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Part of the establishment

Reflecting on 10 years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium

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Abstract:

In 2004, a new movement began. It was one that promised democratisation of media production tools and the means to freely distribute work. Using domestic tools and open source software the pioneers threatened to disrupt the top down media ecosystem that we were used to. That movement was podcasting. In the ten years that have passed since we first heard the word 'Podcast' thousands of podcasts have started, audiences have grown steadily, technologies have evolved and the medium has become increasingly professionalised. By 2015 the medium had become a significant talking point through the success of podcasts such as *Serial, Start-up* and *WTF,* suggesting that podcasting may have reached maturity.

Keywords:

Radio. Podcasting. iPhone. iPod. Mobile Media

In 2006, I published one of the first academic articles on podcasting and posed the question 'Will the iPod kill the radio star?' (Berry, 2006). Like other articles of the time, it wrestled with defining the new medium. The article reviewed developments and discussed podcasting as both an opportunity and a threat for traditional radio media (p. 149). This article will revisit some of those initial thoughts and – drawing again on interviews with practitioners and industry professionals – consider where we are ten years later. Much has happened to podcasting in the intervening years, with some suggestions that by 2014 podcasting was not only experiencing a renaissance but that it was enjoying a golden age (Roose, 2014), with subscriptions to podcasts exceeding one billion (Kang, 2014). Indeed, at the time of writing – 2015 – these developments were consolidated, taking podcasting passed a tipping point into credibility and, in some cases, profit.

Ten years in the making

More than ten years ago, journalist and blogger Ben Hammersley wrote an article for *The Guardian* about the rise of bloggers using MP3 to distribute their own content (Hammersley, 2004). In that article he also proposed what this new trend should be called: 'I wrote something like "so what do we call it?" and I ended up adding 2 or 3 made-up words, and one of those made-up words was podcasting and it sort-of caught on from there' (BBC Radio 4, 4 April 2014). In the ten years that followed Hammersley's coining of the term, podcasting became both a familiar term and an increasingly viable means of disintermediated audio distribution. A broad range of participants were experimenting with the new form and if they weren't making them they were listening

to them (Markman, 2012) (Zikuhr, 2013). As Shaw (2010: 216) notes, 'Across 2004–05, the new wave of podcasting was seen as an attack on the old AM/FM radio model … media journals were full of stories headlined "podcasting kills the radio star" with or without a question mark'. It appeared that radio would experience the same challenges that were facing other industries (Friedman, 2006) as the world moved online. A key moment came in 2005 when the writer and comedian Ricky Gervais launched his first podcast-only series with *The Guardian* newspaper. Almost overnight people who had never heard of podcasting were not only aware of this new medium but were listening to one of its biggest stars. Neither the newspaper nor Gervais had the slightest idea what would happen next, but as the then Head of *The Guardian*'s Editorial Department observed: 'it was clear in the first few days that it was going to be huge. We'd budgeted for 100,000 downloads in the first week and we'd done that by the Wednesday. … It was absolutely huge and got bigger as it rolled on' (McIntosh, 2005). Highlighting the new freedom podcasting offered, Gervais noted: 'We didn't have a boss. We didn't have rules or restrictions that you do on radio. … We could do it when we wanted, for as long as we wanted. We could put it up there and then people would go to it at any time' (BBC News, 2006). Yet, in a 2012 survey of podcasters Markman found that '[the] desire to do "radio" was the most frequently cited reason for starting to podcast', but went on to add that:

> many of those who mentioned an interest in radio or media also cited the
> convenience of the medium – that it was relatively low cost, flexible and easy to
> enter … participants noted that podcasting allowed them to do radio on their
> own terms – free from industry and/or legal constraints. (p. 555)

Recent interviews conducted for this present article reinforce the suggestion that podcasting was not only seen in its early days as a step into radio but as a means by which opinions could be heard. One interviewee noted that: 'I think people were curious generally about podcasting and getting involved. ... Anybody can do it. All you need is the internet, a computer and a microphone really!' (Barker, 2014). Whilst such self-funded production may be prolific Morgan (2015) suggests there over 60,000 active podcasts in the US iTunes store), it is often more traditionally sourced content that attains the higher public profile. When one reviews the iTunes charts in the USA, the UK, Australia and Canada over a period months, patterns emerge and a taxonomy can be identified. These charts seem to confirm the existence of the Long Tail (Anderson, 2006) in podcasting, with a relatively small cluster of dominant hits and an extended tail of more varied content with far smaller audiences.

Sampling these charts from English speaking territories at intervals during 2014 and 2015 suggests that it is public broadcasters (~~such as~~ primarily: ABC, BBC, CBC or NPR) who enjoy the most success. This is evident not only in the country of origin but increasingly in other nations as well, with podcasts such as *Radiolab* (NPR) and *In Our Time* (BBC) performing well domestically and internationally. More commercially orientated podcasts produced by traditional media organisations, corporations, celebrities or people with products to promote also feature strongly~~, offering digital content and material to promote personal brands. ~~.Whilst podcast listeners continue to flock around a small number of key productions, there is an infinite array of highly specialised but small-scale podcasts where profit is an ideal – rather than a requirement. An example of such activity is the *Wise Men Say* podcast, produced by Sunderland football fans Gareth Barker and Stephen Goldsmith. They say whilst it is

difficult to fully know where their listeners are, or why they listen, they are clear on what drives success 'When we [Sunderland AFC] do well figures go up. During the cup run and our good 3-month spell, we were topping around 2,500 [downloads] a week' (Barker, 2014). This suggests that (at least for this podcast) the popularity and visibility of the subject matter is a key driver for success, as when fans are excited they search for ways to engage with their obsession.

Although the flatness of the platform suggests that opportunities should be equal, familiar inequalities have emerged. Part of the problem lies in the data, as podcast charts in both iTunes and the mobile application Pocketcasts are derived from a mix of comments and new subscriptions rather than the number of downloads. This means that a heavily marketed (or commented upon) podcast can appear to be more popular than one which may have more listeners but built its audience slowly by word of mouth. In other words, charts from podcast aggregators are a poor external indicator of success, as popularity is measured by attention rather than consumption. Whilst independently produced podcasts such as *Welcome to Nightvale*, *Answer Me This*, *Reply All* and *WTF* do enjoy great success, the charts are often dominated by established linear broadcast organisations (Markman, 2011: 549) where content is cross-promoted on-air, generating a stream of new subscribers. The Director of Operations for *This American Life*, Seth Lind, agrees that the profile his programme already had by being on the radio was a contributing factor to it podcast success. He acknowledges that success 'was definitely driven by our reach and popularity on public radio' (Lind, 2014). Whilst podcasters will know how many downloads they receive, the nature of the MP3 as ~~a 'dumb'~~ an orphaned file means that it is impossible to know whether that file is ever heard, or whether the listener is downloading multiple files across their devices. This

means that subscription charts are the only widely available metric with which we can currently evaluate performance.

Whilst the absorption of the word 'podcasting' into our lexicon indicates that it is now a more visible activity, the promise that podcasts would radically change 'who's talking and who's listening' (Winer, 2005) seems to be an ideal that is yet to be fully achieved. In fact, the dominance of work created by established media organisations and professionals reflect the findings of Elberse in her study of the Blockbuster, where: 'In general, most people are perfectly happy with the most popular products' (2013: 164) or at least gravitate towards the familiar. However, even though the figures attributed to podcasts like *Wise Men Say* are substantially smaller than leading podcasts, the scale of independent podcasting (in terms of the volume offered) is still significant (Millette, 2011). Whereas mass market podcasts will have significantly larger listener bases, independent podcasts far outnumber them and offer a greater diversity of voice, opinion and subject matter. This is what Sterne et al (2008) refer to as the medium's 'cultural cache', whereby podcasting gains value over traditional linear broadcasters because it can accommodate the extremes of diversity. The majority of podcasters in this amateur arena undertake podcasting 'primarily [as] a hobby activity that does not generate revenue' (Markman and Sawyer, 2014: 3). Unlike the brands at the head of the tail which are seeking to make money, the motivation of these amateurs is different: ~~the~~ a desire to engage their audience and have a voice. ~~The authors~~ Markman and Sawyer place this work into a wider context of participatory culture, where podcasting offers an alternative to traditional forms. The growth and evolution of podcasting in the past three years has meant that independent podcasting now has its own long tail ranging

from grassroots producers creating work at home for fun to podcasting businesses with salaried staff and premises.

Did the iPod kill the radio star?

One key factor contributing to the early success of podcasting was the iPod, and the manner in which the listener/consumer engaged with it. The iconic devices became an essential tool for the urban commuter, allowing users to isolate themselves from the busy world around them (Bull, 2007). They created a privatised and personalized auditory experience, which Menduni ~~argues~~ argued is more 'individualised than radio listening [where] the Podcasters are seen not as institutions but as peers' (2007: 16) and where content choices are as personal to the user as their music choices. Shaw's research in Denmark similarly suggests that podcasting 'adds a new dimension to the act of listening, a more individual or personal dimension' (2010: 218). In the early 2000s this iPod powered movement looked revolutionary – so much so that *Wired* magazine ran a front page that suggested 'The End of Radio' was nigh (Issue 13.03/March 2005). There was some logic in their proclamation: technologies were changing, and in podcasting listeners could find alternatives to traditional broadcast formats. Writing in 2007 Albarran et al examined the impact that new forms of audio entertainment were having on radio. In their sample of young adult users, 26.7% of those surveyed were already listening to podcasts (p. 97). The same year Ferguson et al (2007: 103) also reported that the iPod and podcasting were increasingly impacting both audiences and the media. While they found that 'users of MP3 players have not stopped listening [to the radio] entirely' (p. 116), there was a significant preference for

their own personalised soundtracks. Indeed, Sellas (2012: 10) has argued that podcasting was (in part) a response to the 'demands of a generation that has grown up in an environment where digital technology is commonplace. It is informed by factors such as mobility, the ability to make decisions, freedom of choice and alteration of content, or the generation of one's own universe'. In short, radio looked like a medium in trouble.

Ten years on from the birth of the podcasting movement, far from killing off radio, podcasting has had a positive impact, offering new opportunities for flexible listening, format innovation and revenue. As Shaw (2010: 217) explains: 'for radio fans, while the move to podcasting led to a shift away from linear to non-linear radio, it was never about rejecting "live" radio. It was simply about opting for the choice of having radio on-demand whenever you wanted it rather than tied to a programmer's schedule.' In her examination of the use of podcasting by ABC in Australia, Murray found that 'Podcasting facilitates repeat listening far better than the domestic audio taping of the past' (2009: 204). As both Sellas (2012) and Johnson (2012) report, this adoption of digital approaches fitted into wider strategies within public broadcasters which might introduce new listeners to radio and lower the age of listeners. Seth Lind, Director of Operations for *This American Life*, agrees with the above researchers' findings, noting that:

> Podcast listeners are on average younger than radio listeners. But more than attracting young people, podcasting attracts MORE people. A lot of people do not have a lifestyle that fits schedule-based radio listening. They want to listen on-demand. ... I think podcasting allows public radio to retain listeners as well as gain them. When we launched the podcast in 2006 ... a lot of people said

things like 'I used to listen when I had a commute, and now I'm listening again!' (2014, emphasis in the original).

By developing podcasting models Public Broadcasters reach audiences who might not otherwise engage with linear broadcasts and are able to experiment with both new formats and new sources of revenue. Through podcasting, the podcast *99% Invisible* was able to offer longer form content than it could as an insert into networked radio and the team led by Lind at *This American Life* were able to create *Serial*. Debuting in December 2014, *Serial* became a defining moment for a medium in change and rapidly became the most listened to and talked about podcast of all time. As both Bonini (2015) and Berry (2015) note, the success enjoyed by *Serial* was due in part to technological shifts but also the lift factor created through the podcast's association with *This American Life* and its high profile presenter/producer Ira Glass. This has moved podcasting into what Bonini calls a 'Second Age' (2015) where accumulated experience has created a developing sector of professionalised businesses (such as Gimlet Media and Panoply) that he says have 'radically changed the economics behind the production of podcasts' (p. 27). Indeed, it is this growing sector of independent podcasting that has spearheaded the movement into the mainstream, as seen during 2014 and 2015. ~~In the case of *Serial*, the platform allowed producers to respond to a story and format idea that would not have been possible in the available linear radio slots. (Berry, 2015)~~

For the BBC, its approach to podcasting has shifted over the past ten years. Initially podcasting was an alternative means of distribution for whole shows or highlights, where podcasts became 'promotional paratexts for the source radio programs' (Cwynar 2015: 191). This has evolved into a wider mix of texts that also include a curated

approach, where podcasts, such as *Seriously* and *Radio 4 on Music,* frame previously

broadcasted programmes with an introduction from a presenter. Effectively,

broadcasters have responded to the threat posed by podcasting not by attempting to

stifle it but by embracing it and making it their own. Podcasting has become a

distribution route, as well as a space for innovation and remediation – where content

can be shared with listeners in a way that linear transmission systems cannot facilitate.

Is Podcasting radio, and does it matter?

My 2006 article profiled podcasting 'as radio'. Whilst this offered a useful frame at the

time with which to evaluate something new, we should now question whether that

remains a useful approach. Andrew Dubber wrestles with these big issues for radio in

his 2014 book, where he argues that radio is a complex set of practices, determined by a

combination of technology, culture and the audience. Rooke and Hambly-Odame (2013),

Tacchi (2000), Lind and Medoff (1999) and Cordeiro (2012a) also discuss the nature of

what we might be able to call 'radio' and how we might define it. According to Cordeiro

(2012b: 503) radio-audio is now 'interactive, (more) participatory, shareable,

asynchronous, repeatable, reproducible, searchable, customisable, discontinuous,

hypertextual, not linear, convergent and on-demand'. However, this presents us with an

uncomfortable position which suggests that whilst many podcasts are radio and some

sound like radio, we should be careful about defining them purely as such. Many radio

shows are re-edited to make them suitable for podcasting by either adding content not

permitted on broadcast radio or removing copyrighted content. This means they change

shape when podcasted, raising semantic questions about what they are in their

remediated form. Equally, podcasts may take on forms that simply would be inappropriate for linear broadcast, due to content, duration or format. Therefore, whilst we might continue to discuss podcasting as a radiogenic practice or one that occurs within a radio business, I would argue that there is a uniqueness that should also be considered. Over time, definitions may become easier, although experience would suggest that might not be the case. Andrew Bottomley (2015) suggests that whilst podcasting can be described by its technology (the process of subscribing to an RSS feed etc) this is merely one way of defining the word. There are also styles and sounds to consider in any possible definition, and the presence of programmes that have previously been on the radio can complicate matters.

What has changed since podcasting began is that podcasters have developed aesthetics that are notably different to linear radio. In the debate over what is podcasting and what is radio, I would assert that podcasts have developed definite features that are distinct from radio – distinct enough for us to consider them *alongside* radio, rather than purely as part *of* radio. Whilst radio is an intimate medium (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998), it is possible to argue that podcasting takes this a stage further and offers, in many instances, a sense of 'hyper-intimacy'. Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting (headphones), utilising an intimate form of communication (human speech). Furthermore, in many cases podcasts are presented by people from within a listener's own community of interest or by people s/he may already have a relationship with via social media, and are frequently recorded in a podcaster's own personal or domestic space. Unlike radio listeners, who may encounter programmes by chance and use them as sonic wallpaper, the podcast listener actively searches for content and puts time aside to listen. Podcaster Helen Zaltman also recognises this unique trait of podcasts, as

she explains: 'You're talking right into their ears. They feel physically close to you. ... They have to make several choices in order to able to listen to it. You can't end up listening by accident and then you'll be listening on headphones on a portable device and carrying you around with them' (Zaltman, 2014). Podcasters are aware of this and often tailor their modes of address with this in mind. This combination of active decision making and highly privatised listening gives reasonable grounds to consider audio podcasting as a highly personal and intimate medium – one which is similar to but not the same as radio.

The iPod is dead, long live the iPhone

Both my own 2006 discussion and that of Menduni in 2007 suggested that the Smartphone would become an essential tool for podcast consumption. Indeed, iPod sales have been on a downward trend since 2008, with iPhone sales growing (Cunningham, 2014) and Apple confirming in 2014 they would no longer produce the iconic iPod Classic. This suggests that whilst a device with media functionality is important to consumers, connectivity and immediacy are even more important. As Cordeiro (2012b: 502) suggests the purchasing decisions of these 'e-listeners' may be as much about which platform is convenient to them as anything else. Research conducted in 2014 around the podcast *Serial* (Berry, 2015) indicates the transition of podcast listening to mobile was fundamentally important to success. The mobile app also allows podcasters to offer additional on-demand content, such as images or archived programmes. Seth Lind from *This American Life* notes: 'Between the app and the site and the 24 hour stream, there are about 300K weekly archive listens. That's probably doubled in the last two years' (2014). This would suggest that listeners not only appreciate the opportunity to explore content (see McClung and Johnson, 2010) but also

seek ways to engage further with the content they love. For producers distribution via their own app provides accurate data on listening trends and habits, telling producers what works and what doesn't, which can feed back into the production process (Ragusea, 2015).

This ability to stream, download and listen to audio content on the move has increased interest in podcasting. In the 2015 MIDAS report, RAJAR revealed that in the UK, for instance, 36% of podcast listening was on a Smartphone, while data from Edison/Triton (2015) showed that more podcasts in the United States were consumed on smartphones/tablets or other portable devices than in the previous years (55% compared to 34% in 2013). The shift from MP3 player to smartphone removed many of the problems inherent in engaging with podcasts, issues which technically minded early adopters would be willing to negotiate but the majority of listeners would not. The mobile app has not only significantly reduced the barriers involved in accessing podcasts but also introduced additional benefits such as the opportunity to share content via social media or contribute to productions, developments which Wade Morris and Patterson (2015) suggest have reinvigorated podcasting by offering 'hyper-personalized features, ... convenience and efficient listening features' (p. 229) .

The line between what is a podcast and what is on-demand audio is also becoming less distinct. In this blurring of boundaries we may see a new term emerge, or we may simply see everything as 'stuff we like' and listen to it across a myriad of connected devices. We may see divergence between professional and amateur producers occurring here. Some independent podcasters may favour the democracy and affordability of RSS distribution via free hosting sites and others the collective marketing potential of networks – such as TuneIN or Stitcher. Other producers may

prefer to manage their own applications, where they can control their own intellectual property rights, maintain a direct path to the listener and offer premium content. In other words, whilst the number of ways in which listeners can receive podcasts will grow via an increasing plethora of connected devices, there is potential for fragmentation, creating a multifaceted market that might make future studies more complex.

Conclusions: The next ten years?

Many factors will contribute to what happens to podcasting over the next ten years. From the current trajectory of developments, we could expect that podcasts will shift increasingly from a 'download and listen later' to a 'listen now' model. It is possible to argue therefore that podcasting is subject to a form of hybridisation where multiple platforms converge in a cloud of connected devices with audio content (that was once solely available via an RSS feed) synchronised across phones, tablets, computers and cars. For public or speech broadcasters the podcast remains useful, as unlike linear radio which is transitory, podcasts can remain long after the transmission has ended through open-ended archives (Sellas, 2012 P10). The experience of *Serial* in 2014 is a case in point, as listeners who discovered the podcast late could start at the beginning and catch-up (Berry, 2015).   Over the past ten years podcasting provided a bridge between a broadcast age of restricted access to a post-broadcast age of availability.

In 2006, I questioned whether podcasting in its current form (where listeners subscribe to content via RSS and download it to a device at home) would persist, suggesting that '[w]hilst the term may become redundant, the concept will not' (p. 157). It may be that podcasting is a transitory solution, one that offered a temporary fix until a more

workable solution could be found (Menduni, 2007). In the past 10 years radio has become visual (Berry, 2013), engaged with social media (Bonini, 2012) and has moved increasingly online and mobile (Cordeiro, 2012a). According to Edmund, listeners are 'experimenting with ever more complex cross-media practices' (2014: 2) and so listeners may stop downloading 'Podcasts' and begin to consume content on demand. Podcast producer Lind speculates that, 'Downloading will stop. … In the future, a listener will have access to all of our content perpetually and updated automatically, without downloading a thing' (Lind, 2014). So, whilst in ten years' time we could still be talking about audio content, it is possible not everyone will be calling such content 'podcasts'. Podcaster Helen Zaltzman (2014) agrees, suggesting: 'it's quite possible we will be calling them something else… But on the other hand people are familiar with it now.' Indeed, we may be talking about a 'hybrid' form of 'radio' where on-demand and live, amateur, professional and public content is consumed on the same device (Bowie, 2012), with future listeners flipping between live local programming, downloads and streaming without recognition of how the audio reaches them. Just as when radio moved online, as Black (2001) notes, listeners still called it radio, the word podcasting may hold cultural significance long after the processes that created it have been replaced.

Any notions that podcasting would 'kill' radio have been largely disproved over the past ten years. Indeed, if the history of radio has told us anything it is that far from being replaced by new technologies, radio has adapted to them or made use of them in ever more complex media landscapes. Ideas about what form a medium might, or might not, take are constantly contested and challenged by a range of practices and trends. These are influenced by technologies, content producers, business models and consumers

(Meikle and Young, 2012: 24). Although podcasters themselves are more than optimistic about the future (Caldwell, 2013), it is not without challenges for both the industry and anyone attempting to evaluate developments. Unlike broadcasting, the distribution systems and technologies for podcasting are in the public domain and so producers and consumers have been able to bend and define the podcast space to fit their own needs without the need for regulatory change or expensive engineering solutions.

Whilst as a medium radio remains largely unchanged, there has been an impact on radio business practices. Whilst there is a suggestion that the podcast *Serial* has prompted renewed interest in serialised narratives, the content of podcasts has had little impact on radio. However, podcasting has created space for the creation of new forms of audio and offered greater access to audiences for producers. This relationship is typical of the convergence culture discussed by Jenkins, where grassroots participants generate diversity and traditional media amplifies it. As he explains: 'The power of participation comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it and then recirculating it, feeding it back into the mainstream' (2006: 257). This process will continue in the realm of podcasting, but its growth will be parallel to radio, rather than as a direct replacement for it.

Podcasting is a medium that has been experimented with over several years and is now moving into a period of credibility, stability and maturity. Almost certainly in the next ten years, whilst the demand for and nature of the content outlined here and in my 2006 article will remain fixtures in the media landscape, the processes by which podcasts are delivered will be superseded by streaming, 'smart' radios and other yet-to-emerge systems. In this evolving market, radio and media businesses will consider not how

they might counter these trends but how they might exploit and embrace them as new opportunities to engage with and expand their audiences. Whether, in these shifts, we continue to use the term 'podcast' remains to be seen

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