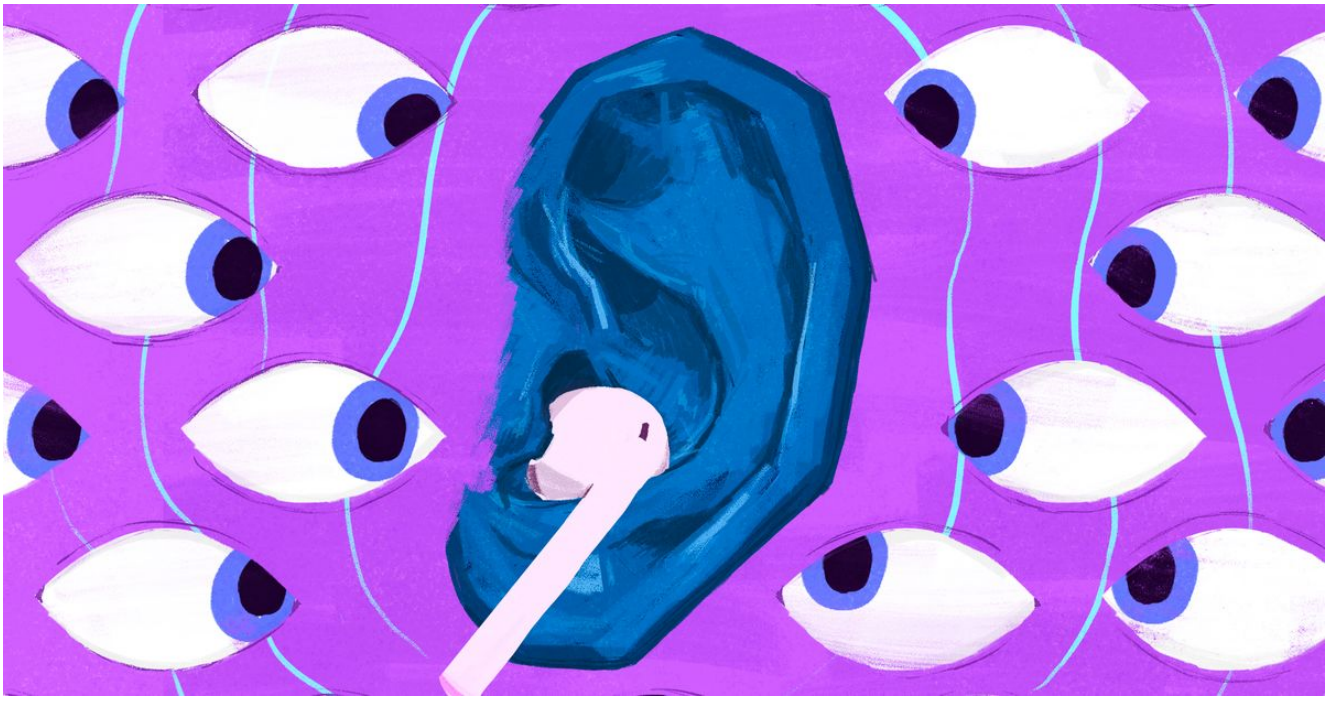
NPR wants to know what podcast ads you skip



NPR has a plan to figure out how much people actually listen to podcasts, but whether it can be pulled off depends on one of the industry's biggest names: Apple.

NPR's Remote Audio Data system (RAD), launched earlier this month, lets podcasters know whether people are listening to their shows and, crucially, the ads embedded within them. That knowledge could be a boon for the growing, ad-supported industry, but RAD's success relies on Apple — a company typically wary of handing over consumer data — agreeing to join.

The podcast industry is booming, thanks to ads. Revenue is expected to reach $659 million in 2020, up from $314 million in 2017, according to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and PricewaterhouseCoopers US. But when it comes to podcast analytics, it's a free-for-all: There's no massive, third-party, arbiter of success, like Nielsen for TV ratings, that gives advertisers a clear idea of how a show measures up to its competition.

The podcast industry could produce $659 million in revenue in 2020

Right now, advertisers rely almost entirely on download figures to determine the value of advertising on a podcast. However, they can't tell if a show is widely downloaded but barely listened to, or if it has a small but passionate fan base that consumes each program in its entirety. They also can't tell if just their ad was skipped over, but the entire show was actually heard. It's a problem both for podcasters who want to know their listeners' habits and for advertisers who want to spend effectively.

Advertisers will expect more detailed listener data as the industry matures, says Dennis Buchheim, who leads IAB's Tech Lab. "As the podcast industry scales, advertisers will look for measurement and attribution techniques available in other forms of digital media," he says.

NPR's potential solution, RAD, requires podcasters to code specific tags into their episodes that can detect when listeners have reached a certain point in a show, like an advertiser segment. That information is then sent back to the podcast's creator, letting them know whether certain ads were actually reached.

Tagging a show isn't a huge lift for creators

"This is something that's going to matter to podcast creators," Stacey Goers, product manager for podcasts and social at NPR, tells *The Verge*. "From our point of view, it's supporting the next evolution of the industry."

NPR already has a mix of partners on board, including analytics standards companies, hosting platforms, smaller consumption platforms, and, of course, its own NPR One app. Interestingly, the team behind the recently acquired Pocket Casts app says it doesn't have any plans to implement RAD.

> *While we're proud to have a co-owner and partner as respected and accomplished as NPR, we are an independent company with*

> *our own product roadmap. As such, we have no plans to implement RAD at this time.*
>
> *We thought that was worth clarifying since quite a few of you have asked.*
>
> *— Pocket Casts (@pocketcasts)* ***December 11, 2018***

NPR is still missing a key element, however: the places most people actually listen to shows. According to Anchor, more than half of all podcast listens come from Apple Podcasts. Spotify represents nearly one-fifth of all listens, and smaller platforms make up the remainder.

Apple and Spotify have not yet announced support for RAD. Spotify did not respond to a request for comment, and Apple declined to comment. NPR did confirm to *The Verge*, however, that Apple employees offered their feedback on the RAD protocol, so Apple's team knows it exists and has had a hand in its development.

Apple's podcast team has at least reviewed the RAD protocol
The platforms might be choosing to sit RAD out in favor of prioritizing their own metrics. Spotify, in October, began testing an analytics platform that gives podcasters insight into their listener demographics, and Apple is currently testing a beta analytics platform that shows how long listeners stick around, although these aren't a replacement for what NPR has created. If podcasters want to build a comprehensive look at their show, they need to compile all this separate data. RAD, on the other hand, would gather all listens across all platforms in one place.

There are also potential privacy issues. Even if advertisers are excited about more user information, podcast app creators might not be eager to offer that data, and listeners might not be comfortable having their listening session tracked. Overcast founder Marco Arment, whose iOS app is a popular

third-party alternative, even went as far as to say RAD could violate Europe's new GDPR privacy protections. He tweeted about his disinterest in helping podcasters monetize off listener data. "There's no clear benefit to the app makers (in fact, it requires more work), and it's a privacy violation and a GDPR liability that users would likely object to if they understood it," he wrote earlier this month.

> *Yes. I understand why huge podcast companies want more listener data, but there are zero advantages for listeners or app-makers.*
>
> *I won't be supporting any listener-behavior tracking specs in Overcast. Podcasters get enough data from your IP address when you download episodes.* *https://t.co/mplhnrmCsc*
>
> *— Marco Arment (@marcoarment)* *December 11, 2018*

There might be a product way to allay listeners' concerns, however. Podcast apps could solve this problem by allowing users to opt-in, says Jake Shapiro, co-founder of the listening app RadioPublic. His company plans to ask listeners to opt into analytics like RAD. "It's important to give listeners a clear sense of when listening data is being accessed and for what purpose," he says.

NPR says its RAD standard doesn't provide personally identifiable data to podcasters or advertisers. NPR itself also can't access any listener information about competitor shows, the company says, which could have been a rightful worry for anyone who wants to keep their listener data secret. Still, the standard requires data nonetheless, and listeners might not feel comfortable with the idea of show creators knowing what ads they heard and which they decided to skip.

The benefits to listeners aren't immediately apparent, either, unlike some other proprietary analytics. RadioPublic has its own tracking system, for instance, that allows podcast

creators to interact with listeners based on how engaged they are. *The New York Times'* podcast *The Daily* used this feature to send a notification to its most dedicated listeners, Shapiro says, asking them to sign up for a morning newsletter. The conversion rates with these types of promotions are relatively high with a 10 to 20 percent conversion rate, he says.

Listeners might not see a benefit in giving their data away
For its part, IAB wants clearer standards put in place, regardless of who creates the analytics platform, which is why it introduced a certification program this past week to ensure analytics are consistent across platforms. Obviously, advertisers want better metrics around their ads, and ultimately, if they demand granular listening data before committing to buying an ad, they could single-handedly push the industry toward broader measuring methods. In fact, Buchheim says this is already happening, and that "a lot of platforms and publishers" have reached out about the bureau's new guidelines and getting certified. Everyone wants to keep money flowing into their shows, so they'll utilize analytics to bolster their sales pitch.

The podcast industry has known it needs to figure out a better metrics system for years, even if it means facing the truth about how many people skip their ads. That information could crush some shows, but it could also help small, but successful, names find advertisers to support them. NPR's already a massive entity in the podcasting world, so having the buy-in of its shows and platforms represents a big step to getting the entire industry on board.

But RAD might not be the ultimate analytics winner, if there even is one. The bigger question is whether listeners are ultimately okay with forking their data over to podcasters and their advertisers, or if they care at all. We've all been tracked online for years and only relatively recently has the backlash against creepy ads started to take hold. Granted, the

majority of people aren’t readily quitting Instagram, Facebook, or Google. Podcasts just want to catch up to the online content space and get that data.

Updated 6:45pm ET 12/27 to include Pocket Cast’s tweet about not implementing RAD.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/27/18156895/npr-remote-audio-data-rad-analytics-podcast-tracking-apple-spotify