

A Taxonomy of News Podcasts (4/24/2017, Nick Quah)

So, I'm going to depart from my co-panelists and take a top-down view, and I'm going to try and provide a rough taxonomy of the news podcasts that we're currently seeing in the market.

I reckon that this makes for a tricky enterprise, because categorizing things tends to be a somewhat political act and can be overly reductive. And besides, media products are inherently fluid things that bleed over lines and categorizes, and they constantly borrow from each other, and so there will always be room for debate about the ways we thinking about a certain genre.

But I think a taxonomy is a productive exercise for two reasons:

- Firstly, the podcast ecosystem is a weird, chaotic, and messy place — not unlike the early days of blogging, as Nieman Lab's Joshua Benton [has written before](#) — and the news podcast genre is a genuine microcosm of that: we're seeing a lot news teams trying out a bunch of different things in different ways to broadly achieve different goals. So a taxonomy, I think, gives us a baseline system to efficiently think about this expanding universe of news podcasts.
- Secondly, for those of you who are thinking about developing projects in this space, I hope that this taxonomy can serve as a menu of options for you to choose from.

Two quick caveats before I jump into this list:

(1) I'd like to point out that this taxonomy is distinctly US-centric, for the simple reason that the US is my primary scope of work. Media and news are culturally-specific entities, and I would expect that news podcasts in other countries, in so far that they exist, would adhere to different dynamics and categorical logics.

(2) This taxonomy is a work in progress, and I look forward to seeing where we disagree.

Here we go.

1. The Conversational, or “Gabfest,” format.

This is the prototypical archetype of the podcast medium. The conversational is typically designed as a discussion that recaps the news of the week, and it generally functions to provide listeners with context and commentary, and hopefully as a result of those two things, clarity. It also gives listeners a space to *feel out* and *process* the news, which I'd argue is a pretty important service to provide at this moment. (As a side note: it's also what I think is news podcasting most distinct contribution to news media.) I'd also like to note that the conversational is deceptively easy to set up, but incredibly hard to do well and to scale.

Examples in this category include: the Slate Political Gabfest — the exemplar of the form — Vox.com's The Weeds, Politico's Nerdcast, NPR Politics, FiveThirtyEight Politics, WSJ's Heard on the Street.

2. The Documentary format

This is generally the stuff people talk about when they talk about podcasts; indeed, I'd argue that this is where the medium gets the most buzz. Documentary podcasts are often in-depth, deeply reported, highly-produced narrative projects, and it also happens to be where the medium really flexes its storytelling muscles. You could roughly postulate they perform the same function as a magazine feature; more often than not, they're telling a deeper, longer story within full context, and they function within the marketplace of information and ideas in similar fashion.

Examples include all those podcasts you've probably heard about: In The Dark, More Perfect, 99% Invisible, Radio Ambulante, and This American Life. You can also more specifically point to the collaborations that have taken place between audio teams and more traditional publishers, like the investigative work This American Life has done with the New York Times and Pro Publica.

3. The Interview format

Pretty straightforward category here — it's literally a podcast that's nothing but the full interview. The Interview, of course, is but one tool in a much larger toolkit used in other formats, but the standalone Interview podcast is very much its own creature with its own particular dynamics. An interview podcast has its own arc, and it has the capacity to break news, to litigate an issue, to create a biography, to explain something. And much like the Gabfest model, the Interview Podcast is deceptively easy to set up, but immensely difficult to make valuable for a broad audience.

Examples include: Recode Decode, Fresh Air, Newsfeed with BuzzFeed Ben, The Ezra Klein Show, and so on.

4. The News Magazine format

This should be very familiar to those who have worked in radio before: it's a multi-segmented, variety show that's either built around a specific topic, theme, or central reportorial figure. This one is a more straightforward carryover from traditional radio; it's what we think about when we think about NPR's All Things Considered or Morning Edition, only structured more as a standalone on-demand audio experience without the oppressive shadow of a broadcast clock.

Examples include: Slate's The Gist, Current's The Pub, On the Media, Slate's Trumpcast.

5. The Explainer format

This is the part of the taxonomy where we get progressively granular. The Explainer is defined less by its structure and format, and more by the specific value it offers listeners: which is to imbue them with the fundamentals of a given topic. These podcasts provide listeners with meaning, context, and history; and at best it's more evergreen than timely, even though topicality can be the hook.

Examples include: New Hampshire Public Radio's Civics 101, WaPo's Can He Do That?, Too Embarrassed To Ask, APM's Make Me Smart.

6. The Local Podcast

I'll admit that this remains a loose subgenre, but I believe it's steadily emerging — and important. It is, obviously, defined more by a focus on a place and its residents as subject matter, constituency, and consumer base. The local podcast also tends to privilege community interaction — and to a large extent it's community-driven — and it's more explicitly a civic-building tool.

Examples include: WBEZ's Curious City, Oregon Public Broadcasting's This Land is Our Land, The Rise of Charm City, KQED's Q'ed up, and check out this [sizzling Smithsonian article](#).

7. The Morning News, or Daily News, Podcast

This is where we're currently seeing a fair bit of activity, and I'm excited to see more of it. It's an emerging, somewhat experimental form, best thought of as being defined by its relation to how it fits into a use case or into the intended consumer's user behavior. It does bear some analog to the Morning News Hour or the Morning Newsletter, and I do think it can be a pretty strong adaptation of the Newspaper in the Audio Format.

Examples include: The New York Times' The Daily, NPR's Up First, and I'd argue The Outline World Dispatch.

Two brief, closing thoughts:

- I've loosely based the ordering of the taxonomy according to a rough narrative about the trajectory of news podcasts. It should be noted that the news podcast is a concept that's aggressively evolving; as we move forward in time, we've seen more intentionality in producing higher quality experiences, in producing better and more thoughtful show designs, and in thinking more consciously about the user experience and the casual audience. I expect that trend to continue, and I expect only good things to come.
- Let's not forget that podcasting is a weird medium. It is to a considerable extent a forgotten child of Apple, and it's not a particularly sexy media category — in fact it's a medium that's said to be unlikely in ever experiencing a hockey-stick growth — and as

has constantly been said, it's still technologically underdeveloped industry in many key ways. But because it's unsexy and slowly but steadily growing, and because it's still a space that's allowed for really interesting and fantastic pieces of journalism and art and culture despite all of its quirks, I do believe the podcast medium is something of an opportunity for a fresh start to realizing the original dream of digital publishing. We've got something good going with the podcasts; it's still fresh, green open fields that we haven't fucked up yet — and that's no small thing.