

## The Decline and Fall of the Independent Podcast (November 2015)

Last fall, the podcast *Serial* hooked millions of listeners on a tale of true crime. Hosted by Sarah Koenig and more specifically *This American Life*, *Serial* is a high production value podcast. Even now, almost a year since the last episode, *Serial* is ranked number five in the iTunes Store. To some it heralded a golden age of podcasts. Others, like me, see something else on the horizon: the podcast armageddon.

Let's give the golden age its due. Podcasts have gone professional in these last few years, which is good for the producer and the consumer. The rise of sponsors (Audible, NatureBox, Stamps.com, etc.) and the expansion of listener support on venues like Patreon mean that podcasters can get paid. And many are not only paying the bills, but also earning a living, which is fantastic.

Part of this professionalization also involves the advent of podcast networks. Alex Blumberg performed a coup with the formation of Gimlet Media, running off the initial success from his podcast *Startup*, a “very meta” podcast about creating a podcast company. Since 2014 they've added *Reply All*, *Mystery Show*, and *Surprisingly Interesting*, each arriving with the patented plethora of authentic “Ums” and pauses. Some networks like Panoply and Radiotopia have risen from the podcasting ecosystem, while others, like WNYC, NPR and ESPN have their roots in a pre-podcast era.

If you're a podcast enthusiast, this should sound spectacular. You want your favorite podcasts to benefit their creators. You want them to keep coming. But this professionalization has resulted in a troubling degree of standardization. For lack of a better word, let's call it the “NPR-ification” of the podcast world.

Most podcasts in the top charts, from *Radiolab* and *Hidden Brain* to *Planet Money* and *99% Invisible*, feature the same basic structure. The hosts guide the listener into an examination of a strange event, phenomenon or person's life, accomplishing this in either twenty or forty five minutes. Each episode is a self-contained capsule of auditory education.

What's wrong with that sort of a podcast? Nothing, inherently. The trouble comes when this type of podcast becomes the dominant type of podcast-- when NPR-ification is what you think of when you think of podcasts.

Podcasts are so much more than that. The more I see the NPR-ification take hold, the sadder it makes me. Podcasts do not have to be tailored for commercial breaks, for scheduled programming. Podcasts don't have to be factual, nor do they have to be educational.

Yes, there are popular podcasts defying this model, such as *Hardcore History* and *Welcome to Night Vale*. In different ways, they break the stereotypical podcast mold, the former with the magnitude of its subject matter, the latter with satire and surrealism.

Sadly, those podcasts are becoming less common. Nothing saddens me more when a small podcaster announces they can't afford to continue; the cost of keeping up the servers is outpacing the meager revenues. Small podcasters can't keep up with the production value of dedicated radio teams and infrastructures. Remember *Serial* from above? Not only has it spun off fan shows and parodies but now a new show, *The Message* has emerged on the scene, branding itself as a *Serial*-style podcast narrative, feeding off an expectation that listeners want more of the same.

We need a real podcast renaissance, one that broadens our conventional definition of podcast. Here are five independent podcasts you can start with, if you want to help make that a reality.

1. *The History of Rome* by Mike Duncan. While these episodes are only 15-35 minutes, they are not self-contained nuggets of oral composition. Duncan takes his listeners from Rome's humble beginnings all the way to 476 CE, over almost two hundred episodes. It's may be a massive commitment, but Duncan is smart, down to earth, and devastatingly dry humored.
2. *Spilled Milk* by Matthew Amster-Burton and Molly Wizenberg. Walking the line between either a food and a comedy podcast, Amster-Burton and Wizenberg spend 70% of the time giggling or talking

about high school slumber parties, and 30% talking about the ingredient of the week. They are unprofessional in the best possible way. I recommend starting with “Walnuts”, “Classic Cocktails” or “Pumpkin Spice,” but order is unimportant.

3. *Poem of the Day* by Poetry Foundation. Though not strictly an independent podcast, this is one that deserves more love. Every day, a new poem is featured; some classics, some modern, all enjoyable. Great for walking home in the snow.

4. *We Have Concerns* by Jeff Cannata and Anthony Carboni. WHC walks dangerously close to NPR-ification by discussing the latest in science and philosophy, but rarely do Robert Krulwich and Jad Abumrad break into spontaneous improv bits. If you love dad jokes or hate dad jokes, this is your podcast.

5. *Internet Box* by the Internet Box Crew. IB is intensely inappropriate, with a rotating cast of strange humans, each lovable and detestable in different ways. There is no podcast less professional than this one. Episodes range from 40 minutes to 3.5 hours.

Well, what are you waiting for? Put down your Encounters book and start listening. There are thousands of other podcasts that break the formula. Find them! Don't let podcasts be singular. Let podcasts demonstrate all that they can be.