

COMM310 - Assignment 3:

Final Paper

Voices in Our Heads:

Why Podcast Listenership is Exploding Among Young Demographics

Seamus McKale

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Instructor: April Warn

Podcasting is a relatively modern spin on radio broadcasting, one of the oldest electronic broadcast mediums. Podcasts are serialized audio programs, distributed through RSS feeds to anyone with internet access. They range in length from a few minutes to a few hours, and podcasts can be found to cover virtually any topic imaginable. The ease of distribution coupled with the inexpensive and simple production process makes the medium very accessible to creators, even those without any audio production background. Podcasting was invented in 2004, and began its rise to prominence almost immediately. In 2018, there were over 525,000 active podcasts, totalling over 18.5 million episodes in circulation. The audience for the medium has consistently grown by 10 to 20 per cent year over year, with 26 per cent of the U.S. population in 2018 listening to a podcast at least once per month (Bhaskar, 2018). When one looks at the demographics of podcast listeners, an interesting trend becomes apparent. At the time of a 2017 survey, 31 per cent of respondents aged 25-54 had listened to a podcast in the past month, compared to just 12 per cent of those aged 55-plus (Greenwald, 2018). Podcast listenership is definitively skewed towards a younger audience. What is it about this medium that attracts younger listeners, while older listeners remain slow to join in?

Podcasting has its origins in traditional AM/FM radio broadcasting, and so it makes sense to compare the two, particularly when speaking about listener demographics. As listener age increases, the listener is less likely to choose podcasts and more likely to listen to AM/FM radio, with the contrast being quite stark. A survey of listening habits conducted by AudienceNet found that for those aged 16-24, the listening share (percentage of total listening time) of on-demand streaming was 49-60 per cent. In the age range 25-44, it was 24-33 per cent. Compare that to those aged 45-plus, who spend just 8-15 per cent of their listening time with on-demand streaming (Jacobs, 2018). The listening share of AM/FM radio, predictably, is the reverse of this

trend: 16-year-olds spend just 12 per cent of their listening time with AM/FM, compared to the 45 per cent listening share of those aged 65-plus (Jacobs, 2018). Possibly the easiest explanation for this trend is simply that podcasting makes use of new technology, and older people are less likely to be adopters of new technology, preferring to stick to what they know and are comfortable with, in this case AM/FM radio. This doesn't explain everything, however.

Terrestrial radio stations are all available to be streamed live on the very same devices used for podcast listening, so there is something more that drives the younger demographics towards podcasts.

While both traditional radio and podcasts are audio-only media, the experience of listening to podcasts is very different from the experience of listening to radio. McLuhan's media ecology theory tells us that our everyday experience with a technology is more important than the newness or novelty of the technology itself (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 311). The key strengths of traditional radio are seen as immediacy and intimacy. While podcasting lacks the immediacy of radio, it brings a much deeper level of intimacy. When it comes to creating an intimate environment for the listener, podcasting has numerous advantages that radio does not. The low barrier of entry for creating podcasts means many or most of the podcasts available are performed and produced by amateurs, who lack the professional polish of commercial radio announcers. Podcast hosts tend to have a very relaxed, conversational, and amateurish manner of speech, compared to the "traditional vocal-god authority" of AM/FM radio announcers (Wolcott, 2016). The laid-back performance typical of podcast hosts has been referred to as "NPR voice," (Wayne, 2015).

The technical limitations, or lack thereof, of podcasts also contribute to their intimacy. Where AM/FM radio is rigidly confined to an hour-by-hour schedule, carefully timed to allow

the requisite advertising breaks, podcasts are effectively unbound by time constraints. Podcast episodes over 60 minutes long are common, and some even reach three to four hours. These long-form casts allow hosts to build an exceptional level of credibility and familiarity with their listeners (Bhaskar, 2018). Over dozens of episodes and hundreds of hours, listening to a podcast can start to feel almost like spending time with a good friend, or what Alan Rubin refers to as a “parasocial relationship” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 352).

Having examined some of what podcasts have to offer, why then is it mainly younger demographics flocking to them? Elihu Katz’s uses and gratifications theory tells us that people choose media based on trying to gratify their own personal needs (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 348). It stands to reason that younger people will likely have different needs than older people, and so make different choices in their media. McLuhan’s media ecology theory suggests that these different choices ultimately mean that the younger group will exist within a different media environment than the older group, which reshapes their experiences and compounds the differences between generations (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 309). The needs gratified by radio or podcasting can vary. Of Rubin’s eight motivations (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 350), any one or all could apply to either of our audio media. Passing time, information, and relaxation seem like the most relevant motivations for one to listen to commercial radio. Podcasting fits those three, but to those we can add enjoyment, and even companionship. By offering content on niche topics, podcasts can provide a level of interest and enjoyment to individual listeners that AM/FM radio simply cannot match. Similarly, the intimate connections that listeners can form with hosts makes podcasting capable of filling the need for companionship, at least in part. With multitudes of Millennials listening to podcasts through earbuds at work or on public transit, this is some of the only companionship available to them during much of their day.

The entertainment value provided by podcasts is important as well. While older generations grew up with broadcast radio and television, younger people have had access to on-demand stream-able content for much of their lives. Being used to being able to make their own media programming choices à la carte, younger listeners do not seem find as much entertainment value in the pre-packaged programming choices offered by AM/FM radio. Podcasts grant listeners access to on-demand programming on any subject material they wish, and this appeals to a generation that grew up alongside on-demand media services such as Netflix and Spotify.

There is a quantifiable difference between our younger and older demographics that seems to suggest a potential reason for the podcasts vs. radio choice. Millennials, commonly defined as those born between 1981 and 1996, tend to be more educated than their older counterparts, Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. 39 per cent of Millennials hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared to just 25 per cent of Boomers (Bialik & Fry, 2019). Despite this, Millennials are earning less money and have amassed much less wealth than their Boomer elders had at the same age. The comparatively lower pay and difficult economic situation faced by Millennials has instilled, to some degree, a jaded, anti-corporate sentiment within the group. Podcasting represents a by the people, for the people approach to content creation that counters the heavily commercialized AM/FM radio landscape. Millennials are a politically-aware demographic, who are largely cognizant of the fact that traditional mass media acts as the voice of those in positions of power, as was believed by Stuart Hall (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 332). Podcasts are a relatively democratic medium, not reliant on a corporate broadcaster to transmit the content to the listeners. As a result, podcasts are an opportunity for marginalized groups to have a voice and a platform. Millennials in North America are a more diverse demographic than their older counterparts (Bialik & Fry, 2019), and so the appeal of such an inclusive medium can

easily be seen. Through podcasting, lesser-heard voices have a medium through which they can provide a substitute to the dominant messages of the corporate-controlled media, or as Hall refers to it, the “dominant code” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 339).

The easy-to-access, open landscape of podcasts faces challenges, however. Though the majority of podcasts are genuinely amateur productions, podcasting as a whole is becoming big business. Podcasts have always been ad-supported, but advertisers are starting to see more and more potential in the medium. The perceived intimate connection that podcast hosts have with their listeners is invaluable to advertisers, because podcast hosts generally read ad copy themselves during the regular course of their program. Ad copy being read by a deeply trusted host is more impactful than copy in a pre-produced radio commercial delivered separately from the main content of the show. Furthermore, podcasts provide direct access to the coveted 18-34 demographic, which can be difficult to reach through traditional advertising channels. Brands are willing to pay a hefty premium for this kind of access, and the growth in podcast ad revenue was estimated to be as high as 80 per cent between 2017 and 2018, and 50 per cent between 2018 and 2019 (Greenwald, 2018). With major brands like Pepsi, Starbucks, and Google getting involved in podcast advertising, as well as the sale of podcast studio Gimlet to Spotify for \$230 million US, the medium may quickly become as corporatized as its AM/FM counterpart. In the democratic spirit of the medium, however, many podcasters are eschewing corporate ad revenue in favour of soliciting donations directly from their listeners through crowdfunding services such as Patreon.

Conclusion

We've seen here three main reasons that podcasts appeal so strongly to younger demographics compared to older groups. The first and most obvious is the fact that podcasts are a new medium accessed through new technology, and so there is an immediate barrier to their adoption by older generations who are less adaptive to technological advancements. Though streaming use is growing across all demographics, older groups still generally prefer traditional broadcast radio to podcasting as their source of audio programming.

The second reason is that the younger demographics simply seek to gratify different needs compared to older demographics. Podcasting provides a level of intimacy and perceived companionship that terrestrial radio does not, and this seems to appeal to the younger group. Additionally, podcasts allow for listeners to find on-demand programming on extremely niche subject matter, and appeals to the younger generations' need for such access. Having grown up alongside on-demand streaming for most media, younger demographics simply don't seem to find the same value in pre-programmed AM/FM radio.

Finally, podcasting provides an alternative to heavily-corporatized broadcast radio for a generation that seems to feel somewhat jaded about large corporations. Podcasting allows for more diverse voices to be heard, which appeals to the younger demographics because they are more diverse than their older counterparts.

Podcast listenership continues to grow rapidly, not just amongst young demographics but for everyone. This is likely going to continue, as technology continues to make podcast listening easier. More and more vehicles on the road are internet connected, which allows for podcasts to be streamed while driving. People listening in their cars has long been the biggest chunk of AM/FM radio's audience, and as the ability to listen to podcasts with the same ease is going to

put a lot of pressure on traditional radio to adapt, and try to attract those younger listeners who have abandoned AM/FM in favour of podcasts. It will be interesting to see in coming years if the infusion of corporate money into the podcast world will result in efforts being made to appeal to the older generations.

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