

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.

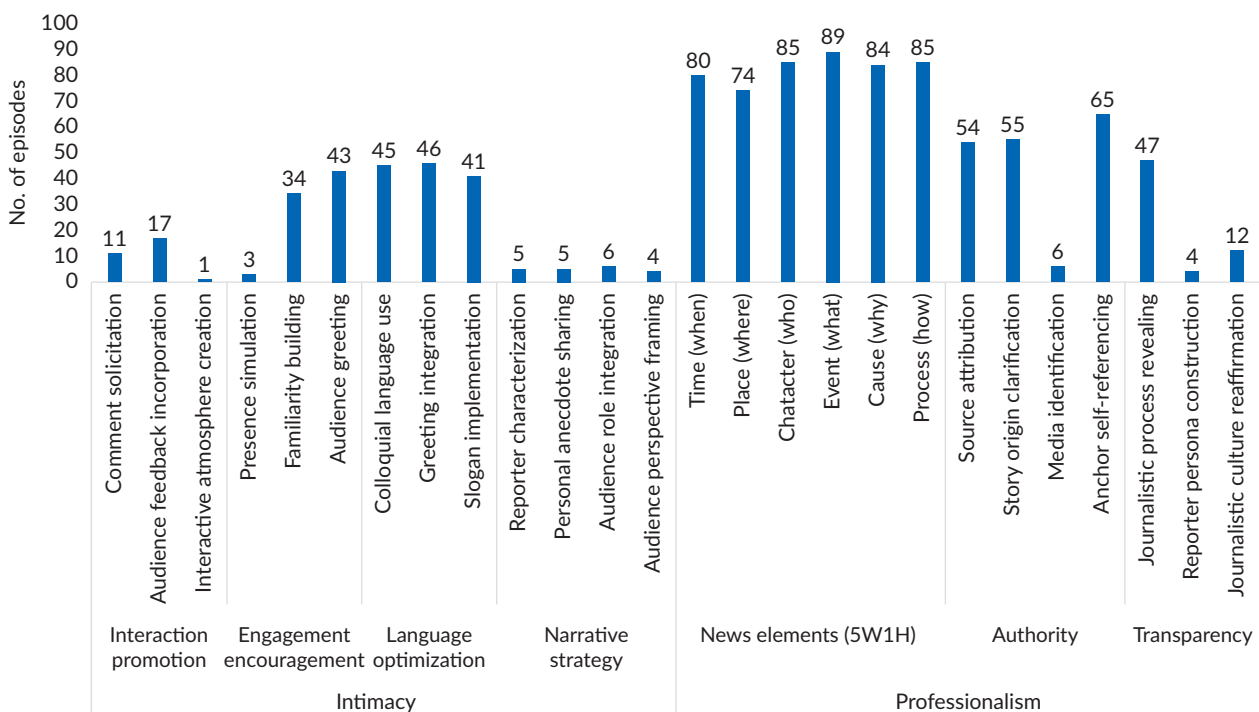


Figure 1. Overview of intimacy and professionalism strategies used in the selected news podcasts.

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 ($n = 5$).

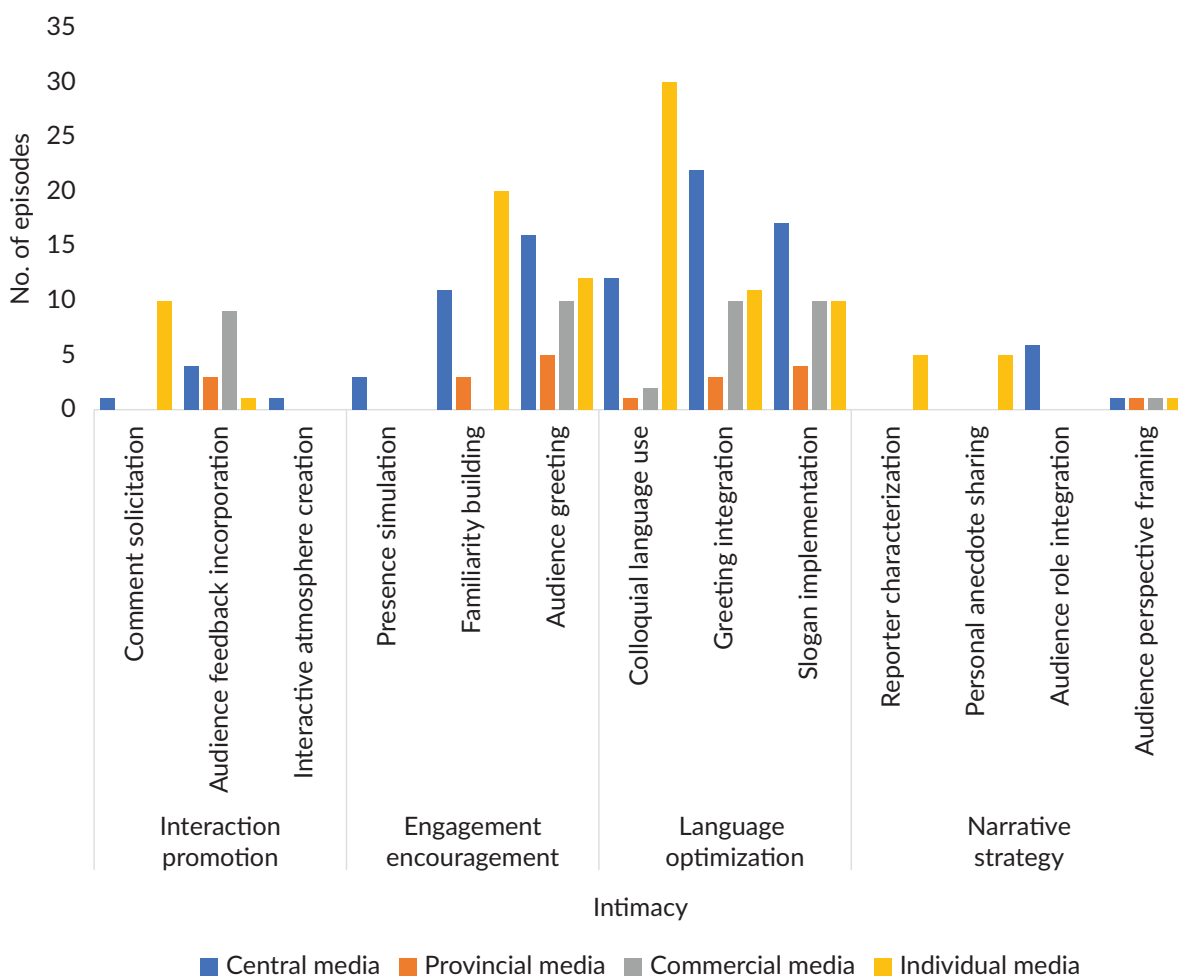


Figure 2. Distribution of intimacy strategies employed by different media types.

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 ($n = 6$),

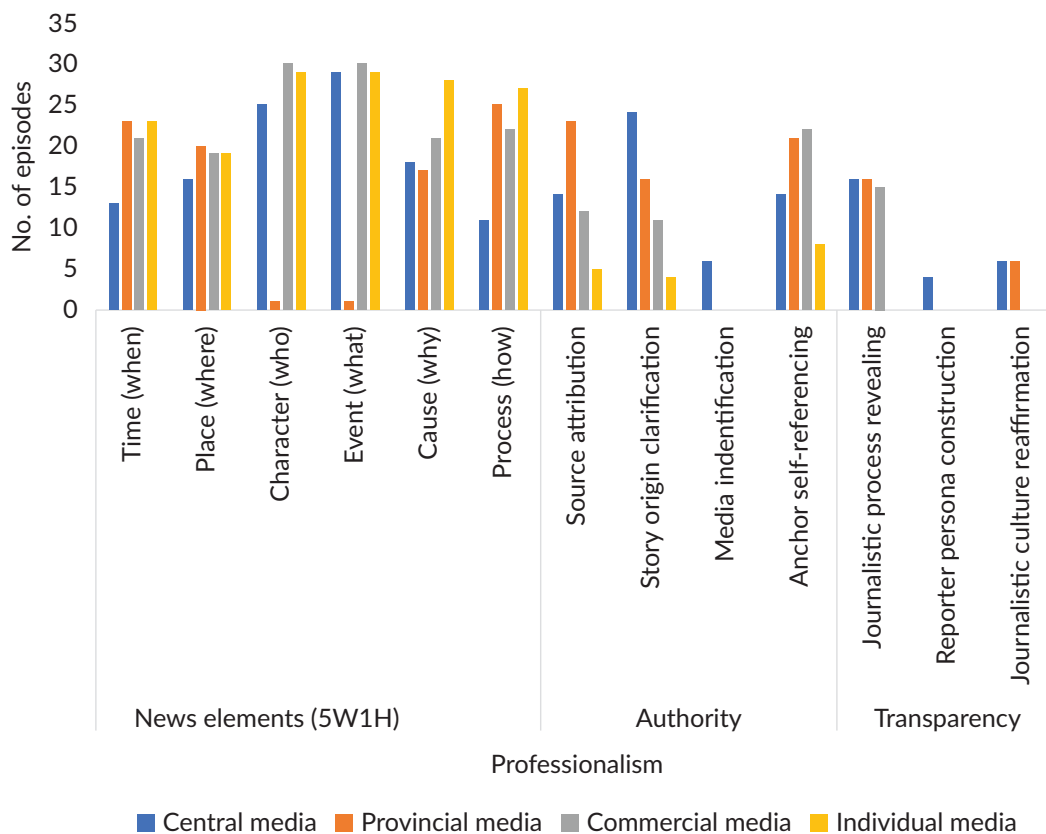


Figure 3. Distribution of professionalism strategies employed by various media types.

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.

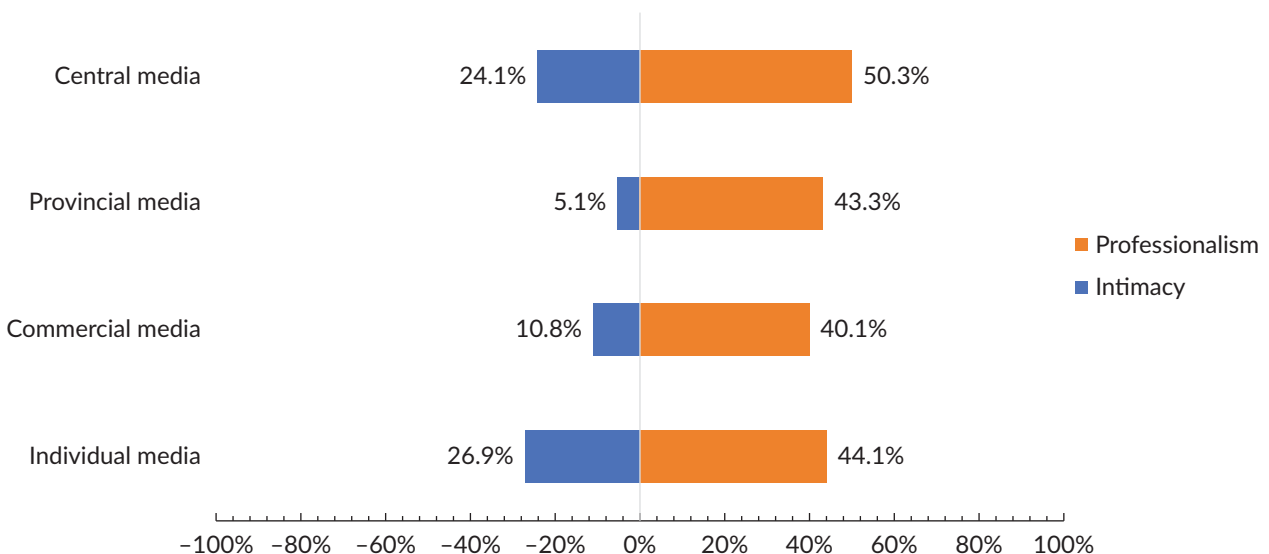


Figure 4. Percentage of episodes employing intimacy and professionalism strategies.

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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