

Interview 2: Samantha Henig of BuzzFeed News discusses the rise of news podcasts

[00:00:00] This week we've been diving into the role podcasting has played in the resurgence of audio storytelling, and podcasting is often thought of in popular culture as to people just kind of chatting or serialized stories like Serial or the many true crime podcasts. But one of the most interesting changes in podcasting to me has been the shift in podcasting to daily news podcasts. Even at NPR, our podcast started off mostly of storytelling ones, but more and more we find we're launching daily news-driven podcasts. That's because younger people aren't quite listening to the radio like generations of the past did. They're listen to podcasts, and if we want to reach them with audio news, podcasting is a big way to do that.

[00:00:40] Samantha Henig was on the frontlines of that shift. She's now the executive editor for strategy at BuzzFeed News. But in 2015, she was at the New York Times, and she returned from her maternity leave and was quote tasked with "looking into whether the Times should get into audio." Samantha, thanks so much for joining us today.

[00:00:58] Sure. Happy to be here.

[00:01:00] So tell me, why was the Times starting to get interested in audio?

[00:01:05] Well, it wasn't the first time that the Times had been interested in audio. The Times actually had about a decade prior to that had launched several podcasts. And at the peak, I think there were maybe 12 or 14 podcasts that the Times was doing, and then those had kind of, for the most part, died off. And so 2015, it was Serial had come out. Apple podcast was preinstalled on phones. Like it was that moment where things were really surging, and so it couldn't be ignored. So I think several people at the Times were saying, "Is this a thing we should be doing? Why aren't we doing this?" And we also had Kinsey Wilson, who had come from NPR, and he was at the executive level at the Times. And so he was a real champion for podcasts, like really knew what that opportunity was and what it would take to really build out an audio operation, and so I think that helped a lot with pushing things forward at the executive level.

[00:02:13] So how did that desire to really push forward and create an audio division turn into The Daily, which became a real tour de force?

[00:02:22] Yeah, I mean, I think it was a lot of factors kind of converging. So one factor was the 2016 election. So the first podcast that we launched once we got the Times to invest in audio, did an international search for an executive producer to come in with audio production experience so that we could really start making shows. And then the first show that we launched was called The Run-Up. And the idea was that it was kind of a pop-up podcast to track the final months of the 2016 election, and it was hosted by Michael Barbaro. So I think two of the factors that converged began percolating during the run-up, so one of those was Michael Barbaro, himself. And he had been up until that point, a politics reporter for the Times. And it was through that first podcast that both we started to recognize his unique talent and also he started to recognize the power of the medium and the form, and he just really fell in love with podcasting. And so by the time that the election happened, he had already pretty much decided he didn't want to go back to being just a typical reporter. He wanted to do audio. And then another factor at that time was the results of the election, and realizing coming out of that, you know, we had always intended the Run-Up to just be a temporary show, but coming out of that election, it felt like there was such a need to keep going, to do it more. There was just so much that was happening on the political scene that felt like it needed to be kind of processed and explained on a daily basis. And then I would say the third factor in the mix was that we got a launch sponsor. So in, I believe it was September, I had put together this one-pager for our sales team of like, you know, someday we want to do a daily news podcast, and here's what we think it would be. And they took that out to the market, and very quickly, I mean, shocking everyone, got a launch sponsor on board. And so then suddenly we had a launch date that we were committed to and luckily had a host in Michael, and so then the whole thing came together really fast from there.

[00:04:56] And you ended up not launching just a daily news podcast, but it was a really successful daily news podcast. I'm curious what was involved in taking an organization that really had print at its DNA and kind of recrafting it as an audio organization?

[00:05:12] I mean, in some ways, the fact that print was the DNA, I think really helped us because...I mean, I remember at the time talking to people at NPR, and some of the people who wanted to do more in podcasts at NPR saying, "Well, you know, there's such a way of doing things here, and it's really hard to change that and to innovate." And I had, at that time, I had been at the Times for four or five years, already, focused on the digital side of things, and so I had felt that so much at the Times in terms of the written word. You know. Like anything that you wanted to do that was changing kind of the tone or approach of a written story, you would come up against like layers and layers of resistance. And that's not how we do things. That's not Times-ien. But then when you shift into audio, no one had any kind of stake in it. There was no one saying, "Oh, we can't do it that way," because it wasn't a thing that existed or that was core to how everyone at the Times sort of thought of what it means to be The New York Times, and so I think that really freed us up to approach things in a more innovative way.

[00:06:35] So I'm curious, what challenges do you see the podcasting form having when it comes to news? You know, because we're in a world where stories are breaking constantly, and I think people have been accustomed to the kind of CNN, you know, constantly rolling news that's always updated. And podcasting is this thing that's released. It's downloaded. What challenges do you feel that presents for offering news to consumers?

[00:07:00] Yeah, I mean, you just nailed it. I think the challenge is that it can't be as up to the minute, but I think that's also an opportunity because...

[00:07:08] In what way?

[00:07:09] Well, it kind of forces you to in some ways be more magazine-y with it, you know, I came from magazines. So when I came to the Times, I was initially at the Times magazine, and you need to really, like, treat it as the full story. So it's not about, you know, this is what just happened. It's starting from the beginning and telling the story, and I think that that's really what made The Daily work. And in some ways, it's like catering to a slightly different user. So the Times asked when you picture who's using the Times app, you're picturing someone who's like a news junkie, and they want to know, you know, the second that something breaks they want to know what happens. And they want to know the newest nugget first. I mean, that's the way a news story is constructed. I think with the podcast listener, you're catering to a slightly more casual news consumer who wants to understand the context, the back story. They want to start from, like, from the beginning, and then you end with the newest information and why it's significant. But by the time you get there, you really have a better sense of the full story.

[00:08:25] And so for listeners, you know, what do you see as the benefits to podcasting really getting into the news space? And what are kind of maybe, you know, the unintended consequences or the cons of it.

[00:08:35] I don't think I see cons. Good.

[00:08:39] I mean, I think that it's it's for people who that's their preferred way of of getting news and entertainment. I think it's good for news to be an option there and.

[00:08:53] Yeah, I don't I don't see any negatives.

[00:08:57] You know, you know, I think the only thing that I think is a challenge, but I think, as you rightfully said, there's a lot of opportunity in it is that it can't really be breaking.

[00:09:06] And, you know, sometimes you download a podcast and the story has advanced, but that information's not in that news podcast. But, you know, as you said, there's a lot of benefits. That, too. And it's just another layer of context and understanding the podcast offer.

[00:09:21] But I'm curious, you know, the other thing that I think I've noticed is we've seen. So many what we thought of as print organizations get into the podcasting in the audio space, you know, whether it's like Fox or The Wall Street Journal, you know, you name it. Are they are they just doing it to reach audience, or is there another reason this is happening more of a business perspective?

[00:09:45] I mean, I can't speak to the others, I know that at the Times, like it was initially largely an audience play, it was that we you know, we had research, there's market research to to indicate that the podcast audience is young, it's diverse.

[00:10:02] It was all of the things that the Times as an institution knew that that's the audience it needs to be engaging to have a viable long term future. So that was a big part of it was wanting to reach that audience. We also knew that that podcast listeners were very loyal to the podcast that they loved. And so loyalty and habit are very important drivers for the times overall. And so in some ways, it really was like brand marketing for The New York Times around the same time that we launched The Daily, The Times did a really big marketing campaign around the idea of the truth is worth it. And, you know, Ranna, I think a Super Bowl ad and some other maybe Oscars, I don't totally remember.

[00:10:47] But, you know, big high production value like snazzy ads. And those are very expensive. And in some ways, the daily does the same thing. It's it's if you listen to an episode of The Daily, you're probably going to come away from it, respecting the New York Times journalists and journalism in a new way and really like valuing the work that they do and the investment that is made in that reporting. And so so, yeah, I think even if you took away the kind of like advertising revenue and thinking about the business case in those terms, there's a real there's a real value as far as like the audience that you're reaching and the way that you're connecting with them and affecting the way that they view the brand new news podcast, Make Money and do they drive subscriptions for the newspapers that are subscription driven? I don't I don't know about all of them. I mean, I think that one of the things that's tough in general about the podcast ecosystem is that it's it's crowded and getting more crowded every day. And so to make money, you need to have an audience and to get an audience, you need to break through. So I think that that can be a real challenge. And, you know, when I've talked to people at other news institutions that are curious about starting podcasts, I don't think it's I don't think it's right for everybody, especially now, because it is so hard to break through. So, you know, if you're going at it as a as a revenue play, I think that it's it's a. It's a risky one, unless you have a real means of tapping into kind of a network and getting promoted and confidence that you can build that audience.

[00:12:36] So The Times was very much like a secret organization that's gone into podcasting, you know, has a number of hits with the Daily. You know, you're now at BuzzFeed News, which is more of a digital native kind of organization. Do you see differences in how audio strategy and podcasts are approached between the different types of of organizations?

[00:12:55] Not particularly, I mean, I think that.

[00:12:59] I think that there is a thing that print organizations, especially early on in podcasting, felt a need to do, which was to really tie the podcast to the work that they were doing in print. So like of those initial podcasts at the The Times was doing, one of them was someone just reading the front page of the Times like and even even in things that were less literally tied to it.

[00:13:25] I think there was generally an instinct to say, well, as I wrote about in my article in the paper today, or and I think you do hear that in some podcasts that are coming out of print publications, I feel like that's just not a good idea in general. It's not it's not good for the listener.

[00:13:45] And so I guess in some ways, if you're coming from a digital publication, that might that instinct might not be there in the same way, although even even at BuzzFeed, people might feel some drive to say, as I wrote about in my article today, and and I would encourage them not to whether they're at a print publication or not.

[00:14:06] But no, other than that, I don't think there's necessarily like an inherent difference in how a print publication or digital publication would approach podcasting, especially since just the

line between them is blurring every day. I mean, The New York Times is very much a digital first organization now, and I think that's true of a lot of, you know, legacy media organizations. Absolutely. Where do you think news podcasting is going to go next? I mean, probably, as you were saying, it's like the thing that is harder is the the up to the minute kind of news. And I feel like that that's an obvious direction that things could go, especially on a platform like Spotify, where it's more likely to be streamed than downloads.

[00:15:00] So I think that's one thing. I feel like, you know, companies like Audible that have been doing these recordings of print stories. I don't I don't personally love that experience, and I feel like there's something different about hearing something that was written to be read versus hearing something that was made to be heard. But I do feel like that's tapping into a kind of like making a bet on the idea that people are increasingly going to want to get their news by listening rather than reading. And so, you know, one kind of cheap, easy way to do that right now is to have people read print stories out loud. But you could certainly see that progressing in a direction where where maybe those maybe stories are being thought of as audio first. If you if you do believe that that desire is there for people to sorry, there's a honking outside for people to hear the news rather than then read it.

[00:16:07] Over the course of your career, you've worked in a lot of different areas, news and audio, curious, you know, for the students and storytellers in this class. Do you have any advice, you know, if they're interested in doing audio storytelling or even news podcasting?

[00:16:22] Yeah, I mean, I would say learn, learn Pro Tools or Audacity or whatever software you choose, but learn how to cut tape. I think that's an incredibly valuable skill and can even if you don't end up in a role where that's the bulk of what you're doing, I think it still affects the way that you think about how you piece of story together to have those goals. I also think, I mean something that I when I was hiring at the Times, would often talk to people about issues. And that, I think is worth kind of evaluating in yourself before you look for jobs, is how much you care about being on Mike versus being kind of behind the scenes.

[00:17:04] Certainly at places like the Times, there's a huge demand for people who can be behind the scenes and take the work that other journalists are doing and really make it shine.

[00:17:16] And audio, there's less of an opportunity there to be, you know, an on air presence because that at that particular place, so much of the strategy is building around New York Times journalists. But there are also plenty of jobs where they're looking for people who are great on air. So I think that just knowing about yourself, like how much is that a priority would affect which roles make sense.

[00:17:45] Samantha, thank you so much for joining us today. This is great.

[00:17:48] Yes, happy to do it. Thank you.

[00:17:51] You can check out BuzzFeed News News podcast, which is called News O'clock, wherever you get your podcasts.