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Chapter 1: Introduction

“The kind of radio that entrances me as a listener, and that excites me as a thinker, it’s unknown here. How the hell could I explain what it is that makes the radio I love so important and worth our attention? …So, here’s my answer. Radio, especially public radio and the podcasts that have sprung from it, and especially (though not exclusively) in the USA, is the most fertile ground for narrative nonfiction in English-language media.” – Cartoonist and Podcaster Jessica Abel in Out on the Wire, 2015

Have you ever had a “driveway moment?” You might have been listening to something on the radio, and some aspect of what you were hearing has kept you engaged, even though you are already at your destination. And so you sit there, in the driveway, listening entranced to the story. Today, having a “driveway moment” is a changing experience. Increasingly, these moments are no longer occurring in our driveways. They are arriving at different times, while we do chores, exercise, or simply walk from place to place. “Driveway moment” is a catch-all term for the same experience that has traditionally come from stationary radios in cars and homes, but has recently moved into our ears and the phones in our pockets. And with this advent of mobile devices, the stories have evolved, as well.

The goal of this thesis is to explore and expound upon this growing phenomenon. The way that we are interacting with digital sound, especially via mobile devices, is fundamentally changing the way that we think about the medium of radio
and the actual content that we are listening to. Podcasting in particular is acting as a fulcrum of this massive shift in digital listening, with new technologies and business structures being built to support the medium. However, this thesis will pay significant attention to one specific section of podcasting that I argue has arisen directly from a tradition of nonfiction reporting and storytelling found mainly on public radio within the United States. Public radio, in this country, has been the primary origin of many of those “driveway moments” that are now commonly found in podcasts.

Some have written off the ongoing “podcast renaissance” as a trend of digital media, set to have a short life span like many other trends before it. This thesis, and the body of work it taps into, stands to rebuke that sentiment, and to illustrate how podcasting draws upon public radio traditions. The journey to document the history and current state of public radio and podcasting has been in part a labor of love. It has involved many hours of researching by both reading the work of and listening to some of the greatest minds that public radio and podcasting have to offer. I hope that this thesis does their work and the work of their predecessors the justice that it deserves.

Moving forward, Public radio, in the context of this thesis, refers to the radio broadcast network in the United States that was established in the late 1960s as a foil to traditional commercial radio broadcasters. Public radio’s mission is to educate, inform, and entertain through a mix of news, culture, and music programming via a network of interconnected but independent member stations. Podcasting refers to the production and distribution technology of digital audio files known as podcasts, which
are typically, but not exclusively, spoken word or music shows delivered regularly to consumers via Internet services.

Some of the most impactful and groundbreaking reporting and non-fiction storytelling is happening in podcasts at this very moment. Over the past several years, these types of stories have been receiving more and more attention. In many cases, mainstream news media has begun covering them as a serious source of news information and entertainment. In other cases, advertisers, looking to find new audiences and platforms to which they can market products and services, see podcasting as a new frontier for audience engagement. In any case, there has been an explosion of interest in this format, and that growing attention seems motivate more and more people to listen to these podcasts. From 2008 to 2015, the percentage of Americans who had listened to a podcast in the past month doubled from just under 9 percent to 17 percent. In 2016, that rose to 21 percent (Vogt). Additionally, its reported today that one-third of Americans have listened to a podcast (“The Infinite Dial, 2016”). These evolving listening behaviors are having a direct influence on our common understanding of what radio represents.

Broadcast radio has the unique characteristics of being simultaneously separated from time and closely tied to it. If the medium were invented today, it might seem strange to the average listener. Why would so much time and effort be channeled into a seemingly free service that people might willingly ignore or accidentally miss? The current climate of our media consumption culture promotes specific on-demand and flexible access; characteristics that are not strengths of traditional broadcast radio,
with its fixed time slots and its rigid programming. Additionally, the media diet of the average consumer has grown increasingly dense. Thanks to streaming services and the a la carte culture of Internet, digital consumers have more options for entertainment and information than ever before. Within this dynamic, radio seems unintuitive: listening is often time-intensive, and requires more attention than background music or white noise. To catch to the programs that you might want to listen to, you need to stick to the predefined programming schedule, a challenge that, in times of TIVO and on-demand content streaming services, is also threatening the traditional broadcast television model. Historically, radio was relegated to a secondary medium with the rise of broadcast television and the advent of the car radio. While informational broadcast radio still exists, largely within the public radio system, the majority of radio broadcasters primarily exist to play music. But, if that were the case, why is the popular media praising radio’s triumphant return? Why is “Listening to the Radio Cool Again” (Evans)?

Our contemporary understanding of radio news and documentary has changed significantly, just within the past two decades. Additionally, the ways that we interact with sound and the role that it plays in our day-to-day lives have changed alongside the massive shifts in format and access just in the past 15 years. In that time, we’ve seen the popularization of mobile listening devices like the iPod mp3 player and internet-connected mobile devices like the smartphone. Wireless Internet access has grown more ubiquitous, making streaming video and audio less expensive and more accessible. Considering digital audio, our definition of what constitutes radio is
beginning to broaden. Outside of traditional broadcast, it now encompasses digital streaming music services and online storefronts as much as the FM dials in our cars and in our homes. The way that listeners interact with this audio media has also changed significantly in recent years. While traditional radio has been a secondary medium for long time, meant for consumption while multitasking, podcasting has, in many cases, become a parallel medium, used to accompany tasks that leave enough mental capacity for listening, such as driving, exercising, walking, or performing other menial or cyclical tasks. In these situations, our attention is more amendable to be split between two active roles. When it comes to today’s audio consumption habits, listening to a podcast is increasingly one of those two actions. The role that sound and listening has changed so much of our day-to-day lives, and this newfound attention to long-form narratives in podcasting and radio is evidence of that.

But the underlying goal of this research is not only to examine and explain the contemporary phenomena related to podcasting. This thesis hopes to trace a specific line between examples of high-quality documentary storytelling common in today’s most popular podcasts and a historical tradition of reporting and public interest reporting that has been made long before the Internet was invented. Any analysis of the current state of journalistic podcasting and where its origins are located requires considerable background and context, consisting of both historical fact and theoretical research. Thus, the goal is to connect the heritage of public radio in the United States and how it has influenced and laid the groundwork for the some of the most popular
podcasts being produced today, and will examine the carefully constructed relationship between the two.

**Content Overview**

The thesis will first explore how the US public radio system has grown since its official founding in the mid 1970s, and how that system became the robust public radio environment that it is today. The second chapter will detail the loose collection of educational broadcasters who continually pressured the federal government to establish a cohesive network of public service radio stations, for the purposes of providing informative cultural and news programming to communities. From there, it will explain the rocky establishment of National Public Radio and the values that drove its initial programming development. It will then cover the challenges the system faced, and the way that the system’s structure has changed in reaction. Along with NPR, there are many individuals and organizations in the history of public radio that have shaped how the system looks today. All in all, this historical background should serve as the basis for understanding how the modern institutions of public radio have grown to deliver high quality podcasts and serve as the inspiration for producers who would go on to innovate in the field.

In order to explain what role podcasting is playing in the larger digital media market today, the third chapter will analyze modern listening habits, the nature of digital audio, and the internal structure of the podcasting ecosystem. This chapter will first outline a brief history of mobile listening and podcasts. It will then provide a detailed background on the rise and popularization of podcasting as a medium for
listening to audio content up to today. The primary goal here will be explaining and outlining the changes that have taken place in listening habits over the past two decades. With regard to podcasting, this section will explore how and why our modern understanding of “radio” now extends beyond traditional broadcast to also encompass new digital services. This discussion will serve as both the empirical and theoretical backbone for connecting recent shifts in Internet culture, business structure, and entrepreneurial podcast production. Furthermore, this chapter will explain, in-depth, the way that the podcasting market is structured and how the businesses within that market fund their products. Given that this is a very young field, there are many emerging trends in the way that these companies are choosing to approach advertising, sponsorship, and listener-based support.

The fourth chapter will serve as an in-depth analysis of contemporary podcasts, giving specific attention to those podcasts that are directly inspired by or spun off from public radio programming. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a clear link among these podcasts and measure the extent to which they derive themselves from a common public radio-inspired formula. This chapter will do this by proposing a specific classification and categorization of the top podcasts that follow in this tradition of narrative journalism. The criteria chosen in this chapter are derived from common elements found in all these podcasts in varying degrees, and will serve as unifying elements common to public radio productions. Each individual show will then be judged based on these criteria, allowing us to draw conclusions about which
podcasts best adopt these criteria and how exactly they have innovated upon or refined certain aspects of narrative non-fiction audio journalism.

The overarching goals of this research is to demonstrate, in detail, how digital radio and podcasting have become the new standard for documentary radio, and how the modern understanding of audio storytelling has begun to shift to support this change. The language that people use to talk about radio and storytelling, especially for people who have matured alongside the Internet, includes digital radio and podcasting as part of the inherent conversation. Podcasting has established itself as the ground-level platform for original audio storytelling in our current environment. However, despite the wide field of research conducted on broadcast radio, analysis done in the area of podcasting is exploring relatively uncharted territory. As a result of this, much of the literature presented in this thesis represents research and analysis that is pioneering and original in nature. Additionally, much of the existing literature on this subject is new, in the sense that a sizable portion of relevant literature was published while this thesis study was being conducted. Although this presented an analytical and practical challenge, the effect that it had is that my analysis is contributing to a relative small body of work in the media studies and journalism fields. My thesis represents a first attempt to a systematic analysis of a blossoming academic field that will certainly see a lot of research in the years to come.

The pace of change in the podcasting community has been ever accelerating in recent years. That is a volatile and difficult reality to deal with while conducting this research, but it is also clear evidence that it such research necessary in order to fully
understand the current events and developments in radio and podcasting. We are in a pivotal moment for the future of radio today. The snapshot of digital radio contained in this thesis will provide important context for explaining this new format for audio storytelling that has gained such a large amount of attention in such a short amount of time. As with so many other forms of media today, it is imperative to take out and examine these individual examples, especially when the pace of change is so rapid. Today’s podcasting has entered in the mainstream conversation, and, as shown in this thesis, we need to listen to it more carefully.
Chapter 2: A Brief History of US Public Radio

Introduction

“National Public Radio will serve the individual; it will promote personal growth; it will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness.” -- Bill Siemering, in NPR’s founding mission statement, 1970

As National Public Radio’s first Director of Programming, Bill Siemering had a vision for a new national network of radio broadcasters that would seek a higher purpose. In 1970, in the midst television broadcasting’s ascendancy and a nation that was embroiled in questions of morality in mass communication, Siemering’s vision would play a crucial role in setting a course for what public broadcasting could and should be in America. Appointed the first Director of Programming at NPR in 1972, Siemering served as a lead architect in designing a style of reporting, storytelling, and production that would differentiate itself from both commercial broadcasting and “stodgy” educational broadcasting and create something new: a broadcast product that was always fighting to make itself better in the name of public service. While Siemering would leave that position within the decade, he would continue to work in the interest of spreading knowledge and democracy through radio broadcasting. In February 2016, NPR’s news chief Michael Oreskes invited Siemering back to NPR to meet with the
staff and see what progress they had made over the past four decades. When asked how today’s radio meets his idea of the radio that he had drafted forty years ago, he explained:

It was the happiest day I ever had at NPR, and one of the happiest days of my life… Sometimes we need to just pause and appreciate this wonderful public radio system we have in this country. When you consider the depth of experience of the reporting and the producers, the whole independent producer community that’s there and variety in the range of programming, it’s just extraordinary (Ragusea, “Bill Siemering”).

Over those past four decades, much has changed for public radio. Shifts in technology, finances, and structure have shaped in the industry in dramatic ways, for better or worse. While public radio looks very different than it did several decades ago, Siemering has said that it has continued to uphold that original mission statement he authored in 1970, and that US Public Radio has grown to accomplish so much more than he could have hoped for.

Overview

Before any discussion of new technologies or modern developments in public radio storytelling, it is integral to go back and detail how the public radio broadcast system in the United States became the standardized organization of public broadcasting that it is today. This factual history is key to understanding the full extent of how the public radio system developed and began to unravel at the dawn of the
digital era and how podcasting became a contemporary standard of reporting and storytelling. That history does not necessarily start with, or end with, the formation of the National Public Radio system, but it is clearly framed by it. This cannot be overstated, though NPR was established in 1970 as a relative afterthought to public television broadcasting, but soon established itself as the controlling player in public radio by working through challenges. While not immune to continued problems, NPR has become a familiar constant in an incessantly changing journalism industry.

This chapter will take a step-by-step tour through the history of NPR’s founding and its subsequent executive and editorial management. The first goal here is to provide crucial historical background necessary for understanding why it is that NPR and the public radio system look the way they do today. Following that, an explanation the system’s growth into a national broadcasting and news media system will analyze the structural and financial challenges NPR has faced over the years. The ways in which the US public radio system works have become increasingly complicated and difficult to understand for the average listener or news consumer. Because of this, it is then necessary to explain the mechanical background of the US public radio system’s structure and financial setup. Doing so will make it easier to explain the extent to which podcasting and digital audio disrupted traditional radio in the 21st century. The final section will serve as an overview of these new advances in radio and podcasting, which will be further elaborated upon in this paper’s third chapter.
The Early Years of Educational Radio

While NPR appears to be the de-facto leader in public radio today, it is important to note that public-interest radio had important predecessors. Throughout the 20th century, a loosely connected system of educational broadcasters would slowly but surely be unified into a federally funded system of public radio. The beginnings of educational radio were a direct result of the Progressive Era in American history. Progressives had, since their rise at the end of the 19th century, taken up the cause of media reform as a central tenant of their movement. This included putting pressure on newspaper publishers to cut ties with the “corrupting influence of commercialism,” as well as the rise of “independent” magazines and newspapers that focused on furthering the cause of social justice. Leaders in the progressive movement thought the role of media should be to enlighten citizens, encourage responsible government, and foster democratic and intellectual debate in the public (Mitchell Ch. 1). When, in the 1920s, radio surged into popularity, many began applying these same values on the airwaves.

As radio’s popularity grew, professional organizations began to form around the idea of public service radio broadcasting. First established as the Association of College and University Broadcasting Stations in 1925, educational broadcasters struggled throughout most of the early 20th century to gain a dedicated foothold in broadcasting, which at the time was widely un-regulated with regard to both content and frequency. Much like many of today’s public broadcasters, educational stations often relied on funds from colleges and universities to pay for radio licenses and employees. In 1934, the group reorganized as the National Association of Educational
Broadcasters (NAEB) (Engelman 83). At this point in radio’s history, the US government stepped in to organize the chaos of conflicting frequencies and lack of regulation, passing the Communications Act of 1934. The act established the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which would decide how best to organize a national broadcast system. The progressive-minded leaders of the educational broadcasting hoped the need for regulation would encourage the government to nationalize radio and establish a public system, as Britain did with the establishment of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). However, the government opted to auction airwaves based on a commercial market, based on geography and the power of each individual signal (Mitchell Ch. 1).

However, not all was lost; in 1938, educational broadcasters convinced the FCC to set aside five radio channels. While these signals were weak and expensive to maintain, they provided a basis for growth in educational broadcasting. Through WW II, educational broadcasters would continue to struggle due to a lack of interconnectedness. The end of WW II provided them an opportunity to build a new network to address this problem when a new technology, the higher-quality FM band, provided new frequencies up for the taking. This time, their early attempts at lobbying the government and the FCC paid off, and the FCC set aside 20 out of the 100 available FM frequencies solely for educational broadcasting. The next two decades were difficult, however, as adoption of FM receivers was slow (Engelman 84). These decades also witnessed the founding of Pacifica Radio, a public radio foundation and broadcaster that hosted largely intellectual and left-leaning music and culture.
programming. In the Vietnam era, Pacifica would become vocally anti-war in its broadcasts (Mitchell Ch. 2).

In the 1960s, the rise of television put increased pressure on educational radio, and in 1963 the NAEB split into two separate radio and television divisions, leaving radio to the National Education Radio (NER) division. Television’s rapid growth drew the attention of the government, particularly President Lyndon Johnson, who wanted to include federally funded noncommercial television as part of his Great Society plan. The Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, established in 1965, was the lead author on the upcoming public broadcasting bill and considered public radio a cause that would drag the whole effort down. The word “radio” did not even appear in the commission’s official report (Mitchell Ch. 3). However, NER pushed back, publishing *The Hidden Medium*, a report on educational radio’s neglect and need for federal support. Over the previous decades, NER had made a slow but steady shift its focus, shifting away from and education-focused service and more toward ideals of public service, which had broader appeal. *The Hidden Medium*, along with a massive lobbying effort, was enough to include the establishment of a public radio system, mere months before the National Broadcasting Act of 1967 was passed on September 21st, 1967, and subsequently signed into law by Johnson on November 7th (Engelman 88).

The act established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the non-profit institution that would handle the funding and initial organization of public broadcasting systems. However, CPB itself would not be a broadcaster; that
responsibility would be handled by two separate agencies, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). Hartford Gunn, the president of public television powerhouse WGBH in Boston, was brought in to be the first president of PBS. While CPB had some knowledge of educational radio, the architects of the US’s first national public radio system lacked a vision for what the system could or should be. Gunn attempted to create a plan for how a system of public radio should sound, but it was found to be too narrowly focused to be accepted. The plan they ultimately decided on came from a young man named Bill Siemering from radio station WHA in Madison, Wisconsin. With Siemering’s plan and a Board of Directors in place, National Public Radio was quietly founded on March 3rd, 1970 (Engelman 88).

A New National Institution

NPR’s founding was the product of tireless work by several key players, many of whom came from this small but strong group of American educational broadcasters. NPR’s first Board of Directors would name Don Quayle, a broadcaster from WGBH in Boston, to serve as the company’s first president. Bill Siemering, hired as NPR’s first Director of Programming in 1970, would decisively set the tone for how NPR was going to differentiate itself from commercial broadcasters. Susan Stamberg of All Things Considered famously recalls how Siemering laid out his vision for how NPR should sound:

[My reel tape] is from a series I produced on my earlier (and only) public radio job. I was rather proud of that series— a weekly panel
discussion of current affairs, recorded in Washington with the highest-powered experts I could inveigle. When my turn comes, Bill threads up the audio reel, and we hear the deep, stentorian announcer’s voice. “From WAMU-FM in Washington, DC … this is ‘A Federal Case.’”

Bill looks up, He tilts his head back, and semi-smiles “That is exactly how we DON’T want to sound!” (Roberts 13)

Siemering took many notes on this approach from Lord John Reith, who, before his death in 1971, crafted a sound at the BBC that highlighted intellectual curiosity rather than directed authority (Mitchell Ch. 4). Quayle and Siemering would have their major differences in NPR’s first few years; Quayle had more of a business-like managerial disposition, coming from his television background at the sizable station WGBH in Boston, while Siemering had a more vague and impressionistic approach to crafting programming. For NPR’s flagship news show, All Things Considered, Siemering hired a cast of young, college-educated students from both Washington DC and his former station in Buffalo, NY. Among them were Stamberg, hired by Quayle, and Jack Mitchell, ATC’s first producer. Quayle was also forced to give up major funding from the Ford Foundation, when Siemering chose not hire recognizable CBS radio anchor Edward P. Morgan, against the foundation’s wishes. Siemering wanted to establish a unique sound at NPR and not be reliant on a recognizable voice (Mitchell Ch. 4). On May 3, 1971, ATC had its inaugural broadcast on 104 member stations across 34 states. The 90-minute program was designed by Siemering to be a flexible news magazine, containing both hard news as well as time for longer documentary coverage
and cultural programming. Quayle found this initial pitch of the program to be frustratingly vague, as he wanted a more concrete diagram of programming. Siemering then moved from ATC and begin to develop culture and public affairs programming in NPR, but tensions between he and Quayle would remain high. In 1972, Quayle dismissed Siemering, citing that he was not a good administrator for the organization (McCauley 38). However, under his leadership, All Things Considered had become a consistent program with high quality content, garnering acclaim for its coverage of Vietnam protests. Just 3 months after Siemering was fired, All Things Considered would win its first Peabody award, and later, an increased CPB appropriation of one million dollars (Mitchell Ch. 6). Siemering would go onto establish the long-running show Fresh Air at WHYY in Philadelphia before returning to NPR as a member of its board of directors following Quayle’s resignation later in 1972 (McCauley 39). The departure of these two founding leaders left NPR with a fair amount of instability, especially as Richard Nixon, never a supporter of federally-fund public broadcasting, vetoed authorization for CPB, and appointees from his administration took control of CPB leadership (Engelman, 91).

NPR’s next president, Lee Frischknecht, President from 1973 to 1977, came into the void left by Quayle and Siemering. He had the challenge of balancing Quayle’s focus on developing a high-quality news organization and Siemering’s focus on establishing NPR as something that appealed to higher values (Mitchell Ch. 6). Jack Mitchell, then head of news and reporting at NPR, hired Robert Zelnick, a hard-news journalist, to head the programming side when the news of the Watergate
scandal broke. His appointment, along with the hiring of Nina Totenberg to cover the Supreme Court, agitated many journalists within the organization who saw these two so-called hard news journalists as a threat to NPR’s human-interest mission. Some threatened to resign. This situation became additionally tenuous by reorganization that merged the news department with the culture and special interest departments (McCauley 41). There were also major changes going on in public radio outside of NPR. There were two other powerful state public radio networks that rivaled NPR in programming capacity, led by Ronald Bornstein in Wisconsin and Bill Kling in Minnesota. Bornstein and, to a greater extent, Kling led a grassroots group of member station managers that would become the Association of Public Radio Stations, formed in 1973 as a successor to NER, the former association of educational broadcasters. The group saw NPR as incapable of simultaneously producing ethical journalistic programming while being so close to the CPB lobbying effort in Washington. Those lobbying efforts were not going well, and Kling used this as leverage for his plan: merge the two organizations (Engelman 100). As part of the terms of the merger, Bornstein and Kling took seats on NPR’s Board of Directors and subsequently gained decision-making power on the future of the organization’s leadership and direction (Mitchell Ch. 6).

After some careful decision-making as to who next should lead NPR, the board decided on Frank Mankiewicz, a former Democratic political figure, who would serve as President of NPR from 1977 to 1983. Mankiewicz arrived at NPR looking to expand from a niche broadcaster to a recognizable national news organization, and
was initially very successful. Under his leadership, NPR launched their morning newsmagazine *Morning Edition* with the initial production direction of Jay Kernis. *Morning Edition*’s launch and distribution had dramatic effects for NPR and its listening audience. The show took a thoughtful approach and played a foil to the “hard news” often found in *All Things Considered*, helping frame NPR’s daily news coverage. Within two years of *Morning Edition*’s launch, NPR’s weekly listening audience would grow from 5 million listeners to over 8 million. When *All Things Considered* launched, it reached just 2 million listeners (Mitchell Ch. 7). Additionally, NPR’s news division successfully launched a London Bureau that specialized in international coverage. Staff salaries rose more than 70 percent over his first two years as president. Mankiewicz would also successfully lobby members of Congress, operating now in the political climate of the Jimmy Carter administration, to secure a 25 percent of CPB’s federal funding for public radio in 1978, a significant increase for the time (McCaulley 50). *All Things Considered* host Noah Adams on Mankiewicz’s impact on the network:

> On August 1, 1977, a sturdy, lively, gray-haired man walked through hither front doors and into the lobby of the building on M street where NPR had its studios and offices. This was Frank Mankiewicz. He was the new president. NPR had established a national audience. Talented reporters were being hired, and the member stations were doing well, many setting up their own first-rate news operations. (Roberts 48)
A provision in the 1978 appropriation bill established the development of a public radio satellite system that would more easily deliver national content to member stations with little drop in sound quality. It would also allow stations more editorial control to choose between different feeds of programming (McCauley 56). The sixteen satellites approved in that bill would mark as the beginning of the US public radio system’s oncoming decentralization. Bill Kling’s Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) was one of the member stations in the country that received a satellite uplink, and they used it to successfully launch and distribute a musical variety show called *A Prairie Home Companion*, hosted by Garrison Keilor. To NPR leaderships’ distaste, *Prairie Home* would quickly become the third-most carried to public radio show in the nation, behind *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. While there was no regulation stopping the show from being national distributed, NPR had grown accustomed to being the sole producer of national programming, a status quo that Bill Kling sought to disrupt (Mitchell Ch. 7).

At NPR, Mankiewicz’s ambitious expansion would go on to guide NPR into political and financial struggles in the late 70s and early 80s. Mankiewicz’s eager spending to expand NPR helped grow public radio’s audience considerably, but it came with high costs. This was coupled with a 20 percent cut in funding for CPB from the Ronald Reagan administration, which became a direct 20 percent cut in NPR’s CPB appropriation. Mankiewicz’s plan to tackle an oncoming budget shortage was radical; he moved to generate as much private funding as possible in order to remove NPR from public funding. Mankiewicz put faith in NPR’s ability to completely
separate itself from public funds within five years, and instead look to private sources for support (Engelman 102-103). However, the company faced an $8 million budget deficit and it hardly had enough to make payroll for its essential employees. 56 employees, ten percent of the entire staff, had been let go in January 1983. When an emergency CPB loan failed to be approved for NPR, Mankiewicz and senior management organized “The Drive to Survive,” a week-long in which NPR hosts appealed for direct listener donations. The drive was partially a success, raising $1 million, keeping the employees at the company, but it was still deep in debt (McCauley 72). In the midst of this budget crisis, Mankiewicz resigned under pressure from the board of directors for mishandling these budgetary challenges, leaving opinions on his legacy mixed. Jack Mitchell writes that hindsight shows Mankiewicz should get more credit for his successes than his failures:

The first five years of the Mankiewicz presidency were successful beyond anyone's hopes. The sixth year was worse than anyone's fears. Looking back, the accomplishments of his first five years outweigh the explosion of his last, but it is tragic, in the classical sense of the term, that his flaws nearly wiped out his heroic contributions to NPR and public radio (McCauley 67).

Mankiewicz set NPR on a trajectory toward future success, but circumstances both in and out of his control led to the end of his leadership.

After, Robert Bornstein served as interim president for a short time, Douglas Bennet, NPR’s president from 1983 to 1993 would be chosen to succeed Mankiewicz
and inherit NPR’s troubled financial situation. Bennet was more bureaucratic than Mankiewicz and in the early years, he focused on rebuilding the political and financial relationship between NPR and CPB. Prior to Bennet’s official hiring, NPR cut its staff by 25 percent and the news staff was struggling to hold a steady budget. CPB allowed *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* to stay afloat with grant money, but NPR’s cultural programming had been all but shut down (Engelman 103). This dire financial situation spurred CPB and Bennet to take radical steps to restructure the public radio system to ensure NPR and the public radio system as a whole. No longer would NPR receive a direct appropriation from CPB, who would in turn fund member stations. Instead, CPB would give direct grants to members stations, who would then pay to subscribe to programming from any number of public radio distributors, including NPR, Public Radio International (PRI), BBC, etc. This meant that, for the first time, NPR member stations were not required to air NPR-produced content like *All Things Considered*. However, most stations would continue to subscribe to NPR’s content, and when they did, they were required to subscribe to all of NPR’s services. This all-or-nothing approach allowed NPR to continue to fund smaller-scale programming experiments without needing the program to be carried by a large number of stations (Mitchell Ch. 10). This decentralization of the public radio system would establish a new status quo. This system, where member stations ultimately have control over their individual programming, is the system in place today (Roberts, 54). Despite losing its relative monopoly on public radio in 1987, Doug Bennet and NPR’s board of directors paid off NPR’s loan to CPB in 1986, and got the organization into
the black in 1988, ending that year with a surplus of 2.8 million dollars (McCauley 77).

While the revolving door of male executives kept turning, it was often the female journalists that held relatively unprecedented domination of the airwaves and the conversation about what NPR should and could be. Susan Stamberg, Linda Wertheimer, Nina Totenberg, and Cokie Roberts are defining personalities for NPR, beyond many others (Loviglio 69). Stamberg served as the central voice of *All Things Considered* for 15 years. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1987, she took over the role of a new program, *Weekend Edition Sunday*, which adopted a thoughtful sound similar to that of the first few years of *All Things Considered* (Mitchell Ch. 8). Wertheimer has been award several times for her coverage of the Carter-era Panama Canal treaties. Totenberg remains one of the most prolific reporters covering Supreme Court, having covered and broke several key stories about the body. Roberts continues to be a brilliant reporter and one of the most awarded political news analysts. They have made and continue to make NPR more human and give it the character and integrity that it has today. Other news outlets of the time would not even considering hiring women for public hosting or reporting positions (Loviglio 69). Even during times when they were not technically in control of the company, they were individuals who had the most say in NPR’s structure and programming. Mitchell writes that, while he was head of programming during NPR’s 1983 budget crisis, he received a letter signed by 100 Congress members, demanding him to preserve the news department as much as possible. He writes, “I might have suspected that NPR's
potent congressional reporting team of Wertheimer and Roberts might have had something to do with that letter” (Mitchell, Ch. 8). NPR’s Vice President for Programming Jay Kernis reflected on what it was like to enter their offices that he referred to as “The Fallopian Jungle:”

They were formidable… There was a famous yellow ochre couch in that area. When you were summoned to sit on the couch, you know that either you were going to be lecture, or that they were gonna discuss strategy, or they were gonna discuss the company’s future. And I think, rightly so, they took it upon themselves to make sure that whoever was managing the company, they were managing it well (McCauley 82).

These were the women that reported on the first and second Gulf War and reported through some of the most high-profile stories of the past several decades. Throughout all of public radio’s history, female voices have been dominant in roles of creative and executive leadership, and that tradition continues, in many ways, into podcasting and digital audio today.

Doug Bennet would preside over NPR until 1993. In that time, NPR’s sound was in transition, with key figures like Stamberg, Noah Adams, Ira Flatow, Robert Krulwich and Cokie Roberts leaving the organization for one reason or another. The changes required NPR to bring in a new generation of voices and talent, as well as develop a strong brand for their existing programs. One of the key resources in developing the future of NPR’s sound and news coverage was *Audience 88*, a public radio audience study published by David Giovanni in 1988 and funded by CPB. It was
the first significant insight that public radio producers and managers had into the listening audience, including their socioeconomic demographics, programming preferences, and listening schedules (Thomas and Clifford). The same study would later be repeated in 1998. It was during the early 1990s that NPR would produce such award-winning coverage as that of the first Gulf War in 1991. It was this strength and consistency of coverage that led Bennet’s NPR to finish the work that Mankiewicz has started, making NPR into a household name (Mitchell Ch. 10). Outside of NPR, organizations like American Public Radio, later known as Public Radio International (PRI), launched competitive national programs like *Marketplace*, an hour-long news magazine focused on business and economics. *Marketplace* would provide the first significant NPR had to its news magazine coverage, with many stations opting to carry the show in place of an hour of *All Things Considered*. The continued success of programs like *Marketplace* showed that as the public radio audience was growing, NPR’s monopoly on programming was ending, despite their continued dominance over the public radio news audience. Groups like PRI, APM, and later PRX were now for programming and airtime on public radio schedules (McCauley 76).

Delano Lewis replaced Doug Bennet after a long tenure in 1994 and would lead the company until 1998. Lewis was a businessman who was focused on bolstering NPR’s brand and developing a well of private money on which NPR could rely if public support were ever to end. This was a real threat, as Lewis presided over NPR through the political threats of House Speaker Newt Gingrich to defund CPB and subsequently end NPR’s federal funding. This move was part of the Republican
Party’s plan to remove most, if not all, of President Johnson’s Great Society programs. Lewis and NPR successfully avoided drastic cuts through both careful lobbying with Congress and the support of now 20 million listeners, as well as the major underwriters and foundations that supported public radio (Mitchell Ch. 12). Lewis piloted an organization that was now quickly maturing, in both authoritative sound and consistent structure, as it no longer had the reputation and authority of voices like Stamberg’s to legitimize the news. This included standardizing host language for introductions and outros, as well as creating carefully controlled clocks for news magazine programming. However, while Lewis’s business-like approach to NPR allowed him to protect the organization from political threats, it did not lead to a long tenure at the company (McCaulley 86).

In 1998, Kevin Klose became NPR’s next president and would go on to serve for a decade. Klose struck a balance for the company. Klose had a close relationship with the company’s board of Directors and took the role of an intermediary between their input on programming choices and the organization itself. He took it upon himself to spend a lot of time outside Washington, visiting NPR member stations and exploring how the network could grow its audience in partnership with its stations (Roberts 41.) Klose also hired Jay Kernis to fill the newly created vice president for programming position. Kernis had spent his entire career in radio and worked as the senior producer of Morning Edition, and now would help develop new programs like arts-focused news magazine Voices in the Wind. Kernis and the news division were also uniquely important during frantic coverage of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist
attacks on New York City. Despite a rocky start, NPR’s coverage of the attacks was superb and earned the organization a George Foster Peabody Award (McCauley 95-96). During the mid 2000s, Kernis and NPR worked harder to bolster NPR news’ brand as a reliable provider of breaking national and international news. From 2008, onward, NPR has yet to hold onto a solid President for more than two years. The economic recession in 2008 led NPR to cancel two of its programs and reduce its staff by seven percent, which did not help stabilize leadership turnover. These following years would prove tumultuous for the company. Ken Stern led NPR through this recession until March 2008, but the organization would continue to stumble through several presidents and remain steady financially by a thread. In April 2013, NPR moved its national Washington headquarters to a new facility across the city. Just a few months later, the company offered its 840 employees voluntary buyouts, hoping to stabilize its budget and reduce staff by ten percent by 2015 (Bloomgarden-Smoke).

In May 2014, Jarl Mohn, an established radio and television manager, was named President and during his brief tenure, he has sought to make impactful changes on the company. The first evidence of this came when he forced out chief content officer Kinsey Wilson. Wilson had an ideology of working to keep broadcast audiences steady while growing a digital-centric audience, while Mohn continues to be focused on growing NPR and working to keep broadcast audiences engaged (Folkenflik). NPR’s digital presence was the driving element of change in the public radio ecosystem in the mid-2000s, continuing into today. Eric Nuzum, who recently departed NPR to create original programming for audiobook service Audible, oversaw
the development of a successful programming division within NPR. He oversaw the
development of such programs as *Ask Me Another*, the national distribution of
WBUR’s *Here & Now*, and the successful podcast *Invisibilia* (Falk, "Program
Directors Challenged").

The rise and popularization of providing public radio shows as podcasts, as
well as developing programming solely for a digital audience has been a key
component of NPR’s strategy for gaining future audiences. This is all happening while
NPR attempts to build and re-innovate its flagship broadcast programs while
maintaining a dedication to its core broadcast audience. The balance between these
two competing priorities, developing a young digital audience while maintaining an
older audience that is more likely to donate or support stations, is becoming more dire
than ever. New Nielsen research shows that the public radio audience is aging, and
that podcasting and digital listening isn’t necessarily filling the gap. Since 2010,
Average-quarter-hour (AQH) listenership has dropped eleven percent for morning
listening and six percent for afternoon listening. In addition, NPR’s listening audience
is getting older; from 2010-2015, listening in all age groups under 55 dropped 20
percent. While public radio podcast downloads are on the rise, they may not be
enough to offset loss of on-air listeners (Falk, “Drop in Younger Listeners”). Clearly
NPR and public radio as a whole have a significant challenge of adjusting their
programming and working with member station to increase listenership, especially
among young people. While digital penetration is a great way of reaching young
audiences, they will have to work in a way that compliments the expensive business of broadcasting in future, lest it become too expensive to justify.

**Funding and Structure of US Public Radio**

The way that public radio stations are structured and funded has remained relatively static since the CPB restructuring that took place while Douglas Bennet was NPR’s president in the early 1980s. Public radio stations in the United States receive funding from the federally funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting, add it to the substantial member support they get from sustaining member support. The stations then use that money to purchase subscriptions from any nationally distributed provider of public radio content, usually delivered via the Public Radio Satellite System. Almost every news-focused public radio station subscribes to NPR’s primary news magazines, *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*, but their broadcast schedules can contain any combination of locally produced news/entertainment content or content purchased from major public radio providers, namely American Public Media (*Marketplace*), Public Radio International (*The World*), the Public Radio Exchange (*Reveal*), the BBC (*World Service*), or NPR (*Here & Now*) itself. By that fact, it is not required for a public radio broadcaster to necessarily carry NPR programming, though most public stations utilize the Public Radio Satellite System (Mitchell Ch. 6).

It has become increasingly popular in the past couple decades for the US public radio system to become a political target, founded on that common misconception that all or most of public radio’s funding comes from the federal government, when, in actuality, the proportion is quite small (Mitchell Ch. 12). NPR
took financial hits from the conservative administrations of both Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Since then it has been commonplace for the CPB and NPR to be a political target for any argument against needless government spending. The political strategy was clearly illustrated in the 2012 presidential race, in which Mitt Romney famously mentioned Big Bird from the PBS’s *Sesame Street* in a campaign speech calling for decreased government spending. That spending on public broadcasting was $445 million, approximately 1/1000th of the national budget (“Alternative Sources of Funding”). The most recent example of this occurred in 2011, where a bill that would have made it illegal for federal funds to go to NPR or any other public radio organization passed the House. The bill stalled in the Democrat-controlled senate, but the memory of that most recent effort to cut federal funding remains (Giarolo 436). While the bill was being discussed, some of the rhetoric that dominates conversations about public broadcasting was very clearly exemplified. Democratic Representative Betty McCollum called the bill “another example of a Republican–tea party agenda which kills jobs and imposes an extremist right-wing ideological agenda on the American people” (McCollum).

However, the majority of voices calling for cutting NPR’s funding in 2011 were moderate voices. Republican Representative Marsha Blackburn says that the decision to cut off federal funding to NPR is a practical one, saying, “It is time for us to remove the Federal support system that they have relied on. They have told us they do not need the money. We need to cut the umbilical cord. We need to see what NPR can do on their own” (“Prohibiting Federal Funding”). It may prove that NPR’s
financial issues require it to completely separate from the federal government, but the
American political system is too deadlocked to make a clear decision. After all, the
bill was brought up after a video was leaked of NPR’s fundraising executive saying
that they did not need federal funding. If NPR does eventually leave federal funding
behind, it may be necessary that they do it on their own terms (Mitchell, Ch. 12).

Part of the rationale for the political strikes against NPR is the allegation that it
is, on a basic level, a liberally biased news organization. This is an allegation that
comes from both conservative politicians and commentators that has stuck to the
organization over the years. Jack Mitchel writes that, during the period in which
House Speaker Newt Gingrich threatened cuts to CPB and subsequently NPR, the
organization’s political image was more nuanced than many made it seem:

When conservatives criticized NPR, they expressed no surprise at its
orientation, seeing a liberal bias as part and parcel of what NPR was.
When liberals criticized NPR, they often expressed surprise and
disappointment that NPR failed to meet their expectations. Both
conservatives and liberals, then, seemed to share the expectation that
NPR normally looked at the world through a liberal filter. NPR layered
journalistic values on top of academic values, both liberal in the sense
that Bennet described liberal values, that is, an openness to-an
eagerness for-new ideas and evidence, an effort to put aside ideology in
favor of facts and an endless quest for new insights (Mitchell Ch. 12).
Mitchell says that these allegations against NPR were somewhat inevitable because NPR’s mission was “liberal” not in the political sense, but in the academic sense that it sought to explore and explain new ideas. But what do statistical analyses of the organization’s news broadcasts have to say on this issue? The WNYC-produced program *On the Media* did a series of stories in 2011 exploring whether or not NPR had an actual or just a perceived liberal bias. The show cited reports from the University of Missouri and UCLA finding a liberal bias in an analysis of *Morning Edition* ("On the Media: Conclusions on NPR's Liberal Bias"). It also cited a controversial 2004 study from the allegedly liberal Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, which found that NPR actually had a conservative bias by looking at the partisanship of political guests on *All Things Considered*. They found that 61 percent of guests on the news magazine leaned conservative (Rendall and Butterworth).

Another guest on the show, Tom Rosenstiel from the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, said that quantifying media bias is not an easy task:

> Well, do I see proof of bias in the story selection? No. Do I see evidence in our tone studies that prove a liberal bias? No. Does this prove that NPR is not biased? I can't say that. We don't have tone for every topic. In the end, it’s very hard to establish, even if someone were to identify who’s on the air and what their political affiliations are. ("On the Media: Conclusions on NPR's Liberal Bias").

The very concept of media bias is a mixed bag with many nuances that can change from person to person or even study to study. In the *On the Media* broadcast,
Rosenstiel says that NPR’s coverage differs by being focused on international issues and explanatory pieces, making the tone of such broadcasts the determining factor in perceptions of media bias, one way or another. The real answer to whether or not NPR is biased will remain mostly in the ear of the listener.

There are many theories about what the broadcast public radio system needs to do in order to maintain financial viability into the future. Giarolo offers several potential routes that might serve to help the organization, including reviving the Fairness Doctrine to clean up the broadcast radio landscape and even suggesting the implementation of a BBC-style license fee (439). A study of NPR donation drives through the lens of consumer analysis and marketing tactics showed that multiple tactics are very effective in increasing listener donations to individual member stations. It noted in particular that emotional appeals and the perception of socialized peer pressure are effective tools in increasing private donations (Kinally and Brinkerhoff 12). However, donation drives are often unpredictable and in many cases aren’t an effective way of raising funds for a public media station, let alone supporting an entire network.

While CPB’s federal appropriation to public radio stations has increased every year from 1969, the increases have often not kept up with the scale of media audience the organization serves or the financial needs of the system. A 2013 CPB report explored a variety of potential ways in which public broadcasting as a whole could become more, if not entirely, self-sufficient. The report highlighted expansion of commercial advertisement on radio and television as well as paid digital subscriptions
as means by which NPR could create new streams of revenue (McLoughlin and Gurevitz 410). Both of these options, as well as others mentioned, heavily borrow from the experiments of commercial media outlets. However, the report cited an internal review of the corporation’s funding structure that determined that even new revenue generated from commercial sources would not be enough to offset the loss of federal funds. The report said:

Ultimately, the system itself would be at serious risk of collapse. Even if it would survive, the public broadcasting system in the United States would suffer with reduced numbers of stations resulting in gaps in service, and the remaining stations would be impoverished. This would dangerously impair public broadcasting’s ability to help create and maintain the educated and informed citizenry that is required for a healthy democracy and civil society (“Alternative Sources of Funding” 23).

The report says as many as 90 public radio stations would shut down without federal funding. Those sobering results aside, it’s clear that US Public Radio's unique mix of federal and private funding is a double-edged sword, a burden that the organization cannot live with or without.

Today, in an era when mobile streaming and podcasting are quickly becoming the primary way that public radio content gets to its audience, the funding structures that support radio content and the organizations that create it are in an unusual situation. This could perhaps best summed up by the recent history of public radio
flagship, *This American Life*. In 2014, Ira Glass announced the program would cut distribution ties with Public Radio International and instead self-distribute through the Public Radio Exchange. In April 2015 NPR, WBEZ from Chicago, and WNYC from New York held an advertising upfront convention, looking to attract big name brands to advertise on the station’s podcasts. Here, Glass somewhat infamously claimed, “public radio is ready for Capitalism” (Greiff). When this raised alarms from public service-protective radio professionals, Glass clarified his comments:

> They think I’m saying we should open the floodgates and turn public radio into a moronic money-grabbing wasteland of commercial shillery. To be clear: I’m against that. I’m not advocating a cartoony and stupid version of embracing capitalism. I see a huge middle ground, where we keep our mission and our ideals, and bring in more money using the conventional tools of the market economy. This is nothing new. Public radio has been getting plenty of money from underwriting for decades. But now, with podcasting booming, we could make more than we have in the past, and spend it on the stuff that people turn to public radio for.

(Glass)

Glass is joining a growing number of radio professionals who are toeing the line as to what underwriting can and should be. Podcasting-exclusive organizations, while maintaining public radio roots, have been increasingly experimenting with crowd-based and private methods of funding, in ways that diverge from the traditional models that have supported non-profit broadcast radio. In many ways, these new
organizations are attempting to take the mission and sentiments of traditional public radio and combine it with innovative technologies and business models that will certainly only grow more innovative in the future. These innovations, and the complicated differences between podcast advertising and public radio underwriting, will be further addressed in the third chapter of this paper.

**Reflection**

In this chapter, we have taken a deep dive into the history of the US public radio system. Though it has this complicated history, the system is still definitely very young. This chapter detailed how a collection of influential educational broadcasters petitioned the federal government for a small opportunity to grow a network of public-interest broadcasters. The initial product of that lobbying effort was National Public Radio, a small but dedicated group of journalists and radio producers who sought to create an innovative aesthetic on the radio. The public radio system grew quickly, with other institutions forming over the years to compete and collaborate with NPR. Despite some structural financial difficulties, public radio and NPR grew to become household names thanks to the tireless work of dedicated radio professionals. Today, the way that we consume radio is changing, but these individuals are still at the helm of innovative audio storytelling and news reporting.

The storied history of US Public Radio is the backbone of any further discussion about story-based audio production, especially how it relates to podcasting, as we know it today. The systems, the major production outfits, and the individual producers who are driving innovation in the modern sphere of digital audio
storytelling and podcasting were almost entirely influence by the above history. Even the technologies that have developed to support digital audio have had their historical production roots in these individual producers, striving to create and share innovative audio that, as Bill Siemering wrote, inspires, unifies, and educates. Moving forward, the next chapter will delve deeper into our modern understanding about how we listen to digital audio, where we receive that content, and it is produced in this new Internet-driven environment. From that, we can begin to better understand the basis for the podcasting revolution that we are undergoing, and how we, the consumers, are experiencing it.
Chapter 3: Podcasting & Digital Audio

Overview

After reviewing the broad strokes of the history and current state of public radio broadcasting, I now will lay out background on how the traditions and techniques used in public radio lend themselves naturally to the digital-only medium of podcasting, and why these two media products collectively form the modern understanding of “radio.” While podcasting is a wide-encompassing platform with many different types of content, there’s plenty of evidence to suggest that the story-driven podcasts have deeper historical roots. Ethics-driven journalism, strengthened by the non-commercial mission and traditions of public radio, has laid the groundwork for modern podcasts that are both commercially successful and widely popular, all without sacrificing a core journalistic mission. This unique mixture of commercial interests and strong journalistic integrity is what makes podcasting and radio storytelling such an evocative news product and why the format is seeing renewed success and popularity. Additionally, this chapter will explore the influence that modern internet-inspired production cultures have had on podcasting and its popularity, and how that intimate producer-listener relationship runs parallel to the ideas of early broadcast radio innovators and theorists. This background will help demonstrate how digital media has broadened the definition of radio, and brought new life to the audio medium.

This chapter will also go one step further and examine the business side of the podcasting market, including an overview of its overall business and financial
structure. This section will pay specific attention to the means by which producers of non-fiction audio fund their work, usually by means of sponsorship and audience engagement. From this same point, it will examine how the podcasting market measures listenership data and what those data mean for advertisers. This will also take into account contemporary innovations in funding media, such as crowdfunding. Given that many of the podcasts and services referenced in this chapter have direct ties to journalistic tradition, specifically within public radio, the section will also address a set of ethical questions that are raised by advertisement and sponsorship. These details on the structure of the current podcasting market is of particular importance because it is experiencing such rapid growth, which in turn has implications for the actual content of the podcasts being produced.

Taking that discussion into account, the overall goal of the chapter is to illustrate and emphasize the rapid pace of change taking place in the podcasting ecosystem at the moment. Many of the technologies, social norms, and business structures described in this chapter have a direct impact on type and amount of non-fiction podcasts being produced today. As discussed later in this chapter, all of these new trends and inherent changes in listening habits have manifested themselves in something resembling a “podcasting renaissance,” in which new attention is being paid to podcasts, particularly those non-fiction podcasts with a history in high-quality journalistic production.
A Brief History of Podcasting and Mobile Listening

Established old media -- a term often used to refer to print newspapers and broadcast terrestrial television and radio -- have been well documented as being slow to adopt many digital and internet based platforms for its content. Public radio, in some respects has been no different. But in other ways it has not. Undoubtedly the largest concern when talking about NPR is, quite simply, is anyone listening to it? The answer, however, is not so simple. NPR and public radio, by positioning themselves as the journalistic authority in audio broadcast, prepared themselves better for digital convergence moreso than many other audio broadcasters. While NPR’s terrestrial listenership on AM and FM is undoubtedly declining (though, by no means is it dead), it has begun to make up for those losses in digital downloads of podcasts, online streaming, and other digital services. Since 2005, there have been roughly 25 to 26 million NPR listeners per month, with that number decreasing slightly each year. However, in 2013, there were roughly 19.2 million people in the digital audience each month, downloading podcasts and visiting NPR’s website (Santhanan, Mitchell, and Olmsted). Almost all of NPR’s broadcast programming is now available a la carte on its website or through its applications for mobile devices. In 2015, NPR debuted a new mobile streaming application to fill a middle ground between Podcasts and live radio. NPR One streams news and cultural stories that are customized to the listener’s preference and location. The audio storytelling format is a natural fit in digital media, and radio’s nature as a secondary medium, content you listen to while doing other things, allows it to be easily ported to mobile devices and new technologies.
What impact has this had on traditional radio listenership? While terrestrial broadcast listening of public radio has consistently slowed, other data show the public radio audience is diversifying. Each year, Jacobs Media, in partnership with the Public Radio Program Directors Association, conducts the Public Radio Tech Survey. In 2015, Fred Jacobs from Jacobs Media said that the data is showing that public radio increasingly has “two audiences”:

Radio has actually held up a lot better than many people think, but, as we pointed out in PRTS7, slowly but surely the ridiculous metaphor I think I gave is that the toothpaste is out of the tube whether you promote your stream or you promote your mobile app or you promote your podcasts, people are going to find it, and that’s what’s happening now. It’s been more organic than it has been promotional, but eventually, if you’re in the space where you love podcasts, radio better be there providing great podcast content. Public radio, fortunately, has been way ahead of the game (Ragusea, “Fred Jacobs”).

The challenge for public radio organizations is now how best to bridge those two audiences. At the Public Radio Program Directors conference in September 2015, former NPR Programming VP Eric Nuzum charged program directors not think in terms of, or spend money on, distribution platforms, but to instead think in terms of how to best serve their audience (Falk, "Program Directors Challenged").
The Internet did not only have a disruptive effect within NPR, it also opened up new opportunities for other groups to make names for themselves in the public radio ecosystem. Over the past decade, several organizations focused on innovating in the areas of podcasting and public radio storytelling have begun making names for themselves in the media landscape. Two of the more influential innovators in to appear over the past decade are the Public Radio Exchange (PRX) and Transom. Jay Allison, the radio producer who dreamed up these two organizations first founded Atlantic Public Media in a partnership with WGBH in Boston in 2000 with the intent of being a clearinghouse for innovative structures and experiments in public media. In 2002, that media lab birthed Transom, an Internet portal that would allow aspiring radio producers to access learning resources about audio equipment and production techniques, and PRX, an open online system where listeners, producers, and broadcast stations can share stories and sound with one another. While on the outside, PRX may seem like just another source for public radio content, much like PRI or APM, PRX is actually distinctly unique. PRX is the first strictly internet-based public radio network, not relying on satellite technology like similar organizations to distribute programming (Hilmes and Loviglio 56-58). There are reasons why this is significant for the field. The first being that, up until this year, PRX distributed This American Life, unarguably one of the most influential shows on public radio. Another key example is Radiotopia, the podcast network co-founded between PRX and
Roman Mars, show-runner of the *99% Invisible* podcast. As of 2015, Radiotopia is the home to 13 podcasts distributed digitally, but also broadcast on stations around the country via PRX.

The increased focus on digital platforms and podcasting also gave rise to the Third Coast International Audio Festival. Founded in 2000 in Chicago, Illinois, the TCIAF, regarded as the “Emmys of Public Radio,” awards podcast producers each year in a variety of categories. Each year the organization holds educational and entertainment events, most notably “filmless” film screenings in which fans and producers gather to listen and critique audio-only documentaries or stories (Hilmes and Loviglio 58). Independents in radio have more opportunity than ever to make names for themselves without necessarily having to attach themselves to networks or occasionally bureaucratic organizations. The plummeting costs of quality audio production equipment and easy distribution on Internet platforms means any amateur producer can become professional with relatively little effort than in the past. There are also additional organizations like the Association of Independents in Audio, which exists to connect independent producers with mentors and colleagues who can improve the craft. The concept of independent producers and the new accessibility of radio as a profession will be elaborated on in the next chapter.

Podcasting and digital distribution of radio programs clearly has revolutionized both how producers are sharing their work and how we, the listeners, are consuming it. But how did we get here, and what is the history behind the technologies that made these innovations possible? In 1999, one of the leading Internet browser companies,
Netscape, rolled out the first version of Really Simple Syndication (RSS) that allowed easy digital distribution of content posted to the Internet. From that point on, if a news organization or website wanted to mass-distribute its content, all it would need do is set up an RSS feed, which would allow any website or application to pull that content and republish it on its own site. In 2000, the RSS protocol was tweaked by blogging pioneer Dave Winer to support audio files (“History of RSS”). Winer, along with Christopher Lydon from *The New York Times* and NPR, launched the blog *Radio Open Source*, featuring downloadable mp3 interviews (Quirk). This marked the publishing the first podcast, as they are now known.

However, podcast, as a commonly understood term, came about only after Apple popularized mobile digital audio with its wildly popular iPod, first launched in 2001. In 2004, Ben Hammersley, writing for *The Guardian* was the first to combine the words “iPod” and “broadcast” to arrive at “podcast” (Hammersly). Public Radio International was the first public radio organization to launch a podcast of its daily newsmagazine *The World* in 2005, and Apple’s iTunes added a separate store directory for searching and subscribing to regularly updated shows (Quirk). In 2006, Edison Research released its first report on digital media that included podcasting, showing that 22 percent of Americans were aware of podcasting. However, that penetration would move rather slowly. In 2009, Edison recorded that 43 percent of Americans were aware of podcasting (Webster).

In a move distinctly influential in the public radio market, Ira Glass’s *This American Life*, already over a decade old, became released as a free podcast in late
2006. In the following years, other major, non-public radio shows would launch, including Marc Maron’s *WTF* in 2009 (Quirk). In 2009, NPR reported 14 million monthly downloads of their podcasts as well as 8 million online visitors. That number has ballooned in recent years, with NPR touting a monthly average of 38 million downloads in 2013, ballooning to 94 million in March 2015 (Sanders). Offerings like *Planet Money, Fresh Air,* and the *TED Radio Hour* frequently occupy the iTunes Top 10 podcasts chart and remain consistently popular with audiences. Eric Nuzum was instrumental in growing NPR’s podcast offerings. Launched in 2015 for a short trial run, Nuzum lead the development of the podcast *Invisibilia,* created by *Radiolab* alum Lulu Miller and *This American Life’s* Alix Spiegel. The show’s first episode, released in February, reached 10 million downloads in just 4 weeks, a success for NPR’s programming and brand (“NPR's Invisibilia Reaches 10 Million Plays”).

This is just a brief overview of the major players in public-radio inspired podcasting that have grown so popular today, but it is by no means exhaustive. There is increasing opportunity for smaller outfits of radio producers, whether they be entire public media member stations, a teams of private hobbyists, or even individuals, to produce podcasts and radio shows that fall within the same styles, conventions, and production quality as is common in public radio podcasts and shows. The fourth chapter of this thesis will focus solely on those podcasts, attempting to extrapolate what sets them apart from other podcasts, and what shared traditional practices they tap into to achieve success with a podcasting audience.
New Technologies and the Changing Definition of “Radio”

There are three key areas in which the public radio tradition has directly influenced and shaped the modern understanding of podcasting. Firstly, the ways in which mobile communication and audio technologies have changed rapidly since the rise of the Internet have allowed for a uniquely dynamic and interactive digital listening experience. This has allowed for more experimentation and the mainstream success of different mediums for audio storytelling, as well as allowed more participation on the part of consumers-turned producers. Secondly, the public radio tradition of highly produced and ethically reported stories has found a home on these new platforms, particularly podcasting, and allowed for this type of media product to become more widely celebrated. Lastly, the public radio tradition of listener-supported business models and networks has found a similar culture on the Internet, which encourages crowd-sourced financial support and sharing networks via social media.

In the move to digital media and internet-based distribution platforms, it comes to light that there are many constraints, inherent within the broadcast audio medium, that are directly addressed, changed, or eliminated by digital audio in its modern form. This is especially for the media products produced within public media, as all news and story-telling based media are facing challenges to their traditional form. Consider traditional broadcast audio radio: on its most technical level, it is ultra-linear in the clearest sense (Russo 59). The listener or consumer does not have the ability to move backward or forward within a broadcast, nor can they pause or change the content they are hearing, save between different frequencies or stations or turning off the radio.
broadcast altogether. That is a relatively low level of media interaction. For comparison, consider an essay or a newspaper. While the level of interaction still remains at best shallow, it is not nearly as linear as broadcast audio or video, for that matter. The only linearity is constrained to the syntax of sentences and headlines, but the content itself remains static and able to re-read and consumed again. This has myriad effects on how that content is composed, as it is with broadcast media. Their linearity is the most inhibiting yet defining element, one that continues to have an effect on broadcast radio, even today (Russo 98-100).

Linearity in broadcast also is one of the underlying motivations for the innovations in digital radio’s content, particularly due to newfound techniques and technologies in digital manipulation of sound. In reviewing the ways in which digital editing has allowed for expanded manipulation of sound and aurality in radio, Spinelli reviews a deep history of radio innovators working to break the norms of analogue radio throughout the 20th century. Through both poetic works of documentary, many of these early producers, such as the Canadian Broadcasting Company’s Glenn Gould and composer John Oswald, created pre-computer radio documentaries using techniques that would later be mirrored in digital production (Spinelli 203). In Gould’s case, this technique would be stringing multiple reels of physical tape together to create a linear documentary. In Oswald’s case, he coined the term “plunderphonics” to describe the practice of reusing and manipulating existing sound to create original sound collage. In explaining how contemporary producers are finding new ways of recorded speech in digitally produced radio project, Spinelli says that digital-savvy
listeners should understand and be more receptive to this type of innovation. He says that the new tools of production have disrupted both producers and listeners accepted ideas of how radio can and should sound like, changing the accepted norms of linearity (Spinelli 210).

Linearity, as well as radio’s constantly moving nature, has led the technology, throughout its lifetime, to be seen as an essential and basic tool of both one- and two-way communication. Within the first few decades of radio’s invention, it was often praised a fixture of a forward-looking democratic society. Bertolt Brecht, a German playwright and broadcasting pioneer, described utopian use of the radio to hold public institutions accountable:

Whatever radio sets out to do, it must strive to combat the lack of consequences that makes almost all of our public institutions so ridiculous… Any campaign with a clear consequence – that is, any campaign really aiming to intervene with reality, taking its goal the transformation of reality… would secure the radio a quite different, incomparably deeper impact and endow it with a quite different social meaning from the current decorative attitude. As for the technology that needs to be developed for all such undertakings, it must work according to the principle that the audience is not only instructed, but must also instruct (Brecht 43).

Though Brecht did not outline how the specific technology of these ideas should work, he made clear that radio presented an unprecedented opportunity for long-distance,
collective communication.

It might be easy to say, however, that the modern broadcast system is not the one Brecht had in mind. Many critics of modern broadcast systems point to governmental regulation as a method of thwarting this idea of organized dissent. Through requiring licensees and public registration of transmitters and frequencies, some saw the airwaves being taken away from the general public, which defeated an inherent democratic intent of the technology (Enzensberger). In the US and many other countries, the initial unregulated rush to start and operate radio stations lead to widespread signal disruption in many parts of the country. This forced the US government’s hand to take direct control over the licensing of broadcasters. As a result, the network system and the “big three” broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) would slowly be born out of the radio broadcasting system’s increasing consolidation Other countries saw the need to tie broadcasting closer to actual public government systems. Keeping broadcasting a public, democracy-promoting service lead countries like the United Kingdom to nationalize their broadcasting services to protect it from commercial influence (Russo 53). However, not even these nationalized broadcasters are immune from the disruption of digital listening.

Speaking to the American Philosophical Society in 2009, former BBC Director-General Mark Thompson gave an address on the vast impact that digital media was, and is, having on the public service broadcasting company. In his address, he brought up another major impact that digital media has on traditional news organizations. Organizations like the BBC and other broadcasters have traditionally
distributed their content as highly bundled packages of content for which customers paid a flat rate for access, regardless of what portion of the content customers were interested in. With digital media, this is no longer the case as consumers are largely free to choose exactly what type of content they are looking to consume, whether that be buying a television show on iTunes or downloading a specific podcast. These types of unbundled services, Thompson says, put stress on those traditional broadcasting companies that are used to highly bundled distribution. That said, Thompson sees a continued “hybrid future” in which the two types of media consumption: both “linear passive media” and “non-linear participative media” can coexist and host different types of content (141). Thompson says that would be a future in which knowledge and information are being best presented to the public, as content can now be delivered in the form and schedule that is most appropriate.

Podcasting and digital-based radio erases or assuages many of the inherent limitations of production and distribution within the medium by its own nature, but there is also a significant change in how we, as the end consumers of radio, are interacting with the technologies that deliver sound to us. This is partly an effect of what Michele Hilmes describes as a “new materiality of radio.” She refers to this new tangibility and semi-physical existence of sound as “soundwork:”

Today radio is a screen medium: we access it through screens both mobile and static, using tactile visual and textual interfaces… Thanks to the variety of digital platforms and practices develops by professionals and amateurs alike, radio’s archive has been opened up
for enjoyment and analyses never before, as far back as the first olden age of network broadcasting but also including the previously largely inaccessible soundwork of last week, or last month, or last year.

(Loviglio and Hilmes 44)

This new definition of sound re-classifies the modern way we interact with sound as similar to the way we interact with physical objects. The play and pause “buttons” and scrubbing selector bar are now as ubiquitous to radio as once was the dial on a receiver. Furthermore, we interact with the stories we listen to on a much more intimate level than we ever have before. The communal or familial practice of gathering around the radio, then evolving into universal car radio, has now become an ultra-personal and intimate affair. As Hilmes describes, our radio is now in our pocket. As our relationship with this technology has become more and more intimate, the social space has tightened. Radio of all forms has held a long-standing tradition of speaking directly to the listener using second person terms such as “you” and this has only been reinforced by the increasingly intimate distance at which we consume radio (Hilmes 46). Additionally, the increasing intimacy and ease of access to these consumption and production platforms has had a reciprocal effect on the communities of production that have arisen around podcasting, as well as many of the other digital media we interact with.

Some claim that the invention of podcasting in the early 21st century follows a similar trend to what happened within other media during the same time period in reaction to the increasing commonality of the Internet and digital platforms. In 2007,
Australian researcher Axel Bruns proposed the model of “produsage” to identify this new movement of user-led creation and interaction that rose along with the digital age. Bruns uses this term to explain the relatively new shift from industrial-era top-down producer hierarchies to more social and communal organizations that produce both tangible and intangible content. The communities Burn describes are self-sustaining and thrive on participants engaging in mutual feedback and continual reiteration and innovation. This also explains the fluidity with which consumers and participants become producers and leaders, particularly in online-based communities. The examples he proposes range from the ballooning blogging community in the early 2000s to the rise of YouTube and other streaming websites as platforms for both consumption and remixing of content for further consumption (Bruns).

This theory is very applicable to the rise of the independent podcasting community that began in the early 2000s. Kris Markman and Caroline Sawyer apply the theory of produsage as a major driver in the podcasting community, especially as a key player in bringing together networks of independent producers. Their study found that many of these producers found a niche for themselves within podcasting first by listening to other productions and then becoming producers themselves. Markman and Sawyer identify podcasting as relatively accessible, given the low costs of distributions and production inherent to the medium. Once they enter the podcasting community, many of the producers they surveyed indicated that they found communities that supported them and provided them feedback that helped them improve their own content (Markman and Sawyer 20-35).
Additionally, producers used these communities as gateways to finding other new content, furthering the reach of the community as a whole. They identify this in particular as similar to the parallel rise in blogging at the time (Markman and Sawyer 24-25). These moves to form digital communities that allows consumers to become producers is a staple of what is commonly known as “convergence culture,” in which changing technologies in media and telecommunications add value to existing processes, like radio broadcasting, and help establish new technologies, like podcasting. The interaction between the users of these processes and the systems themselves is growing ever more intimate. Convergence is the key component of the “Web 2.0” movement, which sees old media and new media colliding and forming altogether different systems (Jenkins 15). The popularity of blogging in the early 2000s was the first major piece of evidence of this. Many saw the growth of blogging as a natural continuation of a journalistic tradition, with the key difference being that the Internet and digital media were putting more power into everyday individuals, rather than professionals, to produce, share, and remix content (Hewitt, Ch. 1). Henry Jenkins observed this convergence in many changing media during this time, for example(s): the major drive of producers to make television entertainment more participatory, the increasing prominence of photo-editing software that gave rise to certain online movements, and a rise in grassroots filmmaking based around social media communities (Jenkins 30). With regard to radio, specifically music broadcasting, Cordiero, similar to Hilmes, identifies that convergence has meant
listeners interacting with their audio more and more often in online digital environments that provide personal curation tools (Cordiero 498-500).

**Podcasting Popularized**

By all measures, podcasts have grown in popularity every year since their inception, usually parallel in popularity to the hardware devices used to listen to them. There have been two major periods of growth here. The first phase in the growth of podcasts took place shortly after their inception from approximately 2004-2005. When they were first introduced, their popularity rose alongside the growing ubiquity of iPods and personal mp3 music players. During this time, podcasts were mainly accessed as a download-only type medium. As technologies developed and podcasting and Internet radio technologies continued to become more and more commonplace, academics and industry professionals began taking a closer look at the effect that these new digital platforms were having on the general concept of what actually constitutes “radio” (Freire 100-103).

This brings us the second major surge in popularity around 2009-2010, which took place around the time that smartphones became ubiquitous, alongside the increasing ubiquity of cheap and easily accessed Wi-Fi and wireless Internet via mobile phones. This new form of wireless podcasting is characterized by easy access via streaming on devices with large amount of physical storage. The way we interact with podcasts has changed slightly between these two surges in popularity. Similar to the way that Michele Himes has organized her understanding of the new “materiality” of radio, Pluskota combines the visual and interactive elements that one might
consider commonplace to the practice of listening to a podcast or interacting with a piece of music on a mobile device (Pluskota 328). The key changes from traditional broadcast radio are threefold here. Audio has become more of a mobile experience than ever before, via the overall commonplace nature of internet-connected mobile devices like smartphones. Secondly, the freedom from constantly moving broadcast schedules allows listeners more control over their listening experience. And finally, as Cordiero, like Hilmes, points out, the traditional listening experience has become and interactive multimedia process, across different yet convergent digital media platforms (Cordiero 498-500). These changes inform our understanding of what audio is, making the audio listening experience less passive and more dynamic than ever before.

Podcasting as an audible medium has become more and more commonplace, as demonstrated by steadily growing audiences that were downloading podcasts, but also by a growing percentage of Americans who are familiar with podcasting. In 2006, only 22% reported being aware of the term “podcasting,” compared to 46% in 2012 and 49% today. Additionally, in 2006, only 11% of Americans reported ever listening to a podcast, compared to 29% in 2012 and 33% 2015. Podcast listening is more frequent among more younger, affluent, and highly educated groups, but is split equally among men and women (“The Infinite Dial 2016”). In late 2014, many online media news outlets began reporting on, as first mentioned in New York Magazine, “the great podcast renaissance” (Roose).

In that year, more and more podcasts were produced and disseminated, and many of them coming from public broadcast stations or affiliates. A great number of
news outlets and media organizations began sections or series covering and profiling podcasts, often in the same way they previously covered television shows, music releases, or movies, which led to what was termed “the great podcast renaissance” in *New York Magazine* (Roose). This buzzword’s spread coincided with several major podcast releases, but none were as popular and as often cited as a catalyst for this renaissance as the rollout of *This American Life* spin-off *Serial* (“Serial Podcast”). On the show, producer Sarah Koenig explored one story over 12 weeks: an investigation into the 1999 murder of Baltimore County teenager Hae Mihn Lee, and the man convicted of her murder, Adnan Syed. The podcast broke the iTunes store records as the fastest to reach 5 million downloads/streams, has been download from iTunes store over 100 million times, and developed a mainstream public presence inviting parody and spin-off podcasts that dig even deeper into the story in question. In November 2015, a second season of *Serial* began, this time focusing on the high-profile capture and subsequent release of US soldier Bowe Bergdahl by the Taliban. This season of *Serial* met similar acclaim and widespread downloads, with executive producer Julie Snyder reporting over 50 million downloads for the season, surpassing that of the first season (Robinson).

There is no doubt that *Serial* has had a profound impact, both on the podcasting community and on the people being interviewed and profiled in the story. For the industry, the result of *Serial*’s popularity was renewed general interest in story-based podcasts both by the general public as well as investors and advertisers eager to find dedicated, expanding audiences (Berry, “A Golden Age,” 170-173).
However, the “great podcasting renaissance” brought about is not necessarily the sole product of *Serial*’s individual success. The latter can be considered as just one of the many major factors that invited this resurgence of interest. As Richard Berry described it, *Serial* rose to prominence at a unique point in time:

> There are factors that drive this change. In regards to the apparent success of Serial, there seems to be a sense of events colliding in synchronicity…So, while Serial might represent an identifiable landmark, the reasons behind this notability may be a combination of factors, in which technologies, brands, social sharing, and engaging content all play a part. (Berry, “A Golden Age,” 170)

Serial arrived at a time when smartphones, accessing cheap and common wireless broadband and cellular data services, allow podcast listeners to easily access and interact with podcasts in a way that is distinctly easier and more streamlined when compared to the early days of downloading, subscribing, and listening to podcasts. Discussions about what is driving this newfound attention to podcasting are continuing to evolve and grow more complex. In studying how mobile devices have affected our modern understanding of “radio,” Jonathan Pluskota attempts to categorize the entire slew of terrestrial and digital options as the “modern listening experience” (MLE). By doing so, Pluskota suggests a model to reestablish a common concept of what we recognize as “radio” under a new name. In doing so, he attempts to reframe the medium of audio that takes into account the new media properties that have come to be associated with listening. This includes the customizability, choice,
ease of access, especially with regard to how these attributes contribute to each of the different methods of listening, whether it be terrestrial radio, internet streaming, or podcasts (Pluskota 328). Additionally, Hilmes has pointed out that our modern understanding of podcast has two layers, one that defines podcasting as the content being delivered by that technology, but another defines podcasting as the technology, not unlike traditional radio (Hilmes and Loviglio 44-46). The MLE model attempts to converge the first side, the technology of podcasting, with all the different delivery methods of digital audio into one end-all listening product. The table below considers many of the leading audio distribution services, both digital and otherwise. It illustrates how the MLE attempts to integrate existing terrestrial broadcast with newer digital technologies under a common, umbrella definition. Podcasting, in this context, plays just one role in a larger ecosystem of digital listening.

Table 1: Media Listening Experience (Source: Pluskota 329).

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<th>Media Listening Experience Options by Delivery Method</th>
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*Some terrestrial stations and SiriusXM offer Internet streams of their station signal, though satellite streaming is a paid add-on.

**HD sub-channels are optional and are not “High Definition” as often thought. Rather, HD Radio refers to iBiquity’s digital radio technology that is recognized by the FCC as the digital radio standard (iBiquity, 2015).
Additionally, under the MLE model, the content of a particular method of listening is categorized. The MLE provides three overlying categorizations of delivery method, and they have an inherent impact on the type of content being consumed. Pluskota writes, “Radio is limited based on proximity to the transmitter, satellite has a larger footprint but is subject to interference, and Internet-based services are subject to cell tower proximity—and these limitations impact and shape the content as well” (33).

This convergence of media listening, especially in how it has affected the behaviors of consumers in listening and sharing, could provide evidence for why we are seeing the “renaissance” in mobile podcast listening. All sources of digital audio, including podcasts, are easier than ever to access on mobile devices. Where previously podcasts had to be downloaded from a stationary computer, synced to a device, then later accessed in a device, today most podcasts can be listened to after a few gestures, provided access to cellular Internet data. These new listening behaviors, coupled with innovations within the business of podcasting, create an opportunity for widespread interest in digital nonfiction audio. But how do these larger ideas about mobile listening experiences impact our specific relationship with podcasts?

In studying, comparing, and contrasting how individuals podcasts are received by audiences, Jeremy Wade Morris and Eleanor Patterson break down the current hierarchy of podcasting, consisting of three layers: Producers, Podcasts, and “Podcatchers.” This represents the individual “actors” in a podcasting relationship, but also the size of control at each level, “Podcatchers” being the most removed from the creators. Today, there are multiple “podcatching” services producers are able to
choose from, each with their own unique tools and audience sizes (Morris and Patterson 224). They also note one simple element that may have led to significant audience growth: the “appification” of podcasting. Apple’s decision to section podcasts off into their own default application, instead of it being buried under an additional menu in the music application alongside other “podcatching” applications, have had a profound impact. To Morris and Patterson this “underscores podcasting’s intricate relationship to the technologies and interfaces of its delivery” (Morris and Patterson 223).

The intimacy that podcasting demonstrates in light of these facts underscores how different a trend this rise in podcasting is. Podcasting producers, like producers in many other developing media, have a newfound closeness to their own product. The rise in podcasting is very much a revolution in individual or small-group production, but also reflective of the technology and tools of production that allows producers to be their own bosses and drivers. By offering their work on easily accessible platforms like podcasts, they have invited audiences to be part of the podcast process.

**Structure and Funding of the Podcasting Market**

Another major area of change, driven by the Internet, pertains to the inherent similarities between the way that public radio and popular podcasts are funded and structured. The funding and structure of podcasting is an understandably natural extension of its radio roots. That said, the digital environment of podcasting allows for more flexibility an innovation than traditional radio. As a result, podcasters have
found new ways to iterate upon existing methods as well as blaze their own trails for themselves.

If you were to turn on your local public radio station, you would occasionally hear, within a given hour, an attribution that tells the listener what organization, foundation, or business has contributed to the source of the content you are hearing, whether it be supporting the local station, supporting the national news broadcast, or supporting a program one could hear on a local station. Underwriting is a recognizable and important component of public radio broadcasting’s non-commercial status. It is often the most identifiable difference between public radio and commercial broadcasts, such as music or talk radio stations. The origins of strict underwriting regulation goes back to the initial support for US public broadcasting, when in 1964, FCC Chairman Newton Minow gave his notorious “Wasteland Speech,” decrying the intrusive effect of commercial advertising on America’s airwaves. Minow described advertisements as having debilitating and dumbing effect on the content of what was being broadcast, especially on television, saying the famous words, “Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland” (Minow). He would later become part of the progressive push for a standardized American public broadcasting system. Minow himself would later serve on the National Education Television Board of Governors. He was one of the major players for the passage of the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, which established underwriting regulation (Gillies; Corporation for Public Broadcasting). In 1984, however, the FCC relaxed noncommercial underwriting regulation to allow non-
promotional slogans, location information, neutral descriptions, and brand names to be included in underwriting spots. This allowed local stations more access to underwriting dollars, particularly from local businesses or services (“Commission Policy on the Noncommercial Nature of Educational Broadcasting”).

The biggest difference between an underwriting break that you would hear on public radio and a typical advertisement that you might hear on a commercial podcast or on commercial radio is the content of the promotion itself. Sponsorship underwriting on public radio, while sounding similar to traditional advertisements, has more strict legal guidelines on the content of the message. Underwriting, unlike advertising, is not meant to be promotional, but rather informational. The official guidelines state, “Acknowledgments are strictly for identification of donors and should not promote the company, products, or services of the donor. Announcements which contain comparative or qualitative description of a product or company go beyond permissible limits” (“Guidelines for Underwriting”). Underwriting is not allowed to offer sales or promotions for products and services, or use language that expressly endorses a product, service, or company. It can only identify and share information about the source of financial support. This is why sponsorship is usually referred to using such phrases as “Support for NPR comes from NPR member stations and from…” The justification for these standards is that public radio is a non-profit service and is meant to distribute educational, cultural, and informational programming as a public service. Therefore, the underwriting messaging is considered primarily as an on-air acknowledgement of a gift or donation ("Guidelines for Underwriting").
Generally speaking, podcasting advertisers, not just those who advertise on public radio style-podcasts, either market products and services that are promoted alongside a sale or promotion, or use sponsorship messages to attempt to attest the quality of goods or services they provide. Podcasts, like most advertising- or sponsorship-supported media products, rely on the value that advertisers give the product per audience impressions they can generate with the show, measured often in cost per impression (CPI) or cost per thousand impressions (CPM). Popular podcasts demand large dedicated audiences. Today, moderately successful podcast audiences are generating extremely high CPM rates, ranging in the area of $20-$100+ (Dumas). For context, traditional NPR underwriting calls for about $2 CPMs, which is considered healthy for the medium (Sutton and Davidson).

The podcast marketplace is made of organizations of varying size. In their study on the landscape, Kris Markman and Caroline Sawyer identify an existing business market model that offers some insight into the changes going on in podcasting: the “long tail” phenomenon (24-26).
Table 2: The Long Tail Model (Source: Anderson, “The Long Tail”).

The long tail model, as first formulated by Chris Anderson, models a specific statistical trend, most recently driven by rapid growth via the internet, in which the market for a particular good or service grows so rapidly that drastic polarization begins to form (Anderson). It is to illustrate a common trend in online-based media forms, where by density in the top percentage of popularity is high, but continually thin among broad audiences. While growth is generally consistent within the entire market, popularity and attention is focused on the head of the long tail model. This minority of particularly popular products or services drives attention to the market as a whole, while maintaining relative dominance within the market. It becomes effective, and therefore profitable, to produce concentrated, highly networked, and high-quality products that skew toward the head of the long tail model. However, as the market, in this case podcasting, matures, the tail grows, and eventually the collective popularity of products in the long tail begins to exceed the concentrated popularity of the head. Anderson used the example of Internet blogs in the early 2000s as an easy illustration of this effect, in which the collective low popularity of rarely visited and scarcely
linked-to blogs began to exceed the concentrated, high-popularity blogs (Anderson). Blogging, like podcasting that followed, gained massive attention in the mid 2000s for, as mentioned previously, its ability to put the tools of creation and publishing into the hands of users in a way that, at that point, had never been seen before (Debatin 824-825). The same incentive to create, remix, and share was present in podcasting during its invention, and is beginning to come into maturity, as evidenced by the “long tail” of podcasting (Markman and Sawyer 24-26).

Due to a mix of increased social attention to podcasts like *Serial*, reinvigorated advertising potential, and an influx of venture capital funding, the podcasting marketplace is growing very quickly. But what are the networks and who are the producers making up the “long tail” model of podcasting we see today? While there is much breadth within the podcasting community with hundreds of thousands of shows now being produced, the majority of listenership remains concentrated on those “hit” podcasts, often those associated with a brand or a producer with some indication of quality. These include major podcasting networks, including Slate’s Panoply network and the comedy-focused network Earwolf (Quirk). However, the most popular networks are overwhelmingly those produced by public radio institutions or organizations with public radio backgrounds: NPR, Gimlet Media, *This American Life*, and PRX’s Radiotopia (Markman and Sawyer 22). In the podcasting industry these make up the “head” of the “long tail,” these are the highly networked, successful podcasts, both those with public radio backgrounds and those without public radio backgrounds. The long tail portion of the model comes from the hundreds of
thousands of podcasts that populate the leading “podcatchers,” yet maintain smaller, primarily niche audiences. The some of the more successful examples in the thicker portion of the long tail may include religious and spiritual podcasts, as well as political-focused podcasts, both of which control major audiences (Swanson 106-124). Due to the accessibility of the medium, other podcasts include independent, lower-production shows, which can bring in niche audiences, however small or large (Markman and Sawyer 26-27). But what is the underlying engine that is driving all of this growth in the podcasting market?

The long tail model is a business model, so it is fitting that there is a trend that is pushing growth in the market: CPM rates for podcasts reportedly remain consistently high. For context, typical online display ads run for $5 CPM to a mass online market, $11 for a specified, targeted market (Kahn). An average video YouTube CPM runs at about $14.72 CPM (Blattberg, “Almost famous:”). In podcasts, the model varies, but Transom laid out a basic funding formula for podcasters in Fall 2014. They explain that a podcast with 20,000 downloads can easily begin with a CPM of $15 to $25 for a 15 to 30 second advertising spot. For most podcasts, 20,000 might be considered a huge audience, but when you reach hundreds of thousands of downloads, this number can easily increase, and podcasts with over 1 million downloads can bill for much higher than that (Hoffman). By this comparison, there is a clear incentive for both further sponsorship and advertisement of podcasts, as well as the possibility for venture capital to flow into podcasting producers. The current situation indicates that, as long as podcasts can maintain small but dedicated
audiences, they can continue to support themselves and not be drowned out in the larger expanse of the market. Podcasts in the middle section of the tail often tend to be niche, meaning that they can maintain this level of healthy audiences, which are increasingly attractive to sponsors (Markman and Sawyer 30). In the long tail model, trends that begin with a high level of interest in a product or service usually start to flatten, given enough time (Anderson). Time will tell if this applies to podcasting.

Moving forward, this chapter will focus specifically on podcasts produced with a public radio background in an attempt to understand what advertising, sponsorship, and community support mean for these shows that often draw large amount of listeners.

While most podcasting advertisements feature explicit promotions for products or services, some groups with backgrounds in public radio are relying on advertising methods that call back to the public radio underwriting model. One example, perhaps most prevalent in popular culture, is the now ubiquitous and meme-ified “Mail Kimp” advertisement for the “MailChimp” email newsletter service heard at the beginning of every episode of the first season of Serial (Parkinson). Another might be the experimentation going on in the podcast advertisements created by Gimlet Media and Radiotopia, which often feature story-drive actualities pertaining to the ads supporting the podcasts themselves. This is a rising trend in podcasts, particularly those produced by professionals with backgrounds in public radio. These sponsorship messages can sometimes contain interviews and some of the scripted story-telling techniques that are
found in the content of the podcast itself (Grandoni). The similarity has not gone unnoticed:

This structure tends to mirror the sponsorship or under-writing model of advertising found on many public radio or television programs where the emphasis is on maintaining the integrity of the program content and flow by limiting commercial interruptions (Haygood 520). This raises a new ethical grey area, requiring producers to be extra cautious to make clear to their audiences that they are listening to an advertisement, in the same way that sponsored content on a website or in a periodical must make clear to the reader that what they are reading is not coming from an editorial source (Grandoni). What can be observed here in podcasting is a phenomenon that all news media are experiencing: a move toward native advertising in podcasting, particularly those with backgrounds in public radio.

Native advertising refers to content partnerships between editorial publishers and advertisers/sponsors in which sponsored content is produced in the same style, tone, and form as editorial content. One of the foremost examples of this type of content becoming contentious arose in 2013, in which an article appeared in The Atlantic that praised the accomplishments of Church of Scientology leader David Miscavige with two disclaimers that it was sponsored content from the often-controversial church. The article spurred concerns about the increasingly narrow line between journalism and advertising (Carlson 849-65).
Native advertising has become a topic of debate and analysis, both within the news industry and the academic community. To address the problems of native advertising, some larger online publishers, such as Vox, Vice, Gawker, and The Huffington Post, have established entire teams of reporters and editors who focus solely on creation of sponsored content, as to maintain the editorial independence of non-sponsored reporting and focus on delivering quality content to sponsors (Sternberg). That said, many public radio podcasts are some of the most successful shows in the podcasting charts, and they come from backgrounds that support transparency, ethical reporting, and public service journalism. Some of these organizations have dipped their toes into native advertising and are trying to navigate that minefield. One episode of the StartUp podcasting from Gimlet Media focused on the ethical issues of attaching a journalism organization’s name to product endorsements. In the end, the company established an ethical guideline in which Gimlet would not cross-promote any podcast that it produced in a partnership with an outside client company. (“StartUp: #17”). These ethical questions are going to continue to be contentious, as public radio podcasts begin to seek private sources of funding.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, public radio podcasting’s strongest players held an advertising upfront conference in April 2015 to appeal to major companies about the potential of podcasts as an effective medium for reaching large audiences. It was at this conference that This American Life’s Ira Glass claimed that public media was “ready for capitalism,” causing concern among some public media
professionals who viewed the statement as creaking away from the traditional, mission-focused efforts of public radio, even if that content is often delivered via podcasting (Greiff). However, partnerships between podcasting groups and private businesses have already become a reality in the podcasting environment. Slate Group, the media company that backs Slate.com, has developed its own slew of successful podcasts. In doing so, they have also made major strides in developing sponsored content advertising with their relatively young podcast network Panoply, which seeks to partner with brands to spread advertisements and sponsorship to specific podcast audiences, especially in sports-related podcasts, as well as those for news media sites like vox.com and comedian personality podcasts (“Panoply Media”). Gimlet Media, founded under a public media tradition by This American Life alum Alex Blumberg, is also developing a similar model within their company that would them to partner with outside companies to produce narrative-driven podcasts (“Gimlet”). Outside of this plan, clearly Gimlet has been a venture capital success. In following along with their large aspirations for expanding the young podcasting company, Gimlet successfully has raised $6 million in Series A startup funding, at a $30 million valuation (“StartUp: #17 Words About Words from Our Sponsors”). “Series A” Financing refers to the first round of private fundraising that occurs after a venture start-up incorporates (“Series A Financing Definition”). The funds Gimlet raised include a major investment from Graham Holdings, an investment firm most known for formerly owning The Washington Post and holding a majority stake in Slate Media Group and Panoply.

These recent new methods of fundraising demonstrate that podcasting, as a medium,
has entered into the mainstream debate about the future of funding media, which has and will continue to change rapidly in coming years (Quah, “Hot Pod:”). Podcasting, as a competitive market, exists squarely within the commercial spectrum of media products, but may still have potential to balance that with a transparent, self-aware approach to dealing with the ethical challenges of financing high quality journalism.

However, this may not be an arrangement that sits well with individuals who hope to maintain a public-radio focused tradition. There are skeptics of the new future of podcast advertising and public radio underwriting. Conor Gillies, a producer for Radio Open Source, wrote that, as he sees it, the industry is beginning to venture into dangerous territory as hosts of podcasts and public radio are reading sponsorship and advertising messages, sometimes adding the voices of guests or listeners into that copy. He is one of many producers who see public radio underwriting as closer in tone and content to the advertisements common on podcasts, serving the same mission-based purpose, a purpose that he said we betray by attempting to sugar-coat commercial advertisements with public radio ethical interests:

Advertising on public radio doesn’t totally undermine the virtues that make public radio public or worth supporting; we accept ads on city subway platforms and in non-profit magazines. However, what makes these ads troubling is that they don’t sound like ads: They sound like public radio. They exploit a special kind of trust listeners reserve for noncommercial educational media—a trust built over decades and deeply connected to the distance producers have maintained from a
profit motive—to get listeners to buy things. Advertisements, no matter how relevant or blended-into-the-tone-of-the-show they are, serve only to extract dollars from the listener. Public radio serves a civic good (Gillies).

Gillies worries about the content of public radio underwriting betraying the outer guise that underwriting portrays: one of public service, community engagement, and equal opportunity. This a concern which runs parallel to concerns about native advertisement and sponsored content, with the most basic concern being that media messages become those of the advertiser, and the latter playing the role of the journalist. Advertising on public radio-related podcasts, and all sources of media, is constantly growing, and Gillies agrees that the Internet has adequately opened up the playing field for experimentation, provided that we do not forget the educational and mission-based roots that public media was founded on. He suggests paying more attention to podcasts, radio programs, and networks that do not, in his view, take advantage of their community.

That said, practices and technologies within podcasting are already being developed that make the medium more viable for private advertising support. More popular public radio podcasts that pull-in large audiences like Radiolab, This American Life, and Serial use tools to dynamically update advertisement spots, allowing producers to sell more add time on a podcast episode, even after its initial run. These are not native ads, but are making use of new technology to improve the value of time allocated advertising in a given podcast, and subsequently the income
potential for the podcast overall. For example, hours after the second season of *Serial* was released to audiences, dynamic ads for MailChimp’s email newsletter services were replaced with advertisements for CVS Health. The effect these technologies have on podcasts is two-fold: it reinforces both the transience and permanence of a la carte podcasts. It allows the producers and distributors of a podcast not to be tied to the specific audience that was accessed the moment that the program is pushed into an RSS feed, but for the changing and evolving audience throughout that podcast’s lingering popularity. On the money side, this means that the same advertising spot can be sold twice, by appealing to two different audiences listening at two different times. Technologies like these will continue to grow more advanced as the medium matures and changes, perhaps now accelerated by growing audiences and increased attention.

When it comes to the actual distribution and delivery of podcasts, the technology and production culture has taken many cues from the open-source, community-centered culture of the Internet. These traditions just happen to fall in line with many of the norms of public media. Most podcasts have adopted the approach of providing free, regularly updated content, subsidized by advertising and sponsorship, listener donations, and membership programs that provide paying listeners extra perks or access to exclusive content (Haygood 522). The “freemium” model is so engrained in podcasting culture that iTunes, the most popular “podcatcher” and the most common entry-point for aspiring producers, does not even allow podcast producers to charge for subscriptions or downloads, as they are able to do for music, movies, television, and software (Morris and Patterson 226). While there is no one-to-one link
showing that podcasting explicitly takes directly from the traditional broadcast radio tradition, it falls in line with the historical notion that the content that appears on the airwaves is made free to listeners and is supported by those listeners in a secondary manner, whether it be through merchandise, promotions, or special access to content (Kramer). Story-based podcasters with a history in public radio have demonstrated this as well. Most notably, Radiotopia, the podcasting network founded by PRX, has seen success in the now-common practice of “crowdfunding.” Their initial launch drive in 2014 raised over $600,000 in funding, breaking the existing recording for Kickstarter Publishing or Radio projects. Another fund drive was held by PRX in 2015, in addition to a $1 million grant from the Knight Foundation in May 2015. Similarly, Gimlet Media now offers a membership program, which provides annual subscribers access to early pilots of upcoming shows, as well as exclusive access to giveaways and merchandising (“Become a Gimlet Member”).

Despite the success of many podcast networks and programs, there are still glaring challenges within podcasting that hamper its efforts to break into mainstream advertising and monetization. The most prominent example of this is a lack of precise data regarding to how listeners actually interact with podcasts (Blattberg, “The Measurement Challenge”). As explained previously, podcasts, in their most basic form, are simply audio files attached to a linear RSS feed that listeners are able to subscribe to. The result of this is an overreliance on several key metrics, some of which are completely outside of podcast producers’ control. A program’s success can be measured by the number of subscribers the podcasts has, or by the number of
downloads individual episodes receive. However, what cannot be measured is most crucial. Given current tools, podcast researchers have no way of measuring whether or not an individual listens to a podcast after downloading it, or if the listener listened to only a portion of a podcast. It is possible that this type of information is collected by podcatchers like iTunes, but this information is not public (Blattberg, “The Measurement Challenge”). This problem is compounded by commonplace reliance on subscribes as a metric for measuring popularity, which usually automatically downloads podcasts, regardless of whether or not they are listened to (Morris and Patterson 225). Furthermore, it is important to note how decentralized podcasting, as a practice and a media product, is from the distributors and the technologies that support it. Nick Quah, a Nieman Fellow and podcasting researcher, says that the many ways that podcast listening can take place pose specific problems for generating accurate data:

The podcast universe is made up not just of huge number of different podcast consumption apps (the native iOS Podcast app, Stitcher, Pocket Casts, Overcast) and podcast hosting platforms (LibSyn, Acast, Panoply, Art19, etc. etc.), but also a huge number of different ways of consuming and hosting podcasts that aren’t podcast specific (Soundcloud is a hosting example here). And with every different app or platform, there’s potentially a different technical way of defining and reporting what constitutes a download, a listen, a unique and meaningful impression (Quah, “The Future of Podcasting Metrics”).
Quah goes on to explain that this unorganized podcasting system likely leads to inflated listenership numbers. That, on its own, is not necessarily a problem, but it furthermore indicates that the business of podcasting has no internal incentive to refine its methods of measuring listenership, as inflated listenership numbers would potential benefit podcast producers financially (Quah, “The Future of Podcasting Metrics”).

Beginning in Spring 2015, a collaboration of different public radio professionals began working on a report that proposed a standard measurement model for podcasting, starting calling on other podcasting groups to voluntarily support the model. They presented projections that may serve to standardize compensation and sponsorship plans in order to create voluntary competition in the interest of transparency and consistency within the platform. The most specific measurement change is the filtering out of multiple downloads made by the same person across several listening devices, regardless of whether they be computers, phones, laptops, etc. (“Public Radio Podcast Measurement Guidelines V1.1”). This is a strong signal that the public media community is engaged with the competitive podcasting market, taking ownership of their place as a driving membership.

While some groups work to solve the problem of standard measurement, others have found ways of working around this issue. Last year NPR developed and released NPR One, which is an application built to stream a mix of nationally and locally produced content in a manner not all that different from music streaming services or their traditional broadcast radio transmissions. One of the byproducts of this app is an increased ability to monitor user habits, such as when users opted to skip a story or
what types of stories get the most traffic. In one instance, it allowed producers of the Planet Money podcast to A/B test different leads to the same story, to see which was more effective. The result was that listeners were able to decide which version of the show worked best for them. Of the two choices, listeners opted not to skip the lead intro that featured a mini-story, focusing on President Barack Obama, which then opened up into a larger story about the concept of A vs. B testing of products and services. (“Planet Money Episode 669: A or B”).

As we can see, some producers are looking toward new technologies; ones that could either live alongside podcasting or within future formats that might replace podcasting in order to get around the inherent lack of listenership data in podcasting. These hypothetical technologies are expected to have more control over the content they are delivering and more interaction with the audiences that they are serving. For example, Stephen Henn, a longtime journalist for NPR and the Planet Money team, recently left the organization to pursue new audio-focused platforms that would allow more flexibility (“Why I Left NPR”). He cited recent statistics that show severe drop-off in youth listening to public radio, saying that the current system is not supporting the innovation that is necessary:

The digital radio I want would make it easier to support great work. It would help public radio break out of the white, upper-middle class suburb it has created for itself. It would be personalized. It would be global. It would be social and ubiquitous. It would let the audience talk back. My ideal digital radio, it would listen to the audience (Henn).
Henn’s comments echo back to some of the most basic theories of radio’s inherent democratic quality, as described by Bertolt Brecht, who—as discussed earlier in this chapter—wished for a shared radio, in which every member of society could use radio as a tool for both sending and receiving to further democracy and participation (Brecht 44). Henn’s thoughts voice a similar matter with regard to the public radio system. In 2015, NPR reporter Adam Davidson and audience researcher John Sutton debated the extent to which public radio is adequately serving its audience. They focused specifically on how there is little incentive for innovation at member stations and the larger national market due to a lack of competition (Sutton and Davidson). It may be possible that the future of digital audio exists primarily within a technology that is not necessarily podcasts. The pace of growth surrounding these technologies is constantly quickening, and a new, innovative standard could end up matching or accelerating this rate of change.

**Reflection**

The rapid growth and maturation of podcasting over the past several years has been the astonishing byproduct of several converging factors. Podcasting, like blogging before it, is in the middle of a media tools zeitgeist that makes it increasingly easy and popular to create, share, and remix audio content. That content is being produced and distributed at a time when individual listeners have a closer relationship to their mobile devices and the audio that they consume on those devices than ever before. Additionally, the high-quality storytelling content being created in those podcasts is grounded in a strong tradition of individuals and organizations with
backgrounds in US public radio. Those professionals are now finding themselves
interacting with social media-based Internet communities that are looking to support
consistently high quality journalism that has a public-focused approach. So the “great
podcast renaissance” that we have today is not the result of any one single show or
individual, but the confluence of factors that continues to define the Internet as a place
for and by creators.

I do not necessarily believe, as individuals like Ira Glass have indicated, that
podcasting is a bubble that will burst at some point. Given the observations regarding
the long tail model, I believe podcasting itself will at some point lose the excitement
and attention it currently is receiving, but not before new forms of digital audio are
pioneered and popularized. Podcasting, as it is described in this chapter, has much in
common with the explosion of blogging in the early years of Web 2.0. However,
blogging has not disappeared; blogging has matured and evolved into full-fledged
publishing platforms and publication websites (Debatin 824-826). While the
excitement surround the trend of blogging has dissipated, the effects that the blogging
boom had on journalism and online publications persists. This may prove to be the
same situation for podcasts.

The largest takeaway from this chapter should be that this specific period of
time, in which an unprecedented level of attention is being paid toward podcasts, is a
pivotal time for the medium of nonfiction audio. Over the coming years, we should
see continued exponential growth in quality non-fiction storytelling as a direct result
of changing trends in digital listening and innovations within the business of
broadcasting and digital audio. The changes that are happening now are just signals of more changes to come, especially as the surge in podcasting raises more questions about the future of radio and broadcasting as a business. While podcasting has its own sphere of influence, the business of radio broadcasting is inexorably tied to it.

One identifiable weakness with this analysis is that it comes in the middle of so much rapid change. Circumstances surrounding modern listening and podcasting are sure to change dramatically in coming years. Only within the past several years have academics and public radio professional begun to regard podcasting as a serious addition to the research of radio broadcast. I expect that more and more will be written and published in coming years. I expect that analysis to regard podcasting, as I have, as an extension of radio and, the businesses that support it, as institutions innovating in the fields of digital media and nonfiction storytelling.
Chapter 4: The New Radio

Overview

“I find myself lately living in a world I never imagined would exist. When I learned to make radio stories like the ones I make today, you could fit everyone who made these sorts of stories into a minivan. Now we’re an army. Our ranks have been growing for a while but just in the last year, it feels like some new beachhead’s been conquered and a flood of new podcasts has arrived, filled with stories that have surprising plotlines and humor and emotion and interesting, original ideas. And these podcasts are finding audiences.” – Ira Glass, in a Foreword to Out on the Wire by Jessica Abel, 2015

By the early 1990s, US Public Radio had established itself as a fully-fledged network of membership stations and broadcasters, serving thousands of people across the country. National Public Radio had matured and NPR became a household name. Its national broadcasts had become a cornerstone of radio news in America, in a news media market that was growing increasingly dense. Throughout the 1980s, 24/7 cable news became the new standard for the average news consumer, and soon the Internet would become more and more commonplace in American homes, bringing with it a flood of information. It was in those years that a young Ira Glass was an intern at NPR, cutting reel-to-reel tape and booking interviews. After graduating from Brown University in 1982, he would go onto become a reporter and host for shows like All Things Considered, Morning Edition, and Talk of the Nation. In 1990, he joined the
staff of Chicago Public Media, and began to experiment with new program styles and reporting techniques. In 1995, with the help of general manager Torey Malatia, that experimentation led to the launch of *This American Life*, initially titled *Your Radio Playhouse*. The show was self-effacing and poignant. Its structure was theatrical, with different stories told in different acts; its content was literary, but also documentary. It was very different. So different that NPR, Glass’s old employer, passed on distributing the show before Public Radio International picked it up in 1996.

It’s funny, now *This American Life* seems like such a standard thing on Public Radio, but when we started, it was such a weird show. Really, stations didn’t really know how to take it, and I sounded very different than everyone else who was hosting a public radio show. It was a much more casual performance than was happening on the air on public radio in 1995. I’d been a reporter on the daily news shows and a producer before that for a long time. When I started the show, I had been working in public radio for 17 years. I’m old (“Longform Podcast #159: Ira Glass”).

The rest is somewhat history. Over two decades later, *This American Life* is going strong, not only as a radio show, but also as a podcast and a clearinghouse for groundbreaking storytelling like that in the podcast *Serial*. Perhaps more impactful is the inspiration the show has served as for multitude of new producers and shows that have come after it. That was something that Ira Glass did not anticipate:
We didn’t think of ourselves as the advance guard for the crowd that’s now formed alongside us. But lately there’s so much great audio being made, it’s hard keeping up with it all. People are trying new things, expressing their personalities, documenting stuff nobody had gotten to till now. More than ever, it feels like there’s so much to invent and discover. It feels like we’re just at the beginning (Abel xi).

**Narrative-Drive Storytelling**

Given a wide view of the current landscape of narrative-driven audio stories being produced today, we should be able to recognize that we are in the middle of a transformative moment. It is easier than it has ever been to find, listen to, and produce high quality, ethically produced audio stories. These stories are coming from both independent producers and large studios inspired by a long tradition of storytelling, largely coming from a background in public radio news reporting. With increasing attention being paid to podcasts and the outfits that produce them, we should begin to question, “How did this start?” This change has been a long time coming in public radio. As David Biewen said in 2010, in the late 1990s, documentary and experimental public radio began disappearing from traditional broadcasts, and indicated a need for a new platform:

NPR’s talented radio makers covered the news of the day more comprehensively but told fewer intimate stories, took fewer risks, took listeners on fewer journeys. The news magazine still aired the more personal and imaginative work sent in by indie producers, but in
smaller portions. The few oases in public radio expressly devoted to innovative documentary work, such as the long-running half-hour show *Soundprint*, were often relegated to the wee hours or weekend evenings when audiences were at a low ebb (Biewen and Dilworth 2).

Today it is apparent that what Biewen was searching for was a version of radio that was not constrained to the traditional restraints of the medium, as it existed at the time. It would be developed, over time, by many different producers and documentary-focused outlets, and would then later flourish with increasing availability to the tools of digital production and distribution. Today we have that, in the form of podcasts and all the freedom that brings.

If a convergence of technology and production are driving the podcasting renaissance then the next step in exploring why some podcasts are more successful than others is to look more deeply into who are producing these show and what they are doing. Alex Blumberg, the CEO of Gimlet Media and show runner of the *Startup* podcast, recently described a tradition of well-produced, diligently reported shows that make up a majority of the most successful podcasts. In a recent episode of his show, entitled “The Secret Formula,” he said that the bet his company is making on its programming is that they will work best following a certain tradition. That tradition involves professional production and meticulous editing over long periods of time, a process that can quickly become prohibitively expensive and time-consuming for many producers:
There are a lot of podcasts out there, popular podcasts that I personally love where they don’t do anything close to this. Where two people walk into a studio, turn on mics and talk for an hour, then press upload… Our podcasts, on the other hand, take months to produce… Why do we do it this way? The data suggests, its actually good business. (“StartUp: #17 Words About Words from Our Sponsors”).

This is a tradition built out of the US’s history in public radio journalism, and its shaping this nascent industry in many ways, even as conversations about advertising and funding continue to swirl. This tradition, mixed with the unique period of technological convergence discussed in the previous chapter, is driving the current renaissance in audio storytelling and podcasting.

**Experimentation in the Format**

Since radio’s inception as a popular news medium in the early 20th century, producers have been innovating and experimenting with different styles. There have been several landmark radio programs in US public radio’s history that have had ripple effects throughout the industry, but perhaps none more than *This American Life*. Launched in 1995, *This American Life* would quickly grow to become a household name over the next few years. Ira Glass had worked in public radio for almost 20 years before coming to WBEZ Chicago with the plan for an act-based documentary program, one with a very casual approach to personal story telling. The program was actually born out of Glass’ frustrations with the constraints of NPR’s traditional newsmagazines. Glass often describes the initial reaction of station managers, to
whom he was pitching the show, as mixed. “Now *This American Life* seems like such a standard thing on public radio, but when we started, it was such a weird show. Stations did not know how to take it, I sounded very different from everybody else who was hosting a public radio show; it was a much more casual performance than what was happening in public radio in 1995” (“Longform Podcast #159: Ira Glass”). Both through the program’s style and the talent it inspired and employed, *This American Life* has the single greatest influence on many of the most popular podcasts and producers that have come since, including *Radiolab*, the podcasts of Radiotopia, and *This American Life* alum Alex Blumberg’s podcast production company, Gimlet Media (Abel 1-11). The model and tone of *This American Life* is often cited as the influence for many modern story-based podcasts. *Current* writer and podcast producer Adam Ragusea describes the long-term impact of *This American Life* as a fortunate accident:

> It all goes back to Ira Glass. If you look at the iTunes charts of podcasts, the majority of podcasts, the majority of those people were directly inspired by Ira Glass and his way of telling stories. A majority of the majority of those people worked with Ira Glass. He is the Kevin Bacon of modern podcasting. Everyone connects to him through either one step or two steps. It’s quite an amazing serendipity that he was onto the formula of content that works best for podcasts 20 years before podcasts got popular. That’s just pure luck (Ragusea).¹

¹ Quoted from IRB-approved interview with Ragusea in August 2015.
However, *This American Life*’s success, or at least the style of storytelling it popularized does not necessarily seem to have been a complete accident, separate from what was going on in the media landscape at that time.

Another important element of Glass’s and TAL’s contribution to modern radio storytelling and podcasting is a definite culture of collaboration. The TAL-style of telling different stories each week, united by a central theme, invited a lot of variety of voices throughout the show’s history. In addition, the show’s in-house production staff has a strong background in group editing and creative criticism. As a result, the show has invited a whole slew of journalists, writers, actors, and normal people to pitch and tell stories to the show. The result is an entire family tree of radio producers that, even after moving on to different shows or projects, share a familial lineage back to TAL.

As Jessica Abel describes it, after reviewing the innovative storytelling doing produced today, this is an effect that is intensified by the ease of access that comes with podcasting:

…one of the beautiful things about podcasting as opposed to over-the-air radio, terrestrial radio, is that you can have as many shows as people who want to make shows. There’s room for so many voices, there’s so much more diversity, both in the sense of subject matter and in the sense of people and voices—young people, women, etc., and that is new (“JRAM ’s Interview With Jessica Abel”).

Podcasting allows for both different story perspectives, but also new formats and structures that drive innovation within the landscape. *Song Exploder* a Radiotopia
podcast by musician Hrishikesh Hirway, recently gained notoriety for pioneering a new format of breaking down, or “exploding” popular tracks by musicians and bands in a narrative structure (Grubey). The varying lengths of stories possible in a podcast like *Serial* allow episodes to be produced outside the constraints of a broadcast clock. New stories and formats are constantly being invented, impacting other shows within the podcasting landscape.

With specific regard to the success of *Serial*, the podcast spun-off of TAL by producer Sarah Koenig, Richard Berry describes how the podcast’s relationship with *This American Life*, perhaps the most successful long-running public radio show and podcast, and the minds it has inspired and collaborated with also lent it some brand credibility that propelled it success forward (172). Ira Glass, working within the tradition of public radio, has passed on this success to many producers and programs over the years. In the conversations that followed *Serial*’s rise, more attention was being given to other highly produced podcasts that were either directly or indirectly inspired by work being produced by Ira Glass and *This American Life* (Morris & Patterson, 2015). These podcasts are born out of strong traditions that, in America, have strong ties to its history of public radio journalism. In many ways, the history of that journalism has directly influenced the professionalism and level of journalistic quality that some now celebrate as exclusive to podcasting. These shows and producers are many, but a short-list includes: *Radiolab, Snap Judgment, Freakonomics Radio, 99% Invisible, Planet Money, Reply All,* and many more. By tracking the
history of how public radio has been produced over the years, we can better understand how and why this type of content works so well in modern podcasts.

**The Formal Attributes of Podcasting**

Before exploring a specific subset of podcasts, it is first necessary to fully detail the vast landscape of podcasts that it exists within. Podcasting, as with any medium digital or analogue, is a platform that provides innumerable possibilities for content types. However, the unique formal attributes that podcasts have shape the types of content are being produced, particularly when compared to other audio-based media. Form, in this case, refers to way that the content is displayed, how the user interacts with it, and in what way it is consumed (Morris and Patterson 227-228).

While podcasts, as a technology, are not specifically bound to the medium of audio, the vast majority of podcasts exist solely as audio files downloaded or streamed over an Internet connection. This is the most basic formal characteristic for the majority of podcasts. Many individuals who have studied podcasting have attempted to relate it in terms of other media, likening it to the practice of subscribing to a newspaper instead of buying it at a newsstand or comparing podcasting’s effect on radio to that of VHS tapes on broadcast television (Berry, *Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star?* 146).

As discussed in previous chapters, podcasting, specifically in relation to typical broadcast radio, has an undeniable freeing effect on audio listening. While traditional terrestrial radio is bound by a broadcast clock that must be strictly adhered to, podcasting is free of these restrictions in two ways. Firstly, no competition for broadcast slots allows the duration or format of a given podcast episode to be
governed solely by its content or by simple practicality of file size/production time. The result of this difference is a vast variety of podcasts that differ in length, even from episode to episode. Many podcasts have chosen to adopt this new freedom, adopting styles and formats that bear resemblance to those shows traditionally found on the radio, but with more variance and flexibility with regard to time constraints. However, in some cases, some shows have seen this flexibility as a challenge to develop their own standard format with regard to length and structure, rarely breaking from their own self-imposed length standards (Russo, 2010). Secondly, no scheduled time slots means that podcasts, in many cases, develop semi-regular release schedules, ranging from daily, weekly, monthly, or even less frequently to maintain informed relationships with dedicated audiences. Many podcasts, particularly those that require a higher amount of production time, have popularized the use of seasonal releases to inform listeners of when they should expect regular podcast releases (Lewis, 2015).

Since podcasting’s invention and popularization, the inherent media attributes that separate podcasting from other media have shaped the type and structure of content that can be found in popular podcasts. The most commonplace and popular, in terms of quantity, type of podcast is undoubtedly discussion-based and interview-focused podcasts. In fact, the first and longest running podcast, Radio Open Source with Christopher Lydon, began as recorded mp3 conversations with journalists, bloggers, and political commentators (Quirk, 2015). Today, due to low-cost access to high-quality recording and producing equipment, launching and sustaining a discussion-based podcast is easier than ever. Many of these shows establish niche
audiences by maintaining a core set of hosts and guests and focusing on a specific theme that attracts a specific audience (Quirk, 2015). However, many podcasts of this type have enjoyed broader success. With formats similar those heard on traditional broadcast radio talk shows, shows like Another Round from Buzzfeed and Slate’s Political Gabfest draw audiences in with biting commentary on social issues, politics, and economics. As podcasting has matured as an industry, some early adopters and hobbyist groups quickly became professional podcasters. The success of some of these professionals has been propelled by their success in comedy, acting, or performance. Notable examples include WTF with Marc Maron, The Joe Rogan Experience, and Chris Hardwick’s The Nerdist. Both these discussion and interview shows utilize the benefit of podcasting’s accessibility and freedom of length.

But not all podcasts follow these models that are so common on broadcast radio today. As podcasting has grown, individual producers have begun to experiment and create new and successful ways to use podcasting that break out of modern conventions. One form that has seen a major resurgence is the form of the radio drama. Using podcasting’s freedom of length and regular distribution methods, podcasts like Welcome to Nightvale, Limetown, and The Truth are reviving the radio format that dominated the early decades of radio broadcasting but has been relatively absent since the 1960s (Bottomley 180). Creatively minded producers and teams of theatre-trained actors are consistently innovating in the field of audio fiction, and this resurgence was recognized in 2014 with the founding of the Sarah Awards, from Sarah Lawrence College, to celebrate that innovation (“The Sarahs – About”). Similar
podcasts, which usually consist of a single voice and narrative delivery, are employing the aesthetics of audio drama for non-fiction storytelling. *The Memory Palace*, for example, uses poetry and literary scripting to retell true stories from the past. *Dan Carlin’s Hardcore History* uses similar techniques to create dramatic retellings and explanations of historical events and movements.

Beyond this basic umbrella are a whole slew of podcasts that do not necessarily fall into a broader category. Many television shows, particularly nightly news programs like *Meet the Press* use podcasting as a way to share the audio from their television broadcasts. Other major news networks also distributed television audio as podcasts, such as CNN distributing *Anderson Cooper 360* as a podcast. Many dedicated radio programs in and outside of public radio mirror this behavior. *NPR* distributes podcasts of its news magazine shows like *All Things Considered*, in addition to even smaller pieces of content like its hourly newscasts. While they have never reached the full popularity of audio podcasts, video podcasts continue to be created and distributed, particularly with regard to presentations such as TED talks and religious sermons. Music shows like *All Songs Considered* and *Song Exploder* use the technology of podcasting to mix the genres of interviews and group discussions to enhance the experience of listening to music. The particular subset of podcasts that we are examining in this chapter is set apart from many others in distinct ways. All of the podcasts being considered in this category are first and foremost, non-fictional narratives. Jessica Abel, writing in *Out on the Wire*, could only best describe this subset of podcasts and radio programs as “radio journalism” (20). All of these
podcasts have roots in or directly practice journalism as part of their content, but have also adopted a narrative structure that is more commonly found in documentary or fiction.

This subset of podcasts warrants this specific attention for two primary reasons. Firstly, as detailed in the previous chapter, the “head” of Chris Anderson’s long tail model, when applied to blogging, podcasts, and many other online industries, consists of a small number of highly popular and successful projects/products as opposed to the long tail of mildly or rarely popular counterparts that exists. As this relates to podcasts, many programs that fall partly or wholly into the category of non-fictional narratives gravitate toward the head of the long tail. Finding accurate statistical data on iTunes podcasting charts can be difficult, as an internal algorithm is used to balance those podcasts that see a rapid rise in listenership against those who see consistently high downloads and subscriptions. According to a snapshot of iTunes podcast charts (see Table 3 next page) on March 1st, 2016, 28 of the top 100 podcasts are produced, broadcast, or distributed by public radio stations or organizations (Column A). If that window is expanded to podcasts created by public radio producers or networks associated with public radio distributors (Gimlet Media, PRX) that number raises to 35 (Column B). After the 100-podcast mark, the density of these public radio shows begins to drop off significantly, indicating that there is a high concentration of public radio and public radio-inspired podcasts toward the head of Anderson’s long tail model. A body of podcasts that makes up such a significant portion of the top podcasts is worthy of further investigation and analysis.
Table 3: Podcasts that fall under category of “public radio distributed” or “public radio inspired” (Source: iTunes Podcast Charts, March 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Podcast</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Serial</td>
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<td>Stuff You Should Know</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Pardon My Take</td>
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<td>TED Radio Hour</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Myths and Legends</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>NPR Politics Podcast</td>
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<tr>
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<td>The Way I Heard It with Mike Rowe</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Radiolab</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>The Joe Rogan Experience</td>
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<td>Stuff You Missed in History Class</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Wait Wait... Don’t Tell Me!</td>
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<td>On the Media</td>
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<td>Dan Carlin’s Hardcore History</td>
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<td>The Nerdist</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Criminal</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>The Moth Podcast</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Welcome to Night Vale</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>99% Invisible</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Hidden Brain</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>10% Happier with Dan Harris</td>
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<td>WTF with Marc Maron Podcast</td>
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<td>Guys We F****d</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>The Dave Ramsey Show</td>
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<td>Lore</td>
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<td>Real Time with Bill Maher</td>
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<td>Presidential</td>
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<td>How To Do Everything</td>
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<td>Joel Osteen Podcast</td>
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<td>The Doug Stanhope Shotclog Podcast</td>
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<td>Ku and the Gang Podcast</td>
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<td>The Axe Files with David Axelrod</td>
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<td>Anna Faris Is Unqualified</td>
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<td>NBC Meet the Press (audio)</td>
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<td>The Black Tapes</td>
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<td>On Being</td>
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<td>Undisclosed: The State Vs. Adnan Syed</td>
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<td>Grammar Girl</td>
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<td>Stuff Mom Never Told You</td>
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<td>Pop Culture Happy Hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Death, Sex &amp; Money</td>
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<td>All Songs Considered</td>
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<td>Happier with Gretchen Rubin</td>
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<td>The Adam Carolla Show</td>
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<td>73</td>
<td>the memory palace</td>
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<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Another Round</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>Science Friday</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td>Common Sense with Dan Carlin</td>
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<td>77</td>
<td>Savage Lovecast</td>
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<td>78</td>
<td>TEDTalks (video)</td>
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<td>The Fighter &amp; The Kid</td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>Slate’s Political Gabfest</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>Comedy Bang Bang: The Podcast</td>
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<td>Mystery Show</td>
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<td>Strangers</td>
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<td>KFC Radio</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>StartUp Podcast</td>
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<td>86</td>
<td>Better Call Saul Insider Podcast</td>
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<td>StoryCorps</td>
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<td>88</td>
<td>PTI</td>
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<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>The New Yorker Radio Hour</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>Here’s The Thing with Alec Baldwin</td>
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<td>91</td>
<td>The Art of Charm</td>
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<td>The Art of Manliness</td>
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<tr>
<td>93</td>
<td>You Must Remember This</td>
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<td>Surprisingly Awesome</td>
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<td>Meditation Oasis</td>
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<td>You Made It Weird with Pete Holmes</td>
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<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>Dear Sugar Radio</td>
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<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>The New Yorker: Politics and More</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>99</td>
<td>The School of Greatness with Lewis Howes</td>
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<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>HBR IdeaCast</td>
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Totals: 28 35
The second reason for this is analysis is that not much academic attention has been paid to the content of modern podcasts, let alone this specific set of podcasts. By further analyzing the content of these shows, we can provide crucial context toward understanding their common elements and how they contribute to the success of each individual show.

**Criteria for Analysis**

If we pose the question “What elements of these podcasts set them apart, and to what degree are they employed?” we will need to develop a system of measure with which to analyze and compare different cases. However, unlike many areas of media, podcasting poses some unique challenges. As has been mentioned previously in this thesis, the academic literature behind podcasting, especially compared to its broadcast and digital counterparts, is sparse even within the larger context of radio-related research (Bottomley 181). Due to its relative youth as a subset of media, and the subsequently small pool of examples, a true qualitative analysis of becomes difficult, as this process usually involves coding for a sizable set of data across a large sample size. In such situations, it is not uncommon for categorization to be set first by identifying common aspects that could be considered as coding categories. In some cases, these definitions can provide the empirical backing for coding decisions (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 263). Taking this approach sometimes presents a significant challenge to the trustworthiness of the classification, but may prove effective if the theoretical justification proves strong enough. The effect of using pre-defined criteria to define general concepts is to create consistent silos into which certain aspects of
these podcasts can be rated. Those rated most consistently high among this sample of shows should prove to be most representative of the traditions set out by public radio standards and podcast innovation.

The following four criteria represent different elements that are commonly found in these narrative podcasts, in varying amounts. These criteria will be explained below, providing a theoretical justification for their inclusion. These theoretical explanations will be crucial to full explaining why these particular aspects are being specified, and their particular impact. Coding using a rating scale from 1 to 5, we will identify the extent to which each element is present in each individual podcast, and provide examples to back up those assertions.

1. **Reliance on Authoritative Narrative Voice**

The vast majority of these story-driven podcasts we are examining feature an individual or group of narrator(s), openly represented the host of a given podcast. Their usual role is contextual; they provide a consistent voice for the podcast, whether it be for the entirety of the program, or as an interstitial voice that ties together the external sound and voices that create a larger story. However, the degree to which podcasts rely on this narrator to be the main driver of the narrative varies from program to program. In most traditional radio broadcasts, particularly on public radio, hosts primarily act as a steward and a voice of authority that ties together a collection of segments, usually populated by voices of interviewees and reports from journalists (Fulton 123). However, when it comes to podcasts, in many cases, the style and format of shows can very different than traditional news broadcasts. The role of a podcast
host can vary between being the reliable narrator, who only appears to introduce or explain other segments of the podcast, to being an editorial or discussion-based guide that is woven in and out of the dialogue being discussed. In many podcasts and radio programs, it is not at all uncommon for the reporters or hosts to involve themselves in the stories that they are reporting. This is an ethical debate that has continued to grow more contentious as media structures change, beginning to include post-modern narrative forms (Singer, 94). In these narrative podcasts, the role of the host is an ever-moving target, so it is vital to compare and contrast how podcasts in this subset are handling this trend, and which individual shows are innovating in this way. These podcasts will be assessed on this criterion anywhere from one, indicating that the podcast does not rely or relies very little on an authoritative host who is not involved in the story at hand, to five, indicating that the host provides all or a vast majority of the narrative voice and is participatory in the narrative. The ultimate effect here is to measure how present and influential the narrative voice is as a guide within a given podcast. Narrative voice, either scripted or non-scripted, is a core concept that drives all storytelling, and strong narrative voice is an indication of the focus so common in highly produced podcasts.

2. Use of Ambient Sound/Music

Most narrative podcasts use at least some element of sound or music to create context and atmosphere for the given story being told. The use of non-vocal sound is very purposeful in most every podcast, used only when planned. Sound and music are possibly the most carefully edited and tracked element of narrative podcasts. They are
primarily used to emphasize or enhance a certain moment or section of the narrative. Jad Abumrad, who co-hosts and produces the podcast/radio show *Radiolab*, describes the use of music as a tool to emphasize, enhance, or frame particular segments or ideas. *Radiolab* often takes this one step further as uses sound as a storytelling device, almost a character unto itself (Biewen and Dilworth 46). As podcasts are primarily an audio medium, many shows in this subset of narrative podcasts use sound and music in ways that affect the narrative. Most of the research in the area of using sound as a narrative tool comes in the study of cinema and film, particularly in how the practice of using sound has evolved since the early days of cinema (Manolas & Pauletto 40) Many, if not most, podcast producers use both diegetic sound, sound that comes from a field recording and is part of an actuality, and non-diegetic sound, music or composed sound added into a recording, to establish either artificial or actual context for the story being told. Despite all belonging to this specific subset, narrative podcasts differ greatly in their reliance and use of music and sound. Music in this case is defined as pre-composed sound used for atmosphere-building and sound refers in sound effects or short pieces of non-music sound used within or instead of narration or interviews to create an aesthetic or emphasis certain words/phrases. Therefore, it is useful to track specifically to what degree certain shows use this technique to augment their narratives. Podcasts will be scored on this criterion anywhere from one, meaning the podcast uses no or almost no music in the content of the show, to five, meaning that music and/or sound is used throughout or as the main driver of narrative in the given podcast. Sound, in the context of any audio story or journalistic piece, is one of
the strongest and most pervasive tools that a produce can use to emphasize, frame, and draw attention to certain parts of a story. Used in certain ways, sound can become the central voice of the storytelling, directing the listener to fully engage in the story they are listening to in while experiencing very precisely planned emotions.

3. Variety of Voices

Most of the narrative podcasts we are examining feature some variety of voices that play a part in a narrative. The role of these voices play in the podcast can range from a first-person monologue to just a quick contextual aside for a larger concept. In many cases, the narrative structure of these podcasts often uses the subjects and interviewees of a story as “characters,” using their particular place in a planned narrative to serve a storytelling or thematic purpose (Fulton, 2005). This is a practice that is common throughout these narrative podcasts due to their often-long production process. When attempting to frame a sequence of confusing events or in-depth details, podcast producers often use these “characters” as ways of simplifying or translating difficult concepts, often combining the voices of the interviewee with expository narration to translate a complex concept. This is a useful storytelling tool, but also brings along ethical issues of fairness in representation (Abel 82). Podcasts that use a wide variety of voices often due so to provide a wide variety of perspectives on issues, especially those issues that are divisive, if only to work toward the journalistic ideal of balance, perhaps best laid out in Mitchell Charnley’s Reporting (1963). The use of multiple, or very few, voices also has an aesthetic effect on a given podcast. Some shows choose to use a singular narrator for a segment to emphasize the fact that it is a
personal, first-hand account. Others use a wide variety of voices that respond to one another to create a simulated conversation across separate interviews. All of these podcasts have an individual approach to introducing and attributing multiple voices and sources of information, but use of multiple voices to provide perspective is a common element among them. The podcasts we are analyzing will be scored on this criterion anywhere from one, showing that they use very few or singular voices to tell an individual story, to five, indicating that they use a wide variety of voices that are interwoven to contextualize a story. There are two key roles that a variety of voices play in a narrative podcast: first to create aesthetic difference, breaking the monotony of a single or couple of voices that substantiate narrative, but second to lend legitimacy and context to the narrative hosts of the shows.

4. Prevalence of Journalistic Technique

Since the onset of the Internet, there has been much discussion about what constitutes journalism and reporting in the digital age. The popularization of blogging in the early 2000s began to put a spotlight on the ethical responsibilities that reporters hold important to separate themselves from the average blogger. Today, this discussion has intensified with the rise of mainstream “infotainment.” When it comes to news media, and in particular the medium of audio, this conflict is often characterized as “hard” vs. “soft” news, with “hard” news focusing on fact-heavy subjects like politics and economics and “soft” news leaning toward more cultural and human interest stories (Fulton 23). Narrative podcasts, depending on the show, waver somewhere between these two generalized categories, even varying episode-to-
episode. Many podcasts and radio shows focus on producing “evergreen” stories, which are intentionally less topical and better suit the on-demand nature of many podcasts. In some cases, this approach of delivering facts in a story-like format begins to raise ethical issues of fairness and balance when portraying individuals or issues (Loviglio 72). Because of all of these factors, it is important to measure the level to which different podcasts rely on the traditional conventions of news reporting, as opposed to the conventions of storytelling. Podcasts scoring one in this category feature stories that show minimal elements of journalistic news reporting, resulting more in a more essayistic or theatrical podcast. On the other end of the spectrum, podcasts scoring five in this category employ many techniques of traditional news reporting and tell stories in a style more akin to a news report.

Taxonomy

The following taxonomy of 10 individual podcasts will use the above criteria to score each on their individual usage of the criteria as part of their production make-up. Scores will be assessed on a one-to-five scale on the basis of their relative usage in the 10 selected shows. This is a qualitative assessment, based on my observations of at least 20 of each show. It is not a statistically representative evaluation but a categorical-typological assessment. While one might debate its validity and reliability – instead, qualitative researchers usually talk about rigor and trustworthiness (Lincoln 1994) --, it is important to understand that the main benefit of this taxonomy is the comparison across the shows. Provided that my assessment was consistent across the shows, it will produce sufficiently reliable and valid relative rankings that allow for
comparison (see e.g. Winter 2000). Therefore, individual scores will not correlate to specific instances of usage within the podcasts. However, each case study will include examples of individual podcasts and/or broadcasts that provide evidence of the given criteria’s usage. Again, the scores generated by this taxonomy are meant to indicate the extent to which each program uses all of the production tools available them to produce innovative and impactful radio documentary.

**Table 4:** A Select Taxonomy of Narrative Podcasts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Podcasts</th>
<th>Reliance on Narrative Voice</th>
<th>Use of Sound/Music</th>
<th>Variety of External Voices</th>
<th>Prevalence of Journalistic Techniques</th>
<th>Total:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>99% Invisible</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freakonomics Radio</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisibilia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery Show</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planet Money</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radiolab</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reply All</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serial</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snap Judgment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Case-By-Case Analysis**

**99% Invisible**

*99% Invisible* is a podcast about architecture, infrastructure, and human design, produced by Roman Mars in partnership
with KALW in San Francisco, California. It is also one of the founding podcasts in PRX’s Radiotopia podcast network. The podcast tells details the history of conceptualizing and designing objects and structures that many people may take for granted every day. The podcast has retold the stories of inventions like the water fountain, the design of state and city flags, and the construction of buildings like Penn Station in New York City. Roman Mars host and narrates every episode of 99% Invisible, sometimes being joined by one of the shows associate producers (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 4). The show is highly scripted, but relies heavily on both interviews and archival recordings to provide first-person perspective on the history behind each episode’s subject matter (Variety of External Voices: 3). Mars mixes every episode of the podcast and often uses ambient music with permission from sometimes-obscure electronic artists. While this music does not provide a huge amount of meaning to the content of the narrative, Mars curates the music, often sharing them in the form of playlists on social media (Use of Sound/Music: 3). Finally, the show is heavily reported, showing attention to detail with regard to sourcing and attribution, especially when it comes to the use of archival materials. That said, most episodes of the podcast are told as linear narratives, such as one award-winning episode, Structural Integrity, which tells the story behind how the Citi-Corp center in Manhattan could have easily toppled under certain weather conditions. This episode purposefully withholds information throughout its telling and continually folds back new layers of information to show a different, smaller story within the larger history of the Citi-Corp building (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 3).
Total Score: 12. *99% Percent Invisible* is very much a middle of the road podcast without a whole lot of innovation, especially with regard to the show’s structure. Its production quality, while not necessarily unique, is consistently high and the podcast remains popular.

**Criminal**

*Criminal* is a podcast that tells the true story behind crimes and their investigations. It is produced primarily by Phoebe Judge, out of the studios of WUNC in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. With each episode, Judge interviews victims, friends and family of victims, and historians who have had intimate interactions with crimes ranging from unsolved murders to police brutality. Judge tells the story of these crimes, in most episodes, as a linear narrative with her own voice and the voice of her interviews as the only other voices. She tightly controls the pace of each episode, usually explaining the circumstances of the crime in questions before introducing characters who help contextualize the crime (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 3). However, there are usually no more than 2 or 3 external voices in each podcast (Variety of External Voices: 3). In the episode 695BGK, she uses the testimony of two Texas police officers that shot an unarmed African American man at close range to first set up the context of the story, then contrasts that account with the account of the family of the man who was shot, but survived. Judge uses music sparingly throughout each episode of the podcast, often deferring to her interview subjects to tell the story for themselves without the backing of music (Use of Sound/Music: 1). That is a
testament to how tightly *Criminal* is reported, often going out of its way to identify or attribute information that could sometimes take the listener out of the story. However, each episode is told as a linear narrative, much like other Radiotopia podcasts (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 4). **Total Score: 11.** Much like *99% Invisible*, *Criminal* is a middle-of-the-road show, without much inherent innovation but highly consistent quality.

**Freakonomics Radio**

Freakonomics Radio is a podcast about the in-depth background of social economics produced by author Stephen Dubner and WNYC in New York City. The podcast began as a spin-off of the popular book series that Dubner co-authored with University of Chicago Professor Steven Levitt. Each episode of the podcast tackles a specific topic or question in social economics, or features an in-depth interview with an influential figure. The podcast is highly scripted, with Dubner serving as the core driver of each episode. He often plays devil advocate against both his interviewees and against himself, bringing up contrary viewpoints to challenge assumptions about the issue at hand (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 3). Some of the most impactful episodes are those on education. The episode *How to Fix A Broken High Schooler, in Four Easy Steps* introduces the case study of an intervention program in a Toronto housing project, introducing and subsequently challenging the program’s four steps for improving the lives of troubled students. Music peppers each episode, but does not serve a significant purpose other than framing or transitioning
between sections (Use of Sound/Music: 1). The podcast features a wide variety of voices, partly due to each episode’s length and in-depth nature. These external voices usually consist of experts, professors and analysts, with differing viewpoints on problems (Variety of External Voices: 1). As the podcast tackles broad topics and in-depth questions, episodes are largely non-linear, choosing to investigate different aspects of a complex problem rather than fit those problems into a narrative storyline. Dubner is an accomplished interviewer, and the tightly produced nature of the show indicates the high level of journalistic technique used in its creation (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 4). **Total Score: 10.** *Freakonomics Radio* is a strong podcast, especially since it covers such dense economic topics. However, for the same reason, it also sounds very much like a traditional pubic radio program, especially considering the relatively dense tone and story structure. The program is solid, but does not bring a sizable amount of innovation to the table.

**Invisibilia**

*Invisibilia* is an in-house NPR podcast that launched with one season in February 2015. Co-hosted and produced by Alix Spiegel and Lulu Miller, the show focuses on forces like thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that govern human behavior. Each of the seven episodes that have been produced feature a key story, usually using an individual person as a case study to explore a larger phenomenon. The episode *How To Become Batman* tells the story of blind man who has taught himself to echolocate like a bat, improving his spatial awareness to the point that he can hike over rough
terrain and ride a bicycle. The podcast uses his story to dive into the history of how society treats blind people and explores the idea that blindness is largely a social construct. The show is highly produced, using both artificial and diegetic sounds and music to emphasize different segments of the narrative and frame questions and turns in the story (Use of Sound/Music: 5). Each episode contains a wide variety of voices, between the central characters of stories and experts who help explain larger concepts (Variety of External Voices: 3). Miller and Spiegel are omnipresent throughout the podcast, but are at times dominated by the show’s production and the individuals interviewed (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 3). Each episode is loosely structured as an open-minded narrative but adheres to journalistic technique, especially with regard to explaining complex topics in psychology and sociology (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 3). Total Score: 14. Invisibilia is a strong podcast that uses an abnormal structure and high amount of sound editing to create an original aesthetic. This highly produced sound compliments the broad nature of the stories it covers. The podcast does also borrow some of the stiffness in reporting and storytelling present in NPR podcasts and radio shows, but still manages to break the mold in other ways.

**Mystery Show**

Mystery Show is a podcast that attempts to find the solutions to obscure, quirky mysteries that cannot be solved with a simple Internet search. Hosted and produced by Starlee Kine for Gimlet media, Mystery Show is a semi-serious investigation into real mysteries that come from Kine’s friends and from the Internet
community. Each episode is largely reliant on Kine’s scripting, where she usually tackles various aspects of a mystery by making calls, investigating leads, and performing interviews. She periodically checks back in the individual who posed the mystery to her, before, in most cases, tracking down the solution to each mystery.

There is a fair amount of music production in the show, primarily used to frame Starlee’s literary-style scripting (Use of Sound/Music: 2). Mystery Show clearly employs seriously journalistic techniques, with Kine digging deep to find sources who have some degree of knowledge about the solution to the mystery she is tackling.

Throughout the show, Kine adopts a pseudo-serious alter-ego as an investigator, instead of a journalist or a podcaster (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 5). An example of this semi-serious presentation is that some of her research and interviewing is often presented solely as humorous and touching asides. In Britney, while she is attempting to purchase VIP tickets to a Britney Spears concert, she spends several minutes on the phone with a Ticketmaster employee talking about his life, goals, and role models (Variety of External Voices: 3). Mystery Show employs serious journalistic techniques to tell stories that are largely non-journalistic, but captivating all the same (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 1). **Total Score: 11.** Mystery Show is a very unique podcast to fall into this category. While being totally non-fictional and journalistic in its structure, so much of the programs scripting and internal narrative recalls something more vague and fictional. In some cases, this makes Mystery Show entirely original and compelling. Other times, these original aspects detract from the overall unique podcast.
**Planet Money**

Planet Money began as a project of NPR News focused on telling story about how larger economics or business trends affect the average individual. This NPR podcast began as continuation of the reporting found in the *This American Life* episode “The Giant Pool of Money,” in which reporters Adam Davidson and Alex Blumberg broke down exactly what mistakes and accidents caused the 2008 US financial crisis. Since 2008, the program has tackled many economic and financial issues, small and large, hoping to inform listeners of larger economic trends. Planet Money, as a podcast, relies heavily on narrative voice. The show features a cycling panel of hosts, who use a strict, but partially improvised script to add levity and wit to understandably complex economic topics. This show relies heavily of these hosts to provide the expository context for complex subject, but primarily uses them as the transitions between interviewee voices to translate larger topics into understandable terms (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 2). The show emphasizes this translator nature through its somewhat unscripted hosting. However, this format does not change much between episodes (Variety of External Voices: 1). The only music present in this podcast serves as introductory or expository cues, usually also featuring the sponsorship or advertising for the episode (Use of Sound/Music: 1). The variety of voices in each show is entirely reliant upon the individuals interviewed for the show. For Planet Money, these guests are consistently experts in the area of business, trade, or economics. The most redeeming aspect that breaks *Planet Money* out of its
relatively stagnant shell is the quality and consistency of its reporting. The hosts and producers of the podcast are some of the most knowledgeable individuals when it comes to this area of economics reporting, and they use common journalistic structuring and contextualization skills to communicate very complicated topics (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 5). **Total Score: 9.** *Planet Money* does what few other podcasts outside of NPR could do, which is present major trends in business, trade, and economics as understandable evergreen stories. However, their stagnant style of pacing, narrative, and production value too often detract from their successes with the podcast.

**Radiolab**

*Radiolab*, produced and distributed by WNYC, focuses on in-depth explanation of the scientific and social history and implications of often-unknown stories. Hosts Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich have pioneered a unique method of scripting and recording a podcast. They invite producers, both from their own staff and the marketplace at large, into the studio to tell their stories, answer questions, and brainstorm. However, unlike many shows, these unscripted studio sessions end up becoming part of the show itself, emphasizing a sense of curiosity toward the unknown (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 3). As the radio show has adopted podcasting as its primary platform, it has begun to experiment with length and structure as well, often breaking out of its pre-determined 1-hour running time for broadcast. The most recognizable aspect of *Radiolab* is its heavy use of sound editing and music. Jad
Abumrad is a former theatrical music producer, and he employs his varied talents by incorporating sound and composition deep into the narrative of stories. It particularly serves to emulate the emotional and sensational effects of audio stories, creating an aesthetic that is absent from many other podcasts and radio programs (Use of Sound/Music: 5). One episode in particular, *Space*, uses cosmic arrangements to simulate the wonder of space exploration set over an interview with Carl Sagans first wife Ann Druyan. The musical arrangement, mixed with intimacy of the interview, create something very different than the two elements separated from one another. Similarly, *Radiolab* often uses a mish-mash of its interview subjects and their voices to create patterns of call and response that create a single narrative voice (Variety of External Voices: 5). The journalism of the podcast is solid, but it also comes to second to its ultimate production, which is less about reporting and more about storytelling and curiosity. In recent years, *Radiolab* has begun to tackle more specific news events and evolving stories, but never abandoned their big picture approach to reporting and storytelling (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 3). **Total Score: 16.** *Radiolab* is a program that pioneered a new way of telling stories, relying heavily on production and a loose take on program structure to create an innovative and original aesthetic for radio documentary.

**Reply All**

*Reply All* is a podcast exploring hidden stories that come from unexpected places on the Internet. This Gimlet Media podcast is hosted by PJ Vogt and Alex Goldman, the pair who
previously headed up WNYC TL;DR podcast. Most episodes of Reply All feature a headline story, produced either by Vogt, Goldman, or one of their associate producers like Sruthi Pinnamaneni, which focuses on the interactions that people have with various aspects of the Internet. These stories range from the complicated stories behind the laws that regulate the Internet to the humorous history of pop-up advertisements on websites. One episode, *DMV Nation* focuses on the terrible inefficiency of the federal government when it comes to design technology and websites, especially in light of the rocky launch of the Affordable Care Act’s Healthcare.gov insurance service. Vogt and Goldman are extremely present as the guiding voices in all of their stories, using a casual delivery style and casual tone (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 4). A partnership with electronic artist Breakmaster Cylinder allows the show to continually use new music, though it is not integral or highly woven into the narrative of the stories (Use of Sound/Music: 3). *Reply All* succeeds in striking a strong balance between narration and external voices of interviews (Variety of External Voices: 3). Each story is well produced and reported, but also strongly leans into a narrative format for the purposes of storytelling (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 3). **Total Score: 13.** While this middle-of-the-road score might seem to reflect on *Reply All* poorly, it is evidence that the show consistently delivers engaging storytelling and reporting, while rarely sacrificing quality and avoiding stagnation. *Reply All* is, at the very least, a podcast that always sounds fresh while delivers information and entertainment.
Serial is the wildly popular spin-off of This American Life that explores a true story, week by week. The first season of the podcast saw producer Sarah Koenig exploring the conviction of Baltimore high school student Adnan Syed for the 1999 murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Mihn Li. Since the first season, Serial has become a mainstream phenomenon, spawning multiple other analysis podcasts, Internet communities and spoofs. Sarah Koenig is the most identifiable voice of Serial, guiding the listener through the complicated details of the case at hand. The narrative direction in the podcast is dominating as Koenig often over-explains situations and speculates as to the meaning of circumstances and evidence (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 5). There are many interviews in Serial, and the overall cast of characters is large, especially thanks to police recordings and interviews with former friends of Syed, but they are not the central figure. Second only to Koenig is her recorded phone calls with Syed, which pepper throughout the entire podcast (Variety of External Voices: 3). Serial, despite its recognizable theme music, is not at all heavy on the use of music or any sounds to weave in and out of the story, and the music’s use is similar to that of its mother show, This American Life (Use of Sound/Music: 2). The practice of journalism is present through the entirety of the podcast, which is part of the cause of some of the critique the series has encountered. Some have made ethical criticisms of the podcast on the basis of its presentation as a journalistic endeavor being not always reflected in the reporting itself. This is a criticism common pointed toward “true crime” reporting
(Levin, “Serial Wasn’t a Satisfying Story”). That said, because the podcast does not follow a strict chronological order, many of the reporting techniques become more evident and important to the podcast than a pre-composed narrative would be (Prevalence of Journalistic Technique: 4). **Total Score: 14.** While *Serial*’s effect on the overall podcasting revolution may be overstated, it is important to recognize that *Serial* follows and innovates on the tradition of strong radio documentary that came out of public radio and, in this specific case, *This American Life*. By breaking apart the traditional structure of a documentary and telling a single story week by week, *Serial* can and should be credited with creating a unique and engrossing podcast worthy of its reputation.

**Snap Judgment**

*Snap Judgment* is a WNYC-produced and NPR-distributed podcast and radio show about experimental storytelling of real stories. Much like *This American Life*, each episode is centered on a specific theme and is made up of both first-person stories and reported pieces. Hosted by Glynn Washington, the show bills itself as an edgier and more modern alternative to the style of storytelling found in *This American Life*, as well as clearinghouse for up-and-coming radio talent Washington is a dominating host, but primarily serves as the steward for the pieces produced for the radio show. Washington has a delivery style and tone that is rhythmic and poetic, and it lends to the podcast, especially in episodes like *High and Mighty*, which ends with a dramatic retelling of the story of Job (Reliance on Narrative Voice: 2). It often features
a wider and more impressionistic set of voices that \textit{TAL}, but still maintains some of that show’s strict broadcast clock-inspired structure (Variety of External Voices: 2). Where this podcast breaks away from \textit{TAL} is in the production department, where bass lines and rhythms move throughout almost every story and consistently underlay Washington’s poetic delivery style (Use of Sound/Music: 3). The music drives the storytelling to experiment in surprising ways, which sets \textit{Snap Judgment} apart from other podcasts and radio shows. However, it is a style that takes away from the journalistic elements that similar podcasts, especially NPR-distributed podcasts, have in spades (Reliance on Journalistic Technique: 2). \textbf{Total Score: 9.} \textit{Snap Judgment} is a worthy iteration on the structure and success of much of radio documentary. It takes this familiar sound and adds a new aesthetic style, one that is in some cases younger and more exciting than other radio programs. However, it is still tied down by many of the conventions found in programs like \textit{This American Life}.

\textbf{Reflection}

What these case studies and criteria are meant to illustrate is the variations on a similar theme within each of these successful podcasts. That said, we can draw very meaningful conclusions from the results. These shows in particular are examples of some of the premier nonfiction audio storytelling programs offered through podcasts. While none of the programs are overwhelmingly similar, they rely exist within similar networks of programming, namely podcasting companies and public radio organizations, that emphasize a high standard of production. The criteria detailed above are meant to reflect several key aspects that make up that overall standard of
production. The podcasts detailed above use these standards of production as tools to offer a familiar kernel of strong audio storytelling, with origins in public radio documentary, but packaged in formats and structures that offer innovative ways of delivering those stories.

That is not say this brief taxonomy is an all-encompassing representation of the programs being produced by high-end public radio institutions and podcast networks. Not only do we have to keep in mind the above discussed limitations of the qualitative assessment, we also need to remember that there are many shows that fit roughly into this same category of public radio-inspired non-fiction audio podcasts. They either do not strive for this level of production quality or fail to meet these high standards. This taxonomy also does not mean that this level of production quality is necessary, but rather that it is a recognizable aspect of the successful podcasts in this particular category. Producing these highly edited journalistic programs can be exponentially more expensive and time-consuming than other podcasts. But, as Alex Blumberg stated in his comments about Gimlet Media, in some cases it might make sense to make that larger investment. The end result can be a journalistic product that is both particularly informative and highly entertaining.

The ideals of perfect information and perfect entertainment might never fully coincide, but there are many people working to make this ideal of information storytelling a reality. They take true stories, strong narration, compelling interviews with compelling people, and a high level of production quality to create podcasts that are altogether similar in quality but wholly unique in content. Similarly, it is this core
group of podcasting tools that inspires new producers and journalists to create their own shows. They can only do that because it increasingly easy to get the proper equipment and begin to experiment with new types of content. “Beautiful radio is being produced in the least likely of places” (Abel 10). And it is the message that many ring through here, in podcasting.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Honestly, I feel like we’re in a bubble right now. It will have to burst. [Podcasts are] so popular because people are just discovering them and it’s sort of cool and new still, so that’s part of it. And some of the individual shows are popular just because they’re great shows on their own merit... I feel like the reason people like it is the same reason we on the staff like the stories. It’s just fun to lose yourself in a story and what to find out what’s going to happen and the feelings that go along with it” – Ira Glass (Souza)

I follow along with this logic, but I have also come believe that Glass’ argument is more complex than it initially sounds. Glass describes a period in time in which the benefits of podcasting are only temporary. He sees the potential of the medium as limited. I believe it is safe to say that such a belief is reductionist in light of the ongoing changes in this digital listening revolution. Listeners are flocking to podcasting at an unprecedented level, signaling a significant change in how mobile digital listening has affected behaviors and attitudes around audio as a medium. I also believe Glass works diligently to appear humble in light of the success of This American Life and understates the effects of This American Life and the successful shows for which it has served as inspiration. The impact that his professional work has had on radio documentary is only emphasized by the current popularization of podcasts.
At the 2016 South by Southwest conference, Glass described and explained certain podcasts. He described *Reply All*, from Gimlet Media, as one of the podcasts that he is most proud that he did not create. This is a statement of admiration, as Alex Blumberg recently departed *This American Life* to start his own podcasting company. Blumberg’s company, Gimlet Media, has made a name for itself as a successful start-up business, complete with venture capital financing and a growing staff. What is more impressive, however, is that this has been accomplished almost solely by producing quality non-fiction stories. Glass is celebrating these successes. These podcasts are not simply thought of in terms of how long these stories can be or how listeners consume them; Stories and programs are now being developed now for the sole purpose of podcasting. In the case of these public radio producers, they have experienced how vibrant and impressive this type of audio can be.

Podcasting and digital radio represent a phase that is currently enjoying the fruits of renewed interest in audio as a medium. In this thesis we have explored how the US public radio system has been developed since its official founding in the 1970s, and the cultural implications of the country adopting a central fixture of public broadcast. We have also seen that it is especially important to understand public radio and podcast through the lens of modern listening habits and technology. The technology that serves as a backbone for podcasting stands to play a pivotal role in the ongoing digital audio revolution. People are now listening to a multitude of podcasts and radio shows that are utilizing the advantages of digital production and Internet distribution to create a new radio ecosystem. This is an environment that is offering
new life to the types of high-quality stories found, most commonly, in US Public Radio.

Key Research Findings

• The commonplace definition of radio has broadened to include digital listening services such as streaming and podcasting.

The audiences today that are most dedicated listening to and producing “radio” are generally not referring to broadcast FM radio. Instead, they are often referring to the myriad of digital services that deliver music or spoken word audio, either constantly streaming or via on-demand access. People refer to services like Spotify, iTunes podcasts, and Google Play podcasts as “radio” as often as they would their favorite FM station. That is not to say FM radio listening has altogether evaporated. On the contrary, there remains a core audience of listeners who will continue to tune into FM stations. But many of them also use streaming services, the terrestrial radio-only audience is getting older, and the costs of broadcasting are beginning to outweigh revenues. This shift also indicates that consumers’ priorities have changed in relation to what they want from an audio listening service. Audiences are responding to the inherent benefits that digital listening platforms bring. That leads to our next key finding.

• The rise of interest in podcast production and consumption is a direct response to podcasting’s differences from traditional broadcast radio.

When comparing podcasts to traditional radio, there are basic differences in the ways that the two media handle audio. A la carte digital podcasts break down many of the
inherent limitations that are present throughout broadcast audio. There is primarily the issue of linearity, in which terrestrial radio is constantly flowing and unable to be temporarily interrupted, rewound, or edited. It is a very time-bound method of handling audio, and the practical product of that linearity is the broadcast clock.

Podcasts break with this linearity in two ways: Firstly podcasts are no longer competing with each other across broadcast stations for pre-determined time slots, allowing the audience to determine when, where, and how to listen to them. Secondly, podcasts are allowed to be whatever length or format appropriate for their content. Additionally, the tools of production and mass distribution for podcasts are much cheaper and easier to acquire than the tools to broadcast a radio signal of any significant strength. The barrier to entry is much less restrictive for podcasting when compared to radio, and the benefits are being celebrated by consumers.

- **Podcasting provides more opportunity to independent radio producers than ever before, but the majority of growth and attention will continue to be found at podcasting companies, podcasting collectives, and public radio stations/institutions.**

Because entry into the podcasting ecosystem is easy, there is massive opportunity for individual or small teams of aspiring radio producers to create podcasts that attract a sizable, if only niche, audience. This has allowed hobbyists to create programs that generate revenue through advertising and sponsorships, often on by promoting themselves on social media. In addition, entrepreneurial podcasting has led to the creation of businesses that offer services like content hosting, easy RSS feed creation,
and podcast-specific advertising. Despite all of this, the majority of widespread, barrier-breaking successes in podcasting come from networks, institutions, and groups of radio-trained professionals or well-known performers. Some of these institutions already have backgrounds in audio production, such as public radio member stations like WNYC and institutions like NPR. Others are born almost solely of podcasts, with collectives like Panoply and Earwolf, who have little or no connection to broadcast radio, gaining prominence. These programs offer institutional and technical support with things such as back-end business management, advertising, and high-end production facilities that allow the producers of podcasts to focus purely on the creative aspects of production. This is why podcasts backed by broadcast institutions or run by professionals from the industry make up the majority of the long tail’s head, as discussed in the third chapter.

• **Some of the most successful podcasts in terms of funding and listenership are direct adaptations of public radio programming traditions.**

A major reason why some of these podcasts are so successful is that they are inspired by a tradition of high-quality production that is either directly or indirectly inherited from public radio programs and their producers. This thesis’s analysis of individual podcasts and the reasons for their success demonstrate that there are certain common elements shared among these podcasts. The standards of high-quality production, as well as in-depth reporting and editing, are a direct result of public radio’s history in refining a century-old tradition of documentary radio journalism. By innovating upon these common elements in different ways, these popular podcasts have contributed to
this condition and benefited from their success. Furthermore, the connections that the producers of these podcasts have to their predecessors and former home institutions have propelled not only their individual careers but also helped market their content as following from a public radio tradition. In short, the public radio tradition lends a “seal of authenticity” to the producers and podcasts that uphold it.

**Key Research Challenges**

- **The pace of research and growth in the podcasting industry often outpaces academic research into podcasting as a media form.**

The challenge in researching a topic that is constantly changing is that it requires a higher amount of flexibility in order to draw substantial conclusions. This applies to topics in all sectors of research, not just that on media or podcasting specifically. During the course of creating this thesis, several studies, academic journals, and news articles were published that extensively covered either podcasting or continuing trends in digital audio consumption. In some of those cases, it required large changes in research direction and challenges to previously held assumptions and findings. However, in other cases, these new academic contributions lend more support to the arguments laid out in this thesis. So far, this has already been an area of sparse research. This topic continues to be an area of major attention, and more academic work will be conducted on the art and business of podcasting. This thesis is just a first snapshot in that continuing story.

- **Statistics on podcast downloads and listening habits may be exaggerated or misleading due to measurement limitations.**
As discussed in the third chapter, podcasting, as an industry supported by third-party advertising, suffers from a lack of reliable data on user consumption. As a decentralized technology, podcasting relies on aggregators and “podcatchers” like Apple’s iTunes to measure downloads and podcast subscriptions. In turn, podcasters use these data to attract advertisers. However, these data may not be entirely representative of the actually engagement of the listening audience. The current data collection tools available to podcasts are unable to capture the length of listening session, whether the listener skipped over advertisements, or whether they really listened to the podcast at all. Some have accused the data of being exaggerated, to the point that it offers podcast producers no incentive to seek more accurate numbers. This poses a significant challenge for research, as accurate data may be necessary for accurate conclusions to be drawn about audience growth.

- **Despite its rapid growth, podcasting remains a very niche medium in terms of revenue when it comes to the wider media market.**

While this thesis has made a concentrated effort to examine podcasting within a specific context of audio media and radio, it still makes up just a small percentage of the overall media market, particularly in terms of advertising revenue. The revenue generated by the entirety of podcasting in no way rivals that of other major media markets, including traditional broadcast radio. Combined with the challenge mentioned above, about a lack of data, research on podcasting may run the risk of exaggerating its actual impact on media markets and advertising markets, which in turn may increase the risk of the bubble bursting. Even though we can clearly see
trends showing digital listening increases while broadcast listening decreases, the extent of growth as it relates to podcasting may be overstated.

**Reflections and Implications**

Through the original research and analysis found in this thesis, we have examined the contextual history of public radio and podcasting’s background in order to establish a clear line of cause and effect. Thus, we have illustrated the ways in which the US public radio system matured as business at about the same time when the Internet rose to significant prominence. This allowed established public radio entities like NPR as well as their producers to develop new and robust networks and systems around digital content. Podcasting, in particular, would allow audio content to work dynamically in ways that differed from traditional broadcast. In many cases, these productions adopted the reporting and storytelling styles that were already established on public radio. Furthermore, the inherent differences between podcasting and traditional radio allowed for major innovations in the public radio format, while maintaining the core concepts of high-quality production and storytelling.

The findings in the third chapter provide the main theoretical and empirical background for the analysis in this thesis. The purpose of this chapter was to illustrate how the resurgence of podcasting as a primary driver in the ongoing digital audio revolution is the result of a confluence of many factors. Here we examined how the modern understanding of radio and listening have changed so drastically in just a few years. That coupled with strategic changes in the “podcatching” ecosystem, created an environment of production that was so susceptible and amenable for a wave of major
podcast to break into mainstream consumption. The prime example is the wildly successful podcast *Serial*, which triggered a massive wave of attention on podcasts and the important, well-researched stories that they offer. When average listeners realized that accessing these engrossing in-depth stories was as simple as opening an application on their smartphone, they began listening, sharing, and recreating content that would propel podcasting into the mainstream. This chapter examined the specific context in which important documentary radio has been produced for podcasts, and why the contemporary media environment is fertile ground for it to flourish.

As podcasting has seen rapid growth within the past several years, so it will continue as younger audiences search out accessible forms of digital audio content and encounter podcasting and services like it as viable alternatives. Growth within the past two years, in particular, indicates that podcasting will see continuing growth as both producers, investors, and advertisers begin to view the medium as important in the overall media market. However, growth may slow or level off in the future without outside intervention. In the section exploring the history of podcasting’s growth as compared to that of blogging in the early 2000s, we can track how early adoption by individuals seeking more open publishing platforms led to rapid growth in blogging. However, we can also glean how attention in blogging as a product of the Web 2.0 movement slowed and stalled, before eventually spinning off into several different types of publishing systems. This pattern may too prove applicable to podcasting, indicating that the medium of digital audio might need to reinvent and differentiate itself in the near future to prevent the bubble “bursting.”
The third chapter laid the groundwork for the important findings of the fourth chapter, where taxonomy of the top journalistic podcasts in the field showed that highly produced podcasts and meticulously reported stories represent the best that this new version of radio has to offer. By detailing the background of this original storytelling, we can now better understand the depth of the revolution taking place for podcasting and the reasons why it is focused around this one subsection of narrative non-fiction stories. Local producers first subverted the tradition that public radio began, in the form of public-focused reporting, in the mid 1990s. The success of programs like *This American Life* began to draw new attention to documentary radio. However, the power of this format would lie largely untapped until the Internet and digital culture advanced to a point at which it was ready for this particular type of media. When podcasting arrived, a new subversion began, and it answered audiences’ occasionally silent desire for strong audio storytelling. The Internet and podcasting became the new standard for listening to these stories. This chapter explored exactly what type of story lives so healthily in this large section of podcasting. It is a marriage of format and content that makes these stories and their production so powerful.

There is some reason for concern, however. The shelf life of modern digital radio and podcasting exists largely irrespective of the content of podcasts. The bubble that we discuss in podcasting does not refer to the specific quality of podcasts, but to the ever-increasing amount of development and advertising dollars being poured into the platform. This is a trend that has previously played out in online digital media such as web-blogging. Sponsorship and advertising in podcasts are growing fast, but Ira
Glass pointed out that this phenomenon could only last so long. Despite this fair warning, it is nonetheless important to take a snapshot of this pivotal moment in the way that we appreciate and consume audio.

That is what this thesis has attempted to analyze; detailing and describing the defining characteristics of modern podcasting and what really sets them apart from the vast sea of audio content being produced today. These elements of modern podcasting are of timeless value. They are perpetuated by their format, but they are not dependent upon it. That said, it is exciting to see renewed interest in this version of journalism and storytelling. Radio journalism is a form that will go through phases, podcasting being one of them. The audio medium is constantly changing and evolving, but this moment in its history should be examined and appreciated for what it is: a redefinition and reinvention of radio through the liberating and subversive power of podcasting.
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