

My six-month dive into podcasting's very chaotic year

This is Hot Pod, The Verge's newsletter about podcasting and the audio industry. Sign up here for more.

Well, this is a weird email to write – today is *technically* my last day at *Hot Pod*. But you'll still see my byline around from time to time because I'm joining *The Verge's* news team in November. Starting next week, the newsletter will entirely be back in the very capable hands of lead *Hot Pod* reporter Ariel Shapiro. Although I'm sad to leave, I'm also really excited to see her take the reins again and continue to churn out the coverage that *Hot Pod* is known for.

It's probably not a surprise to most of you that I *knew very little* about podcasts before taking this job back in April – a time that also coincided with some seismic changes in the podcast industry itself. Although my background is in tech reporting, I'm normally known for writing stories like this and stories like this. Weirdly enough, I also covered Spotify's acquisition of Podcasts and Chartable way back in 2019 for *Engadget* – a story that *I have no memory of actually writing*. I learned a ton in a short period of time by relying on the work of my *Hot Pod* predecessors, which include Ariel, Ashley Carman, and Nicholas Quah – as well as the help of my editor, Jake Kastrenakes. But I also relied on the tips and expertise of numerous *Hot Pod* readers. So thanks for your help over these past several months – as well as trusting me to tell your stories.

A couple of people at Podcast Movement noted that all of the

Hot Pod writers have had very distinct styles. Obviously, we're all different people – but we all took over during very distinct periods for the industry at large. In my view, Nicholas and Ashley covered the promises and failed hopes of the “golden” era of podcasting and the rush of dumb money that made it possible. For me and Ariel, our challenge seems to be how to document an industry that is in the middle of a contraction – but also figuring out how to survive and reinvent itself.

During the time I was in charge of *Hot Pod*, Spotify laid off hundreds and effectively killed its in-house podcast production units, Gimlet and Parcast. It seemed like every entity, from public radio to news publishers, made cuts to their podcast units. Companies folded, and left their creators hanging. The film industry effectively went on hiatus this summer as both the unions for screenwriters and actors went on strike, which, living in Los Angeles, I saw firsthand. The loss of Hollywood ad dollars led to real consequences for public radio – both WNYC's president LaFontaine Oliver and former Southern California Public Radio chief Herb Scannell cited it as a factor in layoffs. A few celebrities lost podcast deals – but it seems like every day, a new famous person gets a podcast.

To that end, it's still a mystery to me why most popular podcasts got that way. I don't know why Joe Rogan's weekly drop of three hours of unedited babble is always one of the top podcasts in the country. I don't know why so many people like *Morbid* or Alex Cooper. When I look at the top podcast charts, I see a mix of disposable true crime, news podcasts from major media outlets like NPR or *The New York Times*, and buzzworthy celebrity-led efforts like *Strike Force Five* or *SmartLess* or that one hosted by Taylor Swift's boyfriend and his brother. But while the titles that have wide appeal may be a mystery to me, they clearly resonate with others.

I was heartened to see *Heavyweight*, a former Gimlet podcast

hosted by Jonathan Goldstein and now made by Spotify Studios, do well now that it's available widely on all players – it currently ranks number 36 on Apple Podcasts. But it was also kind of surprising, given that many interpreted Spotify letting go of Gimlet and Parcast as a sign that narrative podcasts were over. I'm sure Goldstein's ties to the early days of Gimlet and *This American Life* no doubt plays a factor in its success.

But at the end of the day, I do think people still have an appetite for good stories. It's easy to forget that, I guess, during an age where “everything is content” and virality is the key to survival. The number of views or streams on a video or news article or a post often seems like the only thing that matters. While algorithms can be tweaked – I do think certain concepts are timeless.

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white">Lightning Round**

Jon Stewart and **Apple** are reportedly parting ways over creative differences, including the host's intention to cover topics such as AI and China. I'll be curious to see what happens with the podcast, considering it performed so much better than the TV show.

Speaking of former *Daily Show* hosts, **Trevor Noah's** podcast on **Spotify** is set to launch on November 9. The show, which is hosted and distributed by Megaphone, will be released across podcast platforms as part of Spotify's shift away from exclusivity.

Audioboom is still making deals, announcing yesterday that it

has signed exclusive partnerships with *Girls Next Level*, *The Bulwark Podcast*, *We're Here to Help*, and *Out of the Pods*.

On October 26, **Serial** will debut *The Kids of Rutherford County*, a new investigative podcast that examines how a juvenile court in Tennessee abused its power. The show was produced in partnership with ProPublica and WPLN Nashville Public Radio, and is hosted by WPLN reporter **Meribah Knight**.

Suge Knight is making a podcast from prison, and according to TMZ, it's all about personal beef.

Triton released its September podcast ranking, with *Dateline NBC* ranked number one. Two caveats to the ranking, which is that NPR is excluded temporarily because of a data migration. The second is that it also does not include Spotify podcasts, so **Joe Rogan** (the real number one) is not on there.

Spotify reports earnings on October 24, and will be followed by **Cumulus Media** on October 27 and **SiriusXM** on October 31 (spooky!).

<https://www.theverge.com/2023/10/20/23925917/youtube-hot-pod-goodbye-podcasting-bust>