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**Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio'**

**Richard Berry**, University of Sunderland

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## **Abstract**

*When evaluating any new medium or technology we often turn to the familiar as a point of reference. Podcasting was no different, drawing obvious comparisons with radio. While there are traits within all podcasts that are radiogenic, one must also consider whether such distinctions are beneficial to the medium. Indeed, one might argue that when one considers the manner in which podcasts are created and consumed then there is an increasing sense in which podcasting can present itself as a distinct medium. While it is true to suggest that as an adaptable medium radio has simply evolved and podcasting is its latest iteration. In doing so, we might fail to appreciate the unique values that exist. In this article, I suggest that by considering podcasts on their term we might begin to uncover new truths about a medium in change.*

## **Keywords**

Radio-Studies

podcasting

podcast listening

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radio

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After more than ten years of podcasting scholarship, histories and contexts are well documented, with articles such as that by Bonini (2015), Menduni (2007) and Berry (2006). However, we should consider how we began to frame podcasting as a subject of scrutiny. The first public usage of the word 'Podcasting' came from a hastily created portmanteau word by a *Guardian* journalist in the early 2004. Ben Hammersley was reporting on 'a new boom in amateur radio' (2004). He notes that this new form was 'Liberating the listeners from time and place, and allowing them to talk back to the programme-makers' (2004). What is interesting from both the report and those Hammersley spoke to is that they all still called what they did 'radio' but added that 'While these downloads are all in the traditional radio style, the low cost of producing audio for the internet means more interesting stuff can be done' (2004). This distinction presented then, as now, some thorny questions of whether or not podcasting is radio and whether those who make podcasts are part of the radio family. In this article I propose that we begin a discussion around how we might consider podcasting on its own terms, focusing on its inherent differences, and how we might frame this 'interesting stuff'.

Radio is an evolutionary animal, one which has adapted to the world around it. As technologies and consumption patterns change, radio has proven that it can adapt. In this context, it would seem fair and logical to consider podcasting as an extension of radio. Indeed, previous podcasting articles such as that by Berry (2006) and Menduni (2007) made close reference to the links between podcasting and radio and

considered whether podcasting presented itself as a threat to or an opportunity for radio, concluding that while radio would prove resistant to the threats posed by this new upstart, 'radio may require some retuning' (Berry 2006: 159). Menduni also considered it as a stage in the technological evolution of radio, perhaps even that missing link between the mobility offered by radio and the global reach and range of web radio. Both these early articles concluded that podcasting in its earliest iteration was presenting itself as an interim technology, 'one of a number of possible ways for radio to face a complex digital future' (Menduni 2007: 16).

The transformative impact of digital practices in radio has raised many questions about the nature of the medium as a purely auditory medium, questioning whether radio is 'a medium that is defined purely by its mode of delivery – radio waves – or is it something more nuanced than that' (Berry 2013: 180). This is an argument shared by others, including Lacey (2008), Shaw (2010) and Dubber (2013). Radio, one which Dubber argues, is complex and multifaceted, where the term could mean institutions, practices or a means of transmission of a physical object (2013: 13). We can locate podcasting in this paradigmatic debate, as it might share practices and institutions with radio, it also presents itself as a collection of practices, cultures, institutions and distribution systems. Podcasting sounds like radio while at the same time laying stake to its own sense of uniqueness, which might contradict traditionally held concepts of what 'radio' is, while often remaining a function of the radio industry. We can probably reach broad agreement on what 'radio' is, as while formats change, the inherent 'radio-ness' of the thing remains consistent through time. However, as Edmund notes, contemporary radio is 'experimenting with ever more complex cross-media practices' (2014: 2) where websites, video and social media are all part of the

output of many radio stations, where social media practices (Bonini 2012), video and visuals (Berry: 2014) and mobile apps (Morris and Patterson 2015) further complicate these earlier definitions and suggest that radio is increasingly a selection of multifaceted interactive practices (Cordeiro 2012). The most talked about podcast of the recent time, *Serial* (Berry: 2015) can be located within this paradigmatic shift, as although it was radiogenic in nature and created by radio producers employed by a radio business, it was not intended for radio broadcast. While *Serial* did deploy extensive radiogenic techniques, it also recognized that the space is different, being one that allowed the producers to tell the story in their own way rather than in the highly structured form demanded by linear broadcasting (Chisholm 2015). Primarily, the podcast form meant that there was more freedom for profanity and no longer a need to be constrained by a linear broadcast 'slot', but more significantly it allowed for listeners to engage with the narrative in a more attentive manner.

There are further delineations between linear radio and podcasting, as the work of Sterne et al. (2008) suggests that while podcasts might 'broadcast' in a general sense, there is much about it that is oppositional to traditional notions of broadcasting. The authors conclude that 'Podcasting is not an alternative to broadcasting, but a realisation of broadcasting that ought to exist alongside and compete with other models' (2008). This is perhaps a reflection of the platform-ness of podcasting, in that it is highly capable of distributing programme content efficiently to anyone willing to receive those messages. It may also do with far greater efficiency and less state interference than broadcast systems. There is no suggestion in this article that podcasting will replace broadcasting, but that it presents itself is a parallel (largely unmediated) path for distribution where some

content might shift between the two. A radio programme can be both a broadcast artefact and a podcast, and while the manner in which a listener might consume them can differ, they are essentially the same piece of audio. Podcasts can be radio, made by radio stations or by former radio professionals. Other podcasts can be created by individuals with no experience of the above, or any interest in sounding like radio, and although they might sound different, they share listening and distributive practices. Therefore, one might be able to prise radio and podcasting apart, as related but increasingly divergent forms. Podcasts might arise from radio stations and be located within radio practice, but at the same time also work might deploy approaches that are counter to many contemporary professional practices of broadcasting and of our own radio pedagogies.

In her study of independent podcasters, Kris Markman found that a desire to 'do radio' was the most frequently cited reason for starting to podcast' (2012: 555). This suggests that radio maintains an intrinsic appeal but podcasting has specific appeal because it allows participants 'to do radio on their own terms – free from industry and/or legal restrictions' (Markman 2014). Perhaps these podcasters are more interested in broadcasting rather than radio as a cultural practice. Although community radio may offer some opportunities for these aspiring communicators, the fully disintermediated nature of podcasting offers an even greater degree of freedom as it is both free of all regulatory control and management interference, and grants the ability to perform on one's own schedule. The discussion here is that while we can consider podcasting to be part of radio, or to be a radio practice, it could actually be unhelpful to label it as radio as doing so engenders a perception in the minds of producers and listeners based on their previous experience of radio formats. Black

suggests listeners have a lot to do with it (2001: 398), but if we consider that many listeners might come to podcasting because it is not radio, a distinct identity could prove to be advantageous. These are thoughts outlined by podcaster and academic Adam Ragusea (2015) who notes that while the lines between the two mediums are fluid, they do need responding to. The 'radio' label might help the uninitiated, but it is not conducive to innovation and may actually distract us from attempts to fully theorize and investigate the form of podcasting on its own terms as it becomes more ingrained in our lives.

### **Radio as a reference point**

Radio academics have long appreciated the challenges of attempting to clearly define radio, not least because the form(s) the medium has taken has evolved over time. The arrival of television meant that the radio set was no longer the object around which the family gathered, and by embracing music (rather than talk) as its dominant form, radio was able to adapt to its new place in the lives of listeners (Rothenbuhler and McCourt 2002). Radio is always subject to change and some argue it has rarely been fixed (Moscote Freire 2007), as new technologies and trends pose fresh challenges to our attempts to analyse a medium under change. It is this willingness to adapt, as Hilmes and Loviglio (2013) suggest, that has helped radio to thrive, rather than flounder, in the digital age, even if it may have complicated the narrative around what was 'previously less-problematically termed radio' (Moscote Freire 2007: 99). Other scholars have also considered the impact of the Internet on radio, notably David Black (2001), Kate Lacey (2008) and Jo Tacchi (2000). In each case, the authors attempted to extract the 'radioness' from audio heard online, with Black suggesting that the distinction actually lies in the heads of



the listeners. In her call for a greater debate, Tacchi argued that 'radio is what history says it is: it has no essence since it has already taken, and continues to take, different forms. Radio is what it is at a given time, in a given context of use and meaningfulness' (2000: 292). For all of these authors, the movement of radio onto the Internet prompted questions for research, which have been discussed but in the case of podcasting have not yet been fully resolved. Kate Lacey suggests that 'invoking the name of radio efficiently cuts through a swathe of possibilities to register a set of expectations and practices' (2008: 24). Perhaps, then, we are using the term radio as a shorthand for audio, or as a set of features by which to judge new audio products (Moscote Freire 2007) or for new products wishing to explain themselves to a confused consumer. If this is the case, then invoking the name radio when considering a podcast might be both useful and problematic, as it may both instil a set of expectations and suggest a set of practices that are uncondusive to the space. In this lies our problem. It is not a problem about fixing what radio is but is about offering a framework to consider what *podcasting* is (or might be) as a distinct form. Jonathan Sterne and his co-authors of a 2008 article suggest that podcasting falls within a wider debate around broadcasting, one where the notions around what is 'broadcasting' is set by corporate interests. The same could be said for online radio, with streaming music services laying claim on the word 'radio'. This is contested ground where scholars, listeners and audience researchers have so far failed to reach universal agreement.

From a purely technological perspective, we can easily recognize radio as an auditory medium that requires the use of a transmitter and a receiver to distribute a linear stream of content that is heard synchronously by listeners in a specific area.

When radio stations began to digitally stream live programmes, the experience remained synchronous, albeit over a much wider area and through a different device. This remains ostensibly the radio with which we were historically familiar with, with breaks for news and unstoppable linear flow of programming. However, when this experience becomes delayed or extends into visual and social forms, some challenges do emerge. In their consideration of podcasting in the age of the smartphone, Morris and Patterson suggest that 'Podcasting is neither limited to nor defined by its technologies. Rather, it is a set of specific practices and cultural meanings that are entirely entwined with the technologies for its distribution, organization, and consumption' (2015: 221–22). So, while the means of distribution alone might be sufficient grounds for podcasting to be interrogated as a distinct form, when we also factor in different production approaches, distribution and listening patterns we start to build a thesis that podcasting is capable of being considered as a distinct form. It is precisely these practices, meanings and consumption patterns that this article suggests as the basis for extracting the *podcastness* out of radio.

Podcasts are, like radio, an auditory experience. Like radio, we might listen to them alone while doing other things, and like radio, they feature presenters, music, stories and topics that might appeal to a range of listeners. Although in the case of podcasting the content is increasingly niche and so bears a closer resemblance to participatory media, with independent podcasters 'contributing to the long tail of online media content' (Markman: 2012: 550) rather than replicating commercial or public formats. Many podcasts were originally created as radio and are distributed as podcasts to offer additional opportunities for audiences to engage with content on their own terms and schedule (Murray 2009). This remediation of content certainly

does not remove the 'radioness' from them, as they are undoubtedly programmes created for radio, for which the podcast is merely an extension or another route to the ears of potential listeners. In his discussion on podcasting, Hugh Chignell recognizes that while podcasts may not be seen as radio by purists, a previously lost generation of listeners to speech radio might be attracted to the medium. There is some truth to this, with the producers of *This American Life* noting that their podcasts were attracting not only younger listeners but also those with schedules that made appointment listening difficult (Berry 2016). These are examples of podcasts created as radio or as *part* of a wider radio experience where the title of 'radio' remains appropriate. Kate Lacey notes that even this term is the subject of debate among radio scholars, and draws on the work of Alan Beck in suggesting only texts that are 'ideally suited to radio, or that display an optimum aesthetic use of sound' (2013: 93) are radiogenic in nature. This may help us when extracting the radioness out of podcasts. If we are to use Beck's definition of radioness as a benchmark for defining the medium, then there are podcasts that would be well-suited to radio, not least because many were made for radio in the first place. However, many would be wholly unsuited to broadcast environments due to a number of factors (such as language or recording quality) and so in this definition they are not radio. In his discussion on radio in the digital age, Andrew Dubber (2013: 58) suggests that considering podcasts such as *Sodajerker on Songwriting* as radio in any meaningful sense is complex and contestable.

### **Podcast listeners are different**

While both the podcast listener and the radio listener are seeking aural entertainment and while there may be occasions where both listeners consume the same content, they may do so in different ways and for different reasons. For the radio listener to experience 'radio', they only need to approach their radio set and turn it on. They are then presented with whatever programme the station they are tuned to is broadcasting. Like a light bulb, it is either on or off. Of course, it may be re-tuned to another programme but again the linearity of radio means that the listener can only join the programme at the point at which they tune in. One could argue that it is this serendipitous simplicity that has enabled radio to endure and thrive for almost a 100 years; it is a low-demand medium that merely requires the listeners to turn it on and listen. The podcast listener has a different journey, one that starts with making a series of choices over what they want to hear, often before that piece of audio has been produced and certainly before they begin to hear it. This places podcasting as a 'pull' medium, one where the listener is more active in the process of selection and scheduling (Murray 2009; McClung and Johnson 2010), where there may also be an emotional investment in the process. While new intermediaries such as *iTunes*, *Pocketcasts*, *Acast* and other apps are increasingly curating and mediating this process (Morris and Patterson 2015), this is a process where the listener has a greater degree of autonomy. Making choices about which specific podcasts to listen to, and also when and where suggests that the podcast listener is a more actively engaged participant than the radio listener. Research by Winocur notes that radio listeners rarely sit down to listen to the radio, preferring instead to float between domestic tasks, which she refers to as a 'distracted way of relating to the radio' (2005: 323). For the radio listener, the sounds offered by the radio are often intended as aural wallpaper to set a mood or provide accompaniment

to routine tasks. It is the device that wakes us up and provides structure to the day; as Winocur suggests, 'it has been incorporated into the complexity of symbolic and cultural frameworks that structure domestic life' (2005: 330). The fixed schedule of linear broadcasting provides that structure, one which listeners fit around and use to create routines.

The podcast listener, however, is not constrained by such fixed-point linearity. While they might choose to create a listening schedule (e.g., listening to a specific podcast on a morning commute) they are not required to do so. Although the listeners of *Serial* did come together physically and virtually to listen collectively to new episodes, this is most definitely not a common occurrence. While a listener might typically listen to a podcast on the morning after it is posted, it is an experience that can be easily deferred, paused or abandoned. Indeed, they may choose to select a time to listen when they are least likely to be distracted, should the podcast warrant close attention. Research from ABC in Australia referenced by Quirk (2015) suggests that listeners are highly engaged with the content from beginning to end, and a survey conducted by *Serial* among its listeners suggests that 93 per cent of them always gave the podcast their 'full attention' (PR Newswire). This suggests that podcast listeners are not only less distracted but also potentially more engaged in the experience. In his research with urban listeners, Lars Nyre notes that 'While live radio comes from the public to you as a listener, podcasting is described in quite different terms. It is self-selected in the extreme, and the engagement starts on the inside, from the listener's interests, and grows outward' (2015: 294). Interestingly, this study asked participants to listen to music playlists, live radio and podcasts while walking and commuting through London and suggests that in some cases the

content (The *In Our Time* podcast from BBC Radio 4) did not suit the context, as it was one that required their full attention.

This suggests that while listeners may self-curate both music and podcasts, there are different modes of consumption: one where attention can be pulled away from the listening experience and one where doing so requires rewinding to keep track of the subject matter (Nyre 2015: 295). While the particularly didactic nature of this podcast is plainly a factor in these findings, the need for such close listening is not unusual in podcasting. The highly successful podcast *Radiolab* makes a virtue of its highly produced and crafted approach to programme-making, of which Walker says,

radio drifts by or washes over you when it comes out of a box on the other side of the room — but remember, a majority of ‘Radiolab’ listeners actually take in the show via podcast, and there’s something different going on when it enters your head through earbuds at the exact moment you have chosen to hear it, while you’re commuting with nothing else to think about, or cleaning the kitchen, or lying down for the night. (2011)

One could argue that while there may be occasions when a listener turns to the radio for focused listening – such as a drama or a football match – radio is largely an inattentive medium, one that understands that listeners multitask. It could be that a combination of the dominance of speech in podcasting and nature of the medium as self-selected experience based on niche experiences almost demands that podcast listening is both theoretically and actually different from radio listening, especially

music radio. Mia Lindgren furthers this and suggests that, as a platform, podcasting is highly advantageous for creative producers as work 'can be sought out, returned to, listened to more than once' (2014: 75), which may motivate producers to develop more nuanced and crafted productions.

While a podcast listener might stream content via Bluetooth to loudspeakers or their car stereo from a mobile phone, it is likely that more often than not they are using headphones: audience research from RAJAR in the United Kingdom notes that 57 per cent (2016) of podcast consumption is via a smartphone, and at least 90 per cent (2015) of listening alone might support this notion. This creates a deeply personal and highly privatized (and intimate) space in which content is consumed, which seems to provide a reasonable hypothesis that podcasting is more intimate. While a radio listener may be confined to a 'least-worst option' choice of listening, the long tail of podcasts enables podcast listeners to find something that more closely represents their interests. Perhaps by combining a highly personal listening environment with content that has immediate appeal to the listener and is consumed at a time and place of their choosing, we have grounds to consider that podcasts are capable of a deeper level of intimacy. It is a relationship that MacDougall suggests 'may be part of an evolution in parasocial phenomena and a fundamentally new form of mediated interpersonal communication' (2011: 716). It is a relationship that is complex, as Lacey notes that digital devices that are carried through public and private spaces complicate 'the ideological distinctions drawn between active and passive, public and private listening' (2014: 49), thus placing as it does the privatized act of listening to an 'intimate soundscape of their own choosing' (2014: 120) – into public spaces such as the commuter train or the city street. This is reflected in what Michael Bull has described as 'mediated isolation' (2007: 4), where listeners remove

themselves from the surrounding world. In this example, Bull was primarily discussing the relationship with music, where listeners escape into a musical world we might consider a slightly different form of escapism with the podcast listener. As while plugging in a pair of earpieces and listening to a podcast might disconnect the listener from their immediate surroundings, they are connecting to a different public, one of asynchronous podcast listeners connected via a shared interest and social media. While the podcast listener may feel connected to the experience, Chignell suggests that the privatized form of listening proposed by Bull feels 'profoundly unradio-like' (2009: 42), which further adds weight to the argument that podcasts are something different to the radio we experienced during the twentieth century. While podcasts such as *Serial* and *The Message* almost demand that audiences listen from the start, podcast narratives are mostly sufficiently open-ended to negate this need for all but the most ardent.

Podcasters recognize the different listening experiences in their delivery style. In this regard, we could consider that podcasts engender a sense of hyper-intimacy, where listeners feel deeply engaged with both the process of listening and the material to which they listen. Podcaster Roman Mars notes of this relationship, 'I love the closeness that people feel to me and to my show... Podcast listeners are so, so dedicated... personal connection is major' (in Steuer 2015). He also recognizes the nature of the experience, noting that

People typically listen to podcasts by themselves, often with earbuds. It's right there in their ears. It's not playing over speakers at the bar. And even more important, it's totally the multitasking medium. We're in a world now where



you have something to do at all times, and podcasts are available for you all the time, on demand. (Steuer 2015)

The British podcaster Helen Zaltzman has also noted that the relationship between the podcaster and the podcast listener is highly intimate: 'When people are wearing headphones, you're sort of talking right into their skull. It's not coming from a radio set on the far side of the room... It's a very intimate relationship' (in Taylor 2015). It is a relationship that Sarah Koenig, the producer and host of *Serial*, has suggested is far more intimate than the one she had experienced in the traditional radio (The New School 2015). While not all listening will be on headphones, and while radio can also be listened to in this fashion via smartphone apps, there is a suggestion here that the headphone-orientated approach taken by some podcasters is further grounds for a claim of difference.

One should also consider (at least in the case of podcasts produced by amateur producers) that many podcasts are produced in the homes of the podcasters. Podcasts such *WTF with Marc Maron* is famously produced in his Los Angeles garage, therefore creating a double-ended domestication or privatization of the experience where both the production and the consumption are occurring in the private spaces of the homes or the headphone-wearing commuter. In his study of the podcast, Meserko suggests that this situation offers both Maron and his guests an opportunity to 'reveal themselves in ways previously unseen publicly' (2015: 797) allowing the podcast (and the host) to be presented as being more authentic. Early podcasts such as *The Daily Source Code* also made overt references to their domestic setting, often pointing out the noises created by family members in

adjoining rooms. While, as Bonini (2015) notes, the medium is becoming increasingly professionalized and therefore drawn into the more public space of a studio, for many podcasters the home studio remains dominant. The engagement podcast listeners feel also might prompt them to financially engage with the content they listen to; in fact, Murtha suggests that 'Podcasts breed intimacy through hosts who speak openly and directly to listeners, sharing their defeats along with their victories... That intimacy leads to trust' (2016).

Industry research (Webster 2015) seems to suggest that there is a cycle of deeper engagement for podcast listeners, where the self-identified listeners were not only listening to more podcasts (the average was six) but they were spending more time with podcasts than any other audio medium, including radio. This is perhaps not surprising given the exponential growth in the number of podcasts and the ease with which a listener can subscribe to a podcast, without cost or commitment. In addition, some highly engaged fans are willing to make a financial commitment to their most favoured podcasts. Since 2012, the San Francisco-based podcast *99% Invisible* has proved to be a leading proponent of this funding method, an approach that has seen it become the highest funded journalistic project on the Kickstarter website on more than one occasion (Popovich 2013). The creator of *99% Invisible*, Roman Mars, went on to develop the *Radiotopia* collective of podcasts and again sought audience support, first raising \$350,000 and then \$620,000 the following year (Fast Company 2015). This suggests that not only are podcast listeners more engaged with the content but they are also highly likely to support the sustainability of their favourite work financially. Other podcasts such *Welcome to Night Vale* and *Richard Herring's Leicester Square Theatre Podcast* also take on listener-centred non-advertising

funding models, where listeners are able to support the podcast through live events and merchandising.

### **Podcasts sound different from radio**

As I outlined in the previous section, while some of the more popular podcasts might be created in the kind of facility normally found in a radio station, many are created in domestic settings. Indeed, it is the de-professionalization of the production process that has proven to be podcasting's biggest disruptive influence. Just as the tools for consumption were often reappropriated, the tools of production were also borrowed from other processes. Inbuilt microphones and pre-bundled software such as Garageband proved to be useful tools for podcasters. Over time, these tools developed, and a simple search on retailer sites such as Amazon or E-Bay will offer up a range of specialist equipment and 'how-to' guides. While a radio broadcaster may spend heavily on studio construction and equipment, a podcaster does not need to do so and may often make a virtue of their domestically situated 'studio'. Marc Maron makes it clear that the celebrity interviews in his *WTF* podcast are recorded in his home garage, and while good microphone selection and a quiet environment can produce more than acceptable results, there can still be a sense of domesticity in such recordings. While researchers such as Kris Markman have considered the motivations of podcasters (in 2012) and with Sawyer (2014), there is little research into how podcasters actually produce work. In *The Long Tail* (C. Anderson, 2006) of podcasters described by Markman and Sawyer (2014: 24), some podcasts have been created using equipment that would not look out of place in radio stations while some most definitely have not. While such sonic signatures might also appear in pirate and community radio, the lo-fi nature of podcasting can present us with another line of enquiry.

Podcasts such *The Bugle* and the successful *Ricky Gervais Show* (2005–2014) also take on little or no structure. While they may adopt recurring features, unlike broadcast radio they are not constrained by the clock where content must fit into regularly scheduled slots leaving space for news, travel, commercials and other elements of scheduled 'benchmarks'. While a producer engaged to make a programme for BBC Radio 4 will know how long their programme should be – often to the second – a podcaster has no such pressure. To use the season one of the podcast *Serial* as an example, episodes ranged from 28 minutes (Episode 3) to 56 minutes (Episode 12). This allowed the producer to tell the story in the best possible way, rather than in a manner dictated by an arbitrary clock or schedule. Although many radio programmes appear as podcasts, it would be unusual for the reverse to occur – not least due to the profane nature of many podcasts, but also due to issues of length, subject matter and structure. A radio broadcaster is always aware that the serendipitous nature of radio means that a listener might join and leave a live radio programme at any point; the nature of podcasting means the radiogenic practices used to alleviate this are largely meaningless. A podcast listener will inevitably start at the beginning of the text, and while they might skip ahead, pause the audio or abandon it all together, the more self-selected listening nature that is inherent in podcasting means listeners are either absent or present; as Ragusea highlights, 'Nobody tunes into the middle of a podcast' (2015). He also highlights a core difference in that podcasters can afford to cater to smaller, more defined audiences, which the mass-market radio stations fail to satisfy. The non-linearity of the podcast also means that while some listeners may download and listen to a podcast soon after it has been posted, following the podcasters schedule of episodes, many may not. Podcast listeners, like Netflix viewers, might prefer to 'stack' episodes, delve into

archives, skip episodes or revisit favourites. This different behaviour was noted by the streaming platform Stitcher, which noted in a December 2014 article on Medium that 'Six episodes in, 21 percent of *Serial*'s listening behavior matched our definition of binge listening... *Serial* is proving that podcast listeners are just as inclined to binge on episodic radio shows than on TV series' (2014). Although this obsessive listening pattern is enabled by podcasting, it may be unusual as podcast narratives are mostly sufficiently open-ended to negate this need for all but the most ardent, partly because podcasters do not have to follow any consistent pattern of production.

In sound and form the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* harks back to the radio dramas of radio's golden age, while simultaneously being contemporary in approach; as Bottomley notes, 'there is little about podcasting that is truly new, when the full range of radio's history and forms are taken into account' (2015: 180). Bottomley further suggests that the intimacy of the podcast 'is hardly a new technique, even if it does seem novel compared to most of the professionalized mainstream radio heard in the past few decades' (2015: 186). There is some logic here, as while podcasts such as *Serial* and *Welcome to Night Vale* might sound like the radio of the past, they are in their own regard points of innovation that have triggered revivals or sparked others to consider podcasts as a form of expression or a source of entertainment, in what has been described as the 'Serial Effect' – where there has been renewed interest in podcasting and serialized storytelling. This suggests that while some podcasts do not sound like contemporary radio, they do sound like the radio of the past, and with that comes the challenges of adding what Richmond has described as 'noise', noting 'For all the vaunted variety of the Golden Age of podcasting, the endless proliferation of options, essentially all shows fall into a few

predictable categories' (2015). While listeners may appreciate such revivalist approaches, there is a need for podcasting to further develop its own identity. Writing on the state of commercial podcasting in Spain, Pérez notes, 'There is a need to give this format further relevance and differentiate it from traditional broadcasting' (2012: 31). While podcasting may present some fundamental differences, there is a sense that it is also an incremental step on a divergent path that leads to a place where the inherent differences between radio and podcasting are more greatly understood. There may even be a case to argue that podcasting now occupies a space vacated by radio.

As a medium, podcasting crosses radio studies, academic pedagogies (Huntsberger and Stavitsky 2007), politics (Chadha et al. 2012) and more. It carries content for general entertainment and learning (Brabazon 2009). It is a medium that is capable of being both radiogenic and non-radiogenic and is both a commercialized space (Bonini 2012) and a more authentic and independent media form (Meserko 2015) (Markman 2012). Just as radio convenes a set of practices and experiences, podcasting has now established a similar, but different, set of conventions and opportunities with an established canon of scholarship.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Podcasting is a hybrid of forms, one that is both a platform and an identifiable collection of practices and characteristics. It is also a space that unlike broadcasting or platforms such as YouTube is self-governed by participants, listeners and

intermediaries, and so is capable of being both mass market and incredibly niche with all the inherent diversity that may be involved. The publication of this themed issue of *The Radio Journal* is a clear recognition that podcasting has become an established form of audio content, and while the word 'radio' remains a useful reference point, we have arrived at an interesting place in the evolution of the medium. Podcasts are moving into the mainstream, presenting us with both credible and popular content, and an emerging set of practices. We are at a point in time that Tiziano Bonini (2015) refers to as the 'Second Age' of podcasting, one where he suggests we reframe podcasting not as radio but a new mass medium. Many aspects of radio studies still remain pertinent to podcasts and other on-demand audio, but we must also be mindful of the differentness that exists. Podcasting and radio are closely intertwined, sharing technologies, techniques and content, but they are increasingly coexisting on divergent and often intersecting paths. Podcasts can (but do not have to) sound different to radio; podcast listeners can consume in different ways to traditional radio listeners, and increasingly audio content is being produced exclusively with this market in mind. While the delivery technologies will change, and even the terminology may change, the practices will (I would suggest) remain.

While the transformative abilities of radio remain pertinent, in this article I have attempted to explore how the nature, the sound and the listening experience of podcasting is different from that of linear radio, and so suggest that the blanket term 'radio' might not be useful in the analysis (or the production) of podcasts. There are parallels here to YouTube, of which Burgess and Green note, 'each scholarly approach to understanding how YouTube works make choices... in effect recreating it as a different object each time' (2009: 6). In the same way, we should consider

podcasting differently depending on the lens through which we view it. For example, we could delineate between content that sounds like radio (recorded in a studio, etc.) and that which most definitely does not. We could be pragmatic and suggest that if the text under consideration has not been (and is not intended for) broadcast, then it is not radio. We could also take a converged view and accept that all forms of audio production are radio to some extent. We could scrutinize the content, or, also, examine the listening patterns and use the artefact listened as a defining factor.

Podcasting can sit inside or outside of radio as the mood fits. There is no simple fix answer. You can cut the cake in whichever way you want to. Also, in considering whether podcasting is radio, we must ask the question who decided it was? Just as Sterne et al. (2008) suggest that broadcasting is a cultural question, the same might be true of podcasting, with claims of radioness pursued by those who wish to see it as an extension of their own corporate interests. It could be that we did so to explain the new or to draw on the cultural status of radio. What is increasingly apparent is that radio is more than the sum of its parts; it is an evolving collection of practices, and while the traditional radio practices of production might remain largely static, there is a wider set of practices of radio stations that expand and diverge into other formats and industries.

In common with YouTube, podcasting can perform both as a distributor of commercial works and a source of disruptive innovation and alternative participatory practice. Simultaneously, it is a platform, an object (the 'podcast' itself) and a collection of practices that can be both part of radio and part of a wider ecology of digital participatory practices. It is also, as I have argued, an audio form where the conventions and production processes present a collection of texts that are sonically different and are treated differently from radio – even if they still emerge from the



same business. This is not suggesting that a study of podcasting should no longer be part of radio studies; more that there is an argument (reflected in this special issue) for the emergence of a branch of podcast studies, one that might embrace parallel scholarship within pedagogies and digital media. My suggestion here is that in order to advance our scholarship on podcasting we could also consider it as something that is capable of being distinct from linear radio broadcasting and then investigate it further on its own terms. By changing the lens, we may be able to change the questions we ask and reach new conclusions about what podcasting really is.

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### **Contributor details**

Richard Berry is a Senior Lecturer in Radio in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media at the University of Sunderland. He holds a Masters Degree in Radio from Goldsmiths College, London, and is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy. His research centres on the intersections between radio and new technologies: how the Internet generates new opportunities for producers and listeners and how these trends might change our understanding of what radio is. He published one of the earliest academic articles on podcasting in 2006, as well as publishing work on Digital Radio, Visualisation, Online Content and the podcast *Serial*.

Contact:

[richard.berry@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:richard.berry@sunderland.ac.uk)

Faculty of Arts, Design and Media,

David Puttnam Media Centre,

Sir Tom Cowie Campus at St Peters,

Sunderland,

Tyne and Wear,

SR6 0DD