Library-Podcast Intersections

Steve Thomas*

A library, at its core, is not just a collection of ideas but also an institution that provides the means to develop and contextualize new knowledge. Similarly, a podcast is not just an audio file distributed over the internet but also a tool that creates conversations, generating new ideas and concepts.

The links between libraries and podcasts are more prevalent than might be apparent at first blush. Libraries fill the world with stories, whether in the striking text of a physical volume or through the mellifluous words of a children's librarian during storytime. Many of the most popular podcasts have scaled their way to the top of the charts by telling an engaging true crime story or humorously poking holes in our culture through drunken retellings of the past. Just as most libraries carry popular materials, a podcast can also entertain as its main goal.

Libraries and podcasts also have the potential to be remarkable facilitators of learning. Both thrive on satiating curiosities and exploring one's own imagination through reading, attending a program, or creating in a makerspace, filling the voids that users may not even be aware they have. Libraries have historically been engines of education, and podcasts, though a much newer phenomenon than libraries, also generate learning opportunities for their listeners, whether navigating listeners through a fraught election season, guiding nascent runners on their fitness journey, or digging deep into how stuff works.

Intersections

Until recently, intersections between libraries and podcasts have been infrequent. A few universities used podcasts to dole out homework assignments a decade back but quickly abandoned this method of distribution. In 2005, South Huntington Public Library in Long Island, New York, allowed its patrons to check out iPods with audiobooks preloaded on them.[1] Most of the early library podcasts were produced by individual librarians on their own time, not as part of their regular job at an institution. However, there are exceptions, such as Maurice Coleman's *T Is for Training,* which is the longest-running library podcast and provides a place for librarians to bring up training issues, among other professional concerns, in a supportive roundtable discussion.[2]

Library podcasts generally fall into two categories: patron-focused or professional development. This chapter will deal mainly in the latter category due to my work on the *Circulating Ideas* podcast. However, focusing on patrons is an equally valid and exciting form of podcasting. Many of these podcasts are officially produced and distributed from their institutions, such as the Library of Congress, publishers, and even vendors like OverDrive.

The most popular podcasts produced by librarians as part of their work for patrons are edited versions of live events such as on-stage interviews with authors, for example, at the National Book Festival from the Library of Congress. Other public libraries that preserve the talks done by outside speakers as podcasts include Los Angeles (CA) Public Library's *ALOUD* at the Central Library, the *Free Library Podcast* from the Free Library of Philadelphia (PA), and the *NYPL Podcast.*[3]

Others will broadcast about upcoming library and community events or feature various library staff members talking about their work. Universal College of Learning's library in Palmerston North, New Zealand, did an experiment with podcasting in 2006 to provide instructional materials to its patrons, such as orientation tours and information on how to use the online catalog. A teacher outside Washington, DC, shared her excitement about podcasting with her students, leading the students to create their own podcast

---

* **Steve Thomas** is a branch manager at Gwinnett County (GA) Public Library. Since 2011, he has produced the *Circulating Ideas* podcast, where he facilitates conversions about how libraries remain relevant and vibrant in the twenty-first century. You can find out more about his podcast by visiting https://circulatingideas.com and by following *Circulating Ideas* on Twitter @circideas.

called *100% Kids*, talking about fairness and injustice. The Escondido Public Library collects and shares local knowledge in its *LibraryYOU* podcast. Recently, I started a podcast called *Flip the Library* at my place of work, where a colleague and I focus on the work our staff does; it is intended mostly for our internal staff but is publicly available for our community as well.

Another popular genre of patron-centered library podcasts revolves around readers' advisory. One innovative example is Arlington (VA) Public Library's *Big Book Club* podcast, a virtual book club that first made its way through *War and Peace* 100 pages at a time and then tackled *Middlemarch*, complete with live Facebook discussions between library staff and their community, along with an accompanying podcast with library staff giving their impressions of the text. OverDrive's *Professional Book Nerds* offers personal recommendations from OverDrive staff, and Harper-Collins releases the *Library Love Fest* podcast, which focuses exclusively on titles in its catalog but often offers an inside look at the process by having editors interview the authors with whom they work.

Independent librarians also produce some of the best readers' advisory podcasts. Renata Sancken and Kait Sudol host the *Worst Bestsellers* podcast, where they read popular books of questionable quality, or, as their tagline states, "We read stuff so you don't have to." Matthew Winner's *Children's Book Podcast* is, as expected, about children's books and features interviews with the authors who write them. The *Book Club for Masochists* chooses a genre at random monthly and reads a few titles in that genre to discuss in a group setting, which sometimes leads to pleasant surprises, and sometimes not.

The previously mentioned *T Is for Training* is done as part of Coleman's work as technical trainer at Harford County (MD) Public Library, but most other library podcasts that pursue professional development goals are more likely produced by independent librarians. The now-defunct *Adventures in Library Instruction* featured academic librarians focused on bibliographic instructional issues. *Beyond the Stacks*, which was funded through an IMLS grant, focused on the variety of careers available to library and information professionals. Daniel Messer's *Cyberpunk Librarian* talks about using high-tech, low-budget ideas for your library. *The Library Pros* podcast puts the focus on library professionals and the work that they do. Library professional organizations have also gotten into the act in recent years, with the American Library Association's *Dewey Decibel* podcast and the Public Library Association's *FYI* podcast.

Since 2011, I have produced the *Circulating Ideas* podcast, which facilitates conversations about the innovative people and ideas allowing libraries to thrive in the twenty-first century. Most guests work in libraries and discuss their experience, but others with a link to libraries have also been featured, such as author Cory Doctorow, thought leader David Weinberger, and journalists Clive Thompson, Andy Ihnatko, and David Beard. The focus is on lighting a beacon to reveal the many paths toward the future of libraries by interviewing the people doing the work.

Process

To understand the process of creating and distributing a podcast, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the technical infrastructure underlying the podcasting ecosystem. Though video podcasts ("vodcasts") exist, for the most part, podcasts are spoken-word audio files, like talk radio on the internet. They are primarily in the open standard MP3 format, which allows the audio to be compressed to a small size with acceptable fidelity to the source material, which saves bandwidth costs to users who either download or stream the files.[4]

Podcasts are distributed via RSS, which stands for either "Rich Site Summary" or "Really Simple Syndication," depending on who you ask. RSS creates a feed that allows the user to subscribe to a source of information on the internet and receive new content as it is posted to that source. A podcast app, sometimes called a podcatcher, will take that RSS feed and either automatically download or provide the user a notification when new content, such as a new episode of a podcast, is posted on the source. Most podcast listeners consume podcasts via smartphone apps, such as Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, or Overcast, among others, but podcast episodes can often be streamed from a website in a browser as well.

But what about the initial creation of the podcast?

Libraries and podcasts share another key aspect: they can be, and often by necessity are, shoestring operations. It's actually an advantage of podcasting that it can be done in a low-cost way, as it allows a lower barrier to access.[5] I have been fortunate enough to have supportive listeners and some generous sponsors to partially fund the production of my show, allowing me to upgrade equipment and software to provide better audio and more convenient recording options, but with a few foundational technologies, anyone can get started with podcasting, and it gets easier and more convenient every day.

The one required piece of technology is a microphone to record the audio for the podcast, though for the budget-conscious, that microphone may be the one inside their phone or computer. An external microphone, either in a handheld recorder like a Zoom h4n or one that plugs in via USB or XLR cables, will drastically improve the sound quality, as will the use of a pop filter, which offers protection for the microphone from fast-moving air like wind or aspirated human speech. The type of microphone purchased depends on the use case.

Many podcasts with more than one host or with guests are recorded over the internet via Skype or Google Hangouts, while others are recorded face-to-face. Audio can also be captured via traditional phone calls.

Quickly, producers of burgeoning podcasts will learn that they would do well to add or upgrade other hardware and software. Editing software allows the producer to improve sound quality and add in additional music tracks or other audio. Many free options are available, with one of the most popular being Audacity, an open-source solution that works on all major desktop operating systems, including Linux. Apple's GarageBand comes bundled free with all Macintosh computers running macOS; an iOS version with fewer features is also a free option for users of Apple mobile devices.

For the *Circulating Ideas* podcast, I have a Blue Yeti microphone that plugs into my iMac via USB-A and has a pop filter, and I edit the audio using Apple's professional editing software Logic. I use the Forecast app to convert my file to MP3 and to add chapters and episode-specific art. Most episodes are recorded over Skype with eCamm's Call Recorder app; when recording a phone call, I use Audio Hijack from Rogue Amoeba. For the best audio, I will sometimes ask my guests to record their end of the conversation on their computer and send me the file, and then I combine that with my track to recreate the conversation. In person, I record either on my iPad with the Ferrite Recording Studio or Twisted Wave app, or with a handheld digital recorder called a Zoom h4n, which records onto a standard SD card that is easily transferable to my iMac.

Audience

If a podcast is recorded and no one listens, does it make a sound?

The next step to gaining an audience for your podcast, even if it is restricted, is to find it a home on the internet. Producers who run their own servers may choose to upload their file there, or they may pick from a wide array of hosting platforms, many of which cater directly to the podcast market. These specialized hosts facilitate the generation of RSS feeds and provide valuable statistics, such as how many downloads episodes get and the geographic location of those downloads; these statistics may be a valuable asset if a library is asked for quantifiable data to justify its podcasting efforts.

My host of choice is the Internet Archive, which has the benefits of being free and robust enough to feel secure in its long-term vitality. Other popular hosting options are Libsyn, Podbean, and SoundCloud. Since the Internet Archive does not generate an RSS feed for my content, I turn to Google's FeedBurner, which picks up new posts on my WordPress site and pushes them to the feed for consumers to download on their devices, in their apps of choice.

Podcasts, for all their positives, also have some drawbacks that must be addressed, the main one being accessibility.[6] For many of those with hearing impairments, a podcast is not going to be an option, though many podcasts, including my own, offer text transcripts to open up the content of the shows to those with hearing impairments or those who do not learn well from audio. Transcripts on the web also increase discoverability because search engines cannot crawl an audio file (yet!) and rely on text to properly index pages. Blind and low-vision patrons may also encounter roadblocks, but podcasters can help alleviate them by following accessibility standards; also, smart speakers with voice assistants like Amazon's Echo devices or Apple's Home-Pod can be another solution for these patrons.

Another accessibility hurdle—that podcasts require an internet connection—can be a barrier to those across the digital divide who do not have internet-enabled devices or lack the knowledge of how to find and listen to podcasts. Libraries assist with this by offering patrons free Wi-Fi access.

Content

A podcast needs a purpose, or no one will want to listen. For librarians, there are many options, as mentioned earlier, but they all share the idea of sharing knowledge and learning, and podcasting can be an invaluable formal or informal instructional tool. Formally, podcasts can distribute homework assignments or guide the learner through a difficult piece of work, providing audio annotations to a text or work of art. They can function in the role of course reserves and offer a wider range of options, such as playing music clips or important speeches. Podcasts could also be used to assist patrons in using library resources or finding out about upcoming events or programs of interest. Informally, podcasts can be used more as I do, to facilitate casual, professional conversations about a wide range of topics, or provide water cooler discussion fodder.

I started my podcast because I was inspired by the work of other librarians and wanted as many people as possible to know about that work, to break the stereotypes of the profession and let the world know about the real work being done in libraries in the modern age. In my wildest dreams, the show would reach beyond libraryland and would change civilian attitudes about how libraries had changed since their childhood. As it is, the show's audience is primarily people working in libraries, but that provides the profession with that same inspiration that drove me to start the show in the first place. Having role models can be a powerful motivator and can generate creative new ideas in your own work.

In the course of my regular professional reading, I keep notes on names of librarians whose writing appeals to me. This reading includes not only publications such as *Library Journal, American Libraries,* and *Publishers Weekly,* but also social media; I am a member of a small number of library groups on Facebook, and most of my Twitter follows are of other librarians or others who might influence the profession. *Library Journal*'s annual Movers and Shakers list is a prime source for adding new voices to my potential guest list. I also peruse the catalogs of ALA Publishing, ABC-CLIO's Libraries Unlimited, and other library-centric publishers for trends that they are covering with books and reports.

I take a conversational tone with guests to make them feel more comfortable and to make listening a more pleasant, entertaining experience. The librarians and library-adjacent guests on my podcast inform the listeners about topics ranging from setting up a makerspace to planning an engaging story time for children with developmental disabilities, from driving civilians to the polls to support their local library to fighting fake news. When planning a podcast, remember your audience. Think about who you are speaking to, the tone you might like to use, and ways to draw in an audience.

Conclusion

In one final key way, libraries and podcasts intersect by fostering community. The patrons of a library and the listeners of a podcast come together to share their love of learning and the joys of discovery. Just as a library does outreach to its community, including through its curated collections, there is a connection between podcast producers and their audience and interweaving connections among the audience itself. Often, these communities don't meet in the same physical space, as is the wont of the twenty-first-century citizen, but come together in an intellectual sense to share in a collective knowledge, and occasionally meet in the physical world at library programs or live podcast recordings.

As librarians are scattered throughout the country and around the world, podcasts can bring them together to learn and grow in common.

Circulating Ideas Resources: The Tech That Makes This Particular Podcast Happen

- *Circulating Ideas*, https://circulatingideas.com
- Blue: Yeti Microphones, https://www.bluedesigns.com
- Logic Pro X, https://www.apple.com/logic-pro
- Forecast, https://overcast.fm/forecast
- Ecamm Call Recorder, https://www.ecamm.com/mac/callrecorder
- Audio Hijack, https://rogueamoeba.com/audiohijack
- Ferrite Recording Studio, https://www.wooji-juice.com/products/ferrite
- TwistedWave, https://twistedwave.com
- Zoom H4n, https://www.zoom.co.jp/products/handy-recorder/h4nsp-handy-recorder

Recommended Library-Themed Podcasts

- *T Is for Training*, https://tisfortraining.wordpress.com
- Library of Congress Podcasts, https://www.loc.gov/podcasts
- *Big Book Club*, http://bigbookclub.libsyn.com
- *Professional Book Nerds*, https://professionalbooknerds.com
- *Library Love Fest*, https://www.librarylovefest.com
- *Worst Bestsellers*, http://www.frowl.org/worstbestsellers
- *Children's Book Podcast*, http://www.matthewcwinner.com/podcast
- *Book Club for Masochists*, https://bookclub4m.libsyn.com
- *Beyond the Stacks*, http://beyondthestacks.info
- *Cyberpunk Librarian*, https://cyberpunklibrarian.com
- *The Library Pros*, https://www.thelibrarypros.com
- *Dewey Decibel*, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/tag/dewey-decibel
- Public Library Association: *FYI* Podcast, http://publiclibrariesonline.org/tag/fyi-podcast

Notes

1. L. Gordon-Murnane, "Saying 'I Do' to Podcasting: Another 'Next Big Thing' for Librarians?" *Searcher: The Magazine for Database Professionals* 13, no. 6 (June 1, 2005): 44–51.
2. Steve Thomas, "Hearing Voices: Librarian-Produced Podcasts," *American Libraries Magazine*, January 4, 2016, http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2016/01/04/hearing-voices-librarian-produced-podcasts.
3. Brendan Dowling, "Engaging Patrons with Library Podcasts," *Public Libraries Magazine*, July/August 2017, http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2017/10/engaging-patrons-with-library-podcasts.
4. Gordon-Murnane, "Saying 'I Do' to Podcasting."
5. Rachel Evans, "Tech, Tips, and Ideas for Podcasting with or without a Studio," *Computers in Libraries* 38, no. 6 (July/August 2018): 4–7.
6. Nicole Hennig, "Podcast Literacy: Educational, Accessible, and Diverse Podcasts for Library Users," *Library Technology Reports* 53, no. 2 (February/March 2017).

Digital Media and Library Instruction   **Heather Moorefield-Lang, editor**