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Podcast – Towards an Inclusive Definition

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Abstract: Podcast definitions are subject to reevaluation and review due to the development of the medium which gradually impacts the media sphere. The displacement of definitions over the time doesn't mean an attribute of falsehood attached to them. This paper uses an exploratory approach in order to fill in the gaps of defining the concept of podcast, improving its understanding, through a qualitative review and synthesis of existing research. It also seeks to identify a balance between notions of audio and video content that can fit and harmonize the often-misleading picture of the term, trying to differentiate between notions. In the same vein, this study uses a comparative procedure in an attempt to outline and intersect podcast with radio programs and video associated content, an analysis which is highly necessary in order to provide a fresh definition associated to the podcast term.

Keywords: term; concept; audio; video; media

Introduction

The audio technology revolution guided by the emergence of the podcast comprises many challenges in defining terms which nowadays involve updated communication models, numerous formats and ways of consumption. As expected, the development of podcast has attracted scientific attention, being attached to a media convergence approach. A stable relationship between code and message, in order to be able to transmit auditory stimulus, is needed to create a genuine podcast, regardless of the platform through which it is mediated. Only in the US, more than 155 million citizens listened to a podcast in the last year (Edison Research Infinite Dial, 2020),

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whereas in Romania the numbers in this regard reach approximately 3,2 million people (BRAT & Banca Transilvania, 2020). Bonini (2015, p. 21) recognizes the mass potential of the podcast and its ability to generate profit when he structures the meaning of a so-called “commercial productive practice and a medium for mass consumption.” In this regard, 2021 is the official year for extensive possibilities of monetizing a podcast, as Apple (2021) and Sportify (2021) announced in April, an aspect that contributes to further individualization of the product in the media space.

There is a real need for scientific reevaluation of current nominations for online practices that try to extend the already broad notion of podcasting, a better account of understanding the medium revealed in its use. This personal, direct connection which is set when playing a podcast is sized to encompass a diverse range of themes and provides a strong image of the ability to transform information technology. Moreover, the production of a podcast is synonymous with sharing a wide range of substance, especially information, ideas and experiences associated with multiple subjects. Still, the technology-mediated relationship implies a degree of virtual community where you can find a comprehensive taxonomy of podcast format. Logue (2020) identifies 7 types – interview, solo, conversation among co-hosts, roundtable, non-fictional storytelling, fiction and a combination of formats. The impact of the podcast on the media landscape provided the necessary premises to draw the broad outlines of the concept.

Numerous scholars attempted to refine the term, adding different layers which revolve around the structure of the medium, its methods of production, behavioral patterns and the essence of its content. From its beginning, the term *podcast* was built from an etymologic point of view as a hybrid, a combination of *iPod* - portable music player and *broadcast* - live streaming. Hammersley (2004), the journalist who introduced podcast in the media jargon for the first time, associated the term with the freedom of choosing the time and place of *listening* a specific recording such as downloadable radio programs.

Aural notions are inextricably linked to podcast, the act of listening being decisive and preeminent in the idea of consuming the product. The ability to visually enact audible representations is an intrinsic attribute of the audience. However, current technologies and media trends have witnessed the development of the podcast as a product that can both be played as an audio or as a video file, changing, in some extent, the essence of the term and behavioral patterns associated with the medium. In the same vein, the rapid spread of podcast authorship made podcast open to

producers of different backgrounds and level of professional training as Berry (2019) underlines.

Due to the fact that there is a lack of understanding related to particular forms of expression, my main research objective is to find a definition that captures the podcast metamorphose in order to be properly delivered to the mass communication field. Cambridge Dictionary states that a definition is “a description of the features and limits of something”. This current analysis serves the idea of formulating a definition corresponding to a rising phenomenon that accumulates new directions of dissemination and reception. In order for this approach to be rigorously supported, an epistemological cut-out is necessary. A well-balanced interpretation of the podcast should take into account the key of generating meaning, regardless of the environment or its manner of consumption, keeping, however a plea in favor of the auditory approach and without falling short into a potential excessive reductionism. Thus, the creation of meaning is fundamental for this study and a new definition has to be sufficiently broad, yet parsimonious enough, to address all the aspects associated with the structure and characteristics of a podcast.

Finding a Proper Definition

Podcast as an on-demand media product has rapidly evolved as a constant of daily life with specific characteristics and personality that draw meaning in a perpetual change. A new born definition should be used in order to describe genuine necessary and sufficient conditions, both essential and individuating conditions for carving this concept from the media sphere. Also, the notion became fundamental in all expressions of cognition. Because podcasts can be distributed and consumed across a variety of platforms, the internet and associated applications can create a fertile environment for their distribution and consumption.

In the academic circle the term derived from media studies and became “a curiosity sitting on the periphery of mainstream media, an esoteric offshoot of digital culture” as Llinares, Fox and Berry (2018, p. 6) underline. Numerous attempts have been made in order to define the term, yet many of them became outdated and subject to review because the current scientific puzzle has undergone extensive development. The definition of podcast was summarized as “audio and video via subscription” by Geoghegan and Klass (2007, p. 5). It captures the essence of the term in a simple manner adapted to the rigors of this new media sample. However, the idea of simply juxtaposing audio and video seems nowadays too broad and unproductive. Without

a semantic hook you cannot distinguish a podcast from the generous media offer which is still gradually developing in the audio and video formats. Equally, it leaves space for judging the type of interaction and consumer habits besides the usual subscription in those rare cases where you do not necessarily need a subscription in order to directly access radio programs that upload their associated podcasts afterwards. Madsen (2009, p. 1195) initially called podcast “a new kind of radio”, whereas more than 10 years later we can see the term emerging as a vivid choice in a gallery that counts numerous multimedia products which claim an intimate model of consumption. McHugh (2016) adds the binominal enquiry of art and journalism, trying to structure an environment for podcasts which is dominated by the journalistic usage of the art or the art of storytelling through journalistic means. Spinelli & Dan (2019) also converge to this point and they insist on the unique features of a podcast in their argument of detaching the medium from radio.

Using a definition which involves audio and video raises, once again, a debate between scholars and practitioners – should we include video in the chain of receiving podcast content? The same debate has an extension related to the content uploaded on YouTube: should a static image associated to the product be used in order to be considered a podcast or dynamic images (videos) could also fit the profile? In the US, for example, YouTube is the number one destination for podcast consumption (Futuri Media, University of Florida, National Association of Broadcasters, 2019). The same general pictures can be observed in Romania. Stanca argues that “video interviews on Youtube conducted by many celebrities have somehow abused the notion of a podcast”, underlining the Romanian options in this regard (BRAT & Banca Transilvania, 2020, p. 29). Moreover, Andersen (2011, p. 220) observes the increasing level of videos associated with the term of podcast and states that this trend should be kept inside the concept, whereas the only differences may take into account issues of “delivery and development”. This specific video platform not only became the core for podcast distribution, it also made its acceptance more visible.

Bridging Radio Programs and Podcasts

Judging by the numerous articles throughout the existing literature, the podcast was usually compared and contrasted with radio programs in order to extract proper characteristics. Nowadays podcasts have numerous shades and attributes which are useful when finding proper words in order to circumscribe the whole term. Nuzum (2019, pp. 9-10) moves away from the concept of “content” and militates exclusively on the idea of “experience”, putting aside the wide range of delivery methods associated to this product. Moreover, when speaking about podcast, Zurakait (2020, p. 45) underlines the notion of “auditory experience” similar to a social exchange with a pronounced dimension of addressing human needs and senses. It can, therefore, encompass a broader notion of living through mobile experiences in the absence of a visual image. Also, the two-word combination offers a clear delimitation from the product’s manner of reception which is useful for enhancing precision without sacrificing multimedia capabilities. Radio is also a listening experience, so there is a need for further delimitation inside a potential definition. The novelty of podcast resides in its flexibility and the ability to act like a timeless notion meant to overcome the barriers of broadcasting. While traditional radio captures the listening momentum, podcast gains ground through its flexible way of distribution and consumption.

Although, orality is a defining feature for both concepts, the difference between traditional radio and podcasts could be easy to represent in terms of moving and static “targets”. While in the first case, the listener’s eyeglass often follows the lead of the radio program it finds when turning on a specific device, under a static target umbrella, the consumer pinpoints a specific subject of interest which a priori meets a higher degree of interest. Moreover, in the case of a podcast the content itself is absorbed in a deliberate way. I find Nuzum’s (2019, p. 11) “active listening” concept as being very meaningful and loaded with substance in this regard. Moreover, a new definition for podcasts should take this matter into consideration. Also, Nuzum (2019, p. 11) lengthens the axis of intimacy in that point where podcasts exchange place with radio programs in their quest of capturing the so-called “ultimate intimate medium” reference. Mobility, listening control, deliberate engagement, niche addressability, production and scheduling freedom are among the native features underlined by Spinelli & Dan (2019). Although still mobile in its essence, in contrast, radio is associated with the lack of listening control, spontaneous contact, clear rules of broadcasting and production.

Newman and Galo (2019, p. 9) underline that searching for a proper definition for the podcast is challenging and thus they put forward a neat classification of “native podcast” and “catch-up radio” in order to differentiate instances of traceability. Whereas the catch-up radio notion encompasses products of media professionals, the native term remains open also for amateur producers who meet minimal criteria for podcast creation.

The evolution of the podcast acted like a constraint factor for traditional broadcasters and made them aware of the emergence of this product. Radio programs started delivering similar products as a secondary or complementary offer in order to meet public expectations and consumption trends. Instead, podcasts tend to open a more liberal atmosphere for the consumer. Zurakait (2020, p. 48) calls it “lack of reliance upon a formal structure” and views it as an important differentiation criterion from traditional radio and television. Also, the authorship of podcasts is often a contrast issue over traditional radio professionals contributing to an “ethos of authenticity” as Sullivan (2018, p. 39) argues. Moreover, in radio’s case the subject palette circumscribes to broader notions of public interest and editorial rigours that fit the format of the station and its media codes, whereas independent podcasters often tend to concentrate on a specific micro-agenda, without searching an outcome for general public.

Therefore, fluid formats, rather than predefined ones, amateur and independent producers, not only professional radio practitioners engaged in such activities, broad subjects, generous time frames and flexible consumption methods should have a specific place inside any definition that relates to podcast, in order to keep the contrast level associated with radio programs.

Vodcast, Video Podcast or Simply, Podcast?

As stated before, another digital media practice that saw rapid development was the attachment of video formats to existing podcasts. Throughout the existing literature, there is also a tendency to change the initial term from podcast to vodcast or video podcast, an upgrade to the native term for a so-called accuracy improvement which we find unnecessary and rather exaggerated. The native term has enough broadness to prevent excessive hybridization and its format taxonomy speaks volumes. Indeed, a body of native features detaches when podcasts go video. DW (2006) argued that vodcasting is a “a step beyond podcasting, vodcasting, also called video podcasting or vlogging.”, misrepresenting the genre series inside that particular call. The

previous mixture of concepts tends to bypass the initial goals of the podcast. Also, inside that specific enumeration there is a further need for delimitation, especially when we speak about vlogs.

Although it shares notions of mobility and thematic generosity with podcasts and their video extension called vodcasts or video podcasts, a vlog is much more open-ended, personal, individualistic, mostly with a short duration attached, where the author is mainly in charge of the full set of intimacy details. The monologue formula is one of the most recognizable formats that can be associated with a vlog, as Aran et al. (2014) point out, which I find in contrast with the vast setup of a podcast. Zhang (2020, p. 69) underlines “a new dimension in viewing experience for the audience” in his attempt to define the concept, in conflict with the particular auditory experience of a podcast.

The video form of the podcast is mostly used for visibility and further distribution facilities, whereas in the absence of the video format, a vlog is emptied of its main substance. Taking the audio content from a vlog does not automatically transform the sound wave into a podcast. The same works for the potential adding of a visual perspective to a podcast and thus miscalling it a vlog. A general distinction can be also made in terms of editing and camera techniques associated with the two products. Whereas a video element attached to a broadcast involves mainly static characteristics, vlogs tend to over use camera motions, angles and compositions.

The inclusion of video in a potential podcast definition doesn't necessary involve challenges that seek to overcome possible interferences with the original concept, although some lines of research (Lowman, 2014) seek to delimit the audio-only and audio and video notions. Audio leaves much more space to flexibility and multitasking, whereas sight base components, like video, have some limitations attached to the consumption pattern. Severoni (2021) argues that mobile experiences and situations are much fit for audio than video. A plea for a better inclusion system is fundamental to the detriment of disparate assignments that could create confusion. Researchers find video features useful and call them “an expressive non-textual way to capture and present information” as Kalludi et al (2015) underline. Thus, there is a need for definition upgrades also in this regard, a systematization with inclusive touches.

Through video platforms the audience is more or less guided from the perspective of visualizing the content, leaving a more restricted space to human capacities of imagination. Although the introduction of a visual perspective changes the behavior

of the consumer, meanings associated to the listening experience must remain pivotal for the way this feature is instrumentalized inside podcasts and therefore should be subject of consideration for an all-around definition.

Shahid & Ali (2017, p. 171) insist on a point of return under the auspices of auditory notions when speaking about video podcasting and argue that “the visual aspect of podcasts can make learning of listening experience more attractive, engaging and effective.” Even dedicated software for podcasts have adapted to video feature but remain attached to values of the audio code. Last year, Spotify (Newsroom Spotify, 2020) announced a video podcast feature for its service which was built in order to “enhance [...] existing audio experience.”

The video feature becomes, therefore, embedded in the broader notion and contributes to the enrichment of the field, leaving space for new possibilities of distribution, although it lacks the same amount of flexibility, derived from the very essence of the “portable” notion, as the audio-only option. Instead, due to the amplitude of the podcast consuming behavior through video platforms, the attached feature must find its place in a proper definition of the medium.

Conclusions

Podcasting has become a very rich area of study with numerous contributions leading to the improvement of discerning its core characteristics and evolution tendencies. Numerous studies have pointed out a wide range of native features that can easily fit the profile of a consolidated medium. For the correct diagnosis of this type of medium and associated characteristics I found it necessary to follow distinct notes of production, engagement and distribution and to detect patterns that showed that the term podcast consists of sufficient arguments to remain uniform, without further cross-references and add-ons from the video jargon. A comparative analysis related to mass communication mediums was suitable to provide a better understanding of the place and the attributes of the podcast. This study examined media products that interfere with the broad notion of podcast in order to extract proper meanings for a relevant definition. A general assumption in this regard referred to the purpose of the definition in its attempt to express the most basic circumstances under which meaningful words saturated the concept. This paper reviewed podcast definitions which were scientifically built overtime in order to render an inclusive approach for future evaluations. Thus, *a podcast* may be more granularly defined as *an on-demand listening experience, mediated through audio or video platforms, which involves*

heterogeneous formats and generous thematic designs that can be authored by producers of multiple backgrounds. The way podcasts tend to absorb multimedia features was drawn from its versatile profile. This new scientific accent was underlined in order to find proper meaning, without sacrificing intersecting notions from traditional and new media. Therefore, in order to marry boiling points of numerous debates which revolve around the concept and its digital extensions, this current definition was introduced not to replace previous designations, but to act as a natural resultant of the content form that emerges nowadays. This clarification is in line with its original layout and offers the proper guidelines to both differentiate between different audio experiences and projects and to maintain its appliance to such a diverse medium.

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