

Matter of Facts  
Season 2 Episode 10  
Dr. Funk – Podcasts  
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[INTRODUCTION - BYRNE] Facebook Twitter 24/7 News Talk Radio citizen journalism fake News Real News audiences are drowning in an overwhelming overload of information. Clearly a guidepost is needed to identify what is trustworthy and a reliable source of both news and information. Season 2 of the Delaware Humanities podcast “A Matter of Facts” delves into the topic, this year examining more closely popular sources of news and information. The *A Matter of Facts* podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming.

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[BYRNE] Thanks for joining us on the *A Matter of Facts* podcast. I’m your host Tom Byrne. Our second season has looked more deeply into a variety of popular sources of news and information, and in this final episode of the season, at our listeners urging, we get a little introspective, examining what you’re listening to right now - a podcast. Podcasting growth has exploded in recent years. When I taught a podcasting class at the University of Delaware in 2017, the number of Americans that had ever listen to a podcast was still below 50%. Now at 55%, with 37% having listen to one in the past month, and 24% saying they listen to one weekly. And while that still doesn’t come close to the over 90% of people that say they listen to radio each week, the gap is closing. So, how do podcasts shape the news and information people who listen to them get? What information do they best provide and how can they best fit into a person’s media diet? To help us look at those questions and more we are joined on the podcast by Dr. Marcus Funk, Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Sam Houston State University. His research focuses on community and online journalism and he’s written about the role of podcasts in those settings. Dr. Funk with, thanks for being with us on the *A Matter of Facts* podcast, we appreciate you taking the time to be with us.

[FUNK] Thank you I’m thrilled to be here.

[BYRNE] I want to start with your take on the growth of podcast. Is there any reason to see it slowing down, and is it destined at some point to stand side-by-side with things like radio at some point?

[FUNK] So it’s interesting, if you’d asked me that question last year, in May of 2020, I would have said there’s a ceiling in sight because the conventional wisdom is that everyone

listens to radio and podcasting in their cars while they're commuting, and a funny thing happened last March and we stopped driving to work. But interestingly enough that didn't happen. There wasn't a ceiling for podcasting and it rebounded relatively quickly last summer and listening has been growing, it's been diversifying, and it's been really expanding in interesting ways. As we sort of figure out this whole work from home and post-pandemic normal, I personally don't see any reason to think that podcasting won't continue to play a big role in our media diet.

[BYRNE] You mention it growing in some interesting ways. What are some ways that it's growing that you find interesting?

[FUNK] Well in terms of racial listening, the demographics, ethnically, almost, reflect the demographics, nationally. And while traditionally we have an idea podcasting is being a nerdy basic white guy hobby, actually, it's diversifying quite a bit and it's beginning to reflect national ethnic demographics quite a bit. There's a long history of ethnic podcasting and Black podcasting really reflecting the African American community and podcasting reflecting and emulating social spaces like barber shops and Black churches, and we're seeing more and more and more of that. And we've seen considerable growth in the Hispanic community and Hispanic listeners as well. And we almost demographically have gender parity almost as many female podcast listeners as male podcast listeners, and I think that's interesting as well. These trends all continue to grow and continue to be realized as most of us were sitting at home incorporating podcasting into our new routines, in our new normal. We still don't know what normal is going to look like in the next couple of months, couple years, but I'm intrigued and fascinated by the idea that podcasting will play an increasingly large role in that those habits in that media consumption.

[BYRNE] And obviously the habit, we kind of alluded to it earlier, feels in some ways similar to radio and that comparison with radio, especially when you talk about particularly more newsy podcasts, seems kind of a natural comparison. Many of the top news podcast, things like *The Daily* from *The New York Times*, *Up First* from NPR, come from traditional news organizations and we've seen in the past many podcasts become radio shows and sometimes even vice-versa. And I also found in really interesting, looking at some of the recent Nielsen research, that news podcast that top the list of podcasts listening, do so at the traditional Radio Drive Time, 6 to 10 a.m. 3 to 7 p.m., so it seems there's that easy connection. But I guess what I'm curious is if at some point that comparison's going to become antiquated as time goes on because of just the differences in the two platforms or is that always going to be natural?

[FUNK] Well I think podcasting shares a great deal with terrestrial radio and traditional radio and certainly it has considerable roots in the older medium, a lot of writing, a lot of scholarship has looked at overlap between podcasting and traditional radio, the similarities and the differences. One really fun, easy comparison is to look at Radio

Drama and fictional podcasts and if you look back at the Golden Age of radio and *The Shadow* and all those fun radio dramas, well they have a lot in common with *Welcome to Night Vale* or *The Black Tapes* and fictional radio dramas that we here exclusively on podcast today. We can see similar overlap in news. NPR publishing a podcast, the contents, not all that different than a traditional radio. In fact many podcasts and many radio programs overlap, and they double dip and the content appears in both mediums, including the show we're on right now. So I think for traditional radio outlets like NPR, it's especially similar. But what's interesting is that overall podcasting is to terrestrial radio what YouTube is to traditional broadcast. It offers a similar venue and a similar format for traditional broadcasters like NPR or like traditional television stations but it also opens the door and really lowers the threshold, lowers those barriers to entry for a wide range of hobby podcasters in a wide range of newsrooms than maybe don't have a traditional broadcasting arm like a traditional newspaper that can jump into podcasting super easily and can extend their written content or their digital content into the audio streaming world. It really pays a lot of dividends for them.

[BYRNE] Earlier when we were talking about some of the things you found interesting about podcast listening and one of the things that interests me that you said was the idea of in the Black community a lot of times podcasts can kind of mirror the barbershop mentality or the barbershop venue for that kind of conversation and information. I know you've written a fair amount about podcasts and community journalism, and I'm curious as we see local news sources start to shrink and struggle, particularly in the print venue but also in radio and TV to a lesser extent, are these kind of more community-based podcasts a way to fill the gap in local news and local information?

[FUNK] Absolutely. And I think part of it comes down to how we define the word "podcast" and we can look at it purely in a technological sense. We can talk about how its digital streaming audio and how it differs from terrestrial radio. There's a lot of value in those conversations, but at the end of the day that only gets you up to the microphone, so exclusively looking at technological comparisons, then you wind up staring at the mic going, "Okay, now what, what do I say?" and if we look at podcasting from a content perspective and we consider why are people flocking to this medium, what is it about this thing that makes it so compelling, technology only explains part of that picture. What we find instead is it's the digital community, sense of emotional and personal connections that audiences have with each other and with hosts, because I'm communicating a great deal more about myself and my personality over audio in this conversation, right now, than I would be if I were writing literally the same words out and you were reading them on Twitter or on a traditional webpage, or even a typewriter in the traditional page and audiences really respond, well, to those parasocial relationships and those parasocial interactions, those senses that they know there's a sense of emotional connection between the podcast host and the podcast listener. And I think that helps explain a great deal of why audiences flock to podcasting during a pandemic where they were literally disconnected from direct face-to-face contact from one another for so long. This is a way

of generating emotional conversation. This is a way of generating shared experiences and emotional experiences. Separated through a relatively informal media platform. And if we consider podcasting as building digital community, and we consider audio as a particularly effective way of transferring personality, of exploring emotion, then what podcasting does isn't all that different from a traditional mom-and-pop suburban, or exurban or rural community newspaper, which is all about community connections, it's all about shared experiences and celebrating the life and times and culture in news that affect that little community and only that little community. Podcasting usually isn't focused on a particular geographic area, but if we think of community in more of an ideological sense that everyone is gathered around this particular podcast, to talk about this particular topic and build a community. Any newsroom can help foster that. Any newsroom can help generate that community outreach that sense of emotional connectivity through podcasting. The other thing I would say to newsrooms around the country, is this is a relatively cheap and effective way not just to reach your audiences on a new platform but to generate some revenue. In 2020, and this still blows my mind, in 2020 National Public Radio, made more money off of underwriting for podcasts than they did for tradition radio broadcast. This was during a pandemic. There's an argument that podcasting still, the ceiling financially, the potential for advertising dollars, still hasn't breached, we have not peaked yet and it's certainly true that the advertising revenue was relatively confined to the top 1%, the top 5% of all podcasts. But if I'm sitting at our traditional newsroom, I can spend a relatively small amount of money on a podcast studio and have a new super-efficient super-time effective way of reaching my audience and opening up a new revenue stream...

[BYRNE] I do want to jump in, I've heard that argument before, but I think sometimes what that argument leaves out is the personal capital that's needed to do podcasting, right? That the reason why it's easier for larger newsrooms, larger entities like NPR and *New York Times* to monetize podcast is because they've got the initial investment where they can hire people who can focus specifically on podcasts and the audio engineers to make it high quality, whereas a local news room, you're probably asking a reporter who's already overtaxed to jump in the podcasting as well, and it's a little bit harder to monetize because either you got to pay that person more, you got to hire somebody else to help make it happen, or you kind of wind up in danger of burning people out, is that still kind of barrier though that there is that kind of time and personnel capital that it's harder for smaller entities. Even though the basic overhead of podcasting is cheap, there are some kind of maybe we call them hidden costs?

[FUNK] Certainly local media are getting squeezed across the board and I think that's a big reason why we're so polarized as a nation right now because all of our media or a disproportionate part of our media are nationally focused, not locally focused, so I can certainly sympathize with those concerns and there are only so many hours in the week. I think that also helps explain why a lot of local news podcasts, and a lot of news podcast generally aren't necessarily breaking news. They're not going out into the field and recording audio or audio interview. It's emotional conversations about the news at a set

time every particular week or every particular day. So *Up First*, from NPR is a great example. They're not on *Up First* every morning, going out and breaking news. They're bringing an individual reporters who've already done that, and they're exploring those news topics in depth in a run-down every morning. And we see a variety of nonprofit newsrooms across the country and a variety of traditional newsrooms across the cross-country approaching podcasting the same way, this is a weekly run down or a daily run down, a conversation that sort of peeks behind of the curtain a little bit and gives those really dedicated and really interested news junkies more of an understanding of how the sausage is made and what is really happening and I think that eases some of those burdens. I think yeah asking reporters to take additional equipment out into the field and produce podcasting story on top of everything they're already doing, that can be a big ask in some circumstances. But saying, let's take an hour or 90 minutes every week to just break down what happened this week and what stories we're working on and why they're important, I think that's much, much simpler.

[BYRNE] I do want to go back to the idea of the comparisons to community journalism and kind of connecting with people and having a kind of more visceral connection through podcasting you might have normally. Is that certainly something that journalists can learn from podcasters, this kind of community building opportunity, because a lot of times up until maybe more recently, when journalists are jumping on Twitter, for instance, and maybe showing a little bit more of their personality, journalists have always kind of kept that gulf between themselves and the public, that they were kind of this more neutral observer perhaps. Do you feel like this is an opportunity for journalists to maybe connect more with the communities they are reporting on and maybe help build trust in communities in a time when, as you mentioned, things are very polarized, there is distrust of the media, does this offer of an avenue to do those type of things as well?

[FUNK] Absolutely. And I think the era of the fly-on-the-wall journalist has really drawn to a close and we have sort of a mythology of Journalism as a kind of a hypodermic needle of the journalists just produce the news, and then they injected it out into the population. And it's a one-way communication flow, and everyone takes that news and they make rational, objective decisions, based on that rational objective news content. And I don't want to advocate subjective or biased reporting, I think it does a lot of harm, but we're also in a very social and interconnected world that craves community, and craves emotional and interpersonal connection. And I think journalists do a disservice when they continuously try to detach themselves from their audience and from their own work. I think journalists need to be more willing to be people. And less insistent upon being completely sober and completely objective minded, "Just the facts, Ma'am". A comparison I use for my students is all about comic books and I tell them less Clark Kent, less just hanging out in the background just taking photos being completely unnoticed. More Eddie Brock, more actually engaging with people having direct conversations, being willing to be on the camera and sharing some of your perspective to help the audience more fully understand the topic. Podcasting offers a great fantastic way to do that because if you've

got an informal chat between two journalists talking about the news, you can't not share your own perspective. You can't not share your own emotions, and in so doing you're also building Community with audiences, that really resonate with those perspectives and with those emotions. This is a country that votes for president based on who they want to have a beer with, not on who has the most objective, mathematical policies. And in many ways, media need to learn from those practices, we need to show a little bit more figurative skin. There's certainly a limit, there's certainly a barrier beyond which you don't want to go, but I think there's much more appetite on social media and on podcasting to be social, and be emotional. And I think podcasting is a really simple, really informal way to really tap those instincts, to really build those community connections. And part of that is just the nature of audio media because we hear so much more about a person when they're speaking than we do when we simply read their work.

[BYRNE] I'm curious I'm going to flip the coin here on this end and look at the other side of this and that is for people who are getting information from podcasts, particularly maybe community oriented ones that are trying to provide news and information but they're not attached to a news organization. How much of a concern is there about the journalistic integrity of the information people are getting from those type of podcast, weighing it against having someone whose eyes and ears are in the community and bring you information about the community that you may not be able to find elsewhere?

[FUNK] So it's a question of credibility right, and there is a tension there, because on the one hand podcasting, really encourages emotional connections and really encouraged the idea that credibility is based on authenticity, not necessarily traditional facts, but traditional journalism is all about the facts, not about bias or perspective and so there's a juggling act, that journalists need to do to show a little bit more of themselves to be more human more relatable while still continually defaulting to traditional objective, journalistic practices. As a podcast listener, particularly beyond the realm of journalism when we're talking about political commentary or opinion, then we have to stop ourselves. We have to wonder, "Okay, are we listening to this podcast purely because we like the host and because he's persuasive and relatable?" versus "What are they actually saying, can we break down the actual factual credibility of those claims and weigh the podcast on that objective reality, not necessarily on the persuasiveness of the personality of the host". So there's a real friction there because this medium, this platform, really drives on emotional connection in parasocial relationships, and feelings of community and emotional investment. And that's where journalists can really leverage it for its full potential. But at the same time, there's a very clear risk that audio media both radio and podcasting will encourage disinformation or mistruths or conspiracy because credibility is rooted so fundamentally in personality and perspective and emotion, not necessarily objective verifiable facts. There is a, a real clear friction there.

[BYRNE] So I want to delve out of news for just a moment because we talked a lot about news and journalism and podcasts. But obviously there's more than just news podcast

and I'm curious what you see is the role of other genres, especially popular ones like true crime, tech and science, history podcasts, playing in both podcast growth and how people expect to get information moving forward. And I guess in some ways to journalists need to be more creative in how they present things to get and engage podcast listeners?

[FUNK] One thing that has always fascinated me about podcasting is its timelessness and its dissociation from the hard currency of this is what is happening now, now, now, that is so dominant on cable news, and traditional television news. The big watershed moment for podcasting with serial, The True Crime podcast, that was about a crime that happened a full fifteen years before the podcast came out and became popular and ordinarily news media wouldn't dive 15 years into the past, a decade and a half, to find a relatively unknown crime to really deep dive into, but podcasting allows that kind of chronological flexibility. And I think that's something that we can take from True Crime and into broader areas of news that it allows us to look at events and in context, like, NPR's *Throughline* that are not devoted to the here and now. I also think that we're country that badly needs hobbies, we're a country that badly needs side interests and that perhaps news media have been so exclusively focused on politics for what feels like forever. And you can understand why that is no one would doubt the gravity or the importance of presidential politics right now, or over the last five or ten years, but at the same time, fatigue does set in, and I think part of the reason we're so polarized as a nation and part of the reason that faith in news media and trust in news media is so low is because it's emotionally exhausting. There's so much exhaustive focus on news and politics in the daily grind, that it feels like there's not an off switch. Podcasting gives you opportunities to look at other topics, look at older historical political events, that help couch the modern political movement, or True Crime that is more or less disconnected from that daily Republican and Democratic politics, but still informs our understanding of law enforcement and race relations and how policy might move forward. And I think it helps broaden and diversify, our understanding of a lot of different topics in a lot of different subjects that also comes from the voices that are doing the podcasting as well. Because this is not a platform that has a particularly expensive barrier to entry. This is something that just about anybody can buy a microphone, hope on the internet, and stream and can podcast. In fact, we saw a great deal of people do exactly that once the pandemic hit last March, last April, last May. And I think that helps too, there's value in diversity, of voices, and diversity of topics and perspectives. And I think podcasting offers a really fresh and really convenient way of branching out away from what feels like the daily grind of ceaseless, endless, zero-sum game politics.

[BYRNE] So as we start to wrap up, what are your thoughts on what's next in podcasting? Where do podcast go from here? Where are they in 5-10 years?

[FUNK] I'm not sure. I think that's an interesting question because we haven't peaked yet. We haven't seen where this medium is going to end up, and we're also not sure how it's going to incorporate into our new normal, because were not totally sure what that new

normal is. Conventional wisdom would have been that. Yeah, people will still keep primarily listening to it in their cars to and from work but it's not even clear how often we're going to commute to work in 2022 or 2023. And I'm fascinated by the notion that podcasting is so resilient, is such a big part of our work from home routines, but that makes it hard to predict what's in store next. I think we're going to continue to see growth and expansion and I think we're going to continue to see podcasting reflect the trends in news and the cultural trends that we've encountered over the last year. I think the big issues, the big stories we've been following over the last year about race relations and about the pandemic and about vaccinations and how the conservative movement continues to sort of evolve in the post Trump era. All those conversations have a big, big foothold in podcasting. I think this audio platform that is so emotionally focused is going to play a big role in how we as a country and society sort of negotiate those evolving stories.

[BYRNE] And finally we like to end this podcast by asking each of guests where do you get your news on a daily basis, what are your favorite or go-to news sources and I feel free to include podcasts.

[FUNK] So I subscribe to the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and I'm also a supporter of the *Texas Tribune*. I read a lot of *Axios* and *The Hill*, as well as *The Wall Street Journal* and our local NPR affiliate in Houston. As for podcasts, I'm a big fan of *Up First*, *Axios Today*, and *Slow Burn*. I also really like *Majority 54*, *The Bulwark*, and *Stay Tuned with Preet*. And my wife has got me hooked on *Crime Junkie* and other True Crime podcasts.

[BYRNE] Well Dr. Marcus Funk, we appreciate you taking your time. Dr. Marcus Funk, Associate Professor of Mass Communication at Sam Houston State University. We appreciate you for joining us on the *A Matter of Facts* podcast. Thanks for taking the time.

[FUNK] Thank you. I really appreciate it.

[OUTRO - BYRNE] Thanks for listening to this episode of the "A Matter of Facts" podcast. The "A Matter of Facts" podcast is brought to you by Delaware Humanities, a state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Its mission is to engage, educate, and inspire all Delawareans through cultural programming. We thank the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for its generous support of this initiative and the Pulitzer prizes for its partnership. A Matter of Facts is produced by Delaware Public Media, Delaware's source for NPR news.