



Listen Up!

If you haven't tried podcasts yet, you might wonder why devotees are so passionate. Maybe you've heard friends rave about how thought-provoking *This American Life* is or how listening to *Modern Love* brought them to tears. Perhaps your kids or workmates are talking excitedly about *Homecoming*. Or how they just binged on *Dirty John* and really, really want you to listen to it.

Human beings are hardwired to love a good yarn, and podcasts deliver some really high-quality ones—right into your headphones, any time of day or night. “In the past, you’d have an orator standing in front of a crowd. Later, it was books on tape and then on CD,” says Jeremy Altfeder, financial advisor at CAPTRUST. “Podcasts aren’t unique, but their delivery is new. They’re in your ear. You don’t have to go to them, they come right to you.”

Two-thirds of Americans now listen to podcasts at least once in a while, and 23 percent listen a few times a week, according to a 2019 *CBS News* poll. That’s a sharp increase from a year ago, when the majority of Americans did not listen to podcasts.

Podcasts offer hours of rich entertainment and food for thought, waiting to be nibbled or devoured whenever you want it. There are bite-size news programs to help you start your day. Dramas to enliven car trips. And if you have a particular passion, whether it’s knitting, Greek mythology, theme parks, or whatever, there is probably a podcast in that niche that will impart a special feeling of having found your tribe.



Podcasts have existed since 2003 but were more or less on the fringe until the fall of 2014, when the true crime podcast *Serial* came out. “*Serial* was what got me into podcasts. A lot of my friends were really into it,” says Altfeder. Right away, he was drawn in.

Serial tells the story of Adnan Syed, a man who has served many years of his lifetime sentence for murder. But a cloud hangs over his conviction: Did he really end the life of his former girlfriend in 1999, even though they were still friends? Or did a shoddy defense case doom an innocent man? One of Syed’s supporters brought his old case files to National Public Radio reporter Sarah Koenig, and she started looking into the case. Koenig talks to Syed from prison, tracks down people who knew him then, and interviews former classmates who could perhaps have provided an alibi. She becomes obsessed, and through her vivid storytelling, masses of listeners did, too. To date, the first season of *Serial* has been downloaded more than 200 million times.

Serial and its follow-up, *S-Town*, are “some of the best storytelling I have ever been exposed to,” says Greg Middleton, director of marketing at CAPTRUST, who is also a die-hard podcast fan. Before *Serial*, only 27 percent of Americans had listened to a podcast, but the show’s wild popularity drew in millions more listeners.

After finishing *Serial*, Altfeder sought other true crime podcasts like *S-Town*, *Dr. Death*, and *Who the Hell is Hamish?* He found *Revisionist History*, in which *Tipping Point* author Malcolm Gladwell examines misunderstood people and events from the past. That podcast led him to another Gladwell endeavor, *Broken Record*, that has in-depth interviews with musical geniuses like David Byrne, Rufus Wainwright, and the late Tom Petty. Each new podcast seemed to lead him to several other must-listens.

Podcasts are such a treat for Altfeder that he now uses them to motivate himself to work out or tackle an unloved chore. “I hate mowing the lawn, but if I can put on my headphones and listen to a podcast, it’s like a reward,” says Altfeder. “It helps me not to have such distaste for something I hate doing. It’s like watching a really good movie—I get completely lost in it.”

The mental trick of pairing something fun with a dreaded job has a formal name in behavioral economics. It’s called *temptation bundling*. Thanks to podcasts, anyone who’s curious about this can download *Freakonomics Radio* to hear a full explanation directly from Katherine Milkman, the professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania who coined the term. Altfeder listened to her experiments using the technique to help subjects coax themselves to go to the gym and meet their goals, similar to what he does for his own self-improvement. The episode is No. 200, “When Willpower Isn’t Enough,” if you want to give it a listen.

Before he found podcasts, Middleton was often bored on his morning commutes, listening to the usual talk radio and Top 40 pop songs. A friend suggested that TED talks might provide more stimulation, so he searched online for some and stumbled upon the *TED Radio Hour* podcast.

If TED talks are brain food, the *TED Radio Hour* podcast is a shot of concentrated vitamin B-12. Each



episode takes on a big, captivating theme—extrasensory perception, altruism, or colonizing outer space are some examples—and explores it through an hour's worth of the most interesting excerpts from various TED Talks. "Before you know it, your commute is over, and you wish it was longer," says Middleton.

Another one he finds inspiring is *Jocko Podcast*. "I'm a goal-driven person. I like a military approach to life," says Middleton. The show's host, Jocko Willink, is a retired Navy SEAL who uses compelling military stories to discuss discipline and leadership in the business world. It isn't necessarily everyone's cup of tea, but Middleton finds the podcast mentally nourishing, along with some others like *The Tim Ferris Show* and *The Jordan B. Peterson Podcast*.

A parent of active young kids, Middleton also relies on podcasts to sustain him through his daily routine with his family. "Anything that makes you better engaged when you're doing dishes at 9:30 at night—when the kids have finally been put to bed and you still haven't changed out of your suit—is a bonus. It helps me through that."

Podcasts are great to share with kids, particularly on road trips. "They solve the question of what to play in the car," he says, "with something positive that helps them develop and grow." Middleton's family loves listening to *Wow in the World*, an NPR program with tantalizing science tidbits for kids. Middleton's son enjoys it so much, "he wants to call in to the hosts and share cool science facts he learns in school," he says. He wants to tell them his *Wow in the World*.

Middleton's even gotten his 71-year-old dad, an avid barbecue griller, interested in podcasts. "My dad was getting tips on his craft from YouTube videos," but his vision isn't that strong anymore. "He recently asked me to help him download some barbecue podcasts," says Middleton. That's right, barbecue is a podcast category with a surprising slate of titles: *BBQ Beat*, *BBQ State of Mind*, *BBQ Central Show*, *Best Barbecue Show*, and *Behind the Smoke: BBQ War Stories*—to name just a few. Aficionados can listen to pitmasters from around the world riff on grilling techniques, sauce recipes, and the best in cooker technology. So, whether your love is drama, news, history, linguistics, politics, or barbecue, there's likely a podcast that's perfect for you. Humans have always loved a good story, and now with podcasts, you can carry them around on your phone and listen to them anytime.