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Introduction: Podcasting as the Marker of Cultural Shift in Media

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Podcasts have entered the mainstream media culture, becoming a considerable source of entertainment and education, devices for self- and artistic expression. It is predicted that there will be almost 500 millions of podcast listeners worldwide by the end of 2022 (Ruby 2022). There are countless podcasts that vary in genre, formats and modes of production, from passionate ramblings from one's closet and independent, crowd-founded titles to professionally produced, complex ventures and podcasts that are by-products of the radio and other media. There are also attempts to monetize the podcasts' popularity by other mass media producers. However, a cross-media translation from podcast to streaming series, which was the case of Facebook Watch's *Limetown* (2019) and Netflix's *Archive 81* (2022), had mixed results so far. To repeat the success of a podcast series is not an easy task. It could be attributed to the fact that podcasting is a highly self-aware medium using meta-narration tools such as found footage (in this case, found recording) which also is the subject of reflection in papers collected in this issue.

It was Ben Hammersley who first used the term "podcast", combining the words "iPod" and "broadcasting", in his 2004 *The Guardian* article entitled *Why Online Radio is Booming*. It is significant that the term itself as well as the title of the article draw our focus to technology, distribution of content in digital era, listenership and radio – a medium that is still the most common point of reference for podcasting in emerging podcast studies, although the comparison between podcasting and radio has its limitations: as Dario Llinares wrote "podcasting has a »subcultural logic« that demarcates it from institutional and production structures of radio" (2018: 128). This "subcultural logic" is highly

visible (or, rather, audible) in the independent podcasts that offer a platform to marginalized and disowned voices. It is no coincidence that half of papers in this issue touch upon the matters of representation and queerness. As Emilia Ferreyra convincingly proves, podcasts are a source of quality representation, maintaining a close relationship with their audiences, responding to their needs. Similarly, Michał Pokrowiecki offers a case study of the Polish podcast *Familia*, focusing on the problems of homophobia and of straight-washing queer family stories in mainstream media – a problem that is not limited to Polish context as Netflix’s *Archive 81* straight-washed one of the main characters, bluntly ignoring the very aspect of the story that made this podcast so popular in the first place. Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann (2019) argue that podcasting is a form of “audio media revolution” and it is difficult to disagree as podcasts offer to cover niche interests in stories told by passionate independent voices that engage with their audiences on a more egalitarian, familiar and intimate level. Podcasting marks another shift in our rapidly changing media landscape and could be taken as symptomatic of new ways of production, distribution and reception of digital content.

Richard Berry proposed the idea of “Golden Age of podcasting” (2015; 2016). For Spinelli and Dann this “Golden Age” started in 2014, the year of simultaneous launching of Apple podcast app built-in on every iPhone and the multiple award-winning true crime podcast series *Serial*; according to Spinelli and Dann, the “Golden Age” is still going on with the increasing visibility of podcasts in contemporary media landscape (2019: 31). They proposed eleven major podcasting features and concepts (discussed in detail by Szewczyk, Doliwa and others in the context of the Polish podcast *Raport o stanie świata*) that can be categorized as modes of consumption (intimate listening via earbuds or headphones, on the move and on demand, which requires active engagement on the part of the listener) and modes of production (appealing to the niche interests, using social media, operating on “freemium” model, the everlasting supply of content, the possibility of editing all podcast content and the lack of gatekeeping and constraints characteristic for broadcast media) (Spinelli, Dann 2019: 22). As such, podcasting fits within the widely discussed shift from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0 – a term coined in 2014 by Gavin Wood. The key concepts of Web 2.0 were user-generated content, platform economy, ease of use, participatory culture and interoperability. It led to the monopolization of the digital space by media concerns, such as Facebook (now known as Meta). Web 3.0 could be characterized as an attempt to take the Internet back from the media giants via decentralization, privatization, block-chain technologies and token-based economy. Web 2.0 made Internet more interactive and social for the price of user privacy and, paradoxically, subjectivity (data-gathering algorithms used to recognize users’ habits and interests with the goal to sell more advertisements, in turn changing users into consumers). Web 3.0 supposedly gives the power and ownership back to the users via decentralization. It may be coincidental that the discussion of Web 3.0 started in the same year as the “Golden Age

of podcasting” but the podcast experience (as a podcaster and as a listener) is exactly what Web 3.0 promises: ownership of media content, control upon one’s media experience and subjective approach to the users. It also possible that Web 3.0 will fall prey to monopolization, especially on the minefield of crypto currency, but so far alternative forms of production and engagement with digital content have been on the rise, also for podcasting with platforms such as Fable and Folly Network or Rusty Quill.

The “audio media revolution” has yet another dimension to it – one that could be attributed to a wider cultural shift. Ceallaigh S. MacCath-Moran, producer, writer and the voice of *Folklore & Fiction* podcast, draws attention to the notion of re-oralization in contemporary culture. In the interview presented in this issue we discuss the popularity of podcasting in the context of the human need to tell and hear stories. The intimacy of podcasts’ listenership comes not only from using the headphones, which makes podcast the audio-field of the listener, but also from the simple act of hearing a voice of another human being, a voice that conveys emotion and gives one an illusion of proximity. During the pandemic and quarantine, listening to podcasts was, for many people, the only way to hear the voices of others, a substitute of human contact. In that sense, the podcast is close to some of the already established media forms of communication (telephone etc.) as much as it is a “radio renaissance” on the Internet. Of course, the phenomenon of podcasting is not limited to these comparisons, as it has its own structure and identity, which are the subject of emerging podcast studies. The notion of re-oralization does not stop at podcasting, but also includes other media practices, such as video essays or even the “sound-sharing” feature of TikTok. As much as our media landscape is shifting from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, our media culture as a whole is putting more emphasis on the audio part of the “audio visual culture” which may be attributed to the distrust toward the highly artificial, simulative structure of the visual media. As we cannot trust the pictures to be real, podcasting maintains a close relationship with listeners via social media, Q&A episodes, transparency and live shows, presenting humanity behind the voice.

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