

Independent Podcasting as a Specific Online Participative Subculture: a case study of Montreal's podcasters

Mélanie Millette

Université du Québec à Montréal.
Canada
millette.melanie@courrier.uqam.ca

Abstract

Based on a theoretical framework grounded in a sociological analysis of usage and the subculture paradigmatic approach of Cultural Studies, this paper analyzes the socio-cultural dynamic of online participation through the use of a technological device in a digitally literate community, namely independent podcasters. I argue that independent podcasting should not be understood as either a form of 'radio-to-go' or a simple online delivery system. Drawing on data collected in a three-year period of research within the Montreal (Canada) podcasting community, I propose that independent audio podcasting is a specific form of online participation, with its own subcultural logic and a unique 'style' that is completely different from the institutional and traditional radio model. To present the specificity of the podcasting subculture, this paper demonstrates how a podcast's distinctive style is formed, through a singular level of familiarity among users, the subversion of lexical radio conventions and the influence of DJing and blogging on podcasters' practices. This paper illustrates the stylistic repertoire of Montreal's independent podcasters based on an online practice on the fringe of the mainstream media production model, specifically with regard to commercial radio.

Keywords

podcasting; independent podcasting; usage; subculture.

Introduction

Podcasting is poorly represented in the field of Internet Studies. While there are plenty of studies on blogs, social networking sites and online video practices, audio podcasting remains largely neglected. Since the advent of this form of online contribution around 2004, only a few scattered studies have examined it. Some research depicts podcasting as a means of “broadcast on demand” that public and commercial radio stations should adopt to increase their audiences (OFCOM 2004; O’Neill 2006; Murray 2009). Other research dwells on the individualized nature of the broadcast (self-adapted broadcast) which makes it a type of “personalized media” (Berry 2006, p.156). While these scientific contributions explain some aspects of podcasting, they tend to focus on technical characteristics and broadcasting conditions, leaving aside the entire social and cultural experience of the podcaster. This is exactly what this paper will attempt to remedy. I argue that podcasting should not be understood as either a form of ‘radio-to-go’ or a simple online audio delivery system. Drawing on data collected in a three-year period (2006-2009) of research within the Montreal (Canada) podcasting community¹, I propose that independent audio podcasting is a specific form of online participation, with its own subcultural logic that is completely different from institutional and traditional radio production.

I will begin this paper with a brief review of the literature, which will allow me to provide a portrait of podcasting as seen by other researchers. I will reveal repetitions and tensions within these definitions to demonstrate the need to consider independent podcasting as a different practice from internet radio broadcasting. I will then present an exhaustive definition of “independent podcasting” based on my observations and as defined by the podcasters interviewed. Podcasting will be presented as a participatory usage that is at the heart of a web subculture that is closely related to the practices of DJing and blogging.

One original aspect of this study lies in the fact that podcasters and the meaning they attach to their practices are at the very heart of the research method. The methodology used to conduct this study was inspired by the grounded theory approach, and I took an observer/participant position in the community. As a participant, I created and actively updated

¹ I did this study for my master’s thesis (see Millette, 2009). A second segment of the study is currently underway. This segment is an enquiry conducted at UQAM’s LabCMO (cmo.uqam.ca) into the social forms of internet contribution. The project is directed by Professor Serge Proulx; Professor Lorna Heaton is conducting a case study on a botanical wiki (*TelaBotanica*), Mary Jane Kwok Choon is studying the use of *Facebook* by two NGOs in Mauritius, and I am doing a third case study on independent podcasters and the linkage between their individual and group contributions.

a personal blog which I referenced in my signature when I commented on podcasters' blogs. I also participated in podcaster activities, including PodCamps and informal meetings. I assiduously listened to multiple podcasts and left comments on podcasters' blogs and Facebook profiles. As an observer, I conducted two rounds of interviews with 15 podcasters: the first round was exploratory, while the second was semi-directed. To complement this methodological design, I meticulously analyzed three podcasters' audio material, which means that I undertook an audio analysis of their three last audio podcasts and an in-depth website examination.

From Radio-to-go to Broadcasting: What is Podcasting?

As I mentioned earlier, there is little literature on podcasting, and in what little exists podcasting is understood primarily as an "innovative means of broadcasting" that combines mobility, content available online and RSS feed subscription (see Berry 2006; O'Neill 2006; DeLys & Foley 2006; OFCOM 2004, among others). In these studies, podcasting is painted in broad strokes and includes:

- 1) Radiophonic content rebroadcast online (for example, rebroadcast of a program initially broadcast by Hertzian waves)
- 2) Original content created by radio stations and institutions for broadcast online (such as CBC.ca's Radio 3 portal and Radio-Canada.ca's Bande à part)
- 3) Original creations of independent amateurs

In a widely cited article, Richard Berry reports that when it comes to podcasting, "content is king" because it is the content that dictates the form of the final production (2006, p.153). This also helps make podcasting an ideal "niche media" (Ibid.). For Berry, the customized and customizable aspect of the relationship with the media is an essential part of podcasting: we listen to content that deals with the topic of our choosing, at the time of our choosing, in the place of our choosing.

Sterne, Morris, Baker and Freire (2008) suggest that we look at podcasting as an alternative online broadcasting practice. Their analysis is more sensitive to the social characteristics, the historical-technological context and the media and cultural implications of podcasting. These McGill University researchers slot podcasting into the evolutionary line of amateur musical practices, related in particular to the development of recording and sound processing technologies (Sterne et al. 2008, p.6). The presence of an independent podcaster in

Professor Sterne's team – Jeremy Morris, one of the voices of the Montreal Anglophone podcast *Midnight Poutine*, a podcast that covers Montreal's alternative music scene – appears to have helped create an image of podcasting as an alternative practice closely related to the development of amateur and semi-professional studio equipment.

Murray focuses on the specific media practices that podcasting is helping to launch, both in terms of the listeners' personal programming ('self-scheduling') and for corporations that want to spread their brand image to younger audiences (Murray 2009). Bull's work on the culture of mobile listening adds to our understanding of podcasting by explaining how the mobile listening allowed by digital players like iPods creates an "audio bubble" (2005).

If we look at these studies on podcasting as a whole, we see tension between the technologically centred definition of podcasting, seen primarily as an on-demand or RSS feed broadcasting method, on one hand, and the idea that podcasting has subversive potential as an alternative practice, on the other. This quote clearly illustrates this tension:

A podcast is simply an audio file, along with RSS XML tags, and applications that poll and download these files. The combination allows users to have programs automatically delivered to their MP3 players, and producers to have self-published, syndicated radio shows. Institutional broadcasters acting quickly to exploit the rapid uptake of this technology are still grappling with the ramifications for content and, so far, most large broadcasters simply re-version broadcast content for MP3 download. But individual podcasters are challenging commercially driven notions of appropriate radio content and the immersive, sustained listening conditions podcasting promotes prime it to carry on certain of the traditions of long-form 'radiophonic works' (DeLys & Foley 2006, p.131).

While these studies provide useful input to help frame podcasting, they tend to reduce it to its technical contingencies and the issue of broadcasting. My main reproach for them is that they do not systematically differentiate between the independent podcaster's process, which implies specific usage, and the content broadcast on the internet by commercial or public radio. The study I am presenting here looks explicitly at how the practice of independent podcasting is specific and must be understood as such.

Independent Podcasting

I will argue here that it is appropriate to refer to 'independent podcasting' when we are talking about the production of original audio content in a non-institutionalized setting by one or more people who create it for pleasure, with no editorial filter imposed by a third party, and

broadcast it over the internet. You will note that I avoid using the word ‘amateur’; although this label may well be useful in our understanding of independent podcasting as different from institutional podcasting (which we could qualify as ‘professional’), it seems to me that it limits our analysis to the duality of amateur vs. expert. Furthermore, while independent podcasting is indeed practised by amateurs, they nevertheless develop considerably technical expertise, in the handling of microphones, the use of editing software, and the integration of various broadcasting strategies through social media, for example (*Twitter*, *Facebook* and blogs, etc., are often used). The communications skills developed by users are also notable, as demonstrated by the podcasters’ improved hosting techniques as their practice advances². Podcasters develop very advanced communicational and technical expertise.

In the podcasting community³, the rising popularity of web broadcasting has elicited discussions about the distinctive (or otherwise) nature of podcasting as they themselves see it. One of Canada’s podcasting pioneers, Marie-Chantale Turgeon, wrote a blog post on the subject back in 2005:

What "real" podcast is or could be: [...]

- personal
- the podcaster talk [sic] about his personal life, feelings, emotions.
- expression of one's mind
- with spontaneity
- improvise, explore the unknown which is of course what brings in innovation
- portable
- available in any time and space
- free
- directly connected to the web
- organic and alive, can start or stop at any time
- actual (rss delivers news about a new post or show in the minute it is online) [...]

² This progress is especially obvious among ‘senior’ podcasters with several years of podcasting experience. One of the podcasters interviewed even admitted having withdrawn his first podcasts from his site because he was embarrassed for his current listeners to hear his early offerings.

³ I use the word ‘community’ in the full sense of the word: podcasters demonstrate real commitment to their practice and to other podcasters. They know each other, and during the research period, there were regular meetings of *PodMtl* where podcasters get together for a drink, to talk with each other and meet listeners.

Following the publication of this post, several commenters discussed the characteristics of ‘real podcasting’ in contrast with web re-broadcasting of radio content. In the comments section, Turgeon clarifies that some of the characteristics she attributes to podcasting are shared by radio: spontaneity, for example. But it is nevertheless evident that even though radio hosts are free to improvise on the air, their discourse is limited by certain constraints: air time, sponsors and advertisers, as well as the station’s brand image, to mention just a few.

This discussion among users, listeners and podcasters following Turgeon’s post zeroes in on the image podcasters have of their practice and the general definition suggested by studies on podcasting: there is something in independent podcasting that goes beyond the technical. During my research, a podcaster expressed this very sentiment of specificity with regard to his media practice by comparing podcasting to film. He also repeated the analogy in his personal blog:

[...] webcast radio programs are not podcasts.

Not even slightly? **No, not even slightly** ...

It’s like pretending that a birthday video I shot in 1994 is a film. Yes, I am using the same technology (more or less), but I am not following the rules of the seventh art. It’s the same for people who claim to be podcasting but replicate radio station rules. **A podcast is just a vulgar audio file captured in an RSS feed** (Laurent LaSalle, *Mes paroles s’envolent*, post on October 22, 2008 – the emphasis is his, the translation is ours).

In other words, it is not a direct step from holding a camera to making a film. Likewise, broadcasting an audio file over the internet is not podcasting. To make a film, you need to adopt codes and develop a process that goes far beyond simply wanting to immortalize a birthday party: you have to develop a message and include the use of the camera in a much larger process of meaning. This is where the concepts of usage and subculture can be helpful in understanding the practice of independent podcasting.

Usage and Subculture

Drawing in part on the ideas of Michel De Certeau (1990), the sociology of usage defines ‘usage’ as a daily life practice endowed with specific meaning for the user, which includes the micro-social aspect of the situation as well as the constraints and innovative possibilities of the technical device (Breton & Proulx 2006). It is not the instrumental use of a

technical tool, but a complex and situated usage through which the user develops cognitive and technical competencies (Proulx 2008). To clarify, let's say that when we are talking about usage, the relationship with the technical tool is the opposite of Charlie Chaplin's relationship with the industrial assembly line in *Modern Times*. With usage, the action is accompanied by understanding and produces meaning.

The term 'usage' in relation to web 'contribution' or 'production' becomes "contributive usage" (Proulx 2009) or "produsage" (Bruns 2008). That is that say that through usage, the user posts or modifies online content by commenting, tagging, broadcasting and discussing on the web. Independent podcasting is a contributive and expressive usage that leaves media footprints other users can interact with. The communication that unfolds among podcasters and between podcasters and their audiences is a crucible for referents and specific codes about the practice and its themes (music, alternative culture, local cultural life). In the discussions of Montreal podcasters and their listeners, we observed recurring references to urban and local geography. For example, podcasters generally mention the place where they record (on their balcony, in a particular café or park) and places they have gone without necessarily taking the time to explain the exact location. One podcaster assumes that his listeners know him well enough to realize that the *Café Léopard* he mentions is a café on Masson Street in Montreal, near his place, because he has already mentioned it elsewhere in his blog and podcast. The same is true for the people the podcasters mention. Each podcast develops a stylistic repertory marked by references (places, people, activities, preferred themes, musical style), and a sense of complicity grows between the podcaster and the listeners because they share the meaning of these codes.

It is through the development of this shared repertory and the sharing of these meanings around the practice that the subculture is established. A 'subculture' exists in tension with a dominant culture, not 'under' it in terms of hierarchical subordination but rather on the fringes of and in reaction to it (Clarke et al. 1976). A subculture emerges in the specific context where a group of people share specific values and experiences, often unconventional and unusual, that do not correspond to those embraced by the dominant culture: their specific relationship with the world is the platform for the development of a repertory (lifestyle, but also habits, shared values) that attests to their specific experience (Clarke et al. 1976; Clarke 1976; Hebdige 2008 [1979]).

In their usage, the podcasters I observed talk about their own experience, and their remarks are generally anchored in their personal situation. Without being systematically

personal in the sense of ‘intimate’, the podcasters’ remarks are personalized and unique because they are deeply entwined with their own experience and personality. Indeed, podcasting stands out as a structuring usage in the identity of the podcasters interviewed. They report their practice proudly and use it to describe themselves. In most cases, they use podcasting as an outlet and forum for personal expression where they can give free reign to their passion for music and creativity. This is a recurring motif in the usage of podcasting: making a podcast for the pleasure of self-expression without bowing to the editorial filter of a gate-keeper. In fact, in the case of Montreal podcasters, authenticity is one of the guiding values vital to the expression of the subcultural logic. This shows through in the approach: the process must be authentic and acknowledge the podcaster’s subjectivity. In terms of form, it is not uncommon to hear ambient noise that attests to the ‘real life’ of the podcaster, such as the fridge motor starting up, a siren in the distance or the hubbub of the café where the podcaster is recording.

Podcasting as a Participative Online Subculture

Independent podcasting exists in tension with the dominant culture of commercial radio. Some reports suggest that younger listeners are increasingly turning away from commercial and public radio, especially because of the repetitive programming on these stations and the presence of advertising and self-promotion (see OFCOM 2004 and O’Neill 2006, among others). Independent podcasting seems to follow a similar logic: podcasters are disappointed fans of traditional radio who have seized on the opportunity provided by podcasting to create the audio media experience of their desires. Most of the podcasters interviewed said they never listen to commercial radio, and one said that if he really had no other options, he would tune in to university radios, such as CISM, the Université de Montréal radio station that has an FM license with a mandate to air emerging music. Musical programming is the crux of the podcasters’ disappointment with commercial radio: they lament a repetitive repertory that does not reflect their personal taste (see Millette 2009 for details and OFCOM 2004 for similar results). Independent podcasting as we observed it is similar to DJing in that the integration of music is extremely structuring. In both the creation of an audio signature unique to each podcaster and the narrative aspect and building of atmosphere, pieces and jingles are used to create an original auditory experience in which the podcaster takes into account the development of the audience’s listening experience (Millette 2009, p.101-102).

Independent podcasting is also linked to a whole series of contributive usages of the internet, including blogging and participating in social networking sites, especially *Facebook*

and Twitter. All of the podcasters listened to and interviewed for this study had at least one blog and many also had *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts⁴. They generally use the blog as a central broadcasting point for the podcast and subsequently relate the information on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, etc. Blogging contributes to the stylistic repertory of the podcast by rounding out the audio universe with visual and textual support.

Independent podcasting is thus an online participatory subculture expressed through a specific practice but connected to other contributive usages online. Podcasters make use of a tangle of media, choosing different usages to make different types of contributions. This tangled usage and technological convergence bears out observations on “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006; Bruns 2008). Independent podcasting is one of the participatory subcultures that have emerged with the rise of Web 2.0 tools and practices. The subculture of independent podcasting unfolds around a specific usage of the internet which serves as a means of expression for the podcaster and exists in tension with traditional radiophonic culture, especially that of commercial radio.

Conclusion

Bruns posits that contributive usage on the internet, which he calls “produsage,” provides an alternative route to the production of media content: “the environments of what we describe as produsage now often offer credible alternatives to and sustained competition for established industries and their products” (2008, p.4). For him, these usages constitute a system that is gaining in credibility, becoming more refined through the efforts of the community and setting itself up as potential competition for the traditional media.

I would further qualify these ideas by pointing out that contributive usages are often drowned in a flood of ‘spam’, advertising and pornographic content. Furthermore, independent productions of mediocre quality are sometimes broadcast, highlighting the technical and communicational expertise users need to acquire for contributive usages to constitute a real alternative to the traditional media model. Because not just anybody can participate in this ‘participatory culture’: to establish a real voice in digital space, users must hone their ‘usage’ of web platforms in order to fully communicate the message they want to broadcast.

⁴ In this regard, I should mention that these results date back to 2009. The use of *Facebook* and especially *Twitter* is far more widespread now. The practices of podcasters who already had a *Facebook* profile have become more sophisticated in the last three years: some have created a *Facebook* page specifically for their podcast.

Despite this, independent podcasting as I observed it presents an articulate and lively response to traditional radio. By developing a participatory subculture where their interest in and expression of music are at the heart of the media usage, podcasters offer an alternative that may not be ‘competitive’ in terms of the market (independent podcasting is still far from mainstream), but that is definitely legitimate and diverse in terms of content and format. As Sterne et al. put it, “While podcasting is neither a complete break from broadcasting nor part of any kind of revolution, it is the realization of an alternate cultural model of broadcasting” (2008, p.2).

I have tried to provide a nuanced portrait of independent podcasting as a contributive usage that has sparked an online subculture. I focused on the fact that independent podcasting deserves to be considered as a different media modality than radio re-broadcast on the internet or institutional podcasting. To support my argument, I drew on a case study of Montreal podcasters, illustrating a few of the specificities of the practice of independent podcasting. Podcasters succeed in broadcasting creative and unique audio content by anchoring themselves in authenticity, communicating personalized discourse, sharing specific stylistic codes and acquiring extensive technical expertise.

For research purposes, convergent and hybrid media practices like independent podcasting create new lines of interaction with media content, and these generate new research issues, in terms of both the questions we ask and the methods required to answer them. For example, the relationship with mobility is a blind spot in studies of podcasting. How does the mobility and decontextualization of the audience shape the specificity of these internet usages? How do they influence the way users create content? These and other similar questions provide avenues of interest for future studies.

References

- Berry, R. (2006). Will the iPod Kill the Radio Star? Profiling Podcasting as Radio. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 12(2), 143-62.
- Breton, P., & Proulx, S. (2006). *L’Explosion de la communication à l’aube du XXIe siècle*. Montreal: Boréal.
- Bruns, A. (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond. From Production to Producership*. New York: Peter Lang.

- Bull, M. (2005). No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening. *Leisure Studies*, 24(4), 343-355.
- Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T., & Roberts, B. (1976). Subcultures, Cultures and Class. In Stuart Hall & Tony Jefferson (Eds.). *Resistance Through Rituals - Youth Subcultures In Post-War Britain* (pp. 9 -79).. London-Melbourne-Sydney-Auckland Johannesburg: Hutchison.
- Clarke, J. (1976). Style. In Stuart Hall & Tony Jefferson (Eds.). *Resistance Through Rituals - Youth Subcultures In PostWar Britain* (pp. 175-191). London-Melbourne-Sydney Auckland-Johannesburg: Hutchison.
- De Certeau, M. (1990). Faire avec : usage et tactiques. In *L'invention du quotidien : les Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 50-68.
- DeLys, S., & Foley, M. (2006). The Exchange: A radio-Web project for Creative Practitioners and Researchers. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 12(2), 129-135.
- Hebdige, D. (2008 [orig. 1979]). *Sous-culture - Le sens du style*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Hebdige, D. (1983). Posing... Threats, Striking... Poses – Youth, Surveillance, and Display». *The Subcultures Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London and New York: Routledge. p. 288-298.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture - Where Old And New Media Collide*. New York – London: New York University Press.
- Millette, M. (2009). *Usages contributifs d'Internet : Le podcasting indépendant et le sens de son style*. M.A. thesis, Université du Québec à Montréal. Retrieved from:
http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/3853443/Millette2009_MemoireMA_PodcastingIndependant.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIGQICEMJ5UHTFFWA&Expires=1316211610&Signature=xhqM5uOEcgNXdtiEthBAM%2BiNKBw%3D
- Murray, S. (2009). Servicing self-scheduling' consumers. *Global Media and Communication*, 5, 197-219.

OFCOM (Office of Communication – UK). (2004). *The iPod Generation. Devices and Desires of the Next Generation of Radio Listeners* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from:

http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/radio/reports/ipod_gen/

O'Neill, B. (2006). CBC.ca: Broadcast Sovereignty in a Digital Environment. *Convergence : The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 12(2), p. 179-197.

Proulx, S. (2009, May). Form of User' s Contribution in Online Environments: Mechanisms of Mutual Recognition Between Contributors. Paper presented at *The Good, The Bad and The Challenging – The user and the future of information and communication technologies*, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Proulx, S. (2008, July). La sociologie des usages, et après? *Congrès international des sociologies de langue française (AISLF)*. “Sociologie de la communication” task force, Istanbul, Turkey.

Ragusa, A. T., Chan, A., & Crampton, A. (2009). iPods Aren't Just for iTunes. *Information, Communications & Society*, 12(5), 678-690.

Sterne, J., Morris, J., Brendan Baker, M., & Moscote Freire, A. (2008). The Politics of Podcasting. *Fibreculture Journal*, 13. Retrieved from:

http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue13/issue13_sterne.html#top

Turgeon, M., (2005, August 11). *Vu d'ici / Seen from here*. What 'real' podcasting is or could be. Retrieved from: <http://mcturgeon.com/blog/2005/08/11/what-is-real-podcasting/>

Directory of podcasts cited

Mes paroles s'envolent. Podcast and independent blog by Laurent LaSalle.

<http://mesparolesenvolent.com/>

Midnight Poutine. Blog (group, written by several contributors) and independent podcast on urban life and Montreal culture. Podcast by Jeremy Morris, alias Jer.

<http://www.midnightpoutine.ca/>

Vu d'ici / Seen from here. Blog, former podcast and independent videocast signed by Marie-Chantale Turgeon. <http://www.mcturgeon.com/>