

## Introduction

In a formative paper published in *Insurgent Sociologist* in 1984, Sut Jhally advanced a pathbreaking materialist analysis of how mediated sport captures and commodifies audiences. Jhally (1984, pp. 41–42) identified the relationship between professional sports, mass media, and advertising as a fundamental axis for understanding sport's social and economic significance as a “spectacle of accumulation” in capitalist societies, reasoning that “it is through the mass media of television that the vast majority view their sports,” and that it is “advertising that provides the key to the economic functioning of the media.” This invocation of a sport media complex has since been heralded as “arguably one of the most significant, yet overlooked, pieces of scholarship” (Jackson, 2015, p. 491) across the many fields concerned with the political economy and cultural resonance of mediated sport (cf. Boyle and Haynes, 2000; Rowe, 1999; Wenner, 1989, 1998; Whannel, 1992). No small part of that significance derives from its central premise, coming via communications theorist Dallas Smythe (1979), that the production of a mass audience, beholden to televised sport replete with advertisements, exemplifies “the truly dialectical nature of material/cultural relationships in advanced capitalism” (Jhally, 1984, p. 55).

In the four decades since Jhally's analysis, transformations at the convergence of late capitalism and the digital revolution have inaugurated new and expanded modes of audience capture and experience, allied with new modes of accumulation and surveillance. The audience has been extended through informatic and computational infrastructures that underlie slick, seemingly immaterial interfaces, becoming not only a metric or object but also a generator of value through the “free labor” of digital cultural exchange (Terranova, 2000) and the data generated in the process (Wark, 2019). In this digital condition, human sociality has itself “become a site of new economic value and intense redefinition” (Couldry and van Dijck, 2015,

p. 1), and human desire for connection a frontier for new forms of measurement, appropriation, subjectification, and other modes of psycho-social control (Zuboff, 2019). Surveying the beginnings of these changes in their 2012 book *Sport Beyond Television*, Brett Hutchins and David Rowe argued that while the coming age of “networked media sport” signified “a challenge to the hegemony of television, which can be alternatively bypassed, undercut, and complemented by online media” (p. 5), televised sport nonetheless retained its status as a unique mode of creating and delivering audiences. In fact, broadcast sport seemed not only to be surviving the era of on-demand, hyperconnected media, and increasingly nomadic and fragmented audiences, but on account of its distinctiveness as a live event had come to occupy an even more rarefied place within it.

This article is a contribution to this lineage of critical thought about how mediated sport captures, commodifies, and otherwise affects audiences. It proceeds on the premise that developments in sport media even since Hutchins and Rowe’s analysis of the “birth of a new media sport order” (2012, p. 4) – developments driven by the growth of “platform capitalism” (Srnicsek, 2017) and of digitality more broadly – invite a revisiting, if not a reappraisal, of the sport media complex. More specifically, we analyze how the *sport podcast* and its imbrications with the social, economic, and technological logics of platforms, paired with the propinquity, mobility, and connectivity of mobile listening devices, has altered the spatial, temporal, and sensory dynamics of how people interact with sport media. The podcast, we will argue, expands opportunities for engagement with mediated sport in ways that not only widen the discourse circulating about sport itself, but also capture listeners through intimate audio modalities that are distinctive and desirable in late capitalist societies, already established as a feature of podcasts (Murray, 2019; Euritt, 2022), and increasingly recognized for this capacity by investors, marketers, media companies, and advertisers. This helps explain how sport has become a leading category in the multibillion-dollar podcast industry

that has developed in the last two decades, attracting US\$9 billion of investment (composite of mergers, acquisitions, and advertising) since 2020 (Jahani and Associates, 2024) while amassing millions of downloads across thousands of shows dedicated to an array of sports.

The lack of scholarship on sport podcasts relative to their popularity is somewhat surprising given the concomitant turns to and calls for digital sociology (Lupton, 2015), digital leisure studies (Silk, Millington, Rich and Bush, 2016; Schultz and McKeown, 2017), mobile sport communications research (Hutchins, 2019) and the many explorations of digitally mediated communities, subjectivities, and experiences across the fields that critically analyze sport media. This is doubtless set to change, and in any case sport-related scholarly engagements with podcasting are more vibrant and diverse than this first suggests. At least since Dave Zirin's *Edge of Sports* podcast was launched in 2014 as a space for critical reckonings with sport (cf. Forde and Wilson, 2018; King, 2008), various sport studies scholars have launched podcasts as part of their scholarship (e.g., Hutchins' *Media Sport Podcast Series*, Ahmed, Davis, Elsey, Gibbs, and Luther's *Burn it all Down*, and Clevenger and Rick's *Somatic Podcast* – as well as various research centre and institution-led series). Podcasts have also been the object of discrete studies exploring, for example, their utility as part of participatory methodologies when studying the social meanings of sport and physical activity for youth (Smith et al, 2020), the potential of podcasts as a knowledge translation tool for sport scholars (Clevenger et al., 2024), perceptions of women broadcasters in auditory formats (Yang et al, 2023), production techniques that create 'lo fi' atmospheres that complement discussions of sport and physical culture (Clevenger and Rick, 2021), and how podcasts covered sport during the height of the pandemic (Broussard et al., 2024).

These examples indicate a rich array of sporting scholarly engagements with podcasting, most imbued with an educative function, and our list is doubtless incomplete given our English language bias and the abundance of sport-related podcasts. And beyond

sport, many scholars have tracked the boom in podcasting from various vantages, with focusses ranging from its inheritance from radio and hybridization of old and new media (Berry, 2016) to its educative deployment and potential (Cook, 2023), and many other perspectives collated in several monographs and edited collections dedicated to exploring and expanding understandings of the medium (Beckstead and Llinares, 2025; Llinares, Fox and Berry, 2018; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Nevertheless, the sport podcast is yet to be afforded the kind of sustained critical analytical attention that has been shown to other mediums in the sport media complex, or in its relationship to digitality and late capitalism. These elisions have grown in significance as sport podcasts have proliferated in recent years, and they beget important questions about how and why sport podcasts create and sustain audience attention, where that attention is directed, and whose interests are enriched in the process.

In what follows we draw on industry reports, advertisements, excerpts from select sport podcasts, and insights offered by hosts and contributors *to posit sport podcasting as a novel form of audience capture*. We identify several techno-experiential dimensions of podcasting that are already established to varying degrees in the extant scholarship on the medium as new media technology and culture industry, in particular: the *mobility* of the podcast; the proclaimed *intimacy* of the podcast as audio that monopolizes the soundscape of the listener; and, the oft-repeated claim that podcast listening leads to more *tangible economic impact* for advertisers – clicks, hits, and purchases – than other mediums. Owing to these qualities, sport podcasts are vaunted by industry insiders for their capacity to “fill the spaces” between live sport events, and to resonate in a personal, familiar way with listeners in a manner that has traditionally challenged broadcasting by definition (Sharon and John, 2024). As Head of the *Sport Social Podcast Network* Stefan Doyle (quoted in Makari, 2023) puts it, “When a game is finished, that can sometimes be where the coverage stops. I think that’s where podcasting really comes into a strength because it can continue that conversation after the main event has finished. I think

that's why it's really continuing to see such a big growth, because it [fills] a gap that was there before." Of course, radio has sought to fill that gap for a long time (Nylund, 2007), as have 24/7 rolling sports channels more recently. But the saturation of everyday life with new media connectivity has expanded and intensified the possibilities for audience capture, not least through mobile audio. This raises specific questions about the nature of targeted, dynamically inserted, and host-read advertising used in podcasts, and broader ones about the psycho-social conditions of late capitalism that might make listening alone and "on the go" more likely, perhaps even more desirable. The curation of intimate audience relationships through podcasting therefore warrants scrutiny not only for the content of shows or the possibilities for accumulation they generate, but for the *kinds of sociality* that sport podcasts engender – connections that are themselves "an *effect of* a new dominant techno-economic materiality" (Couldry and van Dijck, 2015, p. 3). The rise of sport podcasts must therefore be understood as part of a cultural politics of listening that inherits a great deal from radio, including the "sonic whiteness" indicated by the prevalence of white, male hosts across leading podcasts genres (Brekke, 2020; Stoever, 2016), and are inseparable from the social and political formations that have grown with and through the age of networked media. Calling back to Jhally's (1984) central premise of the sport media complex, these kinds of sociality are crucial to the political economy of the podcast medium, exemplifying and intensifying the synergy of economic modes and cultural forms in the age of platform capitalism.

In 2000, twenty- six years after his historic intervention, McLaren revisited the fiasco. Claiming that "pem [protein- energy malnutrition] is now recognized to be a complex, deep- seated, and massive public- health problem that will respond only to general development," he declared with some satisfaction that "the protein- rich food mixtures and all the other trappings of the fiasco have long disappeared is evidence that that particular fallacy is long dead and gone."<sup>128</sup> While there is general consensus that the period from the mid-1970s to the present has been dominated by a micronutrient paradigm,<sup>129</sup> McLaren's assessment seems optimistic and sweeping from today's perspective.

## **“The Quiet Part Out Loud:” Podcasts, political economy, and the ‘crisis’ of sport media**

With *The Ringer*, I think we bought the next ESPN. We think that’s going to be a tremendously valuable property as we look at the development of sports over the next decade and the billions of people that will start listening to audio.

– Daniel Ek, Spotify Chief Executive, 2020

According to all available measures, the sport podcast is booming. In Edison’s 2024 listings, sport ranked as the fifth most popular genre of podcast, behind comedy, society and culture, news, and true crime. SiriusXM, a Manhattan-based broadcasting company founded in 2008 that specializes in satellite and online radio, reported a 41% upswing in demand for sport content in the United States since 2019 (Breslin, 2023). Other charts produced by Nielsen, Buzzsprout, and platforms such as Apple indicate the same upward trend in terms of listenership, while a 2023 report published by the International Advertising Bureau notes, albeit without explanation, that “for the second straight year, comedy and sports outrank news as production grows and listeners turn to lighter topics.”

This comparison between sport and other genres invites some delineation of the conceptual parameters around the ‘sport podcast’ as an object of analysis, albeit mostly to stress how blurry those parameters can be. Categorizing podcasts is not as simple as the charts make out. We might seek to start with the declared orientation of a particular show and ask whether it is the rapacious offshoot of a corporate network, or a mode of knowledge transfer for an academic or research centre, or the passion project of an artisan. The differences are important. But while podcasts produced or hosted by academics (such as those produced by sociologists of sport listed in our introduction) have an explicitly educative aim, it does not follow that they operate outside of the commercial logics of the platforms that host them, or, conversely, that podcasts produced for commercial purposes by networks and other

media organizations do not have pedagogical functions. Moreover, sport podcasts, even as they declare their sporting focus in their titles, include and incorporate many sub genres – analytics, business, nostalgia, comedy, journalism, education, politics, fandom, and simply previewing and reviewing events. And a particular show might aspire to be any or all of them in a particular segment, episode, or across their output, depending on many factors, not least their desired relationship with audiences, the expertise of hosts and guests, and what is happening in the world of sport. Much like Bruno Latour’s daily newspaper in his introduction to *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), most sport podcasts are hybrids of all sorts of genres, varying their tone and emphasis towards audiences in ways that are more nuanced, less easily categorizable, than any ratings chart can contain.

While there is a seemingly endless heterogeneity to the kinds of podcast that could be and have been produced, today’s podcast charts are increasingly homologous to the wider world of broadcast sport. At the time of writing, the shows at the top of Apple’s UK sport charts are *The Rest is Football*, *Stick to Football*, and *The Guardian’s Football Weekly*. While *Football Weekly* was founded in 2006, the first two are more recent entrants to the market, propelled by the reputational capital of the former footballers and current broadcasters that host them. In the US, NFL-focused shows lead the charts, with *The Ringer Network* regularly ranking at the top of podcasts across all categories. Notably, the above shows are all hosted by men, talking about codes of football, and their primary listener demographics are men, too – a matter of significance to which we will return. Although sport podcasts are nearly as old as podcasting itself, with Sam Coutin’s *My Sports Pod* launching in 2004, their proliferation in the last five years or so is reflective of the broader transition of the podcast “from cultural form to culture industry,” as John Sullivan (2023) puts it. Echoing larger critiques of the commodification and enclosure of the internet (McChesney, 2013), Sullivan shows how the promise of podcasting to connect independent and amateur

broadcasters to niche and far-flung audiences through open, decentralized communication channels has been curtailed by platforms and their monopolization of content infrastructure, visibility, and monetization tools. At the same time, leading media companies have increasingly assimilated podcasts into their business models such that the once vaunted ‘disruptive potential’ and ‘golden age’ of podcasting (Berry, 2006, 2015) has given way to processes of convergence and consolidation that have sought to incorporate its distinctive qualities.

Investment in sport podcasts is in keeping with this ascendance. According to an August 2024 report by New York-based global investment bank Jahani and Associates into sport podcast advertising, “between Q1 2020 and Q2 2024, \$9 billion was deployed by acquirers in sports podcasting.” The same report positions the United States and Western Europe at the centre of the political economy of sport podcasting in terms of capital investment, platform hosting, show production, and audience metrics. Spotify’s purchase of *The Ringer Podcast Network* for more than US\$195 million in February 2020 is exemplary. The network’s flagship show, *The Bill Simmons Podcast*, was in the top 5 of all podcasts for revenue in 2024, declaring around 500,000 monthly listeners. As quoted above, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek proclaimed at the time of the acquisition that he saw *The Ringer Network* as the next ESPN (Feiner, 2020), and later asserted that “we have increasing conviction in the causal relationship between growth in podcast consumption driving higher [value] and retention among our user base” (Sweeney, 2021). Founder Simmons was employed by ESPN until 2015 and, subsequent to the sale of *The Ringer*, is now an executive at Spotify overseeing podcast innovation and monetization.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the political economy of sport podcasts is not so much the upsurge in acquisitions, investments, advertising revenue, and listener metrics, particularly in the last five years, but the *discordance* between that upsurge and the widely

recognized decline of ‘established’ or ‘traditional’ sport media. As early as 2009, Hutchins and Rowe had earmarked how digital communications technologies were “creating enormous conflict and uncertainty” (p. 355) in a sport media economy dominated by television and print media (see also Dart, 2014). These ‘disruptions’, to use a phrase favored by platforms, have been identified as part of broader concerns about the fate of journalism and implications for liberal democracy in a digital era (McChesney, 2013). A few recent examples attest to this narrative of disruption and decline in the context of sport. In the summer of 2023, ESPN let go 20 commentators, analysts, and broadcasters as part of “cost-saving measures” (The Guardian, 2023). A further round of lay-offs followed in 2024, when *Sports Illustrated* also announced it would be laying off the majority of its workforce in a move portended by some as the end of the legacy sports publication (New York Times, 2024). And *The New York Times* disbanded its entire sports desk in 2023, announcing that it would rely on coverage produced by *The Athletic* – the subscription-based sport journalism company it had acquired for \$550 million in 2022. As testament to the turbulence of this period, *The Athletic* was only founded in 2016 as a dedicated site for sports journalism and grew quickly before its acquisition by *The New York Times*.

Curiously, then, in the same period that podcasting has seen huge growth and investment, some of the most established and venerable broadcasters and publishers are making enormous cuts, even ceasing operations. Sports journalist Jon Wertheim has offered some insights on this dynamic. Wertheim is executive editor at *Sports Illustrated* and a broadcaster on, among other shows, CBS’s *60 Minutes*, as well as the co-host of the *Served with Andy Roddick* podcast alongside the eponymous former tennis world number one. Here he is conversing with the Tennis Channel commentator Gil Gross on the latter’s *Monday Match Analysis* podcast (September 19, 2024):

Gil Gross: “I think about the NBA, and Jon you know this, there are NBA fans who don’t watch games. That’s how robust the content industry is in basketball, where there are legitimately people out there who say ‘I’m an NBA fan’ and they don’t watch the games. And I’m not saying that we want that for tennis, we want people to watch the matches, but I do think that there should be more out there for fans to engage in outside of the matches.”

Jon Wertheim: “You are saying the quiet part out loud my friend. This is one of the great ironies of sports today. That sports are driving all these media rights, and live rights and sports are propping up tv .... And the NBA just got seven and a half billion dollars on this new rights deal, seven and a half billion dollars, half of which, mind you, goes to the players. And you say, oh my god, the ratings must be through the ceiling if all these networks are shelling out billions of dollars the ratings must be phenomenal. And then you say wait a second, these ratings are falling off a cliff. I mean it’s an incredible business case study, where people like sports more than ever, people engage with sports more than ever, there’s more commerce ... this NBA rights deal is just insane, we’re gonna see players that you and I have never heard of making 20-30 million dollars a season, and the irony is that no-one is watching the game.” (Gross, 2024)

Although the tonal emphasis of this exchange is easily lost in transcription, any embellishment here contains a curious truth: that the decline in NBA viewer ratings, a trend also seen in the NHL and MLB, is juxtaposed with the commercial value conferred by its latest television broadcast deal, worth 160% more than the previous contract at US\$76 billion over eleven years (Adgate, 2024). Significantly, that broadcast deal involves ESPN and ABC, as well as Amazon – the platform titan that has invested in broadcasting American football, soccer, tennis, and

other sports in recent years. Amazon were also one of the leading investors in the afore-cited Jahani and Associates 2024 report on sport podcasts.

In this same exchange, speaking about tennis and his role as a podcaster, Wertheim continues:

JW: It is a really strange sports media eco-system out there, and yeah I mean I think Andy [Roddick] and I are the beneficiaries. We pay zero dollars and zero cents for rights fees, and yet we are able to capitalize on this culture that everybody loves. But yeah, it's wild times out there because the majority secret of sports today: we all love sports, we're all engaged, it's going 24/7 - fewer people than ever are watching the actual games and you wonder at some point if, maybe the networks and maybe all the media entities paying the rights are ahead of the curve and they recognize this and they've baked all this into their numbers, or maybe this bubble's about to burst.

Wertheim is describing shifts in the organization of sport media that have been identified for fifteen years. As Hutchins and Rowe put it in 2012, "television is, in effect, no longer the only medium that matters when it comes to the exercise of major economic and cultural power in media sport" (p. 5). As many others have noted, and as Amazon's interest attests, the trend is not simply away from live broadcasting and print to streaming and on-demand media. Wertheim's own position as a broadcaster, journalist, and podcaster exemplifies convergence between media, as sport journalists seek to amplify their outputs and reach audiences, and, of course, accrue fees beyond their potentially vulnerable established print, television, or radio roles.

Rather than see live mediated sport as juxtaposed to the boom in podcasting – a hostile position seen in many culture industries in response to the 'disruptions' of new media

communications (Dart, 2014) – their synergies are just as revealing. In December 2024, the US-based media executive Mark Shapiro offered the beginnings of an explanation for why the total value of sports broadcasting rights increased to US\$60 billion that year, despite the wider decline reported in television viewership:

Sports right now is the only thing flat-out working across linear and digital. Because it's live, and because of the competition, the rooting history, the equity many of these sports have with their fanbases and different countries and universes and followings. So, sports is on its own. It's a unicorn. And that's why you see so many deals where the platforms are putting more and more sports on non-traditional platforms, or putting them in windows that are unorthodox. Sports works, and it is the magic serum. Some will stay hot and some will cool off to warm, but they'll never be less than warm. (Shapiro, as quoted in Roan, 2024)

What Wertheim and (to a lesser extent) Shapiro are each beginning to describe, but ultimately fall short of offering, is an explanation for why sport podcasts have surged in popularity and attracted these investments. Wertheim makes plain the relatively low costs incurred by podcast producers in order to cover professional sport, albeit in doing so neglects the reputational capital and institutional backing increasingly needed for a show to gain visibility and establish a listenership. And his provocation that many people are listening to hosts talk about sport without actually watching live events needs to be borne out with more specific data on listener demographics and habits. Shapiro, meanwhile, tells us that live sport is ‘working’ across linear and digital channels but limits his explanation to certain characteristics of sports events and fandoms. We can address more precisely this question about the political economy and distinctive appeal of sport podcasts by focalizing the role of platforms in the podcast boom, beginning with the medium’s saturation of time.

## Platform Capitalism and the Commodification of Time

We have built a global real time communication network. We have built a planetary exoskeleton ... What for? To maximise ad revenue.

(Aaron Bastani, *Novara Media* podcast, 2024)

Podcasting's growth in the past decade especially is inseparable from the concomitant growth of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017), a mode of accumulation through which digital platforms position themselves centrally within interactions, exchanges, and services. The leading platforms in podcasting – Amazon, Apple, and Spotify – have curated images of themselves as mere technology companies, rather than as communicative hubs at the forefront of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls "the new frontier of power" in surveillance capitalism. In Zuboff's account, platforms not only connect producers and consumers; they also extract data from their interactions, which is used to derive a further surplus. They harness, commodify, and survey human experience, notably that of workers (especially 'flexible' gig economy workers and precarious employees), social media users, journalists, and advertisers (Narayan, 2024), while their ubiquity helps foster a drive for compulsory connectivity in order to participate in social life. As such, platforms are increasingly positioned "at the centre of critical understandings of digital economic circulation" (Langley & Leyson, 2017, p. 13) in an effort to de-fetishize their curated image as frictionless, immaterial hosts of sociality.

In the case of the podcast industry, it is useful to consider the social relation between producers, platforms, and audiences (or 'users'), all of whom partake in a process of economic circulation with asymmetrical interest in, and varying awareness of the terms of engagement. On first glance, platform capitalism has become central to the podcast industry thanks to a number of attributes that each offers the other. In keeping with the spirit of

openness synonymous with the early internet, the costs of podcast production have often been vaunted as non-existent or minimal, and relative to established media there remains some truth to this claim to affordability. Recording, disseminating, and accessing podcasts is far less costly than doing the equivalent in print, television, and even radio, especially when we factor in the potential audience. From the listener's perspective, most podcasts are free to access as long as you are willing to listen to advertisements and forgo 'premium' content. Platforms use their status to offer enormous opportunities for distributing podcasts into the feeds of listeners via RSS technologies that are not unique to podcasting but have been essential to the medium's ability to connect amateur podcasters with audiences.

However, rather than overcoming entry points for production and distribution renowned in traditional media, we might say that one gatekeeper has been substituted for another. Platforms do not simply host podcasts as transparent intermediaries: they shape what is heard through algorithmic recommendations, which rely on accruing, harvesting, and analyzing data about shows and audiences. As in other new media formats, algorithms shape which shows become visible, find certain audiences, and ultimately achieve success. Behavioural data is measured in terms of duration of listening, repeat listening to shows, completion rates, likes and shares, comments and reviews, and other engagement metrics that all affect visibility on platforms. For the shows (and increasingly their production companies), working with these metrics is increasingly important for climbing rankings and becoming "discoverable" to new audiences. For the listener, preferences today thereby shape what might be recommended for future listening or simply cued up to play immediately after the completion of a selected show – though platforms might also have other reasons to 'push' certain content. 'Popularity loops' reinforce success for shows, and listener engagement enriches the 'user profile' developed by the platform. Algorithms assess responses to recommendations and update profiles and show rankings accordingly (Paisana, Cardoso, and

Couraceiro, 2024). Relative to the early days of podcasting, emerging creators must seek to know and master this increasingly competitive ecosystem, with branding and professionalism (and of course the branding of non-professionalism) key to curating audiences. The economic, epistemic and reputational resources required to start and sustain a podcast have risen in the process. And while RSS feeds are crucial to the history and future of open distribution in podcasting, what Eric Hoyt and Jeremy Wade Morris (2021) call the ‘spotification’ of the medium increasingly renders creators dependent on, even exclusive to particular platforms in a move that “potentially represents the narrowing of voices, a further enclosure around an audio culture that has the potential to be open and accessible.” In this sense, the platformization of podcasting not only mirrors the enclosure of the digital commons seen elsewhere in media, sport, and leisure contexts (Rojek, 2005; Weedon, 2013) but also the longer history of (and resistance to) capitalist appropriation of amateur cultural innovation (Strangelove, 2005; Terranova, 2000).

There is an important sense in which the boom in sport podcasts emerges from the techno-experiential conditions of platformization, in both production and consumption, that make *time* the frontier of accumulation sought by podcasters, platforms, and advertisers. Whereas television coheres a single sports audience around a common event, sport podcasts allow for the engagement of variegated audiences in the time elapsing between events. “Podcasts never stop,” as *Sports Business Journal* (Salveson, 2024) puts it, and when they drop into the feeds of listeners they seek a monopoly on one’s listening time. Platforms have openly sought to control and exploit time, most notably the time of workers through surveillance and behaviour manipulation that continue to be the subject of critical scholarship (Gent, 2024). Though the circumstances are not the same for the podcast listener, time is still the object of measurement, modulation, and commodification, and the time of the audience is

a highly-prized and finite resource in an abundant sea of digitalized media. It is therefore not possible to write off podcast listening as the leisurely pursuit or pure volition of the listener. That attention, that time, is the object of each platform's commercial enterprise.

In the pursuit of listener time, podcasts hold the distinct advantage over other mediums of their audio format combined with the mobility and online connectivity of listening devices. The result is the capacity to reach audiences, as the industry phrase goes, 'on demand.' And in the case of sport, demand it they do. Observing a "clear appetite from sports fans for audio and podcast content", the *Sport Social Podcast Network* (2024) reported that, "on average, sports fans listen to over six hours' worth of audio content each day - two hours more than the average person." Making the same point comparatively, SiriusXM's MaryKate Breslin (2025) states that "podcasts transcend the limitations of traditional media by creating pathways for advertisers to reach a captive audience of sports fans pre-game, post-game, pre-season, in-season, and, most notably, off-season."

The capacity of the podcast to saturate time in this way, to expand and intensify the spatio-temporal horizons of the sport media complex, drastically opens up the kinds of discourse potentially circulating about sport. How exactly particular podcasts use this time, and how decisions differ based on combinations of sport, region, host and listener demographic, and so on, will doubtless be the focus of much future research. For our purposes, the emphasis is on the listener's time between events as the frontier pursued by sport podcasters. Time is of economic value once it is put to work for purposes of accumulation, or, according to some scholars of leisure and cultural studies, when an audience is exposed to opportunities for consumption. If the audience is 'working,' as Dallas Smythe (2001) once argued, and if we follow Ellen Meiksins Wood in defining "capitalism as a system uniquely driven to improve the productivity of labor by technical means" (2017, p. 2), then the podcast emerges as an exceptionally powerful and far-reaching technical

means of commodifying a diffuse audience. And, while this has always been the objective of broadcast media, ‘postbroadcast’ media adds a further mode of accumulation through time: the accrual and harvesting of data about listeners – when they listen, to what, for how long, and so on – which are used for sharpening decisions, and algorithms, around advertising and content visibility.

As much as listening time is unmistakably the frontier of accumulation pursued and expanded by the podcast industry, the political economy of podcasting is as much about the circulation of affects, messages, and the creation of sociality as it is about ‘platformization’ and its monetary techniques. As McKenzie Wark (2019, p. 3) puts it when writing about the inchoate emergence of a new political economic regime that monopolizes information and communication channels, “not just our labour, not just our leisure – something else is being commodified here: our sociability, we might even say our communism.” It is significant that sentiment analysis, not just data analysis, is conducted by platforms, and podcasts are a potent vector for creating these sentiments through friendly, familiar voices, interested in the same subjects as listeners. In terms of what has made sport such a popular category in this industry, we might speculate on the longstanding sociological critique of modernist performance sport and its hyper-commodification, wherein over-professionalized athletes labor in evermore specialized spectacles that are increasingly less ludic and increasingly less humanistic (e.g. Hoberman, 1992; Pronger, 1990). Might sport podcasts, in their conviviality and ‘phatic’ semiotic function (Eco, 1986), in their capacity to reach audiences ‘on demand’ as everyday life unfolds, be offering a dose of human connection that is increasingly missing from the spectacles they cover? And if so, what are some of the techniques advanced by platforms, producers, marketers, and hosts that engender, capture, and commodify this desire for human connection?

## **Listening Alone, Together: Intimacy, Digital Sociality, and Audio Advertising**

I don't have friends I have podcasts.

(Reddit Thread, 2021)

Intimacy is an emotion that is mostly cited for its absence in capitalist societies. As Eva Illouz (2007) demonstrates, several of the keystone theorists of modernity – Durkheim's bonds of social solidarity, Weber's emphasis on the anxiety induced from Protestantism that compels the entrepreneurial spirit, Simmel's observations of the blasé disposition of the urban flaneur, and Marx's notion of alienation from the fruits of one's labour – each have something to say about how modern societies induce distance, separation, anxiety, and ennui. “Emotion”, writes Illouz, “is not action per se, but it is the inner energy that propels us toward an act, what gives a particular “mood” or “coloration” to an act” (2007, p. 2).

Advertisers have grasped this insight since the industry's inception: that closeness of feeling and connection help induce consumption. And while much has been written about the falsity of advertising, its apotheosis is to seamlessly eclipse a product or service with something of real, authentic emotional import to the would-be buyer (Leiss et al, 2005). In worlds of cold intimacies, podcasting is a “hot” auditory prospect (i.e., replete with lush and plentiful sensory data), to echo Marshall McLuhan's (1964) description of radio. Scholarship and industry sources on podcasting concur that intimacy is both its aspiration and the key to creating and holding an audience (Euritt, 2022). And it is here where the value of the sport podcast, in close concert with its capacity to expand the spatial and temporal horizons of sport media into personalized soundscapes, becomes fully apparent.

Sport has long been identified as a deeply affective cultural form, and podcasts advertisers and marketers know it: their reports and business-to-business advertisements are

flush with references to this power. As Sabrina b of True Native Media, an agency that matches podcasts with advertisers, puts it:

Sports podcasting has emerged as a powerful medium for reaching passionate and engaged audiences. These podcasts cater to passionate fans of specific sports teams or leagues and offer advertisers a unique opportunity to tap into loyal and highly engaged audiences. By leveraging the power of local hosts and authentic ad reads, sports podcasts are delivering impressive results for brands.

But whereas excitement and passion are the kinds of affect that tend to be attached to sport, it is podcasting's potential for intimacy – familiarity, companionship, trust, empathy – that is of greatest value to advertisers (cf. Euritt, 2022; Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

The techniques for podcast advertising borrow from those well-established in radio and from the gamut of possibilities offered by new media technology, with listener data harvested and aggregated to make optimal pairings between advert and audience, as well as dynamically inserted adverts that are part of temporary campaigns, played at specific intervals in a podcast episode. One technique, the host-read advert – where the voices with whom listeners are already familiar are those pitching the product or service – homes in on the distinctive capacity of the sport podcast for garnering intimate audience relationships. As an example of a host read ad, here are the hosts of the Guardian's award-winning *Football Weekly* podcast, Max Rushden and Barry Glendenning, advertising subscriptions to TNT sports to their listeners:

Max Rushden: Hi pod fans, Max here, Barry's here too. *Football Weekly* is supported by TNT Sports. Now Barry, as you've hopefully noticed, the new UEFA Champions League is in full swing.

Barry Glendenning: I have noticed, yes.

MR: Nothing gets past you! And of course, part of the reason we love it is because sport unlocks emotions we simply don't experience in everyday life. Do you experience emotions in everyday life, Barry?

BG: From time to time, Max.

MR: But you don't just watch sport, you feel it, don't you Baz?

BG: Yes.

MR: I will say that, when Tottenham got through to the Champions League final, and after that breathless moment, I did have a real, like a genuine sort of welling-up moment, when I thought *I can't go to this game [in Madrid]. I've got to watch this game with my dad*. And it did actually, I was sat at the canteen at *The Guardian* the next day, quite tearful. And then I got on with my day, Barry. Sometimes it's good to let it out. It's what football does, doesn't it?

BG: That's right, Max. And as I recall, your father wasn't that fussed about watching it with you, in the end, you probably should have gone.

MR: [laughs] Only sport can do this Barry. Feel the highs and lows of the new UEFA Champions League season – live on TNT sports. Stream TNT sports on Discovery+, or watch TNT Sports channels on EE, Sky, or Virgin Media.

(Host-read advertisement for TNT Sports, Football Weekly, 2024)

We've featured this advert in part because it is not remarkable – many sport podcasts feature host-read ads for different companies and products, and all will have differing orientations to humour, tone, and the anticipated desires of their audience. A few features are

nonetheless noteworthy. First, it is a recording read by the hosts (rather than recorded live in the show), played in this case at the beginning of the episode, yet seeks to emulate the rhythm of an impromptu conversation akin to those on the show. Second, it is read out in a way that is clearly scripted but intonated to bring the listener in on what is happening – that the hosts with whom they are familiar are reading an advert. Both hosts have worked together in sports radio where reading adverts has long been commonplace and so have experience in curating an atmosphere of this kind. The ‘do you experience emotions’ line, for instance, is a droll play on Barry’s dourness on the show, and might also be to mock the need to bring the emotional qualities synonymous with sport into the foreground. But the implication that ‘they know their audience knows’ that they are now selling them something at once garners a sense of trust and meets the demand of the advertiser. This aligns with the well-rehearsed ‘knowing wink’ technique common to many modern advertising campaigns (Goldman & Papson, 1991) but is intertwined here with features that are distinctive to audio media (radio as well as podcasts). Fourth, Max’s story is short but heartfelt, evoking the ‘breathlessness’ of the winning moment when watching live sport, and then immediately moving to his relationship with his father and the centrality of sport to it. Fifth, note that after Max’s ‘welling up’ in the canteen, Barry restores levity, which also imbues the advert with a characteristic wry authenticity via the masculine expression of emotions through their downplaying (which is notably different to the claims of stoicism synonymous with hegemonic masculinity). It is clear that the advertiser’s desire to convey the emotional power of sport through the ad has been achieved, but without displacing or compromising the authentic relationship between these hosts, or the relationship between host and listeners. It is a far cry from a television advert that must speak to a presumed national or international audience, often of large production value and cost.

The intimacy of personalized audio media – of familiar voices sharing an anecdote with humour and feeling, of the bonds that connect sport to family – are crucial to establishing trust and retaining authenticity. A report compiled by the *Sport Social Podcast Network* based on listener survey data claims that “sports podcast listeners are more likely to trust podcast ads the most and pay the most attention to podcast ads when compared with legacy media consumers.” Similarly, a 2024 advertising agency report entitled *Medals, Mics, Marketing: How Sports Podcasts Bring Brands Closer to the Conversation*, states the following:

Sport is always on as there’s always the next season or another tournament. And if the action never ends, neither do the conversations. Sports podcasts are an authentic way for brands to join these conversations. Their social nature offers brands a unique opportunity to connect and gain relevancy with audiences, but only if brands know the rules of the road. The most effective ads feel like natural extensions of the conversation and by understanding the informal and communal nature of podcasting, advertising can be tailored to resonate with listeners in a way that feels both genuine and unobtrusive. (Global DAX, 2024)

To be clear, this is as much about holding an audience as it is about optimizing adverts. In fact, in the age of platform capitalism, these intentions are blurred. A reader’s comment posted under an article written by Max Rushden (2023) in *The Guardian*, entitled “Friends Reunited: Football Weekly Listeners come for the Games and Stay for the People”, underscores these points:

This article has made me realise that I’ve been listening since at least 2012 and I have listened to every one, more or less. That’s more time spent in the company of [former

host] AC Jimbo, Max and especially Barry than I have spent with family members and genuinely close friends. And as my life changes, it's remained as a cornerstone.

A SiriusXM survey of 423 'customers' bears out this experience. Around half of listeners of sports podcasts do so as a surrogate form of friendship, agreeing that "listening to a sports podcast is like having a conversation with a friend about the game," that "the host provides a humorous tone that enhances the listening experience," and that the intimate environment makes you feel part of the conversation – leading SiriusXM to conclude that because "in-depth coverage forms deep bonds ... brands can tap into the listener-host relationship in a way that is both authentic and effective" (Breslin, 2025). The above comment from the *Football Weekly* listener is, therefore, not an aberration. Nor is it a secret: sport podcasts with established audiences are wont to read out this sort of correspondence, and it lends credibility to the otherwise predictably bold cheerleading from PR agencies about the appeal of sport podcasts. It also helps establish and affirm the kinds of authentic affective connections that are frequently decried as lost or waning in the hypermediated commercial spectacle of professional sport, potentially positioning sport podcasts as more real, in the sense of being more authentic and relatable, than the sporting spectacles they cover.

As Sarah Banet Weiser (2012) has argued, authenticity is the paradoxical currency of the social media age: the desired quality that is compromised once its expression is coded as intentional or becomes synonymous with brand culture. Authenticity, then, is a skilful aesthetic to curate in a new media context where the "prosumer" (Toffler, 1980) has a heightened sensibility to what constitutes genuine digital output. Sport podcasts may or may not be advertising products or services that the listener needs, wants or cares for. But what is crucial is that the adverts chosen do not compromise the sense of authentic care for the sports they cover, or the personalities they express. Thus, the critique of advertising as an

ideological mechanism of capitalist accumulation, exemplified by Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One Dimensional Man* and the distinction he drew between 'false' and 'authentic' needs, risks missing the point. What is being sold in the moment is not the product so much as the bonds of sociality established between podcaster and listener.

Far more remarkable than these claims about the reach of sport podcasts or the resonance they have with listeners are those surrounding their efficacy in inducing listeners to 'act' on advertisements. As Wark has put it, "a good deal of snake oil still goes into persuading ad buyers that advertisers have magical means of persuasion that will galvanize people's desire towards actually buying the product" (2019, p. 2). However, the same SiriusXM survey cited above reports that of their respondents, "after hearing a podcast ad, over five in ten sports podcast listeners visited the brand's website or researched a product online. And nearly four in ten listeners purchased the product online or in store" (Breslin, 2025). These are extraordinary coefficients, and it is worth noting that the research produced by companies working in these industries is conducted and presented towards hyping the potential of their markets. Yet, even if this sample were not representative of listeners (little further detail is offered in the report), the key point is that sport audiences are, as Manager of Research at Edison Salam Aly puts it, not only "receptive to athlete endorsements" but especially amenable to the convivial familiarity of sport podcast hosts (Edison Research and SiriusXM Media, 2024).

Recalling Jon Wertheim's earlier comments, sport podcasts generally claim a younger, more diverse audience than broadcasters and print media have come to rely on. Edison (2024) published a UK Podcast Consumer report and found that podcasts writ large "are an excellent way to reach the sought-after 35-54-year-old UK segment, many who are in their prime spending years." The *Sport Social Podcast Network* (2024) is more specific:

Sport podcasts also know their audiences, and while of course these will differ by show and specialization, the aggregations from marketing firms show that 25–44-year-olds, 70% of whom are men, make up the sport podcast listener demographic (Sport Social Podcast Network Report, 2024).

Further research is needed to establish how these demographics are distributed across sports, regions, and so on, and how the hosting aesthetics of particular sport podcasts attract particular audiences to follow advertisements through to consumption.

Nevertheless, we can begin to posit a correlation between the desire for intimacy and companionship (‘feeling part of the conversation’) declared by sport podcast listeners, and the breakdown in sociality, identified by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000), by numerous critics of neoliberal capitalism, and in a spate of analyses of the digital condition. “Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies,” writes Sheryl Turkle (2011, p. 1) in *Alone Together: How we Came to Expect More from Computers and Less from Ourselves*. “These days, it suggests substitutions that put the real on the run.” “Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities,” she continues, “and as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy” (p. 3). This framing of the relationship between digital connectivity and human sociality is the inverse, the *camera obscura*, to the way brand managers and marketers celebrate the sport podcast for its capacity to engender meaningful relationships with audiences; it identifies the breakdown of sociality that podcasts seek to supplement with their authentic, familiar, intimate dialogue, and invites critical analysis of the relationship between the audio modalities of digital capitalism and the kinds of sociality it is prone to engender.

To be clear, there is no single, homogenous sport podcast audience, even as larger audiences increasingly assemble around the chart-leading podcasts abetted by reputations, legacy media companies, and the algorithmic advantages they can confer, and so generalizations need tempering. But the young and middle-aged men that are identified as the majority listenership of sport podcasts are reported to be highly susceptible to, and less likely to talk about, loneliness, social isolation, and depression. To illustrate Turkle's argument concerning the propensity of digitality to offer technological solutions to the things it has helped compromise, consider that BetterHelp, the online therapy and counselling company, has been the world's largest podcast advertiser since 2020. Moreover, as with all affective connections, intimacy is never politically neutral; connections are formed around particular shared interests, values, and norms. This does not mean that all sport podcasts are expressions of the 'manosphere' and the political formations to which it is tethered on account of their majority listenership. For example, *Football Weekly* is produced by the Guardian, a left-liberal media company that attracts a socially conscious audience – a consciousness that the podcast informs through consistent coverage of social and political issues in professional football, from gambling and corruption to racism and climate breakdown. Suffice it to say that any brute homology between who hosts sport podcasts and how they cover sport will fall down quickly once the political affinities, economic models and desired audiences of different shows are brought into the analysis. At the same time, the whiteness of podcasting as an industry, and the prevalence of male hosts, needs to be reckoned with (Friesse, 2015; Locke, 2017). The chart-leading show across all genres is *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which broke with its brand of curated pluralism by hosting and endorsing Trump in the build-up to the 2024 US elections. Rogan's podcast is not a sport podcast per se, but here is an instance where the blurred boundaries of genre definition become manifest, given Rogan's background in wrestling, promotion of mixed martial arts, and his business interests in the supplements industry (see

King and Weedon, forthcoming). The “sonic whiteness” of podcasting, “marked by its absence” in the words of Brekke (2020, p. 175), seldom surfaces as plainly as in Rogan’s Trump endorsement. But when it does, it invites attention to where and to what end podcasting’s capacity for engendering intimacy and sociality are mobilized beyond the overt selling of products.

The “social industry”, as Richard Seymour (2016) calls it, pursues the commodification not only of audience attention but of human desire for connection. Sentiment, passion, and sociality itself are crucial to the currency of new media, platform capitalism, and the podcast industry, each of which have the propensity to not only commodify attention but to make human nature itself a site for accumulation, while harvesting data as part of the process. Audio media, in which hosts and contributors speak convivially with audiences, that can be played at the whim of the listener and block out the surrounding soundscape, are a new frontier in the mission of advertising and the interiority of platform capitalism to human social existence. As such, they prompt a reconsideration of whether and how mediated sport remains a “spectacle of accumulation” (Jhally, 1984), and more to the point, whether a visual metaphor of arrested audience attention remains the most accurate for grasping what is going on.

## **Conclusion**

We first discussed the significance of podcasting in sport media together a decade ago in the context of a project on the changing nature of sport journalism. Had we committed those ideas to writing then, the outlook would have been quite different from what we present here. In 2015, it was still possible to survey podcasting as independent and amateur broadcasters making shows for niche audiences, and for established broadcasters to complement their existing media output, even as the success of *Serial* by This American Life

indicated a sea change. Keeping pace since then has meant watching podcasting continue to move from a complementary media modality imbued with alternative possibilities to a leading form of audience capture, alongside the growth and consolidation of platforms in an age of networked late capitalism. Where that early spirit of amateurism remains, it is of heightened value to an industry that seeks to curate and commodify authenticity, intimacy, and sociality, something that bears on the podcast hosts and producers who must navigate the complex affective and algorithmic politics of new media. How and to what end podcasters navigate these dynamics is a foremost question for future research on the intensified sport media complex.

We can draw out two main conclusions from this analysis of the sport podcast as an ascendant cultural object, the first of which centres on its continuities with the sport media complex. Just as Sut Jhally (1984, 1989) identified advertising as the key to understanding why mediated sport is materially significant in capitalist societies – insofar as it promotes an orientation towards (and products for) consumption – adverts have become central to the economy of sport podcasts. Platforms, marketers, brand managers, and industry reports all celebrate the appeal of the sport podcast for its combining of the medium's qualities of mobile on-demand audio, and the latent potential for constant exposure, with the emotional attachments already inherent to sport audiences. In this sense at least, what Jhally (1984, p. 55) called the “dialectic of material/cultural relations in advanced capitalism” is only intensified by sport podcasts.

At the same time, what constitutes exposure has expanded, such that the mediated live sport event – and we venture, the sensory experience of visuality and the spectacle itself – has been at least augmented, and by some accounts altered and even compromised, by the experience of listening. Radio, as McLuhan (1964) famously put it, is the “tribal drum” that

made society a “single echo chamber” that resonated with a species consciousness, or collective psyche. At the same time, its aural modalities have long been identified as gendered and racialised in ways that are more differentiated than this suggests (Stoever, 2016). In its inheritance from radio, the podcast brings that oral tradition, that tribal drum, and the cultural politics of listening, into the digital capitalist age. The capacity of new media technologies to take as their object the commodification of our most basic desire for human connection – certainly in the accounts we have featured here – is widely held to be realized more effectively by the podcast than other media. At the same time, a noteworthy trend to follow is that of podcasters increasingly transcending audio, converging into visual mediums via platforms such as YouTube and creating mediums for audience interaction and exchange, from dedicated fan forums to live shows and tours.

Sport podcasts are part of a digital condition where ‘content’ can be endlessly diverse, but the power to control the terms and likelihood of access is increasingly concentrated, its operations opaquely contained in the workings of algorithms and investment drives. Almost none of this registers in the user’s interface, in the slick transition from notification to streaming or downloading to listening. We can highlight, then, that the podcast is suited to the carriage of hosting slow, considered discussion in a way that contrasts with most other media forms, certainly its new media contemporaries in platforms such as X, TikTok and Facebook. Podcasting is also imbued with educative potential, formal and informal, as sociologists of sport have already recognized. And in its slowness and pedagogical capacity, it is a medium that can make discussions of sport amenable to socially and politically sensitive matters, and that can open up heterodox spaces of identity, community, and experience. But the medium is at least as amenable to populism, to “disinfotainment”, to the machinations of the manosphere, and the affective politics of resentment that have surfaced internationally in recent years (Seymour, 2024). Perhaps it is most urgent to pursue these

possibilities together: to understand the pedagogical politics of sport podcasting as a means of creating and harnessing emotional energy towards different political ends.

In sport podcasting, in place of a single stream of content is a heterogenous blend of all sorts – from the satirical to the analytical to the educative to simply talking about yesterday's game – that does not find, nor necessarily need, enormous audiences to exist. Herein lie the kernels of the early dream of podcasting, the amateur broadcaster connecting with a niche audience, the creative and democratic potential of which has been curtailed by the making of a podcast industry beholden to the algorithmic logics of platform capitalism, where advertising revenue and data harvesting to that end are its *raison d'être*, and where the emotional dynamics that make the medium so powerful are available to powerful interests. Thus, in terms of implications, there is an argument that podcasting still represents an opportunity for a “revolutionary moment in the sociology of sport” (Wilson, 2007) that was heralded by globally networked communications technology, not only on account of the endless array of possible ‘content’ but because of the channels it opens for organizing, collective listening, and the creation and capture of listeners concerned with the social significance of sport. But at the same time, optimism about these possibilities is tempered by the internet's mutation into a “cyberlibertarian” (Golumbia, 2024) space where human nature (Zuboff, 2019), sociality (Wark, 2019), and the futures of other cherished humanist ideals are the object of commodification, measurement, appropriation, and social control.

On account of this trajectory and based on the lines of inquiry we have been unable to pursue in this article but see as crucial to a critical scholarly appreciation of these changes in the sport media complex, we conclude by highlighting some avenues for further research that would expand, test, or move beyond what we argued heretofore. First, sport podcasts are a largely untapped, enormous digital archive for analysis. That this data trove is impossibly large

and growing, and that each podcast is interacting deliberately with an “imagined” listener in highly specific ways, underscores the challenges and possibilities in treating this archive empirically. Second, the ‘content’ of sport podcasts needs to be understood as part of the political economy of platform capitalism and how new media has not only altered the direction and reliability of revenue streams but has become interior to human connections and relationships. Third, questions need to be asked about whether novel methodologies are required for further research on podcasts, with the broader aim of truly engaging not only the intersections of production, content, and consumption (du gay et al, 1997) but also the psycho-social condition of mobile listening (cf. Hutchins, 2019) in an age of digital capitalism. Fourth, none of the above overwrites the distinctiveness or creative potential of podcasts to be availed many ends: to be educative, irreverent, radical even; to navigate and exceed the thrall of platforms and the compulsory connectivity of digital capitalism (Llineres, Fox and Berry, 2018). (As an example of one of many avenues for exploration in this realm, we might look to the emerging body of work focused on the possibilities in podcast spaces for queer(ing) social identities [Copeland, 2018, 2023].) Finally, the experiences and strategies of producers trying to create and sustain podcasts in this fast-changing arena could build further, deeper appreciation of how sport podcasters negotiate algorithms, make decisions about which adverts to run and sponsors to embrace or reject, mobilize sentiment as a mode of audience capture, and hold onto the elements of podcasting that first animated today’s audio media revolution.

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