

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

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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About the Author



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