SYMPOSIUM: PODCASTING: A DECADE IN THE LIFE OF A
"NEW" AUDIO MEDIUM

Podcasting: A Decade in the Life of a "New" Audio Medium: Introduction

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Podcasting came of age in 2005, a full decade ago. The roots of podcasting date back to 2000, though, when software developer Dave Winer published RSS 0.92, a new version of the RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication) Web syndication format—one of the back bones of newsfeed aggregators and Web 2.0 tools like blogs—that enabled digital audio files to be delivered in RSS feeds.[1] Winer created these "audioblogging" capabilities in response to requests from former MTV VJ Adam Curry (Winer, 2000). Over the next few years, Winer, Curry, and other Internet technology insiders experimented with carrying audio files in RSS feeds. It was not until 2004, however, that what was beginning to become known as "podcasting" emerged as a viable technology with many citing Curry's release of an RSS-to-iPod "podcatcher" client, iPodder, along with his launch of podcasting's first breakout program, *Daily Source Code*, as watershed moments in the medium's path to widespread use (Chen, 2009). The year 2005 went on to become "the year of the podcast" (Bowers, 2005), the emergence of the new medium being solidified in June 2015 when Apple upgraded to iTunes 4.9, the first version of the software to provide fully integrated podcast support; Apple's new podcast directory made it simple for ordinary users to search for and subscribe to podcasts (Friess, 2015). iTunes 4.9 effectively brought podcasting into the cultural mainstream.

Fast forward to July 2013, when Apple surpassed the one billion subscriptions mark for podcasts via its iTunes platform—a remarkable milestone for a medium that was barely a decade old and, in the intervening years, had descended from "next big thing" to has-been status, routinely regarded as little more than a niche or fringe format. Indeed, nearly as soon as it began, Web and tech industry commentators

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were proclaiming that ''podcasting is dead'' (e.g., Freedman, 2005; Iskold, 2007; Wolfe, 2008). These eulogies were, in some cases, being given very soon after, or even *during* 2005, the year in which the medium skyrocketed in popularity and ''podcast'' was chosen as the *New Oxford American Dictionary*'s Word of the Year (Bowers, 2005). Between 2005 and 2013, podcasting struggled to break through as a truly ''mass'' medium; industry observers attributed podcasting's relatively limited growth to everything from difficulties monetizing the medium, to competition from online video (2005 may have been the year of the podcast, but 2006 was the year of video-sharing Web site YouTube), to its very name, the term ''podcast'' being closely associated with a single company (Apple) and a product (the iPod) that had become all but obsolete in the smartphone era.

Yet, podcasting never died. In fact, it has quietly grown year over year, both in terms of producers and listeners. It was estimated that in 2013 there were well over 250,000 unique podcasts (with a combined eight million-plus episodes) in more than 100 languages available online (Williams, 2013)—that number was reportedly up to 285,000 podcasts by early 2015 (O'Connell, 2015). According to studies from the Pew Research Center (Vogt, 2015), podcast listening has been growing considerably over recent years, the number of American podcast listeners nearly doubling between 2008 and 2015. What's more, market research has discovered that podcast fans tend to be highly dedicated ''super listeners,'' consuming more audio by time than listeners of AM/FM radio, streaming music, or any other form of audio (Edison Research, 2014). All of this growth was occurring despite popular media discourse that continued to privilege online video as the future of media, as well as decried the death of downloading in the face of streaming media. That was, at least, until the fall of 2014 when the unexpected popularity of *Serial*—the program spurring nearly 77 million downloads within its first seven months of release (O'Connell, 2015)—helped thrust podcasting back into the limelight. Suddenly, media critics were declaring ''the golden age of podcasts'' (Bech Sillesen, 2014) and ''the great podcast renaissance'' (Roose, 2014)—an enthusiasm that remains strong at the time of this symposium's publication in late 2015.

Suffice it to say, podcasting is an integral part of the digital media landscape in the early years of the new millennium. Yet, the subject has received scant sustained scholarly attention in the media and communication studies disciplines, even within the radio and sound studies sub-fields with which it is most closely affiliated. Moreover, much of the limited published research on podcasting was conducted during the medium's infancy (e.g., Berry, 2006; Crofts, Dilley, Fox, Retsema, & Williams, 2005; Menduni, 2007), and is sorely in need of updating and expansion. While there has been a fair amount of research in instructional technology about the educational uses of podcasting and some in mass communication about its incorporation into journalism and broadcast production, much less attention has been paid to issues related to the culture of podcasting, podcast audiences and listening practices, the format's technological properties, podcast aesthetics and style, and so on. Exceptions here include insightful work by Kris Markman (2012; with Sawyer, 2014) on the motivations of independent podcast producers and Steven

McClung and Kristine Johnson (2010) on the habits of podcast fans, plus research by Juan Ignacio Gallego Perez, Nele Heise, Simone Murray, Neil Verma, and a handful of other scholars. It is worth noting that, still to this day, there remains little scholarly consensus about podcasting's status as a medium: is it merely an extension of radio or a distinct ''new'' medium of its own?[2]

After all, what *is* a podcast? It is a term that is seemingly simple but also quite ambiguous. Technologically speaking, podcasting refers to digital audio files (e.g., MP3s) delivered via RSS to an Internet-connected computer or portable media player (Farivar, 2004). The fact that it incorporates RSS means that a listener subscribes to a ''feed'' and new recordings are automatically pushed to the listener's device whenever they are uploaded by the podcast's producers. It is the RSS feed that distinguishes podcasting from streaming audio and a plethora of other downloadable audio media files online (e.g., recorded music on a peer-to-peer file sharing service like Napster). The use of RSS also implies seriality, since the listener subscribes to a ''show'' that will repeat over time, providing new ''episodes'' on a semi-regular schedule. (Notice the imputation of broadcasting logics and practices to podcasting: series, episodes, predictable scheduling, even ''seasons.'') All of this may seem plainly obvious to readers who have been listening to podcasts for years now, but the fact of the matter is that this is merely one definition of a podcast.

Coined by *Guardian* journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004 to describe the burgeoning ''audible revolution'' of independent online radio, ''podcast'' is an amalgam of ''iPod'' and ''broadcast'' (as the industry leading brand, ''iPod'' was synonymous with all portable media players, much the same way ''MP3'' is often used as shorthand for any digital audio file format). Immediately, though, the exact definition of podcasting gets fuzzy because Hammersley uses the term to refer broadly to any ''downloadable radio'' distributed via the Internet (par. 14). That is, the man who conceived the term ''podcasting'' does not limit podcasting to only audio content delivered via RSS. Indeed, many experts emphasize ''time-shifting''—the ability for listeners to hear the audio ''anytime, anywhere,'' in contrast to the streaming model of broadcasting—as podcasting's defining characteristic (e.g., McElhearn, Giles, & Herrington, 2006). Time-shifting does not require Web syndication. Further confusion comes from the fact that ''podcast'' can refer to both the program (or ''series'') as well as the individual unit (or ''episode'').

Podcasting, though, is more than a method of audio distribution. At the content level, Hammersley and many other early adopters generally saw podcasts as independent, mostly amateur productions originating outside the traditional media industries. As the medium took off around 2005, though, more and more established media personalities and institutions—from Ricky Gervais to NPR—came to dominate the podcasting space. This incursion of podcasting by radio broadcasters, in particular, has more recently led many people to believe that podcasts are simply downloads of audio programs that have already aired elsewhere (Hudson, 2011)— quite contrary to the initial assumption that podcasts were native to the Web, even anti-radio. This confusion is hardly surprising considering that many of today's most successful ''podcasts'' originated as terrestrial radio programs and still air on

broadcast radio (e.g., *Radiolab*, *This American Life*, *On the Media*), while others have become syndicated on radio following their success online (e.g., *99% Invisible*, *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*). These convergences between podcasting and radio (not to mention film and television, music, theater, literature, etc.) make identifying a podcasting ''sound'' or ''style,'' or even a distinct podcasting audience or industry, exceedingly difficult.

   This symposium seeks to mark the tenth anniversary of podcasting's widespread cultural acceptance by expanding the scholarly perspectives on podcasting, utilizing media and cultural studies approaches to dig into some of the above questions and investigate podcasting's culture, history, technology, aesthetics, and uses. While the subject matter of the seven articles is varied, the authors all grapple with the (not-so-) new media of podcasting in complimentary ways. Richard Berry begins the symposium by building on his foundational work on podcasting (2006), using the 2014 hit podcast *Serial* to survey the medium's historical development. Andrew J. Bottomley and Andrew J. Salvati each look closely at individual podcast programs. Bottomley's article considers the remediation of radio in podcasting, taking *Welcome to Night Vale* as a case study of the revival of the radio drama format via podcasting. Salvati's article considers how alternative modes of historical interpretation are enabled through fan-produced history podcasts like Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History*. Sarah Florini's article also explores podcast production cultures, considering how an informal network of Black American podcasters, known as the ''Chitlin' Circuit,'' functions as a contemporary digital iteration of Black counterpublics. Christopher Cwynar focuses on the uses of podcasting at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), arguing that the medium has primarily been used to extend, not disrupt, established broadcasting forms and institutions. Brian Fauteux's article on SiriusXM satellite radio's *Blog Radio* program also looks at podcasting within the context of an established media organization, analyzing how the new sonic aesthetics of podcasting are influencing traditional music radio programming. Jeremy Wade Morris and Eleanor Patterson's article centers on podcasting technology, examining how the ''podcatcher'' software applications through which podcasts are accessed promote new instances of listening and reconfigure relationships between listeners and producers. Together, these contributors examine a cross-section of some—though certainly not all—of the important ways podcasting has transformed over the past decade, aiming to better understand podcasting as a media form and an avenue for cultural expression. These articles should be instructive for anyone studying digital convergence, and how the promises of ''new media'' shift, sharpen, and stumble as a medium matures.

Notes

   [1] Though there were even earlier precursors, such as Carl Malamud's experiments with ''Internet radio,'' which started in 1993 and consisted of downloadable audio files of talk radio-like programs (Markoff, 1993).

[2]I personally refer to podcasting as a "medium" in the title of this symposium and throughout this introductory essay, and a number of the other symposium contributors regard podcasting as a medium in their respective articles too. I defer to this usage largely because it has become commonplace in both academic and industry discourse. At the same time, I am wary of the default custom of calling every "new" media technology or platform a "medium." I am inclined to side with Sterne, Morris, Baker, & Freire's 2008 definition of podcasting as a practice—"a group of connected technologies, practices, and institutions"—rather than a new, stand-alone medium or format (2008, par. 20).

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