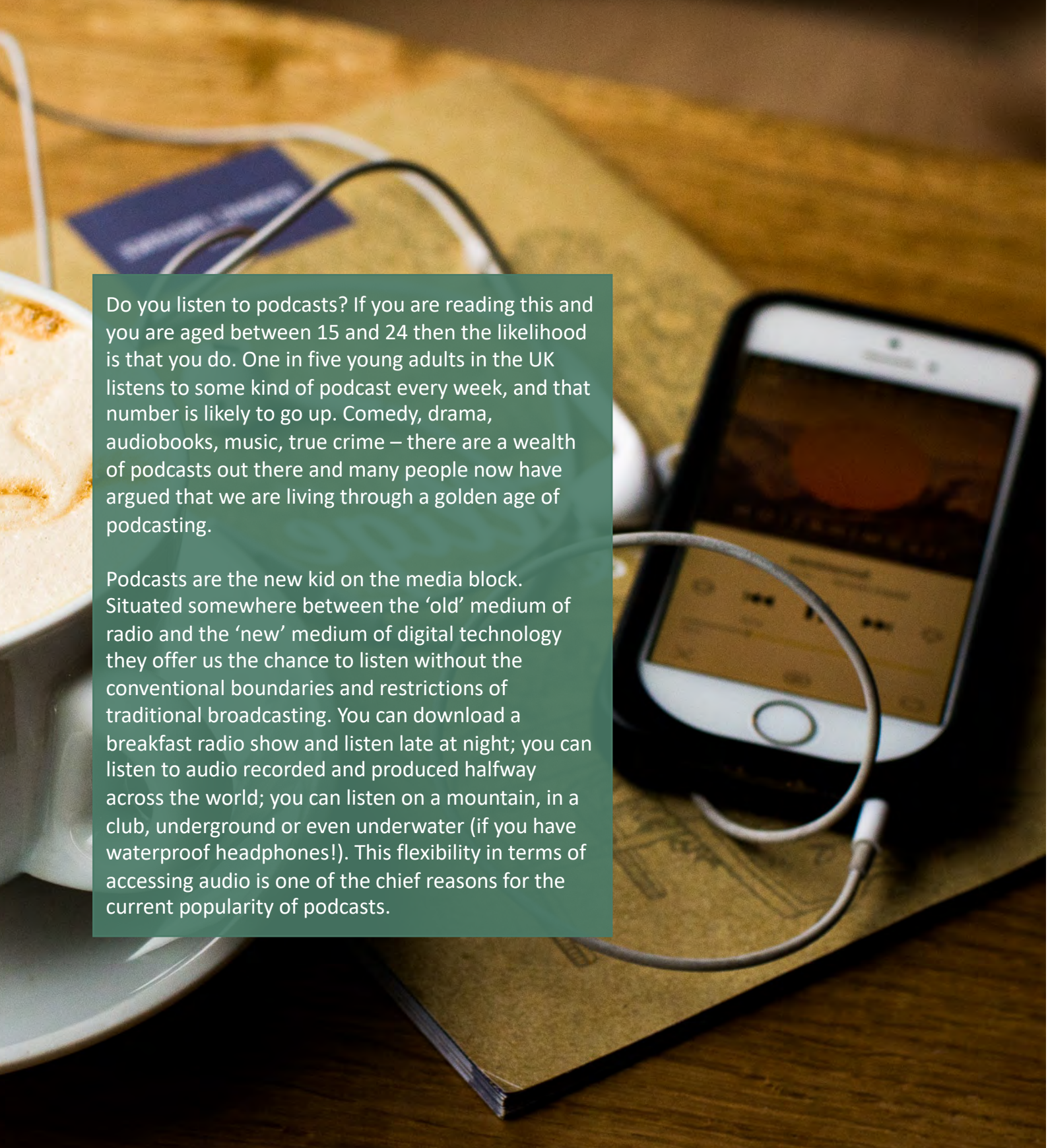


PEAS IN A PODCAST

Radio and the rise of the podcast



Do you listen to podcasts? If you are reading this and you are aged between 15 and 24 then the likelihood is that you do. One in five young adults in the UK listens to some kind of podcast every week, and that number is likely to go up. Comedy, drama, audiobooks, music, true crime – there are a wealth of podcasts out there and many people now have argued that we are living through a golden age of podcasting.

Podcasts are the new kid on the media block. Situated somewhere between the 'old' medium of radio and the 'new' medium of digital technology they offer us the chance to listen without the conventional boundaries and restrictions of traditional broadcasting. You can download a breakfast radio show and listen late at night; you can listen to audio recorded and produced halfway across the world; you can listen on a mountain, in a club, underground or even underwater (if you have waterproof headphones!). This flexibility in terms of accessing audio is one of the chief reasons for the current popularity of podcasts.

KEY IDEAS

One of the first Radio Studies scholars to notice the significance of podcasting was Richard Berry who questioned whether the iPod would 'kill' the 'Radio Star' (2006). Berry spotted the changing ways in which listeners interacted with the iPod (then a largely music delivery device) in comparison to the radio. He argued that, at a stroke, the very nature of audio broadcasting could be altered through podcast technology allowing for a new kind of 'portability', 'intimacy' and 'accessibility.'

Berry also realised that this would mean a change in terms of *who* could actually make radio and audio. Up until the early 2000s when podcasting emerged, independent audio producers had to approach big media giants like the BBC to have their programmes aired. Podcasting changed this radically. You no longer needed a slot on a radio network to broadcast your show. You could put it on iTunes or another podcast platform and, immediately, your audio was there for

anyone to listen to. This produced what Spinelli and Dann (2019) have called a new 'egalitarian mode' of production, 'freed from gatekeepers' such as the BBC. One of the breakthrough podcast series to use this premise was *Serial* (2014) in which American reporter Sarah Koenig told just *one* story – about the murder of a teenager – over 12 episodes and in more than 11 hours of audio. Each episode was a different length and would drop at a slightly different time weekly. Listeners would refresh their iTunes eagerly awaiting the latest episode. To date, more than 175 million listeners worldwide have downloaded Season One of *Serial*.

Much of the debate about podcasting now centres on its relationship to radio – is it, in fact, radio for the 21st century? Or is it something completely different? Perhaps, to use Spinelli and Dann's description, it is a 'liminal' medium suspended somewhere between old and new technology. But, as they also warn, podcasting is also now a lucrative market and everybody wants a piece of the action. This includes 'behemoths' like the BBC with their new podcast-friendly Sounds app. The question now is whether podcasting will be able to hold on to its 'outsider sensibility' or if it will become mainstream like radio did in the last century. Perhaps that's a question you can consider next time you tune in to your favourite podcast.

KEY READINGS

Berry, R. (2006). Will the iPod kill the Radio Star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio. *Convergence*, 12(2), pp.143-162 Available from: bit.ly/2HkMLXG.

Llinares, D. Fox, N. And Berry, R. (eds.) (2018). *Podcasting: New aural cultures and digital media*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Spinelli, M. And Lance, D. (2019). *Podcasting: The audio media revolution*. London: Bloomsbury.

Serial (2014). Podcast [online]. Available from: serialpodcast.org

ACTIVITIES

1. Listen to one episode/opening section of an episode of a podcast – what is effective about the podcast as a listen? Do you like particular sections of it? If so, why?
2. Now compare and contrast with a podcast episode from a different genre e.g. true crime, drama, comedy.
 - i. How does storytelling differ in these contrasting genres?
 - ii. What about the varying uses of sound, voice and music?
 - iii. What makes them good and what does not work so well?
3. Think up your own idea for a podcast – can you think of something fun, original and listenable?
 - i. Is it a relatable subject?
 - ii. Who is going to present it?
 - iii. Don't forget to factor in the potential audience – young/old/men/women/mainstream/specialist/urban/rural etc.!