

# Podcasting in Serbia: Podcasters' Perspectives on Emerging Roles, Practices, and Functions

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## Abstract

Podcasting has become increasingly popular in Serbia, a hybrid regime country characterized by profound polarization, a lack of media professionalism, and widespread anti-press sentiment. This study aimed to explore how podcast creators view their roles and practices within the evolving media landscape, as well as the implications of podcasting's growing popularity in the Serbian public sphere. The data were obtained through focus groups with 16 independent and mainstream media-affiliated podcasters, exploring their perspectives on podcasting's distinctiveness, functions, affordances, and obstacles. Participants noted the ability of podcasts to provide in-depth analysis of often neglected topics due to their flexible, informal presentation style, as opposed to the perceived routinization, rigidity, and superficiality of traditional media. Podcasters affiliated with professional media described podcasting as an extension of their practices, providing behind-the-scenes insights and additional journalistic content, whereas independent podcasters prioritized genuine conversations to create resonant content tailored to specialized communities. Journalist podcasters attributed the appeal of podcasting to the authenticity and intimacy it creates but emphasized the struggles of matching these features with journalistic standards. While most participants believed that podcasting contributes to greater external pluralism by providing a space for neglected subjects, alternative narratives, and marginalized voices, some were concerned about the possibility of exacerbating polarization, as podcasts frequently serve divided audiences. By exploring the perspectives Serbian podcasters bring to production and the meanings they attach to their roles and practices, this study offers insights for scholars and practitioners exploring media innovation in hybrid regimes and emerging democracies.

## Keywords

authenticity; hybrid regime; intimacy; media innovation; media professionalism; podcasters' perspectives; podcasting; podcasting practice; self-reflexivity; Serbia

## 1. Introduction

Podcasting has steadily gained prominence in Serbia, coinciding with the rising trend of news avoidance (Kleut et al., 2023). It is hardly surprising that audiences are turning away from traditional news outlets at higher rates, given the persistent problems within the Serbian media system, particularly the lack of journalistic professionalism, reflected in significant political parallelism, sensationalism, and partisan coverage (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network [BIRN], 2023; International Research & Exchanges Board, 2023). Furthermore, Serbia's democratic backsliding over the past decade has resulted in a significant erosion of press freedom (Freedom House, 2023). The digital era further exacerbated some of these issues by contributing to information overload and the dissemination of mis- and disinformation.

It is also hardly surprising that podcasting has been attracting increasing attention, considering its global popularity and appeal. Podcasting, characterized by a flexible format, intimate aesthetics, and a tendency toward self-reflexivity, can foster trust and deeper connections with audiences (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Wendland, 2024). Previous research has highlighted its potential to enhance inclusive communication and provide space for alternative narratives (Llinares et al., 2018; Mădroane & Cârlan, 2024; Rae & Diprose, 2024). As a practice rooted in convergence and participatory media culture (see Jenkins, 2006), podcasting holds democratic potential for inclusivity and diversity; however, it remains contingent on the power relations that shape the broader socioeconomic, cultural, and political dynamics involved in its production (see Cwynar, 2019; Euritt, 2022). The same characteristics that render podcasting appealing can also be exploited by corrupt actors to promote extreme rhetoric, misinformation, or divisive narratives (Dowling et al., 2022; Girard, 2024; Speakman & Funk, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore how podcast creators view their roles and practices within the evolving media landscape, along with the implications of the growing popularity of podcasts in the Serbian public sphere. Our study mostly aligns with the socio-cultural tradition in podcast studies, focusing on the ever-evolving practices and social dynamics that shape the meaning of podcasts (Sharon, 2023). Studying the perspectives of podcast creators is important because it provides insights into the meanings they attach to their practices and their view of their role in shaping public discourse (see Laughlin, 2023; Markman & Sawyer, 2014; Millette, 2011; Tennant, 2023). Our study is set in Serbia, a representative of a hybrid regime—an underexplored context in a field dominated by Western-centric research. It responds to Laughlin's (2023) call to expand research to podcasters' perspectives, as "there are interpretive communities of podcasters all over the world producing influential work and creating new advances in the industry and form" (p. 821). Recognizing the dual potential of podcasting—as a tool for both media innovation and manipulation—we hope that our findings will advance the conversation on podcasters' perception of its potential to disrupt, complement, or even undermine the existing media landscape in contexts beyond established democracies.

## 2. Podcasting as Media Innovation

While podcasting emerged as a mechanism for distributing and archiving audio content, its popularity and evolution are closely tied to its ability to create unique sound aesthetics and foster genre experimentation at the intersections of journalism, art, entertainment, and education (Berry, 2018; Millette, 2011; Sharon, 2023). As such, we tentatively observe podcasts as a site for experimenting with innovative practices in

public communication (e.g., Berry, 2018), which present both opportunities and challenges in hybrid media environments (Martinoli, 2020). We proceed with a review of podcasting's most discussed features and emerging practices before providing an overview of the Serbian podcasting scene and presenting research questions that guided our empirical inquiry.

### **2.1. Intimacy and Parasocial Relationships**

Intimacy is often seen as a distinguishing feature of podcasting, fostering a sense of close connection between hosts and audiences (e.g., Adler Berg, 2023; Euritt, 2022; Lindgren, 2023). This type of mediated proximity often strengthens parasocial interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956), wherein listeners develop one-sided attachments to podcasters (Adler Berg, 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023), viewing them as *friends in their ears* (McGregor, 2022). Berry (2016) describes this connection as *hyper-intimacy*, stressing that podcasts not only engage listeners through audio contact but also foster communities of shared interest, often extending relationships through social media. Similarly, Adler Berg (2023) notes that intimacy in podcasting extends from listening practices to topic selection, content presentation, and cross-media interactions, shaped by the medium's aural qualities and Web 2.0 culture.

At the same time, the intimacy inherent in podcasting carries some risks. Euritt (2022) notes that intimacy is inextricably linked to the power dynamics involved in a relationship. Podcast intimacy engages with power structures embedded in culturally accessible narratives and discourses, with the potential to both challenge and reinforce them. Audiences who form strong parasocial relationships with podcast hosts may become more susceptible to persuasive messages and vulnerable to trust breaches (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Intimacy in podcasting often involves pronounced emotional appeal (Lindgren, 2023), which can be weaponized to spread misinformation and polarizing rhetoric, increasing social divisions (Dowling et al., 2022). Therefore, while intimacy is key to podcasting's appeal, it necessitates careful ethical consideration, particularly in terms of its impact on public discourse and the possibility for parasocial ties to influence audience perceptions and emotions (Adler Berg, 2023; Lindgren, 2023; Schlütz & Hedder, 2022).

### **2.2. Self-Reflexivity and Authenticity**

Self-reflexivity and authenticity have emerged as common features that allow podcasters to set their content apart from more routinized professional media formats (Laughlin, 2023; Sullivan, 2018). Unlike the strict editorial standards and vetted content of traditional media, podcasting often takes a raw, unedited approach infused with the host's personal anecdotes and self-revelations to connect with audiences. For example, hosts may openly reveal personal struggles or views on complex social issues, signaling their values and identities, and offering audiences insight into their lived experiences (see Meserko, 2015; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). In an era of growing media criticisms, this approach can help humanize newsmen and make audiences more familiar with the complexities of the journalistic process (see Dowling & Miller, 2019). Audiences may respond positively to expressions of self-reflexive authenticity, as these disclose the hosts' flaws and virtues, making them more relatable (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022).

For Laughlin (2023), the emphasis on authenticity in podcasting reflects a generational understanding shaped by millennials' experiences growing up with social media. The study by Soto-Vásquez et al. (2022) shows that while audiences value authenticity, they often question whether it is staged. Given the

importance placed on authenticity in podcasting, it is easy to see how producers might use it strategically to enhance the effectiveness of their messages. Brinson and Lemon (2023) found that parasocial relationships with hosts are associated with perceived authenticity in ad readings. Participants in their study described these ads as relatable and the podcasters' delivery as sincere, often trusting them to be genuine users of the advertised products. Another study (Cwynar, 2019) analyzed entrepreneurial reality podcasts, concluding that "perceived transparency and self-reflexivity work in conjunction with curated authenticity to create reality soundwork programs that effectively promote the businesses and personalities behind them without registering as excessively promotional" (p. 325).

### **2.3. Flexibility and Informality**

Podcasting offers versatility in formats and presentation styles, creating distinct advantages over traditional media, particularly in terms of audience engagement. This versatility allows podcasters to experiment with creative approaches, from polished and edited broadcasts to spontaneous, conversational formats that engage with audiences on a more intimate level (Day et al., 2017). The relative lack of restrictions in terms of time and structure allows podcast production to incorporate humor, banter, and personal anecdotes (e.g., Bratcher & Cabosky, 2022; Hanley, 2024; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). For instance, Hanley's (2024) research on social work podcasters in England demonstrates how podcasting's casual nature enables these producers to discuss complex social issues in a relatable and approachable way. It finds that the informal nature of podcasting is linked to increased attention and may facilitate learning (Drew, 2017). Meanwhile, Newman and Gallo (2020) show that informality is valued not only by independent podcasters but also by those affiliated with traditional media, such as the BBC. The same study finds that the Covid-19 pandemic may have further promoted flexibility in podcasting.

The lack of regulation may foster flexibility and informality in podcasting, but it also raises concerns about content reliability by bypassing standard editorial conventions. Increasing scrutiny surrounds podcasting's role in spreading misinformation, conspiracy theories, and echo chambers (e.g., Colbjørnsen, 2024; Girard, 2024; Wirtschafter, 2023). For instance, Girard (2024) discusses how far-right women podcasters use the medium to normalize extreme ideological positions and events like the January 6 insurrection. The informal nature of podcasting may limit audiences' critical participation, as its casual tone can blur the line between truth and opinion. Dowling et al. (2022) capture this by showing how right-wing podcasters in the US use opinion and emotional appeal to delegitimize professional journalism. Politicians, too, have leveraged podcasting's informal approach; Bratcher and Cabosky (2022) reveal that during the 2020 US primary, candidates used podcasts to "code-switch," presenting themselves as more relatable to targeted audiences. While this strategy may have helped broaden campaign agendas to include issues like race relations, the authors caution that it may also lead to cynical pandering through authenticity-signaling.

### **2.4. Narrative Techniques and Engagement**

Reliance on storytelling and narrative elements has become a prominent practice in modern podcasting. Lindgren (2016) describes personal narrative journalism in podcasting as a blend of storytelling principles and confessional journalism, where human experiences take center stage, and the podcaster often becomes a character in the story. Dowling and Miller (2019) discuss how storytelling and narrative techniques create immersive environments for podcast listeners, offering a window into others' experiences. During the early

months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Nee and Santana (2021) documented a widespread use of narrative elements in news podcasts, resulting in a shift from objective journalism to interpretive reporting. Narrative elements can help focus audiences' attention on important topics and make complex social issues more accessible (Nee & Santana, 2021). Exposure to narrative news is also associated with fostering compassion, positive emotions, and behavioral intentions toward marginalized groups (Oliver et al., 2012).

Yet, Nee and Santana (2021) note that storytelling elements tend to take precedence, rendering news secondary in narrative podcast formats. In addition, significant ethical dilemmas arise as audiences may struggle to distinguish facts from subjective accounts and opinions, which often blend seamlessly (Lindgren, 2016; Nee & Santana, 2021). This is particularly pronounced in genres like documentary serials, which mediate reality through the intersecting lenses of journalism, arts, and entertainment (Dowling & Miller, 2019).

### 3. Podcasting and the Public Sphere in Serbia

Serbia's media environment is characterized by extreme division, a lack of media professionalism, and a growing anti-press sentiment (BIRN, 2023; International Research & Exchanges Board, 2023; Kleut et al., 2023). Traditional media outlets are often perceived as strongly associated with political agendas, leading to widespread distrust and cynicism (Markov & Min, 2023). According to Pjesivac (2017), public distrust in the media is mainly due to perceived corruption and a loss of journalistic integrity. This distrust often manifests as animosity toward the press, further fueled by sensationalism and the spread of disinformation (Markov & Đorđević, 2024). These characteristics foster a highly polarized media climate, one in which public discourse often fails to align with the public interest.

According to a recent report, 65% of internet users in Serbia sometimes or often avoid the news (Kleut et al., 2023). This report uses the same methodology as the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's *Digital News Report 2022* and concludes that Serbia ranks higher in news avoidance than 46 other countries included in the 2022 report (Newman et al., 2023). Interestingly, 49% of Serbian respondents cited listening to at least one podcast during the preceding month, above the average of 34% of monthly listeners across 20 countries with a developed podcasting industry. While the study sample only includes internet users and overrepresents highly educated individuals, suggesting that the actual number of podcast listeners is likely lower, it still highlights the growing popularity of podcasting among Serbian audiences. According to Martinoli (2020), the popularity of podcasting in Serbia may stem from the perception that podcasts offer a platform for marginalized or less mainstream perspectives, fostering a sense of community among listeners.

In 2019, a local association called Podkast Podrška (Podcast Support) launched podcast.rs—a podcast generator platform for producers and listeners in Serbia and the wider Western Balkans. Jovana Tripunović, the project coordinator at Podkast Podrška, shared that podcast.rs ended its first year with 20 local and regional podcasts. Following the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number surged to 200 and has been steadily increasing since, reaching 460 podcasts as of September 2024. Tripunović also revealed that podcast.rs has transparent terms of use, outlining prohibited behavior and content. Two podcasts were removed for violating these terms (personal communication, September 17, 2024). While most of the content is produced in Serbian, several podcasts are available in other regional languages, including Bosnian, Croatian, and Montenegrin. Although many of the 460 podcasts have been discontinued over the past five

years, 220 have released at least one episode in the last six months. They cover a wide range of topics, including current affairs, business and entrepreneurship, mental health, popular culture, sports, science, technology, etc. Serbian podcasters predominately produce extended chat formats, which Newman et al. (2023) define as personality-driven long interviews characterized by an informal style. This format remains highly popular across markets and is attractive to producers due to its relatively low production costs.

Podkast Podrška (2023) conducted a survey of regional podcast producers and self-selected audiences to explore podcasters' challenges and the potential for financial sustainability, as well as audiences' needs and habits. According to this report, most podcast audiences follow 1–2 podcasts weekly or 3–5 monthly. The main reason for tuning in is to learn something new and gain in-depth knowledge on a topic. Accordingly, 91.6% of respondents cited content quality and guest selection as key criteria for choosing a podcast. YouTube is the first choice for podcast access for 53.6% of respondents, whilst 37.7% primarily use audio platforms.

The same report found that nearly two-thirds of podcasters are between 30 and 45 years old, while 80.8% work in teams of 2–4 people. Almost 60% of podcasters publish their episodes weekly. In terms of content distribution, 84.6% make their podcasts available on both audio and video platforms, while the remainder publish exclusively on audio platforms. On audio platforms, 51.9% of podcasters reach fewer than 1,000 listeners per episode, while 46.2% attract up to 10,000 listeners. On YouTube, 27.5% have a viewership of fewer than 1,000 per episode, while 56.5% attract up to 10,000. More than three-quarters of podcasters reported a perceived increase in their audience over the past six months. For 57.7%, podcasting is a hobby, with only 5.8% citing it as their primary profession and sole source of income. Among those who monetize their podcasts, 51.5% rely on audience support and donations. A lack of access to advertisers and resources for promotional activities remains the primary challenge for podcasters, with 60% identifying it as their main concern.

Based on the reviewed literature, podcasting possesses features that could mitigate some of the shortcomings in the Serbian media landscape and public sphere. Among other things, podcasting provides a sense of autonomy that may attract creators discouraged by the lack of editorial independence or the prevalence of sensationalist practices in Serbian media. Podcasting also fosters authenticity, intimacy, and self-reflexivity, which could help alleviate widespread distrust among Serbian audiences. However, these same characteristics may be misused, potentially transforming podcasting into a tool for deepening social divisions. To explore how these dilemmas resonate with Serbian podcasters and how they make sense of and navigate emerging roles and practices, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Serbian podcasters perceive the unique features of podcasting compared to traditional media formats?

RQ2: What techniques do Serbian podcasters employ to connect with their audiences?

RQ3: What is Serbian podcasters' perception regarding podcasting as a site for renegotiating professional media norms and roles?

RQ4: What is Serbian podcasters' view of podcasting's potential to foster a more inclusive and democratic public sphere in Serbia?



## 4. Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted four focus groups with 16 podcasters in Serbia. Since there is no clear sampling frame for this population, we began by mapping the Serbian podcasting landscape using publicly available data from popular streaming services and platforms, such as *podcast.rs*. Through purposive sampling, we aimed to construct a theoretical sample that reflects the topical diversity of popular Serbian podcasts. This included both independent podcasters (see Markman, 2012; Millette, 2011; Tennant, 2023) and those affiliated with traditional media outlets.

Participants were chosen based on several criteria. First, we targeted podcasts that were active during the data collection period. This meant they were either maintaining a regular publication schedule, preparing their next episode, or, in the case of seasonal breaks, planning for the next season. Given the rapidly evolving nature of podcasting, we focused on active podcasters to gather the most relevant insights into current challenges, trends, and opportunities within the Serbian podcasting landscape. Next, in line with this study's aim to explore creators' perspectives on the role of podcasting in the Serbian public sphere, we prioritized podcasts that addressed social issues and current affairs broadly defined. These included news podcasts and those on specialized topics (e.g., science, technology, or health), provided they included social commentary on these subjects. According to Kleut et al. (2023), such podcasts are followed by 67.3% of Serbian podcast audiences. Concurrently, we excluded podcasts focused exclusively on sports, entertainment, language learning, comedy, art reviews, scripted drama, true crime, and children's programming to maintain our focus on content contributing directly to public discourse on social issues. Finally, we aimed for a balanced representation of independent and mainstream media-affiliated podcasters, as we expected that these groups would have distinct perspectives on podcasting's potential to reshape public communication norms and practices. This proved to be a challenge since independent podcasters significantly outnumber those affiliated with mainstream media. Following these criteria, we contacted 30 candidates, 20 of whom accepted our invitation, with 16 ultimately participating in the interviews (see Table 1). The final sample comprised podcasters covering a broad range of topics—from politics and culture to specialized subjects—reflecting the diversity of Serbia's podcasting scene. The sample also represented varied experiences and perspectives due to a relatively balanced gender representation, diverse institutional affiliations, and differing years of podcasting experience. All participants agreed to have their real names used in the article, both before the focus groups and after reviewing the draft manuscript to confirm that their quotes were accurately attributed and that they still felt comfortable with their names being included.

Upon obtaining the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade (approval no. 608 from May 21, 2024), we conducted four focus groups in June and July 2024, each lasting an average of 92 minutes. This approach allowed us to capitalize on dynamic interactions among participants, observing how they debate and reflect on their professional responsibilities, challenges, aspirations, and norms—dynamics shaped by broader social interactions within the podcasting community and related professional networks. As Barbour (2018) suggests, focus group discussions facilitate a deeper understanding of collective processes by enabling participants to engage with and build upon each other's experiences and perspectives. Focus groups are particularly useful for directly observing similarities and differences in participants' responses to professional and ethical issues, rather than making inferences based on separate observations (Morgan, 1997). Previous studies have used focus groups to explore the

**Table 1.** Focus group participants.

Name	Podcast Title	Podcast Topic	Media Affiliation	No. of Episodes (Start Year)
Ivan Minić	Pojačalo	Entrepreneurship	Independent	275 (2018)
Ivan Ćosić	Još podkast jedan	Current affairs, professional development, and entrepreneurship	Independent	169 (2021)
Vladimir Trifunović	Dijalog	Social issues, national identity, religion	Independent	82 (2021)
Čedomir Vučinić	Šta je Danas na meniju?	Current affairs, culture, politics, and social issues	Danas	16 (2023)
Brankica Matić	Reflektor	Local entrepreneurship	Storyteller.rs	27 (2023)
Vojislav Žanetić	NA	NA	NA	NA
Radmilo Marković	BIRN priča	Investigative journalism	BIRN	28 (2022)
Dimitrije Gašić	Neću da ćutim	Socio-economic issues	Nova ekonomija	29 (2020)
Iva Branković	Kako da izgradite bolji život/Otvoreni razgovori	Mental health, personal development	Velike priče/Independent	55 (2023)/29 (2017)
Tamara Bajčić	Pola sata Demostata	Current affairs	Demostat, Danas	71 (2022)
Aleksandra Trajković Arsić	Da se razumemo	Social issues	Radio Television of Serbia	2 (2024)
Marko Nikolić	Lokomotiva	Current affairs, geopolitical relations	Russia Today Balkan	53 (2022)
Gorica Nikolin	Podkast Inicijative A11	Human rights, social welfare, and economic inequality	Independent	13 (2020)
Milica Veljković	Mi možemo sve	Social inclusion, advocacy, and personal stories of people with disabilities	Independent	16 (2023)
Lara Končar	Zvučna etnografija	Society and culture, anthropology, social science, and humanities	Radio Aparat	76 (2014)
Goran Jankuloski	Žiška/Kolegijum	Marketing, advertising, cultural commentary/Entrepreneurship, technology, media, culture	Independent	225 (2019)/24 (2023)

Note: Vojislav Žanetić is a creative consultant who was involved in the creation of various popular podcasts and contributed to the popularity of podcasting in Serbia and, as such, he was included in the sample as an expert participant in the podcasting scene rather than an active podcaster.



perspectives of podcasters (Tennant, 2023) and audiences (Heiselberg & Have, 2023), demonstrating the method's effectiveness in capturing dynamics within podcasting communities.

The discussions were semi-structured; researchers provided prompts as conversation starters and allowed conversations to develop naturally among participants while ensuring they remained relevant to the study's topic. We typically began by asking about participants' motivation to engage in podcasting over other media formats, before addressing the techniques they use in their work and their methods for engaging audiences at different stages of production. Finally, we explored participants' perspectives on the impact of the rising popularity of podcasts on the public sphere in Serbia.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive thematic coding. During the first reading, both researchers independently identified meaning units and assigned preliminary codes to them. The researchers then discussed their early insights and how they related to the study's research questions. In subsequent readings, researchers looked for patterns in codes, merging meaning units, and comparing them to the existing literature. In the final stage, we described a set of patterns that provided succinct but meaningful insights into the data and situated them within the broader literature on podcasting and media studies.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1. *Perceived Distinctiveness of Podcasting*

Regardless of their affiliation with mainstream media or journalistic background, our participants consistently described the affordances of podcasting as the aspect that made it their preferred media format (RQ1). They highlighted that podcasting facilitates a deep dive into meaningful topics with its flexible form and presentation style, tailored to the author's sensibility and skills. This was contrasted with mainstream media, which were depicted as superficial, frequently focused on trivial topics, rigid in presentation, and constrained by numerous professional and external factors.

According to our participants, podcasting allows for focusing on topics that truly matter to audiences, which are either absent from mainstream media or inadequately addressed. This aligns with Markman (2012), who found that content motives, including passion for the subject matter, serve as a driving force for starting and continuing podcasting. More recent research supports the enduring relevance of in-depth treatment of subjects for Spanish podcasters and listeners (García-Marín, 2020) as well as for journalistic podcasters in Austria, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland (Körner & Graßl, 2024). As Goran Jankuloski put it: "A podcast is a format that, if it involves a sufficiently skilled author, offers an in-depth analysis that you can't get anywhere else."

Regarding the "can't-get-anywhere-else" aspect, some participants stress that podcasting provides an opportunity to strengthen expert voices in public discussions often perceived as cacophonous. In her podcasts, Iva Branković covers psychological subjects that have become increasingly more mainstream but are often discussed by "gurus and shamans" instead of experts. "We talk about emotional literacy, assertiveness, ways to cope with difficulties, and how to overcome difficult situations," she stated, concluding that "podcasts offer the privilege to have your own platform where you can present something

you think is important and relevant to people, and potentially useful to them.” In addition to skills and expertise, the selection of topics and depth of coverage were also associated with podcasters’ lived experiences. Milica Veljković started her podcast to focus on the stories and lives of people with disabilities, exemplifying the potential of podcasting to empower often underrepresented communities. This finding resonates with previous research investigating podcasting among underserved communities, such as Rae and Diprose’s (2024) study of Australian rural women podcasters or minority ethnic groups in the UK (Vrikki & Malik, 2019).

Contrasting the topic selection and diversity in podcasts with that of mainstream media provides early insight into how perceptions of traditional media might shape podcasting practices. Aleksandra Trajković Arsić, a journalist at the national public broadcaster RTS, expressed a moderate view. She started her podcast because she believed that “the public broadcaster doesn’t provide enough space for topics that stand out, that are different” and for “stories about ordinary people and...subjects like freedom, democracy, the LGBT population, and women’s rights.” She wanted “to delve deeper into such issues and view them from multiple perspectives.” Others were more critical of the mainstream media, echoing negative public sentiments toward media reported in previous research from Serbia (e.g., Markov & Min, 2023). These participants believed that the mainstream media agenda failed to reflect the informational needs of the Serbian public:

Radmilo Marković: People are turning their backs on the media...they want to listen to people who are independent.

Vojislav Žanetić: Exactly. Because they don’t want to listen to the news....Mainstream media produces useless information.

Brankica Matić: And they keep doing the same thing over and over again.

Finally, participants emphasized the flexibility of podcasts in form and presentation as another key distinction. Traditional media formats were seen as time-constrained; as Vojislav Žanetić put it, there is “an exact amount of time for commercials, exact length of commercials. Everything is rigid, everything must fit within a mold. A podcast is an unmolded conversation. It must sound spontaneous.” Traditional reporting was described as overly restricted by professional standards and commercial demands, whereas podcasting was seen as a medium that thrives on creativity and authenticity. This was consistent with previous works that emphasized the importance of professional autonomy for podcasters, free from the control of gatekeepers (e.g., Berry, 2018; Millette, 2011; Sullivan, 2018). Vladimir Trifunović stated that podcasting provided him with the autonomy and flexibility he was missing in traditional media, which in turn inspired him to produce more creative content that can develop in unexpected directions. “We could start with a story about football and end up discussing a spiritual journey to Mount Athos, so you never know where a story might take you, as long as the conversation has value for the audiences,” he said.

## **5.2. Media Techniques and Audience Engagement**

RQ2 addresses specific techniques employed to create engaging content and form relationships with audiences. We observed notable differences between podcasters affiliated with mainstream media and those that are independent. The former typically perceive podcasting as an extension of their outlets, aiming

to reach new audiences and break through established media bubbles. They leverage their experience to incorporate meta-narrative and self-reflexive elements into their podcasts, providing listeners with behind-the-scenes insights into journalism and news production. Independent podcasters, on the other hand, often target niche communities with specific interests, creating content that resonates deeply with their audiences and building loyal, dedicated listener bases. A charismatic podcast host is seen as central, with spontaneous conversations resonating more effectively with audiences than professional interviews, which are often perceived as formulaic and uninspired.

One way to view podcasts, albeit a narrow one, is as a distribution mechanism for pre-existing content (see Sharon, 2023). While this practice exists in Serbia, it was not prominent among our participants who produce podcasts for professional news outlets. Some participants sought to use podcasting to align with the media habits of contemporary audiences, such as multitasking (see Perks et al., 2019), seeing it as an opportunity to create accessible and convenient content. As Iva Branković stated: “Our podcast actually supports the articles in *Velike priče* [an online news magazine practicing explanatory and analytical reporting] because it allows people to hear the content more quickly and easily since most prefer listening over reading.” Consistent with Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022), some participants saw podcasting as a way to practice transparency and claim professional authority through meta-journalistic narratives. BIRN launched the *BIRN priča* podcast in order “to talk with BIRN journalists after they publish a story, to see what lies behind...and how the story emerged” (Radmilo Marković). Similarly, Čedomir Vučinić stated that the *Danas* (daily newspaper) podcast sought to “allow people to peek into the newsroom and discover the dynamics underlying news production.”

Participants affiliated with mainstream media also referenced the importance of storytelling and intimacy in creating engaging content. While such responses were not prevalent, they signal that some journalists in our sample are attentive to emerging podcast aesthetics (e.g., Dowling & Miller, 2019; Hänninen & Rautiainen-Keskustalo, 2023) and are willing to experiment. For instance, Brankica Matić explained that these principles are reflected in the name of her digital outlet *Storyteller.rs*, which focuses on local topics and caters to the Slovak minority in Serbia, with a mission to practice modular, narrative, and solutions journalism while adhering to high professional and ethical standards. She noted that her podcast *Reflektor* adopts the same credo, recognizing that some important topics, like those at the intersection of gender and entrepreneurship, are best told through personal stories.

While podcasters affiliated with mainstream media described building on journalistic practices to produce accessible and engaging content for their existing audiences and to attract new ones, independent podcasters described a different approach. A prevalent view among independent podcasters was that specific podcasting techniques are secondary, if not trivial, to the social relevance of a podcast. As Goran Jankuloski stated, “Crucial for a podcast is not that a single episode functions as a narrative whole; much more important is the broader social conversation that the podcast aligns with.” For Ivan Minić, “the problem with techniques is that people cling to them too rigidly. Techniques [in podcasting] are like strategies in football. Someone is on the other side, and you can’t play how you want to because they won’t allow it.”

Along similar lines, independent podcasters emphasized authenticity, creativity, flexibility, and spontaneity as key. This finding resonates strongly with previous literature (see Laughlin, 2023; Tennant, 2023), particularly Sullivan (2018), who found that podcasters strive for authenticity to counter the perceived generic, heavily

commercialized, and formulaic content in mainstream media. Similarly, Millette (2011) placed authenticity at the center of the subcultural dynamic connecting podcasters in Montreal with their communities of shared meaning. Rather than focusing on expanding audiences, the independent podcasters in our sample emphasized the significance of close community connections formed around hosts, listeners, other podcasters, and guests. Ivan Minić called them “oases,” indicating their niche status and their positioning relative to the mainstream, in line with the “demassified” logic of podcasting (Wendland, 2024). In the words of Ivan Ćosić, “There may be 1,000, or 10,000, or only 500 people—it doesn’t matter. If they trust you, even if it’s 500, that’s 500 people eager to hear what you have to say and what guests you have chosen.”

### 5.3. Professional Roles

With RQ3, we wanted to explore the extent to which podcasting can serve as a platform for renegotiating professional norms and practices. Building on the answers to previous questions, we describe how conceptions of professional roles may vary depending on a podcaster’s journalistic background. The primary issue for our participants was determining how prominent the podcaster’s presence should be, including expressions of their personality, opinions, and values.

As a medium that bridges broadcasting and the internet, podcasting blends the characteristics of traditional media and journalism with the participatory culture and produsage ethos of Web 2.0 (Berry, 2018; Markman, 2012). As the medium matures, distinct professional identities begin to form (Berry, 2018). Consistent with previous findings, some independent podcasters in our sample emphasized the distinction between their work and journalism. As Ivan Minić stated, “Five years later, some people still don’t understand that I am not a journalist, not a news anchor, but a host. I don’t ask questions; I sit and talk to people.” In line with Sullivan (2018), independent podcasters in our study could be described as pro-ams—amateur media creators who set professional standards. They shape podcasting standards not through excellence in professional journalism but through domain expertise, authentic communication, and entrepreneurial savvy. Common for independent podcasters was to contrast journalistic interviews, which they perceived as overly structured, shallow, or formulaic, with podcast conversations, which they described as more creative, deep, and spontaneous. Vladimir Trifunović highlighted this distinction, naming his podcast *Dijalog* (Dialogue) to emphasize “active listening” over rigidly sticking to a list of prepared questions. Similarly, Ivan Ćosić criticized “overly prepared journalists who do not participate in their own conversations” but rather “wait for the moment to ask their question without truly listening to the response.” While these examples illustrate how podcasting can foster innovation in media formats, it is also important to recognize that the same features could be exploited for malicious purposes. For instance, Dowling et al. (2022) argue that some conservative podcasters in the US use the medium’s intimacy and informality to deliver highly partisan coverage, spread unfounded claims, and demonize mainstream media. Although our study did not examine the content, this aspect warrants close monitoring, particularly given the pervasive anti-press sentiment and polarized political climate in Serbia.

For podcasters with a journalistic background, the tension centered on reconciling different professional roles as both journalists and podcasters. They emphasized the relevance of journalism; as Dimitrije Gašić noted, “We must remember that the essence of every podcast is the story and the interview, which is the cornerstone of journalism.” However, they also discussed how their journalistic background could complicate their role as podcasters. Milica Veljković reflected on her transition from being a journalist at a

regional public broadcaster to becoming an independent podcaster: “It was quite difficult for me to break out of that pattern, to move away from the journalistic structure and truly feel that it’s not just an interview, but a genuine, two-way conversation.” As Heiselberg and Have (2023) have shown, in addition to knowledge and storytelling, audiences expect podcast hosts to foster parasociality through a lively personality, enthusiasm, self-disclosure, and everyday language. This expectation aligns with how independent podcasters in our study perceive their roles. In contrast, journalist-podcasters in our sample described struggling to enact this role due to their adherence to journalistic conventions. For Aleksandra Trajković Arsić, “the biggest challenge was getting used to the idea that I should express my own opinion. In traditional journalism, you have no right to an opinion.” Despite these challenges, our participants agreed that journalism is not incompatible with podcasting, but that it requires journalists to “reveal their traits, even their flaws, make them more visible, instead of being amorphous” (Dimitrije Gašić).

#### 5.4. Perceived Impact of Podcasting in the Public Sphere

RQ4 asked about participants’ perspectives on the role and transformative potential of podcasts within the Serbian public sphere. Most participants agreed that the current podcasting scene more accurately reflects public opinion and informational demand in Serbia than traditional media. This was attributed to the perceived high external pluralism—diversity within the podcasting landscape—and the space it created for marginalized voices and neglected subjects. In contrast, internal pluralism—within a single podcast—was typically perceived as low, with some participants expressing concern that this could exacerbate polarization. Participants also identified sustainability issues as a limiting factor.

Echoing previous research (e.g., Rae & Diprose, 2024; Vrikki & Malik, 2019), participants credited podcasting with providing a platform for voices and topics that remain overlooked by the mainstream. While they did not express “utopian” views on the democratic potential of podcasting (see Laughlin, 2023; Sullivan, 2018), they noted its current contributions to external pluralism (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004) by introducing new perspectives into public discourse. Tamara Bajčić stated: “Podcasts provide the opportunity to hear things and choose between perspectives that cannot be heard on traditional media.” Goran Jankuloski highlights that this exemplifies the power of podcasting in the current media landscape: “Take the Rio Tinto controversy [opposition to a lithium mining project due to environmental concerns]: No platform or outlet educated citizens about it better than *Agelast* [a popular podcast].” Aleksandra Trajković Arsić expressed the view that “thanks to some of these podcasts, issues like women’s rights are being increasingly discussed.” She added: “It seems to me that podcasts are on the right track to becoming the main driver of this agenda, not necessarily on a daily basis, but in shaping the media agenda in a broader sense.”

Consistent with previous studies showing that podcasters actively reappraise traditional journalistic values (e.g., Lindgren, 2023; Nee & Santana, 2021), some participants—particularly independent podcasters—did not claim a commitment to objectivity in their content. Instead, they emphasized openness and transparency regarding their values, presenting their subjectivity as a strength, consistent with the principle of authenticity (see Millette, 2011). As Gorica Nikolin explained:

Considering we are a civil society organization, our podcast is entirely driven by our values and goals. We criticize governmental measures that have caused some people to become marginalized, along with the context and culture that treat marginalized people differently.

In a similar vein, Iva Branković stated:

I don't know about other podcasts, but I feel they tend not to be objective, or at least ours isn't. We have certain value-based, theoretical, practical, and experiential convictions about what psychological subject we should aim to cover. And we don't really invite guests who could strongly disagree with us. Our goal is rather to promote certain ideas.

She also echoed concerns raised by other participants about showcasing various opinions without engaging in meaningful dialogue, which could contribute to further polarization:

I'd like to think that having diverse voices helps reduce differences and polarization, but I'm afraid that's not how it works....We're getting closer to a situation where there are so many voices that we are unable to hear each other.

There were also participants who expressed skepticism regarding the role of podcasting in the public sphere. Addressing the researchers, Ivan Minić said: "I feel like you are constantly trying to give additional value to it," adding, "expecting from a podcast to improve society or even to have a mere role in that process is, in my opinion, completely ungrounded."

In addition to these concerns, participants often highlighted the issue of sustainability in their podcast production (see Sullivan, 2018). This was less of a concern for participants with stable incomes who treated podcasting as a hobby, as well as the few independent podcasters who had managed to secure regular sponsorships. For most of them, however, it was an insurmountable challenge. Some participants affiliated with mainstream media outlets reported having difficulties convincing their management that it was worthwhile investing in podcasts that did not appear to generate revenue. Others described struggling to secure sponsorship deals and the attention of advertising agencies because their reach was perceived as insufficiently broad. As a result, many participants reported relying on project funding, making it difficult to plan and maintain a regular publication schedule. This sometimes meant compromising on subject selection depending on the availability of funding calls.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights the significance of podcasting as a platform for alternative narratives and marginalized voices in Serbia's fragmented media landscape, which is dominated by strong partisan agendas and sensationalism. While podcasting provides an opportunity to challenge dominant discourse and deepen public debate (Mădroane & Cărlan, 2024; Rae & Diprose, 2024; Vrikki & Malik, 2019), its contribution to the public sphere depends, at least in part, on podcasters' perceptions of professional news media and how they navigate the medium's affordances and emerging roles. Our discussions with podcasters revealed gaps in professional and ethical norms within the medium, signaling a tension between the desire for personal expression and the responsibility to provide credible information in the public interest. An important dilemma faced by our participants—one that warrants further attention—is whether podcasting should strive to uphold traditional journalistic norms, like objectivity, or instead prioritize authenticity and transparency (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022).

Rather than viewing podcasting as a disruptive force in the media environment, our participants saw it in a more modest light. For some, podcasting represented a hybrid genre that blends traditional journalistic techniques with the unique qualities of digital platforms (see Lindgren, 2016). Others saw it as a trendy expression of participatory online culture, more akin to forums and blogging practices than to journalism (see Laughlin, 2023; Millette, 2011). Accordingly, our participants perceived the role of podcasting in the Serbian public sphere primarily as either providing a complementary media agenda or offering an alternative one intended for niche audiences. In both cases, the trust between podcasters and their audiences was recognized as a defining strength; however, balancing between emotional bonds and a commitment to public interest requires further scrutiny. Future research may investigate how the medium's emotional appeal and close connections with audiences influence public engagement and contribute to information disorder.

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings and planning future studies. Our relatively small sample size was designed for exploratory purposes. Future studies may consider employing survey methods to test the prevalence of the patterns identified in a more representative sample. Furthermore, we focused solely on podcasters' perspectives, leaving audience experiences unexplored. For a more comprehensive account, future research may consider exploring the degree of alignment between podcasters' and audiences' views regarding the role of podcasting in the public sphere. Finally, as this study focused solely on Serbia, comparative research across hybrid regimes and backsliding democracies would provide additional insight into how digital media innovations may evolve under systemic constraints.

In Serbia and other hybrid regimes, podcasting, as a form of media innovation, has the capacity to challenge established patterns and address shortcomings in public communication. In the future, the contributions of podcasting to a more inclusive and democratic public sphere will depend on podcasters' ability to effectively navigate professional and ethical challenges concerning autonomy, expression, and social responsibility. To fully harness the potential of podcasting, it is essential to develop and implement self-regulation and media literacy frameworks that emphasize accountability while fostering media pluralism.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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