LINKS GLOBAL
Communicating with Purpose. Powered by Insight.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

The Celebrity Podcast Problem

When a democratic medium becomes an oligopoly of famous voices

A Links Global thought leadership article by M. Sanchez, founder of Links Global, a communications firm working at the intersection of trust science, narrative design, and civic engagement. Part of the Links Global article series: Contemporary Challenges. Drawn from 25 years of field practice and evidence-based research in strategic communication, public engagement, and institutional trust.

In Brief

Podcasting promised to let expertise find an audience without a gatekeeper. The medium now concentrates its largest audiences in a small number of celebrity shows. This article describes what has happened, what is lost, why the platforms built it this way, and where the medium is still doing what it promised.

The podcast was supposed to be the democratic medium.

The premise, in the early years, was genuinely exciting: anyone with a microphone, a story, and something worth saying could build an audience. The barriers to entry were low, the gatekeepers were gone, and the format rewarded authenticity, depth, and genuine intellectual engagement over production gloss and celebrity. Independent podcasters (historians, scientists, journalists, comedians, practitioners, thinkers of every kind) were finding audiences for conversations that traditional media would never have commissioned, on topics that traditional media would never have considered commercially viable.

That premise is still partially true, and still generating some of the best content available in any medium. But something significant has also happened to the podcast landscape that the medium's enthusiasts are reluctant to name clearly: the same concentration dynamics that have characterized every prior media revolution have arrived in podcasting, and they are reshaping the medium in ways that are bad for listeners, bad for the independent creators who built it, and bad for the discourse that the podcast was supposed to democratize.

The celebrity podcast is the vehicle through which this concentration is occurring. And the specific form it is taking (the mass migration of established media personalities, athletes, politicians, and entertainment figures onto podcasting platforms, backed by the marketing infrastructure and audience cross-pollination that celebrity status provides) is producing a podcast landscape that increasingly resembles the legacy media it was supposed to disrupt.

What Has Actually Happened

The numbers tell a clear story. The podcast landscape now consists of a very small number of shows with very large audiences and an enormous number of shows with very small audiences: a power law distribution that has become increasingly steep as the decade has progressed. There are more than 3.8 million podcasts indexed, and a Pew Research analysis of the top-ranked shows found that in 2022 only 31 percent were independent; the rest were affiliated with news organizations or media companies.

At the top of that distribution sit, with disproportionate dominance, shows hosted by people who were already famous before they launched their podcasts. Former late-night hosts, national politicians, professional athletes, Hollywood actors, established journalists with major platform experience, and a small number of internet-native creators who achieved celebrity in other formats before migrating to audio. Their shows dominate the download charts, the platform recommendation algorithms, and the advertising market.

This is not an accident. It is the predictable outcome of how celebrity functions in attention economies. Celebrity provides its possessors with an existing audience, a proven media presence, institutional promotional infrastructure, and the kind of platform visibility that generates the algorithmic recommendations that compound into audience growth. A podcaster with existing celebrity launching a new show is not starting from zero. They are starting with a significant head start that most independent podcasters cannot overcome regardless of the quality of their content.

The result is a podcast landscape where the ranking systems that listeners use to discover new content are dominated by celebrity shows, where the advertising revenue is concentrated in celebrity shows, and where the investment in content development, from platforms and from the media companies that have acquired podcast studios, is flowing primarily toward celebrity show production.

What Gets Lost in the Celebrity Podcast Landscape

The concentration of attention and resources in celebrity podcasting is not simply a matter of some shows being bigger than others. It is producing specific losses in the podcast landscape that deserve honest accounting.

The loss of genuine expertise. The celebrity podcaster is, by definition, famous for something, but that something is often not expertise in the topics the show addresses. The athlete who launches a culture and society podcast, the actor who launches a politics commentary show, the television host who launches an interview program covering subjects outside their professional domain: these shows occupy prominent algorithmic positions on the basis of the host's celebrity in an entirely different field, crowding out shows hosted by genuine domain experts whose content is substantively richer but whose celebrity capital is thinner.

The listener who discovers a podcast through a platform recommendation or a download chart is increasingly likely to encounter celebrity-hosted content over expert-hosted content, not because the celebrity content is better, but because the celebrity's pre-existing audience has driven the download numbers that drive the algorithm's recommendation. The podcasting ecosystem is increasingly rewarding fame over expertise.

The commercialization of conversational intimacy. The podcast format's specific power (the parasocial relationship between host and listener built through genuine, unguarded conversational engagement) is being systematically commercialized by celebrity shows in ways that hollow out the format's distinctive value.

The celebrity podcast episode that is structured around a brand partnership, in which the host's apparently candid recommendation of a product is a paid placement presented as personal enthusiasm, is not having a conversation with the listener. It is running a highly sophisticated advertisement in the format of a conversation. This is not a new problem in media: native advertising has existed in various forms for decades. But the podcast format's specific intimacy makes the deception more consequential. The listener who trusts a podcast host because the format signals authenticity is being manipulated by that very trust when the authenticity is performed.

The homogenization of perspective. Celebrity podcast hosts are not a representative sample of professional, intellectual, or cultural experience. They are drawn overwhelmingly from the same relatively narrow demographic and institutional circles that have always dominated mass media: predominantly white, predominantly male, predominantly American or British, predominantly from elite educational and professional backgrounds. The specific promise of podcasting, that it would diversify whose voices and whose perspectives reached large audiences, is being progressively undermined by the concentration of the largest audiences around the most demographically familiar faces.

The genuine diversity of the podcast landscape exists in the long tail: in the thousands of shows hosted by practitioners, scholars, journalists, and thinkers from the full range of human experience. But the long tail is increasingly invisible in a recommendation ecosystem dominated by celebrity show traffic.

The Platform Problem

The celebrity podcast problem is not primarily a content problem. It is a platform problem: a consequence of how the major podcast distribution platforms have structured their discovery and recommendation systems.

Podcast discovery has become increasingly algorithmic, increasingly tied to social media cross-promotion, and increasingly dominated by the engagement metrics that favor shows with existing large audiences over shows with small but highly engaged audiences. The independent podcaster with a

deeply loyal, specialized audience who generates high per-listener engagement is algorithmically invisible compared to the celebrity show with a large but casual audience. The discovery systems reward reach, not quality, and reach is most efficiently acquired through celebrity cross-pollination rather than through merit.

The platform investment decisions have reinforced this dynamic. The major podcast platforms have paid significant sums to secure celebrity shows (Spotify's renewed 2024 deal with Joe Rogan was reported by the Wall Street Journal at up to $250 million, though the show is no longer exclusive to Spotify), while providing independent creators with minimal infrastructure support, minimal discovery assistance, and minimal monetization support beyond advertising programs that require audience scale most independent podcasters cannot achieve.

The result is a platform ecosystem that talks about democratizing content creation while systematically directing resources toward the already-powerful. This is the same dynamic that characterized the early social media platforms, which promised democratic voice while progressively building systems that rewarded existing power and concentrated attention in the hands of those with the most followers. Podcasting is replicating this trajectory.

Is the Medium Becoming Ridiculous?

The honest answer to the question implicit in this article's framing is: not exactly ridiculous, but increasingly stratified in ways that are bad for the discourse and bad for listeners who are trying to navigate the landscape.

The celebrity podcast at its worst is genuinely embarrassing (the A-list actor explaining geopolitics, the professional athlete opining on economic policy, the reality television star interviewing a head of state) not because celebrity people cannot be intelligent, but because celebrity alone is not a credential for substantive commentary on complex topics, and the format rewards the celebrity's ability to generate attention regardless of the quality of what is said.

But the medium has not become uniformly ridiculous, because the long tail of genuinely excellent podcasting (the expert practitioners, the deep historians, the rigorous journalists, the careful scientists, the authentic storytellers) continues to produce remarkable content. The problem is not that the medium has become ridiculous. The problem is that finding the excellent content requires navigating past the celebrity noise, and the platforms are not helping listeners do that.

What the Medium Still Offers, If You Know How to Find It

The defense of podcasting is not a defense of the celebrity podcast economy. It is a defense of what the medium can still produce when the incentives are right.

The podcast that is still doing what the format always promised (the one that finds and sustains a highly specific, deeply engaged audience for genuinely substantive long-form conversation on a topic that conventional media cannot or will not cover with the depth it deserves) is still one of the most powerful content formats available.

Finding it requires moving past the algorithmic recommendations, past the download charts, past the celebrity-dominated top lists, and into the communities of practice, the professional networks, and the listener-to-listener recommendations that have always been the most reliable way to find the podcasts worth listening to.

That has always been true of the best media. The best of any medium has never been the most algorithmically visible. It has been the most worth seeking out.

Where This Fits

If you are deciding whether to start a show of your own, read Everything You Need to Know Before You Start a Podcast first. The reason specialist, long-tail podcasts still work is explained in Trust Literacy: they are trust relationships, and trust does not scale the way reach does.

Schedule a conversation with Links Global: www.linksglobal.org

Sources

- Pew Research Center. (2023, June 15). *A profile of the top-ranked podcasts in the U.S.* pewresearch.org
- Listen Notes. (2026). *Podcast stats*. listennotes.com
- Associated Press. (2024, February 3). Joe Rogan signs a new deal with Spotify for up to a reported $250 million. apnews.com

Ownership and use. © 2026 Links Global. All rights reserved. The Links Global Trust Audit™, Narrative Stewardship Infrastructure™, NSI™, Epistemic Re-Regulation Architecture™, and ERA™ are trademarks of Links Global. You are welcome to read this article, link to it, share it, and quote brief passages with attribution to Links Global and a link to this page. Reproducing it in whole or in substantial part, adapting or translating it, or using the analysis presented here in training, consulting, publications, or derivative works requires prior written permission from Links Global. Please cite as: Sanchez, M. (2026). *The Celebrity Podcast Problem: When a Democratic Medium Becomes an Oligopoly of Famous Voices*. Links Global. www.linksglobal.org.