

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media

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What *is* a podcast, anyway? Is it a textual form? A genre of audio recording? A distribution method? And what *was* a podcast ten years ago? Are they different now from how they were then? How so? Why?

Those are important questions. But it appears that media studies, as a discipline, has yet to pursue them in any sustained way. The word “podcast” has appeared in *Cinema Journal* in only 11 pieces, mostly in announcements and citations. In *Velvet Light Trap*, the word’s appeared twice. Major academic publishers like Routledge have only a few podcasting monographs, mostly of the how-to variety. Run a search on the term “podcast” on *Flow* and you get 41 results. A single television series like *Battlestar Galactica*, by contrast, returns 46 results.

What might explain this relative silence from a group of scholars whose animating purpose is the study of popular media? I am reminded, as I often am, of Tim Anderson’s 2009 *Velvet Light Trap* essay “A Skip in the Record of Media Studies.” In it, Anderson argues that media studies’ failure to fully embrace the study of sound media has “*unwittingly articulated blind spots that make it unable to fully understand what is at stake today*” (104). Consider, for example the roundtable prompt that animates our discussion, which articulates a desire to consider podcasts “*alongside other popular forms, such as web series and online television,*” but not sound media. If media studies scholars want to understand podcasts (and I think we all here sincerely do) we need to understand them in relation to media industries like radio, pop music, and sound recording *as well as* screen media.

So to address this workshop’s central question--“how can academia scrutinize podcasts as part of a genealogy of convergent digital media?”-- I’d like to offer up for discussion one particular podcast that might help us to begin to understand the evolution of podcasts in general.

Uhh Yeah Dude is a podcast featuring Jonathan Larroquette (the son of the *Night Court* star) and Seth Romatelli (a recovering addict who appeared in the Britney Spears vehicle *Crossroads*). The first episode was released in February 2006, which makes it (as far as I can tell) the longest continually running podcast in existence. Its longevity and its relatively unchanged nature make *UYD* a valuable case study to think about the emergence of the podcast as a distinctive media form, and podcasting’s place in the landscape of media industries.

Formally, *UYD* is something of a throwback. There are no theme songs, no segments, no guests, no scripted material, and (aside from a brief period in 2008) no advertisements. Although it is consistently ranked among the most popular comedy podcasts on iTunes, they’re aren’t really any jokes. Instead, listeners get “America through the Eyes of Two American Americans,” freewheeling riffs on odds and ends from American culture—ads on Craigslist, new fast-casual restaurant concepts, “Ask Amy” advice columns, and episodes of *To Catch a Predator*. Its formal and textual qualities, I’d argue, reflect its origins in the web experience of 2006, defined by proudly amateurish user-generated-content on message boards or early web radio.

In terms of production, *UYD* is DIY. The two don’t work from a studio—every week, they meet in Seth’s East Hollywood apartment, arrange 3x5” notecards on the couch, plug two handheld mics into Jonathan’s MacBook, and press ‘record.’ The shaggy recording and the intimate nature of podcast listening have fostered a unique relationship between fans and producers. Larroquette gave out his cell phone number in

early episodes, until the two moved to a toll-free voicemail. Romatelli personally returns phone calls and sends postcards to listeners. They've relied on friends to organize merchandise orders and curate a searchable episode guide. Fans, or "Dudeheads," participate in fan communities online, populate their own dating site ("OKSeatbelts"), help to book live shows, animate audio segments, and more recently fund a Patreon campaign that has allowed the dudes to quit their day jobs to podcast full time.

So, what might we learn from the example of *Uhh Yeah Dude*? It's been fifteen years since Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin published *Remediation*, and nearly as long since podcasts began circulating, and yet there is little critical work on what distinguishes a podcast from a radio show. I'm particularly interested in thinking through the differences between *UYD* and commercial radio programming, and perhaps comparing that to contemporary podcasts produced by large media companies (either traditional or digital). In addition, I'm interested in thinking through the practical challenges of doing podcast research, particularly on shows from podcasting's first five years (iTunes only archives the latest 200 episodes of any program, *UYD*'s archives are curated by fans alone). I'm also happy to recount my favorite *UYD* moments.