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Comm 738 Final Assignment  
Research Proposal  
The New Age of Podcasting: “Serial” and its Affect on Podcasting Habits  
March 1, 2015

## **Introduction**

This research will be looking at podcasting as a medium to consume content. It is interested in the affect that the supremely popular podcast, “Serial”, had on the medium. Previously not a popular source to consume media, podcasting and “Serial” had most people’s attention in Fall of 2014. A survey will be administered in order to come to an understanding of the affects one popular podcasts may have had on an entire medium. The research is beneficial to many audiences. The most important being advertisers. With the new interest in podcasts, podcasters can use this new data to attract lucrative advertising deals. Also, it validates a new advertising opportunity for companies with smaller budgets that may not be able to afford advertising with more traditional media. Another audience that may find this data useful is content creators: broadcasters, Youtubers, Bloggers, and entertainers. Podcasting is a interesting, innovative way to build a following and fan base. For example, traditional broadcasters can use it as a way to increase listenership. This data will validate that podcasts are a good investment and encourage more to be created. This paper will discuss relevant ideas about this topic, and go on to explore the research concept and methodology, along with the limitations of this research.

## **Literature Review**

“Serial” aired during the October 3, 2014 episode of popular weekly radio show, *This American Life*. During this traditional broadcast, it was explained that the show’s writer and narrator, Sarah Koenig would take audiences through a story week by week via a podcast. The audience could not binge listen to the show. They would have to wait every week to hear more about a tantalizing story about the murder of a teenage girl in 1999 and flimsy case that put an 18- year -old boy in prison for life. Quickly the podcast became a huge success. By November

2014, the podcast reached 5 million downloads (Roberts, 2014). People became obsessed with the podcast, discussing it on a multitude of platforms including Twitter, Reddit, and other podcasts created to commentate on “Serial”. It was a national sensation, *and* by December 2014, the podcast had an estimated 40 million downloads (Roberts, 2014). To grasp the popularity and impact of “Serial”, compare it to other popular podcasts. During a series run of 4 years, “WTF with Marc Maron”, a popular podcast, has over one hundred million downloads (McDermott, 2015). The last episode of “Serial” was released December 18, 2014, and it remains number 2 on the iTunes podcasting charts.

However, podcasting didn’t start with “Serial”. Since the development of podcasts with iTunes and their app, people have realized that it is a valuable method in storytelling. Adam Bennington explains the appeal of podcasts in his article: “Stick it in Your Ear: Keeping Current with Podcasts” (2007). He explains that podcasts are convenient and easy for the listener to gather information because it is portable and easily absorbed. More importantly, he points out that podcasts are available to listeners at no cost. Despite being published in 2007, Bennington aptly describes why certain podcasts are successful. He mentions that traditional media, such as radio, would have more listeners or would be discovered more easily by listeners. He also encourages classic marketing techniques to bolster podcasts listenerships and encourages listeners to recommend their favorite podcasts to grow the medium. “Serial” is the culmination of all of the positive things about podcasts.

## **Research Concept**

This research project is guided by two research questions: Did “Serial” increase the likelihood of people listening to podcasts and did people start listening to a greater number of podcasts after the release of “Serial”. The goal of the project is to show how podcasting changed and is changing since this phenomena. The concepts being measured in this research is the effect that “Serial” may or may not have had on a listeners podcasting habits. The project is interested in learning if one popular podcast was the catalyst in a podcasting renaissance. Did one incredibly popular product motivate people to seek out things like it?

The variables in this research are related to the aforementioned ideas. The dependent variable in this research is related to the increased interest in podcasts. The one dependent variable is the likelihood that participant may listen to podcasts. The other dependent variable is the amount of podcasts a participant may listen. The independent variable is whether or not the participant listened to “Serial”. The measurement that is being used is a survey. The survey will question people about their podcasting habits in relation to “Serial” to achieve the data. Considering the success of “Serial” and the ideas surrounding it, the hypothesis for this research is that “Serial” increased the likelihood that people listen to podcasts and increased the number of podcasts people are listening, subscribing, and downloading.

## **Sampling Method**

In order to achieve results, the researcher will administer a survey to a sample of 400 adults 18-45. The population is any American adult with Internet access. The sampling frame is adults between the ages of 18 and 45 that are users of podcasting service such as, iTunes Podcasts or Soundcloud. The motivation for this population is simplicity. The project wants to

measure the affect of “Serial” and the simplest way to achieve that is to obtain data from people that had access to the podcast. However, this is a difficult population because it is large. The sample will be set at 400 in order to avoid sampling error. With the smaller sample, it is easier to achieve a smaller margin of error. In order to make it manageable a snowball sampling method will be used.

Snowball sampling is ideal for this project. Because of the incredibly large and unspecific population, it would be almost impossible to gather and effectively create a population list. With snowball sampling, the research team can find people that meet the criteria and have them disperse it other participants. The survey will include a prompt for the participant to send the survey to people that may be interested in participating. The sample will have a degree of bias because it will favor certain attributes depending on the first few participants. Also, the fear of the research team is that it does not reach 400 participants. With the risk of a low response rate, the research team has to be vigilant in finding excited participants. If the participants are excited and engaged with the survey, they will be more likely to pass it on to similar participants. Because of the popularity of “Serial” and the intense fervor over the podcast, listeners will more than likely be willing to assist this research as participants. If the researcher finds engaged participants, the snowball sampling will achieve the 400 people sample.

Snowball sampling isn’t the ideal route because it may be more difficult to generalize these results to a larger population, however, due to the large population size it seems to be the cheapest, most effective way to reach the sample.

## Survey Instrument

The instrument of measurement for this research is a survey. The survey will flow in relation to the research questions. It will start with questions regarding basic information about the participant. Following that portion, the survey will ask specific questions about the participant's contact with "Serial". If the participant has listen to episodes of "Serial" , the survey will go a certain way focusing on if this participant is more likely to listen to more podcasts after listening to "Serial". If the participant has never listened to "Serial", the survey will take that participant down a path answering questions about their likelihood of listening to podcasts in general. The survey will be composed of mostly closed-ended questions, and will end in one open-ended question. This project is relying on closed ended questions because these type of questions are the best when trying to measure perceptions. The perception that "Serial" affects any participant's podcast use is truly what the researcher is trying to get to in this project, so those will be the main focus of the survey.

The majority of the questions will be answered with a simple yes or no. Or, the participants will be given a set of choices. The survey will also make use of "skip and fill" questions meaning one question will lead into different questions depending on the participant's answer. There is one open ended question on the survey. The virtue of using this open-ended question is that this research is studying something new. The project is interested in obtaining people's raw opinions about podcasting habits and how "Serial" has affected the participant's podcasting habits. The survey will be distributed online. This would be the best method to reach the sample. It is the cheapest and quickest way to reach the most people. Also, it is simply logical to use an online survey because this project is studying internet users.

Using the survey, the project will receive valid and reliable data. The variables present in the survey will be measured as nominal data. The questions being asked in the survey will put each participant in a different category depending on their answers. For example, if a participant answers that they did listen to “Serial”, they would be placed in the “Serial” listeners category. “Serial” listeners are operationalized as people listening to one or more episodes of “Serial”. If they answered no, they would be placed in the non-listener category. The likelihood of the participants listening to more podcasts will be operationalized by the interest they demonstrated in their survey answers.

The questions are focused by the objectives of the research. One of the most important factors to consider is content validity. The questions must be related to the objective of the research or they are not achieving any usable data in the survey. Also, the survey has face validity. The survey explores all possibilities in the answers to its questions. Lastly, this survey has construct validity because it will be measuring the important concept of the project and determine who’s podcasting habits were and were not affected by “Serial”.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this experiment come from the accessibility of the content being studied. The largest limitation to this project is the size of the population. “Serial” and podcasts are available to every Internet user. . Another limitation of this project is the sampling method. With snowball sampling, the chances of sampling bias are high. Relying on the participants to find other participants is risky. It also decreases generalizability. The goal of any research is to generalize the results to the greater population. With this sampling method, that goal becomes tricky. Snowball sampling increases the likelihood of sampling error. Using random sampling is

almost impossible due to the incredibly large population. However, snowball sampling seems like the most effective and most cost effective choice for this project.

Many ideas that are formed from this research could lead to further projects. One idea would be qualitative research involving case studies of podcast creators that were influenced by “Serial” to create great content using the podcast platform. Other research questions include: Did “Serial” encourage more original content on the podcasting platform? Before the major hit of “Serial”, most popular podcasts were rebroadcasts of popular radio shows. It would be interesting to explore if “Serial” had any affect on more original content being seen on the iTunes top Podcasts charts. Another idea involves this project being expanded upon with the focus for advertisers. This project would revolve around this one, but it would focus on the likelihood for a listener to buy a product they heard about during a podcast. This could measure the true profitability of a podcast. Overall, it seems that podcasting is available as a new frontier for profitable, interesting content.

## Appendix A

The following survey will be measuring the influence of the podcast, “Serial”.

First please answer the following questions about yourself:

1. What is your age:

2. What is your sex:

A. Male

B. Female

Thank you for answering the above questions, now the next set of questions will be directed at your podcasting habits in relation to the podcast “Serial”.

3. Did you listen to the podcast, “Serial”?

A. Yes

B. No

If you answered yes, please go to questions 4- 13. If you answered no, please go to questions 14-20.

4. How many episodes of “Serial” have you listened to?

A. 3-5

B. 5-7

C. entire series

5. When did you start listening?

A. When “Serial first premiered”

B. After hearing about it

C. After it finished airing

If you answered b, go to question 6. If answered with A or C, go to question 7.

6. How did you hear about “Serial”?

A. Print media

B. Broadcast media

C. Online magazine

D. Social Media

7. Do you consider yourself a podcast listener?

- A. yes
- B. no
- C. not sure

8. Were you subscribed to or download any podcasts before listening to “Serial”?

- A. Yes
- B. No

If yes, go to question 9. If no, please go to question 10.

9. How many podcasts were you subscribed to before listening to “Serial”?

- A. 1-3
- B. 3-7
- C. 10 or more

10. How many podcasts were you subscribed to after listening to “Serial”?

- A. 1-3
- B. 3-7
- C. 10 or more

11. How often do you listen?

- A. not often
- B. fairly often
- C. neutral
- D. often
- E. very often

12. Do you agree with this statement?

Listening to Serial has made me more likely to listen to podcasts.

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Mostly agree
- D. Mostly disagree
- E. Disagree
- F. Strongly disagree

13. Please describe your reasoning behind your answer to number 12 in the space provided below.

14. Are you aware of the podcast, “Serial”?

- A. Yes
- B. No

15. Where did you first hear about “Serial”?

- A. Print Media
- B. Broadcast Media
- C. Online Magazine
- D. Social Media
- E. N/A

16. Do you consider yourself a podcast listener?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. Not sure
- D. N/A

17. After hearing about it, are you more likely to listen to “Serial”?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. N/A

18. After hearing about “Serial”, are you more interested in listening to podcasts, even if you are not interested in “Serial”?

- A. Yes
- B. No
- C. N/A

19. Do you agree with this statement?

“Serial” has made me more likely to listen to podcasts

- A. Strongly agree
- B. Agree
- C. Mostly agree
- D. Mostly disagree
- E. Disagree
- F. Strongly disagree
- G. N/A

Please describe your reasoning behind your answer if number 19 in the space below.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their reasoning for question 19.

## Bibliography

Bennington, A. (2007). Stick it in your ear: Keeping current with podcasts. *Online*, 31(3), 30-32. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/199931869?accountid=8285>

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