

Jeremy Wade Morris is the author of the book “Podcasting.” This 2024 book is part of the ongoing Digital Media and Society series from Polity publishing. He was interviewed by the Library of Congress on July 5, 2024.



Library of Congress: My first question is: what inspired you to write this book?

Jeremy Wade Morris: I've been following podcasting since probably 2005 or 2006, since I used to run a podcast myself. When I was doing my PhD, it was what I did in any downtime that I had, and then I started writing about podcasting with my supervisor. He wanted to do some research in the area so, with some other PhD students, we wrote an article together in 2008. So, it's always been an interest of mine in terms of research avenues.

I also worked on an edited collection with my colleague Eric Hoyt in 2021 about preserving podcasts, and after having done that ...I just started seeing a lot of the work in podcasting studies grow over the last number of years....

[Then], I was approached by a publisher who wanted a book that was a macro-level overview about what has happened in podcasting in the last 20 years. So that was the impetus. It was a research interest of mine and then, also, a request from a publisher to fill this gap that they felt was out there in the market.

LC: What was your podcast on?

JWM: It was about bands that were coming to Montreal. It was an audio guide for what live music shows to go and see in the city.

LC: When it came to writing the book, were you apprehensive to take on this subject? I mean that's a pretty good deal to be approached by a publisher, but did you know how you were going to tell this story?

JWM: No, I didn't know how I was going to tell this story and that was the thing that I was most apprehensive about! I really respect the book series that it's in. It's in Polity's Digital Media and Society series. It contains a lot of books that I've used in my classes so I knew the kind of thing that they were looking for, and it's a very different form of writing than just, "Here's your own research idea." It's like: how do you give a really big overview of all the things that scholars have written about podcasting, and still have a bit of an argument of your own in there? So it was a very different kind of writing challenge than what I'd had with my first book, but I was excited in that I guess it's always a shock to me that podcasting is still as new *and* as old as it is. It's now 20 plus years old so I can't really believe that because I still think of it as a new thing, but it has both these new and old elements to it which I really like.

LC: Can we put a birth date to podcasting?

JWM: The press does; there's a date when the term was coined which is around 2004. That's often one of the birth dates. One of my colleagues Andrew Bottomley, who used to be a graduate student when I started teaching at UW-Madison, now has a book "Sound Streams" where he talks about these early audio blogs and early internet radio shows, many of which could be defined as podcasts, happening earlier than 2004. So I think there's always contention about when podcasting starts; are we asking when the term first comes up? Or the actual first audio file was sent out via RSS? So I think there's always contention about when podcasting starts, and it's sort of like, "When did the term come up?" Or when was the actual first audio file sent out? So there's all these dates between, I'd say, the late '90s and the early 2000s that you have as "the birth of the podcast."

LC: Were you an early adopter of, to, the podcast? Were you listening to podcasts fairly early, or what was the first one you listened to?

JWM: I can't remember the very first one I listened to but I got into listening to them around the same time I started making them. I was writing for a blog at the time in 2005, and so probably 2004, 2005 is when I started listening to them but that's also when I started making them. I think we started the "Midnight Poutine Podcast" [in Montreal] in 2006, so all of that happens right around that same two-year time span for me. I think I remember listening to music-focused podcasts and a few chat/comedy ones at that time. I'm sure I listened to a tech one as well because I was interested in technology at the time, so I can't really pinpoint what was the first podcast that I listened to.

LC: What do you think is the one podcast that sort of made the genre? I always think it was "Serial" and the all the true crime ones put podcasts on the map. Or is that a simplistic view?

JWM: No, I don't think it's a simplistic view. As I talk about in the book, podcasting has many moments that feel like that's when people started getting on board and so that moment in 2014 with "Serial" coming out is huge. That's certainly when podcasting goes in the US and when it gets a lot of attention. And I think a lot of people were like, "Oh, I see the power of this form and this format." There were obviously a lot of big podcasts before "Serial" came out. If you're talking 2004 that's ten years of podcasting before we get to "Serial," so I think there's a lot of

good shows that came out during that time. Though they're not the same--they don't necessarily have exactly the same thing going on that “Serial” does--but there are these different moments and, depending on what your own kind of podcast style is.... I think there's people who are like, “Ooh, I remember hearing that in 2008, and that really got me excited about podcasts.” Or “I remember ‘Serial’ in 2014, and that got me really excited.”

LC: What were some of the other pre-“Serial” podcasts that we should know of?

JWM: Off the top of my head?! So, in the book, I talk about Adam Curry's podcast, which is often regularly referenced as an early podcast [and] “The Dawn and Drew Show” is another one that I talk about. It's made in Wisconsin, they are a couple that talked about their life, their relationship. There was often a lot of swearing, frank talk about sex, so it shows you some of the ways I think people thought, “Oh, I can say this stuff in a podcast and not on the radio!” Then, later in the 2000s, you get more of the move to public radio into and then you get a different kind of production quality that comes as a result.

LC: Do you have a podcast now?

JWM: No, I teach podcasting and I did a podcast for an online class during COVID where I kind of turned my lecture into a podcast format, but that's basically been the extent of it. Most of my production time goes towards designing labs and teaching students.

LC: Then you and I must be the only two people in the world that don't have a podcast or so it seems. Will we eventually reach a saturation point?

JWM: It's a good question. I think you're seeing some of that now, although I guess it depends on what you mean by “saturation.” I start the book with a funny anecdote about an article in “The Onion” that was like, “No podcasters can find guests to be on their podcast because everybody's just so busy making their own.”

So, yeah, there is certainly this feeling that we've hit peak podcast. There are certainly a lot of them. There are at least a couple of million podcasts couple hundred million podcasts if you're looking in the databases. Now, how many of those are regularly maintained? How many of those are uploading each week? The numbers vary on that. I think we're in a moment we saw with blogs where it was, at first, an interesting technology. And a lot of people could do it and a lot of people did, and then I think you see it sort of decline a little bit in terms of the number of people participating as the form gets more formalized and institutionalized. [But] the people who are in this to try to make money, and who want to create a business around it, they're going to keep doing [it]. And like blogging, everyday users will continue to find it a powerful mode of expression.

LC: Are there any podcast cliches that you're tired of?

JWM: That's a hard one; that's a great question. I guess it sort of depends on the format or the genre that you're interested in. Neil Verma, for example, talks a lot about true crime, kind of narratives that happens there. Where it's almost become less about what the actual crime is but

about the reporters' interaction and relationship with the case, and the journey that they're going on. Because a lot of these true crimes never get solved, but you still want to feel like you've arrived at an ending by the conclusion of the podcast. Like with "Serial," you still feel like you've got somewhere because of Sarah Koenig's relationship with the case. So, that, to me, is sort of a cliché that now you see repeated.

You can see a lot of people trying to do the things that Ira Glass does because of the way Ira Glass tells stories. Or trying to imitate some of the technical wizardry that goes into the production of a show like RadioLab. I don't know if I'd call them clichés necessarily, but you certainly see aesthetics that then get applied to other podcasts, I guess more actual clichés might be like the "Rate and Review" the podcast or the podcast requests that people make at the end of the show, "Hey, go make sure you go subscribe, go make sure you—" and some of those are funny to me because it's unclear how much those actually help, but I think podcasters are sort of trained to think, "Oh, this makes a difference, so I need to tell my audience to go and do this."

LC: What surprised you the most in writing the book?

JWM: Again, I think maybe that goes back to what I was saying at the start, about just how far podcasting has come in 20 years but how it still feels like it's this new media that's always on the verge of blowing up to bigger audiences. I think I was a little shocked; it's been 20 years since that term was coined. To me, that feels like a good chunk of time but, at least in my life, it doesn't feel like it was that long ago. That surprised me.

Also, the changes that the industry is going through are surprising, like the ways that platforms like Spotify, platforms like Amazon, is trying to move into the podcasting game and trying to mesh podcasts with other audio content and what that means for podcasts as a distinct format moving forward. Those are the questions that the book explores and that I'm most excited about, curious about, and scared about, all at the same time.

LC: Does podcasting face a type of discrimination? I know that that's a strong word but is it being treated as legitimate a medium as it should be?

JWM: By whom?

LC: Just the culture itself and by established media, like let's say terrestrial radio and whatnot.

JWM: No, I think certainly for established media, podcasting is now enough of a norm that it is part of a wider media strategy for people, so you see HBO shows that now come out that also have an accompanying podcast, so I don't necessarily feel like, industrially, it's not trusted. Maybe it is [discriminated against] by the advertisers. I think there's always some skepticism of how much return on investment advertising in podcasting gets. But [podcasts] are definitely now part of the media industries in that way. I still think there may be a public perception that podcasts are kind of like blogs....

It's just like anyone can say whatever they want and therefore how can we trust these things? But

I also feel enough people have... I think the stats now are something like over 50% or 54% of the US population has listened to at least one podcast in the last month or something like that, so I'm pretty sure that a good chunk of the audience has at least found some podcast that they find entertaining, useful, and that they get some value out of. [Today,] podcasting is seen as a little less like two random people in their basement making something like a "Wayne's World" version of audio....

Though I think there's definitely still some skepticism around it, but it's enough of a commonplace format that people are hearing. I also think about, like my parents, they keep saying they don't necessarily know what a podcast is, and yet they listen to podcasts, they just get them through other forms. It's just not the way you used to have to get podcasts by going and subscribing to a feed and all that stuff.

LC: Are there any upcoming trends, large ones, that are happening in the podcasting industry?

JWM: Yeah, the biggest ones right now to keep an eye on are the platformization of podcasts—which is what I call it--so like when a company like Spotify that was initially a music company gets into the business of podcasting and starts making that a part of its service offerings, starts adding all these tools for podcasters, starts becoming one of the default places that now people are going to get podcasts As platforms grow in importance, what happens to the format of podcasts as we knew them? So that's just one example.

Just quickly: Spotify doesn't really rely on RSS feeds in the same way as previous podcast platforms used to. You used to have to get an RSS feed and then subscribe to it and some people found that a very complicated process, so Spotify has almost removed that entirely and you just stream the thing like you do with your music, and I think that's a bit of a different relationship that is created between the podcast listener and the podcaster.

Spotify has a bunch of those changes going on, so that's one trend Another trend is video, I'd say. Obviously YouTube is now becoming one of the key platforms for podcasts and therefore there's usually some video component to it: like you could imagine if we were doing a podcast of this interview, they'd have a screen showing a video for it. But other people would have just a thumbnail image or something, but Spotify's also been encouraging the use of video podcasts because that's easier to monetize, and they're encouraging through their production tools, so video is another trend to watch.

Then, I'm doing some other work on artificial intelligence in the media industry, so I'm watching who's starting to use AI in podcasts and in what ways.

LC: Since I'm with the Library of Congress, I have to ask, is anybody preserving these podcasts besides what the Library is starting to do and maybe the originators of the podcasts themselves, if that?

JWM: Great question and I may have a way too long answer for you, and then I might have questions for you about what the Library of Congress is doing right now!

But let me try a short answer: so there is not a centralized platform that is dedicated to the preservation of podcasts. I've been working on a project myself since 2014, 2015, so I have a database called podcastRE.org, that is basically a searchable/researchable database for podcasts, and we have something close to 4 million podcast episodes preserved there. It is hit and miss and is dependent on grant funding... I'm always dependent on hiring somebody to help me maintain it, and deal with the vast amount of shows that are out there.

There's another initiative that people that I've worked with before are working on called Preserve This Podcast, which is a more podcaster-focused effort and they teach podcasters how to save their own stuff, because I think, like you mentioned, a lot of times podcasters themselves don't even save it.

LC: I was afraid of that.

JWM: Yeah, they make it, they just put it out there and they don't really necessarily think about preserving for the long term.

LC: It's like it was with early film, radio, TV--a lot was just chucked out.

JWM: Right, and even the podcast I did in 2005-- we had three hundred, four hundred episodes or something like that, and I have a bunch of them on a stack of burned CDs somewhere, but am I doing the proper work of making sure that I'm still going to be able to access those? I don't even have CD drives in my computers anymore, so bringing those up to date making them accessible in new forms....? I haven't necessarily done so and this is something that I'm interested in myself professionally. Otherwise, you have a whole bunch of other disparate activities where people have saved a whole bunch of metadata like The Podcast Index, so you can search a huge database of shows. There's also one that's almost like the IMDB for podcasts called Podchaser, so you have a bunch of efforts to save to save pieces of podcasting but you don't necessarily have a concerted institutional effort that isn't corporate. Otherwise, you have whatever Spotify's doing or whatever NPR is doing, and my conversations with some of the people involved with those is that sometimes it's not as much as you'd expect....

LC: Are you working on a new book?

JWM: Yes, I've been doing some research on the topic of AI in the media industries so that might be a potential avenue. I've also been working on a project about the history of apps. Even though I'm not necessarily a historian by trade, a lot of my research has been about investigating how a lot of the media technologies we have today emerged.