

Managing community through digital talk: Podcasting in the South Asian diaspora

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Abstract

Are podcasts “internet radio shows,” “talking blogs,” or a new medium? Utilizing insights from scholarship on Broadcast Talk and New Media Studies, this paper argues for a careful consideration of the (sometimes old, sometimes new) technologies and the discourses mobilized in the production and use of podcasts. Based on an overview of English-language South Asian diasporic podcasts, and an analysis of the South Asian Journalist Association’s web/podcast, this paper will first sketch the contours of an online community and address how the way it serves itself is shaped by technological affordances, community needs, and discourses about the South Asian diaspora and the potential of “new media.” It will then consider the specific talk strategies of one web/podcast to illustrate how the use of this new configuration of technologies and discourses allows for a viable, variously bounded special interest community to be repeatedly talked into being.

Keywords

podcasting; broadcast talk; community; diaspora

Podcasts have been significantly under-studied in comparison to other digital communication and media tools, such as blogs, games, and social networking sites. More than this, when they are studied they are frequently a part of the mainstream media studies discussion only as markers in larger narratives concerned with the possibilities and dangers of digital plenitude and the implications of the shifting of institutional resources to new media frontiers (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009; O’Baill, 2009). Such coverage often highlights political questions: Who has the power to speak and be heard in this situation, and in what ways (Tan 2011)? Most conspicuously, scholars ponder: can the internet be a stage or force for democracy and civic engagement (MacDougall, 2011; Jarrett, 2009)? These are important questions to study, but such analyses highlight, in the first place, political and ideological questions to the exclusion of others which are also crucial in understanding the role of media in the production and “reproduction of social life” (Montgomery, 1986, p. 424). In the case of podcasting, we must also study its communicative characteristics and real uses by ordinary people, the technological, material, and cultural conditions of the production of podcasts, and the lived experiences of producing, publishing, seeking, downloading, and listening. This paper seeks to begin this intervention by way of a case study of the South Asian diasporic podcast-verse generally, and the South Asian Journalist Association’s (SAJA’s) web/podcast¹ specifically.

The English-language South Asian diasporic podcast-verse is not only shaped by digital sound production, editing, and distribution technology, and access to it, but also by general trends in podcasting, existing and developing networks of social capital and engagement in the diasporic community, and general discourses about what are typical, desirable “South Asian” topics. Thus, the vast majority of podcasts in this diasporic genre are related to traditional and fusion music styles, from curated lists of Bollywood songs² to DJed radio-like sessions of Bhangra hits³ to educational programming about the finer points of listening to classical musical styles⁴. This first and largest

¹ <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/saja>.

² Soundcloud (<https://www.soundcloud.com>), for example, is a fruitful site for such curated sets.

³ <http://thedesinetworks.com/>.

⁴ <http://podcast.prasantmusic.com/>.

category of South Asian diasporic podcasts frequently overlaps with the other two major categories: institution-affiliated and interview programs. The former include programs associated with and promoting the goals of institutions and organizations such as the Smithsonian, the BBC, or SAJA. The latter include programs based around the popular interview podcast format, and involve people in the diaspora interested in or affiliated with South Asia interviewing others on South Asia-related topics⁵. The study of these trends in the South Asian diaspora highlights that the actual use of and investment in the tool of podcasting is as much a matter of general podcasting trends (e.g. the overwhelming number of music and interview shows) and technological affordances (e.g. the way in which podcasting lends itself to music dissemination) and technological history (e.g. podcasting's association with radio and radio's emphasis on music) as it is a matter of South Asian diasporic cultural developments (e.g. strong transnational music distribution networks that existed prior to the internet).

This paper also seeks to employ insights gained from the application of conversation analysis to broadcast talk toward the study of podcast talk. The tenets of conversation analysis direct us to notice and appreciate the manner in which everyday talk is organized, complex, and functional for a number of complicated uses (Grice, 1989; Sacks, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Austen, 1955). Applying this to radio and television talk, scholars have shown that the talk of hosts constantly does careful work to manage, from moment to moment, the situation of the show so that it may be properly participated in and enjoyed by audience members (Scannell, 1996; Montgomery, 1986; Heritage 1985; Brunt, 1990). This is especially true of radio broadcast talk, as the entire situation must be spoken into being. Scannell (2010) encourages us to consider, then, the way that the technologies we create to use for the production of media (i.e. the teleprompter) shape the communicative ethos of our programming (i.e. so that newscasters may look us in the eye and seem trustworthy). That, in turn, has implications for the situation created as part of the show in which we as listeners participate, and thus for our relationship with the show, with the host, and with each other.

The SAJA web/podcast is produced using the BlogTalkRadio platform, allowing multiple interviewees and even audience members to phone in and join the conversation that is both webcast as it is being recorded, and archived by various sites for later access. In its desire to serve different listener needs—identity (for South Asian heritage journalists), affiliation (for experts in the field), or simply interest (for those with no connection to anything South Asian)—the SAJA program uses the tools available to talk a viable yet messy community into being. It is a community with porous, and variable borders, welcoming all and managing discordant temporalities (e.g. time zones and delayed listening) and backgrounds, but providing a special site of exalted interaction for those who are professional journalists of South Asian heritage covering South Asian topics living in North America. Moreover, it is a community that does not necessarily exist until it is continuously talked into being. To manage its boundaries and make some listeners feel more included than others, program hosts unconsciously use several mechanisms: fluctuating pronoun interchangeability⁶ depending on who is being addressed to indicate similarity or difference; repeatedly returning to pro-visibility narratives of diasporic South Asians' community investment and success and the South Asian experience rather than the specified podcast topic; the need to talk other identity memberships into being (e.g. whiteness); and the conspicuous presence or absence of explanations of community-specific terms.

The questions of community inclusion and exclusion bring back to the fore issues of politics and power, but through an actual investigation of podcasting's communicative characteristics. Such an investigation also forces us to appreciate what producing and listening to this web/podcast might mean for people on a daily basis, as an everyday activity, urging us to reconsider the scholarly emphasis placed on overtly political civic engagement as the most desired outcome of media use. In the end, this extended investigation of the South Asian diasporic podcast-verse and the SAJA program thus brings

⁵ <http://kamlashow.com/podcast/>.

⁶ Pronoun interchangeability refers to the way speakers systematically switch between referring to others using pronouns that suggest similarity (you, we, us) or difference (they, it, one) in a manner that implies who is and is not part of an in-group (Brunt, 1990).

us one step closer to understanding what podcasting is: not exactly a new medium, but a new intentional and practical use of new and old technologies, social protocol (Gitelman, 2005, p. 5), and discourses to build and manage previously untenable forms of community.

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