

## ISOJ 2019: Day 1, Afternoon Session

### *Ok, Google, Alexa and Siri: Play the news. Can you really help journalism in the podcast boom?*

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**Chair:** Debbie Hiott, general manager, KUT & KUTX

- Kourtney Bitterly, lead research & development, **New York Times**
  - Steve Lickteig, executive producer, podcasts and audio, **NBC News and MSNBC**
  - Irene Noguchi, executive producer of *Today, Explained* podcast, **Vox Media**
  - Jessica Stahl, director of audio, **The Washington Post**
  - Emily Withrow, director, **Quartz Bots Studio**
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**Debbie Hiott:** When Rosenthal asked me to do this panel I had been in the radio world for about six weeks, so a hot minute here. The good news for you is that there are a lot of other experts on the panel who can tell you a lot about what's going on and there's an awful lot going on with smart audio and streaming and of course podcasts.

Just want to tell you a little bit about our experts that are going to be coming up. Irene Noguchi, who is the executive producer of Today, Explained with Vox Media she's going to really talk about how one podcast comes together and how they have had to evolve over time. Steve Lickteig is the executive producer of podcasts and audio for NBC News and MSNBC and he's working on an overall strategy for the organization. Kourtney Bitterly is lead for research & development at the New York Times, she's very focused on what the audience is looking for and how the Times will pivot to the next thing. Emily Withrow is the director of the Quartz Bots Studio and I think she's got the fascinating job of really going after the holy grail here in terms of personalized audio interactive experiences. And of course, Jessica Stahl who is the director of audio with The Washington Post which has done quite a bit in a short period of time on that.

I just want to give you a little bit of an overview so you have a sense of the urgency I think of this issue. When I look at where smart audio is right now in podcasting I really think about the situation that was facing newspapers about 10-15 years ago and still not pivoting as much to digital, and this is the area that for those of us in the broadcast world is probably our biggest threat and opportunity and it is a great opportunity for everyone else.

The podcast boom right now you all know since serial came out in 2014 podcasts have really taken off, off course they were there before that, but that was really kind of what burst into the mainstream. More than six hundred and sixty thousand podcasts and growing right now, that's content in more than 100 different languages and when you think about that... to me it reminds me of the 90s when everyone suddenly could be a news blogger, everyone had a blog and then of course we all know only the strong were able to survive.

Everyone has a podcast, 51% of the U.S. population right now that's older than twelve is actually listening to podcasts and they're doing it with a good bit of frequency, you know... one third of the people listen to the podcast in the past 30 days and 17% in the past week. There are a number of people that are actually listening to multiple podcasts throughout the week have made it a regular schedule.

NPR had quite a few podcasts that have been very popular and just in the past couple of years they went from 3.5 million downloads in 2016 to 5.4 in 2017 and of course there is money attached to this. Podcast, advertising, spending was estimated to be about 250 million in 2018 and that was actually up from only 133 million in 2015, so it is really moving in a big way in building.

So, the other issue that we're facing right now is smart audio and as you all know that's the smart speakers that is Alexa, it is Google home, it is Siri, it is all the different ways that you can get access to your favorite audio. According to the latest smart audio report from NPR and Edison more than a fifth of the adults in the U.S. own a smart speaker and actually a whole lot of them own more than one, I mean they're all over the house now, and from 2017 and 2018 the number of folks that we're actually using the smart speakers grew 78%.

Now when you think about that and you think about those of us who are going over the air on radio that is quite a bit of competition, but it's also quite a bit of opportunity to catch people not just in the car, but to make their listening habits a part of their entire day.

29% of the folks who own smart speakers are actually using that speaker several times a day in addition to the 19% who are using speakers multiple times, there is another 24% about once a day. It's not really a case like it was maybe three years ago where a lot of people were getting smart speakers and where in fact there were cool gadgets to have and people weren't exactly sure what to do with them.

We know from all of these numbers that people know exactly what to do with them now, and so I want to turn it over to Irene so that she can talk about exactly what it is that they're doing with podcasting at VOX to get that opportunity.

**Kourtney Bitterly:** I'm Kourtney Bitterly, I am research lead from the New York Times, and so we view our mission as helping people understand the world and more recently we've been doing that, we've been expanding our offer through audio, you know launching things like The Daily, Caliphate, Still Processing which is really great.

Thank you, I also really appreciate Jenna and Leslie, but we've really you know, as we expanded those offerings and really have seen success in those what we realized as we were seeing you know as Debby quoted earlier that we're seeing so many of these smart speakers take off.

So what does that really mean? Is voice the same as audio? How should we be thinking about this space? And I think we've uncovered a lot of really interesting things because you know, in our newsroom we're really used to creating content, but with these smart speakers we're essentially having to create entire user experiences as well.

And so, the way that we approach this is we decided to do some design research, so we set out across the country, we went to three markets Seattle, Miami and Detroit and we spoke to over 20 people in their homes because we really wanted to

observe them, and the reason we chose this approach is that we really wanted to be able since this is such a decent space to really spend time and understand people's behaviors because it's not quite yet even though we're seeing a bunch of articles about what people are doing what they're buying we're not necessarily understanding why they're doing it.

So, a couple of things that we did as we actually went out and we had these provocation so we call them sacrificial concepts and essentially what they were because this is a very decent space still to this day we wanted to start to understand what are some of the boundaries that people are creating for themselves.

So, what we did is we went out with some of the sacrificial concepts and so because we're trying to understand you know a lot of the uses that people have for these devices right now are still very basic. They're they're setting alarms, they're asking for the weather, so we wanted to understand what would they be potentially open to in the future. So, we did things like the center one which was my favorite is that if you asked for the news and you sounded sad is that the device would acknowledge that you were sad and it would say "you sound sad, do you want to pick me up?"

Everyone universally found that creepy, 100 percent of the people that we interviewed were like absolutely not, we do not want Alexa telling us we sound sad, that would make us need additional therapy on top of the therapy we're already getting and so, what we realize though is like people are trying to create boundaries and that's what we really wanted to understand. So, what we learned is that right now people are experiencing these devices in these three different modes:

So there's Ambient and this is where people are really just using it as a radio, they're playing podcasts, they're playing music.

Assistive, this is where they're viewing it more as a service and this happens in multitasking moments, so things like even flash briefings actually we're falling into this category, but things like setting alarms it's really helping people as they're going about their routines.

And then Captive was where people were viewing it as a destination. Where these things are right now is that it kind of feels like a lot of quizzes fall into this space and that kids actually tend to be the users that have the biggest patients to really view this as a destination.

But when we saw again is that there's a lot of tensions that exist as people are still creating these boundaries. So, the first one was Adoption vs. Intrusion, so you know even though people are buying these devices really rapidly they're still expressing caution about privacy.

Futuristic vs. Nostalgic, so we heard a lot of people mentioning things like the movie her or minority report when they talked about buying these devices, but at the same time they were mainly using it as a radio.

And then Communal vs. Individual it's inherently shared, but you can use it to support some of your individual routines.

And then Functional vs. Novelty, I won't touch on every single one, but Functional vs. Novelty is that we've found that things are really kind of breaking into these two categories that they were either super tactical like "Alexa turn out the lights" or it was very novelty like playing 20 questions.

And so the insights that we gathered from this is that as much as people were buying these devices the big part of why they were buying these is that they were really starting to like re-evaluate the relationship that they had with technology and screens in particular and the smart speakers were becoming a place where they could mediate that.

And so, even though it wasn't necessarily the impetus for buying them a lot of times the impetus was because they got a free gift with purchase when they bought something from Amazon or even Google is that as they started using them they really felt like there is this benefit that they started getting off of their phones more and so I think for us what we sized you know, so many people talked about rabbit holes, they're like you know "I go to check one thing on my phone and then like 30 minutes later I'm on Instagram and I don't even understand how that happened."

But yeah, I think that the other aspect of this is you know we've always assumed that the future of the Smart Home was about constant connection, but we saw of people feeling addicted and overwhelmed by their devices, and the thing that they were really looking for is to kind of take control, take power back, they felt like things were constantly being pushed at them so the ability to actually pull something felt really powerful.

And then how we saw people kind of expressing their relationship to news through this was the fact that right now native content is pretty limited on these devices which I actually see as an opportunity for all of us in the room to really speak to one another understand what we're learning and really kind of define what these kind of content types will look like, and so what we found though is that this was kind of the complement to some of that content.

But, what we saw is that you know, this is the complement of the addictive nature of technology is that these constant refresh mechanisms content was filling them whether it was from social channels or whether it was from news organizations themselves.

And so people were really looking for an escape as well, and they were talking about the fact that news fatigue feels very real. My favorite is this that Enterprise Rent-A-Car did a survey about people's travel plans and the reasons that they were traveling and the top three reasons were stress, the news, and the political climate.

And so the fact that this was trickling down into renting a car means that we really need to start to think about what's the tone and cadence of the news. We heard a lot of people just talk about the fact that they felt like they needed to make a choice between staying informed and staying mentally healthy, but the bright side of all of that was audio.

As they talked about the fact that they were so tired of looking at their phones they're so tired of all of these push notifications about breaking news as one woman in Miami told us like the fact that Trump yelled at a reporter it doesn't feel like something I need to know exactly at 1:23 p.m. it feels like I could get caught

up on that later, I don't know why someone's pushing a notification to my phone about that, but what we saw with audio is that audio actually felt like a break. It really kind of felt like it wasn't constrained by that same relationship that people had with the news.

And so, the reason that they said is you know it's stuff that I think everyone on this panel knows is that it just feels like smart people having a conversation, and so it allowed people to really access complicated subject matter in a different way. You know, we talked to an art student who is actually listening to a podcast on gravitational waves and she's like "if I were to read this there's no way I could understand it, but because I'm hearing a smart passionate person talk about it I actually remember it and then I go and I talk about it with my friends."

And these are some of the stats that I think have already been shared about how much we're seeing podcast listenership grow, but I think with these devices what we're starting to see is that maybe the formats need to change. So, maybe we need to start experimenting you know The Daily is 20 plus minutes, a lot of people are talking about you know the moments that I'm using these devices the most or at like 7:00 a.m. and 7 p.m. when I'm getting ready in the morning when I'm getting out the door.

So, we need to start thinking about how can we actually adjust what we're doing to meet people where they are. And so, some of the considerations that we have been reflecting on how we can design for these voice environments is number one acknowledging shared consumption. You know, as a print and digital publisher I think what's interesting is that in the most natural thing that people do with our content is have a conversation about it, but we don't always design for it, we design for very individual consumption.

Embedding an existing routine so as I said before like we're really creating user experiences when we do this, we're not just creating content, so we need to be a little bit more aware of that. Sparking discovery so in these environments discovery is really really hard. It's really hard, people often know what to say, they have to then remember to say it frequently, and so it's a really big challenge, so we need to start to extend those reminders off the platform.

And then lastly matching the voice to the moment. So, something else that we saw is that people started to get fatigued with the digital assistant, with the voice assistant voices, and so we saw that when it came to telling a story they still really wanted a person to tell them that, they wanted a human being to tell them that.

It was fine if and an assistant could actually help them with tasks, but people still really want to have human beings tell them stories. So, as a result, these are a couple of the things that we built which I won't go into too much detail because I know we're going over time, but we've launched The Daily, we relaunched the pop music roundup on Alexa, the Times Book Review is something else that we launched as kind of helping people get inspired about what they can read.

We created a flash briefing that's hosted by Michael Barbaro and then we created a Times News Quiz and all of this is not to say that like we think these are the answers, but these are things that we think are experiments that we really want to learn from. So thank you so much.

**Steve Lickteig:** Hello everyone! You know, I was going to talk about podcasting, but what I'm really going to talk about is Taxes barbecue which I had this morning I found myself in Lockhart Texas, I'm just very briefly got to tell this story, drove down Lockhart Texas, 10 a.m. Smitty's opens up, it was amazing. I ate brisket, I had ribs, and then sausage, and in Smitty's they have open fires on the ground, and it was extraordinary, and I'm inspired to now do a barbecue podcast, we'll see if NBC lets us do that.

Anyway, it was great, highly recommended. My dedication to barbecue knows no bounds. So NBC, it's an interesting place, it's a huge organization, NBC News, MSNBC, it is interesting that NBC started as a radio network back in the 20s, but when I got to NBC and my job there was no radio studio in the entire building.

So, they had to build a new one to help us get our podcasts off the ground which is great, but it's not a culture of audio it's a culture of TV, and that was the first thing that I had to sort of figure out. As I was interviewing for the job I was digging into

what NBC was doing in podcasting and I realized that I really didn't know that much about what they were up to.

And I started to think gosh what do they do, and basically all they had in Apple podcast was these things that they call showcast which is the audio of the television shows. So, the Rachel Maddow Show has a showcast, Chris Hayes has a showcast and my little audio producer heart just like shrunk to tiny size, and I was like so sad about that because there's no artistry or creativity there, it's like: what? They're just taking audio from a TV show?

And I thought: Do I want to work at a place like this? I don't know that I do, and of course through the interview process I found that they had much bigger and higher ambitions and they want to do things beyond the showcast, but I believed that those showcasts were really just brand extensions of those talents and they couldn't really be doing anything extraordinary or interesting, but what I found out when I got there was that they were bringing in 18 million monthly downloads which blew me away, I was like: "that's impossible."

And that number by the way is not including Bag Man which is Rachel Maddow's narrative podcast about the incredibly corrupt vice presidency of Spiro Agnew while Richard Nixon was also being incredibly corrupt at the same time, he had a whole other thing going on. It does not include why is this happening with Chris Hayes or the Today Sunday sit down which is sort of a semi original podcast.

So, that blew me away, I thought: "Oh my God!". And by the way they weren't monetizing any of this stuff. It was just 18 million downloads a month going out to the world, no advertising, no nothing. So, they were looking for a strategy, how can we monetize what we got and make new things.

So, it taught me something, and it sort of made me feel like I didn't know what I was doing anymore because I realized that what people want at least in this instance is information, they want clear and concise information, and those shows even those TV shows themselves are very highly produced and very well produced, there's teams of producers creating those segments.

So, the thing is if you listen to them it plays pretty well as audio and it's something that I realized I shouldn't be scoffing at because it actually provides pretty good information in the audio form. So, I took this idea of audio being presented in whatever way it's being presented this time through TV audio and said: what can I do with that information to help make audio first podcasts?

And basically what we've decided to do at NBC is to lean in hard into our newsroom, into our reporters, it's a huge newsroom all the way across the globe, and we have this other part that does TV newsroom, and then there's this other thing called NBCNews.com which is a completely other newsroom filled with reporters that it would probably be the size of like a mid city sized newspaper, and these people are doing their own original enterprise reporting alongside all the TV reporters.

And I thought "Oh my God! I have a wealth of resources to tap into here, what can I make and use all these people?" So, what we started to do is you know obviously finding more talent within NBC and MSNBC, not necessarily TV talent, but digital reporters and writers, we've found many. There's going to be shows launching around some of those digital initiatives, some of the digital... what do they call that in digital? Vertical, verticals like doing their own verticals.

And we've got a lot of people we've tapped into, we're expanding our team, we're staffing up podcasting, we're gonna be hiring eight/nine people in the next few weeks/couple months. So, look out for those job postings producers of all levels audio engineers possibly more hosts, things like that, and we're going to also be reworking some existing content.

One thing that NBC has a lot of obviously is video and television content. They did a dateline producer named Dan Slepian and did a 13 part digital video series called conviction. I found it, I watched it, and then I realized I didn't have to look at it and I turned away, and I just listened to the entire series, and I thought "Oh my God this could be a podcast."

So, I brought in a freelance podcast producer, worked with Slepian, took it all apart, put it back together again, and made it into a seven part podcast, and called it

a different name. Now it's going to be called 13 Alibis, and basically we took something and we just completely repurposed it, but we made it audio first by really taking it apart and making it into a podcast not just taking the audio from the video series.

So, there's tons of that stuff at NBC and it's just a matter of digging into the treasure box and finding it. Not to mention the huge NBC News archive of sound and video which goes back to the 20s, and that's all accessible to me and my team and we have to figure out the best ways to use it.

And then going back to the hard news thing here we feel like there's not a saturation of daily news podcasts. It may seem that there's a saturation of news podcasts, but what it's telling me out in the world right now there's tens of millions of people that don't listen to podcasts. One day those people are gonna come in to the fold, and they're gonna start listening, and they're going to want to know what's in there, is it just two guys in their basement talking about movies or is there hard news and investigative news and really sound journalism happening in the podcast space?

And so, what we want to do is create a daily news podcast focusing on the election in 2020. So we're going to tap into this whole roving team of reporters that go out into the field they call the road warriors, and they go out and they're with the candidates for the entire lecture. They assign one reporter one producer and then a digital reporter for every candidate and they follow them all over the country and we're going to basically hitch a ride and create a show based around that.

We're also going to do politics, new tech and culture which are the verticals on the digital side, and also more short narratives along the bagmen model which was very successful for us 12 million downloads over seven episodes and more sort of short interview series. Not doing shows in perpetuity, but doing like 10 or 12 episodes of an interview series based around a theme, and we have lots of those in the works as well.

So there's tons of stuff happening at NBC and it's funny, there's so many resources there, they've been doing this for so long in lots of different ways being journalists,

but they've never really put a strategy around audio, and it's an exciting time for me to be there to build something kind of from scratch in a way, but with a massive amount of resources behind it to make it happen.

So please tune in to an NBC News podcast as they are launched. It's happening soon the first couple will be out in May and then there'll be another one in June and then more as that as the year progresses. That's it, thank you.

**Irene Noguchi:** Hi my name's Irene Noguchi. I am the executive producer of the Daily News podcast at Vox, it's called today explained. For those of you who might not be familiar with the Daily News podcasts it's typically about 20 minutes long and we run five days a week, so every weekday we turn out a new show. We often take one topic and do a deep dive into it.

Now, when Vox wanted to start its first Daily News podcast last year they really wanted to do something different. They didn't want to sound like New York Times, they didn't want to sound like NPR, they wanted to sound very much like Vox. So, fun, laid back, a little more casual, but still very accessible, still very informed.

So they hired me as the executive producer and they hired this guy Sean Ramos as a host. And I don't know if anyone's listened to our show, but Sean's very laid back. He will often swear and crack jokes and so forth, but we have a good time on the show.

So, the focus that we really go for with a daily news podcast for Vox is we wanted to give people the feel not like you were listening to a professor trying to teach you something in a classroom, but more like you're hanging out with your friends at a bar after work and you know when you hang out with your friends everyone's having a good time and sooner or later the news bubbles up.

People want to talk about politics and there's always that one friend you have in the crowd who knows how to explain things really clearly and he's moving around the salt and pepper shakers to explain how Brexit works, and it's like he makes it very clear a lot of fun and that's a feel that we really go for on our show.

So we've put out nearly 300 shows now and had nearly 47 million downloads so we have a lot of material to work with to figure out what makes a daily news podcast work, and we figured that 3 things really help to explain succeed. The first is that you need to craft a unique sound, the second is that you want to tap into listeners curiosity, and the third is that you really have to experiment.

There's a lot of constraints with the Daily News podcasts given the time and the fast turnaround and you really have to find new ways to push outside the bounds. So crafting a unique sound, the news can be really heavy. Sometimes it can feel like a dumpster fire everything coming through the day, but you always want to make it sound light and accessible for the listener.

Let me give you an example. We did an episode on emotional support animals or comfort animals. People were bringing their dogs onto planes and airlines started cracking down on it, and around this time people were starting to bring emotional support peacocks and emotional support ponies onto airplanes, and we're interviewing one guy and he told us about this woman who brought an emotional support duck onto the plane, and it's moments like these during the interview that you have to just grab onto.

And so I turned to my engineer and he and I are like let's sound design the heck out of this. So this is Daniel the duck and we decided to have some fun with it to really draw the listener in because at the end of the day with the Daily News podcast you only have 15 to 20 minutes to hook someone and usually only have to hook them in the first five minutes, but when they walk away they're only going to remember one or two things, so you really have to find these little gems and make them shine. So let me play you what we ended up doing here:

"As I recall it had little slippers on its feet too."

"What was its name?"

"Oh God, I forgot! I was afraid you would ask me that. I do not remember you. You can look it up."

"Daniel Turducken Stinkerbutt."

"Daniel the duck! Okay, well you can see the pictures of Daniel, yeah."

"Oh my God it's got like red flippers."

"Yeah I told you that."

"Oh man, if this duck was on my plane it would be the best flight ever."

"Without Daniel I would stay home for the rest of my life. I would never leave the house because I can't."

So, Daniel Turducken Stinkerbutt. You really have to create these little moments that linger because like I said you only have 15 to 20 minutes and people will remember just one or two things from that. The second thing we found to focus on that really works for our Daily News podcast is tapping into listeners curiosity and by that I mean two things:

1. First, you want to choose topics that people are genuinely curious about. I mean we cover a lot of hard serious news, but we also cover things that people just wonder about. Like for me, I get 20 to 30 robo calls a day and I feel like especially I'm sure you all have the same thing where you're kind of hitting cancel all the time, but I feel like in the past half year it's really spiked, and so we did an episode looking into all these like underground warehouses and the businesses they run and how they mask numbers, and it was one of our most downloaded episodes because people were genuinely curious on why am I getting so many robocalls?

2. Another thing that works for listeners curiosity is catchy titles. I mean podcast as you know so much of an auditory thing, but now it's just a visual thing where people are scrolling through whatever catches their eye and catchy titles might seem obvious, but we actually see an extra 30,000 downloads per episode when we have a really catchy title.

Let me give you an example. So you're all familiar with the college admissions scandal that's in the news a bunch of celebrities and rich people paying top dollar to send their kids to top schools and you know obviously didn't lead to good things, but we had Anne Becky from Full House and we're like OK, Anne Becky from Full House and a college admissions scandal, what are we going to call this? "Becky with the bad grades" still one of our most downloaded episodes.

People love catchy titles and we found that really works for us. Beto & Ted's Excellent Adventure, Thank u, next (Attorney General Remix), and Lady & the Trump which was about Stormy Daniels and the president and still one of our most downloaded episodes. But you'll notice with all these titles we keep them short, keep them light, usually funny, and we're just glancing at them you can tell automatically what they're about.

3. The third thing we found that really works for Daily News podcasts is experimentation. Now, as I said with the Daily News podcast there's a lot of constraints. You have to be a tight 20 minutes, you have to turn it around within a few hours of the day, you can't really often go out in the field and collect audio, and so you really have to find new ways to be creative and push the boundaries.

So, let me give you an example. We were doing an episode on gerrymandering and typically when you talk about gerrymandering people will glaze over like a doughnut like their eyes will just roll in the back of their heads. So, we had a guy on and he was talking about gerrymandering and there's these 2 terms called cracking and packing, and he's describing it to us and he's a really smart guy, but everyone's getting super bored and we're like: "how are we going to keep the listeners hooked?" So my producer leans over to me and he says: "I'm going to add some ACDC to this" and I said OK.

So he only had an hour to do this, he grabs a bunch of people from the studio, he rushes them and he crawls them around the mic, and he plays the music and has them yell "cracking" and then the guest explains briefly what cracking is, and he has them yell "packing" and the guest explains what packing is, and I'm going to play you a clip so you can see how it ended up playing out, how to make gerrymandering not boring.

"There are two key ways of doing this. There is "packing" and there is "cracking."  
Packing and cracking."

"Yes, packing and cracking, which I think is probably also an ACDC song."

Hacking is taking all of the other party's votes and trying to stuff them into as few seats as possible "hacking". You then have big majorities in all of the other districts "hacking".

Cracking involves spreading the other side's votes out "cracking" diluting them as being as thinly as you can across as many districts as possible to win more seats on your side.

So we had a lot of fun with that, but in essence when you're putting together Daily News podcasts just based on our experience we found these 3 things really work: crafting a unique sound for yourself, tapping into listeners curiosities like with catchy titles, and experimenting. No matter what your podcast is there's gonna be certain constraints and just finding new ways to be creative is what we found is really worked for us on today explained and within the Daily News podcast sphere. Thank you.

**Jessica Stahl:** Hello! So, I'm Jess Stahl. I'm the head of audio at the Washington Post, I run a division that deals with the content and strategy of all of our audio products, podcasts, smart speakers voice assistance and other audio, projects, experiments. I'm very cognizant of going last here not only of this panel, but towards the end of what I know has been a long day.

So, I'm going to try to offer some very high level summation of everything that you've just been hearing because you think it's been very cool to listen to these presentations from my colleagues in the space because I think there's some things that come through very clearly here for me that we think about at The Post as well.

One, is how exciting the space of OnDemand audio is right now. It's something that we are looking at massive changes coming in the future. We're seeing ways

that audio is going to be part of people's lives that it hasn't been before, and we're looking at all of this potential opportunities stretched out in front of us, and at the same time it was really clear in all of these presentations that there is a lot of challenges to realizing that opportunity in this moment.

We are seeing massive growth in podcast listener ships. You saw in the first bit of this presentation 30% of Americans now say they listen to podcasts every month, that's 70% who don't, right? And the number of podcasts that are out there are growing every year potentially even faster than the listenership is growing.

Smart speakers are in more houses than ever before. They're gonna be in every device that we own in all of our lives, but those are still incredibly mason ecosystem. They still are not sure how they want to treat news on those platforms and discovery is a huge issue. So, what do you make of all of that? As you're sitting here listening and you kind of want to go back to your news organizations and your companies, how do you make sense of all of that world?

At the Washington Post the way that we're making sense of it is that we are investing in this space. We now produce over 20 episodes of podcast content, audio content every week and that's everything from Daily News to weekly analysis to these sort of massive documentary sound rich ambitious mini series.

We're really excited about that space, that's paired with investment on our tech and engineering side. We have a great product team and that has built a custom audio CMS for us, that works with us on experimentation, on new platforms, that's worked to build our own proprietary innovative dynamic ad insertion technology, and just in December we launched our own daily news podcast Post Reports and so massive flagship effort for us.

I won't talk too much about it because you've heard a lot about Daily News podcasts already. And I will show you one thing that I'm really excited about that hopefully gets an "uh" blinking, no? Thank you, all right!

No, but I'll just say briefly this is something we thought a lot about as we were trying to decide if this was the space we wanted to enter into. The New York

Times was already there, NPR was already there, Vox was already there, and once we decided that it was the journalism that The Washington Post does, the news that we're putting out every day, that we really wanted the venue to put that out in the audio space then we thought a lot about what that would be.

What what makes us stand out? What's really different and special about The Washington Post? And where we landed with this program is you know our differentiator, our core asset is our journalism, it is our journalists, it is the strength of the newsroom that we have, and the depth of experience and analysis that we bring not only to politics, I mean yes to politics, people know the Washington Post for our politics, we are in Washington D.C., steeped in the world of politics, but beyond that too I mean we have reporters in our newsroom who are the leading experts on space, on technology, on comic books, and so when we thought about our daily news podcast we really thought about how we reflect the breadth of that experience and the idea not only that we have all of that coverage in our newsroom, but that people are interested in so much more than just kind of the blaring headlines in the news alerts of the day, right?

We wanted to create something that reflected the idea that news is so much more than what matters in our world is so much more. So, Post Reports is really exciting for us and we're getting a lot of great feedback to that approach. It's a little bit more multidisciplinary, allows us to range a little bit more widely in the idea of what the news is.

And this program is really reflective of the way that we are thinking about the audio ecosystem right now, the way we are making sense of all this kind of opportunity, and the challenge is that it's paired with. And the way that I think about it, the way that I kind of want The Post to think about it, and would encourage all of you to think about it is that there is room for more things in the audio space, I think particularly room for journalism.

Journalism is a differentiator for all of us here in this room. It's something not everyone can do, but there's not room for everything, there's room for great things and there's things that stand out, and before I switch the next slide I just want everyone to take note I have a certificate in graphic design and I hope it really

shows through here, this is worth the money that I spent on that 15 years ago, but there's room for great things.

And the idea of what is a great thing, what makes your organization unique, what can you do that's going to stand out, all of us are going to have a different answer to that question, but answering that question is what really matters. So, at The Post our answer to the question is we make programs that are smart, different and true to The Post, this is the motto that we kind of live by when we think about what makes a great Washington Post podcast.

So smart, we mean that every program from the Washington Post everything you listen to from us should teach you something about your world. You should walk away feeling that you have new information or a new perspective whether that's on the news or on your world. That we don't just do audio for the sake of it, that we want you to really feel that you've gained something from our programs.

By different we mean every Washington Post program should feel like something you haven't heard before. Whether it's the topic, the format, the storytelling style we really want to push ourselves with everything that we do to try to break the boundaries and figure out some new spaces that we can explore in audio storytelling.

And then of course true to The Post, we really believe that journalism is a differentiator. That the newsroom, and the news, and the reporters that we have are the best asset that we can put out there, and it's interesting to hear Steve say the same thing. I think all of us kind of look to our reporters and see what they have to offer. So, that leads us to some really exciting things coming up in the next couple of months through the rest of this year.

The first one is something we just launched called Voices of the Movement. This is a special mini series from Jonathan Capehart one of our opinions columnists, capturing the stories and sort of reflections of these civil rights leaders of the 60s era and they're in their 80s and 90s now and kind of capturing what they have to pass on task before they can't do that anymore.

And some other stuff through the rest of the year I cannot wait for you guys to all hear our history of the space race that we're releasing for the anniversary of the moon landing. It's going to be really really special, really different, I'm so so excited about that.

And I wish I could stop there, I wish I could say "make great things make unique things make special things and great you've done it" unfortunately that is not the case, my fantastic partner on the product side of the Washington Post Joe Price makes me include this metaphor in all of my presentations. You may recognize that you're laughing, that's good.

Fields of dreams, right? If you build it they will come, not the case here with audio. Audio has a big discovery problem, you cannot sort of imagine it's enough to just make great things. I actually never seen field of dreams, so this metaphor that Joe gave me a little over my head, but he gave me something else that I think is both simple and genius and is the way that we think about what we do with all this great content.

How do we imagine the ways that we are gonna get this in front of people and the ways that that's going to set us up for success, particularly in some of these new spaces? And so, the little motto that we've come up here is we want people to know us, love us and then in this world of smart speakers and voice assistance ask for us. And I think again it sounds really simple, but the key to this is you look out at these kind of voice interactive platforms and I think a lot of people jumped right to ask, right? They kind of say like great I'm on these platforms, people are going to listen to me on these platforms, and you can expect people to jump all the way there.

First, they have to know that you exist and they have to want to get you in that new space, and so you just kind of go through this briefly I want to just put forward a couple of questions that you can ask yourselves in each of these different areas so you can kind of take this back with you.

So for "know" I'd encourage you all to think about what are the levers that you have at your disposal to put your stuff in front of people? What do you already

have access to that maybe you could use better or use stronger, and even more than that, what partnerships can you form within your own organizations to gain access to more of those levers? Who could you be working with to make this effort of your organization something everyone's behind and not just something that you know then the newsroom is putting out or you're putting out on your own?

We're also thinking a lot at the Washington Post about how we expand the listening audience beyond that 30% of people who listen to podcasts? How do we reach people who maybe don't know yet that podcasts are for them or will never be willing to open that app on their phone with the little broadcast thing on it?

So, we're experimenting right now with subscribe by email. Basically letting people say "I don't want to go into this apple app, this google app, I don't know what those are, but just send me an email every day" and we're really excited to continue playing in that space and figure out ways to unlock that kind of majority of people who still aren't really inclined to play in this space with us.

When we think about love, of course great things is one way that you make people love you, right? Great content engenders love. Some other things that I just want to suggest need to be thought about in the realm of love is user experience. That is user experience with in your audio product, right? So how do you make sure that everything that somebody is hearing creates a great experience.

That includes the advertising that they're hearing, it includes any other sort of messaging that they're hearing, and how do you make sure that the way that they find them creates a positive experience. We also think a lot about how we build that relationship with our hosts so that people feel part of the programs that we're putting out there.

And finally, then and only then can you expect people to ask for you on a smart speaker device. So, to kind of sum all that up, I just want to sort of say again like there's a lot of exciting things happening here right now. You've heard from some of the other presentations some of the things that we're thinking about in terms of where audio is going, where on demand is going, and I think there's all sorts of things coming in the next several years that we're not even thinking about yet, that

we can't even anticipate, but where does that leave you now in this moment with what we can do, and I would say it is to make great things and make sure people know about those great things. Super simple, but somehow profound and if you want to see our great things: [washingtonpost.com/podcast](https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcast).

**Emily Withrow:** Awesome. Hello! My name is Emily Withrow I'm the director of the Quartz Bots Studio. We design narrative experiences for voice and chat platforms, what does that mean? It means we build story software that you can talk to. So, when it comes to smart speakers, when it comes to interactive audio we're really looking at that assistive space at that captive space.

So what does that mean? Story software you can talk to. Imagine if you could have an intelligent conversation with the people who are writing the news, reporting the news, what does that look like? This has been an obsession of mine for a really long time, this idea of one size fits all journalism being problematic.

Emily Gallegos was talking earlier about multiple audiences. So, I've been trying to crack that problem for a while and speaking of captive audiences the births of Siri and Alexa coincided with the birth of my two children and I was armless right. Suddenly I was relying on my voice more than ever to try to achieve things on my phone, to try to achieve things anywhere that I could, and so that's a different type of captive audience, right?

So we have to think about the different use cases for this and we're really looking at the future of this technology so there's the current state of smart speaker technology, but there's also how this technology is going to be built into computing going forward, right?

And so, what does this look like when it's just in your ear and you don't have a screen, what does this look like when you're on the go? We're thinking through all of those scenarios and really trying to crack the problem of this idea of interactive news, this idea of sort of personalized news delivery at the story level so not the algorithm that changes up the menu of what you get, but what changes the actual unfolding of the story in front of you.

So, let's play a game. It has to do with Game of Thrones, ok so raise your hand if you know the first and the last name of this character. This character? This guy? Samwell Tarly OK, and this one? Wooo OK, it's a deep cut. Ok so, before you're thinking OK are we gonna talk about Game of Thrones? This is something that we do in conversation all of the time.

We are trying to figure out who we're talking to. Game of Thrones, final season premiere is tomorrow, we're all very excited. Those of us who are excited are constantly trying to figure out like who am I talking to? Am I talking to a fan? Am I talking to somebody who's read the books? Am I talking to somebody who has no interest in dragons like, why? They're so cool, right?

So, we do this in conversation we ask these questions, we try to figure out who we're talking to so that we adjust. We turn the dial of our delivery just as an interlock, right? So that we are delivering information that sort of act customized to you.

We do this as humans and when we're thinking about conversation design for voice, for something you might type to, what we're trying to do is figure out in an ambient way not in a scary way where we're like purchasing data, but in an ambient way figuring out who we're talking to so that we can adjust the story to fit you.

All right, come on! It's a work in progress. These systems are not perfect, we're in sort of the infancy of all of these devices and really the technology, but I hope that as news organizations we will recognize them in babies as babies and sort of invest in their future like, yeah you can be kind of dumb right now, but you're gonna be smart, let's spend some time together, let's grow together, that we don't just move into this space say like it's useless people aren't engaging, right? People will.

So, why do we do this? One on one is really different, it's often a private channel, sometimes it's a public channel, these are in people's homes, it's more like we're all sitting around listening to the radio together, but we're arriving to a single person, right? and that's really really different from a lot of the other types of media that

we consume and what we can do in these individual environments is check in with people, right?

So, if you are doing a recipe and you're saying "OK, the surface is dotted with bubbles" this is you know making bread, "you need to see bubbles that means the yeast is working" so, we can check in with people at that moment and say: do you see bubbles? and then they say "yeah, I see bubbles" and you continue, if they say "no" you go into like a yeast troubleshooting section, right?

This is the same thing when we're talking about cryptocurrency or bitcoin or conflict in Syria, right? We can check in with our audience on a regular basis to figure out whether or not they're following, whether or not they're with us and then again sort of change the story to fill in the gaps that people need filling.

This is something that we saw in traditional storytelling to an oral storytelling. We do these checks with audiences frequently to make sure that they're still with us. Same principles apply here. So, how do we do it and move into some quick tips.

This is a question I'm obsessed with because when you think about affordances, when you think about design, what are the design affordances of conversation? So, when we talk about the conversation and make sure to check my notes. So, James Gibson (I live in fear of making a factual error on stage, I have all my facts here) James Gibson, 1977, psychologists, coined the term "affordance" and it's really any possible action you can do.

So, an affordance of a trumpet is you can play a trumpet, but also an affordance of a trumpet is like you can chuck it across the room, right? Technically if you're physically capable you can, it's an affordance. Later on we skip to 1988 with a look at Don Norman, 1988, HCI design of everyday things and we shift the definition to all perceived actions.

So, this is what makes a button look pushable, but when we look at conversation as a whole, when we look at the dialogue as a whole we're a lot closer to the previous definition, right? Because so much is possible in a conversation and with humans if

what you're looking at is like "how does a human behave?" It's really kind of the sky is the limit. So, how do we approach this?

#1: Focus on the user, right? but to a reasonable degree. Figure out who is in your audience, who are you talking to. You have your casual fans, you have the hardcore fans. You can also do tonal shifts, you have people who take Game of Thrones very very seriously and then you have like goofballs who watch it also. So, you can pick up on these clues, shift the story around people and then you got to let it go.

#2: You got to let go of the idea that you, master storyteller that you are, have the perfect delivery of the story, that there is one way to tell this story and you are the person that's going to do that. You don't know the life experiences of all of the people who are reading your content, right? So we can give some of that power to them, but you have to let go of the idea that there is one way. So, you identify what's a central for every group like everybody, what are the key features of the story that everyone must know and then what's essential for these other groups, how do I fill in those gaps as I go?

#3: Fight the infinity wars. We have a tendency to do this like branching narrative thing in this space where you're like: "oh I'll make a path here, and I'll make a path here." Save yourselves the time and the effort because if you go in all those directions you're doing so much work for a very limited user experience.

So, what we end up doing if you were to model the narrative structure of the stories we do, it looks a lot more like a chain, it's like this weaving of pulling in the fact that you might not know, pulling in this, pulling in this for this person, and so it's still a linear construct. You can still own the trajectory of that story as you should, as a reporter, as a journalist, but you can include other pieces as well.

OK, so I'm not saying you all are sheep, I'm really not, but you have to fight this open world problem because in these spaces where people can and will say anything to you, you have to decide OK, what am I going to field? And again there are 3 cases that actually matter.

They are up here, right? There is a person who needs help, who's going to interrupt your flow to say "I need something", there is the abusive people of the world who will yell profanity at your machine, and then you have the curious people these are the people who are trying to figure out the boundaries.

The first news experience that I built was a news quiz, it was four years ago as interactive audio for... whatever it doesn't matter, but we mentioned the Super Bowl during one of the stories and the person cuts in and says: who won the Super Bowl in 1984? This is not a total jerk, this is a curious person who's trying to figure out the bounds of the experience, right?

So, you can field that with an error and it's fine, but if you field other things as error it's just going to enrage people. If people shot profanity at you you say "I don't know" you know, and they're just gonna rage, and the same thing for if people need help and they get that.

So game it out, figure out how you're going to walk people through, figure out how you're going to think about that open world problem and to embrace the chaos, write for it, write for the unpredictable nature, write for this is my favorite exchange of just like people talking to us and the machine making the choice about what to playback, but embrace the chaos, write for that sort of ambiguity, understand that you're not going to be able to control every single back and forth.

And finally if you're interested in experimenting in the interactive audio space this is a tool that we made, it's on glitch, you can remix it. The secret is to get started you don't have to do any code, you just have to have access to a microphone and record yourself because if you open your computer and you just play audio people think they're talking to Alexa, it's fine. So, you can create interactive audio experiences, you can get a lot of information about them without having to write a line of code, and then once you've gotten your idea then you can enlist the developers. All right, thank you.