Podcasting in a Platform Age: From an Amateur to a Professional Medium, John L Sullivan (Bloomsbury, 2024): A Review

Catherine Chambers, Keele University c.chambers@keele.ac.uk

Abstract

John L Sullivan's study of podcasting as a professional 'platformed' medium looks at how the rise of the four (Spotify, Apple, Google, Amazon) has proved a double edge sword; on the one hand thrusting podcasting in the mainstream, on the other threatening the authenticity of grass roots producers and voices which the democratisation of the medium originally sought to embrace. The review reflects on the merits of the narrative and its place alongside existing literature on the topic and in the wider context of the media ecosystem.

Keywords

Podcasting, platformisation, monetisation, Kickstarter, Patreon

Recommended Citation

In the 20 years since Guardian journalist Ben Hammersley (2004) coined the term 'podcast' to describe a downloadable audio file, 'podcasting' has become a global industry, dominated by major players and publishers. In contrast to the early grassroots podcasting movement which emerged as a result of the democratisation of the medium in the early 2000s - where all you needed was a microphone, computer and an internet connection (Sullivan, 2024, 4) – four heavyweights now dominate the market: Spotify, Apple, Google, Amazon. John L Sullivan's book *Podcasting in a Platform Age* explores this transition through what he refers to as 'formalisation', 'platformization', 'specialisation' and monetisation'.

Chapter One, 'Podcasting as a 21st Century Form', treads familiar ground and is recommended reading for those new to the rise and development of podcasting as a medium. It touches briefly on the emergence of the personal narrative – explored in more depth in Mia Lindgren's 2016 article 'Personal narrative journalism and podcasting' – but skippable for those who already know this story. As Sullivan points out in his introduction, the book has been written with a non-linear approach in mind for readers to jump to the most relevant chapters.

Subsequent chapters provide interesting insights as to the influence of platforms on the industry as a whole. In the second chapter, 'Podcasting as A Media Industry, Formalisation from Above and Below', Sullivan explores how podcasting has become a bonafide production industry similar to 'legacy' industries such as TV and Radio. Sullivan refers to a process of formalisation where successful independent producers have been recruited by industry players including those that have also branched out from their traditional business model (i.e. Amazon, Google) which has resulted in podcasting shifting away from its DIY ethos to professional production values. Described as a form of 'top down' formalisation, it can also occur 'bottom up' as podcasters form professional organisations to guard against exploitation and embrace entrepreneurialism.

The underlying narrative is of a landscape of challenges faced by independent podcasters as they continue to operate side by side with tech giants who maintain a stronghold through 'platformization'. As explored in Chapter Four, 'Distribution and Exhibition Shifts: The Platformization of Podcasting', the big players shape how listeners discover and consume content and essentially control audience reach through algorithms, with the medium becoming more 'push than pull', a trend also evident across social media content platforms. Platformization raises questions about the contradiction that lies at the heart of podcasting – the growth

in niche audio and authenticity facilitated by democratisation of the media versus the shift towards professional standards and ultimately towards commercial gain. As well as the rise in professionalism among independent podcasters, this has seen a move away from the more open-source RSS towards streaming apps (a recognition of both the increase in content consumption on mobile devices and the shift towards control and capturing audience data).

Commercialism is, for better or worse, driving podcasting development; this has led to an increase in monetisation strategies including subscription, advertising, merchandising and for some, exclusive deals or acquisitions. The pressure to increase subscribers over content quality is also a potential pitfall for a podcasting ecosystem driven by audience metrics (Sullivan, 2024, 171). Sullivan explores monetisation strategies from selling audience data to advertisers to more entrepreneurial approaches including crowdfunding (Kickstarter, Patreon, Buy Me A Coffee), the latter of which has enabled independent podcasters, particularly those with less than 10,000 downloads per episode to monetise their 'product' through a direct creator-fan business model.

Over the last 10 years, podcasting has continued to evolve and podcasts are now fully embedded in the media ecosystem with podcast content increasingly adapted into TV formats (for example, true crime ABC Podcast series *The Dropout* [Searchlight, 2022] and *Dirty John* [Bravo, Netflix 2018] originally a Wondery podcast, or 2016 Gimlet drama *Homecoming* [Amazon Prime, 2018]). This cross-media translation is evidence of podcasting's 'cultural and commercial significance' (Sullivan, 2024, 71), of the increasing importance of the 'brand' and of the widening gap between platform driven podcasts and smaller independent podcasters.

Although outside the scope of this book, non-narrative UK formats such as *Uncanny* (BBC) have proved popular in visual form. Kermode and Mayo's *Film Review*, one of the early pioneers of podcasting in the UK in 2005, experimented with multiplatform as the live radio show was live streamed, and the show released as a podcast and edited video versions made available. A useful addendum may have been case studies across the last 20 years looking at the podcasts across different genres and how they have embraced the wider media ecosystem as part of their brand, beyond the podcast.

Sullivan's book however does an excellent job of introducing the reader to the complexities of the podcast landscape and developments leading to the

crossroads at which podcasting finds itself. As he states in his final paragraph 'formalisation, specialisation and monetisation may fundamentally challenge the democratic ethos of the medium, it is imperative that we consider what might be lost in a future dominated by online platforms' (2024, 224). A further edition might consider the impact of Generative AI with the rise of tools such as Google LM Notebook, on the podcast landscape.

Author details

Catherine Chambers is module leader for Podcast and Radio Production at Keele University in the UK and Director of KIITE, the Keele Institute for Innovation and Teaching Excellence. She is also a former BBC Producer and journalist at *Kerrang!* a UK-based music magazine and radio station.

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