Everyone's Talkin' At Me: Growing Your Own Podcast

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Welcome & Overview

Hello and welcome to a talk about podcasting, embedded fittingly enough, inside an episode of a podcast. I'm Dr Gareth J Johnson, Managing Editor in Chief of Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal. I'm also the creator and host of the Exchanges Discourse podcast, so thanks for joining me.

In this episode, I'm going to be talking about the podcast's genesis, reflecting on the production process experiences along with providing guidance about creating and using podcasts to engage with new audiences, to hopefully inspire and inform any would be podcasters listening.

Introduction

Podcasts are a format which while not particularly new have blossomed in popularity in recent years. Lockdown and remote working have especially caused people to seek out new forms of information, education and entertainment, so consequently potential listening audiences for them have grown. Notably, podcasts are easier to produce than video content, plus are readily consumable everywhere: at home, in the car, or even when you're out for a jog. There are too some suggestions how podcasts can be more engaging than other media because of the effective intimacy they offer audiences through intently listening to voices.

Now, the Exchanges journal was created in 2013 to promote an 'interdisciplinary discourse', between early career researchers. Since I took it over three years ago, I had always thought a spoken word accompaniment would permit a more authentic and appealing discursive element with which to complement our journal, and additionally increasing the title's visibility.

Hence when lockdown reduced my direct interaction with potential authors, I began rethinking ways the title could re-engage with our community. Having been podcasting personally for many years it was a communication medium with which I was already heartily familiar. So, introducing a companion podcast seemed an ideal route forward.

Creating Exchanges' Discourse

Our earliest episodes using a single voice were always intended as testbed to explore the format and production requirements, while providing a foundation from which to build towards my desired configuration: discussions with guest speakers. Initially I also wanted to gauge the institutional reactions, although, my departmental ethos is one where experimentation is encouraged, and failure merely a learning experience. Reactions were though pleasingly positive.

Each episode is bookended by an introduction and conclusion, which provide key branding and contact details, and are sandwiched around the core episode content. This ensures any new listeners understand who we are and the podcast's context too. Today our main content is mostly guest speakers talking about their research and publication experiences, although a few episodes are solely myself discussing aspects of editorial concern. Normally, a single guest is hosted per episode, although more have sometimes featured, notably increasing the episode's run time to give everyone a fair chance to speak. A second speaker benefits listeners' attentions by varying tone and pace, along with increasing the topics covered.

We have slowly evolved to a roughly 15-minute standard runtime, largely because the episodes are intended to be bite-sized, although we have run longer at times. This then is essentially the format we have used the last two years.

Scripted vs Improvised

In creating our content, there were three outline approaches we could have taken: unscripted, semi-scripted and fully-scripted.

If you work with energised, inspirational speakers a completely unscripted approach can produce exciting and dynamic content. However, it may require more post-production editing, with coherency relying on a combination of good improvisational speakers and an excellent host to steer each episode.

Alternatively, being fully scripted means you can directly define and shape each episode's contents, and is an excellent way to utilise asynchronously recorded contributions edited together to form your podcasts. It does require the most preparation and editing time though, and while it can be the most on brand approach risks reducing the degree of spontaneity which often contribute a podcast's most engaging elements.

For the Exchanges Discourse I adopted a semi-scripted approach, as offering the best of all options. The host's opening and closing contributions are scripted, while topics for discussion are predefined and shared with the guest ahead of recording, but are only used as a guide. Serendipitous diversions can still be embraced, but the overall shape of the episode is predefined, making editing each episode together easier. In this way, some spontaneity is retained, while guests can speak knowledgeably, delivering a more polished performance.

Technical Challenges

The technical entry barriers to podcast creation are small. A smart phone or laptop have good enough microphones to record dialogue, although a dedicated handheld recorder or desktop mic will offer greater audio fidelity. In terms of software I use Zoom or Teams to record conversations. Audacity is then utilized to record the intro and outro of each episode, to filter out background noise and normalize sound levels in recorded content. Finally, the audio is edited, removing unwanted pauses, muttering, and misspeaking in PowerDirector. You can use Audacity for this last stage, but experience has shown using a video editing tool is a more time-effective approach.

I adopted this mediated post-production approach, as I find a more professional sounding final episode both enhanced listeners' engagement and raised favourable perceptions of the podcast. Editing each episode together takes around four times the length of the recorded audio. While I cut for timing and sometimes my own waffling, I aim to retain as much of any guest's performance as possible

Notably, providing episode transcripts can be a bonus in terms of content accessibility. Using Word365's transcription function is a relatively efficient way to achieve this, although there is usually a bit of hands-on textural clean-up required. I'm increasingly considering making it standard practice as it helps content reach broader audiences than speech alone.

Hosting & Attention

Distributing our finished podcast is also relatively easy. We host the Exchanges Discourse on the Anchor FM platform, because it's free, simple to use and because it is owned by Spotify cascades every episode to multiple platforms. This helps us reach more people than only those visiting our social media stream and website, where we also do highlight each new episode.

A consequence of lockdown has been every celebrity or would-be influencer seems to have launched a podcast, so it is a crowded environment, meaning you should expect to be cross-promoting your podcast, alongside any other outputs. While episode quantity and production regularity can be an ambitious way to build a following, it can be a challenging schedule to maintain. Alternatively, original or quirky content may stand a better chance of standing out and gaining a following. Certainly, possessing a strong core concept alongside a clear conceptualisation of your target audience will be a crucial consideration while you are establishing yourselves.

There is no ideal length of podcast episode, as listeners' attention spans vary hugely, but as with any kind of media you are reliant on retaining your audience's attention. For the Exchanges Discourse, my aim was to produce something to be consumed over a cup of coffee. Longer podcasts exist, and many work well. Which is why some audience research will help in guiding you on listeners' ideal duration, although you may need to develop a different length as your podcast format and content matures.

Concluding Thoughts

To date there are over 20 Exchanges Discourse episodes, with more speakers and guests lined up. While our initial format has served us well, for the third season, I'm looking to revise and refresh our format and structure based on experience.

I believe though that we have achieved our initial goals for the Exchanges Discourse podcast in creating something which compliments our journal. Potential guests now even approach me to appear and people are clearly discussing episodes online too. Undoubtably, we are reaching new audiences than the journal alone, and while more listeners would be great, the podcast remains a secondary element of my role for now. _But_ it remains an aspect I greatly enjoy creating, and something exciting which has grown within the headspace provided by remote working.

Contact & Questions

For now, I've been Dr Gareth J Johnson, your host for this Exchanges Discourse podcast. You can find us on Anchor.fm, Apple Podcasts and Spotify, or to get in touch about our work, you can reach me at ExchangesJournal@warwick.ac.uk or via http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk.