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*Everything is true (and everything isn't)*

**ABSTRACT:** The essay develops a reflection on the relationship between narrative truth and editorial responsibility in journalistic podcasts. The investigation draws on quantitative research documenting the growing trust in the medium to explore the dimensions of the phenomenon. Through cases and testimonies, the research delves into the relationship between documentary objectivity and authorial perspective and explores its deontological consequences. The analysis of the relationship between fact and fiction leads to the formulation of a paradigm in which methodological transparency becomes a central element of the communicative pact with the listener. The conclusions outline an approach that, by overcoming the dichotomy between objectivity and interpretation, proposes professional practices based on an awareness of the mediated nature of audio narration.

**KEYWORDS:** podcast; ethics; journalism; storytelling; sound design

*In podcast we trust*

In an era characterised by a growing distrust of legacy media, podcasting is emerging as a medium that enjoys high credibility with the public. This is confirmed by various surveys conducted in the United States, a country that often first registers trends that then emerge elsewhere. A survey published in March 2024 by the business intelligence company Morning Consult (He, 2024) shows that podcasts are the medium with the most significant growth in terms of trust: 47% of the people who took part in the study trust the medium, compared to 27% in 2020. The figure is even higher for Generation Z (people born between 1997 and 2012): almost half of the sample trusts podcasts as a source of news; in 2020 it was 29% (*Ibidem*).

The relevance of podcasts as an information tool is confirmed by research by the Pew Research Center in April 2023 (Shearer *et al.*, 2023): two-thirds of podcast listeners (one-third of all US adults) listen to current affairs content, and more than half follow podcasts dealing with politics. The US presidential election of 2024 was a striking proof of this phenomenon, so much so that it was called the «podcast election»: for the first time in history, both the Republican and the Democratic candidate (Donald Trump and Kamala Harris) made podcasts a central element of their communication strategy, often favouring them over traditional media.

But what makes podcasts so credible in the eyes – or rather, ears – of the public? The answer lies in a psychological dynamic well known by media scholars: the parasocial relationship, that particular one-sided bond that develops with public figures or media personalities. In the case of podcasts, this connection takes on unique characteristics, fuelled by the inherently intimate nature of the audio medium and the perceived exclusive relationship with the narrator. Although the podcast reaches thousands or millions of people simultaneously, the listening experience is experienced as a personal and private dialogue with the podcaster.

The concept of intimacy is central to academic research on podcasting in recent years. As shown by Mia Lindgren (2021), audio journalism has developed narrative conventions that exploit precisely this dimension of emotional proximity. Her essay, based on an analysis of eleven Australian and British productions that were finalists in the 2019 Podcast Awards, shows how audio journalists and documentarians move away from the impersonality typical of traditional reporting to adopt a first-person narrative approach, sharing experiences, doubts and reflections that emerge during the journalistic investigation.

«For most people, journalists are the ones who shout on TV talk shows, or are names in newspapers that they do not buy. The voice humanises the journalist and creates closeness with the listener», said Francesco Costa, deputy editor of the Italian newspaper *Il Post*, in an interview with *Prima Comunicazione* (de CESCO, 2023: 74). In the same article, Mario Calabresi, director of Chora Media and former editor of *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, stressed how this closeness also implies a higher responsibility: «In the newspaper the journalist is a piece of an organization. With podcasts, on the other hand, you have a higher level of responsibility. Whoever does a podcast, puts more than his face into it, he puts his voice into it» (*Ibidem*).

Voice is probably the element that more than any other creates that feeling of intimacy in the listener of a podcast. But «intimacy» is not always a term used in a positive sense. As Lance Dann and Martin Spinelli point out in *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution* (2019: 95), there is also a tendency to view intimacy as an artifice or a deception.

Anne O’Keeffe is a case in point; in her *Investigating Media Discourse* she describes a *pseudo*-intimacy built on the *para*-social (people sat speaking as if they were old friends). She cites a *simulated* co-presence (a presenter’s referencing of surroundings), vocatives, and other rhetorical figures in order to cast suspicion on the idea of media intimacy.

While certain intimate broadcast language is marked by «a relatively complete and honest level of self-disclosure» the material distance between presenter and listener means the relationship is only ever ersatz. Because the audience is always “out there”, a sus-

tained sense of commonality must be simulated to transcend physical distance.

Even more critical (and perhaps cynical) than O'Keeffe, Alan Hall sees in this performative simulation a simple manipulation designed to monetise an audience; if our audiences feel more emotionally invested they will buy more of what our advertisers are pushing (*Ivi*: 76).

Regarding the element of voice specifically, writer Nicola Lagioia, interviewed for this essay, points out another potential risk: «Oral narrative lends itself more to reworking than written. So one has to be more careful. The written remains, black on white: if you say something that is inaccurate or betrays reality, they can easily nail you». Audio is a warm medium, as Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964 referring to the radio, capable of touching everyone on an intimate level. «While writing is subjected to a test that has to do with reason, voice is subjected to a test that has more to do with emotion», continues Lagioia, author and voice of the podcast *La città dei vivi*<sup>1</sup>. «Because the voice constantly betrays our emotions, and those who know how to manipulate the voice well can also play with the emotions of the listener, perhaps even regardless of what they say. And so the voice from this point of view is wonderful, but it is also dangerous».

Added to this criticality is another, highlighted by Jonathan Zenti in the aforementioned *Prima Comunicazione* article: the public's difficulty in critically evaluating what they hear. «We trust a voice, a content, but at the same time people no longer have the tools to make a critical analysis of that voice or that content, and they don't really know who and what they are trusting», Zenti observes. «There is information everywhere, and people can search for the news they want as they want it, without being challenged. We tend to look for what we want to find, what gives us comfort, rather than what informs us. The news tells us about the world, and if we find the news we like, the world also seems more like the way we want it to be» (de Cesco, 2023: 74).

A recent article reveals a complementary aspect of the podcaster-listener dynamic: the «inverse parasocial relationship» (Sharon & John, 2024). While studies have traditionally focused on how listeners develop a unidirectional bond with podcast voices, this research flips the perspective, examining how podcasters visualise and relate to their invisible audience. The researchers found that creators tend to imagine their listener as an extension of themselves, an ideal alter ego with whom they have an inner dialogue during the recording. When listeners perceive authenticity and closeness, they are actually intercepting this internal dialogue of the podcaster with the idealised version of their audience.

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<sup>1</sup> *La città dei vivi* by Nicola Lagioia, published in 2021 and produced by Chora Media, is based on the book of the same name by the same author (Einaudi, 2022). Podcast and book tell the story of a murder that took place in Rome in 2016. The victim was a boy named Luca Varani, who was murdered during a party by Manuel Foffo and Marco Prato, two thirty year-olds from good families. See also <https://choramedia.com/podcast/la-citta-dei-vivi/>

The podcast therefore has intrinsic characteristics that make it capable of generating a high degree of trust and a strong sense of intimacy in the listener. These same characteristics, however, also make it a potentially dangerous medium that lends itself to an easy manipulation of reality – a manipulation that the listener is unlikely to detect, precisely because of the relationship of intimacy and trust that is established with the podcaster.

The desire or need to shape a compelling and intimate narrative that can hold attention and create empathy may in fact drive the podcaster to rework or manipulate reality to suit his or her needs. This manipulation can involve both the presenter's narration and the testimonies of third parties and can be reinforced through the strategic use of music and sounds to suggest certain situations or arouse precise emotions.

These issues become particularly relevant when it comes to journalistic podcasts, audio documentaries or podcasts dealing with the telling of reality. In the following paragraphs, we will explore them through the reflections of journalists, authors, sound designers and audio scholars: we will analyse the role of the first-person narrator in journalistic reporting, the significance of adopting a particular point of view on a story, the concept of truth in its different meanings, the ethics of audio journalism, the risks and potentials of mixing reality and fiction. The aim is to understand if and how it is possible to produce stories that are engaging and that, at the same time, have ethical foundations that justify the trust that a growing segment of citizens accords to those who provide narration and information through podcasts.

### *A matter of perspective*

The complexity of journalistic and documentary storytelling through podcasts emerges with particular clarity in the experience of Scott Carrier, a long-standing US radio producer. In *The Friendly Man*<sup>2</sup>, the famous episode he made for the National Public Radio programme *This American Life*, Carrier recounts his time working for a well-known American radio programme with the assignment of telling positive stories about the United States. The episode highlights the difficulties in telling “truths” that match editorial expectations, especially on the day when just as he is documenting a basketball programme designed to reduce youth crime, he is robbed.

His passion for radio production began at the age of 21 (Carrier, 2001: 1), inspired by watching a scene with Jackie Kennedy in Richard Leacock's film *Primary*<sup>3</sup> and the documentary's ability to convey to viewers the feeling of “being there”. His first thoughts on how to turn reality into a story, however,

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/181/the-friendly-man>.

<sup>3</sup> The film chronicles the 1960 Democratic Party primary election for Wisconsin, contested between John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey.

came when he started working for NPR. Initially inspired by the work for the *All Things Considered* programme<sup>4</sup> produced by the Kitchen Sisters (Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva) – which used only the voices of interviewees without narration – he was confronted with the practical limitations of this purist approach. Colleague Alex Chadwick points out to him that reality does not naturally present itself as a story, but needs to be organized, suggesting that he add a narrative to contextualize the recordings.

The question raised by Carrier's experience introduces a broader reflection on the nature of journalistic truth in podcasting. According to Manuel Álvaro de La-Chica Duarte (2024a), we are witnessing a significant change in its conception: no longer a closed and absolute factum, but a process of construction that maintains the distinction between truth and falsehood while acknowledging its complexity. A vision that is grounded in the work of Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2003), for whom «journalistic truth is more a process than a dictum», and in the words of Tomás Eloy Martínez (2002), who identifies doubt as the «sacred flame of journalism», emphasizing how «where documents seem to establish a certainty, journalism always asks a question».

Mario Calabresi translates this approach into operational terms. «Respect for the facts must be total», he says, while making a clear distinction between narrative reworking and factual manipulation. When the need to rework factual reality emerges, for Calabresi it means that «a passage is deflated: it means I have not done good research». According to him, what can be reworked is the cut, the temporal structure of the story. In the context of traditional journalism, the story typically develops along a linear time axis, with a balanced distribution of narrative space. Podcasting allows instead to privilege «the point of view», building the story around «a face, a voice, a place» or altering the temporal continuity (Calabresi, 2024).

An example in this sense is the podcast *Due volte che sono morto*<sup>5</sup> by Paolo Nori (a Chora production for Rai Play Sound), where the writer recounts and is told about the two incidents that led to the news that he had died, one in 1999 and the other in 2013. In the narration, it was decided to start with the more recent incident, because the one further back in time is stronger from a narrative point of view, and it was chosen to save it for last. In short, the time axis of the narrative is reversed with respect to reality.

Calabresi's view on respect for factual truth and the role of point of view is echoed in the words of Álvaro de Cózar, co-founder of True Story, a company that produces *Hechos Reales* (a Spanish podcast that tells stories united by the «unbeatable power of reality»<sup>6</sup>), also interviewed for this essay: «our responsibility as storytellers should be to the facts that can be proven. Then we add the interpretations of those facts, people's opinions, our points of view, which

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.npr.org/programs/all-things-considered/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/duevoltechesonmorto>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://hechosrealespodcast.com/>.

are not only valid but probably the reason why they listen to us» (de Cózar, 2024). At the same time, he recognises that «we have to be aware that when we tell a story we are always “manipulating” reality, because we make cuts, edits, etc. in order to highlight what we have focused on» (*Ibidem*).

In this regard, Daria Corrias, journalist and editor of Rai Radio 3's programme *Tre Soldi*<sup>7</sup>, interviewed for this essay, quotes Edwin Brys, one of the masters of European documentary radio: «Everything has been told but not by me» (Corrias, 2024). A statement that encapsulates a fundamental methodological principle: the need for a distinctive point of view not as a stylistic exercise, but as an ethical responsibility towards the listener. Corrias articulates this responsibility on two levels: intellectual honesty towards the audience, since proposing points of view that are always the same would mean limiting the view of human beings, and the authorial responsibility to «illuminate a dark corner of the story that no one has ever illuminated».

Similarly, for writer Nicola Lagioia, recounting a true fact means embarking on a path of discovery whose outcome is not predetermined: «Trying to understand, to explore the human soul is the most important thing, more so than seducing or captivating». An approach that requires suspension of judgement and an openness to the unexpected that can lead to discovering «something completely different» from initial intuitions. The great works of fiction, Lagioia argues, are those that «do not offer definitive answers, but leave open doors that we are free to pass through and interpret». A specific pact is thus established with the listener: the collected facts are reorganised to offer «a general picture» that becomes a shared heritage, while the «background» of reality remains «still mysterious».

This delicate balance between authorial guidance and interpretive space finds an interesting theoretical elaboration in Katharina Smets' essay *Between Me and You* (2023). The effective audio documentary, the scholar argues, requires the narrator to be visible enough to create a clear dynamic with the interviewee, yet discreet enough to leave room for the listener's interpretation.

La-Chica Duarte's research on the construction of authority in podcasting offers a further key to understanding it through the concept of the intradiegetic narrator – a narrator who is part of the story itself. This figure favours the construction of what the scholar calls the «researcher ethos», where the journalist is perceived as someone who conducts his research competently and honestly. The listener discovers journalistic truth at the same time as the narrator, creating a relationship between “peers” that eliminates traditional hierarchical distances.

However, this intimacy built on the transparency of the journalistic process also carries significant risks. Breaking the pact of trust can be particularly damaging precisely because of the intensity of the relationship established: «the breach of trust could be greater because it would be perceived as a betrayal».

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/tresoldi>.



Carrier's original dilemma – between documentary purity and narrative necessity – thus emerges not so much as a problem to be solved as a productive field of tension that characterises contemporary podcasting. The authenticity of the narrative arises precisely from the transparent management of this fundamental dialectic, where narrative mediation does not compromise the truth of the facts but becomes a tool to illuminate their complexity.

### *A matter of sound*

The question of point of view in journalistic narration acquires an additional dimension when considering the role of sound and music in audio narration. If the choice of words and narrative structure already imply a mediation of reality, the sound intervention introduces an additional level of interpretation that deserves in-depth analysis.

As Luca Micheli, Head of Music&Sound at Chora Media, observes, the very nature of sound recording already implies a technological mediation of reality: «The filming of reality is not reality, it is still something you film with a filter, a technological element, with a microphone, which is done in a certain way. A sound taken with a microphone sounds one way, with another microphone another way, even the place where the microphone is placed changes the perception of the sound event, so it is always a reconstruction» (Micheli, 2024).

This consideration opens up a fundamental epistemological question: even when we have recordings of real events – take for example the impact of planes against the Twin Towers – their sound reproduction is always mediated by technological and creative choices that influence the perception of the event itself.

Sound design in news podcasts thus finds itself operating in a space of controlled creativity, where fidelity to reality may paradoxically require its reconstruction. «With sound you can allow yourself to reconstruct a scene as you wish, working on emotionality, it's audio staging, it's not reality», Micheli explains, citing as an example the possibility of representing the sound of a bomb through «a low piano note or strings moving very very low» (*Ibidem*). In some cases, even silence can become a more effective tool than realistic reproduction to communicate the emotional impact of an event: «silences can actually sometimes express what words cannot» (Oz, 2001: 150). Micheli gives the example of the film *Oppenheimer*: «Just think of what Christopher Nolan recently did in *Oppenheimer*. When the bomb explodes, with a very powerful explosion and flames rising into the sky, the whole scene is completely silent. The effect is emotionally powerful» (Micheli, 2024).

This ability of sound to «shift emotion», however, introduces a specific ethical responsibility. The sound designer often has to manage a delicate tension between narrative effectiveness and respect for the subject matter: «In some cases if I hear something particularly gloomy I don't exaggerate with the gloom,

if I hear something particularly painful I try not to exaggerate with the pain. In some cases, especially when faced with particularly sensitive testimonies, the choice may be not to intervene at all, letting the words resonate for everyone in a different way» (*Ibidem*).

The management of the «emotional temperature» of the story takes the form of a real pact with the listener. «I repeat, it is a staging of reality. I'm using sound, I'm reconstructing scenes, I'm working with music, so I'm taking you where I want to take you», Micheli admits. «If you trust me, you listen to me, and you let me accompany you» (*Ibidem*). A statement that highlights how sound in the journalistic podcast is always an interpretive act that requires ethical awareness and methodological transparency.

Sound design thus emerges not as a mere embellishment of the narrative, but as a constituent element of the author's point of view, capable of directing the understanding and emotional processing of the events narrated. A potential that requires constant reflection on the boundary between narrative effectiveness and journalistic responsibility.

### *Rock 'n' ethics*

The journalistic and documentary podcasting industry today faces a fundamental paradox: while personal stories emerge as the dominant format in the non-fiction media ecosystem, awareness of the ethical issues of this form of storytelling is growing. Jess Shane's *Shocking, Heartbreaking, Transformative* podcast for Radiotopia<sup>8</sup> takes the form of a crucial meta-reflection on these dynamics, exploring the mechanisms through which personal experiences are shaped to meet the demands of the media industry.

Shane raised a central question: in a «competitive market that demands certain kinds of representations of reality», how can we balance the need to create engaging content with an ethical responsibility towards the protagonists of the stories? The question becomes particularly delicate in the context of podcasting where, as Shane herself notes, «when listening to someone whispering stories in our ear, one may have the perception of thinking to oneself or having an intimate conversation with a loved one» (Shane, 2024).

Quoting John Grierson, Shane says that documentary represents a «creative treatment of reality», a definition that encapsulates the complexity of the relationship between factual truth and narrative mediation. The issue of trust emerges as a crucial element in the ecosystem of documentary podcasting, where three levels of relationship are intertwined: the relationship between author and protagonists of the story, the relationship between author and audience, and the relationship between the protagonists and the audience itself.

This relational complexity was also addressed by Matteo Caccia, writer,

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<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.radiotopia.fm/podcasts/shocking-heartbreaking-transformative>



podcaster and radio presenter, who emphasises the need for a dual pact of trust: «Not only with the listener, but also and above all with the storyteller. The story must be in front of everything, even in front of the needs of the storyteller» (Caccia, 2024). The important thing, Caccia emphasises, is that the story has narrative effectiveness: «That is, you have to make the listener want to keep listening. And so, even though I never basically rework anything, some small cuts or editing may be needed, because it is not certain that the person telling their story knows how to make it interesting» (*Ibidem*).

With respect to the management of these relational dynamics, Daria Corrias emphasises how in over twenty years of profession she has «never had the feeling, in selecting the parts of an interview, of betraying the trust of those interviewed» (Corrias, 2024). This result, according to Corrias, derives from a precise methodological approach: establishing with the interviewees «a relationship based on sharing what we were doing right from the start» (*Ibidem*).

This view is echoed in the reflections of journalist Francesca Berardi, who develops a kind of ethical protocol for handling documentary material. «I always ask myself: does what I have selected do justice to the trust given to me by the interviewee? [...] If I realise that the listener cannot recognise him or herself in the story or the characters, then it means that I have distorted them too much according to my idea or my prejudice» (Berardi, 2024). But there are also other “golden rules” that Berardi has drawn up for her work: «do not dwell on the pain and constantly question the real narrative necessity of the most intimate details». As the journalist notes, «often [these details] only satisfy our voyeurism» (*Ibidem*). Yet Berardi herself acknowledges the complexity of this assessment, pointing out that «the line between a certain idea of respect and “censorship” is not so clear-cut».

Shane’s analysis of contemporary audio documentary goes beyond critique to outline the possibility of a new production paradigm that recognises the inherently problematic nature of the «creative treatment of reality». Within the non-fiction content industry, where personal stories have become «central to our media entertainment ecosystem», the need for alternatives to the traditional narrative model of the hero’s journey emerges (Shane, 2024).

«We need to recognise», Shane argues, «how these kinds of stories can feed a distorted portrait of the world, based on a neoliberal conception of society» (*Ibidem*). Her methodological proposal leans towards the exploration of alternative narrative forms that exploit «the possibilities of montage, polyphony, speculative docufiction». This approach is echoed in Corrias’ reflection on the nature of documentary truth: «Reality remains what it is: I tell it from my point of view and take responsibility for it; and the listener in turn has his own point of view». (Corrias, 2024).

However, this dialogical conception of documentary truth clashes with the pressures of the content market. As stated by Byung-Chul Han in *The Crisis of Narrative*: «Through storytelling, capitalism appropriates the narrative and submits it to consumption. Storytelling produces narratives in a consumable

form. It charges products with emotion. It promises unique experiences. We buy, sell and consume narratives and emotions. Stories sell. Storytelling is storyselling» (2024: 9).

As Shane notes (2024), operating outside the logic of the market and «the editorial mandate of many media companies that depend too much on advertising revenue» becomes an ethical necessity before it is a creative one.

In this perspective, the audio documentary emerges as a field of tension between several forces: the push towards the commodification of personal stories, the need for truth and insight, and the ethical responsibility towards the protagonists of the stories. As Shane reminds us, «naming the world can be violent or beautiful; it is often both» (*Ibidem*).

The challenge for the future of audio documentary lies in finding ways of production that allow these tensions to be navigated without sacrificing either the ethical rigour or the narrative power of the medium. The solution, suggest the professionals surveyed, lies not so much in seeking an impossible balance between conflicting demands, but in radically rethinking the relationship between media production and social responsibility. A process that requires to «trust those who speak to you» (Berardi, 2024) and at the same time maintain constant ethical vigilance over one's work as an author.

This schematic representation highlights how the podcaster is at the apex of a complex relational system, the recipient of a dual trust (that of the listener and that of the eventual interviewee) which entails a dual ethical responsibility.

### *To fact or to fiction?*

If the ethics of audio journalism is based on building a relationship of trust with the listener through the transparency of the documentation process, the question of truth in contemporary podcasting raises even more complex questions when we consider the role of fiction in telling reality. The intimate relationship established between the narrator and listener, which has already emerged as a distinctive element of the medium, can in fact become as much a vehicle of misinformation as a tool for the creative exploration of reality.

The issue of disinformation found an emblematic manifestation in the case of *Caliphate*, a *New York Times* podcast created by Rukmini Callimachi<sup>9</sup>, a leading journalist covering international terrorism. In 2020, it emerged that the series, built around the testimony of an alleged ISIS member, was based on an elaborate fabrication of false identities and unreliable statements. The *Times'* internal investigation led not only to the return of the Peabody award it had received in 2018, but to a fundamental overhaul of verification standards in audio journalism.

The vulnerability of the medium is particularly evident in the analysis con-

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/column/caliphate>

ducted by Valerie Wirtschafter, senior data analyst at the Brookings Institution. In her study *The challenge of detecting misinformation in podcasting* (Wirtschafter, 2021), she examined over 8000 episodes of popular political podcasts, revealing that more than a tenth of them contained potentially false information. The researcher highlights how podcasting establishes a one-way relationship that limits the possibilities of immediate fact-checking. As Wirtschafter notes, «the podcaster is in your ear» (*Ibidem*), creating a level of authority and credibility that can make even the most problematic narratives particularly persuasive.

This dynamic was particularly evident in the case of *The Joe Rogan Experience*<sup>10</sup>, where the intimate and conversational nature of the medium amplified the spread of scientifically unfounded theories during the COVID-19 pandemic. And in December 2024, a BBC investigation (Wakefield, 2024) into *The Diary of a CEO*<sup>11</sup>, one of the most popular podcasts in the UK, found that several false health claims were spread without any verification or challenge from the host, Steven Bartlett.

The question of truth in contemporary podcasting cannot, however, be reduced to a simple dichotomy between journalistic accuracy and disinformation. Indeed, the history of the audio medium reveals a complex relationship with fiction, often characterized by problematic audience reactions. A significant historical precedent is *The War of the Worlds*, a radio drama directed and narrated by Orson Welles as an adaptation of the novel of the same name by H.G. Wells. The script, broadcast live on the evening of 30 October 1938 on the CBS radio network, announced that an alien invasion was underway. Some listeners panicked, demonstrating the power of the radio medium to construct credible alternative realities. Dorothy Thompson at the time wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that the broadcast had demonstrated that «few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can so convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create nation-wide panic»<sup>12</sup>.

This issue resurfaced with Matteo Caccia's *Amnesia*, which aired between 2008 and 2009 on Rai Radio 2<sup>13</sup>. In the programme Caccia told his story in the first person, that of a man suffering from global retrograde amnesia. When he finally revealed that it was all false, some did not take it well. There were those who accused Caccia of having compromised the very credibility of the radio medium. «Today I don't think I would do that. I could have burnt my career. [...] Of one thing I was certain: and that was that at some point we had to say that the story was not true. I didn't want to be an impostor, I wanted to be the person who had invented that project» (Caccia 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.joerogan.com/>

<sup>11</sup> See <https://stevenbartlett.com/doac/>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://rwoconne.github.io/rwoclass/ast1210/welles-and-mass-delusion-DThompson-1938.html>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/amnesia>

The debate on the use of fiction in audio documentary finds a theoretical systematization in the essay *Fact/Fiction: Docu-fiction in the Audio Canon*, where Talia Agustidis, audio producer and Third Coast Award winner, proposes an articulate reflection on the different ways of integrating reality and fiction in contemporary podcasting. Her analysis reveals how many audio documentaries considered “pure” already contain elements of fiction: from the use of foley to recreate sound scenes to interviews based on the inevitably selective memory of witnesses. The artist elaborates a taxonomy of docu-fiction practices that includes techniques such as re-creation, integrated topicality and re-contextualisation, offering a valuable map for navigating this hybrid territory (Agustidis, 2024).

Sharon Mashihi’s experience with the *Appearances* series<sup>14</sup> offers an illuminating example of how these techniques can be applied with critical awareness. Basing her work on her own Iranian-American family experiences, Mashihi decides to tell her family history as if it were fiction, thus consciously constructing a hybrid narrative space, where the protagonist Melanie is placed in an undefined territory between author and character. When Mashihi states that «the series is more true than fiction, around 6.5/10» (*Ibidem*), she recognises how the distance offered by fictionalisation can paradoxically allow for a more honest portrayal of family reality, while simultaneously protecting the privacy of those involved.

The writer Javier Cercas offers a fundamental interpretative key to understanding this apparent contradiction between fiction and truth. Interviewed by Eugenio Cau for the *Globo* podcast in June 2024<sup>15</sup>, the Spanish writer in distinguishing between lies and literary fiction highlights how the latter can become an instrument of rebellion against official truths, offering alternative perspectives that illuminate hidden aspects of reality. In the context of podcasting, this distinction takes on particular relevance: fiction can enrich journalistic narrative rather than compromise its integrity. Provided it is stated and handled consciously, as Álvaro de Cózar (2024), co-founder of True Story, also points out: «As a reader or listener, the mixture of reality and fiction interests me a lot. But I want it to be told or to be obvious».

The analysis of the different ways of integrating fact and fiction in contemporary podcasting suggests the need to overcome a dichotomous view that simplistically contrasts truth and invention. If cases such as *Caliphate* and *The Joe Rogan Experience* have highlighted the risks of deliberate disinformation, showing how the lack of verification of sources can compromise journalistic integrity, experiences such as those of Mashihi, Hardinge and Caccia reveal the potential of fiction as a tool for exploring reality when used with methodological awareness and ethical transparency.

The taxonomy elaborated by Agustidis (2024) may offer a theoretical frame-

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.radiotopia.fm/podcasts/appearances>

<sup>15</sup> See <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1qW3H6NiPX6t5eR1pme1jj>

work to understand how these different narrative practices can coexist within an ethically grounded documentary approach. The key lies in the transparency of the pact with the listener and an awareness of the potential and risks inherent in each narrative choice. As Wirtschafter's analysis of political podcasts highlights (2021), the unidirectional nature of the medium requires special attention to editorial responsibility, precisely because the absence of immediate fact-checking by the audience makes the integrity of the narrative process crucial.

The challenge for the future of documentary podcasting thus lies not so much in the attempt to purify the medium of all elements of fiction, but in the development of professional practices that are able to clearly distinguish between the lie, which aims to distort reality, and the conscious and avowed use of fiction as a tool for investigation and understanding. In this perspective, the boundary between truth and fiction reveals itself not as an insurmountable demarcation line, but as a space of creative exploration where documentary rigour can coexist with the ambition to illuminate, through narration, the most complex nuances of reality.

### *A thousand shades of truth*

We have seen how the boundary between reality and fiction in documentary podcasting does not have to be clear-cut, but can take the form of a space of creative exploration where journalistic rigour coexists with narrative ambition. This productive tension brings us to the heart of a fundamental question: what is truth in the context of audio storytelling?

In a talk at the EBU Audio Storytelling Festival 2024 entitled *Documentary and the truth: What lies beneath facts, emotions, time and perception*, Jonathan Zenti (2024) offers a perspective that starts from the very foundations of the concept of truth, tracing its evolution through human history. The writer and podcast designer outlines a path from the perceptive truth of early man, based on direct experience, to the spiritual truth that intuits the invisible, via the legal truth codified in the first written laws. This path continues with the observational truth introduced by Galileo, who distinguished between perception and instrumental observation, to physical and theoretical truth, culminating in the quantum truth theorised by Heisenberg. A genealogy that leads Zenti to a significant conclusion: documentary filmmakers do not tell the truth but construct a reality.

«Anyone who thinks they are telling the Truth is cheating, as well as lacking humility», notes de Cózar (2024). What we can aspire to, according to the Spanish producer, is a «factual truth», a sum of proven facts that allows us to approach a more complete picture of reality. A position that highlights how the question of truth in podcasting cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between fact and fiction.

This complexity of the relationship between reality and narrative was par-

ticularly evident in the case of comedian Hasan Minhaj. In 2023, a *New Yorker* article revealed how many of the personal stories Minhaj told in his shows – from alleged post-9/11 persecution to an encounter with an FBI informant in his mosque – were largely fictional. The comedian defended himself by comparing his approach to a mixed drink: just as the Arnold Palmer is a mix of tea and lemonade, so his stories would be composed of 70% emotional truth and 30% hyperbole and exaggeration. «When it comes to my plays, emotional truth comes first. Factual truth is secondary», the comedian claimed (Malone, 2023).

At Resonate Pod Fest 2024, Ronald Young Jr. (host of the *Weight For It* podcast<sup>16</sup>) used the Minhaj case to explore the implications of this distinction between factual and emotional truth. The problem, according to Young Jr., lies not so much in the use of fiction to narrate real experiences, but in the consequences that this choice can have: when the audience discovers that a story presented as true is not, this can damage the credibility of those who actually live those experiences. As we have seen with the case of *Amnesia* by Matteo Caccia, «audiences like to be surprised, but not tricked», summarises Young Jr.

A different perspective emerges from the work of Kaitlin Prest, an audio artist known for podcasts *The Heart*<sup>17</sup> or *The Shadows*<sup>18</sup>. For Prest, who describes herself as «documentarian of the emotions», (de CESCO, 2024), any narrative necessarily involves manipulation of facts: «Whether you say it's a documentary or not, whether you say it's reporting or journalism or not, you're manipulating facts. You're arranging them. You're taking data that you filter through your own point of view» (*Ibidem*). According to the artist, truth does not exist as an isolated fact but emerges from the interaction between different perspectives and interpretations, in a dynamic process involving the teller, the told and the listener. It is in this sense that Prest states that «truth is relational and is constantly changing» (Espinosa de los Monteros, 2020) – there is no absolute and immutable truth, but a truth that is constructed and transformed through the relationships between the people involved in the narrative process.

In this context, the pact with the listener assumes crucial importance. As Young Jr. points out, it is not just a question of intellectual honesty, but of responsibility towards the listener and the narrator. His reflection is echoed in the words of Jonathan Zenti, when he points out how every element of audio documentary contains elements of construction: «An interview is a lie, a tape montage is a lie. And do you know what the biggest lie is? The room tone. What is less true than asking an interviewee to stay still in silence?» (Zenti 2024).

This does not mean giving up the search for truth. Kaitlin Prest's experience with *The Shadows* offers an interesting example of how fiction can become a tool for exploring the real. While presenting itself as fiction, the podcast recounts events that actually happened. The choice to romanticise certain ele-

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.radiotopia.fm/podcasts/weight-for-it>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.theheartradio.org/>

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/201-the-shadows>



ments – such as the protagonist's profession – stems from the need to protect the identities of the people involved, without compromising the substance of the story. «Does it really matter whether she was a radio documentarian or a puppeteer?», asks Prest. «No, it doesn't, because it's not about that. It's about love. It's about what this woman experienced» (de Cesco, 2024).

The central question then becomes the transparency of narrative choices. If every documentary is a construction that implies a series of mediations – from the interview to the editing, from the choice of music to the recording of the room tone – honesty with the listener lies not so much in the claim of an impossible objectivity, as in making the process of narrative construction explicit. A principle that finds concrete application in podcasts such as Sabrina Efinayi's *Storia del mio nome*<sup>19</sup>, where the search for personal truth itself becomes part of the story, in a process of discovery that involves both the author and the listener.

The complexity of the relationship between truth and narration in documentary podcasting thus emerges not as a limitation, but as a resource peculiar to the medium. If Zenti suggests abandoning the ambition to close stories with a definitive “truth”, preferring to leave the narrative open to the perspectives of the audience, it is precisely because he recognises how truth in the podcast context is a dynamic process rather than an end point. A view that resonates with Kaitlin Prest's approach when she describes her work as an ongoing attempt to get «the most truth that I could achieve» (*Ibidem*).

This quest inevitably clashes with the limits of memory, the subjective nature of experience, and the need to protect those being told. But it is precisely these limits that define the ethical space of documentary podcasting: a space where truth emerges not so much from a literal adherence to facts, but from the transparency of the narrative process and an awareness of responsibility towards those who listen and those who are told. A responsibility that becomes particularly crucial in an age where, as Young Jr. points out through the example of Minhaj, the manipulation of truth can have real consequences on the credibility of entire communities.

The podcast is thus configured as an instrument for the exploration of truth in its multiple forms: from the factual truth that emerges from the sum of verifiable facts to the emotional truth that arises from lived experience, from the personal truth that is constructed through storytelling to the relational truth that develops in the encounter between the teller and the listener. A medium that, precisely because of its intimate and constructed nature, requires a renewed pact of honesty with the listener: not the promise of an absolute and indisputable truth, but the commitment to make transparent the process through which that truth is sought, constructed and shared.

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<sup>19</sup> See <https://choramedia.com/podcast/storia-del-mio-nome/>

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