

What's Behind the Great Podcast Renaissance?

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By Kevin Roose



This man is probably listening to "Radiolab." *Photo: Roberto Westbrook/Blend Images/Corbis*

In 2001, Steve Jobs announced the original iPod, a music player that would make it possible for people to carry their entire album collections in their pockets. Over the next few years, a genre of narrative audio that took the device's name — "podcasting" — became a thriving mini-industry. There were podcasts about politics, sports, literature, comedy. There were podcasts that sounded like NPR, and ones that sounded like Rush Limbaugh. Many lacked polish, but most had a kind of energy to them that suited their audiences well.

And then, sometime around 2009 or 2010, the podcast scene seemed to wither. The stalwarts ("This American Life," "Radiolab") stayed around at the top of the iTunes charts, but there wasn't much else happening. Download numbers fell. Interest waned. People moved on to online video and streaming music services as a way to pass the time.

Today, a very different problem exists: There are *too* many great podcasts to keep up with. There's "Serial," the true-crime drama hosted by "This American Life" producer Sarah Koenig. There's "99% Invisible," a design-themed podcast hosted by Roman Mars that has run several mega-successful Kickstarter campaigns. There's "StartUp," another product of the public-radio diaspora, which tells the episodic story of NPR veteran Alex Blumberg's attempt to create a podcasting business. Then there are the celebrities: Ice T, Snooki from *Jersey Shore*, Stone Cold Steve Austin — podcasters all. According to [Edison Research](#), 39 million people listened to a podcast in the last month, the highest number on record.

What's happening? And why now? The word *podcast* is roughly ten years old, after all, and the "pod" to which it refers has been [discontinued](#). Still, the genre seems more alive than ever. I spoke to the people behind several popular shows, and they agreed: We're in a golden age of podcasting.

“What’s weird about this moment right now is that, broadly, you’ve got this huge audience of radio listeners,” Blumberg, the host of the “StartUp” podcast, told me. “Now that audio has moved to on-demand,” he added, “people are really jumping in.”

“We’re seeing more people getting in the game of podcasting,” said Emily Condon, the production manager of “Serial.” “As people become more and more used to consuming media in transit, while they’re cooking, in various parts of their lives, it’s caught on.”

“It’s spreading like wildfire,” added John Lee Dumas, the host of “Entrepreneur on Fire,” a popular business podcast now on its 738th episode.

“When you have Ira Glass [going on *The Tonight Show*](#) to talk about podcasting, something is a little different,” said Roman Mars.

There are a few possible reasons for the resurgence. The first is that today’s podcasts are simply better. Most podcasts used to be pretty amateurish — two people talking about sports for an hour, say, or a businessman ad libbing MBA lessons. And some still are. But today’s top podcasts — and I’ll refer you to [The Atlantic’s list](#) of some of the best — are full-scale productions with real staff, budget, and industry expertise behind them.

Another reason that podcasts may be growing is that the [economics](#) are compelling. Producing an average podcast costs far less than producing a TV show or a radio show (all you really need is a microphone or two, a copy of Audacity or some other editing software, and a cheap hosting service for the audio files themselves). And the advertising rates on a successful podcast are big enough to pay for the costs many times over. Several top podcasters told me that their CPM (the cost to an advertiser per thousand impressions, a standard ad-industry unit) was between \$20 and \$45. Compare that to a typical radio CPM (roughly \$1 to \$18) or network TV (\$5 to \$20) or even a regular old web ad (\$1 to \$20), and the podcast wins. Podcasts can charge higher ad rates because of the personal nature of the single-host format — as an advertiser, it’s far better to have “Serial”’s Sarah Koenig reading your copy out loud than to burst in with a prepackaged ad that nobody will pay attention to.

But as I talked to podcasters, they told me that the biggest reason for the podcast renaissance has nothing to do with the podcasts themselves, or the advertisers funding them.

It’s actually about cars.

The secret to radio’s success has always been the drive-time commuter. An estimated [44 percent](#) of all radio listening takes place in the car, and that’s the way the radio industry likes it. Car-based listeners are captive, they tune in for long stretches at a time, and they’re valuable to advertisers. And drivers’ dedication to the AM/FM spectrum has made radio a remarkably stable medium — even in 2013, according to the Pew Research Center and Nielsen Audio, 91 percent of Americans over age 12 listened to the radio on a weekly basis.

Now, though, cars are going online. Both Google and Apple have rolled out connected-car platforms (Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, respectively), and most new cars sold in the U.S. these days come with the ability to play smartphone audio over the car’s speakers, either through Bluetooth connectivity or through a USB or auxiliary plug. One industry group, GMSA, [estimates](#) that 50 percent of all cars sold in 2015 will be internet-connected, and 100 percent by 2025.

Connected cars are a boon for the entire streaming audio industry, but they’re especially exciting for

podcast makers, whose shows are perfectly suited to in-car listening. Just as TV watchers can now choose Netflix or Amazon streams over surfing channels, radio listeners will soon have a bevy of on-demand options at their disposal.

Podcasts have also gotten help from software makers. Apple, whose iTunes provided the launching pad for most early podcasts, gave podcasts their own, non-deletable app on the latest version of its mobile operating system. And several slick third-party apps — Stitcher, Overcast, and Castro among them — have popped up with more robust functionality.

“With iTunes it was always a matter of plugging in your phone and syncing it,” Mars said. “There’s still probably a couple steps too many for it to really be widespread, like TiVo. But I think it’s improved.”

Combined with the macro trends of on-demand audio and connected cars, these tools have made it possible for people like Roman Mars and Alex Blumberg (whose podcasting start-up has raised more than \$1 million to date) to make a living doing podcasts. And the advertisers who aren’t paying attention to long-form audio storytelling might soon be convinced to give the genre another look.

“Radio has been saved the disruption that has happened to other media. It’s been frozen in time for 50 years,” Blumberg said. “Now that everyone is walking around with a radio in their pocket at all times, and now that all cars are going to be connected, the form can flourish again.”