

16 Podcasts

Provider of in-depth journalistic information

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Although the podcast is not a completely new concept and already known since the early 2000s (Bottomley 2015), it has since then become a central and successful format for the distribution of both information and entertainment. The podcast is an expression of a new audio age made possible by digitization. In this context, however, the podcast is only one innovative element of this Audio 3.0 age (Schützeneder and Graßl 2021). Audio 3.0 is characterized by a change across many dimensions, from which the podcast, as a format, benefits considerably (technically simple production, location- and time-independent, and fast distribution). Apps like Anchor allow the production and distribution of audio content (including podcasts) within just a few clicks, and platforms like *Spotify* are becoming central hubs with attention as the new currency. The boundaries between producers and listeners are blurring. This also offers opportunities for journalism, which has discovered the podcast as an important format for distributing audio content (Legorburu et al. 2021; Klinghardt et al. 2022). Media houses take advantage of the potential of audio as a new distribution channel for news in the digital ecosystem (Asier and Pedrero-Esteban 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic was a boost for journalistic podcast formats, helping science and educational formats to achieve high audiences (Nee and Santana 2022).

Research points out podcasts as being (innovative) drivers of audio development in journalism. In our research project, the development of “audio and podcast” in recent years was also identified as one of the 20 most important innovation areas by the experts in four countries (Austria, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland), following the research methodology outlined in Chapter 2. It must be mentioned that the development of podcasts as a format in journalism, in comparison to other formats, occurred over various stages. In the United Kingdom, one of the countries that participated in the JoIn-DemoS project, media used the journalistic podcast in the early 2000s, much earlier than continental Europe. For this reason, UK experts interviewed in the project’s initial substudy (Meier et al. 2022) no longer view the podcast as an area of innovation. This view stands in contrast to the other four countries. However, there is a lack of research on, among other things, the specific aims media companies have pursued with the introduction of

podcasts and which factors have supported and obstructed implementation. To fill this research gap, the following case studies of a successful best-practice podcast example from each of the four countries should contribute.

Case studies

- Austria: The podcast *Erklär mir die Welt* was started in 2018 and can be seen as one of the first to be created with a fully independent journalistic approach (Erklär mir die Welt 2021). With more than 15,000 listeners per episode, the journalistic podcast is one of Austria's most successful and independently produced examples. Moreover, the podcast is an award-winning podcast in Austria (e.g., Ö3 Podcast Award). The interviewee was the founder, Andreas Sator.
- Germany: Podcasts at *Die Zeit* are considered pioneers in the German audio landscape because, in comparison with other media houses, the podcasts not only have a broad and high-quality podcast portfolio (Zeit Online 2023), but they are also very popular. True crime podcasts, such as *Zeit Verbrechen*, have large audiences among young people. The first podcast was *Zeit Wissen* in 2009, after which a steady buildup was followed by a major expansion of the portfolio from 2017 onwards. The interviewees were Ole Pflüger (head of podcasts) and Sabine Rückert (deputy chief editor and host of *Zeit Verbrechen*).
- Spain: *Podium Podcast* was founded in 2016 (Podium Podcast 2023) as an initiative of the largest Spanish-speaking radio group *PRISA*. Podium Podcast was the first major project in Spain dedicated professionally to podcasting. The quality of its programs, documentaries, and sound fiction has made it one of the most award-winning media in the audio sector in Spain. The interviewees were María Jesús Espinosa de los Monteros (manager) and Lourdes Moreno (executive producer).
- Switzerland: The podcast *Durchblick* is a science podcast that was established in 2019 and is part of the portfolio of the *Blick* group (Blick 2023). There were hardly any science podcasts in Switzerland before *Durchblick*, and thus the innovation filled a previously unoccupied niche. In the beginning, the production was the responsibility of an external organization ("Podcastschieme" Winterthur) but is now in-house at *Blick*. The interviewees in Switzerland were assured of anonymity prior to the interviews. Therefore, here and in the following, the quotes and statements are only attributed to the podcast *Durchblick* and not to specific staff.

Aims of the innovation

The case studies in the four countries showed great overall heterogeneity in their initial media situation and the development of podcasts in the specific countries. Even though the starting positions of all the case studies were

different from one another, similar goals can be recognized internationally. In Germany, Spain, and Switzerland, the main aim was to broaden the target groups, of which the sole differentiation was how they would define these networks. The German experts, for example, “wanted to reach a young readership, listeners or interested parties. And that’s why we launched these forms of journalism that are popular among young people, online and also podcasts. That was the intention,” said Rückert.

In Austria, Andreas Sator said, specifically, that *Erklär mir die Welt* was created to offer guidance to people who wanted to think about the world a little more slowly and take more time to understand certain topics. The podcast format was ideal for conveying content in precisely this way. In addition, the podcast episodes should have fulfilled an advocacy function for the listeners.

The experts from Germany and Spain were clear about what kind of people they wanted to reach with the implementation of podcasts. The German expert Sabine Rückert emphasized that the aim for *Die Zeit* was to tap into reader groups that were new, young, and different from the usual *Die Zeit* reader. Her colleague and chief of podcast Ole Pflüger, however, insisted on other goals, which all podcasts had in common. At the beginning of *Die Zeit*’s development, the goal was definitely to create good journalistic content that contributed strongly to community building. Ole Pflüger confirmed that each individual podcast at *Die Zeit* was to handle this differently but that the goal throughout was to strengthen the listener-brand relations: “You can see that in how appreciative criticism is formulated and the trusting emails we sometimes get” (Pflüger, Germany, *Die Zeit*). Every podcast would vary the degree of the involvement of the listeners.

Sabine Rückert agreed with this, at least for *Zeit Verbrechen* podcast, which she produced. The aim, in this case, was not only to bind the listeners to *Die Zeit* but also to be able to better advertise the *Zeit Verbrechen* magazine to the podcast.

The Spanish podcast producer Lourdes Moreno pointed out that their aim was to rejuvenate their audience through the production of podcasts. The younger target group could be reached by moving away from the classic, linear media structures and toward on-demand offers. The possibility of consuming media wherever and whenever you want, mostly via smartphone, helped to kick-start the innovation. Also, Espinosa de los Monteros pointed out that hyperspecialization on topics in a podcast helped the innovation develop.

In Switzerland, the expert mentioned that the idea was only to reach new target groups without specifying the new target group in more detail. They emphasized that the implementation of podcasts had been a strategic decision for the department to comply with further company goals: reputation and relevance. In the context of using podcasts, “of course, we say we can deliver in-depth journalism and really address new target groups with a kind of scientific service journalism,” said a Swiss interviewee.

Supportive conditions

Various factors also ensured the successful development of podcasts. In all four countries, the experts named specific supporting circumstances they believed had had a positive influence on the work. International comparisons showed parallels between Spain and the other countries, whereas the countries of the D-A-CH¹ association tended to differ from each other. For Austria, Sator emphasized that a major advantage was that he was an already well-known journalist who had previously worked for quality media and was, therefore, trustworthy:

I think that was the advantage that I could also say at the interview [...], “Hello, I’m at the STANDARD and I’m now doing a podcast. It’s private, but I’d like to invite you.”

(Sator, *Erklär mir die Welt*, Austria)

Moreover, Sator noted that being a pioneer in the field had clearly helped *Erklär mir die Welt*. The interplay of trust and leadership had driven reception and thus the success of the podcast.

In Germany at *Die Zeit*, the interviewees positively noted that the interaction between the internal editors and external production companies strongly supported the podcast development. These group dynamics among committed and creative teams were viewed as being conducive to further podcast development in Germany and in Spain.

In Spain, both Moreno and Espinosa de los Monteros confirmed that it was probably *PRISA*’s particular structure that contributed to the successful development of the *Podium Podcast*. They stressed that *Podium Podcast* was like a start-up within *PRISA*, which supported the project with the advantages of both worlds:

A startup, which [can] move with a certain agility to be able to compete well with other digital, technological, etc. adversaries. [...] [and] the best of a media company like *PRISA*, which is the enormous amplification in the structure.

(Espinosa de los Monteros, *Podium Podcast*, Spain)

Podium was like a small start-up under the auspices of *PRISA* and therefore benefited from the standing of the media company, which, for example, lowered the risk of investing in a podcast. As for the investment in podcasting, *PRISA* did not have much at stake in the profit and loss account, and, therefore, the impact of failures was less painful. This was the reason *PRISA* supported the podcast financially.

Similar structures also existed in Switzerland. The podcast *Durchblick* allowed *Blick* to professionalize the production, operations, equipment, and distribution of podcasts in a cost-effective manner. Moreover, the Swiss

experts mainly saw an advantage in their personal case: the host of the podcast *Durchblick* had a special position as a well-trained journalist and scientist.

Obstructive conditions

Besides all the supportive conditions, there were still some obstacles that obstructed the development and implementation of podcasts, which, when comparing the four countries, did and still exist.

In Germany, for instance, the main problem was the lack of resources, which differed from the situation in Spain. Espinosa de los Monteros explained that the main obstacles were friction with advertisers that kept the project from developing, the constant fear the ecosystem would become saturated and that the podcast was simply not needed. Even though Espinosa de los Monteros would not say that the markets, for example, for either books or movies would ever be saturated; he felt a podcast would be another kind of medium, and the market would differ: “[I]t is true that it is very important to know very well how to distribute content in podcasts, because it is nothing like the distribution of other own content that we have had,” he explained. Moreno was also critical that, in general, the media company structures were outdated in that working methods, hierarchies, and organizations were still in the 20th century.

To some extent the media company also stood in the way of *Durchblick*, the case in Switzerland. Here, however, the expert said the *Blick* was brand “contaminated,” that there were people who were afraid to use the medium:

So it's more relevant for us to show that we really do in-depth journalism that doesn't come at all with a cudgel and is very all-encompassing and takes its time.

(Expert interviewee, *Durchblick*, Switzerland)

By this they meant that too many people were afraid to encounter the brand, no matter how many new formats it developed. *Blick* also had the problem of a lack of in-house expertise in podcasts, which slowed the development process.

Societal impact

Concerning the societal impact, the experts in the four countries named influencing variables that differed for each country. The provision of orientation played a decisive role for Sator in Austria. He thought that podcasting could also have a societal impact in the sense that it explained complexities in a simpler way and could thus pass on citizen participation and knowledge to a broader (but possibly not highly educated) audience.

In Germany, Rückert and Pflüger, independently of each other, focused on the educational mission. Rückert confirmed that her idea of a societal impact was to provide society with knowledge about the state and the role of people in the state.

Similarly, Moreno argued in the Spanish case study that the audience was educated, “seduced,” and entertained by podcasts, and thus relevant topics would have been better communicated. Espinosa de los Monteros also mentioned that the podcast’s goal in terms of social influence would have been to accompany citizens in all situations of life, and this would have been, according to the team’s ethics: “[W]e work with excellence, always stating that quality is non-negotiable and that our commitment to democracy, our listeners, readers and citizens is absolute.”

Conclusion

During the analysis of the interviews in the four countries, it became clear that the needs and goals of the podcasts went in a similar direction. It needed emphasizing that these cases, which were carried out as part of the JoIn-DemoS project, were all best-practice examples and could not have been representative of all podcasts in their countries. Nevertheless, commonalities were identified. Podcasts were intended to address new target groups who have little use for the classic, linear media. They should be enabled to receive information independent of time and place. At the same time, podcasts, because of their length, provide deeper insights into certain topics. The aim was clear: in-depth quality instead of meaningless quantity. This would have led to society being better informed about relevant topics. It was, therefore, important to have experts on the team in the specific media companies who were specifically familiar with these audio formats and who pushed the projects forward strongly.

It also became evident from the interviews that podcasts were more of a format innovation and not an innovation of journalism or a media company per se. It was and still is (tech) companies such as *Apple* or *Spotify* that have decisively driven the development and contributed to the current popularity of podcasts. Journalism and the media have taken up the podcast as an innovative format with the aims and conditions mentioned earlier. Based on these findings, the success of the innovation podcast could be understood better and classified more precisely. In addition, there is a need for further approaches – for example, around the potential monetization of podcasts – which can be addressed in future research based on these results.

Note

- 1 The D-A-CH countries are three German speaking neighbors: Germany (D), Austria (A), Switzerland (CH).

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