



# Public Podcast Production on Interdisciplinary Teams

## Challenges and Successes

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### ABSTRACT

This experience report details technical communicators' contribution to an interdisciplinary team creating a public podcast at a university policy center. We outline challenges and successes that we experienced on this team, including 1) Academic Integrity and Multimedia Authorship 2) Inclusion and Community Engagement 3) Accessibility and Production Quality, and 4) Interdisciplinary Collaborations. We offer four practical takeaways for technical communicators working on public podcast production, which focus on foregrounding accessibility; emphasizing dialogue and multiple modes; offering professional pathways for students; and platforming public scholarship, interdisciplinarity, and community engagement. We suggest that technical communicators can play pivotal roles on public podcasts, due to our expertise in accessibility, commitment to social justice/interdisciplinarity, and attention to rhetorical contingencies. We also discuss such work as a strong pathway to TC careers and skill-building for students.

### CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Human computer interaction (HCI); Interaction devices.

### KEYWORDS

Public communication, podcasts, interdisciplinary technical communication, accessibility

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC PODCASTS AND TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

The role that technical communicators can play on interdisciplinary public communication teams has been discussed concerning science [1], climate change [2], and health [3]. Yet there is limited discussion on technical communicators' involvement specifically

with podcasts, a medium increasingly being adopted as a public communication tool [4].

Originally characterized as a “scrappy, unpredictable little-guy medium”—due to their relatively independent, inexpensive, and decentralized production and distribution—podcasts have since moved more firmly into mainstream media [5]. In 2019, 51% of Americans aged 12 and older reported having ever listened to a podcast and the average podcast listener reported listening for 5 hours/week [6]. Podcast content ranges from news coverage, relationships, and self-help to true crime, among a myriad of other topics. Although podcasts can be produced by mainstream media outlets, they still retain some more independent, decentralized, and/or tactical potential than other forms of media [7]. Podcasts typically are created through a more iterative, collaborative process than more traditional media such as television and radio [8], and independently produced podcasts can also amplify marginalized voices [9, 10].

Within technical communication (TC)-related fields, research has explored using podcasts as educational tools for delivering course content or for teaching students to create multimodal communication [11, 12]. TC scholars have also examined podcasts' accessibility [13, 14]. In praxis, several TC-related podcasts are being produced, such as *Room 42*, which brings TC practitioners and scholars into conversation and *More than Memos*, which covers current TC research.

We build on this body of work here by examining an underexplored form of podcasting: podcasts as a public communication tool. More than 60% percent of the top 20 listened-to podcasts in the U.S. can be characterized as public podcasts, which are a specific podcast form that aim to further policy discussions through balanced reporting and bipartisan dialogue [15]. With this public service purpose, public podcasts' content ranges from daily news to academic research. Public podcasts can be produced by mainstream media outlets, such as The New York Times' *The Daily*, a news podcast, and *This American Life*, National Public Radio's social commentary podcast. Increasingly, universities have begun producing public podcasts such as Harvard's *PolicyCast*, which explores global public issues, as have smaller non-profits such as the Common Ground Committee's *Let's Find Common Ground*, which discusses bipartisan policy. Public podcasting can become an important medium for TC, given the field's commitment to social justice, multimedia production, interdisciplinarity, and public dialogue.

In this experience report, we describe how we became involved on an interdisciplinary public podcast production team at a university policy center. We then discuss challenges/successes that we have encountered as part of this team. Finally, we outline several practical takeaways for TC scholars and practitioners embarking on public podcast production projects.

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## 2 BACKGROUND: THE PUBLIC POLICY CENTER PODCAST

Our involvement on an interdisciplinary public podcast team began with a phone call between Kathryn and the director of our campus' public policy center. The director had reached out to Kathryn, who runs our English Department's internship program, because he was looking for an intern who could 'translate' academic articles into podcast scripts. The public policy center ('the Center' moving forward) is a "nonpartisan, independent research and public service unit" housed on the flagship campus of our state university system. The Center supports interdisciplinary research and brings policy experts, community leaders, and researchers together to further public dialogue across the state. The Center publishes an academic journal; conducts research on key issues in our state, such as substance use and violent crime; and supports several research and professional development opportunities for students, among other programs.

The initial idea behind the podcast was to create another platform for disseminating policy-related research published in the Center's academic journal to state lawmakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders. Following the phone call between Kathryn and the Center's director, Jonathan, the Center decided to bring on Jayson – who was then a TC graduate student in our English MA program – as the new podcast's scriptwriting intern. Kathryn remained involved as a communication consultant. The podcast team also included several economics scholars, library science professionals, and a historian.

While Jayson's internship was initially conceived strictly as composing alphanumeric text (possibly due to commonplace notions of 'English'-related work), his role quickly expanded to include audio production, communicating with subject matter experts (SMEs), content creation, and information design. Upon the completion of his one-year internship and his MA in English degree, Jayson joined the Center in a full-time communications coordinator role – a position that was partly created out of communication needs that became more readily apparent throughout podcast production. Jayson has since become affiliated faculty with the Center, a role that includes greater opportunities for interdisciplinary, public-facing research. These roles expanded as the interdisciplinary team recognized the value of TC well beyond writing alphanumeric text. While Jayson increasingly took on the daily responsibilities of producing the podcast, the rest of the team collaboratively decided on which content to feature and when, how best to market and distribute the podcast, and how to integrate the podcast into the Center's larger mission and programs.

## 3 SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES: PUBLIC PODCAST PRODUCTION

In reflecting on the success and challenges of this work so far, four themes have emerged for us, including 1) Academic Integrity and Multimedia Authorship 2) Inclusion and Community Engagement 3) Accessibility and Production Quality, and 4) Interdisciplinary Collaborations. In this section, we detail successes and challenges under each theme.

### 3.1 Academic Integrity and Multimedia Authorship

The team initially worried that SMEs would be hesitant to have their academic research 'translated' into a multimedia format due to academic integrity concerns, which has largely not been the case. Scholars have been more than willing to be interviewed for the podcast or perform a reading of their articles, perhaps due to the podcast's affiliation with a reputable university and journal. Unexpected benefits came with participating on the podcast – for example, we had an author reach out to us months after the release of his featured episode for listener statistics to include in his annual faculty review.

We did encounter some challenges that underscored the importance of continually working with authors to uphold their work's integrity. The team initially planned for each episode to include the host reading a 10 minute research article summary. It became apparent after the first few episodes, however, that not all articles lent themselves to this format. For each episode, the team then began to consider which of several formats would make the most sense – the host reading a synopsis, the author reading their article's full-text, an author interview, or a panel of guests speaking on the article's topic.

For example, when planning an early episode based on an Indigenous scholar's article about preserving Indigenous languages, Jayson pointed out that a synopsis-style episode would not be appropriate. Collaboratively with the author, we agreed that she would instead read the entirety of her article, which was partly written in Passamaquoddy. We felt that this format would best compliment her argument for "listening deeply to Indigenous voices, which have been systematically suppressed" [16] and showcase the Passamaquoddy language. The author decided to record her own audio, which Jayson scheduled to release at 8 AM via our hosting service. In the early hours of that morning, the author sent Jayson edits to the audio, which she felt better reflected the integrity of Passamaquoddy and rightfully revoked our right to use her voice until the edits could be made. Jayson approached this situation by firstly addressing her concerns over email, taking down the original episode, editing in the requested edits, sending them to her for approval, then re-uploading the episode for release. While we had not anticipated this situation, it emphasized the imperative to work with authors at every stage of production and the potential pitfalls (and affordances) that can occur in a multimedia format.

### 3.2 Inclusion and Community Engagement

While the podcast was initially conceived as way to foster public dialogue via broader distribution of academic research, public podcasts also have the potential to include voices beyond academia, an ongoing effort for our team.

This podcast has been most successful in engaging community voices when the original research is also community-based. For example, the authors of an article about supporting new immigrants to our state, particularly women, joined the podcast for a roundtable episode. These authors are all either immigrants themselves or hold key roles in supporting immigrant communities throughout the state. Because one of the authors could not make the roundtable,

the podcast host read from her section of the article to still include her perspective, an affordance of the podcast medium.

It has been more challenging, however, to connect with community members directly affected by the policy factors discussed in each episode. For an episode about the lobster industry, for instance, we were able to assemble a panel including scientific, economic, and policy professionals in the lobster industry, but we were not able to gain participation by any practicing lobstermen (the preferred industry term for anyone who catches lobster for a living), despite multiple outreach efforts [17]. This difficulty may stem from the podcast's ties to an academic institution and journal, which partly lends an academic ethos to the podcast and can partly impede community outreach efforts. This challenge was also compounded by Jayson's limited time and ethos to establish community connections while working on the podcast as an intern. The team's interest in building stronger community connections via the podcast has now been integrated into Jayson's new position as the full-time communications coordinator for the Center. In other words, the team has recognized that including greater community participation requires more sustained investment via full-time staff.

### 3.3 Accessibility and Production Quality

Accessibility has been a priority since the new podcast launched, with transcripts available for each episode. For Jayson, prioritizing accessibility was not so much a challenge as a learning curve. Being new to the podcast industry, Jayson was also a newcomer to auditory accessibility, though he did have training in TC theories and practices regarding accessibility and inclusion. Jayson thus worked with the team to update himself on the university's accessibility requirements, such as including episode transcripts on all listening platforms, ensuring clear audio, and describing imagery.

While we are thus currently meeting a certain level of accessibility, we are also mindful of calls to consider accessibility "at the incipient design of a digital text" (rather than as an afterthought) and to "anticipate ways that different users might be able to adapt texts and environments to suit their needs and preferences" [18]. Simply providing transcripts is not enough, as it does not enable users to customize these texts as needed. In his new role as communications coordinator, Jayson has begun exploring ideas for greater accessibility, for example, by introducing a YouTube Channel that can pair the podcast's audio with corresponding visual content and/or subtitles.

In this new full-time role, Jayson will now have more time to explore other modes that might improve accessibility as well as overall production quality. There have been limits to the production quality of the podcast, as it is a small budget academic initiative run by a team with many other job duties. As an intern, Jayson used his academic training in TC to analyze podcasts as a genre and to build related podcast production skills like sound editing. His relative success in doing so has led to the continuation of the podcast and the formation of his new full-time communication coordinator role.

### 3.4 Interdisciplinary Collaborations

This podcast has served as a way to literally and figuratively get folks from different disciplines at the same table. The episodes have featured work from scholars in fields ranging from anthropology,

economics, history, philosophy, and forestry, as well as from professionals working in land use, ecology, and community development. As the Center is charged by the state to remain non-partisan, one challenge has been to ensure that the team's selection of episode themes could not be construed as advocating a political agenda. With this in mind, the team carefully discussed each episode's theme, and the order in which those themes should appear, in order to ensure that it did not forward a particular agenda. For example, we decided that an episode on voting controversies would not be appropriate to release on Election Day. This challenge can also be viewed generatively, as the podcast provides a unique public platform to present balanced research on complex issues. While remaining nonpartisan, the podcast has dove deeply into issues such as the state's racist histories and antiracist public policies, sustainable energy, drug-related mortality, indigenous languages, and humanities and democracy.

## 4 PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Our experience has led to several practical takeaways for TC scholars/practitioners embarking on similar projects:

- *Foreground accessibility:* As noted above, we still have work to do as we strive to foreground accessibility at all stages of production. This may yet be another opportunity to involve TC students, interns, and scholars/practitioners, as well as folks from other fields, to envision multiple ways that users can interact with the Center's overall web content including this podcast.
- *Emphasize dialogue and multiple modes:* Internal listener metrics for this podcast have shown that the episodes including an interview or panel are more widely listened to. At the same time, some users—the Center's director included—have commented on the value of shorter synopsis episodes that allow users to quickly gain the main points of a longer academic article. The team is thus experimenting with creating two versions of each episode—a short synopsis, complemented by a larger panel discussion on the same theme.
- *Offer professional pathways for students:* By situating Jayson's position as an internship (rather than a student job), he was able to gain course credit and mentorship, while also building his professional TC skills. At the same time, establishing this internship has formed an ongoing collaboration between the English Department and the Center, as we now plan to place a TC intern there to assist with the podcast every year. In this particular case, Jayson's internship led to a full-time position at the Center. The skills that Jayson built as an intern are also readily transferable to other positions, both in podcast production and TC more generally. Thus, these types of on-campus internships can both provide strong pathways to careers for TC students and help to sustain collaborations between departments which might not otherwise interact.
- *Provide a platform for public scholarship, interdisciplinarity, and community engagement:* Initiatives like this one can provide a bridge between scholars in different disciplines and community stakeholders. While we have further work in this area, the center's institutional infrastructure has allowed us

to maintain interdisciplinarity and to begin to build community connections in ways that being confined to one academic department would not. Such centers—even if not specifically devoted to public policy—are good places to begin when thinking about initiating a public podcast.

## 5 CONCLUSION

As technical communicators have long advocated for interdisciplinary initiatives and community outreach [19], public podcasts are one concrete medium through which we can contribute to such efforts. Our experience has highlighted the importance of upholding authors' academic integrity, getting creative with multimedia authorship, continually working to prioritize accessibility/foster community outreach, and embracing interdisciplinarity in public podcast production.

This project has underscored the key role that TC scholars and practitioners can play in that process—as noted above, while our work as technical communicators was initially perceived as creating alphanumeric text, our wider contributions were quickly proven—e.g. accessibility expertise; commitment to social justice, interdisciplinarity, and community engagement; attention to technical issues; and rhetorical savvy were all TC practices that proved applicable to podcast production. Participating in such projects can also become an important pathway to careers for our students via associated internships. With such commitments in mind, TC scholars/practitioners can contribute to public podcasts disseminating balanced content that furthers (rather than fractures) public dialogue, an important goal in our current moment.

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