EPISODE 889

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] JM: The a16z podcast is a show that is produced by Andreessen Horwitz, an investment fund based in Silicon Valley. The a16z podcast covers topics including software engineering, biology, media, cryptocurrencies and entrepreneurship. A16z is one of the most popular podcasts about technology

Sonal Chokshi is the editor-in-chief at Andreessen Horwitz and the show runner for the a16z podcast. For five years, she's been interviewing entrepreneurs, engineers, artists, and investors exploring how software has increasingly impacted our lives and transforms society.

The success of the a16z podcast is largely a result of Sonal's high editorial standards and her ability to ask the right questions and drive conversations in fruitful directions. Much of the content of Software Engineering Daily has been shaped by a16z, and I've listened to every single episode.

Sonal Chokshi joins today show up for a conversation about podcasting and technology. Sonal shares her beliefs for why the podcast medium has taken off and describes how her background in education, ethnography and technology have shaped the completely distinct voice and flavor of the a16z podcast.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:01:33] JM: Apache Kafka has changed the world of data infrastructure, and Kafka Summit is the place to learn about new design patterns and engineering practices in the world of Kafka. Kafka Summit returns to San Francisco, September 30th through October 1st, 2019. Kafka Summit has sold out in New York and London, and the San Francisco event is likely to be just as popular.

Listeners of Software Engineering Daily can get 25% off their ticket to Kafka Summit by entering promo code SED. With the promo code, Kafka Summit is only about $900 to attend, and if that's

still too expensive, you can consider asking your company or your manager to pay for your ticket.

Kafka Summit is an educational experience with top engineers from places like Netflix, Microsoft, Lyft and Tesla. At Kafka Summit, you can meet with experts who will help you address your toughest Apache Kafka and event streaming questions, or you can start to learn the basics of how to deploy and operate Apache Kafka. There are also hands-on beginner and advanced training courses available, as well as certification.

Join the Kafka Summit, September 30th through October 1st, 2019 and get 25% off your ticket by using promo code SED. I plan on attending Kafka Summit, and I hope to see you there.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:03:13] JM: Sonal Chokshi, welcome to Software Engineering Daily.

[00:03:15] SC: I am so excited to be here, especially since in know like I know you. Since I feel like I know you.

[00:03:19] JM: Well, it's mutual. I mean, most of the time with the podcast, you have the asymmetric intimacy. We actually have symmetric asymmetric intimacy, I guess.

[00:03:28] SC: That's right, because we actually know each other.

[00:03:30] JM: Right.

[00:03:30] SC: It is a little creepy – I mean, it's also great sometimes, and sometimes it's creepy, to be honest. But one thing that's really weird is because podcasts are so intimate, you're really in someone's ear. It's really funny when people come up to you and they feel like they know you and you're like, "I don't know who you are," but it's also great at the same time.

[00:03:46] JM: I've been there. Okay. You host the a16z podcast. Why did it make sense for a venture capital firm to start a podcast?

[00:03:53] SC: Yeah, it's a really good question. So first of all, full background. So I'm the editor-in-chief at Andreessen Horwitz and I joined about five and half years ago to build and lead the editorial operation. So the broader context for the podcast as why does a VC firm have an editorial operation? The reason for that is that a16z has always had a culture of writing and communicating and sharing ideas well before we built an editorial operation. That was here before I even joined.

Then there's this trend of a lot of – I used to joke when I was at – I was at Wired at the time, that it's really funny VCs are the new editors, and I kind of said it in a snarky way, because I felt like who are these people that think they know what's happened? Us, editors, have more things to say. But then I realized that it seemed like they were talking about more leaving versus lagging indicators, and I got frustrated because I felt like I'm focusing on lagging indicators in my narrative work, and I would like to go back to leading indicators, which is why I came to a16z.

So they hired. In fact before I joined, there was another journalist who was here, and I joined as one of the first editors, and the model just sort of shifted to more editing, like editing other people than storytelling in the third-persons. We went to a first-person model, and that takes me to why a podcast.

To answer your question, so why we did a podcast? It actually existed three months before I even joined, and it was, I believe, the brainchild of Chris Dixon, and then Kim Milosevich and Michael Copeland helped with getting it off the ground. It was intended to start off as just sort of hallway conversations, and Dixon was an early blogger. So I believe, not to speak for him, that podcasting was sort of potentially the next evolution of blogging and being able to talk intimately.

So it really just sort of started as an internal experiment. But then I take over shortly after joining in the production and everything, all the soup to nuts of it, and it's been growing since. So it's actually become much more than that, and I can share more about what that is, but that's to answer your question.

[00:05:55] JM: What lessons from the history of blogging apply to podcasting?

[00:06:00] SC: Oh, I love that question, Jeffrey. I'm so glad you're asking that, because I think about this all the time. So it's funny. A lot of the time when people complain about the end of blogging or they nostalgically think of the heyday of blogging. I kind of roll my eyes a little, because I feel like, "You know what? You're just missing –" It's like an insight of a group of people who miss talking to each other. I feel that what I love about podcasting is there something more inclusive about it that anybody can listen to a podcast on a mobile phone. It's not to say that blogging wasn't accessible, because if you think about the history of the printing press and how the printing press made, what would formally very elite ideas more available in the form of math books. Similarly, blogging sort of took what were quote formally elite ideas in the form of certain media outlets and articles into the form of math blogs. But there was to me personally, even though I loved the early waves of blogging, a little bit of the a little bit of elitism to it, where it felt it was very much – Very inside baseball, like a bunch of bloggers who would talk to each other. They had blog roles. There wasn't really this shared sense of an experience that the whole community was having.

To me, one of the parallels in podcasting is that in many ways podcasting is the next evolution of blogging, because of the intimacy. The other similarity is it's also similar in sort of the authentic nature of the communication. You don't have to write like a five-paragraph essay and have it perfectly edited on a blog.

So podcasting is very similar, and that sort of you're really hearing someone's voice. You can't fake that. But what's different is that podcasting is to me like a shared community and it's a movement. People are really following a movement. You have a completely different relation to the people you're listening to. I don't know if I really answered that question.

[00:07:42] JM: No. To go deeper there, a16z recently had a series of documents about podcasting. There was a long PDF. There is a long article, and you did an hour-long episode with Connie Chan and Nick Quah. Did you have any reflections on the spirit of podcasting in its modern form today from all that research and that grinding on the data?

[00:08:09] SC: Yeah. I'm glad you're asking that. So first, full shout outs to the team. So that report on podcasting, so the podcast about podcasting with me and Connie and Nick, as you

noted, and Nick is really well known for doing Hot Pod newsletter, which is one of my favorites, and I know – You're nodding. It's one of yours too. So shout out to Nick.

By the way, I just learned that shout outs were a thing that was invented in rap. I learned that from Ben just this past week, and I had no idea about how that worked. But I'm going to do shout outs now. The report on – We called it, it's investing in the podcast ecosystem in 2019. The report grew out of our internal deal team and was authored and led by Li Jin, who's on our deal team, and she works very closely with Andrew Chen, who is one of the general partners who is really interested in investing in podcasting startup. Then Avery Segal also authored a section in that report on podcasting in China, because it's huge in China, and he works very closely with Connie Chan, who's very interested in investing in podcasting startups and new media startups as well.

Then the third author was Bennett Carroccio, who did a lot of research on that report, and they also really called a lot of the research out there. So I want to give another shot out to Edison research, which you know as well. They produce the infinite Dial Study and Tom Webster. I've been following his work for like 15 years, is like the main lead there and it's a really thoughtful report. So that's a context for the credits and who goes into that report.

I think the big takeaways at a very high level are that podcasting is hitting the "inflection point" that it's becoming more mainstream now. I actually still don't think it's there. I think it's still very early days. So my big reflection on modern podcasting is that it is becoming more mainstream, but it is still phase zero. It is still not even phase 1, because we don't have any of the infrastructure that we need to really do podcasting well.

By that, I mean, it still lacks discovery. I mean, how do you find a podcast? How do people find Software Engineering Daily if they don't already know about it?

[00:09:54] JM: Word of mouth.

[00:09:54] SC: Exactly. As you know, one of the other ways people find podcast, the number one way to discover podcast is to listen to other podcasts. So that's basically how people find out, like you do shout outs on each other's podcasts. Then that's also, by the way, for a show

level discovery, there is a complete lack of episodic discovery, and this is my big – You know this. You and I have talked about this. It's one of my big pet peeves. I don't believe everybody wants to follow every single episode of a podcast if it's not a serialized narrative show. They want topical things.

So what if I want all the podcast on quantum computing, crafting, fantasy novels and romance, which are all things I'm interested in. Kind of a weird combo, but I can't find that now. So that's missing. But some good news on this, talking about modern podcasting, is that Google recently announced that they are transcribing podcasts, which I think is a huge important move, because now finally all that sort of dark voice, for lack of a better phrase, is going finally be indexed, which I think will help a ton with the discovery side. I think discovery is a big problem in modern podcasting. It's probably one of my big things.

[00:10:57] JM: How would you encapsulate the competitive dynamics between Apple, Spotify and Google?

[00:11:03] SC: Yeah, great question. So it's interesting. It's funny because I've never seen this before where three really interesting platforms that all have the opportunity to own a space seem to be really doing very different things. I mean, you yourself talk about it. You had an amazing post, which I should shout out on your podcast to your audience, which is on Podsheets and your view on open source podcasting. You also did like a great overview of like all the different players in the industry, and I thought that was great.

[00:11:28] JM: Thank you.

[00:11:29] SC: No. I loved it. Very aligned with a lot of my own views too. So to answer your question about Spotify, Google and Apple. So, first of all, none of this is investment advice. I am not an investor, nor am I qualified to do any of that speculation on the analysis of a business. So I'm commenting on mainly the trends of these companies being really containers of interesting models that are happening in the podcasting industry.

Spotify I think is really interesting, because they have very openly said they want to really grow podcasting. The CEO, Daniel Ek, is on the public record talking about in a speech he gave this

year about what all the investments are making. So you know they acquired Gimlet obviously. They acquired Anchor. All people whose work I've been following for a long time.

What's really interesting is that they're one of the first to really – They're realizing that audio is music, and podcasting, and they are two different things. That's super important. They're obviously clearly thinking about the user generated side of things. Hence, the acquisition of anchor. So a lot of people, including yourself, will often say that they have the potential to become the YouTube of podcasting, which I think they have a lot of potential for.

But I think is really interesting about Spotify is they've always had really creative ways of thinking about content. Having content, follow people throughout their day, like in micro-waiting moments or in kind of a person's whole audio profile for the day. I believe a third piece of this that is not currently in there is audiobooks, because, to me, the definition of podcasting, and my partner, Connie, believes this too, is it's not just technically "podcasts". It's audiobooks. It's other audio. It's spoken word basically, not words that are sung, educational podcast. There's all kinds of interesting things out there that are still coming on the horizon. So Spotify has a really unique opportunity because of their model with playlists and their ability to I think do more creative things on the recommendation side. I think they have a really unique advantage.

Then, Google, I think will have a really interesting play, because as their model has always been, to index the world's information. The ability to index podcasts is huge. From what I understand on multiple platforms, I recently heard that there are more people coming to podcast via Google than via Spotify and Apple recently, and sort of the fastest growing thing. I heard this on a recent –

[00:13:42] JM: As in Google Search?

[00:13:43] SC: Yeah, coming via Google Search. Now, I want to double check the stat, but I basically heard that they're one of the biggest, fastest growing things because of their move into transcribing. It's still early days yet. So who knows where that's going to go? So I think that's interesting. Google has an advantage on the transcription side and being able to index and search and find podcasts.

Then the third player, Apple, huge fan of that team by the way, James Boggs and everyone. I love those guys, and they're very creative and talented. In the past, Apple hasn't really invested deeply in podcasting. You know the classic story. There's like two people in the department or five people or whatever it is. It seems that they are now. But the thing about Apple is that because of their big position on protecting user privacy, they're not going to ever do some of the really interesting things that podcasters want, which is like the ability to communicate with fans. To be able to send out an email, for instance, update to your fans. They're very invested in protecting their user's privacy.

By the way, none of these three are hosting platforms. They're all distribution platforms, right? None of them are – You can't actually upload your podcast to Spotify, Google or Apple. They're basically sucking in all the feeds.

[00:14:50] JM: What is your vision for podcasting becoming social, and is it an inevitability?

[00:14:55] SC: It's so interesting that you ask this, because I do believe podcasting should be social inherently even though it's not. I know Lee, our partner in the deal team who led that report, also believes in social podcasting. But it's interesting, because it's too early days yet, and we haven't really seen a lot of traction on this front.

I'm interested in two things on that front. I think it'd be really interesting to see – I definitely want graph the graph of people – I mean, there's a classic thing. You always ask other people, "What other podcasts do you listen to?" and find out through word-of-mouth like, "Here are the podcasts that I want to hear and find and discover."

But I'm also interested in people coming around live events around podcasting and sort of coming together in that frame. But for me, another piece of it is a content marketing angle, which is as a creator, how do you communicate with your fans? Right now, I'm in a room with two people, sometimes, recording something, and I can't engage with them. So when I go out in public and they're like, "We want selfies. We want to hang out." It's really cute and really weird and completely mind-boggling that this happens to me. But I would love to be able to continually – Because if you think about it, it's again a movement. You're creating a worldview and a

glimpse into our world and how to think about tech. Imagine if we could send updates to them via apps and various things. I think so far one of the leading social podcasting apps is Breaker, but I think that there's a lot of interesting innovations to still happen in this space.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:16:25] JM: Cruise is a San Francisco based company building a fully electric, self-driving car service. Building self-driving cars is complex involving problems up and down the stack. From hardware to software, from navigation to computer vision. We are at the beginning of the self-driving car industry and Cruise is a leading company in the space.

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Thank you to Cruise for being a sponsor of Software Engineering Daily.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:17:49] JM: Was there particular episode of the a16z podcast were you walked away having your mind significantly changed about something?

[00:17:57] SC: Oh my God! I love that question. Let me start by telling you some of my all-time favorites just off the top of my head.

[00:18:03] JM: Wonderful.

[00:18:04] SC: It's funny, because you know how they always say, like they are all your babies. You got to love them all equally, and it's true. You do love every single episode you produce, and also that my fellow editors produce, because one thing about our model, to give some quick context, is it is not a cult of personality show. So I have a whole taxonomy of podcasting. In that sense, it's not like the Joe Rogan show or something where people are going to listen to Joe Rogan and Elon Musk smoke pot for three hours and hang out. That's not going to happen.

So we are heavily edited. So for me it was kind of a novelty to be on the podcast and host it. I never thought of myself as an editor who could actually also host. I was shocked by that actually. So that was a real eye-opener for me to grow into that. So my favorite episodes are the ones that are an extension of the things that I love and having the conversation with people I really respect. So some of them, very early on, one of the episodes we did may be two years was on emojis, Jenny 8. Lee and Fred Benenson.

[00:19:01] JM: I remember that one.

[00:19:01] SC: Oh, I love it.

[00:19:03] JM: Didn't they talk about emoji con?

[00:19:05] SC: Yes. We talked – That was the first time they were doing emoji con, but they ended on that, because I offered to let them have a shout out about it at the end. But here's what I loved about that episode. To me it was the heart of the a156z podcast. No. It sounds crazy. Emojis?

[00:19:17] JM: No. It was.

[00:19:18] SC: How does it come together?

[00:19:19] JM: Totally.

[00:19:19] SC: Here is why. First of all, people don't realize, you use emojis every single day. Honestly, my three-year-old niece can use emojis on her phone. But a lot of deep tech goes into that. It's also really interesting –

[00:19:31] JM: And governance.

[00:19:32] SC: And governance. Exactly. That was what we talked about. So that was really interesting, is it plays out against this backdrop of one of my all-time favorite themes, which is this tension between open and closed. So the tradeoffs between if you have an open, standardized thing, you can all see the same emojis. Because as you know, not everyone can see the same emojis, depending what platform or phone they're using. But if you have a close proprietary system, you have more control over the design and some of the creative elements, like with an Apple.

So it's really a fascinating backdrop to come up against. Then the governance component, like Jenny advocated for getting a dumpling emoji, because her observation was that there are all these dumplings and international cuisines all around the world, like a samosa as an Indian dumpling basically, and there is in a dumpling emoji, and that's insane. So she went to this entire interesting governance process and a proposal to propose a dumpling emoji.

So what I love about it too is it's also about inclusion, because you have a lot of – Honestly, not necessarily diverse developers developing these emojis. So to have the ability to see a brown hand or a dumpling emoji enter the set is a really interesting move. Then you see how the politics of flags play out for countries that aren't recognized.

The whole thing is so amazing, and this is why it encapsulates the a16z podcast to me, is it's the intersection of technology, people, politics context, culture and humanity. I just love that theme. That is literally the heart of the a16z podcast. So that's one of my all-time favorite episodes for sure.

Probably another one of my very episodes that change my mind, to answer your question, would probably be maybe a podcast with Yuval Harari actually, because he was the author of Homo Deus and, before that, Sapiens, and we're one of his stops in the Bay Area, which is

amazing, because we're one of the few podcasts that actually really moved the book sales for publishers, which I'm very proud of. I met a lot of publishers who verified that factoid.

So Yuval Harari is a best-selling author, and he has like this overarching history of like humanity from like evolution to the time of like tectonic plates shifting all the way to today. One of his interesting ideas is about in the future, people will be augmented by technology that enhances certain things. I had always thought of that is a really good and interesting thing, but then he talked about what happens when more people can afford a certain type of enhancement versus another and I was like, "Oh my God! That's another interesting way that real-life and politics plays out in technologies." I thought it was super fascinating.

So I have many favorite episodes, but one of my other favorite episodes is with my friend, Ross Anderson, at the Atlantic, and one of my fellow editors on the team that I hired two years ago, Hanne Tidnam. We talked to him about an article he wrote about geo-engineering at a mass scale. What I love about that podcast is it's not just about the technology, but it's about the importance of marketing technology and the importance of narrative and vision in telling a story about technology. So I highly recommend that episode as well. Then the other two favorite episodes are all the ones on open source that I've done with Michael Rogers and Nadia Eghbal.

Again, the recurring theme you'll find through all these favorite episodes, it says all about how humanity intersects with technology, and it's essentially the ethnography of technology, which is a defining signature of my work.

[00:22:40] JM: When you look at the established media channels, like an NBC or a CNN, the barriers to entry for building a large media channel have almost completely gone away. We now have all the infrastructure we need. We have YouTube. We have the podcast infrastructure. We can buy cameras. We can by mics. It's not that expensive. We can outsource to editors. It's not that bad.

If you are in this environment with essentially unlimited resources, what's your vision for how the a16z media empire could look?

[00:23:18] SC: Well, first of all, I want to say I'm so glad you brought up the TV classic model, because what you didn't say is – What I love about podcasting, blogging, all of these technologies shifts, the new media shifts is, it is absolutely about the democratization of access to technology. Almost anybody can pick up a phone and record a podcast.

We have a company, we're investors in, called Descript, where you can actually edit podcasts in a Word Doc like a way. That's extremely democratizing, honestly, because you don't necessarily need a sound engineer to do everything for you. There is the ability to distribute everywhere, just like posting on YouTube. You can post to SoundCloud, and podcast ecosystem is all about feed. So you can get the feeds into every app out there. It's super democratizing in that way.

But, and here's the big but, and this is why I think that's the reason that channels like TV shows have not gone away. What's missing his curation in a curatorial point of view. So what I think people often miss when they talk about this massive user-generated content is we crave more lists and curated notions of what podcast should I listen to? What episode should I listen to? What are the top 10 for this year? Where do I find the five best episodes on this particular topic? Everybody wants curation, and that is desperately still missing.

So to me when I think of a16z podcast and – So the way I think about us is in the context of media empire. I think about us as not just a podcast and a product, but a platform. Shout out to Margit Wennmachers, who runs marketing at a16z, because she helped think through that phrasing.

The other thing that I think about is that just like every channel has a network of people and shows, we are expanding into more and more new shows. Because, again, you have this whole movement, a community of people who are following you. One of the things that really made the a16z podcast work in the early days is I would drop five episodes a week, and they would be on topics as diverse as quantum computing, to emojis, to whatever the topic is.

So what would happen is if you're not interested in those things, a variety of listeners would self-select for which one of the five they wanted to listen to. So we continually grew our audience in this way. We're pretty high up in our listens actually per episode for podcast. So it's amazing.

So back to the media empire questions. To me, it's about us not just filling a gap in what's not happening intact coverage today, but offering a fresh take, the leading versus lagging indicators that brought me here in the first place on technology trends and shifts. More importantly, the thing that so close to my heart, and I think the firm's heart, how it changes people's lives and culture. How is technology shaping culture? Because it's everywhere, in everything, bven the emojis my three-year-old niece sees as I mentioned.

So that is what the heart of the media empire is about. It's about helping understand the changes that are happening through tech. How do they affect people's lives? How do they affect businesses? How do they affect industries? How do they affect the future of work? How do they affect how you play, live? I mean, it's basically – Tthink about every single minute of your day and how tech plays a part in all of that. So how do you tell those stories? And that's one of the goals in expanding the platform of the podcasts topics and other content that comes out from us.

[00:26:32] JM: When a16z was started, it was modeled after CAA, which is a talent agency. Mike Ovitz, yup.

[00:26:39] JM: Absolutely. Why does it make sense for a venture firm model itself after a talent agency?

[00:26:46] SC: Yeah. That's such a good question. So Mark Andreessen has talked a lot about this on our own podcast, in fact, and so has Ben Horwitz, because Ben actually interviewed Mike Ovitz, who was the founder of CAA or the cofounder of CAA, and those are both available on the a16z podcast. We actually did an episode where they talk about tech talent in the ecosystem. Sorry for the shot – I didn't mean to do a little ad for that.

[00:27:04] JM: No. Not at all. Great episodes.

[00:27:06] SC: I just wanted to let people know that if they want the answers –

[00:27:08] JM: That's how I found out about the book, by the way. The book was amazing.

[00:27:11] SC: See? This is what I'm talking about. All the publishers told me that we move book sales. It's like actually a really interesting thing, because you have a very self-selected engaged audience.

So to answer your question, so they have better answers to that question about how they think about talent. But here's what I would say about it. Just like I'm talking about technology is not just objects and code and like sort of these clinical algorithms. It's about people. In the same way, startups are about people. Mark often says that there's like three things. You have market, you have product or you have tech. You never know how all three of those are going to play out at any given time.

I mean, yes, you can look for product market fit. Yes, you can figure out is a market ready. Is this the right time? But the end of the day, I'm pretty sure that our firm is about making bets on people and talent is a clear part of that. Because a startup is not just about the founder or CEO. It's about the team that they build, the leadership that this team – That scales their company. The talent that comes into work and build something together. The people who listen to the consumers and users of our product. So it's all about people at the end of the day.

So to answer your question, talented is everything. I mean, it just feels like it's so obvious. How come no one have thought of that sooner? It's shocking.

[00:28:18] JM: Did you read the Mike Ovitz book?

[00:28:19] SC: I did not.

[00:28:20] JM: You didn't. Okay. Well, one thing that stood out to me from that book was he worked so hard and he had these reflections in the book about maybe he works too hard. It made me just think about how we can get wrapped up into our vision so deeply that we become workaholics. Part of his book was reflecting a bit on that, like wondering to himself did he work too hard? Did he need to alienate the kinds of people that he alienated throughout that story?

When you're in an environment like this, this is how I'm feeling kind of these days, is like when you're drinking from the technological fire hose and it's so fun, it can be so addicting, how do you find personal balance?

[00:29:11] SC: That's such an interesting question. Well, I have a really strong point of view on this, and I'm going to go to town on this one. So here's the deal. I think people have a lot of false religious debates about this topic. It actually ties to podcasting, and I'll share that in a minute, which is – So my background before I even moved into tech at all and media was in child and developmental psychology and education, cognitive psychology. One of the things that I studied was how kids would interact with technology and learning new methods.

A lot of the debates that play out among my friends who are mothers is around screen time, and whether children should have X amount of screen time or not. Here's the thing I say. All these debates, whether it's like work-life balance, or screen time or not, there such black-and-white religious debates and the conversation lack so much nuance, and it drives me nuts. Because it's actually not what the person does. It's how and why they do it.

I want to pause on that, because I think that's a super important nuance. It's not a bad thing if a kid watches the TV show. It's not a bad thing if someone works hard or decides to play hard. It's not like a moralistic good or bad thing. What is an issue is the way and when and how a person does it. So if you're working hard because you have psychological issues of withdrawing from your family and you can't deal, that's a really bad reason to be working hard or that's something you need to figure out and work out in therapy or whatever it is.

If your kid is watching TV and so glued that it's like their eyes glass over. That's dangerous. But if they're watching TV and having screen time in a way that's super engaged and they're learning something and they're interacting and it just so happens that the form is not in a classroom from a teacher, because honestly, think about a teacher in a classroom. That's unidirectional motion of communication. It's like the teacher is teaching group of 30 kids. It's one too many. How's that any different than a television in many ways? So I think we tend to paint a very broad, blunt brush when we have these conversations. There's a lot more nuance to it.

Now tying it back to podcasting and media, media and technology pervade our lives. I think people who fight the cellphone world and have these articles and books around, "We need to turn off our cell phones," and "Oh my God! Our lives are different." People have been saying that for years about the same exact thing, whether it was newspapers, or books. I mean, how many people said that about books? Like, "Reading books, you're going to be –" I probably suffered more in my life in terms of being an introvert and isolated because I'm such a book reader than because of my phone.

So all of these things are universal and they've been around for generations and generations and generations. But here's what I think is beautiful about podcasting. Podcasting takes us back to our oral roots of storytelling. Now, because of the ability to mass distribute this beyond a fire and like a small group of people, we can now mass distribute this to millions or thousands of voices. So in a way, if the next phase of podcasting is figuring out how now to bring those voices back to the creators of podcasts where you can essentially have this fire-like communication in storytelling and sharing of ideas in the podcasts medium in a more creative and constructive and interactive way. Oh my God! This is still the phase one. Who knows what can happen next? So that's my way of saying I am not good at balance, and I'm okay with that, and I think that media is actually a very helpful thing.

[00:32:18] JM: What I love about podcasting is the focus on the question and answer dynamic. In doing lots of podcasting, that has become my modus operandi not just for having podcasts, but for normal conversations.

[00:32:36] SC: Oh, interesting.

[00:32:37] JM: But when I come home for dinner, like a Thanksgiving dinner. We have a big Thanksgiving dinner and you have these conversations before and during and after dinner, and the cadence and the format of the conversation is often hard for me, because it becomes more just people talking about themselves and their lives in just this like a solipsistic fashion, and it makes me crave. Like, "Gosh! I wish I could just go have a question and answer format," because the question and answer format is much warmer.

So what I wonder is how do we convey that curiosity and that question and answer format? I don't mean question and answer in like a super rigid, like everything has to be in the question and answer format. But just like the norm of curiosity, the norm of trying to have empathy in a conversation. How do we broaden that beyond the podcast world to more everyday conversation?

[00:33:36] SC: Oh my God! I love that idea. I think it's such a creative way of thinking about this, and it's funny because I have to tell you in my end, what happens is the opposite, which is, of course, I crave those kinds of conversations. But I find myself wanting to fast-forward it to 2X speed when people are talking to me. I'm like, "Can you guys talk faster, or can we get more efficient about this?"

It's also funny, because I've gotten feedback from a lot of people, friends, family, colleagues, that they wish I were my podcast self in real life more, because I'm more collaborative. I'm much more – Having a conversation, engaging in a really intimate way, whereas I tend to be more isolated otherwise in my personal life. So it's kind of a funny dynamic to think about.

So I think what you're saying is really beautiful, because what you're saying is that is it possible that this form of media can change the way we converse in a more interactive, equal exchange, really sharing ideas and raising the bar? I believe if podcasting does spread as mainstream as it could, why couldn't it? Because isn't that how we all learn to communicate?

There's a script we all learn from our parents, our family, our teachers our friends. Why wouldn't we learn that from media? I mean, media has been known to change the way people have conversations in the world all the time. So, in much the same way that binge watching in TV form changed storytelling, I mean, that's why we got Game of Thrones. God! Can I cuss on this podcast?

[00:34:57] JM: You're welcome to.

[00:34:57] SC: Fuck that show, and the way they ended it. But that's all a product of very bad binge watching culture, because what happens is the narrative loses its focus essentially as a result. So it changes storytelling. That's maybe not the best example, but in much the same

way, to your point, what if the way we have conversations on podcasts becomes a way we talk to our friends and family? I don't think that's impossible if that's all you're exposed to and listen to all the time as podcasting becomes more pervasive.

[00:35:24] JM: You've interacted with so many technology entrepreneurs. If you had to identify one characteristic that separates the extremely successful entrepreneurs from the moderately successful ones, what would that trait be?

[00:35:40] SC: Interesting. I mean, I again feel like my partners who are the investors would have a better point of you on that, because they do that professionally. My vantage point on them is primarily through the lens of content, because generally when I interact with entrepreneurs is if they want advice for how to do a podcast or how to think about content strategy. Because what i do is unique and that it's not just content marketing or editorial like for media, but the blend of both, which is like editorial content strategy or editorial content marketing.

What I would say through that lens, just to narrow the scope of my vantage point and true expertise there. I would say that to me the most successful ones are those that have a point of view. They're not just chameleon, like only crowdsourcing insights. But who also know how to listen and hear their team and know how to then take in those inputs and then bring that into their point of view. I think people who have the ability to communicate their ideas to people and other people, not just insiders, but broad teams inside their company and outside in the world, are the ones who have an edge that no one else has.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[00:36:48] JM: You probably do not enjoy searching for a job. Engineers don't like sacrificing their time to do phone screens, and we don't like doing whiteboard problems and working on tedious take home projects. Everyone knows the software hiring process is not perfect. But what's the alternative? Triplebyte is the alternative.

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Thank you to Triplebyte.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:39:08] JM: You seem to have a deep historical understanding of the developments of
Stanford and academic research and also industrial research.

[00:39:19] SC: Yeah. That's funny that you know that. How do you know that?

[00:39:24] JM: Well, I've listened to a lot of episodes. There seems to be so much money going
into industrial research, like Amazon puts so much money into research, Google, and Microsoft
and so on. Is there still a place for academic research?

[00:39:38] SC: Oh my God! I love that you're asking this question. This is so like my favorite
topic, one of my favorite topics too. So to answer your question about why I have that
perspective. So when I left grad school, and I didn't know how to be a writer, and I got into

Columbia Journalism School, but I looked at the price tag and I was like, "There is no fucking way I'm go to pay that much money, nor could I afford it." I was doing my Ph.D. at the time. So a lot of my work was paid for – The tuition was paid for by NSF grants. So the idea of paying that much money in tuition was unheard of.

So what I did was I decided to learn to be a writer by just applying for jobs to just be a writer and took a huge pay cut to do all this too, by the way. So the job that I got leaving grad school was at Xerox Park, which is one of the leading industrial research centers. It's the captive research center to Xerox. Became an independent company, still fully owned by Xerox, and I spent almost 8 years there immersed in the deep – Like immersed in this world basically, which is why I have that vantage point, which is how research and R&D come about.

So here's my view on this. When I was at Xerox, I felt like no one would have the advantage, and I saw the roadmaps of all these fortune 500 companies and all these partners that we talk to all the time. I saw like what uniquely big companies could do with deep investments in R&D. I also saw what government contracts could do with deep investments in R&D. There were many things that startups could and could not do.

But as you know, one of our views at a16z is software hitting the world, and that op-ed came out while I was still at Xerox, I believe. Yes, I was still at Xerox Park when that op-ed came out. I think Mark was absolutely right. Because what's happening is when you see things like AWS and all these tools and things that are now even democratizing the active coding, you essentially have an entirely new way of creating things. So there are things that are now only possible in startups. In fact, even at Xerox, I felt like at park we were competing on things that startups would be able to do faster. Like why would we be doing this inside an institution like Park?

So here's my view on where academia and places like Park have a very special role to play that no one else can play. So where startups can move superfast, uncertain technologies and develop things in a way that no one else can, particularly because they're more close to the metal of the people, and government funding can help with doing really super far out things that nobody has any financial incentive to work on for 20 to 30 years. Where academic and special industrial research labs and captive corporate innovation labs, even including places like

Microsoft, can play really special unique role is where there is a true cross-disciplinary or multidisciplinary need to bring different fields together.

I think the reason is because most companies, institutions, today are not set up for that type of collaboration. Park was really unique in that way. By the way, it is not an accident that they were not a one hit wonder. They had multiple repeat successes. Also, by the way, that they made really good money off of, like people don't realize that they're actually were doing very well for themselves despite the rumors about what happened and how that all went down.

So if you think about that, like academia and industrial research can do really unique things across disciplines in ways that no one else can, because they're not set up for that. However, I do think that as things that crypto become more mainstream, especially with networks of people who replace decentralized organizations, who replace companies potentially, that could be really interesting to see what new forms of collaboration happen. Because at the end of the day, what's beneath all of this is open source. We covered open source for like 10 years. I used to edit Richard Stallman. Oh yeah, I've edited lots of open source. I did one of the first early pieces on GitHub with Michael Rogers. He was at Node.js at the time. One of my fundamental beliefs is Bill Joy's quote that the smartest people in the world will not ever all be working for you. So this world of open source is really the substrate that I think powers this entire viewpoint.

[00:43:20] JM: Is cryptocurrency more of an ideology today or is it a technology?

[00:43:25] SC: Again, I just want to put another full disclosure that none of this is investment advice, because we're an RIA, and if people were to – This is not at all investing thing, but I have covered crypto as a trend since I was at Xerox Park. I actually put up I think one of the very first videos on Bitcoin in 2011. Then at Wired, I was one of the first editors to put Ethereum in a headline, because I commissioned an op-ed from someone about how to think about algorithms and law in blockchain with the idea of Ethereum.

But my view on crypto is it's everything. It's a community. It's a technology. It's an incentive structure. It's a network. It's also a currency, and a currency is important, because that is way that you bring capitalism to open source, to quote my partner, Chris Dixon. Because I think I believe in open source, and the problem with open source traditionally has been that how do

you fund – Like who maintains these networks and resources? How do you fund the operations? How do you align the incentives that people on the platforms, people who are builders, makers, maintainers? So crypto is all the way to do that. We have a great resource on our website called the a16z Crypto Canon. If you're really interested at crypto, I'd check that out and read some stuff.

[00:44:32] JM: It lives up the name. Given your background in child development and your understanding of technology, what is the ideal amount and format of technology for a child's educational upbringing?

[00:44:48] SC: Oh! That's such an interesting question. I don't know how to answer that, because I personally don't think there is a division between technology and anything else. Technology is everywhere. A pencil is technology. That's like asking what's the ideal division between a pen and a pencil and a kid, right?

Technically, these are all tools for innovation, building, making. That's what technology is, or communicating and sharing ideas. So to me, the ideal format is that everyone should have all of the knowledge all the time. Again, it's not what you do, but how you do it. It's not so much a debate about how much they should have, or when they should do it, but how they go about it. Are they doing it in a healthy way, a detached way, a connected way? I think that's more important.

I'll tell you one of my favorite anecdotes from when I was in grad school. I was working in a grant for early childhood education and numeracy in preschoolers. One of my favorite anecdotes is how there's natural organic behavior in children who are doing math every day without knowing it. They were doing things like counting exercises when they do hopscotch. They are doing things like when they're building at tower of Legos, like keeping track of modules and architectures, and they're like 2-1/2, three years old. So what that tells you is that we are born with the ability to engage in technology and we should do a better job of harnessing it in our everyday lives without separating it falsely and arbitrarily.

[00:46:06] JM: What are the biggest lessons you've learned from Mark Andreessen and Ben Horowitz respectively? Only from each of them.

[00:46:13] SC: I love them both. They're such characters too. Oh gosh! Let me think about that. Ben and I have a lot of really interesting conversations. I wish we could open source our emails actually one day. I always tease the team internally that – I tell him this too. He and I are very open and direct with each other about all topics related to inclusion. It's one of my favorite things. I'm pretty feminist. So we'll always talk about these topics, and I find him to be very eye-opening and thoughtful to me on the topics. So I learned a lot from him on that actually. He's actually change my mind on topics actually, because he's so thoughtful about it. I'm not just saying that I'm very fond of him and respect his views on this.

Mark, too, he's one of my favorite people. He's probably one of the smartest people, and he sees really interesting connections between things and has a really interesting way of looking at the world. My favorite thing about Mark is I feel like he's an information hungry like me. I'm the same way. We're just constantly reading feeds and books and movies. So I feel like he's very similar in that way.

I just want to get in his head and figure out like what he's thinking about. I wish we could all do that all the time. But the good news is if you listen to the a16z podcast, episodes he's on, you can catch a little bit of that in his head.

So what I've learned from Mark is – In fact, I would highly recommend the episode he and I did with Brian Koppelman. He shares the importance of creative learning how to give and receive feedback, and it was a real game changer for me, because I had felt like sort of this pride and chip on my shoulder. I felt a little persecuted as a creative in a company. You always have the chip on your shoulder as a creative. You're not getting credit. You're not getting this. It's always a chip on your shoulder.

In that episode, he really shared some really eye-opening thoughts for how creative can engage and really put their work in themselves out in the world. So I highly recommend that, and that's probably one of the best things I learned from Mark.

[00:47:56] JM: If I was to give you $2 million and ask you to go start a company, what would that company be?

[00:48:00] SC: Oh my God! You're not the first person to ask that, believe it or not. People ask me all the time if I want to start a company. It's so funny, or be a VC. I don't know. Of course I would love to see more podcasting startups and more people podcasting, and I have a wish list of things that I want for analytics. I want Chartbeat-like analytics. I have a wish list of things I want for social and discovery and connecting with your audience and fans. I mean, I might go and start my own media outlet. But, hey, that's what we're doing here actually. So I'm not going to complain. I mean, that's that. Yeah.

[00:48:32] JM: What if I gave you a year to write a book. What would that book be about?

[00:48:35] SC: Oh my God! I am trying to work on a book about editorial content marketing, and I just haven't had time to do it, because I get asked all the time like, "How do you think about strategy?" These are things like – So just some of the key ideas, like we haven't talked about the tactics of doing a podcast. But I have a lot of mindsets and principles that I brought to the a16z operation that came from Park and Wired and that are now being played out at a16z, and that is the thing that I believe grew our podcast.

So I'm a big believer in first-person voices. That's the beauty of podcast. You hear the person directly. I'm a big believer in editing. I think that people make the mistake with podcast that they don't need to be edited. Again, if you're Joe Rogan and Elon Musk, sure, hang out for three hours. Everyone will listen. But everyone else, I'm sorry. No one gives a shit. So you need to edit, and that often involves – I often talk about how I always training editors, like you have five levers to pull. You have energy, content, charisma, arc. There're all these different things. So editing let you manipulate those levers. So if you have a content that's low energy but high-end content, you can actually manipulate it so some of the more interesting content comes to the front. So there's lots of creative things you can do.

I have a concept called writer topic fit, which is like modeled after product market fit and it's cleverly cutely, whatever – Annoyingly, WTF, and that's a really fundamental principle of the a16z podcast, which is that I don't want just a expert. I want the expert. If not bad expert, then the next best expert on the topic who has the expertise for it. So even in our own podcast, when

portfolio companies come on, the board member won't necessarily be the person who's on it. I just look for who the expert is on the topic X,Y,Z, whatever that episode is topically about.

So all of these things are things that I want to bring to the book, because a lot of people ask me all the time. Then even on editing, like I have a lot of thoughts on op-eds and how everything is an argument piece. In fact, every podcast to me, every episode is an op-ed from a feature story. So I think about it very specifically, like what is the argument we're making even if we don't know up front. Then how you added it to get that arc out?

I have a principal I learned at Wired the hard way, because I had to beat my way to the top of the leaderboard in that world. It was not easy, because my section was very under resourced and it was kind of the stepchild. But one of the things I learned is the importance of having three turns of nuance, and that long length is arbitrary. People have these religious debates about length, like how long or short should something be. I'm like it should be as long as it needs to be.

So on that note, for the a16z podcast, I think a lot about insights per minute. So I actually make sure we edit for what I call that IPM, because if you're not a cult of personality show, again, the only way to keep listeners engage is to have a high ROI on every minute you're listening So that's all the stuff that powers the thinking behind the a16z podcast, and a lot of that stuff is what I want to put in my book.

But if I finish that book, then the next book I'd want to write would be a fiction book about dinosaurs. You probably don't want to ask me about that on this episode. Oh, yeah. I'll tell you about that later.

[00:51:20] JM: All right, for the next episode. Is there a tactical piece of wisdom about conducting a podcast episode the you learned in the last year?

[00:51:29] SC: Interesting. So as I onboard new people into learning and thinking about podcasting, which we're growing our editorial operations, that we're going to be doing more of. I actually often say that the hardest work in a podcast happens before and after the episode, not

actually during it. I think a lot of people think the hardest part is the actual podcast itself, but it's the thinking about it.

So I don't actually prep for every episode, but my boss teases me that, "What are you talking about? You prep your whole life, because you read all the time and you think about this stuff all the time." But it's hard to really craft, how the group of people should come together. Basically, the thing I've really learned is that the most work happens at the beginning and after and how you put people together and then how you edit it in the postproduction.

Then probably the most important next important thing I've learned is the importance of distribution and marketing, because of course I've always known that. I've had a background in content marketing before I went to Wired and came to a16z. But it's not enough to just enjoy the content, because good content will always do well, for sure, and I definitely have a track record with viral hits on that front all across the board. But you do need to better promote and package and distribute things in order to really get the audience that you want and grow the audience that you want. So that's a really important focus and one of the reasons I hired a managing editor six months ago who's tasked with doing that and is very gifted and talented at doing that. So I'm super excited. So those are some of the things that I've learned recently.

[00:52:48] JM: All right, final question. Do you have a newer podcast recommendation you can give me and why that podcast was valuable or new to you?

[00:52:59] SC: You mean one of our own?

[00:53:00] JM: No. Just a new podcast that you're listening to, or do you listen to podcasts?

[00:53:04] SC: Can I tell you? I actually don't listen to podcasts anymore.

[00:53:06] JM: Oh, no? Okay.

[00:53:07] SC: It's so depressing, because I have this problem at Wired too. I used to love subscribing to magazines and then I stop subscribing to magazines during that time. Similarly, I can no longer listen to podcasts even though I love listening to them before. It just feels like I

want to edit them all the time. They're not even mine. I feel like I'm working though. I need a break. So I do listen to audiobooks and listen to other stuff, but I actually don't listen to podcasts anymore. I'm ashamed to say.

[00:53:28] JM: Okay. Well, a16z is my favorite podcast. It has been for a long time.

[00:53:32] SC: Oh, yey! Thank you, Jeff.

[00:53:35] JM: Thank you very much for producing in. Yeah, it has been very influential on my own content. So, very great work.

[00:53:41] SC: Oh my God! That's great.

[00:53:43] JM: Thank you.

[00:53:43] SC: Thank you so much for listening. Thank you for always being a supporter, and thank you for what you do too. This is so great. I love the questions.

[00:53:49] JM: Yeah. Okay, Sonal. Thanks for coming on.

[00:53:50] SC: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:53:55] JM: Podsheets is open source podcast hosting platform. We are building Podsheets with the learnings from Software Engineering Daily, and our goal is to be the best place to host and monetize your podcast.

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