

The Podcast as a Genre

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What precisely is a podcast? I once heard a minimal definition of a podcast as an mp3 file attached to an RSS feed—which is to say, syndicated audio content on the internet. But looking around, there are plenty of podcasts that don't meet this criteria: podcasts that lack an RSS feed (WHY?!?), to speak nothing of “video podcasts” (which people are apparently still trying to make happen). “Podcast” can sometimes be used as a verb to mean something like “transmitting audio over the internet” (e.g. “Will you be podcasting that keynote lecture?”). Looking at iTunes, you realize plenty of “podcasts” are just radio shows put on the internet: iTunes's most popular podcasts are mostly public radio fare (like “This American Life” and “Radiolab”).

But, the podcast is not simply a technology or a channel. I've been listening to podcasts for awhile now and have been curious to watch my habits slowly shift, moving away from “radio shows on the internet” (*Fresh Air*, whenever I want it!) to something else. This piece looks at the “return” of podcasts as a medium, mostly considering the podcast as a business model. It does however offer this, from “Planet Money” podcaster Alex Blumberg, on what makes podcasts different:

“It's the most intimate of mediums. It's even more intimate than radio. Often you're consuming it through

headphones. I feel like there's a bond that's created."
Source

That seems entirely right to me, and it helpfully points to some of the ways that what I'll call podcasts *as a genre* differ from understanding podcasts as just "radio over the internet." The "podcast" as a form blurs the line between a medium (say, a recurring, asynchronously consumed type of audio—usually neither music or fiction) and a genre. The podcast, as medium, has been enabled by readier access to bandwidth, software technologies like iTunes syndication and RSS, and developments in hardware like relatively cheap but entirely decent microphones. Woe unto the podcaster who relies on built-in mics on laptops and phones, for he shall receive low traffic. and of course the iPod. But these technologies, in their use, create a sort of gravitational pull toward a form that is less formal, more niche, and therefore oddly closer to a sort of specialized and heightened mode of casual conversation than it is to most radio genres.

When the costs of creating and distributing recordings of folks talking into microphones gets *way* cheaper than the costs of writing/producing/reporting stories, you get a new sort of show—where folks just sit around and talk. Central to the conventions of this genre is, I think, the group of regular or semi-regular folks who sit around and talk about something. Such are Leo Laporte's TWIT podcasts; the original TWiT, one of the first podcasts I listened to, was indeed Leo Laporte sitting with folks (some of whom his listeners recognize as, like Laporte, erstwhile TechTV employees) and talking about the week's technology news. This form tends to be parasitic on some other type of content—on news or culture (daily or weekly or semi-regularly), or even on a specific film or primary text. There has to be some *reason*, some excuse or alibi, for the conversation to exist—but the podcast offers a conversation rather than the news.

This may not seem especially novel—after all, personality-driven

“analysis” now dominates cable news. Yet cable news analysis shows usually center on a single individual, and their dominant moods are outrage or indignation or derision; they tend to be centered a **personality** (variably likeable or not) who offers a “perspective.” But what a podcast offers is not a perspective (or not *chiefly* a perspective) but something more like a performance of community. In place of the singular personality, we get personalities. A podcast tends to create characters, or caricatures, out of its hosts: for instance, Stephen Metcalf’s snobbish nostalgia for the world of print clashing regularly with Julia Turner’s culturally omnivorous techno-utopianism on the Slate Culturefest (both, of course, unfair exaggerations). But in other podcasts (perhaps notably, podcasts not affiliated with any large online media presence), this develops into a sense of shared reference—something like *insiderness* or *knowingness*. The result is that certain podcasts (the podcastiest of the podcasts by my sense of the genre) rely heavily on inside jokes. Consider the following short phrases: “Who the hell is Casey?”; “Does this look clean to you?”; “The Port Hole of Time.” To the listeners of certain podcasts, they will immediately register as inside jokes—from, respectively: The Accidental Tech Podcast; Back to Work (quoting the film *The Aviator*, which in the universe of *Back to Work* is frequently referered to as simply *the film*); and The Flop House. Listeners of these podcasts (and I listen to all of these pretty faithfully, though the truly faithful will likely fault my selections) come to recognize these, and participate in the joke. These podcasts create a universe of reference alienating to the newcomer, but comforting to the regular. And the result is just wonderful. These are my guiltiest of guilty pleasure. I try to conceal my love for them, but I cannot.

That intimacy of the medium described by Alex Blumberg, created by the circumstances of consumption (on headphones or in the carAre these things great, or what?), manifests in the genre as a tendency towards dense self-reference.

The result is that the topic of the podcast can increasingly seem to

be just an alibi for the interactions of its hosts. I don't really care about Apple News, but listen to ATP regularly. The greatest joy of *The Flop House* (a "bad movie" podcast, which reviews/discusses relatively recent theatrical "flops") is the experience of hearing the hosts *summarize the plot of a movie* and the digressions that ensue. One emphatically does not have to have seen the movie to enjoy the podcast, and unlike a review (or even the discussions of film and TV on the *Slate Culturefest*), it is completely beside the point whether you will see the movie at some point in the future. I suspect that I'll never see the *Bratz* movie; but I shall cherish all the days of my life *The Flop House's* discussion of it. Listen to early episodes and you'll see that the plot summary initially presented a challenge—something they glossed over or tried to get past in order to get to the discussion (on at least one occasion they just read the Wikipedia summary of a movie). But the joy of the show is entirely in the interactions between its hosts, and so something as rote as a plot summary becomes the perfect opportunity for such interaction. It also explains why at least I find these sorts of shows more engaging than other audio content. The academic lecture, or even *Fresh Air*-style interviews, sometimes allows distraction. But the developing conversation, and tissue of self-reference, simulates the experience of interaction rather than, say, the communication of information. (What an interview show like *Fresh Air* lacks is the regularity of its participants; you're usually learning something *about* a guest rather than a conversation between people who already know each other.)

By foregrounding in-jokes and habits of communication, the podcast turns out to be a cousin to that other "internetiest" of forms: the meme. The meme is likewise an in-joke, where the in-group is those folks who recognize the meme and understand its conventions. The humor of any individual "doge," meme (remember that?) is siphoned off from the larger system of doge memes that makes any particular meme legible and funny. (A picture of a cat with some funny, misspelled words, encountered in utter isolation, carved

into the face of some alien moon millenia hence, would be funny because absurd—but it wouldn't be a meme and wouldn't participate in its humor.)

The affective range of the podcast is much wider than that of meme, chiefly because hearing a conversation between the same set of people (semi)regularly opens more possibilities than silly pictures and block letters. (There I said it; call me elitist.) But this affective depth cuts the other way—it also suggests what I find mildly unsettling about the form, and perhaps slightly embarrassing about my enjoyment of it. If I'm right that inside jokes, and a certain performance of knowing insiderness, are what separates the podcast as a genre from its radio peers, it also feels a little like media consumption as simulated friendship. Its enjoyments are those of easy familiarity and comfortable in-jokes, but with friends who aren't yours. (You might call this the anxiety of authenticity, and I'll just take my lumps for worrying over something as old-fashioned as authenticity.)

More troublingly, that same affective register (of chummy friendship and inside jokes) seems downright insidious when you realize how overwhelmingly the list of podcasts I've cited here is dominated by white guys. In so much as the pleasures and affects of the genre are those associated with those of the proverbial boys' club, it is dismaying to see how much of a boys' club it often is.

What is a podcast? It is the humanization of the internet meme, a type of low-participation friendship, a reduced agency form of "hanging out."

Yours in Flopitude, Chris [Last Name Withheld]