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Introduction

Journalism in listening mode. Models, co-productions, and the new podcast ecosystem

The strengths of news podcasts and the opportunities of co-productions

Over the past several years, podcasts have gained significant scholarly attention in media studies. Seminal works by Berry (2006; 2015; 2016), Bonini (2015; 2022), Bottomley (2015), Lindgren (2016), McHugh (2016), Spinelli and Dann (2019), and Sullivan (2019; 2024) have contributed to an ongoing debate around this evolving digital medium – described as a «socio-technical assemblage» (Bonini & Perrotta, 2023) that blends diverse media, cultural forms, and actor networks. Whether viewed as a continuation of existing media traditions or as an innovative standalone form, podcasting remains a medium in flux, with its future trajectory only partially predictable.

At the same time, podcasting is widely recognized as a major innovation in journalism (Meier *et al.*, 2024), reshaping storytelling formats, amplifying diverse voices, transforming distribution methods, and expanding audience reach. The success of investigative and narrative-driven podcasts, such as *Serial* (2014) and *The Daily* (2017), marked milestones in podcast journalism, introducing deeper, more narrative forms of reporting. *Podcast Journalism: The Promise and Perils of Audio Reporting*, a recent book by David Dowling – who also contributed to this edited volume – explores how podcasts are revitalizing the news industry while redefining journalism's identity. The academic discourse on podcasting's role in journalism continues to grow, with significant contributions from two other authors featured in this collection, Mia Lindgren (2022; 2023; Bird & Lindgren, 2024) and Gabriela Perdomo (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021), whose works have examined the medium's evolving impact on journalistic practices.

The studies cited above highlight key challenges confronting the news industry, including shifts in production routines, audience engagement, ethical dilemmas, and broader social implications. The decline of traditional journalism, coupled with information overload and the slow digital transition in many national markets, has made it increasingly difficult for legacy media to engage audiences, especially the younger ones. But at the same time, the growing influence of on-demand formats, as emphasized by leading research on contemporary journalism (Newman, 2024), has positioned podcasting as a powerful

tool for audience engagement. Studies comparing several countries show that young listeners, particularly those aged 18 to 34, are turning to podcasts for news (Newman *et al.*, 2023), prompting publishers and platforms to explore new ways of delivering meaningful and immersive experiences. With a combination of consumer-driven and ad-supported models, news outlets are strategically leveraging podcasting to attract and retain younger audiences.

Research begins with an analysis of national contexts, yet in a global market, significant disparities emerge in terms of market size, industry players, supply chain integration, and the extent of market «platformization» (Sullivan 2019; 2024). Additionally, factors such as genre diversity, language use, and linguistic specificities further differentiate these media landscapes. Notable contrasts exist between regions like North America (United States and Canada), Australia, and Europe – where markets such as Spain, Britain, France, and Italy each present unique dynamics, not to mention South American and Asian countries.

Maintaining a comprehensive perspective on data and trends is highly complex, as is envisioning an ecosystem that fosters common developments while supporting overall market growth. An examination of the European podcasting landscape – particularly through insights provided by studies and reports of the *EBU Media Intelligence Service*¹ – underscores the pivotal role of journalism and news podcasts within the sector. However, a truly European perspective on podcasting remains challenging due to the absence of a unified podcast market. Rather, there exists a plurality of distinct national markets, each deeply embedded in its respective linguistic and cultural contexts. These markets are shaped by historical trajectories, industry structures, and audience consumption patterns, resulting in significant regional specificities. Consequently, podcasts produced within a particular national framework face considerable challenges in appealing to audiences beyond their domestic sphere, thereby limiting their commercial scalability at a continental level.

Given my background in media and production studies – particularly in radio and podcasting – and my academic and professional roots in Rome, Italy, at the heart of Europe, I was deeply motivated to initiate a project that aligns with *Creative Europe's*² call for cross-border co-production and journalistic collaboration. The *Creative Europe Journalistic Partnerships* aim to strengthen cross-border collaboration among news media organizations, fostering innovation and sustainability in the sector. These calls support projects that enhance journalistic standards, promote media pluralism, and develop new business models to adapt to digital transformation. The initiative encourages knowledge-sharing, professional training, and audience engagement strategies while addressing challenges like misinformation and declining trust in journalism.

¹ See in particular EBU-MIS *Trust in Media* (2022), *Podcast. Deep Dive into a Growing Market* (2023a) and *Audio Essentials. Understanding the European Radio Landscape* (2023b).

² See <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/creative-europe>

This initiative, launched in September 2023, is titled WePod – a multi-partner³, cross-border endeavor designed to foster the growth and sustainability of the European podcasting ecosystem. The project aims to establish a collaborative framework for the production, distribution, promotion, and monetization of journalistic podcasts. As part of this collaboration, Roma Tre University has conducted extensive research on creative and production routines within international podcast co-productions, while also launching a call for papers to explore the evolving landscape of international journalistic podcasts with a curated collection of essays.

The WePod Project and the challenges of podcast co-production for researchers

Building on existing research that identifies key trends shaping podcast journalism, the WePod study has been developed around a critical question: can the principles and best practices emerging from podcast journalism effectively serve as operational tools in the growing domain of cross-border news co-productions? This field demands not only collaboration among creators from diverse cultural and social backgrounds but also the production of content intended for transnational distribution.

These complexities compel scholars to explore research questions specific to co-productions, such as: What models of cross-border partnerships currently exist in the podcast industry? What are the primary challenges in establishing and sustaining such collaborations? What strategies and frameworks can foster successful cross-border cooperation? How do cultural, linguistic, and regulatory factors influence partnership development across different regions? And, crucially, what opportunities for innovation and experimentation arise within cross-border podcast co-productions?

A partial response to these questions has been achieved through the analysis of pre-existing cases of podcast co-productions, approached from both transnational and transcontinental perspectives. To this end, the research methodology developed has combined a comparative analysis of different versions of the same podcast with data collected through online interviews with key production stakeholders, including executive producers, producers, hosts, sound designers, and editors. These interviews follow a semi-structured protocol, ensuring consistency in the data collected while allowing for flexibility to accommodate each interviewee's specific expertise.

We have examined multiple cases of cross-border podcast co-productions, each characterized by collaborative processes involving diverse partners or entities from different countries – or, in some instances, different regions within

³ The editorial partners of WePod are Prisa Audio and Podium Podcast (Spain), Chora Media (Italy), Europod (Belgium), Magyar Jeti (Hungary), Press Freedom Foundation (Serbia), Outriders (Poland). Roma Tre University is the academic partner of the consortium. See: www.wepodproject.eu

the same country. These co-productions are distinguished by their multilingual outputs, with at least two versions released in different languages, reflecting the transnational nature of their reach. The co-producing entities range from podcast production companies and media organizations to independent producers and subject-matter experts, each contributing unique expertise to the creative and journalistic process.

The sample of our preliminary study is a set of cross-border co-productions which showcase the diverse and multilingual nature of contemporary audio storytelling: *The Nobody Zone* (2020) by RTÉ and Third Ear Productions explores the crimes of Irish serial killer Kieran Patrick Kelly in English; *Los últimos días de Maradona* (2021) by Adonde Media for Spotify Studios investigates the final days of Diego Maradona, with six distinct language outputs; *Roleplay* (2022) for SWAN highlights Swiss female filmmakers' fight against gender imbalance, available in Italian, French, and German; *Corinna and the King* (2022) by Project Brazen, PRX, and La Coctelera Music unpacks the affair between Corinna zu Sayn-Wittgenstein and Spain's former king, Juan Carlos I, in Spanish and English; *Freedom in Hungary* (2022) by Europod and Betone Studio presents six personal narratives on the meaning of freedom, in Hungarian and English; *El silencio de la Rambla* (2022) by Cadena SER examines the long-term impact of the 2017 Barcelona terror attacks in Castilian and Catalan; lastly, *#108: The Fall of Press Freedom in Greece* (2023) by The Press Project and Europod investigates Greece's press freedom decline, released in Greek and English.

The analysis of these projects was useful to focus on the growing trend of transnational podcast collaborations, balancing local narratives with global reach (Bilchi & Perrotta, 2025, forthcoming). The research highlighted the intricate challenges and strategic approaches required for successful cross-border podcast co-productions. Cultural adaptation goes beyond translation, demanding deep storytelling adjustments to resonate with diverse audiences. Personalizing content through regionally relevant hosts enhances engagement, while creative adaptation ensures authenticity in different socio-cultural contexts. Simultaneous multilingual production requires meticulous coordination, and audience knowledge must be carefully considered to tailor the depth of information presented. Leveraging exclusive content adds value, and ultimately, these productions thrive on strong collaborative networks between international teams.

These findings highlight the evolving role of podcasting as a transnational medium, laying the groundwork for further analysis of co-productions within the WePod project. While some collaborations are still ongoing, preliminary insights can be drawn from the co-produced podcast *Mar de Rabia / Mare di Rabbia*, released in November 2024 by Prisa Audio (Spain) and Chora Media (Italy), with its English remake, *Sea of Rage*, produced by Europod.

Using a blend of ethnographic methods and qualitative analysis, data were collected through production diaries, in-person and remote meetings, and dig-

ital communication tools like Slack and Milanote. The process began with an in-person pre-production workshop, followed by online meetings. However, larger co-productions – especially those involving more than two partners – required additional in-person meetings to tackle challenges such as identifying a podcast topic with broad cross-national appeal. Continuous communication via digital platforms helped monitor workflow and address production issues in real-time.

Pre-production workshops proved critical for Roma Tre's research, allowing for the observation of creative processes, collaboration dynamics, and organizational structures. While structured planning and digital coordination tools streamlined the workflow, differences in production styles, work structures, and organizational cultures created challenges. Some journalists and producers struggled to keep pace with the demands of co-production due to internal constraints, whereas more structured teams adapted more efficiently.

A key takeaway of this first phase is the importance of personal relationship-building among journalists to foster trust, improve collaboration, and mitigate misunderstandings. The emphasis remained on investigative storytelling over entertainment, with participants favoring narrative journalism techniques. However, differing perceptions of podcasting as a medium made it difficult to establish a shared creative vision. Defining common principles early in pre-production is essential to overcoming these challenges and ensuring the success of cross-border co-productions.

The path of this book

This book was conceived during the conceptual phase of the WePod project and saw the light of day during its actual development. It is therefore a parallel path to what could be observed in the empirical research on co-productions. Designed to support the broader research project, it brings together a curated collection of essays that analyze the transformation of podcast journalism, by voice of authors who come from diverse academic and professional backgrounds.

The first essay, written by Mia Lindgren and Gabriela Perdomo, highlights podcasting's role as a transformative force in journalism. The authors attempt to map «the intrinsic elements of podcast journalism» while claiming that podcasts are redefining news consumption through their emphasis on conversation-driven formats, which not only make storytelling more engaging and accessible but also reconnect audiences with journalism in a cost-effective way. Unlike traditional, detached reporting, podcasts embrace a more human-centered, explanatory approach that aligns with solutions-based journalism. This shift positions journalists as sense-makers, helping listeners navigate information overload while fostering credibility through transparency. By exposing the journalistic process in real-time, podcasts create a deeper level of audience trust

and engagement, combating news fatigue and avoidance. Their authenticity, reliance on the human voice, and departure from rigid news-reading structures allow them to address journalism's ongoing crisis of relevance and audience disengagement. The study introduces the concept of «reflexive deep listening» as a framework for understanding news podcasting, reinforcing conversation as its foundational element. Ultimately, podcast journalism emerges as a transformative medium, making news more approachable, immersive, and essential in the digital era.

The second chapter, by David O. Dowling and Sarah Witmer, examines *Death in Ice Valley*, an international co-production by NRK and BBC World Service, as a prime example of innovative storytelling and production in true crime podcasts. This production, like others in the genre, embraces uncertainty and ambiguity, inviting audiences to participate in ongoing investigations and setting the stage for a resumption of the inquiry by the police. While collaboration with law enforcement can provide valuable access to information, it also raises concerns about journalistic independence. *Death in Ice Valley* exemplifies an interactive and investigative approach that challenges dominant theories and fosters intellectual engagement through a global, co-creative model. Instead of presenting a definitive narrative, it encourages open-ended inquiry, prompting listeners to question conventional wisdom. Rather than being passive consumers, they actively contribute research, theories, and insights, reshaping the way stories are told.

Raffaele Torino's chapter critically examines the impact of recommendation systems and generative AI on podcasting, highlighting the risks of algorithmic discrimination and marginalization. Algorithmic selection can reinforce societal biases, as machine learning models reflect and amplify creators' and users' pre-existing preferences, often sidelining minority voices – including women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ creators – due to lower initial engagement and flawed datasets. Language barriers further exacerbate exclusion, with dominant languages favored in recommendations, while financial constraints on representative datasets contribute to systemic bias. This marginalization affects revenue, sustainability, and diversity within the podcasting landscape, reinforcing echo chambers and limiting informational pluralism. Beyond recommendation algorithms, the chapter explores the legal and ethical challenges of generative AI in automated podcast production, emphasizing the need for transparency, accountability, and protections for personality rights.

The debate over the regulation of podcasts is the focus of the chapter written by Carl Hartley, considering the potential benefits and drawbacks of implementing stricter industry standards. It analyzes the possible implications of introducing regulatory oversight within the podcasting landscape, evaluating whether such a system could effectively serve the interests of podcast creators and exploring potential parallels with other regulated media sectors. The analysis explores three distinct models: a laissez-faire approach characterized by minimal intervention; a structured system of regulation overseen by a dedicated

regulatory body; and a more flexible, self-regulatory model. Each of these approaches is subjected to a rigorous examination of its respective advantages and disadvantages. Ultimately, the chapter offers considered perspectives on the optimal strategies for ensuring continued accessibility to podcasts for a broad audience, while simultaneously safeguarding the fundamental freedom of creators to produce content that resonates with their listeners.

Andrea Federica De CESCO, Head of Chora Academy, and Sabrina Tinelli, Head of Editorial Content at Chora Media – member of the WePod consortium –, explore how journalistic podcasts navigate the tension between compelling storytelling and ethical reporting. Through case studies and firsthand accounts from producers and journalists, their research examines the complex relationship between documentary objectivity and the storyteller's perspective, highlighting the ethical challenges that arise. By analyzing how podcasts weave factual reporting with narrative techniques, the essay argues that transparency about editorial choices is essential for building audience trust. Rather than framing objectivity and interpretation as opposing forces, the study suggests that strong journalistic podcasting embraces the inherent subjectivity of storytelling while maintaining integrity. Ultimately, it concludes that every audio story is shaped by the deliberate decisions of its creators, making ethical awareness a cornerstone of responsible podcast journalism.

In chapter 5, Nicolas Bilchi, Post-Doc at Roma Tre University and main researcher in the WePod project, focuses on two productions that use gossip to build intimacy and create the illusion of being part of a secret conversation, *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King*. Podcasting thrives on intimacy, achieved through stylistic choices and the personal nature of audio consumption, such as listening with earbuds. This sense of closeness is reinforced by conversational tones and subjective storytelling, creating an illusion of liveness and direct engagement with the listener. Gossip, as an aesthetic device, further enhances intimacy by mimicking informal, exclusive conversations. Case studies like *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* demonstrate how gossip can be strategically employed to emotionally engage audiences, fostering social bonds and connecting the speaker and listener (and excluding the subject). It also reinforces group belonging and shared complicity. While traditionally associated with gender stereotypes – often perceived as negative for women but neutral for men – podcasts repurpose gossip to critique public figures, legitimizing it as a tool for social and political commentary.

Matteo Maiorano's work develops a refined methodological framework for analyzing news podcasts, adapting Hallin and Mancini's (2004) journalism models to the digital era through hybrid frameworks like Chadwick's Hybrid Media System, while preserving national distinctions. Scholars have expanded this framework by incorporating grassroots participation, acknowledging the growing influence of non-legacy media such as podcasts. Despite the homogenizing effects of digital globalization, national regulatory and cultural differences continue to shape journalism's evolution. The chapter applies this model

to two institutional news podcasts – *Giorno per Giorno*, the daily podcast of Italy's *Corriere della Sera*, and *Forklart*, the daily podcast of Norway's *Aftenposten* – to assess its effectiveness. While both share similarities in format and editorial structures, they differ in audience reach and the professional backgrounds of their hosts. Certain dimensions of the journalism framework, such as professionalization and political parallelism, prove highly relevant for podcast analysis, as they align with observable traits like host credentials and political orientations. However, other dimensions, including state intervention and market structures, remain difficult to evaluate due to the fragmented nature of podcast distribution and limited available data, demonstrating that while the framework is valuable, its full potential can only be realized through broader, more comprehensive studies.

Chapter 8 features two products made during Brexit, which the essay's authors – Abigail Wincott, Natalia Osorio-Ruiz, and Laurent Fauré – observed for their crucial role in popularizing the medium in the UK as of 2017. During the political turmoil of Brexit, podcasts like *Remainiacs* and *Brexitcast* emerged as vital platforms for audiences to navigate uncertainty, serving as both historical records and sources of emotional reassurance. Through humor, shared experiences, and informal conversation, they helped listeners navigate the tension of “Brexit time,” filling the void of inaction with restless discussion. While *Remainiacs* took an openly anti-Brexit stance, using hyper-dramatization and direct humor to critique the process, *Brexitcast*, as a BBC production, maintained impartiality through self-deprecating humor and teasing. Both podcasts upheld journalistic values by presenting diverse perspectives, using humor to maintain objectivity while simultaneously subverting political authority through satire. Ultimately, they provided a unique blend of critique and community, allowing listeners to cope with the crisis through storytelling, laughter, and collective engagement.

In their research about Finland and Greece, Tarja Rautiainen-Keskustalo and Sofia Theodosiadou examine the podcast listening habits of young adults through the lens of Kate Lacey's concept of «listening as labour», exploring how they engage with audio content as an active form of citizenship. Despite being based on a small sample, the findings reveal the intricate media environment young people navigate, where content choices are driven by personal interests, societal awareness, and strategic engagement amid information overload. Drawing on Hayles' concept of hyper-reading, the study highlights how young listeners take a proactive approach to managing content, critically balancing perspectives and fact-checking to ensure credibility. Trust in journalistic podcasts is shaped not only by the content itself but also by the social interactions surrounding it, yet achieving a well-rounded perspective remains a challenge. Furthermore, the study underscores podcasts' multimodal nature, where the dynamic interplay between auditory and visual elements profoundly influences engagement, emphasizing the need for further research to fully grasp podcasting's evolving role in daily life and democratic participation.

The podcasting industry struggles with a lack of standardized audience metrics, though reports indicate strong growth, particularly among younger, affluent listeners who favor news, true crime, and humor. This is what emerges from the study by Lourdes Moreno Cazalla, Ana Ribera and María Jesús Espinosa de Los Monteros, both editor in chief and managing director of Prisa Audio (leader of WePod consortium). In Spain, podcast consumption surged by over 30% in 2024, but detailed data on news-related content remains scarce. This chapter analyzes three Spanish journalistic podcasts – *Hoy en El País*, *Dios, Patria, Yunque*, and *Saldremos mejores* – focusing on audience engagement, retention, and demographic trends. Findings show that *Saldremos mejores* attracts the most listeners, particularly young women, while *Dios, Patria, Yunque* excels in retention and *Hoy en El País* struggles with conversion despite high impressions. The study highlights the importance of adapting journalistic content to younger audiences, as conversational podcasts foster engagement and community, while narrative non-fiction retains niche but loyal listeners.

The last chapter by Diletta Cenni examines the rise of podcast journalism in Italy, focusing on the backgrounds, career paths, and audience engagement strategies of daily news podcast hosts. Using John Caldwell's production studies framework, it analyzes industry trends through interviews and qualitative research on major Italian outlets like *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Internazionale*, *Will Media*, and *Chora Media*. Daily news podcasts, such as *Morning* by Francesco Costa and *Stories* by Cecilia Sala, have gained popularity by blending traditional journalism with innovative storytelling, fostering audience loyalty and subscription growth. Many podcast hosts come from non-audio backgrounds, highlighting the adaptability of journalism in the digital age. Despite these successes, Italian journalism faces structural challenges, including a slow digital transition and reliance on print sales, making podcasts a crucial avenue for innovation and sustainability.

This book is therefore a critical exploration of the diverse ways in which podcasting is reshaping journalism, storytelling, and audience engagement in the digital age. From the role of AI-driven recommendation systems to the ethical complexities of narrative journalism, the contributions explore both opportunities and challenges in the evolving podcast landscape. Studies on listening habits, media models, and audience interactions underscore the growing significance of podcasts in shaping public discourse and fostering community engagement. Additionally, research on daily news podcasts and their production models reveals how journalism is adapting to new formats while maintaining credibility and trust. The insights presented emphasize the need for transparency, inclusivity, and adaptability in both content creation and distribution. Ultimately, podcasts are redefining journalistic practices, blending factual reporting with compelling storytelling to better serve an increasingly digital and participatory audience.

Looking ahead, the future of podcast journalism is likely to be shaped by

international collaboration, audience participation, and evolving storytelling techniques. As news becomes increasingly global, co-productions in the podcasting sector offer a crucial space for diverse perspectives, cross-border investigations, and shared journalistic standards. Reflecting on these collaborations is essential to understanding how journalism can adapt to a more interconnected and dynamic media landscape.

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