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The Age of Podcasts in the US and UK

With the rise of digital media and reliance on the Internet, several new storytelling platforms have emerged. Podcasts, although not really new, have been established as a popular medium for news and entertainment in the past five years. The first major podcast to gain renown and success was Serial, developed by This American Life. Serial investigates the 1999 murder of a teen in Baltimore (Eadicicco). It sets an interesting precedent for podcast formats, as it is a series of episodes created in a specific order to tell a story. In addition to the serial format, podcasts also feature hosts interviewing new guests every episode or podcasters having a conversation with each other on air. Podcasts also span a wide range of categories from news to comedy to art but generally focus on niche topics. As podcasts have risen in popularity globally, it is interesting to compare the fascinating medium through a news context in two different markets, the United States and the United Kingdom. The US podcast 'The Daily' created by the New York Times and the UK's BBC Global News podcast both use podcasts as a platform to engage listeners in important news of the day in order to adapt to the new media landscape where podcasts have evolved from radio as a major storytelling platform; however, the two podcasts differ in their presentation of news, overall format and style of the show as well as funding models.

Although podcasts have developed from radio in many aspects such as similar content, they represent an entirely different medium due to their intimacy, flexibility and diversity. Podcasts have used basic radio storytelling features and adapted it, making content more engaging. When podcasts were first produced, many publishers used their radio content and “distributed [it] as podcasts to offer additional opportunities for audiences to engage with content on their own terms and schedule” (Berry 2016). The BBC is an example of this as its radio stations began to put their content in podcasts and make it available online as early as July 2007 (Hockaday 2015). Podcasts were not only an evolution of radio but they also helped radio stations like NPR. In 2014, NPR declared its “revenue from podcasts was more than double this year” than the year before, helping the business finally break even in 2015 (Greenberg 2015).

Moreover, since most people listen to podcast on their smartphones since during their commute and largely through headphones, the experience feels more intimate (RAJAR Midas Audio Survey). In many ways, podcasts are filling in a gap in the market because they are able to reach listeners at a crucial time, their commute. With regard to format, podcasts also differ greatly from radio in that they are flexible since listeners can choose what topics interest them as well as control when to listen. Technology journalist Justin Pot even characterizes podcasts as a combination of “the audio experience of radio with the convenience of a magazine” (Pot 2013). Podcasts are also flexible in the sense that they are less structured than radio. Producers can “tell the story in their own way rather than in the highly structured form demanded by linear broadcasting”

(Berry 2016). For instance, Serial experimented with its podcast length and included some episodes that were 28 minutes while others were 56 minutes, which is not possible on radio since there's an allotted time (Berry 2016). Lastly, podcasts have more diverse producers and audiences than radio because of the low barriers to entry and ease in creating a podcast. It does not require expensive high quality equipment so more minorities including people of color are able to voice their opinions and have a platform. The idea that anyone can start a podcast is exemplified by Marc Maron's famous "WTF with Mac Maron" podcast that was produced in his Los Angeles garage (Berry 2016). Even though podcasts are very similar to radio, they are a more evolved form that lends to more creativity and engagement, resulting in its mass appeal.

In order to discuss the reasons behind the rise of podcasts, it is important to consider both diffusion of innovation theory as well as technology acceptance model (TAM). Current research on the adoption of podcasts notes that the "spread of podcasts in institutions could rightfully be considered as the diffusion of innovation, in a manner consistent with Roger's theory" (Merhi 2015). Roger's theory of diffusion of innovation states that there are five adopter categories that include, innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards (LaMorte 2016). The innovators and early adopters will feel the most comfortable adopting new technology in this case, while the rest are slower to adopt. In the context of podcasts, those that began listening and producing in early 2014 and 2015 could be considered innovators or early adopters. Since a large portion of podcast listeners now consists of millennials, they can fall into the early and late

majority categories. In addition to the diffusion of innovation theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) “provides a well-established model for evaluating and predicting user acceptance of information technology”. (Merhi 2015). People are more likely to use the technology if they perceive it to be useful and easy to use. With podcasts, they follow the TAM model well since they are both informative and entertaining as well as listener friendly, satisfying the factors in the model and explaining the attractiveness of the medium.

News podcasts are especially popular; both the New York Times’ The Daily podcast and the BBC World News are daily news podcasts that seek to inform their audience on the biggest news stories using their organizations’ resources such as reporters in order to produce high quality podcasts. The Daily is a five-day a week 20 minute podcast that covers one major news story of the day. BBC World News releases two episodes a day with one at the weekends and is around 25 minutes long. The Daily has been very successful in building a large audience and recently announced a radio show deal (Salmon 2018). This is interesting since it is opposite from the traditional evolution of radio to podcast. Part of the reason the podcast is a success is because “The New York Times is a daily newspaper, so when it decided to build a flagship podcast, it pretty much had to come out daily. That was a smart financial decision: A regular show, even if it builds up slowly, has a very predictable listener base and therefore can bring in much more money from sponsors, week in and week out.” (Salmon 2018). Both publishers are able to benefit from the advantage of having a large parent company and significant resources including reporters on staff in

order to produce high quality news podcasts. The BBC Global News podcast also covers an impressive range of news issues across the globe, which requires significant resources and coordination. It has also become very popular with “322.7million [downloads] since it began in August 2007“ (Hockaday 2015).

After listening to both The Daily and BBC World News, the differences in presentation of news, style and funding model is very evident. Both podcasts recently covered the announcement via South Korea of North Korea’s willingness to discuss denuclearization. The BBC’s podcast first talked about this news story for roughly four minutes and then covered other international stories of the day. The format included the host, Jackie Leonard presenting the news in a very factual, structured way with an interview with a correspondent in Seoul. Overall, it was very news focused and didactic, reminiscent of NPR. The podcast content focused not only on North Korea’s announcement but how the US will react, looking at a more global perspective.

The same news story was discussed in The Daily podcast hosted by Michael Barbaro. The Daily in comparison was more sensational with more music and ambient sounds. The podcast also started off with sound bytes from other news stations covering the same story, which was a creative format of storytelling. The entire 20-minute podcast discussed the importance of the announcement including a historical approach. It was much more conversational as the format is host Barbaro speaking with a new guest speaker (often New York Times correspondents) every show. It is much more conversational and the content is more digestible as Barbaro reiterates and summarizes the key points that the

correspondent makes. Additionally, the episode featured one mid-roll Morgan Stanley advertisement, which the BBC does not have as it remains ad-free on all its podcasts. Lastly, the Daily podcast focuses on news mostly relevant to the US as their last seven podcasts revolved around the Florida school shooting and the issue of gun control in the US. Overall, the style and format of the news podcasts differ as the Daily podcast is formatted as a more casual conversation about major news with the intent to explain it in detail while BBC Global News podcast aims to give listeners a rundown of major news events all over the world in a very objective, factual manner. Yet they are comparable in their content and success as they both cover important daily news through high quality podcasts.

One major difference that speaks to the general podcast market as well is the difference in funding models as The New York Times is not publically funded like the BBC. As a result, the Daily podcast and several other US podcasts rely on revenue from advertisements. However, research shows that advertisements are not always seen as annoying or undesirable. Part of the reason for this could be because of how it is weaved into the podcast, making it feel organic. Midroll Media's CEO Erik Diehn says "when it really does feel like part of a show, there's less of a skip rate", which makes logical sense (Katz 2018). Many listeners actually do not skip through the ads even though there is a native skip feature that could act as an ad-block. Headgum CTO Andrew Pile points out that "there are really audiences out there who listen to every word that comes out of [a host's] mouth" (Katz 2018).

Ultimately, news podcasts have amassed loyal audiences through high quality production and creative, informative journalism in part due to the features podcasts boast over radio. Although this essay analyzes news podcasts in the US and UK, it is important to note that the US market still has a larger audience for podcasts in general largely due to the fact that it is free and convenient for listeners, in contrast to other news platforms. The UK has some exceptionally popular podcasts such as the ones by BBC yet it is still a developing market in other non-news, niche categories especially. Data found that in the UK only “8% of respondents said they listened to a podcast on a weekly basis” (Annicelli 2017). Meanwhile, 17% (48 million) listen to podcasts weekly in the US (2018 Podcast Stats & Facts). Former BBC producer and founder of Falling Tree Productions, Alan Hall believes that “the advertising content prominent on many US podcasts would not be acceptable to British listeners who are accustomed to quality, free programming. Until there's a funding model to compete with public radio commissioning, UK podcasting will remain the preserve of the amateur enthusiast, the self supporting celebrity and the BBC's radio shows” (McHugh 2016).

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