A logo of a company

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**NEW MEDIA STUDIES**

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**The sound of change: The Evolution and Narrative Power of Podcasting**

*‘Podcasting is expanding rapidly as a popular cultural phenomenon, connecting listeners to audio content produced by professionals, radio stations and amateur hobbyists. Recent data from Edison Research revealed that an estimated 73 million Americans had listened to a podcast in the previous month, and those audience listened to an average of seven podcasts per week.’[[1]](#footnote-1)*

The question that this essay will address is, how has podcasting evolved as a media format and what role does it play in shaping the narrative of women in sport? To answer this question, this essay will discuss the new media format of podcasting. It will discuss the history of the format and how it came to be. It will also discuss the evolution of the format and where it stands in modern media. There will be a focus on podcasts that involve the topic of women in sport and how this media format has given them a voice that traditional media did not allow for. This can be due to things like societal norms and misogynistic views. There will also be a focus on how the evolution of the podcasting format has allowed for greater coverage of women’s sports events.

Starting at the very beginning, this essay will discuss how podcasting as a new media format came to be. It is derived from the traditional media format of radio. Statista defines traditional radio as ‘the broadcasting of audio content via radio frequency waves to reach listeners, typically through AM and FM stations. It encompasses the transmission of music, news, talk shows and other programming to a wide audience, often in real time.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Statista also says that traditional radio is ‘A vital platform for businesses to reach audiences through audio commercials and sponsorships.’[[3]](#footnote-3)It is a great tool for businesses to advertise themselves, podcasts have also become a platform on which companies can advertise on by sponsoring an episode or a segment of a podcast or even becoming a full title sponsor of the podcast. Jennifer Dublino said this about why advertising on podcasts is such a good idea. ‘Podcast advertising is unique because listeners form relationships with podcast hosts and trust what they promote, “Over time, listeners often feel like they truly know the hosts, considering them friends they’ve never met”, explained John Sampogna, CEO and co-founder of Wonder sauce. “This intimate connection translates into trust, making podcast ads highly impactful.”’[[4]](#footnote-4) Dublino also mentions this interesting fact in her piece. ‘IAN study found that listeners respond better to ads podcast hosts read than preproduced ads. Host-read ads are responsible for 55 percent of generated revenue. “Host readouts are particularly effective because hosts can tailor the advertisement in a way that resonates with their audience.”’[[5]](#footnote-5)

Many characteristics of radio can be seen in podcasting, including the use of microphones and headsets as well as the format being purely audio based in the beginning. Angel Jimenez speaks about the similarities and differences between traditional radio and podcasting. ‘Both are media outlets that have audio and voices at their core… it’s also easy to see that both are not exactly the same. A radio show can be turned into a podcast, split into small pieces to listen to on demand. And a podcast can easily be broadcast on a radio station’[[6]](#footnote-6) Traditional radio is beginning to die out, being replaced by new formats like podcasting, as well as social media content. A large number of the younger generation would be more likely to go to Tik Tok or their favourite podcast for their daily news. A study found that ‘Gen Z and Millennials still consume local and national news from traditional sources but are more likely to get news and information from social media’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although they are very similar formats and one is derived from the other, people are leaning more towards podcasts for their entertainment and relaxation time. Marta Novaceanu discusses the difference between radio and podcasts and why more people are turning to podcasts in her research paper. ‘The most recent research… show that more and more audience leave the traditional radio in favour of new technologies such as podcast, streaming or online radio.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although they are very similar, they are also very different. Radio has a one to many format, which means that the show is broadcasted from one place to many others at any one time. Podcasting has a many to many format, especially modern day podcasts, where you can listen to the recording whenever you want wherever you are. This allows people to decide what they want to listen to with a greater diversity of content, rather than the very limited content diversity of live radio. ‘The difference between the one-to-many broadcast model that came to dominate radio and the many-to-many internet model that allows for greater content diversity.’[[9]](#footnote-9) The cost of making a podcast can be relatively low, this allows for a larger amount of content to be produced in a wider and more diverse range of subjects than radio. ‘Moreover, unlike radio spectrum, podcast feeds are not a finite resource and the costs of entry remain low.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

Podcasting became a media format in 2004, when two friends Adam Curry and Dave Winter, decided that they wanted to download a radio broadcast to an iPod to be listened to at any time in any place. The name derived from the pod in iPod and the cast in broadcast. The term podcast was even named the Oxford American Dictionary’s word of the year in 2005. It grew from there, each year getting more and more popular, Ricky Gervais earned a Guiness World Record for the most downloaded podcast in 2006. In 2012, Edison Research published a report that stated that 29% of Americans had listened to a podcast. In 2015 *Serial*, is the first podcast to win a Peabody Award.[[11]](#footnote-11) From these examples we can see just how much podcasting has grown since its beginning. It is also important to know the history and where a format got its name and identity, in order to understand just how impactful the format is. According to an article by Conal Byrne, podcasting is an incredibly impactful format that makes people trust and believe the things that are being said on them, ‘75% of podcast listeners trust podcast hosts more than social media, 65% of podcast listeners pay attention to podcast ads, (compared to 39% on TV). As a result, 60% of podcast listeners have bought something because they heard about it in a podcast.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

To go into more detail, in the early stages of podcasting it was seen as a revolution of sorts. It took away the global barriers that live broadcasted radio shows had, therefore increasing its listener spectrum and growing at a huge rate that no one expected. ‘Podcasting not only removes global barriers, to reception but, at a stroke, removes key factors impacting the growth of internet radio: its portability, its intimacy and its accessibility.’[[13]](#footnote-13)

Ben Hammersley was one of the first journalists to report on the new format. In an article written and published by *The Guardian,* Hammersley spoke on the new format and its name, ‘MP3 players like Apple’s iPods in many pockets, audio production software cheap or free, and weblogging an established part of the internet; all the ingredients are there for a new boom in amateur radio. But what to call it? Audio blogging? Podcasting? Guerilla Media?’[[14]](#footnote-14) Hammersley couldn’t have imagined that his brainstorming of the new formats potential name would become what the format is known as. Since it was one of the first articles to mention the format, it didn’t take off straight away.

Within a year of this article being published many people in the industry were using the phrase ‘Podcasting’ to refer to the new format that had taken the internet by storm. Within its first year the popularity of podcasts increased in such a way that no one could have anticipated. Barry commented on the boom in popularity in his article. ‘A Google search for the word ‘Podcast’ would return somewhere in the order of 6000 hits (Terdiman. 2004): today (November 2005) the same search returns over 61 million hits, such is the increasing use of the term and the medium’[[15]](#footnote-15)

Although the ‘invention’ and boom of the podcast format was welcomed by a large number of the population, many media and radio brands had a hard time adjusting to the new format. The growth of the podcast was unprecedented and completely unpredictable, this meant that predictable audiences, were now unpredictable and standard, established practises were no longer effective. The traditional radio and media struggled to keep up with the change in the beginning. ‘Podcasting is not only a converged medium … but also a disruptive technology and one that has already forced some in the radio business to reconsider some established practises and preconceptions about audiences, consumption, production and distribution.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Podcasting has thrust traditional media into the modern world, it has forced them to rethink their formats and advertising models as well as having new target audiences and demographics. Podcasting has been instrumental in turning traditional radio into the modern format that is listened to today. Barclay Goodwin wrote about how podcasts as a media format has changed the traditional radio industry, ‘Podcasting has not only introduced new forms of content and listening habits but also caused big shifts in audience demographics and audience models. Recognizing the need to adapt, traditional radio is looking for ways to use the strengths of podcasting to boost its relevance and reach in the digital era.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

The innovation that is podcasting, feels like a revolution of sorts, a new way of thinking, a new way of living. Some people listen to podcasts every day, podcasts are a talking point in day to day life, for example the 2 Johnnies *GAA Catfish Series*. Podcasting is also multi-task friendly, you can listen while you work, go for a walk or while you cook, in this modern day world we live in, people’s time is very limited, so having something they can listen to and enjoy while doing other tasks is the ultimate busy person hack. Tae Haar and Matthew McLean, who are podcast hosts themselves, wrote an article on the popularity of podcasts. ‘That ability to be put on as entertaining (or informative) background noise that answers the question of why podcasts are so popular. They’re a great choice for so many situations – driving, cleaning, cooking and working’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Podcasting forced companies to get out of their old habits and innovate, improve, advance. ‘The Podcasting’, an account on LinkedIn, wrote a piece about how podcasts forced traditional radio to adapt. ‘Moreover, interactive features borrowed from podcast, such as listener interactions and feedback, have been integrated into radio programming to enhance engagement and relevance.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Podcasting as a media form is so new that anyone can interpret it in any way that they like. The way that it is interpreted today, may be different from how it is interpreted in 20 years. Episodes can be 10 minutes long or an hour, it can be purely audio, or audio and visual. It can have different segments, different weekly guests, different weekly topics. It is a very creative and loose format that thrives on authenticity, which may be why it is so popular. On that point, Doaa Farid says, ‘That authenticity combined with consistency, turned Kefaya Ba2a into a weekly ritual for fans.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

Women in sport have not been represented in the same way that men in sport have. With the growth of social media and media forms like podcasting, women in sports voice are being heard more and more. The introduction of news outlets like *Just Women’s sports*  and *ESPNW,* mean that accessing information on women in sport and women’s game results has never been easier. Especially when regular sports coverage outlets like *ESPN* are not always reliable or don’t always cover women’s games. Jennifer Bubel had this to say on women’s sports coverage. ‘The study found that in 2019, women’s sport coverage only totalled 5.4% of airtime as compared to the 5% in 1989 and 5.1% in 1993’[[21]](#footnote-21). Monica Crawford in her paper about women’s sports media coverage said ‘Repeatedly scholars have shown how mainstream sports media sites consistently underreport women’s sport. However, new digital media platforms intend on covering exclusively women’s sports are trying to lessen the disparity in coverage.’[[22]](#footnote-22)

With the advancements in social media and media platforms as a whole, as well as the younger generation being more interested in seeing women’s sports, there has been an increase in the live coverage of games. Lindsey Darvin wrote a piece in Forbes about how new research has n shown that coverage of women’s sports has increased tremendously, she said this in her article, ‘As younger generations of fans are turning to streaming platforms such as ESPN+, Peacock, Amazon Prime, and Paramount+ at high rates, the roughly 22,000 hours of women’s sports coverage provided across a variety of streaming platforms in 2022 is very encouraging.’.[[23]](#footnote-23) While this research has shown very encouraging results, is viewership increasing enough? Are more people interested in watching the coverage of women’s sports games? For people to be interested in watching the games they need to have an easy way to access them, the Irish government is committed to increasing the viewership numbers for women’s sports events according to an article written by Sean Murray. ‘The government is seeking to expand the number of female sporting events that would be available on free to air TV, as part of its commitment to increase the visibility of women’s sport.’[[24]](#footnote-24) A shocking statistic from the same article says ‘Data suggests that the average men’s Six Nations game pulls eight times the viewers of the women’s Six Nations.’[[25]](#footnote-25)

Looking back to podcasts, and the number of female listeners compared to male listeners is interesting. ‘The most recent research data gathered in 2024, also showed that men have always been more likely to consume podcasts every month, sine 2021. However, women caught up over time and in 2024, they were just three percent behind male listeners.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Podcasts are portrayed as a feminine thing in media like TV shows and films, so this statistic is surprising.

Podcasting is providing a safe space for women, especially women in sport, to be themselves and tell their stories. It is a space where any conversations are valid and welcome. ‘Such conversations are protected and welcomed – where people who identify as women are free to discuss important, valid issues, and where they have a safe platform to engage with others on what matters to them.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Podcasts talking to female sports stars about their lives and careers have become immensely popular with the rise in viewership of women’s sports games. This provides a larger number of role models for the next generation of sports stars and gives them someone to look up to and aspire to be like. *Off The Bench: The Women’s Sport Podcast*, is an example of this, where journalist Molly McElwee, invites female athletes coaches and leaders in the world of sport on to talk about their careers.

The rise in popularity of podcasts along side the rise in viewership of women’s sports games, mean that women have never been more front and centre in the media spotlight particularly in the world of motorsport. The introduction of the F1 Academy, Female only single seater championship, that is supposed to give women a new pathway to get into F1, has brought a huge amount of attention to women in motorsport. Susie Wolff, the head of F1 Academy, spoke in an interview about the huge impact that the series is having in such a short space of time. ‘” With the huge exposure we’ve managed to gather in year one, and bearing in mind that we have nearly all the F1 broadcasters with us, the fact we are racing with F1, that we have brands like Charlotte Tilbury and Tommy Hilfiger helping us reach a brand new audience. I think we really are changing that perception”’.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Many of the women who partake in the series have also spoken on podcasts about their experiences in such a male dominated sport, and how they have dealt with the perception that karting and racing is only for boys and how they deal with negative comments. Chloe Grant, who races in F1 Academy spoke on the negative comments she receives in an interview with Giles Richards. ‘”On social media I get negative comments from 12 year old boys to 60 year old men who are jealous because they are not involved in the sport and they don’t understand it. They say women don’t have the talent, all the things under the sun, but you just ignore it because it’s not true.”’[[29]](#footnote-29) With the rise in popularity of women’s sports it is hoped that these sorts of negative comments are not said anymore as women take a step out of the shadows and fight for the equality in media coverage that they deserve. In my own FYP podcast I delve into the topic of F1 Academy and the representation of women in the motorsport world.

In conclusion, this essay has provided a deep dive into the media format of podcasting, where it began and where it is in the modern era of technology. This essay has also given an insight into the topic of women in podcasting and women in sport in podcasting, providing a detailed look at statistics and research studies about the topic. Finally, it has given a look into the positives of podcasting and how the format is used to create a safe space for women to come together and share their stories, whether that be stories from their day to day lives or stories of women in sport.

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