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# Memory of Reading in the Digital Age: Backlisted and The Book Review Podcast

by Nataliya Tolstopyat

“No matter how deep or obscure your interests are, there is a podcast for you, or there is (relatively) little stopping you making your own”, Dario Llinares and others suggest in their introduction to the book “Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media” (2). In the past few years, there has been a clear surge in the number of podcasts with book-related content.

Readers can currently choose from a wide range of podcasts that focus on various genres, authors and themes. These podcasts are platforms for discussing literary works and trends in publishing, hosting interviews with authors, and promoting reading, thereby contributing to the broader literary discourse.

For example, the *New Books Network*, founded by historian Marshall Poe, is a consortium of podcasts whose style and identity are formed around the goal of introducing “serious authors to [a] wider public” (“New Books Network”). It features interviews with academics and authors of new non-fiction books across various subjects, thereby enriching public discourse on literary topics (“About the New Books Network”).

Similarly, Corey Olsen, known as “The Tolkien Professor,” launched a podcast series of the same name that investigates the works of J.R.R. Tolkien (“About the Show”). His efforts have made scholarly discussions on Tolkien’s literature accessible to a broader audience, exemplifying how podcasts could bridge the gap between academic analysis and public interest in literary subjects.

There are many other independent literary (informally known as ‘bookish’) podcasts<sup>1</sup>, produced by ordinary readers who aim to share their love of reading, as well as those organized by different parties from the publishing industry, such as publishers or booksellers.

Their audio shows are available on multiple platforms thanks to the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) web feed technology which enables subscribers to receive automatic updates on new content, such as articles, podcasts and news reports. This protocol ensures that podcasts in our apps, like Spotify or Apple Podcasts, are up to date and in chronological order without any extra steps (“How Do RSS Feeds Work?”). Podcasters upload their audio files on one platform and they are then sourced by other platforms to create an easier user experience for listeners (Llinares et al. 8–10).

At the same time, it has been suggested that podcasting should be viewed not only as a media object or a distribution technology, but also as a specific cultural form (Bonini 26). Tiziano Bonini describes podcasting as:

“A complex hybrid cultural form constantly reproduced by an evolving network of different, and dynamic, clusters of human (audio producers, editorial curators, software developers, graphic designers, listeners) and non-human actors (platforms, recommender algorithms, mobile media devices, distribution technologies, and internet infrastructures).” (26)

The nature of podcasts can be investigated further and more systematically from the perspective of media convergence. This phenomenon describes the merging of several aspects of information and communication technologies, infrastructures

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the term ‘Bookishness’, see Pressman.

and media content (Flew and Rui Liu, 27). Media convergence is traditionally investigated through technological, industrial, and social dimensions. This concept of media convergence provides an opportunity to investigate how modern media ecosystems work.

Henry Jenkins (2006) defines convergence as the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences”. This definition highlights how traditional boundaries between different forms of media have eroded, leading to an interconnected media landscape in which digital platforms, print media, and audiovisual content coexist and enhance each other. Although some researchers claim that one can see podcasts only as a reiteration of radio (Llinares et al. 26), they remain ecosystems that demonstrate their own rules and conventions in terms of convergence.

Podcasts about books are not only forums for literary discussions but can also be seen as spaces of collective memory. Examining literature, authors, genres, and publishing histories, they actively engage with what Alison Landsberg (144) calls *prosthetic memory*. These are memories that individuals acquire through media engagement, even if they have not lived through the experiences themselves (Landsberg 146).

Readers engage, for example, with the books they haven’t necessarily read or wouldn’t have encountered otherwise. Podcasts thus contribute to the trove of cultural memory, shaping how literary heritage is remembered and shared across digital communities, sometimes even without prior encounter of listeners with books and stories featured in podcasts.

This article aims to investigate through the modified framework of media convergence how two podcasts on book-related content, *Backlisted* and *The Book Review*, build their community of

listeners, contribute to the literary landscape and create space for memory of books and readers. The modified framework includes four selected aspects of convergence: Technological, cultural, economic and social. The following sections examine what each of these four dimensions of convergence imply.

### **Technological Convergence**

Technical convergence, firstly, results from the conversion of content into digital formats. The content which was formerly transmitted via different media can now be consumed and interacted with within a single digital device (Jenkins 293). For bookish communities, technological convergence has created multiple opportunities for engagement. Readers can access audiobooks, e-books, book reviews, and podcasts from the same device, facilitating a more immersive and uninterrupted literary experience. A user can, with one click, switch from the audiobook to an e-reader app and post a direct review all within one device. Podcasts, in particular, can serve as a bridge between traditional literary culture and digital engagement, allowing listeners to engage with authors, critics, and fellow book enthusiasts.

### **Cultural convergence and participatory culture**

Technological convergence often coincides with a convergence of different actors. While there was previously a strict division between producers and consumers of information, digitisation has revolutionized how communities form and interact by providing diverse channels for communication and engagement. Heeremans describes podcasting spaces as “relatively open, accessible, and democratising internet distribution technologies (Heeremans 58), so any amateur podcaster may record and publish their episodes at any time. In addition to users becoming producers of their own

shows, their listeners can engage in co-creation and circulation on new content (Jenkins 290).

For instance, individuals now can comment in online forums, leave their questions to hosts in social media groups, and live-stream events using their smartphones, tablets, or computers, breaking down some of the traditional barriers to community participation. As such, listeners have an opportunity to become prosumers (Llinares et al. 26; Jenkins 246). This type of convergence has led to the emergence of participatory cultures, where users actively contribute to content creation, sharing, and discussion.

The rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning has expanded the capabilities of cultural convergence. Personalized content recommendations on platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Fable and Goodreads use AI-driven algorithms to connect users with content that matches their interests, further deepening their engagement with literary communities (McHugh 181).

It should be added that negative cases, like the Fable AI controversy (Folta), could arise from the use of AI in digital community building as well. The app Fable, used by readers to track their progress and comment on books, released a “Reading Wrap” in 2024 that aimed to provide app users with personalised statistics of their reading that year. Unfortunately, their AI-generated summaries featured racist, sexist and homophobic comments and suggestions. Thus, AI involvement in personalization of content should be taken with caution.

### **Economic Convergence**

Economic (or industrial) convergence refers to the collaboration and blending of different media industries, leading to innovative content production and distribution methods. This convergence

has enabled traditional media entities to adapt to digital trends, thereby reaching wider audiences and fostering community growth (Jenkins 110).

In bookish communities, industrial convergence has manifested in the growing connection between publishing houses and digital media platforms. Large publishing companies such as Penguin Random House and HarperCollins have partnered with literary podcasts, YouTube channels, and social media influencers to market their books, present their authors, and engage with readers. These partnerships help amplify books beyond traditional print advertisements and bookstore promotions, reaching a global audience via digital channels (Llinares et al. 16).

### **Social Convergence**

The social aspect of convergence implies simultaneous use of different media. Henry Jenkins does not explicitly use the term “social convergence” in *Convergence Culture* (2006). He refers to the social dimension of convergence when he writes that convergence occurs “within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others” (“Convergence” 3) and it implies connecting information from various platforms and devices (“Convergence?”). Furthermore, social convergence can be seen as forms of communication and content exchange that became common due to social media proliferation (Flew and Rui Liu 27). Because of processes of social convergence, personal and communal communication channels increasingly blend, allowing individuals to engage in both private and public interactions within the same platforms.

In bookish communities, social convergence is evident in the rise of virtual book clubs, author Q&A sessions, and interactive social media campaigns. Platforms like Reddit and

Discord host book-centric discussions that complement podcast content, creating vibrant literary conversations beyond the audio experience. For podcasts there are various ways of simultaneous communications, and even content creation.

For example, listeners simultaneously may be listening to a podcast on their phone and writing a comment or review of the book featured in the podcast. They can comment on podcast episodes, suggest future topics, and even participate in live-streamed podcast recordings, which illustrates direct communication with podcasters either in the studio, or in the chat. This strengthens the connection between content creators and their audience.

So, how do independent literary podcasts *Backlisted* (Figure 1) and *The New York Times* hosted *The Book Review* fit within this version of a media convergence framework?



Figure 1: *Backlisted* Podcast logo and subtitle (“*Backlisted*”)

*Backlisted* is a literary podcast co-hosted by John Mitchinson and Andy Miller, focusing on bringing new life to old books (Mitchinson). Each episode features a discussion about a specific book, often with guest contributors, aiming to rekindle interest in lesser-known literary works.

### Technological Convergence

The *Backlisted* podcast exemplifies technological convergence by integrating various digital platforms to distribute and promote its content. The podcast is accessible through its official website

and available on multiple podcast platforms (e.g. Apple Podcasts, Spotify, etc) and on different devices. This multi-platform presence ensures that the podcast reaches a broad audience, catering to different listening preferences and developing a sense of intimacy (Berry 402).

### **Economic Convergence**

*Backlisted* operates at the intersection of publishing and digital media. First, John Mitchinson, one of the co-hosts, is a co-founder of Unbound<sup>2</sup>, a crowdfunding publishing platform, who brings his expertise in the field to the book discussions.

This connection bridges the gap between traditional literary culture and contemporary digital content creation, also because it often relies on discussions with authors, critics, and other literary figures (traditional authorities of the publishing industry), thus facilitating collaborations that enrich the content and provide diverse perspectives on the featured books.

Third, the choice of books in *Backlisted* follows the “give new life to old books” motto, as hosts choose them from the traditional literary canon to promote and reignite interest in these texts. At the same time, they present these classical books through a series of episodes with casual discussion, which makes literary criticism more accessible to listeners in the conversational podcast format.

### **Cultural Convergence**

The podcast fosters a vibrant community of fans by encouraging listener participation and interaction. Listeners are invited to share their thoughts on episodes and the books discussed through social media platforms, creating a two-way communication channel that enhances engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://unbound.co.uk/password> Currently, the website is not available to the public due to acquisition by Boundless IP Ltd. Registered users still should have access via their login details.

For instance, *Backlisted* has an active presence on platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram and Bluesky<sup>3</sup>, where listeners share their thoughts on episodes, comment on featured books, and engage with the hosts. In addition to digital interaction, hosts invite their audience members to attend live events and take part in book clubs. With the focus on “old books” (“Backlisted”) their listeners come into contact with the stories these books tell, and even have an opportunity to win a physical object, sometimes even a rare edition of a book (see Figure 2).

Backlisted promotes not only reading and re-reading classic canon, but allows people to come into contact with different editions that have their own history and charm. Interactions with books can also follow some rituals or steps, for example when the book for the coming episode is announced two weeks in advance, or listeners are invited to read a Christmas novel together with the hosts before the episode about it is released.



Figure 2: A give-away of the original Virago Modern Classics books by Backlisted on X.

3 Bluesky handle @backlisted.bsky.social

### Social convergence

Moreover, as agents of participatory culture, listeners might as well suggest books for discussion in the podcast, this way enhancing the sense of shared ownership. The hashtag #BacklistedPodcast allows for ongoing conversations that extend beyond the episodes themselves, creating an interactive book-loving community.

In addition, older books featured on *Backlisted* often gain renewed attention, with discussions spilling over into book-related forums. This multi-platform interaction reflects how social convergence enables podcasts to amplify their influence beyond the audio format. *Backlisted* also offers a Patreon membership, providing subscribers with additional content and benefits (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Post inviting listeners to share their reading recommendations in the comment section on Instagram (@backlisted\_)

This model not only generates revenue but also strengthens the sense of community among dedicated listeners by offering them exclusive content and a closer connection to the hosts of the podcast (McHugh 255).

Below we can see an example of additional options to which supporters of *Backlisted* on Patreon have access. For example, early access to ticket sales for live events, an opportunity to sit in on a podcast recording or free membership of the reading club including book postage expand what direct and indirect interactions listeners can have with podcast hosts. Moreover, listeners may suggest what books will be read and discussed by hosts in future episodes (e.g. Master Storyteller tier in Fig.4). It can be interpreted as an element of co-creation in terms of podcasting, while also being an element of engagement for the audience.

The image shows a screenshot of the 'Choose your membership' page for the podcast 'Backlisted' on Patreon. The page is dark-themed with three membership tiers presented in light-colored boxes. The 'Locklistener' tier is highlighted as 'MOST POPULAR'.

Membership Tier	Price	Key Features
Backlistener	\$7.50 / month (plus VAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early access to each new Backlisted episode</li> <li>An ad-free experience</li> <li>Guest and book announcements before the show is released</li> <li>Our heartfelt thanks</li> </ul>
Locklistener (Most Popular)	\$14.50 / month (plus VAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two exclusive bonus episodes of Locklisted each month (in which Andy &amp; Nicky share what they've been watching, reading and listening to while they should be preparing the main episode). <b>These episodes are only available to subscribers.</b></li> <li>Your name read out in a roll call of heroic patrons at the end of an episode</li> <li>A weekly music blog written by Andy Miller <b>exclusive to Locklisted patrons</b></li> <li>Early access to each new Backlisted episode</li> <li>An ad-free experience</li> <li>Guest and book announcements</li> <li>Our fervent thanks and gratitude</li> </ul>
Master Storyteller	\$29 / month (plus VAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Two exclusive bonus episodes of Locklisted each month</li> <li>Early notification and complimentary tickets to all Backlisted live events</li> <li><b>new</b> Biannual live Backlisted bookclub online event exclusive to Master Storytellers</li> <li>Suggest a book we cover on the show</li> <li>Your name read out as a member of the Most Honourable Guild of Master Storytellers at the end of an episode</li> <li>Early access to each new Backlisted episode</li> <li>An ad-free experience</li> <li>Backlisted book and guest announcement</li> <li>Our ongoing love and respect</li> </ul>

Figure 4: Backlisted membership plan on Patreon

On December 21st 2024 the hosts of Backlisted posted their New Year's greetings on Instagram:

“It’s been a wonderful year for Backlisted. As we look back on some of our highlights, we want to say a warm thank you to all our fantastic guests, our listeners, the team @foylesforbooks for helping us host some great live events and our thriving community on Patreon. We so appreciate your generosity in lending us your ears.[...]” (@backlisted\_ 31 December 2024)

In this post they highlight multiple social interactions they engaged in: live events, Patreon supporters, as well as guests and listeners, who constitute the centre of their community.

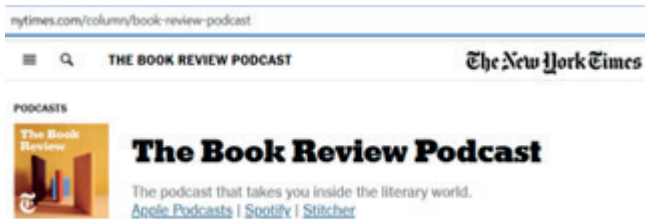


Figure 5: *The Book Review Podcast* thumbnail logo and the subtitle (“*The Book Review Podcast*”).

*The Book Review* (Figure 5) is a podcast produced by *The New York Times*, featuring discussions on the latest books, interviews with authors, and insights into literary trends (The New York Times). Hosted by editors from *The New York Times Book Review*, the podcast provides listeners with professional critiques and in-depth analyses of contemporary literature.

### Technological Convergence

As a product of *The New York Times*, *The Book Review* podcast benefits from the newspaper’s robust digital infrastructure. Episodes are available on *The New York Times* website, integrated seamlessly with related articles and reviews via links and embedding of the podcast track. In addition, the podcast is

distributed across major podcast platforms, ensuring accessibility for a wide audience, as listeners don't have to be on the New York Times web page to access the podcast.

### **Economical Convergence**

*The Book Review* podcast represents industrial convergence by merging traditional print media with digital broadcasting of its audio content. *The New York Times*, a longstanding traditional print newspaper, expands its reach and adapts to changing media consumption habits through the podcast. This way not only the podcast benefits from substantial support and promotion, but the newspaper also engages in the popular modern discourses via audio format.

### **Cultural Convergence**

Through the lens of social convergence, several trends can be observed. First, listener interaction and engagement – while *The Book Review* podcast does not have a dedicated forum, it fosters engagement through The New York Times' social media platforms, such as X and Facebook. Readers and listeners often comment on book-related posts, share their opinions, and discuss episodes with fellow literature enthusiasts online.

Second, the podcast frequently features interviews with authors, publishers, and literary critics, making it a participatory space where audiences can hear directly from industry professionals. This guest participation helps foster a sense of literary ecosystem around the podcast.

*The Book Review* Podcast fills the literary sphere with formal and informal discussions around stories, with focus on writing and publishing. This form of book discussion allows listeners to enrich their own knowledge of books and to feel like part of a group, part

of a community. They passively engage with professionals in the sphere when they listen to a podcast, and actively interact with each other on social media or in person to exchange impressions and thoughts on books.

### Social convergence

Further, there is a general tendency towards cross-media influence: episodes often influence book conversations across multiple media channels. For example, a book featured on *The Book Review* podcast might trend on X, be reviewed in *The New York Times*, or be recommended on other literary platforms, contributing to a larger, interconnected literary community, where listeners can investigate book recommendations on their phone, while listening to the podcast on their laptop, for example.

Overall, curating their presence across different platforms allows *The Book Review* to interact with readers, for instance by asking them to submit questions in chat, and the podcast hosts responding in a short video format with further book recommendations (see Figure 6).

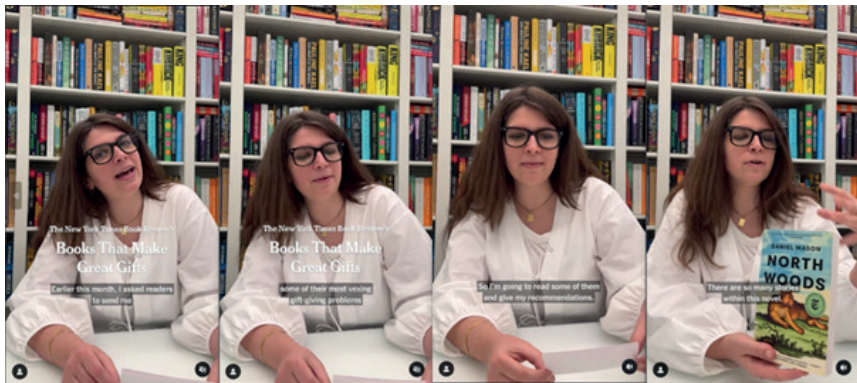


Figure 6: Joumana Khatib, an editor at *The New York Times Book Review*, recommends a few books to readers looking for gifts for their loved ones in the Instagram reel for *The Book Review* Podcast account (@nytbooks).

It is worth noting that communication with podcast hosts happens via multiple platforms and social media channels for a technical reason. Podcasts have to rely on these platforms for exchanges with their audience, as not all comments across podcasting platforms (e.g. Spotify, Apple Podcasts, etc.) are collected and sent to the hosting platform directly (Haahr and MacLean). As a result, podcast hosts aim to interact with their community members on social media or forums, rather than manually follow the comments left to individual episodes across all platforms.

### **Memories of Books Gone by**

Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memories (144) could be used to describe the memories that podcast listeners develop as they share in the stories and experiences of the hosts, even if the book of the episode has not been read. Here, one can argue that all podcasts have an opportunity to form the ways their subjects will be remembered. Accessibility of all episodes of *Backlisted* or *The Book Review* permits the spread of formal literary criticism, as well as casual discussions of a books' merit and importance through time and space, as far as digital communities allow.

### **Conclusion**

This article set out to examine how two literary podcasts, *Backlisted* and *The Book Review Podcast*, function within a landscape of literary content and thus foster a community of listeners and shape the ways books and stories are remembered. The podcasts' activities in the field of book-related content production were examined through a modified media convergence framework that builds on Henry Jenkins's framework to structure the podcasts' technological, industrial, cultural, and social convergence dimensions.

Technological and industrial convergence allow both investigated podcasts to spread the word about new and old books while moving between various online and offline platforms (printed newspapers, social media platforms, live meetings with listeners, videos on YouTube or Instagram, audio on Spotify and Apple via RSS feed, etc.).

As Dario Llinares commented: Convergence culture certainly buttresses the assertion that podcasting is ‘just another distribution channel’ offering consumers access points to content that is increasingly produced with such mobility in mind. (Llinares 127) In addition to these points of digital accessibility, these literary podcasts engage with their audience, as per social convergence rules. Listeners of podcasts, who are commonly also readers of discussed books, can influence the content podcasters create via suggesting discussion and recording of works that they find interesting.

Moreover, they communicate with podcasters and their teams indirectly via comment sections across all platforms that these podcasts are presented on. Direct communication is also possible in case of live recording or a Q&A hosted by the podcasts.

Another useful solution here is donation platforms (e.g. Patreon) that fostered the subscription-based community of devoted fans. *Backlisted*, for example, actively uses Patreon subscriptions to sustain the podcast (together with advertising), but foremost, to communicate directly to the dedicated audience of their podcast. Meanwhile, *The Book Review* is supported by the *New York Times* newspaper platform, which allows them to focus on production of book-related content and not financial survival of their podcast.

Another common trait that both the independently produced *Backlisted* and newspaper-sponsored *The Book Review* share is the

connection their book discussions create between listeners. Hosts share their opinions and experiences of reading and critiquing the books, which not only promotes the books and literary discussions but also fosters ties within the community of their fans.

While listening to a formal or casual podcast discussion, they create shared memories of reading, of stories and of mutual understanding of (or disagreement on) their values in cultural space. Listeners can re-visit older episodes at any time (they usually remain accessible unless hosts take them down) as if looking through a library of previously discussed books.

This way podcasts contribute to the memory of the literary community. Here, however, lies the difference between the two: *Backlisted* aims to give new life to old books thus directly reaching to the past and remembering and rethinking literary canon with the modern perspective of ordinary (albeit well-read) readers.

Conversely, *The Book Review* stems from a long lasting tradition of publishing, editing and formal reviewing (due to its The New York Times roots), which it further institutionalizes via interviews with literary critics and authors as staples of the literary sphere.

Finally, the scope of this article is limited and leaves more space for further investigation of growing interconnectedness between podcasts, authors, readers / listeners and various technological platforms and methods that enable growth and proliferation of literary communities both in virtual and physical worlds. For further research, one just needs to find the right literary podcast, no matter how “deep or obscure your interests are” (Llinares et al. 2).

### About the Author

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*Her publications include: “BookTube, Book Clubs and the Brave New World of Publishing” (2018), “Close Listening: Bookish Podcasts during the COVID-19 Pandemic” (2022) and she is a co-author of the article “Online Learning, Library Access and Bookcase Insecurity: A German Case Study” in Bookshelves in the Age of the COVID-19 Pandemic (2022).*

*Her interests include digital reading communities, podcasting, publishing, and literature in the digital age.*

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