

Political Science and Podcasts

POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PODCASTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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For some time now, podcasting has represented an important convergence of technology and content. Functioning much like radio on demand, podcasts have become a means for distributing content produced by activists and pundits, personalities and corporations, journalists and academics. Even staid institutions such as universities have begun to use podcasts for training, marketing, and educational purposes (Harris and Park 2008). Previously in this journal, Roberts (2008) reported on how podcasts could provide a medium for delivering lectures and other content to students in political science courses. The creation of a podcast could even be used as a course assignment for creatively assessing student learning. Like Harris and Park, Roberts noted that academic institutions could employ podcasting as a means for connecting with alumni and engaging in public outreach.

Today, we know that podcasts not only deliver university courses but also present news and opinions of all stripes. A podcast can be found to cover listeners' favorite sport, cheer on their favorite team, or enrich their enjoyment of popular culture. Some podcasts have even become cultural phenomena themselves—*Serial* being a noteworthy example. Politically, in an era of partisan and ideological polarization, listeners can find podcasts to interpret news and events, rehearse talking points, cheer on politicians and activists, and virtually connect with social movements. No wonder then that the editors of *n+1* (2019) recently published an essay proclaiming their love for a medium that essentially has become “the internet for our ears.”

In some ways, the podcasting boom parallels the advent of blogging. Appearing initially as the domain of diarists and pundits, it was not long before academics began to see the blogosphere as a medium for sharing their work and ideas. As Farrell and Sides (2010) observed, blogs written and curated by political scientists could be a “point of intersection between the discussions that political scientists have among themselves and public debates about politics and policy.” Podcasts produced by or featuring political scientists have created a similar nexus. As a case in point, consider Yascha Mounk's *The Good Fight*, which airs intelligent conversations about populism and politics—the very subject of his book, *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018). Not only did Mounk introduce political science research on this podcast, he also promoted it on *The Ezra Klein Show* and *Trumpcast*—shows aimed at broader, nonacademic audiences. Some podcasts, such as *Civics 101* (from New Hampshire Public Radio), remind audiences that political scientists and other scholars can explain complex governmental structures and processes. Others, such as *No Jargon* (from the Scholars Strategy Network), bring political and social scientific insights to bear on analyzing and solving the nation's most significant policy problems.

As academics explore ways to end ivory-tower isolation and contribute to public discourse, the time seems right for an examination of the state of podcasting within our discipline. The intent behind this spotlight is to share the stories of several podcasts, the political scientists that produce them, and the contributions they make to the “political science public sphere” (Farrell and Sides 2010).

This project began somewhere “between the ears”—that is, with my own appreciation for podcasts covering politics, particularly those in which political scientists have served as hosts or frequent guests. Starting with podcasts to which I subscribe and then locating others by using resources such as Twitter and the *Women Also Know Stuff* project, I reached out to numerous scholars whose podcast work covers current events in domestic and international politics, political science scholarship, and the like. Fortunately, a diverse group of political scientists responded positively to those initial inquiries.

I asked potential contributors to choose from among a list of questions to answer in their articles. They could choose questions from a few of the categories that I outlined, as follows:

1. *General*: What motivated you to get started in podcasting? What have you learned along the way—about the medium, about political science, about yourself?
2. *Public Orientation*: What does political science have to offer a typical audience? What do you assume or know about the audience? What type of feedback do you receive from the audience and from political scientists?
3. *Scholarly Orientation*: To what extent does your podcast highlight or promote political science scholarship? Why is it important for political scientists to engage with the medium? How might political scientists use podcasts in their teaching and research?

Because each podcast emerges from a unique motivation, has a unique orientation, and draws from a different segment of the discipline, the contributors did not address every question that I posed. Their articles that follow nevertheless offer authentic and diverse accounts of the personal and professional experiences that political scientists have had with podcasting.

The eight podcasts profiled here cover a range of fields within political science: American politics, comparative and international politics, and political theory. Some of the shows feature educational interviews and extended conversations with political scientists who have authored noteworthy books or important journal articles. Other podcasts allow political scientists to provide informed commentary on political news and contemporary issues. They manage to remain topical, demonstrate that our discipline has important perspectives to offer, and yet resist the allure of rank punditry. All of the podcasts work hard to bring a diverse set of voices, particularly those of younger scholars, to political and disciplinary discourse. The shows highlighted in this spotlight take

advantage of the intimacy of the podcast medium to make connections with a varied audience of scholars, journalists, policy makers, and interested citizens. These podcasts illustrate that political scientists know how to have engaging conversations, exchange witty banter and bad puns, and even assess the quality of beers.

Roberts, Matthew. 2008. "Adventures in Podcasting." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41 (3): 585–93. Available at www.jstor.org/stable/20452253.

Stein, Anne. N.d. "Podcasting for the People: Sharing Scholarly Works with the Masses." *The Grinnell Magazine*. Available at <http://magazine.grinnell.edu/news/podcasting-people>.

The Editors of *n+1*. 2019. "Friends of the Pod." *n+1* 34 (Spring). Available at <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-34/the-intellectual-situation/friends-of-the-pod>.

As academics explore ways to end ivory-tower isolation and contribute to public discourse, the time seems right for an examination of the state of podcasting within our discipline.

The following articles explain how and why some of our colleagues produce their shows. Most important, the articles emphasize that the focus of these podcasts is on making connections with an audience.¹ In that sense, the art of podcasting is much like the practice of classroom teaching. Whether we produce or listen to political science podcasts, the ultimate joy and value in them is that we learn from others. The spotlight closes with practical considerations and resources for any political scientist who sees a future in podcasting.

Naturally, this spotlight cannot provide a comprehensive account of political science podcasts. The numbers continue to grow and important new contributions to the genre continue to appear. One valiant effort by political scientists (The Politics Guys 2019) to provide a census of podcasts featuring our disciplinary colleagues seemed to be incomplete, if not out of date, on the day it first appeared. Because I am a regular listener and fan of many shows, the process of reaching out to potential contributors helped me to discover many podcasts previously unknown to me—ones that have since found a permanent place in my feed. My hope is that this spotlight will help readers see the benefits of podcasting for our students, our discipline, and our communities. Certainly, the podcasts featured here—and those too numerous to mention—have helped me grapple with new ideas in the literature, find political scientists to follow on social media, learn of important books to read, and discover colleagues to bring to my campus for presentations and conversations. ■

NOTE

1. Speaking of connecting with the audience, it is noteworthy that the single most popular episode for the New Books Network of podcasts was a *New Books in Political Science* interview with Cas Mudde regarding his book, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press 2017). According to Anne Stein (n.d.), that episode "was downloaded nearly 12,000 times in one week."

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"ROCKING OUR PRIORS": FUN, ENTHUSIASTIC, RIGOROUS, AND GLORIOUSLY DIVERSE

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Our colleagues are rigorously analyzing global politics and inequalities. Yet, so much of that valuable knowledge remains trapped behind paywalls and impenetrable jargon, dumbed down for mass consumption, or entirely overlooked due to widespread prejudice. I started my podcast to make fascinating research more accessible and exciting to a wider audience. I purposefully amplify women and people of color so that more people can learn from their work. The interviews are fun, but they also are in-depth discussions: testing and questioning different ideas.

I am a lecturer in the social science of international development. Since 2017, I have run a podcast called "Rocking Our Priors" interviewing academics about their published research on global politics and inequalities. Topics include the drivers of economic growth and poverty reduction, global supply chains, organized crime, authoritarianism, social movements, and trade unions. My goal is to make academic research fun, fascinating, and engaging for a mass audience.

The Status Quo Isn't Working

Much of our mainstream media is consumed by current events: speeches, summits, spectacles, and speculations. In the chaos of Brexit, Trump's tweets, and trade wars, we lose sight of the bigger picture. However, many people want to understand what lies beneath the iceberg: the underlying, long-term drivers. Vast campuses of students, academics, and related practitioners are grappling with these questions; they lack the time to read journal articles in full but enjoy listening to podcasts.

Yet, when academics are interviewed by journalists, we are usually stopped after three minutes max, restricted to top-line summaries. There is no time to explain how we arrived at these conclusions, explore alternative hypotheses, debate the model, or question the reliability of the underlying data. I think there is a gap in the market for fun, engaging, and analytically rigorous podcasting!

Showcasing Exciting Research

I think my podcasts are popular because we discuss these big questions in great depth—carefully thinking through the process of data collection and the choice of variables; scrutinizing