Martin Spinelli & Lance Dann

PODCASTING

The Audio Media Revolution

BLOOMSBURY

Podcasting

Podcasting

The Audio Media Revolution

Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2019
Reprinted 2019, 2020 (twice), 2021

Cover design: Andrew Walker

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Spinelli, Martin, author.
Title: Podcasting : the audio media revolution / by Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann.
Description: New York, NY : Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018047783 (print) | LCCN 2018050792 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501328664 (ePub) | ISBN 9781501328657 (ePDF) | ISBN 9781501328671 (xml-platform) | ISBN 9781501328688 (paperback : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781501328695 (hb)
Subjects: LCSH: Podcasting.
Classification: LCC TK5105.887 (ebook) | LCC TK5105.887 .S67 2019 (print) | DDC 302.23/4--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018047783

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-2869-5
PB: 978-1-5013-2868-8
ePDF: 978-1-5013-2865-7
eBook: 978-1-5013-2866-4

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

For Lio, Lola, and Monty

Contents

Interviewees		viii
Foreword by Professor David Hendy		x
Acknowledgments		xii
1	Introduction: The Audio Media Revolution	1
2	Splatters of Shit: Story, Science, and Digital Speech on *Radiolab*	17
3	You Are Not Alone: Podcast Communities, Audiences, and *Welcome to Night Vale*	43
4	In Bed with Radiotopians: Podcast Intimacy, Empathy, and Narrative	69
5	Don't Look Back: The New Possibilities of Podcast Drama	99
6	A Utopian Moment: *Podium.me*, Diversity, and Youth Podcasting	125
7	*Blood Culture*: Gaming the Podcast System	149
8	The Truth about *Serial*: It's Not Really about a Murder	175
9	The Lucky Strike: Success, Value, and Independence in the Golden Age of Podcasting	199
Afterword		227
References		230
Index		244

Interviewees[1]

Jad Abumrad of *Radiolab* and *More Perfect*. Interviewed on October 26, 2016, in Brooklyn, New York.

Paul Bae and Terry Miles of Pacific Northwest Stories. Interviewed on July 6, 2017, via Skype.

Brendan Baker of *Love + Radio*. Interviewed on July 8, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois.

Alex Blumberg of Gimlet Media. Interviewed on October 10, 2017, via Skype.

Camilla Byk of *Podium.me*. Interviewed on December 11, 2015, and May 24, 2016, in London.

Dana Chivvis of *Serial*. Interviewed on July 5, 2016, in New York, New York.

Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink of *Welcome to Night Vale*. Interviewed on September 11, 2015, via Skype.

John Dryden of Goldhawk Productions. Interviewed on April 28, 2017, on the phone.

Mark Friend of the BBC. Interviewed on June 22, 2016, in London.

Fred Greenhalgh of Final Rune Productions. Interviewed on April 2, 2016, in Los Angeles, and on June 30, 2017, via Skype.

Alan Hall of Falling Tree Productions. Interviewed on July 5, 2016, in London.

Ann Heppermann of *Serendipity* and The Sarah Awards. Interviewed on October 30, 2015, in Brooklyn, New York.

Richard Herring of *RHLSTP*. Interviewed on November 18, 2016, in London.

Ellen Horne of Audible.com. Interviewed on October 27, 2015, in Newark, New Jersey.

Dirk Maggs of Perfectly Normal Productions. Interviewed on November 16, 2009, and January 5, 2018, via Skype.

Aaron Mahnke of *Lore*. Interviewed on April 19, 2017, via Skype.

Jonathan Mitchell of *The Truth*. Interviewed on October 26, 2015, in New York, New York.

[1] Professionals we interviewed are listed here alphabetically by last name. Their affiliations with podcasts or other entities were correct at the time of their interviews.

Jeremy Mortimer, independent audio drama producer. Interviewed on July 5, 2016, in London.

Jamie Morton, James Cooper, and Alice Levine of *My Dad Wrote a Porno*. Interviewed on April 28, 2017, in London.

Steve Peters of Storyforward. Interviewed on April 1, 2016, in Los Angeles.

Scroobius Pip of *Distraction Pieces*. Interviewed on April 28, 2017, in London.

Kaitlin Prest of *The Heart*. Interviewed on October 30, 2015, in Brooklyn, New York.

Nick Quah of *Hot Pod*. Interviewed on October 26, 2016, in New York, New York.

Larry Rosin of Edison Research. Interviewed on October 31, 2016, in Somerville, New Jersey.

Miranda Sawyer of *The Observer*. Interviewed on March 17, 2016, in London.

Julie Shapiro of Radiotopia and PRX. Interviewed on July 8, 2016, in Chicago, Illinois.

Rob Walch of Libsyn. Interviewed on November 5, 2017, via Skype.

K. C. Wayland of *We're Alive* and *Bronzeville*. Interviewed on April 1, 2016, in Los Angeles.

Helen Zaltzman of *Answer Me This!* and *The Allusionist*. Interviewed on September 5, 2016, in London.

Foreword

How do we capture the present moment yet also speak to enduring themes? For if one thing in the media firmament is ripe for such treatment right now, it is surely podcasting.

It's certainly been around long enough to have earned its own history. By which I don't just mean that, two decades or so on, we have the necessary perspective to give cogent shape to its origin story, accurately trace its steps into early adulthood, or precisely locate its place in the contemporary media landscape. I also mean—I *especially* mean—that we can start to reflect properly on the more personal stuff—on how podcasting has brought us lives spent listening in new ways and minds captivated by new experiences. As a cultural historian interested in sound, I usually sense that *this* is the stuff that matters most: what precisely we hear, how what we hear works on our imaginations, how this firing of our imaginations in turn renders intangible but not insignificant shifts in the ways we think and feel and behave. Audio is supposed to be a fleeting, spectral thing—gone the very instant it's born. But it leaves its traces. There's something about the act of listening intimately which lets the stories and voices we hear get under our skin. And podcasting certainly deploys such intimacy in striking ways.

Not by accident, of course. As Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann reveal so expertly and eloquently in the pages that follow, podcasting is emphatically an *art* as well as a business. The question arises then: what *kind* of art, exactly? Genetic links with the medium of radio are all too obvious. A neatly teleological answer is therefore inviting: we might simply cast podcasting as the latest, predestined stage in radio's own mutation. Thankfully, Spinelli and Dann resist this approach. They're steeped in the ways of radio; they both bring a rigorous appreciation of the "older" medium to bear on their latest subject matter. This gives real weight to their analysis. But they've listened carefully to enough podcasts, talked to enough of the people involved, got enough hands-on experience of making the things, and have thought sufficiently deeply about the wider "new" media environment, to ensure they always transcend their own personal comfort zones. They hear afresh and without prejudice.

What emerges from this immersive engagement is always fascinating and often hugely provocative, since the implications are truly wide-ranging. Turning their attentive ears and their critical gazes toward their chosen target, Spinelli and Dann uncover new approaches to speaking, to reportage, to engaging listeners, to telling stories. The breakout podcast *Serial*, for example, offers a kind of "New 'New Journalism.'" Other series re-structure classical narrative arcs, disrupt conventional genre boundaries, and threaten the market dominance of established media behemoths. To think of podcasting *only* in relation to radio, they suggest—to measure it *only* according to radio values and styles and then list its various virtues or deficiencies accordingly—is to fail to hear it for what it *really* is. New medium or not, it is certainly something emphatically starting to take on a life of its own which, naturally, brings its own dangers. At some stage—perhaps all too soon, they warn us—stasis will set in, a certain formulaic style will take hold, and the current creative ferment will ebb slowly away.

But not *yet*. We are, as the authors put it, in a "moment of dynamism." This timely book offers us a ring-side seat. It helps us to *feel* the moment. Better still, it has profound lessons for anyone interested in nurturing modern media's most creative impulses. In short, it helps us to understand why a "moment" such as this really *matters*.

David Hendy
Professor of Media and Cultural History
University of Sussex

Acknowledgments

Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution would not have taken the form it did without the work of Research Assistant Joy Stacey. She not only identified essential resources, undertook close listenings of individual podcasts, and managed and conducted the survey of young podcast journalists, but was also extremely useful in helping us frame issues of diversity and sexual identity in podcasting. We also had research assistant help from Ella Gray Thomas and Joe Horton who undertook additional close listenings and booked and conducted interviews.

We are grateful for a British Academy/Leverhulme Research Grant that enabled us to: travel to, conduct, and transcribe many of our interviews; undertake our survey of young podcast journalists; and pay our research staff. The School of Media, Film and Music at the University of Sussex provided research leave to facilitate the writing of this book and was also the hothouse in which many of the arguments, ideas, contentions, and suggestions found in this book were first hashed out with students and colleagues. In particular we would like to thank Michael Bull and David Hendy for giving this book productive nudges when it was in the early outline stage, which helped make what it offers more substantial and useful to both scholars and practitioners. Nicolas Till and Sally Munt gave useful feedback on grant applications for this project, as did Paul Davidson of the University of Sussex Research and Enterprise Office. The School of Media, Film and Music also provided access to recording equipment and facilities for some interview recordings which resulted in more professional material. In addition, the Head of Media, Film and Music Tim Jordan and the Head of Media Practice Adrian Goycoolea were very supportive of this project. We would also like to thank the School of Media at the University of Brighton and particularly Irmi Karl and Helen Kennedy for their support of the work on this book.

Chapter 6, about diversity and youth podcasting, is indebted to the young journalists and producers of *Podium.me* who offered their valuable time and insights in a survey of their use of podcasts and their approaches to podcast making. While some were happy to be named, all the respondents have been anonymized in accordance with new research guidelines.

Chapter 7 details the production and distribution of the podcast series *Blood Culture* which was a product of the (often underpaid) efforts of a large group of people. We would like to thank Phil Connolly and David Wigram for developing and writing the project, Marley Cole and Simon James for their sound design (and music), Claire M. Singer for her score, Stephen Cooper and James Morris for their web work, Alan Gilchrist for his patience and humor, Kaye Tilbury and Lizzie Parkinson for their work in the studio, Nick Ware for his executive oversight, Cristina Lo Celso for her fantastic input and energy, and of course all cast and crews who put the show together with us. The University of Brighton awarded us a grant that supported our research into audiences for the *Blood Culture* podcast, and the Wellcome Trust contributed the funding that made this project possible.

Thanks goes to Ed Baxter and everyone at Resonance 104.4 FM, not only for helping with *Blood Culture* but for being some of the most inspirational and dedicated people on the UK audio and radio scenes. Honorable mention also should be given to Euan McAleece for his insightful supply of links to web articles.

In addition, we would like to thank: Katie Gallof, for careful and supportive editing at Bloomsbury; Zita Krejzl, for transcribing most of the interviews and proofing the chapters; James Clifton, Jack Jewers and Lee Gooding, for moral support; Gloria Dann, for correcting her son's grammar; and Dawn Dann and Jody De Best, for their patience and emotional support.

Obviously, we are extremely grateful to the highly accomplished and lauded professionals who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us as we were thinking through the sound, relationships, techniques, technologies, forms, and implications of podcasting. Because of their importance, they are listed separately and their interview details are also found in the References, but it would be remiss to omit broad thanks to them here. Their contributions made this book extremely valuable to future generations of audio makers and media thinkers alike. We could not have written this book without them.

While we each made substantial contributions to each of the chapters, Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8 were originally conceived and driven by Martin Spinelli; Chapters 3, 5, 7, and 9 were originally conceived and driven by Lance Dann. This chapter breakdown is also useful for identifying the first-person passages throughout the book. The Introduction and the Afterword were developed collaboratively.

1

Introduction: The Audio Media Revolution

> *There is so much writing about the moment, and reading about the moment, and blogging about the moment, and the metrics, and the business, and the monetization, and the platforms, and the technology, and there seemed to be no discussion of content, barely none . . . . That's a dangerous place where it is all function, no form.*
>
> —Julie Shapiro (2016)

In the summer of 2014 tens of thousands of fans queued outside of theatres across North America and Europe to hear live performances of the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. In October of that year, *This American Life* producer Ira Glass promoted *Serial* to the roughly three million viewers of *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and within four weeks the series could boast four million downloads per episode. In 2016, 3.6 million people were listening to BBC podcasts per month. By 2017 Aaron Mahnke's home-produced *Lore* was being serialized by Amazon, *My Dad Wrote a Porno* was selling out the Sydney Opera House, *S-Town* was being downloaded ten million times in the first four days of its release, and podcasting had moved out of its geeky ghetto into an international cultural mainstream. But, as executive producer of Radiotopia Julie Shapiro noted, all the buzz around the phenomenon and excitement around the numbers[1] of what some called the "Golden Age"[2] of podcasting risked eclipsing what was really interesting and important about this moment: namely, that new modes of expression were taking shape and new ways of generating meaning

[1] These numbers, their implications, and their significant shortcomings as markers of actual listenership are deconstructed in various ways in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

[2] Berry (2016b) usefully takes up the idea of the "Golden Age" in other histories of podcasting; Bonini (2015), instead, describes the resurgence of interest as a "Second Age" of podcasting, a period in which it begins to define itself more clearly. While admittedly somewhat elastic, we think of podcasting's Golden Age as beginning in late 2014 with Apple's inclusion of a built-in podcasting app on every iPhone and the launch of *Serial* through to the time of this writing.

and forming relationships were growing around this emergent medium. Johanna Zorn, long-running executive director of the Third Coast International Audio Festival, echoed this concern in a manifesto for podcasting that included a plea that reviewers outside the rarefied world of public radio take audio's new Golden Age seriously and recognize podcasting as an art form (2016). This book is, to a significant extent, a positive answer to that call and seeks to describe podcasting as a creative medium distinct from radio, with its own unique modes of not just dissemination but also production, listening, and engagement. While we do not intend to contribute to the popular hype around podcasting, and while we do keep a relatively tight historical focus, this book should not be read as an obituary for podcasting's revolutionary moment. Instead, we like to think that it holds the door open for creative audio producers who share the thinking of Ellen Horne, former executive producer of *Radiolab*, then executive producer at Audible.com, that podcasting's real Golden Age is yet to come (2015).

In the 2005 *Radiolab* podcast episode called "Space," the astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson notes that human beings can only detect a mere 4 percent of the matter of the universe. A similar limitation, and the sense of disappointment that comes with it, also marks this book's study of podcasting. Of the 350,000 podcasts reported to exist (Quah 2017b) it was only physically possible for us to reference a tiny handful in efforts to try to describe larger phenomena and more complex patterns—a bit like our children thinking about the cosmos by looking at the stars they can see framed by a bedroom window. We admit that our attentions were most often drawn to those that burned the brightest. Despite this restriction, it has been possible for us to draw constellation lines around similar projects, to extrapolate some larger observations about podcasting's distinctive characteristics as a medium, and to use these observations to push and probe some familiar media studies ideas: Our analysis of the editing on *Radiolab* allows us to talk about new rhetorical techniques for composed audio speech and a postmodern (decidedly podcast) approach to science journalism. Our studies of *Welcome to Night Vale*, *My Dad Wrote a Porno*, and *Podium.me* describe new and distinctive modes of audience engagement while positioning podcasting as not merely dependent on social media, but integrated into it as a new form of social media in and of itself. Our analysis of *Serial* describes a "New 'New Journalism'" native to podcasting and can be used to discuss genre formation within emergent media. Our studies of *The Black Tapes* and *The Truth* help us define the new form of "podcast drama" as a product of the unique characteristics of the medium. Two Radiotopia podcasts are used to document

the particular intimacy of podcast listening and extended possibilities for media-facilitated empathy. And our close production analysis of *Blood Culture* prompts questions about new media popularity and statistics.

The critical forays supported by these case studies are all organized to make the argument for the distinctiveness of podcasting. While we unavoidably make references to radio and consider the associations between podcasting and radio, we reject the proposition that podcasting is merely an extension of radio and that the language and methodologies of radio studies are, with some tweaking, good enough for podcasting.[3] They are not essentially the same thing and they are not separated merely by a distribution technology.[4] Radio certainly intersects the podcast ecosphere and marks it in many ways—not least of which is the dream of many podcast producers to land what they imagine will be a more secure job in radio (Markman 2012)—but our aim here is to describe the unique qualities of our new medium and the experiences it engenders.

Intentions and process

All of this book's contributions to an understanding of the podcast revolution are built on our set of interviews with the producers of arguably the most popular, noteworthy, and culturally significant podcasts from this period in audio history. From Abumrad to Zaltzman, we have collected the thoughts of the most accomplished podcast makers (and related professionals) about how their craft and the medium were developing formally, functionally, and aesthetically. Given the depth, complexity, and intensity of their insights, we made their voices and perspectives central to our portrayal of podcasting's development in this moment of dynamism.

We began this research with fluidity in mind. Rather than starting with a set of fixed (and likely arbitrary) demarcations, the arguments, approaches, sets of case studies, and methodologies we deploy took shape more or less organically.

[3] Berry (2016a), in his extensive meta-study of podcasting across numerous articles (a work that has prepared the ground for this book), points to some of the limitations of a radio-based approach to podcast studies. Ragusea (2015), addressing American public radio professionals, demonstrates—consciously and unconsciously—some of the practical pitfalls of a radio-based approach.

[4] Podcasting is much more than a distribution system. It is not merely a new way of disseminating audio content made in the old ways for old platforms. After all, the internet has been used to distribute audio content (for radio broadcast and individual consumption) for more than twenty years now (for evidence of this history see Spinelli 1996b).

The contents do not borrow much from conceptual categories familiar to radio studies such as format, geography, programming, nationality, or the comparatively more manageable set of listening presets on your car's receiver.[5] The book was informed by our previous interests (in media-making practices, aesthetics, rhetoric, poetics, drama, audiences, and transmedia), by conversations with friends, colleagues, and students, and at conferences, and it grew out of our other research and podcast production projects. There are, obviously, large swathes of podcasting that we do not cover—most significantly, we have barely touched on podcasting's most abundant form, the "chatcast."[6] This approach is in keeping with much of the existing critical writing about podcasting as well as its coverage in the popular media. Even as Larry Rosin of Edison Research[7] reminded us that modest productions can have huge followings, he also suggests that when most people talk about podcasting they are much more likely to have in mind something produced by a virtuoso in Brooklyn than a GarageBand-using amateur in Bolton. Yet while we are admittedly less focused on projects from the deep UGC backstory of podcasting, we certainly do take up some which have evolved out of DIY approaches like *Lore* and *My Dad Wrote a Porno* (and even in some ways *Serial*[8]), as well as podcasts with aspirations for evolution like *Podium.me*.

Textual analysis of podcasts, being harder to find in other places, is a key feature of this book, and our readings of podcasts here—while not vast in number—are purposefully very granular. Close analytical listenings to episodes from *Bronzeville*, *Serial*, *Radiolab*, *The Heart*, and *Love + Radio* detail how particular podcasts are constructed, how they are consumed, what meaning strategies and literary devices they deploy, and to what social and exploratory ends. In addition

[5] However, it is worth noting here that the BBC has been working with auto manufacturers to make the driving podcast listening experience more similar to using car radio receiver presets (Friend 2016).

[6] Friends gathering around a microphone and simply chatting with little or no planning, editing, or thought to production values, narrative constructions, or podcast direction.

[7] Edison Research is an American market research, survey, and polling company whose substantial analysis of podcasting trends dates back to 2006, longer than any other annual podcasting research endeavor we could identify.

[8] *This American Life*, the radio program that launched *Serial* into the world both by supporting its original production and by debuting its first episode for its audience (2.2 million weekly radio listeners), is itself an example of a long evolution in the history of audio speech media from its radio form to its podcasting form. While space prohibits our taking it up as a detailed case study, its influence on many of the podcasts cited in this book is unmistakable. Like the clockwork scratches and tattooed welts of *S-Town*'s "witness marks," an emphasis on strong character and solid narrative structure should be reminders of *This American Life*'s contribution to the most prominent American podcasts.

to these close analytical listenings,[9] this book also offers detailed production studies that describe the pragmatic and coincidental circumstances that inform and shape the way podcasts are created, recognized, and become models for future productions and subjects of critical study.

Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution has something to offer (we hope) to two audiences: the popular and the scholarly. While taking up podcasts familiar to readers of *Rolling Stone*, *The Guardian*, *Medium*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vulture*, it also aspires to the deep dives of more research-based media writing familiar to readers of *New Media & Society*. We hope we have managed to find a hybrid tone that resonates with a popular enthusiasm (minus some of the boosterism) combined with significant critical insight and broad-ranging theoretical scope (minus some of the conditionality and risk aversion). We have approached our subject not just as academics but also as producers and as listeners. The fact that podcasting is a part of our own everyday lives has inflected our analysis. We have attempted to write in a manner that is conscious of our subjective involvement with the form, while remaining sufficiently detached to adopt a critical attitude. We use accounts of our personal relationship to the medium as reflective tools or as entry points for discussion; these passages should be read as asides that color, corroborate, and sometimes question the issues being addressed.

Revolution and other terms

What, exactly, is "revolutionary" about podcasting—a term reputedly coined only to hit a publishing word-count target?[10] Clearly our descriptions of podcasting are laced with words from old and other media: we talk about seasons and episodes, borrow "cast" from broadcasting, and we still edit "tape" (albeit on our computers). Culturally, politically, and socially, it is easy to

[9] This practice of close analytical listening is obviously facilitated by two of the most distinctive features of podcasting: the ease of back-scanning and repeat listening. In practice, close analytical listening means pausing the playback every few seconds to note what is going on at the level of language (who is speaking, what they are saying, where they are saying it, and to whom), how the audio is processed and edited, how the elements are being composed into a narrative and where that narrative turns or suspends, the reactions I am having as a listener and what associations and connections I am making, and how music and sound are being deployed to invite ways of listening and subsequent meanings. See Bernstein (1998) for insights that informed this practice.

[10] It is unclear to us whether this is apocryphal, but it is the assertion made in the BBC Radio Four program, *Podcasting: The First Ten Years* (2014).

dismiss podcasting as just another over-hyped and over-sold emergent medium buoyed by egalitarian but ultimately empty rhetoric.[11] Podcasts, as some argue (Morris and Patterson 2015), are really just another example of "people-catchers" which aggregate and commodify listeners for producers, advertisers, and corporations; and our devices are little more than consumption facilitators. There has also been appropriate suspicion around the idea of "newness" itself. Bottomley, for example, argues that "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). While Lacey, more specifically, invites us to question the novelty of podcasting as offering integrated multimedia experiences (2014: 71). These readings, often powerfully informed by Frankfurt School ideas, force us to keep in mind that podcasting is inextricably intertwined into much larger media, social, and economic systems. Yet, useful and necessary as the work of these critics is, a tone of labored pessimism often dominates which can seem at odds with the perceptions of the producers we interviewed. Part of this problem, if it is a problem, is that our current critical frames of reference (most of them inherited from radio studies) might simply not be a very good fit for podcasting. Too often when looking for a component or a technique that will mark a podcast or podcasting in general as a "success" we refer to old forms.[12] For example, McHugh (2016) is largely supportive of Markman's suggestion that podcasting will succeed not so much because it is a disruptor of radio but because it "has breathed new life into established, and in some cases largely forgotten tropes and forms" (2015: 241). Conversely, many of our interviewees have lost patience with efforts to make sense of podcasting by listening backward. Abumrad, for example, is exasperated by the fact that his *Radiolab* is still considered "new" despite having been in production for more than a decade (2016).

It seems reasonable to assume that the simple fact of a person's age will influence whether that person frames podcasting in terms of radio or is hungry for revolutionary models. Edison Research's "Infinite Dial" (2017)

[11] For a history of democratic claims masking the neoliberal forces within emergent media, see Spinelli (1996a).

[12] Throughout this book certain podcasts are referred to as having been "successful," and this success will normally be contextualized with reference to the particular concept under discussion. This could be audience reach, engagement, cultural impact, or serving a socially beneficial purpose. In Chapter 9, for example, we argue that in a freemium economy perhaps the greatest marker of a podcast's "success" is its survival. "Success" in this book, as it is in the larger media ecosystem, is a fluid term.

shows podcast usage as consistently skewed to younger consumers. Podcasting represents a tantalizing opportunity for a new generation to draw a line under all of audio history in order to invent and reinvent, discover and rediscover, audio experiences and relationships on their own diverse terms and in their own diverse ways. Whether we describe that approach as naive or bold, the chance to reimagine drama, journalism, science, philosophy, sex, spirituality, and even humanity, is rare and refreshing and should be seized without apology. Why would Millennial media makers and consumers want to carry 100 years of broadcast history with them into podcasting? Why would we want to transfer 150 years of journalistic rules and codes into podcasting? Why would anyone dutifully accept that baggage? And crucially, we must ask, why should postmodern producers and listeners be burdened by the tired modernist mantra of "make it new"—constantly forced to refer to past work in order to describe their own as "innovative"? Simply put, podcasting *is* new for many of its producers whether we can trace its history through Bell, Edison, Marconi, Reith, McLeish, Shepherd, and Plowright or not.[13]

With these competing currents in mind, and in order to help chart a straight course to something that might be called "podcast studies," we offer here a clear and consolidated list of the eleven major podcasting features and concepts that we explore and detail in the rest of the book:

1. Consumption on earbuds encourages an interior and intimate mode of listening. This is qualitatively and conceptually different from radio speaker listening (and even listening on open headphones) and facilitates a different kind of relationship.
2. Podcasting is primarily a mobile medium. Podcasts move with the human body and are consumed in urban spaces, while in transit, in the streets and in other public places.
3. Podcasts offer more listener control. It is extremely easy to replay a podcast and listen to it repeatedly. Similarly, we can back-scan a podcast to listen to a section multiple times; this allows for different production practices and modes of shaping content.

[13] Also crucially, none of this diminishes radio. Its own distinct advantages are clear—chiefly its "liveness" and its ability to deliver breaking events in real time. Whatever podcasting is, it is not "live." This is not something likely to change and none of the people we interviewed considered it inevitable. Even as podcasting garnered media buzz, radio continued to have vastly larger audiences in terms of numbers (Rosin 2016 and Edison 2017), particularly in cars where radio is consumed more often by a factor of ten (Friend 2016).

4. Podcast listening requires more selection and active engagement on the part of the consumer in choosing listening options. It is a push-pull technology: listeners pull to discover and, if they subscribe, a feed pushes them new material. Discovery happens in a different way than on radio and, arguably, opportunities for serendipity are reduced.
5. Podcasts can thrive on niche global audiences. They are less rooted in material communities, regions, and countries (an advantage and a disadvantage).
6. Podcasts are interwoven into social media and as such have a heightened capacity to enhance engagement with, and activate, an audience. The same mobile devices used to participate in social media are the devices used to listen to (and in some cases produce) podcasts and there is ready and easy overlap between these uses.
7. Podcasts can be produced and distributed without the approval of a commissioning editor, program controller, or gatekeeper. This means that creators are often working with great freedom and little support.
8. Podcasts are usually distributed as part of a freemium model: there is no charge for the core product and income is earned through a variety of secondary means.
9. Podcasts are "evergreen," available (theoretically) in perpetuity and face greater obstacles in achieving "liveness" than other media.
10. There is no fixed or definitive text of a podcast episode or installment. Mistakes can be corrected, apologies added, advertisements rotated, and sound remixed.
11. Podcasts do not have the timing and scheduling constraints of broadcast media. They can be as long as they need to be and released whenever desired.

While, as we have noted, it is certainly possible to find traces (and even full-throated embodiments) of these individual characteristics and opportunities on radio and in other places, we find them more native to podcasting. Taken together, they encourage us to find a distinct discourse or vocabulary for appreciating and studying podcasts. Podcasting deserves its own language.

In spite of the fact that podcasting is audio designed to be delivered through a borderless internet, our interviews and observations revealed significant differences in podcasting cultures worth mentioning. Many of our interviewees had a sense that the general momentum in the English-speaking audio world

had shifted from the grand façade of the BBC's Broadcasting House to the hipster cafés of Brooklyn.[14] This shift has also been influenced by the broad political currents of recent years that have had an effect on the very idea of public service broadcasting: it is a move from a reliance on a license fee or state or institutional support into an environment in which everyone has had to be much more canny (some might say "crass") about getting money from sponsors and listeners. This is a model American producers have been familiar with for decades.

These changes have influenced sound and style. Many of our interviewees (Prest, Baker, Sawyer, Hall, Shapiro, Heppermann, and Zaltzman) noted, and sometimes lamented, that what they hear as a chatty, familiar, personal, fluid, intimate, or even "American" tone has come to be associated with podcasting in general in the public imagination. This was often contrasted with a more "European" style of audio production frequently described as sophisticated, anonymous, musical, sound-rich, crafted, and even male.[15] Interestingly, this style also tended to be associated with radio rather than podcasting.

Podcast forms

While our chapters invoke broad, familiar media studies frames such as formal analysis, production analysis, and reception/engagement analysis to better understand podcasting, they are built around particular case studies. We take the position that larger ideas are only reliably generated and expanded through a close examination of specific podcasts. This specificity is particularly important in our chapters on podcast forms. For example, Chapter 5, "Don't Look Back: The New Possibilities of Podcast Drama," examines particular structures, practices, and levels of investment on *Bronzeville*, *The Black Tapes, The Truth*, and other fictional podcasts. It locates the emergent form of podcast drama as a subset of audio drama, one that is determined by the modes in which the work is produced and consumed. Historically audio drama, and radio drama in particular, has been created to be listened to either informally and disposably or as sonically demanding, immersive experiences. Our case studies show that a new generation of podcast drama producers is creating works positioned in the

[14] Rosin (2016) emphasized this new location of energy and was very alert to the assumptions this has generated inside and outside of the podcasting ecosphere.

[15] McHugh (2016) makes similar observations, hearing in the "European feature" style a "strong authorial choreography" similar to that associated with film directors.

sweet spot between these poles, serials that are narratively sophisticated while being sonically stripped down. These works are designed to be experienced as a secondary activity that does not expect an audience to engage in the immediate and, possibly distracting, task of creating location, character, and action in their imagination.

Earlier attempts to grapple with and identify a similar "ideal position" for podcast audio in relation to listeners have been useful if somewhat stymied by imprecise or underthought case study choices.[16] By contrast, the case studies taken up in this book are by and large produced with the specific and distinctive forms and characteristics of podcasting in mind. We contend that material produced with this awareness engenders a different kind of listening. Two such examples are *Love + Radio* and *The Heart*, both discussed in Chapter 4, "In Bed with Radiotopians: Podcast Intimacy, Empathy, and Narrative." While it is still difficult to use the word "typical" when describing podcast genres, these Radiotopia offerings are very sympathetic to the formal characteristics we have identified in podcasting. This chapter casts their producers as "empathy artists" through their careful use of interiorization to engage the intimacy of podcast earbud listening. In the end, it suggests that certain subjects might have an affinity for podcasting, such as sex and psychological play and manipulation. Achieving these effects often relies on a high level of skill in sound design, which invites and encourages repeat listening.[17]

Podcast production

The chapters that focus on podcasting production suggest that an awareness of podcasting's distinctiveness has opened the door to creative practices (and dilemmas) not found on radio. For example, the lack of a fixed broadcast schedule allows for more and different kinds of integration of listener ideas and voices. Also, the lack of a permanent (or "once broadcast") audio text in podcasting means that nearly everything is updateable and reframeable rather

[16] Nyre (2015), for example, found that listening to "podcast" content while moving through in urban environments engendered responses quite similar to listening to "live" radio content. The podcasts he chose to sample were not emblematic of the form as we now describe it. For his "podcast" material he selected evergreen radio content of an "educational" nature merely repackaged as podcasts.

[17] Interestingly, we have found that sound art projects that are more "pure"—that are more decontextualized and less dependent on narrative—have not yet made much of an impact in podcast culture.

than static. While certainly a creative and editorial opportunity, this malleability is contentious terrain for many of the producers we interviewed, particularly as it relates to the framing and managing of advertising. The issue of advertising in general continued to dog many of the practitioners we spoke to and is also prominent in a range of other interviews with podcast professionals currently available. Like many of the other podcasting issues we seek to place in context, this one also appears marked by generational and cultural divides. Hall (2016) and others (cited in McHugh 2016) remained concerned that ads diminish the experience of podcast listening, and responses to the issue range from tense ambivalence (Abumrad) to creative engagement (Prest and Baker), to an almost complete lack of concern about it as an issue (many of the young producers of *Podium.me*).

Several of the practitioners who feature in Chapter 9 frame this issue of advertising in terms of how it might intervene in the integrity of the podcaster's relationship with their listener—one in which a sense of authenticity is a key component. The viral success of independent podcasts such as Aaron Mahnke's *Lore* and Scroobius Pip's *Distraction Pieces* can be ascribed to their homebrew qualities and the directness of their communication. These projects, created without exterior oversight, are not part of a marketing scheme or programming schedule; they tend to feature content that is a product of the producer's interests and their intuition about what their audiences will appreciate. This relationship becomes clouded once sponsors and advertisers are introduced into the process and can create the perception that a host is no longer telling their audience something because they want to, but because they are being paid to do so. Alex Blumberg's Gimlet Media attempts to position itself as a response to this conundrum, as proof that, in Ira Glass's words, "Public Radio is ready for capitalism" (quoted in Greiff 2015). The chapter notes that the issues of advertiser funding and authenticity have by no means been put to rest by Gimlet; this was evidenced by the audience outcry that followed the network's cancellation of Starlee Kine's highly praised but fiscally unwieldy investigative series *The Mystery Show*.

Our production analyses are not limited to professional projects defined by familiar ideas of quality or those that have the goal of making money. Most podcasts are marked by other social, personal, political, or cultural agendas; their study provides unique insight into different production practices with far-reaching implications. Chapter 6, "A Utopian Moment: *Podium.me*, Diversity, and Youth Podcasting," profiles *Podium.me* as a proactive and progressive youth

media project and frames diversity in terms of experience rather than quotas or access. It examines *Podium.me*'s practice-based approach in contrast to other, more institutional approaches to issues of diversity. Further, it suggests that the understanding of mobile audio technology has been remarkably one-sided, focusing almost exclusively on its functions for listening rather than recording. *Podium.me*'s focus on the phone as a recording device (even before it is a listening device) allows us to rewrite an important piece of script about mobile media.

In terms of production and dissemination, *Podium.me* is not only thoroughly interwoven into social media but is so enmeshed in an environment of exchange and response that it can function like a social medium itself.[18] As noted, an integration into social media is another key aspect of podcasting, and, as we see in Chapter 7, "*Blood Culture*: Gaming the Podcast System," the actual relationships of social media can become artistic material themselves. This chapter positions the audio drama series *Blood Culture* in terms of practice as research. It details the development, production, and distribution of a project that integrated podcasting as part of a multilayered media experience comprised of film, games, and audio as well as social media. *Blood Culture*'s approach to the larger media ecosystem is presented as an attempt to address a podcast's problem of existing in a potentially limitless "sea of free audio" (Shapiro 2016) and the challenges of discoverability faced by even the most prominent of podcasters (Friend 2016). This chapter presents not just the production process of an award-winning podcast, but the means by which social media, transmedia techniques, and a covert knowledge of Apple's algorithm for deriving its podcast charts can be deployed to develop a following within a community of dedicated audio drama fans.

Podcasting engagement and reception

The engagement that happens through podcasts, not just how they are received by an audience, but the relationships they invite between multiple combinations of makers, listeners, and subjects, is where we find podcasting's most distinctive characteristics. Through these relationships different kinds of meaning can be accessed. Brendan Baker, the producer on *Love + Radio*, was particularly

[18] This situation is clearly enabled to some degree by the fact that the same phones and devices are used interchangeably to engage in social media as well as to record, edit, and upload audio.

useful here when he described radio as "information getting transmitted," and podcasting as more "abstract" and open to multiple engagements and perceptions (2016). For him, radio was for clarity while podcasting was for subtlety.

Among the podcasts committed to working with this subtlety, *Radiolab* is perhaps the most accomplished and the most well-known. Chapter 2, "Splatters of Shit: Story, Science, and Digital Speech on *Radiolab*," presents *Radiolab* as a new form of postmodern podcast science journalism and enquiry that incorporates perspectives not conventionally associated with traditional science reporting. We argue that this approach is facilitated by a dense, sculptural, authentically digital manipulating of audio speech that does not pretend to be real conversation. One of its other particularly postmodern aspects (mentioned above in other contexts) is its natural and easy acceptance of the impermanence of its episodes. On *Radiolab* there is no urtext; after installments are released they can be changed online for editorial reasons. This chapter examines, for example, the Yellow Rain segment from the 2012 "Fact of the Matter" episode which is altered not just for an apology but for an extended discussion of the editorial thinking that led to the initial misstep. While this aspect of podcasting makes for more a vibrant and responsive engagement with updated relevance, it does present some new challenges for scholars used to referring to broadcast audio material using time codes that can then be used by other listeners. Many of the hundreds of essays written about the 1938 Mercury Theatre on the Air broadcast of the *War of the Worlds* rely on the definitive timings of the broadcast event (see Spinelli 2009); the relative ease of identifying, accessing, and discussing specific moments of that broadcast text has helped make it arguably the most studied and most famous in radio history. When conducting the close analytical listenings in this book we can only reference time codes for the version we have downloaded (these are noted in the References). Rather than being unsettled by this lack of a definitive text and its implications for conventional scholarship, we take from this a reminder that *a podcast is more than a mere audio text*, it is a relationship invited through an audio text between people involved in making and listening to that text and beyond.

Therefore, while *individual* listening might be the moment in which a podcast "happens" in some sense, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to consider larger formations of podcast *audiences*. Chapter 3, "You Are Not Alone: Podcast Communities, Audiences, and *Welcome to Night Vale*," examines how social media is and is not used in audience formation. We describe the podcast audience as much more "knowable" than the radio audience, and the interaction