



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The resurgence of audiobooks: an insight into the future of reading?

Dool, Rian van den

Citation

Dool, R. van den. (2019). The resurgence of audiobooks: an insight into the future of reading? *Txt*, 148-157. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3204566>

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3204566>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



THE RESURGENCE OF AUDIOBOOKS

AN INSIGHT INTO THE FUTURE OF READING?

Rian van den Dool

Leiden University

According to The Guardian, audiobooks will save us.¹ No, they will not stop the apocalypse or will go against global warming. However, for the “us” in the publishing world, they could be the surprising savior we have been waiting for. Why do you ask? Because audiobooks have a great advantage: they can get non-readers to read (which is considered the biggest challenge for publishers).² For those people who were around when audiobooks on CDs were first introduced, this might sound odd. Some people will have memories of going on vacation by car and listening to an audiobook on a CD, but this form of entertainment never rooted itself into our daily lives. Audiobooks eventually became a thing of the past—nostalgic even. However, for the past couple of years, they have slowly made a (digital) comeback and are marketed as a modern development. For example, consider what the Dutch newspaper *Vrij Nederland* stated in their yearly thriller guide: “Sherlock Holmes read aloud, because reading yourself is so old-fashioned”.³ What has

¹ S. Cain, “We’re All Ears for Audiobooks – and Here Are Some of the Best”, *The Guardian*, 9 April 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/shortcuts/2018/apr/09/audiobooks-best-sales-doubled-past-five-years-commuters-men-25-44-purchases>>, (28 October 2018).

² Ibid.

³ Translated by Rian van den Dool. Original quote: ‘Sherlock Holmes voorgelezen, want zelf lezen is zó ouderwets.’ This was stated by *Vrij Nederland* (a Dutch Newspaper), when publishing their yearly thriller guide in 2017 with the audiobook of Sherlock Holmes as a gift.

changed in society that made audiobooks relevant and modern and what are the effects? I argue that the renewed interest in audiobooks is a result of the digital developments in our society, but that this should not be regarded as a negative consequence.

History

First, a short introduction on the history of audiobooks, which starts as early as the nineteenth century with the invention of the phonograph. Fun fact: the phonograph was invented by Edison in 1877 to record speech, not music.⁴ While it was not yet used for audiobooks, it marks the beginning of recording audio to transfer information. Around 1930, the first novels were recorded in full in Britain and the United States.⁵ However, the only medium for them were vinyl records (not very practical). Therefore, when audio cassettes were introduced, they quickly took over from records, and the term “audiobook” was used for the first time.⁶ Not only did the invention of cassettes play a role here, but the mobility of the walkman and cassette players in cars increased the popularity of listening to books on the move.⁷ When in the 1980s CDs took over, the way in which audiobooks were used remained mostly the same. Only around twenty years later, in 2002, were audiobooks made available for downloads online and later through streaming.⁸

From when the term “audiobook” was first introduced to the invention of CDs, making use of these recorded stories has been associated with children, dyslexics, or people with eyesight problems.⁹ These groups had to rely on other forms of

⁴ I. Have and B. Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

(non-traditional) reading, as they had issues with processing text visually. Therefore, the audiobook had the status of being compensatory and was often treated only in regard to their ability to provide a shortcut or to overcome a deficiency. Currently, they have gained a wider audience, but mostly amongst young generations. Older generations still often consider audiobooks as a shortcut: “To many, listening to audio books is a debased and lazy way to read, with connotations of illiteracy (...); passivity (...); abandonment of control (...); and lack of commitment.”¹⁰ Regardless of whether this is the case, we must accept that audiobooks are back. But why is this the case and why is there a change in how audiobooks are used?

Changes in Society

Something nobody can escape and the biggest change within society in the last decennia is the fast-moving digital development. The increased popularity of audiobooks would not have been possible without the new devices on which we can listen to them and the oh-so-glorious power of the Internet. This has been identified by De Correspondent Publishers as well.¹¹ They not only publish books but also analyze the world of books while doing this. Bi-weekly newsletters have identified the importance of audiobooks for modern times and why they are suddenly more popular. In one of these newsletters, Milou Klein Lankhorst gives the five main reasons why we started listening more to audiobooks.¹²

First of all, there is a general increase in the influence of smartphones. We always have our phone with us, and this makes

¹⁰ A. Albrechtslund, “Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences”, *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 32 (2016), p. 235.

¹¹ M. Klein Lankhorst, “Wordt zelf lezen ouderwets?”, *De Correspondent*, 14 June 2017, <<https://decorrespondent.nl/6897/wordt-zelf-lezen-ouderwets/2891251919160-5a5b335c>>, (27 October 2018).

¹² *Ibid.*

it easier to listen to whatever we want, whenever we want.

Second, the development of apps for audiobooks and podcasts have widened the audience for audio-based entertainment, and at the same time, increased the visibility of audiobooks. While it is not touched upon within the same list, another related point is the increased popularity of podcasts and the large investment in the listening platform Audible.¹³ They paved the way for the return of audiobooks. When you are used to listening to podcasts, the logical step to an audiobook is an easy one. This development reinforces the number of apps that are available for audio, which in turn reinforces the popularity of podcasts and audiobooks.

Third, the diversifying of devices has allowed for listening everywhere, from connecting your phone to your car stereo, to asking Siri or Alexa to put on an audiobook at home. Thus, not only have smartphones become an inherent part of society, but also other digital developments have increased the ease of listening everywhere.

Fourth, the number of books¹⁴ and audiobooks is growing exponentially. Because the competition is fierce, there is a need to distinguish oneself. Publishers can do this by making high-quality audiobooks.

Finally, you can multitask while listening to books. It has become more and more common to multitask, to always be on the move and be busy. While reading a book requires you to focus your eyesight solely on the book in front of you, audiobooks only occupy your ears. It is regarded as an equivalent to listening to music. It is thus not surprising that there are many studies (qualitative and quantitative) that show audiobooks

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ B.F. Lavoie and R.C. Sconfeld, "Books without Boundaries: A Brief Tour of the System-wide Print Book Collection", *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 9 (2006), p. np.

are the most popular among readers that are in motion. Have and Pedersen refer to this as “turning wasted time into quality time.”¹⁵

Negative and Positive Sides

We have now seen why audiobooks were able to gain ground within society. Not only have they made a comeback, but they are more popular than ever before. This of course has its consequences. When audiobooks are researched, most of the time, they are grouped together with e-books: both are products of the digital revolution, both can enrich a person’s reading experience,¹⁶ both allow you to take many books with you, without the weight of the physical books, and both change the way we read.¹⁷

There are groups that consider this as a negative development. “Since radio, cinema and television began to challenge printed media from the beginning of the 20th century, speculations about the “death of the book” arose, suggesting that it would be slowly replaced and erased by these new technologies.”¹⁸ This sentiment is understandable and definitely not surprising, and this fear for the replacement of physical books and bookshops is shared by many. The developments seem to be too fast and losing the book as a physical object seems undesirable. But what needs to be kept in mind is that something new does not automatically mean the death of something else. And, more importantly, when you hold on to the past too much, you cannot benefit from new developments.

In addition to audiobooks allowing us to being able to listen to

¹⁵ I. Have and B. Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks*, p. 138.

¹⁶ B.A. Rogowsky, B.M. Calhoun and P. Tallal, “Does Modality Matter? The Effects of Reading, Listening, and Dual Modality on Comprehension”, *SAGE Open* 6 (2016), n. pag.

¹⁷ L. C. Larson, “E-Books and Audiobooks”, *The Reading Teacher* 69 (2015), pp. 169–177.

¹⁸ A. Albrechtslund, “Digital Audiobooks”, p. 235.

books while doing other things, they have other advantages as well. Several studies show that multimodality can improve our recollection.¹⁹ Furthermore, being able to adjust certain settings can allow us to concentrate for longer periods of time.²⁰ It might also help to drive away fatigue and boredom when performing tasks where you need to concentrate for longer periods of time (like driving).²¹ Having more input can help you stay awake during longer drives. Also, it makes the story come alive.²² Hearing the different voices and the special rhythm of a voice helps with distinguishing characters and the ease of following a storyline.

Schools and teachers especially have been experimenting with the benefits of audiobooks. Since they occupy themselves with methods to make students remember the most information, a combination of reading and listening to text could be advantageous. Moreover, older audiences should not underestimate what new technologies can bring:

I've come to believe that translations from print to sound enhance access to a work. You can listen while you are driving, walking, sometimes even when you are working. You can transport what were heavy paper volumes on discs, iPods, and laptops. You can still enjoy the book privately riding on a packed commuter train, or sipping an espresso in your favorite coffee hangout. You can carry all two dozen Travis McGee novels in your purse or pockets and pull them out when you have a moment. For us older folks, the new media allow us to [...] turn up the volume in our earphones, without intruding on the privacy of others.²³

¹⁹ L.C. Larson, "E-Books and Audiobooks".

²⁰ L.C. Larson, "E-Books and Audiobooks".

²¹ R.J. Nowosielski, L.M. Trick and R. Toxopeus, "Good Distractions: Testing the Effects of Listening to an Audiobook on Driving Performance in Simple and Complex Road Environments", *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 111 (2018), pp. 202–209.

²² J.N. Berry, "A Media Message: Moving to Another Medium Makes Books More Accessible", *Library Journal* 138 (2013), p. 10.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 10.

Conclusion

Audiobooks are slowly gaining a prominent position in our lives mostly because of all the developments that the digital revolution has brought us. Our devices allow us to do many activities on the move, but they also have other, more negative connotations. Many fear the death of the printed book through increasingly easier access to other forms of entertainment. This should however not blind society to the advantages that digitality can bring and, as discussed in this essay, how useful some of these developments (like audiobooks) can be. Let this be a reminder for all booklovers: cuddle your physical books as much as you want but keep an open mind to the benefits new technologies can bring.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albrechtslund, A., “Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences”, *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research* 32 (2016), pp. 235–237.
- Berry, J.N., “A Media Message: Moving to Another Medium Makes Books More Accessible”, *Library Journal* 138 (2013), p. 10.
- Klein Lankhorst, M., “Wordt zelf lezen ouderwets?”, *De Correspondent*, 14 June 2017, <<https://decorrespondent.nl/6897/wordt-zelf-lezen-ouderwets/2891251919160-5a5b335c>>, (27 October 2018).
- Klein Lankhorst, M., “Zo krijg je niet-lezers aan het lezen”, *De Correspondent*, 2 May 2018, <<https://decorrespondent.nl/8231/zo-krijg-je-niet-lezers-aan-het-lezen/3450470428680-fd201d97>>, (27 October 2018).
- Cain, S., “We’re All Ears for Audiobooks – and Here Are Some of the Best”, *The Guardian*, 9 April 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/shortcuts/2018/apr/09/audiobooks-best-sales-doubled-past-five-years-commuters-men-25-44-purchases>>, (28 October 2018).
- Have, I. and Stougaard Pedersen, B., *Digital Audiobooks : New Media, Users, and Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
- Larson, L.C., “E-Books and Audiobooks”, *The Reading Teacher* 69 (2015), pp. 169–177.
- Lavoie, B.F. and Sconfeld, R.C., “Books without Boundaries: A Brief Tour of the System-wide Print Book Collection”, *Journal of Electronic Publishing* 9 (2006), p. np.
- Nowosielski, R.J., Trick, L.M. and Toxopeus, R., “Good Distractions: Testing the Effects of Listening to an Audiobook on Driving Performance in Simple and Complex Road Environments”, *Accident Analysis and Prevention* 111 (2018), pp. 202–209.

Rogowsky, B.A., Calhoun, B.M. and Tallal, P., “Does Modality Matter? The Effects of Reading, Listening, and Dual Modality on Comprehension”, *SAGE Open* 6 (2016), n. pag.

