
Reviewed by Alice Garner (University of Melbourne)

Published on H-Podcast (July, 2024)

Commissioned by Robert Cassanello (he/him/his) (University of Central Florida)

There has been an extraordinary boom in podcast production in the last decade, alongside a fast-growing lay engagement with digital audio recording, editing, and mixing tools. Podcast listening apps offer a profusion of shows that touch on every obscure corner of human endeavor and interest and vary wildly in quality. But for those curious about the history of podcasting practices, it would be a mistake to assume that anything near the full picture of audio creativity and production can be found through the back catalogues on our smartphone apps or even through advanced internet searches.

Media historians worry about a phenomenon called “podfade,” a term coined by Steve Friess.[1] This is when old podcasts go missing, because of unstable or precarious hosting platforms, or because they have been hidden behind paywalls, or because no one thought them worth preserving. This has consequences for those who seek to write a history of sound work in all its forms.

In Saving New Sounds: Podcast Preservation and Historiography, Jeremy Wade Morris and Eric Hoyt bring together scholars to pick apart the complexities of archiving and writing the history(ies) of sound work, specifically podcasts. The editors describe themselves as media historians and “accidental archivists” (p. 4) who have become alarmed at the fragility of the digital artifacts of audio culture.

The central argument of their book is that “the work of preserving podcasts is inseparable from how we conceptualize the medium’s histories, meanings and definitions” (p. 4). The contributing authors explore different aspects of the medium and approaches to its preservation, grappling with the question of what is kept, what is lost (accidentally or on purpose), and why. Most chapters propose ways to create, curate, and maintain a more robust and inclusive archive of podcasts, keeping space for the homemade, DIY, and obscure as well as more polished and successful commercial products.
In podcast history making, some voices and works have been considered less worthy of remembering or archiving. Jennifer Hyland Wang in “The Perils of Ladycasting” notes that early DIY podcasters were often women, producing their episodes in the domestic space, fitting recording around care work, and creating a “homegrown” sound. Their output did not necessary fit a commercial template, their audio quality could be questionable, and so they have tended to be forgotten in a dominant masculine “techo-utopian” narrative of the origins of podcasting (p. 52). Their marginality has been reinforced by a historical bias against female voices in radio, seen as lacking authority and tending to “vocal fry.”

Black Podcasters have suffered a similar fate in being overlooked as early innovators. Sarah Florini and Briana Barner consider the case of the late Reggie Ossé’s irreverent, Black-hosted “Combat Jack Show” (Loud Speakers Network, 2010-17). A huge success with a million listeners each week in its last year, it also became what Florini and Barner describe as an “ad hoc” oral history of hip-hop culture. Ossé consciously positioned the work against the quiet, considered, NPR style. While Ossé was acknowledged as a pioneer podcaster upon his death, his work rarely appears in histories of podcasting. The authors call for media historians to look beyond the standard histories for other voices, including those that have challenged or even offended listeners. Ossé himself acknowledged the misogyny and homophobia in his show, which raises some questions about the consequences of any decision not to archive, which may mean we miss out on the full picture of what was actually being produced, said, and heard at a particular moment in time.

Choosing what to preserve is as much about judgements of value as it is a technical exercise. Podcast advertisements present an intriguing set of problems for archivists, given their often dynamic and ephemeral nature. J. J. Bersch argues for retaining advertisements and sponsor announcements given they are often integrated into the show by hosts who read the text and sometimes even develop long-lasting humorous plot-lines around them. Removal of advertising from archived podcasts also removes evidence of an important aspect of the economics of the industry.

Later chapters in the book touch on potential uses of archived podcasts, with PodcastRE and other databases giving the historian access to an “abundance of voices” (Jacob Mertens, p. 111) which often discuss issues that lie outside the concerns of traditional broadcasting. Amanda Keeler argues that studying the development of a specific genre of podcasts, for example true crime, can provide insight into broader social tensions, changes to forms of, and ethical principles in journalism, while also representing a form of evidence for future reinvestigations of cases.

Digging into the backend of podcasts, Susan Noh looks at the way creators’ use of metadata to improve discoverability of their work can at times turn into a kind of classificatory activism. Producers try to “manage the push and pull of influence and control” (p. 137) of apps and platforms whose predetermined genre categories have a limiting effect. There are communities of podcasters seeking alternative modes of discovery, and trying also to prevent the “orphaning” of podcasts from their original context. This is a reminder to take metadata seriously; it has implications for future access and for understanding the broader ecosystem of podcasting.

In one chapter, Samuel Hansen explains how Really Simple Syndication (RSS), the original organizing backbone of podcasts and around which the PodcastRE archive is built, is being increasingly challenged by the “walled gardens” (p. 203) of commercial podcasting platforms as well as by the supply of inadequate metadata by creators. Arguing that podcasting is “one of the last keepers of the promise of the open internet” (p. 204), Hansen proposes one solution (while acknowledging it would be a daunting task): a wholesale change by
podcasters to a newer, more robust open standard (JSON).

Jeremy Wade Morris offers a companion piece to Hansen’s, with a critical look at the “platformization” (p. 211) of podcasting, in particular what he calls “Spotification.” Spotify offers a user-friendly, “feels-like-free” interface (p. 214) but effectively draws listeners into a walled garden that separates podcast episodes from their original RSS feed; in this way it disconnects listeners from the original source and its metadata. The original promise of “accessibility and diversity of voices” (p. 209) is under increasing challenge.

For a nontechnical reader, some of the material in the chapters about metadata construction and analysis can be challenging. It is important, however, for podcasters and media historians who want the full diversity of audio work to be preserved and accessible into the future, to be aware of what rolling technical changes, including the increased use of proprietary web players, mean for their field.

One of the most intriguing chapters, “Drifting Voices” (by Mertens, Hoyt, and Wade Morris) interrogates the dominance of the NPR “voice” in the podcasting industry. The authors ask what it means to sound “natural” according to NPR style guides. After testing two digital tools for analyzing pitch and cadence (with mixed results), they express concern about the growing tendency for podcasters to aim for an NPR style in their delivery, with a consequent loss of vocal diversity.

Mack Hagood’s article on audio academia makes a case for a form of scholarly podcasting that pays more careful attention to audio quality and sound design—sitting between “hi-fi, mid register” nonexpert podcasts and the “lo-fi, high register” academic conversation (p. 181). Drawing on his experience producing *Phantom Power*, Hagood expresses some frustration that while “out loud scholarship” can reach and engage academic peers and nonexpert audiences simultaneously, the “constructs of academic knowledge, aesthetics and folkways” (p. 192) mean that gatekeepers are slow to see it as worthy of institutional recognition. This book should help to build a case for a more nuanced appreciation of podcasting as a serious scholarly activity.

Meanwhile, podcasts keep disappearing and so some archivists have developed campaigns to educate podcasters in digital preservation. Dana Gerber-Margie, Mary Kidd, Molly Schwartz, and Sarah Nguyễn discuss their “Preserve this Podcast” (PTP) initiative, designed to guide podcasters in organizing and archiving their audio work. Their chapter brings home the “material reality” that lies behind digital preservation, the “rooms of fallible servers, drives, cooling systems and other machinery” (p. 231).

Another consideration when archiving is the documentation and artifacts generated during the making of a podcast. Just as literary archives include material like notebooks, drafts, and correspondence, podcast archives should include more than audio files and metadata. The final chapter, by Eric Hoyt, explores this rich, multimedia contextual dimension, including visual documentation, promotional videos, newsletters, trade publications, audience data, production emails and schedules, legal documentation, social media posts, ticketing platforms and statistics, merchandise, and fan art. For media historians, the records of podcatching apps and distribution are also valuable. There are technical challenges here, including changing operating systems and hardware obsolescence, of a kind that already keeps archivists awake at night.

The book makes a powerful case for podcast producers to think carefully and strategically about the future of their audio work as part and parcel of their production process. There will always be gaps in the historical record, and so, toward the end, there is a call for the recording of oral histories of podcasting, to capture in practitioners’ voices the many dimensions of production and reception that may not be easily preservable.
in other ways (or may already be lost to us). Hoyt concludes that “the perfect is the enemy of the good, and any work in this space is better than none” (p. 252).

Although each author’s case for a more thoughtful, technically robust, and inclusive archival practice is convincing, the reader turns the last page with an overwhelming sense of the impossibility of preserving all that people wish to see preserved in the podcasting landscape. The commercial pressures, budgetary constraints, and recent mass sackings of podcast makers that we are witnessing currently suggest that this might remain a wish list rather than an eventuality. In the meantime, let us do what we can.

Note

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58538

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.