

# As podcasts evolve, so do their stories

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Adnan Syed was barely a legal adult when a Maryland judge sentenced him to life in prison, plus an additional 30 years, for brutally murdering his ex-girlfriend Hae Min Lee.

The problem is, he may not have actually killed her.

Syed's story and case are profiled in *Serial*, a podcast hosted by Sarah Koenig and developed by *This American Life*.

Jamie Gilbert, associate director of student media advising at NC State University, said *Serial* was the beginning of a new age of media.

"They just found a fascinating topic and had true, in-depth, entertaining reporting and good production quality," Gilbert said. "It was marketed so well that people were hooked, just like a serial television program where you have to come back week after week after week."

Though podcasting originated in 2004, it was not until a decade later that *Serial* was downloaded more than 5 million times. Today, more than four years after its debut, the podcast still ranks 16th on the iTunes Podcast Chart.

"It was just a super fascinating topic," Gilbert said. "They chose a young man who was incarcerated in Baltimore for murdering his girlfriend, but there's so many holes in the story. It's just a really fascinating story. He can't account for his time accurately and he can't fully remember everything that happened. He claims he's innocent but it's really not clear."

Though *Serial* certainly was not the first podcast, Koenig's investigation started a new era of podcasting and left audiences wanting more, according to Gilbert.

## Podcasts created from musical beginnings

Ten years before *Serial*, an MTV DJ was looking for an easier way to get music for his weekly sets.

Gilbert said the DJ, Adam Curry, would have to transfer music from



**SERIAL**

LOGO PROVIDED BY SERIAL

*Serial*, cited as being the most popular podcast of all time, was one of the first to bring podcasting into mainstream culture.

the internet to his computer to his iPod before he could use any of it.

"He researched and researched and he found out there wasn't a better way and so he made one himself," Gilbert said. "He made something called a podcast which previous to that did not exist."

To create podcasts, Curry first had to create a podcatcher program, similar to today's iTunes, and then develop special Really Simple Syndication Code in order to feed the files into the podcatcher.

With Curry's new creation, he could now write RSS codes, tag them and have his audience subscribe to the feed. Once subscribed, the newest upload would be downloaded directly to the subscriber's machine so they could listen to it immediately or take it with them to listen later.

Nearly 15 years later, Curry's original idea has transformed into a way to get content even easier than he could have imagined.

"It's a lot easier to get podcasts on the go where previously you would listen to it on your computer or your iPod," Gilbert said. "Now you can listen to it on your phone, on your wrist."

This portability of podcasts is yet another innovation to come from Curry's frustration.

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— *Bursts O'Goodness*

Before, having a wide catalog of content to listen to meant either having a portable device with an extreme amount of storage – which could get pricey – or staying connected to a desktop to download the content and listen there.

According to polls conducted by Edison Research, 81 percent of monthly podcast subscribers listen on some type of portable device such as a smartphone or tablet.

Gilbert pointed to this increase in technology as a factor of *Serial's* success.

"You want to come back week after week," Gilbert said. "That's why you subscribe to it and when the new episode came out you would automatically have it downloaded to your device. It's just a lot of things coming together."

## Stepping away from radio

Bursts O'Goodness, one of the minds behind *The Final Straw Radio*, a weekly anarchist radio show based in Asheville, worked in radio since the late 1990s.

O'Goodness said when he moved to Asheville from California to work with AshevilleFM, his college radio experience allowed him to be comfortable behind a microphone and podcasting was a natural next step.

"I moved here from the Bay Area where anarchist events and engagements are a constant and wanted a higher level of engagement with ideas and activities," O'Goodness said. "I was already doing a weekly radio show with a couple of friends and having a reading group format and airing the discussions was our

idea. But the show stayed a mostly music-format show so I split."

After leaving this first show, O'Goodness developed *The Final Straw Radio*. The first episode was simple: The host talked to a few LGBTQ+ people who had been the victims of recent beatings. O'Goodness said he was happy to use his talents to give those people voices.

"Those things drove me," O'Goodness said. "A desire to share conversations about struggles people engage in and ideas that excite me."

What makes *The Final Straw Radio* different from other podcasts, though, is that it originally airs as a radio show and is then re-edited for syndication.

Still, unlike traditional live radio, much of O'Goodness' show is pre-recorded and edited, leaving only small points to be added in during the live broadcast, leaving *The Final Straw Radio* somewhere between radio and podcast.

O'Goodness said he started podcasting so other radio stations could pick up his shows for free, leaving them in the in-between area.

For O'Goodness, the concepts between radio and podcasts are similar.

"Like good radio, it's audio that makes the listener stop and focus," O'Goodness said. "To take away insights and affinity they wouldn't have had before."

According to the FCC, radio stations must obtain licenses in order to broadcast. Podcasts, however, are not required to do so.

O'Goodness said he will typically spend up to an hour-and-a-half editing a single hour of audio just cutting out pauses in speech and any words or phrases that are against FCC guidelines.

Other podcasts, such as *Serial*, are free from these limitations because they do not operate under an FCC mandated radio license.

These license-free podcasts are on the rise. Edison Research reports

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