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## Balancing Intimacy and Trust in Audio Journalism

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### Abstract

This thematic issue explores the complex relationship between intimacy and trust in audio journalism, particularly focusing on podcasting as it evolves as a medium. It examines how podcasting’s intimate format creates both opportunities and challenges for journalistic practice. The opportunities include enhanced storytelling capabilities, deeper audience connections, and the ability to address social justice issues more effectively, as demonstrated through various case studies from sports podcasting to investigative journalism. However, the studies also identify significant risks, including the potential for parasocial relationships to compromise journalistic integrity, the challenge of maintaining professional standards while fostering audience connection, and the possibility of reinforcing echo chambers rather than bridging societal divides. The research spans multiple geographical contexts, from Serbian podcasting in hybrid regimes to Chinese platforms, offering insights into how these dynamics manifest across different political and cultural frameworks. The collection of articles employs diverse methodological approaches, from theoretical frameworks combining cosmopolitan ethics with feminist ethics of care to empirical analyses of listener trust and content analysis of podcast platforms. Ultimately, the thematic issue suggests that as podcasting continues to mature, finding the right balance between personal connection and professional practice remains crucial for the medium’s development as a journalistic tool.

### Keywords

audio journalism; intimacy; news podcasts; podcast; professionalism; trust

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between intimacy and trust in audio journalism has emerged as a critical area of investigation as podcasting matures as a medium. As podcasting has become firmly embedded in journalism, driving both

consumption and revenue for online publishers, it has created both new opportunities and challenges for audio storytelling. While news podcasts still represent a relatively small portion of all podcasts, their impact is noteworthy (Newman, 2023).

This thematic issue contributes to our understanding of how the dynamics of intimacy and trust shape contemporary journalistic practice, audience engagement, and the broader media landscape. As audio journalism has expanded beyond traditional broadcasters to include various professional and amateur media actors, the need to understand these dynamics has become increasingly urgent. The freedom from broadcasting conventions and schedules has made podcasting a rich site for journalistic experimentation, including the subversion of traditional professional norms and the medium's ability to build strong parasocial relationships between hosts and listeners (Perks & Turner, 2019). However, these perceived relationships can pose the risk of partisan “ideological hijacking of journalism” (Dowling et al., 2022).

Several articles break new theoretical ground in conceptualizing intimacy in audio journalism. Kate Lacey's (2025) examination of “proper distance” and “listening out” introduces a framework that combines cosmopolitan ethics with feminist ethics of care, offering new ways to theorize the balance between intimacy and trust in listening publics. This theoretical advancement is complemented by M. Olguta Vilceanu's (2025) large-scale analysis of podcast reviews, which provides empirical evidence of how parasocial relationships develop and evolve over time, particularly during periods of change in long-running podcasts.

The collection makes substantial contributions to understanding how intimacy functions across different journalistic contexts. Kim Fox, David O. Dowling, and Kyle J. Miller's (2025) analysis of sports podcasting reveals how intimate formats enable political discourse and social justice advocacy, expanding our understanding of journalistic roles. The emerging podcast conventions of self-reflexivity as a narrative technique, which positions the journalist as a character in the news story, are examined through various lenses throughout these studies.

Methodologically, this collection showcases innovative approaches to studying audio journalism. Kristine Johnson and Michael McCall's (2025) investigation of listener trust across different podcast genres provides valuable insights into how format influences credibility. Meanwhile, Jinghong Xu, Zining Wang, Tong Luo, and Shiyu Liu's (2025) content analysis of Chinese podcasts on the Himalaya platform offers a systematic framework for evaluating how different types of news publishers balance intimacy with professionalism.

The international scope of these studies significantly expands our understanding of audio journalism. Simona Žikić and Čedomir Markov's (2025) examination of podcasting in Serbia's hybrid regime, alongside two teams of Chinese scholars—Haiyan Wang, Zhengqing Yan, and Jing Meng (2025) and Jinghong Xu, Zining Wang, Tong Luo, and Shiyu Liu (2025)—analyzing Chinese podcasting practices, reveal how intimate audio journalism operates within different political and cultural frameworks. These perspectives enrich our understanding of how podcast journalism functions across diverse media environments.

## 2. Opportunities

The studies reveal several key opportunities that arise from the intimate nature of audio journalism and podcasting. Kate Lacey (2025) frames intimacy as a potential positive force in the democratic public sphere,

particularly in building trust relationships between different actors in public and political communication. This aligns with Kristine Johnson and Michael McCall's (2025) findings that listeners generally trust news content in podcast form, especially when delivered through news, comedy, and history genres, suggesting that diverse formats can effectively build credibility with audiences.

The intimate format of podcasting creates unique opportunities for journalistic innovation. Kim Fox, David O. Dowling, and Kyle J. Miller (2025) demonstrate how sports podcasts have leveraged intimacy to expand beyond traditional coverage, opening new spaces for political discourse and addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The temporality and flexibility of the podcast medium have enabled this expansion of journalistic roles, showing how intimacy can facilitate more nuanced and socially progressive content than traditional media coverage typically allows.

Multiple authors highlight how podcast intimacy enables deeper storytelling and authentic connections. Raúl Rodríguez-Ortiz and Manuel Fernández-Sande's (2025) analysis of Ibero-American podcasts reveals how narrative strategies, including personal life stories and sound archives, enhance emotional resonance and help address underrepresented voices. Their study demonstrates how independent non-fiction podcasts are evolving audio journalism through diverse storytelling approaches and experimental formats.

Siobhán McHugh's (2025) examination of *The Greatest Menace* podcast also shows how intimate storytelling can effectively expose historical injustices, with the host's personal narrative interweaving with broader social issues. This case study illustrates how personal connection can strengthen investigative journalism while maintaining ethical standards. The production team's careful balancing of activism and fairness demonstrates how intimacy can enhance rather than compromise journalistic integrity.

In the Chinese context, Haiyan Wang, Zhengqing Yan, and Jing Meng (2025) describe how podcasters are innovating through humanized storytelling, emotive language, and personal details, effectively redefining journalistic norms while maintaining professional standards. Their research shows how podcasters are adapting traditional journalistic practices to meet the demands of an intimate medium. Jinghong Xu, Zining Wang, Tong Luo, and Shiyu Liu's (2025) content analysis supports this, showing how different types of news publishers successfully balance intimacy with professionalism, particularly in central media outlets, which achieved the highest scores in both categories.

### 3. Risks

However, the studies also take a critical lens to identify significant risks and challenges in balancing intimacy with journalistic integrity. Kate Lacey (2025) acknowledges that techniques of intimate communication can serve authoritarian ends just as easily as democratic ones, and the exclusivity of intimate communications might contradict public values of openness and plurality. This fundamental tension requires careful consideration from practitioners and scholars alike.

M. Olguta Vilceanu's (2025) research on podcast listener reviews reveals how changes in host or content can disrupt the parasocial relationships of trust and intimacy, potentially affecting audience loyalty. Through automated semantic network analysis of over 12,000 reviews, the study highlights the delicate balance podcasters must maintain between consistency and evolution, particularly as long-running shows face inevitable transitions.



Several authors address the tension between intimacy and professional standards. Elvira García de Torres, José M. Legorburu, David Parra-Valcarce, Concha Edo, and Lilly Escobar-Artola (2025) warn that “emotional truth” in podcast journalism can blur boundaries between fiction and reality, raising ethical challenges regarding objectivity. Their interviews with journalists producing daily news podcasts and documentaries reveal the complex negotiations required to maintain professional standards while fostering audience connection.

This concern is echoed in Viljami Vaarala’s (2025) examination of how YouTube podcasts challenge legacy journalism’s epistemic authority, suggesting that the intimate format might sometimes compromise journalistic rigor. Through analysis of metajournalistic discussions in Finnish podcasts, the study reveals how alternative media platforms can both enhance and potentially undermine journalistic truth-telling.

In the Serbian context, Simona Žikić and Čedomir Markov (2025) note that while podcasting contributes to external pluralism, it risks exacerbating societal polarization by serving divided audiences. Their focus group research demonstrates how the intimate nature of podcasting might reinforce existing echo chambers rather than bridge divides, particularly in hybrid regimes characterized by media polarization.

#### 4. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue collectively demonstrate that as podcasting continues to evolve, the negotiation between personal connection and professional practice remains central to its development as a journalistic medium. This work provides crucial insights for both scholars and practitioners navigating the future of audio journalism in an increasingly intimate media landscape.

#### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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# Listening in Good Faith: Cosmopolitan Intimacy and Audio Journalism

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## Abstract

This article interrogates the privileging of intimacy in contemporary discussions of media in general and audio journalism in particular (within a broadly Anglo-American frame). It posits that the prominence of the term in relation to podcasting specifically, together with the communicative practices it purports to describe, has become ideological. The article begins by exploring how the intimate address of radio and podcasting has been variously invoked and celebrated in public and academic discourse across a century of spoken word media. This historical overview provides a context for and counterpoint to the ways in which intimacy is invoked in contemporary discourses and introduces the contradictions encapsulated by the notion of an “intimate public sphere” (Berlant, 1998). It highlights how the language of intimacy in the public realm—with all its positive connotations, including in relation to building trust—can be appropriated or transformed under the logics of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005) to disguise unequal power relations, restrict communication across difference, and feed into a culture of atomised individualism. The article turns instead to a cosmopolitan ethics of “proper distance” (Silverstone, 2004) combined with a feminist ethics of care as a way to negotiate the balance between intimacy and trust for the listening public.

## Keywords

care; cosmopolitan intimacy; ethics; feminism; listening; media history; podcasting; proper distance; publics; radio

## 1. Introduction

The association of podcasting with intimacy has become axiomatic among producers, listeners, and critics alike. This is widely assumed to be a good thing, as the idea of intimacy brings with it connotations of closeness, candidness, and care. These are all qualities that can be translated into positive values in a

democratic public sphere, not least in terms of building relations of trust between different actors in the realm of public and political communication. However, as the theme of this thematic issue acknowledges, with opportunities come risks. Certainly, the techniques of intimate communication can be used for authoritarian just as much as democratic ends, and the closeness and exclusivity of intimate communications can run counter to public values of openness, plurality, and listening across difference. This article will rehearse these paradoxes, not in the expectation of resolving them, but in the hope of contextualising the current celebratory rhetoric around intimacy in relation to podcasting—first, in relation to a longer view of journalism in the auditory realm, and second, in relation to the broader context of neoliberal rhetorics of individualism and personalisation. It will then go on to explore how the cosmopolitan ethics of “proper distance” (Silverstone, 2004, 2006) and “listening out” (Lacey, 2013) might combine with a feminist ethics of care to negotiate the balance between intimacy and trust for listening publics.

The proliferation of podcasting has been accompanied by an explosion of scholarly interest in what has become an increasingly powerful media phenomenon. A Web of Science keyword search conducted in November 2024 finds 660 academic works (books, articles, and chapters) referencing “podcasts” or “podcasting” in their title in the four years from January 2021, representing more than half of all such publications, going back to 2005. Fifty of those publications include the word “intimacy” in their title or abstract, and more than half of those appeared in the last two years, including Alyn Euritt’s 2023 monograph, *Podcasting as an Intimate Medium*. If this indicates an intensification of interest in the intimate affordances of the podcast form, it is important to note that it forms part of the “intimacy turn” across media and cultural studies (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 477) that connects with a broader set of concerns to do with the configuration of bodies, emotions, and affect under social and technological change. It also connects to a long-established concern with intimacy in radio studies (Karathanasopoulou, 2014), including radio’s intimate voice (Johnson, 1983), its intimate publics (Loviglio, 2005, 2024), and its sonic intimacies (James, 2020).

Despite this intensification of academic literature on the subject, it is still worth acknowledging at the outset the strange paradox, however productive, of thinking about public communications in relation to intimacy—a term more commonly associated with personal, private, and physical relationships (albeit that even the most personal relationships are always already culturally and socially informed and thoroughly context-dependent, including the context of the mediated worlds that we inhabit). Broadly speaking, then, all of these studies in some way or other address the core problematic of all mediated communication: the extent to which people separated by time or distance can find connection with each other via technological means—connection here having technical, symbolic, and affective connotations that can play out at an interpersonal level or between any number of distant strangers. This is also, of course, the context within which audio journalism is produced and circulated.

Audio journalism is a term of relatively recent coinage, a marker designed to acknowledge the expansion of platforms and players dealing in sound-based journalism beyond its conventional home on radio, as much as to claim its distinction from print and image-based forms. It is a neologism that can also invite attention to a pre-broadcasting history of sound technologies being adopted as authoritative technologies of record. One striking instance of this is Stadler’s (2010) account of early phonographs used to document, through re-enactment, the shockingly intimate sounds of lynching in late 19th-century America. Such examples can provide a deeper historical context—and sometimes a counterpoint—to some of the claims being made for current developments. Podcasting’s continuities and conversations with broadcast radio are the main

concerns in what follows, although this media-technological framing should not obscure the fact that journalistic practices—and the principles on which they rest—change over time in relation to a whole series of drivers including, but not restricted to, technological change (Hewa, 2021).

Of particular interest to the current argument is a parallel “emotional turn” within journalism studies, which is part of the broader history of feminist critiques of and interventions into politics and the public sphere, as well as the changing affordances of digital platforms and social media in opening up more space for emotion in the circuit of journalism practices (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Writing this in the wake of the 2024 US election, branded by some as “the first podcast election” (Fu, 2024; Galloway, 2024), questioning the impacts and implications of podcast journalism—particularly the long-form interview as intimate, relatable chat—has taken on a new urgency. But since the earliest days of audioblogging, podcasting has been carving out an increasingly significant role in the journalistic space in terms of information-sharing, commentary, conversation, and fresh storytelling techniques (Lindgren, 2022; Rae, 2023; Snoussi et al., 2024; Whipple et al., 2023).

It is already becoming evident that the concept of intimacy in this media context is a rather inchoate one, itself intimately aligned with concepts of emotionality and affect, interactivity and immediacy, presence and proximity, familiarity and informality, communication and connection, empathy and care; though it might be adequately summed up, for the purposes of this article at least, as the “feeling of closeness.” Finally, while there is much to be said about how intimacy is produced in specific podcasts and how interpersonal intimacies are represented publicly, it is the discursive categorisation and celebration of mediated relations in the public realm as intimate, specifically in relation to podcasting, with which this article is primarily concerned.

## 2. Sounding Out the Intimacy of Podcasting

Podcasting is certainly widely accepted to be an intimate medium, even exceptionally so (Euritt, 2023; Sharon, 2023; Swiatek, 2018). One common explanation has to do with its being an auditory medium working in sound and voice. Even with podcasts being carried via audiovisual platforms like YouTube, the point broadly stands, because their naming as podcasts denotes production values weighted in favour of sound over visuals. First, the immersive properties of sound work to produce an embodied sense of place, of presence (Euritt, 2023). The soundscapes of audio media are overlain on—or, with noise cancellation, even become—the sonic environment of the individual listener (Bull, 2000; Downs, 2021). This is intensified by the prevalence of earbud listening when it comes to podcasting, which is said to eliminate any sense of exteriority, producing a kind of hyper-intimacy (Sharon, 2023; Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Furthermore, because sound connects the body to its surroundings, theorists have long argued that mediated sound allows for something akin to touch at a distance (McLuhan, 2013; Vassiliou, 2018).

Beyond the sonic qualities, podcast content can be affectively touching too, of course, whether in terms of subject matter or tone. But it is the sound of the human voice that is key to understandings of mediated intimacy, as a channel for emotion, empathy, and identification. The “grain of the voice” (Barthes, 1977; Ffrench, 2015) betrays markers of embodiment, including gender, age, class, ethnicity, or regional heritage. Indeed, it is arguably within the imaginative gap between the particular and the universal that there lies the potential for an idealised intimacy. However, it is also worth noting that the ability to hear any such voices as intimate and trustworthy rests on the historic normalization of listening to disembodied voices, which until the advent of recorded and transmissible sound had belonged firmly in the realm of the uncanny.

Of course, these sonic attributes are not unique to podcasting. Scholars of radio have long since reflected on how the property of visionlessness supports the production of intimacy by allowing for the experience of both inwardness and involvement through imaginative co-production (Crisell, 1994; Karathanasopoulou, 2014). Indeed, from the earliest days of recorded speech—withstanding the distortions and limitations of the technology—producers and consumers alike were struck by the ability for listeners to be transported by a voice, and by the ability of sound to give the impression of co-presence across time, distance, and social differences. Gramophone companies soon exploited the desire of people to hear the living voices of the great and the good within the confines of their own home (Gitelman, 1999), a domestication of public speech that only accelerated with radio broadcasting. The private setting for the vast majority of the listening public began to force a modification of the formats, cadences, and modes of public address (Scannell, 1989). It is almost exclusively within this familiar and feminised communicative context (Lloyd, 2019) that audio journalism developed through the major part of the twentieth century and beyond, albeit in constant tension with the powerful cultural lag of journalistic and presentational conventions forged in the age of print (Carey, 1986; Lacey, 2013). This tension persists into the digital age, expressed now particularly in relation to reconfiguring once stable distinctions between producers and consumers.

Podcasting's intimacy is often also attributed to the degree of control that an individual, isolated listener has over the curation of content and the conditions of reception (Sharon, 2023), although this properly connects to a much longer history of intentional and individualised consumer control over, and interaction with, the sonic environment (Bull, 2000; Lacey, 2013; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Sterne, 2003). Moreover, the impression of increased individual choice, control, and convenience disguises just how much these discourses are the product of—and raw material for—increased commodification, algorithmic targeting, and surveillance of listening trends. Podcasting is just one place among many on privately owned platforms where the creativity, labour, and social capital of digital intimacy is valued as data, mined for profit, and recursively reinscribed into the training of algorithms, although the contours of “emotional capitalism” and its “cold intimacies” were already being shaped before the accelerations of the digital age (Illouz, 2007). As Dobson et al. (2018, pp. 4, 18) explain, platforms in this way “learn to privilege expressions, intimacies and bodies that generate more affective intensity than others” and “to identify and maintain boundaries between different kinds of people and intimate relations.” This is a problematic that has consequences for the public sphere of audio journalism, as it speaks to the same set of dynamics which are held responsible for the increasing polarisation and fragmentation of a communicative commons (Boler & Davis, 2020).

But it is in tracing the continuities and changes in relation to radio specifically where many of the arguments are made relating to podcasting's special claim to intimacy. Technologies, techniques, personnel, and audiences are not only shared between radio and podcasting but are, to varying degrees, consciously produced in dialogue with each other (Bottomley, 2020; Markman, 2015; McHugh, 2016). This is a theme taken up by Bonini (2022), who argues that podcasting is a hybrid cultural form between old and new media, and one that remediates radio in terms of its production ecosystem, genres, aesthetics, and listening practices. In the end, attempts to delineate the edges of media are ultimately futile, though the persistent attempts to do so can reveal much about the shifting ways in which media technologies find their social application (Lacey, 2009), not to mention what they might say about the incentives for practitioners and academics alike to declare and delineate a new field of practice. Such attempts can also display a certain amnesia about or disregard for the great variety of generic forms that have come under the umbrella of radio in different times and places, with “mainstream radio” set up as a kind of ahistorical and impersonal monolith to be contrasted with the intimate and individualising

apparatus of podcasting. This is not just a media-historical issue. As Lambert (2019, p. 304) reminds us, there are also “ways of being intimate that have been forgotten, transformed, or have yet to occur.”

Andrew Bottomley has pursued these questions in his account of the “discourses of intimacy” that feature in writing about podcasting, both within the industry and the academy, particularly in ways that attach to the “affective, subjective access” that podcasting affords its listeners (Bottomley, 2024, p. 306). Even where the antecedents of this personal and informal form of address are acknowledged, it is not unusual for podcasting infrastructures to be held up as a heightened example, a site for a kind of “hyper-intimacy” (Berry, 2016, p. 184) or “enhanced intimacy” (McHugh, 2022, p. 220), where producers and listeners alike have become recursively attuned to a set of techniques for the production of intimacy. The political economy of podcasting holds some clues to the pervasiveness of these textual effects and their reproduction (Kammer & Sejersen, 2024; Sullivan, 2019). With its roots as an insurgent alternative defined in contrast to professional radio, and lacking the financial, technical, and human resources of established broadcasting, its sound was predominantly amateurish and improvisatory. With a premium on personality and authenticity over polished professionalism, the podcast voice could, then, bear all the traces of spontaneity and glossolalia that might be trained or edited out in the encoding of the professional broadcast voice (Madsen, 2009). In seeking authority in the public sphere, the public radio voice—and most especially in the realm of audio journalism—had to aspire to the standards of the written word, and so learned to suppress any bodily vocal markers, those hesitations and personal tics that connote an authentic, intimate, embodied voice.

There are two things that follow from this. The first is the recognition that audio journalists have had different routes to establishing their listeners’ trust. As journalism gets remediated through new delivery systems or new fields of practice, there may be a cultural lag while the tokens of legitimacy are carried over from the established order. The values of abstracted objectivity and linear reasoning established through dominant forms of print journalism (and the corresponding devaluing of “sensationalism”) at first had to be translated into their sonic equivalents. While those traces retain a great deal of their power, a century of broadcasting has seen public discourse open to new tokens of legitimacy, including the encoding of “liveness” and the representation of different forms of witnessing (Peters, 2001). Performative intimacy enacted through personal and personable expression is just one more route to the perception of authenticity and trustworthy connection.

The second thing is the recognition that connotations of intimacy are affected in complicated ways by discourses of professionalism and changing cultures of production as a medium becomes established. This might mean that the association of podcasting with intimacy is contingent on the manner in which it is becoming incorporated into the mainstream media economy—the history of radio hobbyists’ early experimentalism is instructive in this regard, for example (Madsen, 2009; Rikitienskaia, 2018). But it might also mean that, in relation to audio journalism at least, it represents part of a more profound shift in how trust is encoded in and through political communications. For much audio journalism in the expanding spaces of podcasting, this shift has been characterized, for example, by a “movement towards personal narratives” (Lindgren, 2016, p. 2; see also Lindgren, 2023).

Bottomley is not alone in identifying intimacy—or, rather, assumptions about intimacy—as one of the values through which producers and listeners understand and reproduce the form. For Euritt (2023, p. 2), intimacy is used “as a self-description to negotiate its own mediation,” which Adler Berg (2023, p. 2) similarly

describes as a “self-reinforcing and self-fulfilling prophecy.” Certain generic expectations emerge that might include an informal, conversational tone, a certain degree of self-disclosure, immersion into a narrowly defined topic or particular soundworld, and the textual and paratextual constructions of an engaged listening community. However, these authors importantly make the case that discourses of intimacy are products of the wider culture, rather than simply determined by the technology, platform, or format per se. As Euritt (2023, p. 1) puts it in her actor-network-inspired analysis, “podcasts are not intimate because of some innate properties of sound or technology. They are intimate because they draw on how culture constructs intimacy to communicate the feeling of closeness.” This makes these mediated forms of sonic intimacy historically contingent iterations of a desire to overcome distance and, perhaps, retreat into interiority.

These are valuable insights, and raise the question of what is it about the current conjuncture that produces such a swell of discourse around intimacy that podcasting feeds off and sustains? What is at stake, politically, economically, and experientially that makes this such a productive and meaningful framing for the ways in which public communication operates under neoliberalism? And in what ways does this connect with or depart from cultural constructions of intimate communication under different conditions? Turning to this latter question first, the discussion looks to the past to provide some context for the present, to get some sense of how mediated intimacy was produced and understood in the constitution of radio broadcasting, and before that, in the constitution of the public sphere in the age of letters.

### 3. Mediated Intimacy in Historical Context

Griffen-Foley (2007, pp. 123, 125), in an essay on modernity, intimacy, and early Australian commercial radio, cites historian Roland Marchand’s assessment that, “radio surpassed all others in its capacity to deny its own status as a mass medium.” As we know, broadcasters came to speak to unseen millions, but learned to speak to them not *en masse*, but rather in the personalised tones of a family friend. Early schedules were peopled with radio aunts and uncles, featured chats and advice, mirrored and mobilised communities of different sorts, and addressed the audience as “you,” that useful English pronoun that captures at one and the same time a singular personal address and a plural impersonal one. This mode of modern communication served the interests of all its different stakeholders, but also performed a compensatory function in the face of bewildering changes that were happening outside the realm of an individual’s control. The ability to reach into people’s home and speak directly to potential consumers to gain their attention and their trust was clearly an attractive proposition to commercial and political players alike. On the listening side, people had easy access to new swathes of information and entertainment, and the novelty of having constant company on demand. At the same time, radio was reinscribing the retreat of public culture into dispersed and isolated domestic spaces. Griffen-Foley (2007, p. 130) sets all this in the wider context of a culture navigating the unsettling experience of rapid modernisation:

The Australian radio industry presented itself as the embodiment of modernity, it sought consciously to offset the complexity and impersonality of modern life, fusing its mass appeal with apparent intimacy....A modern mass medium—with its resonances of the inchoate, the mechanised and the impersonal—self-consciously transformed itself into a unifying, intimate and highly personalised mass medium.



In other words, in industrialising and urbanising societies, radio played a major part in what Williams (1974, p. 11) famously described as “mobile privatisation,” a set of communicative responses to these contradictions of modernity that contributed to the development of “a society that is both isolating and connecting, atomizing and cosmopolitan, or inward-dwelling but outward-looking” (Groening, 2010, p. 1335). It is a description that resonates with more recent ideas of “mobile intimacy” (Hjorth & Lim, 2012, p. 477), but there are also resonances that reach back into the literary world of the 18th and 19th centuries (Lloyd, 2019, p. 43) and the emergence of journalism as a pillar of the modern public sphere, as famously delineated by Jürgen Habermas. While his normative version of the public sphere rested on the strict separation from the “sphere of intimacy” (Habermas, 1991, p. 172), the historical development of the bourgeois public from which those norms sprang had its roots in the changing media literacies within the intimate private sphere, specifically the development of readers’ “audience-oriented subjectivity” (Habermas, 1991, pp. 28–29). This was a mode of perception and critique learned in the privatised consumption of, and affective engagement with, a novelistic world of fiction and emotion, where readers felt an intimate connection to a text they knew was not unique to them, available as it was to untold distant others. This entrainment of perception through reading was “a ground condition of intelligibility for public language” (Warner, 1992, p. 378). Moreover, not insignificantly, entry into the world of letters for most at that time would have been through listening, as mothers read their children stories, breathing sound into the muted world of print (Kittler, 1999; Lacey, 2016).

This indispensable intertwining of the public and the private notwithstanding, it was the intensification of the “traits of a secondary realm of intimacy” (Habermas, 1991, p. 172) in which Habermas, writing in the mid-20th century, located much of the force of his critique of the structural transformation of the public sphere. In an age where mass media were increasingly making public the problems of private existence, and offering “abundant opportunity for identification,” he argued that in place of “an inner life oriented toward a public life” there emerged “reifications related to the inner life” (Habermas, 1991, p. 172). For example, even where the mass media adopted literary terms like “news story” this was simply to “blur the relationship between the private and public realms by portraying in public a fake intimacy” (Keren, 2003, p. 144). However, feminist critics (Landes, 1988; Mansbridge, 2017) have long since established that such a conceptualisation of the public sphere was predicated on, and reproductive of, a series of gendered exclusions which translated into a set of normative constraints on public discourse that privileged reason over emotion and abnegated subjectivity—with exclusionary consequences for the practice and critique of public communications in terms of both form and content.

The rallying call of second-wave feminism—that the personal is political—was a significant part of a set of changes that gradually saw increasing acceptance in public discourse, including journalism, of a more representative range of subject matter and more personalised modes of public speech. In short, the profound transformations in how intimacy is configured in public life have been at least as much a result of political struggle and collective agency as they result from affordances of particular technologies or the satisfaction of consumer demand. There is also an important sense in which the “intimisation” of the public sphere has been a correction, but also a “feminisation,” and, by extension, a “democratisation.” The question then becomes whether all forms of intimisation are equal and, since intimisation is a process, whether ever greater intimacy is always good for democracy and rational deliberation in the public sphere.

In her review of “histories of intimacy,” broadcasting historian Justine Lloyd explains how feminist critiques of conventional distinctions between the public and the private spheres served to produce “the intimate turn,” a

concern with intimacy as the “constitutive dynamic of closeness and distance” (Lloyd, 2019, pp. 19–24). Lloyd draws attention to the historically contingent ways in which the public and private worlds are spatially and conceptually organised, not least through the adoption of successive media technologies. It is important to understand that alongside the intimization of the public sphere, the private sphere of intimacy has also been thoroughly mediated. Lloyd (2019, p. 42) is particularly interested in how radio, rediscovering “the power of the ordinary and of orality,” was gendered in ways that served to generate “a new mediated space-time of individualized domestic reception” (Lloyd, 2019, p. 34). More than simply regarding intimacy as a textual effect, however, Lloyd mobilises “intimacy” as a critical category, a third term between the public and the private, that can unsettle and complicate conventional distinctions and hierarchies. She draws on Berlant’s (1998) influential work on “the intimate public sphere,” identifying intimacy as a mobile set of practices that can “create spaces around it” (Berlant, 1988, as cited in Lloyd, 2019, p. 26), in order to understand radio’s role in producing and navigating “intimate geographies.” This formulation is a reminder that at the heart of all of these discussions is the negotiation and experience of the space between different actors.

#### 4. Mapping Mediated Closeness

It is to this “dynamic of closeness and distance” in relation to trust-building in the public sphere to which this discussion now turns, via Roger Silverstone’s concept of “proper distance.” Silverstone (2006, p. 47) defined this relational concept as a constantly negotiated achievement as follows:

Proper distance refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding. Proper distance preserves the other through difference as well as through shared identity.

Silverstone’s intervention opened up an analytical space to explore the dialectical interplay of proximity and distance (or connection and separation) in mediated practices within an explicitly moral framework based on ethical responsibility towards the other. It was an intervention motivated, in part at least, in critical response to the prevailing uncritical celebration of “interactivity” identified in emerging forms of internet-based communication. For Silverstone, these new communicative practices involved a “personalization of the other” which necessitated a renewed focus on questions of communicative ethics, not least because “closeness, even intimacy, does not guarantee recognition or responsibility” (Silverstone, 2004, p. 475), just as there can be an ethical dimension to mutual indifference.

To be close to someone can mean either to be in their proximity or to feel some sort of (positive) connection. By the same token, to be distant carries this same doubling, describing either a physical or an affective separation. Of course, this is no linguistic accident but reflects the common distinctions we draw between kin and community on the one hand and distant strangers on the other. This is something we see reflected in conventional journalistic news values, where geographical, cultural, and emotional proximity push stories up the news agenda (Ahva & Pantti, 2014; Caple, 2018). One iteration of this is to be found in the field of humanitarian communication, and specifically the ethical responsibilities of journalists and audiences in relation to the coverage of distant suffering (Chouliaraki, 2015). Here we find some of the most rigorous reflections on the ethical dimension of the dynamic of closeness and distance in mediated communications (Chouliaraki, 2006; Kyriakidou, 2024; Wright, 2012).

The intimisation of the public sphere is particularly critiqued in Chouliaraki's (2010) conceptualisation of "post-humanitarian communication." This describes how a retreat from the problematic "politics of pity" saw humanitarian campaigns move towards inviting fleeting, effortless responses that were already enmeshed in audiences' everyday digital media practices, but that were personally gratifying. Although they can be effective in short-term fundraising and messaging, Chouliaraki (2010, p. 121) argued such developments ran the risk of perpetuating "a political culture of communitarian narcissism—a sensibility that renders the emotions of the self the measure of our understanding of the sufferings of the world at large." In other words, they were "feeding back into a dominant Western culture where the de-emotionalization of the suffering of distant others goes hand in hand with the over-emotionalization of our safe everyday life" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 122). This position harked back to the central problem of proper distance in media space that Silverstone (2004, p. 481) had identified, namely the establishment of "the moral duty of disinterested care." Writing around the time podcasting was emerging into the landscape of Web 2.0, he had already identified this disinterestedness as being at odds with a trajectory in new media towards a narcissistic idea of community as "both a projection and an extension of the self" (Silverstone, 2004, p. 486).

Returning to primary definitions for a moment, there is clearly a connection between "being close" and the verb "to close," including in the sense of "close off" or "shut out." This seems significant for a discussion of public communication where publicness is definitionally practically co-terminous with openness (*Öffentlichkeit* is the German term used by Habermas that came to be translated as "public sphere"). It may be that there are processes of intimisation that are an expression of openness in the public sphere—being open to new modes of expression or enabling a space of genuine plurality that includes once marginalised or excluded voices, for example. But there can also be discomfort in being too close. Podcasters may at times lean into "claustrophobic intimacy" for aesthetic effect (Berry, 2018, as cited in McGregor, 2022), but there can also be feelings of alienation in being excluded from a conversation among intimates. This connects to manifestations of intimacy that are more about exclusivity, about drawing the distinctions between self and other ever more closely in, or about closing off certain voices. Indeed, intimacy has been described as a process of "enclosure over time" (Lambert, 2019, p. 300). Once again, the implications are ambivalent for forms of public communication like audio journalism. If public space comes to feel like a private domain, it can support positive in-group satisfaction that is associated with increased well-being; but it can also enable the rise of new forms of gatekeeping and a return to what Erich Fromm and other Frankfurt School scholars termed "collective" or "group narcissism" (Golec de Zavala, 2024, p. 2). This is a version of social identity (in media terms also a version of imagined community) that is "more focused on out-group prejudice than in-group loyalty" (Kaufman, 2021), a potent context for prejudice and political othering.

## 5. Podcasting and the Limits of Intimacy

So much of what is celebrated about the curation of intimacy in podcasting has to do with the space it affords for niche interests, for fostering parasocial relationships and communities of interest, and for the direct address to listeners who have made a conscious effort to listen in, especially if they find themselves and their interests somehow reflected back to them. The following summary, standing in for many, is taken from a recent encyclopedia entry on podcast studies:

Various characteristics of podcasting as a medium make it particularly well suited to the generation of parasocial relationships. The amateur and grassroots history of the medium (based on the

open-access ethos of RSS technology), the seriality and thus familiarity of shows, on-demand listening through subscription, and generation of microcommunities through highly niche content work together to make podcasts feel more authentic, approachable, and personal than many other forms of mass media. (McGregor, 2022)

Of course, there are all sorts of advantages, including public interest ones, to being able to carve out these spaces of intimate commonality. They provide spaces where it is possible for different groups of people, whether amateur or professional, to diversify, intensify, and fortify their engagement with each other, to experience and experiment with the audio form (Copeland, 2018; Florini, 2019; Fox et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2021). But at least two questions persist. The first is about why intimacy should be quite such a compelling framing for the field of podcasting, and the second is on what might be missed or lost along the way.

For all that the discourses of intimacy are couched in positive terms of authenticity, empathy, and approachability, they appear as part of a broader neoliberal discourse of heightened individualism and a media environment in which, increasingly, content is algorithmically tailored to reflect an individual's worldview back to them (Lim, 2020). The phrase "on-demand," and the associations it has with valorised concepts like choice, control, and convenience, are also part and parcel of a cultural normalisation of self-centredness. Textual effects designed to curate a feeling of intimacy, to let the listener feel spoken to directly, produce a version of the world that is cosy and contained, and centred on the self. This is matched by the sense that barriers to participation in the digital public sphere have been lowered to the point where it is easy (if still misleading) to claim that everyone can have a voice. More than that, voices in these public spaces that register as authentic are likely to be those that disclose most about themselves, experientially and emotionally, to their listeners. To this extent—in theory, at least—podcasting is just one practice among many that are at work in reinforcing the ideology of the sovereign individual within a bespoke, personalised media universe.

This can be a blind spot in the discussions that engage with the ways in which podcasting relates to radio. Alongside all the attention on continuities and changes in relation to production techniques, sonic textures, listening practices, and textual effects, we need to attend to what's at stake in the difference revealed in the nomenclature itself—the contrast between radio as broadcasting and podcasting as a form of narrowcasting. The difference is all too often caricatured as a shift from a monologic and monopolistic mode of communication to one that is dialogic and diverse. This shift then seems unproblematically positive in terms of sustaining a pluralistic and democratic public sphere. It seems counter-intuitive in the current climate to argue that there is also something intrinsically democratic or democratising about broadcasting as a model—a model of communication that can, at least in principle, be undirected and non-reciprocal.

Peters (1999, p. 52) has set this position out most persuasively in understanding the distributive model of broadcasting as generous and indiscriminating. Less efficient than more targeted models of communication, broadcasting's profligacy, particularly when it takes the form of mixed scheduling, is built on the latency of the listenership as a listening public rather than on the predictability of particular demographic constituencies. It is founded, in other words, on the possibility of communication across difference in live, shared communicative space. Instead of a public sphere parcelled up for individual consumption on demand, and distanced through evident pre-recording, it rests on notions of unruly congregation in real-time and

the serendipity of the chance encounter. It is in the very expectation of exposure to voices and views that are unexpected, alien, or alienating—as well as those that are familiar—that listeners are interpellated as inhabitants of a pluralistic civic space. And it is in listening out beyond the confines of the familiar and the echo, and in being able to imaginatively inhabit different subjectivities, that listeners exercise an important civic responsibility (Lacey, 2013). In this sense, the preservation of a public forum that is not predicated on exclusionary intimate relations is a powerful counterpoint to the pseudo-individuality of the public sphere.

The rhetoric of intimacy, on the other hand, is rooted in a distrust of representation because of the way it refers back to an ideal of face-to-face communication, reproducing an entrenched nostalgic fantasy of unmediated connection (Young, 1995). The association of intimacy with familiarity, trust, and security only add to its appeal in a chaotic and uncertain world. Within a fragmenting journalistic offer, the “personal news feed” or the recommendations from friends, real or algorithmic, and couched in the intimate vocabulary of “sharing,” certainly provide stories a patina of credibility for overloaded citizens. And yet, one significant definition of a public is that it is a relation among strangers, constituted by an impersonal and indefinite address, and open to all (Lacey, 2013; Warner, 2002). Trust is an important part of this equation, but not blind trust. There must also be space for distrust. As Robinson et al. (2021, p. 1222) put it in their discussion of how listening literacies are key to rebuilding trust in journalism, “distrust isn’t the opposite of trust, but an essential part of its practice.” Trust in this case is built not on prior connections, not in the blind trust we might put in those we have come to know intimately, but rather in the cultural construction of the conditions for cosmopolitanism—or, to put it another way, for listening out to strangers in good faith.

For all this, the argument here is less about privileging broadcasting over podcasting than about making the case for a mixed economy of mediated address—and for moving beyond simple binaries in our descriptions and evaluations. A public sphere that had no place for the experience and vernacular of everyday, intimate life would exclude too much. Apart from anything else, it is in the interwoven experience of individual feelings and a shared horizon of representation in which anyone, or indeed any collective, “comes to voice” (hooks, 1989, p. 5), that slow process of finding and owning a distinctive and authentic voice with which to speak in the world (and that should be matched by learning how to listen). Personalised and social media now play an important part in that process. The appeal of media intimacy is strong and persistent, and meets a whole range of needs. Intimate media can provide trusted spaces (or “counter-publics”) within which citizens can build solidarities, find recognition, develop skills and confidence, take risks, and exercise agency—all precious aspects of civic communicative practice. But intimate media as the *only* option would surely diminish the scope of public life.

It is also the case that emotion in journalism is ambivalent—it can be manipulated, mobilised, or interpreted to different ends across the political spectrum. The inclusion of the intimate into politics has therefore been theorised alternately as democratically extending access to, and participation in, the public sphere, or as posing an existential threat. Intimacy connotes close acquaintance and detailed knowledge—but get too close and intimacy collapses because there is no space between the one and the other, no distance from which to recognise one’s own otherness in the encounter with another (Lacey, 2013). Too distant, or too enclosed, and there might be neither motivation nor means to communicate, and a space opens up for the demonisation and cancellation of strangers and their views. The stakes are huge in such a balancing act, and inevitably intractable when reduced to binary abstractions. “Proper distance,” as Silverstone (2004, p. 476) points out, is not a given, but a challenge and an achievement in constant process in every encounter.

## 6. Conclusion: Cosmopolitan Intimacy

In relation to audio journalism specifically, the question then becomes whether the entrenchment of intimacy as the dominant mode through which podcasts are understood is obscuring other possible modalities and values, including those traditionally associated with journalism, such as objectivity, impartiality, or disinterestedness. These core ethical principles certainly rest on a certain notion of critical distance which is always, to some degree, a fiction. It simply is not possible to bracket out all traces of status and positionality to produce news as if from nowhere. One powerful element of that fiction which has come under increasing scrutiny, as Wahl-Jorgensen (2020) sets out, is the idea that there is no place for emotion in quality journalism, whether in production, content, or consumption. As she demonstrates, emotion of course plays a powerful part throughout the journalistic enterprise in practice, either directly or through its negation.

This is yet another example of how, just as there are public interest values inherent in some of the most intimate, personalised, and niche formats, so the intimate sphere of emotion and affect resonates through their archetypal opposite. There is, in practice, no singular, linear sliding scale between intimacy on the one hand and cosmopolitanism on the other, but rather an ambivalent and complex constellation of possibilities. Indeed, so imbricated and mutually influential have the terms proven, that the two terms need to be thought together. As Alex Lambert has argued in respect of the network society:

Today, our circumstance is that of a world system in which intimacy always faces cosmopolitanism. One cannot be defined without the other. Each negates the other to become itself. Yet in a Hegelian fashion, one is tantalized with the potential for a sublation in which the dialectic births a new form: cosmopolitan intimacy. (Lambert, 2019)

Cosmopolitan intimacy has value as a description for the experience of listening publics over the long radio century and into the podcasting age, but it has analytical power, too. The concept offers a way through for a communicative ethics by bearing within it a critique of the universalising abstractions of some versions of cosmopolitanism that are predicated on certain privileged Western and masculinist positions. Cosmopolitan intimacy connects to ideas of a caring democracy (Kavada, 2024; Tronto, 2013), where feminist critiques of the public sphere meet a feminist ethics of care. It builds on the insight that “care plays out at different scales and in many different contexts” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 711) and that “day-to-day cosmopolitan practices...are rooted in the particularities of everyday human relations and in the grounded politics of everyday life” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 712). Significantly, the intimate sphere becomes identified as a locus for cosmopolitanism within a moral and ethical framework that stands in critical opposition to its neoliberal framing as a site for commodified individualism.

The theoretical questions around intimacy and trust that podcasting throws up for audio journalism, then, are part of a much longer history of the paradoxes that characterize media communication, but they are also expressions of the age. Intimacy in the production, circulation, and reception of audio journalism is hardly new, but its heightened prominence and valorisation under neoliberalism has far-reaching and deeply ambivalent consequences for the public sphere. The idea of cosmopolitan intimacy offers a critical alternative to the celebratory discourses of individualism and personal gratification. Its achievement under current conditions, however, remains a challenge that poses difficult questions for the infrastructures of journalism, and demands responsibilities of its producers, its audiences, and its critics alike.



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# Advocacy and Activism in Sports Podcasts: Expanding Journalistic Roles

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## Abstract

This article examines the political turn in sports podcasting, focusing on the blurring and evolving boundaries of journalistic roles. The US-based sports podcasts *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports* offer three case studies of how podcasting opens space for politicizing sports coverage beyond scores and highlights. Podcast coverage of sports has adapted by enhancing a focus on the political implications of athletes’ personal stories. Analysis of episodic content and interview correspondence with podcast hosts focuses on how the podcast medium has opened new spaces advancing the cultural discourse on how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion impact athletes’ lives. Our results indicate the affordances unique to the podcast medium, like temporality, have enabled the expansion of journalistic roles and performance to include advocacy functions and leaning toward more socially progressive content than traditional media coverage has allowed.

## Keywords

activism; advocacy; journalistic roles; podcasting; sports media

## 1. Introduction

Sports and politics coverage in media has accelerated dramatically since the advent of digital production. Digital media opened new spaces for sports media to address political dimensions in and beyond the competition itself (Kroon & Eriksson, 2019; Perreault & Nölleke, 2022). Podcast journalism has provided a hothouse of storytelling innovation, enabling journalists to explore roles previously considered anathema to the detached and neutral reporting associated with journalistic objectivity (Nee & Santana, 2021). Podcasting’s expansive space and relative freedom from gatekeeping compared to terrestrial radio enabled a

robust expansion of the journalistic role into advocacy and activism on behalf of progressive politics, including news podcasting as well as Black identity (Miller et al., 2022).

Although a significant body of research is currently dedicated to sports journalism's political turn (Antunovic, 2018; English, 2017; Oates & Pauly, 2007; Schmidt, 2018), little attention has been paid to activist sports reporting in podcasting, particularly theoretical and methodological intersections of podcast and digital journalism studies. Podcast studies include the potential for a deeper understanding of podcasts' reinvention of sports journalism, especially its audience impact (English et al., 2023); digital journalism studies help answer the question of how journalistic roles are conceived and practiced by individual hosts. Building on research on sports media and social activism (Schmidt, 2018), this study examines cases in the sports podcasting industry in which journalists embrace the roles of advocate and activist (Williams Fayne, 2021). The researchers envisioned using Canella's (2023) concept of "journalistic power" to view journalism as a cultural institution whose "truth claims and editorial practices are influenced by the power dynamics embedded in the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they work" (p. 210). Case studies examined include *Social Sport*, centering on track and field with an emphasis on gender and race, *Burn It All Down*, featuring an intersectional feminist view of a variety of international women's sports, and *Edge of Sports*, representing a form of mainstream media sports coverage with a large audience reach. While the majority of the podcast hosts are US-based, the founding host of *Burn It All Down* is Shereen Ahmed, who is Canadian-born and has Pakistani parents. While the content of all three shows includes international topics of global concern, they were selected in part due to their treatment of Title IX, the US legislation promoting sports equity.

## 2. Literature Review and Theory

### 2.1. Sports Podcasts and Journalistic Discourse

Within the field of digital journalism studies, practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) bears immediate relevance to this study of sports podcasting's transformation of traditional journalistic roles. Production practice through this framework is understood through reflexive discourse, in addition to material contexts and activities, which combine to determine what digital journalism is as well as the trajectory on which it develops. Discursive reflexivity, which represents an important data set for this study consisting of interviews in which hosts reflect on their advocacy and activist orientations toward their craft, illuminates the producer's self-perceived societal role as, for example, custodian of conscience, watchdog, disseminator, populist mobilizer, fourth estate, interpreter, or other role conceptions (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Mellado, 2020).

Recent research on journalistic roles has identified the need to move beyond normative understandings according to a predominantly Western framework emphasizing media's contribution to democracy and citizenship that presumes traditional news is the only means of serving these functions (Mellado & Hallin, 2024). As Steensen and Westlund (2021) note, legacy news media is "not the only channel through which trustworthy information can flow in society and a public sphere marked by a diversity of opinions can be established," particularly through citizen journalism, social media, blogs, and podcasts, among an array of other digital communication of information that has democratized public speech (p. 65). As with YouTube and Twitch, podcasting has effectively expanded and diversified journalistic roles, which now extend into service, entertainment, lifestyle news, and sports, all of which are areas that "have been marginalized in



scholarly discourse and occasionally discredited as an unworthy other” (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 147). Digital sports news has endured the double-stigma of online entertainment as “a toy department within a toy department,” a hierarchy in which traditional sports journalists devalue their online colleagues much in the way news reporters disparage the sports desk to elevate their status (McEnnis, 2020, p. 1415).

Despite such preconceived social and professional notions of what constitutes legitimate news sources, sports reporters have increasingly turned toward politically inclined topics. This raises the question posed by gatekeeping theory regarding who decides what is newsworthy and how the digital platform can potentially influence the value ascribed to its content (Bro & Wallberg, 2015). Advocacy and activism mark a distinct characteristic of sports podcasts suggesting the development of a new beat or genre, one currently in the process of establishing its own set of conventions to distinguish it from more traditional sports coverage. As with tech workers and tech start-up companies challenging the boundaries of the journalistic world, referred to as digital interlopers on the periphery of traditional practice (Eldridge, 2017), many podcasters have similarly redrawn the boundaries of the profession to include political analysis and advocacy. Among them are independent sports podcasters, who are motivated by community building, ease of production, and freedom of individual self-expression over financial gain (Taylor, 2023). The hosts of our case studies did not migrate into podcasting via editorializing or punditry, but instead bear more rigorous intellectual pasts from academia (in the case of *Burn It All Down*) and longform reporting and writing on pertinent topics driving public debate. This pattern is evident in Dave Zirin’s work for *The Atlantic* and *The Nation* and Emma Zimmerman’s nonfiction on gender and environmental justice in the journals *Touchstone Literary* and *PRISM International*. Publications specializing in longform in-depth storytelling such as *The Athletic* have begun to invest heavily in podcast production.

This study meets the call for more scholarly attention to different epistemologies of digital journalism (Ekström et al., 2020), particularly in the development of genres, beats, and formats such as those associated with culture, human interest, and sports (Steensen & Westlund, 2021, p. 114). Such epistemological shifts arise in part due to industrial change and disruption, which can open new markets for business opportunities in digital publishing (Briggs, 2012). As producers enter these new markets, they can be self-aware of their contribution to the development of new beats and genres. Transparency has historically been leveraged by news producers as a legitimatizing rhetorical convention that seeks to authenticate and validate the story’s credibility through the disclosure of the reporter’s method and judgment at key intervals during the process of production. These instances in which reporters refer to their own process of production constitute metajournalistic discourse (Dowling et al., 2022), which has become a staple of podcast journalism and other forms of born-digital news media production. Digital culture’s premium of authenticity and self-disclosure also contributes to the spread of metajournalistic discourse by producers across emerging media platforms. Metajournalistic discourse has become so integral and even requisite to podcast journalism that it has, in some cases, become a matter of performative transparency. In some cases, metajournalistic discourse is strategically deployed to occlude or justify ethical transgressions, as in the notorious case of *Caliphate*, a *The New York Times* podcast hosted by Rukmini Callimachi (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). Such ethical concerns have contributed to a relative lack of trust in podcasts as news sources (Whipple et al., 2023) despite the sharp rise in listenership of sports podcasts (Clavio & Moritz, 2022). Metajournalistic discourse is examined in this study through interviews of hosts in which they expand on their journalistic self-perception and the extent to which they understand it as existing in tension with their show’s advocacy and activist functions. This self-perception is then compared to the actual meaning, production, and

expression of the host's podcast to determine if any discrepancies exist, allowing for a deeper understanding of any discrepancy between the producer's epistemological understandings of their craft and the exigencies of their show's ontological reality.

## 2.2. Sports Podcasts as Activist Digital Media

Sports radio journalist Julie DiCaro and ESPN's Sarah Spain posted a four-minute video on Facebook in 2016 in which men alternated reading, directly in front of each from a phone or tablet, actual derogatory posts made toward both journalists. The #MoreThanMean video went viral, and the women both appeared on talk shows to overwhelmingly positive coverage. Yet as the video entered mainstream discourse, discussion centralized men and limited discussion by women and for women of strategies for collective change on specific platforms (Antunovic, 2018, p. 429). The podcast *Burn It All Down* contrasts sharply with such momentary flashes of progressive political change, especially in the case that resulted in the paradoxical silencing of women on the issue. Not only did the show's intersectional feminist advocacy of women's fight for equality in sports offer a more sustained and ongoing examination on inequality and gender, women from a variety of social and ethnic origins came together as a collective. DiCaro would eventually become a *Burn It All Down* emeritus for her service to the show in the years following #MoreThanMean.

Each of our three case studies represents a counterpublic space to professional norms in sports journalism. These norms include the perception that sports journalists prioritize entertainment and fandom over critical, objective reporting (Perreault & Nölleke, 2022), in some instances demanding silence and withholding critique as a condition of freedom (McRobbie, 2004, p. 260). This expectation of silence in the face of harassment and systematic inequality reinforces hegemonic patriarchal controls of women's identity, sexuality, and expression in sports media (Antunovic, 2018). Our intersectional cases offer a clear path toward forming "self-conscious collectives that mutually acknowledge one another as having common purposes or shared experiences" (Young, 1994, p. 735) and in many ways provide an important sign of progress in feminism's continued "struggle with issues of privilege in online spaces, namely the struggle for visibility and recognition of women and feminist ideas in the mediated public sphere on their own terms" (Darmon, 2014, p. 701).

Serving this pivot toward advocacy in sports media is podcasting's emergence from longform narrative and feature writing, also known as "humanist journalism" (DeSilva, 2002). This renaissance in creative and conversational writing and reporting coincided with calls for more narrative elements in journalistic storytelling by *Quill* (Hallman, 2016) and *Nieman Reports* (Kramer, 2000). Explanatory or interpretive journalism is also linked to podcasting's broader formatting, allowing for greater control over material (Nee & Santana, 2021, pp. 3–4). Digital narratives, including podcasts, tend to engage audiences at deeper levels than traditional news, providing a sense of presence and enhancing character identification (Miller et al., 2022; Nee & Santana, 2021; Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Podcasting practices often espouse intimacy, presence, and narrativity (Lindgren, 2023) while retaining "core journalistic values and beliefs of balancing objectivity and subjectivity, immediacy, providing a public service and editorial autonomy" (McEnnis, 2020, p. 967). The premium on "fresh talk" (reading or performance of scripted material as if live; Goffman, 1981) and "superliveness" (emphasizing fluency, informality, and unpredictability; Kroon Lundell, 2014) from broadcasting carry over into podcasting, while the relaxed and personal production aesthetic is an idiom of sports journalism abetting, rather than undermining, sports podcasts' political efficacy. Such efficacy is

enabled through the lack of editorial constraints, allowing for deeper analysis and the pursuit of related topics and concepts unlikely to be addressed in mainstream media, leading to more nuanced patterns of discussion (Kroon & Eriksson, 2019, p. 849; Miller et al., 2022).

The departure from the “stick to sports” credo, as well as the gravitation toward complex topics such as brain injuries, sexuality, and nationality, changed the tone and tenor of sports journalism. Podcasting has increasingly fueled this transition by providing a natural space for discussion of these complex issues given its affordances such as (a) space and time, which is unlimited and inclined toward longform, narrative deep dives, and (b) intimacy inherent in the medium (Lindgren, 2023; Miller et al., 2022). In this sense, emerging media communication forms represent new technologies for journalistic production and distribution, and “new opportunities to...engage with multiple publics, and to tell multi-sided stories” (Waisbord, 2019, p. 357).

### **2.3. Civic Responsibility**

The dramatic rise in instances of athletes advocating for a variety of political or social causes raises the question of how frequently sports media has covered such activism. Schmidt (2018) examined the extent to which sports news media cover athletes taking an activist role, finding in 2016 that “the rate at which such topics were addressed was actually higher in sport media than in news media during periods of significant activism” (p. 11). Our study was prompted by how “an increased sense of civic responsibility may be developing—not just among individual athletes, teams, and leagues but among sports media, as well” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). Digital outlets like podcasts showcase how “sport media are working to reflect the changing and increasingly progressive and accepting attitudes of many in society” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). We argue the period of growth identified in 2016 has developed by expanding the journalistic role, thus realizing sports media’s potential “to not just reflect society but also lead social awareness and promote understanding” (Schmidt, 2018, p. 12). To build on that point, the rapid change in the sports journalism field was thought to be the result of Covid-19, according to Perreault and Nölleke, who noted that sports journalism during this period highlighted important societal issues, like gender inequity, with the potential to influence public discourse (2022).

In addition, research output on journalistic role conception has been around for decades as scholars eventually moved away from the notion that journalists performed their roles as they were conceived by an industry at large (Hellmueller & Mellado, 2015). To take the matter of journalistic roles a step further beyond conceptions, academic research on journalistic role performance has surged recently due to the need to document the continuous shift in the media industry (Mellado & Hallin, 2024). Journalistic role performance is the end result—the actual practice—of journalism standards (Mellado, 2020; Mellado & Hallin, 2024).

Tulloch and Ramon (2017) examined the continued commercial and brand value of longform and narrative sports journalism as a uniquely appealing form, especially in a digital ecosystem of brief, headline-driven news tailored for mobile devices. In remediating older forms of feature writing and documentary journalism, sports podcasts with an activist inclination foreground narrativity and storytelling while also maintaining a dedication to reportorial accuracy. English (2017) also noted sports podcasting’s importance as critical watchdog reporting; our study’s podcasts also showcase how the audio sector of digital sports media has expanded the journalist’s role to critic rather than cheerleader, specifically positioning hosts to call into question institutional inequality and systematic marginalization of diverse communities.

Concern for whether, and to what extent, the critical watchdog and other journalistic roles inform self-perception and production practices of sports podcast activism led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How is activism in sports podcasts represented in the hosts' journalistic role conceptions?

RQ1a: In what ways does the content of these selected sports podcasts align with their hosts' journalistic role conceptions that advance counterpublic agendas?

RQ2: Concerning the current political turn, how have podcasting's unique affordances and shifts in the broader podcast industry enabled sports advocacy podcasts to function within the journalism boundaries?

### 3. Methodology

Through purposive sampling appropriate to qualitative studies in media, the researchers selected three sports podcasts explicitly engaging social and political issues. An initial factor in selecting shows was the presence of any episodes dedicated to Title IX, in some cases occasioned by its 50th anniversary in June 2022. Since this legislation is specific to the US, podcasts selected were US-based, with founding hosts bearing citizenship from the US and Canada (Shereen Ahmed of *Burn It All Down*). Episodes chosen are not narrowly focused on this issue, but resonate with its concern for equity and social justice; Title IX states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Luther et al., 2022). Although Title IX does not mention sports, its application to "equal treatment of female and male student-athletes" by colleges and universities receiving federal assistance benefits profoundly changed athletics and represents a bellwether topic on gender issues (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2023). The presence of a Title IX episode signaled each show's dedication to progressive social change, allowing inquiry into hosts' conceptions of their journalistic roles.

After surveying social media and commentary by hosts on platforms and digital publications ancillary to each podcast's main content, selection was determined in part according to the extent to which hosts carried forward advocacy on behalf of public service through online channels. This criterion favored hosts showing robust activity as public-facing activist figures helping drive national conversations on gender equity and other political issues in sports. According to this rationale, the presence of earnest coverage of Title IX-related issues, and a strong activist web presence of hosts extending the discussion of issues raised in their podcasts, *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports* were chosen. According to qualitative methodology for in-depth analysis of smaller samples, this research makes no claims to formal generalizations based on large randomized samples associated with quantitative methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). However, claims made pertaining specifically to our cases bear relevance to the broader context of their sports podcast ecosystem by uniquely reflecting—rather than necessarily causing—trends toward political advocacy beyond coverage of competitive events and their outcomes. Further, these shows are presented not as universal examples, but rather as important constituents in the contemporary constellation of highly diverse global podcasts.

Subsequently, a series of eight interview questions for hosts were formulated to determine each host's conception of their journalistic roles. Host responses were collected via personal email correspondence for *Social Sport* and *Burn It All Down*. Dave Zirin, host of *Edge of Sports*, did not respond to email or social media inquiries; for that case, we accessed published interviews and online commentary to inform the analysis of podcast content. Methodologically termed "informant interviews" and host feedback offered the perspective of an insider, key player, and gatekeeper. Hosts are in privileged positions to reflect on the show's history, customs, and rituals (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 227). Regarding the ethics of our method, "when qualitative researchers interview 'key informants,' experts who are questioned about their area of expertise; or when they analyze published, public information such as X/Twitter online content, they are not considered to be involving human subjects in their research" (Meyer, 2017). After collecting interview data, the researchers reviewed each podcast's content to deduce discrepancies and/or alignment between role conception and production practice. Critical analysis was carried out on two representative episodes from each podcast.

This study's methodology thus provides qualitative critical analysis and interpretation of selected episodes from the shows. In varying degrees, case studies use paratextual online data drawn from publications and posts on platforms and channels ancillary to the main media text. The warrant for our study is supported by literature on qualitative research methods, specifically positing accurate and valuable knowledge can be gained through deeper inquiry into more carefully selected data sets and specific cases (Mahrt & Scharrow, 2013). This examination of the rhetorical nuances of the journalistic role conception of sports podcast hosts thus seeks to acquire "the deep knowledge and understanding that can be achieved when researchers engage with the units of analysis on a one-on-one basis" (Karlsson & Sjøvaag, 2016, p. 189).

Relevant paratextual data and the podcast content itself were analyzed according to the textual interpretive methodology established by Hans Gadamer dedicated to the text's specific features and its larger context (Palmer, 1969). Interpreting "webs of meaning" entails qualitative research to generate "thick descriptions" of performances (Geertz, 1973), designed to illuminate their significance for the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 53). In our cases, these participants include podcast hosts, guests, listeners, and the community at stake. A key focus of each interpretive step of this study involves analysis of *discourse*, as "the ways in which narratives are patterned in both public and private conversations in reference to existing systems of power as they operate through cultural categories such as race, gender or socioeconomic position" (Clark et al., 2004, p. 532).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Social Sport*

*Social Sport* was hosted by Emma Zimmerman and published in conjunction with *CITIUS MAG*, which is dedicated to competitive distance running, particularly track and field. *Social Sport* served the international community of runners, coaches, and fans seeking more than updates on events, but also in-depth analysis, in 83 podcast episodes from April 2020 through October 2021. Zimmerman, whose longform journalism examines social justice issues related to sports, described *Social Sport* as "using endurance sports to talk about justice, equity, climate change, and mental health with some of the most inspiring, intelligent, intuitive, world-shaking people" (Zimmerman, 2021a). October 4, 2021's, Title IX episode showcased Zimmerman's journalistic role performance. Her advocacy was evident in the selection of her guest, Risa Isard, a policy

expert and sports industry veteran who developed advocacy partnerships with tennis legend and LGBTQIA+ activist Billie Jean King, Brandi Chastain, Duke women's basketball, and the WNBA's Phoenix Mercury.

This episode of *Social Sport* dedicated to Title IX showcased Isard's expertise in gender equity law in women's sports drawn from her work at the University of Massachusetts's Laboratory for Inclusion and Diversity in Sport. For example, Isard noted racial bias through language, attention, and discourse surrounding athletes "is pervasive in and across sports, and in women's sports" (Zimmerman, 2021b). Zimmerman then raised the issue of racial bias in Title IX applications since its 1972 legislation; Isard responded "Title IX has fixed things unequally when it comes to girls," explaining "Title IX has been excellent for white, middle-upper class girls like me [but] has been a lot less effective at creating equity for Black girls, Latinx girls, girls of color broadly, and girls from low-income communities" (Zimmerman, 2021b).

Zimmerman's intersectional advocacy in this episode aligned with her abiding commitment voiced through Instagram black squares posted on June 2, 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder. In them, she emphasized how "organizations must move beyond signaling their commitments to justice (Instagram squares) and toward long-term and comprehensive action" (Zimmerman, 2022). Her podcast accordingly advocated for such deep, structural change, especially for racial justice, as seen in many episodes such as those addressing Black liberation (July 19, 2021); Indigenous sovereignty (August 30, 2021); the next generation of BIPOC runners (May 31, 2021); anti-Asian violence (May 24, 2021); and the plight of Muslim-American women runners (May 3, 2021). Each episode contributed to social progress, because "the culture never adapts in one grand sweep. Change happens in little microcosms, little spheres," she told the researchers via email correspondence, adding, "Sports is one sphere that people care a heck of a lot about, so it has the potential to push the culture forward in a major way" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

An episode featuring middle-distance professional runner Elise Cranny aligned with Zimmerman's core principles regarding her activist role. Cranny opened up about her experience with RED-S (Relative Energy Deficiency in Sports), an eating disorder linked to the under-fueling injury cycle, and commented on body image and comparison (Zimmerman, 2021a). The episode underscored Zimmerman's journalistic role conception as "an analyst/mobilizer, mostly because my show was concerned with the analysts and mobilizers—the people pushing for change in key areas" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023), such as Isard and Cranny. The watchdog role functioned as the driving force behind analysis and mobilization for social change: "I think to be an analyst/mobilizer, one needs to be a watchdog in some respect. Mobilization often comes as a response to an uneven power dynamic—the watchdog element comes first," she explained, adding, "The mobilization/analysis is the response" (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

Zimmerman's January 2022 commentary in her newsletter signaling the conclusion of *Social Sport* clearly articulated her professional role and journalism's duty to social justice, one shaped by particular media. She noted, "The symbolism of the black Instagram square is all too stark: justice worked within the confines of a 1080 X 1080 pixel box" (Zimmerman, 2022). Reflecting on the June 2020 social media posts:

Those little black squares seem like prophecies now. For my part, I promise to never shy away from justice-centered stories. I hope that more publications realize that talking about injustice (talking about reality) is not political. It's just good journalism. And it's necessary. (Zimmerman, 2022)



Zimmerman alluded to the term “political” here according to the stigma associated with activist journalism, preferring instead “injustice” and “reality.” In her view, the less confining space of podcasting “goes much deeper than mainstream news—leading wherever it may lead—philosophy, history, and various interesting places” (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023). As with longform narrative and feature profile reporting and writing, “it is less concerned with being succinct and more concerned with fully hashing out the intricacies of an issue, movement, etc. and how the interviewee’s work relates to it” (E. Zimmerman, personal communication, September 4, 2023).

#### 4.2. *Burn It All Down*

*Burn It All Down* began in 2017; the podcast’s unique angle was its hosting by five women who were either working journalists or college professors and well-read in sports: journalists Shireen Ahmed, Lindsay Gibbs, and Jessica Luther; and professors Amira Rose Davis and Brenda Eley. Through engaging discussions and insightful commentary, *Burn It All Down* explored gender equality in sports, racial justice, and LGBTQIA+ issues. With their vocal commitment to challenging the status quo and advocating for inclusivity, *Burn It All Down* was a platform for underrepresented voices in sports media. Their catalog included 267 episodes, not including interviews with leaders and trailblazers in the sports industry. Currently, there are no new episodes; the last episode aired in October 2022. *Burn It All Down* was a part of the Blue Wire Podcast Network, which mostly consisted of sports podcasts.

The host Jessica Luther provided email responses to questions about the podcast’s core principles and journalistic role conceptions. She acknowledged *Burn It All Down* intentionally took up space in sports programming by providing “feminist, intersectional criticism focused on marginalized voices within sports” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023) and, because of their diverse backgrounds, any of the *Burn It All Down* hosts could “go deep on a single topic or go broad and speak of issues that affect athletes worldwide” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). They spotlighted athletes not typically in the spotlight, and “incorporated pointed criticism of sports media and the narratives often used within it, but we also offered alternatives on how to think and speak about topics within sport” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). In Luther’s response to the potential for weightier conversations and what those conversations would focus on, she indicated:

The deeper issues are things like—but certainly not limited to—systemic inequality in the way sports organizations and institutions are created and maintained, the exclusion of marginalized athletes, the intersection of capitalism and sports and the ill effects from it, the many ways that sports and sporting institutions enable and ignore abuse, and the exploitation of athlete labor. (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023)

Luther’s website listed her media-related titles: investigative journalist, author, and podcaster (Luther, n.d.). As such, in terms of journalistic roles, she naturally embodies them in her day-to-day work, but she also mentioned her compassionate approach: “I think how I write and talk about gendered violence provides a blueprint to others on how to do it in an empathetic, knowledgeable, and careful way that can have an important impact on their everyday lives” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023). Luther neither embraced nor fully dissociated from the role of “advocate,” but instead more strongly identified with being an “educator.” Finally, in terms of other titles like watchdog, Luther felt that was a part of journalism.

She did, however, see “my roles as journalist and co-host as very separate things, even if the content overlapped” (J. Luther, personal communication, November 2, 2023).

*Burn It All Down* addressed Title IX specifically in June 21, 2022’s “Episode 255: Thinking Through 50 Years of Title IX.” Luther, Elsey, and Gibbs hosted the episode, which also included a brief preview of a Title IX book; the hosts provided an overview of Title IX and discussed the beneficiality to girls and women, particularly White women. One distinction of the enactment of Title IX was the National Collegiate Athletic Association spending 10 years in litigation opposing the law with Gibbs pointing out, “Even as the NCAA was taking over women’s sports, they were fighting Title IX in court still” (Luther et al., 2022). The hosts also addressed some Title IX variances including how there are fewer women coaching college teams now than in the 1970s. According to the discussion, Title IX doesn’t have enough weight to be impactful. The hosts cautioned the law could come under threat in the current political environment in the US with attacks on both reproductive rights and transgender athlete sport participation.

### 4.3. *Edge of Sports*

*Edge of Sports* is hosted by Dave Zirin, sports editor of *The Nation* magazine; in a past interview, King (2008) noted Zirin’s focus was on “labor relations and the corporatization of sport; the prejudices and biases of fans and sportswriters, especially racism, homophobia, and sexism; and the spectacles of nationalism” (p. 334), all of which are significant topics in *Edge of Sports*. Zirin emphasized:

Sports are theoretically a meritocracy so it has always been fertile ground to challenge the idea that some are inherently unable because of their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This isn’t just about being able to achieve athletically, but about whether people can strive behind the scenes. (King, 2008, pp. 337–338)

The June 17, 2022, episode “50 Years of Title IX” was a longform discussion with Kim Turner, director of the Gender Equity Initiative at the Positive Coaching Alliance. A pivotal component of the discussion was Zirin emphasizing Title IX’s wording goes beyond sports, yet is largely exclusively relegated to usage within sports, despite its focus on higher and secondary education. Turner’s insights provided an immersive deep-dive into the multiple roles Title IX has played in providing gender equity, particularly in creating opportunities for girls’ and women’s athletics in places lacking those opportunities (Zirin, 2022). Zirin’s discussion with Turner also poignantly examined anti-inclusive movements in sports, particularly transgender athletics. Zirin declared this movement as “scapegoating trans kids,” pointing out hypocritical actions of using women’s athletics to justify those actions while seemingly never caring about those sports until this particular issue. Turner’s response reinforced a need for equity and representation across sports, specifically “to make sure every kid gets that chance to be physically active and play a sport, given the wonderful life lessons they can give to any child” (Zirin, 2022).

Zirin’s later personal commentary in this episode—in the segment “Choice Words”—critiqued former PGA golfers and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the LIV Golf Tour. Zirin used this segment to examine “sportswashing,” a practice “indulged in by all governments when sports are used as a tool to achieve anti-poor, pro-development policy goals that people would otherwise oppose” (Zirin, 2022). Zirin focused on the immense social controversies in athletes joining LIV; he particularly eviscerated golfer Phil Mickelson’s

LIV involvement based on his belief of the US PGA Tour's "cartel-like" control over its players (Zirin, 2022). He then highlighted responses from September 11, 2001 families to Mickelson and golfers joining LIV to show how that tour was trying to "sportswash" past gruesome human rights and terrorism abuses (Zirin, 2022). The episode ended overlooking the Brittney Griner case in Russia. Griner was arrested in Russia in 2022 on drug-related charges and served 10 months of a nine-year sentence before a prisoner swap was brokered. Zirin called out Russia's treatment of Griner essentially as a pawn for that government's self-serving interests. As such, this episode wove together multiple advocacy issues, particularly social inequality and human rights concerns.

Sports activism and gender equality were also common themes in August 4, 2023's "The Women's World Cup and the Fight for Equal Pay," featuring US women's soccer legend Julie Foudy. Foudy noted the importance of equal pay in women's athletics and how data now exists on the return on investment in women's athletics and the success of the league (Zirin, 2023). The discussion detailed how the fight for equal pay includes decades of generations of women's soccer players, with Zirin drawing parallels to Negro League baseball players passing information to its future players on civil rights and equality.

Zirin's penultimate interview discussion with Foudy examined transgender athletes' inclusion in sports; Foudy noted this issue was extremely layered, nuanced, and divisive, yet could be harmful to women's athletics and sports in general:

We should have trans kids playing sports; why are we keeping people out of sports? We need them playing...lost in all of it is the humanity of it. These people didn't transition to win medals, they transitioned because this is who they are. And that's the thing I keep coming back to. (Zirin, 2023)

Zirin's regular "Choice Words" segment immediately after the interview expanded on social and civil liberty activism in sports, focusing on US women's soccer star Megan Rapinoe. Zirin expertly balanced his argument of the importance of Rapinoe's social activism and use of her platform to bring heightened awareness to equal rights within society, not just in sports: "The 'Rapinoe superpower' is that she is restless unless she is turning anger into action," thus "inspiring many more to be brave and fearless in the face of injustice" (Zirin, 2023).

## 5. Discussion

The rise and affordances of podcasting have proven to be a good fit for discussion-driven sports culture (Clavio & Moritz, 2022). Podcasting has fundamentally shifted the traditional boundaries of journalistic roles in sports podcasts, particularly in relation to activism and advocacy (Perreault & Nölleke, 2022). As podcasts increasingly center the political and social dimensions of athletes' experiences, journalists, including podcast hosts, are embracing advocacy functions that go beyond mere reporting, positioning themselves as facilitators of progressive discourse.

*Social Sport* actively implemented advocacy journalism as a core component of production practice, particularly through sustained attention to social justice issues. The host Emma Zimmerman consistently spoke with sports leaders and experts and provided contextualized and counter viewpoints on diverse topics (McRobbie, 2004). For example, Zimmerman's Title IX guest foregrounded the racial disparities that have resulted from the law. *Burn It All Down* focused on political sports activism by zeroing in on systems of power affecting average sports

fans, in the process disrupting broadly accepted narratives through an intersectional lens. Its Title IX discussion, in part, exuded advocacy by educating listeners about the opportunities women did *not* have before Title IX's implementation as cited in Perreault and Nölleke's work (2022). The chief mission of *Edge of Sports* is to cover political implications within sports. The podcast largely uses expert interviews; both episodes analyzed alluded to Title IX's shaping of legislation and the future of girls' and women's athletics, as well as transgender athletes' inclusion (and the dangers of exclusion) in sports.

Regarding RQ1—how politics was represented in hosts' journalistic roles conceptions—*Social Sport* revealed a clear political agenda not retreating from the advocacy role. Zimmerman persistently pressed political topics in and beyond the show into her freelance magazine journalism. Zimmerman intentionally constructed counterpublic spaces (McRobbie, 2004). In *Burn It All Down*, the host Jessica Luther spoke truth to power by singling out topics like systemic inequality and the exclusion of marginalized athletes neglected by mainstream media. In this regard, Luther displayed both feminist ideals (Darmon, 2014) and journalistic power (Canella, 2023). Since Luther is a journalist, journalistic role conceptions were intrinsic to her production practice. Most prominent among her traditional journalistic role conceptions was her mindfulness in her coverage of gendered violence. In *Edge of Sports*, traditional journalistic roles were central. During interviews, host Dave Zirin's journalistic role performance mainly deferred to his interviewees for responses, incorporating a moderator role. Zirin cultivated a shared experience environment (Young, 1994). While he did interject to provide specific insights, Zirin mainly worded his questions as prompts or requests for responses. However, in addressing RQ1a, Zirin's departure from traditional journalistic roles appeared in the "Choice Words" segment, where he more directly interjected his own perspective. Content also aligned with hosts' journalistic roles advancing progressive political agendas in *Social Sport* via Zimmerman's calculated advocacy approach. Though she acted as a digital interloper, addressing topics like injustice, environmental concerns, and running, she considered the journalistic watchdog position an accurate representation of her role.

The entire premise of *Burn It All Down*, a feminist sports podcast, flew in the face of decades of inequalities pervasive in sports media (Antunovic, 2018). As a journalist, Luther exemplified journalistic tendencies on the podcast. However, through some introspection, she also played educator and watchdog. These journalistic role conceptions and performances and *Burn It All Down's* positionality encompass what Williams Fayne (2021) would call advocacy journalism. Further, the credibility of Luther and her colleagues increased the level of respect for podcasts beyond a fringe alternative medium. Hosts and production teams were intentional in advancing progressive political agendas to foster cultural awareness and societal acceptance (Schmidt, 2018).

The primary mission of *Edge of Sports* is in-depth analysis of political implications within sports. In his podcast and written commentary, as well as social media presence (particularly on X), Zirin made clear his political views on stances such as transgender rights and gender pay equality in sports. However, this expression did not come at the expense of journalistic norms. Zirin used his journalism experience to provide insightful questions, discussions, and focus on pivotal, newsworthy issues within sports, thereby incorporating journalism's chief components of timeliness and accuracy.

Unique affordances of podcasting, like temporality and gatebreaking, along with shifts in the broader podcast industry advanced each show's advocacy/activist agendas within journalism's boundaries (RQ2). Civic responsibility is not commonly associated with mainstream contemporary sports talk programs. However, it was a focal point of Zimmerman's podcast and thus set her apart as a positive contributor to

civil society (Schmidt, 2018). She utilized podcasting to circumvent gatekeeping to book guests who could speak freely on social justice topics. *Burn It All Down* leveraged podcasting's unrestricted temporality for deep dives without the pressure of commercial breaks common in terrestrial radio sports radio programs (Miller et al., 2022). Topics such as transgender athletes and gendered violence diverted from those of mainstream sports media. Though *Burn It All Down* was a member of a network, the hosts maintained editorial authority regarding the podcast's content. Luther said she felt she was wearing her journalism cap with the hope of equipping the show's audience to be more politically aware. *Edge of Sports* utilized podcasting's relatively open time and space to incorporate personal views into production, allowing Zirin to not just espouse views on trending topics within sports, but to also balance those commentaries with insightful journalistic expert interviews.

Podcasting practices and content can advance other forms of radicalization in opposition to the values of these chosen case studies. With its expansive multi-hour series of largely unchecked and unaccountable audio-based content—which often does not bear transcripts available online—the podcast medium proliferated political misinformation in the US after the 2020 presidential election. A 2023 Brookings study found conservative hosts and figures were overwhelmingly more likely to share false claims (91%) than liberal hosts and figures (6%) on news-related shows (Dowling et al., 2022; Wirtschafter, 2023). This disproportionately high rate of misinformation spread per episode is magnified by the extraordinarily high volume of conservative podcast production of up to 2.5 times that of centrist and left-leaning podcasts (Wirtschafter, 2023). This pattern reflects the asymmetric nature of political parties in the US as identified by Grossmann and Hopkins (2016), who argue that the two parties are profoundly different given Republicans' overwhelming focus on ideology compared to the group-interest orientation of Democrats. In the podcast medium, this is evident in the lack of self-reflexivity of right-wing podcasts (Dowling et al., 2022), which move oppositely from "human journalism's" adherence to the truth-telling covenant associated with traditional journalism combined with an "effort to understand something and even, at a deeper level, an effort to heal something rather than simply a desire to tell a tale" (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 194, emphasis in original). Although the podcast medium's informality leaves it vulnerable to hijacking by ideologues (Dowling et al., 2022), its interpretive form of news reporting and commentary (Nee & Santana, 2021) can serve as a deliberative model of discursive democracy (Riedl, 2019).

Although the far-right has aggressively appropriated news and politics genres of podcasting (Wirtschafter, 2023), sports podcasting has yet to be hijacked in this manner by conservative extremists. Together with the drive to understand and potentially heal associated with human journalism, progressive sports podcasts embody the diversity of the medium, which nonetheless does not in all instances evenly or consistently advance democracy. They do, however, reflect what Powers (2024) characterizes as podcasting's vocal diversity that distinguishes its performance of the news: "Podcasting has demonstrated the appeal of hosts with diverse backgrounds and presentation styles," which is currently evident in sports podcasts (Powers, 2024, p. 133). Sports consistently ranks as a top genre on the podcast charts, including Edison Research, where sports was ranked fifth in 2024 (Edison Research, 2024). Topics on Brittney Griner, sportswashing, NIL (Name, Image, and Likeness) legislation, transgender competition, Title IX, race, and body image have emerged among the central concerns of these politically oriented sports podcasts. The growing number of podcasts dedicated to advocating for diverse and underrepresented communities in the world of sports include *Playmakers*, *Girl at the Game*, *Queens of the Court*, *The BB Collective*, *In Her Corner*, *The Black Athlete*, *The Legacy of Speed*, and *Champions of Change: The RISE Podcast*.

It should be noted that, in this research, two of the three examined cases, *Social Sport* and *Burn It All Down*, have ceased production. This is reflective of the industry's fluidity, particularly with respect to the tendency in digital sports media for journalists to vacillate between platforms and media. For example, in the case of *Social Sport*, its host Emma Zimmerman opted to cease production to cultivate her print longform journalism on women's distance running. Shereen Ahmed similarly elected to pursue longform storytelling through text-based sports publications such as Canada's TSN. Like Zimmerman, Ahmed maintained her freelance writing while hosting *Burn It All Down* in addition to other media appearances such as her guest spot on the podcast *Sports as a Weapon* (July 2021), a show like *Redspin Sports* that shares the progressive political perspective of our selected cases. Zimmerman (2022) pointed to the emotional labor of podcast production as a major reason for ceasing production. This points to the broader concern for emotional performativity that podcasting entails, which is unique to vocal expression, and the desire among hosts to engage audiences with authenticity (Powers, 2024). The emotional labor of vocal performance, the sense of presence, and the maintenance of narrative intrigue specific to podcasting amplify the demands on mental health and the risk of burnout among news workers operating in other media (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2023).

## 6. Conclusion

The purposive cases revealed progressive politics in *Social Sport*, *Burn It All Down*, and *Edge of Sports*. The limitation of examining only three podcast productions means that our findings are not meant to be generalized. Though our podcast case studies broadened the scope of sports coverage, extending beyond conventional reporting to embrace political dimensions. Content and host interviews indicate podcasts' role in creating new spaces for advancing critical and cultural discourse on the profound impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion on athletes' lives. This exploration has revealed a significant expansion in journalistic role conception and performance, with sports podcasting seemingly embracing advocacy functions that contribute to more socially progressive content than what traditional media coverage has typically allowed. Notably, our investigation indicated an empowerment of podcast hosts and shows with unprecedented opportunities to assume advocacy and activist roles. As outlined in this research, the affordances of podcasting, including temporality, enabled podcast hosts to deeply expand on newsworthy topics, thereby providing counternarratives and discussion-driven storytelling within sports media.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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# Trust in Pod: Listener Trust of News Content Heard on Different Genre Podcasts

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## Abstract

There are several news podcast programs for listeners to choose from, but other genre podcasts (e.g., comedy, true crime, history) also include news in their content. This study measures listener trust in news content aired in different genres. The findings indicate most listeners trust content heard on news podcasts, which may relate to an increase in available news programs, as well as an overall increase in podcast listenership. The research also shows some listeners trust news heard on non-news podcasts. This may relate to interest in alternate sources for news and the storytelling formats used in the programs. When examining the trust of news content based on genre, news heard on comedy, news, and history podcasts are more likely to be trusted by listeners. The majority of gratifications associated with listening to podcasts based on the various genres are similar, with minimal differences seen among certain genres. Discussion of AI and its influence on trust in news heard on podcasts is also addressed.

## Keywords

listener trust; news; podcast; podcast genres; podcast news; podcasting; trust in news; uses and gratifications

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## 1. Introduction

Podcasts are more popular than ever, and the range of genres is vast with everything from comedy to true crime to health and fitness. Yet, when it comes to podcasts from news organizations, only 20% of Americans listen to these programs. However, the same research indicates most podcast listeners report hearing news on podcast genres other than news programs. What’s more, most listeners expect the news they hear on podcasts—regardless of genre—to be accurate or trustworthy (Shearer et al., 2023).

Previous studies have focused on trustworthiness and news podcasts. For instance, audiences are inclined to trust content from news podcasts when it comes from a host they feel connected to, and that bond can be enhanced when the podcaster engages with listeners (English et al., 2023). Others suggest if a listener's political association is in line with the podcast content, they are more likely to interpret the news as unbiased and objective (Whittle, 2023).

There is a collection of research about listener trust of content heard on news podcasts; yet, based on new findings indicating listeners expect news aired on podcast genres to be accurate, it's important to expand the focus. Specifically, this study is designed to do this by concentrating on five areas of interest: (a) trust in news heard on non-news podcasts; (b) trust in news heard on news podcasts; (c) genres for relaying trustworthy news content; (d) why people listen to podcasts based on genre; and (e) a call to action concerning artificial intelligence (AI) and trust in news on podcasts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Podcast Evolution and Listenership Today

What is a common presence in our daily existence dates back to the early 2000s. Initially developed using RSS technology, which enabled users to share audio files on the web, it evolved into what we know as podcasting. In 2004, former MTV video jockey Adam Curry partnered with RSS developer, Dave Winer, to create a new RSS technology, iPodder, that enabled users to download audio files to their iPods (Affleck, 2005). The appeal was notable with the *New Oxford American Dictionary* selecting podcast as the word of the year in 2005. However, growth was initially slow-going, but the 2014 debut of the real-life murder mystery podcast, *Serial*, fueled listener attention and set the stage for a continual rise of interest in podcasts (Bishop, 2014; Dredge, 2014).

Over two-thirds of Americans report listening to a podcast in the past 12 months, half of whom tuned in within the past month, and about a third within the last week. The heightened activity is seen among both genders with females having a greater interest in true crime podcasts than their male counterparts. Listener preference also varies by race with African Americans showcasing a greater preference for podcasts about ethnicity, finance, sports, and health (Shearer, 2023). When examining appeal among all listeners, study findings indicate comedy, society and culture, and news to be the most popular genres (Edison Research, 2024a). Other preferred genres include government and politics, science and technology, self-help, game shows, and sports (Edison Research, 2024a; Hadad, 2024). Common format approaches heard on podcasts include interviews, deep reporting, and commentary. The more in-depth interview style used by Joe Rogan, host of the popular *Rogan Experience*, has been described as “putt[ing] guests at ease, allowing them to share their thoughts and ideas in a way they might not be able to in other interviews” (Keating, n.d.). Deep reporting, where the focal point is a detailed analysis of a particular topic, is frequently put to use on true crime and history podcasts, and the commentary approach can be often heard on political-related podcasts (Stocking et al., 2023).

### 2.2. News Content on Podcasts

People are increasingly accessing news on digital media (Bird, 2023; Sang et al., 2023; Schneier, 2020; Whittle, 2024). Research suggests listeners who tune in to news podcasts may be more engaged and more likely to



take part in political action (Bird, 2023; Park, 2017). Park (2017) identified three concepts used in citizen news podcasts from Korea—carnivalism, engaging journalism, and counter-public sphere. Either of these may threaten the listenership of mainstream news media and be used to draw attention to news stories that may have otherwise been ignored. Sang et al. (2023) emphasized the unique nature of podcasts and their relevance in relaying niche news topics across the globe, and in a study surveying those who listen to a popular podcast about cricket, English et al. (2023) found audiences to be highly engaged, they formed connections with the show hosts, and viewed program content to be trustworthy.

In an examination of award-winning and shortlisted news podcasts, Lindgren (2023, p. 716) identified a trend where journalists drew in listeners with narrative journalism by becoming “an important story character in their own right.” In a study designed to broaden understanding of what was known as an “emerging media phenomenon,” Skalický (2023) interviewed podcast news hosts and editors and found the shows target younger audiences and reveal the processes of how the stories were produced to enhance audience trust. Rae (2023) suggests the way in which something is said plays a key role in the influence of political content. Using informal and casual language, such as that used by Joe Rogan, enhances intimacy and creates a sense of comfort. In an analysis of 40 podcast episodes from news organizations aired during the Covid-19 pandemic, Nee and Santana (2022) found most episodes incorporated personal elements in the content such as first-person voice, character development, and the inclusion of personal opinions as a part of the story. The study highlighted how experimenting with formats during the pandemic led to a blend of traditional journalism and storytelling that appealed to wider audiences, particularly younger listeners.

Whittle (2023) found most users tune in to podcasts associated with traditional media outlets, and these same listeners also find cable television news to be trustworthy. Funk and Speakman (2022) found mainstream news podcasts such as those from NPR and *The New York Times* generally emphasize professionalism and objectivity. Politically conservative podcasts rarely use the word conservative, but otherwise, the language is similar to mainstream podcasts, which makes them indistinguishable. Another investigation found listeners trust news heard on podcasts less than content from traditional media. However, news podcasts were viewed as a more reliable source when compared to online news and digital satirical content. The study also suggests listeners value storytelling techniques that create a sense of immersion and intimacy (Whipple et al., 2023).

Scholars have also examined podcasts associated with major events such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Miller et al. (2022) argued major issues can give rise to the availability of daily news podcasts and, in turn, can create an increase in opportunities for daily discussions. The findings underscored the role of podcasts in reinventing audio reporting with more detailed storytelling during times of social and political unrest. Bratcher (2022) examined how podcasts help shape personal and political identities among young adults with findings indicating participants view podcasts as a significant source of information when compared to traditional media and online news.

### **2.3. Uses and Gratifications**

The uses and gratifications approach dates back to the late 1950s when Katz (1959) called for scholars to turn their attention toward investigating what people do with media rather than what media does to people. The approach is taken from the perspective of audience members and seeks to understand why individuals use media and the gratifications they seek and receive (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Used over the years to examine

audience use of traditional media, it was Ruggiero (2000) who noted the approach to be suitable for digital media based on the active role people played in selecting media sources.

From as early as 2007, uses and gratifications have been used to study motivations associated with podcasts (Johnson, 2007). When examining motivations among college students, Chung and Kim (2016) identified podcasts to be a medium for both entertainment and education. McClung and Johnson (2010) concluded listeners tune in as a form of entertainment, socialization, and to take control of their media experience. Markman (2011) investigated why people produce independent audio podcasting. The findings suggested five motivations: (a) interest in technology and media; (b) passion for the subject matter they cover; (c) interaction with their audience and the broader podcasting community; (d) personal enjoyment and self-expression; and (e) potential for monetization. Perks and Turner (2019) found podcasts offer a supply of engaging content that travels with listeners, enabling them to be productive in various physical and intellectual ways. The same study suggests the gratification associated with listening to podcasts—enjoyment—is based in part on the connections listeners form with both the hosts and the podcast community. Craig et al. (2023) studied motivations among younger audiences and found they varied by podcast genre, with entertainment and escapism as predictors for a positive perception of podcasts. Also, Whittle (2023) identified convenience and socialization among the motivations for listening to daily news podcasts,

### 3. Research Questions

Research indicates most people hear news content when they listen to podcasts—even when it is not a news podcast (Shearer et al., 2023). This study seeks to further explore this finding by focusing on listener trust in the news people hear on podcasts. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How much do listeners trust news content heard on non-news (e.g., comedy, history, true crime) podcasts?

RQ2: How much do listeners trust news content heard on news podcasts?

RQ3: How likely are listeners to trust news content heard on different genre podcasts?

RQ4: What gratifications do podcast listeners of different genres associate with podcasts?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Recruitment

The names of the top 20 podcasts listed on the iTunes directory, a popular online resource where individuals can locate a list of podcast programs, was compiled on July 24, 2024. A search for fan group pages associated with the 20 podcasts was then conducted on the social media outlet, Facebook. Each podcast name was entered into the appropriate search bar, and relevant groups were then documented. Fan groups with fewer than 150 members and those without an administrator contact option were excluded. A request was then sent to the administrator, the person(s) responsible for overseeing the group page, asking for permission to post a

request message with a link to the study survey. Upon receiving the go-ahead, researchers created a survey post on each corresponding group page. Next, using the search terms “podcast” and “podcasting,” researchers continued to search for participants on Facebook specifically for podcast-related groups. Similar to before, groups without administrator access and those with fewer than 150 members were excluded. A request was sent to the associated administrators for permission to post the survey message. Once confirmed, survey requests were posted on the corresponding group pages.

Next, a search for the same top 20 podcasts was conducted on the social media outlet, Reddit. Only groups with more than 150 members were documented. All results from Reddit allowed access to the group’s moderators (those who oversee groups on Reddit). Moderators were asked permission to post a survey message on their corresponding group page. When granted, the researchers posted a survey message. A search for “podcast” and “podcasting” was also performed on Reddit. Similar to before, only groups with more than 150 members were documented, and a moderator(s) was contacted to seek permission to create a survey request post. The researchers posted request messages on the approved group pages. Finally, one of the researchers posted a survey request message on her personal Facebook page.

## 4.2. Survey

After confirming consent to complete the anonymous study survey, participants were directed to a filter question asking how often they listen to podcasts. Individuals who selected “I do not listen to podcasts” were directed to demographic questions and other relevant inquiries. Based on genres from Edison Research (2024a), participants were asked to select the types of podcasts they prefer. Next, they were asked how long they have listened to podcasts, and based in part on Craig et al. (2023) and Chan-Olmsted and Wang (2022), individuals were asked to indicate the reasons they listen to podcasts. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants were next asked to rate what they believe to be the level of trustworthiness of news content they hear on non-news podcasts (e.g., true crime, comedy, history). This was followed by an open-ended question asking listeners to explain their selection of trustworthiness. Only those who said they listen to news podcasts were asked to rate what they believe to be the level of trustworthiness of news they hear on news podcasts. This was followed by an open-ended question asking listeners to explain their selection. The questionnaire ended with varying demographic questions. Responses were collected from 1,102 participants between July 24, 2024, and August 4, 2024.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Demographics

The majority of those who answered the survey fall between the ages of 25–44 with 43.9% being between 25–34 and 36.6% between 35–44 years old. Other age groups include 18–24 (5.5%), 45–54 (10.8%), 55–64 (2.3%), and 65 or older (.5%). The respondents were 58.8% female, 35.5% male, 3.9% binary, 1.1% chose not to say, and .6% selected other. Over two-thirds are white/Caucasian (86%), 5.2% are Hispanic or Latino, 2.8% selected other, 1.8% preferred not to say, 1.4% are African-American, 1.4% are Asian, and .1% are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. In terms of the highest level of education, most participants have a bachelor’s (38%) or graduate degree (29.6%), 10.8% have an associate’s degree, 14.8% reported completing high school, 5.7% selected other, and 1.1% preferred not to say. When it comes to household income, 26.1%

earn more than \$120,000 per year, 22.3% make between \$60,000–\$89,999, 21.3% earn \$30,000–\$59,999, 18.2% make \$90,000–\$119,999, 5.9% preferred to not say, 5.5% selected \$0–\$29,999, and .8% chose other. A total of 35.3% of participants are male; 59.0% are female; 3.9% are non-binary; 1.1% prefer not to say, and 0.6% are other.

## 5.2. Listening Habits

Among those surveyed, 23.2% listen to 1–2 podcasts per week, 38.7% listen to 3–4 podcasts per week, 36.7% listen to more than 5 podcasts per week, and 1.4% do not listen to podcasts. Regarding the number of years of listening to podcasts, 3.9% have listened for 1–2 years, 27.9% have listened for 3–5 years, 45.9% have listened for 6–10 years, and 22.2% have listened for more than 10 years. The four most popular podcast genres are true crime (91.8%), comedy (80.5%), history (52.0%), and society and culture (45.3%). See Tables 1, 2, and 3 for more.

**Table 1.** Average number of podcasts per week.

On an average week, how many podcasts do you listen to?	Count	Percentage
1–2	253	23.2%
3–4	421	38.7%
5 or more	400	36.7%
Total	1,089	100%

**Table 2.** Time listening to podcasts.

How long have you been listening to podcasts?	Count	Percentage
1–2 years	41	3.9%
3–5 years	293	27.9%
6–10 years	482	45.9%
More than 10 years	233	22.2%
Total	1,049	100%

**Table 3.** Types of genres listened to by participants.

Genre	Count	Percentage	Genre	Count	Percentage
True crime	971	91.8%	Government	140	13.2%
Comedy	852	80.5%	Sports	121	11.4%
History	550	52%	Other	96	9.1%
Society and culture	479	45.3%	Arts	94	8.9%
News	391	37%	Technology	87	8.2%
TV and film	337	31.9%	Health and Fitness	80	7.6%
Science	249	23.5%	Religion and Spirituality	74	7%
Fiction	218	20.6%	Leisure	53	5%
Education	180	17%	Business	43	4.1%
Music	177	16.7%	Kids and Family	20	1.9%

Note: Results based on 1,058 survey respondents.

In relation to RQ1, just under 40% of those who hear news content on non-news podcasts (e.g., comedy, true crime, history) either strongly agree or somewhat agree that the news content is trustworthy. Close to a third neither agree nor disagree, 23% somewhat disagree, and about 7% strongly disagree (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Trust in news heard on non-news podcasts.

I trust the news I hear on non-news podcasts (e.g., true crime, comedy, history)		
	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	53	6.2%
Somewhat agree	286	33.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	262	30.7%
Somewhat disagree	196	23%
Strongly disagree	57	6.7%
Total	854	100%

Note: Non-news podcasts may contain news content, they are not identified as a news podcast.

In terms of RQ2, among those who listen to news podcasts, over two-thirds strongly agree or somewhat agree that the news content is trustworthy. A little more than 20% neither agree nor disagree, and about 13% either somewhat disagree or strongly disagree that the news content on news podcasts is trustworthy (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Trust in news content heard on news podcasts.

I trust the news I hear on news podcasts (e.g., <i>The Daily</i> , <i>Pod Save America</i> , <i>Fox News Rundown</i> )		
	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	50	15.2%
Somewhat agree	164	49.7%
Neither agree nor disagree	72	21.8%
Somewhat disagree	34	10.3%
Strongly disagree	10	3%
Total	303	100%

Note: News podcasts are identified as news programs.

In terms of RQ3, when examining the relationship between listeners of different podcast genres and the level of trustworthiness of news heard on podcasts, regardless of genre, there is a statistically significant relationship among those who listen to comedy podcasts. That is, listeners of comedy podcasts are about 30% likely to strongly agree or somewhat agree news content heard on podcasts is trustworthy. Slightly less than half are likely to neither agree nor disagree, and about a quarter are likely to somewhat disagree or strongly agree. Similarly, there is a statistically significant relationship between those who listen to history podcasts and the level of trustworthiness of news content heard on podcasts. Similar to comedy listeners, about 30% are likely to strongly agree or somewhat agree that news content heard on history podcasts is trustworthy. Slightly less than one-half are likely to neither agree nor agree, and about 20% are likely to either strongly disagree or somewhat disagree. About 75% of those who listen to news podcasts are likely to strongly agree or somewhat agree that news content heard on news podcasts is trustworthy. Slightly over 10% are likely to neither agree nor disagree, and about 13% are somewhat likely to disagree or strongly disagree news content on news podcasts is trustworthy (see Tables 6–8).

**Table 6.** Relationship between comedy podcast listeners and trust in news heard on podcasts.

Comedy podcast listeners						
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Count	31	178	327	130	44	874
Percentage	4.4%	25.1%	46.1%	18.3%	6.2%	100%

Notes: Chi-squared test; statistical significance ( $p$ -value) = .00162; sample size = 874.

**Table 7.** Relationship between history podcast listeners and trust in news heard on podcasts.

History podcast listeners						
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Count	29	122	226	66	30	429
Percentage	6.1%	25.8%	47.8%	14%	6.3%	100%

Notes: Chi-squared test; statistical significance ( $p$ -value) = .00838; effect size (Cramér's  $V$ ) = .125; sample size = 874.

**Table 8.** Relationship between news podcast listeners and trust in news heard on podcasts.

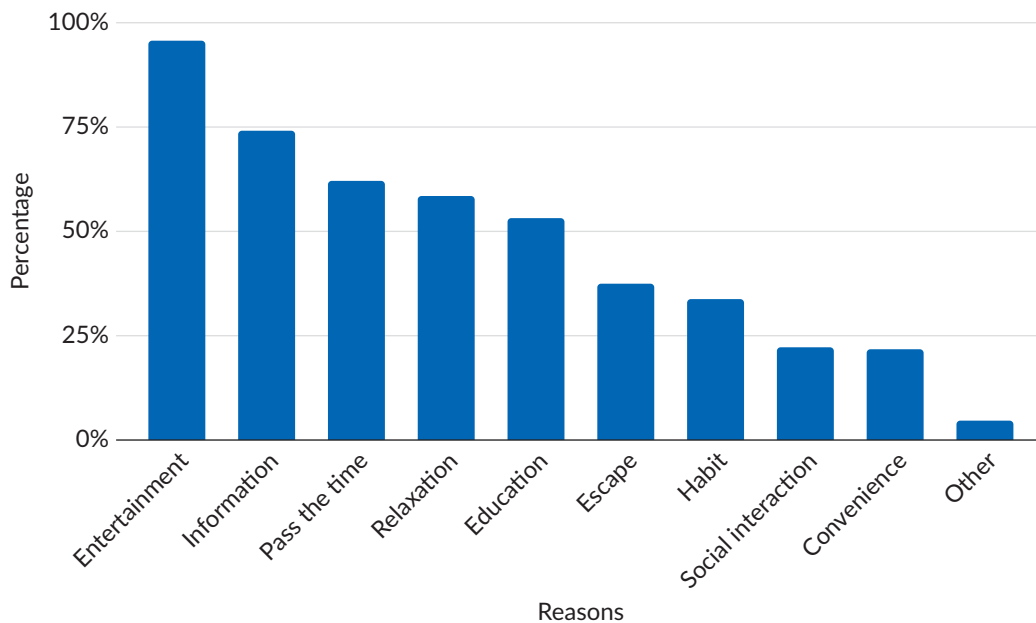
News podcast listeners						
	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Count	156	98	42	29	17	342
Percentage	45.6%	28.7%	12.3%	8.5%	5%	100%

Notes: Chi-squared test; statistical significance ( $p$ -value) = .0000390; effect size (Cramér's  $V$ ) = .171; sample size = 874.

In relation to RQ4, almost all of the 1,056 respondents said they listen to podcasts for entertainment (95.7% or 1,029). Close to three quarters said they tune in for information (74.1% or 779), followed by passing the time (62.2% or 654), relaxation (58.6% or 616), education (53.3% or 560), and escape (37.6% or 395). The remaining reasons include habit (34% or 357), social interaction/companionship (22.1% or 232), convenience (21.8% or 229), and 4.9% or 51 individuals selected other reasons they listen to podcasts (see Figure 1).

There are overlapping genres and reasons why people listen to different genre podcasts. Entertainment, information, education, and relaxation are the top four reasons people listen to comedy, society and culture, true crime, TV and film, arts, science, fiction, and government podcasts. People listen to sports, education, business, health and fitness, and religion and spirituality podcasts for the same four reasons. Entertainment, information, education, and passing the time are the top four reasons people listen to news, history, leisure, and technology podcasts. Entertainment, information, pass the time, and education are the top four reasons people listen to music and kids and family podcasts. The fourth most popular reason people listen to kids and family podcasts (education) is tied to escape. The fourth most popular reason people listen to religion and spirituality podcasts (relaxation) is to pass the time (see Table 9).





**Figure 1.** Why people listen to podcasts.

**Table 9.** Top four reasons people listen to podcasts based on genre.

Genres	Comedy, society and culture, true crime, TV and film, arts, science, fiction, and government Sports, education, business, health and fitness, and religion and spirituality
Reasons	1. Entertainment 2. Information 3. Education 4. Relaxation
Genres	News, leisure, history, and technology
Reasons	1. Entertainment 2. Information 3. Education 4. Pass the time
Genres	Music and kids and family
Reasons	1. Entertainment 2. Information 3. Pass the time 4. Education

Notes: Education as a reason for kids and family podcasts is tied with escape; relaxation as a reason for religion and spirituality podcasts is tied with passing the time.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Trust and News Content

Findings from this study expand on Shearer et al. (2023) by indicating that people exhibit a noticeable level of trust in the news content they hear on non-news podcasts (e.g., comedy, true crime, history). This may, in part, reflect a continuing shift toward the use of alternative sources for news content. That is, similar to how we use

social media, some people may perceive the source as reliable—even if it is not from a news organization (Kang et al., 2011; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). Study findings indicate a similar connection between the podcast host and listener trust. One participant stated: “I trust the podcast personalities more than a big news corporation.” Another wrote, “I feel like I can better vet who I am getting info from and learn their sources and resource habits to verify their findings in podcasts.”

Trust in news content heard on news podcasts remains high, and more people are tuning in to news podcasts more than previously noted (Shearer et al., 2023). This may be based on the overall rise in podcast listenership (Edison Research, 2024b) coupled with the popularity of news shows. Of the top 20 iTunes podcasts used for this research, eight were news or new-related shows. Some programs are associated with individuals (e.g., Tucker Carlson or Ben Shapiro) who are viewed as trustworthy among certain audiences. Still others are digital extensions of traditional media (e.g., Jon Stewart, Rachael Maddow, or *The New York Times*) which, among listeners, may already be established as reliable. For example, one person stated, “I listen to these people every day and understand what they believe better.” Someone else said, “The podcast I listen to is put together by *The New York Times*. Hence, I believe their source.”

Aside from news podcasts, comedy and history shows are more likely to be useful for relaying news content. Listeners tend to trust news they hear on comedy podcasts, which may, in part, be based on the primary element of comedy—storytelling. Story details, even from a comedic standpoint, can heighten the perceived trust and credibility of a program host. Plus, humor helps to break down difficult concepts and makes them easier to understand (Park, 2017). An informal conversation style (Rae, 2023) coupled with the immersion of one’s voice in a story can elevate a listener–show–host connection (Jorgensen, 2021; Rae, 2023). Similarly, when news is heard on history podcasts, listeners are more likely to trust what they hear on the digital airwaves. The narrative style heard on history podcasts can transform dry subjects into compelling stories. Many shows are hosted by historians or enthusiasts with deep knowledge of the subject matter, and they often invite experts to provide additional insights, lending credibility to the content. They also cite their research and provide listeners with resources so they may further delve into the topics discussed (Picard & Marsillo, 2018).

Entertainment, regardless of show genre, is the top reason why people listen to podcasts. This makes sense given the same has been found throughout the years (Craig et al., 2023; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Perks & Turner, 2019; Swanson, 2012). People also tune in to access information, for relaxation, to pass the time, and for educational purposes. However, the motivations for listening to podcasts are almost the same for all genres. Perhaps we have entered an arena somewhat like radio or TV where the variety is endless, but the reasons for tuning in are not nearly as diverse.

Unlike previous studies, fewer listeners had reported tuning in because of convenience. Arguably, this is due to advances from when podcasting was a novel idea. Today, we access almost everything we need from our mobile phones—a far cry from viewing an MP3 as convenient. Also, while the idea of connecting with podcast hosts is still apparent, social connections may also be associated with fellow listeners as noted by Perks and Turner (2019), and as evidenced by the highly-populated fan groups used for this study. Overall, maybe podcasting, and its “not so newness,” is entering the socialization realm of what we have seen with television programs. For example, fans of the podcast *My Favorite Murder* self-identify as Murderinos (Van Driel, 2022), similar to how viewers identified as TV characters from *Sex and the City* by claiming to either be a “Sam,” “a Carrie,” “a Miranda,” or “a Charlotte” (Mason, 2023).

## 6.2. Special Note: Trust in Podcast News Content and AI

The study findings confirm listeners believe news to be reliable if they hear it from a person or an organization they trust. However, with AI at the forefront of our lives, we should investigate how this technology will change our perception of trust. Also, how would we then identify trust? As seen below, AI news technologies are already in our newsrooms:

RadioNewsAI helps your news team get more done, faster. Generate AI News Anchors for your radio station, based on your own local source for news, weather, traffic and more. Rewrite stories, automate updates and deliver it with a trusted station voice. (RadioNewsAI, n.d.)

When we hear news on podcasts—on all genres—can we really trust what we hear, and more importantly, do we know who is talking? It is imperative to investigate podcast news content and the use of AI. We primarily consume podcasts with only our ears, that is, we do not typically rely on visuals, and given our sense of trust with those we hear on the airwaves, any nuances indicating the use of AI in programs may or may not be noticed.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research

This study is based on a convenience sample which does not represent the total number of podcast listeners. The data was gathered shortly before the 2024 US presidential campaign, which might have impacted the study findings. This study measures trustworthiness based on the program genre and does not fully take into consideration the podcast host, and the connection between listener and host. Thus, further examination of the credibility of news content based on the program host would be beneficial. In addition, a combined analysis of podcast host, program genre, and news trustworthiness may also shed light on how listeners decide to trust or distrust news content. In terms of future research, it would be helpful to focus on a more diverse population as program preferences differ by demographic variables. Also, gaining a deeper understanding of the gratifications associated with each genre using qualitative methods may offer greater insight. Finally, this is an exploratory study that will ideally serve as a springboard for future trust and podcast news content research.

## 8. Conclusion

Most podcast listeners trust news they hear on news podcasts, and some listeners trust news they hear on non-news podcasts. Reasons for this may include an overall increase in podcast listenership, the growing number of news podcasts, and storytelling approaches used in podcasts. In terms of genres trusted for news content, comedy, news, and history podcasts are more likely to be seen as providing trustworthy news content. Motivations for listening to the different podcast genres are mostly similar, with minimal variations among certain genres. The interpretation of news heard in different genres of podcasts is especially significant since listening to podcasts may be associated with increased concentration, creating mental imagery, building connections, enhancing understanding, and creating habits (Fitzgerald, 2024). These findings, when combined with trust in news content heard on different genre podcasts, afford podcasters an opportunity to impact listener behavior in terms of prompting people to learn more about news issues. This is especially significant considering tuning in has been shown to alter listener opinions about the news.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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# Parasocial Intimacy, Change, and Nostalgia in Podcast Listener Reviews

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## Abstract

As the medium of podcasting reaches maturity, exploring the evolving nature of parasocial intimacy, nostalgia, and change is crucial. With the podcasting industry increasingly focused on financial viability, listener loyalty and nostalgia are critical components in podcast audience studies. Listener reviews are an integral part of this research. This study enriches podcast audience studies by investigating the connection between the parasocial relationships of trust and intimacy listeners develop with show hosts and nostalgic reactions to show changes. Using automated semantic network analysis of over 12,000 podcast reviews for two of the longest-running and best-regarded US podcasts, this study has confirmed the pivotal role of the show host and content in developing and maintaining the parasocial rapport of intimacy and trust with listeners. It also revealed that changes in the show’s host(s) or content trigger nostalgic reactions, which can be positive or negative. These findings have significant implications for long-lived podcasts as they approach the stage when host or content changes become inevitable, thereby underscoring this study’s practical relevance and importance for the podcasting industry.

## Keywords

change; intimacy; listener reviews; nostalgia; parasocial relationships; podcast hosts; podcasting; podcast reviews; trust

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## 1. Introduction

As an industry, podcasting has just passed its 20th anniversary, with minimal technological changes beyond the ubiquity of listening devices and platforms (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020) since Apple added podcasting to the list of offerings available through the iTunes platform in 2005. By June 2024, almost 100 million Americans aged 12 or older listened to an average of eight episodes per week (Edison Research, 2024). Over 4 million

podcasts were registered worldwide by August 2024, though fewer than half had produced five or more episodes and only a handful of shows have released weekly episodes for over 20 years, with millions of weekly downloads worldwide (Podcast Index, n.d.).

To study changes in the listener–host–show parasocial dynamics, show longevity and regularity of creative production were essential. Therefore, two US shows were chosen for this study because they are some of the longest-running, weekly, and best-regarded podcasts: *This American Life* (TAL) and *Radiolab* (RL). Numerous industry awards recognized the quality of content and production, and weekly listening audiences have placed them in the top rankings for nearly 20 years. Both shows emerged from non-profit organizations, strove to exemplify the golden standards of audio journalism, and relied heavily on listener donations to fund the substantial production costs. Both shows have millions of downloads from listeners who avidly return each week for another dose of their favorite hosts and stories. The size and recurrence of their audiences offer a testament to the longevity of a cultural product and their ability to attract and retain listeners (Brinson & Lemon, 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022).

This study explores the idea that listener reviews can serve as a proxy for analyzing the rapport of intimacy and trust between podcast listeners and show hosts and listener reactions to shows changing hosts or content. First, it seeks confirmation that the host and content serve as anchors in the positioning and perception of intimacy and trust listeners establish with a podcast show. It then explores the impact of changes in the show hosts or content on nostalgic notes in listener narratives, thus expanding podcast audience studies to identify markers and triggers of change in listener experiences and expectations. For podcast practitioners and researchers, understanding nostalgia as listener-initiated communication rather than as a marketing tactic could offer valuable insights into the planning and execution of inevitable show transitions.

## 2. Literature Review

The explosive growth in the number of available podcast shows, genres, languages, and narrative forms makes it challenging to gain deeper insights into the needs, wants, and motivations of audiences around the world—despite the unique consumption characteristics of this medium (Chan-Olmsted & Wang, 2022). An extensive body of research has documented how listening to podcasts in preferred genres helps audiences fulfill intellectual, emotional, and social needs during regular times and periods of crisis—primarily through the emergence of parasocial dynamics between the podcast hosts and the listener community (Boling et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2023; Heiselberg & Have, 2023; Lotun et al., 2024; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). In time, listening to a beloved podcast host becomes more than a scheduled audio experience, and it transitions into a parasocial relationship, complete with quasi-social interactions in which listeners engage fully, deliberately, and completely aware of its mediated nature (Brinson & Lemon, 2023; Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Since we no longer question the existence of parasocial relationships with podcast hosts, it is time to explore their dynamic nature and how listeners perceive and react to change in their favorite shows.

### 2.1. Listener Reviews and Audience Studies

Listener reviews have recently become the focus of audience studies as a proxy for audience engagement (Hamilton & Barber, 2022; Johnson et al., 2024; Van Driel, 2022) or to interrogate platform algorithms for

podcast ranking and promotion (Wade Morris, 2021). Hamilton and Barber (2022) found that listener comments expressed manifestations of engagement clustered around key subjects (e.g., dance music), social aspects such as connecting with celebrities and other fans, and the routines and experience of listening to their favorite podcasts.

In 2021, Wade Morris used data from podcast ratings and rankings to explore and emphasize the cultural challenges associated with the industrialization of podcasting, revealing the infrastructural politics that allow for relatively unknown and smaller-audience podcasts to achieve chart status. Ongoing research by Johnson et al. (2024) found that listener reviews reveal and shape dialectical tensions in the positionality of podcast hosts, narratives, and audiences. Whether conceptualized as audience engagement or as an amateur critique of cultural goods, the analysis of ratings and reviews invites more profound questions about the narratives of intentionality, agency, and performativity of culture (Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023) within the context of listeners' experience and expectations.

## ***2.2. Trust and Intimacy in Parasocial Relationships With Podcast Hosts***

Relationships between listeners and show hosts develop in complex frameworks involving emotions, self-reflexivity, and transparency (Lindgren, 2016). Furthermore, listenership loyalty depends on perceptions of authenticity and quality of show host content (Perks & Turner, 2019). Recent research found that consuming familiar media, such as television or podcasting shows, can help complement the emotional benefits of interacting with real-life social networks (Lotun et al., 2024).

The end of a parasocial relationship is known as a parasocial breakup, which could be initiated by the show (final season or writing out a beloved character) or by audience members who feel the show no longer meets their social, cognitive, or emotional needs (Ellithorpe & Brookes, 2018). Listeners grieve the loss of their parasocial relationships with media hosts and characters just like they process real-life relationships (Boling et al., 2021; Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023).

Most shows encourage the formation and growth of listener communities by acknowledging listener comments and reviews on dedicated platforms, sharing personal information and experiences, inserting themselves as unlikely heroes or dummies in the story, and addressing listeners as if they were contributing to the conversation. This helps hosts establish themselves as a recurrent presence in the listeners' lives and routines (McClung & Johnson, 2010) and heightens connections between hosts and listeners, especially during times of crisis, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Robson, 2021).

Whether authentic or performative, host-centered intimacy facilitates listeners' exploration of their identity, values, and aspirations. Over time, hosts and their guests become part of parasocial networks of quasi-friends, welcomed by listeners into their private space and time (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). The right combination of emotion and personality in the host evokes amplifies or diminishes attachment, trust, and intimacy (Valette-Florence & Valette-Florence, 2020). It also influences listeners' willingness to subscribe, follow, purchase, and donate (Ford & Merchant, 2010) and to listen or respond to host-narrated advertisements (Bonk & Kubinski, 2023; Vilceanu et al., 2021).

### 2.3. Change, Nostalgia, and the Podcasting Ecosystem

This study flips the concept of nostalgia from its commonly accepted use as a marketing tactic to a lens of interpreting listener-initiated communication with their favorite shows and hosts. Intentional use of nostalgia is one of the marketing tactics used to create memorable experiences and establish emotional ties with listeners, users, or consumers, thus nurturing loyalty (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019; Pichierri, 2023). In the broader context of consumer–brand relationships, the strength of the attachment consumers feel toward a brand is a critical determinant of their willingness to support a brand or a cultural product financially (Ford & Merchant, 2010; Zhang & Tao, 2022). Nostalgia tethers real or imagined memories of contextual, interpersonal, family, or individual past experiences through mental or sensory triggers (Juhl et al., 2020). It nurtures the expectation of similar experiences in future encounters (Hidayati, 2021), especially in consuming cultural products with limited sensory experience, such as audio media (Douglas, 2013).

Dramatic changes in real life can significantly impact our interaction with imagined or parasocial realities. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic and its severe and imposed self-isolation, podcasts helped listeners increase their self-resilience and emotional solidarity (Márquez Rodríguez, 2024; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). Similarly, multi-player online games such as *Animal Crossing* provided an escape to a peaceful and joyous dreamland with easily shared narratives (Zhu, 2021), both individual and collective. In consumer behavior research, resilience and solidarity strengthened nostalgia to reconcile a changing reality with past experiences or current perceptions of a shared past (Dai et al., 2024), evoking positive or negative nostalgic reactions (Khoshghadam et al., 2019).

Positive nostalgia is an acknowledgment of change as a necessary component of life, while maintaining a healthy appreciation for the past and actively engaging in the preservation of ideal versions and stories of the past through consumption, donations, and other forms of support (Ford & Merchant, 2010; Hartmann & Brunk, 2019). A strong attachment to the original version of a branded product or content may trigger negative nostalgic experiences when the brand owners deploy rejuvenation campaigns (Shields & Johnson, 2016) and requests to resurrect the original brand promise. It may also result in disengagement or abandonment when consumers feel that brands' cultural discourses no longer meet their needs and expectations (Diniz & Suarez, 2018; Gilal et al., 2020). This might present a significant challenge in the podcasting ecosystem.

The podcasting industry is increasingly vying for financial viability; most podcast shows require monetary support through advertising, crowdfunding, or other monetizing tactics to cover production and distribution costs (Rowles & Rogers, 2019; Sullivan, 2019). Podcast creators, producers, and platforms experience a whirlwind of investments, exits, mergers, and acquisitions on par with the rest of the media industry (Delfau, 2019). Intense efforts—and debates—compare and combine models, techniques, and algorithms that align podcast production with traditional media production regarding budgets, profits, and intellectual property (Sullivan, 2019).

The technology of podcasts has changed minimally in the past twenty years beyond the various tiers of quality and power available in different price brackets for producers, distributors, and listeners. Content genres have also registered minimal disruption in the type of storytelling and interaction—though obviously, some genres and shows have registered explosive growth due to the exceptional combination of skills and opportunities mastered by runaway success stories such as the true crime genre or *The Joe Rogan Experience* show.

Embracing the audio and video presence has allowed podcasts to capture a broader audience, expanding beyond podcast distribution platforms and into social media currently preferred by the younger audience, such as YouTube and TikTok. The additional characteristics of higher levels of education and disposable income of today's podcast audiences and producers made it possible to activate a desire for listeners to support their favorite podcast shows through subscriptions, patronage, or participation in other monetizing tactics, such as purchasing show merchandise, tickets to live in-person show episodes and events, or access to bonus content (Spotify, 2024a).

Good shows are hard to find, and the loss or deterioration of good listening experiences feels, in parasocial networks, like the loss of good friends (Vilceanu & Soto-Vásquez, 2023). How would changes enacted by podcasts trigger or reflect any changes in the rapport of trust and intimacy listeners express in their reviews?

## 2.4. TAL and RL

When Apple launched its podcasting distribution platform in 2006, RL was a newly launched show. In contrast, TAL already had over a decade of content, history, and connections with listeners through its public radio presence. Throughout their decades of existence, the identity and reputation of both shows rested firmly on their respective hosts, who told the story; in many ways, they are the story and experience listeners seek in every episode (Brinson & Lemon, 2023).

TAL, hosted by Ira Glass, was previously called *Your Radio Playhouse*, co-founded with Torey Malaya in 1995 and renamed to its current title in 1996. Glass always had guest producers in charge of one or more acts aired during each episode. The stories have always been “personal...with funny moments, big feelings, and surprising plot twists” (Apple Podcasts, n.d.-a, para. 1). The show was recognized within the broader media industry with awards and cameo or sarcastic features in other major entertainment productions such *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The Onion*, and *Orange is the New Black*. Beginning in 2016, Glass has enacted significant changes in the content of TAL while maintaining the overall production style.

RL ran with its original host team, Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, from its official launch in 2005 through 2020. During this time, RL steadily produced weekly episodes and won several prestigious awards for the quality of their work. A new team took over RL when the original hosts retired (Krulwich in February 2020 and Abumrad in January 2022). While new hosts Lulu Miller and Latif Nasser (re)invented their new team core, the sound and content of RL changed dramatically, though the show still anchored on “deep questions...science, legal history” and, possibly, “the home of someone halfway across the world” (Apple Podcasts, n.d.-b, para. 1).

For most of the study period, both shows consistently ranked in the top 100 podcasting US charts regarding audience size and loyalty, with millions of listeners eagerly waiting to access each new episode (Chartable, n.d.; Spotify, 2024b). Each show has distinctive narrative and soundscape structures and has earned industry awards for its content and production quality. Both have also run highly successful models to fund production through listener donations and subscription models. Most importantly, they both professed to uphold the highest standards for journalistic production and “intimate, personal reporting” (Glass, n.d., para. 2) and serve as gateway podcasts, a term describing shows discovered by listeners who are new to podcasting, try an episode recommended by a friend or another media outlet, fall in love with a show, and then become avid consumers of podcasts (Quah, 2022).

The format and history of these two shows make them ideal for exploring nostalgia, intimacy, and trust in the parasocial relationships listeners form with their favorite podcasts and how they change over time. This study used listener reviews to explore the following research questions:

RQ1. How did listener reviews portray parasocial intimacy and trust with the show hosts?

RQ2. What did listeners like most about their favorite shows?

RQ3. What nostalgic reactions did listeners express to shows changing hosts or content?

### 3. Methods

The dataset for this study includes over 12,000 listener reviews for RL and TAL, posted between May 2006 (when Apple Podcasts first opened the platform to collect listener reviews for the podcasts it carried) and August 2023. Listener reviews were evenly distributed between RL ( $N = 5,910$ ) and TAL ( $N = 6,195$ ).

Reviews were scraped from one of the largest podcast analytics websites (<https://chartable.com/podcasts>; before Spotify refocused the company and this site became unavailable in December 2024). As is typical for research using listener review comments, the dataset captured each post's title, body, and metadata (username, date, country). A computer-assisted semantic network analysis package that combines natural language processing and discourse analysis (Doerfel, 1998; T-Lab, n.d.) was employed to discern thematic changes and narratives throughout the dataset, along with essential variables such as the show name, keywords, and chronological markers.

This text analysis method sees words as floating signifiers (Monsees, 2023) within complex networks, meaning that the presence or absence of words or phrases in chunks of text (in this case, each review) helps researchers identify and interpret narrative themes and key concepts. For the first step, all words were inventoried into an active content-bearing vocabulary of words retained for analyzing frequency, network positioning, and strength of associations within word clusters. Non-content-bearing words such as pronouns, articles, adverbs, prepositions, and numbers were excluded from the active vocabulary. High-frequency and low-relevance words such as year, week, month, and episode were also excluded from the analysis.

Cluster analysis identified groups of words that tended to co-occur within reviews, and narrative themes were teased out of the most meaningful words (chi-square,  $p < 0.05$  within the cluster). The semantic network analysis was conducted for the entire dataset, and each thematic cluster included reviews from both shows. An attempt was made to associate each cluster with a predominant show and address each research question as in-depth as possible (Tables 1–4). Exemplary quotes were selected to help the reader understand the clusters and narrative themes.

### 4. Findings

This study found that hosts function as critical anchors for the rapport of parasocial intimacy and trust listeners develop with their favorite podcast shows. Furthermore, the reasons listeners list for liking their shows stem from the same three functions generally associated with podcast listening: optimal alignment



between the show’s premise and listeners’ needs for companionship, learning, and entertainment. Finally, significant changes in the show’s host or content may trigger strong nostalgic reactions, resulting in listeners deciding to remain loyal or terminate their relationship with the show.

Seven semantic clusters broke down the entire dataset based on keywords anchoring narrative themes focused on show hosts, characteristics, and listener reactions to show changes. Overall, listener reviews described their relationship with show hosts and praised or criticized them for their voices, personalities, or on-set dynamics (CL1–2); recommended them for a good listening experience (CL3–6); or complained when they felt the shows changed too much from their original premise (CL-7).

#### 4.1. Parasocial Intimacy and Trust With the Podcast Hosts

For both shows, listeners mentioned the hosts by their first names, expecting the hosts or other listeners to read these reviews as conversational pieces. Trust and intimacy pervaded listener comments in positive and negative reviews, thus acknowledging the immensely influential role they attributed to the host (see Table 1 for top-ranking keywords in each cluster).

**Table 1.** Host clusters (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
1. RL hosts (11.6%)			2. TAL hosts (21.74%)		
Jad	1,541.41	356 (73.4%)	IRA	1,298.72	649 (77.1%)
Robert	1,497.59	344 (73.6%)	TAL	916.26	986 (54.3%)
Science/s	1,209.76	445 (54%)	Look/s/ed/ing	876.01	460 (75.2%)
Radiolab	884.47	718 (35.3%)	Glass	869.16	370 (84.2%)
Sound/s/ed/ing	451.36	219 (46.1%)	Forward	819.45	357 (83.2%)
Krulwich	213.41	51 (71.8%)	Life	377.64	379 (56%)
Love/d/s/ing	183.76	731 (20.8%)	American/s	278.57	215 (62.6%)
Abumrad	122.00	31 (68.8%)	Download/s/ed/ing	112.77	150 (50.5%)
Latif	112.94	45 (51.7%)	Old/er/est	108.89	242 (51.8%)
Effects	81.09	47 (41.9%)	App/s	86.56	89 (55.6%)
Mind/s	68.86	86 (29.6%)	Monday	77.11	46 (70.7%)
Wonder/s/ed/ing	63.10	50 (35.9%)	Laugh/s/ed/ing	74.25	110 (48.6%)
Music	53.42	60 (30.9%)	Cry/es/ed/ing	68.94	93 (50.2%)
Lulu	49.32	18 (54.5%)	Sunday	49.74	37 (63.7%)

##### 4.1.1. RL Hosts

RL spent its first 15 years immersing the audience in science topics anchored in society rather than covering social issues. Listeners loved the original host team, Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, who created a wonderful science-based listening experience. Audiences raved about their voices and interpersonal dynamics and learned to expect elaborate soundscapes: “The chemistry between Jad and Robert was so charming and Jad’s musical ear was a huge part of the shows personality” (RL, November 2022). Reviewers addressed the dynamic between hosts, or between hosts and their guests, as an integral component of the show’s draw: “The dialogue makes the show. Jad is the believer; Robert is the skeptic. Jad is the curious

student; Robert is the experienced teacher. Jad convinces you that the topic is fun; Robert convinces you that it's true" (RL, April 2014).

Listeners often felt like learning was conducted through "intimate storytelling" (RL, October 2015), and it was "always a wonderful surprise" (RL, December 2013), best enjoyed while "you curl up somewhere" (RL, December 2013). For avid listeners, each RL episode feels like being "back home with trusted friends who have another great story to share" (RL, November 2019). In everyday life, some listeners who incorporated RL into their work commute "actually started to look forward to getting stuck in traffic!!" (RL, April 2013). All this changed when a new team began hosting RL, with insights to be discussed in the section detailing negative nostalgia.

#### 4.1.2. TAL Host

For TAL, host Ira Glass had listeners looking forward to each new episode with "stories...true reflections of the daily lives of ordinary Americans, but told with an insight that causes me to think, not just passively listen" (TAL, November 2012). Listening was always an emotional experience, "sometimes funny, sometimes heartbreaking, but always compelling" (TAL, February 2008), and "the stories and the storytellers are like old friends" (TAL, July 2022).

As seen in previous studies on the importance listeners place on the podcast hosts' voice and personality reviews, the popularity of TAL is inextricably linked with Ira Glass: "Forever my jam. I love Ira's voice and the way he carries himself. The stories are incredible to listen to" (TAL, May 2020). It is the voice listeners invited into their lives and rituals: "Ira's voice solidly gets me through a cranky Monday morning" (TAL, May 2020) and "oh, my God, I've lusted after that man for the last 10 years BECAUSE of his voice!...the show...routinely touches every one of my emotional buttons" (TAL, February 2007).

Interestingly, liking the host's voice could be an acquired taste: "For the newly initiated TAL devotee, once you get used to his annoying voice, you will learn to love him and his show. I am a big fan" (TAL, November 2006). Occasionally, new listeners were put off by the host's voice and decided "that [one episode] was enough" (TAL, March 2007) or expressed emerging sexism and bias: "The voice of the girl who narrates is highly annoying" (TAL, September 2020), and "the female narrator...has to go" (TAL, May 2021), due to vocal fry they found "too distracting" (TAL, April 2019).

#### 4.1.3. Companionship, Entertainment, and Learning

Previous podcast studies have found that podcasts typically fulfill listeners' needs for companionship, entertainment, and learning. Analyzing listener reviews of podcasts confirmed these observations (see Table 2).

One of the most exciting findings emerged from CL-6 and CL-3, where listener reviews identified the essence of each show and how it stood out among all the other podcasts on their regular rotation. Responding to the shows' premises, RL listeners praised the awesome, fascinating, educational, and entertaining content delivered by hosts who felt like friends. TAL listeners fell under the spell of the stories spun in ways that made them think, connect emotionally, and feel less alone.

**Table 2.** Needs and expectations (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
6. RL: Educational (13%)			3. TAL: Great stories (15.1%)		
Interest/s/ed/ing	1,304.58	751 (41.2%)	Great/er/est	7,783.83	1,946 (70.8%)
Entertain/s/ed/ing	1,130.84	423 (52.8%)	Story/ies	413.84	736 (26.9%)
Learn/s/ed/ing	554.90	313 (47.6%)	Tell/s/ing/told	251.46	227 (35%)
Informative	515.64	214 (49.7%)	Keep-up	117.43	74 (41.5%)
Fascinate/s/ed/ing	351.96	205 (41.2%)	Work/s/ed/ing	94.73	178 (26.5%)
Engage/s/d/ing	250.73	130 (43.9%)	Job	58.24	56 (34.1%)
Fun	200.26	124 (40%)	Interest/s/ ed/ing	50.99	353 (19.3%)
Subject/s	158.46	102 (39.2%)	Lot/s	47.04	25 (45.4%)
Awesome	124.09	135 (30.8%)	Content/s	44.37	136 (23%)
Educational	110.74	62 (42.1%)	Storytelling	23.10	80 (22.4%)
Thought-provoking	81.91	79 (32.5%)	Guy/s	20.27	75 (22%)

The companionship function is evident in the strength of the habit of engaging in a comfortable rapport with the show host during listeners’ most private times: “Best show ever to take your mind off everything bothering you at the end of the day! I set my sleep timer to 30 minutes before bed and Ira’s smooth voice and storytelling lulls me to sleep” (TAL, August 2020). Trust in a parasocial relationship goes beyond faithful listening toward engaging in a conversation with the host. This review exemplifies a sentiment frequently encountered in listener reviews for the RL: “The only people I would trust with my own story. If I had a story that I cared more deeply about than anything else in the world, I would want it to be told by *Radiolab*” (RL, January 2016).

The learning function is also essential to the rapport of trust listeners established with the show host, as shown in this post that sounds typical for making this point:

I really can’t begin to explain how much *Radiolab* has, in a sense, changed my life! Dramatic, I guess, but it’s true. Jad and Robert effortlessly show exactly how fascinating science is—something I have somehow failed to notice for the past 22 years of my life. (RL, October 2009)

Learning is not just passive listening but also sharing knowledge gained from a podcast into someone’s physical world: “Amazing show. I love listening....I find great joy in sharing the things I learn from....Jad and Robert” (RL, October 2009). The show’s strongest characteristic of relaying science topics impartially was often remarked upon: “Listening to *Radiolab*, you will just end up learning about anything and everything...and wanting more!! I like that they don’t feed a point of view.” (RL, January 2017). In the ultimate compliment, “this show has changed my life...made me realize how awesome science is” (RL, March 2013), “never repetitive, usually current, and great to listen to” (RL, April 2016).

Entertainment was often directly associated with learning. For example, the terms informative and funny (or synonyms thereof) co-occurred frequently, especially in positive reviews that also mentioned keywords such as excellent, interesting, amazing, and other terms of praise, “even when I don’t necessarily agree with the subject” (RL, January 2016). TAL listeners also found ways to express their appreciation for the fun learning

opportunities in reviews like this: “This show is why they invented radio. Ira Glass should win the Nobel Peace Prize—and maybe the prize for chemistry as well, just to prove that he is better than Henry Kissinger” (TAL, October 2006).

## 4.2. Favorite Podcasts

While the show hosts are the entry point into the podcast, their consistent performance helps listeners establish long-term relationships with the shows. For these two shows, what propelled them to the status of brilliant or incredible (key phrases in RL reviews) or favorite listen of all time (key phrase in TAL reviews) is the way these hosts created content that met the gold standards of radio, now available on listeners’ schedule (see Table 3 below for keyword statistics in their clusters).

**Table 3.** Favorite podcasts (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)	Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
4. RL: Simply amazing (7.4%)			5. TAL: Best radio (22.37%)		
Amaze/s/ed/ing	4,019.79	616 (55.4%)	Best	3,740.79	1,761 (67%)
Simply	1,764.88	193 (73.1%)	Radio	1,044.47	711 (55.9%)
Best	154.68	346 (13.1%)	Podcast/s	769.17	2,263 (36%)
Brilliant	124.70	69 (23.7%)	Favorite	621.64	510 (51.4%)
Incredible	80.23	46 (23.3%)	Hand/s	137.10	80 (60.6%)
Truly	73.62	43 (23.1%)	Listen/s/ed/ing	106.58	1,069 (26.2%)
Recommend/s/ed/ing	63.62	63 (17.8%)	All-time	105.37	73 (55.7%)
Gold-standard	52.03	24 (26.3%)	Program/s	104.92	188 (38.3%)
Radio	50.61	154 (12.1%)	Public	90.17	85 (48.5%)
Cease/d/s	43.99	10 (41.6%)	NPR	72.27	125 (38.8%)
Highly	38.88	38 (18%)	Easily	59.51	37 (58.7%)
Podcast	32.42	450 (9.06%)	Subscribe/d/ing	54.27	75 (41.8%)
Outstanding	29.81	21 (21%)	Absolute	51.61	53 (46.9%)

### 4.2.1. RL

Consistency in the performance and productions of the original host team was often acknowledged in endearing, favorable terms such as “ear candy” (RL, October 2006) and “sonic journey” (RL, June 2007) that accompanied the learning experience loaded with excitement, music, and theater (RL, April 2016). Gratitude was expressed to the show hosts, along with listeners confessing their previous or continued financial support for the show and asking others to do the same (RL, April 2012).

One of the significant themes in listener reviews (CL-4) was “think, laugh, and learn...go deep into complex topics...and how these topics matter” (RL, November 2008). One of the key phrases was “thought-provoking” ( $N = 152$  throughout the entire study period). Listening to RL made them “feel smarter and sound smarter...entertained and informed by two witty, clever and funny hosts” (RL, July 2012). Some of the most enthusiastic reviews mentioned RL’s “phenomenal presentation methods, brilliant research and soul-searching depth of storytelling” (RL, March 2018). For heavy listeners of podcasts, RL stands out for its

“variety of very interesting topics...tackled from very unique angles” (RL, April 2013). The unique soundscape became a trademark of RL, courtesy of Jad Abumrad’s “pure genius” (RL, August 2011). It was intensely recognizable, even though not everyone liked it: “I understand how some don’t take to the engineered sound effects and production, but the content is thought provoking every time” (RL, August 2010).

#### 4.2.2. TAL

Throughout the decades, Ira Glass’s talent for storytelling won listeners’ attention and enthusiasm with his “genius, wit, insatiable questioning” (TAL, March 2023). The playhouse format, with several different acts bundled in each episode, worked well for avid listeners. The vivid portraits and sensitive reporting made TAL an amazing show (TAL, March 2015), which some perceived as the equivalent of “reality radio” (TAL, January 2010). As with RL, one of the biggest wins in the technological developments affecting podcasts was listeners’ experiencing the freedom of their podcast episodes in the privacy of their car or study at any time, not just when the show aired on public radio on Saturday evenings (TAL, September 2009).

#### 4.3. Nostalgia

As expected from the literature review of nostalgia and consumer behavior, references to the past elicited and expressed listeners’ reactions to show changes. For this study, we focused on positive and negative nostalgia as indicators of experiences and intentions that strengthened or weakened listeners’ loyalty to a show they previously or still loved. For both shows, positive nostalgic reactions connected a recent listening experience to how a podcast helped listeners connect with positive personal experiences or accomplishments and the needs and expectations the podcast successfully met. Negative nostalgia, however, appeared as the shows evolved in ways some listeners thought signaled a departure from the original premise, meaning the shows no longer fulfilled their needs.

With new teams hosting an established show (RL) or original hosts making substantial changes in the show’s content (TAL), nostalgia is inevitable, though not consistently negative. The parameters of listeners’ long-term relationship of trust and intimacy with the show and host might change, or listeners might choose to adapt to a new stage in the life of their favorite show or drop the show and seek another listening experience. The phrases “used to” and “I miss” occurred 166 times in the reviews for each show, but mostly appeared alongside positive statements such as “I decay as a human being if I miss an episode” (TAL, June 2016) and:

I miss Jad and Robert so much. I’m sure I’ll get used to the new hosts and this is certainly no criticism of them, they do a fine job and I still love the show, but I do miss Jad and Robert....So I enjoy the reruns. (RL, July 2022)

#### 4.4. Positive Nostalgia

Positive nostalgic reactions were often connected to intentions or recommendations to subscribe, acknowledgments for the hosts’ talent and work well done, and expressions of pure enjoyment. The comments indicative of positive nostalgia were not captured in a separate cluster since they mostly appeared interspersed with the favorite podcast reviews.

Examples of positive nostalgia include the projection of future memories onto the continued experience of listening to a favorite show, such as:

I can't wait for each Sunday, when I pour a glass of wine and Ira helps me clean my house or work in my garden, depending on the season. We laugh and cry and make memories. The next season, when I'm in a certain spot, I'll remember a portion of a podcast year after year. (TAL, January 2017)

Beyond encouraging other listeners to include a favorite podcast in their routines, some reviews positioned RL as “one of the best things the world is coming up with....The artfulness of the production alone blows my mind....Feels like you're listening to a radio station from another, more advanced world” (RL, March 2012).

What differentiates positive nostalgia from negative nostalgia is listeners' ability to see that their show was not perfect or to express wishfulness for a different topic or approach without detracting from it still being their favorite show. For example, some episodes were unsatisfactory, such as “the last one of 2016. But overall, this is the best podcast ever!” (RL, January 2017) or “I wish fewer episodes were about modern problems and cultures, but...this is definitely the best podcast I've ever discovered” (RL, February 2020). Most importantly, positive nostalgic reviews combined with comments on the quality of the show's content and production showed good omens for the financial future of the show: “It's such a good product that I'm willing to pay” (RL, October 2009). A strong rapport with the show host and content, where the listener is happy to share their satisfaction, is a good premise for continued support: “Made me 8% smarter. I love this podcast so much and I share it with everyone I know. This podcast is filled with interesting human stories, compelling facts and just damn good entertaining content. You have to subscribe.” (RL, June 2016)

#### **4.5. Negative Nostalgia: Used to Be Good**

The incidence of the phrase “used to be good” (or great, or awesome) increased substantially each year after 2016 for both shows. Negative nostalgia manifested into calls for change reversal by asking for a return to the topics covered in the show's good times, bringing back the founding hosts—or both. For RL, listeners complained about “missing the old science content” (RL, April 2019), and by the end of the study period, the disconnect was so severe that they often said they “no longer have time for this podcast” (RL, December 2022).

Some reviews indicated dissatisfaction with changes preceded breaking up with the show: “I'm done. Used to be a good show. But now it's all a liberal agenda” (TAL, March 2017). For TAL, incongruence with listeners' attitudes and beliefs is seen as a personal affront bordering on irreconcilable differences, such as when episodes touched on abortion (pro-choice, 2016) or race (White parents, 2020). For RL, changing from science-based to political commentary signaled the end of an era (Quah, 2022, para. 1).

The overall semantic network analysis identified a separate cluster centered on the phrase “used to be good” (see Table 4). The most frequently mentioned issues were introducing political topics or liberal bias and the term vocal fry, indicative of inauthentic voices (pitched abnormally low).



**Table 4.** Negative nostalgia (% of reviews included in the cluster).

Cluster	ChiSq in cluster	N (% of total)
7. Used to be good (8.8%)		
Good	2,782.95	609 (53.6%)
Politics/al	1,059.68	292 (50.8%)
Used_to	729.17	263 (38.5%)
Liberal/s	696.22	116 (65.9%)
Bias/es/ed	511.75	98 (59.3%)
Agenda/s	357.09	62 (63.9%)
Vocal	212.80	54 (48.6%)
Fry/ing	181.83	49 (46.6%)
White	163.78	42 (48.2%)
Left/y	161.56	69 (34.8%)
Bad	124.11	51 (35.6%)

#### 4.5.1. RL

Over time, RL continued to explore science. However, it gradually grew its scope to cover politics, society, and other human stories, which triggered negative nostalgic comments from long-term listeners: “What happened? Radiolab, where did you go? You used to be about science and really interesting aspects of the world. Now it’s just stories and feelings. It should be called RadioFeelings now. Are you trying to be TAL? Booooooo” (RL, June 2015).

The transition period (2020–2022) and the years immediately after Jared Abumrad and Robert Krulwich left RL triggered a significant disconnect between the listeners’ needs, carefully nurtured by the original hosts, and the new hosts’ style, dynamics, and focus on social issues rather than science topics. Long-time listeners found it challenging to adopt the new hosts into their listening habits and family of parasocial friends. They felt as if their favorite hosts had dumped them into new hands incapable of sustaining the relationship and felt this breakup like “a huge blow” (RL, June 2021). They also criticized the new hosts’ lack of artistry and science, replaced by “contrived sound effects and forced reactions” (RL, May 2023) and “too many reruns” (RL, February 2023).

Post-2022, many reviews were brutal in their description of the new hosts: “dialogue [is] zany and silly, combined with the supremely naïve questions” (RL, July 2023), they “act more like little kids at summer camp” (RL, March 2022), their “new tone...has no or very little whimsy” (RL, August 2022), and they “don’t have much chemistry together, which makes them an odd couple for co-hosting” (RL, January 2022). Worst of all, under the new team, RL “sounds like any generic podcast [after it lost] the science angle” (RL, November 2022) and was relegated to “background noise” (RL, September 2023).

The show continued to gain new listeners through relentless promotion across the NPR networks and podcast platforms. However, many old-time listeners abandoned the show:

This was the first podcast I subscribed to. And now I am unsubscribing. I'm sad. This was such a good show. Then Robert left. Then Jad. Everything Jad does is excellent. Except teach his replacements how to make a good show. (RL, March 2023)

Numerous listeners stopped subscribing and donating and encouraged others to do the same—the podcast equivalent of *boycotting*: “This podcast used to be soooo good. After Robert left, the science, curiosity and humor left with him and was followed by episode after episode of biased political stories. Time to unsubscribe and find another gem” (RL, February 2021).

#### 4.5.2. TAL

TAL experienced some moments when the tensions between storytelling, fact-based journalism, and liberal improvisation were revealed as “significant fabrications” were identified in Mike Daisey’s story about an Apple factory in China (Peralta, 2012, para. 1) or in Stephen Glass episodes about working as a phone psychic (Specter, 2012, para. 1). While these events might have been catastrophic in a print publication, they helped TAL strengthen its reputation among loyal listeners: “Great show, stop whining. Ira Glass and the cast and crew of TAL do not lie. Mike Daisey does” (TAL, March 2012). Overall, listeners’ reviews for TAL continued to be overwhelmingly positive: “Eye-opening, intreating [sic], funny, fantastic journalism and storytelling....It has sweetened every Monday for me since I have discovered TAL” (TAL, April 2018), “time flies when I listen to your stories” (TAL, April 2018), and “top notch. Not a single episode has disappointed. Very well done!” (TAL, December 2019).

However, when Ira Glass began to express his philosophical and religious beliefs, some listeners were so unhappy with his “blatantly anti-Christian agenda. Not anti-Muslim, anti-Buddhist, anti-Hindu, or anti-anything-else; just anti-Christian,” they deleted all the TAL episodes from their iPod (TAL, February 2011). Soon after that, TAL episodes covering anti-LGBT groups or deriding vegans also drew negative comments from listeners who “like TAL, or at least...liked TAL” (TAL, December 2012). Increasing numbers mentioned they would rather listen to older episodes than the new ones: “I used to really love this program but in a passive aggressive way they are becoming divisive” (TAL, April 2010).

By July 2023, many listeners signaled their intention to break up with the show because of irreconcilable differences between the show’s original premise—real or perceived—and their attitudes and beliefs, such as in this review: “Gotta Go. I’ve loved this show for over 25 years, but it’s time to unsubscribe. The stink of bias is hard to ignore, and the agenda feels extreme” (TAL, July 2023) and a frequently expressed perception that the new show is focused on “advocacy for extreme ideologies and racial identity politics” (TAL, February 2020).

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

To summarize, this is not a comparative study but an exploratory study using two exemplary shows to address important research questions about the relationship between listeners, hosts, and change. This study found that listener reviews are an excellent place to investigate parasocial dynamics and expressions of nostalgia accompanying podcast show changes. Previous findings about the needs and gratifications audiences associated with podcast listening were confirmed by analyzing listener reviews: The favorite podcasts provide a listening experience that combines emotional and intellectual connections with people

they enjoy spending time with. New findings emphasized the importance of show continuity and, when change is inevitable, understanding, tracking, and managing listener nostalgia to ensure the show's longevity.

This is the first audience research study to point out the importance of understanding and managing change in the needs and expectations of listeners and content creators, an essential function in the production and distribution of cultural products. Podcast hosts are more than show stand-ins: They grow interested in and disenchanted with topics and presentation styles and eventually may want to move on. Long-term listeners are also individuals whose opinions and interests change over time.

When TAL introduced more liberal topics, many old-time listeners searched for new shows they felt were closer aligned to their emotional, intellectual, and entertainment needs. The exodus of listeners was significant, though not crippling. When RL changed the host team, a transition period of about two years saw founding host Krulwich working with new hosts Miller and Nasser, while old-time listeners bypassed new episodes in favor of listening to the archives. For both shows, listeners who stayed accepted the reality that the shows had changed, as did their rapport with the hosts. Nostalgic reactions reflected and influenced the trust and intimacy previously established with the show hosts.

More importantly, this study found that most listeners see the founding host diversifying the content or directions as minor and inevitable changes, treated as fixable mistakes or growing pains. In contrast, most listeners see the show's original host(s) departure as a significant, irreversible change, treated as a break of the brand promise and a legitimate reason to discontinue their relationship with the show brand.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

As researchers and practitioners, we categorize podcasting as a different medium with specific affordances and implications for the communication industries and fields. More research is needed to bridge radio and podcasts from listeners' perspectives. Do listeners see podcasting as a form of, or completely different from radio? Or is the ubiquity of digital delivery for all media making these differences irrelevant to listeners?

One finding that emerged organically from the data analysis, without having been the focus of any research question, is that in their reviews, listeners consider RL and TAL to be radio shows. To most long-time listeners, the term podcasting refers simply to the platform allowing them to access these radio shows whenever and wherever it is convenient—not a new medium or anything more complicated:

Hip Hip Hooray! At long last, *TAL* for the iPod. This is a wonderful, wonderful show. My only problem now is what to do with all the time I used to spend complaining about *TAL* not being available as a podcast. (TAL, October 2006)

One limitation of this study is the absence of an intention to explore listener reviews relating to the additional functions of podcasting introduced to each show: video releases, live events, and other opportunities for listeners to meet the show hosts in person. This observation may speak more to the introverted persona of these shows: Science and intimate stories are best enjoyed as solitary experiences, with the knowledge that others out there also enjoy them in chosen solitude. It should, however, be further investigated as the podcasting industry and audiences continue to grow and diversify.

A second limitation of this study emerged from the nature of the two shows chosen for the analysis: both promised and delivered a form of journalism consistent with the NPR networks and standards. Another direction for future research should focus on the triggers for listener discontent and determine if they are quasi-universal (departure from the show's premise) or specific to a genre or mode of delivery. This dataset found that introducing political topics into a show primarily focused on science (RL) or human-interest stories (TAL) was just one of the changes. However, it triggered significant reactions in listeners' reviews and immediate accusations of bias, propagandistic agendas, and lack of professionalism for both shows, resulting in an exodus of listeners.

With the podcast audiences growing larger and younger, the expectations might be different. This younger podcast audience does not demand traditional journalism, might not appreciate the NPR style, and might present different patterns of parasocial dynamics or overall needs and expectations from their podcasts (Craig et al., 2021; Paris, 2023; Soto, 2023). Perhaps the younger audiences present a higher tolerance for change. More experimental research is needed to determine the best strategies to transition shows when significant changes are inevitable regarding the hosts or the content.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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# Podcasting the Truth: Challenging Journalistic Knowledge and Building Epistemic Authority in Independent YouTube Podcasts

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## Abstract

The legitimacy of journalism as a truth-teller has become contested during the era of digitalisation and newly emerging platforms. Recently, the epistemic authority of legacy journalism has been challenged by right-wing podcasting. This article explores metajournalistic discussions on the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution in six Finnish podcasts published independently outside legacy media on YouTube. This metajournalistic discourse of truth is identified through topic modelling in 229 podcast episodes, of which 119 are scrutinised using qualitative discourse analysis. The discursive articulations in the YouTube podcast episodes are assessed in the light of realist and antirealist philosophies as well as epistemic theories of journalistic truth structured by critical realist and pragmatist philosophies. The results show that the epistemic authority of legacy journalism is challenged through three interconnected themes through which legacy journalism is articulated as an antirealist practice and institution. By contrast, YouTube podcasting is framed as a platform for a balanced, authentic, and uncut talk that realises the epistemic ideals of journalism. The challenges to the epistemic authority of legacy journalism presented by the Finnish YouTube podcasts are also similar to those identified in previous research on right-wing podcasting and online counter-media. The findings point to the need for legacy journalists and podcasting practitioners to adopt more nuanced and context-bound understandings of journalistic knowledge and truth structured by critical realist and pragmatist philosophies.

## Keywords

antirealism; critical realism; epistemology of journalism; journalism; legacy journalism; metajournalistic discourse; podcast; pragmatism; realism; truth; YouTube

## 1. Introduction

The legitimacy of journalism as a truth-teller has become contested during the era of digitalisation and new emerging platforms (Carlson, 2018; Ekström & Westlund, 2019b). While claims about the veracity of news are certainly not a new phenomenon, debates over the epistemic authority of legacy journalism re-gained momentum in the late 2010s and early 2020s in the form of fake news and post-truth (Carlson, 2018; Farkas, 2023; Waisbord, 2018). Recently, in the context of the US, independent right-wing podcasting has contested the epistemic authority of journalism, with actors outside legacy media challenging the authority of traditional journalistic institutions and establishing their own authority by “hijacking” the ideals of journalism and adopting the role of truth-teller (Dowling et al., 2022; see also Johansson, 2021; Markman & Sawyer, 2014). The influence of such US-based podcasting has also been observed in the Nordic countries. For instance, Johansson (2021) notes that a popular Swedish YouTube podcast has not only attempted to establish its authority by imitating the visual aesthetics of *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast—one of the most popular podcasts globally (see Colbjørnsen, 2024)—but it has also built its authority using countercultural narratives where podcasting is defined in contrast to legacy media and journalism.

The rise of podcasting has also been observed in Finland, where young people (aged 18–34) report significantly higher levels of podcast consumption than others (Reunanen et al., 2024). Furthermore, while Finland exhibits the highest level of trust in news among all countries studied in the most recent Reuters Institute Digital News Report, younger audiences show lower levels of trust in news (Reunanen et al., 2024). Instead, many report receiving information about current affairs and society from independent podcast channels published outside legacy media on YouTube and Spotify (Nepa, 2023, 2024; Reunanen et al., 2024). However, while the influence of US podcasting has already been noted in Sweden, studies on independent podcasting in the Nordic countries remain scarce.

This article assesses the contests over journalistic knowledge and truth in Finnish independent YouTube podcasts. It focuses on identifying discourses through which the epistemic authority of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is degraded in order to establish epistemic authority for YouTube podcasting. Legacy media and journalism are perceived in the context of this article as established media companies both in the public and private sectors, such as newspapers and the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE). YouTube podcasting is understood as a form of conversational audiovisual podcasting using YouTube as a central platform for distributing content, although episodes are also published on other podcasting platforms (Johansson, 2021). The epistemic contests over journalistic knowledge and truth are approached from the perspective of metajournalistic discourse, according to which the meanings and boundaries of journalism are defined discursively in social action (Carlson, 2016). This study uses topic modelling and discourse analysis to identify and analyse these metajournalistic discussions. It contributes to the empirical study of both podcasting and the epistemology of journalism by showing how YouTube podcasts challenge the loosely defined concept of journalistic truth to create their own epistemic authority.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Contemporary journalism is bound by an obligation to the truth, and it constructs its epistemic authority by adopting the role of truth-teller (Karlsson, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Nonetheless, the concept of truth in journalism is complex, and it has generally been theorised through other central epistemological

concepts, such as objectivity. Admittedly, the concept of objectivity offers fruitful and diverse ways to study the epistemology of journalism. It has been examined, for instance, through ethnographical inquiries into journalistic methods and practices (Tuchman, 1972), as both an ethical norm that guides journalists' professional self-perception (Skovsgaard et al., 2013) and a norm against which the quality of journalistic outputs can be evaluated (Mellado et al., 2018). Some scholars have argued, however, that the discussion on objectivity steers the discussion away from the more fundamental concept of truth (Hearns-Branaman, 2016; Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Indeed, if journalism has an obligation to the truth and builds its epistemic authority by adopting the role of truth-teller, it is necessary to assess both how journalism is granted its identity as a truth-oriented practice and institution and how this role is being re-negotiated and challenged by new emerging actors online.

### ***2.1. A Post-Foundational Perspective on Metajournalistic Discourse***

The challenges posed by the epistemic authority of legacy journalism are approached in this article through the theoretical lens of metajournalistic discourse. In metajournalistic discourse, the legitimacy and normative roles of journalism are increasingly defined and discussed outside professional and legacy journalism by various members of the public (Carlson, 2016, 2017). While the legitimacy of journalism as an institution is based on certain socially accepted ethical and normative ideals, such as objectivity and the pursuit of truth, these ideals are never static, and their meanings can be challenged and changed in social and discursive action (Carlson, 2016). Carlson (2016, p. 350) defines metajournalistic discourse as “the site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism’s legitimacy.” The theory of metajournalistic discourse, then, provides an understanding of journalism as a practice and institution that gains its meanings as a result of social action where the authority of journalism is constantly re-negotiated (Carlson, 2017).

In this article, the theory of metajournalistic discourse is coupled with a more refined theory on discourses rooted in post-foundationalism (Marttila, 2016). Generally speaking, discourse theories posit that social reality is constructed through language use and meaning-making that eventually lead to shared social meanings perceived as objective and natural by society at large (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this light, discourses structure individuals' thinking and behaviour. In contrast to some other discourse theories, post-foundational theory adopts a particular ontological stance in relation to discourses: Reality is constituted and made intelligible to humans only in social action through discourses (Marttila, 2016). That is, our access to reality is limited to the domain of discourses, whereas, according to the critical realist stance adopted by critical discourse analysis, for instance, a distinction is made between the discursively structured social reality and the extra-discursive ontological state of affairs (Marttila, 2016; see also Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998). Post-foundationalism admits, however, the likely existence of a human-independent reality, yet this reality can only be made intelligible through the meaning-making and language use encompassed by discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). A post-foundational theory of discourses pays particular attention to the identity creation of individuals, groups, and objects via discourses (see Section 3), whereas other discourse theories focus on, for instance, particular situations of language use (e.g., discursive psychology) and changes of meaning over time (e.g., critical discourse analysis; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this regard, a post-foundational theory of discourses offers a compatible theoretical and methodological framework to study the metajournalistic discourse of truth through which the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is established and negotiated.

## 2.2. Truth in Journalism

The identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is assessed in light of four central philosophical traditions that have guided the theories on journalistic truth in journalism studies. These philosophies are realism, antirealism, critical realism, and pragmatism (e.g., Hearn-Branaman, 2016; Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015).

Realism and antirealism differ from the critical realist and pragmatist traditions in their fundamental understandings of truth and the nature of reality. In the context of this article, realism is understood in terms of naïve realism and a naïve correspondence theory of truth, in which news content is expected to correspond to objective metaphysical reality and the ontological state of affairs as they are (Maras, 2013). Such conceptions of truth have been heavily criticised by journalism scholars (e.g., Muñoz-Torres, 2012). However, such naïve realist perceptions have historically structured the epistemic ideals of journalism, such as objectivity, which have been conveyed to journalism through the tradition of scientific realism (Maras, 2013; Waisbord, 2018). While news content must indeed have some correspondence to the events of the world to be considered “true, or at least an acceptable approximation of truth,” journalistic knowledge and truth are always subordinate to various editorial processes, epistemological practices, and technologies (McNair, 2005, p. 30, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, accusations of bias in professional journalism are commonly structured by naïve correspondence or naïve empiricism, where direct observation is considered the only form of valid knowledge (Maras, 2013).

Antirealism adopts an ontological position opposed to realism. Antirealism generally considers that the human perception of reality is always limited by sensory experiences and/or language use, and it is therefore impossible to achieve any truth about reality (Hearn-Branaman, 2016). Such a social constructivist perspective on reality and truth renders the concept of truth and knowledge vulnerable to relativism, according to which truth is always relative to a specific context (Hearn-Branaman, 2016). Adopting a fundamentally antirealist stance would shatter the normative role of journalism as a truth-teller, as there would be no shared understanding of valid knowledge and truth (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Thus, antirealism is understood in this article as a relativist theory of truth, according to which journalism cannot deal with the truth or deliver truthful accounts of reality.

It should be noted, however, that there are also fruitful discussions on knowledge and truth within the realist and antirealist traditions (e.g., Gauthier, 2005; Lynch, 1998). Nonetheless, these philosophies are also burdened by their fundamental and extreme forms of naïve correspondence and relativism, which have also been observed to structure conceptions of knowledge and truth among professional journalists and members of the public (e.g., Hearn-Branaman, 2016; Lau, 2004; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Robertson, 2020). Contemporary journalism nonetheless requires a concept of journalistic truth that upholds its legitimacy:

All of these truths—even the laws of science—are subject to revision, but we operate by them in the meantime because they are necessary and functionally work. This is what our journalism must be after—a practical or functional form of truth. It is not truth in the absolute or philosophical sense. It is not the truth of a chemical equation. Journalism can—and must—pursue truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis. (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, pp. 51–52)

Journalism scholars have therefore argued that both news professionals and the public should adopt conceptions of truth that are structured according to critical realist or pragmatist philosophies (Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015). According to these traditions, journalism should be perceived as a truth-oriented practice and institution despite the fact that journalistic knowledge and truth are subject to various epistemological practices, value judgments, and power relations that are not inherently objective (Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Muñoz-Torres, 2012).

Two central features of critical realist and pragmatist forms of journalistic truth are key for the purposes of this article. First, they both adopt a fallibilist position that allows for the correction of journalistic mistakes and for journalistic knowledge and truth to change from what has been previously reported (Elder-Vass, 2022; Ward, 2015). Second, they emphasise the social processes affecting the production of knowledge and truth rather than focusing on “the metaphysical quest of moving closer to reality” (Ward, 2015, p. 289; see also Ekström & Westlund, 2019a; Elder-Vass, 2022). While critical realism and pragmatism diverge in their ontological beliefs regarding the existence of human-independent metaphysical reality (Elder-Vass, 2022), from the perspective of journalism they function as philosophies that succeed in upholding the identity of journalism as a truth-oriented institution and help journalism confront naïve realist and relativist arguments (Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015). Critical realism and pragmatism are treated here as epistemic theories of journalistic truth that uphold the role of journalism as a truth-teller while simultaneously admitting that knowledge and truth are affected by various epistemological practices, value judgments, and power relations (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2022).

### ***2.3. YouTube Podcasting: An Emerging Form of Contestation Over Journalistic Authority***

The identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution has been questioned by new and emerging online actors. While a vibrant body of research on fake news and post-truth has appeared during the past decade, the empirical analysis of epistemic contests over journalism in the light of more fundamental epistemological and philosophical concepts has remained scarce. Nonetheless, some observations have been made in the context of Nordic far-right counter-media, where journalistic truth and knowledge are often perceived through (naïve) realist perspectives rooted in an “empiricist-positivist philosophy of science” (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 369). For these claims, it is common to articulate legacy journalism as a biased and deceitful institution that delivers untruthful and emotion-based information, in contrast to far-right counter-media outlets, which frame themselves as offering a realist and factual alternative to legacy media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Contestations over journalistic truth have also recently been observed in the context of right-wing podcasting in the US, where the legitimacy of journalism has been questioned by independent podcasting practitioners (Dowling et al., 2022). In these epistemic challenges, the metajournalistic discourse of truth has played a prominent role since podcasts have constructed their epistemic authority by defining themselves as “trusted arbiter[s] of truth” in contrast to legacy media (Dowling et al., 2022, p. 5). Previous research on independent podcasts has also shown that they tend to define themselves as an alternative to mainstream media through this type of negative or antagonistic logic (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). Independent podcasting is, therefore, defined here loosely as a podcasting practice that is produced outside legacy media and is not directly affiliated with any legacy media outlet or broadcaster (Laughlin, 2023; Markman & Sawyer, 2014).



In this study, YouTube podcasts are approached as a form of visual podcasting that distributes content both in audiovisual and audio-only formats (Bonini, 2022; Johansson, 2021). While other podcasting platforms, such as Spotify, have introduced a video feature for podcasts, YouTube is still considered a central platform for these podcasts to distinguish themselves from legacy media (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Johansson, 2021). Furthermore, while audio is also the most important modality for YouTube podcasts (Johansson, 2021), visuality plays a central role in creating a sense of community, intimacy, and trust between podcast hosts and the audience through a feeling of liveness and immediacy (Euritt, 2023). The host–audience relationship is also reinforced through paratexts, such as background cues, logos, memes, and merchandise, that also offer monetising opportunities for these independent podcasts (Bonini, 2022; Euritt, 2023). Distributing podcasting content through YouTube is, therefore, perceived as signalling both intellectual and economic independence from legacy media and other “former monopolies of knowledge” (Johansson, 2021, p. 271).

Based on this literature review, the research questions are the following:

RQ1: Through what themes is the metajournalistic discourse of truth conducted in independent Finnish YouTube podcasts that actively discuss the veracity of legacy media and journalism?

RQ2: How are the epistemic challenges relating to legacy journalism’s identity as a truth-oriented practice and institution structured by realist, antirealist, and epistemic theories of truth on Finnish YouTube podcasts?

RQ3: How is the epistemic authority of independent YouTube podcasting constructed through the metajournalistic discourse of truth?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data Selection and Data Processing

Five criteria guided the selection of YouTube podcast channels for the analysis: that the podcast (a) commented on news and current affairs and engaged in metajournalistic discourse, (b) that it was produced independently outside legacy media (see Markman & Sawyer, 2014), (c) that it was published on YouTube and had at least 5,000 subscribers, (d) that the podcast hosts were not directly involved in party politics, and (e) that it did not actively discuss conspiracy theories. Following these criteria, six YouTube podcast channels were chosen for further analysis after the author actively followed the Finnish YouTube podcasting scene in 2022 (see Table 1). Following the typology created by Newman and Gallo (2019, 2020), the selected podcasts can be categorised as deep dive podcasts, extended chats, or mixtures of these two news podcast genres. All the selected podcasts were hosted by males, and the guests appearing on the shows were also predominantly male. It was also common for the podcast hosts to occasionally appear as guests in each other’s podcasts. The duration of the podcast episodes ranged between 20 and 120 minutes, averaging one hour.

After identifying the relevant podcasts for the study, the author browsed all the available episodes on their YouTube channels and identified episodes involving metajournalistic discourse. This was achieved by identifying topics related to media and journalism by reading the titles and descriptions of the episodes and identifying the guests. Episodes with journalists or guests with journalistic backgrounds, for example, were

automatically included. After this process, the data consisted of 229 episodes published between 2018 and mid-April 2023, marking the end of Finnish parliamentary elections in which the budget of the national broadcaster was a prominent topic of debate. The audio files were extracted from YouTube in June 2023, after which a transcription service based on OpenAI's Whisper model was used to transcribe the audio files into text documents (<https://openai.com/index/whisper>).

**Table 1.** Description of the selected podcasts and the number of podcast episodes included in the data.

Name of the podcast, year of first published episode on YouTube, description of the podcast	Number of episodes/ text documents in the data after topic modelling	Number of subscribers in spring 2023 (approximate)
<i>Futucast</i> , 2018 An extended chat podcast between two hosts and guest(s). The podcast channel is described as offering "general knowledge" and covering "societal issues." The podcast offers commercial collaboration deals that may affect the content.	22	14,000
<i>Puheenaihe</i> (Topic), 2018 An extended chat podcast between two hosts and guest(s). According to the YouTube channel's description, the podcast addresses "the most interesting topics in Finland." The podcast offers commercial collaboration deals that may affect the content.	39	28,000
<i>Ivan Puopolo</i> , 2019 A podcast shifting between the deep dive and extended chat genres. The podcast host also hosts a morning TV show for a commercial legacy media outlet. There are often guest(s) in the podcast. The topics revolve around freedom of speech, politics, and media.	39*	39,000
<i>#neuvottelija</i> (#negotiator), 2020 A podcast drawing on both the deep dive and extended chat genres. The podcast is hosted by one person who initially discussed topics relating to negotiating skills, companies, and entrepreneurship with guests. Since then, topics have revolved increasingly around politics, the economy, and media.	5**	16,000
<i>Otetaan yhdet!</i> (Let's have a drink!), 2020 An extended chat podcast with two hosts that both have worked with legacy media. At the beginning of each episode, the hosts open (alcoholic) beverages and introduce the products of their commercial collaborators. The topics revolve around news, lifestyle, masculinity, and working out.	5**	6,000
<i>23 minuuttia</i> (23 minutes), 2020 A deep dive podcast channel that draws on the informal style of extended chat podcasts. The channel publishes five 23-minute episodes a week. The hosts have a background in legacy media, and they mainly discuss current events, politics, and media. There are sometimes guests on the show.	9	21,000

Notes: \* Eight podcast episodes were removed after topic modelling with random selection to avoid the overrepresentation of certain podcast channels; \*\* podcast episodes were added with random selection because the number of episodes after topic modelling was <5.

In order to identify the episodes most likely to include metajournalistic discourse, the author relied on topic modelling. Latent Dirichlet allocation topic modelling is a probabilistic computational method used to analyse large data sets and detect patterned language use. It is considered an apt method for complementing discourse analytical approaches in which data sets are considered too small for general conclusions (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019). Topic modelling helped the author confirm whether metajournalistic discourse actually existed and the extent to which it was present in the episodes. Thus, topic modelling guided the selection of appropriate documents for close reading and discourse analysis (see Koljonen, 2023).

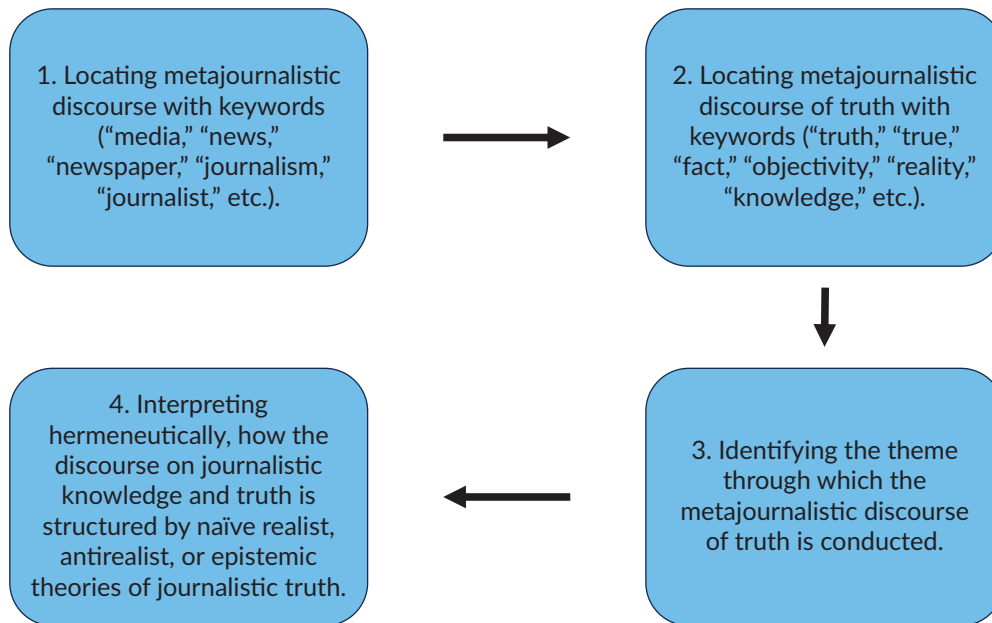
Topic modelling was conducted for models of 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 topics, from which the model of 20 topics (k20 model) was selected due to its detailedness and intelligibility after three iterations. While performing close readings of the text documents in between these iterations, the author noted that the k20 model produced more detailed topics relating to journalism and media than the k10 model and more intelligible topics than the k30 model. Before running the final iteration, the 6–30-page text documents were tokenised into excerpts of 700–1,000 words due to the author's observation in the qualitative data analysis software that the discussed themes in the episodes typically changed after that number of words (for improvement of topic models through multiple iterations see Jockers & Mimno, 2013; Lindgren, 2020). The k20 model produced eight topics relating to media, journalism, and epistemology, confirming that metajournalistic discourse was present in the data (see Supplementary File). The other 12 topics of the k20 model related to other themes that were not directly connected to media or journalism but were still intelligible to the author (e.g., discussions about the prime minister of Finland, prosecutions of politicians, foreign policy, and the opening and ending slots of the podcast episodes).

The final data set for qualitative discourse analysis was selected by choosing the top 50 tokens of each eight topics relating to media, journalism, and epistemology and connecting the tokens to the original text documents. Thus, the data set for qualitative discourse analysis consisted of 119 documents that most likely included metajournalistic discourse of truth through which meanings about legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution are established.

### **3.2. Discourse Analysis**

The study used post-foundational discourse analysis to analyse the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution. The analysis was guided by the theory of metajournalistic discourse, according to which meanings about journalism are established in relation to specific themes (Carlson, 2016). Discourse analysis for the 119 transcribed documents was conducted using Atlas.TI, and it consisted of four phases (see Figure 1). The quality of the transcription was also verified by simultaneously playing the audio files in the background when locating metajournalistic discourse through keywords and identifying themes.

According to post-foundational discourse theory, the themes of metajournalistic discourse can be perceived as nodal points of discourse. Nodal points structure and tie together various discursively articulated elements that, as a whole, grant meaning and identity to a discourse (Marttila, 2016). It is also through discursive articulations that the meaning and identity of the discourse are either maintained or changed (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For example, when legacy journalism is discussed through the theme of freedom of speech, journalism is assigned a discursively structured identity and role of enforcing freedom of speech in society. Thus, the theme/nodal point “freedom of speech” can be connected discursively to the

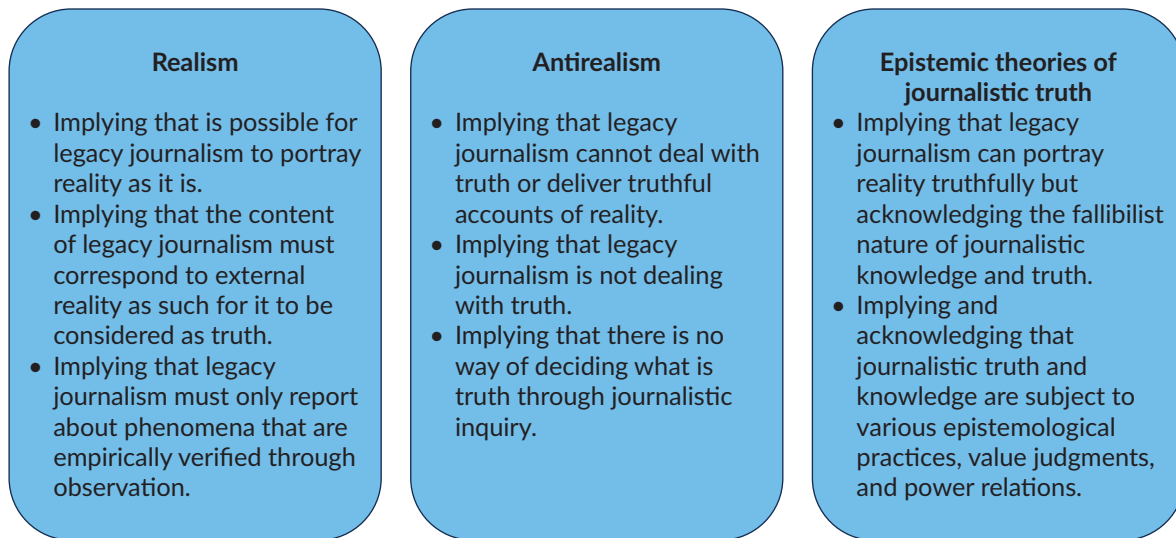


**Figure 1.** A detailed description of the discourse-analytical process.

role of journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution, for example, by claiming that journalism should communicate all views and opinions that exist in society as they are without censorship or bias. In such a claim, the identity of journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is interpreted to be structured by naïve realism and naïve correspondence (see Ylä-Anttila, 2018). On the other hand, some could argue that the normative role of journalism should aim to offer a platform for various views in society to enforce freedom of speech while also acknowledging that journalism cannot liberate itself completely from interpretation, value judgements, or various forms of structural power (such a conception is interpreted here to be structured by epistemic theories of truth; see Hearn-Branaman, 2016). It is noteworthy that discourse analytical approaches cannot rely on the systematic analysis of formal structures alone (e.g., the identification of nodal points) but also require a hermeneutical approach that is sensitive to the different contexts where discourses are established and used (van Dijk, 2011). Thus, journalistic knowledge and truth are discussed in various contexts throughout the data, and their link to the various philosophical traditions requires interpretation (see Figure 2).

## 4. Results

The metajournalistic discourse of truth in independent Finnish YouTube podcasts is reactive in nature. That is, the themes through which metajournalistic discourse is performed originate mainly from a commentary on emerging events covered by legacy media (Carlson, 2016). However, these reactive themes broaden metajournalistic discourse into more general and generative discussions about the normative epistemic role of legacy journalism. The author identified three interconnected generative themes when performing a close reading and conducting discourse analysis for the text documents. While other themes were identified in the data (such as Russian and Ukrainian war propaganda in the Finnish media, the relationship between legacy media and the then-Finnish prime minister, and the Covid-19 pandemic) the three generative themes were interpreted as wider thematic frameworks encompassing the essence of the other themes. This section elaborates on the discursive processes through which meanings about the identity of legacy journalism as a



**Figure 2.** Central criteria guiding the interpretation of articulations relating to journalistic knowledge and truth.

truth-oriented practice and institution are created and how these YouTube podcasts build their own epistemic authority through this metajournalistic critique.

#### **4.1. Articulating Legacy Journalism as an Antirealist Practice and Institution**

The epistemic authority of journalism is undermined by articulating legacy journalists and media as ideologically biased. This overarching theme of “ideologically driven and biased legacy journalists” forms the baseline for the metajournalistic discourse of truth that is also present when other themes/nodal points are introduced. In this critical discourse, it is claimed that legacy media and journalists have liberal biases and systematically disregard conservative views. Such claims are present in both direct accusations and also the premises embedded in the critical questions posed to guests, as in the following excerpt from *Futucast*: “How much were you controlled in the background [when you were scripting the satirical newscast]? You are nonetheless working for a mainstream media company, so you cannot say whatever you want.” Such remarks imply that journalists working for legacy media cannot portray things realistically due to restrictive (ideological or economic) structures that inhibit journalists from delivering truthful accounts of reality. While this could be interpreted as a promising step towards fruitful discussions about the limitations of journalistic inquiry and journalistic knowledge, these claims are often used to impose an antirealist identity on legacy journalism:

If you have 100 researchers out of which 98 are left-wing liberals, and even though you apply whatever criteria, you will probably pick a left-wing liberal [expert for an interview]....Let's suppose that you wanted to steer reality towards right-wing conservatism and wanted to pick experts for this purpose, you would not find them....And for some reason, for example, this gender question is a good one because everyone has an opinion on it and it is after all a question about definitions, whether something is defined as gender or not. So, for some reason biologists are not saying anything. No one asks them how this goes. (*Ivan Puopolo's host*)

The excerpt above shows a general pattern in which the discussions about journalism and journalistic epistemology develop in some 10 minutes into wider discussions about science and society. While the

object of discussion has shifted, in this case to biology, meanings about journalism are still being created. Some of the critique could also be viewed as being structured by more elaborate epistemic theories of journalistic truth since the critique is aimed at deficiencies in the epistemological practices of journalism regarding balance (e.g., interviewing the same or similarly minded experts, and not offering sufficiently balanced perspectives within individual news stories; for the pragmatist ideal of balance in journalism see Hearn-Branaman, 2016). However, the alleged like-mindedness and consensus among experts are often perceived as the intentional bias of legacy media towards picking the same experts for interviews rather than, for instance, a particular feature of Nordic political and media culture (e.g., Andersson, 2023; Rainio-Niemi, 2015).

This critique of the ideology and bias of legacy media and like-minded experts is also prominent in the second interconnected theme, which is interpreted and labelled as “gender issues and science.” At this discursive nodal point, legacy journalism is articulated as an institution burdened by universities’ humanist and social sciences that educate journalists about “gender” and “woke” ideologies—that is, political activism focusing on gender and minority issues that represents the thinking of only a small minority. The relationship between legacy journalists and experts is perceived here as a vicious circle: Experts educate legacy journalists, and journalists adopt the views and ideology of these experts and foster them in their news stories:

One concrete [example] is probably unanimity in the Finnish media. And I refer [in my book] to research conducted at Tampere University about the political views of university students. And over half of journalism students vote for The Greens and one-third vote for the Left Alliance. And even though young people tend to support The Greens and many journalism students probably convert, like myself, when they become adults and start to vote for adults’ parties, I would nonetheless say that in a big Finnish media company, like *Helsingin Sanomat* [the biggest newspaper] and Yle [the national broadcaster]...and maybe also *Suomen Kuvalehti* [a news magazine], there is a quite strong red-green bias....And there is similar red-green dominance at the universities, and that is where I picked my own green thinking when I was working as a researcher after graduation. And it is like a factory setting when one pursues a career as a researcher in the social sciences and humanities and to some extent in legal science, where I was. (*Puheenaihe’s* guest)

One prominent and overarching topic of discussion within this framework is gender. As seen in the very first quote of Section 4.1, gender is often articulated as a non-ideological and ontological biological fact, whereas journalistic articles about pluralist views on gender are interpreted as a form of activism and an attempt to inject journalists’ own ideology into society. The discussion also becomes easily confused since the Finnish language contains just one word to describe both the socially constructed roles of females and males (gender) and the physical and biological characteristics of females and males (sex). The discussion on gender is often linked to discussions about the role of objectivity and facts in journalism. Objectivity is, however, often structured according to naïve realist perspectives based on the assumed existence of “objective facts” without elaborating on the precise meaning of objectivity:

Should talk shows be based on objective facts and what would that mean?....Could Yle outline that its talk shows must be based on objective facts? Could Yle then broadcast any religious content? (*Puheenaihe’s* host)



I have received multiple messages from a mainstream journalist during the past year relating to a matter I have been writing about, but they [sic] responded [to my writing] on their own initiative and stated that either “we do not even try to offer strictly fact-based journalism” or “we do not try to achieve any objectivity. Our aim is to offer the readers a nice experience or to tell a nice story.” But, from a scientist’s perspective, this made my hackles rise a little bit. (*Ivan Puopolo’s* guest)

In the latter quote, scientific objectivity is juxtaposed with journalistic objectivity without contextualisation. There exists an underlying assumption that some branches of science are more objective than others, and legacy journalism is perceived to be dealing excessively with phenomena that are difficult to verify scientifically, in contrast to hard and objective sciences. Here, mathematics and most of the natural sciences are articulated as realist and ideology-free practices that can show people how the world really is:

But the truth is so difficult [when it comes to fake news]. Like, I think that facts do not exist in a way, and this might require a bit of explaining. Facts only exist in mathematics and, in principle, no other facts exist. I could say that Helsinki is the capital of Finland, and it’s a fact. But it is a fact that could change into something else. So, it will not always be that way. (*Puheenaihe’s* guest)

All this assigns journalism an extremely narrow role as a truth-oriented practice and institution as it sets rather strict limits on what journalism should report about. Considering political news, for instance, it is hard to imagine that journalists could produce relevant journalistic knowledge about politics and society without picking a perspective from which to write the story. Obviously, the perspectives in the subsequent stories should cover the previously ignored standpoints to realise the epistemic ideal of balance in the best way possible. Nevertheless, articulating journalistic knowledge and epistemology through such uncontextualised articulations of objectivity assigns journalism a role that it cannot fulfil. Journalism cannot operate solely on the basis of mathematical or hard objective facts, although they can help journalism perform better (e.g., Nguyen & Lugo-Ocando, 2016). Furthermore, the kind of parallels between journalistic and scientific objectivity implied by the guest scientist in the *Ivan Puopolo* podcast render the critique unreasonable and uncontextualised. Journalistic objectivity and scientific objectivity are two separate epistemological concepts, and they should be theorised and discussed respectively within their own separate fields (Semir, 2000).

Furthermore, journalistic objectivity is rarely defined or discussed in detail. This is problematic for two reasons. First, European ethical guidelines for journalists have defined the concept of objectivity in at least seven different ways (e.g., as a feature of reality, of a journalist, of a journalistic institution, of journalistic methods, etc.; Lehtinen, 2016). This illustrates the ambiguity of the concept of objectivity that also facilitates meaning-making structured by naïve realist conceptions that are still associated with journalistic practice (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). This leads to the second point: Such naïve realist perceptions of objectivity are self-contradictory since they normatively state that journalism should be based on objective facts but simultaneously present a value judgment in stating such a claim (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). In other words, value judgments and interpretations are still required to decide what these objective facts are.

The third central theme of the metajournalistic discourse of truth is called “freedom of speech.” Here, it is often argued that the perspectives and themes covered in legacy media should reflect the views and thinking of the majority of the population. Thus, the epistemic role of legacy journalism is not to offer new perspectives on society and the world but rather to bring people together through common narratives:

So, I am now thinking about the diversity of opinions from the perspective of legacy media. So, if we have people there with certain opinions, these opinions should be present in the media in approximately the same proportion as they occur among the people. If we think about—I've always been using this as an example—gender diversity. I would say, according to my gut feeling...that 90% of the population say that there are male and female sexes, and that's it. Like biological sexes and that's it. But if we look at how much this opinion is present in public speech, it is way less than 90%. It is actually in the minority in public speech. And then again, we see that the diversity of opinion is not realised to the extent that it is present out there. And in this way, freedom of speech is not realised, or what I'd like to refer to as the diversity of opinions. (*Puheenaihe's* guest)

As can be seen from the quote above, this metajournalistic theme is yet again used to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity as it fails to portray the social reality as it is. This finding also intersects with narratives that are common in the right-wing counter-media, in which the authentic truth can thrive only when journalism applies absolute freedom of speech and anything can be said without limitations or bias (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). There is a realist connotation embedded in an argument for such an absolute form of freedom of speech since it assumes that representing the thinking of the majority reveals some truth about social reality whereas the thinking of the minority fails to do so. In such a view, the existing biases within the majority are not acknowledged.

Some discussions on journalistic knowledge and truth on the podcasts are also structured according to epistemic theories of journalistic truth. However, they are often articulated by legacy journalists appearing as guests in the episodes. Epistemic theories of journalistic truth are manifested mainly in the form of fallibilism, in which legacy journalists attempt to advance a view of journalistic knowledge and truth as self-correcting processes, such as in the following excerpts by legacy journalists visiting the podcasts:

So, we talked about those objective facts. Obviously, all the discussion in the media cannot be based on them. But if someone clearly makes erroneous claims or begins spreading conspiracy theories [like on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast] and if the media serves a journalistic function, then one must confront these claims and question them, but Joe Rogan and Spotify aren't journalistic institutions. (*Puheenaihe's* guest)

Journalism is made by humans, and there are obviously mistakes. But if the media is committed to self-regulation through the Council for Mass Media, then they will correct those errors. (*Futucast's* guest)

These excerpts show that journalistic knowledge is defined mainly in relation to “errors” or “erroneous claims,” without elaborating further on how journalistic knowledge is constructed. In such definitions, there is a risk that journalistic knowledge and truth will be defined in relation to falseness, rendering journalistic knowledge and truth subject to interpretations structured by naïve realism (i.e., in contrast to falseness and error, there is a single truth to be reported). Such a dialectical view of journalistic knowledge and truth has also been observed among legacy journalists. In this view, the pragmatist ideals of journalism are articulated as important, such as balancing news stories with different views, but the truthfulness of the content is defended through naïve realist arguments in a philosophically incompatible way (Hearns-Branaman, 2016). This finding emphasises the need for legacy journalists to adopt and endorse an epistemic view in which the presence of both errors,

inevitable biases, and the fallibility of truthful journalistic outputs is openly admitted. Simultaneously, actors outside legacy journalism, such as members of the audience and podcasters, should be introduced to more nuanced and context-bound understandings of journalistic knowledge and truth in order to confront naïve realist conceptions.

#### 4.2. Constructing the Epistemic Authority for YouTube Podcasting Through Claims of Authenticity

Legacy media forms an integral part of the independent YouTube podcasts by helping them to define their position in the Finnish media landscape. As knowledge production in the mainstream media is characterised by certain ideological and political biases, which are discussed through the aforementioned themes, independent YouTube podcasting is articulated as a balancing media practice. The YouTube podcasts also demarcate themselves from legacy media by recurrently referring to a wider community of visual podcasting, such as the US-based *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast, and the conservative legacy media outlet Fox News. *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast and Fox News are articulated as the embodiments of a truly liberal media system that allows all voices to be heard. It is here that the epistemic authority of the YouTube podcasts is strongly linked to the metajournalistic theme of “freedom of speech,” through which the podcasts justify their position in the media landscape by offering a platform for conservative and other disregarded views in Finnish society:

There exists a class that has found cohesion [in identity political matters in the US] in the past 10 years and that can be also seen in Finland where big media companies and big tech are both representative of the mindset where showing dissent practically means that you are an idiot and a right-wing extremist who should be cancelled. And that’s why this podcast show exists because the oxygen that is important for public discussion has been running low during the past five years. (*23 minuuttia’s* host)

Thus, YouTube podcasting both corrects the ideological and political biases in the media landscape and lays the foundation for direct and uncut discussion in which guests and hosts can authentically express themselves. This authenticity is also assigned a realist connotation by claiming that through in-depth, direct discussions, it is possible to discern (objective) truths from untruths:

The strength of podcasting generally, not just in our [*Futucast*] podcast but probably in your [*Puheenaihe* podcast] as well...is that here we really get to discuss....And of course, you also have different kinds of responsibilities [for spreading controversial claims] when you have a podcast or a media platform....But on an ideal level, I am such a freedom-of-speech fetishist myself that I am willing to sit down and find out and bring into the light the truths and untruths in all claims. (*Futucast’s* host)

These Finnish YouTube podcasts are then establishing their identity through the metajournalistic discourse of truth by self-identifying with an ideal liberal US media system where, allegedly, all views are authentically represented in the media. What this liberal ideal means in practice for these Finnish YouTube podcasts, however, is a bias in favour of right-wing political views. In 70 out of the 229 podcast episodes chosen for this study, there were guests with a background in right-wing parties, compared to 9 episodes featuring guests from left-wing parties. Therefore, these Finnish independent YouTube podcasts seem to be following the global trend in which right-wing political views continue to be dominant in YouTube podcasting (Dowling et al., 2022; Johansson, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

This article assessed the metajournalistic discourse of truth occurring in Finnish independent YouTube podcasts. The results show that the discourse on the epistemic authority of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is structured according to three central themes: ideologically driven and biased journalists, gender issues and science, and freedom of speech (RQ1). The articulations within these themes are exposed to naïve realist interpretations of journalistic knowledge and truth that appear to highlight the inability of legacy media to realise the ideal of delivering truthful accounts of reality. While the YouTube podcasts indeed address important questions about epistemological deficiencies within professional journalism (e.g., acquiring balance in news stories) and point to the need for professional journalism to refine its epistemological concepts (e.g., the ambiguity of the concept of objectivity), the discussion tends to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity (RQ2). Furthermore, even though some legacy journalists visiting the podcasts attempt to engage in the discussion about journalism's epistemological practices and journalistic knowledge, they often fail to argue for a concept of truth supported and structured according to epistemic theories of truth. This highlights the continuing difficulties within professional journalism in engaging with complex epistemological discussions and endorsing a perception of journalistic truth where, while the fallibility of journalistic knowledge is admitted, such knowledge could still be regarded as truthful (e.g., Muñoz-Torres, 2012).

Podcasting, on the other hand, is articulated as a practice that introduces balance to the media landscape by diversifying the public discussion. Along with this ideal of balance derived from epistemic theories of journalistic truth, podcasting is also seen to achieve the realist ideals of journalism through the authenticity of the format, where speech is direct and uncut. The epistemic authority of podcasting is thus structured through metajournalistic discourse of truth by appropriating elements from both realist and epistemic theories of truth (RQ3). These claims for authority should be approached, however, with a critical lens, since the epistemological challenges of journalism highlighted by the podcasts inevitably apply to podcasting as well. It is therefore problematic that YouTube podcasts establish their epistemic authority in contrast to legacy media through metajournalistic discourse of truth when their own practices are prone to similar epistemic contests and critique.

These findings are in line with previous research on podcasting and online counter-media. US podcasts like *The Joe Rogan Experience* are regularly mentioned as a source of inspiration for the Finnish YouTube podcasts investigated here, and they seem to display a similar tendency to offer a platform for political views present only on the margins of legacy media (Colbjørnsen, 2024). Accusations of liberal and left-wing bias among legacy media are also used to emphasise the need for right-wing partisan media in Finland. This is indicative of the emergence of a right-wing sphere in Finnish podcasting that has also been observed, for instance, in the US and Sweden (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Dowling et al., 2022; Johansson, 2021; Laughlin, 2023). Furthermore, the results of this article suggest that the epistemic authority of the podcasts is built through poorly contextualised discussions about journalism's epistemology that degrade the epistemic authority of legacy journalism. The results are also aligned with studies relating to online counter-media indicating that the metajournalistic discourse of truth in the podcasts concerned seems to have existed prior to the publication of the first episodes. While these studies do not apply the concept of metajournalistic discourse of truth as such, their results point to similar articulations structured by naïve realism that threaten to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

As podcasting is emerging as a platform for regular metajournalistic discussions and journalists are invited to these podcasts to elaborate on their work, it is important that legacy journalists are equipped with the understanding of journalistic knowledge and truth that are defensible against these epistemic challenges. Therefore, the article invites legacy media institutions, individual journalists, and independent podcasting practitioners to contemplate their relationship to the concept of truth. Moreover, as new independent podcasts drawing on journalistic ethics have already appeared, the article recommends that future research focus on how journalistic epistemological practices and ethical codes are applied in podcast content, both inside and outside legacy media.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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# Analysis of Narrative Strategies in Independent Non-Fiction Narrative Podcasts in Ibero-America

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## Abstract

This study analyses the narrative strategies employed in 11 independent narrative non-fiction podcasts from seven Ibero-American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Spain, Portugal, Colombia, Chile, and Mexico. The research concentrates on identifying the primary narrative trends applied within this genre of audio journalism, focusing on how the role of the narrator and the structure of the story boost credibility and listener engagement. The methodology combines semi-structured interviews with 16 podcast producers and content analysis of 73 episodes to explore how these podcasts shape their narrative approaches. The results reveal that these podcasts use various journalistic subgenres, including interviews, sound chronicles a recognised genre within narrative and radio journalism in Ibero-American, and other more artistic or experimental formats such as radio features, along with narrative structures like episodic, Aristotelian, and counterpoint, allowing for diverse forms of storytelling. In addition, the study underscores the incorporation of sound archives, personal life stories, and other audio techniques to enhance the narrative’s depth and emotional resonance. These elements contribute to producing socially relevant stories that often challenge stereotypes and address underrepresented voices in society. Ultimately, this research highlights the role of independent non-fiction podcasts in the evolution of audio journalism in Ibero-America.

## Keywords

audio journalism; Ibero-America; independent podcast production; narrative podcasts; non-fiction podcasts; podcasts; podcast narrator; podcast storytelling; Portuguese podcasts; sound narrative strategies; Spanish podcasts

## 1. Introduction

This study aims to identify the main narrative techniques used in independent non-fiction podcasts in Spanish and Portuguese across Ibero-America that contribute to creating compelling narratives in audio journalism. It particularly focuses on the role of the narrator and the narrative structure to analyse how these elements enhance story credibility and listener involvement. This approach brings new perspectives to the field of narrative non-fiction podcasts in Ibero-America in that the use of narrative strategies in independent productions is an area that has been largely overlooked in prior studies. Although there is previous research on non-fiction podcasts and the evolution of narrative audio journalism (Esteban & Otón, 2023; Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Lindgren, 2016; McCracken, 2017; McHugh, 2022; Santos & Peixinho, 2019; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; among many others), this article differs by concentrating on the specific narrative subgenres and techniques employed by independent podcasts produced in Ibero-America. Through the analysis of the narrator's figure and the narrative structures used, the study offers a detailed view of how these independent productions renew the conventions of traditional audio journalism. This research fills a gap in the scientific literature by investigating how independent narrative podcasts in Spanish and Portuguese address relevant social issues and give voice to often underrepresented characters and communities. Moreover, it also provides a clear conceptual framework for the traditional radio subgenres that comprise this form of podcast, discussing how they are being renewed and how other more sophisticated subgenres, such as the radio feature, are included.

Non-fiction narrative podcasts have been attracting interest both from producers and listeners in Spain and Ibero-America. This kind of podcast has only been surpassed by conversational podcasts in Spain, i.e., informal discussions where one or more hosts chat among themselves or with a guest about a specific topic, sharing stories or opinions on it (Ivoox Observatory, 2023) as well as by interview-based podcasts, according to the pod survey conducted in Ibero-America (Podcasteros, 2022).

A decade after the concept of podcasting was coined (2004), the genre of narrative non-fiction podcasting emerged, thanks to *Serial* (2014), which marked a turning point in true-crime storytelling in the English language (Hardey & James, 2022; Sherrill, 2022). For Latin America, *Radio Ambulante* had the same impact with its audio chronicles (Vicente & de Lima, 2021). However, Santos and Peixinho (2019) point out the difficulty of conceptualising and classifying podcasts and their narratives, while Esteban and Otón (2023) caution that "it is still too early to classify podcast genres, although certain narrative and stylistic elements can be identified, unlike radio genres" (pp. 155–156). On this basis, we can propose a definition and identify certain features.

The narrative non-fiction podcast or documentary podcast is considered a genre within podcast production, in the same way as conversational podcasts and fiction podcasts (Esteban & Otón, 2023). Santos and Peixinho (2019) argue that the narrative non-fiction podcast is based on real lives or the stories of its characters in order to connect with the audience and evoke empathy for the story's protagonists.

This form of podcast is perceived as "flexible and malleable" (Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Given that it is a flexible genre, it can encompass a range of genres from journalism as well as other tools and techniques found in the social sciences, communication, and the arts, including life history, soundscape, and sound experimentation. In this way, the production of the narrative non-fiction podcast adapts to the needs of the story, its characters,

and the scenarios. Although the narrative structures and subgenres used may be aligned with journalistic and radio tradition, such as the chronicle, when the journalist witnesses, narrates, or describes an event, they use their individual perspective, creative freedom, and context (Martínez-Costa & Damas, 2008). In Latin America especially, the chronicle is understood as a form of narration that combines journalistic and literary elements, with a focus on subjective narrative and sociocultural context. The interview, which is considered more than a radio genre, reflects the ability of a journalist to discover the interviewee's truth and communicate it effectively according to the characteristics of the radio medium (Balsebre, 2004; Balsebre et al., 1998). Similarly, the report narrates and describes events of social interest, adding a context of interpretation through a creative structure and diverse sources (Damas, 2007; Villafranca, 2021).

Other subgenres can also be experimented with. The feature tells real stories with “sounds,” like a hybrid genre between journalism and art, seeking to raise audience awareness of social issues (Biewen, 2010; Lechuga, 2015; Ortiz & Galay, 2020; Rodríguez, 2021). The sound essay combines oral narrative with scientific reflection to disseminate more complex or sophisticated knowledge (Esteban & Otón, 2023), and the soundscape is like a sensitive recording and experience, capturing the auditory environment of characters, territories, or spaces (Carles, 2009; Montibeller, 2018; Schaeffer, 1966; Schafer, 1977). Meanwhile, radio drama or audio fiction is currently experiencing a new phase on podcast platforms, as it exploits the artistic forms of radio to communicate content that can mobilise the audience (Galay, 2010; Villafranca & Salar, 2020). In this regard, Esteban and Otón (2023, p. 154) recognise that the narrative non-fiction podcast:

Is a variant of the audio on demand associated with great radio reports and documentaries (Legorburu, Edo & García-González, 2021), but through sound structures and resources (ambiances, shots, music, effects...) less linked to immediacy and more to serenity and depth.

In the realm of the narrative non-fiction podcast, various tools and techniques can be incorporated, including the narrator (Gutiérrez et al., 2019), who provides empathy and credibility (McHugh, 2022), and the sound archive, which provides content, structure, and context (Reséndiz, 2022). Life stories presented as oral biographical or autobiographical accounts are also used (Pujadas, 1992; Valles, 2002), having gained strength because they allow for the construction of personal, intimate narratives that are close to the listener's reality (Lindgren, 2016; McHugh, 2012), as well as sound experimentation (McHugh, 2012; Ortiz & Galay, 2020) and even fictional elements, such as the recreation of past events of which there is no record (Galay, 2010). Podcasts of this genre demonstrate a remarkable ability to integrate techniques that reinforce the credibility of the story while also deepening the listener's emotional connection and engagement with the narrative.

Specifically, the key to captivating the listeners in these stories told through journalistic, artistic, and experimental means lies in the narrators, who are not only the “writer, performer, and guide” (McHugh, 2022, p. 18) but also the ones who engage with the audience through their voices, stories, and relationships with the characters, creating a bond with the listeners (Lindgren, 2023) and transforming them into co-researchers (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

Taking into account these defining characteristics of the narrative non-fiction podcast genre, along with the subgenres and techniques that producers use to tell the story, we propose to analyse them within the context of the Ibero-American independent production. The independent podcast, with cultural roots in stand-up, fanzine, and community radio (Galay, 2015), is characterised by its editorial and creative freedom

(Adler, 2021, 2022; Bonini, 2015; García-Marín, 2020). Bonixe's (2006) study focused on the profiles of Portuguese podcasters, while Markman (2011) and Millette (2011) carried out exploratory research on independent English-language podcasts. The main findings of these studies revealed independence from conventional radio, the freedom to create their own productions without any editorial restrictions, the free use of technologies, and participation in different social groups. According to Markman (2011, p. 552): "An independent audio podcaster is someone who creates and distributes a regular podcast, whose origin is not a pre-existing traditional media programme." Subsequent research identified two clear trends in independent podcasts. The first is an English-language tradition, where podcasters trained in public radio leave it to launch their own podcasts, enjoying editorial, financial, and cultural freedom (Bonini, 2015), and the other trend is in Latin America, linked to community and alternative radio with a social focus (da Silva & de Oliveira, 2020; de Oliveira et al., 2023; Galay, 2015).

Additionally, another four key aspects can be found in research on independent production (Adler, 2021, 2022; Contreras et al., 2022; Fernández-Sande, 2015; Jorgensen, 2021; Ortiz-Díaz & Moreno-Moreno, 2023; Sellas & Bonet, 2023; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Tennant, 2023): (a) the reasons for making a podcast, the most salient being creative freedom; (b) financial strategies and models which feed their productions, and how they are conceived in relation to industrial economic capital; (c) editorial decisions and production practices; and (d) participation and relationships with audiences. On this basis, we understand that independent podcasts draw from media and alternative culture and produce audio stories that are politically aware, seeking to be independent of economic, media, and platform powers and creatively free. This presents a broader focus of interest for scientific research, as it raises questions about how they tell stories, what types of media they use, and how they appropriate mass media strategies to insert themselves into the audio industry.

Authors Santos and Peixinho (2019) set out an evolutionary analysis of art through storytelling, underlining how the narrative is a persuasive way of communicating, combining ancestral means of communication with audio storytelling expressed in slow journalism (Greenberg, 2015) and feature and narrative journalism, among other forms. Noteworthy elements include new ways of building the narrative arc of a story, which spreads due to serialisation (Dann, 2014). With the growing popularity of non-fiction podcasting, driven by the success of the true-crime podcast *Serial*, factors such as narrative objectivity and listener co-inquiry in the story construction process have gained interest (McCracken, 2017; Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Extensive research has been conducted by Lindgren (2014, 2016) on personal narratives and how intimate stories foster listener engagement, contributing to the development of digital audio journalism. Meanwhile, McHugh (2012, 2016, 2022) began a discussion on using sound to tell stories and how the storytelling format differs from that found in radio narratives. With a special focus on narrative podcasts, McHugh (2022) identified history, characters, script, structure, sounds, and art as key factors. According to Gutiérrez et al. (2019), events in audio narratives are not merely presented but are explored in great depth with a "narrative strategy" in a series format, encouraging new ways of narrating. Constructing a narrative arc is crucial for ordering and managing the information given. In the interview with two podcast producers, Hebah Fisher, from *Kerning Cultures*, and Maeve McClenaghan, from *The Tip Off*, Goujard (2018) stressed certain key techniques like planning the narrative arc before producing it and finding sensitive and eloquent characters.

Drawing from the research on film narration by Field (2005) and Villafranca's (2023) adaptation to sound documentaries in the Spanish language, this research incorporates four narrative structures. The classic



Aristotelian structure, and those derived from it, follows a three-act format with a narrative line: First, the characters of the story are introduced, then the conflict they face is presented, and finally, the denouement or resolution of the conflict is revealed. The parallel (Brechtian) structure involves different stories being told that share a thematic nexus and occur in the same historical time, with no apparent continuity. It employs an episodic structure where each episode develops a plot or a series of subplots, which together respond to the story's central plot. The counterpoint structure contrasts two situations at the narrative level, where two different characters, whether or not they are linked by a bond, are brought together by an unexpected event. Finally, the master replay structure is derived from the classic linear structure and typically involves more than one main character who tells the story from different points of view.

Based on the literary studies by Genette (1989), the exploration of the radio story (Martínez-Costa, 1998), and the documentary podcast (Villafranca, 2023), we can establish three kinds of narrators for our analysis. The heterodiegetic narrator, who is not in the story (Genette, 1989), narrates it as a voice-over but does not participate as a character (Martínez-Costa, 1998). The homodiegetic narrator has the role of an observer who provides information obtained as a character or witness at the scene (Genette, 1989; Martínez-Costa, 1998). Meanwhile, the autodiegetic narrator “tells their own experiences as the main character in the story” (Martínez-Costa, 1998, p. 100).

## 2. Methodology

The main objective is to analyse the narrative strategies employed in independent non-fiction podcasts in Ibero-America, focusing on how the narrator's role and the structure of the story enhance credibility and listener engagement. The specific objectives are (a) to determine the role played by the figure of the narrator within the stories presented in independent non-fiction narrative podcasts in Ibero-America, (b) to identify and analyse the subgenres and techniques that constitute the narrative non-fiction podcast in order to gain insight into their diversity and unique characteristics in the field of audio journalism, and (c) to explore the narrative structures of these podcasts and the key elements that boost audience comprehension and interest.

The research questions below address independent non-fiction narrative podcasts from Ibero-America in Spanish and Portuguese:

RQ1: What is the narrator's role in constructing narrative structures in podcasts?

RQ2: How does the type of narrator (heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, or autodiegetic) establish a link with the characters and listeners?

RQ3: What subgenres and techniques make up the narrative non-fiction podcast, and what are their distinguishing characteristics?

RQ4: How do narrative structures, especially non-linear ones (such as Brechtian or counterpoint structures), condition the listener's understanding and interest?

This research involves several exploratory and descriptive case studies using a mixed methodology. It includes 15 interviews—14 individual and one group—with 16 producers of 11 independent non-fiction

narrative podcasts from seven Ibero-American countries. In addition, a content analysis of 73 episodes from the selected productions was conducted to become acquainted with their audio narratives, both in Spanish and Portuguese. This methodological design was divided into three stages: defining the sample, selecting the information-gathering techniques, and developing the instruments for data recording and analysis.

Out of the 22 countries that make up Ibero-America, the seven countries in the study were chosen because they represent important markets for podcast consumption. This is supported by the main research from digital news reports (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2023; Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al., 2021) and secondary data from Statista for Brazil in 2021, and Colombia and Mexico in 2021 and 2023 (Statista, 2021, 2023; see Table 1). On this basis, the sample design was drawn up to include the analysis unit, sampling procedure, sample size, and corpus selection (Tamayo, 2000).

The podcasts chosen were released between 2020 and 2023. These may have consisted of one or more series, whether these be in episodes, units, or a combination of both. The sample was taken over three periods between 20th February 2022 and 15th July 2023. The productions chosen underwent the following selection criteria. First, they had to be non-fiction, independent narrative podcasts from broadcasters, radio stations, and large producers and platforms. Second, they had to fulfil at least one of the three independent but complementary conditions: (a) feature in the Spotify rankings; (b) be a podcast which has received awards, been nominated, or been a finalist in any national or international festival; or (c) be a podcast recommended by specialists. And third, they also had to fulfil one of the following features: (a) be a podcast with just one series; (b) be a podcast with one series with independent unit episodes; (c) be a podcast with over one series and independent unit episodes; and (d) be a podcast with over one series with mixed episodes (that is, unitary and in a series). At least two episodes from each series were analysed (see Supplementary Material).

The sample is made up of podcasts that function independently from traditional media, be they media conglomerates, radio companies, or large podcast production companies, reflecting the editorial, creative, and economic autonomy that characterises these types of productions. In addition, they should correspond to the narrative genre of non-fiction and be true stories based on both current journalistic events and historical facts, being told with greater narrative and aesthetic depth. Finally, the fact that these productions receive the listeners' attention, are acknowledged by a specialist in audio journalism, and/or have obtained an award or a nomination indicates the recognition of journalism, the media, and the podcast industry,

**Table 1.** Consumption of podcasts in selected countries.

Country	Digital News Report 2021 ( $\bar{X}$ = 31%)	Digital News Report 2023 ( $\bar{X}$ = 34%)
Argentina	29%	33%
Brazil	41%	57%
Chile	35%	39%
Colombia	25%	37%
Spain	38%	45%
Mexico	34%	47%
Portugal	41.5%	38%

Source: Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al. (2023), Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al. (2021), and Statista (2021, 2023).

highlighting the quality of the script, production, narrative, and sound design, among other aspects. The selection criteria applied ensured a representative and varied corpus of high-quality and relevant independent podcasts, which stand out for their narrative richness and depth. This allowed for a thorough analysis of narrative strategies and provided a solid basis for exploring diverse techniques and creative approaches.

According to these criteria and subcriteria, 11 podcasts were selected, corresponding to Argentina (two), Brazil (two), Colombia (one), Chile (one), Spain (two), Mexico (one), and Portugal (two). A total of 73 episodes were analysed (see Supplementary Material). Here, qualitative research was performed, and semi-structured interviewing techniques were used (Brennen, 2017; Valles, 2002) along with content analysis (Bardin, 1996; Mayring, 2000; Piñuel, 2002). The first was through a questionnaire with seven questions encoded by Atlas Ti v.7 software. It covered how producers defined their podcasts, chose the topics, and told their stories, as well as the subgenres and tools used and the role the narrator played.

The selection criteria to be met by the interviewee was that they had to be the director of the production company and/or producer of the podcast analysed, managing the entire production phase of the podcast. When two team members were interviewed (as in the case of Argentina, Mexico, Spain, and Portugal), it was because the information provided by one complemented the information shared by the other, leading to complete responses to the questions. Gender (five women and 11 men), age (35 to 50 years old), and profession (all journalists and audiovisual communicators) were less relevant criteria for their selection.

**Table 2.** Interviews.

Country	Podcast	Interviewees
Argentina	<i>La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk</i> from Erre Podcast productions and Nicolás Maggi	Nicolás Maggi, producer and narrator, and Martín Parodi, artistic director
Argentina	<i>Fugas</i> from Anfibia productions	Tomás Pérez Vizzón, director, and Sebastián Ortega, researcher, scriptwriter, and narrator
Brazil	<i>Praia dos Ossos</i> from Rádio Novelo	Branca Vianna, producer
Brazil	<i>Até Que se Prove o Contrário</i> from Agência Pública	Ricardo Terto, producer
Colombia	<i>Un Periódico de Ayer</i> from La No Ficción	Juan Serrano, director
Chile	<i>Relato Nacional</i> from La Factoría	Nancy Castillo, director
Spain	<i>Brazalete Negro</i> from Panenka podcast productions and Radio Primavera Sound	Aitor Lagunas, director and narrator, and Marta Salicrú, executive producer
Spain	<i>La Historia Es Ayer</i> from El Extraordinario	Marcus Hurst, director and producer
Mexico	<i>Así Como Suena</i> from Puro Contenido	Carlos Puig, director, and Yissel Ibarra, producer
Portugal	<i>Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários</i> from Fumaça	Pedro Santos, producer
Portugal	<i>110 Histórias, 110 Objetos</i> from 366 Ideias and the Higher Technical Institute	Marco António Gonçalves, producer, and Joana Lobo, coordinator

This questionnaire was supplemented with a content analysis of 73 episodes using a registry sheet designed for this purpose. The 18 variables, which corresponded to the basic data from the podcast and the audio narratives (topic, structure, narrative podcast mode—i.e., true crime or narrative documental podcast—subgenre, tools, techniques, and narrator), were then encoded. The use of both designs enabled the audio narratives in the 11 podcasts to be analysed on the basis of a non-probability sample and according to the selection criteria explained. Together, the analysis categories mainly concentrated on: (a) topic and kind of story; (b) podcast structure; (c) subgenres and techniques, and (d) author's perspective.

### 3. Results and Analysis

#### 3.1. Classification of Topics in Non-Fiction Podcast Narratives

The topics are varied, from murder (*Praia dos Ossos/Beach of Bones*, Brazil; *Brazalete Negro/Black Bracelet*, Spain), suicide (*La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk/The Second Death of the Punk God*, Argentina), prison escapes (*Fugas/Escapes*, Argentina), to research on the justice system (*Até Que se Prove o Contrário/Reasonable Doubt* from Brazil) and private security (*Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários/Private Security* from Portugal). There are also stories about purposeful lives (*Relato Nacional/National Story*, Chile) and about countries (*110 Histórias, 110 Objetos/110 Stories, 110 Objects* from Portugal; *Un Periódico de Ayer/Yesterday's News* from Colombia; *Así Como Suena/That's How it Sounds* from Mexico; and *La Historia Es Ayer/History Was Yesterday* from Spain).

Based on this thematic diversity, the podcasts were classified into two main thematic trends: historical narrations and personal stories. This classification reflects not only the variety of narrative approaches but also the different creative challenges the genre poses. Historical narrations address past events that have not been told in depth or offer a novel or unexplored point of view (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Lechuga, 2015), while personal stories are intimate or biographical stories of a person or a group of people, which may have a significant or global scope (Lindgren, 2016). Both categories are especially relevant in the context of independent production in Ibero-America. Historical narrations allow us to review significant events from local or alternative perspectives, providing another understanding of history. Personal stories reflect the challenges, struggles, and experiences of underrepresented people and communities, connecting directly to the region's socio-political and cultural realities. This distinction facilitates a thorough analysis of how narrative strategies seek to capture the listener's attention and generate a deep connection to complex realities. Of the 73 chapters analysed, 47 are historical narrations, representing 64% of the sample, with the remaining 26 being personal stories, which account for 36% (see Table 3, whose percentages were ordered from most to least frequency).

Among the historical narrations podcasts identified were: *Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil; *Fugas* from Argentina; *Un Periódico de Ayer* from Colombia; *Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários* and *110 Histórias, 110 Objetos*, both of which are from Portugal; and *Brazalete Negro* and *La Historia Es Ayer* from Spain. Numerous instances from Latin America highlight a strong emphasis on human rights and state-sponsored violence. We see personal stories in podcasts such as *Até Que se Prove o Contrário* (Brazil), *Relato Nacional* (Chile), *La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk* (Argentina), and *Así Como Suena* (Mexico). In most cases, common everyday stories act as a springboard for broader and more profound reflections. The Mexican producer Yissel Ibarra argues: "In effect, as the narrative podcast, we give a voice to these people who never have one, and these are topics that perhaps would never be on the radio as they are on the independent podcast."

**Table 3.** Summary of main trends in the podcasts analysed.

Categories	Subcategories	Frequency of occurrence
Kind of story	Historical narration	Most frequently
	Personal stories	Frequently
Narrative structure	Episodic story	Most frequently
	Aristotelian classic	Frequently
	Replay story	Less frequently
	Parallel or Brechtian; counterpoint	Infrequently
Subgenres	Interview, documentary	Most frequently
	Sound chronicle	Frequently
	Soundscape, audio essay	Less frequently
	Fiction	Infrequently
Techniques	Audio archives	Most frequently
	Recreation of events	less frequently
	Life stories	Infrequently
Narrator role	Heterodiegetic	Most frequently
	Homodiegetic	Less frequently
	Autodiegetic	Infrequently

Notes: Ranges from most frequently, frequently, less frequently and infrequently in relation to obtained results.

Whether these be personal stories or historical narrations, an interest in documentaries and a vocation for journalism is reflected in all podcasts, where the tales encourage critical reflections on certain problems, the country, or the whole of society. This is confirmed by Ricardo Terto, producer of *Até Que se Prove o Contrário* from Brazil:

Beyond individuals, these injustices impact society as a whole. So why do I care about these stories? Because beyond the tragic element of their lives, these stories affect Brazilian society, showing how the Brazilian justice system is flawed....This path has shifted from the micro to the macro.

Despite the differences among the 11 podcasts, they share a social commitment by dealing with historical cases, such as topics that challenge stereotypes, discrimination, or unseen reality, which many ordinary people experience and can identify with as they are universal. Although these podcasts are not based on community or alternative radio, they have approaches and narratives which are inherent to non-conventional media.

### 3.2. Analysis of the Narrative Structure

The literature shows extensive research on audio narratives in podcasts (McHugh, 2022; Santos & Peixinho, 2019; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; among others). This includes those with a fairly traditional structure, as seen in true crime (Hardey & James, 2022), and less conventional documentary narrative podcasts (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Lindgren, 2016). However, Sherrill (2022) proposes a different approach to the classic North American true crime, in line with what interviewees Sebastián Ortega (*Fugas* from Argentina) and Branca Vianna (*Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil) said about the search to establish an identity for Latin American true crime. Sherrill (2022) notes that successor podcasts to *Serial*, like *Undisclosed* (2015–2022), which dealt with wrongful convictions in the United States and *Suspect Convictions* (2017–2018), which investigated two real crimes in Heartland or Midwestern United States critique the genre and reverse the order of victims and

perpetrators by giving black, poor, and LGBTQIA+ people the position as victims they have never been granted as marginalised members of society. Ortega is convincing in this regard:

It's not that the term [true crime] bothers me, but I think a more appropriate term is missing for Latin American narratives. We're talking about prison escapes, many of which are related to the political and social context and the political violence in Argentina and Uruguay, as well as in other Latin American countries.

Based on the content analysis and the proposed classification of structures, this research aims to show an eclectic arc in the Ibero-American world, with the structure aiming to keep the listener's interest until the end. Juan Serrano, director of *Un Periódico de Ayer* from Colombia, argues that "although internally we may say that structure isn't everything, it almost always is, as it's a crucial point in the process of producing a podcast."

Out of the 73 cases analysed, two narrative structures appear most frequently: the episodic story (39 episodes, 53%) and the Aristotelian classic (20 episodes, 27%). The replay story is seen in seven episodes (10%), and the parallel or Brechtian in four episodes (5%). Meanwhile, the counterpoint narrative structure is observed in three (4%; see Table 3). Even when the narratives are traditional, based on literature, cinema, and true crime itself, more daring structures are used involving audio and technological media to make storytelling more appealing.

According to the interviewees, the preeminence of the episodic plot structure is associated with the predominance of chronological narration, which is found within each episode in a relatively linear order. This type of structure is intended to hook listeners, compelling them to continue with the following episodes, and can be seen in two episodes of *Fugas* (Argentina), in the complete series of *Até Que se Prove o Contrário* (Brazil), and in four of the eight episodes of *Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários* (Portugal).

Found in second place is the significant presence of the classic Aristotelian structure, which is also based on the linear or chronological structure. Podcasts such as *Así Como Suena* (Mexico), *Un Periódico de Ayer* (Colombia), *110 Histórias*, *110 Objetos* (Portugal), and various episodes of *Relato Nacional* (Chile) follow this structure. Juan Serrano, director of *Un Periódico de Ayer* (Colombia), argues why this classic form of storytelling is still valuable for today's narrative podcast: "I'm a big fan of the chronological way of telling a story because I think it's the easiest way to order the information and I don't want to confuse the listener."

In other cases, the structure varies in each episode. For example, three of the five episodes analysed in *Relato Nacional* from Chile follow a classic Aristotelian structure, while the other two use the counterpoint structure. In other examples, like in *Así Como Suena* (Mexico), three of the seven episodes studied have replay narratives, and three have parallel ones. *Fugas* from Argentina, *Relato Nacional* from Chile, and *La Historia Es Ayer* from Spain experiment with less traditional structures, which may also be the "secret" to their success in their prize-winning podcasts. Marcus Hurst, director and screenwriter of *La Historia Es Ayer*, explains that:

I'm not that orderly or methodical, although I do start from a central point and add more ingredients. There is no fixed structure, such as a knight and king, but I do like a lot of rhythm and changes to keep the brain awake.



Being able to keep the audience's attention is a major challenge in the context of personalised, asynchronous, and mobile podcast consumption. The intention to sustain the listener's interest is clearly reflected in the idea of a "hook" or "bait," which several producers of the studied podcasts mention. In this regard, Portuguese producer Marco António Gonçalves, of *110 Histórias*, *110 Objetos*, points out that:

What I try to do is to capture the listener's attention and convince them to stay for the rest of the story. Essentially, I throw out a kind of bait when I'm the fisherman, trying to catch the listener and keep them there.

Beyond the tendency to privilege linear structures to tell the story over more experimental ones in the cases studied, the aim is to maintain the listener's attention. As Nicolás Maggi, producer of the Argentinian podcast *La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk* puts it: "Our goal is to ensure that order is at the service of history."

### 3.3. Analysis of Subgenres and Techniques in Non-Fiction Podcast Narratives

The 11 podcasts selected can be classified as narrative podcasts, among which four of the productions, *La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk* and *Fugas* from Argentina, *Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil, and *Brazalete Negro* from Spain follow the true crime format. The remaining seven use the documentary narrative mode, *Até Que se Prove o Contrário* from Brazil, *Relato Nacional* from Chile, *Un Periódico de Ayer* from Colombia, *La Historia Es Ayer* from Spain, *s* from Mexico, and *Segurança Privada*, *Exército de Precários* and *110 Histórias*, *110 Objetos* from Portugal.

These productions feature several subgenres, which can be observed in the narrative format used. Among the 73 episodes, 72 use the interview as a subgenre (99%), illustrating its fundamental role in non-fiction narrative podcasts and the importance of having first-hand knowledge about the stories and statements the main characters make (see Table 3). Thus, the interview is valuable from the outset of the project when it is used in the pre-production stage to gather information about the context, the circumstances of the story, and the characters. Afterwards, it is the genre par excellence when the characters come to life in the narrative structure. Sebastián Ortega, scriptwriter and narrator of *Fugas* from Argentina, sums it up very well: "The function of the interview in our work is twofold: first, as an input or source of information, and second, as the testimony, where an individual shares their story."

Another prevailing subgenre is the documentary, present in 47 episodes (64%), with various interviewees emphasising this format and defining their podcasts as such. A third subgenre is the chronicle, seen in 34 episodes (47%), where the narrator/researcher narrates and describes the events from their own perspective. In their role as witnesses, they can provide a more expressive and free narrative. Ricardo Terto, producer of Brazil's *Até Que se Prove o Contrário*, reflects on the creative impetus these subgenres give to narrative non-fiction:

When I joined the production company "Agência Pública," one of the things that most caught my attention, given that I'm not a journalist but an audiovisual producer, is that they called me precisely because they wanted me to give the podcast a distinct colour and a narrative force from that of a journalistic podcast. My main challenge was how to present a very serious subject while delivering what they asked for: soundscape, creation of the soundtrack, and the chronicle.

The soundscape is utilised in 13 episodes (18%), whereas fiction is included in four (5%). Podcasts such as *La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk* use the soundscape in every episode, while *Así Como Suena*, *Praia dos Ossos*, and *Fugas* incorporate it in three, two, and one, respectively. Meanwhile, in four episodes, three from *Brazalete Negro* and one from *La Historia Es Ayer*, fiction is used as a subgenre (5%). This could be attributed to the merging of documentary and fictional narratives to depict events that have no existing record.

The interview stands out among the subgenres as a fundamental basis for researching stories, testimonies, and experiences. The chronicle and the soundscape often complement each other, blending subjective narratives, creative freedom, and the natural sound spaces provided by field research, a feature that distinguishes this type of podcast from other podcasts, such as the conversation podcast. Specifically, sound chronicles have a long history, stemming from the tradition of narrative and radio journalism in Ibero-America. In the cases analysed, chronicles are used to tell stories in an attractive and emotive way, connecting with the audience through sounds, voices, and music.

Fiction is used when there is no sound record of an event or to make the development of the plot more dynamic and attract the listener's interest. Some podcasts incorporate it to stir up the narration, and for this purpose, 16% use recreation, which involves reconstructing a voice or a past event of which there is no record. This can be seen in *Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil, where 1970's radio news is recreated using information from the main character Ângela Diniz, and *Brazalete Negro* from Spain, which reenacts personal stories or news with modern-day voices.

Certain podcast producers, such as *La Historia Es Ayer*, *Praia dos Ossos*, and *La Segunda Muerte del Dios Punk*, mention incorporating audio essays, which is observed in 10 episodes (14%; see Table 3). This suggests a link between deliberate reflection and experiments with sound. Meanwhile, the report is only used in the series *Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários* from Portugal.

Within the selected narrative podcasts, the use of various subgenres stands out, defined as "specific ways of organizing content" (Villafranca, 2021, p. 33), ranging from the most informative (including chronicles and interviews), interpretative (like reports and opinion), to more artistic subgenres, such as soundscapes and fiction. That is to say, although informative and interpretative genres of reality are used, fictional elements are also incorporated to tell, recreate, or make the story being narrated more striking.

Apart from the subgenres mentioned, the podcasts employ other narrative tools and techniques, the most salient of which is narration in all cases. Also used are audio archives (56%), life stories (8%), and the recreation of events (16%). The audio archive is expressed in several formats: WhatsApp audios, YouTube videos, and legal and press archives, which are later narrated or recreated, supplementing and supporting the narrator and/or character stories. Branca Vianna, producer of *Praia dos Ossos*, says: "We obtained the audio of the trial, which was essential to create the atmosphere of the story." This audio, which can be heard in episode two, "O Julgamento" (the trial), refers to the first trial, held three years later in 1979, against the murderer of Ângela Diniz, Doca Street, who died in 2023 at the age of 86. In this case, the audio recordings not only serve to complement the story but also play a descriptive role in the podcast's narrative arc.

"The work of sound archaeology, i.e., searching for a given video or audio, is tremendous, as it enriches the script and the sound narrative" reflects Aitor Lagunas, director of *Brazalete Negro* from Spain, on the value of the sound archive and its importance for telling the story.

The sound archive, which has been the subject of more intensive study in recent years, both as a heritage and as a sound document (Reséndiz, 2022), is a tool that allows us to better illustrate the history, providing depth and bringing to life the testimonies, sounds, and music that capture a moment and an era. Indeed, this tool makes it possible to evoke and transport the listener to a time that would otherwise be inaccessible. A creative example of the valorisation of sound archives is *La Historia Es Ayer* (Spain), which features the “archaeological” rescue of audiovisual archives from other periods and in different languages. Other examples include *Un Periódico de Ayer* (Colombia), *Fugas* (Argentina), and *Así Como Suena* (México), which highlight the value of the “historical” sound archive to explore past events related to human rights in a context of violence, repression, or disappearance, whether in dictatorship or democracy.

Life stories are also used in some podcasts, such as *Relato Nacional* (Chile) and *Un Periódico de Ayer* (Colombia). In biographies, life stories are explored and enrich the subject matter to create an intimate story with which listeners can identify; in other words, a personal and immersive narrative, as Lindgren (2016) explains. On this level, the life story presented in these podcasts allows us to enhance the value of successive interviews to get to the heart of the characters and thus build a reliable, accurate, intimate, and revealing account of their lives. These techniques reveal both the depth of research with which the story is produced and the quest to connect with listeners through intimate stories that they can relate to or that evoke their empathy.

### 3.4. Analysis of the Narrator Role

The role of the narrator is pivotal in the podcasts chosen. In 75% of cases (55 episodes), the producers mostly used the heterodiegetic narrator, i.e., someone who is objective, carries out research objectively, and does not participate in the story. The role of this type of narrator is more akin to research journalism, seeking to engage listeners in the story. Indeed, concerning the predominance of the heterodiegetic narrator, the interviewees describe the narrator more as a guide or witness, as McHugh (2022) highlights, who accompanies the story and sets the scene.

Branca Vianna, producer of Rádio Novelo in Brazil, analyses her role as a narrator in *Praia dos Ossos*: “What is the narrator’s role? I think it’s always that of a guide, someone who is always guiding and directing the listener, not in an obvious way but subtly because nobody likes to be told what to do.” Juan Serrano, director of *Un Periódico de Ayer* from Colombia, confirms this idea about the heterodiegetic narrator: “I really like the idea of taking the listener by the hand” to show them the actions, circumstances, and context of the characters in the story.

Another type of narration is homodiegetic and can be found in 15 episodes (21%). Here, the narrator is a witness or supporting actor who participates in the action but does not interfere. Meanwhile, the autodiegetic narrator, the protagonist of their own stories, is used in only three episodes (4%; see Table 3).

Although the narrator is a central figure in this type of podcast, they are mainly a heterodiegetic or objective narrator in the cases studied. The homodiegetic narrator—as a direct witness of the story—and the autodiegetic narrator—as the protagonist of their own story—have enough room for exploration and to connect more directly with the listener without neglecting the veracity of the facts that are being told. In this sense, the author’s perspective is guaranteed through a journalistic ethic, as referred to by the interviewees, in which the real facts are thoroughly investigated and even checked by specialists within the

production company, as is the case for *Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil, and *Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários* from Portugal, which have a fact-checking team.

Through their voice, their story, and their relationship with the characters, the narrator plays a pivotal role in connecting with the listeners, and thus achieving credibility and intimacy with the audience (Lindgren, 2023), involving the listener in the dramatic progression of the story (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

#### 4. Conclusions

This study has revealed and analysed in-depth the current trends in the key narrative strategies employed in independent non-fiction narrative podcasts in Ibero-America, providing new insights into the role of the narrator, and the narrative structures and techniques used to generate emotional connection and credibility among listeners.

The predominant use of the heterodiegetic narrator demonstrates a clear tendency towards objectivity in storytelling, with the narrator positioned as a guide or mediator. This figure, though not directly involved in the action, enables the listener to assume the role of witness and collaborator in the reconstruction of events. Despite this distanced approach, the heterodiegetic narrator effectively connects with the audience by not only organising and presenting information clearly but also offering an interpretative context that enhances the understanding of the story. While the presence of homodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators is more limited, their strategic use fosters intimacy and emotional depth. The homodiegetic narrator, acting as a witness or secondary character, brings the listener closer to the story and its characters. In contrast, the autodiegetic narrator, as the protagonist of their own story, creates a stronger emotional bond by offering the listener direct access to personal experiences, which further reinforces the authenticity of the narrative.

The interview stands out as the core resource in the podcasts analysed, serving both as a research tool and a crucial component in the construction of the narrative. This subgenre allows the characters to express their experiences directly, facilitating empathy and identification on the part of the listener. Incorporating documentary and chronicle formats, combined with sound techniques such as soundscape, offers a multidimensional narrative approach that enriches the development of stories and deepens the exploration of social, historical, and personal themes. These techniques reinforce authenticity and provide an immersive experience that distinguishes the narrative non-fiction podcast from other genres. Although some researchers associate podcast narratives with reports, only *Segurança Privada, Exército de Precários* from Portugal develops this subgenre, and the documentary occupies a higher ranking, as stated by several interviewees.

The documentary narrative serves as the primary modality, although true crime is also relevant. There is also a strong social commitment, as seen in *Praia dos Ossos* from Brazil, or more creatively regarding true crime in football in *Brazalete Negro* from Spain. While fiction occupies a lower place as a subgenre, it plays a significant role in recounting a past event of which there is no record, such as an audio file or a sound statement. Thus, recreation is a valuable tool for creative storytelling that complements the other subgenres or resources used.

The principal narratives used tend towards the episodic and classical structures, suggesting a preference for linear forms that make it easier to follow the story. This linear approach allows for greater clarity in the narrative, ensuring that the listener can follow the unfolding events effortlessly. However, although less

frequent, more experimental structures such as counterpoint and Brechtian offer a more sophisticated and challenging narrative that, in some cases, enhances listener interaction by presenting multiple perspectives and timelines within a single story. This demonstrates that the ability to experiment with more complex structures broadens the narrative repertoire while capturing the attention of audiences seeking more innovative content. As for narrative structures, producers recognise that they depend on the story and, above all, on keeping the listener's attention.

These productions stand out for their socially aware topics, whether through historical narrations or personal experiences, which are meant for universal appeal and are in keeping with life stories and subjective approaches. By employing flexible and different narrative structures that are not limited to traditional journalistic formats, narrative non-fiction podcasts present an innovative approach to storytelling. They allow topics to be dealt with in a deeper and more human way, with the intensive use of interviews, life stories, and sound re-enactments providing an emotional and personal connection with listeners. The findings of this study suggest that non-fiction narratives in independent podcasts in Ibero-America have managed to balance objectivity and emotion, creating narratives that are not only informative but also deeply immersive, as well as allowing complex and sensitive topics to be addressed with a more social and holistic perspective, ultimately fostering a more complete and human-centred audio journalism.

Although this study has focused on identifying the main narrative strategies in 11 independent non-fiction podcasts in Ibero-America, a future line of research could address a comparative analysis by country in the region. This approach would allow us to explore how cultural and linguistic contexts influence narrative strategies and the use of sub-genres in each country.

Future lines of research could include also extend the analysis to podcasts of other countries to explore how narrative strategies vary in different environments. Furthermore, it would be relevant to investigate how podcast platforms and their evolution influence the narrative techniques employed by producers, as well as how listeners interact with the stories.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### **Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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# 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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# 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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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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# Intimacy, Trust, and Justice on *The Greatest Menace*, a Podcast Exposing a “Gay Prison”

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## Abstract

In the tradition of narrative podcasts exposing historical injustices, *The Greatest Menace* (TGM) examines how a government-run prison in Australia used those imprisoned to study the causes and treatments of homosexuality. Hosted by gay Arab-Australian journalist Patrick Abboud, TGM interweaves Abboud’s struggle for acceptance in his homophobic community with his forensic documentation of lives ruined by a society where homosexuality was illegal till 1984. Gay men entrust Abboud with their experiences of aversion therapy and estrangement from family; a former cop reveals how he entrapped, then arrested, gay men; a trans woman runs away to New Zealand after being imprisoned. TGM charts the palpable intimacy between Abboud and most of his informants, but as this article explores, the podcast also held potential for the privileging of activism over ethics. The cop could have been depicted as evil, but in pursuit of fairness, the TGM team settled on a more nuanced portrayal. An evangelical interviewee conflates “homosexual” with “paedophile” to Abboud’s face; he retaliates by recording his meta-fury and writing it into the script. Intimacy and trust are intertwined as Abboud and his mother navigate the shame and fear that shadowed his coming out. Using textual analysis, semi-structured interviews, iterative scripts, reflexive practice, and theory of audio storytelling and podcast intimacy, this article analyses, from an autoethnographic insider/maker perspective, how the producers of this acclaimed podcast (17 awards) balanced intimacy and trust while exposing historic queer true crime in all its messy humanity.

## Keywords

audio documentary; audio storytelling; ethics; intimacy; narrative podcast; podcast production; queer studies; trust

## 1. Introduction

The growth in popularity of the podcast medium has seen a burgeoning of analysis focused on the narrative podcast/audio documentary genre. In the 2017 edition of the landmark anthology *Reality Radio*, co-editor Biewen hails “a new flourishing of nonfiction audio, a new wave—a tsunami, really: of podcasts” (Biewen & Dilworth, 2017, p. 1). The audio storytellers he features make a blend of art and documentary: “It’s not enough to convey facts. They gather words and sounds and music, and assemble them, painstakingly, into an *experience*” (Biewen & Dilworth, 2017, p. 5, emphasis in original). US radio studies scholar Bottomley also emphasises affective and aesthetic aspects of this growing form:

The greatest advancements in radio as an art form have occurred in the area of audio storytelling, a broad category of fiction and nonfiction programming united by the use of narrative and other dramatic techniques, as well as a composed sonic aesthetic. And these developments have principally happened through the emerging practice of podcasting. (Bottomley, 2020, p. 175)

Bottomley argues further that:

Much of the industry growth and audience enthusiasm surrounding podcasting both before and after the breakout success of *Serial* in the fall of 2014 has occurred around the broad genre of “storytelling podcasts”—which is little more than a new name for the old form of the narrative radio feature-documentary. (Bottomley, 2020, p. 175)

But while an excellent narrative radio feature-documentary and a premium storytelling podcast do have common aspects, such as being sound-rich and demonstrating adeptly crafted sound production, one signature quality distinguishes the latter: its seriality. A feature-documentary is usually a self-contained audio work, not composed of the numerous episodes over which a narrative nonfiction podcast unspools a true story. This longform serialised format allows makers to take a “deep dive” into a topic, as Dowling and Miller (2019, p. 173) point out:

Podcasts deepened the way we engage with narrative, raising nonfictional storytelling to new heights....Perhaps the best-suited journalistic genre for podcasting is the serial documentary, which showcases absorbing nonfiction narrative that can expand on the stories behind headlines and probe deeper than breaking news.

Exemplary narrative podcasts can be a form of digital literary journalism, with the makers adapting print journalism techniques to the aural/podcast medium:

The real people they depict are developed as characters and interviews are quoted as conversations; deep research and analysis is conveyed as plot and reconstructed scenes; and the writer employs fresh, descriptive language to place the reader at various locations. (McHugh, 2019)

I have cited above esteemed publications concerned with what might be termed the artistic end of narrative podcasts: for instance, those that win prestigious awards such as Peabody, Pulitzer, and New York Festivals. Exemplars include *Stolen* (Walker, 2021–present), *Wind of Change* (Radden Keefe, 2020), and *You Didn't See*

*Nothin* (Lacour, 2023). Given that *The Greatest Menace* (TGM; Abboud, 2022–2023) has won 17 peer-reviewed awards, it seems apposite to include it in this category. As counterpoint, I will also parse it with reference to two emerging scholar-practitioners in the field.

Smets (2023) and Shane (2024) are contemporary audio producers whose writings and audio works engage with a mix of personal storytelling and documentary (both also the currency of TGM) from very different perspectives. Belgian audio producer Katharina Smets comes from the radio feature-making tradition, a culture that started at the BBC in the late 1920s and flourished post-war as other European state broadcasters developed versions of the pre-recorded radio feature. This imaginative format could be a blend of documentary, dramaturgy, and fiction (Madsen, 2023). The audio feature is still nurtured at events such as Prix Europa, Prix Marulic, and the annual International Feature Conference, re-badged as the Audio Storytelling Festival (Reková, 2024). Practitioners focus on the poetics of audio: its liminal ability to evoke a visceral response as the sounds artfully woven by a producer/auteur hover between mind, memory, and imagination. As she experimented with moving from didactic radio reportage of current affairs to a more intentional, creative process that allowed a dialogic relationship with a listener, Smets studied acclaimed audio makers for her doctoral thesis, *Between Me and You: On the Attitude of the Audio Documentary Maker* (Smets, 2023). Smets cogently describes her own aspirations:

The artistic form I was drawn to, and sought my voice in, was a composition of true-life encounters with voiceovers edited into a narrative story form. I saw it as the work of an independent author who nevertheless pays homage to reality and the ethical questions that come with it. (Smets, 2023, p. 62)

Jess Shane, a Canadian audio producer, takes a more pointed position on the audio documentary ethos. After learning the radio documentary trade at CBC, the Canadian public broadcaster, she moved from believing that telling stories of marginalised people was liberating for them and helpful for society because it would build empathy and connection, to questioning the fundamental ethics of documentary-making in a capitalist society (Shane, 2022). As part of a master's thesis, she embarked on a creative nonfiction podcast called *Shocking, Heartbreaking, Transformative*, published by the Radiotopia network (Shane, 2024). She describes the series as follows:

[It] problematizes the use of personal stories in the documentary industry and examines the power dynamics between documentary-makers and their subjects....It also dives into the behind-the-scenes decisions required to tailor individuals' life experiences to conform to industry standards of what makes a "good story." (Shane, 2023, p. 3)

In a perplexing development that Shane partially critiques in the podcast, *Shocking, Heartbreaking, Transformative* departs from its own task of centring the "rights" of the subjects. As Shane admits to US producer Rob Rosenthal, she ends up exploiting the very people she set out to serve:

Jess: Yeah, I totally did! I also exploited myself....I'm making it within a market system that has these sort of inherently, I think extractive policies, like I'm always going to be somewhat of a hypocrite....So yeah, I exploited them. But like, everybody's exploiting everybody all the time. Welcome to capitalism. (Rosenthal, 2024)

The principles and pitfalls explored by Smets and Shane in nonfiction audio storytelling provided helpful grounds for reflection as I developed my analysis, below, of our own production process on TGM. In this article, I will adopt an autoethnographic approach. This follows principles developed by Ellis et al. (2011, p. 1): “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” This approach “treats research as a political, socially-just and socially conscious act” (Adams & Holman-Jones, 2008, as cited in Ellis et al., 2011, p. 1).

My own bias is acknowledged: I am a cisgender heterosexual woman and supporter of LGBTQTIA+ rights. I have known podcast co-creator Patrick Abboud professionally for about 20 years, having taught him audio storytelling when he worked at the Australian public broadcaster, SBS (Special Broadcasting Service). I met co-creator Simon Cunich for the first time while working on TGM. Abboud and Cunich are also staunch supporters of LGBTQTIA+ rights, while Abboud has been a public LGBTQTIA+ rights advocate through his work on television as the “face” of Mardi Gras, the annual Pride Festival held in Sydney.

The purpose of this article is to examine and make transparent critical editorial, artistic, and journalistic decisions our team of three made over the long (three-year) gestation of this podcast. By revealing our process, it is hoped that scholars, teachers, and students of narrative podcasts with a social justice focus will gain a deeper awareness of the form, to help them appraise other exemplars more critically and perhaps be moved to produce their own. At an industry level, those involved in such productions may also learn valuable practical insights.

The article will also have relevance for those studying narratives of marginalisation. Specifically, it helps illuminate the ethics of telling queer histories in documentary work, and makes a small contribution to a field led by Aguayo’s work on documentary and social justice (2019), Pullen’s historical analysis, *Documenting Gay Men* (2007) and Coon’s *Turning the Page* (2018), an insider analysis of how three non-profits empower LGBTQ people via their storytelling.

For TGM, we set out to harness best practices in narrative podcast production as outlined above, while also being driven by a fervent determination to expose and seek accountability for a historical injustice. As a commercial endeavour (commissioned by the Audible platform), we also had a responsibility to hold our listeners’ attention. Our overall aims aligned with Dowling and Miller’s assessment (2019, p. 173) of what some narrative podcasts can achieve: “Thus narrative suspense, subjectivity, a commitment to justice, interactivity, and transparency drive podcasting’s industrial evolution toward sticky content: material designed to attract and engage audiences.” In our case, we sought to blend artistic excellence and editorial gravitas to craft a rigorously researched and deeply moving story, which would thereby prove compelling to an audience.

## 2. Methodology

This article examines issues related to trust, ethics, and intimacy which we encountered while investigating the thorny subject of our podcast: a “gay prison,” or rather, an Australian jail established in 1957 exclusively to house men arrested for “crimes” of homosexuality. It was not decriminalised in New South Wales until 1984. Using a mixed methods approach (textual analysis, semi-structured interviews, iterative scripts, reflexive practice),

I explore the journalistic collaborations that underpinned the podcast series: between co-creators Abboud and Cunich, who worked on it for three years, and between Abboud, Cunich, and me, who worked closely for the last two years. My role, consulting producer, was to “provide advice on script, structure and optimal storytelling through sound on the podcast” as the contract declared; it was negotiated as a commercial research collaboration through the University of Wollongong, where I was then associate professor in journalism. It specified that I could draw on our working materials for research and educational purposes. Thus, from the outset I held a dual role, as co-producer and also participant-observer of the production.

My methodology follows the action research model for digital journalism studies set out by Grubenmann (2018, p. 1), which notes that “action research starts with the reflection on practice with a view to improving it.” My first intention in adopting this model was to carefully document our production process, so as to create records I could later analyse when writing or speaking about the making of the podcast. I have shared versions of these observations of process in guest lectures, seminars, and conference settings. In so doing I hope to help those unaccustomed to making serialised storytelling podcasts to grasp the differing elements to be weighed in pre-production (sourcing and conducting revelatory, relevant interviews; honing and editing them; conducting ancillary research to develop historical background) and post-production (how core elements might be synthesised for optimal aesthetic and narrative impact).

My role as consulting producer allowed me to blend my decades of audio documentary production experience with my scholarly research, which interrogates dynamics of journalistic interviews and the affective power of sound and voice (McHugh, 2012), critical analysis of crafted audio storytelling (McHugh, 2024), and its evolution within the podcast landscape (McHugh, 2022). The TGM project allowed me to undertake action research in an industry-relevant way, as Grubenmann recommends: “Applied in professional contexts, action research offers practitioners an approach to improve their practice and adapt it to the changing environment” (2018, p. 3). Further, “action researchers act on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is uncertain and ambiguous” (Grubenmann, 2018, p. 3): This tallied with our slow journalism approach to research, which relied partly on gathering long (often two or more hours) interviews with a wide range of informants to build a sense of how a gay prison had operated; their memories and assertions were later fact-checked and leads followed up via conventional archival research.

The project focuses particularly on the strand of research culture that Grubenmann, following Stringer (1996, p. 15), labels a “collaborative approach” (Grubenmann, 2018, p. 2). To this end, this article draws on reflexive work journals I maintained that charted our ups (e.g., a fresh source found) and downs (e.g., an interview declined), and analyses iterative scripts, team email/Google Docs discussions, and audio drafts of the podcast. Most pertinently, it sources a post-production interview I conducted with Abboud and Cunich at a public talk (Hub for Innovation in Podcasting, 2022), held the week of the podcast’s publication, when memories were still fresh and emotions high. The 90-minute interview was semi-structured, based on questions I devised in advance after reviewing my production journals and draft podcast iterations. It also allowed for spontaneous reflections by our team on any aspect of the production process and included responses to questions posed by our hybrid (online/in situ) audience of approximately 50 podcast studies academics, students, and industry personnel. Online participants attended from Europe, North America, South America, Central Asia, and Australia. Any unsourced quotes from McHugh, Cunich, and Abboud are derived from a transcript of this talk and have been edited for clarity. Henceforth, Abboud will be referred to as “Pat” and Cunich as “Simon,” to reflect our close working relationship.



### 3. Background to TGM

*The Greatest Menace: Inside the Gay Prison Experiment* (Figure 1) is a nine-episode narrative journalism podcast, six hours and eight minutes in overall duration, with individual episodes from 35–50 minutes. The original eight-part series was published globally on the Audible platform in February 2022, with a follow-up episode a year later. It is free on Audible, described as follows:

Tucked away amongst snow-covered mountains is a tiny Australian town with a dark secret. Journalist Patrick Abboud hears whispers that it was once home to the world’s only “gay prison.” A prison that specifically incarcerated gay men. His investigation...reveals the full story for the first time...a covert government operation to eradicate “the greatest menace to society”: homosexuality. (Abboud, 2022–2023)

Although co-creators Pat and Simon had had lauded careers in screen-based media, neither had produced a narrative journalism podcast. Recognising that serialised audio storytelling was a distinct form, the pair commissioned the author to be consulting producer. The pre-production phase amassed a trove of documentary records and interviews that explored the podcast’s central question: Had the state government established a prison exclusively to house homosexual men, and if so, who was sent there, and why? The challenge was how to convert 102 hours of interviews and 24 hours of actuality into around six hours of compelling, ethically produced episodic storytelling. In so doing, we set out to leverage qualities increasingly associated with the podcast medium: trust and intimacy (Euritt, 2023).

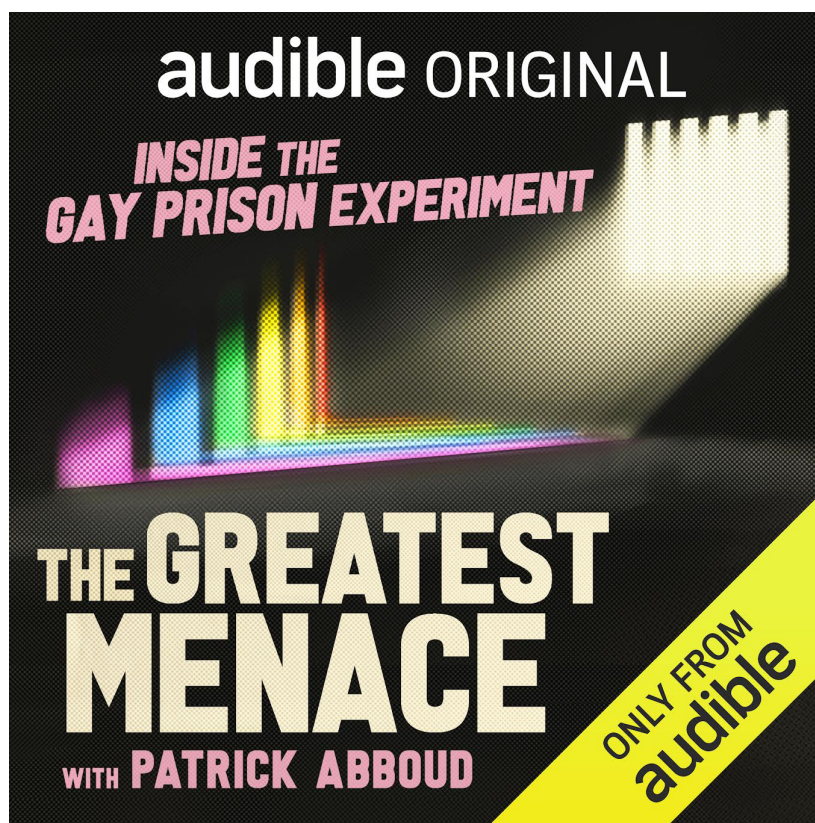


Figure 1. Artwork showing TGM on the Audible platform.

In recent years, scholars such as Fink have identified the declining trust in media as a pressing issue for democracy. “The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public’s lack of trust in it,” declared Fink, citing a poll on US media consumers that found “only 28 percent of respondents believed news organizations supported democracy ‘very well’ or ‘well’” (Fink, 2019, p. 1). However, podcast listeners have a very different attitude, especially when it comes to consuming news and politics. In 2024, a Voxtopica survey of US registered voters found that “85% of registered voters surveyed trust podcasts more than any other news and information source” (Podnews, 2024). This vaunted trust in podcasts relies partially on the strong parasocial bond developed between podcast host and listener over long, 1:1 listening sessions, a connection buttressed by the long recognised affective intimacy of voice (McHugh, 2012, p. 12). But another key factor of podcast intimacy Euritt identifies is its mediation through “sounding the domestic” (2023, p. 65). Thus, chat podcasters might deliberately record their podcasts in their living room or kitchen, the poorer-than-studio sound quality a sort of inverse badge of honour that proclaims their authenticity. But as Euritt notes, “sounding the domestic is not only about the literal sounds caused by the space, but also by the quality of conversation they spur” (2023, p. 65). Since TGM’s aesthetic was not that of a chatcast, but a highly crafted narrative, we would not adopt a kitchen ambience for narration. But we did draw on aural domestic spaces as grounding contexts in which to situate our key interviewees: Thus we hear the contented mewling of gay couple Terry and John’s prizewinning cats (episode 1) before we meet the pair in depth; encounter the cluttered rooms of ex-cop John Bond’s home (episode 1); “see” trans woman Jacquie’s living room and dog before we hear her full story:

Pat: As soon as we get inside, Jacquie kicks off her shoes, falls back into a leather recliner, and puts her feet up.

Jacquie: Ahhh...this is my spot.

Pat: Her white Shih Tzu Chloe curls up at her feet.

(Excerpt, episode 7, TGM)

This intentionally conversational form of scripting captures podcasting’s “codification of intimacy as a host speaking directly to the listener” (Euritt, 2023, p. 61). The setting of these delicate interviews in the subjects’ own homes, we hoped, would encourage them to feel more comfortable about revealing difficult aspects of their personal lives than they would in a sterile studio setting, further facilitating trust. In this way, we are also seeking to use domestic space to “spur” the quality of conversation (Euritt, 2023, p. 65).

Trust can however be jeopardised, especially when a podcast treats a topic or guest without due care and attention. This is often evident in the popular true crime genre, where some shows show scant interest in providing a balanced, thoughtful investigation, instead opting for a salacious, often second-hand, summary. Even where reporters do apply primary research, such as the deep investigative journalism employed in *Serial* (Koenig, 2014–present), the ethics of their storytelling has been challenged. *Serial* investigated a cold case murder and questioned whether the young man imprisoned for the crime was in fact guilty. The combination of a compelling plot (did he/didn’t he do it) and fully-fledged “characters” (the main protagonists were well realised, often speaking directly to listeners) had audiences enthralled; but scholars argue that the *serialisation* of the story hugely amplified its impact: “Serialization, then, unleashes the considerable power of a desiring,

anxious, and invested audience in stories that continually defer closure. This combination is particularly volatile when united with the serial narration of true crime” (Haugtvedt, 2017, p. 9).

TGM would seek to harness the storytelling allure of seriality: “the idea that there is always more to discover,” as Haugtvedt notes (2017, p. 9). But while our podcast used the shorthand descriptor of “queer true crime,” TGM is not true crime in the traditional sense. “The genre of true crime...centrally concerns questions of contested guilt, typically in the context of a legal case,” explains Haugtvedt (2017, p. 10). TGM is not a “whodunnit” seeking to identify a perpetrator. The perpetrator is known—the state government. The victims are more shadowy, the former inmates of a gay prison, whose voices we will seek out. And there is no legal case to answer, just an exploration of how and why a government established this prison and what its advisory committee reported.

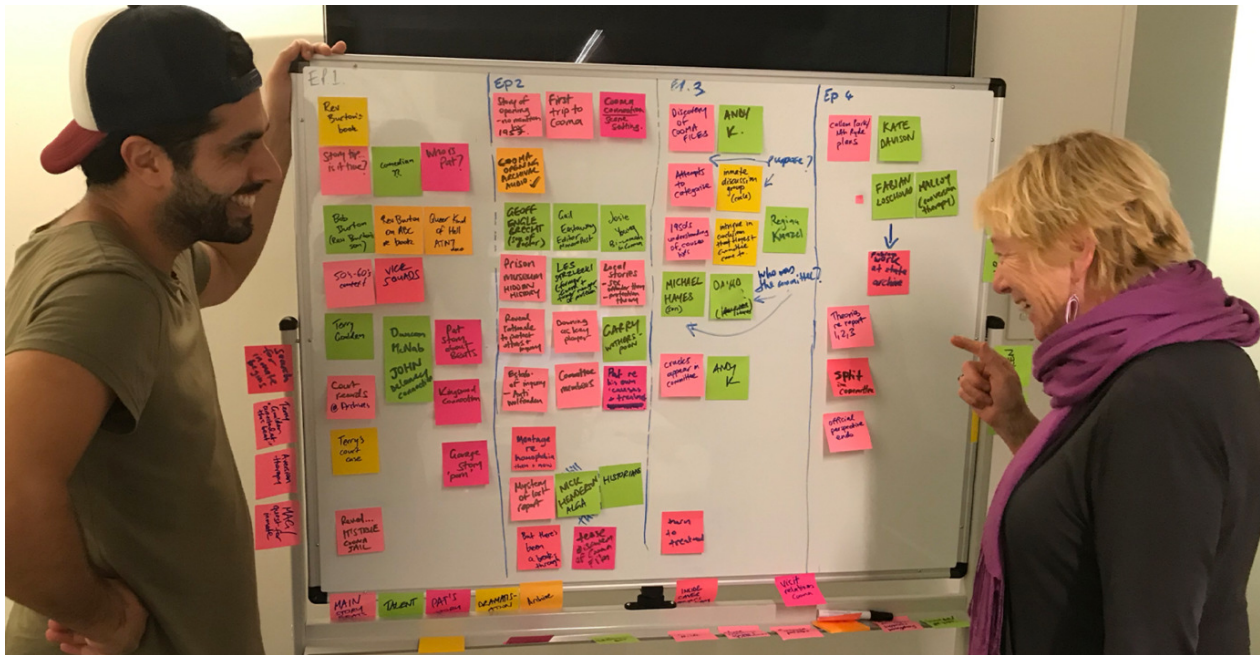
Given that our parameters were not those of conventional true crime podcasts, we were not overly concerned by the ethical dilemmas that genre can pose. Instead, we considered TGM to be a work of rigorous investigative journalism: As such, we were committed to the highest standards of ethical journalism in general. To this end, in production, we employed the code of ethics devised by the Australian journalism peak body, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance. Much refined since its inception in 1944, the code now has a subsection “to assist journalists to deliver respectful coverage of LGBTQIA+ people and the issues they face” (Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, 2024).

Fink linked the growing lack of trust in journalism to the overbearing way journalists are perceived to treat the public: “Journalists often do not recognize the power they wield over members of the public, and thus fail to treat them with sufficient care and respect” (Fink, 2019, p. 1). We pledged as a trio that on TGM we would accord our informants care and respect, representing them fairly and giving voice to a range of opinions and perspectives, even where we disagreed with them. This would lead to some heated discussions over the production, as outlined in the following sections.

#### 4. Trust and Intimacy: A Coming Out Story

At our first production meeting, a whiteboard was used to loosely sketch episode content. Figure 2 shows four episodes delineated vertically and episode elements depicted in colour-coded post-it notes. This provides a quick visual take on the abundance or paucity of each element, with a vibrant mix needed to deliver audio texture. Light pink outlined Pat’s investigation into the prison. Other, occasional, notes in a darker pink depicted his personal journey coming out as a gay man in his culturally homophobic Arab-Australian community.

Pat hid his sexuality from his family at first. He told us how his Lebanese-born mother, Marie, cried when she heard, and wondered what she’d “done wrong.” Mother and son had gone back and forth for years before Marie, after much soul-searching, became reconciled to Pat being gay. When I heard this story of personal growth and compassion, I knew it would make an affecting counterpoint to our macro-narrative of societal attitudes towards homosexuality, especially delivered via the individualised consumption mode of the podcast medium. As Lindgren notes, audio storytelling is “perfectly placed to explore lived, personal experiences...intimately whispered into our ears” (2016, p. 24). So I asked Pat if we could include a “beat” of his identity journey in each episode. It was something Simon as producer had considered but refrained from



**Figure 2.** Production meeting of TGM, July 2020, showing early colour-coded episodic structure. Notes: Patrick Abboud, left, and Siobhán McHugh, right; green = “talent” (interviewees); light pink = main story beats; dark pink = Pat’s coming out story; orange = archival source; yellow = dramatisation.

pushing because it was fraught. My position as incoming story consultant provided fresh impetus. After reflection, Pat agreed, notionally. As the production unfolded, we recorded scenes: Pat talking to his mum about visiting the jail; Pat telling her he was hunting down the report, led by a professor of psychiatry, William Trethowan, into ways to “treat” homosexuality. In one scene, he and Simon visit a favourite aunt, Mary, who plies them with tasty Lebanese food. But it is the meta-commentary that Simon records afterwards that so illuminates the situation, as Pat can now appreciate:

We were sitting at the bottom of Mary’s driveway. And I was really frustrated—because I wanted to tell her that I was happy, I’d bought a house with my partner who I’ve been with for seven years, and having a kid. And I couldn’t do any of that stuff because I was still really too scared. I didn’t even know if she knows that I’m gay. It was very clever of Simon to get these moments, because it was a genuine response...it all really hit me in the moment. (Hub for Innovation in Podcasting, 2022)

This revelatory scene—and there are many throughout the series—is entirely predicated on intimacy and trust. There is the intimacy we as listeners feel, being made privy to the distressing emotions Pat suffers. That intimacy is made possible because of the trust Pat places in Simon to document these vulnerable moments; Simon’s empathy in turn allows Pat to feel safe enough to debrief. A host interpolated into the story has become a trope of narrative podcasts since Sarah Koenig fronted *Serial*, but as journalistic practice, this was new to Pat: “I’m not somebody who puts myself at the front of a story; I’ve never done that in anything I’ve made for the TV or whatever medium.” In this instance, Simon pressed Pat to be reflective in order to deepen the storytelling: “Simon [would] talk me through and make me understand: ‘Pat, listen to this moment, it’s real, dude! You said those words because you felt them’....It was actually a really poetic moment.”



Later, in post-production, Pat must trust me and Simon to shape this reveal with care in the script—not exploit such emotion for cheap “thrills.” Pat also had journalistic concerns: Would he appear unprofessional, even narcissistic, by featuring his own lived experience? Pat recalls his constant vacillations:

Simon and Siobhan were “let’s put the personal in” and I would pull it out. That was the constant to-ing and fro-ing and they really convinced me by the end that it wasn’t indulgent personal vomit—it was actually really important. And I’ve never been prouder of anything.

In the end, the trust and collegiality we had developed over months of robust but respectful debate allowed Pat to expose his feelings. “I’ve never trusted anyone like I’ve trusted Simon with a story,” he laughs. “He’s genuinely brilliant.” The evolving relationship between Pat and his mother is deeply moving, precisely because it is so honest, and difficult. The series ends with Marie reading a letter to Pat, embracing his sexuality and praising his LGBTQIA+ community. As joyous coda, we hear Marie playing with her giggling grandson, baby Zayd.

## 5. Trust With Interviewees: Framing the Ex-Cop

American writer Janet Malcolm excoriated journalists for practising a “seduction and betrayal” model when seeking subjects to profile (Malcolm, 1990, p. 5). Such a potential scenario arose as Pat tried to locate one of the undercover “Vice Squad” officers we knew had been deployed as “bait” for gay men: If they responded, they would be arrested. Court records showed jail terms resulted from such encounters. Serendipitously, I recalled a former policeman, John Bond, whom I had interviewed years before, who had been associated with the Squad. A garrulous man, he agreed to another interview, this time with Pat and Simon. On tape, John detailed the “come on” procedure, as the script excerpt in Figure 3 shows.

We were jubilant at having secured this crucial testimony regarding police entrapment and surveillance. It set up high narrative stakes. As Pat notes, “without John Bond, a whole lot of other story beats couldn’t have happened.” But when I listened to the episode’s first draft, I blanched. John’s selected excerpts made him sound more dastardly than I knew him to be. His views were typical of the time—e.g., describing homosexuals as “deviant”—and clearly obnoxious today. But I also knew that John had a moral code that had seen him stand up to police misconduct at times, a side of him completely missing from the draft. The issue centred on the age-old storyteller’s dilemma: editing.

Editing seeks to distil the essence of an exchange: to cut away verbal flab and thereby sharpen the narrative. As Smets (2023, p. 52) notes, “editing recordings means interpreting content and giving it shape.” But it also carries heavy editorial responsibilities, not to misrepresent the subject. In response to my concerns, Pat and Simon reviewed John’s unexpurgated interview and added a section where he describes standing up for an Aboriginal man a colleague tried to speciously arrest (Figure 4). Pat’s revised narration alludes to John’s “gentle” side and moral compass. These small inclusions round out John’s character from cartoonishly malevolent to the more messy human reality. Thus was trust maintained between us as production team, while simultaneously honouring the trust John placed in us to represent him accurately.

**At the height of Vice Squad operations against homosexuality, John was a young, eager cop at the start of his career.**

John Bond: I was assisting people in the vice squad, when they were doing surveillance of gentlemen's toilets, directly related to sexual behaviour of unacceptable standards.

Pat: Who was engaging in those acts?

John Bond: Well, men who preferred to have sexual encounters with other men...rather deviant type people.

Pat: So, gay men, you're referring to?

John Bond: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Pat: So, what did you do? What did that work involve, John?

John Bond: You would spy from a vantage point, without making it obvious that you were there for some other reason than to use the toilet. You obviously were working in plain clothes.

Pat: So, you were undercover?

John: Yeah, you could say that.

Pat: How were the arrests made?

John: Well, when you found men behaving with other men

Pat: Having sex?

John: Yes, or preparing to do so preparing to do so

Pat: Making advances...

John: Yeah, yeah yeah... they'd be arrested.

Figure 3. Excerpt, episode 1, TGM. Note: Blue represents Pat's narration.

	<p><b>For all his gun-wielding bravado, there's something gentle about John.</b></p> <p>Pat: What would you say was your greatest achievement while you were a police officer?</p> <p>John Bond: Doing good.</p> <p><b>John tells me about a time he pulled up another cop for randomly detaining a First Nations man.</b></p> <p>John Bond: I said, "Could you tell me why you've arrested him?"</p> <p>And he said...we'll work it out on the way back to the station...</p> <p>I said, "if that's the best you can tell me, get your hands off him."</p> <p><b>John says he was always guided by...</b></p> <p>John Bond: My own rules of right and wrong.</p> <p>A policeman doesn't have to report you for everything. The policeman has the power of discretion.</p>
	<p><b>At the height of Vice Squad operations against homosexuality, John was a young, eager cop at the start of his career.</b></p>

Figure 4. Excerpt, episode 1, TGM, amended to round out John Bond's character. Note: Blue denotes Pat's narration.



## 6. Trust and Fairness: Navigating Friends and Strangers

In day-long script meetings, we constantly challenged each other to justify why a certain section was in or out, or to seek more nuance in a line of script. In making these interventions, we drew on our collective experience of documentary-making—experience which sometimes directly shaded how this current production unfolded. For instance, as a TV personality who had hosted Sydney’s Mardi Gras and Pride Festival, Pat’s prior acquaintance with the LGBTQIA+ community set the ground for some warm exchanges with TGM interviewees. This is very evident in episode 5, when we meet Fabian Loschiavo. We get to know Fabian as an accordion-playing collector of religious shrines, before we are introduced to his alter ego, a political performance activist for gay rights, in which he dresses as a nun from the satirically-named Sisters Of Perpetual Indulgence. The episode moves on to an extended dinner scene, during which Pat and Fabian discuss joyous aspects of their personal lives along with the emotional burden suffered by gay men who come from conservative families. Pat then leads the conversation on to the appalling aversion therapy Fabian experienced.

This process, of recording deep, rambling interviews that ranged from the ostensibly trivial (dog overcoats, lasagne recipes) to the hyper-intimate (we learn that Fabian volunteered for aversion therapy, out of societal pressure and shame), is for Pat a valuable and defining aspect of *podcast* journalism: “To run a three and a half, four-hour long interview with a person is not possible in television. You can’t have that much material—it’s going to make your life hell.” Because of Pat and Fabian’s long, affectionate association, it was easy for us as story editors to shape Fabian into an endearing “character.” It is much harder to find that connection with a stranger. But gut feeling plays a part in the development of trust and intimacy too, as when Pat and Simon immediately warmed to interviewee Michael Hayes. He was the son of a deceased parole officer, Frank Hayes, who had been on the infamous Trethowan prison committee. Much hinged on this interview: Michael could either shine a light on the era or be defensive. Pat conducts it in a manner that is open-minded, allowing Michael to vigorously contest the material Pat adduces, and listening to his counterarguments rather than closing them down—an approach Smets also came to uphold:

I have the power to document real encounters with the people I interview, as well as a continued dialogue with my audience. In this search for “I” and “You,” I have found my own attitude in my work; an empathetic exchange with the other to enrich my view of the world. (Smets, 2023, p. 128)

As the interview unfolds, Pat reveals to Michael that his father studied how jailed gay men in his care could be “cured” of homosexuality (Figure 5).

We deliberately retained that entire exchange to honour the nuance of Michael Hayes’ appraisal of his father’s historic role in the gay prison. A more partisan producer might have cut it at Michael saying “I would use the word ‘rehabilitate.’” The narrator could then decry this as someone seeking to excuse homophobia. Instead, we wanted to show the complex dialectics.

**Inside the prison, Frank's first experiment is taking shape. It's basically Homosexuals Anonymous...a kind of proto conversion therapy.**

*Frank Hayes: Nothing can be done until the individual faces up to his own problem.*

**Frank considers the inmates in his group to be remediable. They just need to make a socially acceptable adjustment and to be prevented from returning to the accepting society of other homosexuals. A prison like Cooma does impose on staff a hardship in trying to control sexual deviants.**

Michael: Ok, this is pretty serious stuff, isn't it.

**Beat...atmos...awkward pause**

Pat: What are your thoughts?

Michael: This is not the F.D. Hayes who I knew. This is a new way of thinking for me. A new way of remembering.

**Beat... atmos...awkward pause**

Michael: He seems to be sort of accepting the paradigm that homosexuality is a crime. At the same time there's also an echo, it's more than a whisper, it's an echo coming through that he wants to look after these guys.

Pat: By curing them?

Michael: Well, um, I would use the word "rehabilitate." Rehabilitation was the thing my dad was totally into....I'd just bring a word of caution to you, Patrick, because what we see in that situation...

Pat: I can understand you wanting to protect your father's legacy...

Michael: No, no, no, please! The word's not "protect," the word's "understand." Ok? That's important. And this is something that the whole society was kind of struggling with, and it's very hard for us to kind of make a judgement on them. Now, I'm not excusing him but I'm just saying that we've also got to be fair, that what we're looking at here is a moment in someone's evolution.

**Figure 5.** Excerpt, episode 4, TGM. Notes: Blue depicts Pat's narration; green is sound design/music notes; italics is text from notebooks kept by prison officer, Frank Hayes; dialogue is between Pat and Michael Hayes, son of Frank Hayes.

## 7. Building Trust Over Time and Distance: Jacquie, Former Drag Queen

In contrast to the instantaneous connection Pat and Simon felt on meeting Michael Hayes, ground had to be slowly built with other interviewees. Sometimes this relates simply to personality: An introvert is less disposed to talk easily to strangers. But where a person's traumatic past is likely to be navigated, relationships need to be handled with enormous care. Such was the case with Jacquie Grant, a trans woman and former youthful inmate of Cooma Prison, now living in New Zealand. It took over a year of meticulous research before word of Jacquie's existence surfaced, through social networks. Pat called me that day, exuberant—hers would be

the first personal inmate account. “She was quite forthcoming and she just kept dropping these little nuggets,” Pat recalls. It was during the pandemic and overseas flights were cancelled. We faced a dilemma: Should we record an online interview with Jacquie? Or wait indefinitely to meet her in person? We unanimously opted to meet her on her own ground. “She was really good [on a call],” Simon explains, “but it still felt like it didn’t have the energy we needed, that intimacy of being in the room with her.” And as Jacquie noted in that first conversation, “I think some stories need to be told—but they’ve got to be told in a way that people actually believe them.”

It took a whole year before Pat and Simon could visit Jacquie in Hokitika. Her remarkable story would take up an entire episode (episode 7). After being arrested for “being a drag queen” and serving time in prison, including three months in Cooma in 1961/1962, Jacquie migrated to New Zealand:

Offensive behaviour was the charge. For a man to be in women’s clothes was offensive to society in general...Cooma was known as the prison where they put all the gays and sex offenders, paedophiles...and because you were in drag you were a sex offender...We were all just lumped into the category of perverts. (Jacquie, episode 7)

The bare biographical facts of Jacquie’s life were mind-blowing enough—she rattles off her various occupations: “chef, zookeeper, sailor, sock machine maker, farmer’s wife, foster parent, I’ve been on the Human Rights Tribunal, I got made an officer of the New Zealand order of merit....Oh, and I’ve had night clubs.” Over decades, Jacquie fostered 72 children, the first trans woman permitted to do so in New Zealand. But aside from Jacquie’s seemingly endless colourful anecdotes, what preoccupied Pat and Simon was how to depict the emotional truth of her life while respecting her own boundaries:

Pat: I think Jacquie’s an incredible human—she’s been through so much and she’s got lifetimes of stories in her. But she’s got this kind of bravado and she’s stoic, but we know that that’s a coping mechanism of some kind. You don’t want to diminish that—if that’s her armour you can’t remove her armour. That’s her choice, not ours. But at the same time, you also want to make people understand that there’s still so much pain there, because of what she’s endured.

Simon: Yeah, we were conscious of not wanting to fit her into a simple victim narrative, which is really easy to do in these stories—you’ve got the injustice, the perpetrators; her role is just the victim.

Pat: It was a real balancing act.

Pat and Simon used their time in Jacquie’s ambit not just to interview her at length, but to observe her at home, with her Shih Tzu dog, Chloe, and at work, where one of her many friends, Mayor Bruce Smith, pops into her sock machine shop/museum (Figure 6).

Through a mixture of fly-on-the-wall scenes, thoughtful, descriptive writing, and probing interviews, episode 7 builds an absorbing portrait of a resilient life. But it is Jacquie’s unflinching willingness to face both the darkest moments in her past (such as the death of her best friend and fellow drag queen Gina from a drug overdose following aversion therapy) and to call out the hypocrisy and injustice of every community she has lived in, that creates a sense of intimacy, of getting to see the real Jacquie—who is *still* taking on the bigots, in her late 70s (Figure 7).

Mayor: Do I know any other 77-year-old entrepreneurs?

**The local mayor, Bruce Smith, has just popped into the shop.**

Mayor: Who sets up a bloody sock museum in Hokitika? I mean, you wouldn't do it would ya!

**Bruce and Jacquie have been friends since she arrived in town 24 years ago.**

Mayor: She arrives in a pink Mercedes with 'Tranny 1' as the number plate. You could imagine. We're a conservative town.

**Jacquie laughing in background**

I'd never come across anyone with such a fierce energy.

She's a bloody tough old bird.

**Shop atmos, cash register**

**Figure 6.** Excerpt, episode 7, TGM. Notes: Blue represents Pat's narration; green depicts sound design/music notes.

**Car interior atmos**

Jacquie: ... when I first came here, I went to the local business association and asked them to declare Hokitika a gay-friendly town. So, we put a rainbow flag in every shop window.

Pat: Did you get resistance?

Jacquie: Oh yeah, yeah. There's always resistance. That's what makes it fun! ... I just took two locals to court a few weeks ago on gender discrimination. I got a landmark ruling.

**The two men harassed Jacquie on social media for years, misgendering and dead naming her.**

Jacquie: Calling me "him" and all this sort of shit.

Pat: So where do you think this kind of activist streak in you comes from?

Jacquie: Probably from when I was young. You sort of had to be a bit tough to survive in Sydney. And a lot of people didn't survive of course.

**Car on gravel**

**Figure 7.** Excerpt, episode 7, TGM. Notes: Blue represents Pat's narration; green depicts sound design/music notes.

Jacque put enormous trust in the team, to tell her story with integrity. It was a relief when Simon got an email after she'd listened to the podcast: "She loves it! She just said she 'didn't realise she swore so much.'"

## 8. Intimacy Gone Wrong: The Unexpected Homophobe

As Smets (2023, p. 1) pithily observes of the documentary interview, "real encounters cannot be fully directed." While on location in Cooma, Pat and Simon interviewed a range of locals, seeking to build a picture of the small rural town that had, unknown to most residents, been home to a "gay prison" for years. Among those they ran across was Brian Curzon, a church volunteer who had visited the prison in the 1990s. This was after homosexuality had been decriminalised and the prison had been transformed into a prison for child sex offenders—a horrifying development, as homosexuality and paedophilia had earlier been associated in law. This further conflated them in the public mind.

Because Curzon had rare eye-witness knowledge, Pat and Simon quickly decided to record a longer interview. This was a departure from the usual procedure in which subjects are extensively pre-vetted. "We didn't really know that much about him beforehand, so it was all revelatory," Pat recalls. "Things just happened." Figure 8 shows the transcript of the interview, which was run almost as live. "There wasn't a lot of editing in that scene; that really is how that played out," Pat explains. It is worth listening to the excerpt (episode 4, timestamp 28.46–31.30mins) before proceeding to analysis.

This harrowing scene shows the inversion of intimacy. It starts with Brian Curzon telling Pat he is not averse to homosexuality, provided it is kept discreet. Pat senses things may turn nastier: "I knew very quickly that this person would say things that will be horribly offensive." Struggling to maintain his equilibrium, Pat kept close eye contact with Simon, who was recording:

The first time he dropped a really horrible comment, I said to myself, compose yourself, take a breath inside and let him say every single word—do not react. Because the second I react, he will not say what he actually thinks and feels. (Hub for Innovation in Podcasting, 2022)

Pat's urge to defend himself as a proud and committed gay man was battling with his professional journalistic instincts:

Of course, you want to get the best interview from whoever you're interviewing, but I don't think objectivity really played a part here. It's very difficult to sit and listen to that and not want to get up and just jump the guy! And in the car I literally just went AAAAAGH....Simon and I debriefed for a very long time, driving down the highway, talking through the interview.

Although he hates hearing the interview back ("I feel my blood boiling listening to it, every time"), Pat is glad he was able to contain himself—using the time-honoured technique of giving an interviewee enough rope to hang himself. The team subtly moulded the interview in post-production: Pulsing music comes in as Brian Curzon makes the egregious suggestion that "homosexual" and "paedophile" are the same, building narrative tension. As Smets (2023, pp. 87–88) notes of another unsavoury interviewee: "My revenge was having the last word in our exchange—my weapon, the microphone. I was not distorting reality, but I was appropriating the story in the voice-over." Similarly, Pat reclaims agency by writing around the "live" interview: "I'm NOT



going to let him finish!" The final, spontaneous outpouring to Simon in the car is hugely cathartic, for listeners as much as for Pat in the moment. There was never a question of cutting it out.

**In the 90s' a child sex offender rehabilitation program was run out of Cooma prison, keeping the conflation between homosexuality and pedophilia alive. Brian Curzon ran a Christian fellowship program inside the prison at the time. I'm back at his house in Cooma...**

BC: If you were two homosexuals, it goes all against my Christian values, but who am I to judge. As long as you keep it to yourself. Don't go out and display it and hold hands in bloody Oxford Street.

**Oxford Street in Sydney being where one of the biggest gay pride events in the world happens, which I happened to host on TV for years...**

BC: Would I be wrong in saying that you are a homosexual?

Pat: I am.

BC: Right.

Pat: Do you think I chose to be homosexual?

BC: Yes.

Pat: And what might have made me make that choice?

BC: I'd have to know more about you... Are you the male or the female in the relationship?

Pat: I don't really know how to answer that question. I'm a man, my partner is a man, we're both men.

BC: I'm not against homosexuality. If you love one another, that's between you and God. But don't touch kids.

**Beat**

Brian: Is there a difference between a homosexual and a pedophile?

Pat: So you think there's no difference between a homosexual and a pedophile?

BC: They're very close. I think that they jump the gap. They jump the barrier.

Pat: I'm not sure what you mean.

BC: If you let me finish...

**I'm NOT going to let him finish.**

**Beat**

**Just before we walk out the door...Brian asks to give me a hug...**

BC: Do you know why I wanted to hug you?

Pat: Why?

BC: A hug says 'I like you'.

**Because of Covid restrictions I politely decline.**

**Car door closing**

[Actuality in car] Pat: What. The fuck. Was that??!

**Pat screams..."oh my gooooodddd"**

Pat: I don't think I've ever been so offended, amused, and shocked at the same time...

**Car speeds off.**

**Figure 8.** Excerpt, episode 4, TGM, interview with Brian Curzon (BC), a volunteer at Cooma Prison in the 1990s. Notes: Blue is Pat's narration; green depicts sound design/music notes.



I have played this excerpt in settings from academic conferences to podcast industry events. Almost everyone looks shocked at the line, “Don’t touch kids.” We know such bigotry exists, but it is usually siloed. How powerful to let it unspool in the raw—as almost a form of perverted intimacy, rather than as “grabs” served up by an outraged narrator:

We could have painted him to be this horrible homophobe—but you don’t need to because he does all that work himself; you just have to gently let it unfold. So rather than react in the moment, the gaps, that little moment of tension, was super important, to make it clear that of course we’re not going to let him continue with this garbage that homosexuality and paedophilia, it’s okay to conflate those things. We didn’t have to SAY that though...it was really important to let that scene just completely breathe. Play it out. (Pat, Hub for Innovation in Podcasting, 2022)

## 9. Limitations and Weaknesses

The autoethnographic approach was constrained by my limited involvement in the production process. I was not present in the first year of development and did not attend the recording of interviews, so was unable to gather observational data during these encounters. Instead, I drew conclusions by studying the unexpurgated audio tape, supplemented by our team discussions.

I am not part of the queer community; neither is Simon. This, no doubt, limited our sensibility in some areas. However, Pat wanted TGM to have a broad audience reach, which we could mediate, while also upholding a loyalty to queer lived experience, which he could provide. We also solicited critical listeners, from industry executives to friends, to provide robust feedback, which assisted us as we made final tweaks to content and form before publication.

Regarding future related research, discussions are underway to see if the original interviews on which TGM is based can be preserved as a research collection. This archive could then be used by scholars to obtain deeper context on TGM and its themes, to assess its synthesis, content, and format, and to mine this valuable oral history for ancillary information on themes such as police/LGBTQIA+ history of conflict, historic gay “beats,” and family homophobia.

The action research process followed had strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it does not facilitate the creation of data along pre-ordained parameters, as a conventional methodology might employ. Instead, the researcher has to work with the materials organically created from a production imperative—e.g., interviews are gathered and informants selected using criteria determined not by their suitability to be studied but by their usefulness to the story. As Grubenmann notes, “in action research, scholars surrender some of the control that they normally try to maximize in more formal research” (2018, p. 11). But so long as the researcher can be nimble and pay careful attention to circumstances that can unfold spontaneously on a journalism-driven project, there is much to be gained also: “Research is not only about systematic data collection, because interesting talks and observation can serve as a valuable inspiration and/or trigger insights” (Grubenmann, 2018, p. 3). This was exemplified in sections 5–8 above.

## 10. Conclusion

The TGM project demonstrated that it is possible to achieve a successful and marketable audio narrative without exploiting informants' trust or adversely manipulating their stories and responses through selective editing. For those living in homophobic cultures, especially those from Middle Eastern backgrounds, like Pat, TGM offers a model from which to draw hope and comfort, as they hear how Pat's mother journeyed from shock and rejection to acceptance and love. Several of TGM's contributors expressed deep gratitude for the sense of liberation the podcast brought them: It enabled David, subject of the bonus episode, to come out as a gay man for the first time at 86 years of age. That, and the expunging we co-organised of the criminal record imposed on him 60 years before for the "crime" of homosexuality, were transformative, as he emotionally declares at the end of episode 9: "Sixty years' worth of guilt has just been wiped away....I feel like running on the beach, except I can't run anymore [laughs]. It means more to me than anything else in my life."

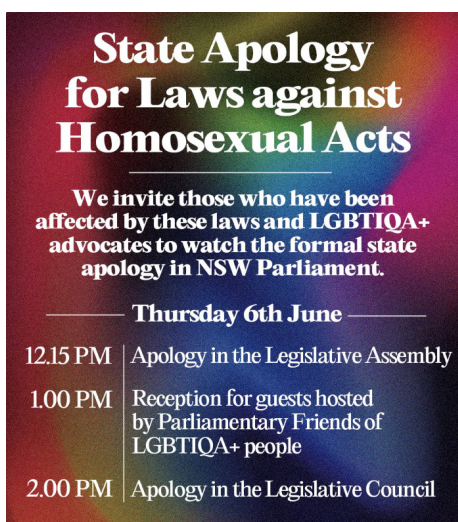
Hundreds of comments on the Audible platform showed how deeply moved listeners were:

"Powerful, emotional and ultimately full of hope": What a brilliant journey! Thank you for such an incredible story. So much strength and integrity from those interviewed, and so much empathy and kindness (not to mention all the research!) from the producers and commentators. (Amazon Customer, 2022)

"Powerful and beautiful": An incredibly important story about part of Australia's history the authorities would rather we forget. Abboud puts in amazing work tracking down evidence of the world's only know [sic] prison specifically for criminalised gay men. In spite of cover-ups, misting records and shockingly overt homophobia from some of his interviewees. Harrowing accounts of police entrapment and inhumane conversion "therapy" practices are balanced with poignant moments of humour and relatable anecdotes from Abboud's own life. This is incredibly important history that all Australians need to know about. (William, 2022)

As this anatomy of TGM's production process shows, trust and intimacy are the cornerstones of authentic storytelling in this narrative nonfiction podcast. But a caution: In unethical hands these qualities can be feigned, to the detriment of those featured. On this point, that documentary storytelling can be extractive/exploitative, Shane and Smets are somewhat aligned: "There is a thin, razor-sharp line between taking a story and telling it. At best, listening can be a gesture of love, but it is also an act of power" (Smets, 2023, p. 101). Shane's Manifesto advocates a "Third Podcasting" system, that eschews the neutral journalism dictates of legacy media ("first podcasting") and artier, auteur shows ("second podcasting"), instead comprising "activist podcasting in an age of social justice capitalism" (Shane, 2022, p. 5). She explains: "The third podcast is sceptical of the award-winning formula of pressing social justice issue + commercial narrative form = commercial hit" (Shane, 2022, p. 7). On Shane's grounds, TGM is a conundrum, because it achieved both critical and mainstream acclaim, while striking a strong blow for social justice. Among the awards it received was Best Social Justice Podcast at New York Festivals. At Audible, it had a remarkable 4.9 out of 5 stars from some 501 listener reviews—an unusually high rating, especially because the reviews came from a cross-generational audience. Its ethical journalism standards were roundly endorsed when it won Australia's highest accolade, a Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism, as well as the Walkley Media Diversity Award.

Grubenmann (2018, p. 12) notes that for action research to be effective, it should operate “at the intersection of technological, social, strategic, and political dimensions.” TGM received fulsome acknowledgment of such political/social impact when it was mentioned in New South Wales state parliament as having helped trigger an Apology (Figure 9) from the premier to the LGBTQIA+ community for laws that criminalised homosexuality (Hornery, 2024). Pat, Simon, and I were invited guests, who listened along with Jacquie and gay couple of 55 years Terry Goulden and John Greenway, who feature prominently in the series, as politicians of all stripes spoke of their regret at the demonisation visited on the LGBTQIA+ community until 1984 (Figure 10).



**Figure 9.** State apology 2024.

Forty years almost to the day that homosexuality was decriminalised in the state, we laughed, cried, and applauded, as our meta-narrative concluded.



**Figure 10.** Outside Parliament House, Sydney, 6 June 2024, before the apology. Notes: Left to right—Terry Goulden and his husband John Greenway; Paul Horan, executive producer, Audible; Jacquie Grant; Simon Cunich; Pat Abboud, beckoning to Siobhán McHugh to join the photo rather than take it.

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The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Siobhán McHugh** is a multi-award-winning producer of narrative journalism podcasts and critic who founded *RadioDoc Review*, the first journal of critical analysis of crafted audio storytelling. Her book *The Power of Podcasting: Telling Stories Through Sound* (Columbia University Press, 2022) analyses the aesthetics and production practices of narrative podcasts. She has published widely on the affective power of audio storytelling and the impact of podcasting as a new medium. She is honorary associate professor in journalism at the University of Wollongong.



# Intimacy and Professionalism: Dilemmas in the Practice of Chinese Podcasters

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## Abstract

As an inherently intimate medium, podcasting offers new opportunities for journalists to engage in innovative media practices. However, for journalistic podcasters, managing intimacy and balancing it with traditional journalistic norms is an important but complex matter that affects the long-term development and democratic potential of news podcasting. This study focuses on a subject rarely studied: Chinese journalistic podcasters, both in terms of how they perceive and construct intimacy and their approaches to navigating the balance between intimacy and professionalization in their podcasting practices. Drawing upon in-depth interviews and document research, this study finds that by adopting humanized storytelling, emotive language, exposure of personal details, use of background audio, and natural dialects, etc., Chinese podcasters are redefining journalistic norms according to the specific demands of podcasting as an intimate medium. At the same time, they are also carefully guarding journalistic boundaries and are wary of abusing intimacy in commercializing podcasts and expanding the market. By examining these innovative practices, this study enhances our understanding of how news can continue to stay connected with the public amidst digital transformation. It suggests that the practices of these journalistic podcasters reflect the potential for revising the traditional norms of journalism in adapting to new technological environments.

## Keywords

authenticity; boundaries; China; emotion; intimacy; journalism; podcasts; professionalism

## 1. Introduction

In the face of the digital disruption affecting the declining traditional news industry, podcasting has emerged as a popular choice among contemporary media outlets. Meanwhile, many media practitioners have



identified the independent opportunities of digital start-ups within the podcasting landscape (Park, 2017). As an emerging genre, the number and popularity of journalistic podcasts have both been increasing in the most recent decade. According to the *Digital News Report* by the Reuters Institute (Newman & Gallo, 2019), the significant rise of podcasts is a global phenomenon. In 2019, the number of newly created news podcast programs worldwide reached 12,000, reflecting a growth rate of 32% compared to the previous year. Many leading news organizations operating at national or transnational levels have ventured into the field and launched podcasting programs, attracting millions of listeners and followers worldwide. In 2020, the Pulitzer Prize established the Audio Reporting Award and included podcasts in its award category for the first time in its history, further solidifying the importance of podcasting in the realm of journalism and the digital transformation of news production (Linton, 2020).

As an emerging medium, podcasting distinguishes itself from traditional media forms by its inherent “intimate aura” (Llinares et al., 2018, p. 209). The technological specifics of the medium gear podcasts towards inhabiting intimacy as their defining feature (Euritt, 2022). The audio form affords intimate and personalized storytelling, allowing the podcasters to present themselves in contrast to the objective and disembodied reporters in traditional journalism (Lindgren, 2022). Nevertheless, while such intimacy has been found to be beneficial to journalistic podcasters in building a more engaged and reciprocal relationship with the audience and boosting the effects of news communication, it tends to be incompatible with the traditional norms of journalistic professionalism. The intimate (re)presentations of journalists on digital media may act to contradict the preservation of their professional images (Bossio, 2023; Bossio & Sacco, 2017; Cheng & Tandoc, 2022). The emphasis on intimate experiences in podcasting may prioritize form and emotions over content, relegating news to a secondary position relative to opinionated expressions (Nee & Santana, 2022). More seriously, the intimate relationship formed between podcasters and listeners may lead to ideological hijacking by partisan actors and endanger democracy (Dowling et al., 2022). Therefore, managing and mastering intimacy is an important issue for journalistic podcasters, and solid empirical research is needed to unravel the question of whether podcasting merely blurs the lines between intimacy and professionalism or if the two are completely exclusive, and how journalists handle the tension in their practices.

An examination of the existing literature reveals many studies of podcasting in different countries, including Australia (Lindgren, 2023), India (Mehendale & Jaggi, 2023), Spain (Sellas & Bonet, 2022), UK (Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2023; Rime et al., 2022), US (Aufderheide et al., 2020; Berry, 2016), Denmark (Berg, 2021a), Latin America (Rojas-Torrijos et al., 2020), and South Korea (Park, 2017), but scant attention has been given to the way it is practiced in China. Like its Western counterparts, podcasting is developing rapidly in the country. Currently, there are over 240,000 podcast programs available in the Chinese market, with an audience exceeding 220 million, 65.12% of whom are young people living in metropolitan cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and approximately 30 capital cities of provinces (“Ximalaya boke jiemu,” 2024). A number of popular podcast platforms have emerged, such as Little Universe, Himalaya, Dragonfly FM, and Litchi FM (“Ximalaya boke jiemu,” 2024). Chinese podcasters have even organized an annual event, PodFest China, which held its sixth iteration in 2024, attracting over 800 podcast creators and fans (“Women zai diliu,” 2024). Such a vast and fast-developing market deserves academic attention.

In the Chinese podcasting landscape, the rise of journalistic podcasts can be observed to have had two distinct trends. On the one hand, traditional media organizations have launched their own podcasting

programs, such as *Sanlian Weekly*, *Caixin Media*, *Southern Weekend*, and *Southern Metropolis Daily*. On the other hand, faced with the decline of traditional journalism, media practitioners have begun seeking alternative paths. Individual journalists have embarked on podcasting under their personal brands. For example, Xu Tao, the founder of the *Shengdong Huopo* (聲動活潑) business and technology news podcasting series, during her 10-year career previously worked as a journalist for media outlets including *Yicai Weekly*. Another instance is the cultural podcast *Left Right* (忽左忽右), co-founded by Cheng Yanliang and Yang Yi, who had previously worked as a cultural journalist and television news editor, respectively. Exploring how these podcasters balance their identities as journalists with the demands of the podcasting medium is a compelling area of inquiry. It raises important questions about how they adapt to this new technological landscape while maintaining the core journalistic values that inform their work, and how tensions between intimacy and professionalism evolve and are resolved in the process.

Drawing upon in-depth interviews and document research, this study examines what intimacy means to Chinese journalistic podcasters and what strategies they adopt to navigate the balance between intimacy and traditional journalistic norms. In the following sections of the article, we will first discuss podcast intimacy and professionalism in journalism. After detailing our research methods, we will then present an analysis of the balancing strategies utilized by journalistic podcasters and discuss their implications. Ultimately, our study attempts to promote a nuanced understanding of the creativity of Chinese journalists, represented by journalistic podcasters, in adapting to the new technological environment.

## 2. Podcasting as an Intimate Medium

Podcasting is regarded as an intimate medium (Berry, 2016; Euritt, 2022). Podcast intimacy, defined as efforts to create and reveal emotional experiences and personal connections in the comfortable space “between interviewers and interview subjects, between the producers themselves, and between listeners, producers, and subjects” (Spinelli & Dann, 2019, p. 77), is afforded by both the technological and ecological features of this specific media form.

As a sonic medium, the podcast is inherently warm as it uses voice, music, and sound to channel a message (Pettman, 2017). One of the greatest assets of podcasting has been the aural intimacy created through the human voice (Lindgren, 2016). As the human voice not only produces feeling but also transmits any number of emotions through the tone and quality of personalized expressions, it can create an affective soundscape through which the listener, subjectively feeling the sounds, becomes entangled in a reciprocal relationship with the produced sound (Clevenger & Rick, 2021). In particular, podcasts differ from traditional radio in being free from broadcast schedules, and available on-demand, affording a more personalized listening environment. The pervasive use of headphones allows podcasters to figuratively whisper their message directly into the ears of their audience (Greene, 2016; Hendricks, 2020). The listener puts on their headphones, presses play, and becomes immersed in an affective discourse of human experience through listening and connecting (Copeland, 2018). A sense of closeness is generated between podcast participants even though they are not physically proximate (Berry, 2016; Euritt, 2022; Swiatek, 2018). Additionally, podcasters use emotion and first-person narratives extensively to bond with listeners (Lindgren, 2023), and self-reflexivity and transparency are generally adopted by them to maintain trustworthiness with listeners (Dowling & Miller, 2019). Both are also found to promote podcast intimacy.

By generating strong feelings of closeness, the affordance of podcasts is thought to have transformative effects on social groups. The effect of intimacy has allowed the empowering potential of podcasts to emerge, along with the engagement of marginalized voices and dissident opinions (Wright, 2022). For instance, Richardson and Green (2018) have explored how podcasting can serve as a platform for amplifying feminist voices, arguing that podcasts offer an accessible and intimate medium that allows women to share their experiences and perspectives, which are often overlooked in traditional media. The facilitation of empathetic relationships between podcasters and listeners provides a safe and encouraging environment for them to reveal intimate and deeply personal information that they would otherwise hesitate to open up. Schukar (2022) has explored the affective potential of queer podcasts, demonstrating how the aesthetics of belonging, embodiment, and desire are created. The amplified voice and “hyper-intimacy” through podcasting afforded the possibility of sharing deep affective and embodied experiences for both the creator and the listener (Rodgers, 2023).

Meanwhile, podcasting and listening are believed to serve to bridge social divides, including temporal and spatial divides, knowledge divides, socio-cultural divides, and even the unequal digital public sphere (Swiatek, 2018). Scholars have actively examined how podcasting facilitated a sense of community when social contact was limited in the context of the pandemic (Lindgren & Bird, 2024; Nee & Santana, 2022). In a study investigating the affective impact of podcasts on listeners, Robson (2021) revealed that, for participants confined indoors due to the Covid-19 restrictions, podcast hosts assumed the role of companions, offering a sense of social connection for listeners in a physically distant environment. Through the on-demand, converged, and distinctive features of the medium, podcasts created mediated opportunities for listeners to experience a sense of normality in terms of mobility and freedoms, providing a kind of affective agency to help them make sense of the crisis.

Nevertheless, despite its potential to deliver pro-social and positive outcomes, podcasting is not without criticism. Podcast intimacy may entangle issues of public concern with personalized, sentimental perspectives, hindering the pursuit of objective truth while making the listener feel personally invested (Wendland, 2024). When podcasters emphasize listeners’ identification with personal narratives, dispassionate considerations may be lost, obscuring the discussion of crucial public issues (McHugh, 2016). For instance, Nee and Santana (2022, p. 12) argue that the emphasis on personalized storytelling in podcasting may prioritize form over content and render news secondary to emotions, exacerbating the “syndrome of post-truth.” Dowling et al. (2022) contend that emotional language can be employed as a powerful and persuasive tool for political propaganda, leading to ideological hijacking. Lindgren (2016, p. 38) believes that while intimacy contains expressive power, aiding the interpretation of news analysis and comprehension of news contexts, it also can carry the “risk of exploitation.”

Overall, podcasting presents both opportunities and dilemmas for producers. While it offers an affective and deliberative space that breaks free from traditional restrictions, it also creates a tension between individuality and public interest, and its intimate nature contradicts the traditional journalistic approach that emphasizes professionalism.

### 3. Journalistic Professionalism and Intimacy Dilemma

Journalistic professionalism refers to a range of issues in journalism, including the professional identity of journalists, their work routines, norms and ethics, training and certification, gatekeeping and quality standards, and so on (Deuze, 2005; Waisbord, 2013). As a summation of “good practices” in journalism, it reflects the boundary work of journalists, through which they seek control over the work they do and identify themselves as a distinctive group with expertise and prestige (Carlson & Lewis, 2015). Ideally, journalistic professionalism emphasizes a set of enduring values such as public service, value-free reporting, fairness, and justice (Deuze, 2005; Waisbord, 2013). But in practice, it is fluid, situational, contextual, and subject to negotiation, and processes of de-professionalization or re-professionalization are intertwined and constantly evolving (Splichal & Dahlgren, 2016; Wang & Meng, 2023). The perceptions and performances of professionalism of journalists are also the result of contingency and hybridity, influenced by personal ideology, organizational structure, journalistic tradition, media culture, and the technological environment (Mellado et al., 2017; Wang & Li, 2024).

The cornerstone concept of journalistic professionalism has been objectivity, which includes such sub-concepts as impartiality, neutrality, and detachment (Schudson & Anderson, 2009). In particular, to maintain professionalism, journalists are required to be emotionally detached from the events and stories they cover and avoid being influenced by the subjects they report (Richards & Rees, 2011). It has long been considered that objectivity and emotionality are fundamentally contradictory terrains in journalism and that the two should be mutually exclusive (Richards & Rees, 2011). However, with the disruption of the news industry by digital technologies and social media, many traditional values of journalistic professionalism, including objectivity and detachment, have gradually changed and been redefined (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Emotions, first-person expressions, and other affective practices are gradually being accepted by journalists in the digital environment and taken as effective means to engage the audience and improve communication (de Bruin et al., 2022; Kotisova, 2020; Wang, 2023).

While subject to changes, professionalism ultimately serves to promote the self-understanding of journalists and the social acceptance of news and journalism (Örnebring, 2009). In recent decades, the rise of digital technologies has challenged the legitimacy of news media and threatened the professional claims of journalists (Tong, 2017; Wang & Yin, 2024). On the one hand, traditional media are pressured to converge with new and emerging media, and in the process, the journalists’ sense of professionalism tends to be gradually diluted as they adapt to new environments and carry out diverse and multiple tasks. On the other hand, in the age of social media, it is difficult for journalists to exhibit a distinction between their personal and professional images, leading to a trend of mixed identities for journalists. In particular, there seems to be a difficult gap to bridge between intimacy and professionalism in the practices of journalists. A study conducted by Bossio and Sacco (2017) in Australia showed that it is common practice for journalists to post highly intimate “selfies” in parallel with “breaking tweets” that highlight the professionalism in journalism on their social media platforms. Distinguishing the two is a difficult task, and it requires journalists to carefully manage the contradiction and complexity between intimacy in interacting with the audience and professionalism represented by objectivity, neutrality, and detachment. Further studies by Bossio (2023, p. 1780) suggested that journalists may be prone to present an “authentic, aesthetically pleasing, and intimate image” on social media, especially on image-oriented platforms such as Instagram, but these were only moderate presentations that did not harm their professional images. At the same time, journalists have

been observed seeking to redefine professionalism through intimate practices (Meng & Wang, 2025). In a study comparing traditional fashion journalists and fashion bloggers on social media, Cheng and Tandoc (2022) found that fashion bloggers always introduce themselves in an approachable and intimate way, often including personal details in their posts, whereas fashion magazine journalists hope to complement their professional image with an easily accessible “girlfriend to girlfriend tone,” and establish an intimate connection with readers in order to gain their loyalty and trust. These studies indicate that although the tension between intimacy and journalistic professionalism is unavoidable, the two are not irreconcilable, and the possibilities lie in the details and nuances of journalists’ new practices in the digital environment.

The intimate aspect of podcasting has led to it being a venue for experimentation in innovative journalism practices, with the potential to reinvent existing norms. Scholars have come up with contradictory findings regarding the relationship between podcasts and traditional journalism. While some found that podcasting represents a reappraisal of journalistic values such as objectivity (Dowling & Miller, 2019), others argued that the sonic elements and headphone-based listening environments represent a subversion of the norm of objectivity (Lindgren, 2023). Therefore, podcasting serves as an important example to examine what kind of balance journalists keep when venturing into new territories in the digital media environment and especially how they navigate between intimacy and professionalism, which seem to be contradictory, paradoxical, and conflictual.

#### 4. Research Questions and Methods

Based on the above discussions, our study focuses on journalistic podcasters in China, asking two research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese podcasters perceive and construct podcast intimacy?

RQ2: How do they manage the dilemma between podcast intimacy and the pursuit of journalistic professionalism?

We used in-depth interviews and document research to answer these questions. The targets of our research were journalistic podcasters with a traditional journalism background. PodFest China, initiated by JustPod, a leading Chinese podcast startup, is the first and biggest podcasters’ conference in China (“Women zai diliu,” 2024). Based on the guest attendance list of PodFest China over the past six years, we identified 37 journalistic podcasters who have worked in traditional media, including on television, in news magazines, and on radio. We contacted each of them for in-depth interviews, and 15 agreed to our interview request. The interviews were conducted from November 2023 to September 2024. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, and five were through voice calls. The shortest lasted for 30 minutes, and the longest was 153 minutes, with an average of 56.1 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interviews, we searched public resources and collected the public remarks of these podcasters on their podcasting experiences. Based on multiple platforms such as Google, Baidu, Weibo, WeChat, Little Universe, Himalaya, and Apple Podcast, our search yielded a total of 35 documents, involving 15 podcasters on the list, among whom six podcasters were also interviewed by us. These materials, spanning from January 2018 to May 2024, include 12 media reports, 20 podcast talks, and three public lectures. The podcast talks and public lectures are in audio form and we transcribed the key content into

texts for analysis. Overall, the lengths of these materials range from 3,011 to 40,401 words, with an average of approximately 15,232 words.

In total, our study has involved 24 journalistic podcasters. They all have at least one year of work experience in the podcast industry, and the longest-serving journalist has 11 years of podcast production experience. The average number of years of podcasting is 4.87. For anonymity reasons, we used alphabet letters (A–X) to code and present them. The analysis followed the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). We first listened to all the audio documents including podcast episodes and taped interviews and read the text documents to familiarize ourselves with the data. Then, concentrating on the RQs of this study, we reviewed the documents and observed relevant details and themes. Our analysis focuses on how the journalist podcasters reflect on their podcasting experience, how they aspire to professionalize this highly personalized medium, what their views on the construction of intimacy are, and how they strike a balance between intimacy and professionalism. We present the research findings in the next section.

## 5. Research Findings

### 5.1. Recognizing Intimacy

Through analysis of research data, we find that Chinese podcasters are well aware that intimacy is central to podcasting practice. They share a consensus that podcasting is an intimate medium, and this is the feature that distinguishes it from the media form they previously experienced. In particular, they believe that the use of sound and voice is the key to constructing intimacy. According to podcaster D, “Humans naturally have a greater emotional attachment to voice,” and once the audiences become familiar with the voice of a podcast host, they will develop an “intimate stickiness” (D, podcast talk, 11 January 2022). In their view, compared to depersonalized and institutionalized media, podcasting, as a special medium, should benefit from using voice to maintain its intimacy, as also stated by podcaster G:

[The quality of] podcast relies on your voice. This doesn't mean that you simply make your voice at random, but it requires that you truly present yourself with your way of speaking, your tone of voice, and your view of things. You need to let audiences know that you are a real and living person. (G, interview, 4 September 2024)

Many believe that an authentic voice is crucial for establishing an intimate relationship between the host and the audience, and this is related to the context in which audiences listen to podcasts:

The scenario of listening to podcasts will be quite personal, whether you're doing some housework, sleeping, doing makeup, or commuting. And at that kind of moment, when you feel someone's voice right next to your ears, it just gives you a sense of intimacy, both in terms of your listening experience and your environment. (Q, interview, 26 May 2024)

Podcaster P further explained the reasons for the intimacy brought about by listening to podcasts in commuting scenarios, believing that this intimacy largely stems from the interaction between the voice of podcasters and the listening environment. The listener's perception and subjective feeling towards that voice also shape the sense of intimacy:



Picture you're driving a car and passing the scenery outside, and you are also listening to a podcast. Although the voice in your headphones doesn't describe the scenery you see outside, you feel that they are communicating. It's an interactive relationship between voice and landscape. Your eyes are looking at the scenery, and there is a person's voice in your ears at the same time. It's the voice you choose to listen to. Together, they give you a very intimate experience. (P, interview, 25 May 2024)

Furthermore, podcaster W suggested that the intimacy of podcasts derived from their companionship function, which was regarded as the underlying logic and characteristic of podcasting. This sense of companionship differentiates podcasts from other media, rendering it a new utopia for building connections and emotional bonds between hosts and listeners (W, media report, 6 May 2022). This observation was echoed by podcaster A, who believed that the construction of intimacy should act upon emotions in "the formation of a tacit understanding between the podcaster and audience" (A, interview, 18 November 2023). He compared the intimacy brought about by listening to podcasts to the kind of intimacy someone experiences when communicating with his or her partner before bedtime (A, podcast talk, 23 December 2022). In such an intimate relationship, "if you find that the host is trying to pretend to be someone different from himself or herself, the feeling of deception arises and it can be devastating" (A, podcast talk, 23 December 2022).

Nevertheless, while recognizing the central role of intimacy in podcasting, the podcasters also realized that the use of intimacy has a two-sided effect: if used well, it can enhance a podcast; if used poorly, it can discredit it. Our analysis shows that Chinese podcasters adopted four strategies to navigate the balance between intimacy and professionalization: maintaining neutrality, limiting personal details, managing sound and voice, and guarding journalistic boundaries. We explain these in turn in Sections 5.2–5.5.

## 5.2. *Maintaining Neutrality*

As a core element of journalistic professionalism, neutrality has been valued by media practitioners in various countries, especially in the Western world (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Ojala, 2021). Neutrality emphasizes a non-interference mindset, which means that journalists should not influence readers' views on the reported events in any way (Ojala, 2021). Adhering to neutrality requires adopting an independent observer's position and only disseminating facts in news reporting (Ojala, 2021). Previous studies argued that journalists from non-Western environments including China (Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017) tend to be more interventionist in their reporting and have moral perspectives. But to Chinese podcasters, cautioning against interventionism, adopting a neutral stance, and avoiding biased expressions are strategic in balancing the inherent intimacy podcasting conveys.

Podcaster F who runs a program specializing in telling human-interest stories, is a typical example of emphasizing the importance of being "a neutral observer":

I entered the media industry in 2010 and have been doing the job for 11 years....I've presented countless stories of other people, but no single episode tells my own story. This may be related to my personality and journalistic beliefs. I've always regarded myself as a recorder and observer. Although I'm the host of the program, I won't be the protagonist. (F, podcast talk, 8 September 2021)

Especially when the stories being told have aroused strong feelings and raised heated debates among the audience, podcaster F would “pay extra attention” to neutrality and be “extra careful” not to make a judgment nor to preach and express his own values (F, podcast talk, 8 September 2021). He sought to objectively present complex and thought-provoking stories of humanized individuals, leaving the interpretation of complexity to the audience:

If your story conveys a truthful reality, it is already effective on your listeners. So usually when I’m recording a podcast, I don’t end with a summary, say, what kind of values this story illustrates, because the story itself already explains everything. (F, podcast talk, 27 January 2019)

Similarly, podcaster C also believed that recording a podcast was a process of “conducting in-depth interviews with people who stand on different sides and have different experiences of the same event” (C, media report, 7 July 2022). In this process, “the hosts should not state their personal views but guide the audience to gain new knowledge from multiple dimensions and new perspectives” (C, media report, 7 July 2022). Podcaster B, who came from a magazine journalism background, concurred and commented:

I was just asked the same question a while ago: Why don’t you express your opinions more? Why are you always asking questions and not expressing yourself? Actually, I have my own thoughts on every topic, but I think as a host, I should let the guests talk more. However, when I encounter views that I disagree with, I’ll definitely choose to express and challenge the guests. But I don’t force anyone to accept mine. (B, media report, 15 October 2020)

To the podcasters, intimacy is a built-in feature of podcasting, and through it, the relationship between the podcasters and the listeners is already much closer than other media forms afford. Therefore, the podcasters need to avoid reinforcing the closeness but instead maintain some distance. Podcaster A admitted that he never touched on “grand narratives” in his podcasts, but rather approached topics from the perspective of human interest and emotions: “This is what podcasting is about” (A, interview, 18 November 2023). However, he will not go further to offer his interpretations of the story to intervene in listeners’ perception, as “the humanized stories and characters are already attractive enough to the listeners, and more is not beneficial but could be damaging” (A, interview, 18 November 2023). The podcasters felt deeply that the flip side of intimacy could be emotional or ideological hijacking. Prioritizing human interest stories and personalized storytelling while adopting a neutral stance in podcasting can effectively resolve this dilemma, maintaining fans’ loyalty without damaging the intimacy between the audience and the podcasters.

### **5.3. Limiting Personal Details**

Exposure to personal stories and details can assist podcasters in enhancing intimacy with their audience while ensuring that the listeners can trust their high-quality podcast content. In this study, we have found the use of personal stories in many podcasters and their programs. Some podcasters may reveal details of their personal lives, such as hobbies, to bond with the listeners. For example, podcaster F collected various sounds from the natural environment of his hometown, and integrated these sounds into his podcast production, sharing his childhood memories and experiences with his audience in the form of sound (F, podcast talk, 27 June 2022). Others may incorporate their personal stories in podcasting to enhance the

listening effects. Coming from a TV news background, podcaster U highlighted her emphasis on the sharing of personal experiences when talking about the different approaches she took in podcasting:

From being a TV host to being a podcast host, becoming particularly authentic is a significant change for me....Another change is that I'll moderately use my personal experiences to induce others to speak. I always believe that a good answer is not actually inspired by interviewing skills but by an interviewer's sharing of personal experiences. (U, public lecture, 25 May 2024)

Similarly, before becoming a podcast host, podcaster V was an investigative reporter in a news magazine. She said that an important change in her journalism style was to start talking about herself and telling her personal stories: "Traditional journalism restricted freedom of personal expressions of individual journalists, but podcasts allowed you to break free from this confinement" (V, public lecture, 25 May 2024).

But at the same time, these podcasters are consciously aware of the need to impose a limit and manage the use of personal details. They have a tendency to showcase their personal stories to achieve stimulating effects while taking care not to overuse personal exposure. Podcaster A said:

When I became a professional podcast producer, I knew I had to bond with my audience on a personal level and resonate with them. Sometimes I share my own experiences when discussing news topics, but it's very limited. My experiences are there to help listeners understand the news better, not to make myself the focus of the story. (A, interview, 18 November 2023)

He believes that telling some of his own stories is necessary, but it must be in line with the topic. Talking about personal anecdotes relevant to the podcast content can help reduce the distance from the audience and enhance intimacy. But the legacy of journalistic professionalism prompts podcasters not to over-indulge in self-expression in storytelling. Podcaster X remarked that sometimes he would deliberately share his own stories in order to stimulate guests to talk about theirs during the interview, but in the editing process, he would cut out his own stories and only keep the guests' stories: "For this reason, some listeners criticized me for having no personality, but maintaining a bit of mystery will be good for me and the show in the long run" (X, interview, 20 September 2024).

To balance intimacy and professionalism, podcasters may use newsletters or additional space for showing personal details and telling personal stories. For example, podcaster B actively uses newsletters to share her personal experiences and stories, such as bird watching, walking in the park, and chatting with tea farmers, as a way of communicating with the audience and collecting their suggestions (B, podcast talk, 26 January 2022). Podcaster G found offline activities to be very useful in establishing personal bonds with the listeners. He organized face-to-face meetings with his listeners almost every year, in which he shared his personal experiences and some details of his personal life (G, interview, 4 September 2024). But overall, the podcasters recognized telling personal stories and experiences should be an audience-oriented practice, the role of which is to be closer to their listeners and enhance the companionship aspect of podcasts. The appropriate degree of personal disclosure is an important factor in the success of this strategy. Excessive sharing of personal details can be irritating to listeners and distract them from the main content. Hence, these particular podcasters from journalistic backgrounds are cautious in using personal details. As Podcaster A said, "We should be very careful not to become the social-media influencer type of host" (A, interview, 18 November 2023).

#### 5.4. Managing Sound and Voice

Sound and voice are among the most important factors defining the quality of podcasts (McHugh, 2022). “Narrative voice, ambient sound, and music” has been found to contribute to the success of a podcast, especially in terms of creating an intimate atmosphere to boost listening effects (Dowling & Miller, 2019, p. 178). But in order to balance between intimacy and professionalism, sound and voice need to be managed, so that they appear in the right way to benefit rather than degrade a podcast program. In this study, we have found that journalistic podcasters are mindful of managing sound and voice to enhance intimacy on the one hand and ensure their quality and acceptance by the audience on the other hand.

As in the instances described by Lindgren (2023) where award-winning Australian and British podcast journalists tend to use “a chatty tone of voice” to tell the stories (p. 709), the Chinese podcasters are also well aware of the necessity of distinguishing themselves from the old-fashioned TV or radio hosts. They avoid making themselves sound as if they are reading a prepared script, and they tend to adopt authentic and natural voices rather than using trained and standardized ones. One of the strategies followed is to adopt natural accents. Podcaster T explained from the audience’s perspective what accent means to a podcast:

I think the audience wants some professionalism, but not everything needs to be so formal. They want something unique, and they appreciate you being you. I deliberately keep some of my accent in my podcasts, not because I can’t speak standard Mandarin, but because I think the accent adds to my style. I think listeners like feeling more connected, guessing whether I’m from the north or south, and then remembering me as a host with personal characteristics. (T, podcast talk, 24 November 2023)

She believed that avoiding standard Mandarin was a gesture to reject the “broadcast” label and retain the “podcaster” identity and it helped construct a unique “voice image” for her. Similarly, podcaster D said that initially, she required the guests appearing on her show to speak standard Mandarin and not to have too much of an accent. For this reason, she was not able to cover many topics because of the accents of the guests. But later she changed her mind, admitting personalized voices in her program, and refraining from eliminating innocuous mistakes, repetitions, and mood words of her guests in editing, because “that’s how people talk” (D, podcast talk, 1 November 2021).

However, this is not without limits. Although the podcasters accept accents and even deliberately create some accents to boost the authenticity of the show, they maintain the standard that “it should not affect listeners’ experience” (X, interview, 20 September 2024). Behind this is the fact that these podcasters have an idea about what the “ideal” kind of voice should be, and they impose professional control to achieve that. Drawing on years of experience in audio editing in the podcast industry, podcaster L explained how he pursued the “ideal voice”:

When editing audio, we often manage to make a person’s voice sound warm, which is a very comfortable way to communicate with others. We want to create the feeling of the sound of the voice lingering in the ears of the listeners and make it like someone speaks closely to a certain part of your body. (L, interview, 8 December 2023)

After years of practice and reflection, he felt that naturalness should not be confused with rawness and roughness, and sound and voice need to be modified. While preserving a sense of natural flow and personalized features, sound processing procedures should be in place to “clean” the audio by cutting off noises, catchphrases, and redundant information: “Otherwise it will damage the audience experience” (L, interview, 8 December 2023). In addition, he habitually incorporates ambient sound, a type of background or environmental noise, into his podcast to provide the audience with an immersive and authentic feeling.

However, professional editing does not solve all the problems that hinder podcasters’ pursuit of the “ideal voice.” Podcaster M said she once hosted a financial news show but had to abandon it because she did not have “the right voice” (M, interview, 8 December 2023). She recalled that she thought she was trying to present a natural voice to her audience, but the audience was dissatisfied and commented that her voice was “too sweet and felt immature.” As the host of a relatively hard news format like financial news, she was expected to speak with a tough and authoritative voice, which she didn’t have. So, she decided to move on to the backstage of the show: “There is nothing I can do about it because I was born with this voice” (M, interview, 8 December 2023).

### **5.5. Guarding Journalistic Boundaries**

The intimate aspect of podcasting has tended to blur journalistic boundaries, making it difficult for listeners to strictly distinguish between personal and professional content. At the same time, in the process of commercialization, podcasters often intuitively rely on intimacy or even abuse intimacy, to sell products and generate revenue, further exacerbating the blurring of journalistic boundaries. Analyzing the research materials, we found that these journalistic podcasters are generally wary of the commercial use or overuse of intimacy in advertising, pay attention to the need to balance commercialism and journalism, and guard journalistic boundaries.

These podcasters hold ambiguous views regarding the commercial use of intimacy. With the development of the podcast industry, commercial operations have become inevitable. Commercialization is one of the important driving forces for them to continue producing podcasting programs, and it is also crucial for the sustainable development of the podcast industry (Berg, 2021b). Intimacy seems to be a convenient and readily available tool for podcasters to pursue their commercial goals. Given that most of the podcast programs run by individuals or groups in China are start-up projects operating in the form of entrepreneurial journalism, sufficient income is particularly important for them to achieve long-term survival and support the production of continuous, stable, and high-quality content. But at the same time, podcasters believe that listeners need to be protected from advertising, and the intimacy that they develop with podcasts should not be monetized.

Formerly a newspaper journalist, Podcaster H believed that the “emotional stickiness and companionship” derived from the intimacy of podcasts are the most unique and appealing features of the medium (H, media report, 8 January 2021). The sense of closeness that voices bring to the audience is much stronger than images, text, and videos. But he also realized that the unguarded acceptance of podcast content by audiences may trigger the abuse of podcast intimacy. Although commercial goals are justifiable, podcasters should not prioritize commercialization:

What are we doing podcasts for? I think the first reason is for enjoyment, the second is to make a living, and the third is to make the world better. I think as podcasters, creating even a little bit of enjoyment for our listeners is valuable. I believe that in the end, we should do podcasting for this purpose, not for commercial things. Commercialization only makes us do it better. (H, podcast talk, 20 November 2020)

An important strategy adopted by the podcasters is the attempt to maintain the boundary between journalistic content and advertisements. From the moment podcasts began to attract people's attention, advertising has become an important practice, providing financial support for content creators. But from the audiences' perspective, advertisements are often perceived as annoying interference (Brinson & Lemon, 2023). These podcasters believe that if the advertising information is cleverly conveyed by their favorite podcast host, the audiences' aversion to the advertisement may decrease.

Podcaster J said that in his program he would strictly distinguish between content and advertisements, ensuring that the needs of advertisers are met while protecting the audiences' intimate listening experience (J, interview, 7 December 2023). Podcaster M mentioned that she often had conflicts with her marketing colleagues as she valued the priority of content over advertisements, protecting podcast content from excessive commercialization (M, interview, 8 December 2023). Podcaster N has also argued that clearly separating content from advertisements was an effective way to prevent content from being infringed upon by advertisements:

Unlike embedding advertisements into specific podcast content, this approach distinguishes content and advertising into two relatively independent parts. It ensures the audience's immersive listening experience is not interrupted. Also, directly telling the audience at the beginning that this part contains an advertisement may also prepare the audience psychologically, and they may not have a feeling of being deceived when hearing the implanted advertisements. (N, interview, 7 December 2023)

Many podcasters noted that the commercialization of podcasts should be a gradual process, and forcing the pace of the commercializing progress may cause listeners to become irritated, which is fatal to the long-term growth of podcasts. Some podcasters have become hesitant in the pursuit of commercialization through advertising, questioning whether they should give advertisers access to the intimate space they have maintained with listeners. As podcaster B said, advertising is not the only funding source, and there are other ways to make a living (B, interview, 21 September 2024). Although she is still in the exploratory stage, she has discovered the potential for generating revenue through alternative methods such as paywalls, membership fees, offline activities, etc., and she believed that her program would gradually develop a sustainable business model without compromising the quality of podcast content (B, interview, 21 September 2024).

## 6. Conclusion

The Chinese podcasters examined in this study, who have backgrounds in mainstream media, entered the podcasting industry for various reasons, but they remain committed to producing high-quality content. Although they currently do not have a clear definition of what constitutes a professional podcast program, they tend to reach a consensus that professionalism is the principle that must be followed when producing a podcast. In the production process, due to the influence of podcast intimacy, these podcasters do not feel



the need to completely de-personalize when pursuing professionalism, as traditional media practitioners do, but feel they should use personal features appropriately. Therefore, the practices of this specific group of podcasters in China can be understood as the pursuit of professional podcast content while highlighting personal features and striking a balance between intimacy and traditional journalistic values.

On the one hand, by adopting human-interest angles, personalized storytelling, background audio, natural language, dialects, etc., Chinese podcasters are redefining journalistic norms according to the specific demands of podcasting as an intimate medium. On the other hand, they tend to balance podcast intimacy and professionalism through strategies such as maintaining neutrality, limiting personal details, managing sound and voice, and guarding journalistic boundaries to avoid over-indulgence in the close relationship with listeners and protect them from advertisements. Some strategies, such as revealing personal details, are relatively difficult to operate in practice, and once excessive or inappropriate information is exposed, it may deal a fatal blow to the bond between the podcasters and their audience. However, even if their strategies are flawed in many ways, their practices should be considered meaningful, reflecting the creativity of Chinese journalists in adapting to the new technological and economic environment.

In summary, this study reveals that Chinese podcasters recognize the intimate nature of the podcast medium. They embrace podcast intimacy and actively leverage this affordance while also managing and regulating intimacy through control mechanisms to emphasize traditional professional values. These podcasters continue to pursue professionalism in the podcast sphere, which may be compromised by intimacy. By balancing intimacy and professionalism, they present new possibilities for preserving publicly-trusted journalism within the podcast sphere.

A large amount of research related to podcasts has focused on the context of Western countries, and a significant contribution of this study is to provide a de-Westernized perspective on podcast research, presenting the case of China and providing an insight into the development of podcasts in one of the most populated countries in the world. In addition, this study has focused on podcasters from journalistic backgrounds, and it enhances our understanding of how news can continue to maintain its connection with the public in the course of digital transformation.

There are of course limitations to this study, and future research is needed to deepen the understanding. First of all, podcasting is a rapidly growing market in China, with over 220 million listeners and more than 240,000 commercially viable podcast programs (“Ximalaya boke jiemu,” 2024). We only studied journalistic podcasters, thus ignoring the programs created by podcasters without a journalism background. Secondly, although podcasts are typically “intimate media,” there are other forms of journalism, such as short videos, thriving in the digital environment based on the stress on the value of intimacy. Comparing podcasts with these media will provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between intimacy and professionalism.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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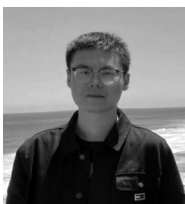
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# Strategic Choices for Balancing Intimacy and Professionalism: Content Analysis of Chinese Podcasts on Himalaya

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## Abstract

By analyzing 120 episodes from 12 podcast accounts, representing central, provincial, commercial, and individual Chinese news outlets on the Himalaya platform, this study examines the strategies employed by news publishers to balance intimacy and professionalism. Our findings show that while all media types prioritize professionalism, their strategies for cultivating intimacy differ significantly. Compared to commercial and provincial media, central media achieved the best balance between intimacy and professionalism. Individual media demonstrated the highest intimacy scores, whereas central media excelled in professionalism. This study enhances our understanding of how institutional backgrounds shape strategies in audio journalism. It offers insights into balancing intimacy with professional standards in the podcast medium.

## Keywords

audio journalism; Chinese podcasts; Himalaya; intimacy; news podcasts; podcasts; professionalism

## 1. Introduction

Podcasts have emerged as a significant force in the digital media landscape, experiencing a surge in both production and listenership. This audio-based format has achieved widespread popularity among audiences, offering a unique combination of convenience, intimacy, and depth that traditional media often struggle to replicate (Berry, 2016). The popularity of podcasts has increased significantly across diverse demographics,

with global listenership expanding rapidly (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, et al., 2023). As of December 2023, there were over 464 million podcast listeners worldwide, with projections indicating this number will reach 504.9 million by 2024 (Harutyunyan, 2025).

In response to the shifting media consumption landscape, an increasing number of media outlets have developed their own podcast offerings to capitalize on this trend (Newman & Gallo, 2019). This transition represents a strategic move by news outlets to adapt to changing audience preferences and leverage the unique benefits of podcasting in an evolving media landscape (Dhiman, 2023), reflecting a fundamental rethinking of how news can be produced, distributed, and consumed in the digital age (Sullivan, 2019). While the rise of podcasts has presented news agencies with opportunities, it has also introduced challenges, particularly in navigating the delicate balance between intimacy and professionalism (MacDougall, 2011; Markman, 2012). This balancing act becomes even more critical as podcasts increasingly become a primary source of news and information for many listeners (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, et al., 2023). However, comprehensive studies on how news podcasts balance these aspects within a diverse ecosystem remain limited.

This study aims to address these research gaps by exploring how Chinese news podcasts balance intimacy and professionalism, contributing to the adaptation of news agencies and individuals to the unique affordances of podcasting while maintaining professionalism in a competitive media environment. By focusing on China's largest podcasting platform, Himalaya, this research provides insights into how news podcasts shape intimacy through the podcast format, maintain professionalism in a medium that often encourages a more casual approach, and develop strategies to balance these seemingly conflicting aspects. The findings of this study will not only enhance our understanding of audio journalism in China but also offer a model that can help us comprehend how news podcasters globally navigate this delicate balance.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. News Podcasts and Intimacy

Podcasts are revolutionizing news consumption by fostering a unique sense of intimacy between reporters and listeners, distinguishing them from traditional media formats (Dhiman, 2023; Llinares et al., 2018). This intimate connection can be understood through the lens of parasocial relationships, a concept introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) to describe the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between media personalities and their audience. Parasocial relationships serve as an effective mechanism for fulfilling social needs (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). In the context of podcasting, these parasocial relationships enhance the medium's intimate nature by fostering personal connections, thereby influencing audience engagement and loyalty (Perks & Turner, 2019). Forming parasocial relationships with hosts can be a motivation for podcast use (Perks & Turner, 2019) and may contribute to the development of stickiness to podcast programs (Lin & Huang, 2024). For instance, Euritt (2023) explored the distinctive qualities that make podcasting an intimate medium, highlighting key elements such as personal connection, narrative style, first-person reporting, emotional resonance, and interactive elements. These elements not only fostered intimacy but also served as the foundation for parasocial relationships between podcast hosts and listeners (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). These findings provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the various dimensions of intimacy in podcast content and consumption.

The intimate nature of podcasts is enhanced by the immersive quality of audio, including ambient sounds, music, and varied vocal tones. Listening to podcasts in personal spaces—such as commuting, exercising, or relaxing at home—also fosters a sense of personal connection (Berry, 2016). This personal and often solitary listening experience further intensifies the parasocial bond, as listeners feel they are being spoken to directly and privately by the host (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Parasocial theory, first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956), explains how mass media performers establish a sense of conversation to engage with their audience. Subsequent scholars have expanded this theory, demonstrating that both intimacy and news characteristics are critical in shaping relationships between news producers and audiences (Stever, 2017). The theory encompasses several key elements, including media figure presentation, interaction strategies, sense of place, linguistic style, and narrative persuasion techniques, alongside professional journalistic standards such as transparency, authority, ethical adherence, and accurate representation of diverse perspectives (Stever, 2017).

Many news podcasts extend intimacy beyond audio by fostering a sense of involvement through interactive elements such as listener feedback segments, social media engagement, and live events or discussions. For instance, Euritt (2019) examined how the *NPR Politics Podcast* incorporates interactive elements (such as audience engagement through social media, listener feedback, and content-shaping polls) and “liveness” (including real-time discussions, timely topics, and live events) to enhance audience engagement and create a sense of intimacy. By inviting listeners to share their opinions, questions, and stories, podcast creators find another way to cultivate a loyal and engaged audience (Menduni, 2007). These interactive elements serve to reinforce and deepen parasocial relationships, as listeners feel increasingly connected to and involved with the podcast and its hosts (Perks & Turner, 2019).

The development of parasocial relationships in podcasting presents both opportunities and challenges for news organizations. While these relationships can foster loyalty and engagement, they also raise questions about maintaining journalistic objectivity and professionalism. As news podcasts continue to evolve, finding the right balance between cultivating intimate, parasocial connections and upholding journalistic standards remains a key consideration for podcast creators and news organizations (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

## **2.2. Professionalism in Audio Journalism**

While podcasting requires audio journalism to create intimacy to engage listeners, professionalism remains crucial, especially as media consumers grow increasingly skeptical of news sources. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, trust in news has declined. In 2023, trust fell by a further 2% from 2022, with only 40% of consumers expressing trust (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, et al., 2023). By 2024, trust in news stabilized at 40%, remaining four points lower than during the height of the pandemic (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, et al., 2024). This trend underscores the continued importance of journalistic professionalism.

Professionalism in journalism encompasses a set of professional standards that guide reporters to conduct their work with credibility, accuracy, and integrity (Beam, 1990; Waisbord, 2013), all of which are essential for maintaining public trust. Historically, these professional standards, including the principles of truthfulness, accuracy, independence, objectivity, impartiality, and fairness, have served as crucial elements for evaluating journalistic performance (Waisbord, 2013). In the context of audio journalism, professionalism manifests through adherence to established journalistic principles, including maintaining robust journalistic

standards (Kern, 2012), establishing and preserving authority (Carlson, 2017), and ensuring transparency in reporting (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). While these conventional standards remain relevant, the emergence of podcasting has given rise to new interpretations of professionalism that sometimes diverge from traditional norms (Bottomley, 2015). For this study, we define professionalism in podcasts as the commitment to ethical standards, factual accuracy, and transparency in reporting, while recognizing that the application of these principles may vary across different podcast formats and cultural contexts.

Journalistic standards encompass multiple fundamental factors, including rigorous fact-checking procedures, ethical considerations, and balanced representation of diverse viewpoints (Kern, 2012). A cornerstone of these standards is the consistent application of the 5W1H framework (who, what, when, where, why, and how), which has long served as a foundational element of professional journalism (Tanikawa, 2017). In the podcasting context, these elements serve as essential guidelines for comprehensive coverage, enabling reporters to deliver thorough, fact-based content that meets professional standards. The 5W1H framework not only helps structure narratives but also ensures the effective conveyance of critical information, thereby upholding principles of accuracy, completeness, and clarity in the digital age (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, et al., 2021). While this framework remains fundamental to journalistic professionalism, it must function in harmony with other essential dimensions—particularly authority and transparency—to ensure professionalism in podcast news.

Authority in podcasts is critical for news credibility and trustworthiness. This concept of authority extends beyond formal institutional power, encompassing informal influences as well. The foundation of journalistic authority lies not in the ability to command, but in the audience's willingness to trust (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). This trust is intrinsically linked to the public's belief in reporters' capacity to fulfill their core responsibilities, particularly in delivering accurate information. Most podcast listeners expect the news to be accurate, underscoring the trust placed in this format (Shearer et al., 2023). Consequently, podcasts often feature experts and officials to validate the information, enhancing credibility. Transparency in the reporting process has become a "staple ingredient" of podcasting (Lindgren, 2022). This involves revealing the journalistic process, constructing the reporter's persona, and reaffirming the journalistic culture (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). Revealing the journalistic process includes discussing how stories are researched, verified, and produced, which builds professionalism by allowing listeners to understand the steps taken to ensure accuracy and fairness. Constructing the reporter's persona helps connect with the audience by sharing personal insights and background information, which adds authenticity and reliability to the content (Shearer et al., 2023). Reaffirming the journalistic culture means upholding and promoting journalism's values and standards, such as integrity, objectivity, and accountability. By doing so, podcasters reinforce the importance of trustworthy news and uphold their medium's professionalism (Cook, 2023).

### ***2.3. Balancing Intimacy and Professionalism***

The characteristics of news and the nature of podcasts present challenges in balancing intimacy and professionalism in news podcasts (MacDougall, 2011; Markman, 2012). On one hand, the intimate nature of podcasts allows for a more personal, conversational tone that can enhance audience engagement and build strong listener relationships. This strategic choice for intimacy can increase trust and loyalty among listeners. On the other hand, the informal and personal aspects of podcasting can impact the professionalism and credibility that traditional news outlets have cultivated over decades (Berry, 2016).

This tension is further complicated by the varying objectives of different news agencies and individuals. Some value the informal, personal touch that podcasts can bring to news delivery, recognizing the medium's potential for deeper audience engagement and storytelling (Lindgren, 2016). These outlets may prioritize building intimate connections with listeners, leveraging the unique affordances of podcasts to create more relatable and accessible content. Conversely, others adhere to the principle that providing an authoritative news source should simply take the form of a podcast without compromising traditional journalistic standards (Perks & Turner, 2019). For these news publishers, maintaining credibility and upholding established norms of objectivity and professionalism take precedence, even as they adapt to new digital formats. This dichotomy reflects broader debates within journalism about adapting to changing media landscapes while preserving core professional values (Dowling & Miller, 2019).

#### **2.4. The Chinese Journalism Landscape**

China's media ecosystem is characterized by a varied array of national, commercial, and individual outlets, offering a rich context for examining the nuances of professionalism in media. Each type of media entity must navigate the tension between engaging audiences through intimate podcast formats and maintaining professional standards. This complex interplay shapes the evolving landscape of podcasts in China, influencing how professionalism is defined, practiced, and perceived by both producers and consumers of news podcasts (Zhao, 2012).

This diversity in media ownership and identity influences how different actors approach the intimacy–professionalism balance in podcasting. State-affiliated media outlets, for example, may prioritize maintaining their authoritative voice while adapting to the more intimate format of podcasts. In contrast, commercial entities and individual creators might have more flexibility to experiment with informal, conversational styles, self-disclosure, and personal storytelling that foster closer connections with listeners (Chen & Reese, 2015; Funk, 2017; Jorgensen, 2021). Notably, it is important to note that while this study examines the balance between intimacy and professionalism in audio journalism, these concepts are not inherently dichotomous or mutually exclusive. Aspects of these two concepts can coexist and even complement each other in podcasts, with their relationship varying depending on the media outlet's identity, goals, and target audience.

#### **2.5. Chinese Audio Journalism on Himalaya**

In recent years, podcast news has risen rapidly in China, expanding the news consumption market. The rise of the Himalaya (Ximalaya FM, <https://www.ximalaya.com>) podcasting platform exemplifies this trend toward audio journalism. Launched in 2013, Himalaya has quickly become the country's leading podcast platform, with over 13.51 million podcast creators (Guangming Online, 2024) and more than 220 million listeners in 2023 (Ximalaya, 2023). The platform is freely accessible to Chinese users and offers a wide range of content, including news, entertainment, education, and more. Its popularity and accessibility make it a representative case for studying podcast trends in China.

The platform's rapid growth has attracted an increasing number of news agencies and individuals who are opening accounts to distribute news content in audio format. In this context, "news agencies" refer to a broad range of entities producing journalistic content, including traditional news organizations, media

companies, and independent journalists who have established a presence on the Himalaya platform. This surge in participation from established media outlets underscores the growing importance of podcasts in China's news ecosystem (Wang, 2023). The varied landscape of China's media, spanning government-controlled, market-driven, and individual news sources, offers a unique and rich field to explore how various podcast types navigate the balance between intimacy and professionalism.

### 3. Research Objectives

While previous studies have explored the characteristics and strategies of podcasts in various contexts (Markman, 2012; McClung & Johnson, 2010), limited research focuses on how news agencies balance intimacy and professionalism in their content production. This balance is particularly complex in the context of China's diverse media landscape, which encompasses governmental, commercial, and individual news entities. Accordingly, building on parasocial theory, this study aims to explore the strategic choices in balancing intimacy and professionalism by analyzing Chinese news podcasts on the Himalaya platform. Specifically, the research objectives are:

1. To identify and analyze the strategies employed by Chinese news outlets to foster intimacy and maintain professionalism.
2. To explore how Chinese news outlets maintain professional credibility while leveraging the intimate nature of podcasts.
3. To examine how the identity of news outlets (governmental, commercial, or individual) influences their approaches to podcast content.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Media Platform and Materials Samples

We selected Himalaya, China's leading podcast platform, as the media platform for this study. From the numerous news podcast accounts on Himalaya, we chose to analyze four types of accounts based on their administrative hierarchy and characteristics: central media, provincial media, commercial media, and individual media. Central media refers to national-level outlets directly overseen by the central government, playing a pivotal role in China's news media sector. Provincial media serves as local extensions of central media, operating at the provincial level. Commercial media encompasses news outlets operating on a for-profit basis through private and semi-private entities. Individual media, also known as self-media, represents independently created and distributed podcasts produced by individuals. This selection of media types provides a comprehensive representation of the diverse news podcast landscape in China.

To ensure representative examples, we selected the top three most subscribed accounts from each media type and analyzed the top 10 most-played podcast episodes from each account as the research subjects for content analysis. Ultimately, we gathered 120 pieces of content from 12 podcast accounts, published between January 1, 2024, and June 30, 2024. This sample size allowed us to capture a diverse range of topics and styles within each account, providing a comprehensive view of how these podcasts regularly function. Details are provided in Table 1.



**Table 1.** Distribution of analyzed podcast accounts and episodes.

Media type	Top three most subscribed accounts	Number of selected episodes
Central media (national)	<i>People.cn</i>	10
	<i>CCTV.com</i>	10
	<i>Xinhua News Agency</i>	10
Provincial media (local)	<i>Nanfang Metropolis Daily</i>	10
	<i>The Beijing News</i>	10
	<i>Liaoshen Evening News</i>	10
Commercial media	<i>Xima Headlines</i>	10
	<i>The Paper</i>	10
	<i>Red Star News</i>	10
Individual media	<i>Channel of Xiaobo Wu</i>	10
	<i>Studio of Kewen Lu</i>	10
	<i>Zhenhai Qiu</i>	10

## 4.2. Coding

Two of the co-authors, who are postgraduate students in Journalism and Communication, screened and categorized the selected news podcasts according to coding themes. The coding book, which was made by the first and corresponding author, contains variables that cover the basic dimensions of intimacy and professionalism in news podcasts, such as interaction promotion, engagement encouragement, language optimization, narrative strategy, news elements (5W1H), authority, and transparency. These dimensions were further broken down into 26 specific indicators. Table 2 presents the detailed dimensions, corresponding indicators, and descriptions.

The process of constructing these coding elements was as follows: First, we identified the main dimensions of intimacy and professionalism based on existing literature (Lindgren, 2016, 2023; Perks & Turner, 2019). Then, we listened to a sample of podcasts to identify specific manifestations of these dimensions in Chinese news podcasts. Next, we combined these observations with our theoretical framework to develop an initial coding scheme. Finally, we conducted a round of trial coding and refined the coding scheme based on the results. This iterative approach ensured that our coding scheme was both theoretically grounded and accurately reflected the realities of Chinese news podcasts. Detailed information about the coding scheme, including specific definitions and examples for each indicator, can be found in Table 2.

In addition to the manual coding items mentioned above, to utilize the objective characteristics of podcast audio for a better understanding of the various dimensions of manual coding, this study employed the deep learning-based FunASR model to transcribe the audio into text.

## 4.3. Reliability

After operationalizing the coding items, the coders underwent a training session. We selected 20% of the 120 episodes for preliminary coding. This initial round resulted in an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.73 (Fleiss' Kappa). Following this, the coders underwent additional training, focusing specifically on the

**Table 2.** The category and description of coding.

Category	Dimensions	Indicators	Definition & description
Intimacy	Interaction promotion	Comment solicitation	Reminding/encouraging listeners to comment
		Audience feedback incorporation	Pointing out/quoting comments from listeners
		Interactive atmosphere creation	Encouraging interaction
	Engagement encouragement	Presence simulation	Creating a sense of presence, e.g., "follow my step to XX"
		Familiarity building	Bringing people closer together, e.g., using intimate words
		Audience greeting	Greeting the audience
	Language optimization	Colloquial language use	Using colloquial language
		Greeting integration	Using greetings, e.g., hi, hello, good night, etc.
		Slogan implementation	Using fixed greetings or slogans
	Narrative strategy	Reporter characterization	Reporters as a character in stories or news
		Personal anecdote sharing	Reporters telling stories of people around them
		Audience role integration	Listeners as characters in a story or news
Audience perspective framing		Regarding listeners as friends	
Professionalism	News elements	Time (when)	When: The specific time of the event
		Place (where)	Where: The specific location of the event
		Characters (who)	Who: The characters involved in the event
		Event (what)	What: What event or situation occurred
		Cause (why)	Why: The reason for the event
		Process (how)	How: How the event occurred
	Authority	Source attribution	Indicating the source of news, including official sources (e.g., government documents, official statistics), mainstream media outlets, academic sources, and expert viewpoints
		Story origin clarification	Indicating the story or news source
		Media identification	Indicating the name of the media outlet/account
	Transparency*	Anchor self-referencing	Identifying the anchor as the source
		Journalistic process revealing	Revealing the journalistic process
		Reporter persona construction	Constructing the reporter's persona
		Journalistic culture reaffirmation	Reaffirming the journalistic culture

Note: \* Adapted from Perdomo and Rodrigues-Rouleau (2022).

dimensions that showed lower consistency: transparency, typology, and sonic elements. A second round of coding was then conducted using 15 new episodes. This resulted in an improved inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.9 (Fleiss' Kappa). Finally, the 120 episodes were randomized, and each coder was assigned 60 episodes to code independently. When different opinions appeared, all authors chose a suitable one after discussion.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Overview of Selected News Podcasts

Ten out of the 12 accounts held Blue V certification, which is a verification status on the Himalaya platform that indicates the account belongs to an official organization, media outlet, or public figure. This certification serves to authenticate the identity of the account holder and often carries more credibility with users. Collectively, these accounts had 146,735,989 followers, with an average episode duration of 427 seconds. The overall average duration across all podcasts was 433 seconds, with durations ranging from 9 seconds to 2,454 seconds. The average number of plays per episode was 113,750, with a minimum of 775 and a maximum of 532,000 plays.

All episodes featured at least one host, while 11.7% included one or more guests. Regarding episode types, 12 were categorized as micro-bulletins, 55 as news roundups, 44 as deep-dive analyses, and 9 as others. In terms of sonic elements, 14 news podcasts incorporated guest voices, 16 included theme tunes, 43 featured background music, and 30 contained film clips or visual elements. Details are provided in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of included podcasts.

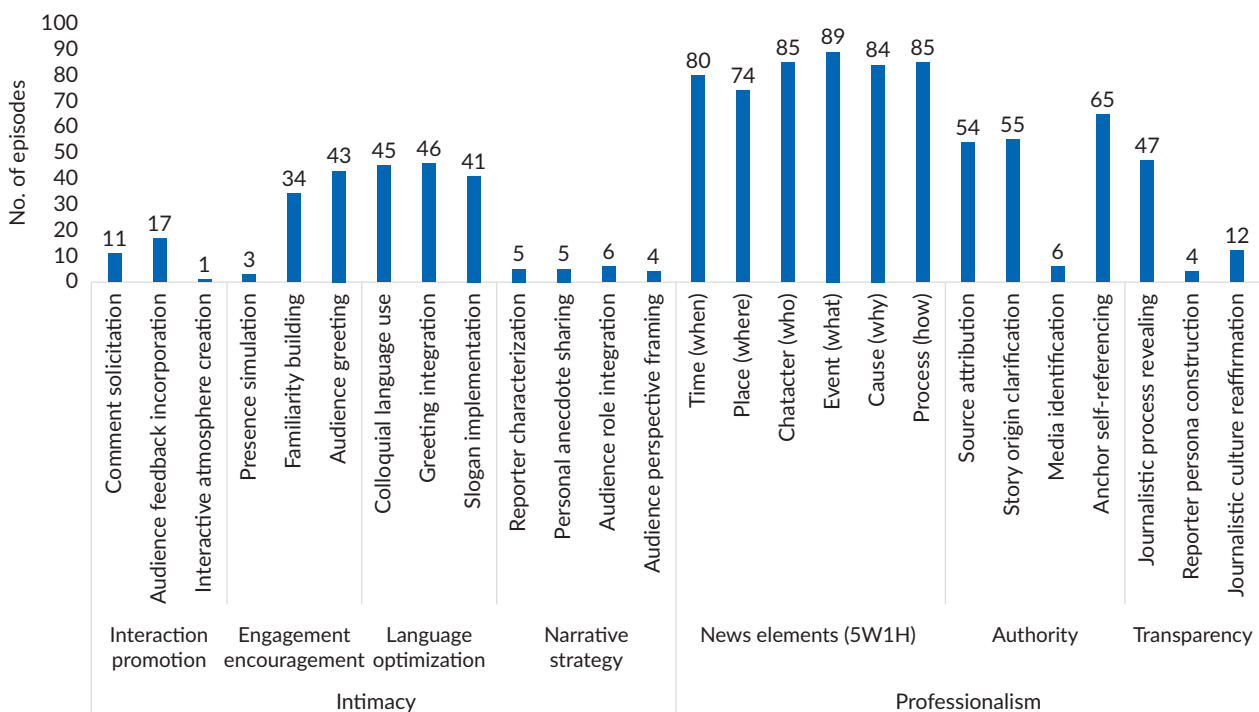
Characteristic	Items	No. (%)
Episodes	—	120
Blue V*	—	10 (83.3%)
Followers	—	146,735,989
Average duration(s)	—	433
Average plays	—	113,750
Hosts	—	120 (100%)
Guests	—	14 (11.7%)
Podcast types*	Micro-bulletins	12 (10%)
	News round-ups	55 (67%)
	Deep-dive analysis	44 (36.7%)
	Others	9 (3.3%)
Sonic elements**	Guest voices	14 (11.7%)
	Theme tunes	16 (13.3%)
	Background music	43 (35.8%)
	Film clips/Visual elements	30 (25%)

Notes: \* This referenced the literature of Newman and Gallo (2019); \*\* sum of percentages does not equal 100% because 13 episodes were not identified as containing altered sonic elements.

## 5.2. Intimacy and Professionalism Strategies for Selected News Podcasts

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of intimacy and professionalism strategies used in the selected news podcasts. In the intimacy dimension, four main categories were identified: interaction promotion, engagement encouragement, language optimization, and narrative strategy. Among these, language optimization was the most widely adopted, featuring strategies such as colloquial language use ( $n = 45$ ), greeting integration ( $n = 46$ ), and slogan implementation ( $n = 41$ ). Engagement encouragement was the second widely used, particularly in familiarity building ( $n = 34$ ) and audience greeting ( $n = 43$ ). Interaction promotion showed moderate adoption, notably with comment solicitation ( $n = 11$ ) and audience feedback incorporation ( $n = 17$ ). Narrative strategy exhibited the least usage, including reporter characterization ( $n = 5$ ), personal anecdote sharing ( $n = 5$ ), audience role integration ( $n = 6$ ), and audience perspective framing ( $n = 4$ ).

The professionalism dimension included three primary categories: news elements (5W1H), authority, and transparency. The news elements category, covering the fundamental components of news reporting, showed remarkably high usage across all elements. The authority category also saw significant adoption, particularly in anchor self-referencing ( $n = 65$ ) and story origin clarification ( $n = 55$ ). The transparency category saw moderate usage of strategies such as reporter persona construction ( $n = 47$ ) and journalistic culture reaffirmation ( $n = 12$ ), suggesting an ongoing effort to maintain and communicate journalistic integrity within the podcast medium.



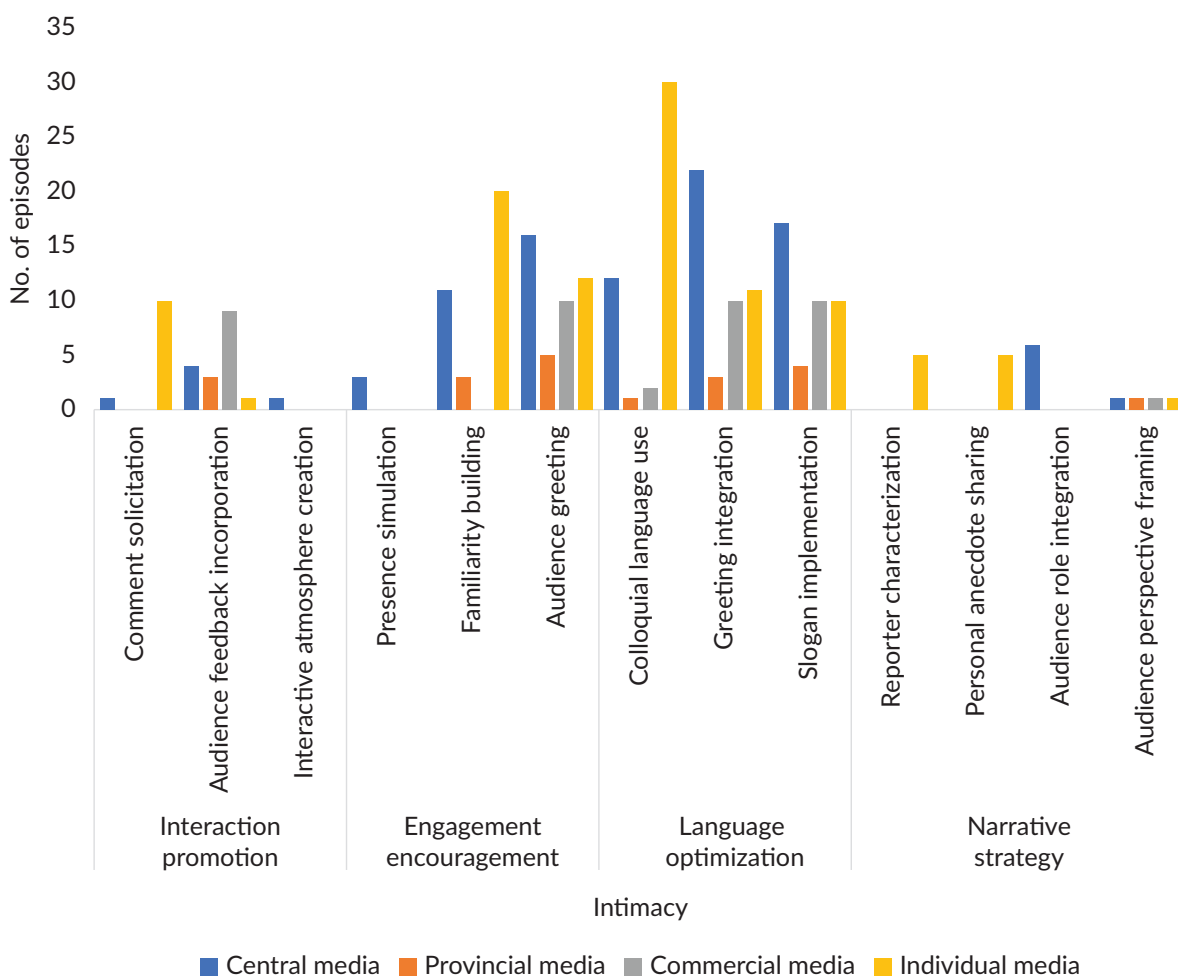
**Figure 1.** Overview of intimacy and professionalism strategies used in the selected news podcasts.

### 5.3. Distribution of Intimacy Strategies in Different Media Types

Figure 2 illustrates the performance of intimacy strategies in the selected news podcasts. Across all categories, individual media consistently showed high engagement with most strategies, followed closely by central media. Commercial and provincial media showed a higher prevalence of certain practices, particularly in specific areas of engagement and language use, but generally exhibited lower overall adoption of these strategies.

In the realm of interaction promotion, individual media engaged much more frequently in these practices, particularly in soliciting comments ( $n = 10$ ). Commercial media led in incorporating audience feedback ( $n = 9$ ). In terms of engagement encouragement, central media excelled in audience greetings ( $n = 12$ ) and presence simulation ( $n = 3$ ). Individual media excelled in building familiarity ( $n = 20$ ).

Language optimization strategies saw widespread adoption across all media types. Individual media led in colloquial language use ( $n = 30$ ). Central media showed strong performance in greeting integration ( $n = 22$ ) and slogan implementation ( $n = 17$ ). Narrative strategy techniques showed the least adoption, with central media leading in audience role integration ( $n = 6$ ) and individual media in reporter characterization ( $n = 5$ ).



**Figure 2.** Distribution of intimacy strategies employed by different media types.

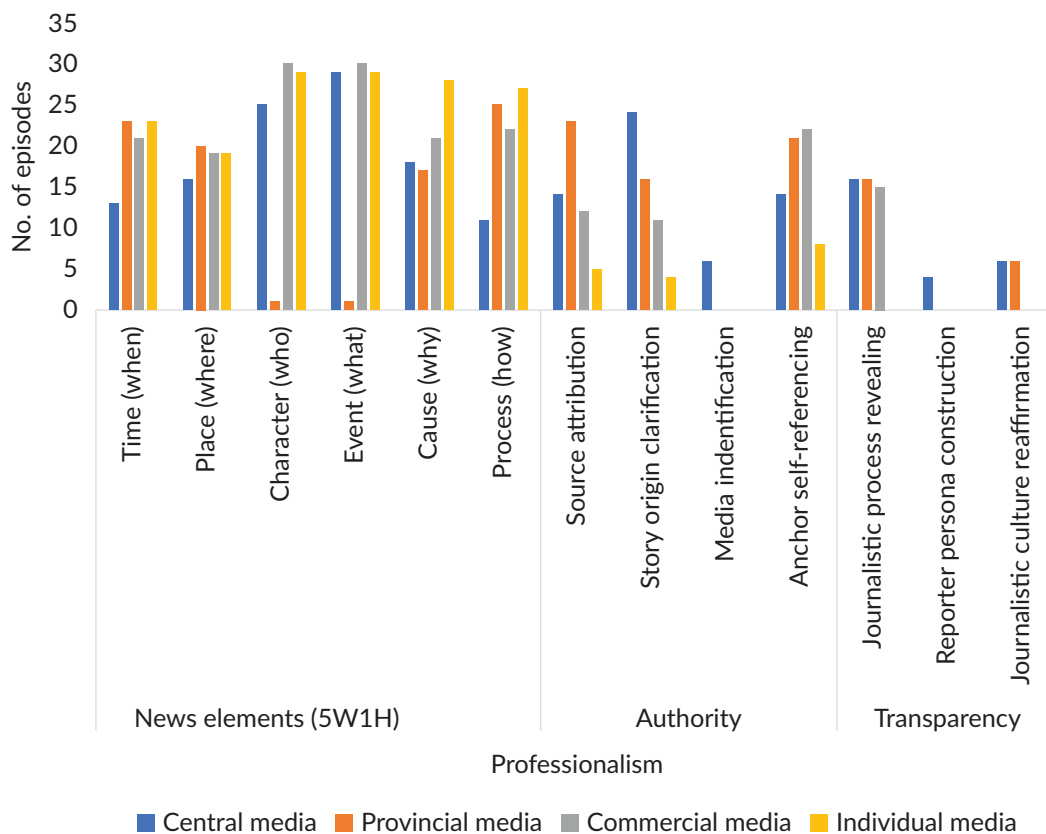
### 5.4. Distribution of Professionalism Strategies in Different Media Types

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of professionalism strategies employed by various media types in the selected news podcasts, highlighting the complex strategies used by different media types.

In the domain of news elements (5W1H), a cornerstone of journalistic professionalism, all media types demonstrated robust engagement. Notably, commercial and individual media exhibited a higher frequency of usage across these elements, particularly in elucidating events and their underlying causes. This trend suggests a concerted effort to provide comprehensive, context-rich reporting despite the constraints of the podcast format.

Authority-building strategies presented an intriguing distribution across media types. Provincial media led in source attribution ( $n = 23$ ), potentially indicating a strategy to bolster credibility through external validation. Central media excelled in story origin clarification ( $n = 24$ ) and media identification ( $n = 6$ ), leveraging their institutional reputation. Commercial media emerged as the top performer in anchor self-referencing ( $n = 22$ ), possibly aiming to personalize their content while maintaining professional standards.

Transparency measures revealed more varied adoption patterns. Commercial media's pronounced use of journalistic process revealing ( $n = 16$ ), reporter persona construction ( $n = 4$ ), and journalistic culture reaffirmation ( $n = 6$ ) stands out, suggesting a strategy of building trust through openness. Provincial media matched this performance in process revealing ( $n = 16$ ) and journalistic culture reaffirmation ( $n = 6$ ),



**Figure 3.** Distribution of professionalism strategies employed by various media types.



indicating a similar commitment to transparency. Interestingly, commercial and individual media demonstrated average performance across all three indicators of transparency.

In terms of establishing authority, we found significant differences in how different types of media use external sources. Central media tended to cite official and authoritative sources, while commercial media cited more diverse sources. Notably, central media performed best in citing reliable sources ( $n = 28$ ), followed by provincial media ( $n = 23$ ). However, individual media had the highest frequency of citing potentially problematic sources ( $n = 7$ ).

### 5.5. Balancing Intimacy and Professionalism

To quantify the media's efforts in balancing intimacy and professionalism, we calculated the percentage of episodes that employed at least one strategy from each category (Figure 4). This analysis revealed a consistent prioritization of professionalism across all media types, albeit with varying degrees of intimacy integration.

Individual media emerged as the most adept at navigating this balance, achieving the highest intimacy score (26.9%) while maintaining a robust professionalism rating (44.1%). Central media followed closely, demonstrating a strong commitment to professionalism (50.3%) while still cultivating a significant degree of intimacy (24.1%), indicating a nuanced adaptation of traditional journalistic practices to the podcast medium. Commercial media, while achieving the least professionalism score (40.1%), managed to incorporate a moderate level of intimacy (10.8%). Notably, provincial media exhibited the most pronounced disparity, heavily favoring professionalism (43.3%) at the expense of intimacy (5.1%).

This analysis highlights the varying approaches to balancing intimacy and professionalism across different types of media in China's podcasting landscape. Individual media lead in intimacy while maintaining professionalism, central media closely follow with a strong emphasis on professionalism, provincial media show a clear preference for professionalism over intimacy, and commercial media strive to balance both, albeit with a lower overall score in professionalism.

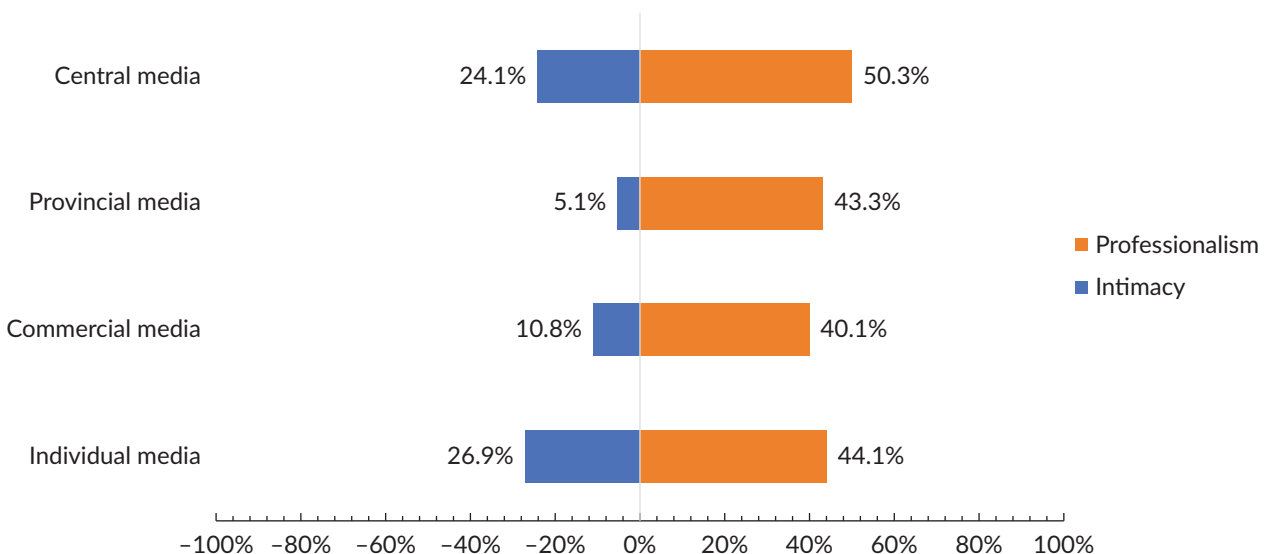


Figure 4. Percentage of episodes employing intimacy and professionalism strategies.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines Chinese news podcasts on the Himalaya platform, revealing nuanced strategies employed by various media organizations to balance intimacy and professionalism in digital audio journalism. The findings illuminate the complex interplay between traditional journalistic values and the demands of podcast formats, emphasizing how identities influence strategies for engaging audiences while maintaining professionalism.

### 6.1. *Institutional Identity and Intimacy Strategies*

To enhance audience engagement, news podcasts employ various intimacy-building strategies, such as interactive elements, heightened engagement techniques, and innovative narrative approaches. However, the pursuit of intimacy is not unlimited; it is bound by and intricately linked to the media's identity.

The study demonstrates that individual media consistently employed the widest range of intimacy strategies, particularly excelling in soliciting comments, building familiarity, and using colloquial language. This approach aligns with the personal nature of podcasting and the greater flexibility available to individual creators (Berry, 2016). Funk (2017) found that non-professional podcast hosts were more inclined to engage in self-disclosure, and Jorgensen (2021) observed that independent podcast hosts used personal storytelling to enhance emotional connections. Similarly, commercial media's strengths in areas such as incorporating audience feedback suggest a targeted strategy to engage listeners while balancing commercial interests with journalistic integrity.

In contrast, central media's strong performance in integrating greetings and implementing slogans suggests a more structured approach to fostering intimacy, possibly reflecting their need to maintain a formal institutional identity while adapting to the podcast medium. Although constrained by their high-authority institutional background, central media outlets still strive to bridge the gap with listeners through colloquial language and greetings. The lower adoption of intimacy strategies by provincial media is noteworthy and may indicate a more cautious approach to digital transformation. This could stem from resource constraints or a perceived need to maintain traditional journalistic detachment (MacDougall, 2011). It is also possible that China's provincial media outlets are simply repurposing news from traditional outlets onto podcast platforms without prioritizing audience expansion or digital transformation.

### 6.2. *Maintaining Professionalism in Podcast Formats*

News agencies leveraging podcast platforms to discover or expand their audience base must maintain journalistic professionalism. Unlike traditional broadcast media, podcasts allow for long-form content that delves deeply into subjects, providing comprehensive analysis and diverse perspectives. This format affords news organizations the opportunity to enhance their professional credibility through in-depth reporting and analysis. Our study demonstrates that, on Himalaya, all four media types prioritized professionalism over intimacy. However, it's important to acknowledge that professionalism and intimacy are not always mutually exclusive and can, in fact, overlap and interact in complex ways.

The extensive use of core news elements (5W1H) across all media types underscores the enduring importance of fundamental journalistic practices in podcast formats. Notably, presenting the 5W1H of a

story in an intimate tone of voice can be seen as an example where professionalism and intimacy converge. Similarly, efforts to reveal the journalistic process might simultaneously demonstrate professional transparency while fostering intimacy with listeners. Central media's excellence in clarifying story origins and identifying media sources reflects their institutional strength and the importance they place on source credibility (Xie & Zhao, 2014). This approach aligns with traditional expectations of state-affiliated media outlets in China's media landscape, suggesting a strategic adaptation of established practices to the podcast medium.

The emphasis on professionalism across all media types in the podcast format reflects a broader trend in audio journalism, where maintaining credibility and trust is paramount in an increasingly crowded and complex media landscape. This emphasis is particularly noteworthy in the context of podcasting, a medium that often blends personal storytelling with journalistic rigor. Professionalism is not just a practice in journalism but an ideology that shapes journalists' identities and work methods (Zelizer, 2004). In the digital age, the importance of this professionalism has become even more pronounced.

The use of external sources reveals unique challenges in assessing the professionalism of news podcasts. Central media's tendency to cite official and authoritative sources reflects the emphasis on official information in Chinese journalism; however, this practice may limit the diversity of information. In contrast, commercial and individual media tend to reference a wider range of sources, which increases the risk of citing potentially unreliable ones.

Our research findings, which show an emphasis on professionalism across different types of media organizations in podcasts, may reflect their common pursuit of maintaining public credibility. However, as Ekström and Westlund (2019) pointed out, journalistic professionalism in the digital environment is undergoing a process of redefinition and renegotiation. In the specific format of podcasts, this redefinition may manifest as adherence to traditional news elements and the incorporation of new values such as transparency and interactivity.

### ***6.3. Navigating the Intimacy–Professionalism Balance***

Overall, while all media types excel in professionalism over intimacy, efforts are made to balance both. Our study reveals distinct strategies employed by different media types to navigate this balance. Individual media's low average pitch and moderate speaking rate, combined with the high use of intimacy strategies, suggest a conversational approach that prioritizes listener engagement (Markman, 2012). In contrast, central media's higher pitch and slower speaking rate, along with strong use of formal journalistic elements, indicate a careful balance between maintaining authority and adapting to the podcast format.

The varying approaches across media types highlight the influence of institutional identity on content and broadcasting strategy. Central and provincial media appear more constrained by traditional journalistic authority, while commercial and individual media show greater flexibility in adopting intimate, audience-centric approaches. This divergence reflects the complex interplay between institutional norms, audience expectations, and platform affordances in shaping digital journalism practices (Steensen & Westlund, 2021). Central and provincial media's adherence to conventional journalistic standards may stem from their roles as official information sources, prioritizing credibility over engagement (Wilding et al., 2018).

Conversely, commercial and individual media's adaptability suggests a strategic pivot toward audience preferences, leveraging the podcast medium's intimate nature to foster closer listener relationships (Berry, 2016).

This dichotomy highlights the ongoing tension in podcasts between upholding professional standards and adopting new forms of audience engagement. This is particularly evident in the pursuit of dual legitimacy to connect with audiences in China's evolving media landscape (Yin et al., 2024), illuminating the complex interactions among news entities, audiences, technology, and the state in China. Navigating this balance requires careful consideration of content, tone, and presentation. Journalists and producers must leverage the intimate podcast format without compromising the standards of accuracy, objectivity, and ethical reporting that underpin journalistic professionalism.

#### **6.4. Implications for Podcasts**

The study suggests that successfully navigating the podcast medium requires a nuanced understanding of audience expectations regarding both intimacy and professionalism. The varied strategies employed by different media types indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to balancing these factors. The emphasis on professionalism across all media types in podcast formats underscores the enduring importance of traditional journalistic values in new media environments. This aligns with Lindgren's (2016) observation that podcasting, despite its often informal tone, still requires adherence to core journalistic principles. As podcasts evolve, maintaining this balance between professionalism and the intimate nature of podcasts will be crucial for credibility and audience trust.

The varied approaches to authority-building strategies observed among different media types suggest a need for tailored approaches to establish credibility in audio formats. The intimacy of podcasting creates unique challenges and opportunities for professionalism. Media organizations, especially those transitioning from traditional formats, may need to adapt professionalism-building techniques to suit the podcast medium while preserving their identity (Perks & Turner, 2019). As Boling (2019) stated, personal connection with audiences is a key strength of podcasting, but it must be balanced with professionalism. This suggests that audio reporters need to develop skills in creating engaging, personal content while maintaining professional standards.

The study also highlights the potential for podcasts to serve as a platform for journalistic innovation, particularly for commercial and individual media. Their adoption of diverse intimacy strategies, combined with transparency measures, suggests a pathway for building trust and engagement in the digital age, aligning with Newman and Gallo's (2019) observations on the transformative potential of podcasts for news organizations.

## **7. Limitations and Future Research**

While this study offers valuable insights into the balance between intimacy and professionalism, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, our exclusive focus on the Chinese context constrains the generalizability of our findings to other media environments. Secondly, our sample selection, which emphasized the most popular podcasts on the Himalaya platform, may introduce potential bias. Although this approach allowed for the analysis of podcasts with significant audience reach, it may not accurately

represent the full spectrum of audio journalism in China. Thirdly, while our content analysis method was comprehensive and rigorous, it could be complemented by audience reception studies. Investigating how listeners perceive and respond to news podcasts could provide valuable insights into how intimacy is received and constructed. Finally, while our study identifies specific techniques used by news podcasts to build intimacy, we have not explored the broader cultural construction of intimacy. Our focus on the production side did not capture how these strategies interact with and are shaped by cultural factors.

Building on our findings, future research could explore several promising avenues. Firstly, studies could investigate how cultural factors influence the construction and perception of intimacy in podcasts. Additionally, longitudinal research tracking the evolution of intimacy and professionalism strategies in podcast journalism over time could provide insights into how these practices adapt to changing media landscapes and audience preferences. Furthermore, studies involving podcast journalists could examine their decision-making processes in balancing intimacy and professionalism, shedding light on the practical challenges and strategies employed in podcast production.

In conclusion, audio journalism, particularly in podcast format, is at a critical juncture. It must navigate the demands of a new medium while upholding traditional journalistic values. Future research and practice in this field should focus on developing strategies that leverage the strengths of audio storytelling while maintaining the credibility and authority essential to quality journalism.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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