

# Podcasting and Education: Reflections on the Case of FreshEd

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## Highlights

- New media formats such as podcasts are revolutionizing the production and dissemination of knowledge in and outside of higher education. One danger is the rise of EdTech companies that have used the pandemic as an opportunity to increase profits as more individuals and systems of higher education rely on digital platforms and products.
- This report explores the revolutionary potential of podcasts as an education technology that does not necessarily further the privatization of education. The case of the FreshEd podcast is highlighted.
- The concept of “infrastructuralism” is used to show how an ethos of Open Science can challenge many exploitative academic conventions and social relations. The main problem of a digital infrastructure that does not use the profit motive, however, is sustainable financing.

## Keywords

Digital infrastructures, education technology, FreshEd, podcasts

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## Introduction

New media formats such as podcasts are revolutionizing the production and dissemination of knowledge in and outside of higher education. Some students are using podcasts as part of their data collection methods (Eringfeld, 2021); professors—myself included—have started their own shows, ranging in style from interviews to narrative storytelling; and universities and academic societies have embraced podcasts as part of their public relations and marketing strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced learning online for hundreds of millions of students worldwide, has heightened the reliance on digital audio content in teaching and learning. It's not surprising, as a result, that the number of podcasts on the Spotify audio platform, for instance, increased over 200 percent between 2019 and 2020 (Fischer, 2021). Academic publications on podcasts and education aren't far behind (Ferrer et al., 2020; Killean & Summerville, 2020; Naff, 2020; Rodman & Trivedi, 2020, etc.).

With revolution comes profiteering. EdTech companies see the pandemic as an opportunity to increase profits as more individuals and systems of higher education rely on digital platforms and products (Williamson & Hogan, 2021). Over US\$8 billion was invested in EdTech companies in the first three quarters of 2020 (Williamson & Hogan, 2021, p. 27). The university is no longer a physical entity; it now operates in a digital cloud. Podcasts are sent directly to one's phone or embedded inside Digital Learning Platforms, such as Moodle or Blackboard. Students learn outside of formal timetables, and professors reach audiences far larger than the number of seats in classrooms or conference halls. Data produced by users are monetized by EdTech companies—or, worse, used as a form of social control by university and nation-state alike.

I ask: Is it possible to harness the revolutionary potential of podcasts as an education technology without furthering the privatization of education? It is this specific question on which I reflect in this short essay, drawing on my experiences with the FreshEd podcast, which I started in October 2015. The essay begins with a theoretical discussion of digital infrastructures before turning to the case of FreshEd. I conclude by offering some reflections on the economic implications of podcasts on higher education.

## Digital infrastructure

Before turning to FreshEd and the meaning of “revolutionary potential,” it is important to theorize the relationship among education, technology, and economics in more detail. The intersection of education, technology, and economic transformations has been met with both euphoric visions of a future *technotopia* and dystopian predictions based on *technophobia* (Trend, 2001). From this dichotomous perspective, new technologies within education are seen as having the capability of either enhancing or destroying future societies. It goes without saying that EdTech companies fall on the *technotopia* side of the debate. Movies such as *Mad Max* depict *technophobia* in dystopian future worlds. Notwithstanding the possibility of either scenario, dichotomous thinking is hackneyed thinking.

An alternative way to conceptualize education and technology is as an emergent “digital infrastructure.” Such an idea offers the possibility to interrogate the construction (and deconstruction) of knowledge frameworks and social imaginaries through digital infrastructure (Marres, 2017). Thus, digital technology, such as the podcast, is not simply a contemporary form of mass communication that will either make the world (and teaching/learning) better or worse, but rather a material and immaterial system connecting (and changing) people and institutions across space and time. Moreover, digital infrastructures constitute forms of knowing and being that can reconfigure power relations, on which I will focus specifically when I turn to FreshEd.

To understand digital infrastructure in education, it is important not only to question the technology itself but also the way in which people interact through—or because of—the technology and the subsequent effect this has on existing knowledge frameworks. The concept of “infrastructuralism” is useful here because it highlights “the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes” of digital infrastructure through which people act and interact (Peters, 2015, p. 34). Digital infrastructuralism in education includes critical exploration of the everyday practices of, for instance, how online platforms are reshaping universities and employability discourses (e.g., Komljenovic, 2019), or how big data and algorithms interact with governance (Muellerleile & Robertson, 2018). Thus, the podcast, as a mundane technology accessible on the near-ubiquitous smartphone, is ripe to explore as an emergent digital infrastructure impacting (power relations within) education. One notable absence in this brief overview of digital infrastructure and podcasts is the realm of economics. This is a point I’ll return to by way of conclusion.

## The case of FreshEd

Let’s now turn to an example I know intimately: FreshEd. A look at the “infrastructuralism” of FreshEd reveals the revolutionary potential of podcasts inside the university. It also highlights the economic precarity that could cause a fatal flaw to the entire structure. First, some background.

As a non-profit organization registered in the United States, FreshEd produces podcasts on education broadly defined. FreshEd does not rely on advertisements or sponsored content, and listeners never pay. It is not connected to a university, academic society, or charity. It is independent. A team of academics and students interested in podcasts make FreshEd possible, working spare hours on different parts of the organization from editing to social media and from transcription to translation. All of FreshEd’s content is open-access and licensed under Creative Commons, allowing anyone to reuse and remix episodes so long as credit is given. This ethos contributes to Open Science and challenges many academic conventions and social relations, as will be outlined below.

The main product of FreshEd is called *FreshEd with Will Brehm*, which is an interview-style podcast that showcases cutting-edge research in the field of education, broadly defined. As is obvious by the name, I’m the host of the show, which is used in dozens of university courses

around the world and receives over 10,000 listens per month across 180 countries. Roughly, 40 episodes are released each year. The listenership can be broken into three main groups: students, professors/teachers/researchers, and development practitioners (such as people working for NGOs, the World Bank, or the U.N.).

Where is the revolutionary potential inside the FreshEd infrastructure? *FreshEd with Will Brehm* disrupts the common practice of placing research outputs behind paywalls. This may seem simple but is consequential within the academy. Through freely available interviews, the podcast circulates ideas that would otherwise be inaccessible to many, in particular, those listeners living in the Global South who attend universities that cannot afford the prohibitive costs of journal subscriptions. In this way, FreshEd points to knowledge dissemination strategies that exist outside of and not regulated by the for-profit publishing industry, which holds power over and extracts large economic concessions from many universities and nation-states (for the case of Sweden and Elsevier, see Widmark, 2018). Through informal conversations, episodes also make complex ideas easily understood. For this reason, many students studying in the Global North rely on FreshEd to complement their reading lists; they find understanding ideas through a conversational tone easier than reading at-times dense and jargon-filled academic publications. Many professors (at Berkeley, Edinburgh, Harvard, Hawaii, Hong Kong, Humboldt, Sydney, Penn, and many others) recognize this too, assigning episodes on their syllabi. Anecdotally, COVID-19 seems to have increased the prevalence of FreshEd being assigned in university courses. I know this because of the number of emails I've received from professors since 2020 stating as such.

True knowledge dissemination must go beyond the English-speaking world, however. Many *FreshEd with Will Brehm* episodes are therefore transcribed and then translated into other languages, including Chinese, French, Arabic, Portuguese, and Vietnamese. This process not only increases accessibility but also disseminates knowledge across a geography often overlooked by the Western academe. FreshEd plans to publish some of the translated transcripts as open-access volumes in the future. Its biggest footprint outside of the Global North is in the Chinese mainland, where FreshEd has business accounts set up on the leading podcast (Ximalaya) and social media (WeChat) platforms; this enables FreshEd to bring independent ideas to the Chinese market. In 2020, FreshEd set up a program that teaches Chinese high school students Chinese to English translation using *FreshEd with Will Brehm* episodes exclusively. Instead of charging a fee to these students to take the class (as is common), FreshEd pays them.

FreshEd's knowledge dissemination strategy goes beyond an English language podcast that is translated into other languages. FreshEd actively reverses this dissemination direction by recognizing the diversity of knowledge traditions worldwide. FreshEd is creating non-English podcasts that are then translated back into English. For instance, *Eduquê* is a Portuguese-language podcast created in collaboration with FreshEd, the University of Porto, and the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education. It launched in March 2021. The goal of *Eduquê* is to surface and

disseminate knowledge in the field of education and international development across the 228-million-person Lusophone world, including countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The episodes of *Eduqué* are transcribed and then translated into English. FreshEd hopes to launch other non-English podcasts in the future in order to promote, advance, and disseminate a diversity of knowledge traditions through the medium of audio.

FreshEd actively supports knowledge creation by graduate students. Whereas *FreshEd with Will Brehm* focuses mostly on established and early career researchers, *FreshEd Flux* showcases the ideas and creativity of graduate students. Through yearly Fellowships, *FreshEd Flux* mentors and works with graduate students to turn their research interests into narrative podcasts. This pushes the boundaries of a research output (typically thought of as a written publication) and the medium of podcasting by incorporating academic methodologies. It also prepares the next generation of researchers to think beyond the confines of our current academic structures. *FreshEd Flux* pays each Fellow a stipend to produce her or his episode, like the translation work in China. This is a practice uncommon in university settings where graduate student labor is regularly exploited (Klein, 2017). In 2020, *FreshEd Flux* offered four Fellowships. We plan to grow this initiative in 2021 and beyond.

COVID-19 created an opportunity for EdTech companies to use the pandemic to increase profits and further education privatization. FreshEd offers an antidote to this problem. FreshEd's products are free of charge and never collect user data; it is an organization that actively works to mobilize and disseminate diverse knowledges worldwide in multiple languages; and it has initiatives that alter the exploitative power relations commonly found in academia. The ethos and organizational structure—what we might think of as its infrastructuralism—enables FreshEd to harness the revolutionary potential of podcasts, of technology and education. I am not arguing that FreshEd is some panacea; rather, the case of FreshEd shows that it is possible to design the infrastructure of a digital platform in ways that unsettles and disrupts exploitative relations of power in the university without simply replacing them with a new set of uneven power relations based on the profit motive.

## Implications

Absent from the intentional design of FreshEd as a digital structure is economics. The difficulty for FreshEd has been in securing enough funding to support its growing list of activities and pay a fair wage to its growing team. This struggle for economic sustainability is precisely where FreshEd parts ways with EdTech companies. The difference is the starting point: Whereas most EdTech companies start with the intent to earn a profit and then consider products for education, which always have a nefarious profiteering built into their very DNA, FreshEd starts with educational value and then seeks to make it financially viable. This reversal is something other parts of the university could adopt, but a warning must be heeded.

When profit is not the goal, financial viability becomes the main challenge. FreshEd has considered many options to overcome this challenge. Advertising is the most common way to raise funds for successful podcasts. There are many marketplaces to match podcasts with advertisers. A 10-second advertisement could pay roughly US\$15 for every thousand listens. As a niche podcast, there are few companies willing to advertise on FreshEd. More fundamentally, advertising does not fit into the ethos and politics of FreshEd (see, for instance, Hickel [2020]), so we regularly turn down requests on our show, which strangely come mostly from e-cigarette companies.<sup>1</sup> Websites like Patreon and Substack use a subscription model of funding. Creating a subscription service where some premium content is only available for paying customers is a non-starter for FreshEd. Putting ideas behind a paywall is the antithesis of Open Science. More traditional forms of funding come from grants and donations. Connecting to various institutions and organization is possible, but most want to dictate the content that appears on FreshEd. That's also a non-starter as it would comprise FreshEd's independence. Reaching out to large philanthropic organizations is attractive for the size and stability of funding, but most would not fund FreshEd because of the high transaction costs associated with a relatively small donation. Mastercard Foundation wants to fund US\$5 million, not US\$50,000. Added to this precarity is that funders' own internal politics and priorities change year over year. FreshEd thus struggles to fund its yearly activities, like countless non-governmental organizations worldwide. Over the past few years, FreshEd has used a combination of relatively small grants from the Open Society Foundations, NORRAG, the Comparative and International Education Society, and the UCL Institute of Education to fund operations. Asking for individual donations is something we started to do in 2020, but we want to ensure no money is collected from students. This makes targeted fundraising essential, even if it brings in no more than 20 percent of our yearly budget. Taken together, the economics of a digital platform such as FreshEd show the difficulty of funding a "digital infrastructure" in education without relying on the profit motive.

Digital infrastructure has revolutionary potential in higher education to expand knowledge horizons and alter labor practices. Designed with the right infrastructuralism, digital platforms and technology can act in ways different from for-profit EdTech companies. To do so, however, will not be easy and will not create some *technopia*. It will require constant struggle, a clear guiding ethos, and economic creativity. FreshEd is a case in point. I can only hope more academics and students will experiment with alternative formations of digital infrastructure to push our world in new directions, far away from the trite profit motive and the current disaster capitalism mentality in higher education brought on by COVID-19.

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## Note

1. Juul e-cigarettes wanted to advertise on FreshEd but we declined. Perhaps the most amusing request came from the College Board, which wanted to use FreshEd content on its examinations. FreshEd responded by explaining to the College Board that it can freely use FreshEd content so long as attribution is given, and all its products use the Creative Commons license. We never heard back from them.

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