

Part I: You Should Make a Podcast

“No, I shouldn’t,” you say. “There are already a million podcasts out there.” Well, you’re literally right - [there are a million podcasts out there](#). And, look, that’s a big number. So, your belief that the market is saturated isn’t wrong-headed.

But it isn’t totally right-headed either.

Consider:

- 1) A lot, if not most, of those podcasts are, objectively, bad.
- 2) A lot of them are covering the same topics (i.e. [bad movies](#), [the biographies of comedians as told to other comedians](#)) in the same way.
- 3) A lot of them come from a [particular perspective](#) and are geared toward people of that same perspective
- 4) A lot of them (whether deservedly or not) don’t have many listeners.
- 5) About [45% of people in this country](#) have never listened to even one of them.

So, the notion that there’s no place in the market for a good thing that people want to listen to—that podcasting is *over*—is wrong. What might be over is the Wild West era in podcasting, when podcasting was a (more-or-less) democratic platform where anybody who threw something up online had a chance of drawing some listeners. There are enough shows that discoverability is a real problem, even for the big podcast companies. Also, there are [big podcast companies](#), which have both injected money into podcasting but also hoovered up a lot of talent and attention.

Now, we could get into a whole thing here about what you have to do to grow an audience in this era of podcasting, but that conversation would be boring. It’s not like podcasts obey different market forces than other media. Either you get a celebrity to be on it or you get some big company to fund it or you get a big write up in the New York Times... or you spend a lot of time grinding it out, sweating blood to make the best product you can and slowly, painstakingly building an audience. The point is: *it can be done*. Even in 2020.

But whatever, all of that is for later. The point *today* is that *you should make a podcast*, and here’s the reason why: you could make The Killer Show.

Okay, so... what’s The Killer Show? That’s a phrase I stole from a very smart guy named Tom Webster, who’s a senior vice president at a company called Edison Research. They produce an annual report called [Infinite Dial](#), which aims to be sort of a state of the on-demand audio

business. If you look through the Infinite Dial archive, you can watch as podcast listenership has grown over the past 15 years. But it was only *last year* that the majority of Americans said that they'd *ever* listened to a podcast, and still today the vast, vast majority of American's aren't *regular* listeners to podcasts. In 2018, Tom made a statement about what it would take to make podcasting a real household phenomenon. I think about it all the time:

There were once was a time when plenty of people didn't think they had a Netflix app, didn't know they needed one, and weren't sure how to watch it without getting discs emailed in those red envelopes. So what did Netflix do? They didn't spend a bunch of money on a "Got Netflix?" campaign. They spent a lot of money on "Orange is the New Black" and "House of Cards." What gets people to discover Netflix is curiosity, and what drives curiosity is the *show*. The killer show. But we aren't there yet...

The podcast industry has historically shifted around one big show. Think about [This American Life](#) at the dawn of the podcasting ago. Or, of course, [Serial](#) a couple years ago. I tend to agree with Tom that podcasting's transition into a truly ubiquitous medium is going to require The Killer Show, the one that makes all of our moms and dads and weird uncles Google the word "podcast" for the first time.

We are still in search of The Killer Show.

"But there are a bunch of people who professionally make podcasts!" I hear you cry. "What about them?! Surely one of them will come up with the killer show!"

I don't know! I can't see the future! Stop crying!

Maybe they will. But also, *maybe* they won't.

I had a great editor once, and we were working together on a complicated story. And after one edit session, as she was packing up her stuff to go, and she said, "I love radio. There really are no rules. You can do anything." And she was right. In a sense, audio—and particularly podcasting—is still an experimental medium. There are conventions, but there aren't so many hard and fast rules as there are in other media. That's, in part, because people haven't been listening to podcasts for a hundred years, the way they have with movies, or even fifty years, as they have with TV. So, there aren't as many traditions, expectations and precedents you need to respond to. You have freedom.

But you might not know that from the bulk of the audio content that's out there. It may feel like there are podcasts about everything ([dentistry!](#) [McDonald's pizza!](#) [shipping containers!](#)). But a lot of those podcasts *feel, sound, and view the world* in the same way. Even casual podcast listeners know the tropes: the montages, the performative naivité ("Hang on, are you telling me, the host of a podcast about science, that mitochondria are the *powerhouse* of the cell?"), the plinky-plonky music, the vocal fry.

That sameness may be a function of the fact that a lot of the people making that podcast content come, not just from the same class or ethnic background, but from the same *professional* background. The leaders in the industry are almost uniformly alumni of our nation's public radio stations. Some come from commercial radio. Some from sports radio. But most everybody has spent some time at "a member station." And there are absolutely traditions, expectations and precedents in public radio. There are rules about how those institutions tell those stories. And when you learn them early, you carry them throughout your career.

To be clear: those rules aren't *bad*. Some of the best stuff ever was made abiding by those rules (I love *This American Life*, *Serial*, and *S-Town*, all shows made by the same people). But imagine if every show on TV was a multi-camera comedy made by people who used to work on *Cheers*. Some of them might be great, but it'd be hard to differentiate one from another.

Now, imagine that, into the world of *Cheers*'es, somebody introduced *The Sopranos*. That would be pretty exciting. Shit, it wouldn't even have to be *The Sopranos*. Your show could be *Riverdale*, it'd still knock people's socks off.

What I'm saying is: your show might be the *Riverdale* we've been waiting for. It might even be *The Sopranos*.

So, throw caution to the wind. As I'm about to explain, it takes basically nothing to make a podcast and put it out there. And if you have experience in the creative world, you're really ahead of the pack already. You understand how creative processes work, how to develop a project over time, how to iterate and refine. You know bad from good, and you've got experience navigating the bumpy road from the bad to the good. And you've got the grit to stick it out until you get there. This is the stuff that killer shows are made of.

Part II: You Can Make a Podcast

Making a podcast is easy. You need five things.

- 1) Something to record
- 2) A place to record it
- 3) Something to record it with
- 4) A way to edit your recording
- 5) Something to do with your recording when you're done

You might think that podcasting is not easy, that you need to know a lot of stuff about microphone self-noise and pre-amps and sound foam density and waveforms. You are wrong. You can learn about all of that stuff, and it will make your podcast sound better (and it will be, in

my opinion, *so fun* to learn about). But you don't *need* to know any of it to make a podcast, even to make a *good-sounding* podcast.

I'm going to talk about basics. That's, in part, because [the very beginning is a very good place to start](#). But it's also because grasping the basics gets you a lot of the way toward making something good (most people don't master the basics). And in the process of mastering the basic ideas, you will inevitably find the in-roads into concepts that are more particular to the thing you're making.

Something to Record

I can't help you here. You've got to decide what you're recording. And, sure, it matters a bit what your particular show is—the needs of an interview show are going to be different from the needs of something recorded out in the world. But the basics are the basics.

The only prescription I'll give you is that podcasting is like any other art form: the more experience you have with it, the better you're going to be at it. I wouldn't advise you to write a novel if you've never read a novel. So I'd suggest that if you want to get into podcasts, you spend some time listening to podcasts.

A Place to Record It

Finding a good place to record will have, hands down, the biggest effect on the quality of your final product. A very wise engineer once told me that recording with world-class gear in a space that sounds really shitty gives you a world-class recording of something that sounds really shitty.

So, what is “a space that sounds really shitty,” and how do you avoid it?

The first thing that will make a space shitty is noise. Obviously, you know that you shouldn't record your podcast in a room with a car alarm going off outside or a dance party going on next door. But check this: I want you to take 30 seconds, close your eyes, and listen to the room you're in. I just did it, and here's what I heard:

- My wife on a phone call in the next room
- A bird
- Somebody pounding on something downstairs
- A plane flying overhead
- A different bird
- A low, ambient hum that's maybe from an engine running outside

Truly quiet rooms are very hard to come by, particularly in cities. Recording studios pay *lots* of money to build them. You probably aren't going to have access to a really, really quiet room to record in. But you can do some things to help yourself out:

- 1) Close your windows and your doors.

- 2) Unplug anything you can unplug — refrigerators and air conditioners are serial offenders in adding unwanted noise to a recording.
- 3) When it comes time to record, set yourself up so that your microphone is pointed away from the most egregious noises.
- 4) Don't be afraid to tell people to shut up for a minute because you're recording a podcast.

Noisiness is public enemy number one. But much less frequently discussed, and almost as destructive, is public enemy number two: roominess.

So, whenever you make a sound, that sound bounces around whatever room you're in—that's called "reverberation." Sounds particularly like bouncing off hard objects like walls. When you're making a recording, the microphone is picking up the sound you're making, but it's also picking up the reverberations of the sound that are bouncing all around the room. And when it picks up too many of those reverberations, your recording starts to sound "roomy." [Like this](#). And roominess just sounds... bad.

But reverberations have a kryptonite, and that kryptonite is... soft things. Recording studios tend to be lined with soft stuff. It's not "sound-proofing," it's not there to keep sound *out*. It's there to keep sound from bouncing around the room. Fortunately, you don't need to shell out for acoustic paneling. You probably already have some soft stuff around.

Hands down, the best place in your apartment to record is a closet with clothes hanging in it. It's a small space that's full of soft stuff (i.e. your clothes). Reverberations are going to have a very hard time bouncing around in there.

But closets are cramped and hot and already full of stuff. So, if you need a more comfortable solution, your ideal recording space will have a lot of furniture in it—sofas, chairs, beds, all good. It will have a rug or carpet on the floor (floors are hard surfaces, too). Maybe it would have heavy drapes. Maybe it has bookshelves on the walls (books count!).

And if all else fails, there is an old standby: make a tiny, padded room for you and your microphone by throwing a blanket over your head while you record. [See? Not bad!](#)

Or, you know, if you have \$4,000-\$35,000 lying around, [buy a WhisperRoom](#). (Note: do not do this. Do not go into debt for your podcast. Not right now.)

Something to Record It With

This is where we're going to talk about "gear."

My basic thought about equipment, which I will repeat over and over, is that, for almost all of us, there's only two kinds: good enough for what you're trying to do, and not good enough for what

you're trying to do. You can drive yourself crazy (I know, I have) about whether you have the *right* gear or the *best* gear. The overwhelming majority of people who listen to your thing will not know whether you recorded it on a U87 (which costs around \$3,600) or your iPhone (which is in your pocket right now).

The process I suggest, then, is: start as simple as you can. But be hard on yourself. If you record something, and you think it sounds bad (or doesn't sound the way you want it to), then look into whether there's equipment that will make it sound better. In addition to saving you some money, that process gives you the opportunity to learn as you go. It's a waste of money to buy gear that you don't know how to put to good use. And it's very easy to get overwhelmed by trying to learn it all at once.

So, below is a starting place, with some thoughts about where you might go, if you find you need to go anywhere at all.

Your Recorder

As aforementioned, you already own one, and if you're just starting out, I'd recommend you use it. If you're reading this, you own either a phone or a computer, and either will do as a recorder. You can run a mic into your computer, and your phone actually (get this!) *has a microphone built into it*.

If you're recording on your computer, you're going to need a program to record into. I'd recommend a digital audio workstation (what we in the biz call a DAW). The upshot there is that you can also edit your recording in your DAW. I'll get into DAWs in the section on editing below. If you're recording on your iPhone, the voice memo app works just great. But once you're done, you're going to want to export the recording you made to a DAW. See below.

The other option is to get a digital recorder. A digital recorder is a piece of gear that you can plug microphones into, and it records from the microphones to some digital media, and then you can upload those recordings to your computer. The virtues of a digital recorder are that they're (usually) portable, they're harder to break than your iPhone is, and they give you some flexibility with how many tracks you record and how you record those tracks. Personally, I use a [Zoom H5](#). It cost about \$250 and it's proved very versatile to me. I can plug mics into it, it's got a built in microphone, it's light, I know how to use it. A digital recorder doesn't take a huge layout of money, but I still don't think one is necessary when you're starting out. If you need one, you'll figure that out quick.

One other point about recorders: except in certain rare-ish cases, the recorder itself has very little effect on the quality of your audio. Something recorded on your computer would sound virtually identical to something recorded on my H5, provided that you were using the same mics in the same way. So, if you're compelled to buy a digital recorder, do it because its external features are going to make it easy for you to do something, not because you think a digital recorder will "sound better" than your computer. For our purposes, it probably won't.

Your Microphone

[Check this out.](#) This is a comparison between a vintage AKG C12, which some people think is the best microphone ever made, and a \$20 microphone from a company I've never heard of. Be honest: can you tell the difference in quality between those two mics? Maybe they sound *different*, but to your ears, does the C12 sound drastically *better* than the \$20 microphone? Do you hear the extra \$12,480?

I'll confess: I barely can. Microphones are, for me, the best example of the idea that there's only "good enough" and "not good enough." That \$20 microphone probably isn't good enough, if only because cheap microphones break easy. But can you get a perfectly good microphone for \$100? Absolutely. It's called the [Shure SM58](#), and it's a fixture of music venue stages across our great nation. I've used them for a bunch of stuff, so do a lot of podcasters. And they're [borderline invincible](#).

Also, and I cannot stress this enough, if you got a phone within the last five years, your microphone is probably just fine. [Check out how insanely good Mike "Booth Junkie" Delgaudio sounds talking into his phone.](#) Incidentally, do you know why he sounds so great? Because the room he's in sounds great.

What I'm saying is: don't sweat about the mic.

But what I'm also saying is: get a mic. Like I say, the mic in your iPhone works great. If you're recording on a computer, though, you should get an external mic. Even the \$20 mic above will be an improvement over your computer mic (FYI: it's not really about the quality of the mic, it's just that your computer mic isn't designed to do what you're going to want it to do well). And get a mic for every person who's going to talk on your podcast. No sharing mics! Maintain social distance!

The only other thing about mics that you need to know at this point is that they come in two broad varieties: USB and XLR. There are many differences, but the only one you need to know now is that USB mics plug directly into your computer with a USB cable. XLR mics require an "audio interface" which is a piece of gear that takes the signal from the microphone and translates it into something your computer can understand. USB mics are, generally, entry-level mics. All professional mics are XLR mics. That said, I'm sure you've listened to podcasts that were recorded on USB mics and haven't noticed the difference. So, if you're trying to conserve money early on, get a USB mic. But know that if you want to professionalize your setup at any point, you're going to end up buying an XLR and an audio interface.

I'm not shilling for anybody here, but if you just need somebody to point you in a direction: for a first mic, I'd recommend the [Samson Q2U](#) on the USB side and the [Shure SM58](#) on the XLR side. You might think those mics are terrible. Bully for you.

Other gack

There are at least three other pieces of gear you'll need:

1. A microphone stand - you could hold your mic, but I wouldn't recommend it. For one thing, if you're a fidgeter, which most people are, your recording will include the sound of you fidgeting. For another thing, if you're holding your mic, it's easy for it to drift away from your mouth, and keeping a consistent distance between mic and mouth is helpful.
2. Pop shields - when you're talking into a mic, you're basically blowing air directly into the mic, and mics don't like that. That's where the dreaded "plosives" come from. Pop shields diffuse the air you're blowing into the mic. It's worth getting one for each mic, whether of the "[clown nose](#)" variety or of the "[wind screen](#)" variety
3. Cables - you'll need whatever USB or XLR cables you need to connect your mic to your recorder.
4. Headphones - you don't need super high quality studio headphones right off the bat. But I'd recommend wired headphones that go all the way over your ears. They'll give you a better sense of what you're hearing, and if you're listening at the same time you're recording, they'll limit sound bleeding from the headphones into the microphone.

How to Set Up All This Stuff I Just Told You to Buy

The internet is full of resources to help you get all your specific stuff working. My main message to you is: don't panic. These days, with technology being what it is, chances are you'll plug your stuff in and it will just magically work. And if it doesn't, there's a decade of troubleshooting posts to help you figure out why.

But, basically, you're going to plug in your mic, put your mic in a stand, plug in your headphones, hit record, and go. Stick out your pinky and your thumb as far as they can go: that's about how far you want to be from the mic.

And... record some stuff!

A Way To Edit What You Just Recorded

The chances that you're going to just hit record and that unadulterated magic is going to come out of you are small. So, you're going to want to have a way to edit your recording. Fortunately, the program you use to edit the recording is likely the same program you'll use to record it in the first place.

Such programs are called DAWs, which stands for digital audio workstation. DAWs basically let you do with your computer what it previously took professional engineers and [huge, expensive mixing boards](#) to do.

If you're reading this on a Mac, you already have access to a DAW. It's called GarageBand. For your purposes, GarageBand is pretty great. It was built to be extremely user friendly. But it's also, in a lot of ways, pretty powerful. It basically has all the functionality of a more professional DAW, it just takes a lot of that functionality and pre-packages it into presets, so that it's more accessible for a beginner. There are some eccentricities about GarageBand that drive me really crazy (why no crossfading?!?!?), but it makes recording and editing very easy. And it's exceptionally well documented. [Here's one of many, many tutorials on recording podcasts in GarageBand.](#)

I'm going to recommend a couple apps for those non-Mac users among us, but first I want to give a caveat: I'm not necessarily in the best place to recommend DAWs for beginners. Because I'm a big fancy professional, I use ProTools, which is way (way, way, way) too expensive and also too feature-rich for a beginner. And while I've been using ProTools, a whole new podcast ecosystem has cropped up. Now there are apps, like [Anchor](#) and [Alitu](#), that claim to be one-stop shops for podcast editing and publishing. I've never used any of those apps. By all means, check them out (but don't pay for them) and see if they work for you.

Here are some DAWs that I do have hands-on experience with, though:

- 1) [Audacity](#) - the virtue of Audacity is that it is free and open-source, so there's no initial outlay and it's very well-documented. However, it's not the easiest piece of software to use, in my experience. And its breadth of functionality might be a little imposing to some folks when they're starting out. But if you're looking to dive in with something free, it's definitely an option to consider.
- 2) [Hindenburg Journalist](#) - Hindenburg Journalist (terrible name, stipulated) was the first app I came across that was created specifically for podcasting (every other DAW on this list was made for music production). Like GarageBand, it hides a lot of its bells and whistles, which makes it pretty user-friendly out of the box. And it does some things that can be really useful for a beginner, like it automatically makes all your tracks the same volume. It does cost about \$90, but it's also got a pretty generous trial window where you can use it for free.
- 3) [Reaper](#) - I recently spent some time with Reaper and was really impressed with it. The benefit of Reaper is that it's totally customizable. That might seem kind of imposing at first, but once you get it set up, you can essentially create a DAW that only ever shows you the features you actually use. I followed [this excellent tutorial from Jeff Emtman](#) to get it set up for radio production, after which I felt like I had a pretty powerful and pretty useable DAW to work with. Plus, it's cheap: \$60 (and, the fact is, that you can download

a free, full-feature trial that you can use indefinitely — but, still, if you like the program, pay the people who made it)

If you are recording on your phone, you're still going to want one of these apps. You're just going to export your recording from your phone into a computer. Or, if you are braver than I, you can attempt to use GarageBand on your phone to edit it — but that app has small buttons, and many of us have big fingers...

Exactly how you use these apps to edit your podcast is going to vary depending on your podcast. But, generally speaking, you're going to use them to cut out any parts of the podcast that you (or your guest) messed up, to cut out any interruptions or unpleasant noises, and maybe to try to make yourself sound a little better that you did in your raw recording. Tutorials on how to do all of that are thick on the ground.

Go forth... Record...

Something to Do With Your Recording When You're Done

So, you set up all your gear, you recorded... something, you edited it, now you have your podcast. How do you get it to people to listen to?

You're going to need someone to host it. Some people just choose to make that YouTube or Soundcloud, just a place where the audio can just live on the internet. But chances are you don't listen to podcasts on Soundcloud. Chances are you listen to podcasts in a podcast app on your phone. So, how do we get your podcast into that app?

A lot of the new podcast-creation apps, like Anchor, offer hosting as part of the service they're offering. There is, I think, a slight benefit there in terms of user-friendliness, particularly if you've used one of those apps to record and edit your podcast. And there is also the fact that, if your podcast turns out to be The Killer Show, those apps will help you monetize it (aka get you paid to put advertisements in it).

But if you've done all your recording and editing in a DAW, and just want a place to get it out in the world, I recommend a hosting platform. [Podbean](#), [Transistor](#) and [Buzzsprout](#) are popular ones. Personally, I use [Libsyn](#), which is kind of the granddaddy of hosting platforms. As with everything in this guide, I maintain that most of these services perform much the same service. For a beginner, it really comes down to how much you want to pay, and which interface you're most comfortable with.

In any case, you'll upload your episode to the platform, add some metadata (like the show title, a description of the show, artwork, etc.), and hit publish. And then, a little while later, your show will pop up in your podcast app (more or less, not every podcast app draws from the same

index, but any one of these big hosting platforms will get your podcast into any index it needs to be in).

So, your podcast is live... And what you do from it there is up to you.