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DISCONNECTED

A PODCAST CREATED BY SYDNEY WRIGHT

AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE UNIVERSITY HONORS SCHOLARS PROGRAM AT ETSU

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ABSTRACT

Humans are social creatures. Yet when the pandemic forced the world into lockdown, social interaction became limited and more intentional. I explore the forms of communication people turned to during this time through a series of podcast episodes. I interview people who can provide first-hand experiences of how major areas of life changed. The areas I focused on are: digital literacy in the elderly, online connections versus in-person ones, telehealth, education, journalism, and social media. The episodes can be listened to on the *Disconnected* website.

Introduction

The main part of my project is displayed at this website:

<https://swright2646.wixsite.com/disconnectedpodcast>.

For my thesis project, I decided to do a podcast series called *Disconnected*. It explores major aspects of life that were interrupted by the pandemic through the lens of communication. Social connection is such a huge part of what makes us human, and the pandemic physically separated us (Razai). Of course, throughout history, humans have found ways to connect when talking was not possible. Art, food, movement, all of it in the pursuit of sharing something about human feelings. In the 21st century, communication happens faster than ever aided by social media and the internet (Akram). Yet with advancements, there are always consequences. I wanted to explore the methods of communication we were forced to rely on during the pandemic, and what might stick after the world (hopefully) returns to normal— whatever normal may be.

The series consists of six episodes covering digital literacy in the elderly population, online connections compared to in-person ones, telehealth, education, journalism, and social media. I chose these areas based on what I felt like were unavoidable topics during the pandemic. When approaching people for interviews, I made an effort to find “real” voices affected by the issues where possible. For example, rather than interview a scholar on digital literacy, I interviewed an elderly person who has experienced struggles with technology. However, where industries were affected, such as with journalism and medicine, I found it more appropriate to interview people who worked in those fields.

I was looking for qualitative data on personal experience and emotions. The pandemic tested all of us in some way. How did we overcome it? What are the long-lasting impacts?

Episode by Episode

Episode 1 – Digital Literacy in the Elderly

This topic is what sparked the idea for the entire project. I had not seen my grandmother for several weeks since the pandemic started, and I wondered how she finding social interaction because she struggled with using technology. I spent a lot of the summer on Discord with friends, but I could never imagine my grandmother hopping onto a group chat. She also learned to use the Walmart shopping app a few months into the pandemic, and this was a huge leap for her. It made me wonder, as the world relied more and more heavily on technology to keep everyone safe and at home, what were the elderly who found technology a struggle doing? I researched more on the digital divide, which is typically thought of as rural areas not having access to high-speed internet, and learned more about digital literacy. For instance, one in ten older seniors were found to own a smartphone, as told in a 2017 Pew Research Study. While that number is up from previous years, there were noticeable differences in seniors from different demographics. Those less educated and affluent were less likely to own one. What consequences does this have? I wanted to explore digital literacy's ties to social capital—the ability to search and utilize information on the internet. After all, in this new age, social media and internet forums are where people make their voices heard and their wants and needs known. If someone needs a special cat leash, he or she can find it by online shopping. If we want to know the origins of cotton candy, it is a simple search away. Often, it is easy to forget about how much power we have at the click of a button when you have grown up with the technology. Learning new skills can be difficult though, and I wanted to capture a first-hand struggle to adapt. I believe my

grandmother was the perfect person to interview because she truly wants to take advantage of these new opportunities and knows how useful they can be, she just cannot bridge the gap sometimes, and I felt it was important to point out other factors working against the elderly, such as caregiving duties and other time constraints (Martins Van Jaarsveld).

Episode 2 – Online Connections versus In-Person Connections

In contrast to the first episode, I believe this topic resonates more with the younger generation who have grown up with the option to find online connections. I wanted to explore the complications of it. For example, the social cues theory says we use context clues to figure out how to react in certain situations. How does this translate digitally? Then I wanted to explore the positives of it and why people are embracing it now more than ever (“Online versus Face-to-Face Catch-Ups”). For this, I interviewed a friend who maintains many online relationships because of her history moving around often as a child. While there might not be a definite answer on whether or not online connections can be as fulfilling as in-person ones, it is an important topic to explore. Many people believe they can be, and some are isolated in real life, drawing most of their social interaction from the internet. What are the implications of this? Why are people driven away from in-person interaction? Will the world see “internet friends” in a different light after the pandemic? Finally, what does this mean for us as we transition from mainly online interaction back to a normal way of life as more and more people are vaccinated?

Episode 3 – Telehealth

Originally, I wanted to talk to someone who works in healthcare about their experience during the pandemic. Yet as I was researching, a trend emerged. Telehealth kept coming up. I narrowed down this episode to focus specifically on that because there was so much to unpack. Telehealth

has the potential to be life-changing, but there are so many fundamentals to healthcare that must be rethought. My guest was positioned to provide a firsthand account because of her work. Her genuine care for her patients comes through in the interview, and the aspects of in-person care that she felt had to be carried over if telehealth is to work are highlighted. We explore not only the logistics of equipment and technology but also the patients' reaction to this new method. Are there parts of normal communication between a healthcare provider and patient that are lost when both parties are separated by a screen? What can telehealth replace and what must remain in-person? Interestingly, we also dive into the problem of the digital divide. My guest works in a rural area and remarked on how many patients did not have an internet connection adequate for good care.

Episode 4 – Education

Again and again, I have heard that the field of education is the area that will feel COVID's impact for years to come. It completely upended how teaching happened, and teaching is one of the most vital forms of communication there is. There are the simpler questions, like how did teachers write out equations without a whiteboard, but also the more complex questions, like how come students became so disengaged during the pandemic? Perhaps it points to a bigger problem of how we do education, placing emphasis on grades and assignments without meaning. One thing one of my guests mentioned is that the pandemic has forced us to think about how students can learn whenever and wherever they can. It looks beyond the typical eight-hour school day that so many of us grew up experiencing. I interviewed two guests for this episode because I felt it was important to compare the job of teaching older kids to that of younger ones. For older students, we must examine the motivation and purpose of school. For younger ones, they are still learning the basics, including social manners. How do you get a nine-year-old to sit

in a seat and look at a screen for eight hours? One issue brought to light is that of how much a student's home life affects their schooling. If they had parents who were able to be at home and keep them on task, they fared better. Unfortunately, many missed out on a year of schooling because of factors out of their control.

Episode 5 – Journalism

In those early days, every tiny update about the coronavirus echoed throughout the country. We were brought together by fear and hunger for information, and then the division came. Journalists were documenting everything—the pandemic, the election, the BLM movement, and more. Yet distrust of journalism was high, making their jobs even harder. I wanted to know what it was like reporting in such a crazy year. I also wanted to know how the business of journalism was forced to adapt, as a huge part of it is going out and talking to real people. Was it harder to get information? What was reader response like?

Episode 6 – Social Media

The new courtyards and public squares are platforms like Facebook and Instagram. While they have the advantage of connecting us, they also have trends that are becoming increasingly worrisome. I asked my guest what it was like to write social media posts, for her job and for her personal life, knowing that it would get disseminated to so many people. How has the pandemic changed the tone of social media drafts? What is next, since it seems like we already share so much of our lives on social media? It is also an unregulated space, and we are living in an age of misinformation, fake news, and alternative facts. Is the voice of the majority always the best voice? Can we see what the true majority is with the way that social media platforms operate, keeping us in echo chambers and not exposing us to new ideas?

Production

Once my research was completed, I created a list of questions to guide me through each interview. The structure was that I would first establish the present situation and how the interviewee had personal experience with the episode's subject, rewind into how things had changed since March 2020 to now, dig into what challenges and advancements the pandemic presented, and finally look ahead to the impact on the future.

I was largely inspired by NPR's podcasts like *Consider This*. NPR is leading the game in podcasting, and I wanted to capture the conversational tone the interviewers had while also maintaining an overall informative approach. The human voice is obvious in most NPR podcasts, and it does not feel like an expert is just talking down to you for half an hour. There is emphasis on how and why an issue can be related to one's life.

However, I did feel that my podcast needed some interjection by me, recorded outside of the interview. Once I had the questions and answers cut down to where I wanted them, I would script short sections that bridged the listener from one topic to another or provided added context.

I recorded just two podcasts in person. One was of a friend that was already in my small social circle during the pandemic, and one was of my grandmother who was fully vaccinated at the time of recording. To observe social distancing guidelines, the other five guests were interviewed on Zoom.

For the in-person episodes, I recorded in Adobe Audition using LAV mics. The quality of the Zoom interviews was surprisingly not bad. I did not discover until afterwards that there are programs made for recording podcasts remotely, so if I could go back, I would have used one. However, the only interview that has noticeably spotty quality was Tabitha Wandell's. I am not sure why this is.

Each interview took about 60-90 minutes.

Editing

For each episode, I cut down the recordings to about half their original length. First, I would go through and transcribe each interview, creating markers on the timeline and cutting up the interview into sections that I could easily rearrange later. Once I had the answers on paper, I was able to write a coherent script and rearrange the questions to flow better. I then recorded the scripted bits. Once I had all the pieces, I would edit together the scripted sections, interview, and music and sound effects. On top of this, I would filter out background noise and amplify or lower sections where needed. Finally, I would use the sound mixer to adjust any peaking in the audio and make sure all the tracks were playing at the same level. These were exported out as my first drafts. Then I created the montage sections of answers from multiple people and placed them at the beginning of each episode in my second drafts.

I used Adobe Audition 2020 to edit. I also used copyright free music from Pixabay and Freesound.com but still chose to give credit on the website as thanks to the creators.

Dissemination

I uploaded the episodes to a free podcast hosting website called Podbean. I chose this service because its upload limit for a free account was five hours, which was more than enough time than I needed. It also did not have a limit on how many minutes could be uploaded per month. This was useful because I uploaded all my episodes at the same time, and I had to re-upload several times as I made edits.

However, I knew that I wanted the user experience to be simple when someone went to look at my project, and I still had to incorporate the transcriptions, music and sound effect attributions, and bios for my guests. So I used the RSS link of my podcast on Podbean to add it to a website I created using Wix.

I chose Wix because it allowed me to link the podcast, but a user could still listen to an episode without having to redirect to the Podbean website. I tried to keep each page's look as clean as possible.

To create my graphics, I used Canva. I made two graphics to advertise the entire podcast series, and then six minimalist graphics as covers for each episode.

Conclusion

We are living in the golden age of podcasts, and I wanted to try my hand at producing one.

While it was a very convenient format for a pandemic, I was initially worried about giving up the visual element of video to tell a story. I had not previously done a lot of audio work but filmed a lot of interviews and BROLL for broadcast news. Yet I loved listening to podcasts, so I knew there was value in them. I like that they strip away other elements so the character and emotion

of the people talking comes through. It feels rawer and more immediate, as if they are sitting in the room with you.

I knew I wanted to create a quality podcast, and not simply an unedited recording of 30-minutes of talking. Also, since I was a novice host, more editing was needed on the back end to make up for some of my inexperience and awkwardness during the interviews. I wanted the purpose to be clear, any unnecessary audio to be cut out, and a smooth transition between music and words.

Most importantly, I learned an incredible amount about just how much the pandemic reveals about human beings and their need for communication. It was heartwarming to hear examples of humans' perseverance. My hope is that the world learns something from this period, and that we do not immediately go back to the way things were.

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Programs/Software

Adobe Audition 2020

Canva

Podbean

Wix