

Between Trust and Clicks: Podcast Journalism in the Age of Algorithms

Kenneth K. Wright Jr.

Central Michigan University

MCA560 Radio Operations

Jim Bollella

June 24, 2025

Introduction

From the crackling broadcasts of World War II to the immersive storytelling of today's true crime exposés, audio journalism has a history as one of the most intimate and enduring forms of media. Its evolution reflects society's changing relationship with information, shifting from meticulously edited segments on public radio to a digital landscape where anyone with a microphone can become a broadcaster. In recent years, podcasting has diverged from its radio origins into a transformative medium in its own right — blending storytelling, journalism, and digital culture in ways that are reshaping how news is produced and consumed.

This change has brought undeniable benefits. Podcasts provide flexibility and personalization, creating a direct connection between creators and listeners. This connection fosters a level of trust and engagement that traditional media often neglects. At the same time, the rapid growth of the podcasting industry has also introduced new complications. With low barriers to entry, the space is flooded with content that varies from investigative rigor to opinion-driven entertainment, often with blurred lines between the two. This paradigm raises significant concerns over credibility, regulation, and the future of journalism in an algorithm-driven world.

Can podcasting maintain its status as a powerful force in an age defined by convenience, scale, and skepticism? Or will it give in to the same pressures it once appeared ready to confront? Its evolution reflects broader tensions in the media: between editorial integrity and profits, accessibility and oversaturation, freedom and accountability. By examining its rise alongside changing audience habits and technological obstacles, we can observe how podcasting has both challenged and embraced the limitations of traditional media.

Origins of Audio Journalism

Audio journalism began in the early days of AM radio, when broadcasters first experimented with delivering news through the airwaves. In the 1920s and into the 1930s, radio gained significance through its capability for real-time reporting to mass audiences. Event coverage — ranging from presidential addresses to news bulletins — was transmitted across the nation, initiating the dynamic relationship between the public and the press (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Early radio journalism was headline-driven and offered immediate reports, but the voices carried tone and urgency in ways that print journalism was incapable of.

By the mid-20th century, the advent of FM radio had provided clearer sound quality, paving the way for more diverse and nuanced programming. AM Radio maintained its dominance in news delivery, but FM radio emerged as the platform for long-form content and storytelling. The inception of FM radio marked the beginning of a new chapter in narrative-driven journalism, which prioritized depth over immediacy (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

As audio journalism evolved beyond breaking news, there was a growing recognition that public interest content required institutional support. The legislation of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 marked a significant milestone in American audio journalism. This Act is responsible for the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and National Public Radio (NPR), which have reputations for long-form, noncommercial journalism intended to inform, educate, and enrich public life (Aufderheide, 1991; Engelman, 1996). The groundwork laid by NPR's human-centered approach would later become a blueprint for the emerging podcasting landscape.

Additional regulatory milestones influenced the development of audio journalism during this era. The Fairness Doctrine, introduced by the FCC in 1949, required broadcasters to present

controversial issues in a balanced and honest manner. Although it was repealed in 1987, it played a formative role in defining the ethical responsibilities of early audio media. Decades later, the foundation for modern podcasting was established with the launch of Liberated Syndication (Libsyn) in 2004, the first dedicated podcast hosting platform. In 2005, Steve Jobs announced podcast integration into iTunes, signaling Apple's embrace of the medium and helping to push podcasts into mainstream awareness.

The Rise of Podcasting

The rise of podcasting in the early 2000s was driven by the convergence of several technologies, including portable MP3 players, RSS feeds, and the growing availability of broadband internet. The term *podcast* — a portmanteau of “iPod” and “broadcast” — was coined by *The Guardian* columnist Ben Hammersley in 2004. However, early developers like Dave Winer and former MTV host Adam Curry helped popularize the format through tools such as iPodder, which allowed users to download audio files to their devices automatically (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Unlike traditional radio's real-time, linear programming, podcasts enabled listeners to choose both what to hear and when to hear it — a transformative change in the way audio journalism would be consumed.

Initially seen as a niche or hobbyist pursuit, podcasting quickly evolved as journalists, radio producers, and other creators recognized its narrative and creative potential. Public radio producers were among the earliest adopters, seamlessly adapting their long-form storytelling traditions to this new on-demand format. As Spinelli and Dann (2019) note, the core values of public media — depth, nuance, and mission-driven reporting — translate naturally to the podcasting space, helping establish credibility for the medium.

Media scholar Siobhan McHugh (2016) observed that podcasting allows for a more flexible and experimental use of sound and structure, which can challenge traditional journalism and help re-engage audiences who may feel disconnected. She also pointed out that many commissioning editors recognize podcasting as fostering “a new, more informal, genre of audio narrative feature centered on a strong relationship between the host and listener” (p. 68). This change in tone and format has helped distinguish podcasts from conventional broadcast journalism and has contributed to increased audience engagement.

Podcasting’s breakout moment came in 2014 with the release of *Serial*, a true crime podcast created by the team behind *This American Life*. The show’s serialized structure, suspenseful pacing, and high production quality captivated millions of listeners, marking a turning point in the podcasting landscape. *Serial* was the first podcast to reach five million unique downloads on iTunes, demonstrating that the format could achieve both critical acclaim and mass appeal (Berry, 2016). In the years following its release, the number of monthly podcast listeners in the U.S. surged from 40 million in 2014 to 88 million by 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Building on that momentum, the early 2020s saw an explosion in both podcast production and listenership. Major news organizations, such as *The New York Times* and NPR, launched flagship shows like *The Daily* and *Up First*, blending traditional journalism with the intimate, voice-driven storytelling that had become the hallmark of the medium. Platforms like Apple Podcasts and Spotify emerged as dominant distribution channels, narrowing the gap between institutional outlets and independent creators. According to a 2023 Pew Research study, more

than 40% of adults now report listening to podcasts — a testament to the format’s widespread cultural adoption.

The Challenges to Podcast Journalism

Since podcasting’s step into mainstream media, it now faces several challenges that obscure its role as a vehicle for journalism. One primary concern among industry professionals is over-saturation. With an abundance of active shows vying for attention, discoverability has become a deterrent for both listeners and producers. Podcast critic Nick Quah summarized the state of the medium as “three white dudes in a basement talking for hours, unedited” (Quah, 2022). This critique highlights the industry’s low standards of entry and the myriad of mediocre content, which often masks high-quality journalism. This climate poses challenges for new and meaningful shows striving to gain recognition.

Podcast producer Nick Hilton elaborates on this concern from a fiscal perspective (Hilton, 2022). Despite creating two well-received limited-series documentary podcasts in 2020 and 2021, Hilton reported having lost money on both productions. He finds that the current industry model is losing sustainability as producers prioritize quantity of content over their quality. To maintain viability, creators are now required to produce at least twenty episodes per year, with the goal of attracting tens of thousands of listeners for each episode.

These challenges are exacerbated by listener decision fatigue. Surveys by Nielsen Lab and Ofcom demonstrate that many people cease browsing altogether when they are overwhelmed by a plethora of options, citing a lack of time, concerns over accessibility, or an inability to find shows that pique their interest (Nielsen, 2022; Ofcom, 2022). Meanwhile, podcasting’s shift toward video content — especially on platforms like YouTube — has muddied the line between journalism and influencer-style entertainment. The emergence of video podcasts reflects a shift

in consumer preferences, as well as challenges the medium's identity as an audio-first storytelling format. Megan Lazovick, Vice President at Edison Research, links decision fatigue to the widespread popularity of podcasting: "When people are overwhelmed, they do nothing. And podcasting can be overwhelming" (Lazovick, 2021). Her insight highlights broader issues related to platform design and recommendation algorithms, which can hinder discoverability and decrease the visibility of journalistic content.

Perhaps the most alarming issue is the blurring of the distinction between news and opinion – especially in politically charged spaces. A study conducted by Pew Research reported that more than half of all podcast listeners encounter political commentary, with many struggling to distinguish fact-based reporting from personal opinion (Pew Research Center, 2022). Figures like Joe Rogan, who is considered a trusted news source by nearly one-third of Republican listeners, have faced backlash for spreading misinformation under the guise of open discussion. A Brookings study found that one in ten top political podcasts contained false or unverified claims, bringing editorial standards in podcasting into question, as it is often independent from traditional media regulation (Brookings Institution, 2021).

Podcast Monetization & Sustainability

After podcasting evolved into a profitable medium, it has progressively been influenced by commercial interests. The essential intimacy and trust found in audio storytelling render podcast advertising particularly lucrative, notably through host-read ads, which are considered more authentic than conventional sponsorships (Doctor, 2016). However, this monetization model has disproportionately favored top-performing shows. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center report, a significant majority of advertising revenue in the podcasting industry is given to a small selection of high-profile programs, leaving smaller and independent shows struggling to

achieve meaningful income.

The growing economic discrepancies have raised a broader concern: that podcasts driven by journalistic integrity may be neglected in favor of mass-appeal content that yields higher returns. This trend often encourages creators to produce content at an unrelenting pace to maintain visibility and attract sponsors. According to research conducted by Magellan AI in 2023, the top 500 podcasts averaged \$300,000 in monthly ad revenue, while shows ranked between 501 and 3,000 averaged just \$33,000 — a stark illustration of the industry’s widening financial divide (Magellan AI, 2023). Without diversified revenue streams or funding support akin to that of traditional public radio, podcast journalism risks becoming dependent on metrics, clicks, and advertiser preferences, potentially compromising its editorial integrity. As the financial divide widens, the need for a more sustainable and equitable framework for audio journalism becomes increasingly urgent.

In response to the challenges of ad-based monetization, many podcasters have turned to crowdfunding platforms such as Patreon. This approach allows creators to establish a direct connection with their audiences by offering bonus content or ad-free episodes in exchange for financial support. This unique model made podcasting the second-largest category on the platform, as creators want control over how they run their business. While it may not always be highly lucrative, Patreon can provide a more reliable income source and better align with the principles of independent journalism. Additionally, it offers an opportunity for niche and investigative content that may not attract mainstream advertisers but resonates deeply with dedicated listeners.

Ethical & Regulatory Gaps

Podcasting has transformed modern journalism due to its flexibility and accessibility. However, it remains largely unregulated compared to traditional legacy media. In the United States, terrestrial radio is regulated by the FCC to ensure fairness, require sponsorship disclosures, restrict profanity, and enforce equal time provisions, designed to protect public interest. Because podcasts operate in an ambiguous legal and ethical space due to their on-demand, internet-based structure, they are not regulated by the same standards (FCC, 2024).

This neglect creates an array of challenges. For example, sponsorship disclosures in podcast content can be inconsistent and sometimes even absent. A 2016 Nieman Lab report by Ken Doctor pointed out that host-read ads — a common monetization method in podcasting — often seamlessly blends in with editorial content (Doctor, 2016). This overlap can cause confusion for listeners regarding distinguishing paid messages from objective information, raising concerns about transparency and trust.

While platforms like Spotify and Apple Podcasts may remove offensive content or flag misinformation, there appears to be no consistent industry-wide standard for accountability (Spinelli & Dann, 2019). Without a centralized regulatory body, individual creators or networks often establish their own ethical standards for their programs. This can lead to issues such as inconsistent variations in quality, bias, and disclosure practices. This vacuum also limits options for audiences seeking corrections or clarity when misleading content is published.

As the podcasting industry matures, addressing these ethical and regulatory gaps is crucial. This could involve implementing voluntary codes of conduct, establishing platform-specific guidelines, or creating new frameworks for oversight. The goal should be maintaining the journalistic integrity that podcasting can offer while also preserving the creative freedom that podcasts are known for.

The Future of Audio Journalism

Despite podcasting's continued influence on journalism, its future depends on how it coevolves with audience habits, economic pressures, and technological change. More and more journalists and media analysts are worried that news is becoming less relevant to people's everyday lives. In 2021, Michael Neal, a researcher for Nieman Lab, predicted that news consumption is no longer regarded as a civic ritual. Instead, people are opting to disengage from news altogether, citing mental health fatigue, distrust in institutions, or a desire for personal well-being over constant exposure to negativity (Neal, 2023).

Alongside growing audience apathy, podcasting is also being shaped by technological disruptions, especially the rise of artificial intelligence. Some publishers had hoped licensing content to companies like OpenAI or Google would generate substantial revenue; however, the results have been underwhelming. As Fletcher (2024) noted, only a select few major media outlets have struck deals, and even those receive minimal financial gain. For instance, Dotdash Meredith earns less than 1% of its total annual revenue from its AI licensing agreement. Smaller outlets, especially those in non-English languages and independent producers, are largely excluded from these deals.

This prompted skepticism over whether the AI era will support or undermine the journalism industry. In Fletcher's words, "Most publishers will not get any meaningful revenue from licensing content to technology companies." Fletcher emphasizes that organizations should focus on creating value for human listeners rather than for algorithms. This shift may already be underway. Ken Doctor (2016) argues that host-read advertising and niche podcasting provide more sustainable options, especially when creators prioritize editorial integrity over scale.

The future of audio journalism may balance between innovation and mission. Journalists and podcasters will need to adapt to changing consumer habits while maintaining their public service goals. Whether this involves exploring new delivery platforms, implementing transparent funding models, or focusing on audience-first storytelling, the success of podcast journalism won't solely rely on technology, but also on its capacity to reestablish a connection between people and trustworthy, human-centered reporting.

Conclusion

Podcasting has altered the boundaries of audio journalism by providing a more streamlined, personal, and flexible platform for storytelling. From its origin in public radio to its role as a powerful digital medium, podcasting has simultaneously broadened journalism's reach while introducing new challenges. As the industry adapts, concerns about misinformation, commercialization, ethical oversight, and technological disruption must be addressed.

While the low standards of quality have allowed for a diversity of voices, it has also blinded audiences from distinguishing journalism and entertainment. In most industries, financial models typically favor mass appeal over public service; the same can be said for audio journalism. The absence of consistent regulations raises concerns about credibility and accountability. Yet despite these concerns, podcasting still holds immense promise. Its ability to establish meaningful relationships with audiences in personal ways, to amplify underrepresented stories, and grow alongside new technology positions it as journalism's most resilient frontier.

Looking ahead, the legacy of podcast journalism will depend on its ability to strike a balance between innovation and integrity. To truly serve the public interest, creators, platforms,

and listeners must demand more than just clicks and charisma; they must insist on trust, transparency, and a renewed commitment to truth. This involves supporting long-form investigative storytelling, promoting diversity in voices and perspectives, and resisting the pressure to conform to viral trends or platform algorithms. Podcasting's greatest strength lies not in its novelty, but in its ability to connect with people through the power of sound. If nurtured with care and conscience, audio journalism can remain a vital force for public understanding in a fragmented media landscape.

References

- Aufderheide, P. (1991). Public television and the public sphere. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 8(2), 168–183.
- Berry, R. (2016). Serial and ten years of podcasting: Has the medium grown up? *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 23(2), 310–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19376529.2016.1208211>
- Doctor, K. (2016). And now a word from our sponsor: Host-read ads and the play between niche and scale. Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2016/09/and-now-a-word-from-our-sponsor-host-read-ads-and-the-play-between-niche-and-scale/>
- Engelman, R. (1996). *Public radio and television in America: A political history*. Sage Publications.
- Federal Communications Commission. (2024). The fairness doctrine. <https://www.fcc.gov/media/policy/fairness-doctrine>
- Fletcher, R. (2024). The AI era not so lucrative for most publishers. Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/the-ai-era-is-proving-not-so-lucrative-for-most-publishers/>
- Lazovick, M. (2021). Overwhelmed: Why podcast discovery is broken and how to fix it. Edison Research. <https://www.edisonresearch.com/overwhelmed-why-podcast-discovery-is-broken-and-how-to-fix-it/>
- McHugh, S. (2016). How podcasting is changing the audio storytelling genre. *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14(1), 65–82. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306077496>
- Neal, M. (2024). Maybe we really are done with journalism? Nieman Lab. <https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/maybe-we-really-are-done-with-journalism/>

Pew Research Center. (2023). Podcasting facts & statistics. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/20/key-facts-about-the-us-podcast-listener/>

Quah, N. (2022). Podcasting is just radio now. Vulture.

<https://www.vulture.com/2022/09/podcasting-is-just-radio-now.html>

Spinelli, M., & Dann, L. (2019). Podcasting: The audio media revolution. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Hilton, N. (2022). Is podcasting becoming more like radio? Medium.

<https://nickfhilton.medium.com/is-podcasting-becoming-more-like-radio-48bc1e2b67ce>