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Podcasts and History

Podcasts are one of the fastest-growing forms of digital content in the modern era. Despite only being around for about 15 years, as of 2019, there are about 62 million Americans listening to podcasts weekly, with many Americans having listened to podcasts at least once, and most Americans at the very least are familiar with podcasts they are clearly becoming a staple of modern life.[[1]](#footnote-1) Because of their popularity, podcasts have become an important digital tool that is used to practice history in a variety of different ways. Through the use of both radio and podcasts, historians and others have used storytelling methods to connect with the general public and interpret history. In this paper, I will discuss the creation of podcasts, and how they are a more evolved continuation of the radio as a method of audio entertainment that connects with a wide public through the process of talking about history through storytelling. The accessibility of podcasts separates it from its predecessor and allows it to be utilized as both entertainment and as a tool for academics.

In the early 20th century, a technological boom occurred, things such as movies and television began to change the world exponentially. Much like in the 21st century, these developments began to connect people across the world and fundamentally change society; this is when the radio began to emerge and grow in popularity. As these new technological advances came to be, various groups began to try to use them to connect to people throughout the country, from Christians to major corporations’ various groups clamored to use the radio to connect with the public, amongst them where historians.[[2]](#footnote-2)

While movies and television tend to overshadow the radio today, in the 1920s, radio was seen as a more popular form of media, which made radio seem like a better tool for reaching out to the public. Radio allowed organizations to connect to far more people then movies and television did because radio was more affordable for both listeners and creators. Another benefit of radio was that sound was considered easier to convert from paper, which made it more attractive to historians. History broadcasts began to be produced as a part of a growing push for more educational content to be added to the radio, which was led by the *Women’s National Radio Committee*, who was concerned over a large amount of pop culture radio broadcasts. History themed radio broadcasts began at the grassroots level with various colleges and universities applying history-themed content into there already established radio broadcasts.[[3]](#footnote-3) This early grassroots movement grew as more professional historians began to get more and more involved in radio broadcasting so that they can connect with the public. This resulted in the *American Historical Association* (AHA) deciding to create a radio show that focused on history.

This led to the AHA and the *National Advisory Council on Radio in Education* partnering to produce the show, *The Story Behind the Headlines*, the first major radio broadcast that was produced by historians and focused on history. This was a program that related history to the present by mapping the historical connections to current events and discussed why the study of history was important for the present. The original concept of the show was to dramatically recreate historical events with the use of actors and sound effects, but this was later scrapped in favor of a less entertainment-focused concept. The concept that they decided on was a weekly talk that discussed different subject matter and the background behind it. Its producer was a historian named Conyers Read, and with his contributions, they pushed to ensure that that the show encouraged historical thought and inquiry while also encouraging their listeners to read about history as well. One of the ways they did this was for the first two years of the show; each talk was complemented with the *Bulletin of "The Story Behind the Headlines.”* A weekly publication that had an article and a bibliography based on the theme of that week’s talk. As time went on, the show began to be rejected by both fans who were concerned about the liberal views of its producer and concerned historians, along with budget cuts this led to the show ending after about ten years. *The Story Behind the Headlines* was not the only popular history broadcast on the radio. However, its main competition was *Cavalcade of America*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Cavalcade* started in 1935, and moved from CBS to NBC and eventually was picked up for a television show. *Cavalcade,* was not produced or created by historians, but it did take its exploration of history seriously and had a historian as a consultant for the show. It differed from *Headlines* in two significant ways, which were format and political leaning. *Cavalcade* was dramatic with a star-studded cast; it was a show that was more dedicated to the entertainment element of radio then *Headlines*. Beyond the entertainment focus, it differed from *Headlines* by being the more conservative and using the past as a way to legitimate the present not to reflect upon it. These differences allowed *Cavalcade* to temporarily survive longer then *Headlines*, but as the 40s continued on, audiences lost interest.[[5]](#footnote-5) These two programs are a great example of the early stages of history being portrayed in an audio form. Long before the establishment of the concept of Public history, historians were still attempting to connect to the public by using digital audio tools. This desire for connection has continued and is reflected by historians' use of new digital audio tools, namely the podcast.

The history of podcasts can be split into about two eras, an early age from 2004-2012, and the so-called "golden age," which began in 2014, which describes the boom in popularity that carries us into today. The term “podcast” was coined by a journalist for the Guardian, who combined the words “iPod” and “broadcast.” Podcasts have an interesting yet short history that informs the way that historians and others have begun to use it as a teaching tool and a way to interpret history to the public. Podcasts were created by a joint effort between Dave Winer and Adam Curry after a meeting in the year 2000. They began to develop a program that was meant to create a downloadable audio and video feed without it taking up too much space on devices. In 2004 they developed the RSS feed that can be used for downloading, and Adam Curry created the first podcatcher. Dave Winer partnered with journalist Christopher Wyder so that they can use the new RSS feed on Wyden's blog, making it one of the first sites to use this technology. From there, podcasting took off in its first real boom of popularity in 2004.[[6]](#footnote-6) This time was marked by the use of the RSS feed on the White house’s website, making George W Bush the first president to use podcasting technology.[[7]](#footnote-7) *Libsyn* was the first to create a podcasting streaming site, which eventually leads to Yahoo doing the same.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As podcasting began to grow in popularity, major corporations began to pick it up and apply it to their own websites; the most important of these corporations was Apple, who embraced podcasting early on and applied its RSS software to iTunes.[[9]](#footnote-9) This was a defining moment because it allowed podcasts to reach a wider public and, with the recognition by Apple, ensured that podcasts were seen as a part of the growing technological phenomenon happening at the time. There was an initial boom that occurred after this with podcasts becoming increasingly popular, but after this initial boom, podcasts decreased significantly in popularity for a time. Despite this decrease in listeners, podcasts themselves continued to grow in number with more and more people producing new series.[[10]](#footnote-10) Podcasting officially reentered the mainstream when the show *Serial* came out in 2014. With *Serial* podcasts were talked about in casual conversation across the country, with millions of subscribers and the inspiration of many other podcasts, *Serial* created a sort of renaissance for podcasts that carries into today.

Podcasts have two advantages that allowed its eventual reemergence into the mainstream, and that has made it an incredibly useful resource. One of these advantages is its place within the internet; many podcasts stay on the internet long after they were created, which ensures that their audience can continue to grow. The second reason is the sheer accessibility of the podcast, with equipment being relatively cheap. It is a more accessible medium than even the radio because these professional historians and nonprofessional historians can utilize It for mainly two things, education, and public access.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, podcasts still represent a continuation of the historical method of radio, and they share many institutions, and they both foster an intimate connection between the listener and the host.[[12]](#footnote-12) Some podcasts that are produced today are even similar to the radio shows such as *Headlines* and *Cavalcade* in the methods utilized, and the way that they connect history with the present. However, podcasts also represent a sort of challenge to the radio, and these challenges ensured the continued growth of podcasts. Podcasts are not limited by the constraints of broadcasting, which allows the creators a large amount of freedom when it comes to topics, language, and other more creative decisions. Podcasts streaming abilities also free it from the constraints of a time slot; listeners are able to stream podcasts whenever they wish instead of having to listen to it at a certain time of the day.[[13]](#footnote-13) This increase in accessibility and freedom is the way that podcasts majorly differentiate itself from radio and can a create an avenue that allows for creators to not have to be concerned about circumstances such as the one that eventually led to the downfall of *Headlines.*

Since the emergence of the podcast’s scholars has used and worked with podcasts in a variety of different ways, one way that scholars use podcasts is by using it as a teaching tool. Podcasting provides a unique opportunity with teaching; some studies suggest that audio learning is good for children because listening is usually instinctual.[[14]](#footnote-14) In Deborah Vass's article, *Why, I teach with iPod,* she discusses the results of an experiment she held for a semester with her students in the historical theory course she taught. This was held in the early days of the iPod around the year 2004, she gave her students an iPod and fitted her assignments to ensure that the iPod was at the center of the class. Using the iPod in class excited the students who all wanted to learn how to use the technology, which encouraged engagement in class. One of the most important ways that her students used the iPod was to use them for oral interviews and a digital presentation. Through the use of the iPod, they created digital visual presentations by creating podcasts, because of the use of video and audio students where more thorough in their completion of the assignment. They reported later on that because of this format, they reviewed there work earlier and noticed more problems within their scripts because they were reading aloud. Not only was the creation of these podcast lectures good for the current students, but Vess also wanted the podcasts that these students created to be available for future students to be able to access for future use, which is one of the main benefits of podcasting as a medium.[[15]](#footnote-15) Vess's experiment shows an example of one of the ways that podcasts can be utilized. The main use for podcasts, however, is entertainment, and it is through that method that listeners can connect with history.

In 2016 the AHA held a roundtable discussion at the annual meeting where they had some well-known podcasting historians come together and discuss history podcasts. In this roundtable, they discussed what podcasts have done in their lives and how they create a successful podcast.[[16]](#footnote-16) They discussed how creating podcasts helped them as historians in a variety of ways. Young historian podcasters were able to use podcasts as a way to bypass the normal academic acrobatics to get there work out to the public, it also allowed them to create a network of historians who connect through making and listening to podcasts. They also stated that many of them used them in their classrooms, making them better teachers.[[17]](#footnote-17) The podcasters who reached the top of the charts on their selective streaming sites did so because of their ability to tell great stories. History podcasts are more than just educational, they are provided on streaming sights such as iTunes and Spotify, which are fundamentally sites that are meant to provide entertainment. The entertainment factor is what makes proper storytelling arguably the most important aspect of these podcasts and helps the hosts of history podcasts connect to the audience.

Many different history podcasts have been made since 2004, and for this paper, I wanted to make sure that I looked at a wide range of podcasts that can showcase a variety in method, style, and focus. The podcasts I will analyze are *Revisionist History*, *Backstory*, *the Memory Palace, American History Tellers*, and *Dig: a History Podcast*. The first four of these podcasts are considered some of the most popular history podcasts that are currently being produced all of them appear in many different listicles on various sites. I wanted to focus on these popular shows because they connect to the most people, and I wanted to really consider what about them ensures their continued popularity. The outlier in my selections is *Dig: A History Podcast*, though not as well-known as the others it still has a pretty large fanbase and it is created by four historians. I choose this podcast because of my own familiarity and because it presents a sort of foil to the others in some sense in both style, and content. Through these case studies, I will discuss the people who make them, and the way they tell their stories.

*Revisionist history* was founded by well-known author Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote the nonfiction books *Blink*, *Outliers*, and *The Tipping Point*, among others. In this podcast, he focuses on a historical subjects for 10-week intervals. The main purpose of the podcast is to reassess these histories and question the way that they are remembered by most Americans. *Revisionist history* explores history by focusing on personal stories.[[18]](#footnote-18)

One of the miniseries of the podcast covers education history, focusing on the recent past and features an interview with an 8th grader about his struggles in inner-city L.A., and the educational organization that works with him. Though history is engaged to some extent, it doesn't go into specifics about the historical origins of the American education system, however it does work to deconstruct a certain idea that is associated with the educational system. *Revisionist history* has a more journalistic narrative style than the others.[[19]](#footnote-19) The episodes consist of Gladwell introducing the topic, and mentioning an idea that lead him to the topic of the episode, he then begins to tell the story. Gladwell describes the settings for his interviews, and the people with great detail making the listener feel like they are in the room with him. In an episode about Elvis, Gladwell investigates Elvis’ memory of a song. This inquiry into one song expands into a discussion about Elvis himself and encourages the listener interrogate what they know about him as a person, then it evolves into a discussion on memory, and emotion that includes everyone in the episode, including Gladwell himself.[[20]](#footnote-20) The historical aspects of the stories are just the beginning of the stories, Gladwell also includes his thoughts, observations, and emotions. *Revisionist history* explores history in an interesting investigative way, that encourages the listener to really think about the subject matter.

When it comes to history podcasts, there is one name the rises above the rest, and that name is *Backstory*. *Backstory* began as a radio show and then began to be streamed as a podcast in 2008 created by the Virginia humanities. Originally it was hosted by historians, Ed Ayers, Brian Balogh, and Peter Onus two coming from the University of Virginia and another the University of Richmond, but in 2017 two other historians joined the team, Joanne Freeman and Nathan Connolly with Peter Onus no longer being a permanent host. Unlike *Revisionist History*, the hour-long weekly episodes of *Backstory* are very much a history centered podcast. This is discernable by the way that they consult with other historians and academics who are experts in the subject that the episode covers and when they casually talk about history. History is the central aspect of *Backstory*, and the stories that they tell are very much based on the history of their subject; they are informed by things within the present, and they use ideas from the present to introduce and discuss the past. *Backstory* is quite similar to *Headline*s, it was created by a historical society, hosted by historians, and uses the present as a way to look into the past and gain a more complete idea of it. This can be seen by some of their more recent episodes that are all informed by the current pandemic with a few episodes that covering the subject of pandemics. [[21]](#footnote-21)

The hosts of the show are aware of their audience, which is mostly made up of non-scholarly people. Their nonacademic audience encourages the host of Backstory to look outside of academia to provide their narrative of history and to engage with their audience by ensuring a more human look at history.[[22]](#footnote-22) *Backstory* is also similar to its older radio ancestor because of its support of reading, *Backstory* provides very few sources on its website, but the ones they do provide are all books written by guests on the show. Within the episodes, the people who are interviewed are not just specialists in the subject but are also authors. They mention the books that their guests often write every time they introduce them into the conversation and at the end of the episode. They also provide useful resources for academics to use, with k-12 lesson plans based on some of the episodes.

*The Memory Palace* is a podcast that tells historical stories, and it was created by a writer named Nate DiMeo in 2008. These podcast episodes are more like short stories, then historical. However, that does not divorce them from history. *The Memory Palace* is one of the most well-known podcasts with an international following. The show focuses on short tales about people, events, and objects. With DiMeo's storytelling transporting the audience into a sort of imaginative state; he does his best to have his audience conjure up memories or use their imagination so that it his audience is transported into the historical moment he briefly discusses[[23]](#footnote-23)

DiMeo’s podcast is rather personal which can be seen on his website when he discusses his sources they are more like suggestions; he writes things such as a “fun thing to read is. insert book or article” and gives a limited number of sources. These transportive short narratives are meant in more cases than not to be a reprieve from reality that can give a brief insight into history and politics. This is a very important element to the podcast, as can be seen from the lack of episode description. In a place of a complete description are the words, “in a perfect world you go into each episode of the Memory Palace knowing nothing about what it’s about.” One of the more recent episodes “Wong Kim Ark” discusses the story of one man who was at the center of the birthright citizenship court decision. In 5 minutes DiMeo can tell a candid story about racism, hope, and the Chinese exclusion act by focusing on Wong Kim Ark and his detainment on a ship for months after a visit to his family in China, there are not many historical details, but he can engagingly communicate historical themes.[[24]](#footnote-24)

American History Tellers is hosted by Lindsey Graham. The name illustrates an important distinction that all of the podcasts I have previously discussed do as well, and it is storytelling. The Wondery website says that the purpose of the podcast is to tell the stories of American history by discussing “ordinary” people who were in the middle of the event that is discussed. The main way that they communicate history is by submerging their listeners into the historical moment of each episode.[[25]](#footnote-25) This is almost like speculative history, Graham describing what it must have been like to witness history as it was happening, making his listeners bystanders to major events such as the Cold war, Civil war, and other events in history. [[26]](#footnote-26) At the time that the show reached number one on iTunes, Graham was an advertising advisor at Southern Methodist University when he created the show.

The scripts are written and researched by a team of historians with Graham reading it for segments that last about 90 minutes.[[27]](#footnote-27) With Graham's more subversive narrative style of storytelling, he recreates scenes in history. In these sorts of reconstructions, he uses descriptive language, thoroughly discussing the scenery, weather, and speculative ideas on how the characters feel. He acts out all of the parts, occasionally adding accents to certain characters to add a level of authenticity. American history tellers disconnect the host from the storyline more so than the rest, while the other podcasts that I discuss tend to allow the host to discuss their own experiences and ideas, but American History tellers are far more scripted than the others. Through the stories of these smaller players in history, American History Tellers attempts to show not well-known aspects of history. However, there seems to be no way to look at the sources they use. Because it is sponsored by Wondery, it does not have its own website.

Dig: A History Podcast is a show that does not reach the top of the charts, like the rest of these podcasts; however, it is an excellent example of how well a podcast show can work without the need for a large budget. This podcast like Backstory is run by four historians, Dr. Earl Avril's, Dr. Sarah Handley-Cousins, Dr. Marissa C Rhodes, and Dr. Elizabeth Garner Masaryk, though there is an air of narrative it flows more like a series of lectures that explore aspects of history with a more historical approach. The show grew out of another called the History Buffs, which was run by seven historians; Dig came to be in 2017.[[28]](#footnote-28) These historians all specialize in feminist history, with two being Americanist and two being Europeanist.

This podcast takes a different tone than the rest because certain themes emerge throughout the episodes because of the specialties of the producers. Dig focuses on history that can truly be said to be not mainstream with subjects ranging from abortion rights, slavery, and sex. They always try to include those who are forgotten in history, people such as women and minorities.

In almost every theme explored, people of color experiences are discussed in great detail and do not shy away from more painful and complicated aspects of history. In their Suffragist series, they discuss the double standard built into the movement with its focus on wealthy white women and often ignoring African American women and attacking African American men, another example of this is in their True Crime series they did an episode about a slave owner being murdered by an enslaved woman. Through these stories, they tell a more complicated version of history that challenges the way that people think of history more than in others. Unlike the other podcasts, Dig has a lower budget, so many of the research is done by the hosts themselves. They provide a myriad of sources that are both primary and secondary. They tend to provide more of their sources than the rest of the podcasts because of this. Which allows their audience to be able to do the same. Instead of interviewing historians, two of them lead the discussion on the topic. Though there is a narrative style to some extent, it is still very much grounded on historical thought and practice, which goes more in-depth into actual historical thought than the rest of these. There is not much of a performative aspect to Dig, with no sound effects of dramatic, detailed descriptive language, but its simplicity allows for a more critical look at history.

Despite their differences, all of these podcasts have in common is that they value the importance of storytelling when depicting history. Storytelling has been a valuable method of popular history creation since the days of *Headlines*. However, it is an even more important method today because of the way that audiences consume media. With the growth of streaming binge, watching and listening has increasingly become the main method that audiences consume media, because of this content began to adapt to create a different sort of narrative style. Podcasts utilize an immersive narrative style, that uses drama and sensory immersion to connect with their audience[[29]](#footnote-29). Podcasts such as *American History Tellers* and *Revisionist History* are excellent examples of this, with both using engaging narration along with sound effects to create a feeling as though their audience is present in the moment that they are describing. This binging mentality also encourages podcast creators to ensure that their stories create a connected storyline across multiple episodes. *American History Tellers, Dig: A History Podcast, and Revisionism history* all group episodes together into connected units so that even when listing to several different episodes, there is a clear storyline throughout. Though when it comes to the educational aspects of the podcast, the creation of them by students and teachers, they are not determined by those who listen who are outside of their class, however popular history podcasts are completely influenced by who their listeners are. The majority of those who listen to these podcasts are not people who work within the field of history but are ordinary people who have a mild interest in history because of this podcast hosts need to invest in ways of communicating history entertainingly, which is why storytelling is essential. However, despite the common use of storytelling, they do not have a uniform way of storytelling.

There seems to be a noticeable difference between the way that podcaster who is in the history field tell these stories and how non-historian host tells these stories. Memory Palace, Revisionist history, and American history tellers are more committed to telling history more narratively with the use of sound effects and the descriptive language they show a commitment of wanting their listeners to put themselves in the shoes of historical figures an act that most historians tend to buckle at. This hesitancy to use a “imagine you. \_\_\_" narrative can be seen very clearly in the podcasts that are created by actual historians, *Dig* and Backstory. In these podcasts, they don't encourage their audience to imagine being within the historical moment, but they maintain a sort of intimacy with the audience which is crucial when it comes to creating successful podcasts, they replace a more intricate narrative with a conversational tone that creates intimacy in a different way by letting their audience get to know them. These podcasts all have similar goals in engaging with the history that is considered not "mainstream," almost all of them say on their websites and internet descriptions that their main goal is introducing or reinterpreting history for audiences that encourages there audience to think more critically of the mainstream historical narrative.

These podcasts strive to not just tell the story but reassess it as well, in a more critical way. Providing sources from there analysis is an intricate part of encouraging further thought from their audience, which is evident from there listing of sources on their websites, with some even creating lesson plans based on the historical work that was talked about on the show. These podcasts are more than just podcasts however the hosts create a sort of community amongst there listeners to some extent, with their active social media accounts you can see that connecting with this community is an important aspect of the podcast experience though most of these listeners tend to not communicate directly with few comments, many share articles from the pages and tweet appreciation and support.

Since the 1930s, there has been an interest in using audio technology to reach out to the public and to teach about the past. As web 2.0 came to be, this became more of a possibility with the invention of podcasts and smartphones with millions of subscribers. People are showing a great interest in history and are executing that interest by listening to podcasts. But the great thing about podcasts is not only the way that it connects to the public but also the way that its accessibility allows it to be used by just about anyone. This accessibility allows podcasts to be applied within the classroom as both a way that teachers can connect with students but also a way that students can connect with the material by applying a digital tool to it, and it encourages them to evaluate the material in different ways. Podcasts can also connect historians directly to an interested public, which can be seen by the large fanbases that follow these and other history podcasts there is a large group of people with interest in history who can be met by with the creation of podcasts.

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