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A Golden Age of Podcasting?

Evaluating Serial in the Context of Podcast Histories.

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Abstract:

This article considers the 2014 podcast, *Serial*, within a context of technical change, and podcast histories. Building on previous work, the author argues that *Serial* is a significant moment in the history of podcasting. Recent trends have shifted podcasts from iPods to networked screen-based mobile devices in smartphones and connected dashboards, locations where global brands enjoy a significant advantage. It is in this context that the author places *Serial* as cultural object.

Keywords: *Podcasting, Serial, Radio*

Biography

Richard Berry (M.A. University of London, 1994) is a Senior Lecturer in Radio at the University of Sunderland, UK. His research interests center on the opportunities that digital technologies offer radio producers to distribute work, create new content and to connect with audiences in new ways.

In late 2014 – 10 years after the medium first appeared - the world was suddenly talking about podcasting again. More specifically they were talking about one podcast, Serial - A spin-off from This American Life and the Chicago public radio station WBEZ. The first episode appeared on October 21st 2014. New episodes were posted each Thursday for the following 12 weeks, with a break taken for the annual Thanksgiving holiday.

Episodes were distributed via a conventional podcast RSS feed, through the podcasts website, and on platforms such as Soundcloud and YouTube. Serial reached five million iTunes downloads in record time (Dredge, 2014), has been described as “the greatest podcast ever made” (Richman, 2014) and a podcast which has become “a breakout hit, inspiring watercooler talk and Twitter chatter” (Johnson, 2014). It was success that producers did not expect. Speaking several months after the podcast first appeared producer and narrator Sarah Koenig told an event at Penn State University ““I never meant to create a fever,...It’s hard for me to answer why [it went viral] I didn’t know if it was even going to work” (Selzer, 2015). Even in early 2015 the podcast was still being downloaded 500,000 times a day (Kohjer, 2015). Serial arrived at a time that was being described as a golden age of podcasting and for some it represented the first “breakout hit” (Carr, 2014) of the medium and perhaps a sign that we had reached the tipping point for a medium in maturity. This article considers these assertions and questions them in the light of podcasting histories, technical change and listenership analysis.

The premise was, in itself, original for an audio podcast but one that mirrored narratives in the classic serials of radio’s past. Producer Sarah Koenig explained that the genesis

of the project came from an experience of listening to audiobooks on long car journeys (Syme, 2014) at a time of renewed interest in serialisation (Ganita et al, 2012) using an approach that drew comparisons with the 2014 popular crime serial “True Detectives” (HBO, 2014). Like the fictional counterparts Serial is also the story of a murder, that of Hae Min Lee, whose body was found in a Baltimore park in 1999. Her former boyfriend, Adnan Syed was arrested, and subsequently convicted of the crime. Serial takes up this story, talking to Syed and others involved in the story, picking through the evidence to dig behind the headlines over the 12 week run of the podcast (Raptopoulos, 2014).

Serial became a hotly debated topic in social settings, on traditional media and perhaps most significantly in a slew of podcasts about the podcast. These meta podcasts offered their own views and responses to each episode in a way not previously seen (to this extent) in the medium. David Haglund presented the ‘Slate Serial Spoiler’ podcast and notes “Serial spurred conversation like few other stories.... There was plenty to disagree about, and many questions to ask...All of these things are good ingredients for the conversations that one can build a podcast around” (Interview, 2015). This is something Koenig herself recognizes, telling Nieman that “I had not banked on that’s what people are responding to. It’s not our great idea and our wonderful storytelling; it’s just that people can’t resist a murder mystery.” (Kiernan, 2014) What Serial did was offer a podcast that not only had mass appeal but also presented itself as a narrative in which the audience could engage with intellectually and emotionally. It did so at a time when technology made the experience simpler and where the success of podcasts such as ‘99% Invisible’ had primed the market.

To many observers Serial represented a key moment for podcasting, moving it from a niche activity to a mainstream media platform, but as Malcolm Gladwell points out in “The Tipping Point” (2001) change does not happen in isolation. There are factors that drive this change. In regards to the apparent success of Serial, there seems to be a sense of events colliding in synchronicity. It is a point (Executive Producer) Ira Glass acknowledges, crediting “a lucky congruence of a bunch of new, really good podcasts, but also the fact that the technology has changed made for a lot of new people finally hearing podcasts” (Kocher, 2015), for their success. So, whilst Serial might represent an identifiable landmark, the reasons behind this notability may be a combination of factors, in which technologies, brands, social sharing and engaging content all play a part.

It seems timely that Serial appeared 10 years after journalist Ben Hammersley first created the portmanteau word in article that highlighted an emergence of independent audio content on the internet. It is perhaps telling that the word was invented to meet his word count, rather than a prediction of the trend that was about to seize upon his definition (BBC/Dann, 2014). What began as a rush of early content that initially presented itself as a potential rival to radio, seemed then to settle down into a pattern of steady growth of niche content and on-demand listening. It became an opportunity rather than a threat, one that public broadcasters (such as the radio station behind Serial) in particular found to be beneficial, as it offers opportunity for “audiences to free themselves from the ‘tyranny of live’” (Murray, 2009, p.199). In their study of podcast

listeners, McClung and Johnson suggest there are many factors that attract listeners, but a common theme here was about control - control over what is listened to, with the authors noting that podcasts and new digital devices were “changing the way people interact with media” (2010, p.82) and it is these conveniences that ultimately presented the biggest draw for audiences and broadcasters. It also afforded producers the opportunity to explore topics, formats, durations and approaches that would not normally find a home on broadcast radio.

Early articles on podcasting (Berry, 2006; Menduni, 2007; Madsen, 2009) considered it as an extension of radio. For Menduni podcasting was a bridge between internet radio and traditional forms of wireless radio - which represented a temporary solution reflecting “radio’s past rather than its future, recalling its amateur phase: i.e., those wireless (sanfilistes) radio-amateurs of the 1910s and 1920s who built their own radio sets prior to mass production. This suggests that podcasting is a mid-term technology, representing one of a number of possible ways for radio to face a complex digital future” (p.10). Just as radio itself was not intended as a one-to-many medium, podcasting emerged from a collection of other practices, rather than an invented medium. This is not untypical when examining the internet. Henry Jenkins suggests that the early days of media convergence were “a kind of kludge – a jerry-rigged relationship between different media technologies – rather than a fully integrated system” (2004, p.34). These fully integrated systems come later. Only when Apple embraced podcasts in 2005 and added the capacity to download podcasts via iTunes did the process finally become more fluid and one that the average user could navigate. Later developments on iPads

and iPhones have further enhanced this ease of flow. Scholarship has also considered ways in which podcasting offered an uncontrolled space where amateurs could compete equally with traditional media. Markman's work in 2012 and 2014 discusses the wealth of content that is still being created at the almost infinitely thin end of what Anderson (2006) calls the Long Tail. However, the head of the tail in 2014 is still about 'hits' - podcasts created by services, brands and individuals with public profiles. This includes content for which podcasting is merely another form of distribution. As Street in *The Poetry of Radio, the Colour of Sound* notes, what we used to know as 'radio stations' (his emphasis) are increasingly becoming "platforms for audio experiences" (2012, p.112). He further suggests that podcasts such as RadioLab (WNYC) and This American Life (WBEZ) all indicate that while the "boundaries between 'radio' and 'audio' may be blurred, the appetite for creative making and committed listening is strong and enthusiastic and growing more all over the world" (pp.112-113). Whilst traditional broadcasters embraced the opportunities of podcasting, the extent to which content has been tailored for the space has generally been mixed (Perez, 2012)

Ten years ago, there appeared to be an impression that podcasting was the beginning of the end for linear broadcast radio (cf Wired issue 13:03). Podcasting seemed to both democratise access and break content free from the tyranny of the schedule, in media markets where traditional broadcasters invited audiences to have more control of their media experiences (Johnson, 2012 & Perez, 2012). By 2014, although battered and bruised, radio remains in good health. Despite the Pew Research Centre suggesting that growth "has largely levelled off" in 2014 (Mitchell & Page, 2014), it was clear that

whilst growth in podcast listening had slowed, it had not stalled.¹ In fact there has been steady growth over the past ten years, with around 39 million Americans now listening to podcasts (Edison/Triton, 2014). Despite this growth podcasting does not seem to have crossed the line into the mainstream, with both radio and streaming music services accounting for a larger “share of ear” (Edison Research, 2014). The researchers noted both a growth in the numbers of listeners and more notably in the number of podcasts each listener engaged with. As for podcast listeners specifically, podcast consumption accounted for more of their “share of ear” than any other form of audio, including radio. The Edison team noted that whilst increased quality of Podcasts was a factor in this, the reduction in friction was also having an impact. They stated that - “We’ve tracked podcasting since 2006 in this research series, and I still remember the days of hunting down an RSS feed, copying it and pasting it into iTunes, downloading the podcast to my computer, and then syncing it to my iPod to listen to later” Continuing the researchers added “Today, all that friction has been reduced to just one step; thanks to the convergence of Broadband access, computing, and media server that is the modern mobile phone.”(Webster, 2014).

However, as with all internet forms there are still grounds to be cautious. As Hesmondhalgh notes, “we need to be especially on guard when assessing claims that the internet and the World Wide Web have democratised culture” (2007, p.247). Indeed, whilst the internet may be supplementing traditional broadcasting rather than replacing it (ibid, p.249), and whilst there may be a point at which audiences choose internet delivered content over live linear broadcasting, that point has not yet arrived. Indeed, in

the examples cited by Elberse (2014) there are clear signs that rather than diffusion of content across a myriad of platforms contemporary culture remains hit-driven. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider metrics. Unlike broadcast media, there is no unified source of listening data. Podcast charts compiled by aggregators such as iTunes track new subscriptions and interactions via comments, so a well-promoted new podcast can appear to be more popular than a podcast with a loyal and substantial audience. At the time of writing, late Spring 2015, Serial remains in the iTunes top ten in the United States, the UK, Canada and Australia. These chart positions are potentially driven by new subscriptions by new listeners finding out what their friends have been talking about, listeners who would have missed the series had it been on a conventional broadcast.

As a podcast, Serial enjoyed a significant advantage from their association with 'This American Life', a program well aware of the importance of doing new things, (cf Edmond, 2014). It is a well-known, much loved and highly respected brand. The co-founder and current presenter Ira Glass is equally known and respected, and appeared on the 'Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon' (NBC, 6/10/14) to promote his new project. There would be very few podcasts launching in 2014 that would have enjoyed national coverage, on a show, which drew an average of four million viewers in that quarter (Bibel, 2015). As part of the appearance, Glass featured in a short video (This American Life, 2014) with an elderly neighbor who faces the camera and explains to the audience how to listen to a podcast - specifically Serial - via the player on the podcasts website or through a mobile application. The piece suggested that whilst viewers might have heard

of podcasts, there were still barriers that seemed to be stopping many people from listening. The other benefit of the association with This American Life is experience. As a program, the team generates hundreds of stories each year, all told within a basic framework that Executive Producer Glass outlined in “Reality Radio” (2010), an organisational storytelling structure that has been applied to Serial, albeit over a longer narrative. If nothing else, Serial has set a benchmark for quality - one which has been widely seized upon by other podcasts and by awards such as Peabody.

As part of the research for this article, I conducted a small-scale survey of Serial listeners, with promotion on Twitter via the #serial and #serialpodcast hashtags and with a post on the Serial discussion pages on the website reddit.com – known as a subreddit. The survey was limited to 100 participants and intended only to offer a snapshot insight into whether something dramatic had happened to make podcasting suddenly become popular. The results suggested that Serial listeners were already attuned to this form of content, with more than half (54%) declaring themselves to be either regular or occasional listeners to This American Life, or 72% listening to some form of public radio. It also suggested that other connectors and tastemakers are at work here, with 67% hearing about the podcast via friends or social media. In turn, 85% of survey respondents told a friend about Serial, and 45% posting on social media. Therefore, in the consumption of Serial we see similar patterns to those noted by Gladwell (2012) with other trends, where early adopters ‘discover’ something new and share that experience with others via personal recommendation.

Serial also offered some interesting, and useful insights into how content is consumed. A third of those I surveyed only discovered the podcast after the season had ended, suggesting that by remaining online content continues to pick up audience. More interestingly, those who were listening during the season wanted to do so quickly (usually within 24 hours of it being posted) which not only highlights the compelling nature of the content, but also raises questions about what audiences really want. These findings suggest that there is movement from an on-demand event, to appointment to listen, or at least an appointment to download or stream within a timeframe. Although podcasts are intended as asynchronous listening experiences - where the listeners choose where to listen and on what device - once listeners became aware of the time when the next episode of Serial was due to be posted listening parties were organized and advertised on social media. Whilst such a rigorous adherence to a schedule is not unusual (Dubber, 2013, p.57), there can be few examples of when this behavior by listeners was so obsessive, with one respondent making a specific point of waking early to listen. In her consideration of the interaction between live events and programs like *This American Life*, Maura Edmond (2014, p.6) notes such offline real-world activities “remediate radio’s live broadcast qualities,” in what is referred to as “an era of podcasting and audio on-demand. We may no longer listen simultaneously and en-masse to a programme as it goes to air, but at these one-off events, ‘listeners come together in a physical setting to enjoy a similar (even heightened) experience of collective listening’. Suggesting that even in an on-demand world, shared experiences remain important.

At the end of 2014, there was much to be positive about when it came to podcasting. Serial was enjoying popular success, the Radiotopia network was expanding after a successful Kickstarter campaign, there were more people listening and those who did listen were spending more time with their podcasts. Serial generated significant interest, as a topic for ethical debate, but also what it might mean for podcast listening. From my own survey amongst Serial listeners, it would appear that its impact could be slight, with 61% of Serial listeners suggesting that their consumption is about the same (as it was before Serial), and whilst the 15% who had been introduced to podcasting through Serial is encouraging, it is not necessarily significant. Serial's success may be significant, but with other equally promoted podcasts such as Start-up (Blumberg, 2014) and Invisibilia (NPR, 2015) also enjoying success it may not be exceptional.

Serial offers good insights into the future of podcasting, as whilst some listeners still do favor the friction-loaded method of subscribing to podcasts on a computer, and then synchronising them with a device, the majority of listeners have now migrated to smartphones. Only two people in my survey listened on an iPod, against the 80% who were using a smartphone as one of their devices. The series itself reported similar numbers with 71% of iTunes downloads going direct to mobile devices (Perlberg, 2014).

Serial could represent a reminder of the medium for lapsed listeners or an incentive to explore for newcomers, as Reviewer Bill Adair (2014) offers, "Many of us hadn't downloaded a podcast since the iPod era, when you had to go through the hassle of syncing with your desktop computer to get a new episode. Serial showed that in the

days of Wi-Fi, it is easy to subscribe and download” Adair concludes “Serial is something of a gateway drug, leading many of us to other podcasts.” (2014). the improving skills of podcasters could also be behind the growth, as whilst “podcasts used to be pretty amateurish ... today's top podcasts ... are full-scale productions with real staff, budget, and industry expertise behind them. (Roose, 2014).

All of these factors worked together to create both the stickiness required to make something engaging enough to stay with and share, but also the ease with which the content can now be accessed (and shared) – all such removes some of the barriers that hampered early growth. As Crocco (2014) notes Serial “had a springboard to bring in an initial group of listeners. Word of mouth handled the rest” There is a sense that Serial forced many to re-evaluate the medium, as it not only raised the quality bar (nearly all of my survey respondents said this was important to them) but presented podcasting as a viable alternative platform for content creators and storytellers. Whilst developments in technology (such as the merging of speech into music streaming apps) could pose threats, podcasting is a medium that - through Serial - has enjoyed renewed attention. In that regard, Serial is a significant, but not necessarily a defining moment and one this will no doubt be the subject of further academic scrutiny.

Endnotes

(1) It worth noting here that Pew drew their data in this report from the annual Edison 'Infinite Dial' survey, which in 2014 modified the definition of 'podcast'. This had the effect that listening which was previously defined as a podcast (such as audio which the listener would need to click on to download) was now discounted. Therefore, the modest rise should be seen in this context.

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