Pandemic Podcasting: From Classroom to Bedroom

Alex Wake, *RMIT University, Australia*
Kim Fox, *American University Cairo, Egypt*
Catherine Strong, *Massey University, New Zealand*

Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic upended the pre-planned teaching terms for journalism educators, and during the lockdown many educators and students, globally were forced to adapt to a new online learning environment. This was not the normal online courses with an educator creating resources, well in advance, in the cozy and professional environment of on-campus offices. The educators, as well as students, were confined to their homes, which for many meant their bedrooms. This article will highlight how podcasts were used as a teaching tool in three different countries – Egypt, New Zealand and Australia – and how students developed their own remote recording techniques, to produce course assigned podcasts.

Introduction

The short-notice closure of many universities in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic meant educators/professors had to alter their method of teaching, as well as their resources. Although the courses were moved online, they were not the normal online courses that are carefully crafted and beta-tested over several months before being used for student classes. The 2020 teaching term swiftly moved to emergency remote teaching, meaning resources were prepared quickly and without the help normally available to educators and professors, such as instructional course designers and studios to produce high quality instructional materials.

Podcasting has long been hailed as the quiet achiever of the media landscape, slowly and quietly winning loyal listeners, particularly as news organizations turn to podcasts, among other techniques, to increase engagement and loyalty (Newman and Gallo, 2019). The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 found that podcasts had globally grown significantly in the last year, though it acknowledged that coronavirus lockdowns may have temporarily reversed this trend in some markets (Newman et. al., 2020). It noted that in the 40 countries surveyed, half of all respondents said that podcasts provided more depth than other types of media.

In the United States, the pandemic did bring a massive drop in podcast downloads, with some sites noticing a decrease of up to 20 percent of their listeners, which translated into those who would normally listen to podcasts on their daily commute. However, there were also significant increases in some at-home listening podcasts, particularly of those featuring COVID-19 (Cridland, 2020).

The authors here argue that the global pandemic

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lockdown brought a new significance to audio recordings and podcasts within the education field, and 2020 may be known in history as the year of podcast teaching, and/or podcast learning. It's ironic considering that it is exactly 100 years since radio began and the study of effective audio scripting and production started. Over the century, however, much has changed including the introduction of the internet, smartphones, and inexpensive home recording equipment. In the past decade alone podcasts have boomed, particularly among the young, which makes them perfect for the usually youthful demographics of university students.

Podcast popularity: The popularity of podcasting (creating them, and listening to them) was highlighted in Australia at the height of the coronavirus lockdown when a comedy program, *At Home Alone Together*, released a video clip of television personalities pleading with the general public to not make a podcast. While there was great mirth from some at this typical Australian humor, there was also an immediate online backlash from podcast enthusiasts. Academics and meia practicioners outlined clearly the reasons for supporting podcasts such as: podcasts were not produced by mainstream media organizations, diverse and niche groups of people could access a publishing platform, new voices could develop their skills, and there were low cost and relative ease with which people could start a podcast.

For these reasons, and more, podcasts were perfect for university educators and students to create and use during the coronavirus lockdown.

Podcasts as lockdown lectures: In some countries, including New Zealand and Australia, the university closures came within days of a nationwide stay-where-you-are lockdown. This meant students were often stuck in small bedroom apartments, sometimes with poor internet, and sometimes with several housemates vying for a computer or limited wifi. Some students were able to move to be with their families, but this was sometimes in remote areas that had little-or-no wifi access and typically with access only to a shared computer. It also meant educators had very little time to create resources to be available online.

In New Zealand, in three courses where the educator produced weekly podcasts for the students, the students said they welcomed an audio lecture that they could download onto their mobile device when possible and could listen later more leisurely. In these courses the educator used the typical podcast style of intimate voice projection and an informal speaking style.

Based on a post-semester survey of journalism and public relations New Zealand students, most of them reported that they listened to the podcast lectures while in bed (60%). A further 20% listened while in the living room on their own, indicating an overwhelming number of them were lying down while learning through podcasts.

Podcasts as a tool for teaching: There was another aspect that made the educator-voiced podcasts valuable. The New Zealand university students said it was comforting hearing a familiar voice, even if it was a dry lecture on communication theory or emotional engagement theory. They got to know the educator in the weeks before the lockdown, so it was soothing. It was normalizing. This view was echoed by the Australian students, who were given video lectures but predominately listened rather than watched the content.

In the New Zealand survey, a whopping 80% of the students reported that the most helpful part of the emergency teaching program was interactive two-hour-long Zoom sessions, where the educator led discussion on personal social chatter, as well as academic issues. The students particularly mentioned the value of the educator asking each student how they were feeling and coping with lockdown. This further emphasized the importance of the educator's voice in their learning when housebound.

The emotional and psychological impact on the students of the coronavirus lockdown and emergency teaching that was offered cannot be under-estimated. In Australia and New Zealand many students were separated from family and friends at a time when little was known about the deadly virus. Yet somehow with podcasts, they reported that could drift back to normality for a while, listening to the educator's voice in their head, through the earbuds. Comments on the educator-produced podcasts included "I could remember information easier with the sound of someone's voice in my head." … "I loved the format of a podcast. It was something I haven't had before in university and really enjoyed listening to them in my free time." … "It feels like we are learning from a real person rather than a video or from a script." ... "I found it more engaging and easier to connect to." When asked what was the negative of learning from podcasts the response was overwhelming "nothing."

Making podcasts, or even audio recordings, was

not necessarily easy for educators who do not usually work in the multi-media sphere. Some educators said they were scared of even the word "podcast" and many academics from other disciplines sought our assistance with basic audio skills over the coronavirus lockdown period.

These educators were in much the same position as mass media students during the coronavirus lockdown. These same students who were, only weeks earlier, introduced to microphone placement and the intricacies of narration.

Teaching remote recording to produce podcasts: Teaching audio production and podcasting has its challenges, with a particular learning curve for using audio equipment and studios. The move to an online-only environment also carried the burden of attempting to obtain quality audio, not just from interviews, but also from narrated segments.

Students at The American University in Cairo in Egypt had six weeks of face-to-face instruction before the lockdown. Some small audio projects had been executed during that time but were focused on hosting a roundtable discussion podcast and editing. Although this knowledge was useful, students were still worried about the quality of the remaining audio assignments to be completed off campus, including a final five-minute audio feature. In addition to pulling together resources from NPR, online posts, and professional journalists' tips for recording remotely, the professor's Zoom class sessions focused on pitching story ideas, scriptwriting and other facets of audio journalism.

The students' remote recording methods sometimes involved using a small closet, but overwhelmingly the students created a tent using blankets or a pillow fort and a mobile device, much like professional audio producers who were also working at home. To solve the issue of getting quality recordings, many students pitched stories that involved family members so they could still conduct in-person interviews. For those stories that required a remote interview solution, most students used a variety of methods including Zoom, which has a split audio tracks feature, which is useful for isolating voices when it comes to audio editing, and some used WhatsApp voice notes.

One element that was missing from most of the final audio features, which adds depth to narrative pieces, was natural sound (ambient). Some of the students who interviewed family members had some natural sounds, but its absence in the majority of the

audio features was noticeable.

One part of the audio production process that went well in the online environment was scriptwriting as well as feedback on scripts and rough cuts. The professor used a voice note to offer minute-by-minute feedback on rough cuts of the audio. As noted with the New Zealand students, the familiarity of the professor's voice was instructive, but students in Egypt also seemed to appreciate the detailed vocal feedback: "I was able to receive feedback from the professor, which helped me a lot with my feature overall."

In their final course reflections in Egypt, the students noted that the process of producing quality audio was less challenging than they originally thought and under the circumstances they were pleased with the end results:

> Thankfully, everything I needed was available for me, even outside of the classroom. I used voice memos on my phone and the quality of the audio was really good. I used Adobe Audition on my laptop. The only thing I wish was possible was recording my main interview face-to-face for optimal quality audio. (AUC Survey Response Undergraduate Student)

At RMIT University in Australia, staff and students were excluded from the campus three weeks into the new academic year. The undergraduate class was similar to the students in Egypt, in that they already had had classroom instruction in using formal radio studios and audio recorders, therefore the move to completely online instruction and production was not as difficult as anticipated. For those new students in the Graduate Diploma of Journalism, however, it was a different proposition, as they had no face-to-face instruction before the coronavirus lockdown moved them off campus.

Students in both cohorts were required to produce podcasts, but both had different reactions. For those who had worked with audio previously in the classroom, there was generally enthusiasm for the podcasts with such comments as "We all loved being a part of something that felt revolutionary." However, they were concerned that they did not have adequate equipment for the high-quality work that they knew they could produce with face-to-face interviews with campus-owned professional recorders.

> ...without a good connection you'd find the Zoom or Skype call dropping in and out/skipping/glitching, which was a bit difficult if you were interviewing and that happened in the

middle of an answer. (RMIT Survey Response Undergraduate Student)

For the Graduate Diploma class, with no previous face-to-face instruction, the lack of access to professional equipment from the university was more keenly felt. Many students made a comment about this inhibiting their ability to get a good recording and only two discussing other matters (such as difficulties with housemates or enjoyment in the flexibility of the project). Most had something to say about equipment and their ability to use it.

> I found it super difficult! I live close to a main road in an old house, so no matter what I did it was nearly impossible to get clear sound. I bought a Rode lapel mic hoping it might produce better quality audio, but it didn't help much at all. (RMIT Survey Response Graduate Diploma Student)

Student response to creating podcasts remotely

Podcast educators in three countries explored student reaction to making podcasts in the new emergency remote teaching environment. The cross-country survey is descriptive and cross-sectional. It used statistical data as a source of evidence for inductive interpretation rather than for direct answers. It identified patterns and themes for exploration and drew upon the three researchers' extensive history as audio producers and journalism educators. The sample was from an audio course in Egypt, a journalism course in New Zealand, and two journalism courses in Australia. There were 47 responses to the online survey.

Comments from the students indicated they found the exercise challenging, but fun and rewarding. At the end of the course some called it a "great assignment" or a "good experience" or "a really neat

Figure 1. Where Students Recorded Podcast Narrative in Remote Learning
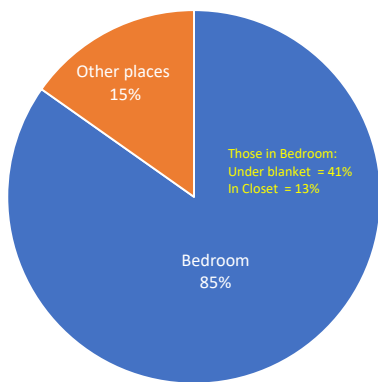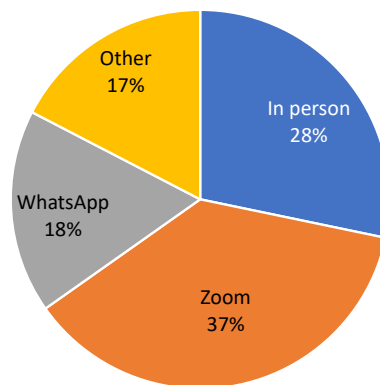

Figure 2. How Students Interviewed Remotely

concept," although others admitted they did not initially think so: "It was surprisingly easy; a lot easier than I was worried it would be." Several commented that they felt empowered to learn how to create podcasts at home as they could see it useful in the future.

The results indicated the majority of them recorded the voice piece or narrative part of their podcast assignments in their bedrooms. For many, this was simply copying the professional broadcasters who were also in lockdown and presenting from bedroom studios. Of those recording in their bedroom, 41% admitted they recorded under a blanket; and 13% reported conducting their recordings in the closet, with some using a t-shirt or sock to muffle the microphone.

The students in the three countries used a variety of methods to conduct interviews for their podcast assignments. Many were able to interview face-to-face, people within their lockdown bubble or nearby. For those unable to conduct in-person interviews, the majority used Zoom or WhatsApp. The remainder used a variety of applications including Skype and the phone.

No matter which country the students were located, their most useful method of recording interviews while learning away from studios and university equipment was the built-in microphone on their smartphone. Some were able to access external microphones, mostly the microphone on their small earbuds. Others simply interviewed directly into their editing software.

Conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic began exactly 100 years after the first news was broadcast through radio… at a time when audio information has transformed from daunting studios, to home-production with inexpensive digital technology. The pandemic lock-

downs further encouraged quiet bedrooms to become recording studios. The 2020 emergency forced remote teaching as a necessary experiment that proved challenging for both educators and students. However, podcasts also proved to be useful for both teaching and learning at this time. This research emphasized the value of the professor's own voice in educational podcasts. Students listened to lectures in their bedrooms and learned to appreciate the special characteristics of gaining information from podcasts produced by their educators because of the familiarity of the educator's voice and also the amount of details imparted. Journalism students also rose to the challenge of learning new skills to produce their own podcasts, from their bedroom studios using their smartphones as recorder and microphone.

Figure 3. How Students Recorded Podcast Narrative in Remote Learning
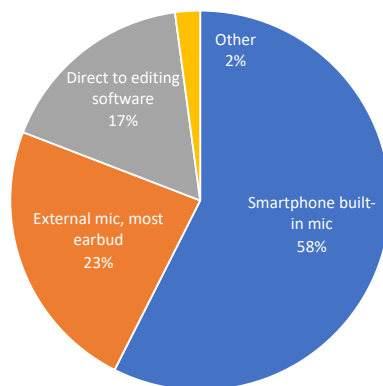
If the pandemic podcast teaching and learnings continue, the educators will be motivated to produce documents to share with students and their interviewees about how to get better quality recordings of themselves, such as how to hold a mobile device if using the internal microphone. There will also need to be a more concerted effort to capture better quality audio using a remote set-up. Finally, we will all need to find more creative ways of including natural sounds in recordings.

Although off campus learning was forced on the academic community and presented some challenges, the successes in using homemade audio platforms may become a trusted and reliable tool in every course resource kit.

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Each member of this research team had careers in radio journalism prior to joining academia. They specialize in audio communication, particularly information and journalism based. The team has completed other research projects into podcasting. Dr. Alex Wake is at RMIT University in Melbourne in Australia, and is president of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia; Prof. Kim Fox is at American University of Cairo in Egypt, and is on the executive board of the Broadcast Education Association; Dr. Catherine Strong is at Massey University in Wellington in New Zealand, and is on the executive of the Journalism Education Association of New Zealand.