



The Role of Podcasts in Shaping Public Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the media landscape has been reshaped by technological disruption, corporate consolidation, and shifting consumption habits. Within this evolving environment, podcasts have emerged as a transformative medium, facilitating participatory, decentralized, and often hyperlocal discourse. This paper examines the rise of podcasts as a powerful cultural force in shaping public conversations, political dialogue, and social engagement. It examines the historical and philosophical foundations of public media, the accessibility and flexibility of podcast formats, and their potential as democratic tools of informal education and civic participation. Through case studies, production analysis, and interviews with content creators, this paper analyzes how podcast hosts and audiences co-create narratives that influence public opinion, challenge traditional journalism, and foster community engagement. Special attention is given to the dual nature of podcasts as platforms for both credible information and misinformation, highlighting their centrality in navigating contemporary issues such as political polarization, social justice movements, and the future of public media.

Keywords: Podcasting, public discourse, digital media, civic engagement, audio journalism, misinformation, community storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the U.S. media landscape has significantly transformed, marked by de-regulation and the rise of powerful media corporations engaging in monopolistic practices. Traditional business models have been decimated by digital technology and evolving consumption habits. A range of political upheavals—from the Iraq War to the resurgence of neo-fascism—has prompted both mainstream and non-commercial media to reflect critically on their roles. This collection of essays advocates for a comprehensive understanding of these shifts and their political implications. Public radio journalism is presented as a counterforce to the overwhelming digital noise, influencing how communities perceive and engage with media. Local soundscapes uniquely characterize daily life, illustrating the dynamic involvement of community members within broadcast systems. The rise of podcasting enhances local cultural public broadcasting by fostering highly participatory, geographically focused engagement, and creating a healthy local ecology. This grassroots audio storytelling benefits from low entry barriers, minimal competition, advanced distribution, and sustainable revenue models [1, 2].

Historical Context of Podcasts

In a 1934 lecture, John Dewey outlined the ideal of a fully developed news media in an educated democracy. News media ought to play an educational role in public life, publishing and broadcasting information that would lead to greater democratic participation, and a stronger sense of community in society. Dewey was careful to specify that he meant news published in the broadest sense. To be a fully educated citizen able to partake in a democracy does not simply mean passively consuming occasional national network news broadcasts. Rather, an ideal news citizen would cultivate an array of daily news endeavors and be able to connect the dots between local developments and the broader historical or political context in which they occur. Dewey considered such connections to be, if not elementary, at least some kind of first step in the education of a citizenry able to engage in the public controversies of the day. Coverage, in other words, should be fluid, dynamic, variable, and multi-sourced. Why does one news story get printed at a given time, or ignored? In his words, “its importance cannot be determined unless

the new is placed in relation to the old. In short, there should be a kind of news as a commodity that functions not for the advertisement of the newsier but for the educational needs of the news consumer". A well-known side effect of burgeoning media technologies and formats has been a steadily increasing rate of news commodification. Dewey was perhaps prophetic in the way that he warned, "With news as a commodity, there will be a radical change in the media and implications of its use." Journalists who are given to for profit use and abuse of the news commodity may not mind misinforming and diverting the public. Those who are dedicated to social service and cultural development may be caught in a dismaying conflict when in the hands of large business organizations. Those honest but too naïve in the world of finance may unwittingly pit themselves against an opponent who knows no ethics and scruples, calculating agency analyzers and possibilities in terms of dollars rather than education and cultivation of the public affairs. This is a dangerous expression when a news commodity takes the shape of a media entertainment vehicle widely watched, yet none the wiser [3, 4].

The Rise of Podcasting

If music inspires and radio entertains, podcasts examine the human intellect. Their popularity has surged in recent years due to easy accessibility and the minimal technology needed to create them. People listen during commutes, workouts, or while working, and anyone can create a podcast. This widespread media form has naturally expanded beyond entertainment. A podcast is defined as a digital audio file shared online. Although it may seem new, podcasting is nearly twenty years old, with one of the first continuously running podcasts starting in 2003. Interviews with a wide range of figures were recorded and shared as MP3 files. The podcasting revolution was facilitated by software developed in the late 1990s, leveraging RSS feeds to distribute audio files. The launch of the Apple iPod in 2002 also played a crucial role in mainstream podcasting adoption. As of 2023, approximately 486 million people globally listen to podcasts at least monthly, with 424 million tuning in weekly. There are notable discrepancies in podcast consumption between the US and the rest of the world [5, 6].

Podcasts As a Medium for Public Discourse

Public broadcasting has adapted to the rise of digital content, excelling in audio and video production. NPR's 1A attracts millions with diverse topics, while local initiatives like On the Line and Louisiana Issues Forum foster in-depth discussions among experts and community leaders on quality-of-life issues. Stations such as Milwaukee PBS and KETC offer forums addressing current concerns. PBS NewsHour Nation engages audiences with live-streamed roundtables covering mental health, eco-anxiety, censorship, and more, inviting viewer input on topics. This paper explores similar podcasts, analyzing their formats, lengths, and promotional tactics, and evaluates their contributions to public discourse. It discusses how they navigate public interest goals amidst constraints like organizational culture and funding. The paper also reflects on public media creators' views about new podcast opportunities and challenges in fostering informed discussions. Recommendations aim to bridge the gap between digital discourse expectations and public media's mission to encourage civil dialogue. The discussion situates itself within the evolving landscape of media, noting the increased commercialization and consolidation within broadcast media, streaming services, and social media. It highlights the implications and opportunities posed by new platforms for public programming, drawing insights from interviews with media makers on their strategies to navigate risks and leverage potential benefits [7, 8].

Influence on Political Conversations

Although podcasts cover every conceivable genre you can imagine, many famous shows focus on politics, and some have even risen to become chart-topping compared to traditional media outlets. Around 20% of Americans said they listened to political podcasts in 2021, compared to around 50% for news shows. Despite podcasts' inability to replace traditional news sources' informational capacity, they account for a higher percentage of political dialogue than any other medium, with 32% of political discussions taking place there, compared to 23% for international media and 4% for print. Podcasts are a growing factor in public discourse and can influence political opinions instead of the quality of the news source. Nonetheless, the first quarter of 2020 saw the rise of false conspiracy theories, in particular "5G" theories alleging that COVID-19 was caused by 5G transmitters. Furthermore, 40% of respondents indicated that they were exposed to conspiracy theories on podcasts or other social media platforms. Podcasts are easily accessible to everyone — the only requirement is a smartphone that, combined with ubiquitous use and simple accessibility, can become a public influential medium. Emerging politics of truth talk show newly risen decision-makers in society, which makes room for the rise of marketability and the anti-consumer discourse. Some mainstream 'truth' views explained COVID-19 in a manner that is conspiratorial and questionable and contributed to an explosive growth in reach through social media. This danger of

conspiracy theories comes with implications beyond the pandemic. Political origin conspiracy theories that wish to attribute COVID-19 to a market of a wet food market in Wuhan or a laboratory-engineered virus or a biological warfare tool of the Army Bioweapons Lab have been particularly fruitful of work. Among them, the former represented by the viral "Chain of Transmission" [9, 10].

Podcasts and Social Movements

In recent years, the emergence of "grassroots" media from fringe figures online has led to increased extremism and conspiracy-driven disinformation reaching mainstream audiences. This trend coincides with a decline in traditional media gatekeeping for news production and distribution. The rise of long-form journalism in the mid-1990s at NPR has mirrored these changes. One way to help audiences engage with the implications of rapid events is through long-form audio storytelling about the media landscape. This is exemplified by a small media nonprofit's podcasts aimed at promoting media literacy. The case discusses one internal and one external podcast, revealing insights into media consumption, conspiracy theories, the media landscape, and social justice issues. Despite limited focus on podcasting's impact on information production, examples of "homegrown" media are needed to address these concerns. Understanding how podcasters can influence changes in media coverage and introduce new ideas or stories is crucial. Both podcasts emphasize the complexity of news consumption and the meanings of journalism in democracy and citizenship. They highlight political disaffection, conspiracy theories, filter bubble fears, and the need for assistance, thus showcasing the relevance of journalism today [11, 12].

The Role of Hosts and Guests

To grasp podcasting's influence on public discourse, understanding the roles of hosts and guests is essential. Hosts often drive the content, particularly in narrative-style podcasts, yet many rely on question-response dynamics to convey information. By asking targeted questions and providing commentary, hosts shape the context and presentation of the episode. Conversely, guests contribute their experiences or expertise, sometimes challenging the host's views. This co-production affects the episode's flow and conclusions drawn from it. Unlike traditional broadcast journalism, where the host is an objective facilitator, podcast hosts typically assume a more interpretive role, assessing relevance, biases, and topic relationships. Their follow-up questions and tonal adjustments allow for real-time contextualization of the information, creating a blend of informative and emotive exchanges. This interactional dynamics in topical podcasts often go unnoticed in existing research. This study builds on previous work regarding conversational repair within interactions, focusing on how John and Dax handled a variety of content in a topical podcast setting. By examining a specific episode, this research seeks insight into the conducting of podcast interviews and their potential religious purposes, analyzing the structure, style, and meaning to understand the podcast's operational dynamics at a micro level [13, 14].

Audience Engagement and Interaction

That immediacy is referenced by some producers discussing "breaking the fourth wall," engaging the audience in the journalism process rather than delivering a finished product. Devin Katayama, host of The Bay, explains that he sometimes addresses the audience directly after a report, inviting them to connect personally. Obsessed pioneered this direct engagement, with the host in the first episode saying, "Hang in there," leading to feedback on the relatable content, creating a bond with listeners. One producer suggests podcasts have allowed audio-centric storytelling to flourish, whereas radio remains tied to traditional hard news. There's a notable tension in public radio between those who believe good podcasts are akin to good broadcasts and those advocating for a distinct creation process for podcasts. Each approach has its benefits. Angela Evancie of Vermont Public Radio discusses their initiative, "Brave Little State," which engages the community by answering audience questions. This podcast, while primarily digital, has attracted new audiences and illuminated the local news process for listeners. "Brave Little State" exemplifies innovative information gathering, using Hearken's tools to collect audience questions, allowing votes to determine which topics are featured. Evancie emphasizes the success of this engagement: "Our motto is to make our journalism more inclusive, transparent, and fun." With Hearken, the audience is treated as partners, collaborating on both the subject matter and the form of the journalism piece [15, 16].

Challenges In Podcasting

Light on new trends in public media podcasting reveals issues of context: radio as a shared, collective medium, while podcasts are ceaselessly binging solo pursuits. Publicly funded media may counter commercialization of new terms, yet chill thorough discussion of subsidies and potential models, to stem concerns over patronage or further erosion of "the public." Interviews explore public service podcasting, obstacles to programming and production, and how strategies were adjusted over time. Users shifted

assumptions about needs and tasks; strategies began to focus more on programming design, steering structures, and social amplification—which shaped planned activity and vision and conceptualized success. Social media marketing was increasingly prioritized, and openings for unanticipated connection were sought out using various platforms in addition to wider messaging. Educators identified tacit expertise that was desired to be moved. Possible continuities were also identified; critical reflection on when less successful efforts occurred suggested challenges involving sound and being on camera in youth-produced video meant to circulate more widely on social media. Traditional media are shifting modes in response to various pressures, launching on-demand podcasts and live video streams. Audiences over time have been conditioned to see notions of late night without host/correspondent interaction as counter to expectations. Small adjustments such as captioning, aside annotations, and on-screen visuals created “smoother viewing arcs.” Pop up sets for select segments have instigated correspondent/A-listers changing locales, managing laughter on live shows. The term “winging it” extended but consolidated selective jocularity of earlier years. In a nascent yet competitive medium, public media organizations anticipate challenges preserving distinct editorial independence, funding models, and existing public service relationships as they ramp production and traffic of platform-native podcasts [17, 18].

The Future of Podcasts in Public Discourse

Podcasts are a flexible tool for informal learning, enabling listeners to engage with information at their own pace, which aids in disseminating new research. Despite less documentation, epistolary podcasts are increasingly used to foster public debates on socially relevant topics. Respected journals recommend such podcasts, and collaborations with existing producers emerge to effectively reach audiences. The potential impact of journal-initiated podcasts on target audiences is unclear, prompting a study of three peer-reviewed neuroscience articles podcasted by two journals alongside a sample of control articles. A computational text analysis identified commonly used words, revealing a blend of editorial board taxonomy and field-specific terminology, highlighting cognitive processes tied to current events. Combining this keyword list with temporal data led to retrieving articles published after the podcasts. A selection of these articles was randomly reviewed, suggesting that organizers of public discourse on new research would benefit from presenting both controversial and supportive perspectives. This approach could foster a more informed public, as it encourages knowledge producers to discuss the implications of new research, stimulating essential public debates [19, 20].

Comparative Analysis with Other Media

Podcasts differ from conventional radio broadcasts in production and distribution, creating unique relationships to media ownership, marketing, and audience participation. However, understanding podcasts requires examining their origins in the broader digital landscape. The internet serves as a vast repository of digital information, blending narratives, data, and user contributions within a socio-technical framework. While the internet contains a variety of digital formats, the web notably represents the medium through which radio transitioned to digital. Online radio retains the same audio signals and equipment as traditional radio but differs fundamentally from podcasts in three key areas: time, organization, and text. Podcasts feature static audio files available for download or streaming, contrasting with the dynamic nature of live audio. The metadata and organizational structures of podcasts complicate how episodes are presented, differing from traditional radio formats. Lastly, podcasting alters narrative forms and conclusions typically associated with radio, relying on pre-recorded audio that changes how content is produced and received. While comparisons between podcasts and public radio exist, they often overlook important elements, such as community radio and creative audio, which have historically influenced both mediums. This highlights an alternative perspective, suggesting that while commercial radio may have industrialized formats, podcasts can foster radical participatory practices, illustrating a complex relationship between these media forms [21, 22].

Ethical Considerations in Podcasting

Despite podcasting's growing influence, its ethical framework remains poorly understood. Key concerns include accuracy, truthfulness, privacy, and social responsibility. In 2008, the Society of Professional Journalists introduced a code emphasizing that podcast producers should deliver news that is “honest, fair, and accurate.” However, like radio and television journalism, ethical standards in audio journalism lack rigorous enforcement. The fast evolution of the medium complicates the establishment of clear ethical guidelines. Given the perception of podcasts as unregulated media, it is vital to investigate how podcasters address these ethical dilemmas and define their genre's boundaries. This research aims to identify the moral codes guiding podcasters' audio narratives. Drawing from Dewey's community-oriented view of ethics, the study highlights the social processes involved in ethical navigation. As podcasting grows, it influences public discourse, with over 60 million Americans listening to more than 7

million podcasts. Many seek deeper engagement with complex subjects, contrasting with the superficiality of soundbite journalism and social media polarization. The storytelling potential of podcasts creates opportunities for community dialogue on challenging issues. Podcasts have emerged in journalism as a medium to connect audiences with diverse stories, often in collaboration with those most affected. However, podcasting's intention to disrupt existing power dynamics may be undermined by its dominance by major producers and platforms within a commercialized framework. This situation raises critical questions about engaging with institutional or commercially produced podcasts and developing ways to ensure accountability [23, 24].

Case Studies of Influential Podcasts

Podcasts have exploded in popularity since the beginning of the 21st century. In Britain and America, the growth of both the number and audience of podcasts has challenged traditional broadcasting institutions to develop strategies for the delivery of audio content via the Internet. This workshop responds to the question: why do talk-based podcasts elicit so much enthusiasm? A project with three case studies responds to the question: what do audio producers consider key features of successful talk-based mass-market podcasts. It addresses specifically the imagined audience for the programs, the catering to that audience, and the role of social media in connecting producers with audiences. The status of the producers' channels and accounts also features highly in the discussions. The project triangulates the theoretical framework of public service broadcasting and the methodological approaches of participatory action research and critical discourse analysis will be used in analyzing the information. Through taking part in the workshop, audio producers will reveal the features of talk-based podcasts that they identify as key to the success of their programs. They will reveal the degree of self-promotional language that they foreground in their own services; from self-promoting questions that invite audience participation to an acknowledgment of geolocation bias. They have the opportunity to express self-doubt as to the impact of social media followings on the reception of programming and share how they curate viewer interactions with audio content. They can demonstrate through existing material how talk-based broadcasting is a highly interactive, participatory medium rather than a one-way transfer of information. The presentation is for and with the people who produce talk-based broadcast content, including podcasts and radio, at various stations. Production staffs with backgrounds in qualitative research, psychology, musicology, journalism, and linguistics will isolate features that they may not otherwise have highlighted. Creativity and engagement with audio content outside of the board indicative of a poor signal to noise ratio for such production [25, 26].

Global Perspectives on Podcasting

The rise of podcasting has enabled the growth of networks focused on music and sound. Online broadcasts have become essential, with public media organizations creating streaming and downloadable content. Streaming services are acquiring rights to public radio programs, shifting audience access from stations to aggregators. Public media now offers talk programs as podcasts to engage online audiences. Despite building online followings, stations struggle with a business model that works in this environment, as listeners do not support online services like traditional broadcast. The past decade has seen a surge in independent and aggregated producers, raising questions about the public meaning in a non-commercial context. Widely popular shows like Caliphate, Serial, and S-Town have highlighted journalism's flaws and reshaped public expectations about journalism practices in response to audience feedback. Podcasting provides new opportunities and challenges for public service broadcasting, impacting the news media landscape. The case studies in this volume help readers examine the strengths and challenges public service broadcasting faces in producing public journalism alongside alternative journalism forms in the evolving audio medium [27, 28].

CONCLUSION

Podcasts have matured from a niche form of entertainment into a robust platform for civic dialogue and public education. Their unique structure—informal, accessible, and interactive—positions them as critical tools in shaping contemporary public discourse. By empowering diverse voices, fostering community engagement, and providing space for long-form, nuanced discussions, podcasts offer alternatives to the increasingly commercialized and fragmented traditional media. However, their unregulated nature also raises concerns about the spread of misinformation and ideological echo chambers. As podcasting continues to evolve, its future will depend on striking a balance between openness and responsibility, creativity and credibility. Public media institutions, independent creators, and listeners all play a role in shaping a podcasting ecosystem that not only informs but also strengthens democratic participation and social connection.

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