

Podcasts, an Increasingly Effective Media Tool

Katherine Haines

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The importance of the world staying connected and up-to-date on current news and new information is only going to continue as technology improves and people look for new sources of education. As we see so many things shift online during the Covid-19 pandemic, it's only natural that news would continue to shift that way as well. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, podcasts were an alternate source of information that was becoming more and more popular. While the information distributed by podcasts and social media may not be as complete as news from stereotypical sources, they are much more effective because they are more accessible, better at capturing the audience's attention, and can be used to educate people on important issues or start a conversation.

Traditional news sources require viewers to have a television connection and some sort of cable access, or a desktop or laptop computer, as many website-based news sources are not compatible with mobile devices. Local news stations also usually don't post all of their content and broadcasts on their websites, only the highlights or more popular pieces. Some news sources even require their audience to pay a subscription fee (for example: *The New York Times*, and local papers like *The Centre Daily Times*). Katerina Matsa wrote in 2018 that, only 50% of US adults got their news from televised sources, and that number has been declining per year. Local television has suffered the most loss, but still has higher numbers of regular viewers (Matsa). Unless you are going to watch the news while you commute, then cable or visual news sources are not compatible with a lifestyle that is more on-the-go. Nicole Martin goes as far as to say that online news sources have surpassed traditional news saying, "Social media has become the main source of news online with more than 2.4 billion internet users, nearly 64.5 percent receive breaking news from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram instead of traditional media."

In response to peoples' desire for information in easier to access forms, podcasts are often recorded audio news that can be taken on the go through your phone and played in your car. They can even be downloaded before you leave your home, office, or in an area of free internet, to be listened to later. Even better, many podcasts don't have advertisements, or only have a few seconds of advertisements compared to many minutes of commercials on a television broadcast. Podcasts don't require a cable connection, subscription fee, or even a set time that you need to watch them. For people who don't have access to internet, they can still download podcasts off of public internet, and then can listen to multiple ones in a row, making podcasts much more accessible. Mollett et al. state that the increasing ubiquity of smartphones has been the biggest encouragement for podcasts, as they allow podcasts to be more portable and accessible, and now to be an increasing feature in car trips. This ease and accessibility of podcasts is allowing podcasts and social media to surpass television as a news source.

There is also increasing support for the fact that younger and more informed generations are turning away from television as their main news source. Matsa wrote that in 2018, only 8% of adults ages 18-29 got their news from network television, but that number increases to 49% with people 65 and older. Matsa also claims that there is a correlation between education and income and the consumption of local and network TV. For adults who have completed college, 26% get their news from local television, while 21% consume network television, compared to 47% and 31% of those who have only completed high school. This suggests that podcasts and social media will only continue to gain in popularity as new generations are beginning to use them instead of traditional televised news options.

Fans of traditional news wonder how podcasts make money if they don't host multiple long advertisements, and how they don't distract people during their commute. Many podcasts are funded from host organizations that already have advertisements in their main content. For example, the podcast *Overheard at National Geographic*, has only a few very short

advertisements, but they are affiliated with National Geographic, which has plenty of advertisements on their television programs, in their magazines, and also charge a subscription fee for many of those. Stepping away from big-name podcasts, many podcasts are put out by individuals or groups and so they don't need as much funding, especially since they are producing only an audio recording not an entire visual news report. With the ability for people to produce podcasts and other social media from home, without the use of an expensive production studio or even a large production team, podcasts and more accessible forms of news like social media are cheaper to produce, a stark contrast to the high production costs of televised news.

Podcasts aren't any more distracting than anything else that people do during their commute, or even in their daily lives in general. You might even say that podcasts keep commuters more alert in the fact that many people use them to stay awake while driving. They don't require the audience to be staring at a phone and taking their attention away from driving or riding and they activate your brain before you need it, making you more alert. Any form of media that is used in addition to another task, like driving, has the possibility to be distracting, but podcasts aren't any more distracting than music or radio. In fact, once you put the podcast on you wouldn't even need to look at your phone, like you do to change the radio.

Another upside of podcasts is the fact that they are often much shorter than a televised news report and so they can focus on more than one topic at a time (usually in different episodes), but also hold the audience's attention more fully than a longer televised news report. This allows podcasts to give more focused attention to important topics that televised news might brush over, or only have a few minutes to give attention to. Audiences also have the option to pick what kinds of news they are interested in learning more about, and where they choose to spend their time. This allows them to have more control over the content they consume and to only consume the content that they're looking for and not waste their time on news reports that are full of pieces they might not be interested in. Martin also adds that, "an

average visitor will only read an article for 15 seconds or less and the average video watch time online is 10 seconds,” making an even stronger case for podcasts, a hands-free, eyes-free, listening-only information option.

Producers of podcasts work hard to make sure that their content is entertaining and engaging, often using changing music, interviews, sound clips, and other audio tactics to keep the audience entertained. A lot of televised news can get bland, as they are quickly trying to report as much as possible in as short as possible and only focusing on that and not the engagement of the audience. Carstens et al. recognized that individuals are constantly experiencing an information overload from both the quantity and the speed of information, and that attention deficits tend to be increasing as attention spans shorten to adapt to the overload. (Carstens et al. defines attention span as the amount of time an individual is able to focus before becoming distracted or easily bored.) Therefore, podcasts allow the audience a break from their screens and holds the audience’s attention better since they aren’t being as overloaded with information as they are watching televised news (think less commercials, less variety in stories in an episode, etc.)

It is claimed that podcasts lack outside sources or enough background information in an effort to keep their shows short. This can be true if the audience is not picking reliable podcasts to listen to. In the same way that audiences have to do their research and pay attention to how the news is portrayed through different mainstream news sources, choosing reliable podcasts also requires that kind of attention to facts. Martin expresses the concern that many share over the reliability of the media we consume, but concludes that the best way for people to get the truth is to be their own fact checkers. News happens fast and falsehood spreads wider and faster than most reliable news, but all media and news sources struggle to combat this. Podcasts are no different, but they require the audience to continue to be vigilant about what they consume, a task that is only going to increase in its necessity. However,

podcasts rely only on sound to connect with their audience, and removes the misinformation that is easily shared through images that can be interpreted in many different ways.

Perhaps the most important aspect of podcasts is that since audiences can choose what they are listening to, they are picking podcasts that engage them in learning. Even if the podcast isn't specifically educational, using that part of your brain to consume information requires people to focus their attention on one specific thing. In doing this, the audience is adding to their critical thinking skills and sharpening their focus. By focusing on learning about a specific thing, these podcasts engage the audiences' brain to improve their functioning, even if it isn't something specifically based on facts that they're learning. Comedies or other story-based podcasts still require the audience to focus their brain on the one thing being shared through the podcast, engaging their brain for longer amounts of time.

While entertainment podcasts are certainly popular, podcasts that focus on education are also very popular. Audiences can focus what they want to learn about in specific fields like science, history, or current news, but can also focus them even further to learn about geology, or Egyptian history, or news from Australia. Even if the podcast isn't specifically labeled 'news,' podcasts that discuss new research or recent events, maybe less mainstream, are still considered to be 'news' and important for people to learn about. This form of education is invaluable in the sense that it encourages the audience to actively engage in their continued learning by picking things they're actually interested in, which encourages them to keep picking more podcasts to listen to.

The information in many of these podcasts often comes directly from experts who care about what they're talking about, which adds to the entertainment factor as well, but also to the reliability and engagement of podcasts. The experts want you to learn and be interested in what they're talking about, but they also enjoy what they're talking about, which comes out in the passion involved in making and sharing the podcast.

Even better is the fact that choosing from so many podcasts allows people to learn about things that might not be covered in mainstream news. By engaging with lesser-known topics, it can encourage more people to become engaged in the world that they live in, to notice things in the world that they learned about in their podcast, and to talk to others about it. People like to share things that they learn with others, and podcasts encourage that discussion and the spread of information through conversation.

Of course, when talking about educational podcasts, the more recent trend of TikToks comes to mind as well. While TikTok is often considered to be a platform for short and silly videos, as more people are staying home it has also become a host for short educational videos. Educators like Hank Green, people with special skills like master chefs like Gordon Ramsey, other kinds of experts (like experts on home gardening or certain kinds of crafts) have taken to the platform to continue to educate people. In June 2020, TikTok's general manager for the Europe branch, Rich Waterworth, announced that TikTok planned to commission hundreds of experts and institutions to make educational content to be placed on the platform alongside user-generated content. Osman Iqbal for BBC quotes Waterworth as saying, "“Going forward, LearnOnTikTok is about us investing in partners and content creators with a breadth of professional content...We think this is about applying the power of TikTok to learning: the effects, the audio, the transitions, the tools that make it so engaging and fun, to make people enjoy learning,”" demonstrating that these companies have recognized their importance as a learning tool, not just a platform for entertainment. By platforms recognizing their power in encouraging education, individual creators focusing on education will be more supported by social media ventures than they ever would be from televised news.

Motley et. al. discuss the *Serial* and *This American Life* podcasts from 2014 that really set were the first to make podcasts popular, with a poll of *Serial*'s listeners (taken by McKinney advertising agency) demonstrating that before that specific podcast, 25% of the

listeners had never listened to a podcast before, but then almost half of those first-time listeners went on to listen to podcasts on a more regular, weekly basis, specifically because of *Serial*. The authors also state that “From the same poll, a staggering 90% of those first-time listeners said it changed the way they thought about podcasts” (Motley, et al). By utilizing podcasts, educators and experts are tapping into a completely different platform than where they were originally working and sharing, which allows for more people to consume their content. Motley et al. even go as far as to claim that some podcasts, like investigative podcasts with interviews, serve as new forms of research that stand alone and can be built on in similar ways that traditional research is.

Again, the problem that podcasts are technically less regulated than mainstream news sources since any individual can make and share one, suggest that podcasts could be more biased or used to spread incorrect/harmful information. However, you could also argue that mainstream and televised media isn't very 'unbiased' anymore as most televised news sites are aligned with the different leanings of politics. Placing less of a regulatory focus on podcasts could allow for podcasts that spread misinformation to gain in popularity, but news pieces that are misinformed also gain popularity, even with more 'regulation' of a host company. Many social media sources like Twitter, provide labels of possible misinformation on posts, and if podcasts continue to gain in popularity, that also be added to podcasts on places like the Spotify if it's believed they're not completely truthful. Televised news sources are unable to do that because they are promoting the kinds of pieces they believe in, even if they end up not to be true, or to be biased in some way. In the end though, it is still up to the audience to do their research and make sure the information they consume is from credible sources. Credible podcasts source their information either verbally or on a transcript/website page, something that televised news sources sometimes don't do with their information (they also may not screen their experts to be unbiased).

There are many arguments that these online, easily accessed podcasts will be used to replace traditional education for students. While podcasts are a powerful educational tool, they shouldn't replace other tools like in-person learning or text-books that were peer-reviewed and written by certified experts. Kazlauskas and Robinson studied students using podcasts as educational tools and determined that, "Despite the flexibility and mobile learning opportunities afforded by podcasts, significant numbers of students prefer to learn in face-to-face environments and by reading and/or listening in set study environments," suggesting that students still prefer many of the traditional learning methods, but that podcasts can be used as another tool to add to learning. The authors investigated the claim that 'everybody' in education uses these new digital tools like podcasts, and decided that the statement is a common misconception. Podcasts can be an aid to learning, but shouldn't replace important teaching like in-person lecturing. The design of the podcast is often to expand the knowledge of the audience, not to educate them with the same thoroughness and in the same way that college professors, who are paid and certified educators, teach. Podcasts don't save time in learning, they shift time to being used differently, and that should be recognized as a strength of the podcast tool.

While podcasts shouldn't be used to entirely replace current news at this moment in time, since it is still important for people to be generally educated on current events, eventually podcasts could replace televised news. Televised news could easily shift to podcast forms with website-based information to host the visual additions to news. Even if they all don't serve the same exact function as televised mainstream news, the information distributed by podcasts are much more effective in the information they share because they are much more accessible to their audiences, better at capturing their attention, and can be used as an educational tool to better inform the audience about specific topics and to encourage conversations between listeners and non-listeners alike. Podcasts serve as a way for experts to notice a hole in the knowledge that people consume from the news and add to the information

available in an entertaining and accessible way, which leads to a more informed society, and one that learns on their commute.

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