Prologue—Podcasts are Disappearing Transcript

MOLLY: Fifteen years ago, in 2004, Jason Scott started building a machine in his basement. He named it… the Podsucker. And he built it to suck up as many podcasts as he could.

JASON: I was downloading thousands of episodes. By just using directories, downloading them as MP3s, and putting them into hard drives, with this kind of self-created archival system.

MOLLY: This machine downloaded podcasts from every source that Jason could find. And then it saved them onto hard drives. The entire setup fit on just one shelf.

JASON: It was one single machine, Podsucker. It was red, it had this beautiful window with these glowing bits inside. And then I put that machine in the basement, running 24/7, running this program, and just constantly going.

MOLLY: Jason built the podsucker because he was concerned about the future of podcasts. He had a dayjob managing computer servers. He knows something that a lot of people don't: which is that the stuff we make on computers has a surprisingly short lifespan.

JASON: Unlike a lot of other media, like paper and film, digital media lives as a file on a spinning piece of metal that has magnetic oxide sprayed on it, that's inside of a vacuum inside of another box, and everything about that is utterly ridiculous. A disk drive has to be constantly moving to be read, and so whenever it's plugged in, it's just moving. And they've come up with ways to mitigate the destruction, but over time it WILL DIE.

MOLLY: When it comes to podcasts the same issues apply. Jason noticed that a lot of people were making podcasts. But no one seemed concerned about their impending digital death.

JASON: So I was like, this this is super at risk. The potential for them to disappear is really huge. I'm going to just grab it all.

MOLLY: Everything we make on computers is stored on some machine that's located somewhere. These machines wear down over time, just like any machine. Even the stuff that's on the internet – it's just stored on someone else's servers. And it turns out that all these machines we use to store data – the servers, and the computers, and the hard drives – they all have about the same lifespan.

JASON: You're going to be talking about everything dying within 5 years.

Jason's Podsucker captured around 540 different shows and over 14,000 podcast episodes.

But then, in 2007, Jason shut off the Podsucker.

Jason figured that as podcasting became more of an official medium, some institution or other would come around and start doing the kind of work that he was doing with the Podsucker.

But that… never happened.

I went through a sample Jason's Podsucker collection of podcasts from 2005. I did some more searching to see if these podcasts are still online today. I looked for 125 episodes, and I could only find 13 of them. If Jason hadn't captured them with his Podsucker, we wouldn't even know that 87% of these podcasts had ever existed.

Some media institutions do have an archivist on staff, but that's pretty rare. The truth is, if you make a podcast, NO ONE is out there saving your podcast for you.

DAVE: It's only a matter of time before all that is GONE, you know. And it's terrible because we are using this medium as if it were indelible.

MOLLY: That's Dave Winer. He's a software developer who helped invent podcasting back in 2001, when he wrote MP3 files into an RSS format. He says it's common for people to lose their content when tech companies fold.

DAVE: Well that's tech companies. And you're giving that to a silo that's going to go out of business one day and swallow all your archives with it. I mean it's hideous what happens. So much good stuff that's just going to disappear.

That's why this podcast is here. Through this podcast, we're going to teach podcasters how to preserve their podcasts. And to help us out, we're working with two archivists and four indie podcast producers. These are some of the people who are dealing with these issues right now.

KAYTLIN: I know how to get the podcast into this box. I don't know how to get the podcast on the internet and I certainly don't know how to preserve things on the internet.

ALICE: It's like what, how come I didn't think about archiving this podcast. And I think it's because I was just assuming that it's digital and it would always be there

MARY: I kind of think of archives as something that you think is a given. It doesn't just happen.

This is Preserve This Podcast, a show about how to save our podcasts. I'm Molly Schwartz. My archivist co-conspirators are Dana Gerber Margie and Mary Kidd. This podcast is brought to you by the Metropolitan New York Library Council with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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