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What Every Advertiser Needs to Know About Podcast Metrics

A white paper from Authentic



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Introduction

With the growing popularity of podcasts, more and more brands and agencies are exploring the medium in search of opportunities that make the most sense for their brands.

Some media planners start their podcast research by asking coworkers what podcasts they listen to. Others browse iTunes. Still others reach out to radio contacts. All of which often leads to a confusing set of answers, data, metrics and pricing, with little more clarity than when the research process began.

Here's how one podcast advertiser put it to *Digiday*:

“The way that some of these tools piece together these download numbers can be bizarre, confusing, and not necessarily the most accurate representation of what’s actually happening... You’d be surprised how many podcasts don’t even have analytics on their downloads.”

In this white paper, we'll end the confusion around podcast measurement and empower you with the info and data you need to smartly develop a high level media plan, evaluate proposals and decide what's best for your brand. Here we address these questions important to podcast publishers and advertisers:

- What metrics are helpful and available for planning a podcast campaign?
- What metrics are helpful and available for counting ad delivery?
- Which metrics are inaccurate or misleading?
- How do metrics affect pricing?

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1 - Podcast Planning Metrics

What are the most accurate measures of podcast audience size?

An obvious place to start your exploration of podcast advertising is with understanding the relative audience sizes of various podcasts.

Podtrac has provided the leading measurement service for podcasts since 2005. In 2016, Podtrac introduced “**Monthly Unique Audience**” for the podcast industry. It's the same metric used for planning other types of digital media, and for the first time it's available for podcasts from Podtrac. **Monthly Unique Audience** from Podtrac is available:

- By podcast publisher across all of the podcast shows and episodes they produce
- By show for all of the podcast episodes they produce
- The above metrics are available for global and U.S. audience counts

Unique monthly audience is an important metric in digital media because it enables planners to consider monthly audience reach regardless of potential impressions served. And as with other media, the monthly unique audience metrics from Podtrac are consistent across publishers and shows whether the episodes post daily, twice a week, weekly, etc.

Here are a listing and definitions for Podtrac’s Monthly Unique Audience metrics:

Publisher-Level Audience Metrics

- **Monthly U.S. Audience by Publisher** - Unique U.S. audience to a publisher’s content across all shows they produce per month. This gives an accurate measure of the publisher’s U.S. podcast audience reach. Podtrac uses this metric to rank podcast publishers each month.
- **Monthly Global Audience by Publisher** - Unique global audience to a publisher’s content across all shows they produce per month. This gives an accurate measure of the publisher’s global podcast audience reach.

Show-Level Audience Metrics

- **Monthly U.S. Audience by Show** - Unique US audience to a podcast across all episodes posted per month. This gives an accurate measure of a show’s overall US reach.
- **Monthly Global Audience by Show** - Global audience to a podcast across all episodes posted per month. This gives an accurate measure of a show’s overall US reach.

- Note: “unique downloads per episode” (U.S. or global) is an episode-level metric vs a show-level metric and does not define a show’s monthly reach, since not every audience member downloads or listens to every show.

Podcast Industry Rankings

Using the U.S. Unique Audience by Publisher described above, Podtrac produces a monthly Ranking Report showing the top publishers in the industry by US audience. Podtrac is in a unique position to produce this report, because of its podcast measurement technology and its 10+ years of measurement relationships with substantially all of the top publishers in the industry.

2 - Podcast Ad Delivery Metrics

What are the most accurate measures of podcast ad delivery?

Numerous advertisers in podcasts over the last ten years can attest to the effectiveness of podcast advertising. How though is ad delivery measured? There are three techniques for measuring ad delivery:

- For “live read” ads and other ad types which are included in the episode prior to posting, the count of Unique Downloads for that episode (U.S. or global) equates to ad delivery.
- For auto-inserted ads stitched server-side, ad delivery is a count of Unique Downloads for specific versions of that episode containing the ad.
- For auto-inserted ads stitched client-side during playback, ad delivery is a count of ads actually played through the player.

Notes:

- A and B above are equally accurate measures of podcast ad delivery. Auto-inserted ads do not provide any more or less accurate counts of ad delivery than integrated “live read” ads. Together A and B are used most often in the podcast space.
- C above is most closely associated with plays, however this technique is impossible to implement for the majority of podcast delivery. This is because podcasts are usually delivered in podcast listening environments and apps that don’t report plays. Foremost among these are the Apple Podcast App and iTunes which account for over 65% of all podcast delivery and do not enable JavaScript for play reporting. As of

2016, a few non-Apple podcatchers provide playback data, but they account for such a miniscule portion of all podcast delivery as to be effectively irrelevant.

Here are a listing and definitions for podcast ad delivery metrics:

- **Unique Downloads (U.S. or global)** - This count represents the number of unique listeners who access a specific episode during the given time period.
- **Impressions (U.S. or global)** - This count is the same technical count as “unique downloads” when there is one ad position per advertiser per episode. When there is more than one ad position per advertiser per episode, then the impression count is Unique Downloads (U.S. or global) x the number of ad positions per episode. This definition applies to ad types 1 or 2 above.

3 - Inaccurate or Misleading Podcast Planning and Ad Delivery Metrics

Which metrics are wrong when it comes to podcast ad planning or ad delivery?

Historically, advertisers have not had a metric that sizes audience members by show or by publisher. They’ve had to rely on sub-optimal ways of estimating these figures to assess the relative popularity of shows and publishers or ad delivery. These metrics include:

- **Logfile Hits as a proxy for anything.** This is a count of all the individual requests to a piece of hosted media. A single download can spawn many separate hits to the target media file, so this figure has little correlation to actual delivery. The data is only collected for media hosted on Podtrac, and is only used for internal purposes.
- **“Raw” Hits as a proxy for anything.** Many podcast clients issue multiple requests to download a single media file for a single listener. This ratio is determined by the software developers, and has nothing to do with user behavior. The resulting raw counts are analogous to “hits” in the website space, and can overstate delivery by a **factor of 2x to as much as 10x**. “Raw” counts are thus no measure of actual podcast episode delivery or ad delivery. Unfortunately, “raw” stats are the most easily produced by fledgling podcast publishers, because they can be produced by simple and ubiquitous website analysis programs. And unfortunately, these “raw” counts are often reported erroneously as “downloads” or even “plays”. Caveat emptor.
- **Subscribers as a proxy for anything.** In the early days of podcasting, it was fashionable to track the number of times listeners / viewers clicked the “subscribe” button in iTunes to follow the feed for a given show. It soon became apparent that this had little durable relevance due to churn (i.e. - people unsubscribing either

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intentionally or automatically after failing to play the episodes). More recent approaches count the number of unique listeners / viewers who access the feed during a given period of time, but even this is a bit misleading, because it doesn't reveal anything about consumption of the actual episodes.

- **iTunes Rank as a proxy for anything.** iTunes provides continuous rankings of top podcasts overall and in over a dozen different categories. This ranking is based on recent podcast subscriptions rather than audience size, so new podcasts with smaller audiences are frequently ranked higher in iTunes than those with larger, established audiences.
- **Unique IP addresses.** Some older measurement systems attempted to de-dupe traffic simply by aggregating requests by IP address, but in the era of growing wireless delivery, this significantly undercounts delivery.
- **Total Monthly Unique Downloads as a proxy for audience reach.** While this is a valid measure of a show's or publisher's overall inventory, it doesn't provide any visibility into redundancy. For example, a show that produces episodes daily will deliver 7x as many downloads as a weekly show with the same number of subscribers.
- **Unique Downloads per Episode.** This is perhaps the best approximation of a show's audience size, but it undercounts due to audience churn. Not every listener downloads every episode of a show, so the listeners for one episode aren't the same as the listeners for another. The degree of overlap is highly variable and depends on a myriad of outside factors. Together, the unique listeners across multiple episodes form a greater total audience size than even the highest count of Unique Downloads per Episode.
- **Client-side ad play ping counts.** As noted above, the vast majority of podcast listeners come through Apple sources, and Apple software does not support pingbacks for ad plays. Web or app players that support ad pingbacks for ad plays constitute less than 10% of traffic per show.
- **Server-side ad play stream counts.** Some podcast technology providers claim to count stream duration from the server, however less than 5% of podcasts are on a streaming server. Podcasts are not listened to in the same way as online radio streams so many technologies for online radio don't apply to podcasts.
- **Server-side ad file packet download counts.** Some podcast technology providers believe that counting ad file download packets is a way of counting podcast ad streams. However, when users listen to simulated streams, podcast clients download and buffer several minutes of podcast content in advance of users hearing it, including ad files. All of which means ad file packet range server analysis does not offer an accurate measure of ad delivery and listening.



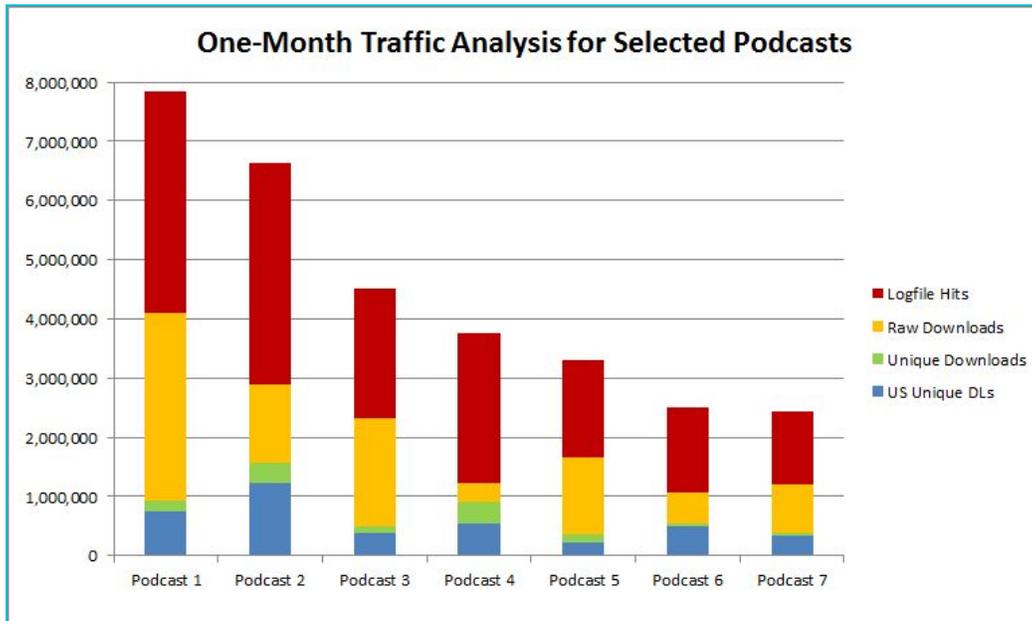


Figure 1 shows the traffic analysis of a top-ranked podcast for a single month. Totals are winnowed from Logfile Hits to Raw Requests to Unique Downloads to US-Only Unique Downloads. Logfile Hits grossly overstate user consumption.

Plays: A Largely Unavailable Metric

Plays is not an available metric in the podcast space for several reasons:

- Podcasts are either played in real time or downloaded for listening in the future. Due to privacy concerns, most podcatchers (iTunes and the Apple Podcast App in particular) do not provide any playback reporting. Play environments that do not support playback reporting make up over 90% of the market.
- Some downloaded episodes go unplayed, some are “binged” by listeners at a future time, and some are played multiple times. The ratios of these behaviors vary by device, software, show, day of the week, and other factors, so they are for the most part unknown outside of user focus groups. It is however notable that most podcatchers (and the Apple podcatchers in particular) automatically unsubscribe from feeds after a certain number of episodes go unplayed.
- Certain proprietary players provide playback information, but these handle such a tiny fraction of total podcast delivery that their data is anecdotal at best. User playback behavior in one podcatcher or for one show can not be generalized to others.

- Podtrac continues to monitor the evolution of the industry, and will provide data on podcast plays if and when it can be reliably produced for a significant portion of the industry.

4 - Pricing and Metrics

Podcast CPMs range from publisher to publisher, from \$5 to \$70. In some cases, the pricing differences are real, in others they're not because sometimes a publisher uses metrics which are misleading or inaccurate. Here's an example:

<i>Podcast Publisher</i>	<i>Podcast CPM</i>	<i>Metric</i>	<i>Metric Ratio to Actual Users</i>	<i>Effective CPM</i>
A	\$7	Logfile hits	10:1	\$70
B	\$16	"Downloads"	1.5:1	\$24
C	\$25	Unique Downloads / impressions	1:1	\$25

In this example, Podcast Publisher A lists a low CPM but it is really charging more than twice as much as Publishers B and C.

The IAB is coming out in support of the "unique" download or impression metric for podcasting. Short of plays, this is the most representative metric available, and as discussed above other available metrics available are misleading or inaccurate.

5 - Next Steps

Advertisers

Whether you're new to podcasts or have been advertising in them for years, here are some ways you can support industry metrics:

- Check out the latest Podcast Industry Rankings from Podtrac. If you request the detailed ranking report, we'll email you the latest ranking once a month.
- As part of your podcast planning process, ask each podcast publisher of interest for their "Monthly Unique Audience" counts for the previous month from Podtrac. If they don't yet have it, ask them to contact Podtrac. It's a free service, and it can supplement whatever other reporting they may currently use.
- Interested in advertising in top podcasts such as *This American Life* and *Serial*? Contact Podtrac Inc.'s ad services group, Authentic, at <http://www.authenticshows.com>.

Podcast Publishers

If you publish a podcast, we encourage you to use free Podtrac Measurement. It provides you with insightful reports, and helps advance the podcast industry with consistent metrics you can use for your show. You can start today at <http://podtrac.com>.

Technical Details

If you're interested in learning more about the Podtrac Measurement System, how it works, and technical definitions about the above metrics, check out the [Podtrac Measurement Methodology white paper](#).

If you have any questions or ideas for ways we can help. Email us at measurement@podtrac.com.

Thanks for your interest in podcasting.

About Podtrac Inc.

Launched at the first podcasting conference in 2005, Podtrac Inc is the leading podcast measurement and advertising services company. With the tremendous growth of podcasting, in 2016 Podtrac separated its offerings into two services to better serve the podcast industry.

- ***Podcast Analytics - Podtrac***

100% focused on podcast industry metrics and analytics. Podtrac provides analytics to thousands of podcasts including virtually all of the top podcasts and publishers. It's "unique monthly audience" metrics and monthly rankings of podcasts are industry firsts for podcasting.

[CONTACT PODTRAC AT PODTRAC.COM](http://podtrac.com)

- ***Podcast Advertising Services - Authentic***

Authentic is the new name of Podtrac's advertising services, providing advertising representation for 200 top podcasts including *This American Life*, *Serial*, *This Week in Tech*, and more. Authentic works with leading brand and direct response advertisers and agencies to reach their targets in the top podcasts we represent, managing some of the most successful and longest-running advertising efforts in podcasting.

[CONTACT AUTHENTIC AT AUTHENTICSHOWS.COM](http://authenticshows.com)