

The 'Second Age' of Podcasting: reframing Podcasting as a New Digital Mass Medium

TIZIANO BONINI

Lecturer in media studies at the Arts and Media Department,
IULM, University of Milan

tiziano.bonini@iulm.it

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Abstract

This article will attempt to analyze the history of podcasting as a cultural practice of producing and consuming digital sound content. After a review of previous studies examining this technology, the case will be made that podcasting has entered a new phase of its evolution, one where it is beginning to generate a market that is no longer simply complementary to radio, but an alternative; one that is moving towards the professionalisation of production and the normalisation of consumption. This phase, which I will call "the second age of podcasting", is distinguished by the transformation of podcasting into a commercial productive practice and a medium for mass consumption, and began in the United States in 2012, with the launch of the first business models that were able to support the independent production and consumption of sound content distributed through podcasting.

Keywords

Radio, podcasting, public radio, political economy, broadcasting

Resum

En aquest article es tractarà d'analitzar la història del podcàsting com una pràctica cultural de la producció i consum de contingut de so digital. Després d'una revisió d'estudis anteriors que van examinar aquesta tecnologia, es plantejarà que el podcàsting ha entrat en una nova fase de la seva evolució, una en què es comença a generar un mercat que ja no és simplement complementari a la ràdio, sinó una alternativa; un mercat que s'està movent cap a la professionalització de la producció i la normalització del consum. Aquesta fase, que anomenaré "la segona edat de podcàsting", es distingeix per la transformació cap a una pràctica productiva comercial i un mitjà per al consum massiu, i es va iniciar als Estats Units el 2012, amb el llançament dels primers models de negoci que van ser capaços de donar suport a la producció independent i al consum de continguts de so distribuït per mitjà del podcàsting.

Paraules clau

Ràdio, podcèsting, ràdio pública, economia política, radiodifusió

1. Introduction

Podcasting is a technology used to distribute, receive and listen, on-demand, to sound content produced by traditional editors such as radio, publishing houses, journalists and educational institutions (schools, professional training centres) as well as content created by independent radio producers, artists and radio amateurs.

It is a technology with a considerable history. The term "podcasting" was originally coined in February 2004 by the British journalist Ben Hammersley in an article for *The Guardian* (Bonini 2006). 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.

The German podcast scholar Nele Heise recently gave the following definition of podcasting, which takes into account both its technical and social dimensions:

"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 (Markman/Sawyer 2014). 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 [as] converged media that bring together audio, web-based infrastructure and portable media devices (Berry 2006). As Dubber (2013: 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. 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)” (Heise 2014: 1-2)

This article will attempt to analyse the history of podcasting as a cultural practice of producing and consuming digital sound content. After a review of previous studies examining this technology, the case will be made that podcasting has entered a new phase in its evolution in which it's beginning to generate a market that's no longer simply complementary to radio but an alternative, with increasingly professionalised production and widespread consumption. This phase, which I will call “the second age of podcasting”, is characterised by the transformation of podcasting into a commercial productive practice and a medium for mass consumption, and it began in the United States in 2012 with the launch of the first business models that were able to support the independent production and consumption of sound content distributed through podcasting.

2. Literature Review: from the rhetoric of podcasting as a liberating technology to podcasting as a new broadcasting tool

Many academics have studied the emergence of this new medium since its inception but most have investigated the potential of podcasting as an educational tool for teaching and learning in high schools and universities (Campbell 2005; Harris & Park 2008; McGarr 2009). Contrary to what we might believe, podcasting as an issue for media studies has not received much attention apart from some notable and often cited exceptions. *The Radio Journal*, an academic journal devoted to the publication of works in broadcast and audio media, published only four articles whose main focus was podcasting between 2004 and 2014, while three articles were published on podcasting in the American academic *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*. Three other articles were published in *New Media & Society* in the same period. In general, a search using the keyword “podcasting” carried out in the online archives of international academic journals dealing with media studies has only produced four other occurrences beyond those already cited.¹

If we examine the most-cited articles on this topic published by radio and media scholars in academic journals up to 2014, we only find a limited number of studies, most of them concentrating on the democratization of radio production brought about by the emergence of podcasting, as well as on the transformation of the audience into producers.

Crofts *et al.* (2005) wrote that podcasting “represents a shift from mass broadcasting to on-demand personalized media”. Dearman & Galloway (2005) focused their attention on the disruptive power of podcasting, describing it as a “bypass technology”, one that people can embrace in order to publish content without passing through the traditional centres of communication (public and commercial radio/TV stations).

Gallego (2005) claimed that podcasting was resurrecting an “artisan” model of doing radio. Berry (2006) focused his research on the portability, intimacy and accessibility of this new medium, which he felt contributed to building “a scenario where audiences are producers” (2006: 143). Bonini (2006) claimed that podcasting was an evolution in the streaming technology (or “bitcasting”, as Ribes, 2001, called it), representing the next step in the de-institutionalisation of radio that had begun with the free and pirate radio stations in the 1960s and the 1970s. Massarelli & Perrotta (2006) looked at podcasting as a challenging technology for traditional broadcasters, allowing listeners to create their own radio content, but also as a change in the listening habits of traditional radio listeners. They showed how asynchronous listening was the main driver for Italian radio listeners to download podcasts. Menduni (2007) presented podcasting both as the last step in the digitisation of sound that began in the 1990s and also the missing link between traditional radio and the internet that online radio stations haven't been able to establish, providing users with a more democratic tool to produce sound-based content. Lüders (2008) framed it as a new type of personal media while Madsen (2009) focused on two new features of podcasting: “Podcasting, which emerged with unexpected rapidity in 2005, has achieved wide popularity due to two of its characteristics: time-shifting and portability” (2009: 1191). Madsen also found podcasting technology to be a fundamental driver behind the transformation of public service radio: “In less than four years the adoption of this new internet-hosted, audio production and distribution platform has resulted in the marked transformation of much of public service broadcast radio, at least in terms of when and how we access and listen to it. I'd argue this transformation has been greater than for commercial or community radio” (2009: 1193). Murray (2009) investigated what she calls the “self-scheduling consumers” of podcasting. Millette (2011) proposes that independent audio podcasting is a specific form of online participation with its own subcultural logic and a unique ‘style’ that's completely different from the institutional and traditional radio model. McHugh (2012) claimed that podcasting has reinvigorated long-form radio narratives. Gallego Perez (2012) and Sellas (2012) showed how podcasting had a great yet undeveloped potential for Spanish radio stations. Gallego Perez also underlined “a certain scepticism towards podcasting and, even if during the first two years it received a lot of attention in the media, later its importance faded within the context of contemporary technology” (2012: 25). Markman (2012) too noticed that “research on podcasting is still uncommon” (2012: 547) and showed, through empirical investigation, that podcasters fit the profile of Pro-Ams (older, educated, professional males) working primarily in the niche markets of long tail podcasting, while Bonini (2015) claimed that podcasters have inherited the spirit of the free radio producers of the 1970s and act as a ‘recursive public’, a concept developed by Kelty (2008):

“There is a thin red line that ties together the communities of amateur broadcasters of the 1920s, the radio pirates of the

1960s, free radio activists, the phone phreakers and computer hackers of the 1970s, the netcasters of the 1990s and the bloggers and podcasters of the 00's: they were all both producers and listeners, and were all linked together in networks. Most of them could fit into the category of "recursive publics" created by social anthropologist Christopher Kelty (2008) for the more recent open source communities. A recursive public "is constituted by a shared concern for maintaining the means of association through which they come together as a public. This kind of public includes the activities of making, maintaining, and modifying software and networks and represents the subject of this making, maintaining, and modifying" (Kelty 2008, 27-28). Amateur broadcasters, radio pirates, free radio activists, phone phreakers, netcasters, podcasters and bloggers, all demanded autonomy and free self-expression in media use and communication tools. Streaming and blogging technologies represented the opportunity for the revival of this spirit of creative conviviality (Illich 1973), as opposed to passive reception (Bonini 2015: 12-13)."

I have tried to summarize the most important claims made by media scholars on podcasting in the last ten years but not all media scholars agree with this positive, and possibly slightly romanticized, view of podcasting as an emancipating cultural practice. Sterne et al. (2008), for example, stressed that the "development of the term 'podcasting' followed the pattern set out in Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's essay 'The Californian Ideology' (1995), where new information technologies are uncritically championed as embodying a Jeffersonian democratic ideal". According to Sterne et al. (2008), the contemporary rhetorical discourse that presents podcasting as a cultural practice as opposed to broadcasting, as being intrinsically more democratic, accessible and independent than the programmes broadcast by corporate and public service media, is a false one. Podcasting is itself a continuation of broadcasting:

"If we free the term broadcasting from its corporate connotations and remember its longer history, then podcasting is not simply an outgrowth of blogger culture but rather part of a much longer history of dissemination. Podcasting is not an alternative to broadcasting but a realisation of broadcasting that ought to exist alongside and compete with other models. If broadcasting were a more generally available term, then perhaps we could begin to speak of our own broadcasts without sounding grandiose or pretentious. The point is not endless celebrations of individuality in computer culture. It is not enough to add 'My Broadcasts' to 'My Documents', 'My Music' and 'My Photos.' Rather, we would like to see broadcasting reopened as a political and cultural question. In some small way, and in spite of its preposterously branded name, podcasting might contribute to that project. At its best, it has certainly already contributed to the weird diversity of audio out there in the world." (2008)

History seems to repeat itself: the democratic rhetoric surrounding the emergence of podcasting reminds us of previous rhetoric accompanying the early stages in the life of other electronic media emerging before podcasting. American scholar Martin Spinelli (2000) has already debunked the similar discourse that sprang up around the rise of radio as a mass broadcasting medium in the 1920s and the internet in the early 1990s.

For ten years podcasting has been under-investigated and overemphasized as a liberating technology by media scholars with the exception of Jonathan Sterne. Now that it seems to be entering a new and more mainstream phase of its brief life, this paper argues that podcasting should be viewed as a digital mass media *per se*, not merely as an alternative to broadcasting but as a renewed form of it, with emerging new markets and business models as well as a growing number of listeners and practitioners. We should dedicate as much attention to it as we pay to other sound-based media, framing it within the well-established categories of media, cultural and critical political economic studies.

3. From independent amateur podcasters to the professionalization of podcasting

As we have seen, podcasting has received little attention from media studies but a great amount of recognition from journals, tech bloggers and technological magazines. Between 2004, when podcasting was born, and 2008 the number of articles mentioning podcasting in important newspapers has multiplied while the use of the word on millions of websites has increased markedly (Berry 2006; Sterne *et al.* 2008). In 2005 "podcast" was added to the Oxford English American Dictionary and pronounced "Word of the Year"; in the same year a survey carried out by the Pew Internet and American Life Research Center (Rainie and Madden 2005) claimed that approximately 6 million of the 22 million U.S. adults who owned a portable audio player had downloaded a podcast.

While media studies scholars have focused on the potentially liberating aspect of podcasting as a tool for independent communication that's independent and accessible even to non-professionals, podcasting was immediately adopted by corporate and traditional public media (radio, TV, newspapers) and by professional producers for commercial aims. Since its creation podcasting has evolved in two directions: amateur, non-profit use and commercial, for-profit use (a profit which, as we will see, is almost always non-existent, at least until 2012). Among those using podcasting for non-profit activity are independent and amateur producers of radio programmes whose only distribution channel is podcasting: as with radio enthusiasts before the emergence of radio broadcasting, the pirates of European free radio in the 1960s and 70s and the aficionados of streaming in the mid-90s, podcasting is also embraced by thousands of individual citizens and geeks around

the (mostly Western and internet-connected) world who are curious to experiment with this medium and use it as a means of personal expression (Bonini 2015). In addition to independent and amateur producers, this category also includes educators, professors and activists as well as members of circles, cultural associations and religious groups who all embrace podcasting as a means of distributing and exchanging knowledge and wisdom. Secondary schools, individual professors and universities have been among the most active producers of podcasts in the last decade. For example, in 2013 the University of Oxford provided 245 free podcasts of entire courses and lessons on iTunes.

Parallel to the educational use of podcasting geared towards self-expression and recreation, a commercial use has also quickly developed, with at least two different categories:

1) Professional producers and celebrities from the world of show business who have taken advantage of podcasts to free themselves from the traditional media by distributing their own sound content for a fee. One example is the British comic Ricky Gervais, who distributed the second season of his podcast *The Ricky Gervais Show* on iTunes for a fee in 2006.

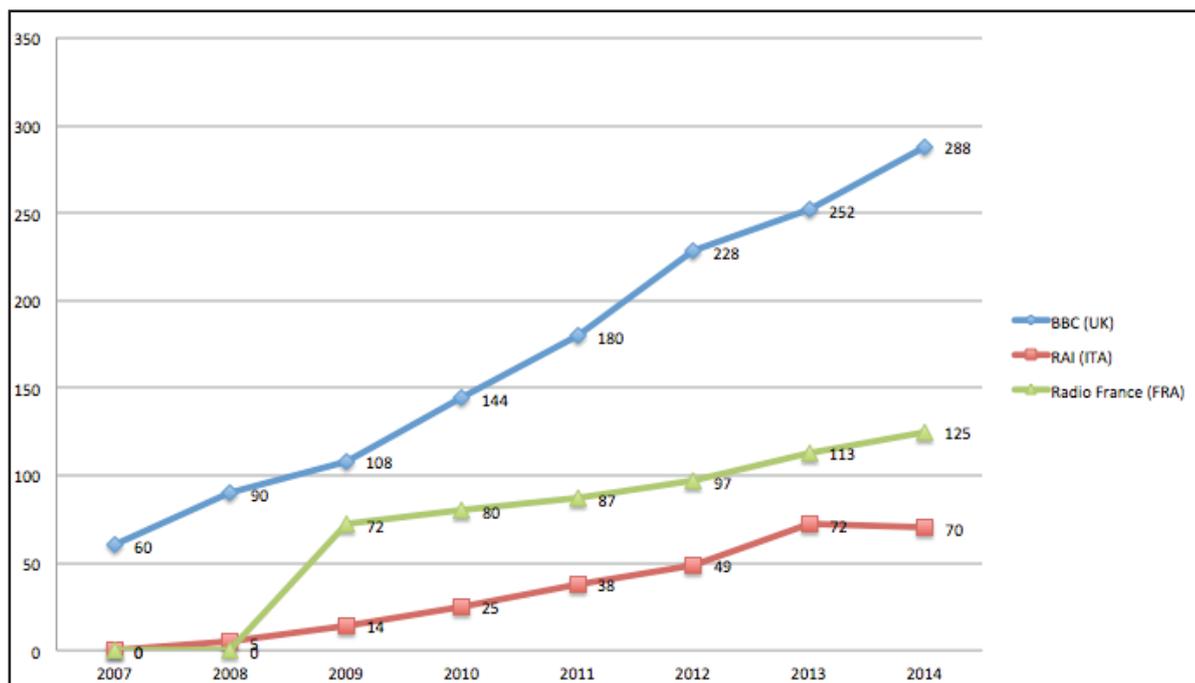
2) Radio and television stations, newspapers and companies. *The Word* (broadcast by *Public Radio International* in Minneapolis) became the first radio programme available as a podcast as well as on air. In May 2005 KYCY, a radio broadcaster in San Francisco, changed its name to KYOU Radio and became the first station to experiment with an *all-podcast* format (transmitted on AM and online). Its programming was based exclusively on independently produced podcasts (Caldwell 2005). However, the experience proved to be economically unviable and the format was abandoned in 2007.

In general, the first radio broadcasters to turn their programmes into podcasts were publicly owned, believing that this tool had the potential to better serve their listeners and legitimise license fees in a historical period of slow but constant FM audience decline. The BBC was one of the first big public broadcasters to take this step (in 2013 it produced 263 podcasts from a total of 977 programmes, cf. Delucia 2013). The first experiments began in April 2004 when the *Reith Lectures* were made available and downloadable on its website: in ten weeks they were downloaded more than 50,000 times. In October 2004 this experimentation was expanded to other programmes such as *In Our Time*, a history programme on Radio 4, and the interviews from the morning programme *Today*, also on Radio 4. The BBC inaugurated a regular podcasting service in 2007. In the United States NPR is the leader: its podcasting service, launched in August 2005, registered a total of 26 million downloads in April 2006 (Jaffe 2006). After two years monthly downloads amounted to 5 million.

As we can see in Figure 1, the download of radio programme podcasts produced by the main European public radio broadcasters has been constantly increasing since 2007, with a persistent increase since 2010, probably due to the expanded use of smartphones.

Talk shows are among the most frequently downloaded programmes from these broadcasters. The programme most downloaded by BBC listeners is the endless Radio 4 soap opera *The Archers*, downloaded 63.4m times since it was launched as a podcast in 2007 (Plunkett 2014) and 2.2m times just in August 2014 (BBC 2014).

Figure 1. Podcast downloads (in millions) per year for the BBC, RAI and Radio France



Sources: Mediametrie, BBC, RAI Pubblicità.²

The most downloaded programmes from Italian public radio are those produced by the cultural channel RAI Radio 3. For example, episodes of its *Ad Alta voce*, a programme on literary classics, were downloaded more than 3 million times in 2014 (RAI Radio 2015). When asked about the success of the programme, Lorenzo Pavolini, one of the programme's producers, claimed that since the podcast began "the programme has come back to life and we're receiving many requests we aren't able to follow up on. In the last two years, especially, podcast requests have literally exploded".³ The programmes that are most often downloaded as podcasts by no means correspond to those most listened to on FM, which proves that not all programmes are suitable for podcast listening. Research carried out by EBU in 2011 reported the case of a programme, *L'ofici de la Viure*, produced and broadcast by the Catalan regional public radio Catalunya Ràdio: downloads of its podcast (54,000 per episode) far exceeded its low listening rates on FM (33,000 per episode).

As for newspapers, in 2005 the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK was the first newspaper to launch a daily podcast with the proposed reading of three of its articles. In the same period the magazine *New Scientist* introduced a 9-week trial period of podcasts with news and interviews. In March 2006 the *Guardian* also began offering a series of podcasts: one for daily news, a weekly appointment with politics, one dedicated to the world of media, one to science and technology, one to the arts and performance and another to music. In Italy the most important experience with audio podcasts linked to a national newspaper is *Repubblica Radio*, a part of *Repubblica TV*, whose podcasts were active until June 2011. In the United States the *New York Times* is among the leading newspapers for original podcast production. It boasted ten podcasts until 2011 but, since 2012, has only featured two: *Book Review* (literary criticism) and *Science Times* (science-related news items). This seems due to a policy of cutting costs deemed to be useless, in favour of diverting funds towards other digital projects; podcasts, which require a great amount of production time and reach a rather limited audience, were subject to numerous cuts. Despite the growth in podcast listening, many newspapers, including giants such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, began to reduce investment in their production because they do not produce the hoped-for returns in terms of traffic and advertising sales (Randall, 2011). Although the downloading of podcasts produced by public radio broadcasters is constantly growing, until now podcasting has remained a marginal part of the radio and editorial market, without a stable, independent business model. Audiences are still too small to be attractive for advertising and, above all, the ways in which podcasting is used, which are not so immediate or intuitive, have relegated it to tech-savvy niche consumption.

However, just when podcasting seemed to have stopped being a "new medium" and lost its innovative appeal, a combination of factors, including the more widespread use of smartphones, the popularity of new crowdfunding sites and the artistic and

creative growth of a legion of professional radio producers trained in public radio have brought about a new phase for podcasting. As we will see in the following section, podcasting is now more popular, more mainstream and more appealing to the media market, in a new phase driven by the producers of American public service radio and by crowdfunding.

4. From public service podcasting to crowdfunding and podcasting networks

What we will call the "second age" of podcasting began in the United States in 2012 when some of the most famous podcasts on American public radio decided to become independent from public radio funding and finance themselves entirely through their listeners, via new crowdfunding platforms such as *Kickstarter*. This is the case of 99% *Invisible*, a podcast on design and architecture produced by Roman Mars for KALW public radio of San Francisco, which raised \$170,000 donated by 5,661 backers in August 2012⁴ and went on to raise \$375,000 the following year. In 2012 two South American authors and writers, Daniel Alarcón and Carolina Guerrero, also gathered \$46,000 through *Kickstarter* in order to produce *Radio Ambulante*, a series of radio features on Latin America via podcast (Fernández Sande 2015). In 2014, once again through *Kickstarter*, the documentary programme *Radio Diaries* raised \$61,000 while Roman Mars launched the project *Radiotopia*, a network of narrative podcasts receiving \$620,000 from 21,000 backers (Steuer 2015). In the month of March 2015 alone, 35 podcast projects could be found on *Kickstarter's* crowdfunding platform, 15 of which (57%) had reached or exceeded 75% of their goal halfway through their campaigns. But *Kickstarter* is not the only crowdfunding platform where you can find campaigns for funding radio podcasts, nor is the United States the only country where these campaigns are successful. Fernández Sande (2015) has shown how this practice has become increasingly popular in other countries such as Italy and Spain, where a number of former national radio personalities have abandoned radio in order to finance their own programmes through these platforms.

Since 2012, through the use of crowdfunding and with the advantage of audiences that already know programmes and radio personalities, a growing number of programmes have abandoned traditional radio distribution and embraced listener-funded podcasting as a way to distribute and support their work. In some cases, such as 99% *Invisible*, *Radio Ambulante* and *Radio Diaries*, programmes continue to be distributed and sold to traditional radio companies while for others, such as a number of podcasts found on *Radiotopia*, podcasting is their only distribution channel.

This article aims to advocate the fundamental role of producers in this professionalization and commercialization of podcasting, producers who have been brought up and trained in public radio. Public radio in both America and

Europe has raised a generation of producers of radio formats based on storytelling who are currently moving away to create independent programmes. American public radio producers include Roman Mars and the producers of *Radio Diaries* (on air since 1996) and all profess to have been inspired by other famous storytelling radio programmes such as *Radiolab* (on air since 2002, Eckstein 2013) and *This American Life* (on air since 1995) hosted by the radio storytelling star Ira Glass, both of which are broadcast by NPR. An increasing number of producers are emerging from this initial core group of storytelling radio producers working with American public radio: the most popular case is represented by *Serial*, the series of 12 episodes hosted by Sarah Koenig, a former producer of *This American Life*. Although it was only distributed via podcast in 2014, it had already been downloaded 72 million times by January 2015 (Sebastian 2015). *Serial* was launched by Ira Glass in an episode of *This American Life* and, from that moment on, it gained in popularity. The importance of an endorsement from Ira Glass for the success of a new podcasting series is explicitly recognised by Ann Friedman in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (2015): “if your show is featured on *This American Life* you can expect a massive increase in listeners, or what several podcasters call ‘the Ira Glass bump’”. Cross-promotion, says Mullin (2015) in *Poynter*, became a common strategy within NPR offices to launch its new radio storytelling series. In January 2015 NPR presented an original and “sophisticated storytelling show, which combined storytelling with cultural and scientific reporting” (Larson 2015), called *Invisibilia*, and cross-promoted previews of the show on podcasting staples such as *This American Life* and *Radiolab*. It paid off: since *Invisibilia* launched on January 6, its episodes have been downloaded more than 33 million times, briefly eclipsing *Serial* on the iTunes charts of March 2015.

Public radio, at least in the US, has played a fundamental role in creating an ecosystem within which podcasting could finally start to flourish.

Serial is not only one of the greatest successes of public radio storytelling but also represents the turning point for the second age of podcasting: it's the programme that has made this distribution technology go mainstream and transformed it into a 'mass medium'. According to Chafin:

“Today, podcasting has put public radio— usually one of the sleeper corners of media—at the white-hot epicenter of pop culture. This is mostly thanks to one thing: *Serial*. The real-life murder mystery podcast produced by *This American Life* became a national obsession last year, amassing well above 20 million downloads in just a few months and along the way making podcasts one of the most exciting areas of emerging media. (2015)”

American public radio, in its national (NPR) and regional/local formats, has produced storytelling programmes that have attracted niche listeners for decades but thanks to podcasting and the expanded use of smartphones and social networks,

these programmes have moved beyond the geographical borders of the radio stations broadcasting them to be enjoyed by millions of people all over the world. In just a few years downloads of these programmes have grown exponentially in the Anglophone world, becoming mass consumer content. With this mix of new technologies for distribution (podcasting) and for listening (smartphones) combined with sound-based social networks (*Soundcloud*, *Mixcloud*, *Spreaker* and the *Deezer*-belonging *Stitcher*) and new crowdfunding platforms (*Kickstarter*, *Indie Go Go*), the foundations have been laid to create an independent market for podcasting. New business models have emerged within this new market based on a mix of donations, crowdfunding, sponsors and advertising. According to figures from the media analysts at Edison Research (Chafin 2015), more than 15% of Americans are now regular podcast listeners, a total of 40 million people while interest in podcasts (and therefore money potential) is growing fast. Monthly podcast listening has grown by two percentage points to 17% in the last year, now totalling about 46 million Americans aged 12 and older according to Edison Research.

This new market is the result of decades of investment by public service media in a narrative format (features, documentaries, radio storytelling in general) that is costly to produce and not very appealing to investors in commercial radio advertising. Without these investments, regardless of the availability of technology, there would be no content to distribute.

Radiotopia represents the latest phase in this evolution: in addition to raising funds from potential listeners and being supported by a foundation, it also allows its programmes to be sponsored. *Radiotopia* presents itself as a commercial radio station that aggregates content in order to attract audiences to be sold to advertising but this is not its only purpose. In 2014 five other similar networks were created in the United States: *PodcastOne*, *Gimlet media* (a project by former *This American Life* producer Alex Blumberg), *Infinite Guest*, *Earwolf* and *Panoply*. *Panoply* was founded by an American media company, *Slate*, and in March 2015 was the home of 15 podcasts with more than 6.5 million monthly downloads. According to Sebastian (2015) it aims to produce and promote podcasts for other media companies, celebrities and authors. It will also sell ads against those podcasts and share a cut of the revenue. The *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Real Simple* magazine, WBUR in Boston and several others have signed up for *Panoply*. One podcast network, *Earwolf* (who only produces original comedy programmes starring popular American comedians), created *Midroll*, an ad-sales network to sell sponsorships for both its own podcasts and those that aren't on the network. *Midroll* sells ads on behalf of about 200 podcasts.

The ability to make money by selling ads against podcasts is gaining ground. According to Friedman (2015), “ACast, a Swedish podcast-hosting company, has an app that runs short ads at the beginning and end of each podcast. They sell ads against podcasts of all audience sizes, and offer podcasters a 50-50 revenue split—which means that even podcasters with

a few thousand listeners could make a little cash. The app is popular in Sweden, and they're planning to launch in America soon".

In just three years this has radically changed the economics behind the production of podcasts. Whereas, in their first ten years, the most downloaded podcasts with the greatest following were produced by European and American public radio broadcasters, today many of these same podcasts, in addition to new products, are starting to be funded through economic systems that are alternative to public services such as crowdfunding, sponsors and advertising. The economic models (sponsorship, advertising, listener donations, infomercials, paid subscriptions) envisioned by Crofts et al. (2005) and by Glaser (2005) are beginning to work, ten years after they were first predicted.

5. Conclusions: from toll broadcasting to "toll podcasting"

This article has reassessed the historical evolution of podcasting as a cultural practice, analysing the state of academic research regarding this relatively new technology and its evolution from an amateur medium to a new channel to distribute for-profit sound content.

The exponential increase in podcast downloads in the Western world (especially Anglophone but also Latin, see Blanco 2006 and Pérez Alaejos and López Merayo, 2013) is due to the increase in quality of the podcasts available, the widespread use of smartphones and the growing popularity of crowdfunding and sound-based social networks, all of which have set the stage for a new market and seem to be the reason for the increased emphasis on podcasting's "resurgence" by American journalists who are experts in the field:

"Podcasts have been around for 10 years —the medium and its adoring fans aren't new. What is new is the renewed interest in podcasts as a lucrative business and, with that, the consolidation into formalized networks. Around three years ago, both the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* gave up on most of their audio programming citing a lack of interest and revenue. Now, Blumberg and Lieber are betting their careers on podcasts. What happened? Money and technology, but mostly money." (Greenfield 2014)

"Mostly money" is the key phrase in the media's renewed emphasis on podcasting. The creation of networks that aggregate podcasts is motivated by purely economic reasons: aggregate content in order to aggregate audiences to be sold to advertising. Audiences aggregated by these networks, which were once marginal, began to expand markedly after the onset of *Serial*. Although they have not yet reached the large numbers achieved by the mass audiences of traditional radio they still number several million, as we have seen. The value of these audiences for the market has therefore rocketed. Furthermore,

advertising embedded in podcasts has a much greater value than advertising broadcast on air:

"People really pay attention to the ads,' *Slate's* podcasting guru Andy Bowers says. That's partly because they have to: The hosts are often right in your ear, and there's no quick way to change the station, like on a radio. Even scrolling past an ad takes more effort than it's worth. What if you skip ahead too far? (O'Donovan 2014)"

Podcast ads seem to generate high levels of engagement. According to Greenfield (2014), Internal Midroll surveys of 300,000 listeners found that 63% of people bought something a host had peddled on his show. Because of that leverage, Midroll charges a lot for podcast ads. This is exactly what American journalist Kevin Roose (2014) discovered:

"Another reason that podcasts may be growing is that the economics are compelling. Producing an average podcast costs far less than producing a TV show or a radio show and the advertising rates on a successful podcast are big enough to pay for the costs many times over. Several top podcasters told me that their CPM (the cost to an advertiser per thousand impressions, a standard ad-industry unit) was between \$20 and \$45. Compare that to a typical radio CPM (roughly \$1 to \$18) or network TV (\$5 to \$20) or even a regular old web ad (\$1 to \$20), and the podcast wins. "

What is happening to podcasting, 11 years after its invention, is its transformation from a do-it-yourself, amateur niche medium to a commercial mass medium: from narrowcasting to broadcasting. This invention, which has been adopted by citizens as a tool for self-expression and by public services as an additional channel for serving its license-fee payers and donors, has now definitively entered the market, following the same history as radio when broadcasting over the airwaves was adopted by American corporations and transformed into a commercial activity. The commercialization of broadcasting implemented by AT&T and RCA is now being reproduced in the podcasting domain by individual radio producers/entrepreneurs such as Roman Mars and media companies such as *Slate*.

In 1922 AT&T announced they would sell "toll broadcasting", where companies would finance the broadcast in exchange for being mentioned on air. The first credited toll broadcast was by New York's WEAJ on August 28, 1922 (Barnouw 1970). Radio thus became a profitable enterprise and broadcasting as a cultural and social practice started to be commodified and commercialised.

Podcasting networks like *Radiotopia* and *Panoply* are the contemporary versions of AT&T and RCA: they're attempting to finance podcast production by selling time slots inside their podcasts to advertisers. Today we could call this model "toll podcasting". The podcast has embarked on a new commercial age. Just as when radio was standardised, radio amateurs and amateur podcast producers will still continue to exist but podcasting has now become another commercial market where

it may sell itself (through crowdfunding) or audiences (through embedded advertising or “toll podcasting”). The fears of Sterne et al. (2008) have finally come true. Podcasting *is* broadcasting but not in the wider and more democratic sense envisioned by Sterne et al. On the contrary, podcasting *is becoming* (commercial) broadcasting.

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Notes

1. This search, carried out on the March 18, 2015, included all articles with the word “podcasting” in their abstracts, found in the online archives of Google Scholar and the publishing group Taylor & Francis. All articles whose main research aim was not podcasting, or which did not deal with podcasting from a media-studies perspective, were excluded from this search.
2. The collection of data regarding podcast downloads initially included the 5 biggest European public broadcasters: BBC (UK), RAI (ITA), Radio France (FRA), RNE (SPAIN) and ARD (GER), which the EBU (European Broadcasting Union) calls the “Big Five”, but neither RNE nor ARD provided the requested data.
3. Lorenzo Pavolini, November 6, 2014, key note speech at *Radiophonica*, a radio art festival held in Milan, Italy, 5-6 November 2014. Speech recorded by the author.
4. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1748303376/99-invisible-season-3?ref=nav_search>

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