

Intimacy in Podcast Journalism: Ethical Challenges and Opportunities in Daily News Podcasts and Documentaries

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Abstract

This research contributes to understanding how podcast intimacy shapes the evolving relationship between journalists and their audiences in the digital age. Intimacy in podcasting refers to creating a close emotional connection between journalist and audience, facilitated by this audio format and the growth of headphone—and earbud—listening. Podcasting allows for a more personal relationship, where journalists not only inform but also share emotions and experiences. However, this “emotional truth” can blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, raising ethical challenges regarding objectivity. Based on 14 semi-structured interviews with journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries, we examine how intimacy is constructed and experienced in these types of productions. Using a qualitative approach, we explore the boundaries of intimacy in journalists’ discourse, as well as the challenges it poses and the opportunities it offers for the production of news podcasts.

Keywords

audience; intimacy; journalism; podcast; Spain; trust

1. Introduction

The rapid changes in the media landscape due to digital transformation are challenging traditional and digital native media, particularly those targeting demanding audiences seeking for news content that is rigorously produced and accessible to consumers at all times. The media industry is struggling with the effects and

implications of digital transformation, the democratization of communication, the spread of disinformation, and increased competition (Bordewijk & van Kaam, 1986; European Commission, 2018; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018), with one-third of users actively avoiding news (Newman et al., 2023). Moreover, a rising hostility toward the media caused by the emergence of post-truth dynamics and the so-called “Trump effect” (Foreman et al., 2022; Romano, 2017; Waterson, 2018) has further complicated the situation.

Within this context, podcasting emerges as “a bright spot for publishers, attracting younger, well-educated audiences” (Newman et al., 2024, p. 11). Due to its unique characteristics (Lindgren, 2023), podcasting addresses the evolving expectations of journalism, offering audiences an experience that is enlightening, surprising, empowering, comforting, and reassuring (Costera Meijer, 2013, 2021).

While numerous studies have examined the intimacy inherent in podcasting, there is still a need for deeper exploration to fully understand its implications for journalism (Lindgren, 2023). In this study, we conducted interviews with 14 journalists who produce daily news podcasts—including both news round-ups and deep dive podcasts—and audio documentaries. Spain serves as an ideal case for this study due to several key factors. First, the country has experienced a rapid growth in the production of daily news podcasts—including both news round-ups and deep dive podcasts—indicating a burgeoning market and swift adoption of the format (Pedrero et al., 2023). Secondly, audio documentaries, which had been in decline, have experienced a significant resurgence (Martín-Nieto et al., 2024). Finally, Spain ranks fourth in podcast listenership among 25 countries, according to the *Digital News Report 2024* (Newman et al., 2024), further highlighting the growing relevance of the podcast format in news consumption.

2. The Impact of Podcasts on Journalism

A competitive advantage of podcasting is that it offers audiences new options, greater interaction with content tailored to their preferences, listening routines, and personalized programming. Podcasting is instrumental, intentional, selective, and active (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2020), unlike traditional broadcasting, whose consumption tends to be more passive and ritualized. For the media, podcasts have opened up a new route to connect with millennials, digital native listeners who access the internet via smartphones. Thus, native audio content in podcast format brings together new and old audiences (Lindeberg, 2019) and helps to generate new communities of listeners.

In Spain, the podcast, which took its first steps in 2004 with *Comunicando* by José Antonio Gelado and with the launch of the audio aggregator iVoox in 2010 (Sellas, 2011), began to gain importance with the founding of two platforms: Cuonda in 2015 and Podium Podcast in 2016 (García-Marín, 2019). Likewise, traditional radio networks were launching their native podcast areas (Alonso et al., 2022), as did newspapers (Leoz & Pedrero, 2022; Martínez-Graña et al., 2023; Martínez-Otón et al., 2022).

Since the *Serial* phenomenon, podcasting has experienced sustained growth, inducing the proliferation of productions by platforms and radio stations, which have become significant competitors to independent producers (Adler, 2022; Murray, 2019), as these companies are associated with professionalism due to their long experience and expertise in sound production (Sullivan, 2024). However, it was unexpected that other traditional journalistic media, such as print newspapers, would also begin producing podcasts

(Martínez-Costa et al., 2022). These media with little or no audio heritage have shown a willingness to innovate and explore both the commercial and editorial potential of audio.

News media companies have found in podcasting a new way to distribute and diversify their news content (Reis, 2018) and also an effective tool for marketing, as shown by recent studies by the Association of Online Publishers (2022), Reuters Institute (Newman & Gallo, 2019, 2020), Pew Research Center (Walker, 2022), and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (Gupta, 2021). Podcasting not only helps shape and strengthen their branding, by placing value on quality content and writing, but it also serves as an effective tool for engaging younger audiences and fostering loyalty, ultimately gaining valuable new subscriptions. According to the *Digital News Report*, “publishers are also exploring different formats to address the engagement challenge, especially those less immediately dependent on platform algorithms, such as podcasts” (Newman et al., 2024, p. 31). Thus, there is no doubt that by increasing audio production, publishers expect future revenue streams (Carvajal et al., 2022; Loewenthal & McMullan, 2019).

Public radio corporations are also devoting resources—to varying degrees—to journalistic podcasting as part of their public service remit. In the USA, NPR holds a privileged position in the podcast ranking, with many productions. However, it has been losing ground to competition from commercial platforms. In Europe, BBC launched podcasting 15 years ago and has a dedicated platform, BBC Sounds. Australia’s ABC, Radio France, and state broadcasters in Denmark and Sweden also excel in podcast production. Clark and McLean (2020) explain this phenomenon:

Despite the perception that public radio is a bland alternative to commercial formats, in the twenty-first century public broadcasters dominated podcast charts globally....Public broadcasters have pioneered personal journalism and storytelling narratives that are well suited to the *hyper-intimacy* of headphones or earbuds, the method of consumption increasingly used by legions of podcast subscribers. (p. 83, emphasis added)

One of the most significant effects of digital transformation in the news industry has been the resurgence of audio in new formats such as podcasts. Particularly, newspapers—traditionally rooted in the written word—have embraced audio journalism as a compelling and innovative tool, marking a disruptive shift in their centuries-long trajectory of news reporting. Similarly, radio stations now employ podcasts to extend the lifespan of their content by offering it on demand. Moreover, they have reintroduced the documentary genre, which had largely vanished from their programming schedules.

As has been noted, among the different audio formats developed by newspapers—news round-ups, deep dive explanatory, documentary, and extended chat (Newman, 2023)—deep dive podcasts stand out as a great success. A deep dive podcast is a short audio clip that delves into one or two recent events, with a standard length of between 5 and 25 minutes. It is important to note that deep dive podcasts are not merely a summary of content but unique creations with their style and identity (Martínez-Costa & Lus, 2019). One of the most successful and internationally renowned examples is *The Daily*, launched by *The New York Times* in February 2017. *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* had already experimented with daily news podcasts in 2005 and 2006, respectively (Gallego, 2010), but *The New York Times*’ podcast stands out in this format, with millions of daily downloads and contributing decisively to both the newspaper’s subscription policy (*The New York Times*, 2023) and its advertising revenue (Verdier, 2018).

An important part of the daily news podcast routine production is, in essence, similar to that of documentaries; both formats are based, according to Newman and Gallo (2019, 2020) and Newman (2023), on deep immersion. Documentaries are based on investigative journalism and utilize elements of sound design, and creativity, among others. This genre, with a few notable exceptions, had nearly vanished from radio programming schedules, particularly in serialized formats. The rise of documentary podcasts within traditional media, therefore, represents the revitalization of a genre of significant value, both from a radio broadcasting and journalistic standpoint (Körner & Grabl, 2024; McHugh, 2022; Verma, 2024). *The Washington Post* and Al Jazeera won the ONA Award for Excellence in Digital Audio Storytelling in 2021. A year later, *The Wall Street Journal* and *FRONTLINE* received the same award, and in 2023, Vox Media and MSNBC, Southern California Public Radio, and The Outlaw Ocean Project were honored. *Serial (This American Life)* won the Peabody Award in 2014, opening the door to many other productions, while other serialized stories such as *The Out Crowd (This American Life)*, *No Compromise* (NPR), *Suave* (Futuro Media and PRX), Gimlet Media, and *You Didn't See Nothing* (USG Audio) won the Pulitzer Prize for audio reporting.

3. Intimacy in Podcasting Journalism

The success of podcasts in the news industry is closely tied to the opportunities offered by the internet, particularly the public's openness to new forms of interaction. Modern audiences now expect more intimacy and a shift in the relationship between journalists and the public. Journalists are now taking on roles beyond those of traditional political journalism, incorporating aspects of everyday life. They are becoming marketers, service providers, friends, networkers, mood managers, inspirers, and coaches (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). A shift that represents a significant departure from the emotional detachment associated with professional journalism in the 1970s and 1980s (McQuail, 1991).

Naturally, this transformation did not happen overnight. Half a century ago, McLuhan foresaw that the expressive potential of the "new media" would extend far beyond their purely mechanical characteristics (Stearn et al., 1973). However, while this evolution, particularly in the emotional sphere, has been gradual, the rise of networked communications and peer-to-peer interactions has significantly accelerated both its pace and intensity (Beckett & Mansell, 2008; Eberwein et al., 2019; Hassan, 2020; Peters, 2011; Waddell, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen & Schmidt, 2020).

Due to their technical nature, podcasts naturally align with the industry's motivations. By adopting a more emotional and conversational approach, they transform complex social and political issues into personal, immersive experiences (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Lecheler, 2020). Since podcasts are primarily listened to alone and with headphones or earbuds, their production "requires a more intimate approach, as well as content that engages emotions" (Newman & Gallo, 2019, p. 34). They also provide learning experiences while fostering a sense of inspiration, belonging, and social connectedness, among others (Costerá Meijer, 2021). According to Jorgensen (2021), everything in this format contributes to enhancing psychological proximity and trust through four key elements: first-person narration, authenticity, empathy, and emotional truth.

In podcasts, journalists use an educated yet informal language by which they offer "a simpler and freer way for people to connect through conversation" (Loviglio, 2024, p. 53). Furthermore, they skillfully use their voices and integrate oral testimonies from sources. In this context, Lindgren (2023, p. 171) notes: "The interplay between the human voice speaking and the human ear listening extends the key attributes in

narrative journalism to create a distinct form of intimate journalism, infused with personal stories, shared feelings, interesting ideas, and surprising plot twists.” Unlike print news, podcasts aim to captivate the audience by stimulating their imagination through rich sound design, where music plays a prominent role (Clarke & Bjork, 2023), building immersive soundscapes around the listener (Dowling & Miller, 2019). This approach creates a narrative experience that is both informative and entertaining (McHugh, 2016). In particular, serialized documentaries are evolving beyond classical structures, incorporating techniques from audio drama, such as reenactments, opening recaps, and cliffhanger endings (Legorburu et al., 2021).

3.1. Normalizing Intimacy

Journalism is rooted in centuries-old traditions and core values, underscoring its universal nature while maintaining the closeness required by local newspapers and the diverse communities associated with civic or community journalism. Moreover, trust and loyalty toward citizens, both closely linked to intimacy, are actively promoted within journalistic values and principles. As stated in Article IV of the American Society of News Editors’ Statement of Principles, “good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism” (American Society of News Editors, 1975). In *The Elements of Journalism*, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) emphasize that journalistic truth is tied to the gathering and verification of facts, transparency regarding sources and methods, and prioritizing the public interest. This “journalistic” intimacy is fundamentally different from the intimacy created by listening conditions, psychological proximity, and the intimate atmosphere of certain media formats.

Indeed, through a reflective reconstruction, podcast audio stories can convey a sense of integrity, norms, and shared values (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021), enhancing the perceived trustworthiness of both the journalist and the medium (Enli, 2015). In this sense, the richness and immersive sound of podcasts offer unique opportunities to restore trust in the media, reinforcing its legitimacy and authority as a credible source of information (Dowling, 2024).

Certain aspects of podcast intimacy remain more contentious. Friendship and fraternity—semantically associated with intimacy—are often linked to the transgression of professional boundaries, such as “going native” with sources (Colombo, 1997; Gieber & Johnson, 1961). The concept of emotional truth (Jorgensen, 2021) in audio feature stories does not necessarily align with journalistic truth, due to the use of techniques traditionally associated with audio drama that blur the line between fact and fiction. In the independent podcasts analyzed by Jorgensen (2021), emotional truth tends to exhibit significant imbalances often prioritizing emotion over factual accuracy. It is often used to fill the gap between fiction and fact, to ease emotional tension by resorting to humor, irony, and laughter when discussing sensitive topics, and to create sonic spaces where the listener’s imagination can freely flow. Another concern is that the expression of emotions and the use of the first person may conflict with the concept of “objectivity,” or at least with the strategic ritual that protects reporters from the inherent risks of their profession (Tuchman, 1999) helping them maintain a sense of “critical distance.”

The lack of consensus surrounding the concept of intimacy in podcasting, as well as the depth it acquires in the fields of psychology and interpersonal communication, complicates its assessment. As a result, Adler (2023) proposes, as a basis for analysis, four parameters related to physical and temporal closeness: intimacy in listening (where, when, and how the listening occurs), intimacy in content (first-person accounts, narrow

in-depth focus, meta-reflections, participation), intimacy in delivery (tone, format such as conversations, music, sounds, authenticity, and friends/commentators), and intimacy in media interaction (cross-media and social media engagement). These parameters, in some respects, are closely linked to the ethical principle of transparency.

While the implications in the field of journalism are substantial, according to Tennant (2023) only Greer (2017) has specifically addressed ethics in podcasting practice. In a study on responsibility in true crime podcasts, Greer (2017, p. 162) raises, among others, the following questions: “Is the story told in enough detail? Does it lack detail? How does taking possession of such a story impose responsibility on its orator?”

Intimacy in podcast journalism has, indeed, been normalized at a remarkable pace. Pioneering journalists who were early adopters of blogs and social media platforms (Lewis, 2012; Wall, 2017) ignited a significant debate over the exposure of journalists’ personal lives and opinions (García de Torres & Hermida, 2017). Notably, several journalists covering the Iraq War were dismissed or resigned after expressing personal views on their blogs. This prompted Singer (2006) to offer a compelling reflection on the conflicting values at stake:

Bloggers also value truth, but they have quite a different view of how to get there. Theirs is a more post-modern approach acknowledging that everyone holds his or her own version of the truth; brought together, those views form a subjective, multi-faceted but cohesive whole. Bloggers place a premium on the power of the collective, of shared knowledge, and the connections among those who possess and are willing to exchange it. (p. 6)

Once again at a crossroads, podcast journalists face the challenge of striking the right balance between normalizing intimacy and engaging with the audience while ensuring that facts remain at the forefront (Sánchez Laws, 2020).

4. Podcast Journalism in Spain

Podcasts are popular in Spain, with increasing audio engagement levels. In 2024, podcast consumption in Spain was six percentage points higher than the average (38 percent) of the 25 countries included in the *Digital News Report’s* research, and three points above the 2022 figure (41 percent). The most frequent listener profile is male, and it is the younger generation who consume the most podcasts: 62 percent of internet users between the ages of 18 and 24. However, over the last three years, there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of adults aged 35 to 44 who report listening to podcasts, while the 55 to 64 age group has remained steady at around 36 percent. The data suggests that podcast consumption in Spain may continue to grow (Newman et al., 2024).

The widespread adoption of this format in Spain is also evident in the consumption of news. According to Pedrero et al. (2023, p. 17), “2022 was the year when the podcast became firmly established thanks to the rapid and massive acceptance of the daily news podcast of *El País*.” The access rate in Spain by 2022 was 14 percent, only slightly behind the USA (19 percent) and Sweden (17 percent; Newman et al., 2023). In 2024, 15 percent of internet users listen to podcasts related to current affairs (news, politics, and international events), and 14 percent tune into podcasts about social issues and events, such as those categorized as true crime (Newman et al., 2024).

The most significant progress in the evolution of news podcasts, however, has taken place in just the last three years, since 2021. After the first tentative ventures involving audio in 2005 by the native outlet known as *Libertad Digital* (Correyero & Baladrón, 2007) and later by ABC in 2018, daily news podcasts, including news round-ups and deep dives, have been published successfully since 2021, for example by *El Mundo*, *El País*, *El Debate*, and *eldiario.es* (Leoz & Pedrero, 2022; Martínez-Graña et al., 2023; Martínez-Otón et al., 2022), some of them with audiences in the millions. Specifically, *El Mundo al Día* (*El Mundo up to Date*), which began publication on June 15, 2021, reached its first million listeners in less than two months and six million in March of the following year. *Hoy en El País* (*Today in El País*), born on March 2, 2022, exceeded 15 million in just 10 months with an average of 75,000 daily downloads, and today, it is usually among the 20 most listened-to podcasts in Spanish, according to Latin America Triton Digital Podcast Ranker. In addition, this daily news podcast, together with those from *El Mundo* and *eldiario.es*, was awarded *ex aequo* with the 2023 Ondas Award in the breakthrough podcast category.

Both in terms of audience and quality, narrative podcasts based on real events and political topics stand out (Legorburu et al., 2021; Sellas & Gutiérrez, 2022). Indeed, four documentaries—*Las Tres Muertes de Mi Padre* (*The Three Deaths of My Father*) of Cuonda, *XRey* (*Former King*) of Spotify, *GAL. El Triángulo* (*GAL. The Triangle*) of Podimo, and *Misterio en La Moraleja* (*Mystery in La Moraleja*) of Spotify—have won the Global Ondas Podcast Awards. In Spain, the narrative non-fiction podcasts were the prevalent category among the new titles released in 2022. Within this category, documentaries dominated, accounting for 50% of the total and holding a significant position in the country's podcasting landscape (Martín-Nieto et al., 2024).

It should be pointed out that these podcasts are being used not only by national newspapers but by regional dailies as well. This high production level has also stimulated, to a large extent, traditional radio stations, which had left the audio feature story genre aside in their programming schedules since the 80s (Legorburu et al., 2021). Thus, in recent times, Cadena SER, COPE, Onda Cero, and RNE have recovered it through the production of native podcasts (Alonso et al., 2022).

5. Methods

Our research questions were:

RQ1: How do journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries tackle podcast intimacy?

RQ2: What are the ethical challenges and the opportunities?

The hypotheses were enunciated as follows:

H1: Journalists producing audio documentaries are more likely to emphasize emotional engagement and personal connection with the audience than those producing daily news podcasts.

H2: Intimacy in daily news podcasts is constructed more through tone and first-person narration, whereas in documentaries it is achieved through deeper narrative techniques and immersive sound design.

H3: Journalists producing documentaries are more likely to encounter ethical challenges related to the blurring of fact and fiction due to emotional truth and storytelling techniques than daily news podcast journalists.

To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, 14 semi-structured interviews were carried out with Spanish journalists belonging to national and regional news media that produce podcasts, with emphasis on printed media due to the innovation it represents for them, as well as audio platforms and radio stations. During the selection phase, careful consideration was given to ensuring a balanced representation of genres.

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, following Newman's (2023) typology of news podcasts, we interviewed seven journalists producing daily news podcasts (including news round-ups and deep dive podcasts) on the one hand, and seven journalists producing documentaries on the other. Within the first group were traditional national newspapers *ABC*, *El Mundo*, and *El País*, regional newspapers (*Las Provincias*), and digital native media (*El Debate* and *The Objective*), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. List of daily news podcasts journalists that were interviewed.

Journalists	News Media	Position	Type of podcast
Jorge Alacid	<i>Las Provincias</i>	Editor of <i>La Semana en Valencia</i> (The Week in Valencia)	News round-up
Javier Attard	<i>El Mundo</i>	Editor of <i>El Mundo al Día</i> (<i>El Mundo</i> up to Date)	Deep dive
Andrea Carrasco	<i>ABC</i>	Editor of <i>Las Noticias de ABC</i> (<i>ABC News</i>)	News round-up
Belén Montes	<i>El Debate</i>	Editor of <i>Hoy en El Debate</i> (Today in <i>El Debate</i>)	News round-up
Diego Moreno	<i>El Debate</i>	Director of the Department of Audio and Video	N/A
Nicolás Pan	<i>The Objective</i>	Editor of <i>Resumen de la Tarde</i> (Afternoon Summary)	News round-up
Inés Vila	<i>El País</i>	Editor and producer of <i>Hoy en El País</i> (Today in <i>El País</i>)	Deep dive

Within the second group, four journalists producing documentaries in radio and newspapers, podcast Ondas Award winners Antonio Rubio and Pablo Romero, and finally an experienced journalist and creative editor of Podium Podcast (PRISA Audio), were interviewed, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. List of documentary journalists that were interviewed.

Journalists	News Media/Company/Platform	Position
Alberto G. Rallo	<i>Las Provincias</i>	Editor of <i>Pitufeo en el Partido Popular de Valencia</i> (Smurfing in the Popular Party of Valencia)
Andrea Morán	Vocento Group	Director of the Department of Audio and Podcasts
Pablo Romero	Cuonda	Editor of <i>Las Tres Muertes de Mi Padre</i> (The Three Deaths of My Father)
Antonio Rubio	Podimo	Editor of <i>GAL. El Triángulo</i> (GAL. The Triangle)
Gina Tosas	<i>La Vanguardia</i>	Editor of <i>Los Ojos de la Guerra</i> (The Eyes of War)
Aloña Velasco	<i>Cadena SER</i>	Editor of <i>Miguel Ángel Blanco, Silencio y Memoria</i> (Miguel Ángel Blanco, Silence and Memory)
Eugenio Viñas	Podium Podcast	Director of the Creative Department

All interviewees were contacted directly via email and WhatsApp, and all agreed to participate on the first attempt. Several factors contributed to the success of these negotiations (Tuchman, 1999). First, the

interviewees' intrinsic motivation to share their unique experiences as pioneers in the field played a key role. Second, the use of the “known sponsor approach” proved effective, as we were able to reference the prestigious funding provided by the National Research Plan (Shenton & Hayter, 2004). Third, the “demonstration of professional suitability” (Shenton & Hayter, 2004) was influential, given the authors' extensive experience in both teaching—training journalists in Spain since the 1990s, including podcasting pioneers—and research, having led innovative projects in online journalism since 2003. While some of these strategies are typically employed to gain access to organizations, they proved equally effective on an individual level. The interviews were conducted from May to September 2022, with two interviews carried out face-to-face, four online, and seven via email, depending on the interviewees' availability and geographical location.

The role of intimacy has been extensively documented (Adler, 2023; Bird & Lindgren, 2024; Bottomley, 2024; Coward, 2013; Cwynar, 2024; Euritt, 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Lindgren, 2016, 2023; Rae, 2023; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Steensen, 2016; Swiatek, 2018; Waddell, 2020). Furthermore, Lindgren (2023) demonstrates that intimacy in podcast journalism has been normalized in high-quality productions and legitimized through professional recognition. Unlike the traditional journalistic standards of objective, detached reporting, podcast journalism incorporates emotional storytelling and first-person narratives to forge a closer, more personal connection between the journalist and the listener.

This study, part of a larger project on podcast journalism, was based on an extensive questionnaire structured around three parameters: (a) profile/skills challenges, (b) production, and (c) public service dimension. The information collected from face-to-face and online interviews was transcribed using automated tools. The discourse of journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries was manually processed. Their responses have been incorporated into the findings using a random numbering system, which does not coincide with their position in Tables 1 and 2. Subsequently, the presence or absence of elements of intimacy for each podcast type was annotated, drawing on Adler's (2023) analytical framework for dissecting and analyzing intimacy in podcasts. References to potential ethical conflicts or the reinforcement of traditional journalistic principles fostered by podcasting were also noted.

6. Findings

The following section addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by applying Adler's (2023) framework of parameters and subcategories (intimacy in listening, content, delivery, and cross-media interactions) to the discourse of journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries. Additionally, it also explores the ethical concerns raised by the interviewees regarding the construction of intimacy in podcast journalism and the opportunities it presents.

6.1. Intimacy in Listening

Our findings suggest that daily news podcasts cultivated long-term audience engagement through their regularity and continuous cycle. Although episodes were released at specific times (morning, evening, and weekends), the approach remained resolutely user-centric, prioritizing the listener's experience. As one journalist explained:

The podcast was developed with the intention to seamlessly integrate into the daily routines of its audience, fully harnessing the possibilities offered by the format. It prioritized building a close connection with the listener, enhancing the depth of the auditory experience, and offering thorough analysis. Ultimately, the goal was to deliver and clarify content in the most compelling and captivating way possible. (J2)

Several factors influenced the length of these podcasts in the study, but the most frequently cited was their ability to connect with the listener's daily life. The average episode lasted 10 minutes, longer than what Martínez-Costa and Lus (2019) found in their study of this type of podcast. Journalists envisioned the user in domestic or everyday settings: "Listening in the car is not the same as listening while cooking" (J5), or, as another interviewee noted, "We put ourselves in the listener's shoes and consider at what time of day or moment they would prefer to hear certain information" (J3). This underscores the relationship between perceived intimacy and the physical spaces where podcast consumption occurs.

Regarding technical concerns, journalists consistently envisioned an audience that listened in "solitude," whether in public or private spaces. As one interviewee noted: "I believe the relationship with the listener can be much more intimate due to something as simple as the fact that they are listening with headphones, directly into their ear, without external interference, and most importantly, with focused attention" (J2). Another one added: "You put on headphones, and whether you were on the subway, driving, or anywhere else, you could listen and engage with content more deeply, gaining a different perspective. The listener no longer has an excuse not to stay informed" (J6). Thus, the imagined audience emerges as active, mobile, and particularly receptive to news delivered in the podcast format, making it a more engaging medium compared to others.

Several discrepancies were identified when analyzing the discourse of journalists producing documentaries. In contrast to daily news podcasts, the release schedule for audio feature stories was more flexible, with longer episode lengths averaging around 20 minutes. These podcasts were often structured as limited series, which significantly shortened the period during which listeners remained engaged with the journalist. While the length of daily news episodes was influenced by listeners' routines, the duration of documentaries was more often determined by the topic and its complexity, "to tell a story effectively and align with the listeners' available time" (J14). Metrics were also relevant to this group—"We faced the challenge of personalizing our content, which requires more data about the end recipient" (J12)—though not necessarily implemented—"I didn't have data on subscribers gained from podcasts, actually" (J11).

Regarding the similarities, the freedom for creativity and experimentation was emphasized, as was also the intimacy attained by using headphones—or earbuds—for listening. However, there was a greater emphasis on the importance of content to achieve intimacy within this group: "The listener tends to be more attentive to the content, as they have deliberately chosen the type of audio that interests them" (J12). The evocation of audience images was not as present in the discourse of documentary podcast journalists.

6.2. *Intimacy in What Is Said*

The primary goal of daily news podcasts, according to the interviewees, was to expand the audience by attracting younger listeners and those beyond the reach of traditional media: "The aim is to engage new

audiences, especially younger ones, and build loyalty” (J4). By doing so, journalists align with industry strategies aimed at appealing to new generations (Newman et al., 2024); notably, many journalists in our sample were themselves young, which enhances their socio-demographic proximity to the target audience.

Content selection in daily news podcasts, according to the interviewees, prioritized actuality, as they typically offered a summary of news: “We talk about topics that interest society, news that matters to a group of readers and listeners eager to further explore a certain news story” (J3). The “what” in daily news podcasts was determined by current events and their relevance to listeners, the editorial team, journalists themselves, and the newsroom—highlighting the podcast’s widespread acceptance and suggesting a sense of camaraderie and even intimacy, as personal audio clips (i.e., children’s return to school) were at some point shared with the podcast team. Daily news podcasts content was characterized by the absence of sensitive or potentially offensive topics. Likewise, subjectivity was minimal, often associated with the use of the first person and music.

Interestingly, metrics were not a primary reference for determining content for journalists producing daily news podcasts: “It’s an editorial decision, but we use metrics daily to select the information” (J2). In general, they did not have access to audience data or were not particularly concerned with it: “It’s important to gain or retain subscribers, but we were still in an early phase where that is not the main priority” (J7). As another interviewee noted: “Yes, we had audience data, but I didn’t manage it; I was more concerned with quality” (J4). Hence, this type of indirect feedback, characteristic of mass communication (McQuail, 1991), had low impact in this group.

We did not find references to sharing personal content or feelings, nor to the physical location of the recording. However, an interviewee mentioned transparency as a goal: “We often focused on the making-of aspect of the newspaper. It is important to be transparent and let the listener know how the information reaches them” (J6).

Yet, due to the conversational tone and intimate atmosphere of the listening experience, the technical complexity and rapid pace of the news-making process—or what one interviewee described as the “lack of freshness” (J2)—might go unnoticed by both listeners of documentary and daily news podcasts. In traditional mass communication, there is significant opacity, and audiences are often unaware of the complexity behind production processes (Maletzke, 1970). Modern podcasts, which may appear simple and spontaneous, are, like other media products, meticulously edited: “The script is our bible. The goal is for it to sound natural and fluid, as though it is being told spontaneously. However, there is a tremendous amount of work behind it; everything was meticulously planned” (J6). In this regard, the gap between the professional production environment and the audience hardly suggests a truly intimate relationship.

In contrast to daily news podcasts, according to the interviewees documentaries tended to focus on more specialized topics, targeting a niche audience with specific interests, while also seeking to engage younger listeners and those beyond the reach of traditional media. Within this group, we found more experienced journalists who aimed not only to connect with younger generations but also to share historical knowledge and provoke reflection. It is important to note that many of these journalists were exploring this new medium for the first time clearly signaling the resurgence of narrative audio through podcasts (Körner & Grabl, 2024).

Regarding topic selection, decisions were mainly driven by the interviewees in this group. These professionals typically possessed specialized knowledge in specific areas, and it was their deep and extensive expertise in these subjects that primarily shaped the content: “More than the audience’s interests, their preferences of the chosen or proposed topic were taken into account” (J13). While journalists producing daily news podcasts in our sample aspired to explain or provide context, journalists in this documentary group frequently used the verb “to form” in the sense of educating—a longstanding debate in journalism regarding its functions: “The timeliness and educational nature of this format open up many sonic possibilities” (J12). Thus, despite the increased subjectivity and emotional engagement, the relationship was not regarded as one among equals but metaphorically akin to that of a teacher stimulating reflection and deep understanding: “To make the events that occurred in Spain over the last 50 years more accessible to students and youth in general” (J13).

Notable distinctions were also identified in the sensitivity of content, as some of the topics addressed in documentary podcasts involved victims of violence. Journalists avoided being offensive or indiscreet, approaching these topics with caution to minimize potential harm. Another significant difference was the inclusion of subjective elements and personal information, illustrating the “turn to emotion” in journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Emotions were deliberately evoked by the themes and narratives chosen. The introductory text provided by the Cuonda platform for the podcast *The Three Deaths of My Father*, whose author was interviewed for this study, reads:

The ETA Madrid Commando killed my father in an attack in 1993. For 20 years, I did nothing to uncover the truth. Now, after a long investigation, I know there is much more than what I was told. This is the story. (Romero, 2018)

Subjectivity is also key in the documentary *The Eyes of War*, focused on Ukraine. As Gina Tosas (2022) explained in an article published by *La Vanguardia*: “One of the objectives was to bring the journalist’s personal experience and point of view closer to the listeners, so opinions and feelings were sought” (Tosas, 2022).

6.3. Intimacy in How It Is Said

Daily news podcasts—news round-ups and deep dives—typically followed a monologue format, where the journalist assumed the role of host and, in most cases, producer as well: “At the moment, the team consisted of just one person, which was me. From production to recording, to editing and assembling” (J2). This enhances the sense of intimacy, according to Adler (2023). In traditional newspaper daily podcasts incorporating additional voices—such as those of specialized journalists alongside ordinary sources—complicates production. In our study, it was rare for the “voices of ordinary citizens” to disrupt the predominately single-journalist discourse. Consequently, these familiar voices, consistently present in the listener’s daily life, strengthened the sense of connection. The conversational format, in which the audience’s voice is actively heard, also remained an exception.

In the editing process, the use of sound elements was intentionally restrained: “Sometimes the choice of one piece of music over another could distance you from pure objectivity” (J5). Other resources, such as sound effects, were mentioned (Legorburu et al., 2021). Most of the interviewees had extensive experience in radio and also in podcasting, and even though they had trained voices, they strove to use an informal tone. Only in one case was there an explicit reference to the use of their voice to convey meaning in daily news podcasts:

“Even when you offer an opinion, it was heavily filtered through humor or a certain irony when reviewing current events. I believe it was non-intrusive” (J2). Overall, both the voice and the sound elements were placed within the context of the focus on the mission: “We report on factual events” (J3).

The end product, on the other hand, was highly personal, as most journalists managed all aspects of production themselves, making it a deep individual endeavor. The use of the first person (Cwynar, 2024) and the act of voicing the news created a sense of fulfillment, and in several cases, enthusiasm was explicit regarding the format, despite the substantial workload it entailed. These productions were meticulously crafted with a strong emphasis on the script, a point frequently highlighted in the interviews. Despite conveying intimacy and informality, every word was carefully measured, structured, and polished. There was a deliberate effort to ensure quality in formal aspects across all types of deep dive podcasts. Editing, in particular, was a crucial part of the process.

In documentaries, “how it is said” became the most important parameter when comparing them to daily news podcasts. However, due to the variety of podcast types within the documentary category, these differences were more significant in some cases than in others. Generally speaking, we found a greater sense of freedom within this group: “Facts were presented in a more novelistic way to captivate the listener” (J11). We also found a greater prominence of personal experiences: “So, being part of my life, I had no choice but to do that. Of course, that’s not common. A journalist does not typically report on his own life” (J9).

Monologues were also common, though journalists reported certain diversity in the use of other voices, confirming McHugh’s findings (2022). In addition to the didactic tone mentioned by at least three journalists, the genre allowed for a stronger emotional presence (Jorgensen, 2021): “My podcast is filled with emotional traps, with a rhythm that lets you exactly where I want you to go, and that today’s audience is already familiar with” (J9). One interviewee, in line with Lindgren (2026), highlighted the intimacy of the voice, the soundscape, the proximity to the microphone, the background sound, and the beauty of natural, untrained voices, emphasizing the authenticity these elements bring. Many journalists producing this type of podcast—particularly those from print media—lacked prior experience with audio, meaning their voices were not quite trained, yet they remained well-articulated: “Only I knew the keys to the case and the chronological sequence in sufficient detail” (J11). In one instance, there was a detailed reference to how the voice was used to build a connection with the audience and capture their interest.

The emotional involvement of the professionals was also evident, reflecting their personal investment: “I got excited when I heard the outcome” (J8). As for the narrative possibilities, one interviewee stated:

It allowed me to take my storytelling skills to another level. I could tell more complex stories in a serialized format, working on concepts completely foreign to journalism school (like character arcs, plots, and storytelling), and it made me feel fulfilled. (J10)

Production became much more sophisticated, with higher technical staff collaboration. As a result, even though journalists’ involvement was very high, there was greater teamwork to ensure quality than in daily news podcasts. Producing documentaries involved navigating greater uncertainty, as the goals were varied and intertwined: “There are podcasts focused on education, entertainment, and information. Interestingly, many combined a bit of all three” (J12).

6.4. *Intimacy in Cross-Media Interactions*

The daily news podcasts—news round-ups and deep dives—in the cases examined, were produced within the context of a brand or media source. Although available on multiple platforms, podcasts were scheduled to debut in tandem with the next day’s publication of revised content on the media website. Thus, while these podcasts were received in a personal and intimate manner (intimacy in listening), they remained an integral part of the broader mass content offered by the media outlet. The strategic importance of the podcast for the media was mentioned multiple times, but journalists also emphasized the meticulous attention to detail during its production. As previously mentioned, there was little reliance on metrics: “We didn’t confuse ends and means. Here, there is no keyword strategy to artificially extend listening time” (J4). Aside from metrics and the inclusion of sound clips, there was no mention of audience interaction. Social media primarily served to promote the product and attract listeners, which is why some social media strategies were highly sophisticated, featuring custom cover art and distribution through platforms like Instagram or X, as well as aggregators and platforms such as Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Unlike daily news podcasts, documentaries included stand-alone independent productions. This raised the debate about plurality and the space that remains for this type of content, not subject to commercial logic: “I did it for public service remit. It was published on all platforms, with the condition that there was no advertising” (J9). That said, there were also those created specifically to encourage subscriptions to the medium, to show the audience how the information was produced and why it was worth paying for it. As was the case with daily news podcasts, in documentaries the market logic was understood, but was subordinated to the journalistic mission: “The goal was to keep the memory alive and prevent it from happening again. Therefore, no, it was not a marketing tool” (J12). There was little mention of the content distribution strategy or the conversation with audiences, beyond the repercussions that some podcasts may have had in terms of impact.

6.5. *Ethical Opportunities and Challenges Related to Intimacy*

According to our findings, journalists’ commitment to their role in informing the public through both daily news podcasts and documentaries remained paramount even though this format allowed for a more creative approach to news production: “The commitment is the same. In the end, we are doing journalism one way or another” (J5). Despite the closer connection with listeners, the use of the first person, and the inherent intimacy of podcasting, all journalists emphasized their ability to separate facts from opinions. However, many also expressed enthusiasm for the format’s flexibility and creative freedom.

Other opportunities were noted, supporting an “integrated” viewpoint (Eco, 1995) as expressed by Beckett and Deuze (2016), Euritt (2023), and Lecheler (2020). Indeed, podcasts may strengthen journalism: “If you want to keep pace with society, a daily format is necessary. It seems ideal for how news is consumed today” (J6). Similarly, the versatility of listening through headphones—or earbuds—was mentioned as a means of facilitating access to news, thereby revitalizing the public sphere. On the other hand, journalists also expressed concern and a sense of responsibility, acknowledging that, due to the nature of the format, listeners could not immediately cross-check what they heard.

The social function of journalism was also highlighted regarding sources in audio journalism: “I believe that in the task of giving voice, of being an intermediary, of being a loudspeaker for those who had no voice, the podcast is an extraordinary tool for media outlets” (J4). Another key element of journalism, “loyalty” to the audience (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021), was stressed by the same interviewee: “The loyalty contract between a media outlet and its potential audience was expressed here. In other words, I sought elements that could meet the audience’s expectations. In that sense, I thought about the audience every minute” (J4). Opportunities for transparency regarding the methods were scarcely mentioned. Finally, quality was paramount for both daily news podcasts and documentary journalists: “Even if it didn’t guarantee downloads, the product had to always strive for excellence” (J12).

Several key challenges were identified. First, most journalists producing daily news podcasts primarily saw themselves as “storytellers” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017), a role that dominated the sample. As one interviewee explained: “What I aimed to do with each podcast was to tell a story, not just provide a summary of current events...the fundamental purpose of journalism was to tell the story of life” (J4).

The role of a “storyteller” implies a naturally closer relationship with the audience, as storytelling inherently involves both a storyteller and a listener, rather than merely disseminating information (Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Jorgensen, 2021). In addition to the storyteller role, these journalists also identify with the roles of “curator,” disseminator, and analyst. These roles predominantly align with the Informational-Instructive parameter and, to a lesser extent, with the Analytical-Deliberative one (analyst), as outlined by Hanitzsch and Vos (2017). It is also worth noting that the role of “friend” was the least valued within this group. As one interviewee notes: “The challenge in a daily news podcast lays in balancing rigor, seriousness, and responsibility with the informative purpose, while incorporating a slightly greater degree of informality in various aspects” (J2), with the latter being particularly significant.

None of the journalists producing documentaries identified themselves as “disseminators”; they all preferred the role of storyteller. Additionally, the role of “inspirator” was frequently mentioned. This reflects a shift towards a greater expression of emotions and a deeper connection with the sense of inspiration sought by audiences (Costera Meijer, 2021). “Storyteller,” “detective,” “inspirator,” and “curator”—along with the “disseminator” role—emerged as essential identities among the journalist interviewees, which also entails a practice oriented towards the Critical-Monitorial parameter (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). “Friend” was highlighted by at least one journalist, reflecting a more intimate connection with the listeners.

Although the assumption of journalistic priority was widespread, applying journalistic principles within such a versatile format was not always straightforward in either type of podcast. The only journalist who admitted to expressing opinions in daily news podcasts emphasized the use of sound elements—particularly the voice—to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion, though few explicitly used the word “opinion.” Another remarked: “If I introduced myself as a journalist, I felt that the definition didn’t fully capture what I did...but that didn’t mean I failed to uphold the principles of the profession” (J14). According to our results, podcasts opened up a more ambiguous space regarding the application of ethical principles:

In the news radio broadcasts, we strived to keep the influence of opinion to a minimum. A podcast is a personalized audio format where the host sometimes speaks in the first person; therefore, it can not be equated with certain other genres. (J12)

Regardless of the fact that the daily news podcasts examined in this study were typically focused on textual content and involved less technical complexity, the editing process remained a significant challenge. Most of the journalists interviewed had experience in radio and other podcast formats, but many of them were self-taught. As one journalist explained, “It’s difficult to translate what your imagination envisioned into what digital software could deliver. While I had the capacity to produce it, I would love to know much more” (J5). In the case of documentaries, journalists generally had less experience and specialized training but benefited from the support of a technical team. Even so, some journalists expressed concerns: “The challenge was to tell stories through sound and music, a language I didn’t usually work with, and to do so without compromising the accuracy of the information” (J8).

7. Conclusions

The findings of this study demonstrate that podcast intimacy, while offering unique opportunities for journalistic engagement, also presents significant ethical challenges. Key concerns identified include the potential confusion among audiences regarding the distinction between facts and opinions, the manipulation of emotions, the concept of emotional truth, and the impact of introducing subjective elements on trust in journalism. These issues are particularly evident in documentaries, which supports H1—journalists producing documentaries are more likely to emphasize emotional engagement and personal connection—and H3—journalists producing documentaries are more likely to encounter ethical challenges related to the blurring of fact and fiction compared to those producing daily news podcasts (news round-ups and deep dive podcasts).

Even though every interviewee was acutely aware of their ethical responsibilities—particularly the need to distinguish fact from opinion—further reflection is warranted on how the intimacy factor influences perceptions of journalistic authority and trust. In addition, methods to increase feedback and transparency in order to clarify the editorial process, emerge as critical areas requiring attention in the study of podcast intimacy. On the other hand, the aural spectrum in podcast journalism offers opportunities to reframe events and avoid re-victimization (Greer, 2017), while also reinforcing journalism’s impact and social function. In daily news podcasts, according to our findings, intimacy is constructed through tone, first-person narration, and an emphasis on immediacy. In contrast, documentaries achieve intimacy through deeper narrative techniques and immersive sound design (Bird & Lindgren, 2024), supporting H2.

In terms of limitations, this study based on interviews with journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries, did not examine other types of podcasts; however, given their unique characteristics, studying extended chat podcasts may provide additional relevant insights.

The application of these findings beyond the Spanish context must be approached with caution. While Spain serves as a valuable case study, given its high podcast consumption and well-established media landscape, the specific media and cultural dynamics at play may not be fully transferable to other markets. Furthermore, our findings are limited to a particular point in time.

We applied Adler’s (2023) framework to analyze intimacy in the discourse of journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries. Our findings confirm that the concept of intimacy requires careful consideration due to the various ways it manifests throughout the production, distribution, and consumption of each podcast

type in journalism. Intimacy may, particularly in documentaries, suggest a deeper reciprocal connection than what truly exists. Even though Adler's (2023) framework allowed us to address our research objectives, a more refined tool is needed to address the unique characteristics of audio journalism and its diverse forms. Some aspects identified in the production processes directly contradict the notion of intimacy, such as the opacity of the production process and the lack of spontaneity linked with the use of a highly detailed script.

Future research should adopt a comprehensive, 360-degree approach to exploring podcast intimacy, using triangulation methods that incorporate perspectives from editors, audiences, content analysis, social media, and open-source data. This would provide a more holistic understanding of what intimacy entails within journalistic podcasts. Finally, while the journalists interviewed were aware of the ethical challenges posed by podcasts, some expressed uncertainties regarding their professional roles. For this reason, further study in this field is critical (Lindgren, 2023). A stronger focus on the ethical implications at stake can help reporters to confidently face the conflicts generated by the ambiguous space that podcasts create, thereby, reinforcing the foundations and trust in today's journalism.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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