# ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS?
## How audio podcasters adopt, transform and re-invent radio storytelling

**By Nele Heise, M. A.**

*This chapter introduces podcasting as an online delivery mechanism for audio files and as a form of user-generated content. In the second part, we will also discuss certain practices of podcasting as forms of remediation, adoption and transformation of radio storytelling. Additionally, we will address the ways in which podcasting differs from 'radiogenic conventions' and contributes to the emergence of 'personal media' genre conventions and new forms of audio storytelling.*

## Podcasting – one notion, manifold meanings

Let us begin with a note on the meaning of 'podcasting', or the more vendor-neutral term 'netcasting'.[1] Technically, podcasting is a method for delivering audio – and/or video – files via so called RSS feeds for download and later playback on various devices (cf. Markman/Sawyer 2014).[2] The term podcast not only refers to a single media file, but also to a (music or talk) program, typically consisting of a series of episodes, "new instalments of which can be received by subscribers automatically" ([Oxford Dictionaries Online](#)). Podcasts are considered converged media that bring together audio, web-based infrastructure and portable media devices (Berry 2006). As Dubber (2013, p. 58) points out, one of the innovative characteristic of podcasts is the way they are distributed and consumed:

> *"What makes it function specifically as a podcast [...] rather than simply as a downloadable piece of audio is the method of distribution: a media enclosure within an RSS feed. Subscribers to the podcast will receive it automatically and listen to it – or not – at their own convenience and discretion."*

However, it is rather difficult to define podcasting apart from its technological features (RSS-based distribution and subscription, downloadable audio files), because it can be understood "as both a simple distribution channel for existing content and an emerging programming vehicle", as well as "a new or hybrid media form that is accessible to amateurs as well as to media professionals" (Markman/Sawyer 2014, p. 21). Markman & Sawyer argue that from the *provider perspective* the framing of podcasting as a delivery mechanism is most appropriate when we talk about podcasts by traditional broadcasters and established media brands, in many cases radio stations (e.g. NPR, BBC), which use podcasting as an additional online-based distribution channel, as opportunity to extend their reach, or as "an extension of their public service mission" (Berry 2006, p. 149). Despite these bigger media brands, podcasting also provides a new means for small-scale media (e.g. free radio stations, community radios) or individual media professionals (e.g. freelance radio journalists, independent radio play producers – one example is the short story podcast *[The Truth](#)*) to distribute their content. Popular examples for this kind of "secondary use" podcasts are *[This American Life](#)* (a weekly hour-long radio program produced by WBEZ and hosted by Ira Glass) and *[Radio Lab](#)* (an hour-long radio show produced by WNYC, focusing on scientific and philosophical topics). Other 'non-audio' media such as newspapers use podcasts to enrich their online portfolio, to reach new target audiences, or to experiment with new revenue models and storytelling

---

[1] The term „podcasting" was originally coined in February 2004 by the British journalist Ben Hammersley in an article for [The Guardian](#). It is a neologism that combines "broadcast" and "pod", which refers to the Apple device iPod and to the widespread practice of listening to audio podcasts on portable media players ([Wikipedia](#)). In 2005, "podcast" was included in the *Oxford English American Dictionary* and announced "Word of the Year" ([online resource](#): interview with Hammersley on the history of podcasting by Austrian podcaster Daniel Meßner).

[2] The RSS standard (*Really Simple Syndication*) was developed in 1999 and became popular with the rise of web blogging. In December 2000, another version (RSS 0.92) was released by programmer Dave Winer, which introduced the so called enclosure element that permitted audio files to be carried in RSS feeds. In 2003, former MTV host Adam Curry introduced the software programme *RSStoiPod*, allowing its users to download audio files. As of 2004, the first podcast clients (e. g. *iPodderX*) were available, and in 2005 a podcatcher was integrated in *iTunes*. Today, it is almost impossible to estimate the number of active podcasts due to the variety of directories (e.g. the German websites *podcast.de, podster.de* or *podbe.de*) and distribution channels (via websites, podcast clients, smartphone or tablet apps etc.). According to media consultant [Minter Dial](#), podcasts are available in around 90 countries via *iTunes*, with English being the most widespread language (ca. 90.000 podcasts in 2009), followed by Spanish, French and Japanese.

forms (see Pérez 2012). One example for these name brand podcasts is **Media Talk**, a podcast on media related topics, which was produced by *The Guardian* from 2006 to 2014. Other uses of podcasting on the professional level comprise side channels and special audio downloads for spin-off niches as well as audio offerings by non-broadcast or media businesses, e.g. to connect with customers or for educational purposes (Berry 2006, p. 159).[3]

Having its roots in the open source movement and close connections to the realms of blogging and social networking sites, podcasting can also be understood as a specific form of online participation and as an exemplar for a participatory culture afforded by digital media technologies (Markman/Sawyer 2014).[4] Some podcasts can be classified as user-generated content, which is voluntarily produced by individuals or groups of enthusiastic, skilled amateurs who are not affiliated with traditional media organizations and who are now empowered to become their own "independent DIY radio" stations (cf. Madsen 2009).[5] Because no one owns the technology, podcasting differs profoundly from the traditional model of 'gate-kept' media and production tools: unlike traditional broadcasting, studios, transmitters or licences are not required (Berry 2006, p. 151), and access to the low-cost production and distribution tools of podcasting allows potentially everyone "to become media producers without going through traditional gatekeeping channels" (Markman/Sawyer 2014, p. 21). In her study Markman (2012, p. 561) found that many independent audio podcasters had the "desire to 'do radio' without being *on the radio*" as well as to produce content not available in – and free of the constraints of – traditional media outlets. In an international survey, Mocimgeba & Riechmann (2007) also found that many private podcasters want to transfer knowledge and information to their listeners, as well as to engage politically and socially by publishing their opinion, which might be of great benefit, e.g. for minority groups. Markman & Sawyer (2014, p. 32) conclude that for some podcasters the desire to express themselves, to promote their expertise or to gain attention and fame, might be related to a rather traditional understanding of "radio as a performance medium".

As Lüders (2008) points out, this group of independently produced podcasts represents a new type of 'personal media', which are more de-institutionalized and de-professionalized than mass media. Podcasting on this private level tends to be more symmetrical, 'horizontal' or anti-hierarchical, since it makes it rather easy for listeners to become producers (and *vice versa*) and enables different interactional roles between content creators and consumers. Examples are networks of independent podcasters, who support each other, promote the work of others (references), collaborate or share podcasting related knowledge and resources to improve their skills (Berry 2006). These podcasting communities constitute specific subcultures, which provide forums of mutual support and feedback, identity formation, self-promotion, critical reflection, but also discursive arenas that might exist in tension with a conventional (commercial) radiophonic culture (Markman/Saywer 2014, p. 24). Free from formal restrictions, podcasting allows them to "offer a more diverse range of audio content than traditional broadcast radio" and to reach an un-served or underserved audience that is not normally found in mainstream radio. Hence, independent podcasters can become part of a new demand curve – the so called 'long tail' – by providing niche content for a specialized but geographically dispersed audience (ibid., p. 25). Another important aspect of podcasting as a 'horizontal', personal medium is that it facilitates different practices of mediated interaction between users and producers, who directly engage in conversations and even cooperate with each other (see below). Despite the presumably unidirectional nature of the pre-recorded podcast episodes, listener interaction and feedback are strongly intended and actually take place (cf.

---

3   See: Radio show "Common Knowledge" on Podcasting and radio beyond radio (2012) with a list of recommended podcasts.
4   An example for the relevance of open source technologies in podcasting is the German initiative *Podlove*, a crowdfunded collaborative of developers, podcasters, fans and designers, working on new standards and software solutions to enhance the production and publication of podcasts (online resource: conference talk by Tim Pritlove on the *Podlove Initiative*).
5   Research suggests that the majority of podcasters is male, over 30, has a high level of education and comes from professional (media and/or IT related) backgrounds (Markman 2012). Additionally, an international survey revealed that North American podcasters spend more money/time on podcasting than European podcasters, who are commercially less ambitious. The study also found that while most private podcasts come with a blog page, podcasters mostly do not identify as bloggers; Asian podcasters appear to use podcasts more often as a way to slip into and to experiment with different roles than podcasters from other world regions (cf. Mocimgeba/Riechmann 2007).

Mocimgeba/Riechmann 2007). Here, Markman (2012, p. 557) found that many podcasters not only "took great pains to provide audiences with the means to talk back" via multiple channels (e.g. discussion boards, emails, voicemails, social media), but that interaction with listeners – and other podcasters – are a main reason to continue podcasting. These 'narrowcasting' practices not only enables podcasters to build on "communities of like-minded listeners" (Madsen 2009, p. 1199), but might also give listeners the feeling "that the producer is 'one of them', a member of their community, whether defined by geography, ethnicity, culture or social group" (Berry 2006, p. 148).

From the *user perspective*, podcasting has changed the patterns of consumption of audio content – from tuning in to subscription. This gives the user more control over her or his listening experience (McClung/Johnson 2010, Dubber 2013):

> "Listeners are enabled to download and store rich audio content to be listened to whenever – and in whichever sequence – they choose. This is potentially an empowering process, allowing prosumers to programme their own listening experience" (Madsen 2009, p. 1202).

Podcasting allows for new types of schedule setting, matching personal lifestyles, routinized activities, availability of attention, preferred distribution methodology and consumption technologies "at the listener's end" (Dubber 2013, p. 57). For one, users are not being fixed to a timed schedule, since they have the convenience to pause or rewind – they might, for instance, match the duration of a podcast to the duration of commuting. Secondly, podcasts are "moveable" and allow for mobile consumption, e.g. via smartphones or MP3 players, which makes them not only "time-shifted", but also "place-shifted content" (Markman/Sawyer 2014, p. 20). Additionally, the listeners are not fixed to a pre-defined program, i.e. they select the content they want to subscribe to – for instance, special interest formats – and create their own program by mixing "genres, styles, formats and even languages" (Berry 2006, p. 156). However, despite certain advantages over broadcast radio, such as the preponderant absence of advertising, podcasting appears to be „a niche consumption activity for the 'prosumer flaneur'" (Dubber 2013, p. 55).[6] Altogether, podcasts combine characteristics of 'push' (automated content delivery) and 'pull' (personalization) media and can be classified as "personalized media" (Berry 2006, Dubber 2013). The 'disruptive model' of podcasting seems to alter the relationship between producer, consumer, and content: the options for a personalized listening experience breaks radio programming as intended by the producer, e.g. the linearity of on-air radio stories, which forced radio practitioners to "reconsider some established practices and preconceptions about audiences" (Berry 2006, p. 144).

## On the shoulders of giants?

As set out above, some podcasts are provided by traditional broadcasters and can clearly be identified as radio content, while others are produced by (individuals or groups of) independent audio podcasters and represent new forms of 'personal media' and user-generated content. Now, let us take a look at the ways in which the latter group remediates and transforms forms of radio storytelling by adopting 'radiogenic' or 'radioesque' (Berry 2006) features and conventions.

The concept of remediation addresses how "new media integrate and appropriate aspects of older forms" (Moscote Freire 2007, p. 102), i.e. how one medium is represented and incorporated in another through formal and discursive 'quotations'. In the case of podcasting, radio or "the historical technologies of over-the-air radio broadcast and reception" (ibid., p. 103) serve as 'textual' anchors for independent podcasters to create a sense of 'radioness'. One discursive reference to radio is made within podcast titles: names such as *Küchenradio*, *Chaos Radio Express* or *Bristol Kitchen Radio* draw a direct line to radio as an institution. They also serve as an identifying textual anchor to give the listener an idea of what to expect,

---

[6]  Usage penetration outside of the U.S. – where the number of Americans who have ever listened to an audio podcast slightly decreased to 27 percent (PEW Key indicators in Media & News 2014) – seems rather poor. In Germany, for instance, only 7 percent of online users listen to audio podcasts at least sometimes (ARD/ZDF Online Survey 2014). Edison Research recently discussed these numbers in their online video "Why Podcasting Is Bigger Than You Think", showing that podcast users dedicate a high amount of their daily audio time to podcasts. The main motives of using podcasts include time-shifting, entertainment/ information (education), library building and social aspects, e.g. discussing the shows with other listeners and fans (McClung & Johnson 2010).

which was particularly important in the early years of podcasting. Today, many podcasts avoid the terms 'radio' and even 'cast' in their titles for many reasons, e.g. due to an emancipation from or to avoid associations with traditional radio. As regards formal aspects, Berry (2006, p. 155) notes that certain elements in independently produced podcasts do actually sound 'radio-like': DJ talk (e.g. addressing the 'listeners' of a 'show'), intros or program jingles, content categories, music tracks interspersed with speech and so forth. According to him many podcasts refer to 'radiogenic' characteristics, in particular linearity: "like radio, they tend to be linear in their nature in that the content is heard as though it were live (…) what we hear happens in real time or is an edited and compressed version of real time" (ibid., p. 151). Some podcasts adopt this idea of the 'liveness' of radio broadcasting by offering live streams (e.g. via the [Xenim streaming network](#)) while new episodes are being recorded. In some cases, listeners and fans are invited to take part in the production via chat rooms, where they can communicate directly with the podcasters and are able to influence the content by suggesting questions, topics or by helping the podcasters with additional information, links and so forth. Opposed to radio talk, interactivity in live podcasting does not only fulfil performative functions (Tolson 2006): Together with the personalized listening experience described above, this potential for actual conversational interaction also separates podcasting from 'radio-like' services (e.g. music streaming platforms) that refer to radio as a 'non-interactive' form and "as a model of listening where user control is limited" (Moscote Freire 2007, p. 109).

As regards the content, the centrality of voice draws a direct line to radio talk – with a difference being that podcasting creates "a vast reservoir of voices (…) [which] no longer fade into the ether" (Madsen 2009, p. 1207).[7] However, the style of talking in independent podcasts often differ a lot from broadcast radio talk, which makes them "more intimate, realistic and engaging" (Berry 2006, p. 151). While some podcasters adopt a more professionalized, 'radiogenic' style of talking, the 'authenticity of voice' (e.g. regional dialects), as well as the podcasters persona, his or her personality and opinions play an important role in many podcasts. Free from the restrictions and conventions of media talk (and a regulating or censoring institution), many podcasts comprise spontaneous, unscripted, unconventional, and 'non-professional' talk: by addressing the listener directly, sharing information of their everyday life, ranting about annoying experiences, or making politically incorrect jokes, these podcasts provide content that is normally unheard of in mainstream radio (cf. ibid.). One example are so called "Laberpodcasts" (jabber podcasts), where a group of people sits together and discusses – sometimes for hours – one or several topics, without following a strict protocol or structure.

Moreover, independent podcasters are not restrained by radio programming structures: unlike radio shows, the episodes might vary in duration – from a few minutes to several hours – and might not appear at regular times, fitting around the producers' routines (Berry 2006, p. 156). Hence, some podcasts are released to a fixed schedule, but "many podcasts (…) may not adhere to a routine at all" (Dubber 2013, p. 58).[8]

As we have seen, some podcasts refer to and adopt conventions of specific radio genres and formats, e.g. interview podcasts with a strict host-guest structure, while others are still auditory but adopt fewer radiogenic features; some could even be classified as experimental radio or sound art (e.g. [Silence Radio](#); Berry 2006). Nevertheless, certain practices and elements of remediation help the podcasters and listeners to "enhance composing and understanding of communication by offering interpretative, recognizable and flexible frames of reference" (Lüders et al. 2010, p. 947). However, the technological and social affordances of podcasting – in particular Social Media infrastructure (blog pages, social networking sites, e.g. Twitter or Facebook) as well as the convergence of audio and visual/textual material, also allow for innovative

---

[7]    In Germany, the majority of independent audio podcasts is voice-based, which constraints the possibilities of storytelling to some extent. One reason for the hesitance to use music in podcasts is legal uncertainty, since the use of copyrighted music is very expensive and/or licencing is rather complicated. Due to these legal issues even public service broadcasters edit their shows – by cutting out certain songs and music elements – before they are published as a podcast. Many podcasters circumvent these legal restraints by using '[podsafe](#)' music (e.g. creative commons licenses).

[8]    An interesting example is [ReliveRadio](#), a website where episodes by independent German podcasts are streamed 24 hours a day and the users can choose between three channels (Mix, Technology and Culture). The reference is a 24/7 radio program (also indicated by the name Relive*Radio*): listeners can tune in and do not need to subscribe the podcasts ('push media'), and – following the serendipity principle of mass media – might also discover and explore new podcasts.

feature and forms of storytelling practices. One example are so called 'show notes', i.e. additional information, which is integrated in the media file and/or displayed on the website of a podcast episode, e.g. as part of a blog posting: hyperlinks to articles (e.g. to Wikipedia), audio-visual material (e.g. YouTube videos, photos), chapter marks, and sometimes also memorable quotes from the respective episode. By adding visual elements and transforming spoken word into text and meta data, show notes represent an extension of the audio content.

Another central element in podcasting are practices of interaction and community building via Social Media channels or in weblog discussion threads. These interactions might also add to the narrative of the respective episode, which is continuously negotiated between podcaster and listeners. In other cases, listeners and fans are directly participating in the co-creation of content, e.g. via chat rooms (see above) or after the publication of an episode. An example for such interactive, creative practices is the episode "A Kitchen Party" by *Bristol Kitchen Radio*: listeners of the show were invited to film themselves while dancing to the episode – the results "of the first interactive podcast ever made (probably)" were then published as a short film on the podcast website. Another example is the German tech-podcast *Freak Show*: every episode starts with a short "previously at Freak Show"-track, a remix of the highlights from the last episode, which is created by a fan of the podcast.

This example also shows that podcasts not only refer to certain radio genres (e.g. talk radio, call-in or music shows), 'radiogenic' features or storytelling elements, but also transform narrative structures, elements and logics of other media genres, such as online diaries – knitting podcasts, for instance, where the podcaster talks about his or her everyday life and needlework projects (e.g. *Cast On*) – or TV series that reflect the serial, episodic nature of podcasts. One example for this type of continuous storytelling is the popular podcast *Yeast Radio:* running since November 2004, the show features the fictional Internet personality Madge Weinstein, an alter ego of underground film maker Richard Bluestein, and a variety of frequent guest characters. While it resembles a soap opera, the show also comprises social-political commentary and personal experiences of Bluestein, and features other actors of the queer podcasting community. Another example for innovative fictional storytelling is the podcast series *Welcome to Night Vale*, which is produced by professional writers and published by Commonplace Books. The episodes are presented as a "radio show for the fictional town of Night Vale, reporting on the strange events that occur within it" (Wikipedia). Like *Yeast Radio*, the show features one main character, the narrator, and several guests, as well as various independent music artists. Due to the popularity of the show, the creators started to produce live episodes with audience participation and are currently touring through Europe. These examples suggest that certain podcast formats can be understood as new emerging 'personal media genres', which are "both medium and outcome of textual practices" (Lüders et al. 2010, p. 947). They emerge through a dynamic interaction between conventions and expectations afforded by technological platforms (Internet infrastructure), media (podcasting) and specific 'texts' (episodes).

Taken together podcasting as an open, technological infrastructure for content distribution creates a shared environment for both mass and personal media. This "new audiosphere of podcasting" (Madsen 2009) is characterised by a broad variety of heterogeneous providers (e.g. media professionals, institutions, or amateurs), topics (e.g. science, pop culture, technology, society), and functions (podcasting as hobby activity, as marketing or educational tool, as alternative news medium, as a non-public communication instrument, etc.). This diversity "re-activates possibilities of the creative commons as reservoir of cultural wealth (…) allowing voices, space and time to re-sound, in a new environment/ ecology, through time/space shifting and dissemination" (Madsen 2009, p. 1202). As we have seen, some practices of podcasting refer to elements and conventions of traditional (radio) broadcasting, while others point to emerging personal media genre conventions as well as innovative ways of audio storytelling and listener interaction. Hence, we might conclude with Berry (2006, p. 156) that while we still tend "to use the reference points of older media like radio as a way of understanding Podcasts (…) there is much that is new and that requires a new perspective".

## References

Berry, R. (2006): Will the iPod kill the Radio star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio. *Convergence*, 12(2), pp. 143–162.

Dubber, A. (2013): Radio in the digital age. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lüders, M. (2008). Conceptualizing personal media. *New Media & Society*, 10(5), pp. 683–702.

Lüders, M.; Prøitz, L.; Rasmussen, T. (2010). Emerging personal media genres. *New Media & Society*, 10(5), pp. 947–963.

Madsen, V. (2009). Voices-Cast: A report on the new audiosphere of podcasting with specific insights for public broadcasting. *ANZCA09 Conference Proceedings*. pp. 1191–1210 (online resource).

Markman, K. (2012). Doing Radio, making friends, and having fun: Exploring the motivations of independent audio podcasters. *New Media & Society*, 14(4), pp. 547–565. DOI: 10.1177/1461444811420848

Markman, K./Sawyer, C. E. (2014). Why Pod? Further Explorations of the Motivations for Independent Podcasting, *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 21(1), pp. 20–35, DOI: 10.1080/19376529.2014.891211.

McClung, S./Johnson, K. (2010). Examining the Motives of Podcast Users. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 17(1), pp. 82–95. Doi: 10.1080/19376521003719391.

Mocimgeba, D./Riechmann, G. (2007). International Podcastersurvey. Presentation (online resource).

Moscote Freire, A. (2007). Remediating radio: Audio streaming, music recommendation and the discourse of radioness. *The Radio Journal - International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*. 5(2-3), p. 97–112.

Pérez, J. (2012): Podcasting in Spain: A new business model or a reflection of traditional radio? *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio* Media, 10(1), pp. 23–34.

Tolson, A. (2006). *Media Talk. Spoken Discourse on TV and Radio*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.