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The Power of a Podcast

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Senior Capstone

The Power of a Podcast

Abstract

This paper examines the correlation between the *Your Own Backyard* podcast and the rebooting of the Kristin Smart missing persons case. This case had gone cold and seemingly ignored for nearly 25 years, until 2019 when the podcast was created. The host conducted immense amounts of research to try and figure out what happened to Kristin, and in doing so, brought her case back to the public's attention. The actions of the podcast host caused the police to become more active on the case again. Because of the podcast, the prime suspect was finally arrested and will be held on trial.

Podcasting has become such a prevalent part of our media intake, with an even bigger impact on us than we might think. Podcasting seems to be becoming a very powerful form of communication. To examine this, we will focus on the history of podcasting, with the intent to show how podcasting can now be considered a form of journalism. Additionally, we will compare printed media with podcast media and how they differ when it comes to bringing awareness to missing persons cases.

Podcasting, True Crime, Journalism, Kristin Smart

Introduction

Podcasting has become a very popular source of entertainment, and is considered by many to be a staple in the media diet of society. But, it has become more than just a form of entertainment. It is now a successful form of journalism. Specifically, there is a direct correlation between a popular podcast and the rebooting of a missing persons case that has gone over 25 years unsolved. The podcast is called *Your Own Backyard*, and it is a deep dive into the Kristin Smart missing persons case that occurred in San Luis Obispo, California. Kristin was a freshman at California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo in 1996 when she went missing after a party. There were many missteps by both campus and local law enforcement, and to this day Kristin has never been found. Chris Lambert, the creator of the *Your Own Backyard* podcast took matters into his own hands, and was able to bring her case back into the public eye with his own research and investigations. His actions have since led to an arrest, and a trial will finally be held for the prime suspect.

A Brief History of Podcasting

Podcasting first arrived on the media scene in the early 2000s and was known then as “audioblogging.” But, the first podcast to truly gain traction was a True Crime podcast titled *Serial*. It was a 12 episode series that received over 5 million views. Since the release of *Serial* in 2014, the number of weekly podcast listeners has more than doubled. Many podcast networks with multiple shows have also been created.

Today, podcasts are much more than a form of entertainment, they have become a recognized form of journalism. In 2017, the New York Times released *The Daily* podcast. Each episode is a deep dive into one specific news story. It was the first podcast of its kind. The type of information presented in a show like *The Daily* podcast is almost identical to what Chris Lambert presents in *Your Own Backyard*. These podcasts “bring quality journalism to new audiences, and illuminate the mechanics of investigative journalism” (Dalrymple, 2019, par. 24).

Journalism has become much more diverse, and *Your Own Backyard* is a perfect example of the success that podcasts can receive from investigative research. Not only are podcasts reputable in the world of journalism, but they have been increasing in popularity in the consumer market. For example,

As of 2021, 56% of all Americans, 12-34, listen to at least one podcast per month, compared to 49% in 2020. From 2020 to 2021, the percentage of Americans ages 55+ who listen to podcasts monthly increased by 18%. At present, more than one-quarter of all 55+ consumers in the United States are listening to podcasts a month. In 2021, 28% or 80 million Americans are weekly podcast listeners. There are now 10 million more weekly podcast listeners than the 69 million Netflix account owners in the U.S. This could indicate the start of a shift from video to audio media. On average, podcast fans listen to 8 podcasts during the course of a week. This average is skewed somewhat, however, by hard-core podcast devotees. 40% of weekly podcast listeners consume 1-3 podcasts per week, but 19% listen to 11 or more podcasts! Overall, more listeners are listening to more podcasts per week as compared to 2020 in which 51% of listeners listened to only 1-3 podcasts per week. (Griffiths, 2021, par. 9-12)

As we can see with these statistics, listening to podcasts is as popular if not more popular than watching television. Podcasts can be utilized and enjoyed by people more often than television because it only requires the auditory attention of an individual, and not their visual sense. This trait enables people to listen to podcasts while driving, while hiking, or doing many other activities. Because of its functional availability, people are able to think more heavily on the subjects that podcasts present to them.

Who was Kristin Smart? What happened to her?

Kristin Smart was born on February 20, 1977. She spent much of her childhood and teen years in Stockton California. When the time came, she decided to attend school at Cal Poly San

Luis Obispo and began her freshman year in 1995. She was accepted as an Architecture major but later switched to Communications as she hoped to travel the world as a reporter.

On Memorial Day weekend of 1996, Kristin ventured out into the streets of San Luis Obispo with her friend Margarita in search of a party. They eventually ended up at a small gathering for someone's birthday. Margarita parted ways with Kristin before the night was over, and she left her keycard with Kristin so she could regain access to their dorm building on the Cal Poly SLO campus. Kristin stayed at the party and became inebriated to the point where she needed assistance from others to stand. A fellow Cal Poly freshman, Paul Flores, offered to assist Kristin back to her dorm room. She was left alone with him. Paul was the last person to ever be seen with Kristin before her disappearance.

The day after this party, nobody heard from Kristin, and her roommate noted that her bed had not been slept in. By the end of the day, she was still nowhere to be found. The Monday after the party, Kristin's friends knew something was not right, and they reported her missing to the University Police Department. However, they did not take the report seriously and insisted that it was normal for a student to leave campus during the long weekend. The San Luis Obispo Police Department was also called, and they took the same stance as the UPD, saying that Kristin must have "run off with a friend to Hawaii without telling anyone" (Lambert, 2019, Episode 2). There was a lot of back and forth between the two police departments and this issue caused an irreversible stall in the investigation. It took four days since Kristin was last seen for a missing persons report to be filed, and "whatever happened in those four days has been lost to history" (Lambert, 2019, Episode 2).

Over the years, Kristin's name lost much of its presence in the media. Her case never seemed to get more than a half hour recap on a TV show, and there were never any answers for what happened to her all those years ago. But what caused this expansive gap in the investigation of her disappearance? In this specific case, it came down to sub-par police work, and a lack of eyewitnesses willing to give information. Many people had theories about what

happened to Kristen on the night of her disappearance, but could not prove any of it. Also, in 1995, cameras were not readily used as they are today. We have the ability to obtain incriminating evidence through the use of technology advancements. However, people in the past did not always have this luxury. When momentum is lost, evidence is not found, warrants are not conducted properly, and people forget, cases can end up going cold. However, this is not the case in the Kristin Smart investigation, thanks to the power of a podcast.

Your Own Backyard

There is a billboard in Arroyo Grande, California where Kristin Smart's "smiling face still watches over the Arroyo Grande Village" (Pope, 2017, p. 11). Podcast host, Chris Lambert, along with many other locals had seen this faded billboard in the years since it was erected and thought, "Oh yeah, they still haven't found her" (Lambert, 2019, Episode 1). This thought inspired Lambert to scour the internet for information about Kristin Smart. He found that there were many discrepancies in the information on her case, and realized that many people believed that she had already been found. Then, he located a 5000 word article written in 2006 by a journalist for the LA Times named Peter H. King. This article included information that was not widely known. These pieces of unknown information made Chris want to do his own digging into the case to see what he could find. He never had any intention to exploit her case, and just wanted to know what happened to her. He hoped to find out more "just by talking to people" (Lambert, 2019, Episode 1).

Chris Lambert released the first episode of *Your Own Backyard* in 2019, and titled it "A Face on a Billboard." This episode follows Chris through his first of many interviews with "the people that knew her best" (Lambert, 2019, Episode 1): Kristin's parents, Stan and Denise Smart. They had given him their blessing to begin his own investigations on what happened to their daughter. They told him all about Kristin. By the end of the interview, he said he felt more than just sadness for the situation. He felt as though he had lost a close friend himself.

Your Own Backyard generated a space in which people could educate themselves on a major disappearance that happened in the past. Prior to the podcast's release, discussions and information were held tight by the SLO Police Department as well as the University Police Department. However, when the podcast came out, the dam broke and people started to talk about the evidence and possibilities of what happened to Kristin. This fact is not only a big deal for the Kristin Smart case, it is a big deal for the entire world because once discussions begin and people become aware of tragedies, changes are made and action is taken. For example, countless pieces of evidence were uncovered, and several additional testimonies relating to the case were given after the podcast was released, years after the initial investigations. As we can see with the Kristin Smart case, releasing so many vital pieces of information through the medium of a podcast allowed many more people to be made aware of the situation. The podcast was more successful in reaching these people than the TV specials and printed newspapers were for over 20 years.

Print vs. Podcast

“How often the media mentions a missing person influences the likeliness of them being found” (Morris, 2017, p. 6). This has been abundantly clear in many cases throughout history. Whatever the medium is for the media's spread of information regarding a missing persons case, the amount of coverage truly can determine the pace that law enforcement takes to solve a case. As is often the case with printed media, details can get skewed so that papers will be sold. Even when the information is accurate, print media does not always meet a large audience. For example, when Kristin went missing, many follow-up articles were not published by local or campus newspapers until the summer. “Since many Cal Poly students returned home over the summer, fewer people were exposed to these articles.” (Morris, 2017, p. 8) This shows that an important story might not gain enough traction with the public if it is in print. However, with the rise of podcasts, information is able to be more widely dispersed throughout the world, and more people are able to get access to information from all corners of the globe.

As can be seen with *Your Own Backyard*, the podcast reached many people that were inspired to give testimonies, which would help put a murderer behind bars. It is likely that these witnesses would never have come forward with their stories had it not been for the podcast.

Traditionally, “journalist” denotes media personnel who investigate news stories and subsequently write articles about them that are printed in news outlets. However, with the rise of podcasting, that definition we have gotten used to is beginning to change. Today, podcasting is a recognized form of media coverage and journalism. It is important to note that Chris Lambert is an example of this change in action. His creation of *Your Own Backyard* was a catalyst for Kristin’s case to be finally going to trial. He did such immense amounts of investigative research that he was able to pass along vital testimonies to law enforcement. Hence, in the preliminary hearings for the trial, Lambert was recognized as media personnel by the presiding judge, and he was allowed to report on the happenings of each hearing. These reports include everything as it happened in the courtroom transcribed from Lambert’s handwritten notes. The final report states: “The Judge rules that he finds a reasonable suspicion of guilt of Paul Flores and Ruben Flores, and schedules an arraignment for October 20th at 8:30am” (Lambert, 2021, Day 22). It was also decided that Lambert’s podcast would not affect the integrity of the trial as his podcast is no different from any other form of journalism or media coverage. These announcements made by an acting judge show the extent to which podcasts have become more recognized as a true form of journalism.

Conclusion

Podcasting is climbing its way up the ladder to ultimate success. As illustrated with the creation and outcome of the *Your Own Backyard* podcast, it can be seen that it may be much more effective to conduct and report on investigative research via podcasts. Podcasts are beginning to gain more consistent and diverse audiences around the world. Journalism has come a long way, and podcasting is the newest member of the journalism entourage.

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LOC's

1. LOC #4: Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context
2. LOC #6: Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy)
3. LOC #9: Influence Public Discourse

