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*Building intimacy through gossip?  
Aesthetics and storytelling in podcast journalism*

**ABSTRACT:** This chapter explores the use of gossip-inspired aesthetics in podcast journalism as a means to foster listener intimacy. It examines the narrative strategies of two podcast series, *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King*, which adopt a conversational style influenced by gossip to engage audiences. By drawing on psychological and sociological research, the study argues that the simulation of negative gossip talk strengthens the bond between hosts and listeners, creating a sense of belonging and complicity. While these podcasts utilize gossip-like tones to critique their morally questionable subjects, such as Silvio Berlusconi and King Juan Carlos I, this approach raises ethical concerns about the balance between journalistic integrity and entertainment. Ultimately, the research highlights how these productions blend personal narratives and gossip aesthetics to challenge traditional notions of objectivity in journalism, fostering a critical yet intimate engagement with their listeners.

**KEYWORDS:** podcast journalism; gossip; personal narratives; intimacy; youth audiences

*Introduction: podcast journalism in times of crisis*

Podcast journalism represents a fervent field in the overall context of the podcast industry, as available data reveal. For example, focusing on the specific case of daily news podcasts, Newman and Gallo show that already in 2020 «daily news podcasts [made] up less than 1% of all those produced but account[ed] for more than 10% of the overall downloads in the US and 9% in France and Australia» (2020: 5), and that about 30% of the top episodes listened on Apple Podcasts were daily news podcasts. Such encouraging results are consistent with researches that explore the reasons guiding podcast listening, highlighting the fact that among users' main motivations to listen to podcasts figures the desire to be informed and learn something new, expanding or acquiring knowledge about a variety of topics (EBU-MIS, 2023a).

These findings are all the more relevant in light of the current state of journalism and news media in the Western world, characterized by growing levels of mistrust in news after the positive peaks reached in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic: as signaled by the EBU-MIS *Trust in media 2022* report, «from

a global perspective, trust in news has declined again slightly after peaking in 2021, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trust in news overall is down by 2 percentage points compared to 2021. The same goes for trust in news sources people themselves use» (2022). Further researches identify a crucial factor for such widespread lack of trust in young citizens' consumption habits: people aged 18-24 tend to access news primarily through social networks, with a strong preference for «the informal, entertaining style of visual media (and particularly online video) platforms» (Reuters Institute, 2022: 43) like Instagram and TikTok; moreover, they seem to embrace a wide concept of what should be classified as news, including in this category entertainment, art, culture and education. They express dissatisfaction towards traditional approaches to newsmaking, preferring to gain information in the dispersed and fragmented ways fostered by social networks, or even avoiding news altogether, because they claim news negatively impact on their mood or fail to meet their tastes and interests. Also, consumption of news on traditional media (newspapers and television) is declining in most markets, and has not been balanced by a tantamount growth in news consumption online (Reuters Institute, 2023). Ultimately, this situation points to

two different but related problems. First, the emergence of a minority of people who are active online, many of them younger or less well educated, but who have become largely disconnected from the news, perhaps because they don't feel that it is relevant to their lives. And then, separately, we find a more generalized decline in news interest and consumption affecting a much bigger group, which may relate to structural changes in the way the news is distributed, such as the shift to online, the nature of the news cycle itself, or both. (Reuters Institute, 2022: 12)

In spite of all that, journalistic podcasts prove to be popular and successful, thus suggesting that the podcast medium may be promoting innovative themes and forms of expression particularly suited for reconnecting people – and especially youth, who represent the majority of podcast users in both the US and Europe (Edison Research, 2024; Cumulus Podcast Network & Signal Hill Insights, 2024) – with news. So, in trying to understand some of the reasons behind this success, this essay will delve into issues of aesthetics of podcast journalism: in particular, it will focus on the specific case of podcasts adopting what could be defined as a gossip-based speech style, examining its potential in producing effects of intimacy, which are deemed very important by scholars to effectively engage listeners, as will be discussed in the next paragraph. The research hypothesis guiding this article is that a style centered on features borrowed from gossip talk can actually strengthen a relation of intimacy between listeners and host. To test this claim, the article will first connect research on podcast intimacy with that addressing the social and relational values of gos-

siping; it will then relate the insights gained to the podcast series *Bunga Bunga* (Wonderly, 2020) and *Corinna and the King* (Project Brazen, PRX, La Coctelera Music, 2022), which widely make use of a gossip aesthetics to frame their narratives and characters. A potential explanation for this choice will be provided by referencing to psychological research on gossip, and especially on so-called “negative” gossip.

### *Intimacy through gossip?*

Intimacy is considered as perhaps podcast’s most specific aesthetic feature: in fact, a sense of intimate connection between listener and host not only is built through stylistic strategies, but, as McHugh (2016) argues, is embedded in podcast’s technical apparatus and established consumption habits (i.e. listening to podcasts with earbuds connected to a smartphone, which isolates the listener from her surroundings and produces the impression of being personally addressed by the speaker, with words and sounds directly whispered in one’s ears). Although media identities are provisional and subject to transformations due to the influences constantly exerted by a plurality of forces at different levels (Bonini, 2022), the currently dominant modes of consumption and technical affordances of the podcast medium give shape to highly intimate listening experiences, further empowered by the styles of expression that podcasters devise accordingly. Euritt (2023) argues that a key condition to engage the listener intimately is to create an illusion of liveness; that is, a credible enough reproduction of a situation of physical proximity with somebody, in real time. This can be achieved, among many possibilities, by crafting a «conversational aesthetics» (Spinelli & Dann, 2019): an approach to the topic of a podcast that employs more informal speech tones than in radio broadcasting, values the dialectic intertwining of multiple and often contrasting perspectives, and therefore emphasizes subjective stances as a means to enhance the listener’s emotional engagement.

In the subfield of podcast journalism, this coincides with heavily relying on «personal narratives», characterized by the journalist’s strong direct involvement in the facts addressed, which are recounted from her subjective point of view, rather than from that “objective” and impartial perspective traditionally associated with news making; moreover, personal narratives use storytelling techniques to provide a narrative frame aimed at making the presentation of news and events more entertaining, dramatic and emotionally charged (Lindgren, 2016; Rojas-Torrijos, Caro-González & González-Alba, 2020; Nee & Santana, 2021). According to Lindgren, personal narrative styles for audio journalism

place human experiences as centrepieces of their programmes,  
using personal stories to explore diverse issues ranging from new

scientific research into fear, to market testing, to daily mysteries of lost objects. Second, the presenters are highly personal in their presentation style and they frequently draw on their own lives for content. They engage with listeners as if they are friends in a conversation. They lead the listeners through stories in an intimate way, creating lasting bonds and loyalty to the programmes, where listeners feel like they know the presenters personally. (2016: 36)

In light of all that, it can be legitimate to investigate whether gossip could serve as an expressive model to strengthen a sense of intimate connection between listener and host, and their mutual complicity with regard to the theme of the podcast.

To determine if it is appropriate to assume that podcast intimacy and the social practice of gossiping share a theoretical common ground, it is necessary, first of all, to provide a comprehensive definition of gossip. That can be borrowed from Dores Cruz *et al.* (2021), who have conducted a systematic review of 6114 scientific articles on gossip in order to overcome the multitude of heterogeneous meanings associated with the concept. The definition resulting from their analysis is that of «a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content» (*Ivi*: 265), which highlights two important aspects: on the one hand, the triad of sender-receiver-target is seen as the essential structure of gossip; on the other, «almost half (48.15%) of the reviewed definitions include the absence of the target as a core characteristic. Therefore, there is a relatively high agreement in the literature that the absence of the target is a necessary, if not sufficient, requirement to define gossip» (*Ivi*: 261).

These qualities fit well with the stylistic approach developed by our case studies. Both *Bunga Bunga*<sup>1</sup> and *Corinna and the King*<sup>2</sup> project a foreign look

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<sup>1</sup> *Bunga Bunga*, in spite of its title, is not an investigation on Silvio Berlusconi's sex parties in 2010, held in his villa in Arcore. Rather, the podcast aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Berlusconi's political career, highlighting its many aspects of moral, as well as legal, ambiguity (the epitome of which is represented by the parties, widely known as "bunga bunga" from an off-color joke told by Berlusconi himself). Berlusconi's rise in 1994, and his later triumphant comebacks after phases of supposed crisis, are judged as symptoms, but at the same time as engine, of a wider cultural, social and moral decay characterizing Italy's recent history. *Bunga Bunga* is a podcast series composed of eight episodes, each dealing with a different facet of Berlusconi's personality and career; topics are addressed by mixing archival materials (news segments, audio and video recordings), monologues by the host recounting events and important facts, and interviews with scholars, experts and people close to Berlusconi. The podcast has been distributed as a premium content available via subscription to the Wondery site or to Amazon Music, which demonstrates how Berlusconi is considered a character able to spark interest among a large international audience. It is also telling, for the purposes of this essay, that the show is hosted by Whitney Cummings, a comedian: this clearly foregrounds the general tones employed by *Bunga Bunga* to present its subject matter, which are based on irony and gossip talk. The show is available at: <https://wondery.com/shows/bunga-bunga/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Corinna and the King* is an eight-episode podcast series investigating the extramarital affair between the Danish-German noblewoman Corinna zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn and King of Spain Juan Carlos I, and the public scandals that originated from their love story and that ultimately led to the

towards characters and events presented as “distant absents” (the political rise of Silvio Berlusconi in the former show, and the scandalous affair between King of Spain Juan Carlos I and Corinna zu Sayn-Wittgenstein in the latter). *Bunga Bunga* is produced by American network Wondery, and thus mainly aimed at US audiences; while *Corinna and the King* is an international co-production project involving the British company Project Brazen, the American PRX and the Spanish La Coctelera Music, with outputs in Spanish and English. The geographical origin of these podcasts, and their primary target listeners, have driven the producers to craft a style which could have made the respective stories accessible and appealing for audiences who do not already know them thoroughly. This has resulted in the wide employment of a gossip-like, alluring tone, enabled by the fact that the stories told take place far away in space. In this sense, Berlusconi and Juan Carlos, targets of the gossip going on in the podcasts, are conceptually framed as absent from the ideal space where the communication is taking place, and therefore unaware of it.

If in this way the basic structure of gossip is metaphorically replicated in the user experience of the two shows, nevertheless one could object that gossip is also a secret conversation about unknown facts regarding a specific subject, while the content of *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* deals with publicly available events. Moreover, Dores Cruz and colleagues would not consider these podcasts as legitimate forms of gossip because, similarly to the gossip magazines discussed in their article (2021: 265-266), they are cultural products distributed to a mass audience and easily discoverable and accessible. Therefore, their targets are allowed to potentially react to the communicative exchange between sender (host) and receiver (listeners) that is affecting their reputations, thus disrupting the practice of gossiping itself. This critique is fully consistent with Dores Cruz *et al.*'s approach, but it is important to stress that the present

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king's abdication in 2014. The podcast is mainly based on exclusive interviews with Corinna herself, in which she reveals details about her complex relationship with Juan Carlos that had previously been unknown. However, *Corinna and the King* is not an interview podcast: Corinna's testimony has been fragmented and inscribed into a strong narrative structure where, similarly to *Bunga Bunga*, her words are intermingled with recounting of important events by the podcast host and the use of archival materials. This is intended to produce a thorough reflection on post-dictatorship Spain, connecting the private dimension of Corinna and Juan Carlos affair to the wider public picture of Spanish politics and culture. Such focus on storytelling has been confirmed by executive producer Bradley Hope in an interview with the author, where he has defined his company Project Brazen as «a storytelling company, with a strong focus on journalism». The choice of actresses Mishel Prada and Laura Gómez as hosts of the show (for the international English version, and for the Spanish version respectively) can be related to this general approach, because, as explained by Hope, the production team had planned to narrate the story with a style resembling a telenovela (therefore rich of gossip tones) in the English version, and a fairy tale in the Spanish one. The overall dramaturgical mood devised for *Corinna and the King* is also clearly stressed by the synopsis present in the official website of the podcast, which reads: «This is the *true story* of the epic greed, unstoppable lust, and dark conspiracies that brought the Spanish royal family to its knees. It's about the fragile myths that modern royalties rely on to survive, and what happens when a nation's people stop believing them» (italics in original; <https://corinnaandtheking.com/>). The show is available for free on its official website and on all the major on demand audio platforms.

article is not suggesting that podcasts could be potential activators of actual gossip activities; rather, it claims that several podcast shows have realized a “simulation” of gossip, that is, an aesthetic device aimed at producing inter-subjective effects similar to those reached by gossiping, and through which to enrich the listening experience of these shows and to boost the listener’s intimate engagement.

But what exactly are these effects? That the act of gossiping constitutes a form of social exchange has been agreed upon for a long time (Rosnow & Fine, 1976), but what values this practice bears has been highly debated in the scientific literature on the topic. Beyond specific accounts evaluating the repercussions of gossip as positive or negative for society, «one general conclusion that can be drawn from [gossip research] is that gossip affects all actors involved in the “gossip triad,” comprised people who send it (gossip senders), people who receive it (gossip receivers), and people who become its target» (Dorez Cruz *et al.*, 2021: 253). So, gossip not only affects the reputation of the targets, but has social consequences for senders and receivers as well. Social anthropology has comprehensively examined this topic, coming to the conclusion that gossip, being performed voluntarily by the subjects involved in the exchange, must prove beneficial for both sender and receiver. One classic account is Gluckman’s, which claims that through gossip people can perceive themselves as part of a group, and strong community bonds can be tightened:

The important things about gossip and scandal are that generally these are enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in a close social relationship. Hence when we try to understand why it is that people in all places and at all times have been so interested in gossip and scandal about each other, we have also to look at those whom they exclude from joining in the gossiping or scandalizing. That is, the right to gossip about certain people is a privilege which is only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark of membership. Hence rights to gossip serve to mark off a particular group from other groups. There is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip: this shows him conclusively that he does not belong. On the other hand, if a man does not join in the gossip and scandal, he shows that he does not accept that he is a party to the relationship; hence we see that gossiping is a duty of membership of the group. (Gluckman, 1963: 313)

This approach differs from how the podcasts studied here employ gossip aesthetically in that it conceives also the target of gossiping as a member of the group joined by the receiver of the message: i.e., sharing sensitive information



about one's friend with another person serves to include the latter in the two friends' intimate sphere of relationships. Nonetheless, it remains important for the present article because it frames gossip as a fundamentally cohesive activity; although one whose pleurability, I contend, would not derive from the sense of having been admitted into an inner circle: rather, following Besnier, the pleasure of gossip «is the pleasure that people experience in each other's company while denigrating absent parties» (2009: 18-19). So, once conceptualized in terms of opposition between sender and receiver on the one hand, and target on the other, gossip appears to possess a power that is segregatory as well as integrative: it can indeed give birth to an intimate complicity between two or more individuals by spreading, and therefore sharing, a common knowledge about someone else's sensitive information; but in doing so, gossip also marks a clear line separating who is part of a group or community from who is deemed morally unworthy of joining them and is elected as target (almost in the ballistic sense of the word here) of derogatory talk. Such a theorization of gossip is consistent with what scholars have defined as «negative gossip» (Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004), and seems to correspond with the aesthetic strategies developed in *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* to boost intimacy.

So, in the next paragraphs I will first provide several instances where such an aesthetics can be seen at work in defining the listener's ideal positioning with respect to the way the stories are told and the characters presented; then, such cases will be discussed according to the definition of negative gossip, to gain a theoretical understanding of their aesthetic value.

But before doing this, there is another aspect of the stylistic organization of gossip devised by these podcasts that should at least be hinted at, because it allows to widen the scope of the analysis to include a gender dimension that would be detrimental to overlook. Besnier explains that gossip is a highly gendered practice, which takes on different meanings and moral connotations according to the sex of the gossiper, thus reflecting wider gender inequalities. In fact, many societies have often conceptualized gossip from a patriarchal standpoint, characterizing «women's communicative activities as reprehensible and unwholesome gossip and of men's as morally neutral talk» (Besnier, 2009: 14). The presence of female hosts in podcast shows adopting a gossip-like aesthetics could, therefore, serve to justify such a speech style and to «normalize» it by associating the activity of gossiping with women: female gossip would seem more naturally related to carrying negative features such as aggressiveness, uncomfortable innuendos, biting remarks aimed at affecting a target's reputation. However, in these shows gossip also results devoid of the reprehensible values Besnier pointed at. This may be due to the fact that the targets of gossiping – Berlusconi and king Juan Carlos in our case studies – are presented as reprehensible personalities themselves; in this way, the employment of negative gossip would be legitimized as a means to foster a caustic critique of their behavior.

*Gossip style: Bunga Bunga and Corinna and the King*

The aim of this paragraph is to present several occurrences of the gossip aesthetics in the case studies addressed by this essay. Due to limited space, it will be possible to discuss only a few but representative examples among all those detectable in *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King*. Moreover, the stylistic influence of gossip in these shows is expressed not only by what is said (how sentences are composed), but primarily by the tones, rhythms and moods accompanying the host's words. Such aspects are pervasive, but nonetheless difficult to describe in written form; so, it is recommended that the reader complement this analysis with direct listening to the podcasts.

*Bunga Bunga* immediately strives to discursively replicate the negative gossip triad. The very first scene of episode one (*I know how to make people love me*) describes the imprisonment in a police station in Milan of young Karima el Mahroug, better known as "Ruby Rubacuori" (Ruby the Heart-stealer), and a subsequent phone call to the police station made by Silvio Berlusconi, who (falsely) claimed that Ruby was the niece of Egyptian Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak. That led to Ruby's release that same night, in order to avoid an international incident. It is interesting what Cummings says, in describing Ruby's physical and psychological state when escorted to the police station: «Ruby has wide eyes, pouty lips, and – *let's be real* – she doesn't look surprised to be here: this isn't her first brush with the cops» (italics added by the author). This sentence is strategic in setting the general tone and mood which will characterize the entire series: the remark «let's be real», in particular, is intended to directly address the listener and to create that sense of intimate complicity that derives, according to Besnier, from gossiping derogatorily about an absent third party (in this case, Ruby). Moreover, «let's be real» also implies that an unquestionable truth exists about the facts that are being narrated, and such truth will be shared by the host with her listener as an act of the utmost importance in strengthening their mutual bond. Since this happens through a sharp allusion to Ruby's alleged previous illegal or ambiguous behaviors that led her to have trouble with the law, she is immediately framed as the target of a negative gossip aimed at revealing uncomfortable truths behind official narratives. Plus, the show immediately links Ruby to Berlusconi, so that the negative judgement already expressed about her is somehow transferred to the Prime Minister as well, who in the show will always appear, conceptually, as target of Cummings' gossiping.

When directed at Berlusconi, gossip also has the aim of highlighting facts that are intuitively recognized as true by many but have not been proven officially. Then, it becomes possible to suggest specific readings and interpretations of the events recounted, without making explicit claims that may be legally contested. For example, in episode two, *Bigger than Jesus*, which explores the reasons behind Berlusconi's election as Prime Minister in 1994, Cummings discusses a pool conducted in 1993 to discover who were the most popular



persons in Italy at that time. The result was that Berlusconi won the pool as the most appreciated man by Italian citizens, followed by Arnold Schwarzenegger and... Jesus Christ. In trying to make sense of such a bizarre outcome, Cummings says: «So, what does Berlusconi have that Jesus and Arnold don't? Well, he runs most of the country's media outlets, so he can count on some really... let's just say... friendly press coverage; which Berlusconi is gonna need, 'cause he's got a lot on the line». While avoiding explicit accusations of corruption or inappropriate professional conduct, the allusive tone employed here is meant to evoke the deep web of connections and favoritisms which have had a paramount role in shaping Berlusconi's public image in biased and all but impartial ways. The same effect is used later in an even more delicate scene, in episode four (*All Silvio, all the time*). This episode investigates the sources of Berlusconi's wealth and, relying on Elio Veltri's and Marco Travaglio's investigative essay *L'odore dei soldi* (2001), hints at alleged deals between Berlusconi and the Mafia. Since statements like this are difficult to prove, the podcast does not make direct accusations; the form of gossip allusion bypasses the need to demonstrate what has been claimed, striving instead to persuade the listener by virtue of the pure force of the allusive tone, which seems to unveil a hidden truth.

In *Corinna and the King* the gossip aesthetics is equally important; however, the overall story of Corinna's relationship with Juan Carlos presents many narrative twists which at times force Prada to adequate her speech style to the unpleasant character of the events depicted. In general terms, the first half of the show (episodes 1-4) deals with the most titillating aspects of Corinna and Juan Carlos' affair, which thus seem perfectly suited for being addressed through gossiping: their first encounter and courting, the dates held in secret to keep Queen Sofia unaware of the affair, the mysteries in Juan Carlos' past, his funny or weird intimate behaviors exposing the human being behind the public figure, the infamous hunting trip to Botswana that revealed the King's scandalous relationship to the Spanish public sphere. The last four episodes, instead, focus on what happens after their return to Botswana, when Corinna decides to break up with the King: Juan Carlos cannot accept her choice, and employs his vast political power and economic resources to remain close to Corinna and to try to conquer her love again, up to the point of stalking and even threatening her when she rejects his courting. Therefore, the pace and general tone of this second half become much more tense, as Corinna is framed as victim of psychological violence, requiring Prada to be sympathetic with her without irony and witty remarks. Moments of reliefs are occasionally present in the second half of the show as well, but it is in the first half that the content appears to be fully consistent with gossip speech and where, then, the majority of occurrences of such aesthetics can be discovered.

For example, at the beginning of episode one, *La casita*, there is a passage clearly intended to engage the listener, creating expectations by anticipating the main points of the story that the podcast is about to tell:

Prada: «Corinna has been summoned [by the King after their first encounter], and what she chooses to do next is simple, harmless even, yet, it will have consequences that neither she, Juan Carlos, nor Europe could ever imagine. Their simple love affair, which will remain secret for another decade, will ultimately rock the house of Bourbon, forcing the king off the throne and into self-imposed exile. And hanging over the wreckage will be the modest, disputed sum of nearly €65 million. It all started as a small favor – fix his gun. There’s a problem with favors. There’s always a catch».

The sentence «And hanging over the wreckage will be the modest, disputed sum of nearly €65 million» is spoken in a strongly suggestive tone, and serves a strategic function in placing the listener as Prada’s confident, while posing both Corinna and Juan Carlos as targets of negative gossip. In fact, as we will see more in detail in the next paragraph, in several occasions Corinna herself becomes the target of gossiping; especially in the more relaxed first half of the show, Corinna’s eccentric habits and behaviors, derived from her high social and economic status, makes her a character that is hard to relate to (while in the second half she is mainly presented as a woman victim of male violence). The reference to the disputed sum of money establishes an unbridgeable distance between the couple of lovers and the listener, so that the latter can find a peer only in the host.

At times, gossip can prove useful when the narration is dealing with mysterious and unprovable events, because the allusive tone allows to hint at hidden truths without making explicit claims which cannot be demonstrated (similarly to what we have seen in *Bunga Bunga* when Cummings discusses Berlusconi’s relationship with the Mafia). Episode three, titled *Envidia*, explores Juan Carlos’ life before he met Corinna, and a topic of obvious relevance is that of the King’s previous lovers, whose fate after their affairs remains often unclear. Let’s consider the following passage:

Prada: «Corinna is, after all, one in a long string of the king’s lovers. His extramarital activities are an open secret in Spain. He is known as the ultimate golfo – a skirt chaser. He likes leggy blondes but also petite brunettes. He likes high society women – royals and socialites, and women in sleek business suits. But he also can’t keep his hands off celebrities, from movie stars to show girls. He likes them younger and older, Spanish and foreign. Corinna knows all that. And she has a name for these women.»  
Corinna: «They were these accessory women, just these objects of his fancy and passion.»

Prada: «But were they all just accessories? Marta Gayá, sometimes called the gran amor del Juan Carlos, was with him for 20 years».

Corinna: «They had full control over her. I think the fact that I'm so international, that I didn't live there, that I was traveling independently around the world, really confused them, puzzled them, made them extremely uncomfortable.»

Prada: «There was Barbara Rey, a Spanish actress and television presenter, who allegedly was paid to not say anything about her fling with the king... And then there's the dark story of Sandra Mozarowsky – an alleged 18 year old mistress of the king, who fell off her balcony and died in an accident in the 70s. She was pregnant. Nobody talks about it, and the silence serves everyone.»

An accusation is clearly implied in the final reference, although necessarily kept implicit, since the hypothesis of Mozarowsky being murdered cannot be proven. However, using allusions allows to suggest a truth that, according to the discursive strategy of the episode, should be intuitively recognized as valid in spite of the lack of actual evidences.

This technique is also applied in episode six, *Blood is thicker*, when Prada talks about the gifts Juan Carlos gave to Corinna after their breakup in an attempt to restart their affair: «The gift of €65 million that he bestowed on his princess two years earlier – an apology, he said, for everything that happened after the Botswana trip. Except, a private plane here, a few luxury hotel suites there. It's not looking like a gift anymore. Corinna doesn't mess around». It is telling here that the approach chosen, instead of being traditionally investigative, is inspired by gossip. This passage demonstrates that the employment of a gossip aesthetics is one precise choice among many possible alternatives, and that such speech style, evidently, has been judged particularly effective in engaging the listener. The next paragraph will try to explain why the gossip style can have such power, by delving into the concept and practice of negative gossip.

#### *Liking to dislike: building intimacy through negative gossip*

In order to analyze how the negative gossip aesthetics of *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* boosts intimacy, this section will rely on Bosson *et al.*'s (2006) experimental research on the bonding power of sharing negative attitudes about absent others. The scholars argue that «a system in which two people share a dislike of a target person will promote closeness more readily than a system in which two people share a liking for that target» (*Ivi*: 135), and that «shared dislikes – as opposed to shared likes – of other people serve as a particularly powerful bonding agent during friendship formation» (*Ivi*: 136). To demonstrate such assumptions, they conducted three experiments: in the first study participants were asked to list the likes and dislikes they found out to share with their closest friend or relationship partner when they were becoming

acquainted with each other. Results showed a prevalence of negative shared attitudes towards other people, rather than positive ones, thus «suggest[ing] that sharing a dislike of a third party with a nonintimate may be a particularly powerful bonding agent in the formative phases of friendship» (*Ivi*: 140).

In study two the researchers asked participants to list the positive and negative attitudes currently shared with their three closest friends. Results were consistent with the first experiment, since respondents reported mainly negative shared attitudes, which were most common with regard to the person they considered to be their dearest friend among the three. Finally, the third study was meant to prove the existence of an actual causal relationship between sharing negative attitudes about others and developing interpersonal closeness. In order to do so, the research team created a fictitious character and asked one of the participants in the experiment to express both a negative judgment and a positive one about him; then the first participant was informed that a second one, whom she believed she would have met soon, shared one of her judgments (without mentioning the other). The first participant was then requested to rate her feeling of closeness to the other person on the basis of the knowledge of holding her same attitude towards the target. Results showed that the negative or positive value of the attitude was not a determining factor in boosting closeness if the two participants were sharing a strong attitude; that is, the sense of closeness was provided primarily by the intensity of the common attitude, regardless of its qualitative traits (whether negative or positive). However, when participants were sharing weak attitudes, the study revealed that only negative ones were actually able to promote closeness; so, this latter experiment «provide[d] experimental support for [the] assumptions about the bonding power of shared negative attitudes about others. People who expected to meet a stranger felt closer to this person when they believed that they shared a negative – as opposed to a positive – attitude» (*Ivi*: 146).

I argue that in adopting a communicative style inspired by gossip talk, *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* replicate such dynamics of bonding formation between strangers. Their target audience, as discussed above, is represented by Anglo-American listeners, who are supposedly unaware, or only slightly aware, of the events involving Juan Carlos and Berlusconi. So, listeners are placed in the symbolic position of ignorant receivers of titillating information bestowed by the sender-host, who obviously possesses a much larger pre-existing knowledge of the narrative. The fact that the protagonists of these podcasts are people of questionable morality, to say the least, is equally crucial to create in the listeners an impression of closeness with the host: due to their blameworthy actions, recounted in detail by the podcasts, Berlusconi and Juan Carlos appear as the perfect targets for forms of negative gossiping. Such experiential asset has two main implications.

First, returning again to Gluckman's account (1963), the social relevance of gossip would lie in its power to establish in-groups and, consequently, out-groups: the people gossiping about someone else will feel themselves as part

of an intimate circle, from which the target of their talk will obviously be excluded. This is paramount in our case studies to foster effects of intimacy, as the listener is aesthetically driven to perceive herself as ethically closer to the host's perspective on the narrative rather than to that of the character framed as the antagonist bearing negative moral values. It is particularly apparent in *Bunga Bunga*, whose ideal listener is supposed to embrace host Whitney Cumming's left-winged, democratic account on Silvio Berlusconi's ambiguous political career. On the contrary, *Corinna and the King* seems to devise a more complex system of relationships with its listener: in fact, while in the Wondery podcast the intimate connection is developed through a simple one-on-one scheme involving host and listener, in this latter case the active presence of Corinna herself as protagonist of the narrative (being interviewed in all the episodes and thus directly recounting part of the story) leads to a more complex, three-way dynamics. The stylistic outcome of such a narrative structure, which places so much importance on Corinna's interviews, is that host Mishel Prada results engaged in a sort of double dialogue, with Corinna and with the audience as well. These two trajectories seem to be mainly consistent with each other, serving the purpose of allowing listeners to empathize with Corinna, who is presented first of all as a woman victim of male violence and abuse. However, it is interesting to note that in several passages of the show Corinna becomes herself the target of some gossiping involving only Prada and the listener (for example, when the host comments on the fact that the Spanish secret services had blocked all access for Corinna to her bank accounts and credit cards by saying that she was not exactly going through hard times, after all). This is probably due to Corinna's high social and economic status, which makes it impossible for the majority of listeners to fully identify with her. It highlights the instability of belonging to a gossiping group: while often Corinna, Prada and the listener can be perceived as united against Juan Carlos, who never leaves his condition of target, in other circumstances Corinna is expunged from the communicative exchange, too, and this results in the strengthening of an even inner circle, one only composed of Prada and the listener, who truly can recognize each other as peers.

The other essential implication is represented by the fact that these podcasts aim at producing the listener's disapproval of the targets' behaviors, as a premeditated result of the expressive style employed. This can be related to what Bosson *et al.* claim: «the expression of a negative attitude about others [...] should be perceived as particularly informative about the *source* of the attitude; thus, to the extent that the listener holds an attitude similar to the speaker's, intimacy between them is more likely to occur» (2006: 137; italics in original). Shifting the analytical focus towards the source of negative gossip is a valuable insight, because it highlights that communicative exchanges are constructs always serving specific purposes. So, studying gossip seems to be more indicative of the source's aims and inclinations than of the targets: information shared in form of gossip may simply be inaccurate, exaggerated or completely fabricated,

thus revealing little about the target but much about the source's goals in gossiping about someone.

Clearly, *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* are first and foremost journalistic podcasts, therefore bound to ensure the overall quality and trustworthiness of their investigations. However, as discussed above, they also seem to superimpose over this strictly journalistic layer (whose integrity is never questioned) another one, more inclined towards storytelling and that makes use of gossip-inspired tones and moods to make the events recounted more appealing and engaging for the audience. Our case studies seem to consciously, and almost self-reflexively, play on such a tension between the objectivity of journalistic practice and the choice to filter facts through the narrative-enhancing lens of gossip, thus perfectly fitting the abovementioned definitions of podcast journalism as valuing personal narratives and entertainment. At the same time, the interplay of these apparently opposite tendencies could be interpreted as paradoxical; but it actually may find its explanation in the principle, borrowed from the New Journalism movement, according to which there would be no such thing as absolute objectivity in journalism, since the reporter's subjectivity, although willingly inhibited to a certain degree, nevertheless influences the way in which events are presented and framed. From this perspective, the main objective of *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* would not be to present their subject matters in a supposedly neutral fashion, but rather to provide a critical stance on the chosen topics by virtue of the central role assigned to the host in recounting the facts: by making use of all the attributes of gossip talk, the host can allusively and luridly express her thoughts and opinions, which are packaged in such a way as to appear personal, but are actually representative of the producers' and production team's wider take on the topic. By foregrounding the host's subjectivity, then, these podcasts aspire to be a critical interpretation of facts, and not just informative products.

At a deeper level, what these podcasts do is to carefully craft listeners' engagement so as to drive them to share the perspective and moral judgment through which the narrative is presented. Rather than convincing unaware or even skeptical listeners of the righteousness of the proposed interpretation by demonstrating or analyzing facts, the simulation of gossip talk developed by our case studies serves the purpose of luring the listener through allusions and innuendos, inscribed into a communicative structure that creates the illusion of being part of an exclusive and secret conversation. So, gossip seduces instead of prompting reasoning; it is important to stress that, according to this, *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* would not fully adhere to the conversational aesthetics theorized by Spinelli and Dann. In fact, their definition implies that podcasts dialectically intermingle multiple perspectives to create complex accounts on a specific topic, thus bringing listeners closer to the characters involved. On the contrary, in replicating the communicative structure of gossip, our case studies deny their targets any opportunity to express themselves: only one interpretation of the events is provided, and presented as trustful by virtue



of the gossip style through which the texts strive to build intimacy with their audience.

### *Conclusions*

Drawing on research on the social value of the practice of gossiping, this chapter has offered a theoretical account aimed at demonstrating that the employment of an aesthetics that simulates gossip talk, as evident in several contemporary podcast shows, can effectively foster the much sought-after forms of intimate engagement between listener and host. However, two orders of critiques could be moved to these findings.

First of all, this aesthetics may raise important ethical issues regarding the proper treatment of news and events when adopting personal narratives in journalism. This point has been debated by many scholars, who have highlighted the risk of distorting facts by projecting on them subjective feelings, opinions and emotions (Roberts & Giles, 2014; Tulloch, 2014; Nee & Santana, 2021); and even in the specific field of podcast journalism several studies have taken into account the tension between objectivity and advocacy, and the tendency to make stories more spectacular and entertaining (Buozis, 2017; Boling, 2019; Dowling & Miller, 2019). According to these researches, a possible solution to such controversial stances could be found in developing a self-reflexive aesthetics, one that makes explicit the subjective and personal value of the perspective adopted to tell the story, and exposes the journalistic process of production. But this is precisely what *Bunga Bunga* and *Corinna and the King* do not do, so heavily relying on the luring and allusive power of gossip. Therefore, the ethical dimension of these podcasts, and of gossip style for audio journalism overall, will certainly need to be explored further.

Moreover, the scope of this research is limited to a purely conceptual ground, so the results it has produced, although valid from a theoretical standpoint, should be considered partial, and in need to be integrated with experimental analysis. They would greatly benefit from an investigation focused on consumption, which would have to take into account the background through which listeners approach these podcasts, and if and how it actually affects the efficacy of their gossip aesthetics.

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