Podcasts: Redefining Mass Media in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Podcasts are rapidly emerging as an effective way to connect with people around the globe. They offer a unique way to communicate with the audience, blending reliability, accessibility, and intimacy. The study discusses the shift from traditional communication channels and changing content consumption patterns among the audience by tracing the journey of podcasts from being niche platforms to becoming mainstream media.

The growing popularity of podcasts is greatly influenced by advancements in technology such as portable devices, high-speed internet, and artificial intelligence. Other factors such as COVID-19 have also helped podcasts to grow significantly and connect with the masses. Moreover, it highlights the impact of podcasts on society, especially among the youth, in shaping their opinion and offering opportunities for content creation. Employing a Descriptive Research method, this study adopts a mixed research design integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Through structured surveys, literature reviews, journals, and articles, we examined the role of podcasts in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Podcasts, mass media, technological advancements, COVID-19, global reach.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, podcasts have become an important form of mass media as they enable people to listen to a diverse range of content wherever and whenever they want. What characterizes its vast popularity around the world is how its list of listeners and producers has just been growing in numbers, making it an extremely accessible source of entertainment and information. Unlike most traditional broadcasting, which usually relies on a schedule, employing the one-to-many broadcast model, podcasts provide an on-demand, user-driven alternative. Podcasts allow people to access various types of content from a variety of sources at any time and from anywhere, breaking a monopoly that was once held by mainstream media outlets. This flexibility comes as a boon for modern-day audiences who require both personalization and accessibility. This has led to democratization in media production, hence allowing voices from all over the world to join in Digital audio has become increasingly popular as people engage with it during various activities like chores and travel. As this platform continues to grow, it also raises concerns about its societal implications, changing content consumption patterns, and the future of traditional forms of media. This paper focuses on the evolution of podcasts, their growing popularity, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and changes in consumption patterns, along with the social impacts that are related to this fast-changing medium.

The Evolution and rise of Podcasts

Podcasts have been in existence for about a decade and have become one of the most preferred modes of communication. This medium began to grow with the rise of the internet, MP3 players, and other portable devices. The word podcast in itself is a blend of "i-pod" commonly known for the Apple Company's music players and "broadcasting". However, podcasts have now become independent and do not rely on any particular

device. The first podcast was created in 2004 when a 1990s MTV video jockey, Adam Curry, together with software developer Dave Winer, invented a system that automated the downloading of audio broadcasts to devices such as iPods. This marked the dawn of a new era in the distribution of audio content.

In 2005, Apple incorporated podcasts into its iTunes platform, which greatly increased their popularity. As they gradually became accessible to the audience, the medium began to grow and expand. The availability of podcasting was not only limited to technologically advanced individuals but also to a broader audience as they also started to access them.

The history and emergence of podcasting have been fundamentally intertwined with technological developments in society such as the increasing use of smartphones with an internet connection and cheap microphones for recording. All these elements made the consumption and creation of podcasts easy. The emergence of podcasting brands e.g. NPR, Gimlet Media, Wondery, etc, elevated the level of podcasting into a business model as high- quality content on diverse topics was readily available.

At present, the podcasting industry is worth billions of dollars with thousands of active shows and millions of episodes available. Research conducted by Edison indicates that it is estimated that more than 100 million adults in the US listen to podcasts every month by the year 2023, which shows how far the expansion of this channel has come. (Edison Research, 2023) The

increase in the marketing of products through the use of podcasts has also changed the perception regarding this medium and has made it useful for companies to connect with their customers.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Podcast Popularity

Most aspects of day-to-day life have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the ways that people consume media. With people locked indoors and less interaction, the need for digital content increased. People had to listen to podcasts as they were easy to access and more adjustable keeping the users entertained and updated with information during the lockdown. A report by Edison Research indicates that, in 2020, 62% of Americans aged between 12-34 years listened to podcasts rising up from 55% in the year 2019. (Edison Research, n.d.)

During the early months of the pandemic, most people started consuming news and entertainment through podcasts. Podcasts even became a necessity when there was a need to deliver correct information about the disease, health warnings, and other concerns from a social perspective. "The Daily" and "Science Vs" for example, were among the popular shows that informed the listeners of the situation around them. Lockdowns however also created new opportunities for the content creators. Many of them began working from their homes, resulting in the rise of podcasts. Established creators expanded their content while other new creators came up with topics centred on resilience, community, and social change. Because of remote recording equipment, creators were able to continue churning out premium content during the pandemic. According to Libsyn, a podcast distribution service, new podcast' creation increased by 53 % in 2020 compared to 2019. (Libsyn, n.d.)

The increasing number of listeners also resulted in the growth of the advertising revenue. Lockdowns inspired brands to invest more in podcast sponsorships as it seemed the best medium to reach the audience. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau, the podcast ad revenue was $1.3 billion in 2021in the U.S. and is expected to grow continuously. (Bureau, n.d.) Another report by KPMG's Media and Entertainment Report 2020 states that India's podcast consumption surged by 29.3% during the first year of the pandemic. (KPMG, 2020)

The podcast industry subsequently evolved as individuals learnt to cope with new ways of living. Listeners during the pandemic preferred meaningful and deeper content that provided both an escape and connection at the same time. This made the creators experiment with

different formats like stories being made into series, interviews, and discussions to present a variety of content.

Changing Content Consumption Patterns

The increasing popularity of podcasts has changed the traditional way to consume content. Most of the traditional televisions, radios among other media follow a schedule and restrict engagement by the audience. On the other hand, podcasts allow users to select and choose what they wish to listen to without restrictions and even plan it according to their daily routine. According to Reuters' Digital News Report 2023, publishers have been investing in podcasts because they are relatively low-cost, help build loyal relationships, and are effective at attracting younger audiences. (Newman, 2023) Young people, who are mostly tech-savvy, are not only the

target audience of these podcasts but the publishers also get to reach out to this audience by engaging them in activities that involve listening such as when an individual is on the move or working out. Since such an audience is easy to reach because of the many activities one can do while listening to a specific podcast, there has been a shift of emphasis towards the use of podcasts as a medium for both creators and consumers. According to PwC's Global Entertainment & Media Outlook 2020 research, India has 57.6 million monthly podcast listeners, ranking third after the United States and China, and is anticipated to reach 17.61 million by 2023. (PwC, n.d.) Podcasts have an on-demand nature which allows the listeners to listen to what they want to listen to without any place and time constraints which offers flexibility that suits the present audiences who have busy schedules. A report by Pew Research Center in 2023 states that nearly half (49%) of adults in the US have reportedly listened to podcasts last year. (Shearer et al., n.d.) Doing other chores during this while listening to podcasts is common and it is observed that most of the people listen to them while travelling, working out or performing other activities which depicts the ease of accessing the podcasts.

Furthermore, the emergence of portable devices has contributed greatly to the popularity of podcasts. With the increased use of smartphones accessing podcasts has become more convenient than before. The reports by Statista indicate that 79% of podcast listeners in the US access podcasts using smartphones. Another report by Pew Research Center states that the
younger generation is more likely to listen to podcasts via mobile devices, which propels the growth of digital content consumption. (Shearer et al., n.d.)
Podcasts cover certain subjects, which would not be viable in traditional forms of media. This provides an opportunity for everyone to become a creator with diverse ideas that can be expressed enabling individuals to discover content of their preference. Be it a true crime, comedy, self-help or politics, podcasts are available for all listeners. Spotify states that more than 60% of its podcast listenership also seeks content related to education and lifestyle. (Spotify, n.d.)
The content consumption patterns of people have changed significantly, and therefore we notice changes in the formats and styles of the podcasts. For example, short videos containing educational content or current affairs created only for a few minutes are becoming a trend for listeners who are seeking quick information. On the other hand, long narratives as well as interesting conversations have also been incorporated in the podcasts for the listeners who want more elaborate content.

Social Impact of Podcasts
The rise in podcasts also brought social changes along with them with them. They not only changed the content consumption patterns of people but also their interaction with society. It is possible to perpetuate social progress and inclusivity through podcasts as they create room for equity by allowing the unheard and unrepresented voices and views. These equal opportunities enable people to tell their tales, enriching the public sphere.
A podcast is an effective way of addressing even the most disturbing modern-day issues, from racism and sexism to mental well-being. Examples include NPR's "Code Switch," and "The Michelle Obama Podcast", which give audiences a deep dive into issues of race, identity, and personal experience, encouraging them to indulge in meaningful conversations on important topics.
Additionally, with the unique nature of audio storytelling, hosts are able to connect with their audiences on a deeper level. The listeners develop companionship with the hosts of the podcasts, forming a society that is united by most of their interests and values. The need for such a community is increased by the fact that many people experience social isolation in the current digital era. The social impact of podcasts also seems to go beyond the individual listener
to influence broader cultural narratives. For instance, podcasts about members of the LGBTQ+ community have helped to create awareness and acceptance of the normality of conversations about sexuality and gender identity.
The effects of podcasts are not limited to raising awareness and improving understanding. They also encourage people to make a move. For social causes, many of these shows call their listeners, whether it is giving money to help the cause, helping hands-on, or promoting the situation in the media. To some extent, this situation transforms into a reality as the audience begins to engage with community-level challenges that require urgent attention. By reconceptualizing and expanding the definition of mass media in the context of the digital age,

podcasts are on their way to entertain the masses and induce social change as well as establish communities.

Literature Review

The article "Podcasting as a Hybrid Cultural Form between old and new media" emphasizes the importance of podcasts as a new cultural form that integrates the old media - namely radio – with the latest digital practices. Key research highlights include its ability to embrace different storytelling mediums and deliver such to its target audience in a unique way. The evolution of podcasting as a practice relates to the re-mediation of radio which goes beyond reproducing existing structures to re-inventing the creation and consumption of audio content. (Bonini, 2022)

In the research paper, "Podcast Media Credibility as A Means Strategy to Carry Out Public Information", the author indicates that podcasts for public information purposes have been rising. The major conclusions underline the credibility of podcasts owing to podcasters' transparency while creating the content. This medium of listening to content brings out the same cognitive engagement as that of reading, thus enhancing critical thinking and creativity in the listeners. In addition, the diverse range of content of podcasts from news to other forms of entertainment facilitates reach to different sections of society. It is also worth noting that these factors such as the accuracy of information, service delivery and content relevance are important if not essential in the sustaining of credibility. Despite their educational potential, the study cautions against misinformation risks, highlighting the need for vigilance in the digital information landscape. (Renisyifa et al., 2022)

The article "From Niche Narrative to Audio Blockbusters" investigates the development of serial journalistic podcasts, and how they have altered the media consumption patterns, particularly the narrative-driven podcasts. The authors appreciate the income-generating capacity of the new format of delivering news and the cultural trends that accommodate growing the audiences that pay for journalism and consume 'everything at once' to younger wealthy audiences. (Krause, 2024)

The paper "Podcast Studies and its Techno-Social Discourses" explores podcasting as a growing and evolving form of media. It brings together different perspectives from academic, industry, and cultural fields, presenting podcast studies as a blend of technological and social discussions. Using a philosophy of technology approach, the paper points out how podcasting is seen as not just a technology, but also as a practice and a medium, all of which are still being shaped as this field continues to develop. (Seo, 2022)

Objectives

1. To explore how podcasts have grown from niche platforms into mainstream media.
2. To understand how technology has made podcasts more accessible and popular.
3. To study how the COVID-19 pandemic boosted podcast and content creation.
4. To investigate how podcasts are promoting inclusivity and providing opportunities for creators.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a mixed methodology of research employing both primary and secondary means of research. It combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather and analyse data. It allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic by utilising multiple sources of data and perspectives.

To collect quantitative data, a survey method was used to conduct the research. A questionnaire was made that included 10 questions in total which not only helped to know how often people listen to podcasts and which type of content they prefer the most but also to know their perspective towards the emergence of podcasts as a new form of mass media. The tool used for the collection of data is Google Form containing multiple-choice questions which was

distributed among people. After filling up of forms, data was collected and analyzed based on their responses in the form of pie charts.
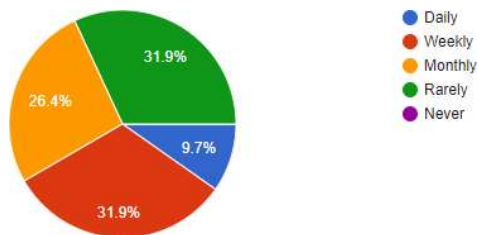
Data Analysis and Interpretation

Figure 1: How often do you listen to podcasts?

The data indicate a divided pattern in podcast listening habits. 31.9% listen weekly and the other 31.9% listen very rarely. While some people have made podcasts as a habit, others engage occasionally. This means that there is a chance to improve engagement by addressing challenges for less frequent listeners.
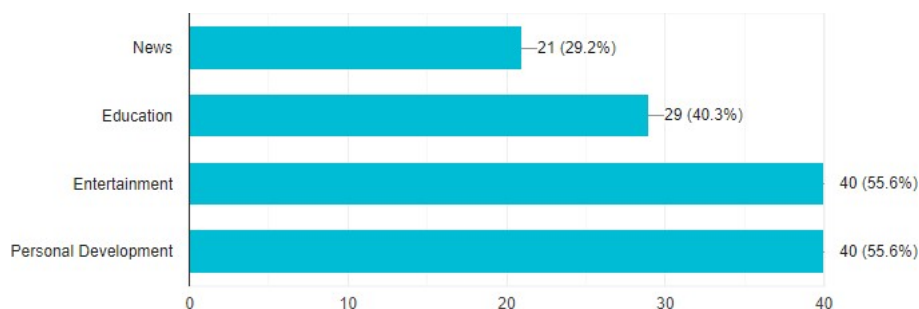

Figure 2: What type of content do you prefer in podcasts?

When people were asked what type of content they prefer in podcasts, it was observed that entertainment (55.6%) and self-development (55.6%) content dominated educational (40.3%) and news (29.2%) content. This encapsulates that listeners enjoy a blend of enjoyment, personal growth, and learning
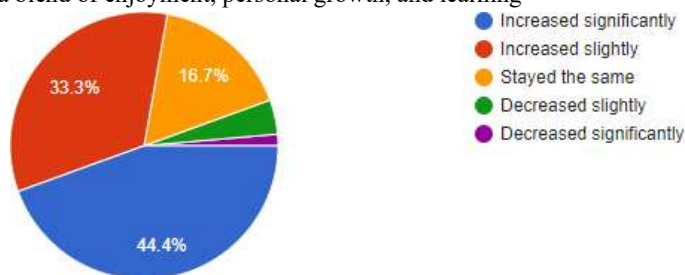

Figure 3: How has your podcast listening frequency changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?

In the survey, a change is observed in the frequency of podcast listeners since the COVID-19 outbreak wherein 44.4% of the respondents indicated that they have increased their frequency significantly and 33.3% seeing a slight rise. This suggests a growing appeal for podcasts as a source of information and entertainment, with minimal declines during these times.
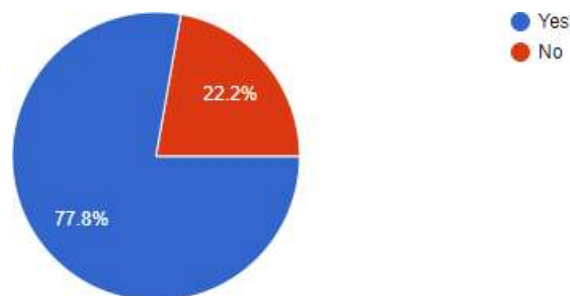
Figure 4: Do you think podcasts have impacted the way you consume other media (e.g., TV, radio, blogs)?

The survey reveals that 77.8% of respondents believe podcasts have positively impacted their media consumption habits, while 22.2% do not feel the same. This suggests that podcasts significantly influence how individuals engage with other media forms, indicating a shift towards audio-based content.
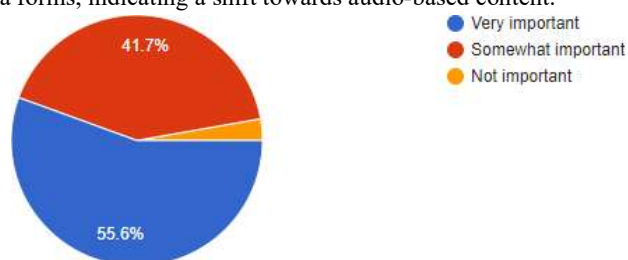

Figure 5: How important is accessibility (e.g., availability of transcripts, language options) in your choice of podcasts?

When people were asked how important the accessibility of podcasts them, it was observed that 55.6% of the respondents believe that it is very important for them whereas 41.7% think that it is somewhat important. A mere 2.8% regard it as unimportant, which shows that listeners value the need to have access to content that is easy to consume.
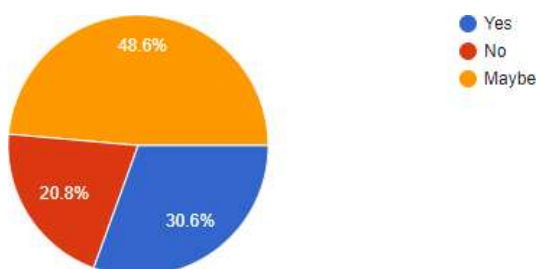

Figure 6: Do you believe podcasts have the potential to replace traditional media (e.g., radio, television) in the future?

According to the survey, 30.6% of respondents believe that podcasts can replace traditional forms of media such as the radio and television in future while 20.8% disagree. Notably, 48.6% of people are not sure about it.
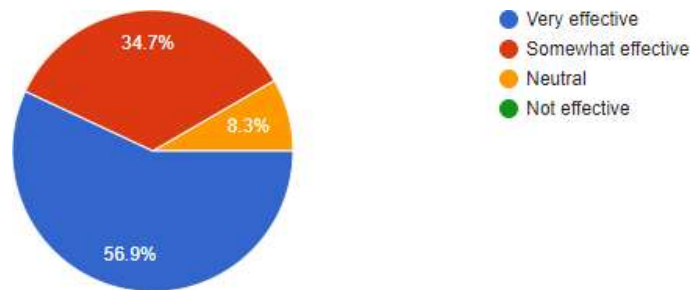
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Figure 7: In your opinion, how effective are podcasts in creating social awareness or driving discussions on important issues?

As per the survey, 56.9% of participants find the podcasts extremely useful for fostering social awareness and encouraging debates over relevant topics, whereas 34.7% think this is helpful to some extent. A mere 8.3% take a neutral position which showing strong confidence in podcasts' ability to foster meaningful conversations.

Conclusion

Advancements in technology have significantly changed the way people consume content in this digital era. Podcast is one such digital platform that provides listeners with ease of accessibility and flexibility which other platforms such as radio and television often lack. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the widespread of podcasts. People are now able to access a diverse range of content at their convenience. Podcasts also promote equality by providing a platform even to those who belong to marginalised communities and helping them to raise their voices.

Moreover, podcasts have become a valuable source of knowledge and information. People turn to podcasts not only for entertainment but also for personal growth and development, as hosts engage listeners in meaningful conversations. Podcasts address important issues like race, identity, and mental health, topics often neglected by mainstream media. This medium brings social issues to the forefront, encouraging people to take a stand for social causes. The rise of podcasts has democratized content consumption, fostering a more informed, empathetic, and connected world. As a result, podcasts are rapidly becoming a new form of mass media, offering a decentralized and accessible platform that reaches a global audience.

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