Creating the SRE Prodcast with John Reese (JTR)

Host **MP English** and former Google SRE **John Reese (JTR)** chat about the creation of the Prodcast.

MP: Hello, and welcome to a very special Episode 0 of the Google SRE podcast, or as we affectionately like to call it, the Prodcast. For this Episode 0, we reached out to find a very special guest, someone who previously was at Google and has moved on and had a huge role in making this podcast series possible. So, I'm going to hand it over to John and let you introduce yourself a little bit.

JTR: Thank you, MP. My name is John Reese. I go by JTR. I was one of the overall tech leads for Google's SRE organization for many years. And while I was in that role, I founded the original Google internal-only version of this podcast, which was called the Prodcast because production seemed like an obvious joke.

The actual origin of this idea is that I was working from a massage chair in our San Francisco office, the kind of chair where you sit in it and you hit a button and it starts squeezing and twisting and trying to relax your muscles. This particular massage chair really wants to massage your arms as well. So I grudgingly put my arms in the massage and I was like, you know, with my arms immobilized, I'm not able to do any work. What if there were a way I could do work just by listening? And this was the origin of the idea to create a work-internal podcast where you could at least find out what was going on elsewhere in the world of reliability at Google.

So I posted the idea on our extremely popular internal social networking site, Google+. Some colleagues popped up who had previous experience in this, or at least a little bit of previous experience. And one of them, his name was Adam. Adam and I sat down and recorded a first episode where he was just interviewing me about old crufty technology I worked on when I started at the company, which I can talk about at length. It is the most interesting thing in the world to me. And we released it after doing a little bit of, sort of, basic audio editing in GarageBand and put it out there and there was some interest. And then another colleague whose name is Andrew—in my imagination, he listened to this.

MP: Andrew's actually our episode seven guest.

JTR: Ah. Andrew P. Widdowson, who you'll see upcoming in Episode 7, had a lot of experience in his college years as a college radio DJ and has continued to do stuff of that sort, audio and deejaying and just generally sort of emceeing things. And he listened to our original podcast episode and he was like, you know what? These are people who appreciate constructive feedback, and I have a lot of constructive feedback. So, he got in touch, drove all the way up from the South Bay to meet us in San Francisco, and sat us down in a room and explained all this stuff about how to make a better audio product. A lot of it was about how microphone pickup works and that you need to talk directly to the microphone because even turning your head a few degrees can cause pickup to drop off. A lot of it was about the editing process. It was all actually super fascinating 'cause I like learning about new technical topics that I don't know anything about. Audio editing is one of those.

So we made a huge list of notes and the second episode that we put out was of much higher audio quality, I believe. We ended up having a bunch of fancy gear, which came from Adam to involve us putting on big over the ear—earphones, headphones, whatever those things are called.

MP: Having monitors.

JTR: Yes. Monitors, all of it goes in a little solid-state recording device. And we would record sort of different audio tracks for each of the people who's speaking,

each of the audio tracks—because we were in the same room because this was pre-plague times—each of the audio recordings would actually pick up mostly the person who was speaking into it, but also the background noise, the people who were off-mic speaking, which added this sort of extra sort of real quality to the recording, which is somewhat lacking actually in modern podcasts that are made remote during the pandemic. And then I was taught by Adam and Andrew how to do audio editing in GarageBand. And then later in Audacity, the much nerdier-seeming of the tools.

MP: Audacity is a good workhorse.

JTR: Yeah. They both can get it done. It was just a new world to me to learn how to deal with audio signals and sort of these signal processing and slicing things up and thinking about, like, compression of the wave signal on all this stuff. That was all new and neat.

MP: How long ago was it that it started? 'Cause I'm not even really sure how long it had been going on for when I got involved.

JTR: Yeah. I have lost all of my extended memory because it was all stored on Google servers. The Prodcast website, I think we have the date stamps and I think it would have been three or four years ago it started. Definitely double-check that, please. One of the interesting things is that we wanted this to be something that people could legitimately do and call it work—they could listen to this podcast and say, I just did an hour or 30 minutes of work. So we picked the target length to be just under 30 minutes, so you can block off a 30 minute slot in your calendar and do it.

And we also made a decision, which fortunately is being revisited to make them confidential, so that people could talk openly about internal projects, so you could be finding out about some exciting project from elsewhere in the company that might have an impact on your work. But it turns out that making a podcast confidential really sort of goes against the grain of the entire podcast ethos, which is very much about information should be free. So it was very hard to get a confidential podcast approved to be listened to through podcast players. We

actually encouraged people to play it directly at a Google Drive because Google Drive ACLs follow local company policy, which, you know, I'm sure that dramatically reduced the number of people who were willing to listen to this as a podcast because they couldn't just shuffle it into their normal podcast feed. We did some investigation into whether we could, like, treat it as like a—the same way podcast players treat premium content where you actually have to, like, password or something in order to get access to it. For whatever reason, that didn't pan out.

MP: Mm-hmm.

JTR: So during my—during my tenure, it was confidential only, and you had to play it in this surprising obnoxious way.

MP: Yeah. Something that frustrated me there was that even knowing, like, how many listens we were getting was really difficult.

JTR: Yeah. We didn't have any sort of good analytics. We had to, like, see how many people were accessing the URL, which of course doesn't tell us how many people have downloaded it in other ways or sent it to other people.

MP: I just have a general question for you. Do you think you'd be interested in doing another podcast of some sort someday?

JTR: Like a guest episode?

MP: Just in general, like, host your own, do something SRE related with all of your experience?

JTR: Yeah. Very possible. And if you're interested in interviewing people outside of the company for this podcast, I am available for that. [Laughs]

MP: We're not entirely sure yet where we're going to go after this run. We want to see how our viewership does. One of the ones I would be really interested in—and it might be a good one to go and look for people both in and outside of the company, especially as people have moved on and time has passed—my concept

is for a second series "garage to global" and a podcast history of Google production.

JTR: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I love that.

MP: I think that would be a really interesting story to share because it's a remarkable scaling.

JTR: Yeah. There's a bunch of these production interviews that might be a good companion piece to that. I've talked to some people about whether we could make those public as well. There's some openness to that. Of course, we would need to work with the people that were interviewed.

MP: Mm-hmm. So I think that's something that I would be interested in doing after the series, but we're definitely going to take a little hiatus after this because it has been a pretty substantial amount of work to get all these episodes together.

JTR: Yeah. What is the recording schedule? What does that look like? How much time has that taken up?

MP: It's been on and off, but usually the commitment per episode in production time is, we have an hour recording block. We have at least one half-hour prep session with the guests. And then there's probably another, like, hour or so of prep work before. So it's about two and a half hours to get to the recording. And then there's generating transcripts, editing transcripts, all the stuff we have to do on the back half. The major change from when we were doing this together that's been a really big benefit is having a professional paid production house to do the edits for us.

JTR: I bet. Yeah.

MP: That has been a huge game-changer.

JTR: That was always where I got stuck. It was fun to do that part, but it took

forever and I'm sure I was doing a terrible job compared to what they were doing.

MP: It's allowed us with this series to really focus on the content and not have to worry too much about getting the audio clean and ready for everyone for general consumption.

JTR: So they're pretty good at cleaning up the audio?

MP: Yeah. And it saves us all that time, 'cause it would—you'd have 30 minutes of audio and it would take you hours and hours to edit 30 minutes of audio. At least now we've been able to be much more content-driven.

JTR: I like it. Cool. When is it coming out?

MP: Episode 1 is going to be in the next week or two? I'm not going to put a firm date on it because this episode will likely be getting released after the first episode has been released. So it's end of March, beginning of April, we will have Episode 1 coming out. We will have *had* Episode 1 coming out for folks actually listening.

JTR: Well, I'm super excited that it got to this point. It was only a dream when I was leaving.

MP: And there's a real big thanks goes out to you for helping set up that transition when you left. That was a really big help—getting us in contact with the folks that we needed to talk to to get that organizational buy-in. That really made all of this possible. So, a huge credit to you for all of that.

JTR: Thank you. I appreciate that.

MP: And to the—just the general legacy of it.

JTR: Yeah. It really—it feels good to me that things that I've started are still developing and continuing and getting better.

MP: I do want to thank you so much for taking the time out of your day to chat

with me.

JTR: Very worth it.

MP: Thanks so much.

JTR: Absolutely. Have a great day.