The Value of Podcasts as a Form of Composition, and Socialization Ignitor

Joey Dundovich

Drawing upon his various uses of podcasts, Dundovich seeks to advocate for the value of podcasts as more than just a form of passing time. Instead, podcasts can be phenomenal educational tools, credible research sources, as well as tangible ways to form connections with the other human beings directly/indirectly involved with the creation of this genre.

My Switch from Music to Podcasts of Varying Lengths

By the time I graduated from high school, I had grown tired of the music I was listening to during travel, working out at the gym, and used as background noise whilst doing schoolwork and general household chores. Even today, modern music still does not offer much to me. I was at a loss when I thought my only other listening options were audiobooks or general radio. I knew I wasn't going to have a car during my undergraduate years at Illinois State University, which meant I would have a lot of long walks around the community and bus rides when coming to/from the Chicagoland area. I also knew I wouldn't be able to walk and read (I'm jealous if you can) or walk and watch a video on my phone or computer, so my campus walks consisted of hearing construction noises and local Midwest wild animals during the first few weeks of summer.

Then, while reading a professional wrestling article on the sports media website, *Bleacher Report*, I stumbled across a podcast. According to Merriam-Webster, a podcast is defined as "A program (as of music or talk) made available in digital format for automatic download over the Internet." Until

this moment, I had assumed that "podcasts" were reserved for interviews, sort of like a longer version of a talk show's guest appearance.

And I was definitely wrong.

The hosts of the show *Ring Rust Radio* are three writers for the website that all shared a similar love for pro-wrestling. Their podcast episodes, which consistently last over three hours, cover news large and small, debates, predictions, fan emails/interactions and a sense of humor that frequently leaves me awkwardly laughing or talking back to my headphones like I'm on speakerphone—in public.

Soon after discovering the show, I branched out to different categories of podcasts. I listened to everything from comedy, celebrity interviews, journalistic reporting, philosophy, or just people discussing their less than glamorous jobs to a wider audience than just their coworkers. Overall, since the summer of 2013, I would estimate that I've listened to a podcast for *at least* thirty minutes each and every day. My travel, workouts, study sessions, and obligations were never overall time wasters, as I always had several podcast episodes at the ready to give me the boost I needed to get through it.

And as I look back over my interactions with podcasts, I can see a lot of evolution in how I understand them and what I use them for. This kind of self-reflection and awareness of texts is something that the ISU Writing Program does a lot through use of pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory, or P-CHAT. **P-CHAT** is a theoretical framework that focuses on how humans think and feel and act in the world, and Joyce Walker explains that the ISU Writing Program uses CHAT as a way to investigate "how people act and communicate in the world, specifically through the production of texts (71–72). In addition, the ISU Writing Program has developed some terms that can help researchers use CHAT concepts to unpack different kinds of literate activities by studying not just the text themselves, but all of the activities that can go into their **representation**, **production**, **distribution**, **reception** and **socialization**. Because the program focuses on using this framework for teaching, they call it **P-CHAT** (pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory). For example, a literate activity can be something as simple as a store posting a sign of their hours of operation, and with P-CHAT, we can discuss how people walking past the store can easily see the written sign that the owners of the store want to communicate to their potential customers (**reception**). This then impacts the likelihood of attending their place of business due to the schedules of various community members or visitors. P-CHAT looks at literate activities that go beyond the written papers in any standard English class, the written or spoken comments given by peers and the grade the final product receives. P-CHAT considers

communication at all stages of a text's life for all kinds of texts that involve communications between humans.

While much of my communication as a podcast listener is with myself, as the podcasts I listen to are typically recorded, they are a type of text. The avenues of communication I've been able to reference podcasts in, or conversations I've had based on a specific podcast, show the validity it has to fit into a P-CHAT framework. Something that is frequently paired to the concept of P-CHAT is **genre**. Again, according to the ISU Writing Program, genres are productions that we can "identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable" (ISU Writing). Thus, genres can be identified by understanding features that might include things beyond just a certain kind of content, like how it is produced, what it looks like, who uses it, or what they use it for. If we follow the definition of a podcast as "an audio file that is downloaded off the Internet," this definition could be understood as one of the basic features that we can use to identify texts that we think fit the gene of podcast. But that very general criteria would certainly not be enough to truly understand what a podcast is. To understand podcasts, we'll need to consider all kind of other features, as well as identifying "subgenres that we might determine through looking at the content in the podcast, the target audience, format of the podcast, usage of speakers and writers, and time length of the audio file" ("Key Terms"). Creating these personalized and open-ended definitions of a genre can help a reader find the ideal text for their preferred use, much like my desire to use podcasts on commutes around a college campus.

Nowadays due to my career as an educator, identifying and understanding the value of different genres most often comes up when trying to help students identify sources that might be useful for their persuasive, argumentative, or informative projects. If we step back and consider what genres are though, the classic definitions of what kind of sources are appropriate for this kind of writing involve some pretty rigid, and sometimes not very helpful, definitions of genres. However, using a P-CHAT framework lends itself to my own teaching style of having a very open-minded framework of what "sources" can be, which I'll discuss below, in part to illustrate my own evolving understanding of the genre of podcasts.

An Atypical, but Sometimes More Valuable, "Source" for Research Projects

Whenever you recall working on a project that required a specific number of credible sources, I'm guessing some standard sources would include books, newspapers, magazines, database articles, and web pages . . . besides

Wikipedia of course). These would fit into the general consensus of what kinds of genres are worthy of being used for formal, school-based research.

As shown by the prior paragraph's scenario, there is something about the phrase "credible sources" that seems to cause people to either include or exclude certain kinds of texts based on their own understanding of research projects. Therefore, both the terms "credible sources" and "research projects" could be viewed as referring to specific types of genres!

But what causes this? In my time as an educator at the middle school, high school, and college, I've heard the following answers from students when asked what they believe makes a source credible enough to be used in a school project or to be a trusted location to learn about something outside of school.

- "If it's online, it has to have a .org, .edu, or .gov to be used."

- "It has to be a 'peer reviewed' source, and you have to be able to find it through our school library's database."

- "The author has to be a professional in the area they're talking about."

- "It has to be available in print in some form . . . it has to be WRITTEN on a document."

And yet, these associations all serve (intentionally or not) to limit potential gold mines of information, any of which might end up being more helpful than the "traditional" associations so many of us are conditioned to use to become educated on a subject. This kind of traditional thinking fails to acknowledge frequently used items in educational environments including Ted Talks, blogs, social media posts, podcasts, documentaries, filmed speeches, billboards, posters, symbols, and other multimodal and uniquely formatted genres that can be, and often are used. Other kinds of sources ultimately used in research can also involve genres that do not fit some/any of the above definitions of a credible source, especially audio and/or visual only genres. But since these texts are actually used all of the time in scholarly writing, understanding what genres could be labelled as "credible resources" all depends on what each individual audience member wants to utilize a text for. So in other words, the kinds of texts an author might decide to use as resources is influenced by how a person understands and uses them.

Joyce Walker defines **reception** as, "not just who will read a text, but takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)" (75). In the case of an audio file, which is what a podcast is, the possible uses are

truly up to the audience member. While my original purpose for becoming a podcast listener was desperation of wanting something to listen to/view during my commutes, chores, and workouts (my reception), I ended up learning new things about topics I was and wasn't already knowledgeable about. I also became a fan of podcasters/guests, cited certain podcast quotes as legitimate sources in essays, and made friendships with other fans of the podcasts. So my personal understanding of the genre of podcasts evolved over time, based on the kinds of podcasts I listened, the activities I engaged in related to podcasts, and my sense of what they could be used for, by me or by other people (including my students). For me, podcasts now include "source of credible research" as one of their possible features, which is much different than my original understand of them as "mostly for entertainment," or as a kind of "background noise" for other tasks I might be completing.

Some of the new knowledge I learned directly from listening to podcasts would include: stand-up comedy from hearing comics discuss their profession on their own/friends' podcasts, courtroom and law enforcement practices from *Serial*, and learning more about some of my favorite actors and the TV/film communities through interview-based podcasts such as *The Joe Rogan Experience* and *WTF with Marc Maron*. The content from all of these podcasts ended up becoming crucial pieces of "expert testimony" in research I was completing, which focused on communication and writing practices in each industry such as stand-up comedy, criminal justice, TV/film production and communication to their respective audience members or colleagues. On top of that, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL), one of the top citation style guides for research practices, has citation procedures for citing a podcast/spoken word text in MLA, APA and Chicago Style formats.

The Production of over Ten Years and 500+ Weekly Episodes

Donald Wood, a writer for the transit based website *Travel Pulse* and frequent contributor for the popular sports media publication *Bleacher Report*, had the hobby of hosting a pro-wrestling podcast for over 500 weekly episodes for a decade at the time of our interview. Wood and his co-hosts, fellow *Bleacher Report* writers Mike Chiari and Brandon Gallivan, have perfected the show's format throughout the years via their current outline:

> We know the outline really well at this point the efficiency of time is very important to us. The crossover between podcasting and writing is pretty prevalent right there. I think that writing allows

you to figure out a way to articulate the points you really want to convey. Whereas when you do it on the air, it's more off the cuff. So essentially what I'll do is write an "article" (the outline) about what the show is going to be, and then I'll roughly follow that once we are recording (the show or specific segment).

Their current outline has evolved to a show format that is typically around three hours but has been as long as seven hours of content. Currently, there are six main bullet points, one per segment of the show's format, with each "main bullet point" having between six-to-eight sub-points that will vary each episode in terms of the content being discussed on the show.

The hosts have mentioned that these changes have occurred due to their personal lives changing and work responsibilities at their "actual paying jobs" adjusting since the show's beginnings. Just like a long running television or books series adjusts as the key producers, and the world around them, changes, so to do audio based texts.

This long term process of adjustments is a form of **production**. While the basic activities the hosts engage in for writing articles vs. writing podcast outlines might vary somewhat, the processes involved can still be viewed in a similar manner. This is because production is described within P-CHAT as "the means through which a text is produced. This includes both tools . . . and practices" (74). For podcasts, the practices can involve the changes that Wood and his co-hosts have made over a ten year period to the show's length, content, and focus areas. **Tools** are just as diverse, given the technological advances that often occur from year to year, and especially over a decade with regards to computers, microphones, headphones, noise canceling equipment, editing software, advertiser involvement, and publications/platforms to upload the finished podcast to.

Therefore, my comparisons between podcasts, traditional academic assignments, and social media groups make use of the kind of research involved in understanding production. Walker describes this metacognitive process as work an author does when they are "thinking about or investigating production for a specific text . . . [and] really trying to uncover how individuals and groups create texts under specific conditions, using specific tools, and following certain practices" (75).

Of course, there are still remaining inside jokes, enduring segments, and audience interaction on the show. But just as the pro-wrestling world has changed over the past decade, so have the conversations discussing this corresponding industry.

The Similarities/Differences between Socialization for Writing Articles and Podcasts

Another clear component of a P-CHAT investigation of literate activity is the involvement of other human beings directly/indirectly involved in the making of a text. This involved the term **socialization**, which is viewed as, "the interactions of people and institutions as they produce, distribute and use texts. . . who we are, what we do, what we know" (ISU Writing Program 76). Thanks to Wood's primary career as a writer, he is very experienced in dealing with all forms of socialization and reception from collaborators and audience members of his work. Due to a majority of his work being published on Internet based publications, he has seen the good, bad, and the ugly of comments/reviews audiences are allowed to give. This differs from the traditional view of an educational text. As Walker points out that:

> A text like the five-paragraph essay is highly socialized—this means that when a teacher assigns this kind of essay, he/she is (conceptually) interacting with a whole set of ideas and beliefs about what this essay is and what it does. These interactions are "made up of" the ways people have discussed and used the five-paragraph essay over time. (76)

For *Ring Rust Radio*, interactions typically exist in the realm of inside jokes/humor about the hosts' lives and writing experiences brought up on *Ring Rust Radio*, Wood will roll with the punches, as feedback is simply a part of being a legitimate producer of content. These forms of reception by the audience have evolved over time in terms of how he considers their views:

> I used to take it all very seriously. But we live in a very "troll oriented" society and with all due respect, I know the content of my article is quality. Otherwise, I wouldn't have posted it on the website. So I don't need some random person telling me my AEW and WWE (two pro-wrestling companies) trade article "sucks" because they don't agree with the premise. That doesn't always mean the entire article sucks, it just shows that you don't agree with the premise. There's a difference.

Unlike receiving a letter grade, a graded rubric, or comments in a school assignment's margins, the comments Wood gets are often public. Given that these comments can be extremely negative, Wood has had to develop "thick skin" as a professional. When asked how this confident style of handling feedback occurred, Wood believes:

> It progressively happened over time. I originally started at a newspaper after college covering the Philadelphia Flyers (a pro-hockey team) for like three years. Then I went to *Bleacher Report*,

there they encourage you to read all the comments, and I was really doing that. In case I misspelled something or an error I missed. After a while it just became, "This article sucks" and "He shouldn't be doing this!" That's not feedback. If you're looking for feedback and find someone who commented and said, "I think this hypothetical trade is a little lopsided. Here's what I would've done to make it a little more fair" then I can understand that, and I would genuinely consider that.

Drawing upon earlier connections made in this article about writing and other forms of composition, Wood feels that this kind of response to the wide range of feedback any published work will get is comparable to the passion shown by sports fans on radio shows:

If anyone listens to sports radio, they can talk about this. Say the Phillies (Philadelphia's pro-baseball team) are not doing really well. A caller goes, "The bullpen is not doing very well, this player hasn't been doing well when he comes in. I wish the starters would get more time." Or the guy that calls in and goes, "Yeah man the Phillies suck! They don't know what they're doing. We should fire this person!" That's the difference, most comments online are the latter.

Ironically, the most notable example of a negative review in Wood's writing career which his co-hosts and fans of the pro-football team the Seattle Seahawks still bring up to him over half a decade later is a *Bleacher Report* review he gave of their team's decisions in the 2012 National Football League Draft. Wood gave the team an "F" but two years later the team ended up winning the league championship with key players from that same "F" graded draft class. He chuckled when stating the life the article has taken on:

Every NFL draft I get hate. Every time the Seahawks make the playoffs I'll get hate. Any time Russell Wilson eats a meal I'll get hate. It's awful. But that goes back to what we were doing at the time. We wrote "Quick Hits" which were twelve-to-fifteen articles a day. That article took me thirty minutes to write at the end of a shift and it meant nothing to me. Two years later it came back to be on *The Soup* (a comedy news show on E! Television) and it just blew up on me ever since.

On the flip side, another podcast co-hosted by Wood, *Attention Horrors*, got positive feedback from its much smaller audience base than his other creative endeavors, it formally ended after thirty-four episodes. This was due to the lack of success in trying to make a hobby a worthwhile endeavor financially, "I've been told not to look at it (*Attention Horrors*) as a failure, but there's no other way to look at it. In this business you have to be very

honest with yourself. That was an abject failure because I couldn't secure the advertising necessary to continue it." The show itself covered historical true crimes and long discussed myths/superstitions. To put their own spin on the popular topics in podcasting, the hosts added comedic elements during conversations about these topics in a heavily research based show. Even with the show's premature conclusion, he remained positive about reflecting on the show's active life, "Content wise, I'm most proud of some of the stuff I did with it, some even more than *Ring Rust Radio* or my writing career. It's really hard to convey some of those points and be very specific and true to fact, while also adding humor, with horror and murder crimes." All in all, it appears that for a producer of content to have long-term enjoyment with their career, the need to persevere through every potential reception an audience member might have is arguably just as important as putting out what you truly feel is quality content for the world to see. Wood, a self-described introvert, ended the interview by saying that he feels that when he and his co-hosts "stop having fun, we're gonna stop the show."

Podcast Fan Group Monitoring and Starting Two Podcasts in the Past Year

Throughout my years of listening to podcasts I've heard hosts mention various social media based fan groups for their podcasts. The two wrestling podcast groups I am a member of have around 250 and 7,500 members. While clearly not as gargantuan as the group membership numbers of certain television shows or movie franchises, the interactions I've had within these two groups has been extremely memorable and fulfilling. These cyber forms of socialization, and occasional friendships, have absolutely played a large role in my continued fandom of the pro-wrestling world as my schedule has changed ever since my discovery of podcasts.

Someone that I developed a cyber friendship with, Jeff Lippman, has a particularly unique entry into the podcasting world. He ventured into podcast listening "probably in 2012–13 because my girlfriend at the time listened to some. I never started downloading any myself until I had a dull long term assignment and one of my coworkers suggested I listen to podcasts to pass the time." Like myself, Lippman joined the group a while after becoming a listener to the wrestling podcast *Solomonster Sounds Off*. However Lippman has made the time commitment of moderating the group we met in. As one might expect with a group of thousands of members, Lippman described the backstory of becoming a mod, "The podcast host became embarrassed by his group and decided to add 2 moderators. He asked the group to nominate potential mods. I was only in the group 7 months, so I kept out of it until

I saw an enormous amount of members nominated me. I was shocked. I didn't think I was well liked." Through these interactions from before (and after) his moderator role, his own listening to the genre, knowledge of pro-wrestling, and other niche topics, Lippman made the decision to start his own two podcasts with co-hosts interested in similar content. Both shows were less than a calendar year old by the time I interviewed him for this article. He claims the choice to take on this unique side business was simple. He stated, "I thought I had things to add that I wanted to bring to larger audiences. I thought I could add new things to the crowded field." Because of the high level of accessibility the podcasting world offers for those that want to start their own show, even the most niche fields have a plethora of listening choices for any individual with hosts holding different forms of credibility. A range of hosts covering this topic include all kinds of current/former employees for pro-wrestling companies, journalists who work for wrestling centric publications, journalists who podcast as a hobby (like Wood and his co-hosts), and fans in career fields that have little to do with the entertainment world.

This lack of gatekeeping to the genre of podcasting makes the path to being involved with a successful/popular show all the more difficult due to oversaturation. Beyond hosting his own pro-wrestling podcast, *The Hammerlock Hangover*, Lippman also co-hosts a variety podcast called *The Garden of Doom*. This second podcast covers lesser known areas of science, culture, world history, and macabre stories, which can venture into the extremely crowded podcast topics of true crime, historical legends, and scientific anomalies.

Despite describing himself as an excellent multitasker, Lippman feels that the biggest stressor between co-hosting two podcasts is, "finding new content I can speak on intelligently. Also, trying to force myself out of repetition. No one wants to hear the same thing over and over again. I've had some success with guests but it's not nearly as easy as I thought it would be—at least real experts." The fact that he actively understands that "no one wants to hear the same thing over and over" shows the awareness of potential listeners making the active choice, as podcasts are not bound to original air times as television shows or movies debuting in theatres, to try out his shows for a different perspective than other shows. This encapsulates some of the P-CHAT concepts covered earlier in this article, this audience awareness impacts a show's production, socialization, and reception for a genre that has such open availability and access as podcasts do. It is for this reason that podcasts can serve as valuable educational tools for listeners finding (or often stumbling upon) a show for whatever reason/purpose. Like any text, podcasts are what the audience makes of them. So don't miss out on the opportunity to have topics presented in styles you're desiring or in a

manner that can open up opportunities for conversations and interactions with others that you would have never engaged with otherwise!

Works Cited

"Key Terms and Concepts For the ISU Writing Program." *ISU Writing*, http://isuwriting.com/key-terms/.

Lippman, Jeff. Dundovich, Joseph. Personal interview. 27 Dec. 2020.

"Podcast." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/podcast. Accessed 6 Aug. 2021.

The Purdue OWL Family of Sites. The Writing Lab and OWL at Purdue and Purdue U, 2008, owl.english.purdue.edu/owl. Accessed 9 Jan. 2021.

Walker, Joyce. "Just CHATting." *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, vol. 1, 2010, pp. 71–80.

Wood, Donald. Dundovich, Joseph. Personal interview. 22 Sept. 2020.

Joey Dundovich is a high school English teacher in the suburbs of Chicago. A graduate of ISU's English education Bachelors program, as well as their English studies Master's program, he is elated to find a way to continue to give back to a place that has helped him grow so much as a person and educator. An avid podcast listener, he hopes this article can show students that it's always worth it to try and reach out to others to converse about your shared interests.