



BROADCASTING LIVE FROM THE CAPITAL: PODCASTING IN OTTAWA

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It may feel like everyone has a podcast nowadays. This may be accounted for by the visible surge in the podcasting industry over the past few years and the overwhelming amount of content currently being released on streaming platforms.

According to a Media Technology Monitor survey published in January 2022, a third of Canadians listen to podcasts, consuming on average four hours of content a week.

This number is expected to continue growing as advertisers have predicted an increase of 31 per cent revenue for the podcasting industry in 2022.

JP Davidson is the founding producer of Pop Up Podcasts, a podcast production studio in downtown Ottawa that helps podcasters with technical production. He said one of the things he appreciates about podcasts is that they can be created from anywhere and reach a global audience.

“People may not even realize that some of the podcasts they’re listening to are based in Ottawa,” Davidson said.

Pandemic restrictions

Josh Stafford, the owner of the Mayfair Theatre—an Ottawa staple for movie lovers—has also taken a stab at podcasting. The theatre’s podcast is among those that Davidson describes as “local flavour.”

“It kind of started purely just for fun and almost as a joke because we’d be hanging around talking about something interesting happening at the cinema or upcoming movies,” Stafford said.

Although many small businesses, such as the Mayfair, struggled during heights of COVID-19 restrictions, listenership in podcasting remained steady in Ottawa. Stafford said he noticed an increase in listeners and support for their podcast as the Mayfair remained closed during the harshest lockdowns of the pandemic.

Podcasting is something many were able to continue doing during the pandemic, something that was important for Stafford, especially for the local community.

“We just kept on doing it even though we had nothing to talk about and that was very touching. We got some really nice emails from people basically just saying ‘Thanks so much for continuing that little sense of normalcy,’” Stafford said.

Despite the hurdles of creating a podcast, gaining notoriety and persevering during a pandemic, Ottawa podcasters have proved their eagerness to break into the expanding world of audio streaming as well as their genuine love for the work.

“It’s definitely broadened my horizons in terms of issues that I may not have paid much attention to,” said Erin Gee, an Ottawa resident and co-host of the “Bad+Bitchy” podcast.

Activism platforms

Gee said her podcast has also shifted focuses.

“We used to have more of a relaxed and pop culture-y vibe, and now we primarily focus on politics and the impact on marginalized communities,” Gee said.

Bad+Bitchy discusses current events in pop culture and politics from the perspective of Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) women.

Though Canadian politics are a hot button topic in the country’s capital, Gee said she strives to also reach a national audience with her podcast’s subscription-based platform.

Deepak Sharma is the host of “It’s Not That Deep,” an interview-based podcast that features people he describes as “high performers in life,” such as rappers, entrepreneurs and athletes. He shared similar views about reaching larger audiences and covering a wide array of topics.

“I wish I could sit here and tell you I have one main topic that I talk about, but it’s really just a conversation—[guests] sharing about their story, their journey and kind of highlighting how they were able to build their success,” Sharma said.

These three podcasts are just a small sample of the content that is being created in Ottawa and represent the variety of styles and topics that podcasting has touched on within the city.

“Everyone and their mom has a podcast now,” Sharma said. “For me it’s about longevity, keeping up content and sticking with it.”

A trend

When asked if they worry about notoriety or getting lost amongst the plethora of podcast shows available, Gee and Stafford said they were not overly concerned when it comes to standing out in a crowd.

“It’s not our job, we’re not as reliant on it as some other people,” Gee said.

Stafford, who also makes podcasts as more of a hobby, agreed.

“On a sliding scale of podcasts, none of us involved are trying to make this our sole source of income,” Stafford said.

But Sharma shared a different experience. He was able to leave his former full-time government job and focus entirely on his podcast, which eventually led to more career opportunities in media for the Ottawa-based creator.

“I got really bored sitting in a cubicle, decided one day to start a podcast because working that job I listened to a lot of podcasts and just really loved what they did for me,” Sharma said.

While it may seem like a majority of Ottawa podcasters are treating their podcasts like a hobby—with local restaurateurs, professors and politicians creating podcasts on the side—there are some benefits and freedoms that come with podcasting.

“I do still think that we provide value that other people don’t,” Gee said. “Neither of us are journalists by trade and so we have no allegiances to existing publications or to political parties so we’re kind of free agents in that way.”

Growing popularity and controversy

While there isn’t much extensive research on the popularity of podcasting in Ottawa specifically, Davidson said 2021 was Pop Up Podcasting’s busiest year, as the industry and demand for content continued to grow.

“It’s the Netflix-ification of radio,” Davidson said, adding that people like the idea of being able to listen to podcasts on demand.

“It goes along with all the social media trends,” he said. “People want their media to come to them when they want it and how they want it.”

The field has also drawn in a variety of different perspectives and stories, as podcasting has provided a platform for all kinds of voices.

But this open platform has also led to recent controversy surrounding the popular “The Joe Rogan Experience” podcast, which draws in an average of 11 million listeners per episode. The controversy was sparked over Rogan’s spreading of COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation coupled with racist slurs and statements, according to *Forbes*.

Famous musicians, including Canadian artists Neil Young and Joni Mitchell, withdrew their music from Spotify over frustrations with the platform’s ongoing deal with Rogan. The deal is estimated to be worth nearly \$200 million according to *The New York Times*.

This serves as one example of how large the podcasting industry has become and the influence some of its most popular programmers have gained.

Ottawa podcasting has also grown alongside this global surge and even begun hosting a podcasting festival in August of 2019. Davidson and Pop Up Podcasting helped facilitate the event, where local shows were selected to record live episodes in front of an audience.

The festival was unable to be repeated the following year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the challenges podcasters have faced in recent years, including pandemic restrictions, compensation and controversy, they are still dedicated to producing content.

“Podcasting was the reason I was able to leave my job. Podcasting was the reason I was able to make so many connections,” Sharma said.

“It led to things that gave me a lot of freedom and the ability to create my own journey,” he said.