

PODCAST IN THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

EXPLORING FORMS
AND FORMATS OF AUDIO
STORYTELLING IN DIGITAL
NEWS MEDIA

Edited by
MARTA PERROTTA

1

NUOVA SERIE - FILOSOFIA, COMUNICAZIONE E SPETTACOLO



Roma TrE-Press

2025



Università degli Studi Roma Tre
Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione e Spettacolo

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI ROMA TRE
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA, COMUNICAZIONE E SPETTACOLO

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Elisa Giomi

Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Marta Perrotta

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The path of this book

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Elements of podcast journalism, an emerging framework

ABSTRACT: This chapter discusses an emerging framework for the study of news podcasting based on a qualitative international analysis of news podcasts from Canada and Australia. It aims to identify the ways in which news podcasting is, whether intentionally or not, helping address various crises currently facing journalism, including news avoidance and threats to journalistic relevance. Using qualitative methods that prioritize listening, the research analyzes two different types of news podcasts in the two countries looking for ways in which journalists are taking advantage of the medium's unique affordances. Following the news podcast typology proposed by the global Reuters *Digital News Report*, we analyze podcasts in the news roundup and deep dive/explanatory categories. Barely a decade into news podcasting, we remain at the early stages of understanding the podcast medium is reshaping journalism. Among other affordances, podcasting has to develop new forms of news production, leaning into forms of intimate communication and reinvigorating genres like confessional journalism, investigative series, and true-crime, often impacting and challenging traditional journalistic norms and roles such as objectivity and distance-based reporting. Our chapter discusses one of the central aspects of news podcasting, conversations about the news, as a defining element of news podcasting.

KEYWORDS: podcast journalism; deep listening; news podcasts; digital journalism; trust

Introduction

In early 2024, a contributor on Reddit posted this question: «I have become averse to accessing any news sources – podcasts, websites... I am politically very liberal and I do vote. Everything is just so bleak right now, and I don't need that kind of energy. Is that a bad thing? Does it really matter? What does the news do for you?» ([Active_Ad9337], 2024). The question spurred a lively debate with answers ranging from «the news is untrustworthy at best, so why bother?» to those confessing they quit the news to protect their mental health, while others provided tips for how to better consume news and learn fact-checking instead of tuning out (*Ibidem*).

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It was not an isolated or rare discussion. In fact, news journalism is going through an existential crisis with dwindling audiences in many countries around the world. As Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen (2023) argue in *Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences for Journalism*, news avoidance is tied to factors from the pedestrian, such as lack of time and money, to the more complex, such as identity and information infrastructures. Two major factors of news avoidance in different countries appear to be information overload – overwhelmed audiences turning off the news (Villi *et al.*, 2021) – and a sense that an excess of negativity in the news is harmful to personal mental health (Overgaard, 2023). The trend towards news avoidance is intertwined with a crisis of news relevance in an environment of media and cultural change that includes the dwindling power of broadcasting platforms like radio and television to attract mass audiences. The words of a former broadcast journalist-turned podcaster in Canada sums this up well: «I was a broadcast journalist. Now, TV is the last place I go for news» (Mesley, 2024). Tired of rigid formats favoring top-down, officialist approaches to the news, and of facing neverending streams of, often negative, information, audiences are turning to technologies that offer streaming and on-demand news, often led by individual personalities (Reuters Institute, 2024).

Against this backdrop, podcasting has emerged as «a bright spot for publishers, attracting younger, well-educated audiences» according to the Reuters *Digital News Report* (2024: 11). The same report found that publishers look at podcasts as opportunities for exploring formats that can help address the challenge of news disengagement, especially because podcasts are less immediately reliant on platform algorithms that tend to push people into news silos. Meanwhile, journalists see podcasts as a space where they can experiment with how news is presented to audiences, challenging traditional conventions of journalistic objectivity and detached reporting (Bird & Lindgren, 2024; Nee & Santana, 2021).

Podcasting started in the early 2000s, but podcast journalism took a while to break into the medium. In 2014, the serialized investigative journalism podcast *Serial*, produced by a team of public radio journalists in Chicago, dropped its first season and marked a turning point for podcasting and news. *Serial* opened the door for journalists to play with the medium outside broadcasting and print constraints and turned the gaze inwards to reveal the behind-the-scenes of journalistic investigations (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021). Then, in 2017, the launch of the *New York Times* podcast *The Daily* marked another landmark moment. The podcast took an innovative approach to journalism with its 20-minute daily deep dives into a single news story, dropping episodes Monday to Friday. Eventually spawning copies in many countries, including Canada and Australia, the success of *The Daily* has had a major impact on the ways in which journalism is both produced and shared with audiences, underlining a return of more narrative forms of delivering the news (Lindgren, 2016) and establishing journalist-to-journalist conversations as an effective format to explain the news.

There is no question that the transformation of journalism experienced from the early years of the 21st century is now intertwined with podcasting. In the

words of Aldona Kobus, the medium has earned its place as a «marker of cultural shift in media» (2002: 7). And though it is true that news podcasts comprise a relatively small portion of all existing podcasts, they are highly popular and still growing. Several studies are showing audience growth for news podcasts in both Australia and Canada. News podcasts boasted a listening audience of 3.8 million Australians in the first half of 2024 alone (CRA & Triton Digital, 2024), and in Canada all podcast consumption is trending upwards – one quarter of the population listened to news podcasts in 2024 (Triton Digital, 2024).

The above-average number of young people engaging with podcast journalism, as well as the rise in dedicated news consumers who are engaging with podcast journalism and news, indicates new habits are rapidly emerging, showing a promising sign for how podcasting may be helping journalism overcome issues with news avoidance and its crisis of relevance. Amongst the thousands of podcasts now populating Apple and Spotify's catalogues for news and current affairs, there are countless examples of journalists ranging from independent producers to national broadcasters experimenting with new approaches to news reporting. This includes popular journalist-to-journalist interviews that have come to characterize daily explanatory-journalism types of podcasts and novel forms of storytelling using creative sound designs in podcast news documentaries. Public broadcasters such as the ABC in Australia and Canada's CBC were early adopters of podcasting and have continued to expand their offerings (Clark & McLean, 2020).

Our study departs from traditional approaches to analysing podcasts by prioritizing listening and orality, a methodology that allows researchers to truly appreciate the transformative power of podcasting (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021). By using deep listening as an analytical lens, we identify specific ways in which both independent and mainstream media organizations, including digital media publishers and broadcasters, are taking advantage of podcasting's unique aural affordances in ways that help address journalism's concurrent crises of news avoidance and threats to relevance. This is the first step in a larger project mapping the intrinsic elements of podcast journalism.

Our analysis aims to provide perspectives from two major English-speaking podcast journalism markets, Canada and Australia, whose journalistic cultures share many traits such as the presence of strong public broadcasters with popular podcast offerings and similar numbers in podcast listeners relative to overall population. This chapter begins to outline how the intersection of podcasting and journalism is resulting in new ways to produce and deliver news, and starts to unpack the timely question of whether podcasting might help address the multiple crises facing journalism. Our theoretical framework is based on the notion that journalism is a culture whose norms, boundaries, and practices are always susceptible to change. Based on Ryfe's (2012) notion that the culture of journalism is reinforced and changed through the socialization of journalists, this framework allows us to understand how journalism's intersection with podcasting is a site of transformation and

possibility. All the while, we recognize that our findings are centred in English-speaking industrialized countries and do not mean to speak for the rest of the world. As Hanitzsch and colleagues have argued (2019), we also also underscore that there is no single «journalistic culture» but rather that multiple journalism co-exist even within apparently homogenous cultures.

Journalism under threat – Podcasting to the rescue?

News avoidance first gained significant attention when the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism began to track it systematically in their *Digital News Report* in 2012. But the topic came into even sharper focus during the COVID-19 pandemic, when researchers observed a marked increase in people deliberately avoiding news content (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Ytre-Arne, & Moe, 2021). There are several, often interlinked, factors driving news avoidance: emotional exhaustion from negative news coverage (often termed «news fatigue»), distrust in media organizations, feelings of powerlessness when faced with overwhelming global problems, and what researchers call «information overload» in our increasingly connected digital environment (*Ibidem*).

As their book *Avoiding the News: Reluctant Audiences for Journalism* explores, Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen (2023) outline a complex web of reasons for why audiences turn away from journalism, from structural and societal factors, such as being time poor, to personal choices, such as choosing to prioritize mental health. Villi *et al.* (2021) identify information overload as a major factor for tuning out the news. Additionally, many people report avoiding news because they find it disruptive to their mental wellbeing, with some individuals describing news consumption as anxiety-inducing and detrimental to their daily mood (Overgaard, 2023). Recent works have looked at news avoidance from the lens of social class (Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2023) and even gender (Sui *et al.*, 2022). According to the *Digital News Report* (2024: 10), global interest in news has fallen by 12 percentage points since 2021 to 48%. The global downturn in news consumption is reflected in many markets, including Poland, Italy, Hungary, Ireland and the UK. Bucking the trend is Australia, which has maintained relatively steady levels of news interest at 54% (*Ibidem*). In 2024, over half of Australians (51%) accessed news more than once a day, with notable rises among Gen Z and women (*Ivi*: 77).

Part of the intricate web of reasons, trust in journalism is also falling and contributing to news avoidance. The 2024 *Digital News Report* states that, «across the world, much of the public does not trust most news most of the time. While there is significant variation from country to country and from brand to brand, in this year's report, just 40% of our respondents across all 47 markets say they trust most news» (Reuters Institute, 2024: 34). And it is not just a question of trust. Especially in the last decade, journalism has been facing a crisis of relevance, facing competition in a saturated and chaotic media market (Carlson *et al.*, 2021).

Finding out how journalists are fighting back is part of the impetus for our research, and we look at this specifically from the standpoint of podcasting. We know that journalists build claims to their relevance by seeking legitimacy and authority through relational practices – that is, through constructing and performing their work in ways that seek to be labelled “legitimate” or “authoritative” by their different publics, as Carlson argued in *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era* (2017). This means that journalists must constantly strive to build these claims to relevance through different means. Initial studies into how journalists are doing this in podcasting have found that a strategic use of journalistic transparency and turning the gaze inwards into journalism’s processes can help build the case for journalism’s overall relevance (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021). Moreover, others have found that podcasting’s ability to connect intimately with listeners is key to understanding how trust is built in this medium (Lindgren, 2016).

Podcast journalism

The short history of podcasting dates back to just about two decades, and journalism did not enter the medium until after 2010 (Berry, 2015). Podcasting has become an increasingly significant medium for journalists, without the bounds of conventions and fixed broadcast schedules of its relative radio journalism. Testing the affordances of podcasting, journalists have experimented with sharing information about journalistic processes, connecting with audiences through conversations, leaning into explanations and commentary, and innovating on storytelling techniques (Lindgren, 2022; Rae, 2023; Bird & Lindgren, 2024; Snoussi, Heywood & Lugo-Ocando, 2024).

David O. Dowling’s aptly titled book *Podcast Journalism. The Promise and Perils of Audio Journalism* (2024) signals both the affordances and challenges of the alluring medium, so successful in capturing new audiences and keeping them listening. Dowling notes podcast journalism has much to offer with its storytelling, servicing both mass audiences and previously underserved communities. Notably, public radio in particular has led the way into news podcasting and public broadcasters continue to dominate podcast charts globally. As Clark and McLean argue, «Public broadcasters have been well positioned to develop and advance the full technological attributes of the medium, relying on the best features of the radiogenic narratives they have been producing for decades, and in some cases “remediating” them for even deeper listener engagement» (2020: 208).

In contrast, however, news podcasting is also seeing the increasing dominance of a few publishers and platforms, and growing questions about ethics and adherence to journalistic principles. And, as illustrated by Donald Trump’s win in 2024 in what was called the «first podcast election» (Fu, 2024; Galloway, 2023), the medium is also providing a platform for disseminating disinformation.

Analyzing podcasts

Our study follows the Reuters *Digital News Report's* typology of news podcasts established by Newman (2023) and analyzes the following two news podcast categories. First, the news roundup, consisting of short news bulletins usually lasting under 10 minutes and offering brief updates on multiple stories. And second, the daily deep dive/explanatory podcast, which is often around 20-minutes long and features an in depth look at one or two news stories, with some narrative and sound design. Newman also identifies two other categories of news podcasts in this typology – the extended chat and the news documentary – but our first analysis is only occupied with the first two.

We selected two podcasts from each category from Canada and Australia, for a total of eight podcasts. From those, we selected three episodes from the month of August, 2024, for each of the eight podcasts for the analysis. The podcasts were intentionally selected as examples fitting Newman's typology of news podcasts and based on anecdotal evidence of each of the podcasts' popularity. The sample includes the following podcasts:

News podcast typology	Canada		Australia	
News round-ups: (Typically 1 – 10 minutes) Podcasts that update audiences briefly with multiple stories (Newman, 2023).	<i>CP Newswatch</i> , by <i>The Canadian Press</i>	<i>The Peak Daily</i> , by <i>The Peak/Curiouscast</i>	<i>SBS News Updates</i> , by <i>SBS News</i>	<i>From the Newsroom</i> , by <i>news.com.au</i>
Online podcast description	Your must-listen every day, bringing you the most-important news and sports stories. Produced by The Canadian Press, Canada's trusted news leader.	Fast Canadian business news. Get up-to-speed quick with a fun and smart breakdown of the three biggest Canadian and global business stories in less than 10 minutes.	A bulletin of the day's top stories from SBS News. Get a quick run-down of the latest headlines from Australia and the world, with fresh updates each morning, lunchtime and evening.	Every morning, afternoon and across the week-end the team at news.com.au get you your headlines, entertainment, sport and everything in between in bite-size easily digestible mini-podcast chunks.

Deep dive/explanatory: (Typically 20 minutes) Examine one or two subjects in detail, narrative style with sound design (Newman, 2023)	<i>The Decibel</i> , by <i>The Globe and Mail</i> newspaper	<i>Frontburner</i> , by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation	<i>The Daily Aus</i> (independent)	<i>The Morning Edition</i> , by the <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> and <i>The Age</i> newspapers
Online podcast description	Context is everything. Join us Monday to Friday for a Canadian daily news podcast from The Globe and Mail newsroom. Explore a story shaping our world, in conversation with reporters, experts, and the people at the centre of the conversation in Canada.	Your essential daily news podcast. We take you deep into the stories shaping Canada and the world. Hosted by Jayme Poisson. Every morning, Monday to Friday.	This is a daily news podcast for young people in Australia. Join <i>The Daily Aus</i> team every weekday morning as we cover the news in your language. We're a newsroom of young journalists, delivering news for young people. TDA is completely independent. We are not owned by any larger media company.	<i>The Morning Edition</i> (formerly <i>Please Explain</i>) brings you the story behind the story with the best journalists in Australia. Join host Samantha Selinger-Morris from the newsrooms of <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> and <i>The Age</i> , weekdays from 5am.

Reflexive thematic analysis: deep listening

Getting to the heart of what makes podcast journalism a potential catalyst for journalistic change requires an approach to coding that goes beyond relying on text-based transcripts. Listening to the audio samples *first* and coding as we listened, before engaging with transcripts, was an important step. This listening lens foregrounds the importance of hearing and experiencing the unique elements of news delivery that podcasting affords, as Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau (2021) found in their study about the *New York Times* podcast *Caliphate*. Following Saldaña (2016), who articulates qualitative coding as a

process of coding-as-analysis, and a reflexive thematic analysis framework that allows for flexibility and iteration, as Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest, we strived to *hear* for clues as to what could be considered elements unique to news podcasting that can be actively helping journalism thrive.

Our reflexive coding process started with general characterizations of “crises” facing journalism, but no code book was created beforehand, eschewing preconceived code books in favor of interpretive coding. We started with the two outlined challenges facing journalism – the issues of news avoidance and threats to relevance – that the podcasts might be addressing, and created a preliminary table before starting our listening sessions. We both analyzed the audio first, and then the text transcripts, looking for salient elements that could be construed as a) an antidote to *news avoidance* (including news fatigue, information overwhelm, and so on); or b) as a way to claim *relevance* for journalism. These elements could be anything from sound production techniques, to the style of the podcast’s host, to the format and length of each episode.

This methodology means engaging with a deep listening practice with a logic attuned to more than text and more than language, and in the case of news, to more than the immediate facts of a news story. Deep listening, as an emerging analytical framework in sound studies, offers researchers one way of engaging with a reflexive analysis that requires an understanding of the complex background of listening audiences (Tamboukou, 2021). By engaging with the podcasts on this level – by «earwitnessing», which is defined by its call to attuning and experiencing beyond the immediately audible (Rae, Russell & Nethery, 2019) – we can identify the specifically aural elements of podcast journalism that are helping to reach new audiences and therefore helping overcome news fatigue and threats to journalistic relevance. Such «elements not normally visible or audible in a traditional journalistic piece (e.g. sound checks, small talk, joking, etc.)», as Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau note in their study (2021: 2317), are key for hinting at the different ways that podcast journalism is transforming through this medium to invite tired audiences back into the fold.

Listening allows us to highlight how journalists are building authority and legitimacy with their audiences in new ways. Slight differences in timbre, the inclusion of laughing, jokes, editing choices, background music, are all potentially transformative elements, however small they may seem on their own. Through listening in depth one becomes attuned to the tonalities of voice and the sonic atmosphere that would not be grasped through more traditional approaches to coding, or the reading of a transcript alone.

The findings we share here are but the beginning of a wider and ambitious attempt to identify elements of journalism that are unique to podcasting. In subsequent studies, we will expand our analysis to include the two other news podcast typologies identified by Newman (2023), the extended chat and the documentary, and include several other countries.

Findings

Listening to these eight podcasts, each on our own, but frequently discussing our findings, we leaned in to hear anything that could be a clue. In close analytical listening, we listened in for choice of language, scripting conventions, and whether hosts were formal or informal. We listened for interactions between hosts, between a host and their guest, or for hosts reaching out to their audiences. We listened for news story selection and journalistic approaches, for clues about the news stories and how they were turned into material for these podcasts. We listened – and we heard something. We realized that, like all podcast audiences, we seem to draw our fascination with this medium from an intrinsic need to participate in conversation, or at least to feel like we are «earwitnessing» one, to refer back to Rae, Russell and Nethery (2019).

It makes sense. Podcasting, as a digital medium, offers audio journalists the chance to break away from the conventions and broadcast constraints of radio news while also allowing newsmakers to take full advantage of the medium's capabilities for intimacy and storytelling. The history of radio news is marked by attempts to repackage print news for convenience. In fact, radio news bulletins started off as readings of newspaper print (Lacey, 2013). Strict bulletin schedules meant journalists had to remain constrained by tight scripts that would begin and end within milliseconds of the time allotted for the news segments. Podcasting offers journalists a chance to break free. And, it turns out, the language that emerges from removing restrictions like time and scripts is closer to human conversation.

We know from studies into the short history of podcasting that journalists are taking advantage of the intimacy afforded by podcasting (Euritt, 2019; Swiatek, 2018; Sharon, 2023). And we know that conversation is one of the ways in which audio journalists connect with audiences, through “informal and conversational” presentation style and tone (Lindgren, 2016: 27). But we haven't looked into how conversation is becoming a defining trait of podcast journalism specifically, and how conversation may be a key aspect of how podcasting is helping address news avoidance and the crisis of relevance in journalism.

In both of the podcast types we analyzed, the news roundup and the daily deep dive, although expressed in different ways, conversation emerged as a central element. Take Canada's *The Peak Daily* and Australia's *From the Newsroom*, two podcasts in the news roundup category. In both cases, the podcasts are hosted by two journalists who bring you the daily headlines in under 10 minutes. The format is quick and to the point, but the hosts are highly interactive with each other in a way that stimulates informal conversation. They also often inject the first person into their news scripts:

Host 1: «International travel is back.»

Host 2: «Woo!»

Host 1: «It's rebounded to pre COVID levels for the first time. First time since the pandemic.»

Host 2: «Go travel!» (*From the Newsroom*, Ep. 1)

Host 1: «I've never been to Newfoundland. I've never been to the Maritimes. Uh, but that's all I can think of.»

Host 2: «Oh, you gotta get out there, Brett.»

Host 1: «I know you've been, and you, and you love, and you love, and by the way, I know Newfoundland is not the Maritimes, it's Atlantic Canada. So I want to correct that before somebody yells at me. Um, but yeah, I would love to go out East.» (*The Peak Daily*, Ep. 1)

In the case of *The Peak Daily* (Can), the hosts employ explanatory language, inviting the audience to hear why a story is relevant or important. The conversation between the two hosts includes the listener, who hears directly from them what they need to know to gauge the relevance of the news item and to connect it to a broader context. The hosts often use explanatory turns of phrase in their script. In the second episode we analyzed, for example, one of the hosts explains why news about the rise in solo dining is relevant: «This is all happening because, per Lightspeed, the top reason for more solo dining is the growing interest in self care» (Ep. 2). The phrase «it matters because» indeed appears to be baked into the script of *The Peak Daily* episodes:

It matters because merch drops drum up social media buzz and build brand loyalty, especially among young and chronically on-line consumers. (Ep. 1)

It matters because canola was Canada's top export to China this year. Not top crop export, top export period, bringing in 3.84 billion. (Ep. 2)

It matters because by this measure, the return on investment for a degree has shrunk in recent years. (Ep. 3)

In *From the Newsroom* (Au), conversations run more closely to friendly chit-chat about the news items that hosts choose to share with their audience. In the episodes we analyzed, the two hosts go through the headlines commenting in a lighthearted tone, akin to friends digesting information together:

Taylor Swift was joined by a very special guest during the first of her five sellout shows at London's Wembley Stadium. Ed Sheeran came out to sing a couple of songs with Taytay. (Ep. 1)

Host 1: «Bucky, shall we do a bit more light hearted stuff?»

Host 2: «Yeah, why not? We'll stick with the theme of Logies. Um, we actually spoke to Sonia Kruger backstage last night and she confirmed that there's a bit of tension between the coaches...»

Host 1: «Whooo.»

Host 2: «...on the new season of *The Voice*, which starts on Channel 7 tonight. Now, Sonya told New.com.au that Kate Miller-Heidke clashes with LeAnn Rimes and Adam Lambert, and she says it's pretty full on.»

(News clip)

Host 1: «Spicy stuff.» (Ep. 2)

Host 1: «A Jetstar passenger was arrested this morning after he opened the emergency exit door.»

Host 2: «Can't do that.»

Host 1: «The flight had just landed in Melbourne from Sydney when the man pulled open the door, walked out onto the wing and jumped down onto the tarmac. He was quickly tackled by ground handlers and was then taken into custody by federal police.»

Host 2: «Interesting behaviour.» (Ep. 3)

In both of these podcasts, as the hosts use slang, share their opinions on news items, and speak in the first person in a tone that is accessible and friendly, you could argue that their approach to news makes them seem more approachable, easier to connect with and overall more inviting to audiences. The banter, which includes exclamations and even small glimpses of emotion, evoke a freer format that invites that parasocial relationship with the audience in a way that straight-up radio news bulletins cannot do.

Notably, two other podcasts that we analyzed in this category of news roundups appear reluctant to exit the confines of this more traditional format of radio news bulletins. Both Canada's *CP Newswatch*, a podcast produced by the news agency The Canadian Press, and Australia's *SBS News Updates*, also a product of a larger traditional newsroom by the same name, have similar formats. Both podcasts rely on news readers trained in the broadcasting tradition – their tone is formal, declarative, unemotional; they deliver the news with voices that project a sense of authority and command. Their news selection follows the conventions and hierarchies of traditional newscasts by keeping the more “serious” national and international news as the top headlines and sports as the closing item and, since there is little in the form of conversation or banter, there is room to pack several news items in one single episode.

In the first episode of *CP Newswatch* (Can) that we studied, headlines include a rail stoppage in Canada, the US Democratic convention, a Canadian mining company finding a giant diamond in Botswana, and three sport stories. In the first episode we analyzed for *SBS News*, similarly, stories include a po-

litical controversy over visas for Palestinians, a UN report remarking the death of over 40,000 Palestinians, a story about the state election in Australian New South Wales, calls to end police discrimination against indigenous people, and one sport story about the National Rugby League. These podcasts are more consistent in their length (*CP Newswatch* just over 4 minutes each and SBS close to 5 minutes each). Overall, they both sound closer in tone and format to traditional, commercial news – simply delivered through podcasting, but not entirely embracing the medium.

In the daily deep dive category, we found this conversational element of podcast journalism even more salient. In the four podcasts we analyzed in this category, it became abundantly clear that the format leans into conversations about the news that make the listener feel as a guest in a cordial and well-informed discussion, with a host and a guest examining a single news item in depth in each episode. In many cases the guest is another journalist, often from the same newsroom producing the podcast. This figure, which we will refer to as the Journalist-as-Guest (JAG), is emerging as a key element of this type of explanatory/deep dive podcast type, which has proven highly effective in attracting large numbers of listeners.

These podcasts share several characteristics that point to the conversational nature of podcast journalism. They are, quite literally, conversations about a single news story that take place over a period of time ranging from at least 15 to up to 35 minutes. The conversations are between two hosts, for the benefit of listeners. They are also imaginary conversations between hosts and listeners, through language directly addressing listeners as “you”. They tend to start off with long introductions setting up the story and feature long answers from the guest-expert or the JAG, offering plenty of background and contextual information as well as explanation. Take for example this excerpt from *The Decibel*, a podcast by Canada’s largest national newspaper, where the host asks a simple question to her guest, who is a colleague at the newspaper – a JAG:

Host 1: «So, Maria, this story really centers around one of the victims of this shooting, Arash Missaghi. What do we know about him? Who was this man?»

JAG: «So, Arash Missaghi was an alleged fraudster with a career that spanned two decades, at least. In June of this year, he was killed by one of the individuals he had allegedly defrauded, Alan Kats. But if we rewind through those last 20 years, Mr. Missaghi allegedly victimized dozens of people, primarily through fraudulent mortgage schemes, but he also had a variety of other methods, like he would hire people and then fail to pay for their service. There were allegations that he did money laundering, participated in art theft, and he also allegedly used businesses and individuals, including his own family members, to serve as proxies for some of his crimes.» (*The Decibel*, Ep. 3)

In an episode of *The Daily Aus*, an Australian independent podcast, it's evident that the conversation revolves around explanation. One of the two hosts indicates explicitly that the goal of the episode is to explain a news item in depth:

Host 1: «Have you ever missed a work deadline? What happened when you did? Well, that's what the New South Wales Liberal Party is reckoning with at this very moment in time after it failed to file essential paperwork on time. What does that mean? Well, at least 138 Liberal Party candidates won't run in the upcoming New South Wales local council elections. In today's deep dive, we're going to explain what exactly has happened and what the Liberals think should happen next.»

Examples of this explanatory language abound in these daily deep dive podcasts. The host usually sets up a question in a way that the guest can respond boasting of their deep knowledge of the topic at hand. When a JAG is involved, they sometimes speak about their own journalistic process, for example how they investigated an issue, or who they reached out to for comment on a story. They do this multiple times in *The Decibel* (Can):

«So I've spoken to experienced condo developers» (JAG, *The Decibel*, Ep. 2)

«According to the documents you found...» (Host, *The Decibel*, Ep. 3)

In *The Daily Aus* (Au), the two hosts, both journalists, often use language that is explicitly about underlining the relevance of a story but also explaining in detail and helping the audience make sense of the news:

Host 1: «I've kind of seen this in the headlines over the past week, can we just start, what do we need to know?»

Host 2: «Well, I think where we need to start with this story is just a bit of context about the New South Wales local election, because as you said, I mean, I will acknowledge that we actually spoke about the Melbourne City Council election.»

Host 1: «True. It is the season for local elections.»

Host 2: «Two for two of me just wedging in random political knowledge, but hey, so with New South Wales specifically. On the 14th of September, New South Wales will hold local council elections. And just a bit of a reminder here that in Australia, we have three levels of government.» (*The Daily Aus*, Ep. 2)

In deep dive episodes featuring a host with an expert, hosts often boast of their own knowledge as journalists and use their questions to demonstrate their own mastery of a topic and their ability to connect it to larger-picture issues. In one episode of *Frontburner*, a podcast produced by the Canadian public broadcaster, the host and the guest, an economist, have this exchange:

Host: «I know another thing that people have been concerned about here with the temporary foreign worker program is that it could have the effect of suppressing wage growth, right? If you have the option to pay less, then you'll take that option. And then, one good thing about a tight labour market is that employees have more leverage, right? And so what about the argument that you're taking that leverage away from them?»

Guest: «100%! I mean, pure demographics tends to Canada on a silver platter, the opportunity to make every job a good job. And when you pour in an extra supply of desperate workers and desperate students also who turn out to be workers, you take away some of the shine of that platter, but it exists underneath it all.»

Discussion

There are many reasons why podcast journalism may be centering around conversations about the news as opposed to offering original news reporting in the two podcast types we studied, the news roundup and the deep dive. Having people discuss the news is, for one, cheaper to produce. And we know that conversation is not new to audio journalism, as the history of broadcasting abounds with examples of host-to-host banter and conversational styles. But our analysis suggests that conversation may be much more than an affordable way to relay and – where the podcast is used to republish broadcast content – also replay news. The shape of the conversations occurring in news podcasts is different, to the point that we argue conversing about the news may indeed be an intrinsic element of podcast journalism, and one that can prove enormously effective in inviting audiences back into journalism and restore its relevance in our societies.

Podcasting is above all a child of the digital era whose ethos is centred on interconnection, authenticity, and transparency. Journalism appears to be leaning into these values as it continues to experiment with the medium. Podcasting, as an audio format, relies on the human voice, and the most common way human voices are “applied” is in conversations. Podcasting is therefore allowing this most human of audio interactions to break free from the more formal news-reading format that was mastered in radio, which was based on emulating newspapers and “reading” the news.

The podcasts we analyzed confirm this. They reveal a willingness to depart

from cold and distanced forms of reporting that marked the dominant formats of the 20th century, led by the supremacy of the print word – newspapers – above all. The rise of podcasting, and more recently of podcast journalism, signals a breaking point with the supremacy of the written word in favour of orality expressed through these conversational formats. By harnessing the power of conversation, podcast journalism is aligning with the growth of solutions, explanatory, and constructive journalism to deliver a powerful form of news that focuses on the role of journalists as sense makers. Podcasting as a medium is thus proving to be a perfect match for conversational formats focused on going beyond traditional, highly constructed and performed forms of news.

In these news-as-conversations, the journalist as sense-maker emerges here as a key figure of podcast journalism, as hosts and JAGs help listeners make sense of the world around them. Indeed, this format addresses a major drawback of the digital era, information overload, one of the drivers of news avoidance. The daily deep dives in particular are taking advantage of the medium to demonstrate the value of spending time to go behind the headlines. In doing so, they also help expose elements of the journalistic process, which is a form of transparency that, when used strategically, can also help build claims to journalistic relevance and legitimacy, and ultimately journalistic authority (Perdomo & Rodrigues Rouleau, 2021).

Overall, whether through informal banter or the often more serious interactions with guest experts or JAGs, the centrality of conversation denotes a format of journalism that is more approachable, easier to connect with, and more inviting to audiences. The co-creation of news understanding, which has always been part of radio's relationship with the listener (who brings their own understanding to a story), appears to have entered a new dimension with podcasting, as the freer format invites the listener to "earwitness" the very processes of journalism, including the process of sense-making, happening *through* conversation.

As a first step in our study, we offer two initial conclusions. First, we underscore the importance of employing reflexive deep listening as a methodology for our emerging framework to analyze the elements of news podcasting. And second, we identify the centrality of conversation as the first pillar in our framework, one that is interconnected with the role of journalists as sense-makers. As we inquire further into the elements of news podcasting, we will learn more about how news podcasting is tangibly helping attract audiences back into the fold of journalism, combatting news avoidance and reestablishing relevance for the news.

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Sarah Witmer, David O. Dowling

*Cross-border crime and collaborative journalism:
Leveraging transnational production
and listenership for true crime podcasts*

ABSTRACT: Compelling narrative storytelling draws great numbers to the “true crime” genre of podcasting with an intimate investigative journalism experience for listeners, frequently prompting the audience to participate in solving the crime. Through an in-depth case study of the award-winning podcast *Death in Ice Valley*, this study examines the cross-border collaboration between the BBC World Service, Norwegian broadcaster NRK, and online audiences across Europe who contributed to criminal reporting through podcast listener groups to crowdsource case information. With nearly 10.000.000 downloads since the initial podcast release in 2018, listeners have helped the BBC discover new information, prompting Bergen, Norway’s police to reopen the investigation of this fifty-year-old cold case. Through textual analysis of *Death in Ice Valley* episodes and various social media communities surrounding the podcast, we argue that the collaborative relationship between transnational reporting teams and their audience members throughout Europe contributed to the podcast’s popularity and improved the quality of the material being produced. Implications for international co-production and crowdsourcing audience dynamics include data collection for police and reporters. News production and consumption are changing, especially among younger generations. With the increasing popularity of podcasting, the future of journalism is collaborative in nature and participatory in execution.

KEYWORDS: podcasting; participatory journalism; true crime; cross-border collaboration; cold case

Introduction

Nearly a full minute of haunting music opens the first episode of the hit podcast *Death in Ice Valley*, setting the scene for an award-winning collaboration between the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service and The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK).

McCarthy: «This is the story of a woman traveling in Norway in 1970, who died a terrible death and left behind a trail of strange clues.»

Higraff: «Her real identity has remained unknown for almost fifty years and it's one of the world's most intriguing unsolved mysteries» (Higraff & McCarthy, 2021).

NRK investigative reporter Marit Higraff spent several years studying the case of the “Isdal Woman”, prompting Norwegian authorities to re-open the cold case. After discovering DNA evidence of the Isdal Woman's European heritage, Higraff teamed up with BBC radio documentary maker Neil McCarthy to hunt for answers. The story that emerged during their twelve-episode podcast series is not truly about solving a true crime mystery. It is the story of a cross-border team of journalists who worked with experts and podcast listeners from around the world in an incredible example of the power of transnational participatory podcast journalism.

Through textual analysis of the *Death in Ice Valley* series and its official Facebook community, this chapter examines the cross-border collaboration between the BBC, NRK, and a dedicated community of international listeners. With nearly 10.000.000 downloads since the initial podcast release in 2018 (Rephonic, 2024), *Death in Ice Valley* invited listeners to contribute to the story, boosting the podcast's popularity and enhancing the quality of the podcast in the long run.

Cross-border true crime podcasts

Podcasts are currently one of the top twenty most important innovation areas according to a group of experts from Austria, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland (Körner & Graßl, 2024). Many podcasters are collaborating across borders regarding both the content produced and the production process (The Webby Awards, 2024). Transnational collaboration is relatively inexpensive thanks to the remote capabilities of digital audio production (Gay *et. al.*, 2006). Combined with the low barrier of entry for podcasting as a mass medium (McGregor, 2022), the possibilities of global production are boundless. Beyond audio entertainment, the concept of cross-border podcasting is gaining traction for positive outcomes. Academic leaders formed an international podcast project between Austria, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Thailand, and the United States, teaching students to collaborate on producing podcasts as part of a course (Wiggins *et. al.*, 2017). Outside of education, many other fields also benefit from crossing national podcast lines, including investigative criminal reporting.

Innovative true crime podcasts reach across international borders to report foreign stories more accurately (French, 2022), such as the collaborations be-

tween the BBC and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) on *Bloodlines* and *The Six Billion Dollar Gold Scam* (CBC, 2024). Some of the stories span several countries and require the work of journalists and law enforcement from different areas. After a journalist was killed on the Mediterranean island of Malta, an international team of journalists produced *Who Killed Daphne?* an active investigative report about their investigative reporting that led to her killers (Wondery, 2022). Such multi-country podcasts are not always centered on crime but sometimes emphasize criminal justice systems. As the top podcast in Finland, Poland, and the Netherlands, and number one for true crime in the United Kingdom, *Murder in the North* focuses on policing and courts in murder cases in Finland and Scandinavia (Podimo, 2023). Multiple countries can contribute to the process of production from start to finish, as in CBC Podcasts and Norwegian newspaper *Verdens Gang's* *Hunting Warhead* in which investigators traverse continents in search of a suspect, collaborating with different police forces and hacker groups (CBC Listen, 2024). Despite the industrious nature of these shows, their international audiences have not been folded into the production itself. *Death in Ice Valley* broke the mold by moving beyond international production and storytelling and into inviting participatory journalism within the cross-border criminal investigation.

Although well-known now, the true crime genre of podcasting did not gain widespread attention until the release of breakout hit *Serial* in 2014, which drew millions of listeners into the host's journey as she investigated a crime and subsequent murder conviction (Vogt, 2016). Since then, novice podcasters and seasoned reporters alike have joined their voices to the popular category, such as German podcast *Zeit Verbrechen*, which draws large audiences among young people in particular (Körner & Graßl, 2024). Although true crime's popularity has skyrocketed over the past decade (Matsa *et al.*, 2023), the gruesome genre is not a passing trend. Crime reporting is a founding discourse of journalism, predating newspapers by more than 150 years (Usher, 2023).

Scholars believe that criminal reporting reached recent renewed success through podcasting thanks to the longform availability afforded by the new medium (McHugh, 2016). Long episodes and multiple seasons allow for richly woven narratives. These frequently contain moments of self-reflection from hosts, who invite listeners along to experience their vulnerable moments of uncertainty during the investigation. This style of podcasting is also known as the «narrative podcast», which is defined as episodic nonfiction audio storytelling that «interweaves voice, music, and ambient sound recordings to create a layered audio experience with a narrative arc» (McHugh, 2012: 105). Narrative audio immersion is achieved through a personal and confessional speaking voice that builds listener trust (Dowling & Miller, 2019), creating a metanarrative beyond the storyline of the crime, which draws audiences into the inner workings of the unfolding journalistic production process. This appeals to listeners who may doubt the validity of standard sources of news. «Podcasting is particularly well placed to promulgate evolutions in journalistic

approaches that reflect contemporary audience desires for greater authenticity and transparency in reporting» (Bird & Lingren, 2024: 435). While doubt in traditional reporting is low (Stubenvoll *et al.*, 2022), listening to a podcast host walk individual listeners through their reporting process can feel more like partaking in a one-on-one conversation.

Investigative podcast communities

A key feature of the medium's authenticity is the informal audio narrative centered on a strong relationship between hosts and their listeners (McHugh, 2016). The relationship is initiated when a listener hears a compelling podcast episode, but it truly begins to develop through active niche community building on social media. Platforms like Facebook provide a centralized location for fans to discuss the podcast and hear directly from the hosts and producers, facilitating collaboration between podcasts and their listeners (Hernandez, 2019). Digital spaces help producers build an interactive community by inviting listeners to be a part of the conversation. While any podcast fans can chat online, true crime listeners build tight-knit communities that attempt to solve cases they learn about through the podcast (Boling, 2019). These podcast-specific groups often attempt to participate in criminal investigations by sharing information publicly, also known as «crowdsourcing» (Gray & Benning, 2019). These groups sometimes engage in «web sleuthing» (Yardley *et al.*, 2018), which refers to online activities that attempt to solve cases. While crowdsourcing can include the sharing of theories or personal experiences, web sleuthing is accomplished through evidence-based activities such as collecting and analyzing digital clues (Havard *et al.*, 2021).

When the crowdsourced information discovered through web sleuthing contributes to a professional reporter's investigation, the process is known as «participatory journalism», or the co-creation of news by an active audience (Vos & Thomas, 2023). With the booming interactive nature of the Internet, the concept of participatory journalism is generally viewed as a means of adding value to the news. Everyday people can submit their input directly to news organizations, creating a wealth of knowledge on subjects that journalists might otherwise be limited in during their workday in the newsroom. Personal knowledge from citizens can provide context and nuance, bring in a broader and more inclusive range of voices, and emphasize issues that traditional sources may have downplayed or overlooked (Knoblich, 2012). Journalists are called to embrace audience engagement because of its alignment with the journalistic value of community empowerment. However, the corporate mandate to implement the audience's input imposes an obligation on the journalists to manufacture opportunities for participation (Vos & Thomas, 2023). The industry ideal of treating audience members as partners in news creation forces a restructuring of the relationship between media professionals and the untrained public. *Death in Ice Valley* is a clear example of how to successfully navigate that relationship.

True crime is criticized for graphic descriptions of crimes, exploiting victims and their families for profit, and creating a «danger narrative» that perpetuates stereotypes against people of color (Webb, 2021). Yet many ethical criminal investigative podcasts aim to raise awareness about crime and its impact without sensationalizing or exploiting tragedy for entertainment (Goodpods, 2024). A quantitative analysis found that true crime podcasts are the most ethical medium for amplifying criminal justice issues on social media, particularly by balancing information and commentary with empathy, advocacy, and justice (Noe, 2022). Another criticism of true crime media is the potential for interference with ongoing police investigations and damage to future trials (Davis, 2019). The Australian podcast *The Teacher's Pet* generated sufficient evidence for police to charge a man with murder, but also delayed the trial by more than one year, during which time several witnesses died (Turnbull, 2022). Despite the potential disruption caused by criminal reporting, police are not opposed to gathering media attention and the help of the public. During a roundtable discussion with law enforcement officials, researchers found that police approve of online true crime participation as long as citizens report their crowdsourced findings to authorities instead of attempting to solve the crimes themselves (Dekker & Meijer, 2020).

Death in Ice Valley's investigation into the Isdal Woman combined the efforts of journalists, the police, and citizens. When interviewed about the upcoming series, BBC World Service Podcast Editor Jon Manel solicited the audience's direct participation with his request, «Can podcast listeners help to provide answers?». The idea of the listeners officially contributing to the podcast quickly gathered attention and *Death in Ice Valley* was dubbed «the BBC's answer to Serial» (Bate, 2018).

The case of Death in Ice Valley

The complicated nature of *Death in Ice Valley's* intricate storyline is reflected in the very production of the podcast itself. We conducted a thorough analysis of all 534 minutes of the podcast episodes. This was processed alongside six years of the podcast's online community discussions on Facebook in order to identify common thematic elements among communication patterns. Results are divided according to the two main co-creative entities of *Death in Ice Valley*: (1) the podcast's producers and (2) the listeners.

Producers

Findings revealed the significant nature of cross-border collaboration woven into every aspect of *Death in Ice Valley* production. The transnational nature of the journalistic investigation included: the intricate international path of

the podcast's true crime storyline, the cross-border team of investigative journalists, police, and government agencies, and the sources of various nationalities interviewed for their professional expertise and personal input.

The *Death in Ice Valley* narrative began in Norway before weaving through potential connections in Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Russia, Italy, Ukraine, and Israel. The podcast team physically traveled to several locations to follow the trail of leads, including Spain, Sweden, and Germany. In Ep. 9, the hosts were transparent about stepping into the unknown by traveling to different areas of Europe to «follow the isotope map» of where scientists placed the Isdal Woman based on the information they found in her teeth.

McCarthy: «This is quite a good time in our story, isn't it? We're moving to a different geographical space. We're going into Europe, into deeper Europe, into the beginning of her story, of her life story.»

Higraff: «I think the exciting thing about this trip we're doing now, I have a strong feeling we're really going into the most interesting area for us now. Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg...» (Higraff & McCarthy, 2021).

As the podcast crew tracked through possible locations of the *Death in Ice Valley* victim, they interviewed people, creatively piecing together a potential path, in the hope that someone local might remember the Isdal Woman or bring evidence forward of her life before her body was discovered in Norway. Traveling to random locations to find clues may seem far-fetched, but the podcasters' path followed some big theoretical discussions from the Facebook page at that time. One listener theory suggested the Isdal Woman may have been a Nazi, given her time of birth in Nuremberg, passports, and array of disguises, prompting a discussion with 153 comments. Although this idea was mostly well-received, dozens of commenters argued that the Isdal Woman was actually a Jewish girl who fled Nuremberg through the French border. Several different posts around this time mention her possible heritage, along with how she ended up in Bergen. These posts looked much like this one, full of speculation and questions:

Perhaps she was Jewish. Born somewhere in eastern Europe. Her parents killed in the Holocaust? Some of her relatives took her to Israel after the war. Mossad hired her to look for Nazis hiding in Norway? (Facebook, 2018).

The theory of the Isdal Woman's Jewish heritage and connection to Israel's Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, known as Mossad, surfaced dozens of times over the years, eventually leading to a listener interview on the subject during Ep. 11. It was a storyline *Death in Ice Valley* followed in person,

interviewing a Jewish man who escaped Nazi takeover as a young boy, workers from a home for girls in the German countryside that may have hidden Jewish children, and an historian from near the French/German border.

Just as the storyline was told by weaving through various nations, behind the scenes of the podcast production was also a patchwork of diverse sources of information. *Death in Ice Valley* included dozens of officials and experts as a part of their team. Working closely with such sources moved them beyond the role of interviewees and into the rank of serious podcast contributors. Higrapp and McCarthy spoke with a wide range of government agencies to gather their growing body of evidence. The team worked directly with the Norwegian Criminal Investigation Service, known as Kripas, and specifically with the identity unit, handwriting experts, chemistry experts, and the forensic department. Other major relationships were formed with the Regional State Archives in Bergen and the local Bergen police, Hordaland Police District. During Ep. 8, Harald Kjongsfjell, the leader of the identity unit at Kripas, flew the Isdal Woman's teeth to Sweden to test them with some experts who heard the podcast and wanted to help. When asked about his thoughts on the case, the officer was not willing to speculate, but allowed that the case was highly unusual.

Part of the show's international cooperation included the media. The BBC and NRK are both traditional broadcasting corporations with relationships with organizations across Europe. Rather than depend on the "viral" nature of the *Death in Ice Valley* podcast through social media, the producers intentionally pushed their content through traditional media channels for better press coverage. This dynamic was transparent from the very first episode when the hosts spoke with Per Angel, the former head of the identification team at Kripas.

Angel: «The media's interest in this case could actually help us a lot because we need to build up the interest for the case in some areas and maybe some persons are going to report that lady missing again with new information that we could have today.»

The public relations tactic worked, and hundreds of articles were written in dozens of languages throughout the world. During the recording of Ep. 9, a German broadcasting crew followed the podcast around, filming their production process. The crew interviewed the podcasters, and the podcasters interviewed the crew in return. They spoke with Claudia Kaffanke, a TV reporter from Südwestrundfunk SWR, one of Germany's biggest broadcasters.

McCarthy: «We wanted to reach into people's homes with her story. A German TV and radio crew has been following us around whilst we make our inquiries, filming and recording us, helping us get the word out to somebody who might remember her.»

Kaffanke: «The story about that woman, nobody knows who she was and it's very interesting for our viewers to hear that she was

German, apparently. She had maybe German sisters or brothers, and parents, or a nephew who remembers her.»

Although any podcast may use publicity to gain a larger audience, *Death in Ice Valley* creators and their international media partners specify an altruistic intention beyond their own popularity. They articulated their intention to expose as many people to the information about the Isdal Woman as possible. The larger the crowd, the larger the crowdsourcing capabilities. The more participants, the higher likelihood of quality participatory journalism. This appeal to the public paid off, bringing forth more information and enhancing the quality of the podcast. During production, *Death in Ice Valley* discovered a wide range of new clues from many different sources. These included dozens of tips reported by listeners, such as “misplaced” photos and police reports from the crime scene.

Although reporting on hard evidence, *Death in Ice Valley* wove the story together as a «narrative podcast» through the hosts’ frequent personal check-ins and questioning of the confusing storyline. Despite the scientific aspect of the investigation, the podcast focused on the human elements of the story by incorporating the voices of forty-eight different interviewees during its single-season run. These included five eyewitnesses, ten listeners, and ten academic experts. The experts were associated with universities in Norway, Australia, Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. They spoke on a range of topics including forensic pathology, genetic identity, odontology, DNA science, and intelligence services during the Cold War. The rest of the interviews were creatively woven to fill in gaps of knowledge throughout the production, such as a famous Norwegian crime writer, a former crime reporter for Norway’s biggest newspaper, *Verdens Gang* (VG), and a former spy for the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB). Despite the impressive range of sources, the largest cross-border relationship that *Death in Ice Valley* formed was among listeners. From Bangladesh to Australia and Antarctica, the international mix of audience members was not just for show. The impact of their efforts to web sleuth and crowdsource were evident throughout the podcast’s storyline and gained more airtime in the episodes as the series continued. The enormity of the audience’s contribution is summed up during the final episode.

McCarthy: «Of course, if it wasn’t for you, our listeners, and the work you are doing, this particular episode wouldn’t have happened. In fact, this whole podcast is driven by you. For us, that’s what makes *Death in Ice Valley* so special: we know we aren’t investigating the story alone.»

Listeners

Added together, more than one-third of the podcast series would not exist without the hard work of the listeners and the podcast creators’ willingness to

intentionally engage them. The greatest gathering space for *Death in Ice Valley* listeners was on the Facebook page established by BBC World Service. Textual analysis of the podcast's Facebook presence revealed a group of more than 42,000 listeners from around the globe, crowdsourcing information and providing their unique international perspectives, often with specialist insight in areas such as genetic coding or geographic analysis.

The collective conversations occurring on Facebook did not include direct responses from the podcast, but the producers were paying attention and taking notes. Ep. 3 contained the first mention that the podcast was following leads provided by listeners. This might typically be considered a "teaser" intended to gain more audience engagement, except the podcast followed through. Listener leads popped up throughout the rest of the podcast series, often used as serious input that changed the direction of the storyline. In Ep. 4, the hosts made a call-to-action, asking listeners to look at the codebook pictures they posted to their Facebook page. On their social media post, they asked, «Can you help us crack the rest?» (Facebook, 2018). Hundreds of listeners liked, commented, and made posts of their attempts to solve the riddle. Each clue mentioned during the series was posted on Facebook and analyzed by the community. The new crowdsourced information was then gathered by the podcast for further consideration. Ep. 9 and Ep. 10 followed listener leads, sometimes mentioning the listeners directly by name.

Higraff: «After episode nine, the Facebook group has done some amazing research, and that's without even seeing the photos of the engraving we've just posted on the website. We must give special mention to Mike Alexander who found out that this symbol with the SCH/P within a heart, was the trademark of a steel company in Vienna, the capital of Austria.»

Ep. 11 and Ep. 12 are almost entirely composed of listener interviews. In Ep. 11, the podcasters talk to one listener who found an old room planner for a hotel the Isdal Woman stayed in, which provided context to some of her behavior. They also spoke to another woman who found a box full of documents from the Isdal Woman case stored in her basement. One of the interviews included Ketil Kversoy, an eyewitness who came forward to give his account after keeping it a secret for decades.

Kversoy: «I had to tell somebody about it. Because this tragedy filled me up. I have remembered it for forty-eight years. I have always had a need to tell somebody. I didn't want to keep it to myself.»

Listener clues abounded, but they did not necessarily make the case any clearer. Despite the overwhelming community response, the trail of evidence

did not lead to answers. The podcast series ended as it began: with an unsolved mystery and a cry for the public to help with the investigation.

McCarthy: «And so, the search continues. We always hoped the listeners would take this and run with it. Maybe even crack it. So, keep on looking, because as we've said all along, somebody must know something» (Ep. 12).

Audience members took McCarthy's order to continue the search seriously. Listeners continue to collaborate online to search for new leads and re-examine old evidence. Many listeners visited Bergen to follow the trail of clues for themselves, sometimes even hiking up to where the body of the Isdal Woman was found. In 2023, a listener posted a «Role/ Evidence Matrix» chart in which they plotted the top theories of the Isdal Woman's identity, evaluating each on how many boxes they "checked off" when compared to the major pieces of evidence in the case. In 2024, users from France, India, the Netherlands, Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom all contributed to several new in-depth discussions surrounding the Isdal Woman's teeth and DNA evidence.

The issue of DNA is consistent and considerable among those still working to solve the case. While many listeners are still active, there is a commonly held belief among Facebook community members that the case will remain unsolved until Norway's government allows for DNA testing through private companies. In 2017, Norway's Kripos sent out a "Black Notice" to 190 countries via Interpol – the world's largest international police organization. They hoped the Isdal Woman was reported missing somewhere and they could match the missing person's report to the DNA collected from relatives (Aardal *et al.* 2017). This only applied to government-collected sources. Many countries do not search the genetic material provided to private DNA companies, including Norway. *Death in Ice Valley* skirted the issue, only addressing it once in the series during Ep. 11:

McCarthy: «The most frequently asked question from listeners has been why don't we compare the DNA profile of the Isdal Woman with the biggest commercial databases containing millions of DNA profiles? And as we've explained before, the DNA material in the case belongs to the police. The Norwegian police have so far not allowed the material to be run through commercial databases that people use to find out about their ancestry. And that's for legal and ethical reasons.»

Higraff: «Since there has been a revolution in solving cases with methods like this, there's now going to be a legal hearing to decide if the police can use this process to solve cases like the Isdal Woman.»

In 2019, around fifty people gathered to discuss the DNA issue on Facebook. Several Europeans argued that it is impossible to gain consent from a deceased person in order to test their DNA, making the process unethical. Some Americans and Canadians responded by poking at the argument. One poster questioned the moral hierarchy of consent to genetic testing over consent to other aspects of criminal reporting. The variety of perspectives from different areas of the world enhanced the discussion, which remained respectful. While the issue of consent was a major part of the ethical debate over DNA testing, cultural aspects specific to the region informed the discussions taking place around the halt in case progress.

The privacy laws in Europe are different than they are in the US. When I worked in the Netherlands, I learned that during WWII, the Nazis raided town halls throughout the country, and used the information there to hunt down the Jewish population of the country. This is in part the reason why EU data protection is so stringent (Facebook, 2019).

While there is still a hopeful tone in the Facebook group that Norway's policies may eventually change, at the time of this study, the law remains the same. In 2021, the Supreme Court of Norway ruled that assumed consent cannot be invoked to collect DNA from a biological registry, even if the purpose of accessing the DNA is to help find a missing person or their remains (Library of Congress, 2021).

Regardless of the cross-border complications forming a roadblock, the case is open and active. *Death in Ice Valley* listeners continue to post on the Facebook page, with a few dozen dedicated fans posting frequently, still optimistic they may crack the case. There are periodic comments about how the case will forever remain a mystery. These statements are not negative, but a sort of good-natured suggestion that the story will continue to fascinate future generations. This idea is echoed by Ingver Nedrever, the director of Norway's regional state archive in Bergen, during Ep. 10.

Nedrever: «The most fascinating thing is, of course, that no one has been able to find a solution.»

Solving the case is no longer essential to many listeners who participated in *Death in Ice Valley's* investigation. The power of the podcast and the collaborative cross-border movement it began are still in effect today. In 2023, listeners held a discussion on the podcast's Facebook page about the tremendous impact the podcast made in their lives. One woman summed it up well, writing:

I have to say, this case, and this woman, have led me down the most far-fetched research and unique paths, as well as to interest-

ing people... It's a very strange thing; the lives this woman continues to touch. And in astonishing ways. It truly is unique among all the mysteries of the world (Facebook, 2023).

Discussion and conclusion

Journalism's central role in the true crime genre can be enhanced by cross-border collaboration, especially in areas of diverse nationality such as Europe and regions with many political subdivisions such as East Asia. As with other news media, true crime podcasts carry meaning based on the technological features, affordances, and consumption practices of its users. As such, its stories bear a tension between pulp crime fiction at the one extreme and public service driven investigative journalism at the other (Murley, 2008; Punnett, 2018). The latter is responsible for serving the public interest by narrating a version of real events to the public through «moral messages and social truth» as epitomized by the podcast *Suspicious Activity: Inside the FinCEN Files* (Punnett, 2018: 93). Launched in 2020, this collaboration between BuzzFeed, Pineapple Street Studios, and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists produced a milestone exposé on global money laundering, a project of monitorial watchdog journalism in service to global democracy.

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists' collaborative model represents a new future for global journalism that embraces collaboration through podcasts such as *Suspicious Activity*. Compared to production processes associated with traditional print, television, and terrestrial radio, the relative versatility and efficiency of podcast production is particularly well suited to the Consortium's cross-border collaborations, as seen in its podcast *Meet the Investigators*. With a production practice driven by transparency and peer scrutiny, the Consortium includes investigative journalists from 105 countries across 140 newspapers, television and radio stations, and online media organizations (ICIJ, 2024). The podcast medium serves the broader goal of publishing investigations simultaneously around the world, which are made available for free. Among journalistic podcast genres, true crime is the most co-creative as seen in its signature calls for audience input and commitment to fostering inclusive discursive space for amateur investigators. Beyond single news teams canvassing support from listeners, multiple teams from various nations benefit from a larger pool of data and feature reporting gathered by independent journalists whose priority is primarily to serve the public interest.

The staffing of cross-border podcast collaborations with world-class investigative journalists mitigates the liability of prioritizing entertainment over information associated with podcasting in the true crime genre. In a series of interviews with true crime podcasters, Boling (2019) found that the news function as a form of public education was paramount in the production values of the industry's top producers, who took measures to protect against «the like-

likelihood that they might misinterpret the cases or manipulate audiences in a particular way» (168). Boling's podcast producers drew confidence from «the months of preparation that went into their podcasts and how seriously they considered their job of presenting the facts of the cases in a clear and concise manner to the audience» (*Ibidem*). In isolation, however, news teams may succumb to market pressure and competition by sensationalizing stories. Working in multi-team cross-border collectives can prevent the tendency to compromise principles, especially when subsidized by an entity such as the European Union. This insulation from market pressure can thus elevate production standards due to the larger scale international investment in projects. In this manner, production in subsidized cross-border collectives orients reporting toward the education of the audience on the international criminal justice system, a goal reinforced through expanded multi-nation editorial oversight. International multi-team projects can curb the risks of journalistic reporting and writing for the true crime genre, particularly through podcasting's established conventions of transparency and self-reflexivity.

True crime's allure with audiences has traditionally derived from the promise of a resolution to a mystery. Podcast narrativity's signature transparency and self-reflexivity plays on and intensifies listener intrigue. Yet beyond individual journalists, such as *Caliphate's* Rukmini Callimachi, cast as protagonists in the dramatic throes of solving crimes to whet the audience's appetite for a revelatory denouement, cross-border collective production teams approach problem solving through a different epistemological lens. In particular, the community of audience and expert investigators behind *Death in Ice Valley* has shown a powerful capacity to tolerate the ambiguity of indeterminate evidence and the reality that the crime may remain unsolved. Sitting with uncertainty is not necessarily an industrial norm in podcasting, but instead represents one of its most promising leading edges. This mode of what Habgood-Coote (2021) calls «inquiry-driven narrative non-fiction» explores the boundaries of knowledge and the inherently unstable epistemic nature of evidence and artifacts» (29). Failure is built into large scale criminal investigations, as ratiocination is stretched to its limit. The inconclusive search for the Isdal Woman's true identity and cause of death suggest a «recessive epistemology», one with distinctively postmodern sensibility that problematizes ways of knowing over and against strident or stentorian solutions (Verma, 2022: 179). Just the reverse, a collective tolerance for ambiguity is embraced by the producers and community of listeners of *Death in Ice Valley*. Yet as the ongoing nature of the investigation shows through social media posts on the case that continue to appear as of this writing, this recessive epistemology should not be confused with passivity or a lack of energy and engagement. Instead, it is characterized by robust activity, endurance, and appetite for knowledge on the subject, a recessive epistemology that questions totalizing and dominant preconceived theories with an unmistakable questing agnosticism.

A key challenge to the cross-border investigation for *Death in Ice Valley* re-

garded concessions made to Norwegian law enforcement, mitigating the principle of independent journalism. A truly independent investigation would have leveled more severe scrutiny at law enforcement beyond its refusal to allow for the use of DNA evidence to solve the case. Deceptive testimony can plague true crime podcasts, particularly those relying on single sources or institutions for the main narrative. This is exhibited in podcasts relying solely on the perspective of police. The principle of a free press is violated when the police – rather than independent reporters – provide the bulk of the evidence. *Crime Junkie* and *Break in the Case*, for example, tend to polish the image of law enforcement and «oversimplify complex, tragic cases» such that «the good guys find justice for the victims and the bad guy gets what he deserves» (Locke, 2020). These are «more summary than investigative» because they rely upon «official accounts of law enforcement as the factual backbone of a story», thus perpetuating the myth of a functional criminal justice system beyond critique. Shows such as Madeleine Baran's *In the Dark*, published by American Public Media, instead «investigate the injustices of the criminal justice system rather than extending the myth of its competence» (Locke, 2020). The producers of *Death in Ice Valley* were not afforded such an opportunity due to their partnership with the Norwegian police that enabled the investigation in the first place. Compensating for this limitation was the strength of the international audience as investigators of the case and co-creators of the series operating in the spirit of mutual aid and cooperation.

There was not a single part of the podcast series that remained untouched by a mix of diverse sources and nationalities: the cross-border team of journalists and production crew, the Isdal Woman and her international trail of clues, the widespread witnesses and sources for the podcast, the intercontinental police and government agencies who provided evidence, and the various experts who analyzed evidence. Yet, throughout the complicated weaving of the true crime story at the heart of *Death in Ice Valley* there was a consistent throughline: the active participation of the global listeners. Without significant input from the transnational audience, the producers would not have achieved the same high standard of quality for the podcast. Without the foundational investigative work of the producers, the audience would not have a story to convene around. This symbiotic relationship is a glimpse into the future of podcasting, where the information is crowdsourced, the story is co-created with the audience, and international borders are extraneous.

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Raffaele Torino

*Podcast and (possible) algorithmic discrimination.
A legal approach*

ABSTRACT: The essay explores the impact of algorithms and artificial intelligence in the podcast industry, focusing on the risks of algorithmic discrimination. It examines the main functionalities of algorithms on podcast platforms, including recommendation systems and the selection of advertising messages. The analysis highlights how these systems can marginalise minority voices or non-mainstream content, affecting cultural diversity, informational pluralism, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, the essay discusses the role of generative AI in the automated creation of podcasts, raising legal questions about personality rights and transparency for listeners. A legal analysis of marginalisation practices is conducted considering the principle of equality under European Union law, alongside an exploration of extra-legal strategies to promote inclusivity and diversity in podcasts.

KEYWORDS: podcast platforms; podcast algorithm; machine learning; discrimination; eu law; principle of equality

Algorithms and podcast platforms

Even the creation and dissemination of podcasts face the great possibilities offered by new artificial intelligence tools based on deterministic algorithms and machine learning, taking on different forms.

With regard to the distribution of podcasts through podcast platforms, the first thing that comes to mind is the recommendation algorithms present on all such platforms. These are computational systems designed and used to suggest podcasts of (presumed) interest to the platform's users, who are duly profiled for this purpose. In this way, the platform seeks to further retain users to itself and to the podcasts it offers (thereby increasing its attractiveness to advertisers and investors in advertising resources).

In this context, there are various types of recommendation algorithms, ranging from the simplest to the most complex:

- a) *Based Filtering Systems*, which are based on the interactions and preferences of other users with similar tastes;
- b) *Content-Based Filtering Systems*, which use the characteristics of content already appreciated by the user – such as descriptions, tags, or genre – to make recommendations;

- c) *Hybrid Recommendation Systems*, which combine the two aforementioned approaches;
- d) *Content-Aware Systems*, which consider context, such as time, geographic location, the device used, or other metadata;
- e) *Deep Learning Systems*, which employ neural networks and machine learning techniques to analyse large datasets and develop complex recommendation models.

The second primary use of algorithms on podcast platforms concerns the selection of advertising messages related to potential goods or services to be displayed while the user engages with the platform and listens to podcasts.

In addition to these two main algorithmic functionalities on podcast platforms, there are, of course, the algorithms (along with other technologies) used by the platforms to collect and analyse user data for various broader purposes, not least to fuel the thriving data market (Groza & Botero Arcila, 2024).

Regarding podcast production, algorithms also come into play in the creation of podcasts through the algorithmic automation of content production or the use of content generated via machine learning algorithms.

Algorithmic selection practices on podcast platforms and in podcasts

Algorithmic selection practices on podcast platforms and within podcasts can intervene at various stages, depending on the areas in which algorithmic decision-making operates (Zuddas, 2020: 4).

As is well known, deterministic algorithms, on the one hand, embed the choices and potential biases that their human creators may – consciously or unconsciously – introduce into the algorithm’s functioning. On the other hand, in a less transparent and potentially more dangerous way, machine learning algorithms learn from patterns, relationships, or perceived regularities which they detect in past user behaviour, inferred from their training dataset. These algorithms unavoidably mirror the choices and the existing biases embedded in the data provided to them (Resta, 2019: 217; Zuddas, 2020; Daelman, 2021: 137; Columbro, 2024).

Thus, regarding recommendation algorithms, whether simplistic or sophisticated, and even assuming the completeness of the algorithm’s training dataset, cases of marginalisation of minority voices may arise. Podcasts and content created by underrepresented groups (e.g., women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ communities) may be less likely to be recommended, particularly if they fail to garner sufficient initial engagement and/or do not employ language or tags aligned with dominant trends. This reflects the “rich get richer” effect, whereby already popular podcasts are further promoted, relegating lesser-known ones to minimal visibility.

Moreover, it is plausible – considering the costs associated with creating sufficiently large datasets – that the collected data might not adequately represent all social groups or cultural preferences, leading to the same marginalisation effects mentioned above.

The language employed in a podcast can also be a factor of algorithmic marginalisation. Algorithms may prioritise content in dominant or widely used languages within the podcast industry (which should also be analysed based on the target market), disadvantaging podcasts in minority languages. However, this specific issue can be addressed through the use of selection filters typically available on most podcast platforms.

Another concern is the potential for moderation algorithms to mistakenly classify legitimate topics as inappropriate or controversial, thereby excluding them from recommendations.

It is worth emphasising that the marginalisation of certain podcasts – because, as stated, they represent minority voices – inevitably results in reduced capacity for these podcasts to attract advertising revenue and secure the resources needed to improve their content. This, in turn, may drive away top professionals, further hindering the growth and quality of these podcasts.

From the perspective of podcast listeners, such marginalisation practices limit their choices and reinforce their confinement within an entertainment or cognitive bubble, which solidifies through repeated listening patterns. More broadly, these practices tend to polarise listeners towards the most popular podcasts (potentially reinforcing ideological bubbles and extremist opinions), reducing cultural diversity and informational pluralism.

Automated podcasts

The pervasiveness of algorithms likely finds its most profound expression in the podcast industry with so-called “automated podcasts”, where generative AI is revolutionising the way podcasts are produced.

Generative AI now plays a significant role in podcasts through voice generation, scriptwriting, and automated editing. With voice generation, AI can create highly realistic voices, almost perfectly imitating real individuals (living or deceased) or generating entirely new voices. This capability allows for the creation of podcasts with virtual hosts and fictional protagonists.

In terms of scriptwriting, the advances made by AI tools are evident on a daily basis, producing increasingly coherent and engaging texts on virtually any topic. Finally, post-production activities – such as adding sound effects or creating background music – long been at the forefront of automation, are now experiencing a disruptive evolutionary leap.

Examples of the aforementioned developments can be observed in the *Joe Rogan AI Experience* (a podcast where AI clones Joe Rogan’s voice to create fictional conversations with other famous guests, whose voices are also AI-generated) and *AI Talks* (a podcast entirely created by AI, from voice generation to scriptwriting).

A noteworthy example is the disclaimer included in an episode of the *Joe Rogan AI Experience*, in which the AI-generated guest is none other than Sam

Altman (CEO of OpenAI). Considering the unsuccessful attempt of overwhelming consumers with excessive information about their abstract rights, it is legitimate to question the effectiveness of such disclaimers, particularly if automated podcast production were to surpass podcasts created by real people.

This channel depicts fictional podcasts between Joe Rogan and guests he hasn't had on the show, with all content generated using AI language models. The ideas and opinions expressed in the podcast are not reflective of the thoughts of Joe Rogan or his guests. The content portrayed in this video is purely for entertainment purposes and should not be taken as a representation of the actual beliefs or attitudes of the individuals portrayed. The use of AI technology to generate this content is solely intended as an exploration of the capabilities of language models and should not be misconstrued as a genuine conversation between the individuals depicted. Any resemblance to actual events, individuals, or entities is purely coincidental. Viewers are encouraged to approach this content with a critical and discerning eye and to understand that the views expressed in this video are not intended to reflect those of the individuals portrayed or of any affiliated organizations or entities.

Among the numerous controversial issues that podcast automation may raise (to mention just one, which I will not address here, there is the possibility that automation could facilitate the spread of disinformation and the creation of deepfake content), it should be emphasised that this automation can easily exacerbate – if not responsibly monitored – the perpetuation of biases derived from the historical data on which the specific AI has been trained. This can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes and discrimination, excluding the perspectives of marginalised groups and minority voices.

Furthermore, it goes without saying that – aiming for the largest possible audience – podcast automation will tend to exclude the production and dissemination of podcasts that address less mainstream social or cultural topics. Labelled as «niche», such topics are increasingly ignored by algorithms, leading to the creation of a «single thought» (Han, 2015; Han, 2016).

Podcast platforms, podcasts, and the discriminatory significance of marginalisation practices

From a general perspective, discrimination manifests as differential treatment not justified by differences in initial situations (Lochak, 1987). In the legal context relevant here, discrimination between individuals becomes significant when it constitutes a violation of the principle of equality as recognized

by primary legal sources (constitutions, international treaties) or secondary sources (laws and regulations) at both the international level and (at least formally) in nearly all legal systems worldwide (Barbera & Borrelli, 2022; Bell, 2022).

For example, in the legal systems of states participating in the European integration process, discriminatory practices in the workplace are prohibited – not only based on constitutional sources (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, Articles 19 and 157 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Articles 21 and 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union) – but also through the principle of equality and equal treatment among workers established in Directive 2000/43/EC, which implements the principle of equal treatment regardless of race and ethnic origin, and Directive 2000/78/EC, which provides a general framework for equal treatment in employment and working conditions, as amended over time and implemented through national legislation (Peruzzi, 2021).

Thus, it is necessary to ask whether the above-mentioned forms of marginalisation in the podcast sector could constitute, at least within the multilayered European legal system built through the integration process and the protection of fundamental rights it ensures, an unlawful violation of the principle of equality. This, in turn, might prompt legal responses such as bans or positive actions to prohibit and counteract such practices.

In general (although, as seen above, the European legislator has also intervened sectorally at the level of secondary legislation), marginalisation practices generated by algorithms could be legally relevant under the prohibition of discrimination expressed in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union if the violation of the principle of equality results in an illegitimate disparity in the enjoyment of a right recognized by European or national law.

In other words, a marginalisation practice becomes discriminatory if, in the enjoyment of a specific right, a particular characteristic (e.g., sex, sexual orientation, race, skin colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic characteristics, language, religion, personal beliefs, political opinions, membership in a national minority, wealth, birth, nationality, disability, age, or other characteristics) of the potential beneficiary is considered (directly or indirectly) to treat that individual less favourably (e.g., by excluding or limiting them in exercising the right) than others in a comparable situation without the discriminating characteristic.

Under a strictly legal perspective, the issue then becomes whether the above-mentioned marginalisation practices in the podcast sector violate the principle of equality established by fundamental European norms by discriminating against a right recognized by European or national law.

It is necessary to specifically examine individual marginalisation practices. This is the goal of the following analysis.

Regarding the marginalisation of so-called “minority voices” (where minor-

ity status depends on non-mainstream content or content primarily appealing to minorities) by recommendation algorithms, it must be acknowledged that no specific right exists for particular content or minority groups to be necessarily included in the recommendations provided by podcast platforms. This is also due to the fundamental right of the platform to freely conduct its business, explicitly recognized by Article 16 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Conversely, there does not appear to be any obligation – at either the European or national level – to include certain content (whether minority-related or not) in platform recommendations, as no legal provisions have been identified that mandate the presence of such content in media outlets.

Where the marginalisation of a theme or social group by the podcast platform's algorithm results from the incompleteness of the training or updating dataset, unless the dataset was deliberately designed to exclude certain themes or references to social groups, the algorithm creator or provider does not appear to have specific legal obligations regarding the dataset's completeness. Nonetheless, from a commercial perspective, a recommendation system trained and updated with the most comprehensive dataset possible represents a clear competitive advantage.

A different case arises if the dataset contains erroneous, outdated, or incomplete personal data, in which case rights recognized under Articles 16 (right to rectification), 17 (right to erasure or the «right to be forgotten»), and 18 (right to restriction of processing) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) may apply. If such deficiencies lead the algorithm or AI to suggest (or not suggest) a certain podcast, thereby violating a right under the GDPR, it is reasonable for the affected party to request and obtain compliance with their rights, potentially requiring adjustments to the recommendation algorithm or its outputs.

If the marginalisation of a podcast or specific content involves restricting the availability of content in a particular language (due to deliberate instructions or the AI's machine learning choices), specific legal obligations protecting linguistic minorities may come into play at the European or national level. This requires a careful examination of whether the deterministic or machine learning algorithm complies with relevant legal provisions.

In the Italian legal system (and similarly in other European systems), for instance, Law No. 482 of 1999 (*Provisions on the Protection of Historical Linguistic Minorities*) includes Article 12, which addresses the protection of linguistic minorities in public broadcasting and mass communication systems. Additionally, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992), open for signature by all European states, dedicates Article 11 to the protection and promotion of such languages in mass media.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to explore whether the aforementioned marginalisation practices comply with the general (European and national) regulatory framework for the audiovisual media services market. *The Audiovi-*

sual Media Services Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/1808), for example, states in Article 6 that, while respecting and protecting human dignity, Member States must ensure that audiovisual media services under their jurisdiction do not incite violence or hatred against groups or individuals based on the grounds listed in Article 21 of the Charter.

Podcast automation and the protection of individual rights

Podcast automation, in addition to the issues of marginalisation and possible discrimination already discussed, raises further legal questions concerning personality rights and the fairness of the relationship between podcast producers and listeners.

A key question arises: to what extent is lawful the imitation of a real person's voice (virtually perfect, and in any case capable of convincing the average listener that they are hearing the "real" voice of that individual) for the purpose of producing podcast content?

It must be considered that each individual's voice (in its main characteristics: frequency, intensity, timbre, and resonance) represents an expression of their identity and personality. From a legal perspective, this reasonably leads to the conclusion that a voice deserves the same protection as other personality rights (such as name and image) and cannot be used by others – except in cases permitted by law (e.g., in the exercise of journalistic rights) – without or against the consent of the person identified with that voice.

In the Italian legal system, while there is no explicit «right to one's voice», case law has extended protection to what are known as evocative elements of a person's personality or artistic activity, such as a singer's voice and its distinctive timbre (Tribunale di Roma, May 12, 1993, *Branduardi case*).

In any case, an unlawful use of a voice requires that the allegedly unlawfully used voice be recognisable and attributable to a specific person. In other words, there must be a deliberate intention and corresponding action to credibly simulate the voice of a real, identifiable individual.

It will be interesting to monitor the developments in the legal actions brought in June 2024 by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) against companies Suno and Udio, which demand the removal of AI-generated songs from music streaming platforms that "replicate" the voices of famous artists whose works are protected by copyright (RIAA, 2024).

Still within the US System, I must mention the so-called Elvis Act (Ensuring Likeness Voice and Image Security Act) signed into law by Tennessee Governor Bill Lee on March 21, 2024 (effective July 1, 2024). The Tennessee state legislation establishes that every person has the right to control the use of their voice (as well as their image) across all means of communication and in any form. The law clarifies that commercial exploitation of image includes the availability of audio recordings or audiovisual works in which an individual's

voice is identifiable. Furthermore, the law introduces the provision that a person can be held liable for the unauthorized use of an individual's voice or for the distribution of technologies primarily used to produce an individual's voice without authorization.

The second issue concerns the listener's interest in knowing whether the podcast they are listening to was produced (wholly or partially) using generative AI systems. The reasons for this interest may vary: from a quest for "human authenticity" to concerns about the reliability of machine learning-based content, considerations of labour ethics, or a desire for full transparency regarding the consumed product.

This concern has led, in the European context, to specific provisions in the so-called *AI Act* (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of June 13, 2024, establishing harmonised rules on artificial intelligence) (ODI, 2024).

In particular, Article 50 of the *AI Act* (in force from August 2, 2026) regulates transparency obligations for providers and deployers (i.e., individuals or entities using an AI system under their authority, except when such use occurs during personal, non-professional activities) of certain AI systems, establishing the following requirements.

1. Providers shall ensure that AI systems intended to interact directly with natural persons are designed and developed in such a way that the natural persons concerned are informed that they are interacting with an AI system, unless this is obvious from the point of view of a natural person who is reasonably well-informed, observant and circumspect, taking into account the circumstances and the context of use. This obligation shall not apply to AI systems authorised by law to detect, prevent, investigate or prosecute criminal offences, subject to appropriate safeguards for the rights and freedoms of third parties, unless those systems are available for the public to report a criminal offence.
2. Providers of AI systems, including general-purpose AI systems, generating synthetic audio, image, video or text content, shall ensure that the outputs of the AI system are marked in a machine-readable format and detectable as artificially generated or manipulated. Providers shall ensure their technical solutions are effective, interoperable, robust and reliable as far as this is technically feasible, taking into account the specificities and limitations of various types of content, the costs of implementation and the generally acknowledged state of the art, as may be reflected in relevant technical standards. This obligation shall not apply to the extent that the AI systems perform an assistive function for standard editing or do not substantially alter the input data provided by the deployer or the semantics

thereof, or where authorised by law to detect, prevent, investigate or prosecute criminal offences.

3. Deployers of an emotion recognition system or a biometric categorisation system shall inform the natural persons exposed thereto of the operation of the system, and shall process the personal data in accordance with Regulations (EU) 2016/679 and (EU) 2018/1725 and Directive (EU) 2016/680, as applicable. This obligation shall not apply to AI systems used for biometric categorisation and emotion recognition, which are permitted by law to detect, prevent or investigate criminal offences, subject to appropriate safeguards for the rights and freedoms of third parties, and in accordance with Union law.
4. Deployers of an AI system that generates or manipulates image, audio or video content constituting a deep fake, shall disclose that the content has been artificially generated or manipulated. This obligation shall not apply where the use is authorised by law to detect, prevent, investigate or prosecute criminal offence. Where the content forms part of an evidently artistic, creative, satirical, fictional or analogous work or programme, the transparency obligations set out in this paragraph are limited to disclosure of the existence of such generated or manipulated content in an appropriate manner that does not hamper the display or enjoyment of the work.

Deployers of an AI system that generates or manipulates text, which is published with the purpose of informing the public on matters of public interest shall disclose that the text has been artificially generated or manipulated. This obligation shall not apply where the use is authorised by law to detect, prevent, investigate or prosecute criminal offences or where the AI-generated content has undergone a process of human review or editorial control and where a natural or legal person holds editorial responsibility for the publication of the content.
5. The information referred to in paragraphs 1 to 4 shall be provided to the natural persons concerned in a clear and distinguishable manner at the latest at the time of the first interaction or exposure. The information shall conform to the applicable accessibility requirements.
6. Paragraphs 1 to 4 shall not affect the requirements and obligations set out in Chapter III, and shall be without prejudice to other transparency obligations laid down in Union or national law for deployers of AI systems.
7. The AI Office shall encourage and facilitate the drawing up of codes of practice at Union level to facilitate the effective implementation of the obligations regarding the detection and la-

bellings of artificially generated or manipulated content. The Commission may adopt implementing acts to approve those codes of practice in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 56 (6). If it deems the code is not adequate, the Commission may adopt an implementing act specifying common rules for the implementation of those obligations in accordance with the examination procedure laid down in Article 98(2).

As stated in Whereas 132 of the AI Act, the objective of Article 50 is to enable individuals to recognise interactions with or (more relevant in this context) content generated by artificial intelligence systems through the imposition of specific transparency measures regarding distinct types of interaction or output. Without such measures, certain AI systems designed to interact with individuals or generate content could risk misleading them or causing them to believe they are interacting with a person or with content created by humans.

Article 50 implements, from a regulatory perspective, the principle of transparency that several European policy documents have long placed at the core of the regulatory vision of the European legal system. These include, most notably, the *Resolution on a Comprehensive European Industrial Policy on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics* (12 February 2019) of the European Parliament, the *Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI* (8 April 2019) of the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, the *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European Approach to Excellence and Trust* (19 February 2020) of the European Commission, and the *2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation* (16 June 2022) of the European Commission.

Extra-normative strategies to reduce algorithmic marginalisation in podcasts

As previously noted, only in certain limited circumstances do marginalisation practices affecting minority content or social groups acquire legal significance sufficient to allow – following the classification of marginalisation as a discriminatory practice violating the principle of equality – access to legal remedies, whether individually or through public authorities.

Nevertheless, an inclusive approach to podcast production and management that respects all elements of civil society and ensures full awareness among podcast listeners makes it advisable to implement a series of interventions and practices. While not legally mandated, these are recommended as good practices. An inclusive approach ensures that podcasts are representative of all of civil society, giving voice to diverse groups and perspectives and contributing to greater social cohesion.

Firstly, in pursuing a transparent production policy, platforms should publicly disclose the criteria governing the functioning of recommendation and data collection algorithms.

To counteract or mitigate marginalisation practices, regular monitoring and identification activities for such practices should be introduced, subsequently aligning algorithms with suggestion policies that are more inclusive and promote cultural and thematic diversity.

More proactively, algorithms could be programmed and aligned to pursue greater linguistic, cultural, and thematic diversity. Additionally, or as compensation, categories and awards could be created for podcasts produced by underrepresented groups.

Finally, efforts to combat the marginalisation of certain types of podcasts or content must also include, on the one hand, the promotion of activities that enable podcast producers to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become increasingly included in algorithmic recommendations, and on the other hand, educating podcast listeners to appreciate the importance of diversifying their choices and embracing greater cultural variety.

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Carl Hartley

Is it time to regulate podcasts?

ABSTRACT: This chapter looks at podcast regulation and explores whether the industry would benefit from putting tighter rules in place. It looks at what podcasting could look like with a regulator; whether podcast creators can see regulation working for them; and whether podcasters can learn from other regulated industries.

Through real-world examples this chapter discusses why the question of tighter control on the podcast industry is in the spotlight now. It looks at what different levels of regulations or rules could be, while also considering what impact that could have on the freedom of podcast creators.

It explores three different approaches; no regulation; regulation with a regulator; and a softer form of regulation. It looks at the advantages and disadvantages of all three before offering some thoughts on the best way to ensure podcasts remain accessible for all, where creators have the freedom to create content that audiences want to hear without the restrictions other forms of media need to apply, while also protecting the audience from mis/dis information with the potential of reaching millions of listeners.

KEYWORDS: podcasts; regulation; misinformation; disinformation; libertarian

The problem – The rise of podcasts, their reach and influence

There's been a podcast boom over the last five years, with the industry establishing itself as a leading media platform. There are more than 500 million people listening to podcasts around the world in 2024 with that figure predicted to rise to 651 million by the end of 2027. In the United States alone, there are an estimated 129.9 million podcast listeners and advertising spend on podcast adverts hit around 4 billion dollars in 2024.

The US has the most monthly listeners, followed by China (117.1 million), Brazil (51.8 million), Mexico (27.5 million), Germany (22.1 million) and the UK (18.3 million) (Yuen, 2024).

It's clear that the podcasting industry is growing and becoming a big business for creators and advertisers. It's beginning to compete with similar media for audience and revenue. But unlike similar media such as radio and TV it doesn't have a set of rules, formats and gatekeepers aimed at protecting listeners from incorrect and potentially harmful content.

Its lack of rules is one of its appeals. It has a low level of entry; which means anyone can create a podcast. This has led to many really niche podcasts being created, offering variety and choice for listeners, building communities, and giving a voice to some people who say that mainstream media hasn't been for them. Some people feel podcasting as it is now, is free from the ties of government and corporate business, which, they argue, bind the mainstream media. However, the fact that anyone can create a podcast has led to misinformation and conspiracy theories being shared, unchecked and unverified, through podcasts.

This lack of rules has seen some people refer to podcasting as the «wild west»: a space where you can say and do what you want with little or no consequences. That view I argue is not accurate. Creators are bound by rules, including copyright and libel laws, and to an extent advertising regulation. There's also self-regulation, comprising our morals and ethical views, which vary vastly from person to person. However, compared to the rules that broadcasters must adhere to in many Western countries such as the U.K, Australia and some European countries, podcasting is currently regulation free.

However, as more people listen to podcasts and their influence grows, it's led to questions around whether some form of regulation is needed (Moss, 2022; Global News, 2022; Paterson, 2024).

Supporters of regulation want audiences to be protected from content that is misleading and offensive. Many of those who take this view say creators have too much “un-checked” freedom allowing for dis- and mis-information to be shared. Disinformation and misinformation constitute a serious problem. The former comprises false information deliberately spread to deceive people. Misinformation is the spreading of false information without specific malicious intent. In 2023 a survey conducted in sixteen countries (all chosen because a national election was foreseen in 2024) found that more than 85% of people were worried about the impact of online disinformation, with 87% saying disinformation has already had a major impact on political life in their country; and had fears it would impact the upcoming election (UNESCO/IPOS, 2023).

Podcast listeners are loyal. There are several reasons for this: the intimacy of how the listener chooses to listen; the accessibility; the community; and the fact that listeners search out content.

Podcasts are often listened to by people on their own when doing solo activities; exercising; on a commute; doing housework; or in a personal space. They invite the host into their lives. This one-to-one connection can make the listener feel as though the host is speaking directly to them or that they are part of a private conversation. Most people listen to podcasts on their mobile phone through earphones (70%) (Backlinko, 2024) which creates a direct and immersive experience. This intimacy is further enhanced by the conversational tone many podcasts adopt. They speak to you like they're your mate, you know them. This builds trust and loyalty, sometimes misplaced loyalty from some

listeners. People taking for fact what is being said without challenging what the podcast host and their guests are saying.

This becomes a particular issue around news and politics podcasts when listeners just hear one side of the argument (usually the side that they agree with). It creates “echo chambers” where listeners don’t hear opposing viewpoints, which is key to a democratic society. When this happens they are more likely to be taken in by false information and ideologies.

I conducted a small-scale study¹ in October 2024 in which I sent a questionnaire to 53 podcast creators. I found that over half (56%) of them said that the industry needs a regulator, while 29% said it does not and 15% were unsure. 39% of my interviewees said they would like to see rules on content around podcast standards to prevent mis/dis information. Interestingly 87% said they would favour creating a voluntary code of practice for which podcast creators could sign up.

This chapter will look at the arguments for taking a libertarian approach and remaining free from regulation. It will explore regulation and the arguments for that, before exploring if there are other options that can help keep listeners safe but avoid removing the creative freedoms that make podcasting different from other forms of media.

The case for a libertarian approach to podcast regulations

At the core of the libertarian argument is the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Podcasts provide a platform for diverse voices and perspectives, enabling individuals to share their ideas without fear of censorship. Imposing regulations on podcast content could stifle this freedom, leading to a uniformed media landscape where only certain viewpoints are allowed. By maintaining an unregulated environment, those behind a libertarian approach believe it ensures that all voices, regardless of their popularity or mainstream acceptance, have the opportunity to be heard.

They argue that freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic societies and allows for the exchange of ideas, fosters innovation, and promotes social progress. In the context of podcasts, this freedom is particularly important because it enables marginalised voices to reach a broader audience. This is a view that was shared in a UK newspaper article in 2023 (Aroesti, 2023), marking 20-years of podcasts. The hosts of the award-winning podcast *Brown Girls Do It Too*, Poppy Jay and Rubina Pabani conclude they would not be employed in «the business of making people laugh» if it wasn’t for the podcast industry.

The lack of regulations and gatekeepers in the podcasting industry has

¹ Follow-up interviews with individual podcast creators will be conducted in the next stage of the study.

created an environment of innovation and creativity. Podcasters are free to experiment with different formats, topics, and styles without the constraints of restrictive formats, codes of conduct and regulatory oversight. This freedom has led to a rich and diverse array of content that caters to a wide range of interests and niche preferences. A quick search for niche podcasts and I end up listening to episode 642 of *The Pen Addict* (2024). The podcast is described as «a weekly fix for all things stationery». In this episode I heard about how Brad loves his new pen that has been hand painted by a company setup by a husband-and-wife team in South Africa. I then travelled around Ireland with Emer and Esther as they ate Sunday roasts (*Emmer and Esther's Sunday Roast* 2024). There are also more than ten active podcasts releasing episodes exploring beekeeping. All this content is at your fingertips without creators having to get licenses and permission. Libertarians argue introducing regulations could hinder this creative freedom, resulting in a less dynamic and innovative industry. They argue innovation thrives in environments where creators are free to take risks and explore new ideas.

Being free from regulation does allow creators to produce content that they believe “the audience” wants to listen to. Those who subscribe to a libertarian view often argue podcasters will self-regulate. They will create content that the audience wants to listen to. If no one is listening, then the creators will change the content or the podcast will end. The listener has the choice of what they consume and support. This is one of the differences a podcast has over radio; there are no gatekeepers and editors, like producers, who work to company formats and who may have their own opinions on what “the listener” wants or should be listening to. Take the *Dawn and Drew Show* (Micelia & Domkus, 2021), one of the early successful podcasts, that ran from 2004 until 2021. The married couple would often go into the most intimate details of their sex life, alongside some other more mundane parts of married life. In 2016 the couple were inducted into the Academy of Podcasting Hall of Fame. Having listened to some of the early episodes (and working in radio during the 2000s), I know that this kind of content would not have been commissioned by radio producers, something Jeremy Wade Morris acknowledges in his book *Podcasting* (Morris, 2024). But the audiences loved it. Episodes were regularly downloaded around 9000 times, a lot for the mid 2000s.

When it comes to the point of mis/disinformation, those against regulation argue that if a podcast spreads misinformation or engages in harmful practices, listeners can simply stop tuning in, leading to a natural decline in the podcast's popularity and influence. Additionally, platforms that host podcasts, such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify, already have community guidelines and content policies in place to address violations. Those in favour of no regulation argue that this market-driven approach ensures accountability without the need for government intervention.

Market self-regulation relies on the principle that consumers are capable of making informed choices. In the podcasting industry this means that listeners

can discern between credible sources and those that spread misinformation. Many in favour of no regulation argue that reviews, ratings, and word-of-mouth recommendations play a crucial role in this process, helping listeners identify high-quality content. Furthermore, podcast platforms have a vested interest in maintaining the integrity of their services, and they often take action against content that violates their guidelines. This self-regulatory mechanism is effective in promoting accountability and ensuring that harmful content does not gain traction. But this does rely on those leaving the reviews to have a good understanding of media and political literacy and for platforms to have the desire and staffing numbers to remove content.

A key concern for those making the libertarian argument is the potential for government overreach. Once regulations are introduced in one area there is a risk that they could expand into other areas, leading to increased control over personal freedoms. In the case of podcasts, initial regulations aimed at combating misinformation could evolve into broader content restrictions, undermining the very principles of free speech and open discourse. By resisting the introduction of regulations, they believe it protects against this slippery slope and preserves individual freedoms to create.

In addition, those against regulation for the podcasting industry say even well-intentioned rules could lead to unintended consequences, such as the suppression of dissenting voices or the stifling of creative content. By maintaining an unregulated environment, they believe it safeguards against these risks and ensures that the podcasting industry remains a space for open and free discourse.

The intimate nature of podcasts, where listeners often develop a strong sense of trust in hosts, is used as a reason for regulation. However, this trust also places a responsibility on podcasters to maintain their credibility. Podcasters who consistently provide valuable and accurate content will naturally build a loyal audience, while those who spread misinformation will lose credibility and listeners over time. This self-regulating dynamic reinforces the importance of trust and accountability without the need for external intervention.

Trust is a fundamental component of the relationship between podcasters and their listeners. This trust is built over time through consistent, high-quality content and transparent communication. Those against regulation argue podcasters who prioritise accuracy and integrity are rewarded with loyal audiences, while those who engage in deceptive practices are held accountable by their listeners. This self-regulating mechanism is effective in promoting responsible content creation and ensuring that the podcasting industry remains trustworthy and credible.

In conclusion, a libertarian approach to podcast regulations emphasises the importance of freedom, innovation, market self-regulation, and individual responsibility. While concerns about misinformation and echo chambers are valid, the solution lies not in government intervention but in fostering a culture of critical thinking and media literacy. By maintaining an unregulated envi-

ronment, it's believed we preserve the dynamic and diverse nature of the podcasting industry, ensuring that it remains a vibrant platform for free expression and creativity.

The podcasting industry has thrived in an unregulated environment, offering a wealth of content that caters to diverse interests and perspectives. This success is a testament to the power of freedom and innovation. By resisting calls for regulation, those in favour of a more libertarian approach say we protect the fundamental principles of free speech and open discourse, ensuring that podcasts continue to be a valuable and dynamic medium for years to come.

There's no denying these freedoms and innovations have not only enriched the medium but have also attracted new listeners who might not have engaged with traditional media. Having an unregulated environment has encouraged experimentation and creativity. If the podcast industry is going to move towards any form of regulation or tighter rules this must be a consideration.

The case for the regulator

Many countries are exploring how to protect people online from harmful content while balancing the freedom of speech of a democratic society. In most countries there are no specific regulations for podcasts; unlike with radio and TV, which often fall under the rules of regulators. However, the tightening of online laws by governments has the potential to impact podcast creators. People opposing tighter online rules claim this threatens privacy and freedom of speech but those in favour say it will protect online users and also help keep podcast competitive with other forms of media.

However, before we get to the debate about whether there should be a regulator, we need to consider the question of who should be responsible should rules not be followed: the creators or hosting platforms?

In traditional media like radio and television, broadcasters are considered the publishers and are ultimately responsible for the content they air. This model ensures a clear line of accountability. However, podcasts operate differently. The creators produce the content, but in many cases it's the platforms that often distribute it to the audience. This complicates the issues of responsibility. Should the onus be on the podcast creators to ensure their content meets regulatory standards or should the platforms that host and distribute the podcasts bear the responsibility?

One argument is that podcast creators should be held accountable for their content, like how authors are responsible for their books. This approach emphasises the creator's role in maintaining the integrity and accuracy of their work. They are the people creating the content; they are the people making the editorial decisions; they are responsible for the content and can choose what goes into the podcast; so, it makes sense that they are responsible. A

regulator that provides clear rules to follow and consequences should they be broken would put the responsibility on creators to ensure content is factually accurate.

On the other hand, platforms like Spotify or Apple Podcasts have the technological means to monitor and regulate content more effectively. They could implement automated systems to flag inappropriate content or provide clearer guidelines for creators. It could be argued they are in a stronger position to enforce regulations, so should be held accountable. There could be a case for both being responsible. In my research with podcast creators, 32% ranked creators top when it comes to who should be responsible for identifying and countering dis/misinformation in podcasts, while 30% said the main responsibility should be with the platforms².

In the UK, the Online Safety bill has been passed into law, requiring technology companies to remove illegal and harmful content or face fines from the media regulator, OFCOM. The regulator is working on codes and best practice, and these are likely to be released in 2025. It's understood it will be like the *Digital Services Act* introduced in the European Union in 2023, requiring tech companies to take down illegal content, work to make sure that type of content doesn't appear in the first place and give users more control to block unwanted content. There will also be age verification checks that platforms will need to do. Some groups opposed to the law, e.g. the Open Rights Group in the UK (Open Rights Group, 2023) argues it will infringe free speech by forcing tech companies to either sanitize their platforms or infringe on people's privacy, with platforms requiring official documents to prove age or using some kind of privacy-intrusive face scans to estimate the age of the user. It also gives big tech companies a lot of power to decide what content they think should be removed. Consideration needs to be given as to what protections are in place to ensure tech companies are not going to start removing content they don't agree with under the guise of it being harmful or offensive. There needs to be very clear guidelines to prevent overreach from tech companies.

Those in favour of a regulator (or for podcasts to be regulated) argue it will ensure the accuracy and reliability of information being produced by podcast creators. They say with the rise of misinformation and fake news, a regulatory framework will help make sure the content listeners hear is trustworthy and verified information. This is particularly important for podcasts that cover news, health, politics, and other important topics. They point to the broadcast industry in countries like the UK and Australia which have regulators. OFCOM (UK's regulator) and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) oversee content standards for television and radio. Their roles are to protect audiences against harmful and offensive material and uphold due impartiality and accuracy, something supporters of tighter rules for podcasts and social media argue is lacking in digital media.

² Details available from the author at c.d.hartley@leeds.ac.uk.

In Canada, the *Broadcasting Act* has been amended to include C-11 (*Canada's Online Streaming Act*) (Canadian Government, 2023). It gives the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) broad authority to regulate platforms like they do with radio and TV. It requires streamers such as Spotify and Apple to register with the CRTC. Some fear that if rules become too restrictive, then they will leave, and the podcasting industry relies on these companies for distributing content.

Also, amongst the changes streamers must «clearly promote and recommend Canadian programming». This is a requirement of Canadian radio and TV and those in favour of the changes say it will help level the playing field between the traditional media and new online streamers and platforms.

Although podcasts are not specifically mentioned within C-11, it refers to «audio content». Some of the bigger podcast creators worry this will lead to platforms that host their podcast changing the “algorithms” to apply with the rules to promote more Canadian and indigenous content, resulting in their podcast reaching fewer people. This could hit listening figures and revenue. Others against this feel it could be regulation «through the back door».

With around half a billion people listening to podcasts in 2024, the industry is making big money for advertisers. The global podcast industry was estimated to be worth around 24-billion dollars in 2023 (Zion Market Research, 2023) and this has led to people wanting to standardise the reporting of audience figures. They argue that a regulator could help with this, making a fairer playing field for all, particularly smaller creators who may struggle to compete with larger, well-funded productions. By establishing clear standards and practices, a regulator can ensure that all podcasters operate on a fair and equal footing.

The calls for a regulator are strengthened further when you hear the argument that misinformation and conspiracy theories are often encouraged by creators and presenters who know the power of a viral social media clip in attracting new listeners. Research for the podcast hosting platform Spotify (Spotify, 2024), suggests that 42% of listeners discover podcasts through channels like Instagram, Tik Tok, and Facebook. There are thousands of articles online with advice to podcast creators about increasing listeners through a presence on social media. Podcasters who can get their material to travel on these platforms have the potential of growing their audience; reaping financial and popularity rewards. Knowing this, along with the potential financial benefits of big audiences through the advertising you can receive, leads to some creators encouraging guests and presenters to push narratives and conspiracy theories in the hope of going viral.

Those critical of the freedom and lack of rules for podcast creators point to the false narratives and extreme views being made to thousands and sometimes millions of listeners as a strong reason why tighter restrictions are needed. They say that audiences are being introduced to people as so called “experts” without them having the credentials to support the claim, with potentially devastating consequences and a lasting impact.

There is merit in this argument. Podcasting has a low barrier of entry which means anyone with a microphone and computer can become a podcaster. This I argue can be a strength of the medium because it removes the gatekeepers that some people feel have too much power in traditional media, but it can lead to the accidental and sometimes deliberate spread of false information that the checks and balance required to meet the regulation for the mainstream media tries to prevent. Take for example, the coverage of the police search for Nicola Bulley, in Lancashire, England, in 2023. Speculation and conspiracies shared in podcasts by creators and so-called experts contributed to police issuing a statement asking for it to “stop” as it was impeding the investigation and having a damaging impact on the local community and Nicola’s family (Milmo, 2024). Nicola was a mum of two living in a small Lancashire village. She disappeared while walking the family dog, shortly after dropping her children off at school. A major search operation was launched including specialist police officers. Her body was found 23 days later in the River Wyre, just one mile from where she was last seen on 27th January 2023. In that time online sleuths visited the village and shared conspiracy theories online including on individually created podcasts with hundreds of thousands of listeners.

A similar example happened in June 2024, fueled by rumours and speculation on social media, when podcast creators and so-called experts were dedicating episodes of podcasts to the search to find missing British teenager, Jay Slater, who disappeared after a music festival in Tenerife. Again, the speculation online, including on some podcasts, led to the Guardia Civil carrying out a “secret search” for his remains; after announcing to the public that they had called off the search. Jay Slater went missing while on holiday in Tenerife. Podcast creators produced episodes dedicated to theories being shared on social media. Some alleged that he had been kidnapped after stealing an expensive watch from gangsters; others suggested he had stolen drugs or had left the island on a yacht. Jay’s mum told the media this hadn’t helped the investigation or her family.

It is not just the true crime genre of podcasts that is implicated in mis/disinformation. The argument for tighter rules is strengthened further when you look at the disinformation published by some podcasts during the Coronavirus pandemic. Misleading statements in podcasts warning of the dangers of having a covid-19 vaccine were shared by podcast creators and guests claiming to be “experts”, with little or no qualifications, despite scientific studies showing vaccines protect the public (Hsu & Tracy, 2021).

In an episode of the American far-right, Tucker Carlson’s podcast, guest Darryl Cooper was introduced as the «most important historian working in the United States today» (Carlson, 2024). Cooper went on to deny the Holocaust, with many historians debunking the claims in media articles following the episode (Koureas, 2024). The interview with Cooper was heard by more than 34 million people. The low barrier to entry of podcasts means anyone can share an opinion or a theory on a podcast, turning them into a broadcaster,

without the rules that broadcasters need to abide by, and this can result in real-world problems.

Sections of society who feel the mainstream media is not reflecting their views are turning to podcasts (and alternative media). Many see podcasts as liberating, giving “real people” a voice, with hosts speaking to and for them, something the traditional media doesn’t do in their opinion. This is one factor why podcasts are trusted more by listeners than other digital media: people are choosing to listen to hosts often sharing views they already agree with. The US election in 2024 is an example of the influence appearing on a podcast can have, with both candidates being guests on different podcasts. Kamala Harris appeared on the podcast *Call Her Daddy*, while Donald Trump was interviewed by various podcasters including Joe Rogan.

Some political experts claim the Republican’s strategy to have Donald Trump appear on popular, mostly “supportive” podcasts, such as *The Joe Rogan Experience*, were a key factor in his return to the White House. Some in the Democrats Party point to the decision for Kamala Harris not to appear on Joe Rogan’s podcast as a «major blunder» for the campaign (Franklin & Nicolaou, 2024).

For context, *The Joe Rogan Experience* is the biggest podcast in the US. It gets an audience of more than 30 million people: more than many shows on the television networks. It also has a high percentage of young men who listen; the young male vote played a big part in deciding the US election outcome.

Politicians choosing to go on podcasts highlight how the political media landscape is changing as influencers and podcast hosts gain more power and influence. This power dynamic shift from mainstream media to podcasters is being mirrored across the podcast genres, too. It comes at a time trust in mainstream media is low; partly because of mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories online about the media; partly because of a lack of transparency from the mainstream media.

Many in favour of regulation argue it could enhance the overall quality of podcasts. This is subjective, but they say by setting standards for production, content and advertising, a regulator could help maintain a level of professionalism across the industry. They argue it would not only enhance the listening experience for listeners but also support podcasters in producing high-quality content that meets industry standards.

In conclusion, I think one of the strongest arguments for a regulatory body is that it brings accountability, making the industry more transparent. It would provide a platform for addressing listeners’ complaints and concerns, such as the family of Nicola Bulley or Jay Slater. It would make the content creators more responsible for what they create and allow for the challenge of misleading advertisements in a prompt manner.

The introduction of a regulatory body for podcasts could have some significant benefits for both creators and listeners. It could address mis/disinformation. It could enhance the credibility and quality of podcasts and allow for more transparency in the industry. However, a regulator would undoubtedly

take away some freedoms and possibly stifle range and creativity. There are problems to be considered about the mechanics of how it would be enforced; regulatory sign-up means there would need to be new policies which again could impact on those who feel mainstream media and mainstream society don't represent them. Then there is the question: do you regulate the platforms or the podcast creators?

The case for soft regulation

Podcasts are different from other media. Their accessibility, low-level to entry, variety and how people listen to them make them unique. We need to protect these characteristics. Having a wide range of different voices, opinions and thoughts is a gain for democracy. Creators are free to make content they believe the listeners want to hear. However, that needs to be balanced with protecting listeners from harmful content. This is where the argument for "soft regulation" begins. It allows creators to keep the freedom to create but also makes creators accountable for harmful content they publish.

In my research study just over half of the podcast creators (51%) said current laws are not enough to protect audiences from dis/misinformation. In addition, 87% said podcast creators have a responsibility to make sure the content they produce is factually correct and accurate with the same percentage saying they would see value in introducing a voluntary code of conduct or guidelines for podcast creators.

Rather than imposing strict regulatory measures or allowing a libertarian approach where mis/disinformation can go unchallenged, there is a case for a system of soft regulation, comprising of guidelines and a code of best practice, which podcast creators can develop and sign-up to. This approach balances the need for maintaining quality and ethical standards with continuing to allow creative freedom.

This approach sees guidelines created by a range of stakeholders, including podcasters, listeners, industry experts, and advocacy groups. They could cover accuracy in balanced reporting, respect for privacy, and the avoidance of harmful or offensive content. It could include guidelines on how to report audience figures and other aspects of advertising. By signing up to the code of conduct podcasters agree to uphold the principles, building a culture of responsibility and trustworthiness within the industry. It can provide a framework for accountability.

Podcasts that sign-up to this approach would be verified and encouraged to display a certificate or badge, signaling their commitment to ethical standards. This can create pressure on other podcasts to adopt a more balanced and accurate approach in order to be trusted by their audience. There can be incentives such as award ceremonies, promotional opportunities, access to exclusive resources and partnerships.

This approach relies on an effective monitoring and feedback system. It would need a lot of promotion and encouragement for podcasters to sign up and would need a lot of support from some of the bigger, more established podcasts, who could argue they already have trust from their audience (whether misguided or not). Some of these may need bigger incentives. A system for reporting breaches and an independent body to oversee them would also be required. To be successful this would need widespread support of the podcasting industry; including podcast creators and platforms.

This multi-pronged approach would need an advisory group, comprising of the stakeholders mentioned above. In addition to the guides and framework it could encourage, support and provide work on increasing media literacy.

For a long time now, some people have accused mainstream media of biases and agendas. In 2017 research for Reuters showed that many media outlets were seen as having an agenda and encouraging an increasingly polarised set of opinions. There is truth in this. Take the US media landscape: broadcaster backing candidates. In the UK, newspapers back political parties. I would suggest that we have witnessed podcasts, and their hosts do something similar. The difference though is the intimacy of a podcast, the echo chambers and the social media communities that are born out of it, where a lot of mis/disinformation is then shared to many more people. You see newspapers choosing political sides, or when people watched TV channels in the past, it didn't lead to social media posts, algorithms pushing content to people who think the same as you, the communities being built that just believe one perspective. Mainstream media meant you came into contact with more opposing views. More conversations were had in public so more viewpoints were heard (Newman & Fletcher, 2017). The report concluded that journalists and news organizations needed to be clearer about «distinguishing news from opinion».

In the US trust in media is again at a record low, with just 31% expressing a «great deal» or «fair amount» of confidence in the media to report the news «fully, accurately and fairly» and for the third consecutive year, more US adults have no trust at all in the media (36%) than trust it a «great deal» or «fair amount» (Brenan, 2024). Trust in mainstream media around the world is continuing to fall (Tobitt, 2024). Mis/disinformation on social media and on podcasts are a part of this, but other factors including a lack of media literacy in society, artificial intelligence, and people's fear of fake content are others.

I would also argue that a lack of transparency by journalists and news organisations has played its part in mainstream media not being trusted. Now more than ever, journalists need to be transparent with their reporting; this means providing real context for their findings and sharing details of how they have come to any conclusions they make, in the locations where false information is being shared.

News organisations around the world have identified this issue and are encouraging journalists to show «their workings out» and to explain how they have investigated claims and come to any conclusion. Bigger news organisa-

tions, such as the BBC, Washington Post, and others are dedicating departments to this. In 2023 the BBC launched *BBC verify* (Turness, 2023) to provide audiences with a look behind the scenes of journalism, showing the rigorous checks required to get a story to the public through the editorial standards. These teams use the platforms where mis/disinformation is being shared, along with the traditional linear media, to give the audience a deeper understanding of how the news story has been put together.

What has been unwelcome news for media literacy and democracy is the departure of some mainstream media from social media platforms identified as places where mis/disinformation is spread. Organisations such as National Public Radio (US) and *The Guardian* (UK) have removed their accounts from X (formerly Twitter). *The Guardian* when they left the platform in 2024 cited «long-standing concerns» about far-right conspiracy theories and racist content. I believe for these opinions, along with the fake news, to be challenged balanced reporting and explanations on how conclusions have been made need to be available where the harmful and false information is.

Podcasts are a great vehicle for this information. When done in a creative way they allow people to get a deeper understanding, and can start to rebuild trust. This was done by the Gibraltar Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) during the McGrail Trial looking into allegations of corruption and bullying within government and the police force.

GBC used its *Inside GBC* podcast to explain some of the legal issues in reporting certain facts; to explain in more detail editorial decisions; how GBC made sure its reporting was fair and balanced; giving the audience a stronger understanding of what was being reported by GBC's journalists online, on radio and TV, during the daily news bulletins and programmes.

The podcast *Inside GBC* was introduced by CEO James Neish shortly after he took office in October 2022. The aim was to bridge the gap between the public service broadcaster and the audience, giving people personal access to behind the scenes. It was introduced to help build trust between the audience and the broadcaster as trends showed a decline in trust. The transparency in its news coverage was a contributing factor in a rise from 4% of people rating their news coverage as excellent in 2022, to 20% in 2024. People satisfied or very satisfied with GBC's news is at 83% in the recent figures (GBC News, 2024).

Another example is *The Sound of Politics* podcast hosted by Professor Stephen Coleman, from the University of Leeds, which I produce. Stephen has spent many years studying political communication and the techniques politicians use to deliver their messages.

The podcast uses clips of politicians in action to demonstrate the points he is making, before speaking to other guests to hear their insight and perspective (University of Leeds, 2024).

One of the ways people can challenge mis/disinformation without regulation is using the influence and trust of podcasts; placing well informed argu-

ments in front of people, with clear examples, in an engaging and accessible way; using the more popular formats that mis/disinformation is distributed through to counteract it with truth. Journalists, academics, and podcast creators with an appetite for tackling mis/disinformation need to work together to disseminate research in engaging ways.

As is clear from the Canadian model, algorithms play a big part in what people view online. The algorithms build a picture of what you are interested in from what you choose to click on. Under the C-11 Act Canada is pushing big tech companies to use algorithms to help promote Canadian content. The algorithm rules are set slightly differently to achieve this. I argue that this model in theory could be used to highlight and support the fight against mis/disinformation online and in podcasting. With certain subjects such as news, politics and health, algorithms could be used to direct people to alternative points of view. Take the Joe Rogan interview on his podcast with Donald Trump during the 2024 US election. There were 32 fact-checked false claims (Dale, 2024). As soon as this is officially recognised as being the case, platforms could attach a disclaimer explaining this podcast has been flagged for being factually incorrect. Then the algorithms could push content that directs people who have listened to Joe Rogan's podcast to an alternative more balanced and considered podcast. Possibly one that has signed-up to the podcast code of conduct. This further adds to the incentives for podcast hosts to be part of the soft regulation framework but also encourages hosts to produce content that is accurate.

In conclusion, soft regulation offers a balanced approach to maintaining ethical standards in the podcasting industry while preserving the creative freedom that makes podcasts unique. By developing comprehensive guidelines and a code of conduct that podcasters can voluntarily sign up to, the industry can enhance credibility, promote diversity, and foster a culture of responsibility. Managing this system involves developing clear guidelines, providing education and support to both podcasters and the audience, and implementing mechanisms for monitoring and feedback. While there are challenges to ensuring widespread adoption and addressing non-compliance, these can be managed through effective communication, a balanced approach to flexibility and standards, and maintaining independence. Adopting this approach will help protect the industry from those who discredit it through mis/disinformation and also increase trust with listeners that the content is not fake news or going to be harmful for them.

Conclusion

The debate around whether podcasts should be regulated has many sides to it. While the libertarian viewpoint advocates for no regulation, emphasising the importance of free speech and creative freedom, it overlooks the potential

harms that can arise from the spread of mis/disinformation and harmful content. On the other hand, blanket enforced regulation could be restrictive for creators, see gatekeepers being introduced to podcasting and be a barrier for entry for some.

A form of soft regulation, supported by a framework and guidelines created by various stakeholders within the podcast industry, presents a balanced approach. This model would involve collaboration between podcast creators, platforms, listeners, and regulatory bodies to establish standards that protect against harmful content while preserving the unique and creative nature of podcasts. Such a framework would not be overly restrictive, allowing podcast hosts to maintain their creative freedom and continue producing diverse and engaging content.

Moreover, this approach would be complemented by increased efforts to improve media literacy among listeners. By equipping audiences with the skills to critically evaluate the content they consume, we can mitigate the risks associated with misinformation and harmful content. Media literacy podcasts and outreach work being promoted through algorithms can empower listeners to distinguish between credible sources, understand the context of the information presented, and make informed decisions about the content they engage with.

In summary, a soft regulation framework, supported by industry stakeholders and enhanced by media literacy initiatives, offers a pragmatic solution to the challenges posed by the podcasting landscape. It strikes a balance between protecting the public from harmful content and preserving the creative freedom that makes podcasts a unique and valuable medium. This approach not only addresses the limitations and arguments of both the libertarian and regulation viewpoints but also ensures that the podcasting industry can continue to thrive and innovate in a responsible manner.

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Andrea Federica de Cesco, Sabrina Tinelli

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*¹. «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.

¹ *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*², 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*³ 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,

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

³ 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* programme⁴ 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*⁵ 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»⁶), 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

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

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

⁶ 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*⁷, 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».

⁷ 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 Radiotopia⁸ 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,

⁸ 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 Callimachi⁹, 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-

⁹ 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*¹⁰, 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*¹¹, 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»¹².

This issue resurfaced with Matteo Caccia's *Amnesia*, which aired between 2008 and 2009 on Rai Radio 2¹³. 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).

¹⁰ See <https://www.joerogan.com/>

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

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

¹³ 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* series¹⁴ 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 2024¹⁵, 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-

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

¹⁵ 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* podcast¹⁶) 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*¹⁷ or *The Shadows*¹⁸. 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-

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

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

¹⁸ 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*¹⁹, 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.

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

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Nicolas Bilchi

*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*¹ and *Corinna and the King*² project a foreign look

¹ *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/>.

² *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

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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Matteo Maiorano

*Comparing Podcast Systems: a theoretical framework
for the analysis of news-podcasts in Europe*

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to establish a connection between the realms of podcasting and journalism through the specific theoretical perspective of «journalism models», as introduced in 2004 by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini. After a brief review of the literature concerning the relationship between Media Systems and digital media, this study seeks to answer two research questions. The first investigates whether the variables used to study journalism models can also be applied to news podcasts, examining them one by one with a focus on podcasting. The second question takes a more practical approach, attempting to apply the methodological framework described above through the study of two news podcasts from different European regions, each representing distinct «journalism models»: *Giorno per Giorno*, the podcast of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, and *Forklart*, its Norwegian counterpart from *Aftenposten*. The findings highlight the potential applicability of this research framework to podcasts, despite limitations related to data availability and the restricted scope of the two selected cases. These findings pave the way for future research to expand the field.

KEYWORDS: podcast; media systems; journalism; digital media; interviews

Introduction and research questions

The relationship between podcasting and journalism is well-consolidated, both from an empirical perspective – considering the number of informational content designed specifically for the podcast format and distributed as such – and from the point of view of research on this type of content. The reasons for this relationship partially stem from the historical phase podcasting is currently experiencing, characterized by a steady increase in listeners year after year (Edison, 2024).

The question «What is a news podcast?» has arguably been most comprehensively addressed by Nic Newman and his collaborators in two specific reports: *Daily News Podcasts: Building New Habits in the Shadow of Coronavirus* (2020) and the *Digital News Report* of 2023.

These studies classify informational podcasts into four categories: News Round-Ups, Deep Dive/Explanatory, Microbulletins, and Extended Chat (Newman, 2020: 13), with the subsequent work adding a fifth category, *Documentary* (Reuters Institute, 2023: 49).

These five types of news podcasts (henceforth referred to as NPs) have, on the one hand, contributed to conceptualizing the phenomenon, and on the other hand, clarified the complexity of the landscape, particularly in relation to how different information actors utilize this medium. In his book, David O. Dowling (2024) highlights how podcasts can contribute to the information sphere in various ways, a topic closely tied to Newman's categories. As Dowling himself notes: «Each genre defines its past and current trajectory in terms of business model, sound design, narrative aesthetic, and journalistic principle» (*Ivi*: 8).

Thus, it is currently impossible to draw a definitive line of meaning that encapsulates the relationship between podcasting and journalism. This paper focuses on the concept of *journalistic principles* and how these are influenced by the dynamics of podcasting.

Both Newman's categorization and Dowling's observations further emphasize the idea of podcasts as socially constructed products, a notion underscored by Bonini and Perrotta's definition of podcasts as «a complex hybrid cultural form constantly shaped by human and non-human actors» (2023: 34).

The cultural component (Bonini, 2022; Berry, 2022) must take precedence when addressing issues related to this medium. This is because, as stated in the aforementioned definition, podcasting encompasses both intrinsic characteristics – primarily its on-demand consumption model – and numerous aspects derived from radio (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Bonini, 2022). Consequently, any discussion about podcasting necessitates essential cultural premises.

The purpose of this study is to bridge the cultural aspect of podcasting with the journalistic sphere, adopting the perspective proposed by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's theory of journalism models (2004). This perspective, which centers on the question «Why is the press the way it is?» (*Ivi*: 5), prioritizes cultural components tied to specific geographical areas. Accepting the established connection between podcasts and information, this paper questions whether certain characteristics of Hallin and Mancini's framework could also be applied to the podcasting domain, narrowing the scope to NPs, despite their diversity.

This type of analysis serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it advances the already extensive field of comparative media systems analysis. Indeed, large-scale studies such as Humprecht *et al.* (2022) have highlighted the need for this specific framework to include more focused, qualitative studies on distinct aspects of the media world (*Ivi*: 159).

The first research question can therefore be structured as follows:

RQ1: Can the dimensional variables proposed in *Comparing Media Systems* be applied to the study of news podcasts?

An explanation for choosing a specific medium like podcasting is promptly given. As will be seen, the impact of digital media on media/journalistic systems is highly significant, as the «form of news» affects these systems (Benson

et al., 2012: 24). Considering Newman's classification, NPs represent a specific mode of journalism tailored to this particular medium. Research such as Benson *et al.*'s demonstrates how focusing on single elements within the media system, such as online versions of newspapers, reveals new aspects of media systems as they are understood (*Ibidem*). Therefore, this study focuses on programs explicitly designed as podcasts, avoiding formats that can be easily identified as adaptations from other media.

On the other hand, this study could benefit podcast-specific research by offering an embryonic attempt at classification and comparison. It seeks to determine whether podcasting aligns with pre-existing characteristics (continuity line) or develops according to its own logic (divergence line). In part, this follows the question posed by the original authors regarding the general homogenization of the three models due to factors such as new technologies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 225). The question is whether podcasts "inherit" the characteristics of different models, leading to the formulation of the second research question:

RQ2: Are NPs influenced by the variables characterizing the different¹ models?

The journalism models' framework is thus "borrowed" for podcasting as a tool for analysis and classification. Referring again to Bonini and Perrotta, the final chapter of their book addresses the question «Where is the medium heading?» (2023: 117), primarily offering arguments focused on comparisons with radio and books. This research aims to provide an additional perspective on that question.

The next section, which also serves as a theoretical framework, delves into the growing importance of digital media and specific case studies in comparative information studies.

Media systems and digital world, a short recap

The journalism models framework has undergone significant evolution over the years, primarily due to attempts at operationalizing its dimensions (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), with Bruggeman's (2014) work remaining one of the most comprehensive in this regard.

Revisiting some essays published after the original work, an important aspect emerges: the need to account for digital media.

The traditional landscape of media systems – originally referring only to

¹ We use "various" without referring to a precise number because from the original models described by Hallin and Mancini, the literature has brought out new ones, with new dimensions and new indicators to refer to.

print and audiovisual media – was challenged by the concept of the *Hybrid Media System* (Chadwick, 2013). This framework partially formalized the influence of digital media on the previously established panorama, shifting the focus of research towards the relationship between media and politics. While the preferred area of study for HMS themes has been political communication, its implications for journalism and its ontology cannot be overlooked.

Since Chadwick's work, much of the research building upon Hallin and Mancini's original themes has reserved space for the digital realm and its impact on the characteristics of the three models.

In the 2017 update published by the original authors, largely dedicated to attempts at operationalizing dimensions, there is also a section on online media (Hallin & Mancini, 2017: 164). The question posed by the authors partially echoes Benson (2012), though it expands to include a third possibility. They ask whether online information follows a line of convergence or continuity with the models' characteristics, or whether it is influenced by the latter while developing patterns distinct from traditional media.

Internet-based media might be a force for convergence, introducing logics rooted in technology or in a globalized economic models or cultural practices that would undermine existing national differences [...] Another possibility is that we might expect continuity: that Internet media would vary by system, shaped by the already-existing structures and practices [...] A third possibility is that new media would develop differently in different media systems, but in a way that might be discontinuous with previous patterns, depending on niches available in the existing media ecology (Hallin & Mancini, 2017: 164).

However, the two authors do not mention Chadwick's work. A connection between these concepts is instead offered by Mattoni and Ceccobelli's analysis (2018), which aims to expand the theoretical framework of journalism models by considering the characteristics of HMS. Their insight suggests that the original four dimensions are no longer fully sufficient in an increasingly complex media system. They propose a fifth dimension, «grassroots participation» (*Ivi*: 548), encompassing bottom-up forms of information dissemination that do not originate from legacy media.

Today, it is impossible to ignore the impact of non-traditional participation forms on the media landscape of at least Western democracies², whether in terms of citizens' influence on media agendas or their active participation through content production. In this regard, podcasting has become central to

² Consider, for example, the role of podcasts in the last American elections: https://www.stronculture.com/p/il-ruolo-dei-podcast-nella-rielezione?utm_source=publication-search

the appearances of political figures and their role in the public sphere (Koo *et al.*, 2015; Park, 2017; Rae, 2021).

The need to incorporate HMS into comparative media system analysis is also emphasized by Marco Bruno and Alessandra Massa. In their revision of the models (2019), they observe that the internet revolution interacts with multiple dynamics in national information spaces, suggesting: «The study of peculiarities makes it reasonable to maintain national references, which are only partially eroded by internet interconnection» (*Ivi*: 127). This underscores how, on the one hand, the theoretical framework of comparative analysis considering the characteristics of individual models remains valid; but – on the other hand – the most effective way to understand it is to focus on specific aspects that yield the most empirical and observable results.

A more “official” acknowledgment of this issue comes from Mancini himself (2020), who explores a series of viewpoints and considerations regarding the new digital media landscape in relation to the original dimensions:

Digital revolution does not change just the structure and the procedures of the existing media systems, but it also dramatically affects our knowledge at their regard [...] the idea of the national media system is challenged by globalization, but national borders still correspond to specific cultural attitudes, practices, and mostly regulations that determine relevant differences able to identify and limit specific national media systems (Mancini, 2020: 5764).

The final work considered in this brief review is Humprecht *et al.*'s (2022), arguably the most comprehensive empirical study on the relationship between digital media and journalism models for at least two reasons.

First, regarding indicators, the authors' extensive research effort can be seen as a direct continuation of Bruggeman's work in 2014, which successfully experimented with operationalizing dimensions (Hallin & Mancini, 2017: 158). Following the same approach, Humprecht *et al.*'s research also worked on indicators while considering the digital world.

Second, regarding outputs, the study not only introduced a new model – the hybrid model (Humprecht *et al.*, 2022) – but also marked the decline of one of the three originals: «The liberal model as described by Hallin and Mancini has vanished» (*Ivi*: 145).

Beyond the characteristics of the newly identified models, this latest study unequivocally confirms not just the relevance of digital media in a narrow sense but their dynamic impact on the evolution of models.

In conclusion, the authors emphasize:

The results of our study provide a multifaceted picture of how media systems vary in the digital age [...] We emphasize that quantitative approaches such as cluster analysis do not allow us

to describe media systems in their entirety. Therefore, the choice of indicators and countries strongly affects the cluster solution. (*Ivi*: 156).

This further highlights the impact of digital media on the information world and the diverse facets of how this impact manifests.

Methods and results

To answer the two research questions, this study involves two stages of analysis. The first stage involves revisiting the variables – and their respective indicators – proposed by Hallin and Mancini to evaluate their potential application to podcasts, aiming to identify which of these can serve as analytical tools for future empirical research.

The second, more practical, phase consists of analyzing two NPs that – at least theoretically – belong to two different journalism models: *Forklart*, the leading informational podcast by the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, and *Giorno per Giorno*, its Italian counterpart from *Corriere della Sera*. The analysis focuses on semi-structured interviews with the hosts of the two programs, David Vekony (*Aftenposten*) and Francesco Giambertone (*Corriere della Sera*). It is important to note that the research does not aim to generalize the interview results to broader models or establish any formula for generalization. The purpose of this investigation is solely to provide a primarily qualitative interpretation of journalism models in relation to digital media, using NPs as a case study.

Podcast indicators: comparing dimensions

The main challenge of analyzing a single media element rather than the entire system lies in selecting the most relevant indicators. Since 2004, the various iterations of the theoretical framework have been possible largely thanks to operationalization efforts, i.e., deciding which aspects of the dimensions to consider. Similarly, in the case of podcasting, certain aspects appear more pertinent than others, given that podcasts constitute only a part of the media system. It is not feasible to capture all the elements used to “measure” the entire system within a single media component.

Taking into account the references from the previous section, the five³ dimensions characterizing media systems are reviewed below.

³ The original dimensions, as well as those used in the more substantial research by Bruggeman (2014) and Humprecht *et al.* (2022), are four. However, the frame proposed by Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018), which also considers the grassroots element, characteristic of digital media, will also be considered here.

Podcast market

The podcast market appears to be steadily growing. A range of national and transnational studies demonstrate how podcasting has firmly entered users' media consumption habits (Edison, 2005; Newman, 2020; Reuters Institute, 2023; Ipsos, 2023). While growth trends are consistent, it is challenging to delineate a precise line for NPs specifically.

The indicator used to measure this dimension is perhaps the most straightforward: the numbers related to informational content (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Data on newspaper circulation or radio listenership, with country-specific variations, are generally well-documented and easily accessible.

For digital-only media, however, the situation is more complex. While detailed reports on the overall phenomenon of podcasting are available, no specific data exists on informational programs. This issue is compounded by the role of distribution platforms (Spotify, Apple Podcast, Audible), which restrict access to listenership data, making it difficult to conduct research on digital media without considering these platforms' influence.

Nevertheless, some of the limited data provided by platforms can be leveraged to formulate research hypotheses, even though they do not provide detailed insights. For example, by using the Chartable platform, one can compare the most-listened-to podcasts on Spotify across different countries, noting the positions of NPs to observe trends, similarities, or differences. However, this approach has clear limitations; some programs opt out of mainstream platforms for distribution.

Another potential research approach involves using «uses and gratifications» theories (Perks *et al.*, 2019; Craig, 2023) to profile NP listenership across various models. This second approach is likely more comprehensive, as it delves deeper into audience consumption dynamics, potentially aligning with other indicators proposed by Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018: 554).

Professionalization of podcasters

The professionalization aspect is arguably the most intriguing to analyze. On one hand, it relates to the increasing professional recognition of the podcaster's role – not in formal terms, but in terms of duties and responsibilities, albeit within the broader category of content creators (Kolo, Haumer & Roth, 2022; Kolo, 2024). On the other hand, it is the aspect most closely aligned with the nuances proposed by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Focusing on individual programs, this analysis examines hosts and creators, particularly two factor: (1) autonomy and (2) background in digital literacy.

Autonomy has been a core theme of professionalization since the original 2004 work. Hallin and Mancini questioned whether and to what extent media professionals perceived editorial pressure in terms of «control over the editorial

process» (*Ivi*: 35). This aspect is particularly relevant to podcasts, especially those produced by journalistic outlets, as it allows observation of the characteristics and interaction dynamics of podcast teams within newspapers. Examples of potential research questions include: 1) How many members make up the podcast team?; 2) What is the relationship with the newspaper's editorial board?; 3) What are the dynamics of editorial meetings?; 4) How is space allocated for podcast content selection?

The background of hosts also lends itself to research practices. Drawing again on Mattoni and Ceccobelli, it is notable that some indicators identified to measure what they call «training in digital literacy» (2018: 552) can also be applied to this study. This analysis would focus on the professional profiles of various speakers to determine the extent of their training and socialization in podcasting practices. Examining the training levels of podcast operators would provide further insight into the significance media outlets attribute to this medium and how they conceptualize it.

These arguments, however, lose relevance when attention shifts from “institutional” podcasts to independent ones created by individual users without mainstream editorial support. Even in such cases, it is possible to trace analytical lines, though they inevitably intersect with the dimension addressed in the next section.

Grassroots participation

One of the defining features of digital media and their associated practices is the opportunity for individuals to actively participate in media processes following bottom-up dynamics. In journalism, the logic of citizen journalism has found wider application with the evolution of technology (Franklin, 2014; Hirst, 2018).

Podcasting is deeply rooted in these dynamics; its origins are characterized by a propensity for independence and leveraging the early Internet's characteristics (Berry, 2006). Although subsequent technological and social evolutions have partially curtailed this inclination toward independence and freedom by confining it to the «walled gardens» of platforms (Sullivan, 2019), podcasts remain a democratizing tool for information creation due to their low entry barriers.

To accurately understand the media-information landscape of a particular model, it is increasingly necessary to include sources of information that are not tied to “legacy” outlets.

The most illustrative example is *The Joe Rogan Experience*, a program whose impact on public opinion⁴ demonstrates how information through podcasts,

⁴ Please refer to the *Digital News Report 2023*. Page 50 of the report lists the *top news podcasts* surveyed in the US, UK and Australia, Joe Rogan's show ranks in the top five in each country.

independent of traditional logic, can influence public perception and, consequently, the structure of information within a specific model. Therefore, understanding how grassroots NPs contribute to media consumption in a given country is critical.

Translated into indicators provided by the literature, the focus could be on the «presence of alternative media outlets» within the podcast domain. Operationally, all programs that have built their work on the opportunities offered by the Internet and new technologies, but with a significant following relevant to the investigation, could be compared. For example, the French podcast *Actus du Jour* by HugoDécrypte is grounded in precisely these premises.

The grassroots aspects of news podcasting intertwine with professionalization. When these programs gain specific relevance within their media landscape, it is also valuable to examine how these actors manage their apparent independence from specific outlets or publishing groups.

Political parallelism

Political parallelism is perhaps the most challenging dimension to address. A deeper examination of its relationship to podcasting quickly reveals the convergence of several previously discussed aspects. In *Comparing Media Systems*, the authors already noted the link between this dimension and professionalization (2004: 39). Within podcasting, things are further complicated by the grassroots dimension. Indeed, it becomes harder to place a particular program within a specific and structured political context, partly due to a general decline in this dimension's relevance. As Mancini notes, «The links became more volatile and less direct, being based just on common ideological and cultural frameworks» (2020: 5769).

This refers to common political matrices that are less tied to specific parties than they once were. Nevertheless, the dimension remains highly useful for analytical purposes. Even if political influence seems less dominant, other factors related to a form of parallelism can still be identified.

Two aspects, in particular, are particularly suited for studying NPs: (1) the connection of professionals with other organizations and (2) the distinction between commentary and news in programs.

The first point relates to what could be seen as a contemporary form of connection with other associations. For instance, branded podcasts, where content is necessarily vetted by funding entities, may be tied to political matrices.

The distinction between news and opinion, meanwhile, has always been integral to media system studies and remains a valid analytical indicator for this dimension. This aspect is relevant given that the “more journalistic”⁵ NPs

⁵ Considering the classification proposed by Newman, as varied as the universe of news podcasts is, it can be perceived in each case which of them have a more “news-oriented” vocation in the strict

often feature a central professional whose recognizable style fosters audience loyalty. The content of such programs frequently blurs the line between factual reporting and personal opinion.

State intervention

In relation to podcasting, this dimension cannot be extensively analyzed as it primarily addresses systemic rather than specific aspects.

However, some nuances could provide interesting insights. For example, analyzing podcast production by public broadcasters could help determine the extent of their investment in this medium in terms of volume and focus, observing which countries pay more or less attention to it. This analysis could be complemented by additional targeted observations, such as examining individual programs or interviewing networks to understand the relevance of podcasts for public service broadcasting.

*Comparing news podcasts in Europe: *Giorno per Giorno* and *Forklart**

The second part of this study consists of analyzing two NPs belonging to different media systems. The aim is to test the approach described in the previous section and address the second research question. The two programs are examined across three⁶ of the five dimensions to identify similarities and differences, with the goal of outlining distinctions.

The central element of the analysis is the semi-structured interviews conducted with the hosts of the two programs.

Podcast description

The selected programs belong to two distinct media systems according to the consulted literature. To ensure the most comparable data, both are “institutional” programs, meaning they operate under similar organizational dynamics.

Giorno per Giorno (GpG) is the flagship podcast of *Corriere della Sera*, Italy’s leading newspaper in terms of circulation⁷. Conversely, *Forklart* (Fk) is its Norwegian counterpart from *Aftenposten*⁸. The two newspapers are generally asso-

sense, both in terms of their relationship with newspapers and in terms of the topics covered.

⁶ Being two “headline” podcasts, the grassroots dimension was not taken into account. *State intervention* also considers aspects that cannot be assessed from the observation of only two products.

⁷ Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/729663/top-daily-newspapers-italy/>

ciated with the Polarized Pluralist model (Italy) and the Democratic Corporatist model (Norway), suggesting that they exhibit differing characteristics.

Despite sharing a similar origin, the two programmes exhibit distinct characteristics that both unify and differentiate them, as outlined in the following brief analysis.

Both programs are freely accessible on their official websites as well as on major streaming platforms. They are produced daily, with an average of one episode per day from Monday to Friday. Exceptions occur on special occasions when multiple episodes are released in a single day, or when releases take place on Sundays. The typical episode duration ranges between fifteen and twenty minutes; however, certain special episodes of the Norwegian podcast, which addresses broader topics⁹, may extend up to fifty minutes.

Another notable similarity concerns the approach to news coverage. Both podcasts rely on interactions with journalists from their respective newspapers to develop content. Each episode follows a consistent structure: an initial brief introduction to the topic by one of the hosts, followed by an in-depth analysis presented by a journalist from the newsroom, and concluding remarks. In both cases, the role of the hosts is primarily limited to introducing the topics to be discussed, while the responsibility for content presentation falls to journalists selected based on their expertise. This characteristic is also highlighted in the descriptions of the podcasts on their respective websites. However, a key distinction emerges between the two countries: the Italian program places greater emphasis on the lead host, Francesco Giambertone, explicitly crediting him with the editorial oversight of the podcast¹⁰. Conversely, the Norwegian program does not prominently feature the hosts' names; instead, an official email address is provided for listeners to submit questions or feedbacks¹¹.

The primary difference between the two podcasts lies in the number of news topics covered. Although both can be classified within the deep dive genre (Newman, 2020: 13), which focuses on an in-depth examination of a limited number of topics, *GpG* covers three news items per episode, whereas *Fk* focuses on just one. Consequently, the time allocated to each news story differs significantly.

In terms of audio production, both shows share similar characteristics. Each episode opens with a background music track accompanying the presentation of the news items, and the editing is kept to a minimum, with cuts made solely to enhance the fluidity of the speech.

⁸ Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/633203/ranking-of-newspapers-in-norway-by-circulation/>

⁹ Cited Episode: "*Kan det bli fred i MidtØsen?*" On Middle-East Issue, 19/01/2025 <https://www.aftenposten.no/podkast/ap/program/100194>

¹⁰ *GpG* Homepage <https://www.corriere.it/podcast/daily/>

¹¹ *Fk* homepage (Cfr. note n. 12)

The interviews

The hosts, Francesco Giambertone (*GpG*) and David Vekony (*Fk*), were asked six questions covering the following themes, aligned with the various dimensions described:

- The role of podcasting in newsrooms.
- The impact of podcasting on the world of journalism.
- The relationship between podcasters and their audience.
- The process of constructing the podcast (selection of news, publication timing, discussions with editorial staff).
- The relationship with distribution platforms (e.g., Spotify).
- The qualities of a good podcaster.
- The relationship between podcasts and “quality” journalism: can everyone do podcast journalism?
- Information via podcasts: objectivity or commentary?

Analysis

Regarding distribution, as previously noted, access to numerical data is unavailable, but certain observations can still be made. Firstly, checking Spotify’s rankings for the most-listened-to podcasts in the two countries reveals that *Fk* is ranked ninth¹², while *GpG* is fifty-seventh¹³. This indicates a significant difference in the two podcasts’ “relevance.”

GpG’s lower position aligns with Giambertone’s comments during the interview, where he noted that his podcast occupies a marginal role within the newspaper’s editorial operations and that there is still limited awareness of the medium’s potential.

In contrast, Vekony described the origins of *Fk* as follows:

There was a sort of a hole in the market where we saw that we could be first [...] It made us a large podcast, and we’ve kept that position. [...] But now we have had a competitor; the State broadcaster has made their own version with a quite similar name and the same concept (Vekony, 2024).

The competitive language used suggests differing perspectives between the two newspapers, which correlates with their respective rankings.

To evaluate professionalization levels, the study explored the educational and professional backgrounds of the two hosts and the dynamics of their podcast teams, particularly in relation to the broader ecosystems of their respective newspapers.

¹² Chartable: <https://chartable.com/charts/spotify/norway-top-podcasts> (29/11/2024)

¹³ Chartable: <https://chartable.com/charts/spotify/italy-top-podcasts?page=2> (29/11/2024)

Francesco Giambertone did not begin as a podcaster and received no specific training in the medium. During the interview, he detailed his journey to hosting *GpG*. After attending a journalism school, he gained diverse experience in journalism, working as a television reporter and covering local news.

Vekony, on the other hand, does not have a journalism background. He studied economics but later developed an interest in audio production, which became his career and ultimately led to his role at *Aftenposten*. It appears that *Corriere della Sera* places more emphasis on the journalistic training of its podcasters, treating them as regular editorial staff with a specific role. Conversely, *Aftenposten* prioritizes technical expertise and audio experience.

The autonomy variable does not reveal significant differences between the two podcasts:

The topics are very much dependent on *Corriere della Sera*. I mean, no one tells us what we should cover; we decide with complete autonomy. But at the same time, given the format we've chosen, it makes sense to follow the newspaper's hierarchy of news [...] no one tells us what to do [...] it's all up to us, and we're very free in this sense. But we are also very marginal within the newspaper's operations (Giambertone, my translation).

Our model is to use our own journalists mostly when we have someone who has written about things. They know the story best and are in a good position to explain it to the listeners. So, we're quite integrated with the newsroom, using their work to make our podcast. But we don't have any guidelines from the editorial staff about what we should or must produce; we have quite some leeway to do what we think meets our target audience's needs best (Vekony).

Both editorial teams describe a model that is content-wise independent but format-wise intrinsically tied to their respective newspapers. Both podcasts utilize the newspapers' journalists to discuss selected topics, each within their area of expertise. However, the interviews reveal a slight difference in topic selection: *GpG* adheres to the newspaper's general news hierarchy, while *Fk* tailors its content to a specific target audience – primarily young people – choosing topics of greatest interest to them.

As noted earlier, the political parallelism dimension poses unique challenges for digital media due to its diminished relevance. Nevertheless, it can be observed through indicators such as the distinction between news and commentary. Neither podcast is tied to particular personalities but opts for a collaborative approach with their respective editorial teams, featuring the voices of various journalists. Despite this, a question about the issue was posed to both hosts:

You can still be objective with what you're relaying to the audience, like which perspectives you're bringing, how you're balancing cases with different voices, and always sticking to the facts. We don't subscribe to alternative facts. We think of the facts as facts, and I think you have to be aware of that. But I think it's possible to be objective. Also, our newspaper often is quite strict in its ethical guidelines. We focus on being objective, neutral, professional journalists. We don't bring ourselves into the stories; we have commentators for that (Vekony).

It makes more sense to do a podcast on current events [...] not so much opinion pieces. But [...] journalism in Italy isn't a journalism where opinions and facts are always clearly separated. That is, there are news articles where you can tell what the writer's opinion is. Even in our segments, we sometimes evaluate whether what a colleague is saying makes sense [...] explaining that reality by also offering an interpretation (Giambertone, my translation).

The two realities seem to operate on decidedly opposing principles. In line with the standards of its parent newspaper, *Fk* emphasizes an almost enforced objectivity. In contrast, *GpG* adopts a journalistic approach that appears to accept that news and opinions cannot be entirely separated – at least in Italy.

Conclusions

This research aimed to develop an innovative methodological framework for analyzing podcasts – specifically, news podcasts – by incorporating the dimensions of Hallin and Mancini's journalism models and the main post-2004 additions to their framework. The goal was twofold: first, to test a research model that considers a single element of the system (in this case, podcasts) through a primarily qualitative lens; and second, to provide an additional interpretive tool for understanding the impact of digital media on the information landscape.

After exploring the various aspects and possibilities offered by this framework, answers to the two research questions can be provided.

RQ1: While it is possible to identify elements within news podcasts that align with all the dimensions proposed by the journalism models framework, some dimensions appear more applicable than others and yield more significant results. Certain elements, such as the podcast market or state intervention, are inherently “truncated” due to the scarcity of available data. The interplay with distribution platforms complicates these types of analyses, which, as shown, can be traced through the limited available information but do not produce comprehensive results.

In contrast, professionalization and political parallelism seem to provide particularly insightful findings. These aspects are well-suited to podcasting research, partly because they do not rely on numerical values like the previous two and partly because podcasts are often associated with identifiable individuals whose professional profiles and, to some extent, political leanings are an evident part of the program.

The grassroots participation dimension remains an open question. While it is partially related to the two preceding dimensions, it is difficult to identify in terms of selecting case studies. The universe of independent podcasts – that is, those not tied to specific outlets – is vast, and choosing which programs to analyze may be misleading in any case. This study proposed a research hypothesis focusing on programs with the largest followings, but this approach risks overlooking numerous “mid-tier” products, which, in aggregate, constitute the majority of the podcast universe.

RQ2: This study also aimed to provide a practical framework for analysis through the examination of two programs from different media systems, using both secondary data and interviews. The results demonstrated that the two podcasts, while similar in context (both are institutional programs) and format, exhibit significant differences. Beyond enjoying varying levels of audience recognition in terms of reach, the two programs also diverge in the professional backgrounds of their hosts and their approaches to news. The similarities lie in their relationships with their respective editorial teams and the degree of freedom in selecting topics, though even here differences were noted in terms of the programs’ objectives.

Despite significant limitations due to the small number of interviewees and the focus on only two programs, the research yielded meaningful results, demonstrating that the analytical framework outlined in this chapter can be applied to podcasting from a comparative perspective.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlighted some distinguishing traits of podcasts from different parts of Europe, though they are limited to the two case studies examined. This opens the door for future research that considers (1) a larger number of programs, potentially from other reference models, and (2) the study of listenerships to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Investigating the diverse models of podcasting is essential to understanding both the future development of this medium, which is still on an undefined path, and – on a broader scale – more in-depth aspects of contemporary information dynamics.

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*The UK's Brexit podcasts: the temporal affordances
of podcasting in a time of crisis*

ABSTRACT: It is sometimes said we live in an age characterised by crisis. Taking Brexit as an example of a recent crisis moment, we explore the role of the UK's political podcasts. Brexit was the subject of a huge amount of conventional media coverage in the UK and elsewhere, including radio, TV and short podcast series. But here we focus on two hugely popular, long-running, single-issue podcasts: *Brexitcast* and *Remainiacs*, which emerged when podcasting was exploding as a popular form and became an unexpected audience hit. They reported on Brexit with far less efficiency than conventional media, taking up hundreds of hours of media time. Much of this time is spent on speculation, humour and domestic trivia. In this chapter we explore how these are used to dramatise and make sense of Brexit as a chaotic process that moves both too fast and too slow. In exploiting the temporal affordances of podcasting, these series carnivalise (Bakhtin, 1970) the sacred space of international politics and help to strip it of some of its power. No wonder this genre of political podcasting has endured post-Brexit, becoming a popular phenomenon in the UK.

KEYWORDS: politics; temporality; podcast intimacy; informality; affect .

A time of crisis and the emergence of the popular politics podcast phenomenon in the UK

Brexit, or the exit of the UK from the European Union, is regularly considered to be a crisis event in European politics (Hall, 2022; Anderson & Wilson, 2018). The vote to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum made apparent the previously latent differences of attitude towards European identity and freedom of movement, among other things – within UK society and within families. Nesting inside this overarching Brexit crisis were multiple crises: Prime Ministerial resignations, sudden elections and the unlawful suspension of parliament, among other events, as the UK government tried and repeatedly failed to negotiate the terms of the country's exit from the EU (Bowcott, Quinn & Carrell, 2019; Szucko, 2022). Of course, Brexit was the subject of much conventional news coverage. But we are focusing on two podcasts that dissected and responded to Brexit: the hugely popular *Brexitcast* (from the

BBC) and *Remainiacs* (by independent production company, Podmasters). These two shows were launched in 2017, at the start of negotiations on the form of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and a time when podcasts were rapidly taking off as a popular media form and as we will argue, Brexit as a political and social crisis found in podcasts an ideal medium of expression.

Although they were not the first political news podcasts (*Brexitcast* followed the successful *Electioncast*, for example), these Brexit shows were unusual in focusing on a single issue for such a long period. They ran for around three years, before rebranding as general politics podcasts *Newscast* and *Oh God, What Now?* respectively. Their popularity with audiences took many by surprise and it has paved the way for a hugely popular genre of the politics-themed conversational podcast. They are now joined by *The Rest is Politics*, *Electoral Dysfunction*, *Political Currency* and *The News Agents*, among others. Audiences for these podcasts are large and growing in the UK. They tend to sit around the top of podcast charts (Makari, 2023; Collins, 2023; Maher, 2024) and even sell out arena-sized venues for their live shows (Bootle, 2024). In the UK's 2024 general election, downloads increased by over fifty percent, leading some to call this the first podcast election (Maher, 2024).

When asked to explain the success of their podcasts, producers' reasons tend to fall under two main themes – intellectual and emotional. Into the former fall claims about the popularity of media that can devote more time to greater depth of coverage, and a sustained discussion between different political viewpoints (Hartley & Coleman, 2024). Into the latter, the belief that these podcasts respond to listeners' strong emotions about the contemporary state of politics and society as permanently in crisis, in ways that conventional news coverage does not. In an edition of a podcast about podcasting titled *Oh God, What Now: Screaming into the void, together* (Shepherd, 2023), Andrew Harrison, a regular on *Remainiacs/Oh God, What Now* says, «people came for the Brexit, but they stayed for the panel... all these people for whom they had become like their gang; their sort of emotional support group». *Brexitcast's* show notes also often refer to the regular contributors as «the gang». Such relationship building may account for high levels of trust in podcasts (Hartley & Coleman, 2024). Both of these explanations for the popularity of Brexit podcasts and their successor politics podcasts are based on their extended duration – they have more time than other media formats to discuss in depth, to develop relationships in studio and with their publics. In this chapter we argue that these temporal affordances of podcasting as a journalistic medium are manifold. Not only do they give more time to present information or ideas, they are used to dramatise or play out the lived experience of crisis time, to anticipate possible futures and to play with chaos and order, in ways that might help to construct our understanding of what is sometimes called a state of perpetual crisis or a permacrisis (Zuleeg, Emmanouilidis & Borges de Castro, 2021).

The affordances of podcasting: taking up time

Unlike their broadcast radio counterparts, political podcasters enjoy a great freedom in the duration and frequency of their programmes. *Brexitcast* ran at around 30 minutes (but durations varied greatly, the shortest being just 2 minutes and the longest 50) for just under three years (139 episodes) and *Remainiacs* 45-60 minutes for more than three years (150 episodes and 2 «bonus» podcasts). Episodes were released weekly on the whole, but they also sometimes took a break for a summer holiday or Christmas, and more often the teams produced extra episodes, which they both referred to as «emergency» podcasts, when unexpected Brexit-related news was announced. Complete listening figures for the shows are not published, but *Remainiacs* had more than ten thousand downloads in the days following its first episode release (Hale, 2022), both series often appeared near the top of the podcast charts on various platforms, and by the end of 2019, the BBC had reported 18 million downloads and plays of *Brexitcast* (Radio Today, 2019). Both podcasts staged live shows in front of an audience, and *Brexitcast* was broadcast on radio and had a spin-off TV show. Both were active on social media. Some broadcast radio talk¹ formats are long too. On UK national stations BBC Radio 5 Live or LBC for example, there are daily programmes on current affairs but they tend to involve live interactivity with the audience (phone-ins) and they change topic frequently. These Brexit podcasts then were still unusual in devoting so much media time to a single issue.

Both series followed a conversational podcast or chatcast format. They were live or as-live interactions between a group of regular contributors and invited guests, in contrast to edited and mixed «features» style or narrative podcasts. The tone of both *Brexitcast* and *Remainiacs* is largely informal with many of the features of everyday «mundane» conversation (Hutchby, 1991). At the same time, this is a standardised and fairly tightly managed interactional structure that draws on broadcast speech radio traditions of the live studio discussion or round-table. It is, like broadcast speech, a hybrid or intermediate form, switching between formal and informal, improvised and scripted «institutional» talk (Hutchby, 1991).

However, where news and current affairs speech radio would traditionally invite in, or play in recorded excerpts from, key players in the unfolding events of Brexit, the «gang» of contributors here tend to use oral storytelling techniques from everyday conversation, acting out imagined conversations to dramatise, narrativise and make sense of Brexit and its multiple crises, and position the imagined listener in relation to post-Brexit futures. This is a much

¹ In British English, particularly at the BBC, a distinction is often made between talk radio and speech or «built speech» formats. The former is largely improvised and associated with the phone-in. The latter includes documentaries, drama, entertainment and factual and news programmes with more structured, planned and scripted elements.

less disciplined and time-efficient mode of delivering information about Brexit, yet it effectively performs some important functions, through the use of far more humour – satire, hyperbole, bathos, teasing and self-deprecation – than would be normal in a conventional broadcast politics programme. In the following sections, we will unpack how these Brexit podcasts deployed this informal and improvised humorous talk to dramatise Brexit as unprecedented and even chaotic crisis-time, to dramatise also the feelings of living through such a time, and then how it is also used to restore order and reframe Brexit times as familiar and predictable after all.

Reflecting the temporal qualities of Brexit: hyperbolic metaphor in Remainiacs

Sometimes the speakers in both podcasts use aggrandising language to dramatise the events of Brexit, including using the word «emergency» for extra episodes, though this may be understood ironically. In the final episode of *Brexitcast*, which commentates live the countdown to the moment when the UK leaves the EU on 30 January 2020, podcast team members are posted outside key symbolic locations as they would be in broadcast news coverage: the EU parliament in Brussels, the UK Prime Minister's residence at 10 Downing Street and Parliament Square in London. Speakers describe the evening as «profound» and «a historic moment». However, as is common in the series, reverential and historicising discourse is swiftly undercut with humour and bathos during extended conversational exchanges – more of which below.

In *Remainiacs*, the temporal dimensions of Brexit are dramatised using negative hyperbolic metaphors that frame Brexit as chaotic and disastrous. For example, in episode 77 alone (18 October 2018), Brexit is likened to a black hole, a cliff edge, dungeons, Hell, being in a fire, a Kafkaesque nightmare, and the experience of living through Brexit in the UK is likened to being in a tumble drier:

The closer you get to a black hole in space, the more that distant events seem to accelerate, happening faster and faster until they all appear to be taking place at the same time, collapsing on top of one another in a violation of causality. None of this matters to you though, because you're being torn to pieces by powerful forces you don't really understand, could never control, and should probably have left well alone. Hello and welcome to another edition of *Remainiacs*. [laughter] A podcast about Brexit. (Andrew Harrison, opening monologue, *Remainiacs* ep. 77)

How was it from watching this stuff from a distance? Does it lend any kind of clarity? Because we're obviously... we're basically in

the tumble dryer that is Brexit and you're watching it from California. (Andrew Harrison asks Nina Schick to comment on recent UK events, *Remainiacs* ep. 77)

What these metaphors for Brexit have in common is they describe very visceral effects on the imagined body of too much happening, too fast, in a series of events over which the subject has no control (heading towards a cliff edge, being sucked into a black hole), and at the same time, in apparent contradiction, too little happens, so that one is stuck (in a dungeon, in Hell, in a Kafkaesque nightmare). Or in the case of the tumble drier, the two ideas meet, as one is presumably invited to imagine constant movement, unable to find one's feet, yet travelling nowhere. Movement towards Brexit is therefore presented as something that happens to us, as the result of an inescapable and chaotic force, rather than an orderly and deliberate mastery of time, turning on its head the relationship with Brexit-time that the government might wish to present.

As Bakhtin (1970: 315-316) explains, the grotesque that nourishes laughter is rarely gratuitous. It generally arises from changes inflicted on the social body and which are seen as unfair. The above metaphors all imply suffering of the literal, individual body too. In the same episode, Andrew Harrison introduces regular contributor Ian Dunt:

Also with us is Ian Dunt, Editor of politics.co.uk and a man who after the events of this week consists of 70% Bisodol, 20% grey market antidepressants and 10% nicotine. [laughter] Hello Ian welcome back to the show. [laughter] How are your nerves this week, it's getting a bit real isn't it?

The joke is that Dunt is made up entirely of self-administered remedies for indigestion, depression and anxiety, in other words, the effects of chronic stress on the body. It relies on both exaggeration for its humour and the aptness of the idea that Brexit time is characterised by moments of change that can occur seemingly at random and to which Dunt might need to respond, but far more of the time is spent waiting for events, over which he has no control, yet perhaps feels responsabilised as a citizen. Brexit, after all, was so often referred to as «the will of the people» (Petkar, 2019).

Though there will undoubtedly have been many people in the UK unworried and even uninterested in Brexit, members of the general public interviewed in Manchester by Sarah Hall (2022: 206) described Brexit in not dissimilar ways as «a whirlwind», «a shitstorm» but also as a «quagmire» and a «waste of time». The hyperbolic metaphors of *Remainiacs* then might be said to express very aptly the experience of living through Brexit time for many listeners. Though Brexit felt eventful, it was the decisions of a small number of

political actors that created the pace and magnitude of events, while most people were excluded from this sphere of political action, and left to wait to find out whether and when the government would, to use its own slogan, «get Brexit done» and what kind of a Brexit it would be (Anderson & Wilson, 2018; Hall, 2022). If exaggeration and amplification seem appropriate here, it is because of the dramatic, historical, and international significance of Brexit and its many twists and turns. Yet the epic style of *Remainiacs* is only used in an approach governed by doubt and humour, in a picaresque, self-conscious, even parodic manner. The hyperbolic metaphors in *Remainiacs* introduce an element of the ridiculous by the extent of their exaggeration, which invites laughter (heard in the recordings) that eventually relieves the tension they build up. The defusing effects of humour are also utilised in *Brexitcast*, but through bathos rather than hyperbole.

Bathetic metaphor: Relocating Brexit in the familiar, domestic past in Brexitcast

We mentioned the final episode of *Brexitcast*, streamed live on the 30 January 2020, during the countdown to the final withdrawal of the UK from the EU at midnight, Brussels time (11pm UK time). Regular member of the podcast, Adam Fleming indulges in a very brief reflection on the significance of the moment, only to undermine that sentiment immediately with a reference to a cosy radio comedy panel show called *Just a Minute*, which has been on air since 1967. The moment where the UK leaves the European Union becomes «something else happening». Fellow regular Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's Political Editor at the time, is at Downing Street, where a clock in red, white and blue lights is projected onto the outside of number 10, counting down to Brexit:

Adam Fleming: «Well, everyone, it's a really big night, a historic moment. It's episode 2 of *Brexitcast* does Brexit-themed *Just a Minute*. No, just kidding. There's something else happening as well. The actual Brexit.»

Paul Mason: «And Katya, Laura, where are you?»

Laura Kuenssberg: «I'm in Downing Street doing just er 8 minutes and 9 seconds. Oh 8 minutes and five seconds, 8 minutes and three seconds to go.»

Adam Fleming: «What does the big clock look like on the on the building?»

Laura Kuenssberg: «Well there are dancing around blue, white and red lights and then the clock looks like a sort of... It's kind of like the face you would have seen on what would have been quite a groovy alarm clock in about 1993.»

Chris Mason: «I've still got one of those. [laughter]»

10 Downing Street is an address with an aura of power, standing in for the office of the elected head of state. The Brexit clock is an attempt to perhaps to strengthen the auratic power of Brexit as a historic event, by projecting it onto that iconic house frontage and at the same time claim Brexit for the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson and construct him as a figure with a (future) historical legacy. But Kuenssberg refuses to reproduce this move, and likens it to a humble domestic item, one that is both old-fashioned and trying and failing to be cool («groovy») and Mason takes up the analogy. Both move the public spectacle of Brexit symbolically into the space of the home and relocate the idea of an uncertain post-Brexit future in the familiar recent past. Later in the same programme Adam Fleming in Brussels describes another moment of potentially powerful symbolism with a domestic metaphor, as the UK flag is taken down from the European Council building:

Two people came out from reception, took the flagpole, folded up the British flag, basically like you would fold up your duvet cover after you've just taken it out of the tumble dryer and then took it off.

Such humorous analogies between formal and public Brexit rituals and the humble and domestic are the profane that might serve to strip the moment of Brexit of some of its power (Bakhtin, 1970). Their incongruity gives rise to laughter that defuses the tension that the few conventional aspects of reportage or commentary have built up. In *Remainiacs*, the hyperbole constructs Brexit as an uninterpretable and chaotic process that destroys what has been constructed in the past. The mocking use of bathos in *Brexitcast* reverses this threat, retreating into a time before Brexit.

The *Brexitcast* regulars turn the mockery on themselves too, through a lot of self-deprecating humour, such as their frequent reference to political analysis as «geekery», a joke about Alex Forsyth being seated too many rows back at the press conference to see anything, or Adam Fleming not having access to many sources (both episode 1). There are also many references to the domestic – what they ate for lunch, having coffee on the train or their accommodation, as in this excerpt at the start of episode 1:

Chris Mason: «I'm Chris Mason in Westminster.»

Adam Fleming: «I'm Adam Fleming, BBC Brussels Reporter in day one of the new job.»

Alex Forsyth: «And I'm Alex Forsyth, usually in Westminster, but the pleasure of being in Brussels and in the first press conference with David Davis and Michel Barnier.»

Chris Mason: «Adam, are you still living out the suitcase then?»

Adam Fleming: «No, I actually unpacked last night in the flat I'm going to be living in for my first month here. And it's a very nice flat, but there is one terrible design flaw – the plugs are in all the wrong places. Specifically, there is no plug by the bed. So as you know, I'm a late night tweet consumer, so not having to be not being able to plug my phone in by the bed».

While contributing to the «carnivalisation» of the situation (Bakhtin, 1970), the inclusion of certain domestic details of the journalists encourages a sense of intimacy, by reminding us of their embodiment and of their personal connection to the story (Lindgren, 2023), which is a «new job». At the same time of course, it also establishes them as experts, in greater proximity (in time and space) to power than most of their listeners – their hotel rooms are in Brussels, they are present at key press conferences. Still, we are reminded that Brexit time for political journalists is also a time of waiting and uncertainty. This conversational work helps to differentiate them from traditional journalistic discourse, which is depersonalised and formulaic, limited in time. Spending so much time on the minutiae of everyday life in their speech they project the idea that their audience also has the time to listen to their domestic chat, forming a «communication contract» (Charaudeau, 2011) or «enunciation device» (Fauré & Smati, 2016: 99)² that establishes a sense of symbolic closeness between the podcast «gang», and between them and their listeners. The domestic and self-deprecating humour also operate to defuse the tension around Brexit these same episodes have built up through their coverage. In fact both *Brexitcast* and *Remainiacs* use other devices found in everyday conversation to defuse tension and reinstate a sense of order.

Commentating, speculating and trying out different futures

In both podcasts, the regular contributors and their guests concern themselves a great deal with rules, procedures and constitutional questions, which quell presumed anxiety over the unprecedented and apparently chaotic nature of Brexit, resituate «historic» Brexit within UK and European continuity, and offer a means to speculate over what might be happening behind closed doors. During these speculations, contributors often reframe disagreement or apparently poor negotiating strategy as pragmatic or a practice that follows past precedent. For example, in episode 1 of *Brexitcast* (19 June 2017) several jour-

² An enunciation device rests first of all on a double image presented by the enunciator: his own, in relation to what he assumes about what he is saying, and the image he proposes of his addressee. The relationship between these two interlocutory instances is constructed precisely within and through the discourse produced.

nalists from different media organisations have been asked to speculate on how negotiations between the UK and the EU might go, and a montage of their recorded answers is played in. Chris Mason suggests he is «intrigued» (though he sounds worried) by the fact that several of these journalists have speculated talks will break down almost as soon as they have begun, when either the EU or UK representative walks out. A walkout sounds chaotic, unprecedented – a crisis. Yet Adam Fleming reframes this immediately as a conventional negotiating strategy in Brussels, the reference to issuing a document or meeting at «a big table» gently ridiculing the practices of the political class, that demonstrates his own insider knowledge of these tactics at the same time:

Adam Fleming: «So we're fine.»

Chris Mason: «Is it? Is it? I mean, it's difficult, isn't it? Because who knows what's gonna happen in the future? But I was intrigued by the number of journalists in that little montage there who were anticipating some sort of walkout. And I'm thinking, is that a sort of journalistic hope? Because it would be dramatic, and it would make for great headlines. Or do we think that's going to happen?»

Adam Fleming: «I think they're just realistic. They're in Brussels, there's a lot of brinkmanship, it's a tool people use for negotiating as much as issuing a document or having a meeting with the big table is a tool.»

In episode 77 of *Remainiacs* there is much discussion of the uncertain timeline for Brexit, and hope of overturning it through a second referendum. They are waiting for news on a deal between Brussels and the UK, which they say might be imminent, or then again might take ten years. There may be a much-feared «no-deal Brexit», and they report on the government's own published notices about the resulting disruption to transport, insurance, banking, and food supplies. Within this chaotic and anxiogenic political landscape, Ian Dunt characterises Prime Minister Teresa May's behaviour as entirely irrational:

Theresa May went to the Commons you suddenly think «Oh, you're making it harder now!» and in fact making a statement to the Commons at all was a frankly insane thing for her to have done.

But as he then speculates at length about what would happen if there were indeed a no-deal Brexit, he speaks in the voice of the government, the Speaker of the House of Commons, and elected members of parliament (MPs): rehearsing what they might say, testing out how infrequently used aspects of the unwritten constitution might help stop the country leaving the EU without any deal:

Just imagine that in sort of January, February the government is trying to push through a no deal. According to the law now on January 27th, they make a neutral motion to the Commons going «there is going to be no deal». What that motion will really say is «a debate has been held on this.» [...] It opens the door for a very confident speaker, and they'd have to be a very confident speaker, ideally a speaker who was about to step down anyway, as he is going to in the summer, to go, «Well, the wording of this motion is less important than the intention of this motion. And therefore, I think that it is amendable.» And if it is amendable you could have MPs saying to the government «you must go back to the drawing board». (*Remainiacs* ep 77)

This ventriloquism (Cooren, 2012) occurs frequently in both series. It is a form of polyphony – the incorporation of more than one voice, which is common in journalism (Głaz & Trofymczuk, 2020) – but here it's of a particular type, drawn from everyday conversational storytelling. The informal use of «goes» or «is like» to mean «says» or «said» is used as the narrative switches from one person to another, or indeed to whole groups of people. This contrasts with the kind of polyphonic techniques typical of broadcast coverage of politics, where short clips of politicians might be played or opposing sides brought in for a studio debate, as a means to explore the story and offer balance. Political decisions around Brexit were mainly taking place behind closed doors, leaving journalists and the general public with a dearth of information about what was being said and indeed what might happen. The extended and relatively free format of these two podcasts makes them inefficient in terms of the delivery of the latest information or facts about Brexit. However, it is used to give extensive space to these oral polyphonic techniques that dramatise Brexit politics, both real and hypothetical.

Conclusion

These podcasts were produced at a time of political instability in the UK, when Brexit and post-Brexit futures were being decided. Waiting to find out what the future might hold in this way is a form of subjugation to the authority and power of the state (Olson, 2015: 522) that may be felt as a tension in the body and mind at the fast pace of news events and the slow progress of meaningful change. In this time, many found political news stressful yet were unable to tear themselves away, a phenomenon sometimes called doomscrolling on social media. It seems hard to understand why podcasts that delivered more of the same, week in, week out, would be such a success. These two podcasts have their differences in style and content, but they both worked to represent and restructure the audience's experience of Brexit time to make it perhaps

somewhat easier to live with. Understanding more about the techniques they used to do this can help us understand something about the role popular politics podcasting might have in the future of journalism.

Though they do recount detailed explanations of laws, processes and practices, these podcasts can't be said to disseminate that information in an especially time-efficient way, and much of their coverage is speculative. Instead, they spend podcasting time on relationship-building with each other and their audience and on representing and responding to the lived experience of crisis times. *Remainiacs* theatricalises the visceral effects of waiting for Brexit, exaggerating them for humorous effect before offering reassuring analysis. In *Brexitcast*, meanwhile, reassurance is offered through domestic analogies and the use of irony and self-deprecation to naturalize Brexit-era instability. Though it does not always linger on it, this downplaying of Brexit in its own way still presupposes likely anxiety about political crisis among its audience.

Both podcasts exhaustively document each stage of the negotiations, events in parliament, news coverage of Brexit and possible Brexit and post-Brexit futures. In a way these podcasts seem to fulfil the function of restless activity that we need to undertake when we are both unable to act and unable to relax. The *Remainiacs* website tagged the series «the no-bullshit Brexit podcast for people who won't just *shut up* and get over Brexit». The only activity available, while those in power decide Brexit, appears to be to talk. *Brexitcast* promises to follow the «twists and turns» of negotiations «behind the scenes» and «goss» or insider gossip from those close to power (episode web texts 14 Dec 2017, 20 Dec 2018, 4 April 2019). Podcast talk is perhaps the equivalent of restless pacing, while waiting for the results of an operation on a loved one. But the restless talk of these podcasts that filled up that huge amount of time it took for Brexit negotiations to happen does more than this. Shared laughter and intimate information in these podcasts suggest a claim to closeness, works towards a sense listeners are spending time in their company – a sense that takes time to establish.

Remainiacs, produced by a non-broadcast media company, is free to be an avowedly pro-Remain podcast, and derives much of its humour from the hyper-dramatisation of Brexit as a crisis and a catastrophe. The BBC, as a broadcaster, is required to be impartial on news and matters of political controversy (Ofcom, 2021). Its mockery is gentler, and it works the other techniques of politics podcasting much more intensively: the performance of informality, self-deprecating humour and teasing, undercutting the seriousness of Brexit and their own work as political journalists. Humour, ventriloquism and the carnivalesque help to circumvent censorship and protect people from punishment by the powerful (Bakhtin, 1970). Shared laughter also serves as social glue. These two series make of the podcast space a kind of public square where a group exhortation to derision takes place, and shapes the collective.

Despite the apparent informality and improvised nature of talk in both shows, they both also conform to some of the central values of journalism.

Ventriloquism helps them not only express sentiments connected to experiencing the crisis, creating drama and humour, but performs the journalistic function of objectivity and balance, bringing in different perspectives or opinions, even in the avowedly anti-Brexit *Remainiacs*, putting them into contestation, evidencing opinions and thus authorising the commentator's narrative as a definitive, rather than personal account (Rautajoki & Hyvärinen, 2021). The self-mockery of *Brexitcast* is both a sign of complicity with the community of the audience and a way to take up a stance of disengagement towards Brexit politics, which might stand in for objectivity.

Both podcasts undermine politicians' power, by mocking the official processes as chaotic (*Remainiacs*) and difficult to comprehend or ridiculous (both series). In ridiculing Brexit and its powerful actors, they repeatedly puncture the sacred dignity of Brexit as the historic moment of Conservative Party politicians, rendering it knowable (retreating into the home and into a time before Brexit) and laughable. In both cases, the deliberations and decisions made by the nation state, invested as they are with a sacred aura, are «carnivalised» (Bakhtin, 1970). By humorously relativising political facts and reality, they are symbolically dethroned, profaned and denied.

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*Listening as Labour: About Podcast Listening Habits
of Young Adults in Finland and Greece*

ABSTRACT: Due to significant changes in media environments, listening has become an important way of consuming media content, particularly among younger generations (under 30). Since the pandemic, these individuals have increasingly turned to curated audio media content. While the practice of listening as a means of engaging with media has been well examined by media research institutions, we contend that the study of listening still requires ethnographic perspectives to address the complex nature of digital environments.

This chapter draws on data collected from Finland and Greece to highlight how listening is intertwined with intricate media landscapes. It explores how young people justify the podcast content they choose and the significance of news content in their decisions. The analysis is based on the concept developed by media scholar Kate Lacey, who argues that listening is an active practice and a form of labor. Lacey posits that listening is an engaged process of exercising citizenship through audio media, encompassing both cognitive and emotional dimensions.

The information is derived from community research by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, along with interviews conducted in Greece during the spring and summer of 2024.

KEYWORDS: podcast; listening; young adults; media infrastructures; trust; audiencing

Podcasts listeners and the future of journalism

As a multifaceted media format, podcasts foster a lively discussion about their definition (e.g. Rime *et al.*, 2022) and their significance in today's media landscape. Although the consensus to these questions is difficult to find, it can be said that in addition to being considered as «entertainment» – i.e., podcast listening is seen to belong to the sphere of leisure – podcasts have become a more and more important way of consuming news and journalistic content in general (Lindgren, 2016).

In the current media infrastructure, where journalism struggles to maintain its vital role in democratic public life, podcasts provide a way to address the various challenges in the post-truth era. This includes addressing the problem

of fragmented audiences in an era when media content is tailored for smaller sub-audiences instead of the general public. Additionally, the intimate nature and on-demand characteristics of podcasts serve as significant competitive advantages in the online media landscape (Newman & Gallo, 2019).

One of the key questions is how journalistic podcasts can provide an engaging and meaningful experience especially for young audiences. Many research reports highlight how the younger generations, particularly those under thirty years old, have increasingly turned to curated audio media content after pandemic. For instance, a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute (2023), which included participants from 20 countries, found that the percentage of people listening to podcasts monthly rose from 29% in 2018 to 34% in 2023. Notably, more than half of individuals aged 18 to 34 reported listening to podcasts.

Although there is a wealth of important research on podcast listeners and their listening habits (e.g., Soto-Vásquez, Vilceanu & Johnson, 2022; Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022; Garcia-Marin, 2020) understanding of how audio content fits into daily media consumption is a broad subject that needs to be examined from various perspectives. Particularly, the reasons why young people prefer audio media over other types of content, the criteria they use to select what to listen to, and how listening fits into their daily media practices highlight important contextual and infrastructural factors, which are critical from the point of view of journalism. Thus, the contextual approach focuses not only on the popularity of different podcast genres but also emphasizes the understanding of how individuals organize their daily use of media. In this article, we approach this question by comparing the listening habits and preferences of young adults between Finland and Greece. We are interested in a) on what grounds they select podcasts they listen to, and what significance news content may have in these choices and b) how they describe their listening practices as part of their everyday life.

The analytical approach we utilize emphasizes examining podcast listening as a practice. Here we particularly draw upon Kate Lacey's (2023) discussions on listening as labour, as a particular kind of multisensory practice. The perspective challenges the understanding of the public sphere as a place of «rational argument» (Habermas, 1974), which is defined solely by the written text. It suggests how audiencing, audience experience and engagement, is a complex process including a spoken word. Thus, voice and sound are not seen to belong only to the realm of emotions and the private sphere but are part of individuals' political agency. Therefore, we argue that the study of listening as labour contributes to discussions concerning the future of journalism by illustrating the complexity of the terrain (young) people encounter when engaging with media. Understanding of the complexity, in turn, affords to understand aspects of trust in journalism: how it is developed and negotiated among young audiences.

Landscapes of podcast listening – Finland and Greece

European countries vary in how podcasts have integrated into their national media landscapes. Therefore, we will first highlight some key features of the media environments both in Finland and Greece in an effort to sketch a short media profile of each country.

According to Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos (2019) Public Service Broadcasting never really existed in Greece. The Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) has been unable to function according to the public service obligations observed in public broadcasters in Britain, Scandinavia or other northern European countries. Greece, like some other southern European countries, entered rather late into “modernity” and has neither a strong civil society nor a strong market. The Greek media have been used as vehicles for negotiating with and pressuring the government of the day, rather than reflecting public discourse (Iosifidis & Papathanassopoulos, 2019; Papatheodorou & Machin, 2003). In the period following the 2008 economic crisis, research has shown that a loose interpretation of the Code of Ethics is a common practice among Greek journalists (Papathanassopoulos *et al.*, 2021). The European Parliament passed a damning resolution in February 2024 regarding the rule of law and freedom of the media in the country that highlights concerns about serious threats to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Greece (Oikonomikos Taxidromos, 2024).

Karathanasopoulou (2020) argues that podcasting is a late bloomer in Greece as it appears to be sparse and disjointed. However podcasting can offer a valuable opportunity for diverse voices to be heard in Greece, allowing them to authentically reflect and preserve the lives, struggles, and hopes of the current generation. Podcasts in Greece include music, news and current affairs, history, lifestyle, sports and technology and there is a growing future for the medium in Greece (*Ibidem*). Journalistic podcasts in Greece represent a growing minority that mainly focuses on commentary journalism and very selectively on investigative journalism, and research into journalistic podcasts in Greece is scarce (Theodosiadou & Ristani, 2024; Theodosiadou, 2024).

Finland, in turn, is often called a «media welfare state», meaning that media access is rather extensive and largely unaffected by social class (Syvertsen *et al.*, 2014). Generally speaking, Finland belongs to the so-called Nordic new media system (including Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden). This means that newspapers’ online editions have been for long the primary sources of news instead of using social media. In addition, people use brand sites online instead of search engines and social media. However, the situation has presumably changed in the early 2020s, but there is not yet very comprehensive research available on the subject. Thirdly, in Finland, trust in news is at a high level. (Schröder *et al.*, 2020)

The popularity of podcasts in Finland rose in 2018, a few years later than in

leading podcasting countries such as the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden (Manninen *et al.*, 2022). A comprehensive study of the early stages of podcasts in Finland has not yet been done. However, Finnish Broadcasting Company has had a significant role in fostering podcast culture in Finland, and currently, all audio content produced by the company is categorized as podcasts.

Regarding print media, podcasts have gradually been incorporated into daily news flow; for some newspapers, they are already an important content production method. In terms of listening Finland is one of the top countries in Europe along with other Nordic countries (Reuters Institute, 2023). According to *Statistics Finland*, the percentage of respondents who listened to a podcast in the past three months has increased from 26% to 39% from 2019 to 2023 (Saarenmaa & Kohvakka, 2022).

Although the media landscapes in Greece and Finland have notable structural, cultural, and historical differences, these aspects constitute important background factors to consider when interpreting the results. We are especially interested in how networked and platform-based media (re)shape these historical conditions of media consumption beyond national boundaries.

Data

The material from Finland used in this article was collected by YLE News Lab, a sub-organization of Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE). The Lab develops services for the company and investigates how Finnish people engage with various forms of media through different types of audience research. The method utilized in this research was so called community research, which is often used in market surveys, because it gives access to customers' thoughts, insights, and feelings. The design of the community research was done in co-operation with the researchers from University of Tampere: the first author of this article participated in the meetings, where the structure of the data including the questions were planned and agreed. Some of the questions served the needs of the company, but most of them were designed to correspond to interviews conducted in Greece.

An online community was established for a four-day study, functioning as a discussion forum hosted by the authors. Participants initially answered questions related to their podcast listening habits and favourite programs. Afterward, they were able to see each other's responses and engage in discussions. Additionally, votes were conducted within the community on topics like favourite podcast hosts.

A total of twenty participants, all of whom actively listen to podcasts, were selected as respondents, with nineteen completing the survey. Among this group, eleven individuals were young adults (under 30), and on them this article is focused. The selected data highlight listening practices and the motivations behind participants' listening choices. In the implementation of data collection

the research team followed the ethical guidelines: participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw from the study. In reporting the results, this article protects the identities of the participants by anonymising any detail that would result in the recognition of individual participants.

The data collection in Greece was conducted by utilizing semi-structured interviews with young adults. The data collection lasted from March to June 2024, and 10 participants from Greece between the ages of 20 and 40 took part. Most of the participants belonged to the age group 20-30 years old. The primary criterion for the recruitment of the sample was to listen to podcasts on a regular basis. The data were fully transcribed and analyzed by the two writers of this chapter, who have conducted similar research and have relevant experience. Discourse analysis was used to analyze the interview material and the Atlas.ti program was used to analyze the coded data. Four codes emerged that include the profile of the listener, the reasons for listening to podcasts, trust in podcasts and what makes a good podcast.

Listening, trust, and young audiences: theoretical perspectives

Building trust and engagement with audiences is essential for journalism today, especially as news spreads widely through social media platforms. In this complicated landscape of datafication and platformization, citizens must navigate between clickbait and filter bubbles, which unfortunately often lead to power struggles and conflict. To meet the challenges of the current media scene, several trends in journalism have emerged, including liveness, experimental events, and face-to-face performances. In these new forms of journalism, the audience's direct interaction and proximity with a journalist is considered to increase trust in journalism (Adams, 2020; Vodianovic, 2020; Hänninen & Rautiainen-Keskustalo, 2023).

The rise of podcasting is part of this development although its benefits are different. As a form of narrative storytelling (McHugh, 2022) it highlights seriality, an accessible format and publication schedule and the listener's control over the choice of content (Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Lindgren, 2016). Because of this, podcasts have become a central part of the content production of private and public media operators. This is exemplified by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, which has categorized much of its downloadable online content as podcasts. While the shift to podcasts has been relatively easy to audio media companies, it has caused more challenges for newspaper-based media. The incentive for this transition has been the pressure to stay on top of technological developments and maintain credibility in the eyes of the audience and advertisers in the current media environment, where media companies' revenues increasingly rely on payments from the audience rather than advertising revenue.

The critical question surrounding podcasts is their potential as a medium,

particularly concerning the way they are received: through listening. Rather than seeing it as an unproblematic way of transmitting knowledge, the rise of podcast culture has urged to problematize listening as an everyday experience. From this perspective, it is possible to see podcast listening as a democratic force. For instance, Andrew Dobson (2014: 8) argues that listening can play a crucial role in fulfilling democratic objectives such as legitimacy, trust, disagreement, understanding, and deliberation. He also emphasizes that listening offers an opportunity to amplify marginalized voices, highlighting citizens' responsibility to hear them. According to Dobson, the power of listening lies especially in its ability to extend beyond the typical discourse on empowerment, which often remains shallow.

However, as Maria Rae's (2023) analysis of the popularity of Joe Rogan shows, Dobson's argument is probably overly optimistic because podcasts as a cultural product are too unregulated and can disseminate hate speech and misinformation. Rogan's rise to prominence exemplifies this issue: starting as a home podcaster, he is probably the most influential podcast host nowadays. He has developed podcasts as the medium of soft power (Loyd, 2008: 479) beyond the regulated media scene. As a result, he has become «a dominant competitor in the public sphere for economic, cultural and social power» (Rae, 2023: 191) The question about podcasts' potentialities is, then, an extremely complex issue.

From the point of view of this article, we argue that Kate Lacey's (2023) idea of podcast listening as labour is fruitful because it frames listening as a practice. According to Lacey (*Ivi*: 5-7), labour of listening is the active process of exercising citizenship through audio media, incorporating cognitive and emotional aspects. The perspective moves beyond Habermas' idealized concept of the public sphere, acknowledging, for example, the labour involved in preparing space, time, setting, and technologies for listening. In a saturated media environment, listening is, for Lacey, «the disembodied dispersed, and domesticated encounters with others in the public sphere through ordinary, everyday media technologies» (*Ivi*: 1).

Therefore, listening is a particular way of exercising citizenship, which is not «just about having a voice, but about having the capacity and the responsibility to listen to others' voices» (*Ivi*: 11). Thus, listening is more than merely consuming content; it reflects how individuals engage in citizenship through the act of listening. This concept also recognizes the ongoing debates and struggles within society, while broadening the discussion to include the technologies and physical spaces where listening occurs.

We propose that Lacey's perspective is fruitful when examining the listening practices of younger generations, as using media through listening is more habitual for them than it was for earlier generations. According to Andersen *et al.* (2021), millennials and Generation Z attend to news on social media more often than the three older generations. Political expertise is not a prerequisite for consuming news on social media platforms, although some generations

(such as Baby Boomers and Generation Z) seek out more political material on social media due to higher levels of political interest and efficacy. To put it another way, political exposure is somewhat facilitated by political engagement and participation, but through various media. However, it is worth keeping in mind that although younger generations enter the political sphere through different doors, they may travel the same path, i.e., young people may not be all that different from older generations (*Ibidem*). Various studies in the last two decades (Stahl & Literat, 2023; Craig *et al.*, 2021; Ezzat, 2020) have shown that social media provide young people with personal empowerment, expanded access and connectivity, community and identity formation, a means for organizing their social life, and multiple possibilities for interaction that adult-mediated and physical spaces may limit. At the same time, however, these platforms can also breed toxicity and harmful experiences (e.g. cyberbullying, friendship fallouts, peer pressure), which can contribute to diminished self-worth, increased stress and anxiety, envy, loneliness, or apathy. Privacy, user activity surveillance, and data-mining are other common concerns pertaining to young people's social media usage that coexist with the platforms' social benefits (Stahl & Literat, 2023; Gangneux, 2019).

In the following analysis, we examine research data collected from Finland and Greece. We scrutinize how young adults (under 30) talk about how they choose the content they listen to, how they evaluate podcasts' content and their everyday listening habits.

Analysis: topic and atmosphere defining the listening choices

In both countries, most participants said they consumed podcasts regularly, listening at least once a week, with most listening daily. The most important criteria for selecting a podcast was personal interest to the topic. Participants did not clearly differentiate between various types of content, such as news, hobbies, and entertainment.

No other factor makes a podcast the best option if it is not interesting. (Participant 1, Finland)

This criterion, personal interest, might seem self-evident. However, we argue it illuminates the nature of on-demand consumerism. Young people have both control and flexibility over the content, which is available for use according to diverse needs wherever and whenever they want (Laor, 2022). Notable was that respondents in their twenties emphasized personal needs and interests, while those over twenty expressed curiosity about various issues, even ones that initially seemed foreign to them. Still, the time was limited, so fairly often they were «running through» podcast content based on their personal interest.

If the topic is too foreign to you, there is not enough time to focus on listening. In addition, if you have a family, time is not on your side, so I preferably use the time I have by listening to a podcast that is personally interesting. (Participant 2, Finland)

While it could be argued that this trend leads to superficial media consumption, it is important to note that a substantial number of respondents in both countries reported listening to podcasts to enhance their knowledge on various subjects. These topics often included news topics as well as broader themes related to lifestyle and hobbies.

What I liked is that you have the time to process the information as you want, i.e. it's not like the news bulletin that says some specific things and you have to listen to them at that time, a podcasts you can listen to it anytime, wherever you are and it goes very deep into information, that is, it gives you information about what happened a year ago, ten years ago, many people are involved, and usually they are made quite neatly. The interviews are in-depth, not so-called superficial. (Participant 2, Greece)

However, young adults' choices were the sum of many factors highlighting the unique nature of podcasts as an audio medium. The concept of atmosphere illustrates this well. Originally introduced by social psychologist Erving Goffman (1981: 166), it refers real-life social interactions where individuals negotiate social roles, leading to collective affects. In the context of podcasts, these interactions are, of course, parasocial in nature (Lindgren, 2016). Regarding the data we used, the atmosphere referred to how the hosts and guests discussed the subject, for example, if there was a balance of the perspectives on controversial issues or how they showed diligence to the subject:

I think the way podcasters deal with things is most important because it determines whether the podcast creates an atmosphere suitable for the topic and whether the subject is covered in a versatile manner or/and from an interesting point of view. (Participant 3, Finland.)

Another thing that impressed me in the pods in relation to the news bulletins is that not everyone participates, that is, we don't take a microphone to ask randomly people what they think, but qualified experts participate that are involved with the event [...]. And I think pods are a great way to learn modern history or to research an event, a person that you're deeply interested in and it's a very different way to discover. (Participant 2, Greece)

On the other hand, atmosphere referred to sound-related issues, especially to the host's speaking style and voice qualities. The host's voice was seen to have the power to make the listener travel to a different time and space. As the young listener from Greece narrates:

[...] Certainly, the meaning first, that is to convey some feelings to me or pass on some meanings to me about life, about people, about social, human relations, that is, more that he wants to pass on [...] And on the other hand, the "feeling self" that the podcast transmits, beyond the information, I like the feeling very much and music can immerse you into that easier. (Participant 1, Greece)

Furthermore, Greek respondents described an engaging voice as the host's ability to maintain the listeners' interest through spontaneity, «the directness in relation to the listener and the ability to keep you on your toes» (Participant 3, Greece and Participant 4, Greece). A young listener illustrates this notion with a metaphor: «I think that (a podcast) should have exactly those features that a (good) theatre play has» (Participant 5, Greece). A Finnish respondent echoed this sentiment by discussing the importance of an «energetic» and «unique» atmosphere (Participant 4, Finland). In addition, some Finnish participants noted that a good podcast makes both the story and the storyteller relatable, effectively connecting with the listener's world. A Finnish respondent, who debated about the reasons why some podcasts gain popularity formulated the idea as follows:

In this case, the podcast, which has touched people closely, has with its empathy and interest originally spoken about real people. (Participant 3, Finland)

Respondents' characterizations, ranging from interesting topics to sonic qualities, including affects and impressions they feel, illustrate well how podcasts provide a complex interpretive framework for a listener. From a journalistic standpoint, the central challenge lies in how to reach beyond personal interests, i.e. overcome the phenomenon indicated in Finnish data: that while respondents wanted to consume news through podcasts, they preferred forms of expressions which were not «too serious» or «news-like».

Multisensory media environments and podcast listening

In addition to podcast content as such, also the overall media environment was defining podcast listening practices. A frequently emerging theme in this regard is the focus on the content versus using podcasts as a background

activity. In this regard, the answers varied a lot. Some of the respondents highlighted how they wanted solely to focus on listening, especially if they were listening to their favorite podcast. A Finnish respondent illustrated her listening habits as follows:

If the topic doesn't interest me, the thought goes off. If you're interested, then you can concentrate. I usually want to be alone when listening to podcasts because otherwise, it might be interrupted if someone starts talking next to me. I sometimes do something else like playing or cleaning while I'm listening, but if other activities take too much time to think or concentrate, listening to a podcast at the same time is impossible for you. In that case, I just put it away and listened later. (Participant 3, Finland)

Similar kind of descriptions was found among Greek respondents.

[...] Usually I'm doing something else (while I listen to podcasts), but for example it's related to the episode when I was listening to this one about the European elections, I was on the phone all the time, playing and looking things up, but when I'm listening to something lighter, (I don't act that way) [...] (Participant 1, Greece)

Both Finnish and Greek respondents stated that podcasts play a significant role in their daily practices, accompanying activities such as housework, travelling, spending time in public places, and engaging in hobbies. While this usage can generally be seen as using audio as a background, it may not be an example of shallowness in reception. Rather, it highlights how young people have been absorbed into social media: content can be consumed using various media technologies wherever people want.

Kate Lacey's (2023) considerations about listening as labour are, then, especially relevant here. Listening is not just a simple way to receive messages; it involves navigating in a complex media infrastructure marked by platformization, algorithms, and limitless number of choices. Especially Finnish respondents highlighted how they used several platforms on daily basis: Spotify, YouTube, Supla, YLE Areena. In addition, some of them also watched TV and read printed newspapers. Jumping from one platform to another was a key part of media use.

Notable is that some of the respondents brought up how the visual aspects of podcasts framed the overall experience of podcasts. The issue may be considered part of the labour the listener has to do when using digital platforms. For example, one of the respondents analyzed how titles and images contradict the contents.

The image [of Yle's news contents] is factual, male-oriented (because several images represent masculinity), aimed at adults, and has seen time (i.e. it is old-fashioned). Images are formed by coloring, people's ages, genders, and forms. (Participant 5, Finland)

The same respondent also said that they preferred watching podcasts, because it helped them to immerse to the discussions:

Video allows you to see people's reactions better, which can be very interesting, for example when dealing with emotional topics. Some video podcasts also give you a greater sense of being "in the company" of the podcasters or participating in the conversation. (Participant 5, Finland)

Trust

Our analysis above has highlighted the complexity of the listening process. However, from a journalism perspective, it is crucial to understand how young people perceive and discuss trust in content, particularly in how they differentiate between news and other types of content. For many young listeners trust was an important criterion for selecting the podcast they want to hear and especially for keeping on listening to it. In the narration from Greek data that follows they explain this vividly:

In other words, it has happened to me to double-check facts (that I listen to on a podcast) many times and discover that they are correct or check them from other sources. And that's how I understood that indeed this podcast was credible, it's worth engaging with *again*. He [the podcaster] may not be telling the truth, 100% in all points, but you know I'll keep working on it and yes... trust is an important factor. (Participant 3, Greece)

However, often trust was the issue, which concerned the host and the nature of the discussion. For example, young listeners in Greece claim that for them a podcaster/journalist who admits their mistake on air is someone they can certainly trust. Also, the podcaster's integrity was something they highly value and take as a sign of trust. For young listeners, trust in a podcaster is essential. It means believing in the authenticity of their words and relying on them to keep the story captivating. This connection fosters engagement, allowing the audience to immerse themselves fully in the narrative being presented.

Again, the atmosphere of podcasts was mentioned as a conveyor of trust; both in Greece and Finland young listeners highlighted the hosts' ability to keep balance between different perspectives; according to a Greek respondent, trust to the podcaster indicated that the podcaster is «confident about what

he says, he has done thorough research on the topic, and he hasn't put on his personal opinion or bias». It was also important that the podcaster's values aligned with their own and that it was possible to recognize the «honesty» of the podcaster from the very beginning. Also, maintaining listening to a podcaster over a long period of time was also an indicator of trust: thereby, they came to know the podcaster/s and familiarized themselves with their research culture and work.

The importance of trust varied depending on the genre of the podcasts that listeners chose. For those who listened to podcasts for fun and entertainment, concerns about trust were minimal. However, when it came to information and news podcasts, listeners naturally sought out trustworthy sources. This distinction was particularly emphasized in the Greek data, while Finnish respondents did not highlight this difference as much. This discrepancy may be attributed to the research context; the community research focused on news media, even though the questions addressed overall media consumption.

Conclusions

In this article, we have compared the listening habits of young adults listening to podcasts in Finland and Greece. We have been analyzing how podcast listening can be understood by utilizing Kate Lacey's (2023) concept of labour: as an active process of exercising citizenship consisting of «encounters with others in the public sphere through ordinary, everyday media technologies» (*Ibidem*). Our research sample has been relatively small, making it difficult to draw broad generalizations. However, our findings provide a perspective on understanding the nature of the current media environment, which is essential when considering the role of podcasts in journalism.

The analysis reveals very well the complexity of the media environment young people are living in. Using media content involves an ongoing process of decision-making between genres and platforms. As the analysis revealed, young people consider the interest in the content to be a key criterion. However, their responses indicated an aspiration to enhance their understanding of the surrounding society. Thus, based on the data, they cannot be regarded as passive regarding societal issues.

Literary critic and theorist N. Katherine Hayles (2012: 12) has argued that in Western information-saturated societies, the primary limitation is attention. There is an overwhelming amount of information and too little time to attend to it. She introduces the concept of hyper-reading, which refers to the way people skim, scan, and juxtapose digital texts to find relevant content. Hayles sees these practices as a strategic response to an information-intensive media environment. Similarly, the way young people discuss their listening habits in our data can be seen as a form of strategic engagement with audio content.

The strategy Hayles discusses can be seen as the basis of the labour the

young podcast listeners do when entering the audio world. The next aspect concerning labour is the atmosphere, which, as we argued, is fruitful for understanding the complex nature of podcasts as a medium. It includes both the material aspects of sound and voice (tone of voice) used, societal relationships, habits, aspirations and policies to talk about them. This highly delicate field highlights what Lacey (2023: 1) portrays as «the disembodied, dispersed, and domesticated encounters with others in the public sphere through ordinary, everyday media technologies». The young people's comments about the need to find the balance between different (conflicting) views speak about these encounters. Highlighting balance is imperative in a democratic society, but unfortunately, the media often favour conflicts and discord.

We argue that trust in (journalistic) podcast content lies, then, in its capacity to debate and navigate topics within conflicts and strive for balance – which is, naturally, a challenging and non-neutral concept. From that point of view, our data indicated that young people recognize the importance of fact-checking, which demonstrates a proactive approach to their media consumption. The occasional criticisms regarding the «seriousness» of the podcast atmosphere are important to consider, especially when discussing trust. While this perspective may be typical of the younger generation, it would be beneficial to explore the theme in greater detail. Finally, we emphasize that these encounters are multidimensional and occur within everyday life, rather than in an abstract space, as often suggested by the Habermasian perspective. These interactions take place amidst various media content, devices, and technologies. Thus, it is crucial to recognize podcasts as multimodal media. This aspect has often been overlooked in Western culture, where printed text has traditionally been viewed as the primary means of conveying information. The multimodality of podcast listening came up in the comments, where visual elements of podcast were mentioned. The interplay between visual and auditory aspects significantly influenced young people's attitudes, particularly when they encountered contradictions. Their engagement and willingness to follow the podcast were affected by this dynamic.

Based on the analysis, knowing listening audiences, especially from the perspective of how listening is labour, is particularly important. This requires much research focused on the audience and theoretical reflection on how to structure a complex media environment.

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*The power of audio journalism and its connection with
young audiences: a case study in Spain through
the daily newspaper El País, the documentary El Yunque
and the commentary with Saldremos Mejores*

ABSTRACT: Podcasts have become a new narrative format for the consumption of information and news. On the one hand, and within the media landscape, they are revolutionising and developing a new genre such as the “daily”. On the other hand, and from within the podcasting industry itself, creating documentary projects or adapting information to communities by commenting on current news. By analysing these three types of formats in relation to audio journalism and by studying specific cases, the aim of this study is to determine whether there is a pattern between the different news formats and their relationship with younger audiences.

KEYWORDS: podcasting; community building; audience; audio journalism

Introduction

The podcast format is beginning to become part of the daily listening routine. According to data from the *Edison Research Share of Ear 2023* report (2023: 9), there has been an increase in consumption since 2014, rising to 55% by 2023.

In June 2023, the Reuters Institute warned that interest in news had fallen by 34 points since 2015, with more visual social networks such as TikTok, Instagram or YouTube being the main platforms chosen by younger audiences to get informed. In the same report on digital journalism and reviewing trends since 2018, the stable consumption of audio news is also observed at the same time as the overall podcast market has grown; specifically in Spain, 14% of podcast users who listen to news are young adults between 18 and 34 years old (Reuters Institute, 2023: 28). A year later, in the new Reuters Institute *Digital News Report 2024*, the journalistic podcast is one of the positive elements for the media, as it attracts a young and highly educated audience. «But overall, it is a minority activity. In 20 countries, just over a third (35%) consume a podcast on a monthly basis, and only 13% listen to a programme linked to news and current affairs» (Reuters Institute, 2024: 11). However,

Spain is an exception, with 44% of listeners having listened to a podcast in the last month (*Ivi*: 105).

In the era of the attention economy and fragmented consumption, the «snack culture» (Scolari, 2020), podcasting has become a narrative format that reflects an underground media subculture that is gaining popularity among a younger and loyal audience. Particularly noteworthy is the daily news podcast (daily), which is expanding in the media industry and has created new narrative opportunities (Carvajal, Marín-Sanchiz & Navas, 2022: 1), not only for traditional media but also for indigenous media in Spain. Beyond the daily, the creation of other audio journalistic formats and on current affairs is promoted as a product or service of journalistic production, representing an opportunity to «inform through narrative modes and different styles compared to traditional media, and to explore other formulas» (Martínez-Costa, Amoedo & Moreno-Moreno, 2022: 4).

Audio journalism through three formats: Daily, Documentary and News Commentary

Podcasts have revolutionised the way we consume news and information, offering «accessibility, diversity, perspectives, rich content, authenticity, global reach and have become an influential medium that complements and challenges traditional media» (Dhiman & Bose, 2023: 4). Online audio opens up a new narrative space for communication companies, especially print media, and for journalists and communication professionals, allowing them to tell stories that would not have a place on the news agenda, either because of time, subject matter or format.

According to the Listen Notes website, the total number of active podcasts indexed by its software was 3.438.068 in October 2024, with an estimated 222.594 in the news category, or 6% of the total. In other studies, and analyses, news podcasts represent about 21% of all podcasts in the United States (Harutyunyan, 2024), being the second most popular category after humour and true crime. In Spain, according to the 3rd Annual Report of the iVoox 2023 Observatory, podcasts published by this platform in the «news and events» category represent 6.7% and have grown compared to other years, while Podtrac's ranking of Spanish podcasts shows that 28% of the titles published in September 2024 were news podcasts.

Pioneers of journalistic podcasting

Journalistic content has been produced since the beginning of podcasting, such as the famous *The Gillmor Gang* by technology journalist Steve Gillmor (launched in 2004) or the first journalistic podcast by WNYC's *On the Media*,

also launched in the early 2000s. Among related journalistic milestones, however, there are three key dates from an international and industry perspective:

- October 2014, when Chicago public radio station WBEZ released *Serial*. This weekly programme, narrated by journalist Sarah Koenig, became a viral phenomenon thanks to word of mouth and interaction on social networks such as Reddit, reaching five million listeners in six weeks and 170 million downloads a year later, setting a new standard in audio storytelling and being considered the pioneering podcast of investigative narrative journalism (McCracken, 2017: 1).
- March 2016, the date set by Professors Martínez-Costa and Lus-Gárate as the origin of daily news podcasts, linked to the launch by *The Guardian* of the daily news podcast *Newsdesk*, later retitled *Guardian Daily* (2019: 320-321).
- In February 2017, *The New York Times* would become a model for daily news podcasts with *The Daily*, analysing a single news story in about 20 minutes and «in depth, produced five days a week» (Dalrymple, 2019).

From a professional point of view, the daily news podcast is considered an online informative audio content with a regular periodicity (generally from Monday to Friday), a limited duration (around 20 minutes) and a singular narrative treatment linked to its host or hostess, who tries to emulate the personality of the medium that produces it (Espinosa de los Monteros, 2018). In Spain, the first experience with news podcasts dates back to 2018, with *El País Noticias* and *Las Noticias de ABC*: «unlike the Anglo-Saxon daily news, the bulletins of *El País* and ABC were broadcast on the weekend, with topics from the supplements of both newspapers» (Martínez-Otón *et al.*, 2022: 6). In terms of the daily format, *El Mundo* was the first newspaper to produce a daily informative podcast under the modality of in-depth analysis on 15 June 2021, *El Mundo al día*. The first daily digital newspaper in Spain was produced by ElDiario.es, which launched *Un tema al día* on 21 September 2021. The first episode of *Hoy en El País* would not be published until 2 March 2022.

As far as the format of long-form audio journalism is concerned, there are several typologies:

- On the one hand, a format in which journalists «break down the week's news, but in a deliberately informal way. The listener feels part of the programme» (McHugh, 2020). *Slate's Political Gabfest* is considered the first news commentary podcast, launched in 2005 by the US magazine *Slate*, and is still on the air. David Plotz, Emily Bazelon and John Dickerson take a relaxed, conversational approach to covering US politics and news, combining critical analysis with humour.
- Meanwhile, podcasts with the narrative format of journalistic nonfiction, the sound documentary or COHRD (Crafted Oral History Radio Documentary), heirs of radio journalism, combine a more creative treatment

of both personal narrative and sound design with the editorial seriousness of documentary (McHugh, 2012: 1). In addition to the aforementioned *Serial*, another forerunner of the documentary podcast was *S-Town*, released in 2017 by the same team behind *Serial* and *This American Life*. The podcast's seven chapters use a criminal investigation as a premise to address issues of life and death, sexuality and identity in the culture of the southern United States.

- In Spain, among the pioneering podcasts of these two types, *La cafetera* by Fernando Berlín in 2015, a hybrid between online radio and podcast, and José Ángel Esteban Carles Porta in 2016 with *Le llamaban padre*, produced by PodiumPodcast in 2016, which received a special mention at the Ortega y Gasset Journalism Awards in 2017.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the production of audio journalism in its three main formats: Daily, News Commentary and Narrative Non-Fiction Documentaries.

On audiences and audio news and information content

One of the major challenges facing the podcasting industry is the transparency and consolidation of official data on audiences and content consumption. While in other media and entertainment industries there is information on public audiences, verified by different measurement systems, in the case of podcasting there is no such standard and public information is produced by each platform or content provider, publishing their own statistics and trends.

In early 2024, streaming, podcasting and monetisation solutions provider Triton Digital published a report on US podcast consumption in 2023, which included some updated data. The trends it identified were a 12% increase in the number of monthly podcast listeners, with a profile that was «increasingly younger, more affluent and more educated», and content preferences that included news, true crime and humour (Triton Digital, 2024). According to reports published by Edison Research (2024), a leading provider of audio research, news podcasts were the third most listened to genre in the US in the first quarter of 2024 among people aged 13 and over, after humour and society and culture.

As for podcasts as a source of news and information, according to data published by the US think tank Pew Research Center, «most podcast listeners say they listen to news stories discussed in podcasts; however, only one in five listeners say they listen to a podcast affiliated with a news organisation» (Shearer *et al.*, 2023) and 87% expect the content to be accurate.

In terms of updated data on podcast consumption in Spain, beyond the aforementioned iVoxx Observatory, in October 2024, at an event hosted by

Spotify in Madrid, Next in Podcast, an increase in consumption was highlighted, with the number of podcast listeners in Spain increasing by more than 30% year-on-year and Spain being «the second fastest growing video podcast market in Europe» (Spotify, 2024). However, no data was provided on news-related topics. On this particular aspect, information is only available from 2022 from the IV State of Audio and Voice: 25.2% of respondents admitted to listening to news-related content (Prodigios Volcán, 2022).

The lack of qualitative and quantitative, consolidated and specific, comparable and extrapolable data on podcast consumption limits the in-depth understanding of the specificities of news podcast consumption in the Spanish context and highlights the importance of research focused on this market.

Methodology

In this research we propose to review the consumption of journalistic podcasts in Spain through the study of three different cases/formats. For this purpose, data from a total of twentyone episodes will be analysed, eleven episodes of *Hoy en El País* that coincide with the publication dates of the other two programmes, five episodes of the documentary *Dios, Patria, Yunque* and the talk show *Saldremos mejores*.

Special attention will be paid to the cross-media between *Dios, Patria, Yunque* and the other two podcasts, in order to broaden the scope, since the first episode of *Dios, Patria, Yunque* was published as one of the episodes of *Hoy en El País* (27 February 2024) and in the programme *Saldremos mejores* (27 March 2024), including an interview with Miguel Ramos, the author and screenwriter of the documentary.

The aim is to verify whether the journalistic podcast format in Spain attracts younger audiences, to what extent and how long they listen to it. As developed in the previous section, this is a novel aspect as it will provide internal information on the audiences of the proposed cases.

In addition to the quantitative data, the aim is to identify the differences and similarities between different audio news narratives. To this end, three different podcast projects will be analysed according to the typologies developed in *News Podcasts and the Opportunities for Publishers* (Newman & Gallo, 2019: 9): *Hoy en El País*, a daily immersive narrative podcast produced by the newspaper *El País* (PRISA Audio); *Dios, Patria, Yunque*, a weekly audio documentary series produced by PodiumPodcast (PRISA Audio); and *Saldremos mejores*, a weekly podcast of news commentary and long conversations produced by PodiumPodcast (PRISA Audio).

Typology	Description	Lenght	Podcasts
Deep immersion	Explores one or two topics in depth with a narrative sound design	Approximately 20 minutes	<i>Hoy en El País</i>
Audio documentary	Narrative series on the same subject in several episodes	Episodes between 30 and 40 minutes long	<i>Dios, Patria, Yunque</i>
Long conversation	Informal round-table discussions on topical issues	Up to 4 hours	<i>Saldremos mejores</i>

Table 1 – Typology of formats analysed, according to Nic Newman's terminology (2023).
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

The analysis focuses on consumption on the Spotify platform alone, which is currently the most used digital audio platform in Spain with more than 16 million unique users per month (GfK DAM, 2023), and during a specific period between 26 February and 24 March 2024, the dates of the documentary series' release, in order to extract results and make comparisons.

The analysis of the quantitative data for each episode will be on the basis of the following parameters:

- Starts: the number of times the episode was played.
- Plays: the number of times the episode was played for at least 60 seconds.
- Listeners: the number of different people who have played this episode.
- Impressions: the number of times the episode or programme was shown to users on the platform.

To collect the data, two dates were set, 31 March and 30 April, in order to determine the latency and interest rates of the content published after 30 and 60 days.

For the qualitative part, the «episode performance» in the first 7 days will be studied in order to check the audience retention rates, i.e. the point at which the listener stays at four moments of the episode (quartiles) and to determine the percentage of people who listen from the beginning to the end, in order to determine the listening fidelity.

In addition, the socio-demographic profile of the listeners of each podcast is examined to confirm whether young audiences under 34 years of age actually participate in listening to journalistic and informative podcasts.

Results: Three different audiences and ways of consuming current affairs content

An initial approach to the three projects analysed reveals important differences in terms of quantitative and qualitative consumption by their respective audiences.

The programme with the highest average number of starts, reproductions

and listeners is the conversational news commentary podcast *Saldremos mejores*, with 50% of the total reproductions, followed by the documentary *Dios, Patria, Yunque*. Therefore, the content with the highest number of episodes analysed and the highest frequency of publication is the one with the lowest number of reproductions and listeners in the period studied. Furthermore, it can be seen that although the *El País* daily generates 99% of the impressions on the platform, it only converts 10% of the listeners.

Programme	Launches	Replays	Listeners (starts)	Impressions	Format
<i>Hoy en El País</i>	7%	7%	10%	99%	Daily
<i>Dios, Patria, Yunque</i>	42%	43%	42%	0%	Documentary
<i>Saldremos mejores</i>	50%	50%	48%	1%	Conversational

Table 2 – Average percentage of listeners for each of the three programmes
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

In the comparative analysis to determine the loyalty rates for listening to the episodes, the average performance of each episode was examined to determine the intention to listen to an episode. The documentary episodes had the best average listening performance, with over 80% of listeners starting an episode and listening until the third quartile. In this sense, it is the conversational podcast (with durations of around one hour per episode) that shows lower episode performance rates, although, with a complete episode performance of 55%, it is similar to the documentary and slightly lower than the daily.

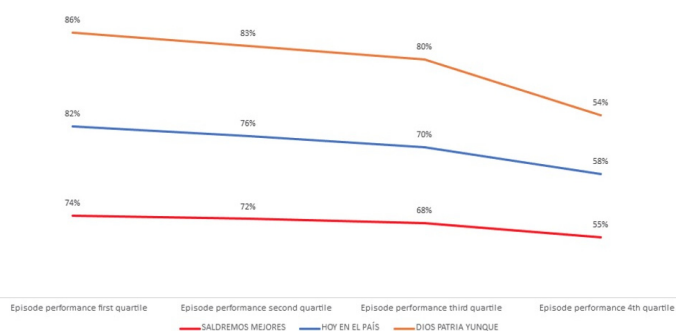


Figure 1 – Comparative chart with average episode yields
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

One aspect of the distribution and promotion strategy for the *Dios, Patria, Yunque* podcast was a cross-media in *Hoy en El País*, the publication of the episode in PodiumPodcast the day after the premiere and an interview with the director in ‘Saldremos mejores’ the day after the publication of the last episode of the series. Looking at the listening data, there is a higher percentage of starts, replays and listeners in the conversation than in the daily, so it can be concluded that the audience of the documentary and the conversation have a greater interest in this topic.

Release date	Podcast	Episode title	Starts	Plays	Listeners (starts)	Impressions
26/02/2024	<i>Dios, Patria, Yunque</i>	<i>First episode El silencio</i>	64,2%	52,4%	40,6%	0,2%
27/02/2024	<i>Hoy en El País</i>	<i>‘Podcast’ First episode Dios, Patria, Yunque: El silencio</i>	8,2%	6,7%	5,5%	8,3%
27/03/2024	<i>Saldremos mejores</i>	<i>Saldremos del yunque 3x23</i>	27,5%	25,4%	16,3%	0,3%

Table 3 – Percentage of listeners of the cross-media action carried out on the documentary *Dios, Patria, Yunque*
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

If we zoom in on the individual projects, starting with the daily *Hoy en El País*, which represents 10% of listeners, we can see several patterns in terms of audience and consumption. On the one hand, the most listened to programmes, with an average of 9.1% of listeners, correspond to international affairs and social issues.

Episode title	Percentage of listeners
<i>¿Hasta dónde puede influir un juez?</i>	8,8%
<i>‘Podcast’ Primer episodio de Dios, Patria, Yunque: El silencio</i>	9,1%
<i>¿Cómo pasó Senegal de democracia estable a país en crisis?</i>	9,2%
<i>Alquileres disparados, alquileres regulados</i>	10,2%
<i>Escudo social: ¿estamos listos para quitar la red?</i>	8,0%

<i>Biden, Trump, la edad y la salud: ¿hay plan B?</i>	10,2%
<i>España y Reino Unido: maneras de lidiar con los asesinatos de desertores</i>	8,5%
<i>El aborto, un derecho de ida y vuelta: formas de blindarlo más allá de</i>	7,7%
<i>El caso alemán en Namibia: ¿quién decide cuánto cuesta un genocidio?</i>	8,3%
<i>Quién es Koldo García: de escolta en tiempos de ETA a presunto</i>	8,4%
<i>¿Quién usa hoy las agencias de viajes?</i>	11,7%

Table 4 – Average percentage of listeners per episode of ‘Hoy en El País’
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

In the case of *Dios, Patria, Yunque*, which represents 42% of listeners and is a complete series with five episodes on the same subject, listeners’ behaviour is different. Although the first episode has the highest number of listeners with 31.1%, the retention rate from the first to the second episode is 74.5% and 38.3% finish the whole series.

Episode title	Percentage of listeners
<i>Primer episodio. El silencio</i>	31,1%
<i>Segundo episodio. La llegada</i>	23,2%
<i>Tercer episodio. Rituales, campamentos y captaciones</i>	18,4%
<i>Cuarto episodio. El Yunque se expande</i>	15,4%
<i>Quinto episodio. La amenaza</i>	11,9%

Table 5 – Average percentage of listeners per episode of *Dios, Patria, Yunque*
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

Saldremos mejores is the podcast with the highest average number of listeners per episode (20%), with 48% of the listeners in the sample analysed and five episodes published with different topics and interviews, with the episode featuring the well-known journalist Iñaki Gabilondo standing out.

Episode title	Percentage of listeners
<i>Saldremos andaluzas</i> 3x19	21,8%
<i>Saldremos al campo</i> 3x20	20,3%
<i>Saldremos con Inaki Gabilondo</i> 3x21	24,8%
<i>Saldremos menopáusicas</i> 3x22	20,0%
<i>Saldremos del Yunque</i> 3x23	13,1%

Table 6 – Average percentage of listeners per episode of *Saldremos mejores*
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

The data is also contrasted to determine cumulative audience growth, comparing March to April. At this point, the average growth of *Hoy en El País* is 4%, compared to 22% for *Dios, Patria, Yunque* and 25% for *Saldremos mejores*, so the conversational project is the one that manages to attract and add more listeners over time to the episodes published.

Looking at the qualitative part of the audience of the three projects, both the daily and the documentary have a slightly higher percentage of male listeners (51% and 58.7%, respectively), compared to *Saldremos mejores*, with an imminently female audience (76.4%).

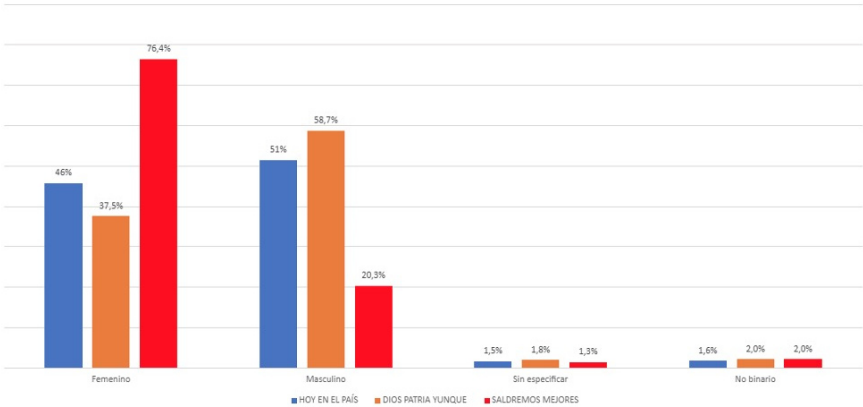


Figure 2 – Audience graphs with percentages of listeners by gender
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

In terms of age, the podcast with the youngest audience is *Saldremos mejores*, with 54% of listeners under the age of 34, compared to 32.7% for *Dios, Patria, Yunque* and 31.3% for *Hoy en El País*. Only the talk show has a younger audience; in the other projects, more than 60% of the audience is over 35.

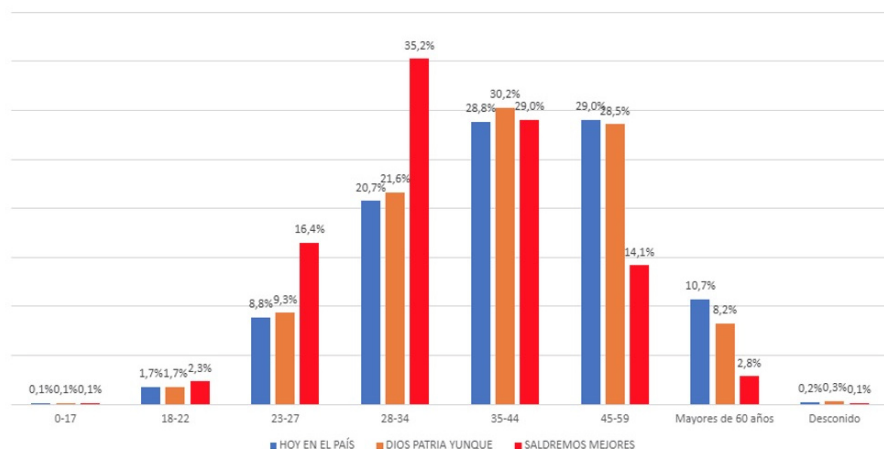


Figure 3 – Audience graph with percentages of listeners by age
Source: elaboration by the authors on internal data (2024)

Discussion

As with many studies, this research has its limitations. On the one hand, by analysing only data related to the consumption and audience of a single platform, Spotify, a global bias is committed and, for example, the daily newspaper *Hoy en El País* is a format that is more linked to the target audience of the media itself than that of the platforms, since it is an additional product for the readers of the newspaper *El País*. According to data published by GfK DAM on media users for the whole month of May in the news category, *El País* reached 14.87 million unique monthly users, placing it sixth in the ranking.

On the other hand, perceptions of journalistic functions and links with podcast listening have not been taken into account, and while some formats may have a greater affinity or relationship with the audience due to the presenters, in other cases the link may be due to interest in the topic or the journalistic brand, covariates that are difficult to equate in this study.

Finally, it was also not possible to establish a direct relationship between the conversion rate of the listeners and the number of impressions or the number of followers of each of the podcasts analysed.

Conclusions

Podcasts are consolidating their position as a highly versatile narrative format with great potential for exploring current affairs and news topics. Their

flexibility allows them to address complex issues from different perspectives, either through multiple episodes or by including different voices and experts, without the time constraints that limit other traditional media.

This research, which analyses three different journalistic formats, found that younger audiences, particularly those under 35, show a clear preference for the conversational podcast format for current affairs consumption. This format is characterised by its ability to create communities around hosts, topics and guests, fostering a sense of belonging and shared values, a key element of podcasting's identity and narrative.

As for the daily format, which is more directly linked to traditional media, it fails to capture the interest of young audiences on this audio platform, as does the narrative non-fiction documentary format, which attracts niche audiences interested in specific topics, but does not have a strong penetration among the under-35s. However, it stands out in terms of audience loyalty, recording the highest average listening rate, with over 80% of listeners completing up to the third quartile of episodes.

These findings underline the importance of adapting journalistic formats to the preferences of new generations, and highlight the role of the conversational podcast as a key vehicle for connecting journalistic content with young audiences.

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Diletta Cenni

*Exploring the role of the podcast journalist in Italy:
A production studies approach*

ABSTRACT: Podcasting has emerged as an increasingly significant medium in journalism, yet research on podcast journalism remains limited, with a predominant focus on non-European productions. Italy, despite its growing podcasting ecosystem, has been particularly overlooked in scholarly literature. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the evolving landscape of podcast journalism in Italy, with a specific emphasis on the role of the “podcast journalist.” Using a production studies framework and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with practitioners, the research explores critical questions, such as who are the journalists behind this medium? How do they perceive their work? What career paths and skills define this emerging profession, and how do previous experiences influence audience engagement? The study reveals that podcast journalism in Italy is profoundly heterogeneous, reflecting the hybrid and adaptive nature of the medium. It highlights opportunities, alongside persistent challenges. Finally, the research situates podcasting within broader trends of decentralization in news production, emphasizing its potential to redefine journalistic practices in an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

KEYWORDS: podcast; journalism; italian journalism; daily podcast; production studies

Over the past decade, podcast journalism has undergone a profound transformation, characterized by a significant increase in the number of news podcasts and journalistic productions. As Nic Newman and Nathan Gallo (2019) highlight, these formats have achieved exceptional levels of audience engagement, fostering a sense of loyalty among consumers that is rare in the contemporary media landscape. This trend gained substantial momentum following the launch of *The Daily* by *The New York Times* in 2017, a groundbreaking podcast that showcased the medium’s potential to redefine both news consumption and production paradigms (*Ivi*: 20).

Concurrently, the podcast RSS feed technology has democratized access to content creation, enabling independent media producers and freelancers to challenge the dominance of traditional news organizations. The cultural and ethical implications of this technology (Berry, 2015) have significantly influenced the evolution of media ecosystems, blurring the lines between profes-

sional journalism and user-generated content. This shift has prompted the emergence of new journalistic practices and aesthetics, not only redefining podcast journalism itself but also exerting a considerable influence on traditional media. As emphasized by Toni Sellas and Montse Bonet, in fact, the increasing presence of prosumers – users who both produce and consume media – has pressured legacy news outlets to adopt innovative storytelling techniques and explore alternative formats aligned with those pioneered by “new” media (2023: 805).

The evolution of podcast journalism is particularly striking when considered against the backdrop of broader trends in contemporary journalism, which has been profoundly shaped by the Web 2.0 era. Here, news production, publication, and consumption have become increasingly rapid, fragmented, and often distracted (Feroli, 2023: 163). The traditional news cycle,

which has always been marked by tight and precise rhythms, has become an uninterrupted stream of breaking news. Today, news comes out constantly and, more importantly, almost simultaneously with the event it deals with. Timelines have contracted, and what is more valuable is not the in-depth analysis and verification of the news as much as the timeliness in communicating it (*Ivi*: 164; my translation).

In this context, podcast journalism stands out as a counterbalance to the accelerated pace of modern news. The format emphasizes reflective and in-depth storytelling, fostering sustained audience engagement. This is evidenced by high completion rates for episodes, even those exceeding fifty minutes, and the ability of podcasts to attract younger audiences, thereby establishing themselves as valuable resources in the contemporary news media ecosystem (*Ivi*: 163).

Despite the global prominence of podcast journalism, scholarly research on the subject remains surprisingly limited. Existing studies have largely focused on non-European productions, often neglecting the analysis of European contexts (Rojas-Torrijos *et al.*, 2020; Nee & Santana, 2021; Lindgren, 2021; Whipple *et al.*, 2023). A notable exception is the work of Meier *et al.* (2024), who explored the intersection of podcasting and journalism across five European countries – Austria, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland – providing valuable insights into the region’s podcasting landscape.

Within this broader European context, Italy emerges as a particularly underexplored case. Despite the growing popularity and significance of podcasting in the country, as evidenced by recent IPSOS surveys (2023), academic attention to Italian podcast journalism remains scarce. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a closer examination of Italy’s contribution to the evolution of podcast journalism.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the role of the podcast

journalist in Italy. It aims to answer key questions that define this emerging field and profession, such as: who are the journalists contributing to this medium? How do they perceive their work, and what motivates them? Are they “native” podcasters, or are they traditional journalists reinventing themselves through this new medium? Furthermore, what career paths and skill sets characterize the role of the podcast journalist, and to what extent do prior professional experiences influence their ability to connect with audiences?

To answer these questions, this study focuses on journalists hosting and producing daily news podcasts, a format emblematic of the broader podcasting landscape and widely adopted by major players within the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1992) under examination. The research employs a production studies framework as outlined by John T. Caldwell (2008; 2009), integrating different qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Analytical framework and methodology

Unlike other scholars who focus on studying the production of culture by investigating routines and practices (Hesmondalgh, 2015), Caldwell’s approach centers on the «cultures of production». This perspective is rooted in the idea that «the media industry, and the individual media it encompasses, are in fact cultures that deserve to be studied in their own right, even beyond the content they produce» (Barra, Bonini & Splendore, 2018: 23; my translation).

To investigate these cultures, Caldwell proposes a dual-level analytical framework. The first level operates at the macro scale, examining the broader dynamics and logics that govern the industry and its production processes. The second level focuses on micro-level analysis, involving vertical deep dives into specific cases and situations. This layered approach enables the triangulation of diverse sources, mitigating the risks associated with relying solely on biased, industry-controlled narratives. As Caldwell warns, in fact, media industries often present highly «codified, controlled, and modulated» accounts of their processes (2008: 20), necessitating critical analysis to move beyond surface-level «ethnographies of the interface» (Barra, 2018: 55; my translation). Caldwell’s methodology is further structured into four distinct «registers of analysis» (2008: 57), drawing on various types of sources:

1. Cultural artifacts, such as texts, interviews, and internal working papers.
2. Field observations, including professional spaces and industry events.
3. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with industry practitioners.
4. Broad industry analysis, examining systemic patterns and trends.

In this study, insights into macro-level dynamics (points 2 and 4) were gleaned from participation in three highly regarded professional industry conventions. Additionally, access to pre-production meetings for the Creative Eu-

rope project WePod proved invaluable. WePod, an initiative aimed at identifying best practices for international podcast co-productions, implied the creation of five collaborative projects among renowned European podcast publishers, including the Italian company Chora Media. Observing these processes provided a unique perspective on the European podcasting ecosystem.

At the micro level, the analysis of cultural artifacts (point 1) played a crucial role, given the podcasting industry's strong inclination toward transparency and self-reflection (Dann & Spinelli, 2019). This openness manifests not only in the explicit narratives within the podcasts themselves but also in the rich body of supplementary content – such as interviews and behind-the-scenes materials – which offer insights into production workflows and the cultural values that underpin them.

The study also incorporated four semi-structured in-depth interviews with podcast journalists and news producers, representing the four primary categories of producers in the Italian podcasting landscape: legacy print daily newspapers; weekly magazines, media companies and communities; and podcast-specific production companies. The interviewees included Francesco Giambertone, host of the daily podcast *Giorno per Giorno*, produced by *Il Corriere della Sera*, Italy's most established print newspaper; Giulia Zoli, host of *Il Mondo*, a daily podcast by the news magazine *Internazionale*; Riccardo Basetto, former head of the podcast division at the community Will Media; and Francesca Milano, head of content at Chora Media's *Chora News* division and host of the daily podcast *Coffee News*.

Although the number of interviews is limited, it is representative of the relatively small number of key players in both traditional and non-traditional Italian journalism. This sample captures the diversity of approaches to daily podcasting in Italy, while also reflecting the varied professional trajectories within the industry.

Before delving into the role of podcast journalists in Italy, it is essential to establish a contextual framework for understanding journalism and podcasting within the Italian media landscape.

The Italian journalistic landscape and the rise of podcasting

Italy's journalistic landscape is characterized by significant challenges. As highlighted in the 2024 Report by the Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Giornalisti (National Council of the Order of Journalists) – the regulatory body overseeing journalism in Italy – the profession faces increasing difficulties in sustaining high-quality reporting amidst rapid technological and cultural transformations. The report paints a sobering picture, portraying journalism as an embattled profession, with a pervasive sense of discouragement among practitioners. This existential crisis is often articulated in combative terms, as captured in the report's statement:

The war we are fighting is not for the survival of newspapers, nor perhaps for the survival of journalists as we know them today; the war we are fighting, and hope to win, is for the survival of journalism itself – information created according to the ethical and professional standards that define our craft (Tedeschini Lalli, 2024: 13; my translation).

This struggle is exacerbated by the relatively slow pace of digital transformation within Italy's media system. Unlike other European countries, where digital disruption has significantly reshaped the media landscape, Italy has experienced a more gradual evolution. For many years, legacy news organizations have maintained a dominant position in the online news market, mirroring their longstanding influence in the offline sphere (Newman *et al.*, 2022: 88). This continuity has hindered the development of innovative, digitally native journalistic formats, leaving the industry vulnerable to the challenges of monetizing content and engaging younger audiences in a highly competitive and fragmented media ecosystem.

Structural issues further stress these challenges. As Lelio Simi observes in his annual report for the Ordine dei Giornalisti, unlike France, the United States, or the United Kingdom – where subscription-based revenue models have historically played a pivotal role, even before the advent of digital media – Italy has relied heavily on an extensive network of newsstands for distribution. Over time, however, this network has dwindled, making it increasingly difficult for publishers to transition from a “culture” of print sales to one of digital subscriptions (Simi, 2023). As Simi notes, only a handful of Italian publications have successfully embraced subscription-based strategies, and even these remain in the early stages of building a critical mass of subscribers. Consequently, the Italian media market has yet to achieve the level of economic viability seen in other countries with more mature subscription systems (*Ibidem*).

Against this backdrop, podcast journalism has emerged as a promising avenue for addressing some of these structural challenges, offering valuable tools for reinvigorating the profession in Italy. Much like the substantial growth witnessed across Europe (Morawski & Zupi, 2022), podcasting in Italy has experienced a parallel rise in popularity. Although podcasts were introduced to the Italian market in the early 2000s (Perrotta, 2022), they were not widely recognized as a viable medium for original productions capable of attracting large audiences until 2017 (Veronese, 2022). A turning point came with the release of *Veleno*, an investigative audio series by journalists Pablo Trincia and Alessia Rafanelli, published by the GEDI editorial group, one of Italy's most prominent media organizations. The success of *Veleno* marked a significant milestone, cementing podcasting's legitimacy as a compelling and impactful medium within the country.

Since then, independent production companies such as Storielibere (2018), Piano P (2016), Gli Ascoltabili (2018), and Chora Media (2020) have played

a pivotal role in expanding the Italian podcasting scenario, producing content that stands apart from traditional broadcasters' programming. Furthermore, the growth of both domestic and international audio platforms, coupled with rising public interest, has significantly amplified the reach and influence of podcasting in Italy (Perrotta, 2022: 420).

The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated this growth. A Nielsen study commissioned by Audible revealed a 24% increase in podcast listeners during lockdowns, with 15% maintaining their habits even after restrictions were lifted (2022). This surge was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the quantity of Italian-language content, which grew from 10.000 podcasts in 2020 to 25.000 in 2021, according to an independent study by Alessandro Piccioni based on data from the Listen Notes podcast search engine (2021). Post-pandemic, the listener base continued to expand. According to IPSOS (2023), 39% of Italians aged 16 to 60 (approximately 11.9 million people) now identify themselves as podcast listeners, reflecting consistent growth from 36% in 2022, 31% in 2021, and 30% in 2020. This steady expansion underscores the podcast's growing appeal, particularly among younger audiences who are often disengaged from traditional news formats.

The daily news podcast: The Daily, Morning and Stories

Among the various podcast genres, those focusing on current affairs and news rank among the most popular in Italy (Veronese, 2022: 23). Within this realm, Newman and Gallo identify five distinct types, categorized by their format and engagement with news content: daily news and current affairs, talk and interview podcasts, narrative podcasts, documentary-style podcasts and audio long reads (2022: 13).

In both Italy and abroad, one of the most prominent formats within news podcasting is the daily podcast. These are characterized by short episodes released on a daily schedule, typically ranging from 5 to 20 minutes in length. Newman (2019) observes that, while daily news podcasts account for fewer than 1% of all podcasts produced, they represent a disproportionate share of the most-listened-to episodes. For example, in the United States, daily news shows represent 10% of the top 250 podcast episodes, while their share stands at 9% in France and Australia, and 5% in the United Kingdom (*Ivi*: 15).

This success highlights the distinctive appeal of the daily podcast format, which, as mentioned, gained international prominence with the launch of *The Daily*, by *The New York Times*. *The Daily* exemplifies a conversational and engaging approach to news reporting. Each 20-minute episode features host Michael Barbaro interviewing newsroom specialists on a specific topic, sometimes supplemented by additional contributors. Episodes conclude with a brief one-minute roundup of other news stories. This structure has proven highly effective in fostering audience loyalty, particularly among younger listeners,

by creating what William Turvill (2020) describes as «affinity» with the brand.

There are other reasons why dailies are so effective. A key factor contributing to the success of daily podcasts lies in their ability to harness the empathy and intimacy fostered by the host-listener relationship (Miller, Fox & Dowling, 2022: 131). This dynamic has transformed the production of daily news content while maintaining journalistic ethics and high aesthetic standards (*Ibidem*). As Lene Heiselberg and Iben Have argue, parasocial relationships between listeners and podcast hosts strongly influence how audiences perceive the social and psychological benefits of programming (2023: 635). This unique bond between host and listener not only enhances audience engagement but also strengthens the perceived value and impact of daily news podcasts.

Despite shared characteristics, the daily podcast format is highly adaptable, allowing producers to tailor content to meet specific production and audience needs. Newman (2019) identifies three subcategories, also commonly found in Italian podcasting: (1) Micro bulletins, short updates of 1-5 minutes; (2) News roundups, concise summaries lasting 6-15 minutes; and (3) deep dives, more in-depth explorations ranging from 15 to 30 minutes.

In Italy, the daily podcast format has already demonstrated its potential as a valuable tool for journalism. A notable example is *Morning*, a press review podcast hosted by Francesco Costa, deputy editor of the online newspaper *Il Post*¹. Launched in May 2021 during the second COVID-19 lockdown, *Morning* quickly became a cornerstone of *Il Post*'s strategy to leverage podcasts for audience engagement and monetization. Initially available across all platforms, the podcast achieved over 100.000 daily streams on Spotify, with nearly 80% of its audience concentrated on *Il Post*'s proprietary app (De Cesco, 2022). In October 2021, *Morning* transitioned to an exclusive subscriber-only offering, available through the app. This strategy enabled *Il Post* to grow its subscription revenue, which now constitutes 60% of its total income (*Com'è andato il Post*, 2022) – an anomaly in the Italian news media landscape. By providing high-quality, exclusive content tailored to its audience's needs, *Il Post* has successfully used *Morning* to drive both user engagement and financial sustainability. Its success underscores the daily format's potential not only to provide news but also to foster deeper connections with listeners, encouraging ongoing support through subscription models.

Another valuable example of the daily podcast format's journalistic potential in the Italian landscape is *Stories*, a daily podcast focused on international politics created by journalist Cecilia Sala. Praised for its innovation within an industry traditionally dominated by print media, *Stories* has garnered international recognition as a groundbreaking project («innovation in a print-focused media industry», Adami, 2022). Sala's podcast has not only carved out

¹ Starting from February 2025, Francesco Costa has assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief at *Il Post*, with journalist Nicola Ghittoni taking over as the host of *Morning*.

a niche for in-depth, narrative-driven reporting but has also successfully engaged younger audiences, demonstrating the versatility and impact of the daily podcast format within the Italian media scenario.

Analyzing the role of the podcast journalist: backgrounds, skills and fame

The framework outlined in the preceding sections allows us to approach the analysis of the podcast journalist with a clearer understanding of the field. One of the most immediately noticeable aspects of this role is its striking heterogeneity, characterized by significant variation in professional trajectories, levels of recognition, and approaches to podcast production. These differences are often shaped by the specific daily podcast formats adopted by various organizations.

For instance, in formats frequently employed by traditional print journalism outlets – where daily podcasts blend elements of the «news roundup» and «deep dive» formats by exploring three or four topics in depth, often through expert interviews – hosts are typically internal staff members from the newsroom, rather than high-profile media figures. These journalists often lack specialized expertise, which might be advantageous for producing niche-focused podcasts or investigative mini-series. However, their broader and more generalist training paradoxically serves as an asset, enabling them to handle a wide variety of topics with adaptability and ease. This perspective emerges from the statements of Giulia Zoli, host of *Internazionale's* daily podcast *Il Mondo*, who explains: «I became an asset because, paradoxically, I didn't have a specific specialization» (2024). Francesco Giambertone, host of *Il Corriere della Sera's* *Giorno per Giorno*, shares a similar experience, noting, «I ended up in the podcasting newsroom somewhat by chance, after having diverse professional experiences» (2024).

In contrast, formats like press reviews or deep dives – where external interviewees are absent and the host's voice becomes central to the podcast's identity – are more commonly associated with individuals who already possess an established public profile. These hosts may either be prominent figures affiliated with the producing organization or external personalities recruited for their renown. A notable example is Mia Ceran, a prominent Italian journalist and television presenter, who was recruited by the online community of Will Media to host *The Essential* in 2020. According to Riccardo Bassetto, the creative director of Will Media's podcast division at the time, Ceran's arrival provided a significant boost to the series, which had initially been hosted by a less recognizable in-house journalist (Bassetto, 2024). Ceran's established public profile not only enhanced the visibility of *The Essential* but also solidified its position as a flagship product within Will Media's podcast portfolio.

The significance of prior success is further demonstrated by the case of Francesco Costa, host of *Morning*. Costa's entry into podcasting followed the success of his blog, *Da Costa a Costa*, which focused on American culture and evolved into a podcast of the same name. Costa attributes the success of his

audio series to his pre-existing following, which provided a ready audience for his podcasting ventures (De Cesco, 2022).

Both Ceran's and Costa's ventures into podcasting were influenced by their awareness of the American podcasting landscape – where the medium is more mature – and its potential (Greco, 2020; Adami, 2022). This familiarity not only shaped their understanding of the medium but also encouraged them to view podcasting as a viable and innovative platform for professional growth. Indeed, the transition to the podcasting medium significantly amplified their reach and success, allowing them to engage with existing audiences while attracting new listeners.

Finally, freelance journalists have also leveraged podcasting as a direct pathway to success, often increasing their appeal to traditional news outlets in the process. As mentioned, Cecilia Sala exemplifies this trend, gaining significant recognition through her podcast reportage from Ukraine. Sala's success underscores the capacity of podcasting to elevate journalists' profiles, positioning them as valuable assets within both digital and traditional media landscapes.

A notable characteristic of podcast journalism is the diversity of professional backgrounds among practitioners, many of whom had no prior experience in audio production. Among the journalists interviewed for this study, none had previously worked in radio reporting before transitioning to podcasting. Curiously, some had never listened to a podcast before creating one, while others drew inspiration from established models, both national and international, such as *Morning*, *Veleno*, and *The Daily*. This diversity underscores podcasting hybrid nature as a medium, accommodating professionals from various fields, while encouraging the reinterpretation and repurposing of skills acquired in other contexts.

For instance, Giambertone emphasizes the value of his prior experience in television, which he describes as instrumental in shaping his approach to podcasting. He explains: «If you've worked in television, you're accustomed to the rhythm and structure of storytelling through interviews and narration, although the pacing of the story needs to be recalibrated. A TV segment might last two minutes, but in a podcast, the same topic might require ten or twenty minutes of discussion» (2024). Similarly, Francesca Milano, Head of *Chora News* – the section of Chora Media dedicated to journalistic productions – and host of the daily podcast *Coffee News*, underscores the foundational importance of journalistic training, which must be complemented by storytelling skills. She explains: «I relied on the journalistic skills I already had, which are universal and applicable to any medium. However, I combined these skills with more literary ones because podcasting – even in journalistic formats – draws heavily from storytelling» (2024). Milano's perspective highlights the intersection of journalistic rigor and narrative creativity as key to effective podcast production.

This view is echoed by Zoli, who acknowledges that while journalistic skills are sufficient to adapt to the podcasting medium, challenges remain. One such

challenge is the loss of control inherent in moving from written journalism to audio. Zoli explains: «Our podcast is conversational because it's based on interviews. There's always an element of unpredictability in conversation, even if it's not live. While you can, in theory, re-record a segment, it becomes evident when it's not spontaneous» (2024).

Interestingly, technological aspects are notably absent among the challenges identified by the podcast journalists interviewed, suggesting that the medium is perceived as accessible and relatively straightforward to navigate. Instead, the difficulties lie primarily in the process of blending traditional journalistic expertise with new techniques and sensibilities. Practitioners must adapt to the distinct demands and opportunities of the podcasting medium, embracing its hybrid nature while balancing journalistic rigor with the creative and performative elements unique to audio storytelling. By repurposing skills acquired in traditional media and integrating them with the requirements of podcasting, journalists are redefining their craft to align with the evolving expectations of digital audiences.

The heterogeneity of podcast journalism extends beyond practitioners' professional backgrounds to include significant variations in daily practices. In fact, the job of a podcast journalist can differ substantially: for some, podcasting constitutes their primary professional focus, while for others – often public figures recruited specifically for their established recognition – it represents only a small portion of their daily responsibilities.

For instance, in the case of podcasts produced by traditional news outlets, such as *Il Mondo* or *Giorno per Giorno*, journalists are fully immersed in audio production, dedicating their entire workday to the podcast. Their day typically begins with early morning editorial meetings, during which they identify the key stories the newspaper will prioritize for the day. This collaborative approach ensures that the podcast mirrors and complements the newspaper's overall editorial strategy, fostering synergy between the podcast team and the newsroom. This integration highlights how podcasting serves not just as a standalone medium but also as an extension of institutional journalistic practices, strengthening the brand identity of traditional outlets.

In contrast, shorter formats or press review podcasts – such as those hosted by Costa or Milano – require less extensive preparation. These formats enable journalists to balance podcasting with other professional responsibilities, as the production process occupies only a portion of their workday. This efficiency allows podcasts to serve as versatile tools that fit seamlessly into the workflows of journalists with diverse professional commitments.

Another key area of differentiation among podcast journalists is their level of involvement in the technical aspects of production. Some journalists, such as Costa and Ceran, take a hands-on approach, actively engaging in tasks that extend beyond scripting and hosting to include recording and post-production. This grassroots production style highlights podcasting's flexibility, accommodating independent and resource-constrained models. Conversely, other pod-

cast journalists rely on external production companies to handle technical aspects, resulting in a more standardized production pipeline. This approach is exemplified by podcasts such as *Giorno per Giorno* and *Il Mondo*, where the focus remains primarily on content creation while technical production is outsourced.

Ultimately, these variations in workload, focus, and technical involvement reflect the adaptability of podcast journalism, which continues to evolve as a hybrid form of media. By offering journalists a range of options to tailor their production processes, podcasting demonstrates its potential to cater to both traditional institutional practices and the innovative demands of a digital-first media landscape.

Podcasting as a double-edged sword: opportunities and challenges

Interviews with journalists reveal a growing consensus that podcasting has become an indispensable tool for contemporary news media outlets. As representatives from Will Media, *Il Corriere della Sera*, and *Internazionale* assert, «it is no longer possible not to produce podcasts» (Zoli, 2024) if organizations wish to avoid appearing outdated and uncompetitive. Beyond institutional pressures, however, journalists view podcasting as a personally fulfilling medium that offers unique professional advantages.

Milano, for example, emphasizes podcasting's potential to address the decline in newspaper readership by making in-depth information more accessible. She explains:

Newspaper readers are decreasing because no one has the time to dedicate exclusively to in-depth information anymore. People limit themselves to reading headlines on websites or posts on social media. But to truly understand a news story, time is needed. That's why I believe podcasts can utilize otherwise "dead time" to provide information while people multitask (Milano, 2024).

Milano also stresses how podcasts cater to the multitasking tendencies of younger generations:

Podcasts are a perfect medium for this era and for younger generations, who are no longer used to doing one thing at a time. Unlike visual media, which faces fierce competition for attention, audio remains underutilized. Podcasts allow for deeper, longer-form storytelling, which is essential for countering the superficial information often found on social media (*Ibidem*).

Other journalists, such as Sala and Ceran, echo this sentiment, emphasizing

the unique ability of podcasts to engage younger audiences who might otherwise remain disconnected from in-depth news reporting (Greco, 2020; Adami, 2022). This ability to reach new demographics, combined with the medium's flexibility, makes podcasting an increasingly necessary and rewarding platform for modern journalism.

Podcasting also offers tangible benefits for the work-life balance of journalists, providing a reprieve from the relentless pace of traditional news production. Francesco Giambertone reflects: «Podcasting allows you to step away from the relentless pressure of print and online journalism, which are constantly racing to deliver breaking news. Producing a podcast, like *Giorno per Giorno*, is far less overwhelming, though it still requires adaptability» (2024).

Nevertheless, alongside its numerous advantages, podcasting also presents significant challenges. Interestingly, the issues identified as frustrating or particularly challenging by the journalists interviewed align closely with those that have long been highlighted in academic research on podcasting. Chief among these is the persistent lack of effective monetization strategies. As Milano notes: «There are still no business models that make [podcasting] economically sustainable, and this is a major problem at the moment, especially in Italy, where the willingness to pay is very low» (Milano, 2024).

This issue is particularly acute for traditional outlets, which are often resistant to innovation and slow to adopt digital approaches. At *Corriere della Sera*, for instance, the economic sustainability of podcasting directly impacts investment in the medium. In the newspaper, the podcasting team consists of only three staff members out of a total workforce of 450 journalists. This limited allocation of resources reflects broader institutional hesitancy to fully embrace podcasting as a core component of journalistic production. This reluctance stems from the recognition that podcasting operations often fail to sustain themselves financially. As Giambertone explains: «[At *Corriere della Sera*] we don't have in-house production, which means that for every project you want to undertake, you have to hire external professionals and pay them. And since the sustainability model for podcasts is still very immature and somewhat unstable, it becomes very difficult to create journalistic series that are not branded content» (2024).

Addressing these challenges would require bold investment strategies that prioritize long-term growth over immediate revenue recovery. However, not all outlets are willing – or able – to allocate resources for this purpose. This reluctance to invest has created a vicious cycle, where the non-branded podcast offering has shrunk over time. In the case of *Corriere della Sera*, the non-branded podcast output is now largely limited to the daily *Giorno per Giorno*, despite its potential. The challenges of monetization and resource allocation thus continue to restrict the development of podcasting in Italy, particularly among legacy media organizations.

Another significant aspect perceived as challenging by podcast journalists is the issue of limited discoverability. This issue is particularly pronounced

among traditional publishers, who continue to struggle with digital transformation and lack the effectiveness needed for social media campaigns and other promotional strategies essential for reaching potential audiences. As a result, these outlets often fail to adequately inform the public about the existence of their podcasts, further limiting their ability to compete in an increasingly crowded and dynamic digital media landscape. Journalists, then, find it particularly frustrating when a high-quality podcast, into which significant effort and expertise have been invested, goes largely unnoticed by the public due to insufficient visibility strategies.

Reflecting on the opportunities and challenges posed by podcasting to journalism, a broader consideration arises. As highlighted earlier, podcast journalists do not exclusively produce content for traditional media outlets – whether audio, online, or print – but increasingly for third parties outside the realm of institutional journalism. Platforms such as Will Media, which functions as an online community, and social profiles like *Torcha* exemplify this shift. Several prominent journalists, whose podcasts rank among the most popular sources of news and information (e.g., *The Essential*, which topped Spotify rankings for two consecutive years), have migrated to these non-traditional spaces, reflecting a broader shift in how and where information is produced. Podcasting, therefore, mirrors the decentralization of news production, which is no longer the sole prerogative of institutional media organizations. While this shift creates new opportunities for journalists to reach diverse audiences, it also raises ethical concerns regarding standards and accountability.

In parallel, traditional print newspapers have embraced podcasting as a paradoxical means of reinforcing their institutional identity. Podcasts provide a platform to showcase the expertise of their editorial teams, allowing audiences – particularly those who might not engage with the newspaper in its traditional form – to access and appreciate their journalistic rigor. As Giambertone explains:

I work in a place with many highly competent colleagues, so we decided to highlight their expertise [through an interview-based format] and bring them into a medium where they might not yet be widely recognized. In my opinion, this format aligns with our production needs and represents a step forward in terms of content, while remaining sustainable (2024).

Additionally, a robust editorial team provides the essential infrastructure for streamlined podcast production. Journalists and experts within the newsroom supply the material and interviews that form the backbone of daily episodes, ensuring a consistent workflow and reliable publishing schedules. This emerges also from the statements of Zoli, who explains: «Our great resource is a large editorial team – people who have specialized in specific areas for years, and whose expertise we can showcase. The podcast leverages this, in-

corporating external collaborators when necessary, but always reflecting the identity of the newspaper» (2024).

Ultimately, podcasts not only extend the reach and visibility of traditional newspapers but also serve as a dynamic reflection of their institutional identity. This synergy demonstrates how podcasting functions as both a tool for innovation and a reinforcement of established journalistic practices, bridging the gap between traditional and modern media.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the heterogeneity of the daily podcast and the multifaceted role of the podcast journalist. The diversity observed among podcast journalists – spanning varying levels of public recognition, work practices, and approaches to the medium – renders it challenging to define a single, comprehensive profile of this professional figure. This heterogeneity reflects the intrinsic adaptability of podcasting, a flexible cultural form capable of accommodating a wide range of personal, professional, and organizational needs.

This hybridity also stems from the fact that podcasting attracts practitioners from diverse backgrounds. Journalists transitioning into this medium often reshape and adapt skills developed in other domains, such as print journalism, television, or other narrative formats. This dynamic enables the medium to experiment with a wide range of formats and storytelling techniques. Consequently, podcasting positions itself as an essential tool for navigating the rapidly evolving media landscape, where versatility is increasingly valued.

Similarly, the destinations of podcast journalists are as varied as their origins. One of the most striking aspects of podcast journalism is the diversity of platforms on which podcast journalists work. As argued, their productions are not confined to institutional channels such as traditional news outlets but extend to online communities and social media profiles. Notably, many well-established journalists trained within traditional news organizations have migrated to independent platforms and communities to produce their podcasts. This decentralization of content production mirrors broader shifts within the news production landscape, as institutional journalism increasingly competes with independent creators and alternative platforms. While this trend creates opportunities for innovation, experimentation, and direct audience engagement, it also raises critical ethical concerns. Issues such as accountability, editorial independence, and the potential erosion of journalistic standards are becoming more pronounced as the boundaries between institutional and independent media continue to blur.

For traditional newspapers, podcasts remain a valuable resource for leveraging and highlighting their editorial expertise. Podcasts offer these organizations the opportunity to connect with younger audiences who are often

disengaged from print media, thus extending their reach and relevance. Nevertheless, these same organizations face significant challenges, particularly with regard to monetization and discoverability. Traditional outlets are often the least equipped to capitalize on the potential of podcasts due to slower rates of digital transformation and outdated promotional strategies. This dual limitation – being both a significant challenge and an area ripe for improvement – warrants further exploration, especially given the precarious state of journalism in the Italian context.

Despite these challenges, the advantages of podcasting are manifold, as articulated by the journalists interviewed. Among the most frequently cited benefits is the professional satisfaction the medium provides – an increasingly rare experience in traditional written journalism. Podcasts allow for a deeper, more sustained connection with audiences, enabling journalists to engage listeners with long-form content and in-depth reporting that often struggles to find a home in other media. This ability to captivate younger demographics, who might otherwise remain disconnected from traditional news sources, further solidifies podcasting's value as a modern journalistic tool. Moreover, the format facilitates a more reflective and detailed approach to storytelling, offering the time and space necessary for nuanced analysis and comprehensive reporting – qualities often constrained by the accelerated pace of news production in other media.

In conclusion, podcasting represents both a significant opportunity and a critical challenge for contemporary journalism in Italy. Its hybrid nature and adaptability make it uniquely suited to address the evolving needs of audiences and journalists alike. At the same time, systemic issues such as financial sustainability and digital integration remain barriers that must be addressed to unlock the medium's full potential. As this study illustrates, podcasting holds the promise of not only revitalizing journalistic practices but also redefining the role of journalism within a rapidly changing media ecosystem. The integration of podcasts into the Italian journalistic landscape is not merely an option but a necessity, as they have become an essential format for any outlet seeking to remain relevant and competitive.

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Is podcasting the future of news? In a digital world craving authentic connection, podcasts have emerged as a powerful force, captivating audiences with intimate storytelling and on-demand access. *Podcasts in the Future of Journalism* dives deep into this evolving landscape, exploring how this dynamic medium is reshaping how we create, consume, and engage with news. This book examines how podcasts are breathing new life into in-depth reporting and attracting younger audiences, while also navigating the challenges of maintaining journalistic integrity in this new media landscape. It explores the global impact of podcasting, from AI-driven recommendations to market trends, and delves into the evolving relationship between journalists and their audiences, highlighting how podcasts foster transparency and deeper connections. Featuring case studies from across Europe, this book showcases how news organizations are embracing podcasting to maintain credibility and trust. *Podcasts in the Future of Journalism* is essential reading for anyone interested in the future of news and the power of podcasts.

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