

## Echolocating the Gutenberg Parenthesis

### *Improv/Comedy Podcasts and the Legacy of Harry Shearer's Le Show*

**ABSTRACT** This essay argues that improvisational actual-play and comedy podcasts are a key inheritor and extension of the legacy of Harry Shearer's weekly radio program/podcast *Le Show*, now in its 42nd year. I examine such podcasts in light of widespread calls for a "Joe Rogan of the left" following the 2024 US presidential election. Such calls acknowledge the importance of podcasts as a part of the US political and media ecosystems, juxtaposing the success of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which consistently tops the charts on major podcasting platforms and frequently features chummy appearances by right-wing guests, with the lack of a similar podcasting juggernaut on the left. However, if one turns from Spotify to crowdfunded podcasts and independent podcast networks, one finds charts topped with leftist comedy podcasts as well as actual-play podcasts that feature actors and comedians playing tabletop role-playing games. While this may seem to be a disparate mix of genres, this piece argues that such podcasts represent a meaningful and influential movement held together by a polyphonic, improvisational ethos as well as the sheer scale of podcasting, and that they offer a notable counterpart to the carefully scripted and edited programs stereotypically associated with liberal audio programming. Blending rhetorical analysis with the author's own experiences with podcasts, the piece positions these subsets of comedy and other improvised podcasts as significant next steps in *Le Show's* legacy: voluminous and extemporaneous, and a playful challenge to podcasting's reiteration of right-wing talk radio. **KEYWORDS** podcasts, rhetoric, humor studies, digital media, sound studies

In 2012, I—like a lot of other academics—was getting ready to start a podcast. More specifically, I was working in a digital rhetoric lab as part of my PhD assistantship, and I was charged with leading a group of graduate students to launch a podcast on the intersections of rhetoric and technology.<sup>1</sup> Podcasts had already been around for a decade or so, but the technological infrastructure for starting one had hit an inflection point, becoming accessible and comprehensible for academics without experience in radio or in setting up RSS feeds.<sup>2</sup>

While podcasting was an exciting, relatively new medium, my sense of it was strongly tied to an old one: radio. Like many graduate students, I initially engaged with podcasts as a means of syndicating NPR—a way to listen to shows like *This American Life* and *Radiolab*, and later *Invisibilia* and *Code Switch*, on an iPod rather than an FM station.<sup>3</sup> Those were also the kinds of shows that served as inspiration for the podcast we cooked up in that lab, though we operated at a much more DIY scale. We built thematically unified episodes with multiple carefully edited segments, interspersing audio essays and interviews with occasional audio experiments. Intentionally or not, we set out to do *This American Life* host and producer Ira Glass proud.

---

*Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*, Vol. 6, Number 4, pp. 387–399. Electronic ISSN: 2688-0113 © 2025 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/res.2025.6.4.387>

A few years later, I had the opportunity to develop a writing class focused on podcasting, and I carried my NPR-informed sense of what podcasts were and should be into that course. I assigned Jessica Abel's excellent *Out on the Wire*, a sort of nonfiction graphic novel that grew out of a project the author did with *This American Life*. The book documents the storytelling practices of radio shows and podcasts in Glass's orbit—programs Abel describes as “the most fertile ground for narrative non-fiction in English-language media.”<sup>4</sup> These were shows with involved, labor-intensive production processes: “get tape, cut tape, write narration (if any), get feedback, rewrite, recut, layer in sound, score with music, air.”<sup>5</sup> I had students listen to *S-Town*, a flawed and intricately narrated podcast that grew out of the podcasting phenomenon *Serial*, which itself grew out of *This American Life*.<sup>6</sup>

But early in the course, I was thrown for a loop. One of the first assignments asked students to give a short, scripted presentation on a podcast of their choice, incorporating a curated highlight reel of clips from the show as a way of giving their classmates and me a sense of its vibe. I designed the project to introduce students to what I saw as key podcasting skills: writing scripts for oral delivery and editing together audio montages. On the day of the presentations, I encountered a trend that is obvious in retrospect: Instead of selecting carefully edited narrative nonfiction podcasts, almost every student presented on a loosely edited discussion podcast—a group of people riffing on sports or beauty tips or video games or music. In the moment, one of my instinctual responses was to think, “I’ll have to narrow the parameters of this assignment next time.” But the experience also made me curious about the disjunct. After all, one of the reasons I’d pursued a PhD in rhetoric instead of literature was that I wasn’t particularly interested in “great books” and gaining expertise in a highly curated subset of canonical texts (no offense meant to my literary colleagues). I was much more interested in the ways everyday speech acts, mundane genres, and odd bits of written communication shaped the world. In another sense, I’ve always been more interested in why students are drawn to the texts they are and why they make the communicative choices they do than I am in shaping their writing to match others’ idealized, exemplified standards. I wasn’t especially interested in building the new podcasting canon.<sup>7</sup> So I began branching out beyond the striated, segmented, often serious space of Glass-inflected NPR podcasts and into the rangy, rambling, frequently comic realm of podcasting writ large.<sup>8</sup> I didn’t want to just tell my students they should listen more narrowly. I figured I should listen more widely.

Looking back, the potential breadth of what “podcasting” meant should have been obvious. Of course many of my students gravitated toward chattier, less pristinely edited podcasts. Such programs have loomed large since the genesis of the medium: One-time MTV video jockey Adam Curry is frequently positioned as one of podcasting’s progenitors, popularizing a “style [that] was more casual than [journalist Christopher] Lydon’s NPR-influenced approach, and included the sort of personal reflections, meta-scenes and incidental references we are used to hearing today.”<sup>9</sup> The very title of one of Curry’s most popular shows, *No Agenda*, illustrates the point neatly. Moreover, Curry’s format is an outgrowth of talk radio, which looms large in podcasting’s prehistory, from Howard Stern and Robin Quivers to “morning zoo” programs to Dr. Laura to—and here we arrive

at a key reference point for this piece—Harry Shearer’s *Le Show*. More on that after a quick break.

## OFF SCRIPT

Talk radio has come, in many ways, to occupy a place diametrically opposed to NPR in the cultural imaginary surrounding US radio. NPR finds itself stereotypically aligned with center-left liberalism, positioned in both the jokes of fans and the attacks of critics as representative of twee, dispassionate politesse. Meanwhile, the death of the Federal Communications Commission’s Fairness Doctrine during the Reagan administration paved the road to “conservative hegemony” in the world of talk radio starting in the 1990s, which Joshua Gunn notes “arguably [achieved] the grass-rooting of the modern conservative movement.”<sup>10</sup> While talk radio isn’t exclusively conservative, it is disproportionately so, providing a stark contrast to the oft-overstated liberal leanings of NPR. More to the point, these two components of the radio landscape provide convenient metonymic stand-ins for liberalism and conservatism, with the cart (the format) potentially put before the horse (the ideological content).

It would be an oversimplification to just map that divide onto podcasting, which is regulated and funded and distributed in ways that echo but also sharply diverge from radio. But in some ways, it also wouldn’t be wrong. That became palpably clear in the immediate wake of the 2024 presidential election, when a vast array of liberal politicians, commentators, and activists began calling for a “Joe Rogan of the left.”<sup>11</sup> Rogan—a former actor, reality television host, and stand-up comedian—has become a unique juggernaut in the world of podcasting. *The Joe Rogan Experience*, a “long form conversation” podcast, launched in 2009 and is still going strong as of 2025, with multiple episodes released every week and the runtime of individual installments frequently exceeding three hours.<sup>12</sup> The podcast attracted a wave of media attention in 2020 because of an exclusive licensing deal with the streaming service Spotify worth at least \$100 million.<sup>13</sup> Reporting on the deal two years later, the *New York Times* characterized it as Spotify’s attempt to “further challenge Apple and Google” via a “superstar podcaster, much as Howard Stern helped put satellite radio on the map in 2006.”<sup>14</sup> The comparison is politically fraught, but *The Joe Rogan Experience* is in many ways a high-profile podcast iteration of *The Howard Stern Show*’s aggressively irreverent, arguably funny, long-winded talk radio format, with Rogan joking, conversing, and speculating with his co-hosts and each episode’s featured guest. During the 2024 election cycle, guests included presidential candidates Donald J. Trump and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the latter now Trump’s secretary of health and human services, as well as prominent Trump supporter Elon Musk. Ultimately, after making supportive remarks about Kennedy, Rogan endorsed Trump on the eve of the election.<sup>15</sup>

That endorsement, combined with Rogan’s consistent place near the top of the podcasting charts and his particular reach with young men, paved the way to post-election calls for a so-called Rogan of the left.<sup>16</sup> Those calls were almost immediately met with mockery and backlash for a host of reasons: concerns that the narrow messaging parameters of the Democratic Party would prevent them from embracing a rambling

Rogan-like podcaster in the first place, that the tendency toward infighting among leftist factions would prevent a single voice from rising to unified prominence, that the very desire for such a figure smacked of misogynist impulses, that the calls created an externalized scapegoat for direct faults in Joe Biden's and Kamala Harris's campaigns.<sup>17</sup> But among those both issuing and critiquing the calls, there was frequent agreement that the Democratic Party had a messaging problem in digital spheres. Rogan represented the success right-wing communicators were having via podcasts and digital video (like many podcasts, Rogan's show is also distributed with a video component via YouTube) as well as related channels like social media and livestreaming. Liberal politics, meanwhile, was positioned as overly tied to fading models of Hollywood celebrity, vanishingly thin slices of television news, and ostensibly siloed social media platforms.<sup>18</sup> How does one imitate, even articulate, the success of Rogan's podcast on behalf of a conglomeration of political ideologies that may be allergic to his rhetorical approach and—an important consideration—when the platforms on which he's succeeding seem at best agnostic and at most actively hostile toward anything left of the right wing (e.g., Spotify's embrace of Rogan, Musk's purchase of the platform formerly known as Twitter, the seeming rightward lurch of Meta's Mark Zuckerberg)?<sup>19</sup>

I set up Rogan and his role in post-election fallout not to diagnose and address these wide-ranging problems in the realms of politics, podcasts, and digital media. That's beyond the scope of what I can accomplish here. Rather, I am interested in what *Le Show* and its long history blurring the bounds of NPR and talk radio can reveal about longstanding audio-rhetorical alternatives to *The Joe Rogan Experience*, and how that might help scholars of sound and culture rethink which, why, and how podcasts merit our attention.

## BACK TO *LE SHOW*

In her introduction to the *Le Show* archives, Rosa Eberly emphasizes their “voluminous” nature.<sup>20</sup> *Le Show* is, she notes, “a uniquely rich and rare historical archive of changes in communication technologies and the political economy of radio over more than 40 years,” with the archive of the show's self-described “constantly expanding” network containing “thousands of examples of Shearer's brilliant sonic satire.”<sup>21</sup> The content of the *Le Show* archive is, of course, a huge part of what makes it so worth preserving and engaging. But its scope and style are noteworthy in their own right. Part of Shearer's remarkable capacity as a radio and podcast host is his sheer, persistent loquaciousness—his ability to fill an hour a week for over 40 years.

Eberly also connects Shearer to the “transdiscipline” of rhetoric, an area of study and practice that Plato's Socrates characterized as having “no subject matter of its own.” That characterization occurs in Plato's *Gorgias*, a dialogue that opens with an exchange between Socrates and the titular Gorgias. While he may not have the same name recognition as Plato or Socrates, Gorgias was a key figure in ancient Greece's rhetorical scene. As a teacher and practitioner of the art of rhetoric, one of his key claims to fame was his willingness to “speak on any subject” at the drop of a hat.<sup>22</sup> Gorgias would ask his

audience to suggest a subject and off he would go. For rhetoric scholars, Gorgias is often positioned near the start of a line of rhetorical figures who helped foster democracy, a migrant from Sicily who trained Athenian citizens to speak effectively in the deliberative and forensic contexts that were core parts of the city's constrained but emerging democratic fora. But framed another way (and I mean this with all due respect), Gorgias's rhetorical practices sound like forerunners to improvisational comedy exercises—ancient predecessors to Shearer's work as part of Christopher Guest's mockumentary crew and on *Le Show* itself. What binds Gorgias and Shearer together is their ability to extemporize at length, to produce what Socrates might have derisively called *makrologias*. Millennia before Second City or Upright Citizens Brigade, Gorgias stood in front of a crowd and asked somebody to give him a scene.<sup>23</sup>

Admittedly, there are wrinkles in this comparison. One key difference is that Shearer is not *just* an improviser. Eberly observes that the *Le Show* archive is full of Shearer's hard-to-index "extemporaneous comments and spontaneous rhetorical flourishes," but these unscripted beats operate in concert with Shearer's prepared material: quoted passages from news stories and written-up riffs that are often hard to distinguish from his offhand remarks.<sup>24</sup> The careful listener can often hear the shuffling of papers in the background of *Le Show* episodes, sonic evidence of the written roots of many of Shearer's spoken words. To put it another way, *Le Show* blurs the NPR/talk radio dichotomy I laid out earlier in this piece. On one hand, even when he's joking, Shearer often speaks with the prepared, measured tone stereotypically associated with an NPR host. He has the cadence of a practiced deliverer of scripts. And there's the straightforward fact that *Le Show* spent decades based out of NPR stations in Santa Monica and New Orleans. But on the other hand, Shearer is supremely capable of delivering unscripted satirical material more conventionally at home on talk radio—segments some squeamish *This American Life* devotees might find distasteful.<sup>25</sup> As Matthew F. Jordan points out, Shearer code-switches seamlessly between "the delivery of news commentary" and satirical impersonations of right-wing "shock jock talk."<sup>26</sup>

To conclude this essay, or maybe to get belatedly to its point (like Shearer, I tend to run with the periodic style),<sup>27</sup> I ask where we might find *Le Show*'s legacy in the contemporary podcasting scene—where we might find the next stages of "the polyphonic contours of our sonic heritage."<sup>28</sup> As Jordan notes, the bullying persona of deceased right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh, whom Shearer long satirized via imitation, has now become the pluralized, univocal personae of right-wing politicians and commentators writ large. But while Limbaugh's legacy lives on in popular podcasts affiliated with entities like the Daily Wire and Tenet Media, those shows pale in comparison to the success and reach of *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which is in some ways more heterodox while still manifesting a persistent rightward bent.<sup>29</sup>

To mark the Rush-to-Rogan shift, I would argue that it's useful to frame *Le Show* in terms of Thomas Pettitt's work on the Gutenberg Parenthesis. For Pettitt, this parenthesis marks "a period of four to five centuries in which the mediation of verbal culture has been dominated by print technology in general and the printed book in particular."<sup>30</sup> In Pettitt's telling, this period marks not a permanent shift from orality to literacy, but

a lengthy interregnum between the dominance of oral (pre-parenthetical) and digital (post-parenthetical) modes of communication, with the oral and the digital ultimately sharing a great deal in common. Rhetoric scholar Damien Smith Pfister applies the parenthesis in his work on attention and deliberation in the early blogosphere: bloggers' "remixing of discourse, sometimes with little to no regard for citationality, harkens back to oral culture. The [digital] medium, though, makes a difference: networked rhetorics are often multimodal instead of just linguistic, are archivable in a way that oral speech is not, and circulate faster and wider than speech."<sup>31</sup>

Given *Le Show's* historical span (1983 to the present), it arguably brings together the Gutenberg Parenthesis's three stages in a notable way. Analog radio relies on many of the moves and affordances of oral culture: an emphasis on performance, strong ties to context (consider how much *Le Show* relies on speaking to and riffing on the news of the week), and a collective if atomized audience, all tuned in at a particular time.<sup>32</sup> And yet 1983 is obviously well after the advent of Gutenberg's printing press, with Shearer making ample use of features attributed to the parenthetical period of print dominance: a relatively stable body of newspapers from which to draw the stories he satirizes as well as his own ability to compose scripted bits to which spontaneous oral improvisations can be attached. But that's not all: Even though *Le Show* launched before what was once commonly referred to as the World Wide Web, the program's entire run deploys some of the key terms Pettitt and Pfister link to the "post-parenthetical" digital era. Shearer samples, appropriates, remixes, and recontextualizes the news through impersonation, digression, elision, and other forms of satire. Meanwhile, the show itself, while still broadcast on some community and public radio stations, made the jump to digital formats almost two decades ago, followed by its subsequent addition to podcasting platforms. In all, *Le Show's* availability has largely shifted from the synchronous, schedule-bound world of radio to the unsynchronized, listen-at-your-leisure world of podcasts.

And yet *Le Show* remains tied to many of radio's structures: fairly standard runtimes, a regular release schedule, and at least some portion of its audience listening via broadcast. That's one of the few things *Le Show* shared in common with the now-defunct *Rush Limbaugh Show*. It's a substantial difference from a podcast like *The Joe Rogan Experience*, whose producers can release episodes as long as they want, whenever they want, without having to worry about editing content down to fit a particular broadcast slot. One other notable difference that is telling in light of Pfister's comments on "citationality": the way Rogan makes use of sources. The aforementioned rustling of papers, though ameliorated in the digital era, indicates the way *Le Show* engages with written material. Often, Shearer is starting from scripts and news excerpts prepared and curated in advance. (A parenthetical on *Le Show's* writing/speech relation: During the August 24, 2025, episode, Shearer pauses after a momentary stumble while reading a passage from a story about Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's church, recently in the news because Hegseth shared a video in which the church's pastor opposed women's right to vote. "I should read these in advance," Shearer sidebars, before returning to the story at hand.) Meanwhile, a common feature of *The Joe Rogan Experience* involves Rogan's producer conducting internet searches mid-show in order to fact-check the host's more obviously dubious

claims—often, it should be noted, without much vetting of the sources the producer himself is using to do the fact-checking.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, both the misinformation and the supposed fact-checking get left in, which—rather than undercutting Rogan’s credibility and appeal—lends precisely the sense of immediacy and authenticity that draws many listeners to the show. Like former guest Trump, Rogan’s propensity for spreading misinformation and factual inaccuracies, even when acknowledged, becomes a sign of a deeper kind of honesty.<sup>34</sup> It’s also something that is part and parcel of the unfiltered, decisively *not* edited for radio style of Rogan’s podcast.

Where, in this context, do we find podcasts carrying over *Le Show*’s legacy into a sonic milieu dominated by Rogan, and what can we learn from the audio work they’re doing? The prospects are more copious than might be expected given the hand-wringing over the lack of a Rogan of the left.

#### AFTER THE BREAK

As I mentioned earlier, one of the key moments of publicity for Rogan’s podcast was his nine-figure licensing deal with Spotify in 2020. Around the same time, Spotify pursued exclusivity deals with other podcasting companies that “didn’t pan out.”<sup>35</sup> Among them was a \$230 million acquisition deal with Gimlet Media, which I highlight given one of its cofounders: Alex Blumberg. Before cofounding Gimlet, which produced an array of tightly produced narrative nonfiction podcasts,<sup>36</sup> Blumberg was affiliated with NPR programs including *This American Life* and *Planet Money* and helped produce such iconic *This American Life* episodes as “The Giant Pool of Money.”<sup>37</sup> Despite Gimlet’s Spotify deal and production acumen, it was “wound down [in 2023] after a series of layoffs.”<sup>38</sup>

As I write this article, it’s been about a month since the federal government clawed back \$1.1 billion in funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a significant source of funding for NPR and other public media.<sup>39</sup> In all, it’s a tremendously difficult time for audio journalism in the NPR mode, with federal funding eliminated as part of the Trump administration’s race to slash government spending it finds politically detestable and companies like Spotify seemingly hesitant to invest in privatized iterations of the kind of high-production-cost shows profiled in Abel’s *Out on the Wire*. It makes a certain kind of sense that Spotify, a monopolistic behemoth in the realm of audio streaming, would prioritize massive investment in *The Joe Rogan Experience*, a monopolistic behemoth in the realm of podcast listenership.

With public radio losing substantial funding, streaming giants consolidating their investments behind figures like Rogan as well as high-profile celebrities from other arenas who are adding podcasts to reliably lucrative media portfolios, and slowdowns in the growth of podcast advertising revenue, what other options and signs of life exist for podcasting?<sup>40</sup> One major alternative has been a move to crowdfunding models, which points us to a few clusters of podcasts that I would position as powerful if indirect inheritors of *Le Show*’s sonic legacy.

Consider Patreon. One of the most recognizable crowdfunding sites for independent creative projects, Patreon has emerged as a particularly significant platform for podcasts.<sup>41</sup>

As of August 2025, seven of Patreon's ten most-subscribed-to projects are podcasts.<sup>42</sup> There are two subcategories of podcast prominently, though not exclusively, featured among those seven: (1) leftist political discussion podcasts on which comedy and satire play significant roles (e.g., *Chapo Trap House*, *TrueAnon*) and actual-play podcasts on which the hosts play tabletop role-playing games in the vein of *Dungeons and Dragons* (e.g., *Not Another D&D Podcast*, *Dungeons and Daddies*, and, worth noting though it sits at number 12 on the Patreon charts, *Worlds Beyond Number*).

Those two categories—leftist/progressively inclined comedy podcasts and actual-play podcasts—are also fixtures of independent networks like Maximum Fun, Critical Role Productions, and Headgum, which have provided podcasters with another notable alternative to tech goliaths like Spotify. These networks operate in a variety of ways. The wide-ranging Maximum Fun—founded by Jesse Thorn, host of NPR's *Bullseye*—is a worker-owned cooperative largely reliant on revenue from member subscriptions, which are driven in part by an annual NPR-style membership drive; Headgum, which is explicitly comedy-focused, operates as a network and production company interwoven with Gumball, a business that coordinates host-read podcast ads, though both the network itself and many of its shows have Patreon accounts as supplementary sources of income; and Critical Role Productions is an LLC that produces podcast versions of its genre-defining actual-play campaigns, performed by teams of experienced voice actors, alongside video-centered productions.<sup>43</sup> As those descriptions may begin to suggest, these networks, in addition to the crowdfunded podcasts mentioned in the preceding paragraph, carry on *Le Show*'s rhetorical and sonic legacy in some key ways. While leftist comedy podcasts and actual-play podcasts are far from identical genres, I articulate some shared features en route to concluding this piece and demonstrating their strong resonances.

### Satire

As Eberly puts it, "If journalism is the first rough draft of history, *Le Show* is a second, revised through a lens of satire."<sup>44</sup> Many of the shows and networks described above are carrying on this second-order drafting. For instance, just as Shearer satirizes right-wing ringleaders and bugbears in segments including "Musk Love," "News of the Godly," and "News of News Corp.," one regular *Chapo Trap House* segment is a reading series in which the hosts satirically respond to the writings of right-wing and conservative figures like Ben Shapiro, Dennis Prager, and Rod Dreher. Like Shearer, the hosts of *Chapo Trap House* are also more than prepared to satirize Democratic figures (just peruse archived *Le Show* episodes from the Clinton administration). Note also the recently launched podcast *Kill the Computer*, cohosted by June Sternbach—known on social media as Junlper—who is a contributor to satirical news site *The Onion* and recognized by Wikipedia for her left-wing "shitposting."<sup>45</sup> That Wikipedia citation may strike some readers as an unnecessary and tasteless terminological move, but Junlper's work represents a reiteration of *Le Show* for the podcasting age: a gifted satirist steeped in internet news and culture in much the way Shearer is steeped in political news and—like Shearer has done for decades—pushing

anti-right-wing counterculture in satirical directions that scratch at the edges of what even sympathetic audiences might consider obscene.

### Polyphony

As Jordan notes, the *Le Show* archive provides endless instances of Shearer's polyphonic, imitative "radio ethopoeia," which Jordan aligns with the "polyphony of voices" so important to a functional deliberative democracy. In different ways, both comedy podcasts and actual-play podcasts provide rampant instances of polyphony in action. As I mentioned above, Critical Role is largely staffed by experienced voice actors—inheritors of Shearer's legacy as the voice of a panoply of *Saturday Night Live*, *Simpsons*, and *Le Show* characters. Performers like Erika Ishii, Brennan Lee Mulligan, and Ashley Johnson readily slide into and between characters and voices across actual-play campaigns, weaving connections between players, characters, and game worlds that facilitate—among many other things—forms of "queer kinship" that proliferate modes of social relation.<sup>46</sup> While the style of actual-play podcasts, with a cast of voice actors staying in and rotating between characters in fantastical settings, is markedly different from Shearer's work as a singularly polyphonic imitation machine on *Le Show*, I would align them in their potential to interrupt and invent alternates to conventional, conservative ideologies and social structures. Such polyphony is also commonplace on comedy podcasts that don't involve 20-sided dice, but more readily falls under the next heading.

### Improvisation

As I write this, the podcast *Comedy Bang! Bang!* is only 70 episodes shy of 1,000. While the show's structure has changed since it launched in 2009 (the same year as *The Joe Rogan Experience*), various improvisation and character exercises have remained part of its DNA. Most notably here, each of the show's ad breaks is followed by the arrival of a comedian in character as a guest or interruptive force, ranging from parodies of celebrities to stock characters to off-kilter entities that word limits prevent me from describing here. The comedians who have appeared in character on *Comedy Bang! Bang!* have gone on to host podcasts in an array of formats across an array of networks. While their character work overlaps with polyphony, it is, in a more direct sense, the art of improvisation. Unsurprisingly, the comedy podcasting scene is flush with hosts who share Shearer's practice at "extemporaneous comments and spontaneous rhetorical flourishes."<sup>47</sup> Driven by improv's "yes, and" imperative, these comedians generate new figures of speech and forms of sonic sociality. Comedy podcasts often operate in a different mode than actual-play shows, but they share a tendency toward wanton, improv-fueled inventiveness.

### Volume

While it might in some ways seem the least consequential, this last item draws everything together. By "volume" I speak not of the relative loudness or softness of a sound, but of scope and scale—voluminousness, capaciousness, sheer size. As I mentioned earlier, one of Shearer's skills as a radio and podcast host is his capacity to fill time, to riff persistently and reliably on the news of the week for *decades*. This kind of capacity is often figured as

a negative in academic and other highbrow cultural contexts: Don't you know when to shut up? Rhetorician, edit thyself! But it is a central gift of the polyphonic improviser and satirist. It is also a relational mechanism: Part of what contributes to Shearer's following—and, in a very different way, Rogan's—is the ability to build a relationship with an audience over time, to breed rhythmic familiarity through production schedules and rhetorical routines. In Shearer's case, this is a testament to his prowess when it comes to radio's constraints and affordances: sticking to a consistent release schedule over huge swaths of time and keeping episodes to a predictable length that befits radio distribution. But the unbinding of podcasts from radio's temporal strictures has let them grow. A podcast could release one two-minute episode in a year or three two-hour-plus episodes in a week.<sup>48</sup> And in terms of building audience size and loyalty, the latter possibility allows podcasts to put what radio can accomplish into overdrive. Near the end of a recent, hour-and-a-half-long episode of *Get Played*, a Headgum podcast about video games, host and *Comedy Bang! Bang!* alum Nick Wiger riffed on the length of a game he and the other hosts were discussing: "More is more. It's like podcast listeners. They're like, 'Give me the longest episode you got.' . . . [to listeners] You freaks know what I mean."<sup>49</sup> While Wiger's comment is a throwaway joke, it's also indicative of both the relationship many audience members have with podcasts and a skill set that serves podcast hosts who aren't aiming for the highly edited limited-series approach popularized by podcasts like *Serial*. Writer, podcaster, and game designer Austin Walker, who hosts the actual-play podcast *Friends at the Table* and has played a key role in the world of video-game podcasts, makes frequent reference to the "five-star runtimes" of the shows he's a part of, a playful but in many ways accurate indication of how inextricable quantity is from quality when it comes to podcasting.<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is hard, in an article of this kind, to say "quantity is quality" and not be understood as making a derogatory statement, offering an indictment of our oversaturated digital age. But when I think about the audio projects to which my students are drawn, the history and prehistory of podcasting so eloquently captured by the *Le Show* archives, and my own shifting listening practices in recent years (it's no accident I can now cite chapter and verse of comedian-hosted video-game podcasts in addition to the NPR podcasts so often canonized in and around media studies), I believe that if we are to understand what Harry Shearer can teach us about the future of sonic media and culture, we need to embrace the virtue of his copiousness as much as his incisiveness. Just give him a mic and any subject, then hear what he has to say. ■

---

ERIC DETWEILER is director of the Public Writing and Rhetoric Program and an associate professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University, where he researches and teaches courses on rhetorical education, digital writing, podcasting, video games, and the history of rhetoric. He is author of the book *Responsible Pedagogy: Moving Beyond Authority and Mastery in Higher Education* as well as host and producer of the podcast *Rhetoricity*. His work has also appeared in such journals as *Rhetoric Review*, the *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*, and *Philosophy & Rhetoric*. Recently, he submitted a question to a podcast about *Star Wars* that led the hosts to discuss how insufferable Socrates would be on social media.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to Rosa Eberly for her advice and encouragement as I sounded out this piece. Thanks also to Nathaniel Rivers. Our conversations about the podcast *Mission to Zyxx* helped launch some of this article's rhetorical trajectories.

## NOTES

1. The lab was the Digital Writing and Research Lab at the University of Texas at Austin, and the podcast we launched was called *Zeugma*.
2. On the early days of podcasting, consult Ben Hammersley, "Audible Revolution," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2004.
3. For more on these shows' stylistic influence on podcasting, consult Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann, *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (Bloomsbury, 2019), particularly chapters 2 and 8.
4. Jessica Abel, *Out on the Wire: The Storytelling Secrets of the New Masters of Radio* (Broadway Books, 2015), 2.
5. Abel, *Out on the Wire*, 9.
6. Monique Rooney, "Queer Objects and Intermedial Timepieces: Reading S-Town (2017)," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 23, no. 1 (2018), doi:10.1080/0969725X.2018.1435392.
7. For an example of such efforts, consider the results of Left of Dial Media's Essential Listening Poll—particularly the top five. "Essential Listening Poll: The 100 Greatest Podcasts of All Time," *Left of Dial Media*, <https://www.leftofdialmedia.com/essential-listening-poll> (accessed August 29, 2025).
8. I gesture here to the distinction between smooth and striated space articulated in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 371. I hear echoes between smooth space and the kinds of podcasts I consider in this essay, but leave them for another time.
9. Siobhán McHugh, *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (Columbia University Press, 2022), 101.
10. Joshua Gunn, "Harry's Dead Air," *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2025): 103.
11. Katherine Krueger, "Bury the #Resistance, Once and for All," *The Nation*, November 21, 2024; Ana Marie Cox, "Liberals Have Much to Learn from MAGA," *New Republic*, December 13, 2024.
12. "Joe Rogan," <https://www.joerogan.com/> (accessed August 24, 2025).
13. Anne Steele, "Spotify Strikes Podcast Deal with Joe Rogan Worth More Than \$100 Million," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2020.
14. Katherine Rosman, Ben Sisario, Mike Isaac, and Adam Satariano, "Spotify Bet Big on Joe Rogan. It Got More Than It Counted On," *New York Times*, February 17, 2022.
15. Dave FitzGerald, "Joe Rogan Gives Backing to Donald Trump in US Election," *BBC*, November 5, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp9z2p3vr480>.
16. Edison Research, "Who Joe Rogan's Listeners Are Likely to Support in the Election," *Edison Research*, October 30, 2024, <https://www.edisonresearch.com/who-joe-rogan-listeners-are-likely-to-support-in-the-election/>.
17. Krueger, "Bury the #Resistance"; Cox, "Liberals Have Much to Learn."
18. A noteworthy if isolated illustration: The top comment on the YouTube version of Rogan's episode featuring Trump is "podcasts are officially more important than traditional media now." "Joe Rogan Experience #2219 - Donald Trump," *YouTube*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBMoPUAeLnY>.

19. On one ultimately unsuccessful attempt at liberal talk radio, consider “Liberal Air America Goes Off the Air,” *NPR*, January 25, 2010, <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/25/122951230/liberal-air-america-goes-off-the-air>.
20. Rosa Eberly, “Harry Shearer’s *Le Show*,” *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2025): 82.
21. Eberly, “Harry,” 84.
22. Rosamund Kent Sprague, *The Older Sophists* (Hackett Publishing, 2001), 31.
23. Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh, *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improv Manual* (Comedy Council of Nicea, 2023), 13.
24. Eberly, “Harry,” 83.
25. For an extended example of such content, consider the December 11, 1994, episode of *Le Show*. Due to issues with his preparation for the episode that are ultimately left ambiguous, Shearer turns the entire thing into an unscripted call-in show, with most of the calls related to Bill Clinton’s firing of Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders after Elders seemed to advocate for addressing masturbation as part of sex education. Jokes about “self-study” abound. “Le Show; 1994-12-11,” December 11, 1994, American Archive of Public Broadcasting, <https://american-archive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-fofo16a4846> (accessed August 24, 2025).
26. Matthew F. Jordan, “The Many Voices of Harry Shearer: Radio *Ethopoeia*, Satire, and Learning to Hear the Right-Wing Voice,” *Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2025): 239.
27. Rosa A. Eberly and Jeremy David Johnson, “Isocratean *Tropos* and Mediated Multiplicity,” in *Ancient Networks + Digital Networks*, ed. Michele Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister (University of Alabama Press, 2018), 137.
28. Jordan, “The Many,” 239.
29. Tim Marchman and Dhruv Mehrotra, “What Right-Wing Influencers Actually Said in Those Tenet Media Videos,” *WIRED*, September 6, 2024.
30. Thomas Pettitt, “Media Dynamics and the Lessons of History: The ‘Gutenberg Parenthesis’ as Restoration Topos,” in *Companion to New Media Dynamics*, ed. John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 55.
31. Damien Smith Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 19.
32. Pfister, *Networked Media*, 20.
33. American Redact, “Watch Joe Rogan Get Fact Checked on His Own Show,” *YouTube*, February 17, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfGo-14SX7I>; Billie Schwab Dunn, “Joe Rogan Podcast Producer Calls Him Out Over Trump Video,” *Newsweek*, February 6, 2025.
34. Ryan Skinnell, “What Passes for Truth in the Trump Era: Telling It Like It Isn’t,” in *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Donald J. Trump*, ed. Ryan Skinnell (Polity, 2018).
35. Reggie Ugwu, “Joe Rogan Renews at Spotify, but Will No Longer Be Exclusive,” *New York Times*, February 2, 2024.
36. E.g., *The Nod*, *Reply All*, and *Science Vs.*, the latter of which has opposed and consistently fact-checked the scientific misinformation spread on *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Dawn Chmielewski, “Science Podcaster Calls Spotify’s Support of Joe Rogan a ‘Slap in the Face,’” *Reuters*, February 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/science-podcaster-calls-spotifys-support-joe-rogan-slap-face-2022-02-01/>.
37. Abel, *Out on the Wire*, 49, 87–90.
38. Ugwu, “Joe Rogan.” It’s worth noting that Gimlet’s shuttering followed a push for unionization by the company’s staff, a move that frequently prompts fierce if indirect backlash from tech giants like Spotify. Ashley Carmen, “Gimlet Media Staff Moves to Unionize Following

- Spotify Deal,” *The Verge*, March 13, 2019, [www.theverge.com/2019/3/13/18263957/gimlet-media-union-spotify-recognition-podcasts](http://www.theverge.com/2019/3/13/18263957/gimlet-media-union-spotify-recognition-podcasts).
39. Allison Perlman and Josh Shepperd, “Clawback of \$1.1B for PBS and NPR Puts Rural Stations at Risk—and Threatens a Vital Source of Journalism,” *The Conversation*, July 17, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/clawback-of-1-1b-for-pbs-and-npr-puts-rural-stations-at-risk-and-threatens-a-vital-source-of-journalism-255826>.
  40. “U.S. Podcast Advertising Revenue Study,” *Interactive Advertising Bureau* (2024), [https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/IAB\\_US\\_Podcast\\_Advertising\\_Revenue\\_Study\\_FY2023\\_May\\_2024.pdf](https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/IAB_US_Podcast_Advertising_Revenue_Study_FY2023_May_2024.pdf), 9. Consider also Jesse Thorn (@JesseThorn), “Background: I am the former owner of one of the oldest podcast networks,” *Reddit*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.reddit.com/r/podcasts/comments/1g8urob/comment/lt41tzy/>.
  41. To be clear, I’m not positioning Patreon as a DIY utopia for independent creators here. Patreon itself is a massive company that emerged as a venture capital-backed startup, and creators who use the platform pay a significant cut back to Patreon itself. While it is an important and popular alternative for podcasts that don’t attract sufficient revenue from joining major podcast networks or other approaches to monetization, Patreon is far from ideal.
  42. This list comes from Graphtreon, a site that creates graphs and charts based on data points pulled from Patreon itself. Specifically, I am citing Graphtreon’s list of the “most popular Patreon accounts by paid member accounts” during the last three months, and the podcasts on the list are *Matt and Shane’s Secret Podcast* (#1), *If Books Could Kill* (#4), *Chapo Trap House* (#5), *the yard* (#7), *TrueAnon Podcast* (#8), *Not Another D&D Podcast* (#9), and *Dungeons and Daddies* (#10). “Top Patreon Creators,” *Graphtreon*, <https://graphtreon.com/top-patreon-creators> (accessed August 27, 2025).
  43. Like Patreon, these business models are not above critique, which you will discover if you spend a few minutes looking up these networks on Reddit. But they mark a significant attempt to provide financial stability for podcasters that extends beyond one-off crowdfunding accounts, piecemeal ad revenue, or deals with streaming giants like Spotify. I am also being selective here, filtering out networks with ties to legacy media (e.g., iHeartPodcasts, WYNC Studios). I am also highlighting networks that reflect the categories at the top of the Patreon charts and are relevant to the rhetorical legacy of *Le Show*.
  44. Eberly, “Harry,” 81.
  45. “Junlper.” *Wikipedia*, August 15, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junlper> (accessed August 24, 2025).
  46. Adrianna Burton, “Chosen Structures of Belonging: Kith and Kin in Actual Play,” *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 64, no. 2 (2025): 175.
  47. Eberly, “Harry,” 83.
  48. A strange but notable instance of podcasting’s temporal flexibility pushed to its limits: *Til Death Do Us Blart*, an annual podcast that releases an episode each November. Every year, the hosts watch and discuss the film *Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2*, and each host chooses their successor should they die before the next episode is recorded. The conceit is that the podcast will run forever with an eternally rotating set of hosts.
  49. “We Play, You Play: *Donkey Kong Bananza*,” *Get Played*, August 25, 2025, <https://headgum.com/get-played/we-play-you-play-donkey-kong-bananza>.
  50. Austin Walker (@austin\_walker), “five star podcasts five star runtimes,” *Twitter*, June 10, 2019, [https://x.com/austin\\_walker/status/1138006330239639552](https://x.com/austin_walker/status/1138006330239639552).