



## The rise of podcasts: Diversifying public media narratives

Kingsley Ibisio Chukwu \*

*Rivers State University, Mass Communication, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.*

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### Abstract

In the media landscape of the twenty-first century, digital media, in general, and podcasting, in particular, are two of the fastest-growing platforms. This study specifically looks at the phenomenon of podcast and media producers as new and substantial alternatives to information and their impact on public narratives and opinions. The traditional media were also, historically, criticized for narrative homogenization and “the missing voices.” This study argues that podcast episodes low barriers to entry, coupled with their intimate, host-centered format, have paved the way for counter-narratives and niche content to appeal to under-represented audiences. Drawing on interviews with listeners, this study combines quantitative survey data on media consumption habits and trust with qualitative analysis of themes. Listeners find podcasts appealing for their perceived authenticity, quality, and the depth of the content and host that create Parasocial relationships. This movement is important as it opens up new spaces for these previously marginalized voices, and on these niche topics, that can contribute to the public sphere. However, the author also point to the dangers of media fragmentation: the possibility of ideological echo chambers and the spread of information that remains unconfirmed. Finally, having provided many reasons for the power of podcasts as instruments of media democratization leads to the conclusion that radio/podcasting is a democratizing force that is not simple, calling for more media literacy, that is, more new literacies to keep up with new media forms and social forces.

**Keywords:** Podcasts; Public Sphere; Media Diversity; Counter-Narratives; Independent Media; Echo Chambers; Parasocial Relationships; Digital Media; Audience Engagement

### 1. Introduction

The auditory landscape of the modern world has irrevocably changed. Instead of radio, a new type of on-demand, private, and intimate media has flourished which are podcasts. The availability of smartphones, as well as digital platforms for storing audio, has also led to a global podcasting trend in which podcasting has become not merely a hobby for the few, but also a widespread cultural and informational phenomenon. This “boom” is not just of the technological sort; it signifies a substantial break in the old media system. A few large corporations have also dominated media ownership over the past few decades, which brings with it a trend toward a narrow range of viewpoints and homogenization of public information and debate (Žikić and Markov, 2025). In particular, this centralization of control has led to questions about who is responsible for telling stories, whose voice truly has the power to speak, and what perspectives are considered newsworthy. Here, the growth of podcasts, especially those produced by independent creators, offers an interesting replacement. The costs associated with production have been dramatically reduced with podcasting, as anyone with a microphone and connection to the Internet can reach a worldwide audience (Jones et al., 2021). The result has been a flood of new content that explodes the possibilities of what can be discussed, how it is examined, stories that are told, and voices that are able to produce content that is not always represented in mainstream media (MSM). These podcasts that explore niche historical events, which have frank discussions on identity politics and mental health from underrepresented viewpoints, are contributing to a collective understanding of public opinion and a type of new community. However, this process is not without its complications. The attributes that make podcasts so

\* Corresponding author: Kingsley Ibisio Chukwu

wonderful is their intimacy, narrowcasting, and lack of editorial watchdogs, but at the same it also has its dark sides. Further, the specialization of audiences in isolated interest communities may also be socially and politically polarizing, as it allows for the creation of sites of discursive affirmation, sites where listeners never hear anything but what they want to hear (Franceschi et al., 2023). In addition, the lack of traditional journalistic gatekeeping also brings into serious question issues of credibility, accountability, and dissemination of inaccurate information. This study attempts to explore this two-sided development. It examines how podcasts decenter the public media story by allowing space for voices that are otherwise not heard or valued. The focus of the present paper, then, will be on delving into the question of how podcasts work to change public opinion and what the resulting critiques that can be derived from this shift are for a vital and pluralistic public sphere. The specific research questions of this study are as follows:

- What key factors motivate listeners to choose podcast episodes over traditional media sources for information and perspective?
- In what ways do podcasts contribute to the representation of diverse communities and specialized knowledge?
- What are the perceived trade-offs for listeners, particularly concerning information credibility and exposure to different viewpoints?

To address these questions, this report seeks to contribute to an important dialogue about the podcasting place in the new media landscape and the future of public discourse in an increasingly digital age. The following chapters describe the theoretical foundations underlying the study, the mixed-methods research design used, the major findings, and an analysis of their significance.

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## 2. Theoretical background

To sufficiently understand podcast episodes' potential role in public discourse, this work relies on some important theories from media and communication studies. These theories are spectacles through which the podcasting phase of media creators, content, and the audience's historical relationship must be interpreted.

First, Jürgen Habermas's original elaboration of the concept of the public sphere provides a point of departure. Habermas's idealized public sphere was a space of rational-critical deliberation in which private individuals could converge and discuss public issues, creating public opinion in a position to check state power (Kinkaid et al., 2019) (Swiatek, 2018). Although Habermas's idea of the public sphere was loosely based on the 18th-century bourgeois coffee house, its tenets have been used to study modern media more generally. Traditional mass media are considered the arena of the public sphere. This "tower of babel" ultimately suffered from cooptation by corporate and governmental interests, which detracted from its radical democratic potential by recolonizing and commercializing public discourse (Wang et al., 2025) (Swiatek, 2018). Podcasting can therefore be understood as a medium that potentially helps the construction of what is now, by some authors, referred to as counter-publics or mini-publics. They are "counter public spheres" in which social groups who are "marginalized or subordinated" to the mainstream public sphere have the ability to create and disseminate "counter-narratives" to facets relevant to this discussion (Vrikki and Malik, 2019). The above framework is utilized here to ascertain the extent to which podcasts are, in fact, cultivating these important counterpublics.

Second, he uses the agenda-setting theory. This theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, argues that MSM do not necessarily tell people what to think about, but rather what to think about. Traditional media influence the public agenda through its choices of issues to highlight. The growing value of grassroots media, such as podcasts and informal media, means that new media can be seen as disrupting this top-down model. Cultural producers of unique podcast episodes can also set different agendas for their targeted niche audiences, highlighting that the mainstream media, or MSM, ignores or under-reports (Dowling et al., 2022). Thus, this study explores how the agenda-setting function is decentralized and changes in the podcasting environment.

Finally, the theory of Parasocial interaction is important in framing the particular draw and impact of podcasts. Though originally offered by Donald Horton, R. Richard Wohl explained the simulated Parasocial relationships that individuals form with media people, and the concept is especially applicable to podcasting (Wrather, 2016). For the most part, the format of the podcast consists of hosts talking in the listener's ear, directly and informally, and often at length. The text's familiarity and the close, "conversational" relationship it imagines between author and reader produce a feeling of intimacy and trust between them, which Docksai refers to as a Parasocial relationship. Such an apparent connection can render hosts very convincing, wherein their opinions may be more credible than even formal, impersonal sources of news (Vilceanu, 2025) (Brinson and Lemon, 2022). This framework becomes important in understanding how and why

trust in podcast hosts is developed by listeners, and in turn, how trust helps listeners to come to accept and trust these diverse and/or alternative narratives.

Each of these theories alone provides a strong basis for examining the emergence of podcasts. They enable us to examine the medium not simply as a new technology but as a powerful social and political dynamic that involves restructuring the public sphere, overtaking previous agenda setters, and fostering influential new dynamics between producers and users.

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### 3. Methodology

To understand the complexity of the effects of podcasting, this study utilizes a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design. This method combines quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis to permit an analysis that connects tentative understandings of broad patterns with more fine-grained analysis conducted at a smaller level of analysis (Sullivan, 2019). It consists of two separate stages; one based on the results of the other. They were designed such that if the protocol did not necessarily exist, it could at least be performed by a student researcher through available online resources.

#### 3.1. Phase 1: Quantitative Online Survey

The first stage involved creating and administering an online survey to collect quantitative information about podcast consumption patterns, motivations for podcasting, and perceptions of media credibility.

##### 3.1.1. Instrument

A 25-item questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. The survey included demographic questions (age, education, and location), media consumption frequency (hours per week for podcasts, television news, and online articles), and a series of Likert-scale questions. These scales measured

- motivations for listening to podcasts (e.g., entertainment, in-depth learning, companionship)
- levels of trust in various media sources (independent podcasts, corporate-backed podcasts, national broadcast news, social media news),
- Perceived diversity of viewpoints in podcasts compared to MSM.

##### 3.1.2. Sampling and Participants

Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants using a non-probability sampling approach. The survey link was posted across several online platforms, such as Reddit communities (e.g., r/podcasts), social media (Twitter, Facebook), and university email networks. The aim was to obtain a diverse cross-section of regular podcast users. Over a four-week period, 267 usable responses were collected.

##### 3.1.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were exported and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to describe the data. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to establish whether trust in one type of media was significantly different from trust in another type of media. This analysis was intended as a general framework of listeners' behaviors and attitudes.

#### 3.2. Phase 2: Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase sought to add depth and context to the survey findings through qualitative interviews.

##### 3.2.1. Instrument

An interview protocol was developed. The questions were open-ended and correlated to the possible constructs that resulted from the survey with the intention of ascertaining the 'why' of the quantitative answers. Questions addressed respondents' own experiences of learning to see the world from a different perspective through podcasts, the experience of engagement with podcast hosts, and dealing with issues of bias and credibility.

### 3.2.2. Sampling and Participants

At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a short follow-up interview. Fifteen participants were purposively sampled to account for a range of ages, listening practices, and favorite podcast genres within the pool of volunteers. This was done to purposively sample diverse experiences.

### 3.2.3. Procedure

The interviews were conducted through the video chat program Zoom. These conversations took approximately 10–15 minutes, which was on par with the level of engagement agreed to with the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the subjects' consent and then transcribed word-by-word.

### 3.2.4. Data Analysis

The interview transcriptions were assessed following the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke, involving six steps. These processes included becoming immersed in the data, coding the data, searching for categories and themes, reviewing categories and themes, defining and naming categories and themes, and producing the final write-up. Through this methodical process, I was able to identify patterns across paired transcripts and capture central issues.

### 3.2.5. Ethical Considerations

This practice was executed with integrity throughout the research process. Both the survey and the interview began with the distribution of an information sheet and an informed consent document that all participants were asked to read and sign if they agreed to participate in the research. All participants were ensured anonymity and privacy, as there was no identifying information contained in the dataset or transcripts. All participants were informed that they were free to disengage from the study at any time, with no consequences.

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## 4. Results

The mixed methods approach contributed to a mixed findings report that was able to provide both quantitative analyses and in-depth qualitative understandings about the place of podcasts within the current media ecosystem summarize findings below, using quantitative survey data and qualitative interview themes.

### 4.1. Quantitative Survey Findings

The results of this survey of 267 podcast listeners revealed numerous trends. The sample also skewed heavy users, as 78% of respondents stated that they listened to podcasts for three hours or more each week. Among the reasons most cited were 'in-depth exploration of topics' (68%) and 'host personality and authenticity' (61%).

Trust was also measured through a series of questions that asked respondents about their perception of the credibility of each medium on a Likert scale from 1 (no credibility) to 5 (complete credibility). Significant differences in perceived credibility were found. Analyses revealed that independent podcasts had the highest mean trust score ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), which was not significantly different from corporate-backed podcasts ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). National television news was found to be at an intermediate level ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), whereas social media news was reported as the lowest of the four types ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). An analysis of paired-samples t-tests revealed that, consistently, there was a significantly higher level of trust in independent podcasts than in national broadcast news,  $t(266) = 12.4$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Moreover, podcast episodes were overwhelmingly felt to be more diverse in viewpoints. Regarding an established news medium, when asked to assess podcasts against traditional television news, 82% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that "podcasts offered you a more varied range of opinions and perspectives."

### 4.2. Qualitative Thematic Analysis Findings

From the content analysis of the 15 semi-structured interviews, three major themes emerged that can help with an explanation and extension of the quantitative results. These themes were: (1) The Quest for Authenticity and Connection, (2) Discovering the 'Untold Story,' and (3) Conscious Navigation of Bias.

#### 4.2.1. Theme 1: The Quest for Authenticity and Connection

The value of the host as the main attraction was a point that participants consistently expressed. Several noted that they felt a connection to the woman on the screen that transcended a traditional media consumer relationship, as the theory

of Parasocial interaction suggests. The unteleprompted, more naturalistic, and sometimes intimate quality of the newscaster was pitted against formulaic, scripted, and unfeeling anchors.

For a 34-year-old listener of history podcasts, “It feels less like a broadcast and more like I am listening in on a fascinating conversation between people who are genuinely passionate about something. “I trust them because they do not sound like they are just reading a teleprompter; you hear enthusiasm, but also doubt. It’s not fake. There is longing in this quote for some authenticity beyond the MSM.

#### 4.2.2. Theme 2: Discovering the ‘Untold Story’

This theme speaks to the way that podcasts are a point of entry for obscure topics and fringe viewpoints. Listeners said that podcasts mobilized them in ways that mainstream media could not; they gave them information and communities of interest they could not get anywhere else. This fact proved especially true for minority- or group-oriented participants.

For example, a 28-year-old software developer felt that “As a woman in tech, there are very few mainstreams shows that talk about the specific challenges I face being in tech” However I did find one that two female engineers had done, and it was a revelation. It was empowering to have the things I have experienced, validated. This quotation is representative of how podcasts reinforce counter-publics in which common identities and interests can be found.

#### 4.2.3. Theme 3: Conscious Navigation of Bias

Despite this high level of trust towards their favorite hosts, participants also understood the possibilities of bias. Several were aware that the absence of institutional regulation meant that they had to become more informed consumers. This theme indicates a relatively high degree of media literacy among some listeners.

And 45-year-old political podcast listener reflected “I know my favorite show leans left, and that’s fine because I do too. But I do make it a point to listen to the headlines of a conservative podcast at least once a week, just to confirm that I am not in fact living in a complete bubble. Everything has to be fact- checked; you have to fact- check yourself in this world. “This kind of conscious effort to prevent the echo chamber can be read as evidence that the potential for damage is high, but also that at least some listeners are taking steps to deal with it.

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## 5. Discussion

This study’s findings contribute to a clearer understanding of the podcasting phenomenon and offer support for the argument that podcasts are contributing to a more diverse public media landscape. Below, I will examine these results by putting them in relation to the theoretical underpinnings and by analyzing the research questions.

This shift in audience preference correlates with the qualitative theme, The Quest for Authenticity and Connection. Parasocial Interaction Theory provides a strong basis for understanding the much greater level of trust granted by audiences to podcasters than to broadcast journalists. The intimate audio form helps establish a feeling of personal connection between the host and listener, which cultivates a level of trust in the listener that makes the host’s story both more interesting and trustworthy (Brinson and Lemon, 2022). It is this Parasocial connection formed between podcast hosts and listeners that is crucial in explaining the influence of podcasts; it is through such connections that podcast hosts are able to establish alternative agendas for their listeners based on a contemporary application of Agenda-Setting Theory.

Support for podcasts as producing conception of “counter-publics” is strongly corroborated in this study. This is perfectly illustrated by the qualitative theme Discovering the ‘Untold Story.’ Attendees discussed discovering communities and validation in podcasts that helped them assert their identities by speaking to their interests or identity, whether it be women in technology or enthusiasm around a particularly obscure historical period. They are counter-publics, or “safe haven” spaces where groups of marginalized people can construct and disseminate their own discourses that counter the dominant discourse of the mainstream public sphere. In this process, podcasts not only diversify the voices in the overall media environment but also reshape the terrain by introducing perspectives that have been marginalized, if not completely omitted from the media (Godin and Doná, 2016).

However, the study also brings to the surface in some clear way the tensions that exist within this new media space. The third qualitative theme, Conscious Navigation of Bias, is most immediately relevant to the major concerns surrounding a decentralized media ecosystem: echo chambers and misinformation. Finally, although some listeners seemed to be quite good at identifying and examining their own biases and going out of their way to find something that went against

preconceived ideas, this is probably not the general case. Parasocial trust viewers feel in newscasters who host a show can also, as many argue, transfer to the viewers themselves, resulting in an audience being more likely to passively absorb information without critically assessing it (Liao et al., 2022). In addition, the medium's almost intrinsic quality of enabling users to search for information and news that appeals to one's own identity and worldview also runs the risk of creating ideological cocoons. In other words, this study's results indicate that media generation has been democratized through podcasting, but the burden of fact-checking and well-rounded consumption has come to rest largely on consumers.

### 5.1. Limitations of the Study

This study has a number of limitations. However, the non-probability sample utilized also means that the quantitative findings cannot be applied to the population of podcast listeners as a whole. The online sample obtained may be biased towards being Internet savvy and engaged individuals. Self-reported measures of media trust and consumption patterns are also possibly affected by social desirability bias. Future studies could also work on increasingly larger and randomized samples and eventually on experimental designs to effectively test the causal effects of podcast consumption on attitudes and beliefs. Further research taking a longitudinal perspective and following listeners over time would also be useful for understanding the development of Parasocial relationships and media habits.

However, despite these shortcomings, the present study contributes significantly by combining quantitative and qualitative evidence to look into the mechanisms of the impact of podcasting. Most importantly, this book does not merely celebrate media democratization, but rather critically examines both the possibilities and challenges that come with this transformation.

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## 6. Conclusion

The goal of this research report was to understand how podcasts have come to dominate alternative perspectives and how they might contribute to the production of multiple publics. It argues that podcasting is responsible for a vast qualitative transformation in media, enabling enormous narrative multiplicity and the risk of further audience fragmentation. The conclusions combine the main findings of each section, which support the following conclusion. This study began with an understanding that media consolidation is a problem because of a smaller, less accessible public sphere and top-down control over the setting of public agendas. Our methodology was meant to capture this, and the findings also support that podcast are an answer to these limitations. The quantitative data are unambiguous in that listeners are migrating away from mainstream media and toward podcasts in search of that which they perceive as missing in centralized media: authenticity, substance, and a range of perspectives. The qualitative data also provided context for the numbers by showing how the experience of the medium is meaningful and rewarding in the connections that listeners build with hosts and the niche communities they discover. This discussion was synthesized within the argument that these mechanisms granted podcasts the potential to establish lively counter-publics that do in fact pluralize the public sphere as theorized. Yet, this very argument, drawing on our qualitative findings around bias navigation, underscored the high potential for echo chambers. Listeners are also attracted to content that reinforces their opinions, and hosts become trusted figures who are not viewed with a critical eye. In short, the close association between mass communication and public dialogue that democratizes information and allows for broader participation can simultaneously lead to polarization, as audiences can be insulated from exposure to diverse perspectives. Drawing these conclusions together, I argue that the rise of podcasts is a mixed blessing. It is responsible for unquestionably democratizing the production of media and for giving a voice to the voiceless, but it has also dropped the gatekeeping function of media directly into the lap of the listener/reader/viewer. To take advantage of this medium and avoid a majority of its pitfalls, society needs to reject the naysayers and double down on the importance of critical media literacy in order to lead us through the future of public opinion.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The author declares there is no conflict of interest

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