

DIY Histories: Podcasting the Past

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Abstract

This is article 3.0 in ***Sounding Out!*** 's April Forum on "Sound and Technology." Every Monday this month, you'll be hearing new insights on this age-old pairing from the likes of *Sounding Out!* veterans **Aaron Trammell** and **Primus Luta** along with new voices **Andrew Salvati** and **Owen Marshall**.

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This is article 3.0 in ***Sounding Out!***'s April Forum on "Sound and Technology." Every Monday this month, you'll be hearing new insights on this age-old pairing from the likes of *Sounding Out!* veterans **Aaron Trammell** and **Primus Luta** along with new voices **Andrew Salvati** and **Owen Marshall**. These fast-forward folks will share their thinking about everything from Auto-tune to techie manifestos. Today, Salvati asks if DIY podcasts are allowing ordinary people to remix the historical record. Let's subscribe and press play. **–JS, Editor-in-Chief**

Was Alexander the Great as bad a person as Adolph Hitler? Will our modern civilization ever fall like civilizations from past eras?

According to Dan Carlin's website, these are the kind of speculative "outside-the-box" perspectives one might expect from his long-running *Hardcore History* podcast. In Carlin's hands, the podcast is a vehicle for presenting dramatic accounts of human history that are clearly meant to entertain, and are quite distinct from what we might recognize as academic history. Carlin, a radio commentator and former journalist, would likely agree with this assessment. As he frequently emphasizes, he is a "fan" of history and not a professional. But while there are particularities of training, perspective, and resources that may distinguish professional and popular historians, an oppositional binary between these kinds of historymakers risks overlooking the plurality of historical interpretation. Instead, we might notice how history podcasters like Carlin utilize this new sonic medium to continue a tradition of oral storytelling that in the West goes back to Herodotus, and has since been the primary means of marginalized and oppressed groups to preserve cultural memory. As a way for hobbyists and amateurs to create and share their own do-it-yourself (DIY) histories, I argue that audio podcasting suggests a democratization of historical inquiry that greatly expands the possibilities for everyone, as **Carl Becker** once said, to become his or her own historian.



"Modified Podcast Logo with My Headphones Photoshopped On" by Flickr user Colleen AF Venable, CC BY-SA 2.0

Frequently listed among iTunes' [top society and culture podcasts](#), and cited by several history podcasters as the inspiration for their own creations, the popularity of *Hardcore History* stems from Carlin's unconventional and dramatic recounting of notable (but sometimes obscure) historical topics, in which he will often elaborate historical-structural changes through contemporizing metaphors. Connecting the distant past to more immediate analogies of present life is the core of Carlin's explanatory method. This form of explanation is quite distinct from the output of academic historians, who assiduously avoid this sort of "presentism." But as the late Roy Rosenzweig (2000) has suggested, it is precisely this kind of conscious and practical engagement with the past – and not the litany of facts in dry-as-dust textbooks – that appeals to non-historians. Rosenzweig and David Thelen claim have found that most Americans perceive a close connection with the past, especially as it relates to the present, through their personal and family life. Using the medium of podcasting to talk about the past is a new way of making the past vital to the present needs and interests of most people. This is how podcasters make sense of history in their own terms. It is DIY insofar as it is distinct from professional discourse, and less encompassing (and expensive) than video methods.

Podcasts can present an alternative model for making sense of the past – one that underscores the historymaker's interpretive imprints, and which cultivates a sense of liveness and interactivity. Admittedly, Dan Carlin's own style can be rambling and melodramatic. But to the extent that he practices history as a kind of storytelling, and acknowledges his own interpretive interventions, *Hardcore History*, like other independently produced history podcasts (I am thinking about a few of my favorites – [Revolutions](#), [The History Chicks](#), and [The British History Podcast](#)) give their listeners the sense that history is not necessarily something that is "out there," or distant from us in the present, but part of a living conversation in the present. Podcasters construct a dialogue

about history which, when combined with the interactivity offered by website forums, draws the listener into a participatory engagement. Rosenzweig and Thelen's explain, Americans interested in popular history are skeptical of "historical presentations that did not give them credit for their critical abilities – commercialized histories on television or textbook-driven high school classes." Such analytic skills are precisely what we as historians and teachers aim to develop in our students. Podcasting, when it constructs a collaborative dialogue in which audience and producer explore history together, can both be a valuable supplement to traditional historiography, and a way for people to connect with the past that overcomes the abstraction of textbooks and video.



*"The histomap – four thousand
years of world history" by Flickr
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But is the podcast as intellectually freeing as it might seem? Jonathan Sterne (et. al., 2008) notes that podcasting encompasses a range of technologies and practices that do not necessarily determine the liberation of content production from the dominance of established institutions and economies of scale. Indeed, there are many professional historians and media producers who have utilized audio (and sometimes video) podcasting to reach a wider audience. While the History Channel has not (yet) entered the field, one can surely imagine the implications of corporate-produced history content that homogenizes local and cultural particularities, or which present globalized capitalism as a natural or inevitable historical trajectory.

The kind of podcasts I am concerned with, however, are created by independent producers taking a DIY approach to content production and historical inquiry. While their resources and motivations may differ, podcasts produced on personal computers in the podcaster's spare time have an intimate, handcrafted feel that I find to be more appealing than, say, a podcast lecture. Ideally, what results is an intimate and episodic performance in which podcasters can, to use Andreas Duus Pape's phrasing from an earlier [Sounding Out!](#) post, "whisper in the ears" of listeners. This intimacy is heightened by the means of access – when I download a particular podcast, transfer it to my iPhone, and listen on my commute, I am *inviting* the podcaster into my personal sonic space.

Complimenting this sense of intimacy is a DIY approach to history practiced by podcasters who are neither professional historians nor professional media producers. Relatively cheap and easy to produce (assuming the necessary equipment and leisure time), podcasting presents a low barrier of entry for history fans inspired to use new media technologies to share their passion with other history fans and the general public. Though a few podcasters acknowledge that they have had some university training in history, they are usually proud of their amateur status. The [History Chicks](#), for example, "don't claim to know it all," and that any pretense toward a comprehensive history "would be kinda boring." Podcasting and historical inquiry are hobbies, and their DIY history projects allow the relative freedom to have fun exploring and talking about their favorite subject matter – without having to conform to fussy disciplinary constraints. For Jamie Jeffers, creator of the [British History](#) podcast, most people are alienated by the way history gets taught in school. However, "almost everyone loves stories," he says, and podcasting "allows us to reconnect to that ancient tradition of oral histories." Others justify the hobby in more bluntly. For the [History Chicks](#), women in history is "a perfect topic to sit down and chat about." Talking about history, arguing about it, is something that history fans (and I include myself here) enjoy. Podcasting can broaden this conversation.

Despite my optimistic tone in this post, however, I do not want to suggest uncritically that the democratizing, DIY aspects that I have noted (among just a handful of podcasts) comprises the entire potential of the format. Nuancing a common opposition between the bottom-up potential of podcasting with the prevalent top-down (commercial) model of broadcasting for example,

Sterne and others have asserted that rather than constituting a disruptive technology – as [Richard Berry](#) has suggested – podcasting realizes “an alternate cultural model of broadcasting.” Referring to earlier models of broadcasting – such as those Susan Douglas (1992) described in her classic study of early amateur radio – Sterne and company assert that analyses of podcasting should focus not on the technology itself, but on practice; not on the challenge podcasting poses to corporate dominance in broadcasting, but rather how it might offer a pluralistic model that permits both commercial/elite and DIY/amateur productions.



“Podcast in Retro” by Flickr user David Shortle, CC BY-NC 2.0

Adapting these recommendations, I argue that podcasting can help us conceptualize an alternate cultural model of history – one that invites reconsideration of what counts as historical knowledge and interpretation, and about who is empowered to construct and access historical discourse. Rather than privileging the empirical or objective histories of academic/professional historians, such an expanded model would recognize the cultural legitimacy of diverse forms of historiographical expression. In other words, that history is never “just” history, or “just” facts, but is always a contingent and situated form of knowledge, and that, as Keith Jenkins writes, “interpretations at (say) the ‘centre’ of our culture are not there because they are true or methodologically correct ... but because they are aligned to the dominant discursive practices: again power/knowledge” (1991/2003, p. 79). But to reiterate Sterne’s (et. al.) caution however, such an alternative model would not necessarily determine a role-reversal between professional and DIY histories. Rather through podcasting, we might discover alternative ways of *performing* history as a new oral tradition – of becoming each of us our own historian.

[Andrew J. Salvati](#) is a Media Studies Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University. His interests include the history of television and media technologies, theory and philosophy of history, and representations of history in media contexts. Additional interests include play, authenticity, the

sublime, and the absurd. Andrew has co-authored a book chapter with colleague Jonathan Bullinger titled “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past” in the recent edited volume [Playing With the Past \(2013\)](#), and has written a recent blog post for Play the Past titled “[The Play of History](#).”

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Featured image: “Podcasts anywhere anytime” by Flickr user Francois, CC BY 2.0

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