

By producing podcasts you can reach wider audiences, occupy your niche and create new items of research

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*The success of the Serial podcast, a true crime spin-off from the widely popular This American Life, has introduced new audiences to a modern form of broadcasting and inspired a new generation of producers. As part of a series previewing their new book [Communicating Your Research with Social Media](#), **Amy Mollett**, **Cheryl Brumley**, **Chris Gilson** and **Sierra Williams** outline why researchers should take advantage of this podcasting renaissance.*



In the autumn of 2014, a new podcast series was launched which would go on to forever change the way the public in North America, the UK and beyond would interact with and understand the potential power of on-demand audio. *Serial*, a 12-part spin-off from popular radio programme and podcast *This American Life*, kicked off its inaugural season with an investigation into the murder of Baltimore high school student, Hae Min Lee. It was an instant hit. *Serial* listening parties sprang up around the US and the UK, lengthy Reddit threads were devoted to solving the case, and – in a meta way, perhaps only possible in the fog of an internet frenzy – it even spawned podcasts about the podcast.

A poll of *Serial*'s listeners, undertaken by creative advertising agency McKinney, showed that [nearly a quarter of the podcast's listeners had never heard a podcast before](#), with nearly half going on to listen to podcasts on a weekly basis as a direct result of the show. From the same poll, a staggering 90% of those first-time listeners said it changed the way they thought about podcasts. This was all part of the so-called "[Serial Effect](#)".

And so, at last, the podcast was having its moment, little more than a decade after the first of its kind came on the scene out of a Harvard University research centre. But, of course, a phenomenon like this doesn't exist in a vacuum and *Serial* alone can't account for the totality of the medium's resurgence. The ubiquity of smartphones has been the biggest boon for podcasts in recent years. Additionally, podcasts are an increasing feature on car journeys through Bluetooth technology (Zorn, 2014).

Podcasts from academic and research organisations – though still dominated by the standard lecture format – are becoming increasingly varied as universities and funding bodies invest more in diverse forms of dissemination in order to react to audience trends and interests. Below we show why researchers should also consider podcasting about their work.

Why you should podcast your research:

1. Podcasting helps you reach wider audiences
2. No topic is too niche- riding out the long tail
3. Podcasts are research



Podcasting helps you reach wider audiences

As has been shown in previous posts on [blogging](#) and [social media](#), digital engagement can help grow your audiences beyond the confines of academic journals and those research communities already plugged into the literature. Likewise, podcasting puts your research on a completely new platform, increasing the odds that new audiences – from politicians to laypersons – will hear about it.

Todd Landman is Professor of Political Science at the University of Nottingham, as well as the creator and host of [The Rights Track](#), a podcast on human rights in which he aims to “raise awareness about human rights analysis for students, academic researchers, policymakers and practitioners working in the field of human rights”. Landman has had such a positive and rewarding experience that he is surprised more academics don’t podcast. In a [2016 article in The Guardian](#), he commented:

“The podcast format is like a fireside chat – it allows listeners to hear experts discuss their work in their own voices, and allows the experts to express themselves more freely than in the usual academic forms of dissemination. We have even been able to work in questions from social media to provide real-time responses within our podcasts.”

No topic is too niche: riding out the long tail

NPR, BBC and podcasting companies like Midroll and Gimlet dominate the iTunes charts. These podcasts generally have high production values, as evidenced in aspects like their scripting or sound design, which can be a daunting listen for those thinking of starting their own project. However, these examples are at the head of what writer [Chris Anderson](#) calls the “long tail”, with a plethora of novice and niche podcasts sitting at the tail end of digital audio offerings.

Anderson’s “long tail” is chiefly applied to the retail economy but the theory is widely applicable to internet-based content. [Markman and Sawyer](#), in their [article on independent podcast-makers and their motivations](#), write that:

“In the long tail marketplace, a small number of traditional hits still dominate at the head of the curve, but they now compete for attention with an increasing array of niche products, populating the tail. Anderson argues that access to low-cost (or no-cost) production and distribution tools has created a new class of producers, frequently technophiles or innovators, who can exploit the economics of the long tail by marketing to a specialised but geographically dispersed audience. As a result, independent podcasts situated in the long tail can offer a more diverse range of audio content than traditional broadcast radio.”

Although it is the big hits that dominate the headlines and garner attention for the medium in the wider press, the podcasting space is, in fact, largely comprised of amateurs providing narrowly targeted content and who sit on the “[infinitely thin end](#)” of the long tail, creating content more tailored for smaller, but interested or influential, audiences. Markman and Sawyer, in identifying motivations of independent podcasters, found those motivated by the “long tail” factor produced podcast content because “[they liked the convenience of the medium, freedom of the medium, \[and\] were interested in filling a niche/un-served market](#)”.

Podcasts are research

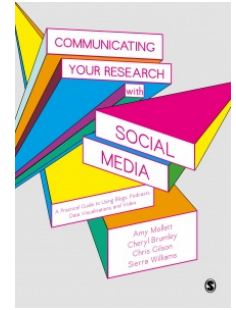
But what about podcasts as pieces of research in themselves, separate to the data collection and dissemination parts of the research lifecycle? Whilst producing the Brazil series of podcasts for the *LSE Review of Books Podcast*, Cheryl Brumley interviewed renowned criminologist Silvia Ramos about violent crime in Rio de Janeiro. The interview would feature in a 30-minute podcast on how Brazilian NGOs were transforming the lives of young people in violent communities (you can listen [here](#)).

During the interview Ramos commented that Brumley was utilising an “investigative methodology” and by doing so, she was producing a piece of research that could stand on its own. Brumley explains:

“I never really thought about podcasting as creating a distinct piece of research. With my background in radio reporting and producing, I was simply asking questions, and piecing together parts of a story in the way that I always did. In this case, I was looking into how deprived areas of Rio benefitted from community arts programmes. I had never previously thought of it as an academic activity. But Ramos was right. By asking questions, and delving deep into the facts on the problem of crime in Rio de Janeiro, I was stitching together a story that was, in its own way, a piece of research: how to stop a cycle of violence in the urban space. The sciences and social sciences at their core are about putting together the pieces of a puzzle. This experience therefore got me thinking about podcasting as more than just a means to an ends. The microphone forms a sort of contract; you listen, collect and clarify. The interviewee in turn understands they must deliver opinions, facts, and in some cases, emotional responses, to your questions.”

After reviewing some of the advantages podcasts can offer, we hope you are convinced of the merits of podcasting for sharing research. Researchers looking to reach wider audiences outside of those already tuned in to the usual ivory tower publishing channels can do so through podcasting. Podcasting is also useful throughout the research lifecycle; its audio format offers you a means to distinguish yourself from the crowded and competitive research landscape. At the same time, it is an accessible and easy means of achieving all these ends.

Chapter 5 of the authors' book [Communicating Your Research with Social Media](#) examines how podcasts can help bring new audiences to your research and demystifies the technical skills required to produce a podcast. If you'd like to purchase a copy of the book, SAGE offer a 20% discount to readers. Just enter the code is **UKRM20** at the SAGE checkout.



Featured image credit: [My Podcast Set 1](#) by Patrick Breitenbach (licensed under a [CC BY 2.0](#) license).

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Amy Mollett is Social Media Manager at the London School of Economics. She previously managed several blogs at LSE, including LSE Review of Books and the Impact Blog. She has published popular guides for researchers on using social media, including “Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities: A guide for academics and researchers” with Patrick Dunleavy, downloaded by 100,000 readers. With her coauthors, Amy has won a Times Higher Education Award for Knowledge Exchange. Amy is a graduate of the London School of Economics and the University of Sussex, and is interested in academic communication, digital engagement, and podcasting. She tweets [@amybmollett](#).



Cheryl Brumley is senior producer at The Economist where she produces daily podcasts on economics, politics and science. Previous to The Economist, Cheryl worked for the LSE Public Policy Group for four years, producing the award winning podcast series The LSE Review of Books podcast, as well as podcasts for the LSE Impact Blog, the British Politics and Policy Blog and EUROPP. Additionally, she has worked at the BBC World Service and Monocle Radio. She is also a freelance radio journalist reporting for outlets such as Public Radio International and Deutsche Welle English. Cheryl was named a “New Voices” scholar for her achievements as a minority producer by the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR). With her coauthors, Cheryl has won a Times Higher Education Award for Knowledge Exchange. She tweets [@cherylbrumley](#).



Chris Gilson is Managing Editor of [USAPP – American Politics and Policy](#), the blog of the LSE's United States Centre. He also launched and managed the LSE's British Politics and Policy blog (2010), and EUROPP – European Politics and Policy (2012), and supports the creation and management of other blogs around the LSE. He has a undergraduate and a Masters degree in Geography, and a postgraduate diploma in Strategic Management, all from the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. With his coauthors, Chris has won a Times Higher Education Award for Knowledge Exchange. His interests include blogging, research communication, US politics, urban politics, and community activism. He tweets [@chrishjgilson](#).



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