

## Hear Here! The Case for Podcasting in Research

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**Abstract:** *Podcasting as a platform has broadly progressed into a popular resource for communication, including advancing knowledge, science, and medicine through research dissemination. First, there is evidence to indicate that podcasting has evolved into a "second wave" as an effective tool to be used in academia and that it can help disseminate research findings to reach other scholars in the field. However, there is also a growing body of literature to indicate it is being used more frequently to communicate, tapping into information that is primarily generated through scholarly work to reach a broader and more general audience. The purpose of this paper is to examine the following research question: How effective is the use of podcast technology for academic research dissemination, research communication, and promotion? This paper also took into account some podcasts representing research, notably VIEW to the U produced by the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research at University of Toronto Mississauga. This research also considered gaps in the current literature related to the effectiveness of audio outputs in research.*

**Keywords:** *podcasting; research; podcasting in research; research communications; research dissemination; digital technology; knowledge mobilization; communication; audio information*

### Introduction

The podcast as a platform has evolved into an incredibly diverse and popular resource for information, and there is evidence to indicate it has advanced to a "second wave" as an educational tool (Berry, 2016; Biber & Heidorn, 2020; Bonini, 2015; Wake & Bahsen, 2016). Podcasts in academia can help disseminate research findings, showcase academic expertise and reach new audiences (Baelo-Allué, 2019; Harter, 2019; Kwok, 2019; Brumley et al., 2017). Podcasting can also help researchers or people working in research communications to highlight faculty members in a unique way that allows listeners to hear directly from a researcher about their work and academic path.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of podcast technology for academic research dissemination, research communication, and research promotion. This paper took into account some podcasts representing research, notably VIEW to the U produced by the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research at UofT Mississauga (DeMarco, 2016–present). This research also considered gaps that may exist in the current literature related to the effectiveness of audio outputs incorporated into the research lifecycle.

## Research Question

*How effective is the use of podcast technology for academic research dissemination, research communication, and promotion?*

It is also important to address at the outset the term “effectiveness,” which in its broadest term can be difficult to measure. Brumley et al. (2017) state that while metrics can help to identify how scholarly content might influence others or is further used, if we focus solely on metrics as a way to measure effectiveness, there is the possibility of making narrow judgements, both explicit and implicit, about the impact and intended audience of the content (p. 262). For the purposes of this study, the effectiveness of podcasting in academia will primarily take into account the power and potential to reach audiences, in academia and beyond, in order to make a scholar and their work more accessible to a larger range of people.

## Context for Academic Podcasts

In her article, “Storytelling in acoustic spaces: Podcasting as embodied and engaged scholarship” (2019), author Lynn Harter chronicles the rise of audio recordings and their power to reach people. She writes that information and news were previously and primarily consumed via traditional or legacy media, including magazines and books, radio, television, and newspapers, but that new and emerging platforms have led to an increase in digital formats (p. 3). Harter cites the rise of the podcast and argues for making information available in an audio format based on two discussion points: “(1) Podcasting stretches the tendencies and capacities of academics toward multi-sensorial forms of inquiry and (2) it connects academics with broader publics” (p. 3). She regards her own foray into podcasting with *Defining Moments* (Harter, 2019–2020, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/727287962/defining-moments>, produced in association with NPR) that serves as a companion platform to the journal *Health Communications*, for which Harter is an editor, as a new way for her to personify and engage with her scholarship (p. 3), as well as a way to make a connection with health-communication scholars, healthcare care providers, patients, and their families, as well as a broader audience interested in well-being, healthcare, and illness (p. 4).

As further support to include podcasts in a scholarly environment, resources have become available to help academics start their own podcast. One such model exists in the United Kingdom and has been operational for over a decade: *Research Podcasts* (<http://researchpodcasts.co.uk/>), which has a tagline of “Disseminate, communicate, educate,” state that their “strength is communicating complex research in an interesting and accessible way,” and that they aim to interview people to best showcase their work and themselves most persuasively. One of the team’s co-founders, Chris Garrington, says she produced her first research-focused podcast in 2008 and has produced over a dozen since then.

## Podcasts with Specific Focus

Podcasts have also cropped up that focus on specific academic disciplines and may be intended for colleagues in a particular field as well as armchair academics: IEEE RAS Soft Robotics Podcast is all about the technology and research behind soft or continuum robotics (ElDiwiny, 2019–present); The Political Theory Review podcast from the University of Houston features scholars talking about their work and recent books in political theory and social and political philosophy (Church, 2017–present); and science-based podcasts, such as Science vs or Gastropod, which both include academics and draws on their expertise for a wide range of timely topics. Gastropod considers food via science and historical perspectives and is supported by the Burroughs Wellcome Fund in order to represent biomedical research (Graber & Twilley, 2014–present). In the case of Science vs, each show concludes with a citation count for their program just as an academic paper concludes with references (Zukerman, 2016–present). This crop of podcasts that all have science at their core are each carving out their own unique way to exist at the intersection of scholarly work and general interest.

## General Audience Research-based Podcasts

A range of general-audience podcasts have also emerged that feature academics discussing their work, highlighting recent publications, and delving deeper into popular topics. Examples of this type of format are podcasts like *The Next Big Idea* (<https://wondery.com/shows/the-next-big-idea/>), which has the tagline “[we bring] you the most ground-breaking ideas that have the power to change the way you live, work, and think,” and has showcased a range of academics from organizational psychologist Professor Adam Grant to neuroscientist Professor Daniel Levitin speaking about their work or specific questions defined by the zeitgeist, as well as notable academic thinkers and authors like Malcolm Gladwell, Susan Cain, and Daniel Pink driving the topics (Griscom, 2019–present). This podcast type is mostly intended for a lay audience seeking to explore concepts delineated by scholarly experts.

## Literature Review

### *Research Communications*

It has become increasingly important to think about research or science communications in academia (Brumley et al., 2017; Rankin, 2018; Rogers & Herbert, 2018; Udovicich et al., 2017). Most recently, there has been a more significant focus and surge in resources, including workshops, publications, as well as courses related to communicating research. For example, in Canada, a new pilot funding opportunity was introduced in January 2020 by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC is one of Canada's leading funding agencies) called the Science Communication Skills grant (NSERC, 2020). The grant is one year in duration, and funds requested can be a maximum of \$20,000 (CAD). The mandate for this program is to promote particular branches of knowledge in order to foster a more robust Canadian culture of science, and they state in the overview on their website that improving science communication is critical for advancing science literacy and evidence-based data, as well as an opportunity to deflect

scientific misinformation. The NSERC fund aims to train researchers and students in science about effectively communicating science to a more general audience.

### *A History of Podcast Technology*

According to Podcast Insights (<https://www.podcastinsights.com/podcast-statistics/>), which regularly compiles podcasting-specific data, there are over 1 million shows and more than 30 million episodes in circulation as of April 2020. This indicates significant growth (nearly doubled) since 2018 when there were approximately 525,000 shows and 18.5 million episodes according to Apple statistics, and that the consumption for podcast outputs has increased since the data also indicates more people are tuning in to podcasts than ever before (Edison Research, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2019; Sullivan, 2019; Winn, 2021).

Along this vein, authors Brumley, Gilson, Mollett, and Williams (2017) wrote the book *Communicating your research with social media: A practical guide to using blogs, podcasts, data visualisations and video* with the intention, most broadly stated, to present a framework for academics about using social media to promote their work on a global scale (p. 1). The authors dedicate an entire chapter (5) to audio and podcasting, but first, to establish the landscape, define the “research lifecycle” as having six phases: “inspiration, collaboration, primary research, public engagement, dissemination and impact” (Brumley et al., 2017, p. 46). The authors significantly detail each stage and put forward their suggestions for employing social and digital media in order to optimize each function of the lifecycle.

For the chapter on audio and podcasts, the authors defined what podcasts are and their history (Brumley et al., 2017, p. 161): podcasting as a platform started in the early 2000s, and after some uptake lost their initial luster because of the cumbersome nature of having to download and transfer to another media player. However, the authors further state that podcasting has been reinvigorated thanks to several popular shows (e.g., *This American Life*, *Radiolab* and *Serial*) and easier access via direct download to smartphones as well as multiple podcast options (Spotify, iTunes, Google, YouTube), and that no matter what field a researcher, academic or student is working in, they can make the most of this podcasting revival and reach broader audiences in order to share their work from various parts of the research lifecycle (Brumley et al., 2017, p. 161).

### *Podcasting and Link to Listening Skills*

In her book, *You're not listening: What you're missing and why it matters*, author Kate Murphy states that listening habits degrade over time if you do not make an effort to listen carefully. She states that “[if] you start listening to everyone as you would scan headlines on a celebrity gossip website, you won't discover the poetry and wisdom that is within people” (2019, p. 20). Although Murphy is relating this notion to conversations with people, this same idea can be applied to listening to researchers on a podcast: the act of listening can be regarded as a gateway to new ideas and thoughts.

Further in her book, in a chapter on “The neuroscience of listening,” Murphy distinguishes between hearing and listening, with the former being more passive and a “forerunner” to the listening, which she describes as active. Murphy further states that those who are the “best

listeners” employ other senses in order to concentrate on what they hear: “Their brains work hard to process all that incoming information and find meaning, which opens the door to creativity, empathy, insight, and knowledge. Understanding is the goal of listening, and it takes effort” (p. 24).

Brumley et al. intimate a similar notion in their book related to the importance sound has in communicating academic information and how it took their work a step further than the blogs they were previously solely publishing (2017, p. 166). They also discuss how introducing information in a way that audio or podcasting allows can diverge from what may have been the traditional format, such as recorded lectures. They cite Tara Brabazon, a cultural studies professor at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, and her book *Digital dialogues and community 2.0: After avatars, trolls and puppets* (2012). In a chapter related to librarians podcasting, Brabazon states that sound allows listeners to slow down their understanding of ideas and words, to bring a heightened awareness of their environment, punctuating their workspaces, home life, and leisure, and that it fosters a sense of “quiet interiority.” She further states that because there is a bias toward the “visual” related to obtaining information theories, sound is not given prominent consideration. Brabazon expresses that the power of sound leads to a more profound introspection and is an absorbing experience in the acquisition of new knowledge (p. 166).

As it relates to listening and learning, there is an opportunity further to study these processes and the effective intake of information (Sharon & John, 2019). In their article “Does Modality Matter? The Effects of Reading, Listening, and Dual Modality on Comprehension,” authors Rogowsky, Calhoun and Tallal (2016) state that despite the increase in audio as a technological advance for consuming material “there is a surprising lack of empirical research that directly evaluates the effect of mode of input on comprehension” and that “a review of the research on adults yields conflicting results” (p. 1). They undertook a study using the same material processed in three different ways, and then administered the same comprehension test: 91 participants were provided the preface and one chapter of a non-fiction book and had to either listen to the digital audiobook version (group 1), read it on an e-reader (group 2), or do both (read and listen) simultaneously (group 3). The study accounted for certain variables, including gender, but overall found no significant difference between the various input modalities as far as comprehension was concerned. The authors state that there were several limitations related to the study, however, including that printed text was not made available, the level of language proficiency was not included as a variable (though all participants were educated and had a bachelor’s degree), and that the text used was non-fiction material.

Going forward, this is something that would require further study, and in particular, as it relates to podcasts, associations with information processing, listening, as well as retention. A study to test the rate of comprehension as well as memory retention when the information is read by a participant, perhaps in a transcribed version of a podcast, versus when the same details are heard in the actual interview and final output of a podcast, and a further group who listen to the podcast while reading the transcript simultaneously, could demonstrate a level of engagement and interest in the material presented in a podcast.

### *Podcasts as an Educational Tool*

Podcasting and even some video outputs as pre-lectures are increasingly being incorporated in the classroom to communicate information and supplement traditional delivery methods, such as attending lectures and reading. When entering search terms in the U of T Library's database related to podcasting in education ("podcasting AND curriculum OR education OR learning"), roughly 400 articles come up that consider how podcasts and digital technology have been increasingly incorporated into the classroom over time. Articles such as "Designing a web-based learning environment using weblogs and podcasts" (Salam & Wang, 2009), "Faculty, are you ready for mobile learning? E-learners say they are geared up and ready to engage" (Corbeil et al., 2008), or "Creating a new mobile learning community with podcasting" (Seo et al., 2010), and several others all point to the usage of podcasting technology as a way to enhance learning in higher education.

Additionally, it is an established fact that students globally are mostly learning virtually due to COVID-19, and institutions have had to implement physical-distancing measures. Though this situation continues to unfold, educators and educational administrators, particularly in colleges and universities where students are often paying tuition, have had to integrate more resources into the curriculum and classroom (e.g., Ross & DiSalvo, 2020), and podcasting will likely become another more common teaching tool in the time to come.

Further considering this idea about incorporating audio into the curriculum, authors Biber and Heidorn (2020) at the University of West Georgia explore a teaching method that blends podcast-based learning and physical activity. They cite a study by Blakemore from 2003 that demonstrates how "[physical] activity increases blood flow to the brain, which stimulates enhanced cognitive functioning for learning and processing" (Biber & Heidorn, p. 1).

Their (Biber and Heidorn's) recent study took this a step further and mixed podcast listening with movement. In their article "Tailoring the walking classroom to promote college student engagement" (2020), Biber and Heidorn explore a teaching method that blends podcast-based learning and physical activity. The authors state that this study was based on the "Walking Classroom" delivery method implemented in some elementary schools. With the prospect of walking podcasts, Biber and Heidorn state they are an appealing and viable option for the instruction of college students because they are easy and free to produce, implement, and sustain (p. 2). They had students either walk an indoor track or head outdoors in small groups or pairs (to minimize any harm of walking alone while wearing headphones) and listen to a 15- to 20-minute podcast that was essentially a lecture and was recorded and accessed via a platform (Vocaroo), which also minimized other online distractions because it does not allow internet surfing. Not only did the majority of the students surveyed say they enjoyed this content-delivery method, they reported that they felt they were able to retain the information better while they were walking as opposed to sitting to read the material or seated in a classroom listening to a lecture. Students also expressed that they enjoyed the physical activity because prior to that they were either sitting at work or sitting while commuting and they felt their ability to focus on the material improved during the simultaneous walking and learning exercise (p. 2).

This prospect requires further study, but it would be interesting to pursue whether listening to a research-based podcast leads to better information retention instead of reading the same material. (See related discussion in *Observations on Podcasting and Link to Listening Skills* section.) This also harkens back to a previously stated fact (in the *Research Communications in General* section, and article by Harter, 2019) that employing the podcast platform also allows listeners to multi-task, e.g., they can consume a podcast while walking, commuting or carrying out other chores.

Historically, several authors (Berry, 2016; Barton & Merolli, 2019; Chen & Melon, 2018; Peoples & Tilley, 2011) have suggested incorporating podcasts and audio outputs as part of knowledge translation (KT). Some of these instances may be related to pedagogy and the use of podcasts as an educational tool, but also used as part of a broader KT plan and engage a more general audience for dense and complex topics, particularly in health-related fields. KT has become increasingly important in research, with at least one of the major funding agencies in Canada, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, implementing as part of a grant application submission the Knowledge Mobilization Plan: a one-page document that requires researchers to outline how they plan to communicate their research findings

### *Podcasts as a Communication Tool*

Brumley et al. (2017) outline how podcasting can expand possibilities, “diversify content,” and how the equipment for podcasting enables visits to “unexpected places” (p. 165). The authors chronicle their own podcasting experience, venturing out with researchers with a recorder and mics to Chinatown in London, UK, and produce a show about the migrant Chinese communities who are working and living in a particular part of the city, bringing a slice of life and the sounds of the streets to interested listeners (p. 165). In this regard, the authors state that they presented listeners with an opportunity to understand elaborate topics, such as identity and migration diaspora, and to immerse listeners in a whole new environment and potentially a different way to think about a topic (p. 166).

Further on this point, Brumley et al. posit that a podcast is a “unique tool for engagement” that enables scholars the opportunity to communicate and showcase their expertise in a more liberating way than the typical forms of academic knowledge mobilization allow (p. 170). They document a particular researcher, political science Professor Todd Landman from the University of Nottingham, who hosts his own podcast *The Rights Track* (2015–present, <http://rightstrack.org/>). They quote Landman as saying that podcasting has provided a new way to engage with an audience, and he likens the opportunity to a “fireside chat” that “allows listeners to hear experts discuss their work in their own voices, and allows the experts to express themselves more freely than in the usual academic forms of dissemination” (p. 170). In this way, podcasting enables engaging with an audience in a way that is not usually possible through traditional media platforms (p. 170).

There is a similar observation put forth by Roberta Kwok’s article (2019) about engaging with the research community through podcasts. In the study conducted by MacKenzie (2019), she emphasizes that podcasts can be an opportunity to reach out to other scholars, which can ultimately benefit an academic’s career. For example, Hugh Osborn, the podcast host of *Exocast* (2016–present, <http://www.exocast.org/>) and an astronomer at the Laboratory of Astrophysics

in Marseille, France, felt that inviting a senior researcher to be a guest on his podcast was a less intimidating or awkward way to meet them than if he were to approach them in a more formal setting, such as a conference, by way of example. In this regard, a podcast can help expand a person's network to include colleagues they might not have had previous opportunities in which to engage.

### *Podcasting as Research Dissemination*

As a platform, the podcast can also be employed to make researchers, research, and an institution's environment more accessible. Much in the same way Williamson (2018) states in "AQR's podcast series dissects weighty topics" that their academic and research findings are frequently intense scholarly papers published in academic journals that are not understandable to a general audience, and that a podcast has the ability to be more discursive and make a topic more comprehensible. In addition, academic institutions are sometimes regarded as ivory towers or considered intimidating or inaccessible places of higher learning that someone might not have encountered before, and so giving "voice" to faculty members and academics who are making their work understandable to the average person allows for more engagement and accessibility, as well as the potential to reach people who may have been previously daunted by the scholarly aspects of a university.

By presenting academics in a podcasting format, listeners are introduced to scholarly experts who may otherwise seem inaccessible and that has the potential to reach an audience through social media and an aural format (Durrani et al., 2015; Gianetti, 2018; Middleton, 2016). In addition, audiences get to hear experts in their own voice, thereby humanizing them in a different way, which does not necessarily occur when reading a profile about them and their work (Murray, 2019). Increasingly social media, which includes the podcast platform, is allowing scholars to engage with an audience in a more contemporary way.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In the case of *View to the U* (VTTU, DeMarco, 2016–present, <https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930>), a monthly podcast produced by the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research (OVPR) at UofT Mississauga (UTM), which is one of three campuses at the University of Toronto (UofT), the idea came about to explore a new platform in order to showcase researchers. Up until VTTU's inception, researchers at UTM were primarily showcased through the OVPR's website ("Research News" and also "Research on Campus" feature), and the UTM main page/newsroom site, as well as print publications, including a printed weekly paper at the University of Toronto called *The Bulletin*, that has since become a three-times-a-week e-newsletter called *The Bulletin Brief*. The VTTU podcast was also introduced as a way to tell more of a researcher's story (how they got into their particular field or explore a timely topic) in their own voice and allow for less editorial limitations or interventions, i.e., a 30-minute podcast output with the researcher talking enables more of their experience and insights to come through than a 750-word profile would allow.

To this point, Harter (2019) emphasizes the importance of a complete assemblage of sounds in podcasting, stating that "[voices], laughter, and other accompanying and contextually emitted

noises produce meaning beyond words uttered. Speakers' intonation and cadence, coupled with musical scores, convey meaning. Silences and pauses can be as powerful as spoken words" (p. 4). Harter further theorizes the notion about the role of the listener: first, podcasts can be heard in the "sonic" environment of choice, whether someone is opting to tune in while performing a quotidian task, such as getting ready for work or commuting, or taking a long contemplative walk; but also that there is an interchange that takes place between a host and their listeners, and beyond being passive, the one who is choosing to listen can feel motivated, moved, inspired or entertained, on top of having an opportunity to learn (p. 4). This was further impetus for the host of VTTU to start a podcast: the fact that it allows listeners to engage more intimately, but also multi-task, e.g., they can consume a podcast while exercising or carrying out other household chores, and they do not need to stop and read or watch a video. Also, in relation to the listening environment, Harter and a colleague, Bill Rawlins, define the process of podcasting as the "worlding of possibilities." a way to change conditions for the listener, and she ties this into her second argument about engaged scholarship, which Harter says is a collaboration between a community and a campus that can result in the deepening of knowledge as a response to important challenges (p. 4).

The podcast as a platform can also be employed to showcase a particular researcher; as in the case of VTTU, the documentation enables further communication about that particular researcher. If someone were writing about one of the researchers featured and needed resources to help flesh out that person and their academic path, the podcast, which contains the thoughts, quotes, and opinions of the interviewee, as well as sometimes some personal anecdotes about their particular path in research, that could be useful background information for writing a profile. In some instances, it could be the impetus to cover a researcher's work: in the case of VTTU, after UTM Geography Professor Ron Buliung was featured, a writer for another online resource, Holland Bloorview, heard the interview and contacted Professor Buliung to profile him and his research in an article (Kinross, 2017); they then proceeded to reference and link to the VTTU interview in the article. In addition, the VTTU podcast is archived on the University of Toronto's institutional repository TSpace (<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/>) as well, so it can be accessed by anyone anywhere in the world who logs in to the UofT Library website.

## Research Strategy

When it comes to research, asking the right questions is key for a successful study. Similarly, the VTTU podcast has also focused on asking questions of the researchers, about their work, their academic paths, but also centered around key themes: based on the specific 'seasonal' theme, questions have related to areas such as being a woman in academia, how the UTM campus and research has changed over its history as part of a 50th-anniversary year celebration, how their work is global in nature, and why they study what they study. Having themes has helped to focus each season of the podcast, and as Brumley et al. state in their reasons for why people should include podcasts as part of their research: "no topic is too niche" (2017, p. 171).

This relates to what author Roberta Kwok refers to as "Finding a niche" (p. 388) in her article, "How to make your podcast stand out in a crowded market" (2019). She cites a study by Lewis MacKenzie (2019) at Durham University in the UK, in which he considered the rise of science

podcasts over several years (“Science podcasts: analysis of global production and output from 2004 to 2018”). Kwok writes that MacKenzie, based on his research, advises researchers or communicators who may be contemplating starting their own podcast to zero in on a unique niche or an underrepresented field or an unusual format, such as science comedy (2019, p. 388). Kwok provides the *Why Aren’t You a Doctor Yet?* podcast (Lathbridge, 2017–present, <https://www.alexlathbridge.com/podcast>) by way of example: this is a podcast spearheaded by University of Bath biochemistry PhD student Alex Lathbridge in 2017. His podcast is meant to have more diverse, multicultural perspectives, which he found lacking in other science-based media, and includes general topics in technology and science in which he hopes to engage a young (ages 18–34), culturally diverse demographic as an audience (Kwok, 2019, p. 388).

Kwok also includes a statement by MacKenzie that the podcast affords an opportunity to engage that might make it a more satisfying endeavour even if the audience base is not huge: interactions from an audience through various networks can provide enough of a motivation for a podcaster to continue producing even if the audience base remains fairly small in scale (2019, p. 389). The VTTU host has experienced this with feedback received, primarily through email and social media engagement. By way of example, a national funder was tagged in a Tweet since one of the people featured on the podcast had received a grant through them, and they retweeted to their over 87K follower base. It also helps to stay motivated when there are hits or listens every day. Even if they sometimes trickle in at a slower pace (slower compared to when an episode first drops), it is motivating to see that there is at least enough interest for downloads to be continuous and to consider that people might be discovering episodes randomly on any given day around the world.

Further on this point, Brumley et al. propose that a podcast is a “unique tool for engagement” that enables scholars the opportunity to communicate and showcase their expertise in a more liberating way than the typical forms of academic knowledge mobilization allow (2017, p. 170). They document a particular researcher, political science Professor Todd Landman from the University of Nottingham, who hosts his own podcast *The Rights Track* (2015–present, <http://rightstrack.org/>). They quote Landman as saying that podcasting has provided a new way to engage with an audience, and he likens the opportunity to a “fireside chat” that “allows listeners to hear experts discuss their work in their own voices, and allows the experts to express themselves more freely than in the usual academic forms of dissemination” (p. 170). In this way, podcasting enables engaging with an audience in a way that is not usually possible through traditional media platforms (p. 170).

There is a similar observation put forth by Kwok’s article (2019) and engaging with the research community through podcasts. In the study conducted by MacKenzie, she emphasizes that podcasts can be an opportunity to reach out to other scholars, which can ultimately benefit an academic’s career. For example, Hugh Osborn, the podcast host of *Exocast* (2016–present, <http://www.exocast.org/>) and an astronomer at the Laboratory of Astrophysics in Marseille, France, felt that inviting a senior researcher to be a guest on his podcast was a less intimidating or awkward way to meet them than if he were to approach them in a more formal setting, such as a conference, by way of example. In this regard, a podcast can help expand a person’s network to

include colleagues they might not have had previous opportunities in which to engage.

## Podcasting Showcase

Anecdotally, for the host of VTTU, there has been interest in learning more about using the podcast as a platform to highlight community members and researchers, particularly since science communications and innovative ways to profile people, in contrast from the traditional written profile, has evolved and podcasts have become easier to produce (Bonini, 2015; Kwok, 2019; Brumley et al., 2017). Since its inception, the creator/host of VTTU has become regarded as an “expert” in podcasting in research and was approached to serve as Chair of a podcast committee for the Society of Research Administrators International. In addition, she was invited to give six presentations on podcasting in academia:

1. UTM Cocktails & Catch-ups (Mississauga, June 2017 <https://twitter.com/michelleyc/status/870642354197327873>)
2. Canadian Association of Research Administrators (<https://cara-acar.ca/>) National Conference (Ottawa, May 2018)
3. UofT Field Day (<https://fieldday.utoronto.ca/> Toronto, May 2019)
4. PSEWEB (<https://pseweb.ca/> Saskatoon, July 2019)
5. Society of Research Administrators International (SRA <https://www.srainternational.org/home/> San Francisco, October 2019)
6. SRA International (Virtual, October 2020)

Additionally, VTTU was written about several times in online articles: in University Affairs (<https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/podcasting-goes-school/>); UofT News (<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/radio-u-t-seven-podcasts-you-should-know-about>); Higher Ed Communications (<https://higheredcommunications.com/2019/03/06/putting-utm-research-in-the-spotlight/>); and UTM’s student newspaper The Medium (<https://themedium.ca/features/view-to-the-u-utms-very-own-podcast/>).

Another update of note in 2020: with the coronavirus pandemic globally gripping institutions, forcing researchers and staff to sequester and avoid going to labs, offices, and campuses, VTTU and various other podcasts are still a platform by which to reach researchers. In contrast to video, a podcast can continue during the COVID-19 restrictions; video production is much more onerous to execute at the best of times (with lighting, b-roll, scheduling, etc., all part of the process), but it becomes even more challenging to carry out this work with the current physical distancing measures in place. Furthermore, it allows an interviewer to probe related topics, such as how a researcher’s work might have shifted or how their expertise could inform the pandemic and subsequent physical-distancing situation; there are so many research areas of interest and implications associated with both the virus proper (epidemiology, wellness, etc.), as well as the effects of the way the world has changed (economic, socioeconomic, how work has shifted, etc.). As an example, VTTU focused on questions related to the pandemic (e.g., how to talk to kids about germs at <https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930/samuel-ronford>, weeding through

pandemic-related information at <https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930/beth-coleman>, what kind of art might be produced from this crisis at <https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930/john-paul-ricco>, how world leaders are dealing with the situation at <https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930/edward-schatz>) with researchers who have expertise in related fields and in these particular topics. In addition, platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams allow for connectivity and have a recording function that can be saved in an mp4 format and subsequently edited to transform into a podcast output. The technology has allowed podcasts to progress and thrive during a difficult situation.

## Evaluate and Analyze the Emergent Concepts

### *Research Methodology*

For the purposes of this study, the authors are using one particular broadly focused research-based institutional podcast as a model, VTTU, a monthly podcast that launched in January 2017 and showcased researchers from UTM's 17 different departments. VTTU now has over 43 tracks, more than 16,100 listens (at the time of this article), and approximately 356 downloads, on average, per episode. Quantitative data related to VTTU can be easily obtained through the SoundCloud platform, where one can consider a number of related statistics, including the top tracks played, as well as isolating a specific timeframe to see what months yielded the most listens, and where geographically podcasts are being accessed.

In addition, two surveys were conducted using a mixed-methods approach through the REDCap platform. People who participated in Survey 1 were the researchers interviewed for VTTU, and for Survey 2 listeners (either regular or infrequent) of the podcast participated; both answered a specific questionnaire designed for either an interviewee or a listener. Participants were recruited through email (to interviewees and to some regular listeners), as well as Twitter and the OVPR website, where there was a link to the survey that was available for a two-week period. The study includes both quantitative and qualitative data that was generated using the analysis that is automatically generated within REDCap.

In total, 25 of the 40 researchers profiled on VTTU responded to the interviewee survey, and 16 listeners responded to the listener-specific survey. The questions covered a range of themes, including whether the respondents listen to other research-related podcasts (for both interviewees and listeners of VTTU), but also specific questions related to VTTU, such as was there any follow-up for researchers who were profiled on the podcast, and for listeners, what motivated them to tune in to VTTU and did they feel they learned something from listening to the podcast.

Lastly, a one-on-one interview was conducted with Professor Sonia Kang in the Department of Management at the Institute for Management and Innovation. The questions asked of Professor Kang were meant to further explore the effectiveness of podcasting in a more specialized format, and to survey her on her experience in turning to podcasting to disseminate her findings and reach a new audience with the recent launch of her own podcast For the Love of Work. [See CASE STUDY - Researcher turned Podcaster.]

## Results

### *Summary of Findings*

Data generated by SoundCloud can be accessed and analyzed on their “Stats” page. In the case of timeframe, and just by way of example, the following figures are statistics from the SoundCloud platform for VTTU from January 2019 to January 2020. This data summarizes overall hits, which was roughly 300+ per month, with the greyed-out sections representing some of the less popular tracks. One can see that some of the top months for listeners were April, June, September, and November where the number of listens all exceeded 350. Most of the top-played tracks in this data visualization are either the podcast episodes that dropped that particular month or were recent additions to the VTTU season. In addition, SoundCloud provides data related to location and listening platforms: VTTU has been listened to in 50 countries (SoundCloud only lists up to 50, so it might have been listened to in over 50 countries), with the top three countries being Canada (11,540 listens), US (2,169), and Ghana (233); the top listening platforms are SoundCloud (8,388) with people using mobile devices (e.g., android and iPhones), and accessed either through the UTM website (via RSS apps) or other social media platforms like Facebook.



Figure 1. SoundCloud quantitative statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

## *Survey quantitative and qualitative statistics*

### SURVEY – INTERVIEWEES

Once the podcast was posted, those featured on VTTU indicated that they were contacted by people who had heard the interview (13 of the 26 respondents): either by a graduate student who reached out to work with them after hearing the VTTU interview (3); by an international listener (3); and by media wanting to cover their work (2). Several respondents also said they further promoted the podcast through their own social media networks or on their website (14).

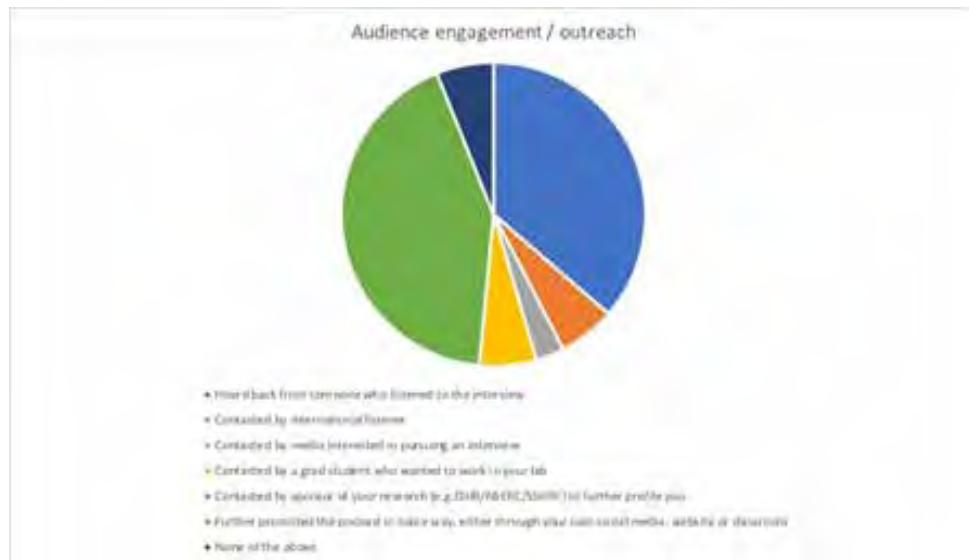


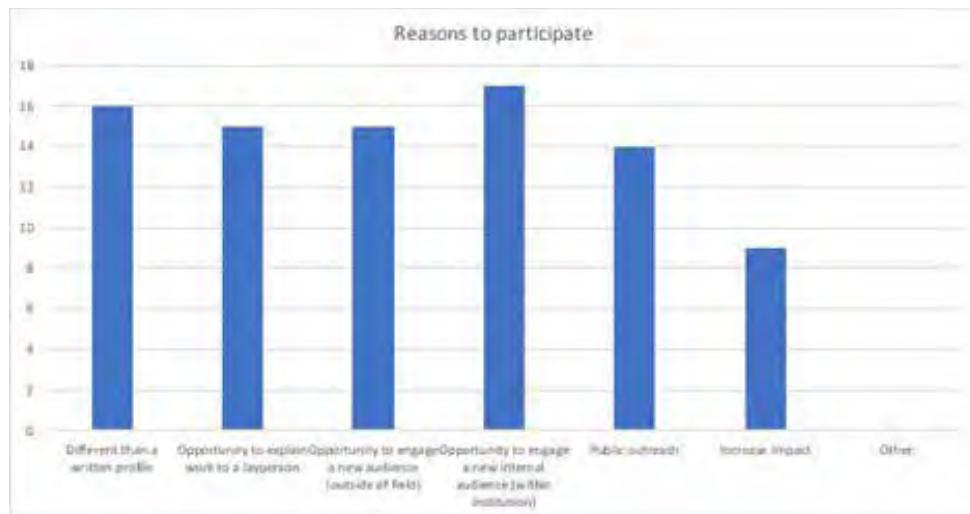
Figure 2. Audience engagement survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

Another survey question related to being showcased via the podcast:

### **“What did you enjoy about being featured?”**

Respondents could opt for multiple answers, and the results were as follows: Different format than a written profile (77.3%), Opportunity to explain work to a layperson (72.7%), Opportunity to engage a new audience (outside of field) (72.7%), Opportunity to engage a new internal audience (within institution) (77.3%), Public outreach (68.2%), Increase impact (40.9%), and Other (4.5%).

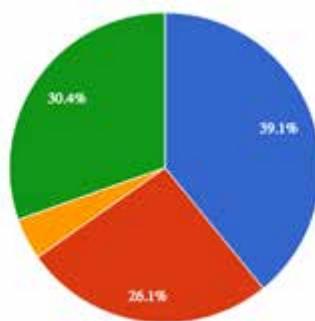


*Figure 3.* Interviewee participation survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

#### *Interest in research-related podcasts*

One of the questions posed was whether the interviewees, who are all academics and researchers, listened to other research-related podcasts, and there are several who responded that they do: 39.1% said they listen to one or two; 26.1% said they listen to several; 4.3% said they subscribe to several research podcasts; and 30.4% said they listen to other podcasts, i.e., not research related.



*Figure 4.* Research-related podcast survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

Interviewees were also asked the following:

**“Have you listened to any other episodes of VIEW to the U featuring your UTM colleagues?”**

Many interviewees (42.3%) said they listened to one or two episodes; 38.5% said they have listened to several episodes; 7.7% said they subscribe to View to the U and try not to miss an episode; and 11.5% said they have not listened to any other episode.

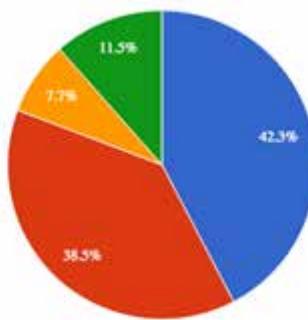


Figure 5. Interviewee-listener survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

## SURVEY – LISTENERS

Listeners of VTTU were asked a range of questions about listening generally (frequency, platform, etc.), which was a robust response, as well as why they listen.

**“How often have you listened to VIEW to the U?”**

Listeners indicated the following: once or twice (11.8%); a few times (64.7%); and I listen to every episode (23.5%).

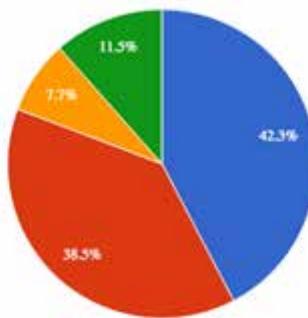


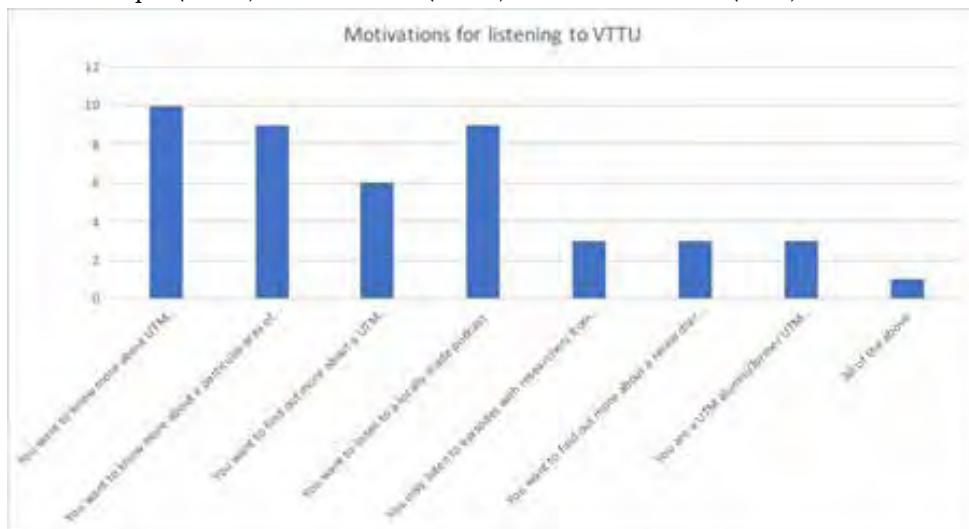
Figure 6. Frequency survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

They were also asked about their reasons for listening and they could select multiple answers.

#### **“What would motivate you to listen to an episode of VIEW to the U?”**

The responses included the following: wanting to know more about a UTM researcher/research in general (58.8%); wanting to know more about a particular area of research (52.9%); wanting to find out more about a UTM researcher through a different platform (e.g., different from print), in their own voice, etc. (35.3%); wanting to listen to a locally made podcast (52.9%); only listen to episodes with researchers from your field or home department (17.6%); wanting to find out more about a researcher from another institution but in a field you are interested in (17.6%); UTM alumni/former UTM employee/faculty emeriti and want to stay connected to the work being done on campus (17.6%); all of the above (11.8%); or none of the above (0.0%).

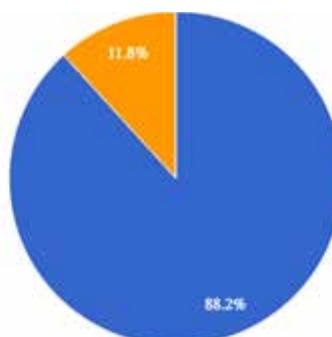


*Figure 7. Motivation survey statistics*

[Click here for larger image](#)

#### **“Do you feel you learned something new by listening to VIEW to the U?”**

When asked if they felt they learned something, the majority (88.2%) said yes, while 11.8% said they weren't sure. (Respondents were given the option to say they had not learned anything new, but no one selected that as a response.)



*Figure 8s.* Educational value survey statistics

[Click here for larger image](#)

## CASE STUDY – Researcher turned podcaster: For the Love of Work

### *Starting a Podcast*

Sonia Kang is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management in UofT Mississauga's Department of Management within the Institute of Management and Innovation, and she holds the prestigious title of Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion. With support by an outside funder, Rogers Sports and Media, as well as Canadian podcast-production agency Pacific Content, she launched a podcast in October 2020 called *For the Love of Work* (Kang, 2020–present, <https://about.rogers.com/life-at-rogers/fortheloveofwork/>).

Professor Kang was not driving the initiative for this podcast starting out, but she was intrigued because she always wanted to start one as a form of outreach for her research, however, did not have the opportunity or time to pursue this goal. The show, which was spearheaded by Rogers, enlisted Pacific Content to produce it. The podcast was initially intended to be internal to Rogers employees: to foster a shared culture and unite the workplace with an “exciting engagement platform,” Professor Kang said. Pacific Content convinced Rogers to expand the podcast externally so that others, both inside and outside the organization, could better understand Rogers’ culture and values. Pacific Content created the basic concept for the podcast and then started auditioning hosts. As part of this process, they reached out to Professor Kang to see if she would be interested in reading for the audition. She did the reading and they thought she would be a good fit: they liked her voice and personality, but in addition, with her research insights and connections with other people in industry and academics working in this particular field, it would benefit the podcast’s output.

### *Intimacy During a Pandemic*

The pandemic and subsequent shutdown occurred right around the time they were going to start producing, but Professor Kang was able to set up a makeshift recording studio in her house in order to read her scripts, and the crew at Pacific Content were equipped to do the post-production

from their respective workspaces. Further, a lot of the racial upheaval that took place earlier in 2020 sparked by the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd among others in the US, resulted in another episode that draws specifically on Professor Kang's work in diversity and inclusion.

This touches on another key point addressed by Brumley et al. (2017) regarding not only the immediacy that the format allows but also, about podcasts being driven by the zeitgeist: Professor Kang and the team were able to consider the racial upheaval that was taking place around the world and speak to that, with the research informing the themes in the show. Additionally, when the pandemic hit, people had to modify their work processes and environments, and Professor Kang was able to react to that organizational change as well since her expertise was beneficial in covering these topics. In this similar vein, the aforementioned shows like *Science vs* and *Gastropod* are able to react to things taking place in real-time. For example, when the pandemic hit *Science vs* offered many episodes related to things like infectious disease spread and vaccination development (Zukerman, 2016–present). A show like *Gastropod* taps into several timely topics, such as last year they did an episode on CRISPR, which a lot of people were talking about at the time, and how it relates to food science. Regarding the pandemic situation, *Gastropod* had an episode on the importance of sharing a meal with others, exploring whether the experience can be recreated on Zoom through the lens of science (Graber & Twilley, 2014–present).

Overall, when it comes to the *For the Love of Work* podcast, Professor Kang is involved with brainstorming, writing the scripts, as well as having input in the final edit. So far, she has been very satisfied with the outcome: by the time she hears a more finalized version of each episode, it has already been through a rigorous editing and finetuning process with the showrunners and producers. “I have really loved working with Rogers, and it’s one of the best workplace cultures I’ve seen,” said Professor Kang said. “They really do prioritize the employee experience and care deeply about their people.”

### *Expanding the Series*

Though *For the Love of Work* was intended to be a limited series of seven episodes, Professor Kang and the team at Pacific Content are already discussing a second season and are brainstorming ideas for future themes and episodes. Since the podcast only launched at the end of October, it is challenging to analyze metrics at this point, but based on what they have measured related to “retention” and “completion,” terms used for whether a listener stays with the episode until the end, they are happy with those numbers so far. Going forward, they will conduct a more in-depth analysis of how many overall listens they received, which they usually assess three to four months after a show’s initial launch.

The team at Pacific Content (2021, <https://pacific-content.com/about/>), who specialize in podcast production, currently have over 30 podcasts that they have produced to “[help] some of the world’s biggest brands to create and market compelling audio stories,” so they are in a prime position to help other academics and universities communicate their respective narratives and work. For Professor Kang, the collaboration has been relatively harmonious thus far, with her research expertise and connections helping to flesh out the interviews, which she will be getting more involved with and conducting herself. At the same time, Pacific Content will continue to

source other guests from the particular industry they are focused on to round out the roster of contributors.

### *Audience Engagement*

With regards to audience engagement, Professor Kang echoes a sentiment expressed by Mollett et. al (2017). The authors stated that while research-related podcasts might not reach the same number of downloads that some popular podcasts receive; garnering perhaps 5,000 downloads for an academic output is a sharp contrast to the millions that a podcast like Serial might achieve. However, “compared to journal article downloads, which have a very modest reach, usually numbering in just the hundreds, these podcasts...reached a significant amount of people on platforms not usually associated with academia” (Brumley et al., 2017, p. 167). [More on this in the *Discussion* section.] Professor Kang said she feels a podcast can have a broader reach for her work and that it “can be more powerful than having a paper that few people are ever going to read.”

Professor Kang says this show has helped to communicate her research findings in a unique way, particularly in diversity and inclusion, and she has been able to reach a whole new audience and a more profound level of engagement. She receives lots of feedback, usually by way of email from people who have listened to the show and want to express that they enjoyed it, but people from agencies are also reaching out to let her know that they have suggestions for an ideal guest for future episodes. Professor Kang, who is a psychologist by training, stated the following: “Even though I ended up in a business school, my knowledge base comes from my psychology background, and I feel like I've been able to engage with that in a much broader and deeper way in the podcast than I usually do in my work.”

Lastly, Professor Kang encouraged other academics to use a podcast as another way to communicate their work and reach an audience. Her advice is for researchers to think of their podcast as “an auditory white paper” that highlights the “big picture message” and *why* people should care about the work. “I think these kinds of communications, like podcasting, are more about communicating the purpose of the work,” said Professor Kang. “I would say to zoom out from the research and don't get caught up in all the details, but really think about the implications for broader society.”

### **Discussion of Findings**

In the case of VTTU, with over 43 tracks and more than 16,200 listens, as mentioned previously in this paper, this is a small number when you compare it to mainstream podcasts that may achieve that many listens for one single episode. However, VTTU as a model can illustrate that a podcast can be a useful research dissemination and outreach tool, as well as a resource to showcase researchers, boost morale, and document research happening at an institution, and potentially engage campus stakeholders, outside agencies, alumni, and students. At its most basic level, VTTU came about to explore a new platform in order to showcase researchers and so far, it has abided by that goal. In addition, the analytics indicate it has reached audiences around the

globe, so it has the potential to reach people in countries who may find particular fields or topics of interest no matter where they reside.

### *Statistics*

As demonstrated by the SoundCloud analytics, as well as the survey results and interview with Professor Kang, there is compelling data to support the inclusion of a podcast as part of an institution's communications efforts, whether it is a research office, alumni initiative, departmental communications plan, or career centre in higher education. Moving forward, the data included on a platform like SoundCloud can be analyzed and considered at any stage once a podcast is posted, and this can impact decisions, such as which researchers or themes one might want to highlight in the future for more uptake, or what time of year generates the most downloads in order to concentrate efforts in certain months.

For example, according to the SoundCloud statistics, Professors Loren Martin and Jennifer Stellar in UTM's Department of Psychology with 1,158 and 1,130 listens respectively (as of November 2020), garnered the most downloads. This may be due to certain influencing factors, including that Professor Martin promoted the podcast via a link on his laboratory's website and the interview with Professor Stellar was featured more broadly by a University of Toronto communications platform (an e-newsletter) that reached thousands of alumni, but this may also be an indication that their research may be of more broad interest, which could potentially be a topic for a future user-experience study. (Professor Martin's research focuses on issues related to chronic pain and empathy, and Professor Stellar studies how positive emotions can improve well-being.) However, in terms of strategic posting, the interview with Professor Stellar was posted in September 2018: the start of a new academic term and with a focus on mental-health positivity, but it could be an interesting comparison to post a podcast of this nature to be timed with a January drop date with people focused on a new year and resolutions, etc. The interview with Professor Stellar did receive most of its downloads at the end of December 2018, but again this coincided with the date that the newsletter was sent out and the podcast was subsequently promoted to all 300,000+ UofT alumni.

In the case of timeframe, as mentioned, the figures from the SoundCloud platform from January 2019 to January 2020 indicated that the top months were April, June, September and November. If one is producing a podcast, these stats can guide how they want to concentrate their efforts and take into account lower listenership, as one might expect in the summer, as well as at the start of a new year and academic term.

An interesting takeaway from the interviewee survey was the question related to being on the podcast. When asked what they enjoyed about being featured, overwhelmingly (77.3%) respondents indicated that they liked that it was different format than a written profile, 72.7% liked that they had the opportunity to explain work to a layperson, and to engage a new audience outside of their field, as well as an opportunity to engage a new internal audience within their institution (77.3%), public outreach (68.2%), and the opportunity to increase impact (40.9%).

This information very much aligns with some of the reasons people chose to listen, which provides

some insight into what might further entice people to tune in, and also whether they feel they learned something new from the podcast. Some of the strongest responses for why people chose to listen to VTTU included wanting to know more about UTM research or researcher in general (58.8%) or interested in a particular area of research (52.9%), as well as wanting to find out more about a UTM researcher through a different platform in their own voice (35.3%) and the opportunity to listen to a locally made podcast (52.9%)

## Recommendations

### Conclusion

There is definitely a place for podcasts in academia and in the research milieu in particular. Though there are challenges, which will be addressed in this section; there are also steps one can take to overcome certain obstacles.

First, as it relates to the Case Study with Professor Sonia Kang and her podcast *For the Love of Work*. In this particular instance and the way this podcast materialized, which was partially an opportunity that presented itself though Professor Kang was interested in the medium prior, perhaps this is not an option or a consideration for other academics. As podcasts continue to emerge in academia, it would be worthwhile to study this further with a few more representative examples to compare other scholars and their experience in branching out with a podcast as a way to disseminate research findings, showcase their expertise, and interact with other researchers, practitioners, industry contacts, and various guests as a more contemporary form of knowledge mobilization.

Secondly, as Kwok suggests in “How to make your podcast stand out in a crowded market,” the podcast environment has become increasingly saturated with shows of all different stripes. Particularly related to science podcasts, and the work done by MacKenzie evaluating the medium of podcasting in science communication over the timeframe of 2004-18, he found that there were approximately 200 science podcasts in 2010 versus 952 science podcasts in 2018, though on average several of these outputs did not last beyond two years. Kwok states that while new technology and online resources have enabled a level of ease for producing podcasts, a lack of limitations or barriers might make it more difficult to secure a regular audience (2019, p. 388). However, later in her article she posits that promotion via social media and posting transcripts or episode notes on the podcast’s host site or website will make it easier to find through an internet search to help “reach listeners” (p. 389) and hopefully lead to longevity for the podcaster.

The host of VTTU has found that social media definitely helps to promote the podcast, as well as including the notes on SoundCloud where the podcast is hosted, and Spotify, and having the transcript online can help to draw certain people in via Googling. But an additional support for promotion is relying on institutional communications, local media, as well as the researchers themselves helping to highlight through their respective networks. In the survey completed by those interviewed, 50% of respondents indicated that VTTU should be “promoted more widely and broadly,” and 63.6% of respondents said they further promoted the podcast in some way, either through their own social media, website or the classroom. Additionally, some of the interviewees

who did help promote had a significant increase in downloads. As an example, Professor Loren Martin in the Department of Psychology has the most downloads for those featured on VTTU with over 1,160 downloads: he created his own SoundCloud page to feature the interview, as well as having a link to the episode featuring his interview prominently displayed on his website. The other interviewee with the second-most downloads, Professor Jennifer Stellar, also in Psychology, was featured in an alumni e-newsletter and her episode has over 1,130 downloads. The host has also relied on some of the funding agencies in Canada that get tagged in her social media, as well as reaching out to media personnel at agencies and traditional media, for further help in promoting the interviews.

### *Alternative Metrics or Altmetrics*

This information all ties into another perspective in the literature: *altmetrics* for podcasting, and social media more generally, as a consideration incorporated into the research environment (Sugimoto et al., 2017). Altmetrics are the non-traditional metrics in the scholarly environment that are regarded as “an alternative or complement to more traditional citation impact metrics such as impact factor and h-index” (Altmetrics, 2021). Because social media and alternate platforms for research communications are factoring into scholarly work in a significant way, the podcast provides researchers, as well as those working in communications, the opportunity to highlight academic work and take a deeper dive into various areas of research, but also the outlet to reach a whole new audience.

In the article “Making the mission visible: Altmetrics and nontraditional publishing” (Bonnet & Méndez-Brady, 2017), the authors state that there is “an increased awareness of, and interest in, impact tracking tools that capture both traditional scholarship, like journal articles, and nontraditional scholarly and creative outputs, such as videos, podcasts, and newsletters” (p. 294). Additionally, findings suggest that there is an academic impact associated with altmetrics that is not entirely represented or captured by traditional metrics (Bonnet & Méndez-Brady, 2017; Sugimoto et al., 2017), and that platforms such as infographics, social media, and podcasts can significantly increase your altmetric scores (Thoma et al., 2018; Verhagen et al., 2014). On this point, in the case study with Professor Sonia Kang, she noted that a lot of people reached out to her, through email as well as social media engagement (primarily Twitter), and this can be another alternate way to regard impact that would not be captured in traditional impact metrics.

For as much as a podcast can reach a broader audience than some academic papers might, as mentioned earlier in this article (Professor Sonia Kang case study; Brumley et al., 2017), the number of downloads is likely to be much lower than some popular podcasts like *This American Life*, *Serial*, *99% Invisible*, etc. However, it is important for anyone starting a podcast not to get too mired in the metrics. In her article, Kwok (2019) states that podcast creators should keep in mind why they are making a podcast in the first place and she quotes Kat Arney, the Director of First Create the Media Ltd., which is a science-communications consultancy in Maidenhead, UK: “Some scientists want to improve communication skills, work with friends or just have fun” (p. 389). The host of VTTU has maintained this throughout the time she has been producing the podcast and has included it in her presentations on podcasting: the main thing is VTTU documents and serves as an archive of the history of research at UTM, as well as showcasing the

researchers at her institution, which was the mission at the outset. As an added bonus, it gets downloaded every day somewhere in the world.

The possibility for a podcast to create more of a sense of community is also a very viable outcome. As results of the VTTU study indicated, 58.8% of listeners wanted to learn more about UTM researchers or research in general and in their own voice (35.3%), but also over 52% wanted to listen to a locally made podcast or were alumni or staff looking to stay connected to the work being done on campus (17.6%). In Kwok's (2019) article, she talks about *The Taproot* podcast (Baxter & Haswell, 2017–present, <https://plantae.org/education/podcasts/the-taproot/>) that, among their plant-science topics, endeavored to show that certain challenges or struggles are common ground for researchers (p. 388), but they also tackled issues such as mental health in graduate students, which yielded favorable feedback from listeners on social media pleased to see their coverage of the topic (p. 389). In addition, a podcast allows perspectives from researchers that might diverge from other sources of information, that could in fact be erroneous or unbalanced, and is being presented in the media. Kwok cites the example of "Tabby's Star" that was eliciting various (and somewhat outlandish) speculation in the news in 2015, and as a researcher in astronomy, Osborn used his podcast *Exocast* (2016–present) to debunk some of what was being presented in the media (p. 388).

In terms of the accessibility factor, which was previously mentioned, there are times when an academic expert can be difficult to understand, particularly if audience members are not specialists in the field. Kwok states in her article that it is sometimes difficult on a podcast that showcases specialized topics to achieve a fitting balance between technical language and information meant for a layperson (2019, p. 388). However, this can be further minimized by either having others listen to the more finalized edit to ensure the podcast is accessible in terms of its terminology, as they do in the *For the Love of Work* podcast, or else the interviewer can emphasize to the interviewee that the podcast is intended for a more general audience. As an example, at the start of each VTTU interview, (offline) the host reiterates to the researcher that any esoteric terminology they use should be explained, as well as any concepts or collaborators they mention should be fleshed out if the average person would not know who or what they are talking about. The type of podcast format, like VTTU, allows scholars to make their research and expertise more digestible to the average person: over 88% of listener-survey respondents indicated they felt they learned something from the interview, and over 72% of interviewees enjoyed having the opportunity to communicate their life's work as it relates to a particular topic to an average listener. Having the podcast platform also affords the opportunity to engage others in their field and perhaps also inspire young academics in their research area.

## **Starting a Podcast**

### *Podcasting Partnerships*

If a researcher wants to embark on a more professional podcast path, there are many companies, such as Pacific Content, who worked with Professor Kang, and Research Podcasts in the UK, that have cropped up in the past few years to help people produce podcasts, and this will presumably

continue as the podcast landscape continues to grow and gain popularity. But there are also universities and armchair podcasters—both academics and communications professionals—who will likely step up to create new audio content. As Mollett et. al. (2017) state, podcasts can be inexpensive to produce, as well as not require any special equipment, which is a great benefit. When the COVID-19 shutdown occurred, VTTU was able to continue production using the Zoom platform that was free to staff, students and faculty to record the audio component of the interview, and then employing the Audacity software program, which is free to download, in order to edit the output.

However, beyond companies who are poised to help produce podcasts, incorporating graduate students in the production of podcasts and to enhance KT is also another possibility. Working on a podcast would provide a graduate student the opportunity to actively engage in research (Mollett et. al state that “podcasts are research,” 2017, p. 169), knowledge mobilization and hone their skills in research, as well as become more proficient in science or research communications, which as stated previously is increasingly important in an academic’s career. In Kwok’s article, she mentions the instance of another podcaster from Brazil, PhD student in plant sciences, Marcos Vinicius Dantas-Queiroz, co-producer for three years of a science podcast *Dragões de Garagem* (Queiroz, 2012–present, <http://dragoesdegaragem.com/>): his work on the podcast is included on his CV and he hopes that the technical and communication skills he has honed working on the podcast will expand his academic-job prospects (2019, p. 388). This harkens back to an earlier point about career benefits, but also that including graduate students and postdocs in this kind of knowledge dissemination and communication can be advantageous all around. There is an instance of this endeavour in particular at the UofT’s Faculty of Medicine with the *Raw Talk* podcast (2016–present, <https://www.rawtalkpodcast.com/>), which is “a graduate student-run podcast at the University of Toronto about medical science, and the people who make it happen.” They have been producing episodes since 2016, and with each cohort who joins in the project, they get a range of fresh perspectives as new students come on board to work on the show.

### *Podcasting Skills*

In terms of the skills necessary to produce a podcast: of course, having a background in broadcasting can be beneficial, however in her book *You’re not Listening*, author Kate Murphy talks about the producers at the popular National Public Radio (NPR) program, Fresh Air with host Terry Gross that is both a radio show and a podcast. Though a couple of the people from the eight-person production team did have radio-specific expertise, the rest “[came] from many different backgrounds, including a former waitress, film director, and folklorist” (Murphy, 2019, p. 116). When executive producer Danny Miller decided on the members that make up the Fresh Air production crew, he said the “key qualification he looks for when hiring producers is ‘good ears,’ meaning a superior ability to listen and detect what’s really going on in conversations” (p. 115). In following this principle, some of the technical skills with editing and recording can definitely be learned by an amateur podcaster, but if someone has the ability to identify the salient points in an interview or what Miller refers to as “having command of conversations” that would definitely give them an advantage for knowing what parts of audio to keep in and what to omit. Kwok also points out that there are several resources online to help a person get started (2019, p.

389), and the host of VTTU has always emphasized this point in her presentation (particularly the blog by Kevan Lee: <https://buffer.com/library/podcasting-for-beginners/>).

In addition, there is the opportunity to partner with existing podcasts. For example, the path led to Professor Kang's (in the case study) podcast coming to light, with her being recruited as a host for her expertise in human resources and organizational management that fit with the podcast Rogers had envisioned and Pacific Content conceived. But there are podcasts that already exist one can consider, such as shows like *Ear Hustle* (<https://www.earhustlesq.com/>), which focuses on life in prison and the inmates at San Quentin State Prison (Poor et al., 2017–present). A researcher could potentially partner with this type of show and provide their expertise on prison, criminality, history of incarcerations, or the justice system; the possibilities are endless.

### *Resources to Sponsor a Podcast*

There could also be the opportunity for sponsorship and podcasting in research. Though Professor Kang's experience was not specifically driven by her initiative to launch her particular podcast, if she had pitched the idea to Rogers Media, who was looking for a way to engage its employees, that could be a way to incubate a podcast. There have been instances of large-scale companies investing in producing a podcast, driven by wanting to educate a public and add to a current dialogue. The most prime example of late is that of the *Who We Are: A Chronicle of Racism in America* podcast (<https://www.vox.com/ad/21354746/who-we-are-podcast-racism-in-america>) that launched in September 2020 (Wallace & Robinson, 2020–2021). This was done with Ben and Jerry's (yes, the ice cream outfit) partnering with Vox Media to produce a six-part series on a history of racial injustice in America as a result of some of the recent racial upheaval in the US. They state on their website that in “the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others, America faces a racial reckoning—one that requires an honest look at the American history that has allowed white supremacy to thrive for the last 400 years” (Ben & Jerry's, 2020). The show features a range of experts on the topic, including several academics, to explore many different themes about the history of slavery and discrimination, and that their goal “is to educate and encourage audiences to dismantle systemic racism” (Wallace & Robinson, 2020–2021).

### *Other Opportunities*

There are also opportunities that have emerged, such as the aforementioned NSERC grant to implement, strategize, and foster better resources for communicating science and research, as well as outlets like NPR, which produces many podcasts, and their Story Lab (<https://nprstorylab.submittable.com/submit>) “idea hub” that serves as an incubator for new segments, programs, podcasts, and shows. They state on their website that they “want to work with new talent that brings a fresh perspective,” and to “keep innovating and leading in the podcast and radio world.” This could easily lend itself as an opportunity for an academic or entrepreneurial research communications professional to put forward as a concept to explore further, and in addition could definitely provide a basis for how to pursue the crafting of potential podcasts in academia. There is also the potential, mentioned previously, to employ students in this endeavour to help enhance their skills in research while also expanding possibilities for reaching a wider audience. As evidenced over the past few years, a podcast can be produced even with restricted resources or

with the intention of doing a limited run in order to gauge uptake. Just as we are spoiled with the wealth of offerings of most streaming services, if you have clear direction on the type of podcast you want to put out in the world, you can likely produce a show that will find its rightful audience.

Lastly, in the words of American jazz singer Dianna Reeves who said “I think the only way for you to grow and evolve is to keep listening, keep moving forward, keep jumping in and trying to experience,” this is good advice to aspiring podcasters in academia and beyond.

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