# BBMRI-ERIC Podcast

## *Episode PAERI’24 – I hear the sparkle in their eyes: podcasting for effective outreach*

**Who we are**

ES: BBMRI is a research infrastructure that focuses on biobanking and biomolecular resources. That is the collection, storage and making available of human samples and related data for medical research. Rather than have one location, it is distributed all over Europe.

BBMRI currently has 25 members and observers that includes The International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organisation. Biobank activity is supported in individual member states by National Node directors – think of them as national (rather than regional) hubs.

Biobanking is the storage and use of biological (in our case, human) samples and related data for medical research. We are headquartered in Graz, Austria, where our core scientific services such as quality management, IT infrastructure, the ethical, legal and societal implications unit and biobanking development are based.

**Who I am**

ES: I’m not a science communicator, not strictly. I am a communicator and have been for over twenty years - web, community radio, content producer, journalism lecturer and now in science communications or rather, outreach with comms thrown in. I’m primarily interested in telling stories which is why I’m here today - to tell you a story about podcasting.

Each story needs a beginning, and each passion has its spark with these often formed in childhood. My passion for audio began as a child when I would hop into bed alongside my coming-round-from-sleep-via-coffee father to listen to BBC Radio Four’s Today programme. Top of the hour. The big interviews.

Occasional days sick at home would be spent in the parental bed drifting in and out to the radio. So, I have grown up with audio, it’s power to share news and primarily stories, whilst introducing me to topics that are completely new.

It’s that last point that provides the reason why I keep gravitating back to audio and why, around 2007 when academics bemoaned the death of radio, I knew it was just shifting form. We love a story, we love to be told a story and audio does this so well.

It’s therefore my delight that audio has only grown in popularity with its ability to accompany us rather than dictate our time. I’ll tell you about the BBMRI podcast using the tried and tested story bullet points of what, why, when, where, who, and how. My aim is for you to leave with an understanding and kindling for podcasting and doing it yourself.

My absolute position is you can do this too. As you listen, turn over in your mind the potential stories out there waiting for you to help tell them. So let’s break podcasting down.

*Cue intro music (00:21:00)*

**What**

ES: So what is the BBMRI podcast? It’s a (mostly) monthly audio piece, around 20-40 minutes long and rolls out in various formats.

I think of the BBMRI podcast as a bucket of ideas within which we chuck all the elements that we offer as a research infrastructure. General thinking is to have a USP and I did when I produced Postcards from Home. It was neat, contained and unique. BBMRI busts that mould but I’m ok with that - we tell stories that reflect the expertise and passion from across the biobanking community and that feels like enough; biobanking is specialist as it is.

Within the podcast bucket are several sub formats for our different brands and audiences so we have Quality Management, ELSI Dialogues, Europe Biobank Week specials, captured education alongside our stock content and that is diverse. We put out webinars, single interview, multiple interviews and on locations. So long as we capture the diversity and value of the biobanking community.

**Why we podcast**

ES: When I came to BBMRI, I was mostly the communications department and there was a track history of farming media out to freelancers and a fear of its cost. So, we did articles, the occasional press release and the usual socials. But biobanking is an alien concept and when you have to spend the first part of any conversation describing what we do, then it’s clear that some basic comms is needed. Added to that is the unseen work that we do, supporting a community of mostly academic and university hospital biobanks, cutting across multiple EU projects, and lending ethical, legal, quality and social implications expertise. A lot of stories come out of this. A lot.

But at the heart of all of this is not the outcomes with their alien concepts but people, their passions and achievements. And this is why we podcast.

I called this talk hearing the sparkle in their eyes and its exactly why we record because as soon as you take a genuine, researched, heartfelt interest in someone’s life work or major project achievement, when you ask them searching questions and give them the floor, their eyes shine. No one really does science for profit or potential Nobel recognition, they do it for the love. Someone once said to me after they agreed very nervously to an interview “no one has ever asked me these questions and I’ve really enjoyed talking to you”.

Job done. Well, partially.

A note on value and impact. For those research infrastructures familiar with the ESFRI roadmap monitoring, they will understand that reflecting the socio-economic impact of the research infrastructure is becoming a greater priority. I’m well familiar with this from my days at community radio and know how slippery it is to capture the qualitative elements of impact. So another reason we podcast is to capture just this and my audiences may be one person at the EC who is alert to the outcomes of a particular flagship project. They may not even listen to our full episode but simply catch - and share - the related audiogram. So again, job done. Partially.

I can summarise, as I did in the abstract why we podcast, and it’s for these reasons. To:

* Communicate complicated concepts related to core biobanking and biomolecular research infrastructure services
* Capture impact from the community
* Highlight inspiring achievements of individuals
* Immerse listeners at outreach events
* Share outcomes from major EU projects
* Add value to live education events by enabling replay

Why a podcast over other formats? I don’t make that choice, I’m a strong believer in doing as little as possible for maximum impact so it means that I record one thing and use it in multiple ways. A webinar - video - with a top and tail, also becomes a podcast, becomes an accompanying article, becomes an embed in a multimedia Headliner story, becomes an audiogram for social media.

*Cue Saba (0:36:03)*

So I don’t make a choice except to think about achieving the highest quality to give me wriggle room. I’ll come onto how we do this shortly.

**When**

ES: Despite being 20 odd episodes in, and knowing good practice dictates that you hit a regular release cycle, we have yet to master being head just above water. Now with a team around me and 2025 to plan, we hope to improve here.

Some of the episodes are dictated by pre-planned diary events so we put out podcast versions of webinars and these can either be outreach education opportunities that are often aligned with project outcomes such as ELSI Dialogues or funding call webinars where we reach into specific communities like the canSERV project that enables translational and transnational cancer research.

Communicating with patient citizens on implementing the European Health Data Space (EHDS) was one of these and we recorded the session in September for release seven weeks later. This was a delay to make sure we had EC permission and to coincide with the project conclusions.

Some episodes are extremely contemporary such as the Europe Biobank Week Congress Radio episodes. Scripted, recorded, edited, transcribed and released on a daily basis throughout the EBW Congress, they served as highlight round ups of the previous day but are also soft marketing - a look at what you could benefit from next time window into the largest biobanking event in the year. Comms often melds into a little bit of marketing and this feels like a high value way of doing it for relatively few resources.

Portraits such as the one with Eva, we can take our time with as they are less linked to contemporary events and serve to highlight excellence.

I mentioned capturing impact to you for demonstrating socio-economic value. I can’t highlight strongly enough that having a mic in hand will mean you don’t miss opportunities for documenting this. When we celebrated ten years of operation at a high-level event in Brussels, we mic’d up our national node speakers who were telling mini stories of achievements from across the biobanking community. They presented with passion about topics close to their research hearts.

When Katerina told everyone about the clinical trials for diagnosing pancreatic cancer (one of the deadliest cancers) from a single drop of blood, research facilitated by samples from our biobanks, she held back tears. Everyone did. The power of science communication comes from these deeply human stories told authentically.

Two episodes of impact story podcasts broadcast these to a wider audience and, key for us, to our Assembly of Member Ministry delegates to take back to their countries. They hold our core budget purse strings so, like that one person in the EC, if they grasp the value we provide from these recordings then the podcast is effective.

When you record is up to you, I would say is, just don’t be afraid to. Have a microphone in your bag and an app on your phone ready. You never know when those gift moments may come up and if you do, well, you have extra time for composing the killer question.

**Where**

ES: OK so, we don’t have a swanky studio and we are located in different countries as a team. In addition, our interviewees are often also located elsewhere. Yes, some are in person recordings so the events I’ve spoken of, I’m there with my phone rigged up as a reporter’s mic (like this) or I have people ready with the microphone in lavalier mode as they present. I do this too if we are also recording video so I have the flexibility of producing both.

The quality of recording really matters - it’s difficult to recover bad audio - and you may have noticed that teams or zoom recordings can really squash the richness of people’s voices. People also use headsets which not only make them look like Star Trek extras but produce a particular aviator-ish sound. To avoid this we record with what I think of as belt and braces. Yes, I interview and record the teams/zoom meeting but we also simulrec - that means to simultaneously record our local voices.

I’ll explain a little more about this in how.

We record the links - that is the intro, outro and the bits in between either in my wardrobe - yes really -, under a blanket with cushions behind the laptop or at the office where we have one of those meeting booths. I’ll be honest though; I really do prefer to be with someone when we record as the energy is more tangible and you can hear it on the recording.

**Who**

ES: Who is the super fun bit. Asking someone to take part in a podcast can be a bit of a door opener once you break past the nerves. When you have a microphone in your hand, it’s empowering. You can walk up to anyone and ask them to speak to their expertise and it’s very rare I’ve had a no.

For the podcast, we want to capture the incredible diversity from biobanking. Our biobanks hold general population cohorts - so tracking groups of people over time - or specialist collections cancer, rare diseases, pandemic response COVID collections, particular conditions like asthma or specialist samples such as breast milk. Whatever a researcher needs in terms of human tissue or liquid samples, our biobanks collect and, with the related data, make available to those research projects.

Perhaps you get a sense of the multiplicity of stories waiting to be told just from that. I’m primarily targeting those biobankers who are also often the main investigator, the scientists closest to the research and dying to tell us all about it. We also interview patients, patient organisations, policy types, politicians, ministry delegates, event attendees and speakers.

*Cue Kathi (0:33:58)*

I’m currently working on a podcast/video that will tell the story of genetic sequencing in Latvia, made possible by the Latvian Biomedical Research and Study Centre (BMC) who curate the Genome Database of Latvian Population (LGDB). Secondary research permission enabled them to conduct a project tracing people at risk of hereditary cancers and has resulted in eight families, so far, receiving genetic counselling and preventative treatment.

Thinking of the presentation title, Vita told me, eyes blazing, that despite 15 years of research paper publishing, her most overwhelming achievement was realising she had helped save or extend the lives of these family members. I can’t wait to record that story with her, the PI and a participant of the project.

For the two examples I’ll share more of, I’ll explain the who in this how section.

**How**

ES: Recipe for a podcast. Let’s take two examples that fulfil my why objectives: Eva Ortega Paíno’s profile and the EHDS workshop visit.

Eva was the first National Node Director for Spain and is now Secretary General for Research, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, Spain. She’s had an amazing career with biobanking at the heart of it. We wanted to profile her as an inspiring figure for young researchers. A simple interview piece, we did it as a simulrec - when each person records their contribution locally to achieve the best audio quality.

Mari and I were on the Blue Yeti and recording straight into Audition. Eva placed her mobile phone with its audio recorder going near her face as she spoke to us via zoom. We make mistakes and I still laugh now - but only because I edited my way out. I forgot to ask her to wear headphones so I needed to do some careful editing of our voice.

The belt and braces of simulrec really mattered for, though we recorded the zoom, when the Ministry cut the internet and she returned via iPad, the sound was completely different. Unusable. So we used her phone recording and it really didn’t matter. I love the fact that you can hear her warmth and passion, right down to the jingling of her bracelets as she gesticulates. Podcasts can highlight the best people and this is what we aimed for - scientific excellence in story form.

I had a script set up that we composed from researching her CV and planning questions that would draw out the arc of her career. I advise against recording questions later is it sounds very false. We briefed Eva on what to expect - recording the introduction and outro. Editing is done in Audition but this is expensive so you can just as easily use Audacity, Ferrite, Hindenburg, GarageBand, or whatever.

I try to naturally remove any tics people have - excessive umms, clicking of tongue, whilst maintaining an easy listening pace. You don’t want to remove the personality and musicality of individuals. Aside from that and using a few techniques to achieve a level sound, I rarely edit much more. This comes from practice and preparation - not recording too much which removes the onerous feeling from editing. The music I use was made by In Love with a Ghost from whom I got permission. They kindly also allowed me to loop their song to use as breaks between sections.

I do try, and did with Eva, to use what is called a pull quote - this is a particularly tasty statement or thought from the interviewee that acts to entice and set the scene for the listener before our intro music. I also use this for the Headliner.

*Cue Eva (00:09:04)*

Once I had edited Eva’s profile piece, I dumped the mp3 into Premiere to transcribe, check and save as a text file. I wrote show notes (pull quote, title, introduction and associated links) that go up on Red Circle, the platform for hosting and distributing the podcast, I made the Headliner - a short audiogram, used this for the socials and created an episode page for her to point people to from the social post. It’s a lot of work, but it’s worth it. I value people’s time to record and want to do them justice. Also, a job done well means more people share it and this increases your reach.

The EHDS podcast was a different kettle of fish. The project team wanted me to capture the workshop, a sense of the major issues swirling around citizen communication when it comes to secondary use of research data.

It comprises many interviews with different stakeholders, all with an interest in shaping better communication and citizen buy in of the European Health Data Space. I recorded this on location in Brussels and steadied my nerves with a mostly drafted script and interview Hitlist. I’m not an EHDS expert and I don’t pretend to be. I recognise as a communicator; I need to know a little about a lot so I call on the experts when I script.

*Cue Rebecca (02:27:16)*

You have to be chill when recording on location; using your body to control noisy coffee break sounds and lots of eye contact to help interviewees stay focused. I have a standard procedure I whip off to everyone; it goes like this:

**Briefing to participants**

* Introduce yourself - name, location/institution
* I’ll ask you the question
* Try to fold the question into the start of your response
* Be concise and aim for 90 seconds
* Consider the sentence you want to end on (so it’s strong)
* If you make a mistake, pause and continue as we will edit after. I promise you’ll sound good.

Despite this planning, it still needed a tiny editorial team behind the podcast because this needed to hit the communications outcomes promised to the EHDS2Pilot project. I think it does that plus it demystifies what happens in a workshop of this type. Like with Eva’s episode, the script added structure, but I wrote more of it when I had edited the audio contributions and had a better sense of the story I wanted to share with listeners.

Whilst I always record people’s names, I tend not to keep that part of the recording but use it for pronunciation accuracy. The end part is always the same sequence; output to mp3, show notes, headliner, page, socials. Make sure you tag everyone :) because people love to hear themselves and know they’ve made a valued contribution.

*Cue Gözde (01:05:41)*

**Effective?**

ES: I trailed podcasting as an effective tool for science communication. I measure the impact of the BBMRI podcast from different perspectives so yes, how many people have tuned in but also, like I said before, even if I know that one EC person high on my priority list listened, then it was an effective exercise.

Podcasting sits alongside my other communications tools and the simple act of audio recording can provide me article fodder and excerpts; I don’t need to edit the whole shebang. I’ve mentioned that I’m kind of lazy and will extract the audio from videos so long as it’s high quality to put into our BBMRI content bucket. What I’m saying is, once you feel confident with the basics, audio, simply lovely audio conveying community driven stories, can be a powerful and effective method of communication.

As I talked, did you turn over some stories to record? Perhaps you peered at my microphones and googled buying some too. If you feel the kindling of inspiration to try this yourself, to engage your many potential participants and audiences in the value of what you do, then I’ve done my job, because you really can do it too.