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Video didn't kill the radio star - she's hosting a podcast

Siobhan A. McHugh
University of Wollongong, smchugh@uow.edu.au

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Video didn’t kill the radio star – she’s hosting a podcast

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Are we in the midst of a podcasting revolution? Mikael Nyberg, CC BY-NC-ND

Siobhan McHugh
Senior Lecturer, Journalism, University of Wollongong

Julie Shapiro
CEO, Radiotopia

John Biewen
Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University

The Conversation’s partners

Podcasters P.J. Vogt, host of Reply All, and Starlee Kine, host of Mystery Show, addressed sold-out sessions at the Sydney Writers' Festival last month, riding the wave of popularity engendered by Serial, the 2014 US true crime podcast series whose 100 million downloads galvanised the audio storytelling world.

Over 12 weeks, using a blend of personal narratives and investigative journalism delivered in ultra-casual conversational style, host Sarah Koenig examined the case against Adnan Syed, a Baltimore high school student who had been convicted of murdering his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee, in 1999.

In risky but inspired innovation, the series launched without a conclusive ending. It invited listeners to veer with Koenig through the unfolding evidence – a departure hailed as making journalism more transparent, in a genre not without ethical conundrums. The show fomented raucous chatrooms online and Koenig featured on the cover of Time magazine.

"Hosting" is at the heart of the vaunted podcasting revolution that has seen comedy, "chumcasts" (friends riffing on a theme) and deeply personal storytelling vie with established radio documentary, feature and interview formats for audience share. In radio institutions such as the ABC or BBC, programs have "presenters" and the organisation adds further brand identity. In the ever-expanding podsphere (over 350,000 podcasts are listed on iTunes),
"Hosts" speak directly into our ear. This seductive intimacy affects both the form and content of the audio storytelling genre. It appeals to listeners from hitherto untapped demographics as well as to rusted-on audiophiles – a development being watched by both advertisers and activists.

In the predominantly English-speaking 12-year-old podsphere, producers and consumers of podcasts used to be mainly young, white, educated, affluent males. But, in the last two years, female listenership has doubled. Female hosts are storming the studio (or bedroom, where many an indie podcast originates, or garage, where US comedian Marc Maron famously conducted a deeply revealing interview with Barack Obama last year).

"Hosts are really forming relationships in new ways with their listeners," says Julie Shapiro, CEO of Radiotopia, "a curated network of extraordinary, story-driven shows" founded in 2014. It now has over ten million downloads a month of its 14 shows.

Radiotopia’s recent “Podquest” competition attracted 1,537 entrants from 53 countries. The finalists propose shows that feature marginalised voices and quirky perspectives, delivered as engaging crafted narrative.

Radiotopia and Gimlet, the independent US network that hosts Kine and Vogt, have been created by former public radio broadcasters. They still proclaim the editorial values and lofty mission articulated when National Public Radio (NPR) was founded in 1971.

The podsphere is unregulated – open slather for hate speech and religious rants, with the medium already exploited by groups like ISIS. But minorities are also colonising the space, with growing audiences for shows on transgender issues, gender, sexuality and race.

In Australia, both public broadcasters are developing podcast-first formats. SBS has True Stories, unusual tales of multicultural experiences, and the ABC offers First Run, which ranges from comedy to entertaining history.

But other organisations, from community radio to independents, are now able to compete for listeners. Longtime ABC star Andrew Denton partnered The Wheeler cultural centre in Melbourne to launch his excellent podcast series on euthanasia, Better Off Dead.
Other veteran radio journalists are going solo. In 2015, US producer John Biewen, whose work has featured on prestigious outlets including This American Life, NPR and the BBC, launched his own show, Scene On Radio. He told me:

Liberation from broadcast gatekeepers and formats outweighed the advantages they bring ... the only downside ... is the loss of audience numbers. [But] the freedom to produce work in the tone and at the length that I choose is priceless.

Podcasts can be as long as a piece of string

Thrillingly, podcasts can be as long as a piece of string. Audio producers can focus on a natural narrative shape rather than artificially moulding a story to a pre-ordained duration. This enhanced Serial’s appeal and opens new structural possibilities for the form.

At one end, we may see podcasting develop further as a form of literary journalism: a poetic or narrative audio genre long established in Europe and articulated by the New Journalism of the 1960s and ’70s. It incorporates qualities such as immersive reportage, scenes, evocative writing and a subjective point of view.

At the other end of the spectrum, cheaply produced podcast panel-fests are proliferating. The topics range from the elections in Australia and the US to race and popular culture. Some of these sound clunky and turgid – print journalists operating in a medium they don’t yet get. Others, such as Buzzfeed’s Another Round, have the chemistry and the tone spot on, snaring big names such as Hillary Clinton along the way.

This rapidly evolving podcast ecology is coming under increasing academic scrutiny.
troubled Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a US soldier held captive by the Taliban for almost five
years, didn't quite manage it. Canada's CBC got close with Somebody Knows Something.

The best candidate yet is The Bowraville Murders, unexpectedly well produced by The
Australian newspaper, in which rookie podcaster Dan Box investigates the unsolved murders
of three Aboriginal children from the same small town 25 years ago, bringing raw pain and
kneejerk racism directly to listeners.

Having received scant attention for his other crime reportage, Box was astonished by the
reaction to the podcast: it has probably been instrumental in launching a fresh trial. Its power
lies in fundamental aspects of the audio medium: its capacity to convey emotion and evoke
empathy, imagination and intimacy. When those strengths are harnessed, podcasting
becomes a formidable force for social engagement.