literature, the fictional podcast is a promising new site for experimentation, the creation of counternarratives, and hopefully imagining alternative futures.

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