

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

Alison Wielgus, *University of Wisconsin-Superior*

When we consider podcasts as part of a genealogy of convergent digital media, we should keep sight of how they have begun to replicate and join forces with established media industries. My response will use the podcast *Comedy Bang! Bang!* (*CBB*, 2009-present) as a case study to consider how podcasts use hybrid models of production and distribution to profit in a digital economy.

Comedy Bang! Bang! began as the stage show *Comedy Death-Ray* at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in Los Angeles before morphing into a satellite radio and podcast show of the same name in 2009 and into a podcast-only format in 2010. On the show's two-year anniversary in 2011, its host Scott Aukerman changed its name to *Comedy Bang! Bang!*. In each weekly episode (and in periodic bonus episodes), Aukerman briefly interviews fellow comedians and performers before strange guests take advantage of the show's "open door policy." Absurd improvised scenarios follow as guests utilize the audio-only nature of podcasts to unmoor us from physical reality. Some guests perform impersonations, such as Paul F. Tompkins spinning farcical tales as Garry Marshall, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Werner Herzog, and Len Wiseman. Others invent original characters, such as Andy Daly crafting a cowboy poet/vampire hunter named Dalton Wilcox, a former game show host and Satanist named Chip Gardner, and a sleazy theater director named Don DiMello. With an episode total above four hundred, *CBB* has developed complex backstories for its characters, catchphrases, and a fan base that can support national tours.

Beyond its content, the trajectory of *CBB*'s ownership shows the ongoing industrial evolution of digital media. Originally broadcast on Indie 103, Aukerman and

Jeff Ulrich founded the podcasting network Earwolf with *CBB* as its flagship program in 2010. The Earwolf network currently hosts thirty-five podcasts, ranging from Chris Gethard's earnest call-in show *Beautiful/Anonymous* (2016-present) to Jason Manzhoukas, June Diane Raphael, and Paul Scheer's discussions of terrible and incomprehensible films in *How Did This Get Made?* (2010-present). Like many contemporary cable television networks, Earwolf links its disparate shows through branding. Podcasts share similar comedic points of view, personnel, and even characters. They often embrace an irreverent and ironic attitude toward pop culture. Earwolf is not the only podcasting network; Nerdist, Panoply, and the radio/web hybrid Public Radio Exchange have also recognized that branding can aid listener growth.

Functioning as a network requires profits. In the case of podcasting, these profits typically come from advertising. Building on Earwolf's momentum, Aukerman and Ulrich founded Midroll Media in 2013 to produce, distribute, and monetize podcasts. Midroll not only owns Earwolf, it also has a larger roster of over two hundred podcasts, allowing podcasters to profit from advertisements without directly fielding offers themselves. These ads often hew closer to older network television spots, with podcasters reading and personalizing ad copy themselves. Some sponsors have purchased so many ads that their names come up, unprompted, in improv bits.

In 2015, Midroll made two major changes. First, The E.W. Scripps Company acquired Midroll. While the production of content remains independent, Midroll now exists within a publicly traded company, gaining access to a larger network of funding and advertisers. Second, Midroll launched the Howl app, a subscription service available for five dollars per month. The app packages Earwolf podcasts alongside comedy albums,

mini-series, archival content, and even live recordings that were previously available for purchase. Midroll makes money using both an older network model of advertising and a newer web subscription model that provides ad-free content, all under the umbrella of a larger company.

The acquisition by Scripps and the hybrid model reveals just how tethered to more traditional media industries podcasting remains. This does not begin to cover the role a show like *CBB* plays in the promotional landscape of Hollywood or the way certain podcasts, like *CBB* and Marc Maron's *WTF* (2009-present), have been used as material for television shows on IFC. *CBB* has been at the forefront of many changes in the podcasting world, but its development is not atypical. Tracking the industrial networks surrounding *CBB*, we can see how podcasts can evolve from a cottage industry to part of larger media conglomerates. Any genealogy of convergent digital media must reckon with how podcasting untethers us from traditional broadcast consumption and reception, but not from all of broadcasting's traditional economic models.