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## Popcast: A music podcast with unexpected scholarly angles. A review and highlighted episode selection

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**Popcast: A music podcast with unexpected scholarly angles**

A review and highlighted episode selection.



*Popcast* is a freely available weekly podcast produced by the *New York Times*, hosted primarily by music critic Jon Caramanica that offers accessible scholarship on pop music in the online era. Episodes from August 2015 to present are available to stream on the *Times* website, and through Apple and Google. Episodes dating back to August 2014 are available exclusively through Spotify Premium. Hip-hop music is a prominent subject, but a variety of genres are covered, along with industry, cultural, and technological trends. Guests with pop culture expertise regularly appear (e.g. Jia Tolentino, Jenna Wortham, Wesley Morris).

This review is intended for pop culture-oriented librarians open to discovering insight about scholarly communication topics from an unexpected source, or to those instructors looking to enliven classroom conversation. Topics such as copyright, metrics, and preservation are all covered on Popcast, but here they are discussed in the context of Charlie Puth and Ariana Grande. Popcast has proved informative in my own professional understanding of the scholarly publishing industry, which helped inspire an article-length exploration of the parallels between pop music and scholarly communication (Boston, 2019).

In fact, scholarly communication and recorded music share many commonalities. The output from each domain is subject to copyright, which the author/creator will often assign over to usually one of a very small handful of very large media corporations in exchange for mass distribution to a target audience. While the internet has nullified the practical need of a record label or academic publisher to distribute content, author/creators continue to go this route to serve more social functions, such as the perception of prestige. The content of both domains, when produced by major commercial outlets, have each seen pricing peaks that have pushed many consumers to piracy, be it Napster for music or Sci-Hub for scholarly works.

Other author/creators have taken advantage of new technologies, ignoring traditional gatekeepers, and opted to release content either on preprint servers and mixtape servers. In these cases, the author/creator puts out the music or research when they are ready, without confinement to the scope of any particular journal or label, relying on their communities to judge the quality of content.

The remainder of this review will serve as a guide that recommends six episodes of Popcast with a synopsis of the episode content and a brief description of the scholarly communication angle. These are recommended for personal/professional enjoyment and edification by librarians or as examples for classroom use.

- **Taylor vs. Scooter: The Pop Music Civil War of 2019 (July 3, 2019).** *Access:* [www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/arts/music/popcast-taylor-swift-scooter-braun.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/arts/music/popcast-taylor-swift-scooter-braun.html)

Researchers are often asked to sign over copyright on their manuscripts to commercial scholarly publishers when their work is accepted, just as recording artists are required to sign over copyright on their songwriting and master recordings. The downsides of doing so are not always immediately clear to creators, whereas the career benefits of publication by a major distributor are. This episode discusses Taylor Swift's recent reckoning with the contract she signed at a very young age. Her example is compared to newer generations of artists who are increasingly negotiating to retain copyright on their master recordings. While Swift has no claims to her original recordings, she has retained copyright on her songwriting, which has since allowed her to begin re-recording her back catalog of albums, each of which she has dubbed as "Taylor's Version."

Librarians will recognize in Swift's example the importance of retaining copyright up front, or when that fails, understanding when it is possible to post an Author's Version manuscript to an open access repository. Episode runtime is 1:05.

- **Can Record Labels Be Trusted to Preserve Music History? (June 13, 2019).** *Access:* [www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/arts/music/popcast-universal-music-fire.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/13/arts/music/popcast-universal-music-fire.html)

The Library of Congress is an organization that understands and demonstrates best practices for preservation of materials, such as music archives. By contrast, UMG had amassed a staggering archive of precious, yet-to-be-digitized cultural documents which had not been properly safeguarded. When fire destroyed the master recordings of up to half a million songs held by Universal Music Group in 2008, the effect was devastating. Jody Rosen guests on this episode to discuss his reporting on the catastrophe. Rosen questions the "big three labels' commitment to preservation" which he calls a "slow-motion assault on our musical heritage that

is poorly understood by many within the record industry, to say nothing of the public at large” (Rosen, 2019).

Librarians and archivists cannot always count on adequate financial commitment to ensure appropriate ongoing maintenance costs, but the UMG fire—responsible for the loss of little-known treasures by Ray Charles, B.B. King, Etta James, Sting, Joni Mitchell, and Tupac Shakur—may serve as a high-profile example that cultural institutions should explicitly try *not* to follow. Episode runtime is 1:14.

- **Pop’s Category Killers, From Live Nation to Spotify, Under the Microscope (April 20, 2018).** Access: [www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/arts/music/popcast-live-nation-ticketmaster-spotify.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/20/arts/music/popcast-live-nation-ticketmaster-spotify.html)

Vertical integration is a corporate strategy that stacks different stages of a supply chain, which are normally run by separate companies, under the banner of one single company. This strategy often results in higher net margins for the conglomerate company left standing, but tends to squeeze out smaller rival companies leaving consumers with fewer options to choose from. This episode discusses the 2010 merger between management and touring agency, Live Nation, and ticketing agency, Ticketmaster. In 2018, the Department of Justice’s antitrust division launched an investigation concerning anticompetitive behavior.

Librarians will be familiar with the concept of vertical integration, as commercial vendors in the space have increasingly acquired services in every conceivable stage of scholarly production, from citation managers (see: Elsevier acquiring Mendeley), to repository software (see: Elsevier acquiring bepress), analytic services (see: Elsevier acquires Plum Analytics, SciBite, and Science-Metrix), and streaming platforms (see: OverDrive acquires Kanopy). The conversation

held in this episode offers librarians a bird's eye view of how corporate interests can create unhealthy consumer markets. Episode runtime is 45:19.

- **What Are the Billboard Charts Really Measuring? (October 27, 2017).** *Access:*  
[www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/arts/music/billboard-chart-streaming-rule-change.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/arts/music/billboard-chart-streaming-rule-change.html)

On this episode, Caramanica asks critical questions about the Hot 100 list. Billboard has measured the popularity of music for decades using changing models that have grown to include radio play, physical sales, as well as paid and free ad-supported streams. While these numbers may be recorded objectively, how the numbers are then weighted is a subjective, undisclosed calculation made by Billboard, prone to reverse-engineering by labels.

As an example of reverse-engineering, we can consider how some publishers began lengthening the span of time between the first online appearance of an article and its *official* publication date as a way to boost their journal's Impact Factor. This strategy is the same as an music artist attaching previously-released singles onto so-called deluxe versions of their albums, instantly attributing the single's play data to the album's play data.

Like Billboard's outsize influence in the music industry, the Journal Impact Factor and Journal Citation Report (also using undisclosed calculations) have created perverse incentives for editors and authors. Goodheart's law states that when measures become targets, they are no longer good measures. This is an important principle for any librarian who seeks to understand bibliometrics and research assessment. Runtime: Episode runtime is 48:58.

- **Is SoundCloud a Business or a Community? (August 25, 2017).** *Access:*  
[www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/arts/music/popcast-soundcloud-online-music-culture.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/arts/music/popcast-soundcloud-online-music-culture.html)

This episode discusses the financial troubles faced by SoundCloud and the possible consequences for the culture it supports. SoundCloud is an online streaming site that allows anyone to upload and share audio content. The influential subgenre of “SoundCloud rap” (e.g. 21 Savage, A Boogie wit da Hoodie, Juice WRLD, and Lil Pump) was first developed in this space. Similar to SoundCloud, open access preprint repositories (arXiv, bioRxiv, etc.) are online spaces where researchers can upload and disseminate original works, ahead of the time-consuming process of peer-review, and without worry over the citation impact-minded decisions of some editors. While such archives offer great benefit to the communities they serve, their funding models (usually non-profit) can leave long-term sustainability an ongoing concern.

This episode may be instructive to librarians in positions of relative power that could advocate for the proposal put forward by Lewis, et. al. (2018) that “every academic library should commit to invest 2.5% of its total budget to support the common infrastructure needed to create the open scholarly commons.” Episode runtime is 30:53.

- **Revisiting Kanye West's 'The Life of Pablo' (November 25, 2016).** Access:

[www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/arts/music/popcast-kanye-the-life-of-pablo.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/arts/music/popcast-kanye-the-life-of-pablo.html)

This episode covers a 2016 Kanye West album which diverged from the traditional album release and exhibited the complicated new modes of digital-era distribution. In the course of a single weekend, one version of the album was previewed at a massive public listening session, two versions of songs premiered on a *Saturday Night Live* episode, and finally, after technical hiccups, a streaming-only version was released exclusively on Tidal. The nature of the Tidal-only release resulted in the piracy of half a million copies. Over the next few weeks, mistakes in the track-listing and credits were fixed, and guest verses were altered based on fan feedback.

This episode may be especially useful for librarians who instruct undergraduates on the production of scholarly knowledge. Like in Kanye's example, creator/authors may go through several drafts, present versions of the research at conference, circulate preprints among peers for feedback, and sometimes issue corrections after publication. Episode runtime is 53:04.

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The six episodes profiled in this guide span from 2016 to 2019, but episodes beyond 2019 continue to provide relevant, parallel insight into scholarly communication topics. More recent episodes, like 2020's "How Merchandise Bundles Undid the Album Chart" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/22/arts/music/popcast-merchandise-bundles.html>), continue asking questions about how the impact of content is measured. Or, considering that SXSW was one the first major music festivals to postpone due to COVID-19 concerns in 2020, the 2021 episode "The (Not So?) Tentative Return of Live Music" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/12/arts/music/popcast-concerts-covid-19-reopening.html>) may be instructive for our thinking about the future of academic library conferences.

Popcast is an outstanding site of scholarship on pop in the online-era. The show has potential appeal to librarians concerned with both pop culture and contemporary issues in scholarly communication. The topics are always fresh and deal not just in the content of the music, but the mediums where it appears, the models that produce it, and the methods that we consume and track it. As Pooley (2016) contends, the media studies field has the "analytic traditions to scrutinize, and perhaps improve, the way academics go about sharing knowledge." As a study in media, Popcast can show us new angles.

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