The future of podcasting

Envisioning an audio stories community for listeners and creators, where they connect through similar interests and share inspiring content.
The thesis project of Piotr Kuklo conducted from January to June 2018, in order to attain a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Interaction Design at Umeå Institute of Design, Umeå University, Sweden.
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Abstract

This is a project exploring a possible future of podcast as a digital audio media format for stories. The project was conducted at Umeå Institute of Design as a MFA Thesis in Interaction Design.

A constant steady growth of the podcast popularity makes this form of media more and more influential amongst all group ages. Unfortunately, the existing solutions do not give enough attention to this different type of medium which podcasting is and treat it similar to music files. Podcasting has a different purpose than music and lack of this understanding creates challenges for users and discourage many to explore a potential of this medium.

To understand the needs of listeners and creators of the stories, I immersed myself in the storytelling world and conducted a thorough research with conversations with both users groups, opportunities evaluations, and concepts testing. The insights gathered during the research brought the conclusion that both listeners and creators tend to want more involvement and have stronger community gathered around audio stories. That is why the project’s goal is to form an audio stories community for listeners and creators, where they connect through similar interests and share inspiring content.

The final outcome of the project consists of a platform Cast3 that has 2 separate products directed to listeners and creators of audio stories. The platform gives users a possibility to connect with similar minded people around specific topics through clubs. The clubs are the spaces where listeners can exchange information, discover new content through a word of mouth and bond with the creators through live shows. The creators’ needs are supported by specialized tools that help to record stories and help to learn more about the listeners. The users of the platform can interact with audio stories through a redefined media format called freecasting. The new format improves a listening experience and responds to presently existing needs of listeners as well as creators.
1.0 Introduction
1.0 Introduction

In my MFA Thesis Project, I would like to investigate how interaction and system design can help to envision an audio story community platform for listeners and creators. The project will try to answer on opportunities such as developing unified experience and simplifying podcast creation with a focus on the community aspect of the platform and discovery of new podcast for listeners to increase engagement and presence of podcasts in their lives (Project scopes). The goal of the project is to form a podcast community for listeners and creators, where they connect through similar interests and share inspiring content. The brief of the thesis will be introduced in the following manner:

- Introducing the topic’s relevance in the context of society from listeners’ and creators’ perspectives
- Framing the problem by explaining the history of audio stories as a mass media, introducing user groups and their characteristics, explaining challenges they are facing and introducing the scope of the project
- Staging the goals for the project
- Introducing collaborators and partners

The topic’s relevance in the context of society

The relevance of the topic in the context of society can be divided into two perspectives from two user groups:

Listeners’ perspective

Podcasting becomes more popular amongst all ages groups. Access to the internet and on-demand media encourage listeners to look for content that is tailored to their tastes and interests. Usually, on-demand media are consumed on the personal devices (like smartphones and tablets (Deloitte, 2015). Because of that fact, presently the media are generally consumed alone. The gathering of whole families around radio or TV are signs of past. As it can be imagined, podcasts are also a media that presently is consumed alone. Interestingly, the initial research and conversations with listeners showed a growing need to be more connected to other listeners in order to share thoughts, exchange perspectives or recommend the content.

Creating a community around a podcast content can bring togetherness for listeners from all over the globe and also shift anonymous online encounters into active relationships through removing ‘the faceless’ of the internet. The groups that gather around specific topics will have an experience of being part of a small size community that breaks the boundaries of physical location, gender, age and income levels and puts exchange of thoughts and listening ‘together’ as their main priority.

Creators’ perspective

The most visible aspect in every conversation with a creator is a passion to stories and people. For many of them, audio stories is a way of life, a way to meet new friends, establish relationships, express their emotions and build sensitivity towards others. In many cases, it is a second job that gives a creator an opportunity to channel their creativity into a form of stories and captive listeners to come back to their content. As in every form of a expression, creations need to interact with the audience. Building communities around specific topics will create a space that creators can direct to and build close connections with the listeners. It will help them to get inspired by those interactions and create more directed content for their listeners.

I believe that by solving existing challenges that podcasting struggles with and building the communities around the content will also turn more people into listening and creating podcasts. As explained before, both of the user groups will benefit from this solution and the approach of communities around a specific type of media can be introduced into different types with similar benefits for people that consume them.

1.1 Problem framing

To understand the potential of the podcasts as a medium, we need to take a step back and look into the history. The radio has been the first device to allow for mass information exchange (Logan Wyman, 2008). Introduced in 1893 by Nikolai Tesla, it has enabled information to be transferred far, not only wide on national level but internationally as well. Due to the devastation of Britain during the WWII, radio made its citizens look for an outlet in radio entertainment. People enjoyed listening to the music, plays, and discussions that the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) played on their streams.

The next 50 years were dictated by the high quality of content prepared by professionals. The starting moment of podcasts - mainly created by enthusiasts at their homes, can be dated in 1980 when the audio blogging phenomenon was formed. But until the forming of RSS feeds (which are feeds with files that once submitted to directories can be accessed by subscribers within a very short time after it’s updated (Boswell, 2017)), podcast have not become truly popular. Thanks to RSS people get an instant access to different audio streams with simplified aggregation of the content (Wikipedia). Still, in
Over the past years, podcasts have become a popular type of media, with monthly listeners in 2017 growing from 21% to 24% year over year in the USA to 63 millions of users in total (Edison, 2017). It is a refreshing alternative to articles and videos, where listeners can hear a genuine human voice rather than see words and images on a screen (Lauren Reamy, 2017).

The growing popularity of podcasts makes them more powerful and influential amongst communities. Podcasts can broaden our perspective on the world, bring us new opinions and at the same time entertain us in a sophisticated way (Jan O’Brien, 2017). They can be listened to every-where, at home, at a gym or during a commute, in a car or bus (Edison, 2017). As Lauren Reamy 2017 summarises, podcasts have positive impacts on our brains and the way we think about our surroundings. In her list of benefits, she mentions that listening to podcasts can help us to become better listeners, improve our imagination, learn more about the world and increase empathy levels. People are also listening to podcasts because they help them to escape from everyday problems (Jan O’Brien, 2017).

A growing number of creators is visible due to lower entry costs. The production of podcasts is becoming cheaper and more accessible, which results in delivering content from people that don’t need a big budget or technical skills to record the content (Ellory Wells, 2017).

**User groups**

In podcast communities, we can distinguish an existence of two main group of users - podcast creators and their listeners. Listeners are looking for valuable content, surrounded by many options, are trying to find something engaging. If we look deeper, listeners can be divided into two main subgroups - occasional and frequent listeners. Following Edison, 2017, 49% users listen to podcasts less than 3 hours per week and 50% are listening to more than 3 hours.

At the same time, creators are trying to seduce listeners with charisma, chosen topic or a famous guest. Sometimes their podcast channel is a hobby, recorded at home, without huge expectation of any profits or sometimes authors treat it as a job, spending hours in professional studios expecting recognition and profits from advertisement provided by external companies. With initial estimates, that will be developed further during the project, creators can be divided into two groups - enthusiasts and professionals.

We also have another actor, acting behind the scenes-the companies that are promoting their services or products on podcast channels hoping to reach to as many customers as possible (Edison, 2017). Often the podcasts start with an author recommendation. Interestingly they are described by her/his own voice, usually mentioning using the product by themselves. The role of ads in the podcasts cannot be overestimated - they are the agency that propels the podcasts ecosystem, giving creators a chance to expect a profit from their hard work.

**Challenges and design opportunities**

Podcast as audio files grow in popularity, but unfortunately, the existing solutions do not give enough attention to this different type of medium and treat them as music files. Opportunities were divided to show them in perspectives of creators and listeners.

**Challenges from creators’ perspective**

**Experience is fragmented.** There are different products to edit recordings, to upload the content, different to connect with fans or gather the crowdfunding budget (eg Patreon). A multiplicity of a required platform can be overwhelming and discourage for many creators. Taking care of this fragmented ecosystem takes their attention of what is the most important - creating the high quality of content for their listeners.

**Lack of connection with listeners.** Creators do not really know who are their listeners, how many people are listening to them, need to check stats on every platform separately, and how their podcasts are listened to if they have more information they could understand what is the perfect length of the material for their audience. Unfortunately, lack of information stops them to better understand their target group of listeners with a bad influence on a quality of their creations.

Starting a podcast can be overwhelming. All of the technicalities and learning curve stops people from becoming a podcaster. With huge probability, they can have a great topic or idea but they are discouraged by the initial obstacles. Obviously, it is harder to record podcast than write a text but with a support of dedicated software, this process can be smoothed.
Hard to monetise a passion and survive in a competitive market. As beginners have their initial problems, the more experienced authors have theirs. Podcasting is a passion but many of more experience creators expect some kind of gratification for their hard work. It is hard to monetize their work since the commercials go mainly to the biggest names in the industry leaving average authors that are not so popular with less earning opportunities. Unfortunately, that sometimes cause a really good quality content disappear because the author does not understand the nuances of promotion and maintaining the relationship with fans and potential advertisement companies.

Challenges from listeners perspective

Experience is inadequate. Podcasts are media that are forced to act like music when they should have different behavior because of their different characteristics. They are longer than songs - on average taking 60 minutes (Daniel J. Lewis, 2010). They are not repeated, contradictory to the music that user is often coming back to the same file. They are often searching for the part that is interesting for the listener while songs are treated as one piece from the beginning to the end. Those small difference are crucial for the experience and engagement with a digital product. Existing solutions have the same micro interactions and system thinking for music and podcasts, limiting listeners and podcast creators, which impedes this type of media consumption.

Project’s scope
In my Thesis Project, I would like to tackle opportunities mentioned before and create a truly dedicated a community publishing platform for podcasts’ stream and challenge the way we interact with those recordings. To make that happen, I distinguish 5 main areas of design interest:

Unity and Creation. How might we create a platform that will combine segmented infrastructure and help creators improve the creation process of the recordings?

Community. How might we create a bond between listeners and creators?

Discovery. How might we help listeners to discover the content that they will enjoy?

Engagement. How might we create an engaging experience that users will be looking forward to coming back?

Presence. How might we integrate the solution to immerse with users’ life?

1.2 Project’s goals
The main goal is to create a solution that will fulfill the needs of both listeners and creators that will be presented in an engaging storytelling way. The success of the project will be defined by:

• Final conversations with previously interviewed users about the desirability of the project outcome (e.g. a survey if they will switch from their existing app to created),
• A popularity of the solution on producthunt.com or similar crowdfunding platform.

A side goal is to learn how to manage projects and follow big picture milestones by everyday micro-steps.

1.3 Collaboration partners
During the thesis, I will be looking for feedback from Natasha Tan, Design Lead at IDEO Palo Alto
Jetti Stykow, Design Lead at IDEO Palo Alto - UID Alumni
Teachers and external tutors at Umeå Institute of Design, Sweden
2.0 Methodology
2.0 Methodology
The project followed human-centered approach to understand users, their perspectives, and challenges. Having users in mind and collaborate with them through a whole process journey helped to discover innovative ways of supporting their needs and desires. Their feedback was taken into consideration at every stage of the project. Their input helped to decide on the directions as well as improve the concepts on a deeper level.

Design Research
Conducted interviews helped to get acquainted with users' needs and challenges that they encounter on a regular basis. The project started with getting familiar with the context through online materials about the topic. Conducted interviews and surveys helped to hear the personal stories and observe behaviors and motivations. A chance to speak with extreme users brought additional angle and emphasis on regular user's needs since extreme user experience them on a greater scale. To dive deeper into users' everyday routines and habits, graphical timelines were created. Hearing those personal journeys was inspiring and brought empathy that helped to generate ideas. After initial understanding of the context, sacrificial concepts were introduced to open up interviews on specific topics and have a better understanding of specific areas. Conversations with experts in the field were conducted to better understand emerging themes and possible future of the industry.

Synthesis
Collected data from the interviews and desk research was translated into actionable insights. They were gathered into generalized categories and were expanded into opportunities areas. The phase helped to move from
individual stories into overarching themes that are true for a group of users as a whole.

**Ideation**
Based on the research insights and synthesis, the ideas were generated and clustered into different categories. To have a different perspective and remove personal connection with any of the ideas, brainstorming sessions with designers and users were conducted. Brainstorming sessions played a role in opening at new innovative solutions.

**Prototyping**
The initial concepts were transformed into rough prototypes. Exploring various ideas and being able to put them on (in this case) screens helped to explore a range of different directions in a quick and rough way. Prototypes were developed in order to put those ideas into user context and get their opinions. They also improved users needs and the concept’s role that they can play in users lives.

**Feedback & Iteration**
The initial prototypes were brought back to the users and analyzed by them. Those conversations helped to improve the ideas and were beneficial to understand user’s point of view. It was crucial to learn how users will approach those new ideas, helped with explorations of positive and negative inclinations and brought the concepts to more a detailed stage.

**Design**
The phase of the project was focused on communicating concepts in an understandable way. A crucial part was to build a story that was convincing and helped observers to relate to it. To add more reality, the main character was inspired by conducted interviews and stories of users. The final story was build in a way to easily recognize the challenges that the main character has and explain the role of a designed solution in the context of her everyday routines.
3.0 Activities
3.1 Initial Activities

Research phase was conducted from 15th of January until 14th of February. During those 5 weeks, performed activities helped me to understand and immerse with the world of podcasting field in general. Research started with desk research and reading academic papers and articles about storytelling and also podcasting. Its growing popularity and challenges that this medium is facing. Parallel to those activities, competitor analysis of existing platform was conducted. During the time of the research, a number of platforms were close to 60. In this time frame they could not be investigated, so the focus was put on the most popular ones. The competitor analysis was focused on attributes that were relevant to the project scope.

After having enough confidence in understanding the topic, guidelines for the interviews were prepared. During two week time span, I have spoken with 8 listeners, 8 podcast creators and 6 experts from all over the world. In order to have a broad understanding of the topic, analogous research was performed through interviewing the owner of a local radio station in Umeå, ROCK & POP Umeå and through analyzing other digital experiences that are based on communities interactions. The last week of the phase was focused on clustering gathered information from all of the mention sources and finding themes for the insights. During this time, the presentation for the research review was developed and presented internally.
Since the topic of audio storytelling is broad, conducting research had a couple of defined lenses and focus points presented on the illustration. Clearly defined lenses helped to be more productive and to not feel overwhelmed with the breadth of desk research activities. A challenging aspect of desk research was to understand that diving too deeply into desk research and attempts to research everything can slow down the overall process and extend the time frame for research activities.

Desk research
Starting with looking at the history of storytelling, helped to understand the cultural context of stories in the history of human species and as well in contemporary societies. A lot of that useful information was found in (Gottschall, 2012) in which author describes the various reasons for creating stories from an evolutionary perspective and walks through story purposes. The book and other academic papers, such as (Kankainen, 2002), gave a lot of inspiration and trust that the project can make an impact by having the perspectives of both listeners and storytellers. After that, desk research moved to analyzing the history of podcasting and the most important moments of its past (Quah, 2017).

To fully understand the present situation in the podcasting world, I got acquainted with online articles around podcasting challenges, growing popularity of this medium, an involvement of big brands such as BBC and ESPN Sport in podcasting and future of spoken media in general. Since my interest went to different aspects of stories and story authors and receivers, I have also researched how books are promoted nowadays and phenomena of growing popularity of book clubs in the United States of America. Members of those clubs...
create a special bond that helps them to discover new books and have an open discussion around understanding the plot.

Analysing the potential futures from (Bergman, 2017) and (Layton, 2016) was crucial to understanding how the next years for podcasting could look like. Gathered information from that article helped to prepare interview guidelines for experts to get their opinions on the future of podcasting. Another part of the desk research was about existing solutions for recording and editing podcast audio files. Through the gathered material and later interviews with podcasters it became one of a possible direction for one of the creator touchpoints (Moren, 2017).

**Quantitative Research Analyse**

To find the quantitative information I looked at (Edison Research, 2017). This comprehensive report gives the understanding of the user behavior from a big data perspective through answering on questions such as what type of devices they are using and how they are listening to their podcasts. It also highlighted steady growing number of listeners that from year to year goes up by ~2%. The steady aspect means that people are more familiar with podcasting and that the project has a potential to bring impact and help to grow these number even faster. What was really interesting and contradictory to my findings from my interviews was the context of listening to podcasts. Edison research suggests that the most popular place to listen to the podcast is listener’s home while my interviewers gave me the opposite answer and their listening moments happen while they are commuting mainly from work to home. Edison report also helped to see the difference in a proportion...
Content isn’t king. The audience is king. There are huge underserved potential audiences for new forms of spoken word media—so let’s not rely on “received wisdom” too much.

The podcast consumer 2017 Edison Research Report

of listeners from demographic lens such as an age or education level of the listeners and bring interesting light on their online behavior such as their social media engagements that are on average 10% higher than whole U.S Population 12+. Looking at big data and statistic helped to start thinking about project’s user group and have a high-level understanding of who the potential user can be. The really inspiring conclusion comes from the report summary - “Content isn’t king. The audience is king. There are huge underserved potential audiences for new forms of spoken word media—so let’s not rely on “received wisdom” too much.” Since then, one of the research direction was to find out what could be this new form of spoken word media.

Products on the Market

At the beginning of 2018 number of products that listeners can use to listen to podcast subscriptions vary from 50 to 60. Ten of those products can be considered as most popular choices for average users and competitor analysis was performed on that ten solutions with looking both at listener and creators perspective. Some of those products are only focused on podcast audio files (Apple, Podcast, Podbean, acast) but in many cases, they are combined with music and work as an addition to music platforms (Spotify, Soundcloud, Google Play). Some of the products work as a hosting platform (Podbean, Soundcloud) and are providing creators space on servers to host their content. Half of the analysed platform have the creator panel where creators can perform more actions beside linking their RSS feed to the platform. The visible ongoing trend of providing more information about listeners cannot be undenied and will be growing to give them access to detailed data. The platforms that are focused on podcasts content
only, provide better information and also start supporting creators revenue activities by providing access to advertisers and dynamically implementing ads into their content.

### Analysing potential competitors

As mentioned before the competitor analysis was focused on ten most popular products. The attributes of listeners experience that was judged came from the project focus points: Community, Discovery process, Approach to podcasts on micro and macro interaction level. Platforms that are only dedicated to podcasting achieved higher results. While their focus is only on podcast their features are defined and more developed. Listeners and creators are appreciating this approach and are shifting to platforms that are dedicated to podcasting. Interestingly the contemporary most popular platform is Apple Podcasts. It is preinstalled on every iPhone device and has basic features of a podcast platform. Through interviews with listeners, I learned that they are not fully satisfied with the product and are accepting the shortcomings or shifting to a different platform dedicated to podcasts only.

### Analogous research: Digital Platforms

In order to get acquainted with different approaches to communities in the contemporary digital world, analogous research was conducted. In this subchapter three platforms will be described in details. Medium, com, Discord, and Zhihu are good examples of working with communities and the way they disrupt classic approach to well-known media. All of them also have different purpose and users that come from different backgrounds or different countries. Understanding their purpose and the way they work bring interesting light.
Medium.com is a platform for writers and readers. For many writers, Medium’s was an answer on fading popularity of blogging culture and embracing many amazing authors. Medium’s team realized the potential in authors community and segmentation of existing platforms and by creating an effortless experience to write a new article and access to the for readers brought new energy and helped many authors to grow and deliver a high quality of content with less effort to a wider audience.

Discord is a free voice and text chat for gamers. I researched this platform after a recommendation from one of the podcast creator that was really impressed by the quality of the sound and experience and mention that his colleagues record Q&A podcast on this platform. It is a simple chat and voice communicator but using it by podcaster seems like an opportunity to bring more interactive elements to podcast field.

Zhihu is a Chinese platform where users can ask experts questions (voice or text) on open live channels and get the answer almost in real time (voice, photo, text). It is an interesting approach that tries to bring a lecture experience to a digital world. The community around Zhihu is really engaged and curious. Since the potential user base is enormous, experts can grow, focus their efforts on the platform and with help of a revenue model (live channels can be under the paywall) expect an acceptable salary. One of the aspects that definitely requires improvement is the browsing through finished live channels. Since it is presented in a form of chat it is really hard to find specific information and it can be discouraging to come back to.

Analogous research: Radio and auditions

To immerse with the media similar to podcasting I interviewed an owner of a Rock & Pop Umeå radio station. Robert Jacobson created the radio in 1999 and from that time, is incessantly working on improving the listening experience. The content of radio is mainly focused on the music from the ’70s and ’80s but conducting live shows with interviews from local events bring the most listeners and is a great moment to promote the radio. Robert knowledge and experience helped to understand how the local radio works. He explained the process of creating and maintaining the bond between a host and listeners. Since Rock & Pop is one of the last 3 local radios in Sweden (in this context local is related to antennas range and also focus on the topics relevant to local communities) being close with the listeners is a recipe to survive on this competitive market.
3.2 Interviews

To get more insights about the podcasting I reach out to people from all over the world. As it can be seen on a map, the listeners were mainly coming from Europe and experts and creators were mainly based in the US. This spread all over the globe pushed to conduct online interviews – through Skype or through Google Hangouts. There were 3 interviews conducted in person in Umeå, Sweden. Guidelines for the interviews created ahead of time, helped to direct interviews into a discussion about the needs, challenges, and expectations of the participants. After each of the interview, the participants were asked to record a short snippet of the most interesting part of the interviews. Those short recordings helped observers immerse with the topic and act as inspiration points during presentations and also during the brainstorming sessions. Participants of presentations and brainstorming session could easily relate to the audio stories and feel that behind the design insights there are real people that helped to shape them.

Listeners

Interviewed listeners are position in the age target group (18–34 years old). I paid attention to gender balance in interviewers and was able to find extreme users. On one side, Karolina is a florist from Munich that listens to only one podcast per week and treats it almost as a school lecture, listening at home and taking notes with full focus. She mainly listens to podcasts around flower design and small company management. On the other side, there is Aaron, young designer living in London that listens to podcasts almost 3 hours every day while he is commuting to work. His interests are really broad starting from technology, business, startups, and design. Talking with extreme users was helpful to understand
specific needs and helped to see clearly the patterns that the regular users are having. The interviews were divided into two types. During the first 4 conversations, the interviewee helped to learn reasons for listening to podcasts, how the process of discovering new podcasts looks like. They also shared the details about the relationship with creators. Last 4 interviews focused more on detailed stories of an interviewee’s day and how podcasts fit the daily schedule. The detailed stories about one specific podcast (from a discovery to a recommendation) were also mentioned and mapped on the paper sheet. In the middle of the interview process, based on early learning, sacrificial concepts were sketched and discussed on the interviews. They worked as conversation starters and helped to bring new perspectives and ideas to the emerging topics.

**Creators**

Creators, hosts and podcast editors were mainly found through the social media. Half of them were approached directly through Twitter and other half answered on the Facebook posts on closed groups for podcasters. Initial worries about a difficulty in finding podcaster disappeared quickly. Luckily this group consists of open people that are willing and excited to help. Interviewing them was really inspirational and brought new energy to the project. As it can be seen on the infographics, half of the interviewees are at the beginning of the podcasting journey, just after launching 10 episodes and looking for listeners outside of their friend and relatives circle. Second half was more experienced, with podcasting for more than a year with different issues from revenue to lack of inspiration for new topics. Similar to interviews with listeners, interviews with creators had a focus shift in the middle. First interviews focused on the broader...
The future of podcasts | Piotr Kuklo MFA Thesis Brief

Topics such as why interviewee is podcasting, what were the challenges at the beginning, how the connection with the listeners look like and how the revenue models are working. The second half of interviews were narrowed mainly to the detailed week activities to launch one episode, details of the podcast editing and what would be helpful and would improve those processes.

Experts
Experts similar to creators were found through social media. In case of expert reaching to them directly was the most effective way. In 2 cases due to the busy schedules, having an online interview was impossible. In that cases, the survey with the most important questions helped to gather relevant information. In all of the cases, experts were willing to help and shared many interesting perspectives on the topic. Their experience and understanding of the industry from the level of an observer enriched the gathered material and improved the understanding of a bigger picture. The conversations with experts helped to understand the history of storytelling - why people share their stories and why others listen to them, how a simplified media history looks like and what are the patterns that can be seen in more mature media that will also be visible in the future of a young media like podcasting. Some of the experts work as mentors and teachers for the podcasters. In that case, it was interesting to learn their perspective of podcaster challenges and what are the most important lessons that experts can teach new podcasters. The aspect of data about podcast listeners was explored too and gave the understanding of the present solutions (what they provide and what they lack of).

Experts list

**Erik Lindenius**
Lecturer at Communication & Media at Umeå University

**Satish Gaire**
VP of Podmill - a host platform for 70k podcasters

**Kate Erickson**
A creator at Entrepreneurs On Fire

**David Jackson**
Tech Support at Libsyn and owner of School of Podcasting

**Robert Jacobsson**
Owner and a host at POP & ROCK Radio Station

**Monique Worotny**
Helps online entrepreneurs with a coaching support
3.3 Analysing the research
Analysing the data gathered from the interviews helped to create insights influencing further design decisions.

Audio storytelling
3 main aspects that define a good podcast
To understand what defines a good podcast I have reached out to Erik Lindus, a lecturer at Department of Communication & Media at Umeå University. One of his expertise is medias analysis and teaching students differences between them. He explains to his students that the quality of a podcast can be defined by 3 parameters that are based on Greek understanding of public speeches:

- **Ethos** focuses on the expertise of the host. If listeners perceived him as a professional, with a lot of experience they will be more engaged in listening.
- **Pathos** is equally important. It focuses on the performance aspect of the podcast. If the voice of a host is engaging, if a host is bringing her/his passion through the voice will influence how the podcast is perceived by a listener.
- **Logos** focuses on a structure of the story. How logic it is, how often the side topics are explored and the way of revealing the facts is also important for engagement.

Those 3 aspects can help to become a successful podcaster. Unfortunately having 3 of those elements is really hard to obtain at the beginning of a journey. Having two of them can be seen in many podcasters but mastering all of them takes time and hard work and can take many years.

"Podcasting is not about a wide audience, it is about a narrow but loyal audience." — David Jackson, Expert
Storyteller creates a special bond with her listeners and listeners reward her with their loyalty

The bond between listeners and podcasts creators was an overarching topic of all interviews. Listening to a voice of a creator through many episodes builds intimate relationships. Listeners believe creators and can easily relate to creators opinions. That’s why listeners are really loyal and can listen to the same creator for years.

Listeners

Podcasts immerse with listeners lives and listening patterns depend on life circumstances

Conducted interviews help to collect personal stories and draw a connection between listeners and creators and media. Really important part of the equation was to find out how podcasts fit into listeners life. For many of them, podcasts are indispensable part of their everyday routine. Listening to podcasts fits into specific moments of a day. Interviewees were mainly listening to podcasts during a commute, while waiting for an appointment or at home while doing tedious tasks like cleaning. What is also relevant is the podcast’s priority. In many cases listening to a podcast will be stopped by the more important activity like getting to work or finishing cleaning. A habit of listening to podcasts is also sensitive to bigger changes in users lives. Moving to another city, changing workplace can have a huge influence on how often and for how long listeners will be listening to podcasts every day. Users are mentioning that if their commute was shorter they will probably not listen to so many podcasts.

Word of mouth is the most powerful way of recommending the content

Mentioning word of mouth as the most popular form
The future of podcasts: A Creators’ Journey

- **Creators’ journey with happy moments and struggles**
  - **Feeling of starting something new and also feeling of ownership and completion something by myself**
  - **Feeling of receiving an appreciative message that an episode changed someone’s opinion or even life**
  - **Feeling of being recognised in a social situation and having an inspiring chat with a fan**
  - **Feeling of realising how many new inspiring friendships podcasting gave**
  - **Feeling of being recognised in a social situation and having an inspiring chat with a fan**

- **Struggles**
  - **Struggling with technicalities**
  - **Struggling with invisibility**
  - **Struggling with lack of inspiration**

- **Listeners**
  - Number of episodes: 10
  - Listeners: 50
  - Listeners: 100
  - Listeners: 200
  - Listeners: 400
  - Listeners: 800
  - Listeners: 1600

- **Word of mouth recommendation**

  - Content recommendation was present in every interview. Not only listeners support that approach, it could also be heard during the interviews with podcast creators. This personal approach to recommending a content is the most powerful way to discover a new content. We can distinguish two main approaches to word of mouth recommendations. The first approach happens when a podcaster is recommending another podcaster to his/her listeners and the listeners start to listen to the recommended content. Podcaster build trust with their listeners and thanks to that intimate relationship listeners have the confidence that the recommendation will fit their taste and will provide a high quality of information that they would like to stay with. The second approach happens on a different level. Mainly between people that know each other and are aware of each other’s interests and taste. Those recommendations happen on various moments during the conversation about a specific topic. Most often one of the sides is recommending the content that they are passionate about and since they know their friend they will encourage them to give it a try.

- **Listeners have growing need to be more engaged with other listeners and creators**

  - Growing popularity of podcasts gives creators an opportunity to explore new formats. Podcast lunches, life podcasts shows and podcast cons (Podcons) are more and more popular amongst podcaster and listeners. During those meetings listeners have a chance to meet people similar to themselves, they can discuss their favorite podcasts and also engage with the creators. Creators have a chance to meet their audience and learn more about their perspectives on their show. Those events also create an opportunity to initiate relationships that could
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Potentially be developed further in the digital space.

Creators

Interviews with podcasters helped to understand their struggles but also enjoyment moments. To see the full picture of a podcaster journey, moments were mapped on a timeline to see where the design platform could potentially help with.

For not tech-savvy person, the launching a podcast can be a struggle

Many of creators are not the experts in the technology and recording a podcast can be a challenge for many of them. The skills and knowledge that need to be absorbed during the first weeks (understanding publishing platforms, marketing, maintaining a relationship with listeners, promotions etc.) are enormous and overwhelming. At the same time while learning about marketing, building stories or improving their presentation skills, they also need to learn how to record, edit and upload audio files. Some of them with bigger budget decide to outsource those tasks and focus only on content. Since not everyone can afford it, most of them are learning to use software that is not dedicated to editing audio files like podcasts and in many cases are slowing their workflow and blocking from being focused on the most relevant task like creating the high quality content.

After using their friends and family as listeners base, creators struggle with finding new listeners

The next moment with the struggles starts closely to launching ten episode. Podcasters are struggling with invisibility. At the beginning they were using their family and friends as a fan base (to promote their content and to listening to them). It helped to grow the numbers of listeners but since the family and friends are finite resources they can not expand their listener group. Moving from ‘only family and friends’ base to a fan base (that consists mainly of listeners that creator does not have personal interactions besides the podcast) can take a long time. Interviewed experts claim that on average it can take at least two years. During this time creators can lose engagement while not seeing any progress in their listener’s numbers.

Many podcasters lose engaged listeners because they don’t know what listeners would like to hear and cannot figure it out by themselves

Thanks to talking to experts in the field, I also get more perspective of a creator’s struggles in the further part of the journey. It was also proven by the conversation about a statistic that one of my experts shared with me. After creators achieved the growing listener’s fan base, they are having troubles with ideating on brand new ideas for their podcasts. They have already launched more than 60 episodes (they are approximately podcasting for more than a year). They do not have many interactions with the listeners and if so it is more passive on listener’s side. Because they don’t have enough information about who their listeners are and what type of topics listeners would like to hear, they are struggling with lack of inspiration and in many cases unsuccessful try to come up with new out of box ideas. In many cases it can discourage their loyal listeners and affect the listeners numbers. Decline in a listeners number is dismotivating for creators and can trigger the decision of stopping podcasting.

3.4 Community as a focus of the project

Beside content creation, recording and editing, as mention in previous insights, creators play important role in recommending each other to listeners. Since the

“I am not editing my podcast. It was one more thing to learn, so I found a girl on Upwork. She edits every episode.

Lara, Podcast Creator

Podcast is like a gift, you need to know what your audience wants as this gift.

Gareth, Podcast Creator

“Podcast is like a gift, you need to know what your audience wants as this gift.”

Gareth, Podcast Creator
Envisioning community

- Exchange opinions about the topics
- Get to know people that have similar interest
- Recommend podcasts
- Exchange experiences and knowhow about podcasting
- Invite on podcasts and recommend each other

New perspectives
Recommending new podcasts
Inspire
Motivate

podcasting is a small subculture and just starts to get more attraction from mass media producers, many podcaster still gathered on different social platforms and are eager to help each other. This behavior can be noticed in many groups bonded by a specific activity not only in podcasting where community around the activity is not focused on profits and is driven by passion.

As mentioned in the brief one of the biggest challenges for listeners is discovering the content that they will find interesting and would like to commit their time to listen to it. In this context, smart algorithms provided by podcasts platforms are not really effective and are usually avoided and depreciated by the listeners. Because of that listeners rely on a word of mouth of their colleagues before they decide they will listen to a recommended podcasts.

There are 3 main types of groups where a new content is recommended. We can distinguish a group that surrounds a specific podcaster that has expertise in a topic and build a trust with her listeners to be able to recommend different podcasters. Here mainly the recommendation comes from the podcaster not usually from other listeners. A second group is developed by the similar interest. Listeners gathered together on different social platforms and share their recommendation to each other. The last group is created spontaneously and doesn’t have a strong bond and defined relation. It is based on group of friends that understand each other tastes and are recommending podcasts that can be interested for their peers.

By taking an overview on existing relations and behaviours between listeners and creators the imbalance can be noticed especially on a line from listeners to
Community areas

- Enhancing relationships
- Direct Connection
- Supporting technical efforts
- Help from peers
- Improving feeling of time well spend
- Adapting to daily needs
- Understanding listeners

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3.5 The goal of the project

The project’s goal is to form a podcast community for listeners and creators, where they connect through similar interests and share inspiring content.

During the research part, I encountered many challenges that listeners and podcast creators struggle with. Segmentation of the experience form both stakeholders, fitting podcasts into music platforms without using its full potential, listeners engagement in content and immersion with their daily activities and lack of connection between creators and their listeners. The important moment of analyzing the data was getting the understanding that many of those challenges can be answered by focusing on one specific aspect which is a relationship between listeners and creators. That is why the discovered opportunity of bonding a podcast community guided the project goal definition. Since the creators. As mentioned before, listeners play significant part in creator’s development, through inspiration, motivation by initiating conversation on face to face meetings or Pod Cons (a gathering similar to Comic Cons). This relation is missed on a bigger scale and its existence in digital world is segmented.

Building a bonded community can benefit both sides of equation. It will bring additional motivation and inspiration for podcast creators, help them to better understand their listeners and deliver more personalised content. Recommending podcasts amongst listeners could be enhanced and new relations could be build. They could help to exchange opinions about the interesting topics or getting familiar with a people that share similar interest.

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The project has the ambition to answer the question of the future of podcasting and how it could look in upcoming years, the community direction has a high chance to make a significant difference in the field and introduce a solution that varies from contemporary ones that mainly focus on content delivery and act as content browser and streaming. A crucial moment of research analysis was a shift of mindset regarding a broad understanding of podcasting world. The idea that podcasting is not mainly about audio files and is mainly about people around them and relationships between them helped to pivot the project to an interesting direction with inspiring potential.

3.6 Community areas

The existing relations between listeners and creators helped with envisioning a big picture of designed community and group different aspects of it into specific categories. It is clear that community platforms should improve relations between stakeholders in many aspects or build new ones through introducing new solutions, the time plan did not allow to explore fully all of the areas of the community platform. The chosen focus areas such as enhancing listeners relationships and building a direct connection between creators and listeners could have a potential to make the biggest impact on the community and its development. And as other areas are also really important and crucial for the platform to be successful, they will be touched upon briefly and presented more in overview way (but deep enough to give observers the understanding of other areas and proof their potential and feasibility) instead of giving the detailed solution.

3.7 Design principles

Developed design principles helped to guide the project during ideation phase and act as a point of reflection that helped to judge the importance and relevance of an idea in a bigger context. The principles are based on the learning from research and improved through discussions with stakeholders. The project is established on 4 main design principles:

Create a platform with balanced benefits

The solution should balance the benefits of listeners and creators and be a space where both collaborate together with an understanding of each other needs.

Create a space for two-way communication

Listeners and creators should have an opportunity to use podcasts as a two-way open media channel where both can have inspiring interpersonal dynamics and help each other grow.

Adapt to users’ lives

Listeners’ and creators’ expected actions should be adapted to their daily activities and schedules.

Support users through out the way

Listeners and Creators should feel empowered and supported independently of their engagement levels on the platform.

3.8 Ideation

Ideation helped to develop early concepts based on insights from the research. 3 weeks of ideation were divided into 2 weekly design sprints inspired by Google Design Sprint method while the last week was spent on developing the presentation for the mid-review presen-

Top: Brainstorming workshop
Bottom: Feedback gathered through online surveys
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Playlists on the go

First concept answer on the opportunity of being adapted to listeners everyday life and helped them to be flexible with time. The platform prepares the playlists for listeners based on the time they can spend on listening. A listener can choose different podcast mashup that has a different length. In case of having just 30 minutes before a doctor meeting, a listener can choose a playlist...
that will present interesting parts of the podcasts and will deliver the content with different opinions and perspectives on a specific topic that lasts for approximately 30 minutes. Benefits of this idea are that the content adapts to users daily activities and synthesizes information. It also encourages a listener to discover new podcasters and based on short fragments of their work gives the possibility to explore their content deeper later.

**Interactive podcast**

The concept is encouraging listeners and creators to have a discussion about the podcast that can inspire new topics for podcasts. Content can be enhanced with the support of images, links or questions asked by the host that listeners can answer on while listening to a podcast and being in the moment.

Before starting to listen to a podcast, a listener can see the list of discussed topics and choose which one is interesting for her. Thanks to that, a listener can listen to only parts that are interesting and can adapt the podcast to a daily schedule. While listening to the podcast listener can see an image that is supporting a discussion, it can be a graph that helps explain the discussed idea, or a photo of a guest. In the same manner, a listener can see links to discussed websites. Thanks to that, a listener has a better understanding of a discussed topic and not struggle with a speech to text transition.

During the process of podcast editing, a podcaster can invite other podcasters to say their own opinion on the topic. Those recordings can be added after the main recording. Those invitations help listeners to be introduced to new creators and listening experience is enriched by supporting or opposing views on the discussed topic.
A creator can also extend her listener group by inviting other hosts and building more connections in a podcasters community.

Thanks to smart tags, listeners have also an opportunity to dive deeper into a specific topic. Tags are assigned to each chapter that every podcast is divided into. When a listener is interested in a specific topic, she can create a playlist of chapters that will discuss this topic based on a recommendation of this podcaster or community.

**Podclubs**

Podclubs work similar to book clubs. In each podclub, we have curators that are responsible for curating the content, creating new suggestions, and guiding the discussion about the podcasts. Creators can ask to be reviewed by admins and connect with the members of clubs.

Listeners can choose from many podclubs that are sorted by analyzing listener behavior on the platform to simplify the searching process. They can see how many members a podclub has and what are the most common topics inside it.

Each podclub has a short list of podcasts that podclub’s members are encouraged to listen to and share their opinions with other members. We also have a list of suggestions for next week, where members and admins can add their suggestions. Podclubs help to bond listeners with similar interests, encourages discovery of new podcasts through word of mouth, and also helps creators to reach out to the right audience. It also has the potential to build closer relationships with specific podclubs through dedicated live shows and self-organized discussion panels.
Smart bookmarks
In this idea each podcast has a live transcript and listener can bookmark quote that they really enjoyed and save it for later or share it with others. Each podcast has a list of the most popular bookmarks chosen by the community. Thanks to that listeners have the summary of each podcast build by the community that they can look to at any moment. It enhances an experience of time-well-spent through a quick overview of most important fragments of a podcast. Creators also benefit from smart bookmarks since their podcasts are easy to share and short visual quotes can encourage other listeners to listen to the work.

Podcast Editor for creators
Creators can use an easy to operate editor that simplifies the process of recording and editing. It also introduces the features that are important to create an interactive podcast such as embedding images, links, surveys, and invitation for other podcasters. Simplified interface and removed complexity from editing tools are easy to use even for not a tech-savvy creator. Ideally, concepts include a support with a smart assistant that is available at every stage of podcast production and thanks to context awareness can support a creator through the whole recording and editing journey to final upload of the podcast.

Smart analysis for creator’s
This concept allows a creator to have an access to an overview information about her listeners. Data is more detailed and the smart assistant gives actionable feedback that can improve the content. For example, it can suggest recording shorter podcasts or create a new one based on a popularity of one of the chapters. A better
understanding of fan base can bring more ideas for channeling the podcast promotion or inspire new topics.

**Concepts on community map**

Explored ideas were mapped on the community journey. Thanks to the big picture overview it was clear which ideas can make the biggest impact and which have complex solutions that require further exploration in the refining phase of the project. Looking at the time schedule of the project, the main focus was taken on exploring the interactive podcast to build a direct connection between listeners and creators and Pod-clubs that will enhance relationships between listeners.

As mentioned before, community platform needs to answer on many opportunities. The developed concepts were not removed from the project but played a supporting role by explaining main 2 ideas. They became the part of a user journey explanation and increase the overview feeling of how stakeholder can benefit through the experience of all platform features.

**3.9 Refinement**

**Direct connection: Interactive Podcast**

To better understand listener’s behavior during listening moments (with a special focus on understanding the balance of engagement with the content versus engagement with the screen) two research activities were conducted. First one was a quantitative probe designed with Framer Studio and supported by usage of Firebase database. The probe consists of a simple podcast player where a listener could choose from 8 different podcasts. On the top were place 5 buttons with different actions. 5 listeners took this prototype and use it in the same context and environment to their usual listening. The functionalities of buttons were explained and
whenever listeners had a feeling that they would like to perform any of those actions, they were asked to press it. All of the interactions with buttons were saved to the database and were analyzed further. Second research activity took a different approach and delivered a more qualitative type of data. I used shadowing method and follow a listener on her way back home - usual moment when she is listening to podcasts. During the activity, I had a chance to observe her behavior in natural environment ask about the reasoning of specific actions. During this time, one of the early prototypes where also tested and feedback from it was implemented into next phase concept.

**Learnings**

Conducted activities gave an overview of listening experience and helped to divide it into three main phases - pre-listening, listening, and post-listening. Three of them have a different purpose and also different engagement level with a screen. Pre-listening phase is a moment when a listener is looking for an episode and starts to listen to it. Quite often, a listener skips through an initial part to avoid advertisement or host introduction until she gets to the ‘real’ content. The listening phase is the moment when a listener is almost fully engaged with the content. But in this phase there are moments when a listener is also engaged with the screen (to navigate through an episode, check some facts or note something that was mentioned on the podcast for a later use). The last phase usually happens when the episode is done or listening was interrupted by another activity. Usually during this moment listener engages with the screen and stops listening, looking for another episode or the next episode is played automatically. The listening phases helped to map elements of direct connection.
concept that were developed in the ideation phase and decide which one should be belong to which phase and remove the overload of possible actions from the listening phase were removed (such as a tag exploration during listening was removed and only implemented in the post-listening phase). Some actions from the listening phase were improved with the support of a headphone controller to minimize moment when a user has to be active on the screen (marked with a blue color on the graphics).

Direct connection: Live show

In order to learn about the live show experience, I decided to simulate it in a school context. Students from the school were invited to participate in a “Typography & InDesign Class” and myself become a host of the event. Since at that moment, many of them were using InDesign to write their report, they were really eager to be participants and help to improve realism of the simulation. In the beginning, they were asked to add their questions and topics that the live show should include. The questions were added to a Google Spreadsheet document that was shared among all participants. Participants had a chance to vote for the topic defined by others by adding a number in a column next to it. The window time for questions was closed a day before to give a host an opportunity to prepare the answers and decide on the flow of the event. The structure of the live show was based on chosen topics but the event was flexible enough to give an opportunity for the participants to add more question during the show and dive deeper into specific topics. After the event, participants were asked to reflect on the experience and share their opinion on what could be improved in it.
Learnings from this simulation can be divided into two categories, one coming from a host’s perspective and one coming from listeners’ perspective.

A host’s perspective

The Q&A experience is easier to prepare than stand-alone lecture, thanks to the already designed structure by the participants. A host does not have to put an effort into brainstorming what are the things that listeners would like to hear; list of questions created by the listeners work as guidelines for topics. Another aspect is that since a live show can be quite chaotic, a host should have tools that help to take control and not get lost in parallel conversations.

A listener’s perspective

Listeners were satisfied with a predefined structure and gathering questions phase help them to have a feeling of being actively involved in the event and encourage them to come to the event since they will find answers on their own questions. During the live show the experience was quite often interrupted by additional questions that influence a flow of it. Participants mentioned also chaotic moments with simultaneous questions. Due to this fact, the solution for this experience needs to provide a clear structure and ‘one voice at the time’ policy. The listeners also proposed a summary of the live show content - an overview of the answers, something that they could save for later and potentially be build by all of the participants.

Enhancing relationships amongst listeners: Podclubs

To further explore the concept of enhancing relationships amongst listeners, 2 co-creation sessions with listeners were conducted - 1-hour session with 2 listeners each - 4 listener’s opinions in total. During the sessions, listeners envisioned their ideal system and structure of the podclub. Lego figures were used to improve the understanding of the concept and bring the tangible component to something that is intangible and abstractive. Listeners were also asked how they would use the podclubs to match their needs and how to make it easier to bring content creators to the clubs. To support the concepts the desk research of existing online communities was conducted with a focus on Reddit and Twitch platforms. Reddit was chosen due to its profile of specialized topics (subreddits) and voluntary involvement of moderators that the service is relying on. Twitch platform was explored due to its powerful community that is based on the original content - in this case, streams of the game and their narrations by the host.

Learnings

Co-creation sessions helped to guide clubs into a direction that listeners were the most interested in. All of the participants mentioned a need for a flexibility of podclubs and emphasis on their different purpose - for example having a clear information if a specific club is focused on a discovery of the content or the main focus is on discussions between club’s members or club members are mostly interested in the live shows. It shifted the initial concept from a clear definition of rules and prepared structure into a more flexible approach that will focus on delivering tools for the voluntary moderators (called leaders and supporting leaders) and give them a chance to manage their clubs with a freedom that is only overviewed by the official paid moderators.
The desk research proved that voluntary involvement is possible and purely depends on the power of community and the way the moderator’s tools works.

3.10 Execution

Building a listener’s story

In order to explain the nuances of the platform, I decided to build a linear story of one of the users of the platform and explain the most important features from her perspective. The main character was to roughly on a story that was heard on one of interviews. The interviewed person interest into listening to audio stories comes from a dream of having own company (startup) after the graduation. She studies the business but at the same time would like to gather the experience and knowledge from more experienced people that her present education cannot provide. Her life is divided into finishing a final thesis project, working in a small company and preparing her role to start something by herself.

That is why she started to look into business podcasts and listening to start up stories.

After the character was defined, the most important elements of the platform were mapped on the journey and the screens presents the actions that main character is performing. Building an initial story took approximately 5 days but its development and improvement lasted until the end of the project.

From wireframes to final screens

The early wireframes presented on a gateway presentation acted as a starting point for the final visual refinement. Since the fidelity level of the built wireframes was high enough and had well thought through visual information hierarchy, the refinement actions were focused more on adding the ‘look & feel.’ Following principles
Interface Layer
White + Accent color

80% Gradient fill
315px height, aligned to the bottom

Episode cover
blurred: 10px
opacity: 10%

40% Black Fill

Episode cover
blurred: 50px
opacity: 100%

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The execution activity is guided by four main criteria:

Clarity. The interface should be easy to understand and the outcome of users' actions should be clearly communicated by a simple text and supporting visuals.

Minimalism with focus on stories. Audio stories are the most important part of the platform and should play the main role. The branding of the platform should play a secondary role.

Playfulness. The look and feel should emphasize on the playfulness and make users happy to play with. Using vibrant colors and icons could increase the playful feeling.

The final design tries to fit into a contemporary style and uses latest visual trends. The inspiration for graphical solutions was gathered from Pinterest and Dribbble platform. Combining them into mood boards and highlighting inspiring solutions helped to deliver satisfactory quality visuals. As in some cases, the visual part of the final project is not the most important part of the process, in this case, the goal to communicate the project with visuals that are based on actual trends was important for the believability of the story. The image presents 3 milestones in the process of designing screens based on one example. Starting with the initial sketch drawn on paper, through wireframes and adding the final styling and feeling to the screen.

Using covers of stories as the main graphics attribute
An important part of ‘look and feel’ design was executing the listening moment. The goal was to provide an
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experience that will immerse a listener and differentiate each creator. The conversations with listeners during initial staged inspired to emphasize visual experience on creators cover. Since many listeners pay big attention to this element, it plays also an important role in the final design. It brings the feeling of reading books. Each book has a unique cover (and also layout), a moment of taking a book into hand and opening it transfers reader to the world of the story. Since it is a digital product that should keep consistency, the cover manipulation is the same in every case. It blurred the image and scales it up. Each cover has defined an accent color build automatically from the cover. This approach brings another differentiation aspects for a listening user.

Animations

Final screens where combined into walkthrough animations in a prototyping tool Flinto. Moving from static screens to animated walkthrough gives an observer a feeling of an actual working product. It is another aspect that helps to relate to the final story and user experience of a listener.

A functional prototype

In order to deliver the experience of the listening the fully functional prototype was created. The prototype was built by using Framer Studio and coded in CoffeeScript language (it is a programming language that trans compiles to JavaScript and can be used on Android, iOS environment and every browser that supports Javascript). The prototype has a full navigation and control interface to change chapters, move backward and forward. It also shows opening of the episode, selecting chapters after opening, saving and sharing bookmarks (text-based or visuals) and showing guest opinion story. At the end of the episode, it presents the final summary of an episode and gives an opportunity to search the new content based on topics mentioned during the episode. Immerging myself in coding the final solution helped to better understand interactions that are heavily based on the sound experience and helped to define a couple of nuances that would stay invisible if this activity was skipped. One of the examples could be defining an experience when a listener decides to save a quote to the bookmark list. It brought the question if the audio should be stopped during this action. The final solution doesn’t stop the audio but after listener presses on ‘Save a bookmark’ button the ‘Pause’ button stays visible as other buttons disappear. This type of challenges can be only answered when the design is getting closer to the final solution and coding the prototype gave this opportunity.
4.0 Solution
4.1 Overview of the platform

**New media**

A part of the final solution is an introduction of a new media that is based on podcast but adapts it to contemporary expectations of listeners. A podcast’s form didn’t change significantly through last 35 years, while the technology made an impressive leap and gives new opportunities and solutions to audio stories in general. The new media name is freecasting and it differs from podcasting in 4 main ways:

### Structure

A podcast episode is usually one, quite often big audio file that is hard to navigate through and almost impossible to search through. In contradiction, each freecast episode is divided into separate chapters that are described with tags and thanks to its length (max. 10 minutes instead of hours) are easy to search through.

### Elements

A contemporary podcast episode consists only of audio and existing solutions are not promoting additional elements that could support and explain a story better. In freecasting, listeners can see the visuals that explain conversation, links or descriptions from a creator, and most important fragments chosen by the creator can be selected by listeners and saved for later.

### Presence

After an upload of a podcast episode, it is hard to modify it, often with old advertisement and outdated information. In a freecast, a creator can add elements whenever there is a need for it. It can be done due to a need to update information, to include a guest perspective or to reflect on comments provided by the listeners.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Podcasting</strong></td>
<td><strong>Freecasting</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one file, hard to navigate</td>
<td>tagged searchable chapters</td>
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<tr>
<td>audio only</td>
<td>supported by visuals, links, descriptions</td>
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<tr>
<td>static after an upload</td>
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<td>listened alone</td>
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Differences between podcasting and freecasting
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Listening experience

Listening to podcasts is a solitary activity. This approach doesn’t use to full potential of its community. In case of freecasting, listening gives the feeling of togetherness through sharing bookmarks with each other, commenting on episodes inside a podclub and live shows that naturally happen together.

4.2 Introduction to Cast3

Cast3 is a platform for audio stories and it consists of two products. Cast3 for listeners helps them to find and listen to stories and is also introducing a podclubs for discovery and discussions which listeners can join and interact with other members. A second product is dedicated to creators of stories - Cast3 for creators is a space where they can record and edit stories and adapt them to a freecast channel. Creators have also the possibility to interact with listeners and understand them better.

4.3 Creators Tools

We can distinguish 4 main tools that are created for creators of stories.

An Episode editor

Creators can use an easy to operate editor that takes a simplified and linear approach to a process of recording and editing freecast episode. After finishing editing a creator can divide an episode into chapters and assign tags with topics for easier discovery. After working on an episode structure, a creator can add elements that are dedicated to freecast experiences, such as images that support stories, external links and build the bookmarks that will make sharing the content easier for listeners and creates the option to save specific fragments into
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Creator tools:
- **Top Left:** An episode Editor, Top Right: Smart Analytics
- **Bottom Left:** A Live Show Editor, Bottom Right: Podclub Tool

Each listener’s bookmark list. The editor also gives a chance to invite a guest creator to share his or her opinion on a specific topic that will bring an opportunity to hear interesting opposing views. A creator can also embed a survey (for example asking about what should be a topic for a next episode).

**Smart Analytics**
In this tool, a creator can see an overview data about users that listen to an episode and detailed information about their actions during listening (which bookmarked was saved the most, which chapters were the most popular). Information is supported by the visual explanation and actionable synthesis is provided to improve creators approach (for example a creator can get a feedback that episodes are too long for her target group and maybe it is worth to consider recording shorter episodes).

**A Live Show editor**
A creator can use an editor to manage the Q&A experience with opening the question section before the live show event. It also supports streaming the live show, choosing the questions that a host would like to answer on and gives the overview of the live discussion that listeners are having.

**A Podclub Tool**
A creator has a tool to build the relationship with podclubs through contacting a podclub’s leaders and introducing the content into a podclub’s playlist. A podclub tool gives a chance to negotiate and schedule live shows and also gives an opportunity to become a weekly expert that will help to guide podclubs’ discussions.
4.4 Listener experience

On the image, we can see the overview of a user journey with a user involvement on the platform on the y-axis. Users’ involvement is a crucial aspect of every community platform’s success. Without user involvement, it cannot develop. That’s why it is important to provide user experiences that will support users’ actions and open the possibility to be more involved. The provided solution gives a user a chance to become involved in a community through clubs or live shows. The flexibility of solution gives a user a chance to be involved as much as he/she would like to be and adapt to those preferences.

Following pages will describe in detail the most important aspects of the platform:

- A web player (Discovery of the platform)
- An interactive episode (Listening experience)
- Clubs (Joining the club & Becoming a leader)
- A live show (Being a part of a Live Show)
Web Player

A web-based player can appear on various social media feeds such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. The main purpose of a web player is to appear in the context where listeners are and where they can have initial encounters with the audio stories - their social media feeds. It introduces a short snippet of audio (not longer than 4 minutes) with a quote mentioned on the recording. It can be a part of an interview or really interesting part of an episode.

After a recording is done, a listener has a chance to listen to a whole episode or explore topics mentioned in the recording by navigating through tags that are related to the snippet.

The web-based player is a first moment when the listener can get familiar with the platform and explore platform’s features.
Interactive episode

Since each freecast episode is divided into chapters, before playing it, a listener can get familiar with chapters and select only the one that she would like to listen to. The deselected chapters will not be played.

During the listening, a listener can dive deeper into a topic through the supporting visuals or links. If there is an interesting fragment of an episode, she can save it to her bookmark list and review it later. All of the bookmarks, links and supporting images have a summary of popularity based on a number of users engagement (number of saved to bookmarks and number of shares). Another aspect of the interactive episode is giving a possibility for a creator to invite a guest.

A listener has a chance to listen to an opinion on the topic by an invited guest. It helps to understand the topic from a different view or create an engaging dialog through opposing views.

Closer to the end of an episode, listeners can share their opinions on an issue asked by a creator. It can be a simple survey where a creator is asking what could be a topic for the next episode or another issue that creator would like to hear the opinion of the listeners.

After an episode is finished, a listener can see the summary with the most saved moments, information about people mentioned on an episode and also explore further mentioned topics.
Clubs

Clubs are the groups where listeners can gather together and share inspiring content through club playlists, meet similar-minded people, and discuss various topics. Clubs can vary in size, starting from private clubs only for a group of friends to big ones with more than 200 members.

The purpose of the club depends on its size and preferences of its members but 3 main characteristics can be distinguished: a club for discovery, a club for discussion, a club for live shows.

Inside each club, we have different ranks that are assigned to the members. Initial rank is called ‘newbie’ and is assigned to members that just joined in and are not really active on the club. The next step is the insider, which is a member that is active on the club discussion page, brings new suggestions for the playlists, or actively participate in live shows. The next level is a supporting leader. Someone that thanks to the commitment and involvement in the club was recognized by the leaders and promoted to a role of an organizer with fixed responsibilities. The role of a leader is to manage the overall activity of the club, help with organizing live shows and building the relationships with creators.

Curation of the content and discussion happen on different levels. The clubs are mainly curated by their leaders but platform moderators with voluntary moderators have an overview of each club activity and can respond to unusual negative behavior.

After a listener is opening a club page, she can see the overview of a club and also have a preview of discus-
sions and weekly playlists. Based on that she can decide if this club is right for her. A club playlist is easily accessible from a home screen. During listening to an episode from a playlist, a listener can see comments from this club members and engage in the conversation.

After a listener is promoted to a supporting leading role, tools that help to manage a club appear on a club page.
Live Show

It is a live Q&A experience where a creator is answering listener’s questions in a real-time. Listeners can ask questions in the specific time frame before the show starts and vote for other questions asked by other listeners. Most upvoted questions will be answered on the live show. During the live streaming, listeners can navigate through the questions that are gathered in specific clusters. During the live show, listeners can save most interesting fragments or dive into a discussion on a chat. After a live show is done, listeners can see the summary of most saved moments and explore mentioned topics.
4.5 Benefits of the platform

The benefits of the platform were divided into two main areas - The direct connection between listeners and creators and Enhancing relationships between listeners.

The direct connection

The direct connection gives listeners a possibility to dive deeper into one topic thanks to arranged playlists based on mention topics and hear new perspectives on it for example through guest opinion on an episode. It also enhances direct interactions with favorite creators through an opportunity to answer a survey question and get a feeling of shaping the content together with a creator. From a creator perspective, the direct connection helps to become visible to new audiences and also encourages building connections with other creators through invitation.

Enhancing relationships

Clubs gives listeners a chance to bonding with other listeners with similar interests, share inspiring content. Club playlists are arranged in a way that listeners are encouraged to discover new content instead of searching it for themselves. At the same time, clubs are helping creators to reach to the right audience and build relationships with club member through live shows and organized discussion panels.
5.0 Reflections
5.0 Reflections

Initial brief and final result

The initial brief gave a lot of freedom to explore the podcast as a design opportunity and started initially from a broad spectrum of how the future of this media could look like. The openness of the project’s opportunities was surrounded by a clear definition of the two main user groups - creators are the users that are responsible for creating the content and listeners are the users that consume this content. The initial research before the project’s start showed that listeners and creators struggle with the fragmentation of the systems, by having different applications to record (creators), communicate (listeners and creators) or find new interesting content (listeners). As can be seen in the brief, creators struggle with starting a podcast due to technical reasons and also monetizing their passion in the future. From listeners side, initial research showed that amount of choice can be overwhelming and lack of good tools discourage a discovery of a new content.

Initial brief combines a lot of opportunities and each of those opportunities could act as a main topic for the project. After a thoughtful research and conducted interviews, it became clear that the most valuable and beneficial for the users would be focusing on relationship between users and how the communities around similar interests could be build to benefit both of the user groups. The initial expectations of the project implied that the final results will contain the detailed stories of both creator and listeners. As it can be seen beneficial to explain the project solution from both perspectives, the project outcome was scaled down and focused only on the listener’s detailed story. The openness of the project’s opportunities was still preserved by developing different applications to record, communicate and find new interesting content.

Visual interface vs. voice interface

As an emphasis on the visual interface instead of an audio interface can be seen as a missed opportunity this was a well thought through decision. Initial tryouts showed that this type of experience requires more prototyping efforts and time than the classical visual interface. I am still developing my skills in conversational interfaces and for this project scope, I decided to focus on familiar media. If I would be moving to the next phase of this project, I would like to explore the voice interface that will act as a support to a main visual interface. It will clearly enrich the project and bring additional value to the final user.

Learnings of a chosen topic

Podcasting is a contemporary way of telling the stories and stories are an inherent part of human’s life since the beginning of our history. From stories narrated around a simple fireplace in early ages, through Greek tales of heroes, to contemporary movies - they all have similar goals. They help to express emotions, transfer information or provide entertainment. Presently they are communicated in different forms and podcasting is one of them. It was really interesting and inspiring to look at this topic from this perspective - that through a work on a digital media, the project is touching on human core values and our incentives as a species. The human aspect was visible through the whole project. One of the pivot moments of the project was understanding that podcasting is about people, their interactions, and their relationships not about audio files. In this context, audio files just play a role of a connection line between people that share similar interests. For many creators, podcasting is a way of life, it is their way to meet new friends, express their emotions and build sensitivity towards others. Through those audio files, listeners have a chance to immerse themselves in spoken stories, get something for their own lives and spent time in an entertaining way.

What was an initial surprise and later was taken for granted was the openness of the podcasting community. There were no problems in finding interviewees - creators are really open and excited about sharing their stories. Thanks to that, the interviews were always fascinating and gave a chance to talk with people that I would probably never had chance to talk to - starting from a London based high level manager that interviews people from Johannesburg - his hometown, to a young graduate that travels through Asia and chats and shares stories of other travellers.

All of those conversations gave the confidence that establishing relationships between people through digital solutions is possible. Even if they are separated from each other by miles, they can still influence each other. That understanding, brought a lot of inspiration and motivation not only to finish this project but probably also for future projects. Now I can see that something that can be perceived as a group of bits and bytes that in this case is formed in a digital soundwave can bond people together and enhance their lives too.

Learnings of a design craft

Since the project was an individual work, I was performing all of the design activities by myself. Throughout that 5 month project, I had a chance to improve different areas of my design responsibilities. Many of them involved high-level work like managing the project or deciding on the direction and next steps. Since the research part is the phase of the design process that I am still exploring,
I consciously decided that to learn and build confidence, I had to conduct more interviews and research activities than actual needs imply. This approach helped me to better understand this part of the process. I learned that interviews should have different lenses. First part of interviews should touch upon general topics to have the overall understanding but after a couple of those interviews, it is really hard to learn something new. That is the moment when the lenses could shift into more detailed ones. Discussing daily routines, observing them in the real context, being more investigative and curious about details brings new perspectives to the project. It is also important to be in the context of a user and to look through their everyday experiences by building their journeys. Unfortunately, most of the interviews were conducted through Skype and it would be beneficial for the process to conduct them face to face. Due to lack of resources and a small budget that was the only way to work but that would be something that I will insist on in the future as a professional designer. Additional thoughts were discovered during the evaluation and testing the ideas. It would be beneficial to get users opinion not only through discussing the feelings but through observing how users would use it in the real context. And preferably giving them a chance to become familiar with the probe for a longer period of time. Conducting activities to evaluate concept helped me to learn new approaches. Testing and evaluating ideas should be performed in a way that users can benefit from them. That is why, for example, the probing of a live show experience was related to the topic relevant to the participants and actually gave them a lot of knowledge. Providing those benefits make participants more engaged and eager to bring more insights that will help to develop the concept.

As a last learning, I would like to mention building the stories that explain the concept. The internship year and my second year of studies showed me how crucial is a good explanation of the design solution. Stories are a way to communicate complex ideas. In many cases, designers are working on systems or platforms that are really hard to explain by only presenting the overview. That is why the personal story of users are so crucial - they are easier to understand and relate to, they can also be powerful and memorable and inspire a client or a team for next phases. As I am still learning storytelling skills, I think I developed in that aspects and I am looking forward to explore it even further. As a complexity of design solutions will definitely increase in the future, I found storytelling as a crucial skill of design execution phase.

**Relevance to interaction design practice**

The project focuses on relevant issues of contemporary interaction design. It is providing a solution that increases the relationships between users and bonds them together through audio content. It also shows how an existing media with established rules can be evaluated and modified to represent actual needs of the users. To develop the concept it was crucial to modify podcasting as a media channel. The project is a good example of showing that to innovate and respond to users expectations, some of the initial settings have to be broken. This approach can be inspiring for other designers that are working on similar topics and are strictly constrained by the format. Opening on questioning why the format is working like that and improving it, can be beneficial for the project outcome and bring new ideas.

The project is also a good example of taking a broad lens on a design system itself (by providing an overview of relationships between its components) and presenting a detailed story of a everyday usage of the system. Those two lenses - overview and detailed is helpful to understand the system behavior and its benefits for the users. The design of a platform as a solution is balanced by detailed and visually appealing screens that explain users perspective and become ‘alive’ thanks to the usage of prototyping and animating tools like Framer Studio or Flinto. The project outcome can work as an inspiration of how to explain systems with multiple components and still having an user as a core of a clearly communicated story.
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