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Article

Infotainers, Mediators, or Watchdogs? Mapping the Field of News Podcasters and Their Role Conceptions in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland

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Abstract: News podcasts have emerged as a relevant medium, contributing to the collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of information in mass media discourse. This paper presents an analysis of the sociodemographic backgrounds, professional profiles, role perceptions, and values of news podcasters based on an online survey of 195 participants in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. The results reveal that news podcasters are predominantly male, middle-aged, and academically educated with no journalistic socialization or journalistic working experience. In terms of self-images and values, news podcasters emphasize the importance of education, information, and entertainment, while rejecting conventional concepts like criticism and control. Overall, they demonstrate a strong orientation towards the needs of their audiences and strive to be responsive to their preferences. Yet, the monetization of content through financing models such as sponsoring or native advertisement is not established on a broad scale. These findings shed light on the unique characteristics of news podcasters and provide insights into their status in a rapidly changing media environment.

Keywords: podcast journalism; audio journalism; news podcast; emerging media; journalistic roles; audio; innovation; profession; values



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1. Introduction: Podcasts as Drivers of Audio Innovation in Journalism

Digitization has led to disruptions in journalism on various levels; in a positive sense, these disruptions have enabled a range of innovations. One of the most important areas of innovation in the last decade has been podcasting. According to a study conducted in five western European countries, audio and podcasts have been listed among the top 20 innovations from 2010 to 2020 in Austria, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland (Meier et al. 2022). This development was largely set in motion by digitization, because it enabled podcasts to receive a further update in their evolution (Bottomley 2020). Production and reception have been almost completely de-linked from space and time, technical and economic barriers of participation have been reduced to a minimum, and the previously established hierarchy between professionals and non-professionals has been removed (Markman 2012; Martín-Morán and Martín-Nieto 2022; Schützeneder and Graßl 2021).

Thus, today's evolution level of audio content can be referred to as "Audio 3.0" (Schützeneder and Graßl 2021). This evolution level differs from its precursors "Audio 2.0" and "Audio 1.0", primarily with regard to the possibilities of audience interaction. At first, in the age of linear radio, the audience did not have the opportunity to give direct feedback at all ("Audio 1.0"). The production of audio content was reserved for a few professionals who informed a broad audience without the audience being able to participate. In the "talk-back radio" of the 1990s, professional audio content production

continued to be in the hands of professional editorial teams but the radio opened up and involved the audience via participatory activities such as call-ins, competitions and, later, homepages in the beginnings of digital radio (Lax 2003) (“Audio 2.0”). Now, in times of apps and platforms, it is theoretically possible for any member of the audience to produce audio content at any time (Berry 2018), distribute it, and thus switch from listener to producer status (“Audio 3.0”). Platforms like Spotify are reshaping audio offerings (Martín-Morán and Martín-Nieto 2022; Prey et al. 2020; Vonderau 2019), putting user-generated content and professional (journalistic) content on the same level without making any differentiation distribution-wise.

Despite their initial appearance in the early 2000s (Bottomley 2015), podcasts have particularly gained prominence since 2014, emerging as the dominant form of audio content. At this point, media and journalism, beyond the early pioneers from the United States and Great Britain, also began to experiment with podcasts as a new innovative format in the field of audio (Körner and Graßl 2024; Laughlin 2023; Wild and Katzenberger 2021) and to use the potential of podcasts as a new distribution channel for news in the digital ecosystem (Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban 2022; Legorburu et al. 2021; Lindgren and Loviglio 2022). By now, podcasts have not only complemented already existing mass media (Lindgren 2016) but have become a “disruptive technology” in the context of information distribution via audio (Berry 2015), as Nee and Santana (2022) describe in the context of the “emergence of news podcasts”. The global progress of podcasts is nevertheless highly heterogeneous, depending on different media markets and the respective media socialization, as several international comparative studies show (Llinares et al. 2018; Newman and Gallo 2020; Sang et al. 2020). In a global context, news podcasts have emerged as a highly sought-after genre, exhibiting (slowly but continually) rising rates of usage, currently standing at 12% worldwide (Newman 2023). In terms of news podcast consumption, the United States, Sweden, and Australia exhibit the highest overall rates at 19%, 17%, and 14%, respectively, whereas several European countries, including Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, demonstrate comparatively lower rates of 10%, 12%, and 12%, respectively (Newman 2023).

International research shows that podcasting was also seen as a challenge for newsrooms (Neuberger et al. 2019) but, more and more, the innovative potential shifted into the spotlight. The innovation potential of podcasts for newsrooms was not only seen in the opening of a new distribution channel; media organizations and newsrooms hoped to reach a new, young, and different group of people and thus to expand the target group on several levels (Körner and Graßl 2024; Legorburu et al. 2021). The development of new podcast formats for these target groups was dominated by traditional roles of journalism and linked to the aim of providing orientation in the digital world and thus contributing to a society that is more thoroughly informed on relevant topics (Körner and Graßl 2024). Driven by new target groups and formats, transformations in journalism have taken place on several levels in the area of the distribution of information through podcasts. The following dimensions can be referred to as examples:

- New narrative forms and storytelling have emerged and permanently evolved (Dowling and Miller 2019). Increasing professionalization and establishment of large podcast production organizations have elevated technical implementation to a higher level. Well-known and award-winning podcasts often resemble elaborately produced audio books, and narrative storytelling is becoming the basis of numerous podcast formats (Schlütz 2020; van Krieken and Sanders 2019). Moreover, such podcasts frequently employ immersive narrative techniques—as established in narrative journalism—like subjective perspectives, personalization, contextualization, and transparency to establish a sense of proximity and to build intimate relationships between the journalist and the listener (Coward 2013; Lindgren 2014, 2016, 2021; Schlütz 2020).
- New organizational forms and editorial teams have multiplied output while also introducing new workflows. The “podcast ecosystem” (Sherrill 2022) is characterized by the interplay of creativity and structure—in terms of content but also during the

production process and in the interaction of the actors involved in it (Jorgensen 2021; Kerrigan et al. 2021).

- New monetization and marketing models have created new potential for commercialization at the level of media economics (Brinson and Lemon 2022; Perks et al. 2019). Thus, the analysis of podcast reception and the conceptualization of audience expectations have become the basis for potential monetization (Heiselberg and Have 2023).

However, the uncertain amortization in the form of economic success has been and remains a challenge for journalistic podcasts (Berg 2022; Drössler 2022; Jorgensen 2021; Schlütz 2020; Terol-Bolinches et al. 2021), especially for private media organizations. In addition to financial considerations, a lack of existing in-house podcast expertise has also proven to be an impeding factor for media organizations in developing journalistic podcast formats (Körner and Graßl 2024). In reverse, successful pioneers in journalistic podcasting, among European media organizations, report that it is primarily individuals who see themselves as well-trained and experienced journalists and who hold technical expertise that have contributed to the success of their podcast formats (Körner and Graßl 2024; Markman and Sawyer 2014). This makes it clear that, similar to other areas of innovation (Meier et al. 2022), adapted skills for journalists have become necessary (Guo and Volz 2019). Although, on one hand, traditional journalistic role understandings seem to have proven their worth even in the innovative audio field, on the other hand, technical and new skills in distribution and presentation are required. These first indicators show that the innovative development in the audio/podcast field has not only led to new narrative formats and new organizational teams but also to newly required skills and thus to possibly new role perceptions in the field of podcasts.

2. New Roles of Journalists in the Digital Age

However, in previous research (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 2018; Mellado et al. 2023; Raemy and Vos 2020), the role perceptions of the producers behind the microphones of podcasts have received little or no attention. At first glance, this is not surprising, since “the study of journalistic roles tends to be descriptive and is thin on theory” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). A recent review by Mellado et al. (2023) is also in line with this observation: “What is still lacking is a comprehensive look at how these transformations affect the performance of specific journalistic roles”. This problem emerged also due to the fact that (international) research on the topic of roles and role models has long been strongly dominated by the exclusive focus on traditional publication channels such as print, TV, or radio (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Stepinska et al. 2016). From this compilation, central developments in the context of role understandings and developments can be synthesized and understood. Moreover, research has consistently demonstrated that basic content coverage in journalism does not vary greatly across traditional channels (print, TV, and radio) (Hoffman 2006; Ryfe 2006). Maier’s (2010) study states: They “covered the same story lines almost in identical proportion with each other as with online media”. Phillips (2012) summarizes this under the keywords homogenization and cannibalization.

This inventory and the theoretical basis for understanding journalistic roles is furthermore enormously influenced by an (elitist) Western perspective on the world, politics, and journalism. Accordingly, journalistic roles can be understood as discursive constructions of journalism’s identity and place in society (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). Over time, these roles have also solidified due to the associated organizational forms in journalism, but are nevertheless permanently in motion, because new technical developments, audience expectations, or content-related format innovations require a further development of the roles. A clear break in the consideration of journalistic roles can be seen from the year 2000 onward (Deuze 2003). The increasing scope and influence of digital media led to a major shift in the previously traditional understanding of journalists. Until the 2000s, this was primarily characterized by the roles interpreter, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer (Weaver and Wilhoit 1981).

Digital advancements have reshaped these roles piecewise. Journalism became more interactive (with the audience), more interpretive and analytical, and faster (online live coverage) (Weaver and Willnat 2012). Journalistic talents and technology became the central dimensions of everyday journalism (Mari 2019). Also, at the same time, the role of the audience changed drastically. Perreault and Ferrucci (2020) describe this change in role based on their study with the catchphrase “serving the audience”. Journalists should and must act even more in a “market-driven manner” and adapt to economic logics. Murray et al. (2010) see new “material practices”, which in turn have to be understood and developed and “embedded in social contexts”. With Citizen Journalism and Citizen Media, new forms of organization and formats supplemented the market of information and opinion formation, which until then journalists had been able to fill almost exclusively for themselves. Journalistic roles at this interface have been analyzed and located primarily along the dimensions of independence, financial endowment, storytelling, and cooperation/competition with established media brands (Beers 2006; Shim 2014; van Krieken and Sanders 2019).

A recent study by Mellado et al. (2023) provides an international framework on the question of (new) roles in journalism and thus also provides an important impetus for our study in the context of podcasts. The authors first derived six role dimensions in journalism from established frameworks; each of these roles is characterized by different measures of professional practices, reporting styles, and narrative schemes (Mellado 2021):

- Interventionist: This role is characterized by a stronger presence of journalists in video or audio. They are interpreting events or promoting action, taking sides and using call to actions.
- Watchdog: The tradition of this role lies in the intensive criticism and observation of power and grievances in society. The core of this role is information on judicial/administrative processes and investigative reporting.
- Loyal-facilitator: This role is characterized (in contrast to watchdog) by a high level of identification with the country, the region, or even the institutions. One wants to be actively there for the benefit of progress and success and therefore acts rather defensively or supportively.
- Service-role: In this understanding, journalists see the importance of their own activity in everyday support of the audience. Tips, hints, and consumer service are the focus of reporting.
- Infotainment-role: Here, journalists act strongly along the logics of tabloid journalism: sensation and personalization are the guidelines with which to evoke the highest possible level of emotion in the audience.
- Civic-role: This role is more fully understood in terms of the history of advocacy for the public. Problems and concerns of society are addressed and held up to decision makers. In addition, movements and initiatives from within society are given support.

The international comparison of the study proved that the respective playout channel exerted a central influence on the respective role images. A comparison of different countries and media systems showed that there are differences between role performance and platforms. This is especially true for roles that enable political influence on news coverage. At this point, the authors argued that the respective media systems significantly influence this relationship.

More specifically, in terms of new roles and role understandings in audio, Park (2017) describes a relationship with mutual influences of professional and non-professional journalists:

The uptake of citizen podcasts offers professional journalists opportunities to reflect on current journalism assumptions, identities, and practices. In other words, podcasts provide journalists with a reflective lens by which they can look back on the rules and conventions of their professional practices.

Complementing this, Nee and Santana (2022) provide a precise overview of the relationships between roles and formats by supplementing the appropriate content dimensions along existing roles (e.g., interpretive journalism) through a content analysis and thus

derived that the podcast medium promotes the use of the first-person voice, as well as subjectivity.

Considering the state of research on the role of podcasts in journalism and journalistic roles in the digital age, three key aspects can be identified that constitute the focal points in the discourse to date and therewith form the basis of our empirical investigation:

- Studies examining the field of podcasts and journalism primarily concentrate on the *medium itself and its (innovative) qualities* (Körner and Graßl 2024; Meier et al. 2022; Nee and Santana 2022; Schützeneder and Graßl 2021; Wild and Katzenberger 2021). Less emphasis is placed on the creators of journalistic podcasts.
- While research on role perception has been extensively conducted for various types of communicators, such as journalists, politicians, and bloggers (Elsen 2004; Hanitzsch and Lauerer 2019; Schenk et al. 2014), there has been a *lack of exploration into the role perception of podcasters* in general and news podcasters in particular. In this paper, news podcasters are defined as producers of news podcasts based on current research (Newman 2023). Additionally, there are few insights into the values and standards that shape their work. If one does not take into account the studies about podcasters from the pioneering period of the medium (Markman 2012; Mocigemba and Riechmann 2007), little is known about their sociodemographic and, even more so, about their professional profiles.
- Research on journalistic podcasts and their creators has primarily relied on *case studies or qualitative studies* with rather small samples or national perspectives (Berg 2022; Berry 2015; Körner and Graßl 2024; Legorburu et al. 2021; Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban 2022). While they certainly provide valuable insights into specific cases and countries, it is difficult to generalize findings and derive overarching patterns.

Our exploratory study was based on the desiderata and methodological considerations from above. By focusing on news podcasts, it addresses an “underexplored area in journalism studies” (Rojas-Torrijos et al. 2020). The aim was to first gain descriptive insights into the group of news podcasters in the DACH area. The DACH region refers to the three Central European countries of Germany (D), Austria (A), and Switzerland (CH). The research questions (RQ) were as follows:

RQ 1: What are the sociodemographic and professional profiles of news podcasters?

RQ 2: How do news podcasters understand their role?

RQ 3: What values and standards do news podcasters follow?

3. Materials and Methods

To address the questions above, a standardized, quantitative online survey among podcasters in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland was conducted. The starting point for our exploratory research was audio streaming platforms. Those platforms are highly relevant since they provide the essential technical infrastructure by which podcasts can be distributed by podcasters and stored, managed, searched, found, and consumed by users (Sullivan 2019). With regard to the number of listeners and the number of available podcasts, Apple Podcasts is one of the most relevant audio platforms worldwide (Newman et al. 2022). For podcast research, Apple Podcast is interesting for another reason, too: Apple Podcasts features application programming interfaces (API). API are platform-specific pipelines for digital data and offer machine-readable interfaces for the collection and analysis of public data (Haim and Hase 2023; Ohme et al. 2023). Based on this data access via Apple Podcast and with the help of web scraping, we collected and analyzed data on all podcasts with the country codes for Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. On this basis, 8043 podcasters were invited to participate in the survey. Participation was voluntary and took about 15 min. During the study period from 9 June 2021 to 24 June 2021, a total of 1340 podcasters took part in the survey, giving the survey a response rate of around 17%. All the data were anonymized, ensuring that no individual identities could be discerned

or conclusions drawn about specific persons. The data were obtained through a public, authorized API, ensuring its legitimacy and adherence to privacy protocols.

Participants answered a total of 26 questions in different sections of a comprehensive questionnaire: (1.) characteristics of the podcasts and content, (2.) role understanding, (3.) values and standards, (4.) sociodemographic background and professional status. The exploratory questions considering the (1.) characteristics of the podcasts and content included aspects like genre, topic, number of listeners, and publication frequency. The questions on the podcaster's (2.) role understandings were based on the scales of [Hanitzsch and Lauerer \(2019\)](#). The analysis of [Hanitzsch and Lauerer \(2019\)](#), its scales, and its results for the DACH region was drawn from the second wave of the Worlds of Journalism Study which was conducted worldwide and simultaneously in 67 countries. The scale on role understandings was differentiated into six sub-dimensions: Information, Mediation, and Analysis; Criticism and Control; Political Articulation and Participation; Social Engagement; Entertainment and Audience Orientation; Education and Culture. The respondents rated the six sub-dimensions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("not at all important") to 5 ("extremely important"). The operationalization of the (3.) values and standards was based on the work of [Paterson et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Lin et al. \(2015\)](#) in a broader sense and interpretation. Again, the respondents were asked to rate the various items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ("not at all important") to 5 ("extremely important"). The (4.) sociodemographic background in the last section of the questionnaire addressed classic aspects like age, gender, and education. The professional status was ascertained through questions on journalistic training, occupation, and income. All data were self-assessments of the participants.

After cleansing the data and excluding incomplete cases from the data set, the sample consisted of 1073 podcasters in total. This makes it the largest survey on podcasters so far. The sample of 1073 podcasters in total was described and analyzed in [Katzenberger et al. \(2022\)](#). However, the analysis in this paper was a further and detailed study of a sub-sample consisting of 195 news podcasters. Given the notoriously fluid boundaries of podcasting, it is relevant to specify how this study undertook the identification and investigation of news podcasters, that is, podcast producers "doing" news journalism. Overall, this study identified news podcasters as survey participants who indicated in the questionnaire's section on (1.) characteristics of the podcasts that they offer a journalistic podcast in the "news and politics" category. Moreover, the section on (4.) sociodemographic background and professional status allowed the identification of podcasters with a journalistic education or journalistic experience. All evaluations in the following sections refer to this specific sub-sample consisting of 195 news podcasters.

4. Results

The socio demographic data of news podcasters showed clear trends: news podcasters were mostly male (73.3%), middle-aged between 30 and 49 years (64.1%), and academically educated (70.8%).

In terms of professional backgrounds, there were some common features among news podcasters: more than two thirds of all survey participants did not have any journalistic training (68.2%). Only a third was socialized in a journalistic context (31.8%). Among them ($n = 62$), traineeships (13.3%), studies of media and communication programs (10.3%), or communication science (9.7%) were most relevant. Independent of their education, half of all survey participants (53.3%) had never worked as a journalist, a quarter had recent working experience as a journalist (23.6%), and another quarter was currently working as a journalist when they took part in the study (23.1%). When it came to their podcasts, in most cases, news podcasters produced their content in a private context or as a hobby (55.4%). A quarter of them produced their podcasts for their employer (26.7%), a media or production company, or as a freelancer (24.6%).

Financial aspects did not play a central role in the production of podcasts for most news podcasters, according to their own statements. Four-fifths of news podcasters (85.1%)

had no income at all from their work as a podcaster. Just under 10 percent (9.2%) said that they earned up to EUR 100 a month from their podcast. A minority (5.6%) earned more than EUR 100 a month from their podcasts. However, at this point, it should be noted that the large share of news podcasters without revenue ($n = 166$) was mostly accounted for by those podcasters who produced their offerings as a hobby or in a private context ($n = 99$). The results of the survey also showed where the income of news podcasters derived; most of the income came from donations via online platforms like Steady or Patreon (17.9%), from sponsoring (13.8%), or from native advertising (7.2%). Native advertising is a form of paid advertising in which the ad matches the style of the podcasts in which it appears.

The production and practices of news podcasters were distinguished by several characteristics. The weekly production effort for the news podcasters was on average 7.14 h; however, there was a wide variation in results (SD: 9.523). Most of the effort was spent on recording (44.3%) and research of the content (22.1%). Practices like organization (12.4%), marketing (8.8%), and community management (6.45%) were less relevant in the production processes of the news podcasters. The huge majority of news podcasters preferred a regular publication frequency for their audio content: They tended to publish their podcasts several times (31.3%) or once a month (20.5%). Daily podcasts were rather rare in the sample (3.6%).

The survey also provided some insights into the audience of news podcasters. The news podcasters mostly targeted middle-aged groups from 30 up to 49 years (59.0%) or young-aged groups from 14 up to 29 years (47.2%). About a third of news podcasters did not target any specific audience groups (35.9%). Per episode, the news podcasters reached on average 8005 people but, again, there was a very wide variation in results. The minimum in the sample was seven listeners per episode and the maximum was 450,000 listeners per episode.

With regard to the understanding of their role (see Table 1), news podcasters found *Education and Culture* to be the most relevant aspect ($M = 3.4/SD = 0.923$). In this context, a professional self-image focused on “promoting tolerance and cultural diversity” was considered “very important” or “extremely important” by 72.2% of all survey participants ($M = 3.9/SD = 1.279$). In second place was *Information, Mediation, and Analysis* ($M = 3.4/SD = 0.957$). Here, the role perception as a provider of neutral information was dominant: 71.3% of all survey participants stated that they found “classifying and analyzing current events” either “very important” or “extremely important” ($M = 3.9/SD = 1.166$). In third place was *Entertainment and Audience Orientation* ($M = 3.3/SD = 0.829$). Of all survey participants, 53.1% considered “offering advice, guidance and assistance” for everyday life to be “very important” or “extremely important” ($M = 3.4/SD = 1.270$). In contrast to these features, news podcasters assigned little importance to *Criticism and Control* ($M = 1.7/SD = 1.002$): “Counterbalancing the government” was the most important item in this context, although agreement among news podcasters was very low for this aspect ($M = 1.8/SD = 1.239$). At this point, it is important to note that all results on the role conceptions were based on the self-assessments of the survey participants. They were not based on independent measurements.

In terms of most important values and standards (see Table 2), *Comprehensibility* ($M = 4.31/SD = 0.806$) and *Diversity/Multiperspectivity* ($M = 4.06/SD = 1.003$), as well as *Objectivity* ($M = 4.06/SD = 1.003$), ranked highest among news podcasters. The approval rates among news podcasters who found these items “very important” or “extremely important” was 86.6%, 78.3%, and 75.6%, respectively. *Actuality* ($M = 3.39/SD = 1.161$), *Establishing a relationship with the audience* ($M = 3.39/SD = 1.152$), and *quick and easy communication with audience* ($M = 3.32/SD = 1.211$) achieved the lowest levels of relevance but they still had positive approval ratings. Again, all statements on the news podcasters’ values were derived from self-assessments.

Table 1. Role perception of news podcaster (Hanitzsch and Lauerer 2019, ranking form 1/“not at all important” up to 5/“extremely important”, % = Percentage of respondents rating the specific item as “very important” or “extremely important”, $\alpha = 0.832$).

	%	M (SD)
Education & Culture		3.4 (0.923)
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	72.4	3.9 (1.279)
Communicating the world in stories as a storyteller	38.9	3.0 (1.428)
Information, Mediation & Analysis		3.4 (0.957)
Classify and analyse current events	71.3	3.9 (1.166)
Report things as they are	63.3	3.7 (1.238)
Being a detached observer	31.3	2.7 (1.374)
Entertainment & Audience Orientation		3.3 (0.829)
Offer advice, guidance and assistance	53.1	3.4 (1.270)
Offer content that attracts the largest possible audience	27.7	2.9 (1.248)
Political Articulation & Participation		3.3 (1.078)
Motivating people to participate in political events	58.2	3.5 (1.382)
Communicate political information	48.2	3.3 (1.360)
Giving people the opportunity to articulate their views	44.0	3.1 (1.406)
Social Commitment		2.5 (0.971)
Advocate for social change	51.5	3.3 (1.428)
Influencing public opinion	28.7	2.7 (1.283)
Support national development	16.4	2.0 (1.311)
Set the political agenda	13.3	2.0 (1.184)
Criticism & Control		1.7 (1.002)
Counterbalance the government	11.5	1.8 (1.239)
Control the government	9.0	1.7 (1.117)
Control the economy	8.9	1.6 (1.066)

Table 2. Values and standards of news podcasters (Paterson et al. 2015 and Lin et al. 2015, ranking form 1/“not at all important” up to 5/“extremely important”, % = Percentage of respondents rating the specific item as “very important” or “extremely important”, $\alpha = 0.832$).

	%	M (SD)
Accuracy/Precision of Information	89.2	4.5 (0.859)
Comprehensibility	86.6	4.3 (0.806)
Diversity/Multiperspectivity	78.3	4.1 (1.003)
Objectivity	75.6	4.1 (1.083)
Relevance/Significance	69.6	3.9 (1.127)
Consider suggestions and wishes from the audience	51.1	3.5 (1.157)
Actuality	48.5	3.4 (1.161)
Establish relationship with the audience	44.8	3.4 (1.152)
Quick and easy communication with audience	46.7	3.3 (1.211)

5. Discussion

In connection to RQ 1, the study found the following: with regard to the sociodemographics, the average news podcaster is male, middle-aged, and academically educated. Although the survey and sample showed a larger proportion of female podcasters than previous studies (Markman and Sawyer 2014; Markman 2012; Mocigemba and Riechmann 2007), diversity among news podcasters is still not well established; news podcasters were mostly male (73.3%). Yet, the higher proportion of female podcasters (26.7%) could be an indication that they have started to transform and shape the podcast scene in the last few years. The debate about gender and diversity in editorial teams has been present in digital journalism for several years. News outlets like podcasts depend on diversity to present multi-perspective and multi-faceted information and opinions. The more homogeneous the composition of editorial teams, the more challenging it is to depict the diversity of perspectives in society in an open and unbiased manner (Steiner 2020).

Considering the professional profiles, it is striking that most news podcasters have no journalistic training and no working experience in the journalistic context at all. Although they take part in the production of news—a classic journalistic genre—and, thus, fulfill classic journalistic functions such as providing information and contributing to the formation of opinions in the discourse, most of them have no journalistic socialization at all.

Regarding the funding of news podcasts, the study supports previous research findings that highlight the challenge podcasters face in terms of monetization and economic success (Berg 2022; Drössler 2022; Jorgensen 2021; Moe 2023; Terol-Bolinches et al. 2021). The results show that the large majority of the survey participants do not generate any income from their podcasts. Similarly, Sehl and Schützeneder (2023) showed that political influencers who podcast do not yield significant revenue from their podcasts. Instead, podcasting is primarily utilized as an additional means of branding and showcasing content through audio. Katzenberger et al. (2022) also state, on the basis of their online survey, that most podcasters are generally not driven by monetary motives in the production of their content. Wild and Katzenberger (2021) confirmed in a content analysis that—in most cases—no monetization models have yet been established in news podcasts from news outlets like print magazines or print newspapers, either.

With regard to RQ 2 and RQ 3, the results from the survey underline that an analysis of the role perception of news podcasters is a relevant element for a comprehensive understanding of the social identity and legitimacy of podcast journalism in general and news podcasts in particular. The concept of role understanding sums up all ideas and intentions that media professionals like podcasters associate with their work. As established above, on the one hand, these ideals are shaped by societal expectations of their performance; on the other hand, they manifest into professional goals and can guide journalistic performance. As will be discussed in a later section, to what extent such intentions and self-assessments are reflected in actual practice is a much disputed topic (Mellado et al. 2017).

The specific results show that, first, news podcasters see themselves as cultural and educational multipliers for their audiences. They agree on the importance of educating the audience. In addition to that, news podcasters find it to be very important to promote tolerance and cultural diversity in their audio content. This understanding of the role might be an indication of their belief in liberal values. Consequently, they also highlight values and standards like diversity or multiperspectivity in their work. This might open the discussion to the question of the extent to which news podcasters exhibit an “elitist role” (Raemy and Vos 2020) at this point.

Within the discourse on podcasts, second, it is often pointed out that podcasts in general mostly focus on entertainment or are a medium with the aim to entertain only (Berry 2018). The results from the survey indicate the contrary for news podcasters: They show that news podcasters mainly want to provide their listeners with informative content. This outcome demonstrates that news podcasters put an emphasis on neutral information and factual analysis. They show high approval ratings for traditional role conceptions like the “detached observer”, the “objective witness”, or the “mirror of reality”. Thus, it can be said that the professional ideology of news podcasters is very much shaped by the epistemological idea of depicting reality as it actually is. In line with these results, news podcasters rate objectivity as very important. So, at least in their self-assessment, it seems important to them to put aside personal assessments and opinions.

Third, the sample also demonstrates that news podcasters are strongly oriented towards their audience and are highly responsive to them. They aim to offer advice, guidance, and assistance, share consumer tips, provide recommendations that their listeners can use in their everyday life, and, thus, nurture the needs of their audience. In doing so, news podcasters take up an understanding of the role that has been established in journalism, as outlined above, and is traditionally summarized as the “service role” (Mellado et al. 2023). This finding is supported by the fact that the news podcasters place utmost importance on values like the comprehensibility or relevance of their content. By doing so, they aim to

make stories more intelligible for their audience—an intention that only further highlights their audience-oriented interpretation of their role as a creator of news content.

In public discourse, journalism's legitimacy is often derived from its role as a democratic "watchdog" or "fourth estate" (Hanitzsch and Lauerer 2019). However, fourth, for news podcasters in the DACH region, the sociopolitical function of criticism and control is hardly relevant. They even seem to reject a normative self-image that aims to scrutinize and criticize political or economic elites. Consequently, it can be stated that news podcasters dismiss the classical "watchdog role" (Mellado et al. 2023) of journalism: in their content, news podcasters do not aim to hold the government to account. News podcasters seem to share this characteristic with traditional journalists in the DACH region; in an international comparison, journalists from these areas also show low approval ratings for aspects such as counterbalancing the government, controlling the government, or controlling the economy (Hanitzsch and Lauerer 2019).

When discussing the outcome of this study, there are some limitations to be considered. It should be noted that the sample's representativeness is restricted. Since the total number of (news) podcasters in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland is unknown, the sample might exhibit bias. However, a look at other studies suggests that the sample of this study might adequately represent the group of news podcasters. With regard to sociodemographic data, the results in this paper show some similarities to the outcome of previous studies (Attig 2020, 2022), for example, in respect of gender, age, and education. All results are based on the subjective self-reports and self-assessments of the survey participants. Another factor to consider in this context is the effect of social desirability. It is known that questions about role perceptions and values can lead media professionals to give socially desirable answers that fit normative expectations (Mellado 2019).

In addition, conceptual aspects must also be taken into account in the context of the discussion and interpretation of the results in this study. Research around journalistic roles in general or role performances in particular has shown that the translation of media professionals' intentions into journalistic products is a multi-dimensional and complex process (Mellado et al. 2017). Thus, the question of whether there is a connection between self-image and journalistic action remains open to discussion (Mellado 2019; Mellado et al. 2017; Mellado and van Dalen 2014). Some authors even argue that "what journalists think they ought to do, what journalists want to do, what journalists really do in practice, and what journalists say they do" (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017) are distinct ideas and often confused. When interpreting the results on the professional role perception and values of news podcasters, it must always be considered that they are based on self-reports by the news podcasters and that they do not (by default) describe actual practice in the field of podcasting.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to take an exploratory perspective on news podcasters in the DACH region. It assessed the sociodemographic backgrounds, professional profiles, role perceptions, standards, and values of 195 news podcasters through an extensive online survey. The analysis revealed that news podcasters continue to face challenges in achieving structural diversity. The majority of podcasters are predominantly male, middle-aged, possess higher levels of academic education, and have no journalistic socialization or working experience. With regard to their self-images and values, on the one hand news podcasters highlight aspects like education, information, entertainment, and political engagement and reject other notions like criticism and control on the other hand.

If one relates this outcome to established concepts from research on the roles and values of media professionals in the digital era (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 2018; Hellmueller and Mellado 2015; Raemy and Vos 2020), it becomes evident that news podcasters fully embrace some traditional role dimensions and values, while they tend to dismiss others. When providing information and sharing consumer tips or recommendations for everyday life, they are acting in accordance with the "service role" (Mellado 2021). At

the same time, they do not identify with the “watchdog role” (Mellado 2021) and do not feel responsible for intensive observation and criticism of power. Above all, they fully embrace an “audience approach” (Mellado et al. 2023) and the idea of “serving the audience” (Perreault and Ferrucci 2020). Thus, even though podcasts are often being labeled as “disruptive technology” (Berry 2015) for their use of new narratives and storytelling techniques (Dowling and Miller 2019), new organizational forms (Jorgensen 2021), and new monetization models (Katzenberger and Wild 2023), in many cases their producers identify with some traditional roles and values and are hence oriented towards classic functions of journalism.

Future research might elaborate how this role conception could help establish a podcast culture in journalism. The high approval ratings for traditional role dimensions like education, information, or audience orientation might be an indicator for the establishment of a podcast culture in journalism. By prioritizing information or education, news podcasters express their intention to provide accurate and fact-based content. It seems reasonable to expect that news podcasters who prioritize information or education place value in investing time and effort in thorough research and detailed preparation such as gathering reliable sources, conducting interviews, and examining the subject matter, ensuring that their content is well-informed and substantiated. Likewise, it is plausible to anticipate that news podcasters who highlight audience orientation or listener service often engage in in-depth analysis and storytelling, going beyond headlines. Such an approach adds relevance and context to the topics discussed, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. The commitment to all of these traditional role dimensions—such as education, information, or audience orientation—aligns with the core principles of journalism and contributes to the establishment of a podcast culture in journalism. However, it is important to note that a professionalization of podcast culture in journalism also depends on various other factors, such as adherence to journalistic ethics or editorial independence. Furthermore, the present study gives rise to a multitude of additional questions, such as how the growing professionalization of news podcasters influences the amateur spirit that is inherent in podcasting or how users utilize news podcasts in comparison to other news sources. Future analyses on these and other related topics are welcome.

Based on these results and their implications, this study contributes to research on podcast journalism in two ways: first, it shows that news podcasts are a multi-faceted and highly heterogeneous phenomenon in digital journalism that is shaped by the many roles and values held by its producers. Second, by revealing this variety of self-perceptions among the producers, this paper emphasizes the relevance of news podcasts as a medium for education, information, entertainment, and political engagement in the digital era. IN an even more interdisciplinary context, the aspect of (media) culture could be added at this point. News podcasters and news podcasts shape the respective political and social culture and also provide new impulses for media socialization. There is a need to further develop these perspectives and to establish a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the functions and services news podcasts fulfill for their audiences in a rapidly changing media environment by looking at the role perceptions of the producers. This seems particularly relevant in consideration of current debates that address new media innovations and their contribution to blurring boundaries in journalism (Banjac and Hanusch 2022; Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018; Carlson 2015; Carlson and Lewis 2020; Eldridge 2014, 2016; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022; Hujanen et al. 2022; Maares and Hanusch 2020). Such a discourse is already underway for new media like web blogs (Hoffjann and Haidukiewicz 2018), Instagram (Maares and Hanusch 2020), or YouTube (Lichtenstein et al. 2021). Considering news podcasts as drivers of audio innovation in journalism as discussed above, it is likely that they challenge paradigms and boundaries in journalism. While this study serves as an initial exploratory investigation of news podcasts and their producers, future research might build upon and further delve into this particular aspect.

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