Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media" Roundtable, part 2
Lauren Savit, *Indiana University, Bloomington*

A dozen years after the introduction of podcasts, podcasting as an emerging media industry is beginning to formally standardize. The widespread integration of soft sell ad copy read by podcast hosts and the development of podcast networks has led to discernible patterns of podcast consumption and distribution. While these co-constitutive commercial models both contribute to shaping podcasting as a media industry, the effect and influence these practices have on audiences' relationships to podcasts should not be overlooked. In examining the emergence and implementation of these advertising practices and podcast networks, it becomes apparent that audiences, once characterized as podcast listeners, innovators, and creators, have been recast as *consumers*, whose relationship to podcasts centers on their demographic data and potential purchasing power. As a result of becoming a more standardized media industry (whose advertising and network practices echo other traditional forms of media such as radio and television), podcasting has effectively disempowered perhaps one of its greatest assets: its audience.

Since its inception, podcasting has been heralded as both a converged and a disruptive medium, often resulting in innovation at the hands of everyday users. In this sense, podcasting has been uniquely pioneered by its audiences, who were often not only podcast listeners, but also podcast creators and innovators, pushing the limits of the what the medium could do or be. Even those whose relationships to podcasts were only as audience members still wielded a tremendous amount of power. Before streaming platforms made television seasons or series available to audiences in their entireties, podcasts were the only media that enabled the audience to decide for themselves when and where they would be consumed. This was--and is--because of the asynchronous nature of podcasting: since audiences are not beholden to a broadcast schedule, they are able to download and/or stream podcasts at their leisure, even if it's days, months, or even years after they were initially released.

Although the asynchronicity of podcast listening is still very much one of its main features (and perhaps one of its biggest draws), the emergence of podcasting as a standardized media industry has shifted the balance of power from podcast listeners to podcasting as an industry, currently realized through podcast networks and their widespread advertising practices. They are not only the key contributing factors to the development of podcasting as a standardized media industry, but also they signify its transition from an open medium available to anyone who wants to create content, to a lucrative one for the few who have the opportunity to monetize it. Here, podcast networks have the advantage because they create brand identities, similar to niche cable networks, and then market these "identities" to advertisers and consumers alike, delivering bulk ad time and listeners en mass to advertisers across a number of podcast titles. In this new landscape, amateur and DIY podcasters, once the cornerstone of podcasting creation and innovation, can no longer compete within this professionalized, corporatized podcasting industry.

With the development and apparent success of podcast networks, the balance of power within podcasting shifts from listeners back to networks, who generate and aggregate podcast program schedules. While audiences are still free to listen to podcasts whenever, wherever, and however they want, the very purpose of a podcast network is predicated on the idea that they're going to curate a list of professionally-made podcast programs *on behalf* of the listener, and ones that are in-line with the network's brand identity. While some may argue that this is not necessarily detrimental to podcast audiences, it certainly removes the horizontal component of podcasting, widening the gap between those who listen to podcasts and those who create them. Ultimately, it disempowers the listener; in effect reducing the defining feature of what made podcasting such a distinct, democratized medium for audiences in the first place. Although we can debate whether or not this is the case, I think the more important question is to what extent does this matter? How has reconstituting podcast audience as podcast consumers reshape podcasting as a media industry, and its potential?