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***SERIAL* AND TEN YEARS OF PODCASTING: HAS THE MEDIUM GROWN UP?**

ABSTRACT

When Ben Hammersley quickly pulled the word “podcasting” out of the air for a Guardian article in 2004, the revolution that became podcasting was a new and emerging movement that re-appropriated the tools around it. As a word, a distribution system, and a production convention, podcasting is now considered mainstream. As the medium approaches teenage years podcast listening continues to grow, but today listeners favour smartphones over iPods, an ecosystem which seems to be generating renewed interest in the medium. The podcast *Serial* is leading this charge; raising the question ‘has podcasting finally grown up?’

KEYWORDS

Radio; podcasting; *Serial*; listening

It seems like a long time since we first heard the word *podcasting*. As a concept it seemed to threaten the very nature of what of what we do in radio. It swept aside the need for the radio schedule and put listeners in charge. More significantly, it opened the door to competition. No longer did you need a transmitter to reach an audience. All you needed was a computer and a microphone, and as the cost of these tools tumbled this became a viable proposition for content producers wanting to crack the world of audio media production. Podcasting was a converged medium in its purest form, as it pulled together the tools we already had and opened the door to new content and practices (Berry, 2006). In 2004 *podcasting* seemed like both a threat and opportunity for radio (Shaw, 2010), as Markman and Sawyer

also note that “while the Internet has not yet killed the radio station, both Internet radio and podcasting specifically have continued to grow in popularity... Podcasting can therefore be seen as both a boon and a challenge to traditional broadcasting” (2014, p. 20). No longer were radio stations restricted to what they could put out on their linear channels and in public radio especially, this has been a significant opportunity, one which has been internationally recognised (Madsen, 2009). Of course, the rumours of radio’s death were greatly exaggerated as – whilst podcast listening has increased – it does not appear to have done so at the expense of radio. Audiences have grown, to the point where 33% of Americans saying they have listened to a podcast (Edison/Triton, 2015). Patterns in other countries (Jedrzejewski, 2014) indicate that whilst podcasting has proven to be of interest to audiences it has not yet been as embraced as it has in the United States where it has been postulated that we are now enjoying a “Golden Age of Podcasting” (Roose, 2014).

There are more podcasts, more listeners and, in 2015, it seems there is more attention being focused on the medium. What made 2014 particularly interesting for podcasting was the podcasts that appeared during this year, notably the American podcast *Serial*. There was much to commend to *Serial* but in what was already a good year for podcasting, something about it caught hold. In this paper I will consider what *Serial* might tell us about the state of podcasting, and what it might tell us about the future.

Serial is a true crime story, one that focuses on the murder in 1999 of Hae Min Lee, a high school girl from Baltimore. After two trials her former boyfriend, Adnan Syed, was convicted for her murder, and it is this story that is the subject of *Serial*. The story is told over twelve episodes, which were posted in weekly instalments during the latter part of 2014. To some extent it was this treatment of true crime that drew many to the story offering as it did the opportunity for listeners to play detective between the episodes. Equally, the high production values of the podcast also drew in many listeners as it seemed to reject the amateur status they possibly once associated with the medium. Presented by producer Sarah Koenig (supported by further producers and fact checkers) the podcast considers the evidence the state presented against Syed in a detailed, often forensic manner and is reflected upon by Koenig in a natural style of first person narration. Like *This American Life*, a strong narrative script, extensive research, vivid interviews and music are techniques deployed here. Whilst many witnesses refused to take part (only to tell their stories to other journalists later) the podcast speaks to range of key participants, including Syed who is interviewed via

telephone from the prison in which he is now serving a life sentence. Calls which Bloomberg estimated cost the podcast \$2500 (Brustein, 2014).

In considering *Serial* one should reflect upon the institutional context of the project. It was developed by *This American Life*, a national public radio programme produced by the Chicago based public radio station WBEZ. Until *Serial* came along it was often *This American Life* itself that topped the podcast charts, not only in the United States but other English speaking nations like the United Kingdom. Public radio programmes like this often appear to benefit the most from podcasting as it allows content to break free from the schedule and “facilitates repeat listening far better than the domestic audio taping of the past” (Murray, 2009). Furthermore it grants audiences a greater window of discovery and offers opportunities to curate collections (McClung & Johnson, 2010). *Serial* set a new level for success in podcasting and attracted a mass of popular interest, online and in the media, and has been described as the “podcast we’ve all been waiting for” (Larson, 2014); “the future of radio” (Chisholm, 2015) and “podcasting’s first breakout hit” (Carr, 2014). The Guardian (Dredge, 2014) reported that it achieved 5 million iTunes downloads faster than any podcast before it and by April 2015 downloads had exceeded 80 million (Chicago Public Media, 2015). The success of *Serial* is remarkable and significant but perhaps not unexpected given the context of growing audiences, good resources and an appealing narrative. A narrative which gained the podcast a Peabody Award in 2015, when the judges noted that *Serial* was “an audio game-changer... The first unquestionably mainstream podcast” (Peabody, 2015).

In theory, the openness of the podcast platform should mean that any podcaster can be successful, (Berry, 2006). The reality is that new unknown podcasts rarely achieve the instant success seen by *Serial*. More often than not podcasts require an advantage, which often comes from being a brand, such as being associated with a familiar producer, brand or personality. Social media and journalistic coverage can also have impact here as this can push the podcast into the charts where casual listeners may encounter it. *Serial* benefitted from a debut on *This American Life*, heavy promotion in the run-up to launch and several favourable reviewers keen to know what Ira Glass was doing. The podcast was also able to draw on the extensive human and financial resources of a large and well-resourced, experienced and extensive production team. This created a distinctive advantage which few podcasts could aspire to.

Serial was narrated by Sarah Koenig (an experienced *This American Life* producer) and overseen by Executive Producer Ira Glass, who has been

producing *This American Life* since 1995 and over that time has built a formula through which all their stories are told (See Glass 2010, and Abel and Glass, 2012); techniques which are used to full effect here. *Serial* has a style. Like *This American Life* it is marked by strong narration, where the reporter as narrator leads the listener through the story, vivid interviews are important, as is music – which for *Serial* was scored specifically. It is a style that resonated well with the audience and helped raise the standard for all new narrative podcasts. Whilst storytelling techniques of *This American Life* when applied here are significant, it is the serialised nature of the story that has proven to be most alluring. Listeners were drip-fed the story over 12 weeks, with the reporting team working on the next episode in the intervening days. Whilst *This American Life* does produce stories that last longer than a single episode to do so over 12 episodes was a departure, and to do so exclusively online was significant. This digital only approach was one that producer Julie Snyder suggests offered the producers more flexibility as: “with a podcast: We can do a story that unfolds over time. You can either go along – we’ll release them every Thursday – or people can binge once they’ve all been released” (Lurie, 2014) rather than be tied to an ever crowded linear broadcast schedule. This approach drew natural comparisons drawn between *Serial* and the rise in fictional stories on contemporary television such as *True Detectives*, as well as the traditional print serialisations of Dickens during the nineteenth century (Timpane, 2014) comparisons the producers accept, and often cite as inspiration for their choice of narrative.

The podcast thrust Sarah Koenig and her production team into the spotlight, triggering TV interviews, memes, fancasts, and spoofs. Listeners created memes, tweeted about the show, told their friends, made T-Shirts, produced podcasts and discussed theories with fellow listeners on Reddit. Listeners became so engaged that many woke early in order to listen as soon as new episodes went online, with some going as far as running listening groups in bars and cafes to share the experience. These online activities spilled out into the real world as listeners started to do their own detective work. They visited locations and started to point very public fingers at those they felt were not telling the truth. As Dean notes “the human appetite for a good story is voracious. Innocent curiosity quickly morphs into something more difficult to parse” (2014). These independent, listener authored paratexts became a defining feature of *Serial*, activity which is unsurprising given the content, as Jason Mittell suggests the format “encouraged and even demanded forensic fandom to fill in the gaps between episodes” (2015).

Whilst many digital stories actively sought out this form of engagement, (Wasik, 2009) *Serial* did not; it did however present listeners with a compelling reason to download the next episode. The manner in which news media and the online community propelled the podcast into popular culture – even amongst non podcast listeners – made the interest a significant part of podcast histories. It was success that the producers did not expect, with Koenig telling an audience: “I never meant to create a fever... It’s hard for me to answer why (it went viral.) I didn’t know if it was even going to work. People just like a good crime story; they want to know who did it” (Ramisetti, 2015). However, *Serial* owes success to many elements, the choice of story being just one.

The success of *Serial* also shows the role which changing technology is playing. Movement from iPods to iPhones and iPads means that podcasting is becoming more accessible, as the reduction in friction and increase in searchability and share-ability helps to bring new audiences to podcasting. Writing on the shift towards mobile consumption Edison researcher Tom Webster notes “There is no question that the mobile phone has dramatically changed podcast consumption – “syncing” and downloads have effectively been supplanted by the immediate gratification of a single click” (2014). In 2014 Edison research noted that 34% of podcast listening was on a mobile device, by 2015 this had risen to 55% (Edison/Triton, 2015) – a year on year growth of four percentage points. The presence of smart-dashboards pre-loaded with podcast apps, and Bluetooth in cars also help to make podcasting more accessible than ever.

When it comes to consuming media content audiences must first navigate the technology which in, the early days of podcasting, was a task that required both skill and patience involving a process of search, download and synchronisation to a portable device. Whilst the portable device (usually an iPod) was not essential it was a defining feature and one to which the medium owes its name. Podcasting appeared to present itself as “that missing link that connects radio and the Net” (Menduni, 2007, p. 15). However, this missing link was one that was improvised and one that often presented itself as a barrier to listening. As Menduni notes “it is difficult to think of mass podcasting given that it requires a component of specialised computer work... this suggests that podcasting is a mid-term technology” (p. 16). So, in preparing the launch of *Serial* Ira Glass took to TV (and YouTube) and proved that if his elderly neighbour (a podcast listener) could manage it, then so could you. What is notable about this promotion was the absence of the iPod. Instead, listeners were directed to a website and to

mobile apps on smartphones and tablets. This suggests that, whilst it acknowledged that Americans might have heard of podcasts, there was something getting in the way of them listening. So, perhaps we could consider *Serial* as a reminder to the audience of a medium they had forgotten about or tried before and rejected for being too complicated.

In the past ten years podcasting has grown from a hybrid technology of “fix and make do” elements to a developed ecosystem of tools (both for production and consumption) created by a network of skilled, informed and focussed producers. It enjoys both mass appeal through popular content, but also embraces highly niched content for small and specialised audiences in public and educational contexts. Over the next 10 years both will continue to co-exist. Podcasting has moved from being an activity where you made decisions about the content you wanted in advance to one that mirrors other internet forms, where decisions can be made spontaneously. This is a shift that has not gone unnoticed by Ira Glass who noted in an interview that: “It used to be for you to listen to a podcast, you had to download it to your computer and then synch it to your phone – there are now all these ways where you basically get an app for your phone like Stitcher or the podcast app for iPhones. You push a button and say, “Oh, I want this one,” and then you have it on your phone and you can listen. It’s super-easy” (Kocher, 2015). Social media gave listeners a platform to talk about *Serial*, and the apps they listen with provided the means to share episodes (or moments) with their friends or followers. Indeed, *Serial* is a good example of how social media spreads ideas, with many listeners coming to the podcast via Twitter posts. In the next ten years of podcasting, we may in fact be talking about ‘appcasts’ where listeners are finding, consuming and sharing audio content (and probably associated visual content) on mobile devices.

Podcasting is a medium that like any pre-teen is starting to find its own identity. Whilst it may still bear resemblance to its radio parentage and may rely on its radio parent for investment, brand, content and promotion, there is a sense that new approaches are merging. There are challenges for both radio and podcasting in the streaming age, but these should be viewed as opportunities. Opportunities to challenge what radio stations as institutions do: but also the means to tell stories in new ways and opportunities for listeners to consume and share the content they want. The producers of *Serial* were able to use podcasting to create a story, that they would not have been able to find a place for on traditional radio and distribute it themselves. The producers at WBEZ turned to podcasting as it gave them the flexibility that a structured scheduled broadcast network could not. “The

format allows for so many freedoms we don't have on the radio – no time constraints or hard deadlines for example – and that means plenty of room for ingenuity” (Chivvis as cited in Sawyer, 2015). This suggests that future success will lie in an ecosystem where producers create strong content which is made accessible across a myriad of devices and platforms. This can represent a good return on investment for public broadcasters looking to access younger and more diverse audiences. As Cordeiro (2012) suggests that, whilst such suggestions have benefits, they require content producers to reconsider strategies (p. 495). This is something which Dubber suggests is positive as it allows for reinvention (2013, p. 182). Change is happening, not least because music streaming services are now looking to embrace podcasts as part of their radio rivalling offer, but also due to new in-car opportunities, where Bluetooth and smart-dashboards have placed podcasts within easy reach of drivers. As Roose (2014) notes: “Connected cars are a boon for the entire streaming audio industry, but they're especially exciting for podcast makers, whose shows are perfectly suited to in-car listening”.

The critical acclaim for *Serial* has been a significant element of this story, with both listeners and critics commending the quality of storytelling and journalism. Historically, a key identifying factor of podcasting has been the rough edges, where there was less emphasis on technical quality (compared to radio) with many podcasters adopting conversation based techniques. *Serial* was a notable departure from that heritage and is likely to set a new benchmark for quality. One can hypothesise that improving quality will draw in fresh listeners and re-engage those who have become disengaged. Whilst the numbers of listeners continues to grow it will be the extent to which those listeners commit that will be more important. Edison Research (2014) also suggest that podcast listeners not only spend more time with podcasts than any other form, but they are also prolific in their listening. This has important implications for the financial model of podcasting as heavy users “show a higher tolerance for podcast advertising as well greater tendency to support companies who advertise on podcasts” (McClung & Johnson, 2010, p. 93). In 2015 podcasters such as NPR and Gimlet both report increased revenues and downloads, (Mullin, 2015), with market leading podcasts commanding markedly higher advertising rates than similar formats on YouTube (Perlberg, 2014). This may prove to be significant for the future, as content producers look for viable alternatives to broadcast media, not least because of the dominance of smartphones and smart dashboards gives them easy access to media consumers outside the home.

Serial was able to set a new benchmark, suggesting that whilst some podcasts may remain ephemeral and self-indulgent, there is a decidedly significant market for crafted stories. However, whilst the *Serial* effect has been responsible for renewed attention and has added listeners to other podcasters it has not yet made podcasting fully mainstream. In my own survey of *Serial* listeners conducted in late 2014 more than 75% of respondents said that prior to *Serial* they were (or had been) podcast listeners. This is also reflected in Edison research from 2015 which said that whilst 10% of the general population were aware of *Serial*, this rose to 29% amongst those who had listened to a podcast in the past week (Rosin, 2015) suggesting that whilst *Serial* had an impact, it achieved greater impact amongst those already predisposed to listen. *Serial* occurred at the congruence of technical and social change and therefore may serve as the gateway through which new listeners (re)discover the medium through the suggestions of their podcast app. In this regard *Serial* is important, partly because we talked about it and the established media took it seriously, but also because it became a useful symbol of what was happening to the medium. Changes were happening to podcasting before *Serial*, however the combination of story, technology and skill helped to ensure it has a place in podcast history by highlighting how far we have come.

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