

# The Reflexive Podcaster: Transdisciplinarity for Emergent Systems Leadership Practice

## Panel Symposia Presenters

Janis Balda

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

Eleftheria Egel

Navigating Transformations

Hugo Gaggiotti

University of the West of England, UK

Jonathan Gosling

University of Exeter Business School, UK, Emeritus  
Pelumbra Ltd

Richard Little

Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, University of Cumbria, UK  
WSB Merito University, Warsaw, Poland

Joanna Stanberry

Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, University of Cumbria, UK

## Outline of the Proposed Format

We propose a symposium format with a short presentation and ample time given to Q&A to discuss the topic of studying the leadership dynamics of systems change in the context of Earth System Governance.

## Abstract

This symposium and related discussion highlights the experience of leadership scholar-practitioners who engaged in a process of reflexive podcasting as methodology to explore ideas that bridged across disciplines towards a richer understanding of “leadership” for more sustainable futures. These framings were applied to the divide between social and ecological systems that are present in the private sector of “environmental, social and governance” (ESG) factors and the more caring and aligned human-natural environment of “Earth System Governance.” Throughout this process eight leadership scholars reflected personally and together on how this experiment might inform methods for transdisciplinary research into Earth System Governance and what were some indications of the kinds of insights that might be derived from it. Several of the participants will be present at ISLC and by sharing our

experiences of working across disciplines, geographies, and methodologies we hope to provoke novel and emergent approaches to studying the leadership dynamics of systems change.

For scholars of leadership, attention to systems change brings networks of interacting dynamics under study towards a more collective approach to understanding leadership dynamics (ISLC 2023). However, the majority (in volume and citations) of scholarship on complex socio-ecological systems are represented by twenty or so years of an integrated research agenda represented by sustainability science (Clark & Harley, 2020) and supported by intradisciplinary work by many fields, including social scientists in the Earth System Governance Network. This “ESG” acronym creates confusion with the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) investment framework. The common error is the launching point for our reflection on bridging the intradisciplinary work of studying the leadership dynamics of systems change in light of diverse knowledge, literature and modes of practice. In the recording of podcasts for the SAGE publication *Journal of Tropical Futures: Sustainable Business, Governance & Development* and in connection with the October 2023 Earth System Governance conference, we begin conversations about these divides. In the process of analysing our planning, interactions, and the experience of podcasting, we simultaneously seek to develop a novel discursive methodology for developing critical reflexivity.

Through podcasting as a reflexive methodology we embrace a ‘potentially revelatory disruption’ to seek a sensorial and communal space for congenial discourses beyond the modes traditionally accepted (Llinares, 2018). We explore how the ‘subjective musings’ and more casual conversations of researchers could further the interdisciplinarity of overlapping fields (Stephenson, 1972) and help bridge the North-South divide towards decolonising conversations that frame the critical issues at the fore in tropical futures (Sénit & Biermann, 2021).

Podcasting has yet to be given close attention within the management literature and, informed by a wide range of sources, this symposium is an attempt to highlight its potential fecundity and importance. We observe that while *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018) appeals to visual analogies in its subtitle, the content neglects discussion of the audiovisual as useful for reflexivity in fieldworking. This relative neglect would include such commonly used techniques as ‘shadowing’ and ‘podcasting’. Similarly, paralinguistic aspects of qualitative methods (gestures, facial expressions, postures) also need to be acknowledged DeLanda’s (2016) . Perhaps Czarniawska’s forewords in the previous editions were suggestive of the dominance of the retrospective discourse of the book: ‘Reflexive Methodology is a textbook indispensable to any young researcher. It does not tell its readers how to do research. It does something much more important: It shows how research has been done in the qualitative tradition, thus encouraging the readers to make their own choices’ (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018: front matter). Barthes’ ‘Writing Degree Zero’ (1953)

Current research on podcasting in the scholarly literature tends to focus on analysis of its uses in the fields of education and communication. As a methodology, podcasting can highlight the intersubjective and interpretative dimensions of analysis in a time-bound and auditory setting and, if approached with a view to power differences, carries emancipatory potential. For

instance, in a multi-year collaborative podcasting research initiative to improve water management policies and integrate Western science and Indigenous knowledge, Day et al. (2017) adopted 'four key "projects" of a decolonizing research agenda from the engagement of Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-researchers: storytelling, representing, reframing, and sharing' (p. 204). Podcasts as a medium can highlight marginalised bodies (and lives) through marginalised voices. When women host, for example, attention is drawn to 'how women's voices continue to be policed and cherished, and the ways in which we can resist and redefine the norms of sonic space' (Tiffe & Hoffmann, 2015: 118).

Simultaneously we raise the prospect that a reflexive methodology that encounters speech in a transparent, but also edited format, raises discourse as manifest in speech, writing and social practice. In 1953 Barthes makes the primary observation in 'Writing Degree Zero':

'All modes of writing have in common the fact of being 'closed' and thus different from spoken language. Writing is in no way an instrument for communication, it is not an open route through which there passes only the intention to speak. A whole disorder flows through speech and gives it this self-devouring momentum which keeps it in a perpetually suspended state. (p. 30, English trans. 1967)

The exclamations, gaffes, and narratives that flow through podcasts in speech inhabit a particular borderland of inquiry, an appropriate stage for our inquiry.

The existence of two 'ESGs' raises a host of difficult questions for reflection. For example, Li et al. (2021) argue that consideration of Environmental, Social, and Governance factors ESG 'is the core framework for enterprises to pursue sustainable development. Integrating it into business management and investment decision making has become an international passport for enterprises to practice sustainable development' (p. 25). Earth System Governance scholars Dahlman et al. (2019) note that 'while much research attention has focused on society and policy makers, we know significantly less about how businesses exercise agency as part of Earth System Governance such as their contribution to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.' (p. 167) as a research framework and the materiality of particular Environmental, Social, and Governance factors in business-oriented 'responsible' management and investing. These questions orbit around many tensions, including but not limited to relating and interpreting multiple knowledges within the Anthropocene (Dryzek & Pickering, 2018; Berkes, 2018; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), capitalism and the contingencies of growth and degrowth (Bendell, 2022; Kallis 2014), making sense of power and emancipatory possibilities (Stanberry & Balda, 2023; Boonstra 2016), and complex understandings of the self in relation to the other (van Loon & Dijk, 2015, Egel, 2020; Ives et al, 2020, Ives et al, 2023). These challenges are particularly acute in the tropics, which experience disproportionately deleterious impacts of Global North economic activity and consumption (Case et al, 2022). The tensions of two 'ESGs' go beyond 'the organisation', and include more diverse institutional, community, resource, value chain, and geographic foci. For example, Gosling et al. (2017) focus on studying sustainable supply chain management from both leadership and learning perspectives and Gaggiotti et al. (2022) suggest

an alternative concept of “unleadership” as suitable for reflecting on a sustainable development scale. The response may even embrace the notion of societal ‘deep adaptation’ (Bendell, 2020).

By advancing podcasting as a reflexive, transdisciplinary methodology, we seek to enrich the understanding of systems leadership in challenging contexts and times, and also make a modest contribution toward sustainable practices and futures. In introducing these tensions and responses proposed by the podcast participants we also seek to further decolonising conversations among those attending ISLC, and in particular to gain insights from individuals who have experienced the harmful effects of the human-nature divide rooted in the Global South.

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