

Strategies for building credibility within the content of informational podcasts

Presented at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research 2016

ABSTRACT

How does one make their voice heard in an online world full of media clutter? The purpose of this study was to analyze the methods in which successful, independent podcasters build a following and establish credibility with their audience. Channels were chosen from the “Top Podcast” menu on iTunes, as of April 2015. Independence was confirmed by further research into ownership and affiliates of each channel. The content for each podcast was analyzed to measure the presence of 16 variables. These variables included references to third party sources, personal experience, and means of identifying with the audience. From our sample study we conclude that the categories in which successful, independent podcasters scored highest in often involved shared personal experiences, and attempts to identify with their audience, or with a specific culture. Moving forward, this research will lead to a better understanding of what builds speaker-credibility in an online-media environment.

METHODS

In working to identify specific podcast channels to use for this study, iTunes was used as a primary search tool. When searching for podcasts, channels had to meet two criteria: popular and independent.

Popularity was guaranteed by choosing podcasts from the ‘Top Podcasts’ chart on iTunes.

Independence from affiliation was verified through investigation of the names and companies associated with each podcast show that was listed on the chart.

i.e. *This American Life* is situated under the branch of *Chicago Public Media*, making it ineligible for this study. However, *Dan Carlin’s Hardcore History* is an independent podcast created and produced by Dan Carlin.

Without affiliation, a podcaster is forced to gain legitimacy from the ground up, thus making it easier to pinpoint which methods each podcaster uses to retain credibility with his or her audience. The selected episodes were consistently the three most recent uploads from each channel.

Sixteen different points had been pre-determined to represent a mode of representing credibility:

Celebrity
Dr. or Prof.
Other expert
Person podcaster knows
Research
Personal experience
Podcaster's education
Podcaster's intelligence
Podcaster's training/jobs
Identifies with a culture
Identifies with audience
References by other media
Companion site
Unrelated website
Listener feedback
Investment in podcast

Tick marks were used to mark the presence of each referenced category point. Multiple references to each category could have been made by the podcaster, but only a single mark was made to indicate general presence of each categorized theme.

The categories included reference to third party sources such as doctors, professors, celebrities, or other experts; while the definition of 'doctor' or 'professor' was simple to determine, the definition of 'celebrity' versus 'expert' was a bit more challenging. For example, do we consider a politician a celebrity or an expert in their craft? Alongside each non-distinct reference, specific names and notes were written in the margin for later deciphering. We decided that any politicians would be considered 'celebrities' instead of experts. Meanwhile

‘expert’ was a more difficult term to clearly define, but was associated with any persons the podcaster perceived as legitimate but who did not fall into the category of celebrity, doctor, or professor. An example may be a famous historian or philosopher that is referenced to credit a theory or proposal the podcaster is making.

Several of the category themes referenced the podcaster’s personal experience, intelligence and research. Any reference to previous jobs, training, meetings, presentations, conferences, or personal education was accounted for. None of the podcasters referenced their own intelligence or education, but many boasted about personal experience and previous job titles. Few referenced conferences or presentations they held and/or attended and spoke to the personal experience they had with attendees as a building point to create legitimacy with their listeners.

Another factor taken into account was the ways that the podcaster identified with culture, his or her audience, and other sources of media. If the podcaster mentioned anything to do with “America”, “society”, “people these days”, or anything referencing popular culture, such as popular book series, music, band, movies, social media, television shows, or celebrities; it was marked as ‘identifying with culture’. If the podcaster mentioned, “many of you have written to me saying...” or “I’ve heard that...” or even a simple, “You know what I mean?” it was marked down as ‘identifying with audience’. Additional references to specific media such as poetry, quotes pulled from a novel, or from a news site were marked as, ‘reference to other media’. Specific mentions to the podcaster’s own site, another unrelated website, or a companion site were also marked and distinguished separately.

Lastly, we made sure to mark down any reference to specific listener feedback, either mentioning previous feedback or encouraging it; and also any reference to investment in the podcast channel, again, whether mentioning past contributions or asking for more.

RESULTS

Variable	Total
Celebrity	5
Dr. or Prof.	0
Other expert	7

Person podcaster knows	7
Research	4
Personal experience	9
Podcaster's education	2
Podcaster's intelligence	3
Podcaster's training/jobs	5
Identifies with a culture	8
Identifies with audience	10
References by other media	1
Companion site	5
Unrelated website	8
Listener feedback	7
Investment in podcast	4

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to use content analysis to determine how podcasters use references to establish authority. The most popular method of reference was identifying with the audience. The next most used methods were sharing personal experience, identifying with culture and referencing an unrelated site or listener feedback, respectively.

From this sampling, the least popular methods of reference were:

- Mention of a doctor or professor
- References by other media

-Mention of podcaster's personal education

Each of these categories had less than three ticks collected throughout the thirteen samples studied. This suggests to us that perhaps independent podcasters do not have the desire to impress their audience in an academic sense.

Although there may be a difference between how much podcasters are willing to boastfully share in relation to academia, there is no shortage of shared personal anecdotes and opinions being verbalized.

i.e. Dan Carlin of Common Sense states in his podcast Overdue Analysis that gun ownership in America is something he sees as a "human right". This is an opinion that he offers no academic or expert reference for, but instead only backs up with stories of his own personal experiences.

Another observation is that the majority of podcasters reference their own previously aired podcasts within their more recent episodes. This seems to be a popular trend that podcasters use to help encourage listeners to backtrack to previous talking points while additionally building credibility for themselves.

Overall, it seems clear from our sampling that podcasters prefer sharing personal experience and using a means of openness to identify with their audience. This type of virtually constructed, one-way rapport through personal story telling works well in the podcasting industry and is enough for listeners to tune in next time.