

Business Anthropology, Podcasting, and the Pandemic

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Keywords

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. It was four days after I gave a TEDx Talk and just over a month since I participated in the University of North Texas' Applied Anthropology Expo. Both in-person events provided fertile ground for discussing my findings, practice, and the merits of anthropology. But as the reality of the pandemic sank in, it became clear that I would not have a similar opportunity for some time.

To fill the gap, I, like so many colleagues, signed up for virtual conferences. I quickly found these to be an inadequate replacement for in-person events. Not because of the quality of presentations, but because virtual conferences didn't work for my lifestyle. I found it hard to justify taking off time from work for a virtual event, and likewise, I would work right through the presentations, thereby ensuring I was not getting a lot out of the experience.

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Most importantly, though, I missed the one-on-one interactions that spontaneously occur in person. These interactions are not only an opportunity to see old friends and network with colleagues, but they are also great for sharing and learning in an informal setting outside of the scheduled presentations.

By late-2020, I had resigned myself to the idea that I was done with virtual conferences. I would still apply to speak at a few and support some monetarily, even if I didn't attend, but I would not try and trick myself into thinking they were a replacement for an in-person social experience.

But what was I to do? Wait out the pandemic without any collegial interaction? No. I decided I would create a space for interaction by starting a podcast. In fact, I decided to start two.

A Brief History of Podcasts

Podcasts refer to digital audio files that listeners can download or stream to personal devices such as phones, computers, and other media players. The term, which invokes memories of Apple's iPod, was coined by Guardian journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004 as an amalgamation of "iPod" and "broadcast."

The term reflects the dominant position of Apple's iPod at that time and the devices' role in popularizing podcasts. However, the history of podcasting does not start with the iPod. In fact, it is grounded in another technology that supports the free and open architecture podcasts are still based on today.

In 2000, software developer Dave Winer published RSS 0.92, an update to the popular Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication Web syndication format. RSS 0.92 was created in response to requests from former MTV VJ Adam Curry and enabled the transfer of audio files. This became known as "audio blogging," and, later, podcasting with Curry's release of an RSS-to-iPod "podcatcher" client, iPodder (Bottomley, 2015).

At this time, podcasting was often seen as a backwater of the larger media landscape. The market was primarily dominated by independent producers, creating content that pales in comparison to the leading podcasts of today. Yet, it was rapidly growing in popularity, with some scholars suggesting its "time-shifting" and "anytime, anywhere" qualities as essential characteristics to its success (McElhearn, et al., 2005). Regardless of its nascent success to this point, 2005 would be the year podcasts broke through.

On June 28, 2005, at the Apple Worldwide Developers Conference, Steve Jobs announced the release of iTunes 4.9. Version 4.9 offered the

ability to subscribe to podcast RSS feeds intuitively within the interface, bringing podcasts to a larger audience. By 2013, iTunes alone was responsible for more than one billion podcast subscriptions to the rapidly growing list of available podcasts (Bottomley, 2015).

According to Williams, in 2013, there were more than 250,000 podcasts with eight million episodes in more than 100 languages. By 2015, O'Connell estimated 285,000 podcasts, and that same year, the Pew Research Center found the number of listeners in the US nearly doubled between 2008 and 2015 (Williams, 2013; O'Connell, 2015; Mitchell & Page, 2015).

Since that time, podcasting has matured and experienced significant growth. Ushered in by greater involvement from the traditional media industry, monetization models that make expensive production viable, and the availability of quality audio production equipment at affordable prices, the production value of podcasts has increased, creating a more enjoyable experience.

Shows such as *Serial*, which witnessed 77 million downloads within its first seven months of release, demonstrated the appetite for the maturing medium while valuations of podcast production companies like Gimlet Media demonstrated the future market potential with its \$15 million venture capital raise. These types of confirmatory market events led scholars and pundits of the time to refer to this period as the "podcast renaissance," which it arguably was, though not quite like we have experienced during the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (O'Connell, 2015; Sullivan, 2018; Roose, 2014; Akanegbu, 2021).

Edison Research found that podcast familiarity or the degree to which Americans are aware of the medium is now 78% of the total US population, up from 75% the year before. It also found that 41% are now monthly podcast listeners, up from 37% the year before, and 28% are habitual weekly podcast listeners, up from 24% the year before (Edison Research, 2021).

If the previous period was the renaissance, we have now moved into the "podcast enlightenment." With that comes new opportunities for us as business anthropologists.

Why a Business Anthropology Podcast?

At the start of 2021, after almost a year craving collegial interaction, I finally took the leap and started two career-oriented business anthropology podcasts. The *Anthropology in Business* podcast is for anthropologists and business leaders interested in learning more about the many ways anthropology is applied in business. The *Anthro to UX* podcast is for anthropologists looking to break into user experience (UX) research.

Both podcasts use the interview format and involve a conversation with a leading anthropologist working in the field. The discussions typically cover the practitioner's anthropological origin story, how they found their way into the business world, a meditation on the practice of anthropology in the business context, and recommendations for the next generation of anthropologists.

My rationale for starting these podcasts, at this time, was based on the belief that I could meaningfully address a few challenges and opportunities that existed because of the pandemic, the state of academic anthropology, and the rise of business anthropology.

First, podcast interviews provide an opportunity to connect with other practitioners to address the lack of collegial interaction we were collectively missing during the pandemic. While I held no misconceptions that it would replace in-person events, I knew it would provide space to connect, share, and learn. Furthermore, given the informal nature of interview podcasts, little to no preparation is required on the guest's part, and most feel pretty at ease. The result is a conversation that is natural, honest, and informative.

Next, there is a problem with anthropological training in academia. Most students are being trained to teach anthropology, even though most students will never do so due to dwindling positions and increased competition. A 2018 study by Speakman, R., et al. found that between 1985 and 2014, the number of US doctoral graduates in Anthropology increased from 350 to 530 per year. Furthermore, they found 79% of anthropology graduates could not find tenure-track positions (Speakman, et al., 2018). As a result, more anthropologists need to work outside of academia, and frequently they struggle to make the transition because of a lack of career-oriented training. By creating two career business anthropology podcasts, the guests and I have created a community of practice (COP) that allows listeners around the globe the ability to connect their education with lessons from practice. The results of these efforts are seen in the listener's comments.

"These conversations can transfer to clients in easy to digestible educational bites used as conversation starters. Every episode has had some takeaway I've found myself sharing." (Mamasaurus Rex)

"My only complaint is that this podcast wasn't around when I graduated with my Anthropology degree! Listening to your podcast is already helping me to better articulate my own professional value as an anthropologist working in a business context." (RAP1991)

"As an anthropology grad student, this kind of resource is super

helpful. Great guests that offer diverse perspectives on transitioning from anthropology to the UX industry.”
(nick192828393939944)

Finally, podcasts represent a business opportunity for organizations and sole practitioners to increase brand awareness, educate, and build trust with current and prospective customers. Be it a company selling consumer goods or an anthropologist looking to develop their personal consulting practice, podcasting as a form of digital content marketing (DCM) can help accomplish these goals. It does so by engaging in the social exchange of knowledge, where valuable content is given away in return for loyalty and future gains. The advantage is that it facilitates more engaged audiences at a reduced marketing cost through communication and relationships. It also accomplishes this without the need to sell overtly, and yet despite this approach, it proves to be quite effective. One estimate DCM results in a 62% cost reduction compared to traditional marketing efforts while producing three times as many leads (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Blau, 1964; Bicks, 2016; Duhon, 2015; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2010). Practitioners can take advantage of this business opportunity by consulting others in the creation of a podcast or in creating podcasts for themselves or their organization. In either scenario, our research skills can contribute to the branding, positioning, content creation, and advertising of a podcast and ongoing customer satisfaction research to ensure it provides the intended value.

How to Get Started

If all of this sounds intriguing, know that it is quite easy to get into podcasting. There is plenty of space in the anthropology podcast landscape, and the barriers to entry are relatively low. While there were numerous anthropology podcasts before I entered the market, such as *This Anthro Life* and *That Anthro Podcast*, none solely focused on business anthropology. As of writing this, that remains true aside from my *Anthropology in Business* and *Anthro to UX* podcasts, and though I overtly focus on business anthropology, there is plenty of room for complementary content.

As for the barriers to entry, interested creators only need a minimal cost investment to acquire the necessary hardware and software. Acquiring a decent microphone is the first step. You could use earbuds, though I would recommend a dedicated microphone such as those from Blue. The Blue Yeti is a standard at this point for getting into podcasting and offers the added advantage of being a USB microphone that does not require special audio equipment.

Next, you will need software for recording the podcast, which will likely need to support virtual recording given the pandemic and since our community is spread out. While I know of podcasts that use Zoom, I

suggest a dedicated podcasting platform. For better or worse, I choose to be an early adopter of Riverside, which has some issues with audio drifting. The more common choices are Zencastr and Squadcast.

The next step is post-production. Many recording platforms will also provide post-production support, such as basic level matching and noise reduction. If you are looking for additional features, third-party options range from free to expensive. A common free tool for editing the audio is Audacity. Paid tools include Adobe Audition and Apple Logic. I use Logic out of habit since I use it to record my music, though it is arguably not the best audio editing software on the market. If you are a user of the Adobe Creative Cloud, you already have access to Audition, so you may want to look at that.

Once you have the podcast edited, you need to distribute it. Here again, there are many options to choose from. If you want to keep costs down, you could use Anchor by Spotify, which is free. Should you find the feature set of Anchor does not work for you, paid options are Buzzsprout, Captivate, and Libsyn. I used Buzzsprout for the past year and have nothing but good things to say about it. That said, I did just switch to Castos because I was looking for tighter integration with my website content management system (CMS), which is WordPress.

Once distributed through one of the above services, you are done. Sit back and enjoy the rewards of spreading valuable content with our community.

Conclusion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has taken much from us over the past two years, human lives most regrettably, it has also created space for us to find new opportunities. A future of work and education where more people are remote is one such opportunity. I applaud those efforts as they can help increase work-life balance and access, but speaking from experience, I also know that we will need to find ways to connect on a more personal level. For me, I have found podcasting to be one such way. Not only has it provided me comfort during these challenging times, but I know from private feedback that it has also done so for many others.

It may not be the answer to most of our problems, but it is an opportunity to connect, contribute value that can help students, faculty, practitioners, and organizations alike

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