

Podcasts are a natural fit for communication of academic ideas

by Blog Admin

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Podcasts present a chance to meet academics you admire and explore the thinking behind their publications all while building up your professional reputation. [Mark Carrigan](#) walks through academic interview technique and technical tips for those curious about podcasting.



I first encountered the idea of academic podcasting when working for a University of Warwick based project a few years ago. It gave a small stipend to PhD students in exchange for producing a short podcast profiling the research of someone within the university, which was then edited and posted online by myself and the other conveners. This was the first time I'd ever considered the notion of podcasting about academic topics and I was instantly struck both by how fun it sounded and what a natural form of communication it was for academic ideas. Since my work on the project ended, I've continued to podcast as a hobby. As I've gone on, I've become ever more convinced that this is something which more people, particularly PhD students, would benefit from doing.

I'd undoubtedly be unsuccessful if I e-mailed a distinguished researcher to ask if we could meet up for a chat about their most recent book. Yet in the time I've been podcasting, I've sent precisely this sort of e-mail to scores of academics and none of them have turned me down. In some cases it has taken quite a long time to actually schedule the interview but all have, at least in principle, been willing to meet. It's a chance to meet academics whose work you admire and explore the thinking behind their publications. It's also a chance to range beyond your own research area, exploring topics you'd love to know more about if you had unlimited time to sit and read.

In this article I'll focus on podcast *interviews* because it's the type of podcast I'm most familiar with. It also requires the most thought. If you're capable of successfully recording a podcast interview then you're perfectly capable of recording a lecture, or anything else, as long as you think carefully about how to position the recorder and consider the more complex issues of consent involved, for example, I'm personally uncomfortable with recording questions from the audience, even if you ask at the start of the session whether this is ok.

How do you plan a podcast?

If you're engaging intellectually with someone's book or paper, it makes you the most natural interviewer in the world. Every question, idea and comment that's occurred to you while reading someone's work constitutes the raw material for an interview. Although it's important to structure the podcast in a way which makes it accessible and enjoyable for the listener, what you need more than anything else is *enthusiasm* and *engagement*. If those conditions are in place then the whole process will come to feel entirely natural, at least after you've done it a few times. If you have an idea for someone you'd like to interview then send them a quick e-mail, explaining what you want to do and why, then take it from there.

Reflecting on what I do when planning a podcast, I came to the eight questions below:

1. Who do you want to interview?
2. What do you want to interview them about?
3. Will you interview them on person or on Skype?
4. How long do you want the interview to be?
5. What topics do you want to ensure you cover?
6. Given your answer to (4) and (5), what questions do you need to ask?

7. Will you stick rigidly to the questions or ask follow ups on the spot?
8. Is your interviewee ok with your planned questions?

It's worth noting that these are just suggestions. There are no *rules* to this, particularly given how new the format is. It is however worth thinking about what you want to achieve with the podcast. If you intend the podcast to be an exploration of specialist issues then it's fine for it to be lengthy and even obscure. I've recorded some fairly substantial social theory interviews which, though not of interest to the vast majority of people who might stumble across them on my websites, nonetheless interest others who work in the area.

However if you intend to disseminate a set of ideas to as wide an audience as possible, it's best to restrict the length of the podcast (e.g. 10 minutes), to not assume prior knowledge and to avoid specialist vocabulary. How you approach the podcast depends on what you want to achieve with it. Try not to obsess too much about form, after all this is effectively just an academic chat with an unusual degree of structure, just consider what the end result will be like and how it will be engaged with by others.

What do you need to podcast?

The technical skills involved in podcasting are minimal. Though, it should be noted, getting podcasts into iTunes is something which I've found fiddly and frustrating as someone who isn't particularly technically minded. However the other aspects of the process are astoundingly quick and easy once you get to grips with them.

- Do you have a voice recorder? If not is there one you can borrow in your department? It's possible to podcast with a very basic voice recorder. Or indeed a smart phone: www.audioboo.fm is great fun. Read the manual and explore the settings, as once you understand how to calibrate the recorder in the way most suitable for podcasting, you can largely forget about the technical side of the process and get on with the fun bit.
- If you're recording a podcast via Skype then you need call recording software. I personally use the unimaginatively named [Call Recorder](#) which is simple and reliable. I'm sure there are also freeware alternatives available online. The advantage of a Skype podcast is, unsurprisingly, the ability to interview anyone anywhere in the world. Similarly, the flexibility it affords makes scheduling a lot easier. The downside is that a certain element of rapport is invariably lost, as there simply isn't the same kind of interaction taking place without physical presence in the same space.
- I must admit that editing is the only part of the process I *don't* enjoy. It's not particularly demanding though. [Audacity](#) is free software which, though packed with features, remains easy to pick up as long as you screen out the 99% of the software which you won't need to use as an academic podcaster. There are many video guides to using the software on Youtube. The only functionality I regularly use is deleting sections of the audio and amplifying the volume.
- If your voice recorder or Skype recorder doesn't export files in MP3 then you'll need a piece of software that can do this. There a range of options available online.
- If you are interviewing in person then you need a *quiet* space. In practice most academic offices can serve this purpose but it's best to avoid conducting interviews at a particularly busy time of day and/or year. Likewise in summer it might be necessary to shut the windows in the office. The better the environment in which you record the interview, the less hassle you'll have with the editing afterwards. The same point applies to positioning the voice recorder. Try and get the placement equal between the two speakers, as well as cautioning people to avoid moving too much if possible (chairs on wheels can be a bit of a danger here). If you're new to the process and/or you're using a lower-end recorder then it's best to test the sound levels to save yourself difficulty later.
- Finally you need a place to host the podcast. It's worth checking if your institution offers a way of uploading audio to your webpage, as many will. Likewise if your institution has a presence on iTunes U or any other central repository. Podcasts can also be posted easily on blogs and increasing

numbers of multi-author blogs are hosting podcasts.

What else do you need to consider?

The sense that your podcasts need to be slickly produced can be a huge barrier to getting started. While some people may disagree with me, I think *functional adequacy* is the key here. We're not media professionals, we're researchers and the aim of academic podcasting is to communicate ideas rather than to impress the wider world with our flashy production skills. By all means do record elaborate introductions with jingles if it's appealing to you to do so. My point is solely that these are in no way *mandatory*. Explore podcasting and find what works for you.

As someone who had done a lot of research interviews prior to starting podcasting, I'd already got past the stage of being unnerved by the sound of my own voice. However if this is new to you, don't let it put you off. If you listen back to the podcast and think you sound silly/ponderous/strange (insert negative epithet here) *it is completely normal* and it goes away. Listening back can also be a good way to gauge if you are talking too quickly. If you think this might be a problem for you then practice with your voice recorder to get the pace right prior to your first podcast. Likewise avoid talking *too much* (unless the podcast is deliberately intended to be a dialogue rather than an interview). Use your questions as prompts to get the interviewees talking in the way you want about the subjects you're interested in. Avoid the temptation to cut in too frequently because the content is getting so interesting. I have to admit I don't always manage to avoid doing this.

Finally, although norms of consent and ownership about academic podcasts are yet to be firmly established, remember to be respectful to your interviewee. Offer to let them check the podcast before you publish it and remind them that you can easily cut out sections they are unhappy with. Even if this means more editing work for you, it's the least you can do given that they've offered their time & attention for the interview.

If you want a bit more guidance about podcasting, I've collected resources specifically geared towards academic podcasting [here](#). I'd particularly recommend the BSA PG Forum podcasting handbook. There's also a lot of generic podcasting resources available online.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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