

April 2024

Some More Notes on Notes on a Scandal: Lessons From Producing Pakistan's First True Crime Podcast

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Recommended Citation

Masood Khan, Tooba, Some More Notes on Notes on a Scandal: Lessons From Producing Pakistan's First True Crime Podcast, *RadioDoc Review*, 9(1), 2024.

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Abstract

If a country's podcast scene could be described as a vibe, Pakistan's would be "dude bro"; that is, politically and culturally right-leaning masculinist narrative. The format is simple: like *The Joe Rogan Experience* which has over 15 million subscribers and over three billion views in Pakistan, there's a host and a guest. In addition to Rogan, other popular pods are *The Pakistan Experience*, *Pakistonomy*, *Thought Behind Things*, *Talks that Matter*, *Mooroo*, *The Pivot*, *Junaid Akram's Podcast*. The conversations usually revolve around the guest's life, their political views, the economy – whether Pakistan will default or not, will the IMF give another tranche for relief, will donor money bring in dollars and other burning subjects. There's also *How Does This Work*, *Misaal* (a tech/start-up podcast), *Policy Beats*, *Climate Mahaul* (Pakistan's first podcast on Climate Change), *Dragon Road* (exploring Pakistan's relationship with China) and *Mosiki* which looks at music, freelancing, and other "fun" things. All this changed in December 2020 when the first episode of mine and Saba Imtiaz's *Notes on a Scandal* – Pakistan's first true-crime podcast – made its debut.

Keywords

Pakistan, True Crime, Podcast, Women.

Women Step Into the Medium

For us, the story came first and the medium followed. As journalists, Saba and I have been looking into the 1970s life and death of poet and Civil Servant Mustafa Zaidi and his relationship with the small-time socialite Shahnaz Gul. They were implicated in what is often referred to as Pakistan's first sex scandal. Even though it was fifty years ago, it was a pivotal time for the country as it dealt with a cyclone, a military dictatorship, its first civilian elections, and a civil war.

Initially, we were hesitant to share our research via an untapped medium in Pakistan – podcasting. We'd already sent story pitches to several newspapers, magazines, and websites and no one seemed interested during the COVID-19 pandemic, so we decided to test the waters with one podcast episode. We initially had less than 100 downloads, but as of January 2024, we are up to a total of 44.3k downloads across our two seasons. Our top-ranking episode has around 5,000 downloads with listeners from all over the world, including the United States, Japan, United Kingdom, India and Pakistan.

When we started, we had a vague listener in mind: someone who spoke English, an expat, someone who was in the civil service or was interested in Urdu poetry. It was a conscious decision to host in English not Urdu, as we assumed that most of our listeners would be like us: young people who consume most of their media content in English. We also didn't expect many people to be interested in the podcast in Pakistan. But there was a surprise. Whilst most of our listeners are from North America, more than 30% of the listenership – our second largest audience – is in Pakistan, followed by the UK and Japan.

The material for the podcast came from three years of extensive research, through newspaper and government archives, magazines, and court documents. We also interviewed over a dozen individuals who knew Zaidi and Gul, civil servants, lawyers, hoteliers, politicians, and socialites to evoke the threads and textures of Pakistan's society in the 1970s.

Saba and I worked together at *The Express Tribune* newspaper back in 2011 – we were both on the Karachi desk but had never worked on a story together. In 2018 we met again and started talking about this interesting case that had gripped the country's imagination. We did not consciously stick to a production template but had heard several podcasts, including *Serial*. We tried to release episodes every week to ten days, but there were delays when we got COVID-19 and moved cities. The first season was mostly recorded in-person while the second was entirely online using Zencastr. For the interviews that were conducted in English, we used Descript to transcribe. We also played around with Instagram reels to generate audio voiceovers and subtitles and shared archives on Instagram (@murdermystery70) to promote the podcast.

True crime is an unexplored genre in Pakistan. With *Notes on a Scandal*, the story took centre-stage and the medium seamlessly followed. The audio helped create a more intense relationship between the audience, the story and even us, as hosts. Sound heightens the senses and the absence of visual elements enhances the power of words. For example, in the Season Two trailer, we repeated accusatory words thrown at Shahnaz such as ‘murderer’ and ‘smuggler’ and interwove these with dramatic sounds in the background. There was a sonic intensity to the storytelling which we hadn’t previously encountered with our written or visual journalistic work. Moreover, true crime stories work very well with the serialised nature of podcasting, something that is hard to replicate in books or television. The episodic build-up and tension as the story progresses kept listeners coming back.

The Plot Thickens

As with a lot of good true crime, our series started *in medias res*, with the first episode introducing Zaidi in life and then reversing to the circumstances of his death. A well-known poet and civil servant, Zaidi was found dead at home in Karachi on the morning of October 13, 1970. Gul, the subject of several of his poems, was found unconscious beside him. Subsequent media coverage depicted Gul as a “bad woman” and several unanswered questions about his death persist. Was he murdered or did he kill himself? While there is evidence to support both claims, his mysterious death intrigues people today as much as it did over fifty years ago.

The established narrative pigeonholes the main characters by gender and by social position, and like many significant cases in Pakistan it coheres around a consensus that there is more to the story than meets the eye. But what the rest of that story might be is unclear. As a well-known man in Karachi cultural and political life, Zaidi’s life was easy to piece together, whereas Gul is a relatively unknown and unprivileged woman (in terms of career profile at least), making her more difficult to trace. In addition, people were reluctant to talk about her and we are still looking for more details about her life. The death had echoes of the UK’s 1960s Profumo Affair. In fact, there was a direct connection as Zaidi – spoiler alert – had printed over 3000 nude pamphlets of Gul, calling her the Christine Keeler of Karachi. Keeler, a model who had an affair with a British Minister, John Profumo, are names recognised by some in Pakistan. The country’s President at the time, Ayub Khan, had been at the Cliveden Residence where Profumo and Keeler allegedly started their affair.

Against these challenges, we tried our best to piece together a story that centred on sex, scandal, and the troubled lives of the rich socialites of 70s Pakistan. The first season revolved around Zaidi’s death, and the second focused on the subsequent court case and media coverage. In season 2, episode 1 we talked about Christine Keeler, revenge porn, and the resonances in the Zaidi/Gul case. More widely, we

played around with time and the unfolding of narrative structure. *Tick Tock*, S1 E6, was one of my favourites as we retraced, hour by hour, the events leading to Zaidi's death. It was like that episode in a true crime TV show where all the pieces come together on the white board – the witness, the weapon, the whodunit.

The timeline is such a crucial part of the story. When Saba and I first worked on the timeline, beginning with Zaidi waking up in the morning, I felt like an investigator. This timeline was created using interviews with friends and family, details from the police report and newspaper archives. The episode also resonated with listeners as we were able to build tension and create genuine excitement about what was going to happen.

Some Lessons

According to one recent study, only 7% of Pakistanis have heard of podcasts.¹ The article claims that out of the 3 million podcasts that exist across the globe, fewer than 100 are from Pakistan or are Pakistan-centric. After *Notes on a Scandal*, I worked on two other podcasts: *Climate Mahaul*, Pakistan's first podcast on Climate Change and *On/Off the Record*, which looks at Pakistan's media landscape. Both podcasts received very different reactions. *Climate Mahaul* appeals to a niche but large audience, via YouTube, while *On/Off the Record*, also on YouTube, has fewer than 100 downloads in over a year. Despite this, I would say that there is immense potential in podcasts for a Pakistani audience.

A new Pew Research study claims that nearly a quarter of American podcast listeners tune into true crime,² in contrast to other genres which yield much lower audience numbers (split roughly evenly between deep reporting, interviews and commentary). Moreover, 95% of these true crime podcasts use in-depth reporting techniques. In Pakistan there are roadblocks to this kind of reporting. The news cycle here is linked to daily politics and most newsrooms do not look beyond that. The last time I was in a newsroom, back in 2020, it was very difficult to get resources or time to do innovative or investigative reporting because editors only cared about covering breaking news. It is difficult to find time and energy to go investigate or look into a cold case when you have a daily quota of stories or don't have time and resources.

For us, *Notes on a Scandal* came along when both of us could take some time out and was a passion project. The podcast medium also, crucially, allowed us space to investigate and use narrative techniques to carry out this storytelling. We have learned

some important lessons and we'd urge Pakistani content creators and journalists to pay attention to them if they're willing to give podcasting a go.

- Audiences prefer listening on Apple podcasts and Spotify but Spotify podcasts are not available in Pakistan.
- Shorter episodes do better, but if the storytelling is gripping enough people will easily sit through 40 minutes.
- Video isn't as important as some tell you.

Looking back, I am glad we chose podcasting because this medium creates an intimacy with the listener – it makes the story personal, a lesson we learned with each episode. It was interesting to piggyback off the “*Serial* effect” because our podcast did better than either of us expected, tapping into poetry types, crime junkies, civil servants, and the Pakistan diaspora. It also connected people over Twitter and Instagram. People wrote about certain twists in episodes and their whodunnit ideas – they felt involved as the story progressed.

True crime and investigative podcasting have immense and disruptive potential in Pakistan. It could potentially be a game changer in election reportage, for example. I believe there is an audience that would be interested in listening to podcasts by reporters on campaign trails, describing candidates' interactions, featuring interviews with candidate and potential voters. This could create close connections between candidates and voters, and maybe even improve voter turnout. Podcasting could also encourage a new generation of women reporters to follow in mine and Saba's footsteps to take the time to revisit cold cases, looking at them through 21st century eyes, untangling the threads of sex, gender and misogyny that weave through Pakistani society.

**Notes on a Scandal* is a limited-episode series in two seasons that investigates a cold case from 1970 in Pakistan. [Listen Here](#). It is an accompaniment to *Society Girl*, a non-fiction book, due to be released in 2024.

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Author details

Tooba Masood-Khan is a Pakistan-based freelance journalist who writes about heritage, culture, women's rights and everything Karachi. She is a podcast host and producer, best known for *Notes on a Scandal* and *Climate Mahaul*.