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The view from inside **Boston**

How These Public Radio Vets Plan to Elevate the Podcast

When was the last time you discovered a great podcast? Maybe it was recently when This American Life and Serial released all eight episodes of the new podcast [S-Town](#). But not all podcasts get the benefit of receiving national headlines and having big names like Ira Glass and Sarah Koenig attached. So how do you uncover those hidden gems?

For public radio vets Jake Shapiro, Matt MacDonald and Chris Rhoden, the answer is [RadioPublic](#), a new podcast recommendation app that aims to help you discover new shows through curated playlists and universal links that will make podcasts more shareable and, ultimately, more accessible. The Boston startup also has some interesting ideas on how to help publishers better monetize podcasts and how it will take on podcast juggernauts like Apple.

The app launched last year after the Boston startup [raised more than \\$1.5 million from big media publishers](#) like The New York Times, American Public Media and the owner of Slate.com, as well as other investors, including local venture capital firm Project 11. The company was spun out of PRX, the Cambridge-based public radio company that Shapiro co-founded and led for several years. MacDonald and Rhoden also previously worked for the company, which distributes popular shows like This American Life.

Discovery through playlists

One of RadioPublic's most notable features are the curated playlists that appear in the app's discovery tab. Instead of recommending individual shows, these playlists showcase individual episodes from a diverse menagerie of creators, ranging from RadioLab and HBR IdeaCast, a show made by Harvard Business Review, to [The Heart](#), a show about "intimacy and humanity."

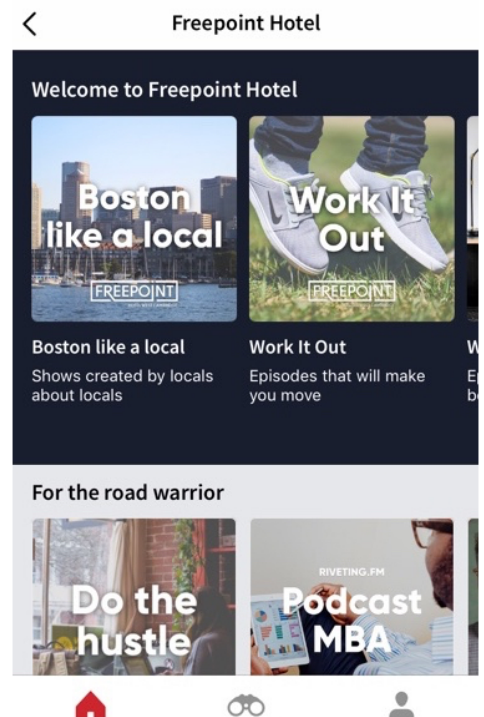
All of the playlists featured in the discovery tab are all curated by individuals and groups from the podcasting community, and they get swapped out on a regular basis. Curators currently include Matt Lieber, co-founder of Gimlet Media, which produces shows like [Startup](#) and [Reply All](#); Andrew Ti, host of [Yo, Is This Racist?](#); and Helen Zaltzman, hosts of [Andrew Me This](#) and [The Allusionist](#). As such, each playlist has its own theme or topic, such as life in Appalachia, running a startup and resistance.

RadioPublic also makes recommendations based on your listening habits, and it lets you search for podcasts through more traditional means, such as browsing through categories, adding an RSS feed or using the search function.

In a recent interview, Shapiro told me the playlists help RadioPublic do a number of things. For one, it helps the app "dramatically increase the surface area for discovery." Instead of having to commit to one show you stumbled upon, the playlists give you a chance to try out several different podcasts before subscribing to one that speaks most to you. It's also a way for producers and editors to showcase their own tastes. And it gives people a reason to use RadioPublic over other apps.

"Strategically, playlists end up being exclusive content for RadioPublic," Shapiro said.

More recently, RadioPublic enabled the ability for anyone to create their own playlists, which Shapiro said can open up ways for more people to share their favorite podcasts with each other (see my embedded playlist below).



'Frictionless' sharing

To make podcasts even more shareable, Shapiro said RadioPublic has developed a universal link and embed feature that make it easier to share podcasts, individual episodes and playlists on its apps and across the web. RadioPublic's biggest competitor, Apple's iTunes, only lets you share links to entire shows and doesn't let you play episodes on the web.

"Podcasting has been frozen in time" since it started in the early 2000s, Shapiro said. "There has been no link economy in podcasting, so it's been treated as a blunt instrument."

"PODCASTING HAS BEEN FROZEN IN TIME." 

At least one competing app, Stitcher, has similar link-sharing and embedding capabilities. But RadioPublic has the one-up in a few areas: the curated and user-generated playlists, the availability of all podcasts ([Stitcher only features a certain subset of shows](#)) and no requirement to register as a user, which Shapiro said helps lend to a more "frictionless" experience.

There was one thing about RadioPublic that surprised me: When I found a link to a podcast on iTunes through Google, clicking on it gave me the option to open the podcast on RadioPublic, which I already had installed. For Android users, this is probably better than what would happen without having RadioPublic installed: a prompt to download Apple Music.

"It's a terrible dead end," Shapiro said of podcast links on iTunes, "and a lot of producers are just not realizing they're cutting off half the world when they don't share a universal link."

Another cool thing RadioPublic can do is if you find one of its embedded podcast players on a website, you can click a button to download the app and finish listening to the podcast there.



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One way RadioPublic has the upper hand in the podcast app ecosystem is the partnerships it has with large media companies, including The New York Times, which was an investor in the startup.

Shapiro said RadioPublic has seen a large uptick in users on Android because The New York Times' Android app exclusively links to RadioPublic for its new popular podcast, [The Daily](#).

Other publications have also been using RadioPublic to link to the podcasting ecosystem, including Entertainment Weekly, which recently used RadioPublic's embedded player [to feature the Song Exploder host's favorite podcast episodes](#).

The company is also working with a number of other media companies to get out the message, including Gimlet Media, Panoply and PRX, the latter of which has begun including mentions of RadioPublic in much of its messaging.

"We think we have a major advantage in design but also in our relationship with publishers," Shapiro said.

Better monetization

While revenue isn't the focus for RadioPublic right now, Shapiro said the company is working on a few ways to monetize with publishers in the future. One of them could be a benefit for any listener who ever wanted to take advantage of a discount code or anything else that gets promoted within a podcast episode. This means the app could eventually give listeners a visual prompt to engage with an ad that appears in an episode, whether that's to buy a book or use a discount code for some kind of service.

RadioPublic is also working on ways to help publishers reach the most engaged listeners by prompting users to click on a link for something like a newsletter if they listen to the podcast a certain amount of times.

"Because we control the listening experience, we have incredibly detailed information about how and where and when people listen," Shapiro said of the company's ability to provide listener data to publishers. However, he added, the company is very conscious about privacy and information rights, which is why they only provide data from listeners on an opt-in basis.

But for the data it does collect, it can be more valuable for RadioPublic than other podcast apps because of how it's integrated with PRX's dynamic ad-serving platform, which can switch out ads based on location or how old an episode is.

"That gives us an edge in the data and in creating more tailored experiences that are better for listeners and publishers," he said.

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