Media and Culture Assignment 3–Critical Case Study and Interview Write Up_6887 words, December 2017

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If 'Facebook Made us Lonely' (Marche, S. 2012), Will Podcasts Reconnect Us?

Certain voices hold this odd pull on our heartstrings. They are like sad oboes or something, something that makes you want to throw all your money at the radio while yelling, "I love you." I don't know what it is.
–Jonathan Goldstein, author.

A smile is, in fact, something that you can hear, and a good set of ears can pick up on different kinds of smiles.
– Amy Drahota, researcher.

Well-being, defined as resilience and happiness, is consistently linked to our sense of belonging to a community. This correlation appears to be eroded with the use of social media, such as Facebook. My aim with this case study has been to explore more about my observation that if, as the 2012 Atlantic press article said, 'Facebook is making us lonely' (Marche, S. 2012), with its superficial and polarized format of likes and extreme statements, then perhaps podcasts with their longer and deeper intimate conversations, marked by authenticity and transparency, are helping listeners build communities based on common interests.

The Question
My main question at the outset was: Does listening to podcasts increase the listeners sense of being part of a community? To answer this initial question, I interviewed 2 people, one who listens to podcasts and one who produces them. But I also began to introduce the question to many of the people I interact with during the course of a day. After the initial interviews, I branched out from my original study outline, to incorporate some other effects of podcast experiences: Is listening to a particular voice more

comforting than looking at an image? Are we happier as listeners or as viewers? And what can I find out about this sense of community? Is it a 'narrowcast' of shared interests or the result of a filter bubble? And secondarily, what happens to these auditory relationships when large brands begin to produce podcasts? Will people subscribe to them? Will we listen to them and trust them? Are podcast conversations the future of advertising?

Introduction to the Case Study

It was originally the convergence of 2 events that inspired me to investigate podcasting. First, I came across a Huffington Post blog entry entitled Podcast Power (Lombardo, T. 2016). It listed podcasting as 'one of the most important ideas in digital media' in September 2016. Secondly, that same month, Laurie Brown, Canadian music journalist and the 10 year host of a very unique late night radio program, The Signal, left traditional radio and launched The Pondercast. Laurie and The Signal had a very dedicated and eccentric community of listeners, the Signalites, who have now followed her to the podcast. The debut Pondercast achieved 'the number one spot for Arts podcasts in iTunes Canada (Brown, L. 2017)

"A gratifying beginning to Pondercast!   You had our debut sitting at the #1 spot for Arts podcasts in   iTunes Canada for days. The Pondercast tribe is strong!"

(Brown, L. 2017) (Note the use of the word "tribe" here.)

I confess that I am one of the Signal listening veterans who has moved to the Pondercast and it is this recent shift that has made me curious to learn more about this audio-blogging/narrow-cast genre of digital media and its ability to create community and a sense of belonging.

The results of recent user surveys indicate that we are listening to podcasts more frequently and for longer periods of time (Edison Research, 2016). But what is a podcast? Generally, it's a digital audio file, made available for downloading, typically available as a series, where the new episodes are received automatically by subscribers. The unique quality shared by all podcasts is this "casting" ability. Casting describes how they are able to be immediately delivered to multiple distribution points such as iTunes applications through a process of syndication called RSS (Real Simple Syndication). When a podcaster releases a new episode, a global audience can be

automatically notified and the episode can also be automatically downloaded to all subscribers. In this way, podcasts are like magazine subscriptions. Podcast websites are typically characterized by listener discussion boards. Listeners post comments and can carry on dialogues with other listeners and the podcast producers.

The History of Podcasts

Online audio talk programs have existed in a variety of limited forms since the 1980s. Starting as scheduling and broadcasting software for radio and TV stations, and as networks for audio and music distribution the programs eventually evolved into standardized, computer readable formats and portable player and music download systems in the late 1990s.

In 2000, the fledgling company i2GO launched the first system to enable the selection, downloading and storage of serial audio content on PCs. They also created the MP3 format and portable MP3 player. By 2003, audio interviews, in MP3 format, could be posted as part of a blog. (i2GO closed in 2008 during the dot com economic crash due to lack of assets). At this point, blogs were still called "weblogs" (Doyle, 2005).

The first podcast, was identified as an audio blog. The name podcast was actually coined a year later. This first downloadable audio piece was created in July 2003 by a former New York Times journalist and radio broadcaster, Christopher Lydon. He was the creator of an early talk show, The Connection, at the Boston U radio station WBUR. Due to a dispute over the intellectual property rights of The Connection content, Lydon began to look for a vehicle through which to self produce his work. In collaboration with Bob Doyle, at MITs New Media Lab, they began to experiment with creating an audio blog, as an alternative to a text blog. Lydon had specifically identified his unique skill to be his "radio voice" and not penmanship. It was this that drove him to find a way to create an audio based format to restart his career after leaving traditional broadcasting. Their research included the investigation of portable recorders, audio editing software and compression tools in order to develop a portable recording studio to support the development of an audio blog. (Doyle, 2005)

Lydons podcast show was launched as Radio Open Source, it is still running and is currently considered the longest running podcast series. At the time of this writing, the latest instalment on Open Source was an interview with the musician and artist Amanda Palmer of the Dresden Dolls performed in front of a live audience on November 27, 2017. This performative aspect appears to be a recent development in podcasting.

And, it was an Open Source listener, Adam Curry, an early MTV host, who wrote the first software that allowed for the daily downloading of his favourite archived talk shows from the web into his iPod. With that, all iPod owners were able to access blog software to fill up their portable recorders. (Doyle, 2005)

Here is a transcript of the first podcast:

"The Internet just got cool again. Forget the crash. What was a collection of static pages and commerce sites has become a living, breathing conversation. A handful of innovations — tagging, syndication and yes, of course, blogging — have only now become user-friendly. They're changing the way we communicate. And finally, the doomsday predictions about the old models — of journalism, of marketing, of research — are no longer exaggerated. They're calling it Web 2.0, and it will probably change your life. A few people saw it coming all along. Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy, they wrote. "
(Lydon, C., 2017)

(*The listen button no longer worked on this one. It suggests that another question a case study might ask is how do we create an archive of podcasts. A rigorously catalogued archive seems to be essential to a study of podcasts*.)

And the word podcast?
The actual word "podcast" arrived a year after the first audio blog was created. In February of 2004, The Guardian published an article by Ben Hammersley, The Audio Revolution. He characterized the new phenomenon as a boom in "amateur radio". As an introduction to the article he asks the question: But what to call it? And suggests 3 possible answers: Audioblogging, podcasting, guerrilla media? Within the article, Hammersley cites an interview with Chris Lydon, where the podcaster talks about his motivation for podcasting: "I feel unleashed to work directly with my audience." This reminds me of Brown's reference to her "tribe" of signalites.

In September 2004, Doc (David) Searls, now an author, editor of Linux Journal, and alumnus fellow of the Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard, began to keep track of how many "hits" Google found for the word "podcasts". On September 28th, he posted that there were 24 results for a search of the word "podcasts". On October 1, there were 2,750 results, and the number doubled every few days. By

October 18th, the number of hits on Google was over 100,000 and Podcasting had been defined by Wikipedia. Wikipedia dates the oldest revision to "Podcast" at 23:10, 26 October, 2004. (And in case you were curious, the most recent revision, sourced on November 8, 2017, was made at 17:18, 7 November 2017) (Wikipedia entry log)

What is a podcast?
As explained in the history of podcasting, which outlines the most conventional definition, the podcast is a type of technology, a digital delivery mechanism, and a method for delivering audio files over the internet for download and playback. In this instance, it is a new hybrid form of media. It is also sometimes explained as a type of grassroots radio. However, academic scholarship has also proposed a more interactive definition, where podcasting can be understood as a "specific form of online participation". (Millet, 2011) And with the trend to record podcasts in front of a live audience, perhaps it is truly just a form of participation, no longer limited to an online environment.

"There are some ideas you just can't get across in a tweet. In a fast food world, this is us inviting folks to sit down and take the time to enjoy a home-cooked meal with us and a few friends." (Beer, J., 2016)

Reflection on Interview Questions and Conversations
Here is my first question:
Do we listen to podcasts? What do we listen to most regularly.
How long do we listen for?
Edison research has conducted annual surveys on media use in the United States. Their research also encompasses podcast users. Their results reported that 46% of the 12+ audience was aware of podcasting in 2012, up from 22% in 2006. This audience is still growing, with another 23% increase between 2015 and 2016 and monthly podcast subscriptions have increased 75% since 2013. Edison prefaces their results with the subtitle "The audience is bigger than you think." The podcast audience in the United States is approximately 57 million listeners. This represents 21% of the country. To put this in context, Edison offers the following comparisons: 13% of the USA listens to Spotify monthly, and 21% of the country actively uses Twitter.
Edison attributes the growth in podcast media to the rise in mobile technology. In 2014, most podcasts were being listened to on a computer, but the more recent values from 2016, indicate that 64% of podcasts are being listened to on a smartphone or tablet.

In 2012, the researchers found that the average podcast consumer listened to three podcasts a week, with a time spent listening of around 30 minutes per week. In 2016, they reported that the podcast audience was now listening to an average of 5 shows per week. In my own limited interviews, the participants had been listening to podcasts for —— years, and had —— number of favourite shows, to which they listened about —— times per week. Edison concludes it research summary with the suggestion that contrary to popular assumptions, the attention span of the audience growing. (Edison, 2016)

"Media consumption is showing signs of being dramatically changed by both technology and by new paradigms. Mobile technology, podcasts and on-demand video is subverting the myth that our attention spans are shorter." (Edison, 2016)

One other question I'm left with is: What does it really mean to "play" a podcast. On the surface, it means that we turns on a machine and listen, but it doesn't necessarily mean "to listen." We can play music for many reasons and sometimes just for background noise. And what other experiences do we derive from just being able to manipulate media? Could it also be a form of game playing, not just playing music? We can programme what kind of music we want to hear and when we want to hear it, and on what playback system. We can be even more creative, with experimental resampling and splicing. (Anderson, T, 2009) The ways in which listeners use music technologies for their own expressive means could also help understand the appeal of podcasts. In my 2 interviews and informal surveys I received a very narrow set of responses to how and why people listen to podcasts. I think it would be interesting to investigate peoples listening habits in more detail. These listeners put emphasis on listening to understand the ideas being discussed.

What do you think motivates independent podcasting?
A 2014 study examining the motivations of independent podcasters used a web-based survey to investigate who is making podcasts and why. The results revealed that podcast production is dominated by educated, professional males over 30, most of whom are not podcasting full-time. Over 50% of them have a post secondary education, and 45% had previous media experience. They are highly engaged with their audiences and motivated by values that emphasize the importance of community, feedback, and continual improvement.(Doyle, 2005) In 2007, a similar study grouped podcasters into five categories of motivation: explorer, personality prototype, theme caster, rebel, and

social capitalist. (Mocigemba & Riechmann, 2007)

Most produced only one podcast, generally in the audio format. While podcasters may be working on their own individual shows, their interest in feedback and improvement appears to advance the podcasting movement as a whole. Podcasters find continued motivation from the existence of their audience. Podcasting remains important because they can express themselves and their expertise and potentially become famous doing so.

After you account for this dominant group of podcast producers, it seems that the rest of podcast media is being produced by a very diverse group. Basically, everybody is podcasting, from churches posting podcasts of sermons, clubs sharing discussions online, and people just obsessed by things like pens or cameras are also making programs for other people who share their interests.

What distinguishes a podcast from a radio show? What isn't a podcast?
A common way to describe a podcast is through the metaphor of radio, but often podcasters themselves see podcasting as an alternative to traditional radio. (Why Pod) The act of listening to a podcast, does seem to be similar to the attention required to listen to a radio show. A survey of listeners of the podcast version of This American Life, found that they attentively listened to and visualized content from the podcast programs similar to old time radio dramas. This attentive listening and visualization of content suggested movement away from current radio listening as a background (Johnson, 2007). This links back in some way to the idea of podcasts as a form of participation. The podcast audience is not simply passively receiving content. The podcast community appears to be developing a form of participatory culture engaged in a variety of production activities, including creating new products, adding improvements to current ones, making recommendations, and rating products (Jenkins, 2006). The boundary between listener and producer can be blurred. Perhaps the terms producer and 'consumer" are no longer are relevant in this case, because producers and users of media can now be one in the same (Bruns, 2008). In this instance it is definitely not typical radio.

Have podcasts changed since you started listening to them?
Have they changed since you started making them?
I was curious about how podcasts may be evolving. The move towards a participatory culture seems like the most significant change. This is strengthened by the phenomena of recording podcasts with live audiences. I did look at one podcast series to compare

the first show with the most recent. Open Source Radio is considered the longest running podcast. (Johnson, 2007) The first show was only available in transcript form, it was brief and manifesto-like. (I've quoted it in the history of podcast section, the play button didn't work anymore). This brief exercise did bring up a practical question, that other researchers have also repeated. Podcast research is challenging due to the lack of a comprehensive podcast archive. (iTunes reports that it only archives the latest 200 episodes of any program, and many other archives are curated by fans alone). There appears to be an especially large gap in the archives during the early years of podcasting between 2003-2008.

Podcasts and feelings of connectivity and HAPPINESS within their audiences? Do you feel like you are part of the conversation when you listen to a podcast? Does it feel like an intimate, more human, experience than other social media? Is it social? What do you think of online podcast communities? Do you participate in any?

I wanted to reflect on the interview question that asked about feelings of connection. This question evolved a bit to include a question about whether or not you felt happier as a podcast listener. This is the question that launched my research.

My main question still is: Does listening to podcasts increase the listeners sense of being part of a community? To answer this, I interviewed 2 people, one who listens to podcasts and one who produces podcasts.

"A merry heart goes all the day, Your sad tires in a mile-a."
—William Shakespeare

I'm again going back to the more interactive definition of podcasting; where podcasting can be understood as a "specific form of online participation". (Millet, 2011) In the industry surveys, most of the podcasters reported drawing small audiences, but they also indicated strong community interaction with their audiences. Interestingly, developing relationships through podcasting was associated with promoting other people, with content, and with services as a motivation for continuing to podcast. One survey concluded that this might be an indication that the relationships that are built through podcasting become more important than the initial performance-related factors. (Markman, 2014) Another study that concluded with a discussion of the convergence between listeners and producers of podcasting media, described the new media environment as being in an state of change, which makes it challenging to extrapolate what the future might be like. They ended in an ambiguous but interesting

place, saying that podcast consumers are "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (Jenkins, 2006).

Another podcaster described it this way: Because podcast websites have ways for listeners to leave comments about each episode, and literally enter into a discussion with other listeners, podcasts are like a community of individuals sharing a common interest. Kind of cool. (Markman, 2014) You could even imagine a podcast format where the audience could make choices in close to real-time that could affect the outcome of the discussion. The potential appears to be there, even if the format hasn't quite grasped it yet.

Perhaps podcasts sit at a nexus of authenticity, storytelling and conversation. Podcasting seems to have consistently served as a medium for some very intriguing content and forward looking ways of integrating a personal connection with their audience. The members of podcast communities appear to strive for continual improvement of the product, and the porous boundaries of the communities allow for feedback to circulate within and outside the producers. Podcasters in turn remain engaged with podcasting because they have found a community where they can receive feedback to help them improve their skills, while at the same time having fun and enjoying the process involved in podcast production. (Mocigemba & Riechmann, 2007)

The reference to fun and enjoyment implies that happiness is part of the podcast experience. In the article, *The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?*, the researchers define happiness "as a state in which people feel a preponderance of positive emotions most of the time". Their research was looking at the bi-directional causal pathway of happiness. We are happy because we are rich in resources valued by society, and happy people are more likely to acquire favourable life experiences. (Lyubomirsky, King, Diener, 2005)
I was interested in the article because they looked in depth at the relationship between social relationships and happiness, and also community involvement and happiness. Both are important factors in the survival of human species, social relationships are essential to successful human functioning. A robust amount of scholarship reinforces this: Friendship has been found to have one of the highest positive correlations with self-rated happiness. (Lyubomirsky, King, Diener, 2005) (Cambell, Converse & Robert, 1976).

This supports the idea that people who are part of podcast communities will feel

happier, and more engaged in society. Is this the antidote to Facebook? I think there are many factors leading to social isolation in todays world. Statistics have revealed that North Americans are living more solitary lives. In 1950, less than 10% of American households contained only one person. By 2010, nearly 27 percent of households had just one person. We meet fewer people. We gather less. And when we gather, our bonds are less meaningful and less easy. The decrease in confidants—that is, in quality social connections—has been dramatic over the past 25 years. In one survey, the mean size of networks of personal confidants decreased from 2.94 people in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004. Similarly, in 1985, only 10 percent of Americans said they had no one with whom to discuss important matters, and 15 percent said they had only one such good friend. By 2004, 25 percent had nobody to talk to, and 20 percent had only one confidant. (Marche, 2012) So contrary to Marche's article, Facebook probably didn't make us lonely. More accurately, Facebook arrived in the middle of an environment of social disintegration. To some degree this is fuelled by the western ideal of the "self". We are self-made, self-reliant, we celebrate self-expression and the breaking away from family, from the state and from all limits entirely. Facebook is just part of this drive to separate. Solitude used to be good for self-reflection. But now perhaps we are only left in the condition of having to think about who we are all the time, denied the chance to forget about ourselves for a while.

Most studies of podcasts focus on the role and potential uses of podcasting in education. Even more articles are about the techniques of making them. In one case, looking at the impact of mobile learning on classroom performance, the results indicated that students in a podcast condition who took notes while listening to the podcast scored significantly higher than students who attended the same course material in a traditional lecture condition. (Morris, 2010) Podcasts and Mobile Assessment Enhance Student Learning Experience and Academic Performance (Morris, 2015) This seems to imply that the podcast format encourages really focused listening.

Another article reported on an initiative to explore the potential of using podcasts to reduce the anxiety caused by isolation and to promote a sense of inclusivity amongst distance learning students studying an information technology. The podcasts were structured as a series of short, 3 to 5 minute talkback radio-style segments, with senior students holding discussions on the subject in a relaxed style. Both quantitative and qualitative data collected indicated that the student listeners experienced and perceived a much stronger sense of being part of the student community. The podcasts were successful in helping the students to integrate into their studies both socially and

academically, despite the presence of physical separation. (Weiley, Sommers, 2014) (Reducing Social Isolation andShannon.Weiley@newcastle.edu.au So) Perhaps this effect of connection could be extrapolated to all podcast listeners?

Are we creating a true sense of community and public space, something perhaps you could call a "narrowcast" based on similar values and beliefs or is it just a filter bubble?

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error. – John Stuart Mill, philosopher, 1859

If we are now in an era when everyone has their own facts. What are the consequences? (Viner, 2016) With the advent of social media as an important source of news and opinions, some activists and scholars have started worrying that the Internet could lead to online segregation and may increase radicalism and extremism in society, due to receiving biased and one-sided news and opinions. Critics have pointed out the dangers of group forming among like-minded on the Internet. Recently, online platforms such as Facebook and Google have been criticized, because with their personalization algorithms they only show users viewpoints that they already agree with, leading to echo chambers, information silos, and filter bubbles. Do online platforms really have biases that may cause bubbles or people themselves construct self-reinforcing filters because of pre-existing divergent beliefs? (Bozdag, 2015)

There is a growing argument that the Internet is not a public forum due to the ease of only reading and linking to like-minded resources and deliberating among like-minded users without hearing contrary views. This is creating social fragmentation and group polarization which leads users to take on extreme positions. Limiting our exposure to opposing view can cause us to become ill-informed about current events. In The Myth of Digital Democracy, Matthew Hindman reinforces these conclusions. His book discusses how the Internet has done little to broaden political discourse but instead only

empowers a small set of elites.

There is a far greater concentration of power in this respect than there has ever been in the past. And the "diversity that the world wide web had originally envisioned" has given way to "the centralisation of information" inside a select few social networks – and the end result is "making us all less powerful in relation to government and corporations". (Derakhshan, 2015) "Social media hasn't just swallowed journalism, it has swallowed everything. It has swallowed political campaigns, banking systems, personal histories, the leisure industry, retail, even government and security."

Is the podcast community just a product of a filter bubble, sharing amplified and concentrated extreme opinions? Or is this a community of people where in their choice to listen to specific and specialized content? A narrow cast, not a broad cast. If broadcasting means appealing to as broad an audience as possible. Perhaps the variable is in two is making the choices? Is a filter offering you the podcast play button, or is the listener choosing it themselves?

Is a podcast a "narrowcast"? With the amount of content that podcasting provides, regular Broadcast Radio can't compete. If broadcasting means attempting to appeal to as broad of an audience as possible, then podcasting, where the audience may be much smaller, is still considerable more interested in the content being delivered.

Reflections on the interview question about
Podcasts and Branding
Would you subscribe to a podcast produced by a big brand?
In 2016, it became clear that everyone is lying, all the time. The companies, brands, and people who will win in 2017 need to understand that the truth, no matter how stained, corrupted, rusted, broken, or overweight, will be the only barometer of trust in the new year. When your audience goes into everything expecting to be lied to, telling the truth, again, no matter how stained, corrupted, rusted, or broken it might be, might possibly be the only barometer of trust in the current climate.

As control shifts to viewers, brands are beginning to focus on creating content that people want to watch, instead of interrupting what they want to watch. Technology has made podcasts easier and more convenient to listen to, and business models have evolved to better translate podcasts into sources of revenue. Podcasts are being leveraged by legacy organizations to cross promote their content, in order to sell, without selling. (Goodwin, 2017)

For example, some of the established, legacy media organizations investing in podcasting includes the New York Times, which is March of 2016 announced the creation of a podcast team focused on new and opinions. General Electric also launched a podcast, Second Science, and Microsoft released Futures. As branded content goes, there seems to be a challenge to overcoming the resistance of listeners to branding. But, since it's such an intimate medium, it's a natural fit for a big brand that's looking to connect with people on a more human level to produce podcasts. They have a lot of stories to share. (Lombardo, 2017)

Although my interview responses did not support branded podcasts, in fact they were very quick to answer this question with a negative answer, other surveys of heavy users of podcasts reported to have a positive view of the advertisers who supported the podcasts (Markman, Sawyer, 2015).

The Visual Experience
With this case study I've knowingly put emphasis on the audio nature of podcasts, and omitted up to now, any discussion of image or visual experience. It seems obvious that we are a predominately visual culture and that our brains are biased towards visual information. A significant proportion of our brain and our emotions are attached to processing what we see. But I have to admit, that in this age of image overload and visual saturation, it's been a relief to spend some time with my eyes closed.

I did come across one interesting observation about media convergence. Where I quoted Millette earlier as defining podcasting as a form of online participation, another researcher looking at how digital natives process images has found something similar evolving in our relationship to images. Photos within the digital native cohort are no longer works of art or memorial objects, but instead instruments of interaction and peer bonding. (Van Dijck, 2007)

I'm beginning to wonder if all media are on a trajectory to eventually become tools of peer bonding. Are we all being pushed back into communities and groups.

The Sonic Experience and what is 'listening and hearing'?
The perception of sound includes how we listen, our psychological responses, and the physiological impact of music and sound on the human nervous system. Ultimately, sound is vibration. Wherever there is motion, there is frequency. Though inaudible at times, all frequencies make a sound. All sounds resonate and can affect one another. All atomic matter vibrates, and frequency is the speed at which matter vibrates. The frequency of vibration creates sound (sometimes inaudible).Resonance can be broadly

defined as "the impact of one vibration on another." Something external sets something else into motion, or changes its vibratory rate, echo-ing and re-sounding.

In addition to the ears critical function of communication and balance, the ear also acts to recycle sound vibrations which recharge our inner batteries. According to the study of psycho acoustics, sound is to the nervous system what food is to our physical bodies: Food provides nourishment at the cellular level of the organism, and sound feeds us the electrical impulses that charge the neocortex (Leeds, 2017).

Listening and looking are active functions; hearing and seeing are passive. In active listening mode, the middle ear function is highly engaged while the brain seeks to identify a pattern. Once an auditory pattern is found, passive hearing begins. Habituation sets in and the brain focuses on other things. Active listening stimulates the nervous system. Passive hearing is neutral or "discharging" (Leeds, 2017).

What we call 'sound' is in fact a progressive acoustic wave — a series of variations in air pressure, spreading out from whatever source made the sound. These pressure variations strike the ear and the signal is converted and translated through numerous states. This signal path encompasses four distinct states of information: acoustic, mechanical (solid), mechanical (liquid), and electric, more specifically electro-chemical. The very nature of the information also changes: from analogue to digital.

The Sound of the Human Voice
I'm also curious to investigate the idea of "voice". Does the sound of the speakers voice have a significant influence on our experience of the podcast. Do we create an emotional contact to that voice? Does that contribute to the sense of community and happiness? The first podcast author, Chris Lydon, recognized the gift of his radio voice. What does that really mean?

Conversations have a way of holding our attention, pulling us into their worlds. They keep us at the table long past our bedtimes and they stick with us for years. The evolution of story-telling is as old as the human race. Podcasting also relies on conversation. Listeners engage with podcasts for long periods of time. Often more than 30 minutes. The lack of strong scripting creates a spontaneous flow, which leads listeners to repeat these conversations creating their own connections to the content. In my interviews, the people surveyed listened for an average of 45-60 minutes per day.

The best conversations depend on a mutual respect of the other party's intelligence:

Podcasts respect consumers intelligence. In this environment, authenticity and transparency are very important to the listener.

When Lydon said his gift was a radio voice, not merely a skillful pen he was identifying some of the specialized information a voice can convey. Research suggest that emotions expressed through our voices are part of an ancient, unconscious primate communication system. (Drahota, Costall, Vasudevi, 2008).

Vocalizations are important components of social behaviour in many vertebrate species, including our own. Less well-understood are the hormonal mechanisms involved in response to vocal cues, and how these systems may influence the course of behavioural evolution. Partly because humans seem to be the only vertebrate capable of producing a continuous and precisely timed amount of comforting vocalizations upon request. To investigate the importance of vocalizations in social bonding, a study selected mother–daughter pairs as test subjects and investigated whether exposure to a special voice could produce the same physiological effects as comforting physical contact. They measured the release of the neurohormone oxytocin (OT), which is used by our bodies to suppress stress. When they compared the two types of social contact, tactile and vocal, they found that both can release OT in female children after a socially stressful event. This work revealed that vocal cues in humans are similar to tactile contact as seen in other mammals with respect to the release of OT. Second, the results also suggest that vocal cues may be a good alternative to physical contact for maintaining healthy human relationships.

So maybe there is something special that happens to us when we listen to our favourite podcast voices. We are energized by the vibrations, and relaxed as our brains release OT. And then perhaps we feel happier?

The sound of happiness
So what does happiness sound like? A number of studies have demonstrated that smiles can be communicated vocally.The research has demonstrated that listeners can, with varying degrees of success, hear different types of smiles in the voices of strangers in the absence of visual cues. Listeners are very good at discriminating authentic smiles ('Duchenne Smiles') from 'No Smiles'. They can also, to a lesser degree, successfully discriminate more relaxed smiles ('Non-Duchenne Smiles')from 'No Smiles', and 'Suppressed Smiles' from 'No Smiles'. It seems that smiles can carry much more audio information than I first assumed. (Drahota, Costall, Vasudevi, 2008)

One other survey of happiness and media was based on interviews with more than 1,000 people, commissioned by the Radio Advertising Bureau to find out if media can influence the way people feel. Respondents were surveyed and interviewed about their media usage and their related moods for one week. The results revealed that radio had the most mood-enhancing effect, with listeners saying that it lifted their happiness levels 100 per cent and energy levels by 300 per cent, compared to those not using any media at all. When compared to TV and internet surfing, which created peaks and troughs in moods, radio provided a consistently upbeat environment shaped to suit the listener. If you define podcasting as a form of grassroots radio, these same mood and energy enhancing effects could apply. A second part of the research involved a separate lab-based investigation using the EEG brain scan technique which showed that radio stimulated positive engagement levels within the brain. The research found that when radio ads followed radio editorial, levels of positive engagement were sustained throughout the ad break. (Media and the Mood of the Nation Study, 2015)

Seeing & Hearing and Seeing What You Hear
Perhaps seeing and hearing aren't so easily separated after all. We can usually differentiate the sights we see and the sounds we hear. But in some cases, the two can be intertwined. During speech perception, our brain integrates information from our ears with information from our eyes. Because this integration happens early in the perceptual process, visual cues influence what we think we are hearing. That is, what we see can actually change what we "hear." This visual-auditory crosstalk, which happens every time we perceive speech, becomes obvious in this video of a phenomenon called the McGurk Effect. In this case, despite the fact that you are listening to the same sound (the word "bah"), what you hear depends on which face you are looking at. The effect persists even after you learn about it. (Groeger, 2012).

Another report discussed how listening to a specially prepared podcast could change the experience of walking through a neglected urban environment. This particular route was typically stressful and was rated as negative without the podcast, but with the podcast the participants felt they had a positive experience, and in one instance, even connected more to the people they passed by. (Briggs, 2015)

One somewhat humorous and informal experiment comparing the effect of images vs. text in online communities was conducted by the online dating app, OK Cupid. They called it the 'Love is Blind, or Should be' Experiment. They celebrated the release of a blind date product by removing all the pictures from OkCupid on launch day, January 15, 2013. The app was a total failure. But they decided to look at the metrics to find out

more about what really happened to their community when no one could see what the participants looked like. They compared the data from the Love Is Blind Day to a normal Tuesday, and observed some unique effects. In 7 hours without images, people responded to initial messages 44% more often, conversations went deeper, and contact details (phone numbers & emails) were exchanged more quickly. In conclusion, they observed that their site worked better. But it was also apparent that looks were still important to those who had participated in blind date day. When the photos were restored at 4PM, 2,200 people were in the middle of conversations that had started "blind". Those conversations ended quickly. The company reported "The goodness was gone, in fact worse than gone. It was like we'd turned on the bright lights at the bar at midnight." I'm guessing that maybe a podcasting community would be more forgiving of images since they would not be initially expecting to date anyone they were talking to. (Rudder, 2014)

Conclusion

In the end, what did I get out of these interviews and case study? In the big picture, technology and people do not exist in isolation – they help shape each other. In fact the technology is represented by people, and the audience is made up of people too. That means when we are engaging with media, we are engaging with people. We should see each other as civic actors, citizens, and equals. On line participation is creating a new kind of public space which is still evolving and changing.

In the more specific question of podcasting and the effects of community building and happiness? I've found a lot of evidence to support the idea of defining podcasts as a form of participation (and not always only online participation either). This is something I hadn't expected going into the research. There also seems to be something special, biological and evolutionary about the effect of the human voice on our brains and emotions. Podcasting benefits from this. And because we can choose when and how we will listen, the audience makes a stronger and more positive connection to the voice and the content of the podcasts. I don't think Facebook made us lonely, but it may be contributing to filter bubbles that are making content choices for us. If podcasts are to create healthy communities and a sense of well-being, it will be important for listeners to value their ability to make their own choices, based on an open and transparent field of variables.

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Wikipedia confession: okay, I'm here confessing that I used wikipedia to access a summary of the history of the google searches for the word podcast. And wikipedia even tells you not too: Anyone in the world can edit an article, deleting accurate information or adding false information, which the reader may not recognize. Thus, you probably shouldn't be citing Wikipedia. This is good advice for all tertiary sources such as encyclopedias, which are designed to introduce readers to a topic, not to be the final point of reference. Wikipedia, like other encyclopedias, provides overviews of a topic and indicates sources of more extensive information.
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the end.