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To cite this article: Tzlil Sharon (2023) Peeling the pod: towards a research agenda for podcast studies, *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 47:3, 324-337, DOI: [10.1080/23808985.2023.2201593](https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2201593)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2201593>



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Published online: 19 Apr 2023.



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Peeling the pod: towards a research agenda for podcast studies

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the notion of podcast studies came about and questions its future among well-established media fields. Through a close reading of various definitions given to the term podcast in the formative years of its academic institutionalization, a first-time classification of the central traditions in podcast studies is proposed and critically discussed. This theoretical typology – whereby ‘podcast’ is understood as a technological, socio-cultural, or formalistic concept – draws attention to the complexities and limitations in justifying the very idea of studying podcasting as an autonomous media field. The critical meta-review leads to six research avenues that can make podcasting uniquely meaningful and innovative in wider contexts of media theory, such as sound studies, digital archiving, and everyday studies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 July 2022

Accepted 17 February 2023




KEYWORDS

Podcast; podcasting; podcast studies; meta-review; Interdisciplinarity; radio studies

What is a podcast, and why does it still need an introduction?

Over the past decade, scholars and journalists have been struggling with pinning down the exact meaning of the word *podcast*, as it became increasingly embedded in everyday life. In fact, although it has been nearly 20 years since Hammersley (2004) coined the term, the question, ‘what is a podcast?’, continues to appear in the titles of even the most recent publications in podcast studies (e.g. Berry, 2022; Rime et al., 2022). Nevertheless, podcasts are now far from peculiar; while early listenership surveys were carefully estimating the scope of familiarity with the term (22% of Americans according to Edison Research in 2006), as of 2021, the Infinite Dial report finds that 57% of Americans over the age of 12 had listened to a podcast at least once, and approximately 161 million Americans had listened to one the previous month (Edison Research, 2021). That said, the fuzziness of the concept still commonly referred to as *internet radio* continues to challenge the academic and the professional communities, both failing to free themselves from the habit of defining what a podcast is at the beginning of every new contribution.

Following this custom, *The New American Oxford Dictionary* (n.d.) offers the following definition: ‘A digital audio file of speech, music, broadcast material, etc., made available on the internet for downloading to a computer or portable media player; a series of such files, new installments of which can be received by subscribers automatically’. On the one hand, then, a podcast is a unit of content: an audio file, usually in MP3 format; on the other, its prominent characteristics, serialization and syndication, are intrinsically involved with a distinct distribution mechanism. Indeed, one reason for the conceptual ambiguity surrounding the term is that it is often used to describe both the thing that is being transmitted and the technical basis that allows for its transmission.¹ This inherent confusion entails an abundance of other issues that make the study of podcasts a complex endeavor and

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arguably puts it in an awkward position within media studies: not 'innovative' enough to be studied outside the shadow of broadcast radio; not theoretically 'new' enough to appeal to sound studies researchers; not (yet) 'platformized' enough like YouTube and TikTok; and not as egalitarian as internet memes, to be recognized as a prominent arena for participatory cultures. Podcasts do possess aspects of all the above qualities; however, for a long time their study has not been able to reflect on them as a cohesive scholarly body. To unpack this argument, this article delves into the intellectual problems and opportunities stemming from the very idea of podcast studies by offering a novel typology of the three thought traditions arising from its developing literature. This typology is used to deconstruct the podcast studies notion and then show how we can engage podcasting to broadly advance media studies in new, unexpected ways.

Between 2005 and 2019 – well over a decade of research into podcasting as a communicative phenomenon (pioneering academic work on podcasting has been done primarily in education, which is outside the scope of this article) – only two encompassing works on the topic were published: a collection of articles edited by Llinares et al. (2018), and a monograph by Spinelli and Dann (2019). During that time, the theoretical conceptualization of podcasting in peer-reviewed communication journals remained rather fragmented and rarely overarching, often based on a single case study, a niche listenership community, or interviews with prominent podcast creators coming from the radio industry. Profound and formative as many of these texts were, they were also limited in their ability to offer a shared articulation of what is, in fact, a podcast, in a sense that makes it a truly new field of communication studies.

Nevertheless, since 2020, we witness a change in the ways podcasting is being studied and, more urgently, talked about. Two recent books (Bottomley, 2020; Morris & Hoyt, 2021) have opened the field for wider media contexts such as sound archiving, creative labor, and digital curation, and new research methods are proposed and applied to make the study of podcasts more systematic and cohesive. Additionally, in October 2020, the largest annual internet researchers conference (AoIR) hosted its first ever podcasting panel (Sullivan et al., 2020), and on 19 February 2021, the first interdisciplinary symposium, titled 'Emerging Research in Podcast Studies', set out to consolidate this distinct area of research. Indeed, it seems that the outcomes of the first 15 years of academic attention accorded to podcasting from media and communication researchers have reached a decisive moment of maturity. However, as the notion of podcast studies continues to loom large in the scholarly imagination, it remains unclear what the theoretical or methodological meaning of it, where we draw its borders, and to what extent it subordinates to or diverges from other media disciplines.²

Taking a meta-review approach, this article aims to offer the first structured intellectual framing of the formative texts in podcast studies. It does so by identifying and defining the central approaches by which podcast researchers conceptualize podcasting – technological, socio-cultural, and formalistic – based on varied definitions of the term *podcast* in media and communication literature between 2005 and 2019. I discuss and demonstrate the type of definitions that stemmed from each approach, explaining the contributions and limitations each imposed in promoting an encompassing theoretical framework. In the second part of the article, I turn the argument on itself, asking if there is such a thing as 'podcast studies' to begin with. By way of answering that question, I problematize previous attempts to academically segregate media fields from one another on the one hand, and, on the other, offer alternative investigation frames. Altogether, I argue that challenging the very notion of podcast studies through a meticulous look at how the field was carved by its pioneer researchers is essential to making the study of podcasting uniquely valuable for communication, with distinct methodologies and concepts.

The technological tradition: podcast as medium

To speak of podcasting as a new medium can be a bit misleading. In fact, many of the characteristics that came to define podcasts in the previous decade were established by a variety of earlier media.

These characteristics include portability (Bull, 2015) and serialization (Haugtvedt, 2017), which originated in the Victorian literary marketplace and shaped the dominant book format in mid-nineteenth century (Allen, 2014); the subscription-based circulation of magazines, which in themselves – much like podcasts – contributed to the creation of an active, migratory audience (Gardner, 2012, p. 103); the mass–personal logic of social media (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018); the democratization of cultural production previously forefronted by YouTube’s invocation to ‘Broadcast Yourself’; and the concepts of autonomous scheduling and binge consumption of on-demand content (Jenner, 2016), enabled by the rise of online streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. Thus, it can be argued that podcasting is a product of the media lens we use to view it, as Berry (2018) notes.

According to a first line of thought, then, podcasting can generally be understood as a delivery mechanism. This is a rather straightforward perspective that characterizes the early writing about podcasting that became less dominant – at least in its narrow technical sense – as the field evolved. Accordingly, it will not be as extensively discussed as the other traditions I characterize in this paper (examples for what I view as a ‘broad’ technological perspective in podcasting theory will be introduced in the concluding discussion). This tradition is reflected in definitions that encapsulate podcasting as ‘a technology used to distribute, receive, and listen, on-demand, to sound content’ (Bonini, 2015, p. 21); ‘media content delivered automatically to a subscriber via the Internet’ (Berry, 2006, p. 144); ‘a means of distributing digitized audio files to subscribing audiences’ (Murray, 2009, p. 198); ‘a vehicle for serialized content’ (Salvati, 2015, p. 235); and ‘a system for the automated distribution and reception of audio content’ (Sellas, 2012).

When this already anachronistic portmanteau of ‘iPod’ and ‘broadcasting’ was coined by Guardian journalist Ben Hammersly in 2004, the word *podcasting* was used to broadly describe ‘downloadable radio programmes’. Yet, the aforementioned definitions emphasize not only the time-shifting aspect, but also the automated distribution apparatus of podcasting, made possible via RSS (Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication). In fact, some researchers argue that the single point of technological novelty for podcasting, if there ever was one, is the development of RSS enclosures, followed by a series of less significant user-experience improvements (Berry, 2018; Bottomley, 2015). Simply put, RSS aggregators enable MP3 files to move automatically from the web to users’ digital audio devices. As such it creates an expectation for seriality and dictates a certain structure of content, which in turn shapes the relationship between producers and listeners: The former create podcast ‘shows’ so that the latter can subscribe and listen to them repeatedly as they wait for new episodes to drop (Sterne et al., 2008).

During the early 2000s, new opportunities stemming from the development of RSS fueled a lively debate among technology journalists with questions that remain relevant: What should the new practice of circulating and listening to serialized audio be named? Should every streaming and downloadable audio show be included under the umbrella of podcasting? If radio is being *broadcast*, what can be said about the casting model of the podcast? Does that special ‘thing’ that defines podcasting lie in the protocols and platforms that enable the circulation of podcasts, or in the devices through which they are consumed by listeners (Cordeiro, 2012; Sterne et al., 2008)? From a political economy point of view, considering the involvement of Apple Inc. in the formation of the podcasting discourse can provide at least partial answers to these questions, if only for the fact that the term *podcasting* implies the use of an iPod. To be precise, the device itself was not as much a game-changer as was its complementary software, iTunes. This key moment took place in June 2005 when Apple introduced a directory of more than 3000 free podcasts incorporated with an RSS aggregation (Apple, 2005). The immediate implication was that podcasts were no longer a niche hobby of tech-savvy internet users; overnight, they became accessible to mainstream audiences that were previously unaware of their existence (Quah, 2017).

Nevertheless, Sterne et al. (2008) argue that telling the story of podcasting as the marriage of RSS and iTunes underestimates the role of other actors, technologies, and practices that took part in the shaping of the field. They negate the assumption that the distribution channel is what defines podcasting as such, suggesting that archived versions of regular radio programs can, too, be

downloaded and individually consumed by listeners. Accordingly, they locate the significance of podcasting in its egalitarianism – ‘it opens up cultural production to a whole group of people who might otherwise have great difficulty being heard’ (par. 33), rejecting its crowning as a new medium but using it to revisit the term *broadcasting* in timely political and cultural contexts.

However, assuming that the conceptualization of podcasting ought to respond to or compete with the broadcasting model incurs the risk of overlooking something fundamental about the cultural meaning that podcasts hold for their creators and audiences. If indeed, as Berry (2016) predicted, ‘the processes by which podcasts are delivered will be superseded by streaming, “smart” radios and other yet-to-emerge systems’ (p. 668) – a vision that had already started taking off when Spotify entered the scene – then perhaps some of the distinctive characteristics grounded in the technological preconditions of podcasting will no longer be relevant. Gillmor’s observation (in his early 2000s *Podcasting Hacks* guide) that podcasts free the audience from ‘the tyranny of live’ (in Murray, 2009, p. 199) is one such example that gradually loses its grip on the definition of podcasting. Delineating the boundaries of the term around the question of whether the podcast is a medium or not (and whether its casting model can be distinguished from the one of broadcast radio) is useful, but also limiting. It is productive to the extent that we consider the multiple media practices that come into play in the creation and consumption of podcasts and that we keep up with the technological changes that podcasting takes on as it evolves, most urgently with its growing inclusion in all-engulfing platforms (Sullivan, 2019).

The socio-cultural tradition: podcast as practice

According to a second line of thought, podcasting can be defined as a cultural practice. Since the relationship between technology and society is never unidirectional, another way of theorizing podcasting as a field is to focus on the human agents who create, consume, and communicate through podcasts, which in effect constructs what podcasting means.

In the first scholarly collection of essays dedicated to podcast studies, editors Llinares et al. (2018) introduced this view by suggesting that podcasting ‘taps into something fundamental about oral communication’ (p. 2), that ‘demonstrates a distinctively different sound aesthetic’ and offers ‘a “new” form in that it has facilitated entry into the creative production of audio for individuals and groups with no broadcasting background’ (p. 4). Accordingly, they advocated shifting the research from reflecting on the phenomenon through a technical lens to viewing it as also shaping new genres and cultural practices. This approach allows us to consider podcasting as ‘a specific set of practices and cultural meanings’ (Morris & Patterson, 2015, p. 221) that ‘spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education’ (Llinares et al., 2018, p. 5), or, in the words of journalist Laura Jane Standley, as ‘the cumulative effect [...] of audio content without a governor’ (in McHugh, 2016, p. 3). According to this perspective, rather than focusing on the communication channel, researchers should investigate what qualifies podcasts as such in the ears of their senders and receivers. There are several aspects to this line of argument.

First, since podcasting allows virtually anyone with a microphone, computer, and internet connection to participate in its creation, it has been suggested that podcasts stem from and contribute to the wider context of participatory culture, alongside blogs, YouTube, and other social media. Characterized by Jenkins (2009) as a set of intertwined cultural practices premised on low entry requirements or accessible means of individual and collective participation, *participatory culture* is a particularly useful concept when dealing with early notions of podcasting. For example, Friedman (2005, p. 120) pins the novelty of podcasts on their ability to release the public from being ‘just passive listeners and viewers’ by inviting them to become producers. More specifically, as observed among independent podcast producers in Montreal, podcasting provides an alternative avenue for ‘disappointed fans of traditional radio’ (Millette, 2011, p. 8), who rely on blogging and social media participation to communicate their podcasts to potential audiences. In this respect, podcasts can be used as an example of masspersonal communication (O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018) in that they challenge

the dichotomy between interpersonal and mass communication channels. This notion fit well with the home-grown, grassroots nature of the early podcasts' content (Berry, 2006) that allowed independent podcasters to break free from the expectation of appealing to mainstream audiences, and in fact, particularly motivated them to fulfill the specific desires of a niche market (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). This aligns with Berry's (2018) observation about creators in this field declaratively referring to themselves as *podcasters* to distinguish themselves from radio producers. Podcasting 'pro-ams', amateur media creators who set professional standards (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004), even share a distinct set of values and beliefs characterized by entrepreneurialism, authenticity, and what Sullivan (2018) terms 'aspirational labor'.

Second, a socio-cultural approach highlights the connection between podcasting and journalism (e.g. McCracken, 2017; Porlezza et al., 2018) by positioning podcasts as central to the rise of personal audio narratives (Lindgren, 2016) and new journalism practices (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Moreover, podcasting can also be seen as a transmedia product that takes shape through an ongoing conversation between journalists and listeners across multiple platforms (Gambarato, 2018). However, with the prominence of professional network-based podcast productions at the top of the iTunes charts, followed by the purchasing of these networks by conglomerates like Spotify and Amazon Music, one can question whether the concept of participatory culture still resonates with the podcasting practice. Moreover, although podcasting was depicted as egalitarian, liberating and accommodating for multiple voices (Florini, 2015; Fox, 2008), early research also shows the dominance of western conventions for delivery style (McHugh, 2018) and the narrow goal-directed mode of listening promoted by digital radio-like apps, that as a matter of fact do not encourage seeking out for diversity (Lacey, 2014).

Third, podcasting can be depicted as a product of cultural practices by virtue of the particular ways people consume and engage with podcasts. The customizability of podcasts places the listener in a position of power (Madsen, 2009; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Murray, 2009): They invite more control into the listening experience, both in the active decision of what to listen to and when, and in the different ways the same content can be listened to (in its entirety, repeatedly, by skipping back and forward, and so on). As a result, podcasts encourage isolated consumption, oftentimes complemented by the use of earbuds, which – unlike headphones – are placed in the ear canal, literally inside the listener's body (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 83). Consequently, it is widely held that podcasts cultivate a highly intimate listening mode (e.g. Berry, 2016; McHugh, 2016; Swiatek, 2018) up to the point of 'claustrophobic intimacy' (Berry, 2018, p. 28). To this, another observation is often attached: the habit of listening to podcasts while in transit. This can be traced back to the early 2000s, when pioneer podcaster and author of one of the first 'How To' podcasting guides, Todd Cochrane (2004), described podcasts as 'walkaway content', and to the idea of 'mobile listening culture' or 'mobile media sound bubbles' derived from the use of portable media players while traveling through the city (Bull, 2015, p. 353). This individualistic and often mobile listening experience to podcasts is complemented by a particular sonic interactivity with designated listening apps, previously referred to as 'podcatchers', that makes it distinct from music listening. Podcatchers, such as Downcast, Overcast, Castro, Pocket Cast and others, were found by Morris and Patterson (2015) to allow for increased listener engagement during everyday activities, with features like double and triple speed listening, back and forth jumping in precise increments and sophisticated organizing logics that support personalized curation of an ongoing flow of self-scheduled audio content. These affordances ultimately cultivate efficient, productive listening subjects (Morris & Patterson, 2015, p. 226).

Lastly, there is the *collective* listening subject, the audience. Indeed, due to their customizability, podcasts cannot construct listening communities in the sense that live broadcast radio programs used to. According to Spinelli and Dann (2019), the bonds created by the 'liveness' of radio are replaced with 'an act of communal engagement rather than one of communal listening' (p. 47) in the context of podcasting. This communal engagement is based on a set of relationships that take shape on social media wherein listeners are invited to communicate with each other and with the podcast producer

directly (Copeland, 2018, p. 221), as well as in listening parties (Sharon & John, 2019) and transmedia events that allow the listeners to move and explore physical locations while listening (Edmond, 2015; Wilson, 2018).

In short, looking at podcasting through socio-cultural glasses means considering it the collection of practices, interactions, and power relations that dictate the meaning of the technology. In many respects, this tradition is more outreaching than the technological one in terms of the varied manifestations its research endeavor can take. It engages with the creators, the audiences, the industry, and even the phenomenological implications of our 'doing-being' with podcasts. Nevertheless, as podcasting becomes ever more professionalized, commercialized, and platformized, a responsive set of new theoretical terms is needed. Such terms will be difficult to develop as long as what I am calling socio-cultural studies on podcasting remain isolated from the technological ones, as indicated by the scarcity of studies that marry the domains of technology and society in the first 15 years of podcasting research (a few exceptions include Lacey, 2014; Morris & Patterson, 2015; Sullivan, 2019). Most significantly, the tradition of viewing podcasting as cultural practice – as either a production or listening culture – ought to keep up with the emerging algorithmic characteristics of the phenomenon. And so, while this approach is prolific, it could become limiting in accounting for the non-human aspects of podcasting.

The formalistic tradition: podcast as genre

According to a third line of thought, some scholars adopt a more formalistic approach by viewing podcasting as an aesthetic form. Those who can be associated with this perspective treat the concept as an artistic umbrella that encompasses a range of distinctive audio genres, a recurring set of structural schemas embedded in recurring discourse practices (Johnstone, 2008). Over time, Johnstone explains, 'new structures and practices emerge, adopted to what the medium can facilitate and to local ideas about its usage' (p. 221). It is therefore the discursive practices that generate new genres of podcasts that can illuminate something substantial about podcasting as a medium.

Somewhat paradoxically, the starting point for discussing podcasting as an artistic form lies in the observation that it does not conform to any particular set of structural rules. For instance, Llinares et al. (2018) describe podcasting as a new form with distinctive sound aesthetics 'where traditional rules around language, content, duration and structural conventions are bent if not completely broken' (p. 5); Edmond (2015) depicts podcasts as 'dispersed and hybrid, serial and experiential rather than finite and linear' stories (p. 1579), and Berry (2018) adds the notion of *podcastness* – an elusive quality that we immediately detect when listening to podcasts, 'even if we cannot (yet) reach agreement over what that might be' (p. 26).

That said, there have been several attempts to categorize specific genres of podcasts that may help distinguish between podcasting and other forms of audio content. For example, Wilson (2018) focuses on the case study of *Wandercast*, a podcast that invites listeners to playfully explore their physical environment in order to describe a genre he calls 'participatory performance' that blurs the boundaries between the artist, the listener, and the surroundings. Another example is the 'DIY histories' genre (Salvati, 2015) that is most evident in Dan Carlin's *Hardcore History* podcast: combining journalism, documentary, dramatic storytelling, and subjective reflection by offering 'sci-fi inflected "what if" thought experiments' (p. 236) that provide spaces 'for users to make sense of the past on their own terms' (p. 238). Also notable is Copeland's (2018) analysis of the award-winning Radiotopia podcast *The Heart*, which opens the way for exploring the possibility of feminine podcasts: sonically rich narratives led by conversational female voices that utilize whispers to represent inner thoughts and evoke 'a deep affective experience both for the presenter and the listener' (p. 211).

In a wider context, we may add to the formalistic view the classification of podcast producers as 'empathy artists' (see Spinelli & Dann, 2019, pp. 69–98 about 'podcast intimacy, empathy and narrative') and the distinction between the so-called 'European' and 'American' style of audio production.

Notably, researchers and podcast producers often associate features like sophistication, anonymity, and sound-rich productions with British podcasts, as opposed to the chatty, intimate, narrative-driven, and 'hand-holding' presentation of American podcast hosts (McHugh, 2016). These gradually established conventions can explain why the terminology of 'storytelling' and 'crafted narrative' resonates more forcefully in the American podcasting industry and its coverage in the media (primarily exemplified by Sarah Koenig's mode of addressing in *Serial*).

While this review makes a valid case for why podcasts extend the breadth of aural genres and allow for new modes of creative expression, the formalistic tradition has its limitations. First, mapping the enormous field of podcasting, which currently comprises over two million reported podcast series (Winn, 2021), requires developing a systematic method that would allow for the sampling and analysis of this ever-growing audio galaxy. Second, and more significantly, even if it were possible to collect and categorize all these podcasts in a systematized manner, it remains difficult to accurately determine which parameters qualify a podcast as such: Would recorded live radio programs, later rebroadcasted online, be included in this classification? Should we count audio books in the category of the narrative storytelling podcasting genre/style? And how do we go about podcast formats, such as the one-on-one interview, panel, solo commentary, and hybrid forms (e.g. Leonard, 2017), which expand the classification to even wider audio categories? Yet again, these questions lead us back to where we started. Finally, we should consider the possibility that what researchers identify as *new* genres do not always fit with the idea the audience holds about certain podcasts. In other words, podcast listeners may have their own definitions for and experiences with different podcasts, which in turn construct particular soundscapes for them, accompanied by typical modes of listening.

Discussion: podcast as podcast

In the proposed conceptual typology, I broadly sketch the formative contributions made in the first and the ongoing second decades of podcast studies. Since, as I have shown, each approach on its own is helpful but not sufficient to determine what podcasting is, two questions are now in order: (1) Should there be an overarching approach to defining and studying podcasting (and what would such an approach look like?); and (2) is there even such a thing as podcast studies?

Of course, these questions are not unrelated. In the effort of becoming '*_ studies*', researchers who aspire to distinguish the certain object that holds them together and shields them from immersion into other disciplines are obliged to engage with a set of shared intellectual problems rooted in and emerging from their accumulated boundary work. To cite Sterne (2005), 'disciplines never fully constitute their objects; they fight over them'. Fighting over the meaning of *podcast*, the master term of podcast studies, can indeed be understood as 'a major disciplinary event' (p. 251) that highlights a key intellectual problem shared by all podcast researchers. However, the debatable casting of podcast as a singular thing – be it a technology, a cultural practice, or an aesthetic artform – is not enough to justify the necessity of podcast studies. Ultimately, it comes down to the question of whether the cumulative writing about podcasting can enrich or cast suspicion on what we already know about core issues of communication.

To be fair, the argument relating to the thing we study as actually assembled of many things and angles is not new. It seems that in the life course of every communication technology comes the time to contemplate the very idea of the discourse constructing it – and consequently delineating its borders (examples I draw from in this article include Silver, 2004, on internet studies; Sterne, 2008, on sound studies; Lacey, 2009 and 2018, on radio studies; Hay, 2001 and Brunsdon, 2007, on television studies). Academically speaking, the decision on the 'birth' and 'death' of media is not so much about how and by whom they are being used, as it is about how and by whom they are *being situated* in the telling of communication history. Told by 'X studies' or by 'Y studies', this story may take on very different lives, assigning its object of inquiry different roles and meanings each time.

Hence, it makes sense that for the collective entity of radio studies scholars, the emergence of podcasting is a reassuring sign of *their* medium's revival, all the more so after years of being described by its limitations ('the blind medium') and inferiority to visual media ('a secondary medium', 'a companion medium'). For podcast researchers, it is often the reverse case, whereby podcasting marks the end of radio along with its tyranny of live broadcasts, rigid schedules, government regulation, and commercial constraints. The same can be said about the 'death of television' declarations, that, in view of today's catalogic and personally customized watching experience led by Netflix, seem naively exaggerated at best and, at worst, blind to the medium's potential to alter its communicability. Needless to add, the formation of whatever-you-may-call-it studies is heavily influenced by political strategies and power relations within the academic world: from syllabi writing to hiring, decisions about the opening, merging or closing of departments, journal publication considerations, legitimation and funding given to designated conferences and more. While it is not the goal of this reflexive critique, it should be made clear that the rise of podcast studies as a separate media field does not serve purely intellectual purposes. That being said, strategical awareness does not give us the privilege to assume that by devoting scholarly attention to podcasting we already offer unique or novel contributions to media studies as a whole, let alone setting our scholarship apart from other media disciplines.

So, what should be done to promote a novel overarching research approach to podcasting? In developing an approach that would capture both the *techné* and the *culture* of podcasting, it is tempting to marry podcasting to wider interdisciplinary concepts such as empathy or intimacy. But if we agree that podcasting is not a singular thing, then its appropriation to be considered as a framework for one such big concept should be regarded with similar suspicion. This is not to say that there is no value in exploring how podcasts bring us closer together, invite para-social relationships into everyday lives, or connect the dots on the culture industry map in surprising ways. While all of this may hold true, framing podcasting as a theoretical bridge to another broad idea is limited in offering profound venues for new work in terms of communication research. Conceptualizing podcasting as intimacy, for instance, is limiting in that it dictates a certain stance in regard to its object, gravitating towards certain listening modes (alone, with earbuds, during a morning jog or driving to work), certain podcast genres (long-form storytelling, intimate one-on-one interviews), and certain aspects of the production and distribution of podcasts. Podcasts facilitate intimacy as long as we choose to ignore their public sphere potential and large portions of randomly addressed audiences. By the same token, the attempts to appoint podcasting as a *remediation* medium, or locating its many moving parts in the metaphor of a network or a web are useful but certainly not exclusive to podcasting. It is difficult to imagine just how such attempts could put forward a particular research perspective that media studies were lacking before podcasting arrived. Put differently, we need to ask ourselves if thinking about 'podcasting as –' can truly provide us new concepts and methods through which other communication technologies can become unfamiliar again, and in effect reveal themselves to us in new ways.

Conclusions: casting new light on the pod

By way of concluding, I would like to engage with some operative questions and then offer entry points that give way to non-obvious answers. Let us imagine for a moment what the objects and methods of podcast studies could be that would allow us to productively *defamiliarize* podcasting for the advantage of wider media inquiries, assuming there is a point in advancing this scholarly body in its own right. How can we bypass the conventional research paths and pave new ones that would situate the podcast as central hub of humanistic and social sciences? What should a project about podcast theorization look like, one that would not lack historical awareness but would also not dismiss the innovative aspects of podcasting by making it subordinate to a certain media hierarchy?

In his 2005 article, Sterne makes a fair point that many studies in the then emerging field of *digital-media studies* are essentially reconstructing the history of media by underestimating the role of 'old' media in the formation of 'new' ones. In a similar vein of criticism, he argues in his co-authored article (Sterne et al., 2008) on the politics of podcasting that podcasting is 'new' only in the sense that it expands the breadth of broadcasting. But, dare I ask, should we not be able to tell the story of podcasting without passing through the history of broadcast radio?

An alternative route could take us through the development of RSS and its impact on the relationship between readers and texts in a digital landscape, content and its metadata, seriality and expectations, open-source distribution and user agency. This could evoke questions like how did the possibility of automatically receiving rapidly changing content reshape the interaction of journalists, bloggers, and other internet creators with their audiences, as these became 'subscribers'. In what ways did this open-source technology that privileges a 'giving your content away' practice shape the structures and standards of the fuzzy object called internet content? What then happened when this mechanism began to carry human voice in the form of episodic audio content, first directly to one's computer desktop and later straight to one's ear canal (via mobile device)? While all of these questions could easily be classified as technological in their approach, the motivation for asking them is not to a priori separate podcasting from radio, as the mother technology from which podcasting aspires to break loose. Alternatively, this sort of investigation uses podcasting to illuminate aspects of RSS that are thought-provoking in wider media perspectives, and would probably be kept in obscurity otherwise. The importance of the shift from a narrow podcast-as-radio approach to a broader technological perspective is evident in the novelty of works that inquire into the infrastructures of platforms' discovery mechanisms (Morris, 2021), the political economy and commodification of sound (Gallego, 2021), and the structural affordances of metadata and open feed (Hansen, 2021) – all of which are timely topics that podcasting provides a unique window into.

Following this logic, I propose six alternative starting points for future research:

1. *Podcasting is a collection of technologies and practices.* Rather than claiming autonomy within media studies, arguing that the podcast should (or should not) be classified as a medium, podcast studies would benefit from adopting a more holistic perspective, one that ties the technical and the socio-cultural. Leaving aside unproductive comparisons with so-called 'origin' media would allow the field to instead focus on a single practice or principle that intersects with varied communication technologies but becomes uniquely enriched or challenged by podcasting. For example, it is quite remarkable that podcasting is rarely associated with the phonograph by virtue of its contribution to the enduring history of the social construction of listening. Such a perspective could have easily revealed that nearly all the hopes Edison (1878) laid on the shoulders of the phonograph did not come to fully materialize in one auditory object until podcasting emerged and offered a whole range of uses and listening modes (from, in Edison's foresightful words, 'letter-writing' and 'phonographic book' to 'educational purposes', 'family record', and even 'musical teacher' – all found in the ever-growing podcast galaxy). Placing a cultural practice related to or shaped by podcasting (e.g. storytelling, reading, commuting) as the departure point for investigating this construct/medium/artifact, sets in motion a series of questions concerning the history and sociology of technology that mediates this practice. Guided by constructivist approaches such as STS or SCOT,³ questions of this nature can situate podcasting alongside technologies beyond our immediate horizons, that connect issues of power, political economy and the relation of human and non-human actors in the construction of technologies.
2. *Podcasting is primarily auditory; therefore, it should engage with sound studies more profoundly.* While video podcasting has been on the rise in recent years due to tech giants aspiring to create fully integrated content platforms (Sullivan, 2019), podcasting is essentially based on syndication of audio files. If we pull on this thread further it will tease out some analysis axes that are being widely employed in the study of sound technologies and formats. These include the relation between text–speech, space–time, ephemeral–permanent, and visibility–invisibility.

Taking the first coupling in this list, researchers could explore the production possibilities of podcast recording in a digital environment; the possibility of shifting speech to text and vice versa in listening platforms, which makes podcasting widely accessible for deaf people (mainly in English), but at the same time inseparably ties podcasting to visual communication; the horizon of generative podcasts, stemming from algorithmic mechanisms that are able to assign theme tags to audio snippets within a singular podcast episode and rearrange them on command (beyond thematic classification, how would such tags account for moments of silence, emotional cues implied in intonation change, or occasional pops and cracks of homely sounds?). Other directions of study that draw on sound paradigms could focus on the time-shifting nature of podcasting, being an asynchronous listening format, and could perhaps delve into the speed-changing option podcast platforms offer users. Listening to more in less time while maintaining the sense of the content is quite unique to podcasting, and certainly evokes new experiences of space and time for the listening subject. Other significant implications could be drawn from the inspection of diverse voice delivery and the range of sonic qualities associated with different modes of addressing in different podcast genres by relying on digital tools. The kind of work that strives to include podcasting in the history of recorded sound is seldomly being done, although some exciting steps have recently been made in this direction (see Bottomley, 2020; Hilmes, 2021; Mertens et al., 2021).

3. *Podcasts live in the realm of the everyday.* As previously discussed, podcasts are rarely consumed as a standalone activity. The invisibility of sound calls for a complementary activity that would utilize the eyes and hands. For podcast listeners it seems obvious to be enveloped by podcasts as they go on their daily routines – from loading the dishwasher to mowing the lawn. Yet surprisingly, nearly none of the socio-cultural writing about the meaning of podcasts has been dedicated to tracing the underlying connections between podcasting and ordinary technologies that go with mundane practices. If podcasts are essential parts of our leisure and domestic routines, then we should try to locate their meanings in places like jogging trails in parks, the gym, the car, the smartphone, and the kitchen. A study of this nature could, for instance, document the daily trails people take as they walk through the city with their earbuds in, listening to podcasts. In linking spoken audio and footsteps, what kind of relationship is formed between the listener and her physical space? What spatial strategies and on-the-ground choices do individuals make as they are accompanied by a familiar voice that has possibly already spoken into their ears for dozens or hundreds of hours? Drawing on De Certeau's investigations into routine practices (1980/1984), it is clear that those seemingly banal acts, into which podcasting sneaks, are nonetheless significant in exposing the subjective use of the urban space and role podcasts play in creating its meaning. Indeed, there is a lot to uncover about social capital, power, and gender relations in association with podcast listening, if only we were to go beyond the immediate communicative functions of podcasts to the wider context of their integration into people's lives.
4. *There is an archiving act in the creation of a podcast.* Podcasts are often described in the literature as 'evergreen' because they are essentially audio files waiting to be distributed by RSS aggregators and be listened by anyone, at any time, and from any place. Hence, the very features that make podcasting freely distributed and accessible also contribute to its vulnerability. It was not so long ago that listeners had to *really* work in order to discover new podcasts, as there are thousands of different podcast feeds and countless individual audio files designated as podcasts out there. It is for these reasons, and all the more so with the increasing platformization and Spotifocation of podcasting (Morris, 2021), that the field could gain new perspective in putting a spotlight on the preservation and searchability of podcasts. Who is in charge of institutional and informal podcast archives? Who decides what is kept and what is lost in the sea of internet content? What are the political and technical aspects played out in the interaction between podcasters and their gatekeepers – storage services and platforms? What are the archival properties of voice recordings and how do those properties translate to algorithmic mechanisms of sound

curation? These and other issues that are already being profoundly addressed in a recent essay collection titled 'Saving New Sounds' (Morris & Hoyt, 2021) tap into wider understanding of memory production in the digital age and could benefit both podcast studies and media studies as a whole.

5. *Podcasts draw on and shape ways of speech.* The discursive properties of 'podcast talk', as both different from and aligned with 'broadcast talk', are occasionally discussed in the context of podcasting and journalism, but are not given enough attention in other regards. There is much to be learned about the use of speech acts in the formation of trusting relationships between podcasters and their radically *uncaptivated* audience; about the modes of addressing in different podcast formats and genres; about the implications of having a structural obligation to listen to podcast episodes from the beginning and not as random outbursts of voice dictated by a broadcast schedule, which in effect invites narrative planning into the speech delivery. In applying discourse analysis methods, we could capture the nuances and patterns of selected case studies and enrich the expanding archives of podcast transcripts.
6. *The economy of podcasting is one of attention.* Lastly, and perhaps most obviously, there is the juxtaposing of podcasting and attentiveness in the overwhelming array of personal media selections, offered to us by countless platforms and on-demand services. As attentional selection operates *through* and *is* limited in time (Nobre, 2010) it is imperative that podcasts will share mutual courses of study with platforms that trade-off their 'free' services in return for our time. To thoroughly trace the history of podcasting, more should be done in documenting and reflecting on the similarities and differences between the casting model of podcasting and models offered by YouTube, IGTV, TikTok, and from another angle, Netflix, Spotify, Tidal, and SoundCloud. Such comparisons would be useful in the wider effort to understand how streaming services challenge the temporality of traditional broadcast, create personal recommendation systems for algorithmic audiences, invite new modes of attention and consumption practices (e.g. binge watching versus binge listening), and reshape the logic of media industries. After all, it is not unlikely that a few years down the line 'podcast studies' will be consumed by a rising field called 'on-demand/ streaming studies'.

To summarize, in this article I have attempted to achieve two goals: to construct a theoretical roadmap of the definitions that shaped what has become known as 'podcast studies', and to critically examine whether the three central approaches arising from the work of pioneer researchers in this field have truly led to a unique area of inquiry. While the discussion explicitly seeks to question the very idea that the object of this study (podcast) justifies its own academic division, the concluding segment carefully replies that, yes, there is such a thing as podcast studies, insofar that this body of work humbly engages with and utilizes the array of concepts, tools and framework developed in already established media disciplines. To attain its own set of methodological approaches, the study of podcasting should aspire to detect new meanings in cultural practices connected to podcasts; to come up with corresponding concepts to 'gaze' and 'visualization' that would fit critical writing about podcast consumption, production and monetization; to characterize new modes of attention and sonic interactivity; to build spoken-audio archives as an open-source resource for researchers; and to develop models for understanding podcast addressivity and the workflows leading its creative production. These and other profound outcomes, I argue, could – and have already started to – emerge from the alternative entry points into the inquiry of podcasts suggested in this essay.

Looking at the pathways we could take to find our place among well-established media fields, our shared task as podcast researchers is to locate the issues that cut across these fields, using podcasting as a sort of analytical machete. As such, it would open the possibility of lining up historical events and technological developments, and allow us to rethink different communication modes, in ways we could not see before podcasts came along.

Notes

1. For this reason, throughout this article I will use both the words *podcast* and *podcasting*, at times interchangeably, when discussing the meaning of the podcast.
2. Echoes of this long-standing debate appear even within some of the most recent additions to the expanding body of podcast-related theory. In his 2020 book, *Sound Streams*, Bottomley goes as far as to argue that podcasting is radio, declaring that: 'the supposed newness of podcasting is significantly tempered when the full range of radio's history and forms are taken into account' (Bottomley, 2020, p. 180), whereas Berry (2021), Hilmes (2022) and Bonini (2022) keep pushing against this claim by stressing the disruptive and creative aspects in which podcasting steps outside broadcast radio's logic and forms.
3. Science Technology Society approach, and Social Construction of Technology approach.

Acknowledgements

I thank Nicholas John, Amit Pinchevski, and Asaf Nissenbaum for their extremely helpful comments on various versions of this article. Additionally, I am deeply thankful to the editors and the anonymous reviewers for their assistance in refining and sharpening my arguments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study was supported by Israel Science Foundation (ISF) [grant number 482/20].

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