



PODCASTS AS INSTRUMENTS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

Podcasting has rapidly developed from an experimental model in digital media to a significant industry within the wider media sphere. This format combines traditional radio features with digital technologies, facilitating flexible, asynchronous, and customized content consumption. In political communication, podcasts and video podcasts serve as tactical promotional tools, offering a relatively unconstrained space that bypasses the institutional limitations of traditional media. This study analyzes current literature on political podcasts, synthesizing both conceptual models and empirical studies. Results identify three key aspects: the sense of intimacy between hosts and audiences, the reflexivity and transparency of discourse, and the potential to advance a further inclusive democratic culture. The analysis also identifies key risks: the aesthetic of authenticity and strong audience relationships may be leveraged to promote radical ideologies or disseminate misinformation. In conclusion, podcasts are changing political communication in the current environment, balancing the potential to democratize the public sphere with emerging algorithmic controls by digital media.

Keywords: podcast, political communication, platforms, social media, disinformation

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, podcasting has undergone rapid development, evolving from an experimental practice specific to emerging digital media to a mature, professionalized communication medium (Sullivan, 2024). This evolution highlights technological advances, shifts in media production and consumption, and changing ties between producers and consumers. From a communication perspective, podcasts offer a flexible space for messages and build a more direct, personal bond with the audience, reinterpreting the characteristics of existing media (Andok, 2025). In this conceptual framework, podcasting appears as a form of convergence between traditional radio and digital network communication. The format retains elements associated with radio, such as the central role of the voice, the serialized structure of the content, and the frequent use of interviews, while the digital medium adds the possibility of on-demand consumption. Thus, the audience can access content at their own pace and in their own context, via mechanisms such as timeshift (listening at a chosen time) and spaceshift (listening from any location) (Andok, 2025; García-Marín, 2022).

Theoretically, podcasts are a hybrid cultural form combining literature, theater, journalism, and participatory internet culture (Bonini, 2022). This blend gives podcasts a strong identity and makes them an effective, personal communication tool.

In the field of political communication, podcasts have established themselves as important tools for influence and promotion. They create more flexible spaces for expression, enabling politicians, journalists, and commentators to engage directly with the public. The format encourages broad discussions, the addressing of sensitive topics, and the integration of reflective analysis and interpretive commentary, while also helping to stimulate civic interest and participation (Sullivan, 2024).

2. Materials and Methods

This paper provides a state-of-the-art analysis of the literature on political podcasts, aiming to synthesise existing knowledge, highlight key research directions, identify theoretical gaps, and examine implications for

contemporary political communication. The analysis focuses on dimensions frequently discussed in the literature, such as the close relationship between host and audience, the reflexivity of discourse, and the potential of podcasts to support a democratic culture. At the same time, the risks associated with this format are also taken into account, including the spread of misinformation and the influence exerted by digital platform algorithms.

Through this approach, the study offers an integrated perspective on the role of political podcasts, placing this format at the intersection of opportunities to democratize the public sphere and challenges posed by the contemporary digital ecosystem.

3. Podcasting as a Tool for Political Engagement

Podcasts have established themselves as a contemporary communication tool in the political sphere, capable of informing, influencing, and mobilizing citizens, especially during election campaigns. In a society where rapid access to information and interaction in digital communities are becoming increasingly important, this format offers a flexible and effective way to convey political messages. At the same time, the literature describes it as a hybrid cultural form that can function as an alternative public sphere, facilitating direct communication between political actors, journalists, and niche audiences (Bonini, 2022; Snoussi et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of podcasts in political communication rests on three elements: fostering trust and familiarity between the host and audience, encouraging analytical transparency, and enabling democratization of voices. First, the close relationship between host and audience—built through a conversational format, informal tone, and extended dialogue—creates authenticity and allows for personal expression of ideas. This proximity strengthens public loyalty and enhances the influence of the political message. Second, podcasts offer an analytical dimension by demanding transparency in how topics, sources, and perspectives are chosen, helping the audience see how political messages are constructed. Third, podcasts democratize political discourse by including less common voices and perspectives. In some contexts, such as Tunisia and South Korea, podcasts serve as key platforms for government criticism, often using humor, satire, or sarcasm to mobilize the public and compensate for a lack of trust in traditional media (Lee, 2021; Snoussi et al., 2024).

Recent studies show that listening to or watching informative podcasts is strongly correlated with political participation, both online and offline. These formats facilitate civic discussions and spark collective engagement in public life (Lee, 2021; Rae, 2023). However, the same medium has significant vulnerabilities. Podcasts have sometimes been used by extremist groups to normalize radical discourse and spread conspiracy theories, using authenticity and informal dialogue. The influence of podcasts was also clear in the 2024 US presidential election, often called the "podcast election," when candidates used them to target undecided voters and emphasized podcasts as a strategic space to compete for political legitimacy. Romanian political parties also use podcasts to promote their candidates and present them in a positive manner.

3.1 Host–audience relational dynamics

One aspect frequently highlighted in the literature on political podcasts is the closeness created between the host and the audience. The podcast format favors interaction perceived as personal, thanks to the use of voice, a conversational tone, and regular episodes, elements that foster a close relationship between the host and the audience. Research shows that this closeness increases listeners' trust and strengthens audience loyalty, which are important factors for effective political communication in the digital environment (Berry, 2016; Llinares et al., 2018).

Studies also highlight that hosts use various discursive strategies to strengthen this relationship with the audience. These include addressing listeners directly, recounting personal experiences, or including reflective comments that create an impression of authenticity. Through such techniques, listeners become more than mere recipients of the message, being integrated into a communication space perceived as close and informal. In this context, the political message takes the form of a conversation, and the perception of direct propaganda diminishes (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

However, this closeness between host and audience also has important political implications. Recent research indicates that the trust built in podcasts can also be used to promote ideological agendas or spread misinformation. For example, a narrative or friendly style can help legitimize radical political views by making the discourse feel authentic and personal to the audience. In this sense, the relationship between host and audience becomes a strategic tool of political communication: on the one hand, it stimulates civic engagement and participation in public debates, and on the other hand, it facilitates the circulation of messages with a strong ideological impact, highlighting the ambivalent nature of this medium.

3.2. The Analytical Dimension of Discourse

Another important feature of political podcasts, highlighted in the literature, is the analytical dimension of discourse, which refers to the hosts' ability to comment on and interpret political content, and to explain how it is constructed and conveyed to the public. In many podcasts, producers openly discuss the sources they use, the criteria for selecting topics, and the perspectives from which they analyze political events. Through this approach, podcasts provide the audience with a clearer framework for understanding how political discourse is constructed (Llinares et al., 2018).

This analytical dimension enhances the transparency and credibility of the message, reinforces the host's perception of authenticity, and creates a space for critical debate. Studies show that audiences appreciate explanations of the context of information, documentation processes, or the limits of journalistic analysis, as these reinforce trust in the content and stimulate more informed participation in public discussions (Berry, 2016).

However, this form of discursive analysis does not eliminate the risks of influencing the audience. Some podcasts may present ideological opinions or interpretations under the guise of neutral analysis, thereby subtly shaping audience perceptions (Bonilla & Rosa, 2020). In this sense, the analytical dimension of political podcasts is ambivalent: it can inform and engage the public, but it can also be used to reinforce selective or distorted political narratives.

3.3 Democratization and the Risk of Misinformation

An essential dimension of political podcasts, highlighted in the literature, is their ability to expand participation and diversity in public discourse by providing access to information and perspectives that are less common in traditional media. Podcasts facilitate the inclusion of marginalized or underrepresented voices in the media, allow complex topics to be addressed, and create a favorable environment for reflective debate and in-depth analysis. In this way, they can help stimulate civic participation and active political engagement among the public (Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Llinares et al., 2018).

The flexibility of the format and editorial freedom give producers the opportunity to explore political topics in greater detail than in traditional media, where time constraints, format, and editorial agenda often limit the depth of discussion. In podcasts, discussions can be longer, and guests can come from diverse backgrounds, including activists, researchers, independent journalists, and civil society representatives. This diversity contributes to the multiplication of perspectives and the strengthening of pluralism of opinion in the public sphere.

Podcasts also facilitate the formation of communities of listeners around certain political themes or values. Online interactions, comments, episode sharing, and discussions on social platforms can turn the audience into active participants in political communication. Through these characteristics, podcasts can help create a more open media environment. At the same time, the literature highlights the risks associated with the spread of misinformation and ideological influence. Podcasts can be used to promote radical political agendas or convey incomplete or distorted information, especially given the perception of intimacy and trust established between the host and the audience (Bonilla & Rosa, 2020). Digital platform algorithms amplify these effects by favoring the distribution of content that generates emotional engagement or loyalty, regardless of its veracity.

Thus, political podcasts operate in an ambivalent space: on the one hand, they can expand access to information, increase civic engagement, and support democratic debate; on the other hand, they can function as vectors of misinformation and the consolidation of selective ideological perspectives.

4. Risks and limitations of political podcasts

Although podcasts are often seen as a tool to broaden participation in political communication, research shows that this medium also poses certain risks and limitations. One of the main problems is the lack of strict editorial control, as exists in traditional media. For this reason, information can circulate more easily without rigorous checks, leading to the spread of misinformation or hate speech.

At the same time, some extremist groups or radical political actors have begun to use podcasts to convey ideological messages. The friendly, conversational tone and close relationship between the host and the audience can make certain radical ideas seem more acceptable or credible to listeners (Wirtschafter, 2023).

In some cases, podcast discussions may present controversial opinions or theories without clear verification of the information. Thus, the audience may be exposed to simplified explanations or conspiracy theories related to sensitive topics such as electoral systems or vaccination. Some very popular podcasts provide a platform for people who promote such ideas, and the discourse is sometimes presented as a simple exploration of alternative perspectives (Rae, 2023).

Therefore, the literature shows that podcasts have an ambivalent role. On the one hand, they can facilitate access to information and encourage participation in public debates. On the other hand, in certain situations, they

can also become channels through which misinformation or messages with a strong ideological impact circulate. A specific risk associated with podcasts arises when the reflexivity of discourse is used manipulatively (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2022). Some producers may present the documentation or investigation process in an exaggerated way or suggest that they are analyzing multiple perspectives to gain public trust. In reality, these strategies may conceal the promotion of a partisan political agenda or avoid discussing documentation errors.

In certain situations, reflexivity is also used to improve the image of controversial political figures, shifting attention from their radical positions to personal stories or experiences presented in ways more accessible to the general public (Bird, 2025).

Another risk is the formation of so-called echo chambers. Because listeners choose the podcasts they follow themselves, there is a tendency to consume content that confirms their own opinions and beliefs. This selection reduces exposure to diverse viewpoints and can contribute to increased political polarization (Rae, 2023; Sindermann et al., 2020). Even though the podcast ecosystem offers a wide variety of programs, many of the most popular podcasts tend to promote a dominant ideological perspective to their loyal audience (Lindgren, 2025).

In addition, digital platforms that host podcasts collect large amounts of data about user behavior, such as listening preferences or content consumption duration. These practices raise issues related to data privacy and the protection of private life (Sullivan, 2024; Turow & Couldry, 2018). The visibility of podcasts also depends on platform algorithms, and how these work is often difficult to understand. In some cases, algorithms may favor more sensational or controversial content at the expense of well-researched content, or limit the visibility of certain material to protect platforms' commercial interests (Sullivan, 2024).

5. Conclusions

This research highlights how this media format has reshaped political communication in the digital environment. Studies show that podcasts combine the characteristics of traditional radio with the advantages of digital platforms, offering a flexible, asynchronous, and personalized mode of consumption, as well as a framework that facilitates more direct and intimate interactions between the host and the audience. The literature highlights three main areas of analysis: the intimate relationship between host and audience, which can stimulate trust and civic engagement, but which can also be exploited to promote ideological agendas or spread misinformation; the reflexivity of discourse and journalistic meta-commentary, which contribute to increasing the transparency and legitimacy of the message and provide the audience with tools for a critical interpretation of political information; and the tension between the democratization of communication and the risk of disinformation, as podcasts can promote pluralism of opinion and civic participation, but can also function as vectors of manipulation or algorithmic influence. In this context, political podcasts appear as an ambivalent tool, situated between the opportunity to expand the democratic public sphere and the risks associated with information control and the spread of disinformation. Thus, their effectiveness as a tool for political communication depends on the hosts' responsibility, journalistic competence, and the audience's media literacy. In conclusion, the article indicates that political podcasts are not only a channel for content distribution but also a space for political mediation and influence, whose effects on democracy and public opinion require constant evaluation, especially in the context of the development of algorithms and the consolidation of digital platforms as central actors in the information ecosystem.

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