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Voix sur les ondes : enquêtes orales et témoignages dans le reportage radiophonique (XXe-XXIe siècles)

Journalistic podcasts as narrative media in Germany: forms, practices, and functions

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Les "voix sur les ondes" prennent aujourd'hui souvent la forme du podcast journalistique et il est possible d'affirmer que cette pratique incarne désormais l'art de l'investigation orale et de la collecte de témoignages dans le but de documenter différents aspects de la réalité. En fusionnant une multitude de pratiques journalistiques, allant de l'investigation à l'édition, ces productions opèrent une symbiose entre information et divertissement. Cet article explore d'abord le concept de "médias narratifs hybrides" afin d'éclairer ses implications pour la communication journalistique. Ensuite, à travers l'analyse de deux podcasts journalistiques allemands, il met en lumière les formes, pratiques et fonctions sous-jacentes. Enfin, il interroge les répercussions du succès des podcasts sur la production des récits journalistiques.

Abstract

As journalistic podcasts are among the most widespread ‘voices on the air’, one can argue that the genre embodies the contemporary art of oral investigation and the art of collecting cultural testimonies to document facets of reality. In this sense, podcasts combine a range of journalistic practices from researching to editing and blend forms of communication by often fusing information with elements of entertainment. In this respect, this contribution will first discuss the concept of "hybrid narrative media". We then point out what this implies for journalism and why podcasts are a manifestation of hybrid narrative media. Finally, this is exemplified by an analysis of forms, practices, and functions of two podcasts from German media. In the conclusion future implications for the production of journalistic narratives with podcasts are critically reflected.

Keywords : journalistic functions, journalistic methods, narrative journalism, intermediality, hybridity

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Mots-clés :
Hybridité, Fonctions journalistiques, Méthodes journalistiques, Journalisme narratif

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This contribution discusses the idea of podcasts as narrative hybrids that have emerged in our new media environment and created journalistic means for authentic reporting and audience engagement. In Germany, podcasts are a fast-growing segment of online journalism and are among the most popular content with younger audiences as they offer an almost universal range of topics, as well as effective means of cross-media production (Planer & Godulla, 2022). Podcasts appear in various journalistic forms such

as talks, interviews, news, reportage, sometimes with a focus on true crime or lifestyle topics.

As journalistic podcasts are among the most widespread ‘voices on the air’, one can argue that the genre embodies the contemporary art of oral investigation and of collecting cultural testimonies to document facets of reality. In this sense, podcasts combine a range of journalistic practices from researching to editing and blend forms of communication by often fusing information with elements of entertainment. They thus show an overlap of different journalistic functions since podcasts inform, contextualise, educate, offer criticism, and so on (Dowling & Miller, 2019). Therefore, we can think of podcasts as a prototypical example of communication in “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick, 2017).

In this respect, this contribution will first discuss the concept of hybridisation and define (hybrid) narrative media (1). We then point out what this implies for journalism and why podcasts are a manifestation of hybrid narrative media (3). This will be exemplified by an analysis of forms, practices, and functions of two podcasts from German media (3). In the conclusion future implications for the production of journalistic narratives with podcasts are critically reflected.

1. Defining the term “hybridity” and conceptualising journalism as narrative hybrid media

The term ‘hybridity’, or ‘hybridisation’, relates to two phenomena. On the one hand, it refers to the process of genre-blending that is characterised by an overlap of discursive modes and textual aesthetics in journalism (Mäntynen & Shore, 2014). This form of hybridisation is observed with the rise of infotainment or soft news that constitute two ‘meta-genres’ of journalism (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). In this sense, journalistic genres are permanently in flux, and digital media change is increasingly affecting how journalistic forms of expression and public communication in general emerge, solidify, and evolve. On the other hand, drawing on Chadwick’s (2017) analysis of political communication in the 21st century, the term hybridity also describes the transformation of the media system which affects institutional structures, professional routines, roles, and practices. The integration of alternative modes and channels of communication, the re-evaluation of institutional resources and role expectations, and the evolution of new media practices have led to an overall fuzziness, or fragmentation, of journalism, as well as a shift in power relationships in the context of public communication.

The manifestation of a hybrid media system in Germany over the last decade(s) has markedly altered how journalism is practised, through which channels it is disseminated, what forms are produced, and how audiences receive relevant messages.

An increasing number of recipients use online news and social media as their primary sources of information in current high-choice media environments (e.g. Newman et al., 2021). In this light, journalism today has additional defining characteristics such as multimediality, connectivity, and hypertextuality (e.g. Nuernbergk & Neuberger, 2018; Witschge et al., 2016). These foster media convergence and cross-media routines, which in return further restructure hybrid journalistic practices in the process.

With these thoughts in mind, it is worthwhile examining alternative forms of journalism, where the approach is to rely more on personal experience, in-depth research, an authentic journalistic voice, and foregrounding different perspectives to overcome social boundaries, with an overall goal of engaging readers emotionally. One of these approaches can be found in the concept of narrative journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen & Schmidt, 2019). By combining aesthetic forms of literature with journalistic research methods, narrative journalism presents readers with a mix of discursive strategies and professional practices that differ substantially from standard reporting.

However, narrative journalism, which is also known as literary journalism, literary reportage, reportage literature, the New Journalism, the nonfiction novel, literary nonfiction, and creative nonfiction (Roiland 2015), is a deep-layered and arbitrary phenomenon. While narrative journalism has emerged as a genre in form and practice all around the world since the 16th century (Sims, 2007; Keeble & Tulloch, 2011; Bak & Reynolds, 2011), studies focus on notable authors or publications and mostly concentrate on the history of the genre. Yet, in the last 20 or so years, multimodal storytelling has drastically expanded the ways in which perspective and detail can be mediated to an audience on an emotional and cognitive level. Audiences find narrative aesthetics in many forms and projects published by media outlets today. At the same time, the technical aspects of crafting the story have altered media practices with regard to getting information and creating transparency. However, this is not a 21st century trend. It is worth noting that the history of narrative journalism is full of examples of hybridisation, and more could be said about the case of late 19th century narrative journalism (Michael, 2020).

With a focus on most recent trends and developments of narrative journalism, it can be argued that multimediality and connectivity allow cross-media production, by which journalistic stories are effectively played out on different platforms, and establish connections with different target audiences, while encouraging participation by users. Connectivity means that journalism is subject to the increased flow of information in digital publics, while users may provide context by linking and fact-checking (Karlsson et al., 2017). At the same time, the immediacy and interactivity of online media may involve more subjectivity and create options for emotional engagement (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020).

These aspects of the discussion on the narrative hybridisation of journalism all suggest that storytelling only succeeds through "intermedial transposition" (Wolf, 2018). Journalistic storytelling in different media contexts relies on the "translation of certain content-related or formal concepts/concept configurations from one medium to another"

(ibid., p. 203). Elleström (2010) understands intermediality as a bridging of medial differences through the transformation and adaptation of practices, structures, and performative modes of communication, and in doing so, he firmly links presentation possibilities (design and performance), the technical dimension (e.g. in terms of time- and space-constraints of a medium), but also the processes of perception and interpretation by audiences.

2. Journalistic Podcasts as Narrative Hybrids

Journalistic podcasts are examples of hybridisation through their inherent intermediality. This notion describes a process of transposition in which different media are bridged and interlinked by borrowing and transforming aesthetic practices and performative modes of communication. These aspects of intermedia storytelling will be further elaborated here in relation to the auditory design and presentation patterns of podcasts, as well as the aural experience dimension. Therefore, the following paragraphs will discuss how podcasts adapt different types of audio media.

Intuitively, a basic characteristic of podcasts, linked to intermedia storytelling, is their orality. Quasthoff and Ohlhus (2017, p. 76) define orality as "narrative processes that are realized vocally-somatically (not graphically) and are thus in principle subject to the fleetingness of the here-and-now." Narration in podcast media merely simulates this aspect of fleetingness, as what is said can technically be repeated and even reproduced at will. At the same time, elements of an immediate mode of communication are adapted and used as a narrative strategy. This is because podcasts can stage the performance of the spoken word through the rhythm and structure of the presentation and use it for their own purposes. In this way, they adapt to the special features of the processual experience that characterises listening. The rhythm and sentence structure create cohesion, give the story its sound, so to speak, and allow the audience to follow the narrative. In addition, the oral presentation allows interjections to be articulated or positive and negative emotions to be emphasised vocally through timbre, volume, and intonation. This presents the narrator or protagonists, from whose perspective the story is told, as authentic speakers, i.e. in the most unadulterated and quasi-intimate way possible (Lindgren, 2016). Intermedia storytelling experiences a further facet of orality in podcasts because oral storytelling also adopts aspects from written tradition and can thus establish a certain communicative distance between the narrator and the audience. Like the oral tradition of fantasy stories and fairy tales, this also applies to non-fictional genres that make use of a "conceptual written form [...] in medial orality", as noted by Quasthoff and Ohlhus (2017, p. 76). In this respect, storytelling in podcast media is intermedial in two respects regarding phenomena of orality. First, the linguistic characteristics of communicative immediacy, which typically occur in interpersonal communication (Koch & Oesterreicher, 2008), and second, the mode of conceptual writing, for example through relevance or topic setting, elaborations, and transitions (Quasthoff & Ohlhus, 2017, p. 80), are combined and translated into an auditory

narrative format.

In the media ensemble, the radio drama or radio serial is another obvious point of reference for podcasts and storytelling. In many respects, successful contemporary formats adapt elements from radio drama, and it is not unreasonable to draw parallels between the golden age of radio serials in the 1930s (Czitrom, 1982, p. 84 offers an overview of radio drama's share of total radio programming time) and the boom of serialised podcasts in the present (Berry, 2015). Radio drama - especially in the US - is also a product of intermedial processes. Brasch (2018, pp. 235-283) explains the contingencies and border crossings between radio and Hollywood films in the early days of radio drama. In addition, a study by Thomas (2007) shows the importance of stars from the film industry for the radio plays of American radio stations. For example, actors such as Peter Lorre or Orson Welles gave series such as Mystery on the Air (NBC) or The Shadow (CBS) their recognition value through their voices and tied the growing radio audience to the serial format. Mildorf (2017, p. 63) states that "[t]hrough the use of a realized narrative voice, listening and experiencing [...] gain in importance." Unlike oral narratives, however, radio plays are "linguistically through-composed" (ibid.) and often borrow their dramaturgy and narrative strategies from popular literary genres such as crime stories, horror, and science fiction. The medium of radio offers new creative scope for the use of the basic narrative elements of perspective, character, and plot elements of space and time. The motivations for actions (which lead to the resolution or non-resolution of a conflict) can be presented on different media levels and gain a different dynamic in the radio play than in the written medium. Huwiler (2005, p. 48) refers to the mixing of spoken language and other sound material (noise atmosphere, musical elements), "mixed together by montage and collage and structured in new ways." Furthermore, Huwiler writes (ibid., p. 54), "[t]hey replace conventional narrative commentary by adding a layer to the characters whose voices we hear. The act of fading in these sound sequences is a narrative act at the level of the discourse, even though there is no 'narrator' as such. It is merely an audible device that helps to tell the story." The intermediality of the radio play thus characterises not only a complementary juxtaposition of media, but also the bridging and translation of different narrative elements through different media forms and modes. For example, the dramatic structure (narrative time) is constructed through time-lapses and fades, ambient sounds convey atmosphere and outline the narrative space, and listening to dialogue or inner monologues offers a new quality of character profiling. Together, this creates the "illusion of being there" (Mildorf, 2017, p. 64), which is also constitutive for storytelling in podcasts.

The performative qualities of the oral mode, aesthetic options, and dramatic techniques in radio drama productions, and the atmospheric potential of a background soundscape, are brought together in current podcasts that make use of non-fictional storytelling. When considering these narrative techniques, however, the relationship to journalistic methods should also be acknowledged and discussed. Failure to comply with such methods makes non-fictional storytelling non-credible. In this respect, the immersion principle of narrative journalism is frequently discussed (e.g. Sims, 2007). Dowling and Miller (2019) use the industry term "deep dives" to describe this method of research.

The principle of immersion refers to the practice of time-consuming, full investigative research, which makes on-site observations and participation in events, comprehensive documentation of conversations, and incorporation of secondary information, e.g. from archives, equally the foundation of the stories. the principle of immersion offers journalists room for the "rendering of felt detail" (Connery, 1992, p. 3). For listeners this creates factual accounts that exhibit personal closeness and may have more elements of emotional involvement. This fosters authenticity and guarantees the credibility of the story. However, it can also mean that a fact or situation is not necessarily presented in an unbiased way. Documentary-reconstructive research and authentic access, in particular, harbour the risk of a loss of journalistic distance and therefore require a different form of transparency than in conventional news journalism. The fact that the presentation is a subjective interpretation must remain recognisable for readers (Haas, 2004; Tulloch, 2014).

3. Examples of podcasts as narrative media

In this section, various narrative techniques are analysed in terms of their capacity for intermedia translation, as well as the juxtaposition of such narrative techniques with journalistic methods of research and the professional ethos of transparency and accountability. The selection of cases is based on exemplary analyses as presented by Dowling and Miller (2019) and Schlütz (2020).

For this purpose, two examples illustrating the range of forms, practices, and functions in narrative journalistic podcasts in Germany were selected. This selection is not meant to be representative but rather shows a scope of options that journalists use to produce podcasts and tell stories in different contexts and with varying goals.

The first example, “Danke, Ciao!”, received the German radio award in 2016. It was aired on Deutschlandfunk Nova in a section called Einhundert, a space devoted to journalistic podcasts with a focus on human-interest and storytelling. In this podcast, which is roughly 30 minutes long and has just one episode, the journalist, Dominik Schottner, gives an autobiographic account of his relationship with his father who died of alcoholism.

The second example is part of a larger journalistic project, namely the publication of the Paradise Papers in 2017 in collaboration with different media (broadsheets and broadcasting, e.g. NDR, WDR, and Süddeutsche Zeitung) in Germany and world-wide (through the ICIJ – the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists). The reporters Benedikt Strunz and Philip Eckstein worked on this publication, and their podcast “Paradise Papers: Im Schattenreich der Steueroasen” aired on NDR Info, which is part of the public broadcasting sector in Germany. The podcast is serialised in seven episodes that run for about 25 minutes each. Basically, the journalists tell the story of how they got their information and how they exposed the global schemes of tax-evasion and money laundering. On the one hand, this is a personal account of their primary

research, while on the other it is an investigative exposé.

3.1 Danke, Ciao!

As regards the narrative perspective, “Danke, Ciao!” follows an established form: Dominik Schottner, the journalist, acts as the host, he is the narrator and therefore the pivotal point of the story. However, Schottner is not an omniscient narrator, but rather a homodiegetic narrator with a limited horizon of knowledge and perception. At times, the host seems like a companion at eye level, accompanying his audience, together with whom he is trying to find out how alcohol killed his father. The details of his father’s life story with its high and low point twists are revealed primarily through Schottner's observations and thus in an extremely subjective and somewhat speculative manner.

The fact that Schottner is by no means perceived as an unreliable narrator is due to the special features of audio narration. Through the performance of the spoken word, the audience perceives him in an authentic and quasi-intimate way. The impression of receiving an unadulterated account is reinforced by the host's colloquial conversational tone, the youthful and pleasant timbre of his voice, and the honest expression of spontaneous emotions.

In contrast to classic narrative texts, the audio narration also allows the audience to grasp the narrator's doubts, which can be interpreted through changes in his intonation and speech tempo. Throughout the podcast, these doubts are articulated particularly clearly when Schottner laments the fact that he could have realised earlier the extent to which his father’s drinking got out of control. Such doubts are credibly underpinned by hesitant speech and Schottner's wavering, uncertain voice. The host also positions himself as a credible and approachable narrator through self-reflexivity by asking himself (and indirectly his audience) questions like “could I have done something to help him?” or “isn’t that absurd?”.

On the other hand, the mode of oral narration in “Danke, Ciao!” also exhibits numerous elements of conceptual writing. The dramatic order of the podcast is artificial, and story time is accelerated through techniques of montage by juxtaposition of phone calls (messages Schottner’s father left on the answering machine because his son would not answer the phone anymore). Although the orality of the audio narration in “Danke, Ciao!” is characterised in parts by time-covering narration, (e.g. when longer segments from telephone calls and other conversations are played), the majority of the story has a highly artificial temporality. Apparently, the story begins at the end with the last message Schottner’s father left on the answering machine, before returning to the journalist’s childhood from where it unfolds chronologically, leading up to the ‘denouement’. In fact, the audience experiences a double temporality, namely first the level of the conversations and situations recorded on the answering machine in medias res and, second, the level on which Schottner organises and explains the story with a time lag when the host provides a reconstruction of the living conditions throughout different phases of his alcoholism. Through such techniques, audiences are offered a detailed psychological profile of an alcoholic and the effects this has on their families.

Emotional engagement is further created in these segments by fading in atmospheric soundscapes and popular music, e.g. a song by The National. The possible listening experience thus creates a different relationship between author, text, and reader, not only by creating atmosphere and mood and expanding the sensory participation in what is described, but also because a common cultural horizon of meaning and values can be established through the reference to certain musical styles and pieces (McHugh, 2012).

"Danke, Ciao!" shows how journalistic podcasts can become a venue for personal, highly intimate narratives that are grounded in reality because of their autobiographical nature. However, this type of podcast still adheres to core journalistic practices and functions. Schottner conducts primary research by drawing on his own experiences, although only in retrospect. He reconstructs childhood memories and his family history. A point of reference is the messages from his father on his answering machine. Not only do these messages structure the narrative but they also help Schottner to sift through a pool of fragmented memories and reflect on his family history, i.e. how he experienced things as a child in contrast to how he now remembers what *really* happened from the perspective of an adult. This process is complemented by secondary research through which the journalist is further immersed in the story of his father. Schottner conducts problem-centred interviews with family members and his father's friends. Although not extensively, he also inspects documents and institutional sources by talking to the police and interpreting the death certificate. The synthesis of narrative form and journalistic practice ensures that an integrative and educational journalistic function is maintained. This type of intimate storytelling creates communicative immediacy and social proximity between journalists and their audience, thereby fostering listeners' engagement and making the story more impactful. In this way, the topic of alcoholism is not communicated in abstract statistics and within a broader social context but through emphasis on personal experience and an episodic framing. The narrative can create awareness for the issue. Thus, audiences may be more susceptible to process the information, which can provide this type of journalistic podcast with a sustainable educational function.

3.2 Paradise Papers: Im Schattenreich der Steueroasen

The second type of podcast is an example of how investigative journalists can use narrative elements to convey an unwieldy topic like tax-evasion in an engaging manner, while also highlighting the challenges and dangers of investigative research. In this respect, it is different from the autodiegetic mode of intimate storytelling in the first example presented above.

A key difference is that the podcast tells the story of how the journalists Benedikt Strunz and Philipp Eckstein worked on the Paradise Papers (a large dataset about offshore tax-evasion which was analysed and published by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists). Each episode begins with numerous journalists from different countries stating their names and their affiliation in English. This gives voice to the collaborative networks behind the publication of the story.

The story then unfolds through varying perspectives and by employing different modes of the auditive medium. One mode can be described as a conventional journalistic narration, similar to the manner in which radio journalists report on topics. Here, there are fewer elements of orality since the speaker refrains from using interjection and has a flat intonation that lacks emotional stance. This narrative voice (belonging also to the journalist Benedikt Strunz) does not create any communicative immediacy. Rather, the narrator is distanced from the experiences and events of the protagonist and thus performs the role of the omniscient narrator. The latter's function is to guide listeners from scene to scene and to describe the setting by employing a mode of storytelling. The different perspectives and storylines are described, organised, and explained from his point of view. When an episode takes place on the Isle of Man, the narrator offers as a short, scenic description: "The capital of the Isle of Man is Douglas, a quiet sea-town that must have had its blooming period in the 19th century. Some things are still reminiscent of its heyday" (Paradise Papers, Episode 7, 3:50-4:05).

Contrary to these segments that connect different stages and threads of investigative work, the podcast also features elements that use the mode of the radio play when listeners 'accompany' the journalists on their various assignments of trying to get people, involved with the criminal schemes, to talk to them. This experiential dimension of the reporters is livelier. Such liveliness is created by implementing atmospheric sounds like traffic noise on the street, people talking in a coffee shop, the bustle of an airport, and so on. These natural sounds are used as atmospheric devices to create a mood and are seemingly recorded on the spot, while the protagonists conducted their journalistic work. This impression of live recording also offers readers a glimpse into the characters of the reporters, who are often humorous and likeable. This likeability is not only created through relatable dialogues but also by creating communicative immediacy through interjections such as "Wow" [wow] or "Wahnsinn" [crazy] that show the excitement or disbelief of the protagonists. The dialogues also make the interview scenes more interesting in the aural medium. Ambient sounds and laughter indicate that these scenes are set, for example, in a newsroom and make the journalists' everyday routines transparent. Here, the journalists also reflect on the difficulties of gathering interview material and testimonies from people, who do not necessarily give them permission to record, collect, and process what they say.

In this respect, the podcast makes it clear that deep, open-ended, and time-consuming research is indispensable for journalism and allows journalists to fulfil a function of criticising and controlling those in powerful positions in society. In an innovative way, narrative journalism in podcast media turns "toward self-reflexivity where the reporting process itself moves from peripheral to main text and established convention of the medium", in the words of Dowling und Miller (2019, p. 170), who elaborate further as to how this creates transparency and "access to the journalists' ethical dilemmas". Thus, narrative journalistic podcasts may qualify as the type of dynamic news creation through discourse that Karlsson (2011) describes, characterised by a strong process-orientation of narrative reporting that establishes accountability and imbues journalistic communication with lasting credibility and trust in changing digital media ecosystems.

4. Conclusion

This paper argued that journalistic podcasts can make use of different narrative capacities. Each form is achieved through specific journalistic methods of research and practices of editing the story. Whether it is the highly personal narration with autobiographical elements or the investigative exposé, journalistic podcasts can be understood as narrative media because the intimacy of audio-narration and the immediacy of arranged soundscapes allow listeners to immerse themselves in an issue that might otherwise escape attention. In this respect, narrative podcasts allow journalists to create the impression of authentic perspectives of reality and, through voice and precise documentation of details, maintain trust and accountability for journalistic work. In this way, narrative podcasts can be understood as a hybrid media practice since they are a genre that challenges established norms of neutral and distanced journalistic reporting. Podcasts thus expand the boundaries of journalistic communication. Furthermore, narrative podcasts are a hybrid form of journalistic discourse as they blend information and entertainment. This could be a means of attracting new audiences, creating engagement for social issues, and offering a new potential for journalistic agenda-building. Here, journalism expands its functionality as a viable and essential vehicle for proliferating public discourse.

The vast number of current projects, illustrated by DLF Nova's storytelling series "Einhundert", demonstrates the spectrum in which podcasts can be constituted as a hybrid genre of journalistic narrative media. A wide range of possibilities are explored for practising journalistic storytelling and using different formats, forms, and modes, each of which creates its own narrative performances and references to reality. Thus, while modes of storytelling flourish throughout online journalism, they may also pose a challenge to the role performance of journalists as detached and neutral observers in more general terms (Hanitzsch & Örnebring, 2020).

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