Host: Dan Cohen, Dean of Libraries and Vice Provost for Information Collaboration at Northeastern University.

Dan Cohen: Hundreds of podcasters from universities, public radio stations, and independent podcasting companies met recently at the Sound Education Conference at Harvard, to discuss the state of educational podcasting. Today on What’s New, it’s me, Dan Cohen, giving one of the keynotes about how podcasts can bridge the academic public divide.

Doug Metzger: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to church. You guys are a fine looking congregation. My name is Doug Metzger, and welcome to Harvard, welcome to the first annual Sound Education festival and conference. This event brings together producers and hosts from all over the planet. The voices in this building right now, the engineers, the technicians, the producers, and the writers together, we teach for millions of hours a day. We are an unofficial university, and a large one, and we've just sprung into existence in a remarkably short period of time, and podcasting, educational podcasting and radio shows, have suddenly become one of the main conduits to human learning. At this moment, our courses are being listened to during morning commutes, and jogs, dog walkings, and bathtub scrubblings, and leaf rakings, and goodness knows what else. While we have all separately agonized over the smallest details of our projects, WAV files, and compression settings, and fade outs, and fade ins, we're here today because we are all a part of something.

Doug Metzger: There is an incredible diversity of educators in this building today. We have faculty members who in spite of their notoriously blocked up schedules, take time to produce educational audio shows for the general public. We have some really particularly successful educational radio hosts, whose organizations produce marvelous educational content for the general public on shoestring budgets, and often merciless time frames. Most of all, maybe, we have independent educational podcasters like me, who are normally atomized, and spread out all over the world, but have come together today to feel that they're a part of something bigger. We’re here to get to know one another, to make friends, and to step out from the sometimes lonely world behind the microphone, and celebrate the work that we have done. In an era of disquieting political polarization and amnesia toward history, educational audio asks us to step out from the familiar corridors of our thoughts and opinions, and learn new stuff.

Doug Metzger: While the optimism that we have individually is going to vary from person to person about the work that we do, I think that everybody in this building right
now feels that we're probably doing more good than harm. Thanks again for coming to our event, and all the hard work that you do, and I want to introduce our morning keynote, Dan Cohen.

Dan Cohen: Hi. Thanks for that kind introduction, Doug, and I just want to thank Doug, and Zach, and the many other, it sounds like dozens of other people, who have helped to put together this conference. I've always found podcasting, I had a prior podcast starting in 2007, before What's New called Digital Campus, which we just put together by the seat of our pants. I've always found that DIY sort of punk way of going about putting audio together to be attractive, a lot of what I do in my job is much more formal. I usually wear a tie. I'm not wearing a tie today, but it shows that there's really an opportunity here to put together incredible audio around education. I want to talk today a little bit about that, and the permeability between the academy and the outside world. First of all, I just ... I want to take a moment to be happy to be in Andover Hall. I think a lot of people don't know that I actually received a master's degree in theological studies from Harvard Divinity School many years ago. It's great to be back.

Dan Cohen: It's great to feel the spirit of studying religion, which I always found to be about, obviously, the biggest problems, the biggest truths. So many of them really unanswerable, and we can approach those higher truths, but maybe not ever attain them. It really ... Studying in this hall reminded me, and I think should remind us here at the beginning of the day about the incompleteness of human knowledge, and the fallibility of human knowledge, and I won't say more about that other than to say, I actually think it's directly related to what I want to talk about today, which is the way we do communicate academic knowledge. The fallibility, and the way that we as professors, and educators, and researchers communicate our work is not in this fallible way. It's, especially to the outside world, it is communicated in other ways. Our formal communications take other forms that are, shall we say, braggadocios. They take the shape of the monograph, or the academic article, and those kinds of formats are specifically formatted, they are specifically given scholarly apparatus, like the footnote to dress to impress.

Dan Cohen: They're dressed to impress our peers. That is in fact the point. Much of my academic work has been written in such a way as to impress my peers. I'll be frank about that. It relates to other things, but obviously it relates to the way we go about getting tenure, the way we communicate these things, again, is in formal structures that have abstracts, and bibliographies, and pointers, and data, and visualizations. These things are understood. They're dressed to impress one's peers. On the other side of the academic house, farther south from us right now, there are ... There's a university communications department, and a very important part of the university. University communications office is of course intent upon impressing the outside world, so they have other formats like the press release, or the article, that sort of glossy magazine article, that are intended to receive coverage beyond the walls of academia. Those also have a structure to them.
Dan Cohen: If you’ve ever read a university communications press release, they’re written in a very narrow lane. They are crowded with spunky crafted quotations that come from a world in which everything, everything is a breakthrough. We know about these formats, and I’ll stop talking about them here. We’re here for podcasts but I just want to highlight here at the start, the formats that we’re used to in the university. I’ve been in the academy, with the exception of my years at a non-profit, the Digital Public Library of America that Doug mentioned, I’ve spent my life in the academy, and I’m extremely familiar with these formats. They’re comfortable to me. I can pick up a book, and make my way through it, read the introduction, look at the notes, get a really quick grasp of what is going on in a book, or an article. My colleagues are the same. What those are are genres. I want to talk about genres here. The press release and the academic article or the monograph may be about scholarly research, but they are in fact distinct genres.

Dan Cohen: I want you today, and this weekend, to think about your podcast in terms of its genre. Genres are actually incredibly helpful structures. They are commonly agreed upon forms of communication that provide identifying signals to the audience about what they’re reading, or viewing, or in the case of podcasts, listening to. Genres give the audience often unconsciously and rapidly a general category for creative work, which in turns, colors its reception. Genres prep the podcaster’s listeners’ ears, and mind, through repetition, recognition, and expectation. Those same words that I’ve talked about with the academic article, or the way I pick up a history book. Repetition, recognition, and expectation. I know something’s coming at the beginning, something’s coming at the end. There’ll be things in the footnotes. Conforming to a genre telegraphs structural information to the audience, makes audio more palatable and relatable. You can think here about podcasts elements like intro and outro music. Those are genre building.

Dan Cohen: They orient the listener, who after all might be tuning in for the first time, and communicate what kind of audio stream this is. This conference is about podcasts, but there can be, and indeed are, many genres of podcasts. Thankfully podcasts no longer occupy the vast spectrum between two white guys talking about technology, and three white guys talking about technology. This conference represents, as Doug just mentioned, is actually I think a really beneficial and quite wonderful flourishing of podcast genres. Now I want to talk about these kinds of genres. The kinds of genres that academic work works well in, and that can take maximum advantage of the medium while having the maximum impact outside the academy. Let’s talk here about how to situate academic and educational podcasts within the galaxy of potential podcast genres. I think here, and I think as a historian, it’s always helpful to look back just a little bit. I know that my colleague Liz downstairs is doing the same thing right now, but going a little farther back to the age of radio. I want to look back at the beginning of the web, and the forms of internet communication that flourished early on.
Dan Cohen: Still a young medium, only about three decades old, and since the advent of the web, and its ability to serve a wide array of texts in different lengths, and sizes, and contexts, we have in fact seen the birth of new genres of writing, and new genres that in fact challenge traditional writing, especially in those formats I just mentioned, that come out of the academy, and break out of the constraints, especially of print publication. Take the blog. Originally it began literally as a web log for the older people in the room. People remember going to the Netscape homepage, and literally seeing a list of links, and then of course in platforms like Live Journal, it kind of morphed into a diary place, and a place for personal musings, and then platforms emerged out of this early blog format, this web log format, moveable type, and then Word Press, that really did in fact act as platforms that were flexible, but were recognizable as genres because they all had reverse chronological, largely textual material, and accommodated posts of a certain length.

Dan Cohen: Because it lived on the web, and given these origins, the blog was colonized by a less formal, more free form style, and that beneficially allowed academics who adopted the blog to loosen up a big. A moment ago, I used the word braggadocios. I have to say, I've never used that word in an academic article that I am aware of. I would feel uncomfortable using that word, in fact, in a formal academic communication, but I've owned the domain name dancohen.org for 20 years. If I want to drop a braggadocios or two at dancohen.org on my blog, I will go ahead and do that, and you can't do anything about it, and I have tenure at this point, so. Thank you. More seriously, the blog, the genre of the blog didn't, and still hasn't, lined up with the strict structures needed for the peer-reviewed article. It still is very bad at doing things like footnoting, or having marginalia. It doesn't line up with other aspects of academia, so the article in the book still provide a sort of final, formal genre for academic research, but they don't accommodate well or often at all the detailed, day-to-day research process.

Dan Cohen: I want to underline this word for you, the day-to-day academic research process that led up to the book or article. Indeed, most academic writing involves obscuring those processes. Thank you for the recognition. It does. I think academics in the audience recognize this process. When we get to the particle or the book, the hand waving begins. The purple curtain is drawn. We start losing those informal words, and we start building that structure, that genre that we recognize as the article, or the academic monograph. But the blog, this new genre that emerged as part of the web, excels in extraordinarily helpful ways, in portraying the academic process, and so we actually now have a distinct genre of academic blog that I love, which I call the process blog, that emerged out of these platforms. For instance, one of the blogs that I subscribe to right now and I've got a big RSS reader still. I'm probably one of the few remaining people who looks at an RSS reader, but I subscribe to a blog of a particle physicist who is doing a daily report on building a fusion reactor.

Dan Cohen: Every day, he just posts a photograph of the electronics that they're hooking up, or the metal tubing, or the computer systems, and just explains it. I'm excited
about this thing. Look at this cool tool, and it's an amazing process to see happen that will never, ever end up in an academic article, that he will submit for formal reasons. It is extraordinarily cool, and it in fact shows the rudiments, the basics of his academic subject. How do you get two tiny particles to line up from opposite ends and hit each other? He talks about the need for really having a lot of screws and bolts, so that these pipes are lined up exactly right, and all of those elements that go into that process, that you don't normally hear, the blog has provided an outlet for that. The same way I have colleagues who blog in history about the ups and downs of archival research. Again, day-to-day, the finds, the drudgery. There's a lot of drudgery to looking through archives when you're writing a history book, the thousands of hours of research, the late night written stops and starts, the self-doubt.

Dan Cohen: Those sentiments cannot come out except maybe in a tiny little print in the acknowledgment section of a book, or the introduction of a book. They can't come out in the formal genre of the monograph or the article, but they can be revealed in a blog, and critically they can enrich and humanize academic work in a way that is recognizable, and relatable to the outside world. Like a good movie, a successful article or book also leaves on the cutting room floor dozens of other great scenes, half-baked, but still quite tasty thoughts that don't make their way into a book project, a swirl of evidence that has to, by necessity, be streamlined again into these recognizable peer reviewed formats. Blogging can be a powerful way to expose these notes from a field, to show ongoing glosses about one's research, that can fascinate the wider world in a way that a structured academic book or article cannot. I've talked about the blog, and I'm sure the gears are already moving in your mind about the ways that much of what I talked about, process, day-to-day work, the insights, the stops and starts, translate extraordinarily well to podcasts.

Dan Cohen: In a way, much better than the blog for reasons I'll now enumerate. Podcasts are wonderful ways to communicate the complex processes involved in acquiring new knowledge, and how to pass it on to students, and to show those bumps along the roads. The processes, the heartache, the excitement. Doug mentioned I did a podcast last week with an incredible young biochemist and engineer who is creating nano sensors. This is straight out of science fiction, when you think about it. She is creating these tiny little nano particles that go into the bloodstream, and they roam around like robots. When they find a specific molecule like lithium, or sodium, they light up, they fluoresce, and then she has a tattoo that she puts on your skin, and as that nano sensor goes underneath, it fluoresces, and the tattoo picks up that fluorescence, and communicates to her computer that you have X amount of lithium, or calcium, or sodium in your bloodstream. That is pretty cool.

Dan Cohen: She has articles that in preparation for this podcast, I always ... Because I'm a good historian, I like to read it all, so I always take the time to go into depth. I did not understand a single word of these articles, but I got her into our podcasting studio, and the first thing I wanted to know was she just did such a wonderful job on is, I've heard nanotechnology in the newspaper. I've seen those
braggadocios press releases, but what is it? How do you nanotechnology? Talk to me. You go in at 9:00 a.m. into your lab. What are you doing? She said the most remarkable thing in response to that question. She said, "You know what? It's actually exactly like making salad dressing." You said, "You've got these things, you've got oily bits, and you've got your salt and pepper over here, and we literally put them in a beaker, and we mix around these oily bits, and we kind of shake it around, and stir it around a bit, and then we weigh it a little bit, and it kind of emulsifies, and we pour it over things, and it hardens, and you just pull these things out."

Dan Cohen: She was just walking through, for the first time, frankly, I have no idea how you make these kind of little particles. It turns out it's like making salad dressing. That is a great story. It is not, again, in her article. It's assumed in her article that everyone who reads her articles will understand that process. They've done it themselves, but it is not something actually that the wider public ever hears, and that we do a very poor job in the academy communicating outside our walls. I had another guest last season on What's New, Dietmar Offenhuber, who has a very academic pursuit that we'll see in remote. He likes to study how trash circulates through cities, which I actually think is really interesting. He has a monograph on it. It has lots of social theory about the hidden aspects of a city. It's a wonderful book, but it definitely has a kind of academic structure. Got him in the studio just asking, how do you track how trash circulates through the city?

Dan Cohen: He said, "Well, I got a couple hundred GPS devices, and threw them in trash bins all around the city of Boston, and then hooked up my computer, and all of a sudden, look at this graph. You could see all these things moving, and then they get on a boat, and they go to China, and they go over here to Brazil and I learned all these things." He just walked through that process in a way, again, that was humanizing, that was fascinating, and that doesn't relate to urban studies, or informatics, or these kinds of things, but that is really about his work on a day-to-day basis. Podcasts can also frame academic expertise in a way that can thrill an audience. Just mentioned a couple of examples that way. I always like quoting Teller, who is the shorter, quieter magician in Penn and Teller, and he does speak, and when he speaks, when people ask him about magic, he always raises this point, which is that a big part, a central part of what makes magic, magic, what makes magic what it is, is that magicians will spend a ridiculous amount of time practicing something.

Dan Cohen: They will practice a specific skill, like bouncing a ball through a hoop, for hundreds and hundreds of hours, more hours than the audience believes is actually possible. They will get so good at something that it seems magical, and that actually it just relates to Teller literally practicing 10, or 12, or 18 hours a day on a new trick. It's more time than seems humanly possible. I think by this definition, there's a lot of magic in academia. Our colleagues spent years, they spend years and even decades decoding ancient papyri, trying to solve fantastically complex mathematical theorems, or tracking down the smallest bits of evidence in the archives, or assembling the largest data sets known to man. Audio done well can display what is, let's be frank about it, obsession. It's the
same. It's a parallel obsession to Teller's obsession. This obsession of academics audience, this willingness to put in the time, and I think as Teller notes, whenever he talks about this, and in the story, he notes that revealing how a magic trick is done, actually telling the audience which they do in their Las Vegas show, this is how this trick was done, which is by grit, and practice, and sheer will, actually enhances the experience from the audience.

Dan Cohen: They still find it magical, and they're wowed in a kind of bigger way, a more appreciative way. It doesn't dissipate the magic, but it enhances it. Doing that on our podcast as well is important. I had a podcast guest last fall, Ellen Cushman, who is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, but didn't grow up speaking the Cherokee language, and the Cherokee language is down to ... There's only about 1,500 fluent speakers of the Cherokee language now in this country, and she decided that she needed to go and learn the language. She went to the reservation in Oklahoma, she spent years picking up a very, very complicated language, which she then spoke to us on the podcast, and just sort of vocalized what Cherokee sounds like. But Ellen took it a step further as an academic. She decided she needed to go back and trace and find every single document written in Cherokee in the early 19th century, because it turns out that the Cherokee language was one of the few languages that we know about, that we have access to today, that made the transition from a purely oral form to a written form.

Dan Cohen: That happened in the 19th century, not so long ago, Cherokee, which was just spoken among hundreds of thousands of people, one person came up with an alphabet of 85 letters, not Latin characters, but new characters, set things, the Bible, other documents that the community wanted into this language, and Ellen decided she needed to spend years, and now decades, tracking down this process of how a language goes from this oral form to a written form. What happens during that process? That is magical, and she will spend a tremendous amount of time in our library at Northeastern. We have a digital project that is scanning these documents, and showing them in parallel. That's tremendous, and magical. Finally, and I think most importantly, podcasts can portray the reality of academic work and inculcate appreciation of it better than written formats, including the blog. Because of the nature of the audio, and of course we're here today to talk about what's special about audio, and for me, hearing academics, there is something unique about the human voice that we should recognize here at the beginning of the day.

Dan Cohen: My wife is a developmental psychologist. We talk about babies a lot in our household, and she will always note that babies, one of the first things they do is differentiate the human voice, obviously, particularly the mother's voice and the father's voice, from all other sounds in the young child's universe. The human voice is special. We respond in different emotional ways to voices than to the written word. We are the most social of animals, and we're incredibly adept at picking up very subtle cues from the human voice—excitement, nervousness, ambivalence, assurance. All of us here have listened to a podcast. I'm sure you have had moments where if you read the transcript to the podcast, you would
not have picked up certain of those social emotional cues as you would when you actually listened to the podcast while walking your dog. The human voice also communicates one's humanity to the listener in a way that most academic writing has enormous trouble with. I think we should admit that.

Dan Cohen: Indeed, those academic structures, those genres that I started my talk with, were really never set up to communicate our humanity. They were there to communicate our knowledge to our peers, and to a network of knowledge, and to the future, but it's a good time to think about communicating that humanity. Setting up the right type of voice. Not the know it all voice, but the voice that is cautious, and thoughtful. The voice that's actually there when you are doing academic research. It's a different voice, and it's a voice that until we have this great flourishing of podcasts, you probably would not have heard. Podcasts are often criticized as raw, or unedited, but I think they can actually take advantage of that rawness, and the lack of edits, and the ums and the ahs. That is helpful, because it combines the expertise of academics with the informality of extemporaneous speech. That's what we hear on educational podcasts.

Dan Cohen: Done well, educational podcasts as a whole, the range of podcasts represented here today, it's 140 podcasts, they can foster audiences that may not always agree with us, or research, or conclusions, but these are audiences that can grasp much more deeply the very human pursuits of the academy, and how those pursuits relate to their lives. In his recent book How to Think, about how to talk across our current social and political divide, the literally scholar Alan Jacobs calls on us to foster what he calls like hearted, rather than like minded, audiences. Like hearted, not like minded audiences. We shouldn't be asking everyone to always agree with us, or set up audio streams that are just convince, convince, convince. That shouldn't be the goal. Instead we're cultivating as a group a receptivity to academic work. Receptivity to the subject matter of what we do, the relatability, and the hard work, and the starts and stops that happen beyond our formal writing, or the university communications department press releases.

Dan Cohen: Podcasts finally give us the opportunity to show the humanity, the humanness of academic practice. Something that significant portions of the public has lost sight of. Your podcast can be an important addition to this humanizing goal. One more step in expanding the audience of curious listeners, and the population of the like hearted. Thanks very much. What's New is a production of the Northeastern University Library, with engineering by Jon Reed, and production assistance by Evan Simpson, Debra Mandel, Jonathan Iannone, Debra Smith, Sarah Sweeney, and Brooke Williams. You can catch all of our episodes, show notes, and transcripts at whatsnewpodcast.org, and we’re available on iTunes, Google Play, and anywhere else you get your podcasts. You can follow us on Twitter, @podcastwhatsnew. We’d love to hear your thoughts and feedback. I’m Dan Cohen. See you next time on What’s New.