

Sound, microphone, action: Podcasts for medical writers

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Abstract

A podcast is a digital audio file that can be downloaded into your computer or mobile device. It is typically available as a series, and new episodes can be received automatically by subscribers. Podcasts are a source of education, inspiration, and entertainment. They are also a useful marketing tool for small business owners. This article provides a short history of podcasting, its uses, and its benefits for medical writers. It will also provide some selected sources, should you decide to give podcasts a go.

Digital audio files and internet made possible the production and distribution of the first podcasts. They were music or talk MP3 audio files that you could download into your computer and listen at your leisure. The downside was that portability was quite limited.

With the creation of RSS feeds, it became possible to receive files automatically with an aggregation software. For podcasts, this meant subscribing to a show feed and get regular updates on new episodes.

As mobile devices became ubiquitous and more powerful, podcasts started to grow too. Listening to them became more practical due to the emergence of mobile applications that could retrieve the podcasts' RSS feeds, download new episodes, and memorise where an episode is paused so that it can be resumed later.

In recent years, the number of podcasts has grown exponentially.¹ Today there are over 700,000 active podcasts.² This represents a sea of

opportunities for medical writers, both for learning and for increasing their visibility.

A podcast in every pocket

Back in 2000, not many people listened to podcasts. You needed a computer to download the MP3 file and had to transfer it to your player if you wanted to listen to it on the go. As smartphones became widespread and apps to retrieve and listen to podcasts appeared, the number of shows being produced surged.

What is the advantage of listening to podcasts? Why just listen when you can read a book or watch a video? For one thing, most podcast listeners do other things, like driving, house chores, or workout while listening. These activities usually are repetitive and automatic, so do not require full attention. That's why radios appeared in the first place, but radio has commercials, which cannot be avoided, so you cannot control what you listen to. Plus, most radios nowadays are music-based and lack in-depth information shows. They have a different model, too: a radio show is a one-to-many broadcast, where a single person talks to hundreds or even millions of people. Podcasts, in contrast, are one-to-one broadcasts. When you do listen to a podcast, you usually do it on your phone, using earphones – a much more personal experience. And while many podcasts now have ads, they are easy to skip.

What kind of podcasts are useful to medical writers?

If podcasts are a new but interesting idea to you, try listening to some on your mobile device. Go to your app store and search for "podcast player". Choose your preferred one and install it. Once inside the app, use the search box to look for your favourite shows. If you do not know any yet, Table 1 has some recommendations. You can also do a Google search using "podcast" + your preferred subjects and see what comes up.

Two blog posts offer some recommendations of useful podcasts to medical writers: "Podcasts for health writers", by Libby Evans from Health

Writer Hub and "10 excellent podcasts for the Medical Translator and Writer", by Oliver Thalmann from the Medical Translator website.^{3,4}

To my knowledge, there is only one podcast geared specifically towards medical writers, called "Medical Writers Speak", hosted by Emma Hitt Nichols, PhD. Unfortunately, it has not been updated since March 2019. Let's hope for a new season in the near future.

Podcasting opportunities for medical writers

News agencies, education, and entertainment



were the first industries that took advantage of podcasts to connect with listeners. Small business owners then began to see the potential of this channel for connecting with prospective clients and hopped into creating podcasts.

Creating a podcast show doesn't require fancy or expensive equipment – you might even already have all the equipment you need: a computer and a headset. The most important part is deciding on the content. Knowing what you want to say and to whom is what sets a useful podcast apart from a less interesting one.

Medical writers can assist in writing or assuring the quality of what goes into a health, medical, or scientific podcast. Every good podcast has some sort of script. If you work in a news agency that is planning to launch a podcast,

like the BBC Science in Action, you may be asked to write, edit, or fact-check the script for each episode. Script writing may also be offered by medical communications agencies and freelance medical writers.

If you are a freelancer or small business owner, creating a podcast can be a powerful marketing tool. In a world with a shortened attention span, having a distraction-free medium to reach your audience can give you a competitive edge. You can establish a connection with prospective clients, provide useful content, and increase your visibility in your area of expertise. Just keep in mind that just like all content creation, it will not give immediate results. To be successful, you have to be consistent, establish a relationship with your listeners, and provide useful content.

The future of podcasting in medical writing

Podcasting will continue to grow. Podcasts can reach a wide audience and are easy to listen to while doing other things. Medical writers can use podcasts to keep up to date in their preferred areas of expertise, learn new things, or take a break. Also, for freelance medical writers or business owners, podcasts can increase visibility in an area of expertise and are therefore a powerful marketing tool. Few podcasts are geared to medical writers, but where's a gap, there's opportunity!

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



Table 1. List of useful podcasts for medical writers

Topic (in bold) Podcast title	Host(s)	Usual episode length (min)	Frequency (episodes/month)
Education			
Best Science Medicine	Dr James McCormack Dr Michael Allan	30	4
BMJ Best Practice	(several)	20	2
Emergency Medicine Cases	Dr Anton Helman	40–60	2–3
HelixTalk	Sean P Kane Khyati S Patel	40	1–2
Pediatric Emergency Playbook	Tim Horeczko	35	1
Real Life Pharmacology	Eric Christianson PharmD	10–15	4
The Curbsiders	Matthew Watto MD Stuart Brigham MD Paul Williams MD	60	6–7
News			
BBC Science in Action	Roland Pease	30	4
Health Report	Dr Norman Swan	30	4
Nature	Shamini Bundell Benjamin Thompson	25	6
Science Weekly	Ian Sample Hannah Devlin Nicola Davis	30	4
Writing and Freelancing			
High Income Business Writing	Ed Gandia	20–40	2
Hot Copy	Kate Toon Belinda Weaver	40	1–2
The Editing Podcast	Denise Cowle Louise Harnby	15–50	1–5
Unemployable	Brian Clark	30–60	5–7
Statistics			
More or Less	Tim Harford	10	4–6
Not So Standard Deviations	Roger Peng Hillary Parker	60	1–2
Stats + Stories	John Bailer Richard Campbell Rosemary Pennington	15–30	4–6
Entertainment			
Bedside Rounds	Adam Rodman MD	20–60	1
Hidden Brain	Shankar Vedantam	30–50	4
Sawbones	Dr Sydnee McElroy Justin McElroy	35–50	3–4
The Knowledge Project	Shane Parrish	50–120	1–3



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Author information

Diana Ribeiro, MSc, is a pharmacist with more than 10 years of experience in the healthcare industry. Her love for communicating science resulted in the creation of Apothecary Medical Writing (<https://www.apothecarymw.com/>), where she provides writing services for biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies.