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Foreword

Podcasting: cultural features, consumption habits and social uses of a successful and under-regulated media form

In an ever-changing media landscape, the podcast is emerging as a tool capable of innovating journalism, offering new ways of reporting and interpreting reality. The volume *Podcasts in the Future of Journalism. Exploring Forms and Formats of Audio Storytelling in Digital News Media*, through contributions from experts in the field, provides interesting insights and essential keys to understanding the role of podcasting in digital information.

Innovative technologies have transformed the way we access information, leading to a steady decline of traditional media such as print, radio and television worldwide. This change is driven by social-demographic shifts, new consumer habits, and crises of confidence and technological evolution, including the spread of mobile devices, social media, personalization through artificial intelligence, and interactive media content. Especially, the printing press has been progressively replaced by more immediate, accessible and customizable digital formats, prompting publishers to explore new distribution channels (Rosada, Koch, Burmester & Clement, 2024).

Podcasting is one of the most interesting and promising digital formats, which is proving to innovate forms of production, distribution and consumption of both entertainment and information genres. In 2005, the term “podcast” was proclaimed word of the year by the New Oxford American Dictionary, marking the emergence of a phenomenon destined to redefine the digital audio landscape (BBC News, 2005). The term was born from the fusion of iPod and broadcast, immediately suggesting a link to radio broadcasting, but within a renewed technological context.

The concept of podcast has evolved over time: initially defined as audio files distributed by RSS, today it also includes downloadable content and even “video podcasts” on platforms such as YouTube (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022). In 2019, the Reuters Institute provided a definition of podcasting as «an episodic series of digital audio files, which can be downloaded, subscribed to or streamed» (Newman & Gallo, 2020). It is being noted that a very useful tool for podcasts are smart speakers that act as gatekeepers, accelerating the distribution of voice-based news formats and providing a convenient way to access content (Rosada, Koch, Burmester & Clement, 2024).

However, there is still relevant academic debate around the nature of this new medium. Some media and radio history scholars see podcasts as a natural evolution of the radio tradition. Researchers in digital media studies, on the

other hand, interpret podcasting as an independent phenomenon with respect to radio, capable of redefining the dynamics of audio production and fruition.

Probably, the most effective way to frame podcasting is to consider it as a hybrid cultural form born from the mediation of different media, an evolving medium, sometimes closer to radio, other times to something completely new. Any strict definition, in fact, would risk crystallizing its development, catching only a single moment in its history (Bonini & Perrotta, 2023).

As far as consumption habits are concerned, podcasts have long been presented as a source of mobile entertainment due to their on-demand features (Berry, 2016; Markman, 2015). However, recent research has shown that podcasts are mainly consumed at home (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022). In this regard, the technological evolution of smart speakers could also further strengthen the consumption of news podcasts due to the comfortable and personalized listening experience (Rosada, Koch, Burmester & Clement, 2024).

The global smart speaker market is growing by 52.3% each year and is expected to reach a value of \$27.8 billion by 2028. With a 40% penetration rate in people's home in countries such as Germany, the US and the UK, and daily usage above 70%, these devices represent a significant component of the contemporary media ecosystem, with news listening among the top three most popular uses. Powered by artificial intelligence, smart speakers combine speakers, microphones, and voice interfaces to allow users to listen to music, manage tasks, shop, access online information, and control smart home devices.

According to a research conducted by the Branded Entertainment Observatory (OBE, 2024a; 2024b), the association that studies and promotes the spread of branded entertainment in the Italian market, the wide range of network connected devices, combined with the emergence of new audio-based services and the adoption of new lifestyles by consumers, mean that in Italy, as well as in the rest of the world, the consumption of audio content is constantly and steadily increasing, thus drawing the interest of many brands.

The data showed that, among the most widely used platforms for listening, Spotify (55 %) and Amazon Music (33%) maintain their supremacy, followed by an interesting 17% of listeners on the author/speaker/influencer channel, while specialized platforms (Audible 16%, Apple Music 12% and Spreaker 5%) are growing. YouTube once again proves to be an important entry point for recruiting new followers (58%), registering a 3% increase over last year. The multitasking nature remains the competitive advantage of podcasts: 75% of listeners say they do other things while listening, from household chores (48%) to travel (44%) and sports (38%), a trend confirmed by the choice of the smartphone as the main device (80%). However, it is also interesting to note a slight increase on the percentage of people primarily focused on listening (+2% on 2023). (2024b)

Turning to the level of content and social uses, the “free” nature of podcasting gives rise to two-fold consequences, both positive and potentially negative, which call into question the importance of effective regulation.

As a hybrid cultural form, as said above, podcasting constitutes a «liminal» space (Llinares 2018: 125) that has always been combined with movements «from below» (Sellas & Bonet, 2022) and with identity practices and politics, especially of minority/marginalized groups, enabling, for example, emancipation from gendered social standards (Hoydis, 2020; Yang, 2022) or subversion of racializing stereotypes (Finozzi, 2023; de los Ríos, 2022).

At the same time, like any media product, podcasts can obviously reproduce rather than fight discrimination, whether ethno-cultural (Apirakvanalee & Zhai, 2023) or (hetero)sexist, e.g., by spreading «rape jokes» (Franzén *et al.*, 2021: 2), «homophobic comedy» (Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2022: 115), transphobic stereotypes (Dejong *et al.*, 2023).

However, it is interesting to observe that despite the potential negative effects of such a widespread and constantly growing cultural and technological form, there is a significant regulatory gap. This gap can be traced to the gap that exists, more broadly, between the video and audio-sound sectors within the digital ecosystem.

In the world of analogy, traditional media, the paths of these two sectors have always run in parallel, but when they entered the online universe, they began to divide sharply. For instance, within broadcasting, radio and TV are treated uniformly and subject to the same obligations. This is due to the common history of broadcasting in Western countries, particularly in Europe, where the same companies that developed radio subsequently introduced television, transferring the regulatory and institutional framework from one medium to the other. As a result, many jurisdictions provide a single sectoral law for both linear radio and TV, as in the case of the Broadcasting Act (1990, UK; updated in the Communications Act 2003), the Telecommunications Act (1996, US) and the Broadcasting Act (1991, Canada).

In the digital ecosystem, however, audio and video follow separate regulatory paths. In Europe, for example, the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive has been updated to include video-sharing platforms and video-based social media, introducing protections against violation of human dignity, content harmful to minors and misinformation. However, audio platforms remain excluded from this framework.

The AVMS directive imposes quotas for the production and exploitation of European works, but the obligation is only on video platforms and not on those providing audio services. It therefore applies to series produced or distributed by Prime Video but not to podcasts produced or distributed by Amazon Music (3%); it affects Netflix, SVOD leader in the audiovisual sector but not Spotify, equally a leader in audio streaming, which, also thanks to its significant investment in the production of original content, to spread an infinite array of symbolic materials daily, shaping social identity and imagination.

Probably this regulatory gap is also due to a perceived minority status of sound versus image in our society and culture. But this is a bias that needs to be straightened out: as the contributions in this volume effectively show, pod-

casting is a genre that is destined to be increasingly successful also as a vehicle for media genres such as information, which are crucial in shaping public opinion and thus in building a viable public sphere.

Therefore, it is to be hoped that the regulatory gap will be bridged, allowing regulation to enable podcasting to reach its full potential while protecting its growing audience and the fundamental rights at the basis of our society.

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