Why Podcasts?

This report is about curating and recommending podcasts for your library users. Helping our users find the best podcasts is a great opportunity for libraries because understanding podcasts is an important part of today's digital literacies. Librarians can curate the best podcasts for different types of users—people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities—in all types of libraries by providing handouts, web guides, and workshops.

Podcasts are flourishing these days, and we'll look at how and why they are becoming more popular. I'll discuss where and why people listen, how podcasts are being used in educational settings, and the advantages of audio podcasts for people with visual disabilities. I'll offer lists of recommended podcasts for different age levels and diverse audiences. We'll also look at some of the best podcast directories and tips for finding new podcasts.

Podcasts can be in either audio or video format, and in this report, we'll focus on audio podcasts. That's because there are many more audio podcasts available, and people can use them in many situations where video is not convenient. In addition, there are other resources for finding and using educational videos,[1] but not as much has been written on audio.

I'll also recommend some of the best podcast listening apps and discuss which kinds of features are most useful in these apps.

Podcasts Defined

Most people know that podcasts are audio programs that you can listen to on your smartphone or tablet. But many don't know some of the interesting details that make podcasts a unique format.

Here's how Merriam-Webster defines a podcast: "A program (as of music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet."[2] Those with technical knowledge understand podcasts as audio or video files attached to an RSS feed.

What's more helpful to understand is the following. The word *podcast* came about by combining the word *broadcast* with *iPod*. The term began to be used in 2004, when iPods were popular.[3] At that time, technology was developed to make it possible to subscribe to a feed with links to audio files you could download. That way you wouldn't have to remember to visit particular websites and blogs that offered your favorite audio shows. Instead you could use software to "subscribe" and automatically be notified when new episodes were available. Since bandwidth for most people was limited, downloading the files to listen to offline was (and still is) especially useful.

Because podcasts aren't restricted by traditional broadcast regulations, there is a huge variety of programming. It's fairly easy to acquire and learn the tools for creating a podcast. So a wide variety of programming is available, both by established media outlets and by individuals and organizations of all sizes.

Here are a few other things to know about podcasts:

- Most podcasts are free (and many are ad-supported). You can listen on any device that plays MP3 files (and other audio formats)—desktop computers, smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, smart earbuds, and some smart TVs.[4]
- You can choose to stream or to download the files in advance—useful when you are offline or have low bandwidth.
- If you subscribe to a podcast, you will be notified automatically when new episodes are available.

You can either auto-download each episode or download just those episodes that interest you.

- You don't have to subscribe to a podcast to listen to an individual episode. Most episodes are available on the website of their creators, and you can stream the episode from there.
- Instead of waiting for your favorite show to broadcast (as with radio), you can pick and choose shows that interest you and listen to them whenever it's convenient.
- You can use various apps on either desktop computers or mobile devices to subscribe to, organize, and download your podcasts.
- One thing to keep in mind is that many podcasts offer only a few episodes and then stop publishing (for various reasons). Older podcast episodes still have value, depending on the topic, and it's possible to download and listen to older episodes anytime.[5]

All of these characteristics make podcasts an interesting and useful format.

Types of Podcasts

There are many types of podcast programming. Just about anything that can be listened to in audio can be made into a series of podcast episodes. Here are some examples:

- interviews[6]
- conversations[7]
- how to[8]
- recordings of entire seminars or lectures[9]
- historical recordings[10]
- found footage[11]
- music performances[12]
- improv comedy[13]
- audio drama[14]
- storytelling[15]
- scary stories[16]
- scripted or nonscripted material[17]
- a series of episodes meant to be listened to in order (serialized)[18]

There is something for everyone in the world of podcasts.

The Increasing Popularity of Podcasts

Listening to Podcasts

Podcasts are increasing in popularity, with steady growth in the last few years (2008–2016).[19] Though it's still a minority of Americans who actively listen to them, the number is growing steadily, from 9 percent in 2008 to 21 percent in 2013.[20]

When it comes to people who have *ever* listened to a podcast, the numbers have doubled since 2008—it's now 36 percent of Americans.[21] The number of people who say they are familiar with the term *podcasting* has increased from 22 percent in 2006 to 49 percent in 2015.[22]

The number of podcasts produced has also grown in the past few years, from 69,860 in 2009 to 91,794 in 2013 (the most recent survey year).[23]

Recent statistics show that more people listen on mobile devices than desktop computers, 69 percent versus 31 percent[24]—not surprising, given the growth of mobile computing and the convenience of listening on the go.

Who Creates Podcasts?

Many news organizations are starting to invest in podcasting, partly because business models are evolving to better translate them into sources of revenue (ad-supported). Another reason is that podcasts can be a new avenue for growing audiences, especially younger audiences.

There is an interesting article about the future of National Public Radio that discusses the conflict between the traditional ways of reporting used in radio shows like *Morning Edition* (with its mainly older audiences) and innovative reporting styles used in podcasts like *Invisibilia*, *Code Switch*, *Embedded*, and *Planet Money* (listened to by younger audiences).

According to the article, "Listeners want audio programming that makes them feel as though they're getting to know a person or a topic intimately, whether through the familiar banter of beloved panelists or through lovingly produced works of storytelling. . . . Successful podcasts, such as *Reply All*, *Criminal*, and *You Must Remember This*, have paved the way for something else entirely: meticulously crafted feature journalism that, in Alex Blumberg's words, feels less like a collection of radio segments and more like 'narrative-driven, textured, sound-rich documentaries.'"[25]

There are many established media organizations that have been investing significant resources in podcasting during the past few years. Some examples are the *New York Times*, public radio station WNYC, the *Wall Street Journal*, and local newspapers, such as the *Des Moines Register*.

Newer media and startups are also getting more involved in podcasting—some examples are Slate, BuzzFeed, Radiotopia, and Gimlet Media (a podcast network).[26]

And with the rise of popular podcasts like *Serial* (a spin-off of the popular radio show *This American Life*,

which tells a true story in episodes released over the course of a season), more and more people are finding ways to use podcasts for educational purposes as well as entertainment.

Serial
https://serialpodcast.org

For example, some schools have been using episodic podcasts like *Serial* in the classroom, with good results.[27] "Meanwhile, high-school teachers in California, Connecticut, Chicago, and a handful of other states have been using *Radiolab, This American Life, StoryCorps,* and, overwhelmingly, *Serial.* The English teacher and *Atlantic* contributing writer Michael Godsey's 10th- and 11th-graders were so enthralled by Koenig's investigative podcast that they began skipping other classes to listen to it."[28]

Podcasts Created by Local Communities and Individuals

Media outlets large and small aren't the only ones creating podcasts. There is also an explosion of podcasts created by individuals and local communities.[29]

Some interesting examples include

- Students telling their stories to friends and family while studying abroad[30]
- Neighborhood activists and organizers creating podcasts to spread the word about local activities and cultural projects[31]
- Local businesses owners talking to their communities[32]
- Local sports teams communicating with their fans[33]
- Churches and religious leaders communicating with their congregations[34]
- Schools and teachers communicating with parents[35]

Because of all this, now is a good time for librarians to develop knowledge of how to find and listen to the best podcasts so that we can point users to relevant content in this convenient format.

Where and When People Listen

One of the best things about audio podcasts is the wide variety of situations where people listen to them.

In a 2015 discussion on Reddit about podcasts, someone asked, "when/where do you usually listen to podcasts?"[36] People mentioned

- During boring jobs
- During a subway, train, or bus commute
- During jobs that involve driving
- During a road trip
- While running, exercising, or going for a walk
- During their morning routine: showering, getting dressed
- While cleaning the house
- While doing yard work
- During a bath
- While waking the dog
- While preparing dinner
- At the gym during strength training
- In bed, before sleep
- While working as a security guard

One thing people most appreciate is the ability to learn something or be entertained during bits of time where it's not as convenient to watch videos or read.

Later in this report, we'll look at examples of how podcasts are being used in school classrooms and higher education and for people who are blind or have low vision. I'll also discuss how libraries are making podcast recommendations to their communities, with ideas and examples.

Notes

1. Julie A. DeCesare, "Streaming Video Resources for Teaching, Learning, and Research," *Library Technology Reports* 50, no. 2 (February/March 2014), http://works.bepress.com/julie_decesare/19.
2. *Merriam-Webster,* s.v. "podcast," accessed September 14, 2016, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/podcast.
3. "Podcasting Historical Timelines and Milestones," International Podcasting Day, accessed September 14, 2016, https://internationalpodcastday.com/podcasting-history.
4. An example of smart wireless earbuds is The Dash, by Bragi (accessed September 23, 2016, www.bragi.com)—you can load audio files on them and listen without having your smartphone with you ("Listen to Music with the Internal Music Player," Bragi Support, accessed September 23, 2016, https://support.bragi.com/hc/en-us/articles/203110812-Listen-to-music-with-the-Internal-Music-Player); Romain Dillet, "Apple Releases Apple TV Update with New Podcasts App," TechCrunch, January 26, 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2016/01/26/apple-releases-apple-tv-update-with-new-podcasts-app.
5. "Between June 2005 and June 2015, a typical podcast ran for six months and twelve episodes, at two episodes per month, before going inactive" (Josh Morgan, "How Podcasts Have Changed in Ten Years: By the Numbers," Medium, September 2, 2015, https://medium.com/@slowerdawn/how-podcasts-have-changed-in-ten-years-by-the-numbers-720a6e984e4e#.cdo8de3mx).
6. Callum Davies, "The Rising Appeal of the Interview Podcast," Cultured Vultures, July 24, 2015, http://

culturedvultures.com/rising-appeal-interview
-podcast.

7. Reddit question posted by "extraextracheese," "Best Podcasts with Organic Conversations?" /r/podcasts, May 18, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/podcasts /comments/4jx3u2/best_podcasts_with_organic _conversations.

8. For example, the *Lifehacker* podcast (iTunes Preview, accessed September 23, 2016, https://itunes.apple .com/us/podcast/lifehacker/id508117781?mt=2).

9. For example, the podcast *Seminars about Long-Term Thinking*, Long Now Foundation, accessed September 23, 2016, http://longnow.org/seminars/podcast.

10. See this collection of podcast episodes that include historical recordings: "In Popcast, Pop Up Archive's house podcast, Eliza Smith excavates audio from Pop Up Archive's public collections, from recordings on wax cylinder to NASA's interstellar rumbles. Listen to Smith resurface and reexamine forgotten sounds in this series of intimate micro-podcasts" ("Browsing Popcast by Pop Up Archive," accessed September 14, 2016, https://www.popuparchive.com /collections/4425).

11. David O'Donoghue, "Archive 81 Shows That the Found Footage Genre Is Made for Podcasts," Cultured Vultures, August 10, 2016, http://culturedvul tures.com/archive-81-found-footage-podcasts.

12. For example, the podcast *Tiny Desk Concerts*, from NPR "Tiny Desk Concerts—Audio," NPR Music, Podcast Directory, accessed September 23, 2016, www .npr.org/podcasts/510306/tiny-desk-concerts-audio.

13. Reddit question posted by "rodeobot," "Improv Podcasts?" /r/Improv, February 3, 2015, https://www .reddit.com/r/improv/comments/2unqy4/improv _podcasts.

14. Quora question posted by Rachel Krislov, "What Are the Best Audio Drama Podcasts I Can Listen To?" May 19, 2016, accessed September 14, 2016, https:// www.quora.com/What-are-the-best-Audio-Drama -Podcasts-I-can-listen-to.

15. Schick Hydro Canada, "The 14 Most Addictive Story-telling Podcasts of 2015," BuzzFeed, June 22, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/schickhydro canada/the-most-addicting-storytelling-podcasts -of-201-u00c?utm_term=.ksZAZxaqL#.filvAGnjE.

16. David O'Donoghue, "Why Podcasts Are the Hottest New Medium for Scary Stories," Cultured Vultures, April 6, 2016, http://culturedvultures.com /podcasts-scary-stories.

17. "Unscripted shows are usually interviews or discussions that play out as recorded. The producers don't know, nor have much control, over where the show goes. Scripted shows, on the other hand, will carefully edit interviews after the fact, mixing them with narration, inter-splicing them with other interviews, maybe adding a soundtrack or ambient sounds. They craft the raw factual materials into a highly produced show in the way a reporter might craft a magazine article, rather than just run a Q&A. Scripted shows, on average, take much more energy, time, staff (and money) to make than unscripted shows (with some exceptions). It is no surprise that the highest ranked podcasts are scripted" (Kevin Kelly and Mark Frauenfelder, "The Best Factual Podcasts," Cool Tools, October 20, 2015, http:// kk.org/cooltools/the-best-factual-podcasts).

18. "New podcasts seldom leverage the success that television has capitalized on for decades. Namely, carrying over characters and plotlines from one episode to the next. Using cliffhangers. Building up drama for the next installment" (Eric McQuade, "The Case for Podcast Serialization," The Timbre, March 18, 2015, http://thetimbre.com/the-case-for-podcast- serialization). But more of these are beginning to be produced.

19. For a quick visual overview, see this infographic: Copyblogger Media, "The Astounding Growth of Podcasting," Pinterest, March 10, 2016, https:// www.pinterest.com/pin/35606653283860174.

20. Nancy Vogt, "Podcasting: Fact Sheet," June 15, 2016, Pew Research Center: Journalism and Media, www .journalism.org/2016/06/15/podcasting-fact-sheet; see also a study by Edison Research: "The Infinite Dial 2016," *Edison Research: Blog—Latest News*, March 10, 2016, www.edisonresearch.com /the-infinite-dial-2016.

21. Vogt, "Podcasting: Fact Sheet."

22. Pew Research Center, "Podcasting: Americans' Familiarity with Podcasting," News Media Indicators Database, accessed September 14, 2016, www.jour nalism.org/media-indicators/podcasting-americans -familiarity-with-podcasting.

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27. Linda Flanagan, "What Teens are Learning from 'Serial' and Other Podcasts," Mind/Shift, KQED News, March 11, 2015, http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift /2015/03/11/what-teens-are-learning-from-serial -and-other-podcasts.

28. Linda Flanagan, "Meaningful Stories: How Teens Connect with StoryCorps and Podcasts," Mind/Shift, KQED News, May 13, 2015, http://ww2.kqed.org /mindshift/2015/05/13/personal-stories-how-teens -connect-with-storycorps-and-podcasts.

29. "Normal, Every-Day Uses for Podcasting," Jellycast, accessed September 14, 2016, www.jellycast.com /examples.html.

30. Natalie M., "Saying YES: A Study Abroad Podcast," *Memories Made in Muscat* (blog), accessed September 23, 2016, https://muscatmemories.wordpress.com /saying-yes-a-study-abroad-podcast.

31. "CHIRP is a volunteer-driven, online community radio station that focuses on music, arts, and culture. We are live and local every day of the year from 6am–midnight from our studios in Chicago's North Center neighborhood, and the city we live in is a key part of everything we do" ("About Chirp Radio," accessed September 23, 2016, http://chirpradio.org

/about). Access the podcasts at http://chirpradio.org
/podcasts.

32. "The Grit City Podcast . . . features Brogan & Scott,
two blue collar guys exploring the people, places and
things that make the pacific northwest great. The
show often spotlights, local small business, history,
artists, entertainers & public figures" ("Grit City Pod-
cast"), Seattle A-List, CityVoter, accessed September
14, 2016, http://best.cityvoter.com/grit-city-podcast
/biz/701825.

33. Eric Allgood, "Locker Room Podcast—State Track
Preview," Striv Sports, May 19, 2016, http://strivs
ports.com/locker-room-podcast-state-track-preview.

34. "Carlton Hill Friends' Podcasts," Leeds Quakers, ac-
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.org.uk/about-us/podcasts.

35. "Parent Podcast," Ceiba College Preparatory Acad-
emy, Ceiba Public Schools, accessed September 23,
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?uREC_ID=419391&type=d&pREC_ID=927040.

36. Reddit question posted by "Jessicaward25," "When
do you listen to podcasts?" /r/podcasts, April 5,
2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/podcasts/comments
/31jm3i/when_do_you_listen_to_podcasts.