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Podcasts and History

With the beginning of the 21st century came an influx of technological advances that changed the face of both the study of history and the world. Knowledge became something that can be accessed by almost anyone quickly and easily; knowledge creation was also given these attributes. One of these technological advances was the creation of the podcast. With millions of people subscribing to a new podcast every day, podcasting has grown into one of the biggest parts of digital life in some ways eclipsing its parent the radio. With genres ranging from comedy, news, science, and more, there is a podcast for pretty much every subject under the sun, which of course, means that there are a plethora of history podcasts.

Podcasts have become an important tool that historians can and have used to reach out to the public and connect with their students within academia. Podcasts, however, are more than just a tool but also a cultural phenomenon and are used by more than scholars but laypeople as well, podcasts much like other developments from the beginning of web 2.0 is accessible to anyone so many of the most well-known podcasts are created by people without a degree, but with a strong interest in the subject, they cover within there podcasts. In this paper, I will discuss the development of podcasts and the way that scholars and others use them as tools to learn and teach about history. I will start from the origins of historians working with audio to connect with the public by initially using the radio, to the development of the podcast and into its use by historians. I will then analyze some history podcasts by analyzing some of the more popular podcasts that are currently being produced; in this, I will analyze the way that they talk about history to engage their audience.

In the early 20th century, another technological boom was occurring. During this time, things such as movies and television began to change the world exponentially. Just like now, these developments began to connect people across the world. With these developments came the creation of the radio. As these new technological advances came to be, various groups began to try to use them to connect to people throughout America. From Christians to major corporations’ various groups clamored to use the radio to connect with the public, amongst them where historians.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While movies and television tend to overshadow the radio today, in the 1920s radio was seen as a more promising prospect than other forms of media. Radio allowed various groups to connect to far more people then movies and television allowed; radio was also more affordable for both listeners and creators. Sound was also 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. This pursuit was led by the Women’s National Radio Committee, who were concerned over a large amount of pop culture media. History themed radio broadcasts began at the grassroots level with various colleges and universities applying history-themed content into there already established radio episodes, however, there was a layer of hesitance because they did not want to broadcast whole lectures.[[2]](#footnote-2) 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) to get involved in creating a radio show that focused solely on history.

In the pursuit of this, the AHA and the National Advisory Council on Radio in Education produced the show, “the Story Behind the Headlines," the first major radio broadcast that was produced by historians and focused on history. The program was supposed to relate history to the present by mapping the historical connections to the present events, the original concept of the show was for it to be dramatic, but this was later scrapped. Its producer was a historian named Conyers Read, with his contributions they pushed to ensure that that the show encouraged historical thought and inquiry, hoping that it would encourage listeners to do more than just listen to history but also encourage them to learn more about it through outside reading. 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 ten years. "The Story Behind the Headlines," was not only popular history broadcast on the radio, however, its main competition was also "Cavalcade of America."

This show started in 1935, moving from CBS to NBC and eventually was picked up for a television show. Differing greatly from its counterpart, it was not produced or created by historians, and its format was dramatic with a star-studded cast, it was a show that was more dedicated to the entertainment element of radio. Despite this Cavalcade, just as much as the AHA supported Headline, was still dedicated to representing the facts with a historical consultant on board. Beyond the entertainment focus, it differed from Headlines by being the more conservative alternative to Headlines and used the past as a way to legitimate the present not to reflect upon it. These political aspects to the show ensured that it temporarily survived Headlines' ending, but as the 40s continued on, audiences lost interest.[[3]](#footnote-3) Ultimately these two programs illustrate the early stages of Historian interaction with the public through audio media. 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 term podcast was coined by a journalist for the Guardian, who combined the words iPod and Broadcast. Podcast has an interesting yet short history that informs the way that historians have begun to use it, first mainly seeing it as a tool that can be used to educate their students and later on using it to reach out 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 twitch this technology. From there, podcasting took off in its first real boom of popularity in 2004. 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.[[4]](#footnote-4) Libsyn was the first to create a podcasting streaming site, which eventually leads to Yahoo doing the same.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As podcasting began to grow in popularity, major corporations began to pick it up and apply it to there own websites the most important of these corporations was Apple who embraced podcasting early on and applied its RSS software to iTunes.[[6]](#footnote-6) After its initial boom, podcasts decreased significantly in popularity for a while, despite this podcasting continued to grow with more and more people creating new podcast series..[[7]](#footnote-7) 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 Renaissance for podcasts that have still gone on until today. Podcasts have two advantages that allowed its eventual reemergence into the mainstream, and that has made it an incredibly useful tool. 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.[[8]](#footnote-8)

When podcasts first emerged, historians and other scholars saw it as a tool that can be used in the classroom. Podcasting provides a unique opportunity with teaching; some studies suggest that audio learning is good for children because listening is usually instinctual. [[9]](#footnote-9)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 with a historical theory course. 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 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, 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 there 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 to be available for future students to be able to access it for future use.[[10]](#footnote-10) Vess’ experiment illustrates an early way that historians and scholars used podcasts within the classroom and with there students, but soon Historians began to branch out of just their classrooms and begin to create podcasts to reach the general public.

With the creation of Web 2.0, historians began to utilize the more connected version of the web in their pursuit to connect with the public; however, it also raises the question about who has the authority to create historical content. With the world of web 2.0, anyone can create content, which means that historians were now in a place where the community is not only the audience, they wanted to reach but also an important part of the creation of historical content online.[[11]](#footnote-11) People do not require a Ph.D. to create a blog, and to create a podcast; all they need is a microphone. This makes the web a place where shared authority is not simply a practice but a requirement of interaction within the online world. The format of historical content on the internet also allows for a dialogue that is usually not present in the usual method of history creation. It is in this sort of environment that successful history podcasts are created.[[12]](#footnote-12)

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. Many of the things they discussed were how creating the podcasts helped them as Historians, those who were young historians where able to use podcasts as a way to bypass the normal academic acrobatics to get there work out to the public, it also creates a sort of network of historians who connect through the making and listening to podcasts. They also stated that many of them used them in their classrooms, making them better teachers..[[13]](#footnote-13) Many of these podcasts reached the top of the charts on there selective streaming sites because of an important factor, their ability to tell great story’s. History podcasts are more than just educational; however, 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 ensure that it connects to the audience.

Many different history podcasts have been made since the beginning of podcasts, from true crime to ancient history there are a plethora of different podcasts that can be used for a case study on history podcasts. For this paper, I have chosen a few that I feel like represent the diversity of History podcasts both by their method of storytelling and the people who create them. The ones I will analyze are Revisionist History, Backstory, Dig a History Podcast, the Memory Palace, and American History Tellers. Through these case studies, I will discuss the people who make them, and the way they tell their stories.

Revisionist History stands out from the group of podcasts that I will discuss; this podcast was founded by well-known author Malcolm Gladwell, who wrote Blink, Outliers, and The Tipping Point, among others. In this podcast, he focuses on historical subjects, people, events, etc. that he focuses on 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. The thing that makes Revisionist history standout against other history podcasts on this list is that it varies quite great when it comes to a period, and personal stories are often centralized.[[14]](#footnote-14)

One of the miniseries of the podcast covers education history, but its main focus is on very recent history with an interview with an 8th grader about his struggles in inner-city LA, and the organization that works with him. Though history is engaged to some extent, it doesn't go into depth or specifics about the historical aspects of the education system, or even the years where certain policies where executed. Revisionist history has a more journalistic narrative style than the others.[[15]](#footnote-15) The episodes consist of Gladwell introducing the topic, indicating his interest/inquiry that leads him to the topic of the episode, he then begins to tell the story, the episodes of Revisionist history sound like the reading of a newspaper article. 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. Though its name indicates a historical analysis the journalistic approach centers it in the present. In an episode about Elvis, Gladwell investigates Elvis’ memory when it comes to one song, “Are you lonesome tonight.” But this inquiry into one song expands beyond a discussion about Elvis himself reassessing him as a person, to a discussion on memory, and emotion that includes everyone, including Gladwell himself.[[16]](#footnote-16) The historical aspects of the stories are just the beginning of the stories, Gladwell includes his thoughts, observations, and emotions.

When it comes to History Podcasts, there is one name the rises above the rest, and that name is Backstory. Backstory began its life as a radio show and then 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 historical 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 "the Story behind the headline," in that it is created by a historical society and led by historians. Another similarity is that they both use 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 there more recent episodes that are all informed by the current pandemic with a few episodes that covering the subject of pandemics. [[17]](#footnote-17)

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 .[[18]](#footnote-18) Backstory is also similar to its older radio ancestor because of its subtle 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 focus, unlike many other podcasts, with DiMeo touring throughout the world. 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 conjure up memories or imagine memories so that it can place his audience into the historical moment he briefly discusses[[19]](#footnote-19)

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 amount 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.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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.[[21]](#footnote-21) 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. [[22]](#footnote-22) 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

[[23]](#footnote-23) 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 tends 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(put in website). 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 there 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 there 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.

In William Cronon's presidential address, he gave a call to action, telling historians not to shy away from using storytelling to talk about history. When it comes to the history podcast, whether historians or not, this is never really an issue. The most important aspect of these podcasts is the aspect of storytelling. 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 there 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 historian podcasts 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 your..\_\_\_" 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 there 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 there 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 there 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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