

Secondary Publication



Katzenberger, Vera; Keil, Jana; Wild, Michael

The Podcast Revolution? : Exploring Journalistic Pioneers Beyond Legacy Media

Date of secondary publication: 19.01.2026

Version of Record (Published Version), Article

Persistent identifier: urn:nbn:de:bvb:473-irb-112643x

Primary publication

Katzenberger, Vera; Keil, Jana; Wild, Michael (2025): The Podcast Revolution? : Exploring Journalistic Pioneers Beyond Legacy Media, in: Journalism and Media, Basel: MDPI AG, Vol. 6, Nr. 1, 20, pp. 1–15, doi: 10.3390/journalmedia6010020.

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Article

The Podcast Revolution? Exploring Journalistic Pioneers Beyond Legacy Media

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Abstract: Podcasts have established themselves in the digital media landscape as an integral part of information gathering and opinion formation for many users. The number of podcast users has stabilized at a high level in recent years. However, podcast producers, including podcast journalists, remain a largely unexplored group. This study focuses on podcast journalists and aims to identify the perceptions, motivations, and quality standards relating to their roles in podcasting. It is based on the results of an online survey of 378 podcast journalists from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Against a background of the concept of pioneer journalism, this article argues that podcast journalists are innovative contributors to the journalism ecosystem and have positioned themselves as new actors within the field. The findings of this study show that podcast journalists create, produce, and present journalistic content, for instance news or background stories, in the form of audio episodes, and see themselves as both educators and entertainers. They use the creative freedom of podcasting to engage deeply with their audiences and achieve high levels of listener loyalty. While financial gain is not their primary motivation, they have innovated new revenue models. They are committed to the quality of their content and emphasize comprehensibility and accuracy of information.

Keywords: podcast journalism; audio journalism; digital media; audience engagement; pioneer journalism; revenue models; content quality



Academic Editor:

Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 8 October 2024

Revised: 25 October 2024

Accepted: 28 January 2025

Published: 2 February 2025

Citation: Katzenberger, V., Keil, J., &

Wild, M. (2025). The Podcast

Revolution? Exploring Journalistic

Pioneers Beyond Legacy Media.

Journalism and Media, 6(1), 20.

[https://doi.org/10.3390/](https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6010020)

[journalmedia6010020](https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6010020)

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1. Introduction: The Evolution of a New Medium in Journalism

Today, a wide range of content creators, including established media organizations, publishing houses, independent amateurs and prominent media personalities, are producing and distributing podcasts. This podcast ecosystem has grown over the last two decades. During the early days of the medium, shortly after the turn of the millennium, amateur creators used podcasts to broadcast their personal interests, hobbies, and unique viewpoints (McGregor, 2022). However, not only amateur creators leveraged the medium; numerous established media organizations around the globe quickly recognized the potential of podcasts for news coverage and adopted them as a new avenue for disseminating journalistic content (Bird & Lindgren, 2024). As an early pioneer in Germany, the public broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* began offering podcasts in 2006, covering a range of topics from news and politics to culture and education. The national public radio station *Deutschlandfunk* soon followed, starting its podcasting efforts in 2007 and offering programs like *Informationen am Morgen* or *Der Tag* for on-demand listening. The weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* is another early German podcast pioneer (Körner & Graßl, 2024, p. 172). *Die Zeit* was not only quick to integrate the new format into its own brand strategy, but also established

a particularly broad and high-quality podcast portfolio early on. The first episode of its *Zeit Wissen* podcast went online as early as 2009.

However, the worldwide development of podcast journalism truly took off in the ‘second age of podcasting’ (Bonini, 2015, p. 22) from 2012 onwards. A significant upswing in podcast journalism began in 2014 when *Chicago Public Media* released *Serial*, establishing podcasts as a serious medium for investigative journalism, information, and entertainment, and reaching a huge audience (Berry, 2015, p. 301). As a result, more and more media organizations began experimenting with the medium, including those in Germany, and started news podcasts. The magazine *Der Spiegel* was also ‘audio active’ early on and published the journalistic news podcast *Stimmenfang* in 2017 (Fruehbrodt & Auerbacher, 2021, p. 92). The newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* introduced its news podcast *Das Thema* in 2017, providing in-depth coverage of current affairs and major stories.

Soon, media organizations beyond these early pioneers began to explore podcasts as an innovative audio format, recognizing their potential as a new medium for journalism within the digital media landscape (Laughlin, 2023). Many media organizations established their own podcasting departments, hiring podcast journalists and creating successful shows (Sullivan, 2019, pp. 35, 36). They viewed podcasting as an innovative way to reach a broader audience, provide on-demand access, and explore new formats for storytelling and reporting. Consequently, they began to produce and distribute a wide variety of journalistic content in podcasts, ranging from daily news summaries (Newman & Gallo, 2019) to in-depth investigative series (Lindgren, 2023) and narrative long-form stories (Dowling & Miller, 2019; McHugh, 2021).

Today, numerous media entities in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland are channeling resources into podcasting. Significantly, public broadcasting networks such as *ARD* in Germany, *ORF* in Austria, and *SRF* in Switzerland, along with newspaper publishers including Germany’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Austria’s *Der Standard*, and Switzerland’s *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, have committed to producing original podcast content and developing their own distribution infrastructures. The podcasts of journalistic media organizations have found interested and engaged audiences in these three countries. *The Reuters Digital News Report 2023* reveals that, on average, just under one-third of the global population engages with podcasts at least once a month (Newman et al., 2023, p. 11). Recent research indicates that in Germany, 28% of the population has listened to a podcast in the past month (Newman et al., 2023, p. 77). Similarly, the usage rate in Austria was 34% (Newman et al., 2023, p. 61), and in Switzerland, it increased to 36% (Newman et al., 2023, p. 106).

Thus, while podcasts were originally mostly seen as a medium for user-generated content by non-professional amateur podcasters, the growing audience and increasing interest from professional media organizations, production studios or independent journalists has gradually transformed it from a “do-it-yourself amateur niche medium” (Bonini, 2015, p. 27) into a commercial mass medium with professional, highly specialized podcast journalists. As a result, podcast journalists appreciate the medium due to its low production and distribution costs, its ability to appeal to a younger, advertising-relevant audience, and its financial significance achieved through long-tail marketing strategies (Sullivan, 2019, pp. 37, 38).

The significant growth of podcast journalism is largely due to the innovative nature of the medium. Podcasts are considered a relevant innovation in the journalistic ecosystem, because they succeed in renewing the journalistic landscape on both practical and structural levels (Meier et al., 2022, p. 705). Podcasts supplement traditional media in the way content is presented, utilizing novel, immersive storytelling techniques that are particularly well suited for comprehensive and in-depth background reporting and therefore enhance or complement traditional reporting. In their storytelling, podcasts use techniques such as

subjective perspectives, personalization, self-reflexivity, contextualization and transparency (Schluetz, 2020, p. 11). Podcasts enable a deeper, more personal relationship between producers and listeners through their direct, continuous and intimate audio communication that traditional media formats often fail to achieve (Lindgren, 2016, p. 26). This close relationship benefits podcast marketing: new monetization strategies have created commercial opportunities, as podcasts provide chances for consumer engagement and positive brand outcomes (Brinson et al., 2022, p. 971), while, in contrast, many traditional media outlets continue to struggle with monetizing their content in a digital environment. However, the use of podcasts in and for journalism has received relatively little academic attention (Rojas-Torrijos et al., 2020, p. 167), even in media studies (Bonini, 2015, p. 23).

This context raises two key areas of inquiry: firstly, describing podcast journalists as a distinct group within journalism, and secondly discussing how podcast journalists are contributing to the wider transformation of journalism. For this purpose, the article adopts the concept of pioneer journalism (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). The pioneer approach is applied because it provides a theoretical framework for understanding how podcast journalists navigate and redefine their roles within the journalism ecosystem.

This study, which is theoretically grounded in the concept of pioneer journalism and empirically driven by the results of an online survey of 1340 podcast producers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, with 378 podcast journalists among them, seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are podcast journalists and what kind of content do they produce, with regard to topics and audiences?

RQ2: How do they perceive their role as podcast journalists?

RQ3: What motivates them to produce podcasts?

RQ4: Which values and standards do they set for themselves and their podcasts?

By answering these questions, this study offers the first insights into the diversity and characteristics of the podcasting profession, analyzing role perceptions, motivations, and quality standards of podcast journalists can lead to a better assessment of production routines, media quality and ethics in podcasting on a theoretical level. The study might also have practical implications for how the industry supports and promotes podcasting in general; it might also inform best practices for producing, distributing, and monetizing podcasts. But above all, this study helps to assess the relevance and impact of the podcasting profession in the journalism landscape.

2. Podcasts and Pioneer Journalism

The traditional newsroom of legacy media has long been regarded as the center of journalism (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). However, new actors are appearing in the field of journalism and complementing, expanding and changing its structures and practices.

Academic debates focus on the new actors and understand them as key actors that stimulate and drive change in journalism. In addition to journalists (individual actors), media organizations, technology companies, and start-ups (collective and collaborative actors) are examined in this context. In addition, new actors are emerging who publish, or claim to publish, journalistic content, and thus contribute to the transformation of the field. Today, there is a variety of different, often overlapping, categories of new digital actors in the journalism landscape, among them 'j-bloggers' (Singer, 2005), content creators on Instagram (Maares & Hanusch, 2020), citizen journalists (Wall, 2015), data journalists (Wright & Doyle, 2019) or journalistic YouTubers (Liechtenstein et al., 2021). As their non-traditional formats comprise an increasing proportion of journalistic work, there is an urgent need to better understand these new actors and how they might transform the field of journalism (Schapals et al., 2019, p. 20).

New players challenge the notion that journalism is confined exclusively to legacy media outlets (Eldridge, 2017, p. 184). Many of these new actors do not define themselves as journalists in the means of traditional role perceptions. Nevertheless, these (mostly) digital actors fulfill journalistic functions in society, as they provide accurate, relevant, comprehensible information to the public or help the public to form opinions (Schapals et al., 2019, p. 21).

Various concepts deal with these new players. The “in-betweeners” approach (Ahva, 2017) puts emphasis on the idea of participation and investigates individuals who do not work full-time as journalists but also do not belong to the typical audience and who bring participatory practices into the field of journalism. Within the framework of “interlopers” (Eldridge, 2014), these new players are seen as actors who embrace journalistic roles, such as the role of the adversary or the role of a counterbalance to the government, and who criticize traditional journalists for failing to adhere to these roles. “Explicit interlopers” (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018) challenge journalistic authority and compete with established news organizations for audience attention by establishing close relationships with the audience and seizing suggestions of the listeners. Their motivations include a desire to reshape the journalistic field or revive its “original” ideals. The concept of “complex peripheral actors” (Hermida & Young, 2019) refers to journalistic players who operate at individual, organizational, and network levels, bringing new practices into the field of journalism, including production, publication, and distribution activities. Other frameworks view these new digital actors as “pioneers” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021) and define them as a “particular group of journalists that incorporate new organizational forms and experimental practice in pursuit of redefining the field and its structural foundations” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021, p. 577). Pioneer journalism has become a broad concept encompassing various journalism practitioners and communities who experiment with new practices, products, and organizational structures. These innovators push beyond traditional institutional and organizational boundaries in their quest to reinvent journalism. Thus, pioneering is understood as ‘leading the way’ because these forerunners work with new practices and create unprecedented products, often driven by their interest for a specific medium or a certain topic (Hepp & Loosen, 2021, p. 578). By leveraging their creativity and collective visions for journalism’s future, pioneers can fundamentally reshape its foundational principles. This is why they are described as “models or imaginaries of new possibilities” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021, p. 581).

There are six criteria that can be used to identify media pioneers (Hepp & Loosen, 2021, pp. 581–582):

- Media pioneers see themselves as forerunners in their professional field and are accepted as such by most members of the profession.
- They often act as intermediaries, linking different fields and thus (professional) spheres, often daring to look beyond their own specialism.
- Media pioneers are usually part of pioneer communities that share a common future orientation. In this sense, pioneer communities are “experimental groupings related to new forms of media-technology related change and collectivity formation” (Hepp, 2016, p. 920). The members of pioneer communities share “a sense of mission and a sense that they are at the ‘forefront’ of a media-related transformation of society as a whole” (Hepp, 2016, pp. 924–925).
- Within these pioneer communities, individual actors take on a role of an organizational elite and serve as role models.
- Pioneers contribute to the development of the professional field through their experimental practices.

- Due to their ‘lighthouse function’ for future developments in a professional field, they themselves often become the subject of media discourse.

Based on this definition, this study argues that podcast journalists should not only be recognized as new actors within the field of journalism, but can also be theoretically identified as pioneers in the journalism ecosystem. All the criteria outlined above apply fully to podcast journalists: many podcast journalists see themselves as innovators in the media industry and often gain recognition from peers for ‘leading the way’ in journalism. An example that gained worldwide attention is the podcast *This American Life*: Ira Glass, host and producer of this audio program, has strongly influenced the genre of auditory journalism as a whole (Lindgren, 2016, p. 35). The narrative approach of this podcast became a point of reference for many podcast producers, which is also reflected in the fact that *This American Life* won a Pulitzer prize (Ugwu, 2020). Podcast journalists also act as mediators because they engage experts from various fields in their work. The participation of sound engineers, audio designers, or audio producers in podcast creation often results in podcasts resembling artful audiobooks (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2019). The American podcast *Serial* is a prominent example in this context. Within the international podcasting community, podcasters have the feeling that they are sharing goals and ‘breaking ground’ for digital audio. Studies show that experienced podcasters in particular have a strong sense of belonging to a so-called ‘podosphere’ (Attig, 2022, p. 69). Particularly in the early stage of the medium, the relationship between listeners and podcasters was marked by deep, close, and warm interactions (largely because there were only a few shows available) and it was dominated by a sense of community (García-Marín, 2020, p. 57). Within this podcasting community, certain podcast journalists serve as role models: for instance, the already mentioned podcast *The Daily* and its hosts, like Michael Barbaro, became role models for many other news podcasters (Katzenberger et al., 2023; Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022). In the realm of experimental practices, it is noteworthy that podcasting borrows traits from traditional broadcasting (Bottomley, 2015) and combines it with new organization, distribution, and production practices, making it a hybrid between new and old media (Bonini, 2022). With this understanding, podcasting incorporates elements from broadcast practices (such as distribution and scheduling), music publishing (such as the audio format), and news publishing (such as coverage of current events) (Bottomley, 2015). Lastly, prominent podcast journalists frequently become subjects of media discourse. For instance, certain episodes of podcasts like *Embedded* or *Reply All* have not only garnered millions of downloads or subscribers, but also often stood at the center of media attention (Boling & Hull, 2018).

3. Materials and Methods

In order to answer the research questions, an online survey of podcast producers in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland was conducted.

For the recruitment of participants, data on podcasts from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were gathered via the Application Programming Interface (API) of the audio platform Apple Podcast. API provide platform-specific access for data collection (Ohme et al., 2023, p. 127) and offer interfaces for collection and analysis of public data (Haim & Hase, 2023, p. 4). While API have the benefit of structured, systematic data collection, the data can vary in type, scope and time periods (Freelon, 2018).

Based on this approach, 8043 podcast producers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland were invited to participate in the initial survey, and a total of 1340 podcast producers responded to the survey. All participants provided informed consent voluntarily and prior to the commencement of the online survey. All participants were comprehensively informed about the study’s objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and associated risks.

To uphold the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, all data collected were anonymized. No identifying information was collected at any stage of the research process, thereby safeguarding the participants' identities and ensuring their privacy was maintained throughout the study.

The questionnaire was structured into the following various thematic areas, comprising 26 questions: (1) topic choices and revenue potential, (2) role perceptions, (3) motives, (4) values and standards, and (5) sociodemographic information. The study utilized established scales to capture the various concepts (Hanitzsch et al., 2016; Paterson et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2015; Markman & Sawyer, 2014). Examination of the internal reliability of the most relevant scales from the questionnaire showed good results for aspects such as role perceptions ($\alpha = 0.847$), motives ($\alpha = 0.723$) and values ($\alpha = 0.791$).

This study focuses on a subset of 378 podcast journalists from the full dataset. The theoretical understanding of podcast journalists defines them as media professionals who create, produce, and often also present journalistic content in the form of audio episodes. They do so as permanent employees for a media organization or as independent freelancers. They may or may not have completed journalistic training. The empirical identification of this group was based on statements in the questionnaire concerning (a) the production of journalistic content and (b) former or current journalistic activity. While there are likely to be differences between the respondents in this subset, for example, in terms of the degree to which they are associated with a media organization, they are similar in terms of producing journalistic content in podcasts.

Investigations for the full dataset are available in German language (Katzenberger et al., 2022) and in English language (Katzenberger & Keil, 2024). There are also studies available on the subgroup of news podcasters (Katzenberger et al., 2023).

4. Results

4.1. Sociodemographics and Professional Background

With regard to sociodemographics, clear trends emerge in this exploratory study on podcast journalists (see Table 1). Men are overrepresented among podcast journalists (64.9%). Women (34.1%) and people who identify as non-binary (0.8%) make up smaller proportions of the sample. The largest age group among podcast journalists is between 31 and 40 years old (33.6%). The majority of respondents have an academic background and hold a university degree (70.9%). This figure increases if those with a doctorate are included (5.8%). Most respondents had completed a journalism apprenticeship (35%), had studied marketing or PR (23.4%), communications (16.8%) or journalism (14.5%) or had attended a j-school (9.9%).

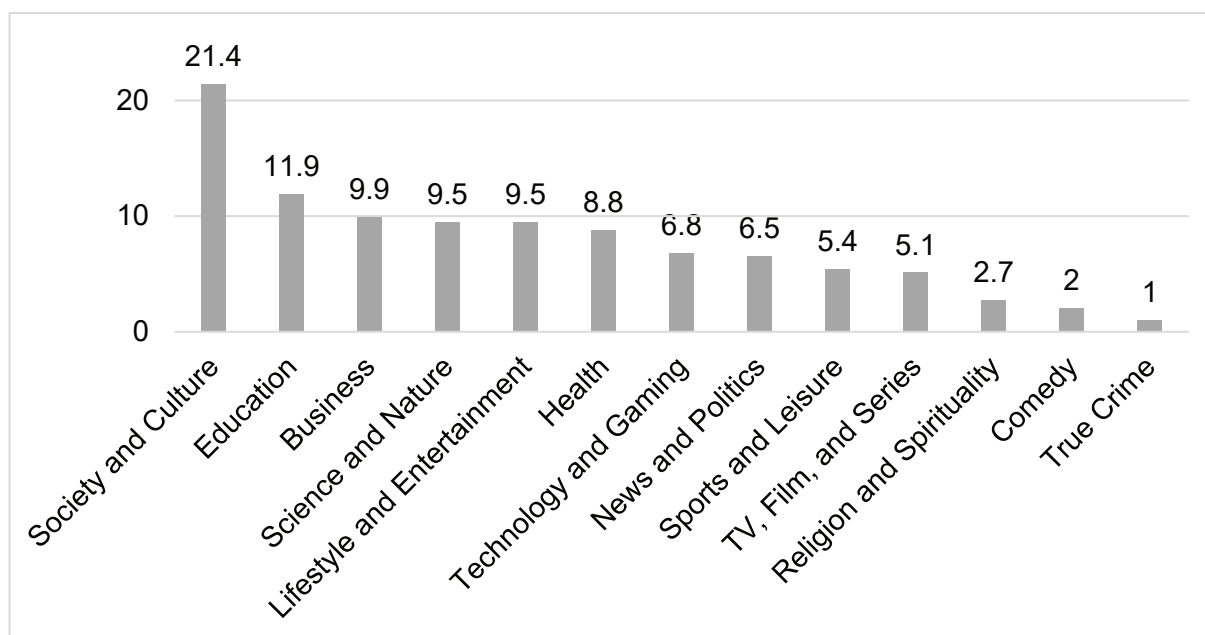
The findings also provide information about the professional backgrounds of podcast journalists. In the sample, the majority of podcast journalists produced the shows as employed journalists for other organizations, for instance, for media outlets (50.8%). Many stated that they produce their shows as private individuals (43.7%) or as freelance journalists (34.4%). (Multiple answers were possible). Differentiating between freelance journalists and those employed by media organizations appears to be particularly beneficial. Podcast journalists within media organizations possess significant journalistic production resources, benefit from the support of the entire editorial team, and are increasingly backed by their companies, which now recognize audio journalism as a strategic component of their content offerings. Conversely, this level of support and resource availability is not typically extended to independent professionals who rely on native platforms for their podcast publications.

Table 1. Sociodemographic information, multiple selections possible (n = 378).

| | Category | % |
|---------------------------------|---|------|
| Gender | Female | 34.1 |
| | Male | 64.6 |
| | Other | 0.8 |
| Age | ≤30 | 18.4 |
| | 31–40 | 33.6 |
| | 41–50 | 26.3 |
| | 51≥ | 21.9 |
| Education | No formal qualification | 0.0 |
| | Basic school diploma | 0.0 |
| | Secondary school diploma | 2.1 |
| | (Specialized) Higher education entrance qualification | 13.2 |
| | Vocational training (dual system) | 6.6 |
| | University degree (or higher education degree) | 70.9 |
| | Doctorate (PhD) | 5.8 |
| Other educational qualification | 1.3 | |
| Journalism Training | Journalism Training | 35.0 |
| | Journalism School | 9.9 |
| | Journalism Studies | 14.5 |
| | Communication Studies | 16.8 |
| | Marketing or PR Studies | 23.8 |

4.2. Content Preferences and Production Activities

Podcasters were also asked about their content preferences (see Figure 1). Due to the medium's flexibility, which lets users decide when and where to listen, as well as what to listen to, the podcast's content is crucial for creators. The choice of topic can greatly affect the target audience, its size, and the podcast's revenue potential, as some topics are more popular with certain listeners. In the study sample, 'Society and culture' (21.4%) is by far the most popular topic, followed by 'Education' (11.9%) and 'Business' (9.9%). The least popular topics are 'Comedy' (2.0%) and 'True Crime' (1.1%).

**Figure 1.** Topics of the podcasts, multiple selections possible (n = 378).

The majority of respondents say they publish their podcasts several times a month (27.3%), followed by weekly (23.5%) and monthly (20.7%). On the other hand, high release frequencies are rare: a minority of podcasters release a new episode several times a week (5.5%), once a day (2.5%) or several times a day (0.7%). Open questions remain regarding podcasters' presence on and use of audio-on-demand and streaming platforms.

Podcasters target an audience aged between 30 and 49 years (34.8%). Smaller groups said their target audience was between 14 and 29 years old (24.3%) or older than 50 years (18.3%). Children are in last place (1.2%). Many podcasters did not focus on a specific audience (20.7%). While some podcasters have only a few dozen listeners, others have thousands. The average size of the audience in the sample was 14,508 people, with a median of 1000 listeners. Half of the respondents had an audience between 300 and 3625 people.

Around half (53.4%) of podcasters with a journalistic background stated that they do not earn any money with their podcast. The main sources of income for podcasts that earn money are sponsorships (24.9%) and donations (23.5%). Audio-specific sources of income such as native advertising (13.2%) or audio spots (13.2%) only play a minor role overall.

The survey also covered podcasters' production activities (see Table 2). Here, it can be noted that podcasters generally produce more than one podcast ($M = 5.97/SD = 21.121/Mdn. = 2$). On average, they need around 9 h per week for production work. Broken down by the individual activities associated with this, it can be seen that respondents spend almost half of their time researching content (42.8%). Production (recording and technical support) takes a quarter of their time (23.3%). They spend just under one hour on organizational activities (12.0%) as well as on marketing (10.6%). The respondents stated that they spend some time on managing their community (6.7%) and on various other activities (4.6%). It should be noted that the amount of time spent depends on the frequency with which the podcasts are published.

Table 2. Production Activities and Podcast Characteristics, (*) multiple selections possible.

| | Category | % |
|--|--|---------------|
| Time investment per activity n = 378 (8:38 h per week) | Recording and production | 23.3 (2:01 h) |
| | Research | 42.8 (3:41 h) |
| | Organizational activities | 12.0 (1:02 h) |
| | Marketing | 10.6 (0:55 h) |
| | Community management | 6.7 (0:35 h) |
| | Other activities | 4.6 (0:23 h) |
| Publication frequency | Several times a month | 27.3 |
| | Once a week | 23.5 |
| | Once a month | 20.7 |
| | Irregular rhythm | 13.7 |
| | Another regular rhythm | 6.2 |
| | Several times a week | 5.5 |
| | Once a day | 2.5 |
| | Several times a day | 0.7 |
| Target audience (*) n = 646 | ≤13 years | 1.2 |
| | 14–29 years | 24.3 |
| | 30–49 years | 34.8 |
| | ≥50 years | 18.3 |
| | No target group | 21.4 |
| Podcast revenue sources n = 281 | Donations | 23.5 |
| | Sponsorship | 24.9 |
| | Indirect financing (e.g., merchandise) | 5.0 |
| | Native advertising | 13.2 |
| | Audio spots | 13.2 |
| | Fees | 13.2 |
| | Paid subscriptions | 7.1 |

4.3. Role Perceptions

The results regarding role perceptions are diverse (see Table 3). At a descriptive level, the dimensions of ‘Education and culture’ and ‘Entertainment and audience orientation’ most strongly define role perceptions ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.138$ and $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.001$, respectively). The two facets of ‘Information mediation and analysis’ and ‘Political articulation and participation’ are somewhat less important for podcasters ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.084$ and $M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.083$, respectively). They also express moderate to weak agreement with the dimension of ‘Social engagement’ ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.868$). By a clear margin, podcast journalists state that their understanding of their role is only minimally characterized by ‘Criticism and control’ ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.764$).

Table 3. Scale from 1 (“not important at all”) to 5 (“extremely important”), % = percentage of respondents who rated these aspects as “very” or “extremely important” ($\alpha = 0.847$) (Scale based on Hanitzsch et al. (2016)).

| | % | M (SD) |
|--|-------------|--------------------|
| Education and Culture | 41.7 | 3.5 (1.097) |
| Promote tolerance and cultural diversity | 58.2 | 3.6 (1.380) |
| Convey the world through stories as a narrator | 53.0 | 3.4 (1.382) |
| Entertainment and Audience Orientation | 41.9 | 3.4 (0.933) |
| Offer advice, guidance, and assistance | 61.2 | 3.8 (1.244) |
| Provide content that attracts a broad audience | 35.7 | 3.1 (1.259) |
| Information, Mediation and Analysis | 35.7 | 3.3 (1.046) |
| Report things as they are | 62.3 | 3.8 (1.220) |
| Contextualize and analyze current events | 50.0 | 3.2 (1.463) |
| Be an impartial observer | 35.7 | 2.9 (1.358) |
| Political Articulation and Participation | 16.3 | 2.7 (1.089) |
| Provide people with the opportunity to express their views | 40.8 | 3.1 (1.397) |
| Motivate people to participate in political affairs | 27.5 | 2.6 (1.364) |
| Convey political information | 23.5 | 2.4 (1.305) |
| Social Engagement | 2.0 | 2.2 (0.770) |
| Advocate for social change | 31.6 | 2.8 (1.325) |
| Influence public opinion | 15.3 | 2.5 (1.109) |
| Support national development | 10.2 | 1.8 (1.075) |
| Set the political agenda | 5.1 | 1.7 (0.913) |
| Criticism, Control | 2.0 | 1.5 (0.730) |
| Monitor the economy | 3.0 | 1.6 (0.852) |
| Act as a counterbalance to the government | 4.1 | 1.5 (0.886) |
| Oversee the government | 4.1 | 1.5 (0.841) |

4.4. Motives

It is evident that podcast journalists are driven by various motives (see Table 4). They primarily podcast for content-related motives ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.733$). In addition, media-specific motives receive a high degree of support ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.085$). Personal motives ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.733$) and interpersonal motives ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.778$) follow at some distance. Financial motives were of little importance to the respondents ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.183$).

Table 4. Scale from 1 (“Does not apply at all”) to 5 (“Fully Applies”); % = percentage of respondents who rated these aspects as “Rather Applies” or “Fully Applies” ($\alpha = 0.723$) (Concept of the scale based on [Markman and Sawyer \(2014\)](#)).

| | % | M (SD) |
|---|-------------|--------------------|
| Content-related motives | 86.3 | 4.4 (0.733) |
| Because I want to provide information on a topic | 84.6 | 4.3 (1.018) |
| Because I am passionate about the topic of my podcast | 88.6 | 4.5 (0.838) |
| Media-specific motives | 63.4 | 3.9 (1.085) |
| Because I also enjoy listening to podcasts | 65.1 | 3.8 (1.336) |
| Because I am interested in podcasts as a medium | 76.7 | 4.1 (1.133) |
| Personal motives | 41.3 | 3.6 (0.733) |
| Because I enjoy it | 89.7 | 4.5 (0.815) |
| Because I seek attention | 28.3 | 2.6 (1.242) |
| Because I want to develop my skills further | 64.5 | 3.7 (1.189) |
| Because I want to express my creativity | 62.7 | 3.7 (1.231) |
| Interpersonal motives | 10.8 | 3.0 (0.778) |
| Because I want to support a (social) movement | 31.0 | 2.7 (1.486) |
| Because others have brought the idea to me | 16.7 | 2.0 (1.317) |
| Because I want to receive feedback from my listeners | 27.0 | 2.8 (1.126) |
| Because I want to build a community | 42.8 | 3.1 (1.344) |
| Because I want to help my listeners | 49.7 | 3.3 (1.328) |
| Because I want to educate my listeners (further) | 64.3 | 3.8 (1.213) |
| Financial motives | 23.0 | 2.8 (1.183) |
| Because I want to make money from it | 28.1 | 2.6 (1.466) |
| Because I hope for benefits for my job/my career | 41.8 | 3.0 (1.388) |

4.5. Values and Standards

The study also explored the importance that podcast journalists place on different aspects of journalistic quality in their work (see [Table 5](#)). Overall, respondents reported setting very high quality standards for themselves and their podcasts, with most characteristics surveyed being at least ‘important’ to them ($M \geq 3.5$). The characteristics of comprehensibility and accuracy of information ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.736$ and $M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.867$, respectively) are considered the most important. These are followed by the criteria like relevance of publication ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.002$), representation of reality in its diversity ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.130$), objectivity ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.179$), relationship to the audience ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.163$), and consideration of audience suggestions and wishes ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.082$). Communication with the audience ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.209$) and topicality of publication ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.197$) are given the least importance.

Table 5. Scale from 1 (“not important at all”) to 5 (“extremely important”), % = percentage of respondents who rated these aspects as “very” or “extremely important” ($\alpha = 0.847$) (Concept of the scale based on [Paterson et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Lin et al. \(2015\)](#)).

| | % | M (SD) |
|--|------|-------------|
| Accuracy | 92.8 | 4.6 (0.718) |
| Comprehensibility | 93.9 | 4.5 (0.677) |
| Objectivity | 72.4 | 4.2 (0.972) |
| Diversity | 77.5 | 4.2 (0.931) |
| Relevance | 76.5 | 4.1 (0.916) |
| Establishing a relationship with the audience | 59.2 | 3.8 (1.139) |
| Suggestions and wishes of the listeners | 61.2 | 3.6 (1.141) |
| Simple and prompt communication with the listeners | 48.0 | 3.4 (1.191) |
| Topicality | 46.9 | 3.3 (1.177) |

5. Discussion

In order to understand the extent to which podcast journalists are pioneers in the field of journalism, it is important to (a) discuss the findings in relation to the pioneering approach presented above, and (b) situate them in the context of studies on journalists from legacy media (e.g., radio, television, press) and other new actors in the journalistic landscape, such as ‘j-bloggers’ (Singer, 2005), content creators on Instagram (Maares & Hanusch, 2020), data journalists (Wright & Doyle, 2019), or journalistic YouTubers (Liechtenstein et al., 2021).

In terms of activities, podcast journalists invest most of their working time in research and podcast production. Journalists in traditional media, on the other hand, spend the most time writing or editing content (Hoffjann & Haidukiewicz, 2018, p. 40). Overall, it can be said that content creation, including related preparatory work such as research, is a central task for both groups. Another similarity is the importance that both groups attach to organisational activities and administration (Hoffjann & Haidukiewicz, 2018, p. 40). However, podcast journalists appear to be actively interested in their audience and to enjoy the exchange with listeners, as they willingly invest part of their working time in contact with the audience. Other new players in the journalism ecosystem are also forerunners in audience interaction, for example, journalistic YouTubers: here, community management has already established itself as an important activity and routine (Liechtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1108). Putting this in the context of the pioneer concept, it seems quite logical that new players deliberately change the established practices of a field: “[P]ioneers are people who, in a self-reflexive process, develop ‘new’ practices and techniques that may never flourish in their more extreme manifestations but which, as models or imaginaries of new possibilities, influence transformation as a whole” (Hepp & Loosen, 2021, p. 581).

When it comes to understanding their role, it is noticeable that podcast journalists and journalists from legacy media are similar in one key aspect: Journalists from traditional media segments prioritize “reporting things as they are” (Hanitzsch et al., 2016, p. 2); the same is true for podcast journalists. In contrast to journalists from traditional media segments (Hanitzsch et al., 2016, p. 4), once again, podcast journalists appear to be more audience-focused. Podcast journalists do not just focus on “reporting things as they are”, but on reporting things in a way that is relevant, accessible, and understandable for their audience. In their audience approach, podcast journalists are very similar to other new players in journalism: Journalistic YouTubers also have a strong focus on audience interaction in the conception their roles and aim to bring journalism to younger audiences (Liechtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1117). Journalistic Instagrammers also state that their audiences, and not they themselves, are at the center of their understanding of their role (Maares & Hanusch, 2020, p. 275).

The importance of the audience for podcast journalists is also striking in terms of motives. Podcast journalists are motivated to support their audience and see their audience as a community they want to interact with and often ask to participate in content creation. This can be understood as a departure from the classic idea of a dispersed audience, which dominated in traditional media for a long time. In this context, podcast journalists act as pioneers in the media field and explore new ways to connect journalism with their audience. Financial incentives play a subordinate role for podcast journalists. The importance of financial motives in the context of pioneer journalism is assumed to be low, especially in the case of self-financing by independent pioneers: Usually, financing as such is not the focus of experimentation (Hepp et al., 2021, p. 569). For other digital players such as journalistic Instagrammers or journalistic YouTubers, financial motives also come second—or have an indirect relevance, as the digital players want to persuade audiences to purchase products or services (not too different from advertising)—but often this motivation is

deeply entangled with a genuine concern to help audiences live a better life (Maares & Hanusch, 2020, p. 275).

In terms of values and norms, podcast journalists appear to follow high quality standards. However, it is particularly notable that they rank timeliness last in their list of quality attributes. This is in line with other findings of this study: most podcast journalists stated that they did not publish daily but rather weekly or monthly. In this context, podcast-specific affordances, such as self-sovereignty and the long-tail distribution logic have established (Schluetz, 2020, p. 421). These findings may indicate that journalists in traditional media appear to tend to emphasize the quick dissemination of up-to-the-minute information, while podcast journalists tend to see their medium as a means of discussing background information. Podcasts often allow for a detailed and nuanced discussion of issues, as podcasters are not limited by the programming or structural constraints of established media channels (e.g., broadcast radio). In this context, podcasts may represent a particularly relevant medium in an era of increasing news fatigue among audiences, offering an in-depth, reflective, and engaging approach to current affairs. Overall, podcast journalists do not appear to be the only new digital players in the journalistic ecosystem that follow high quality standards. For instance, journalistic YouTubers also apply the classic quality standards and even install quality control mechanisms as they are known from classical newsrooms (Liechtenstein et al., 2021, p. 1117).

6. Conclusions

The aim of the study was to describe podcasting from the perspective of the pioneer concept (Hepp & Loosen, 2021). The pioneer approach provided a theoretical framework for the study to understand new and emerging forms of journalism. By applying this perspective to podcasting, it was possible to examine how new media formats such as podcasts fit into the broader transformation of journalism and how they contribute to or challenge existing journalistic norms and practices. On an empirical level, the study presented a survey of podcast journalists from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Overall, the findings suggest that podcasts draw on established principles of traditional journalism, but reproduce them in an innovative way and with a strong focus on audience. Most often categorizing their work under the expansive genre of “society and culture” and publishing in a weekly or monthly frequency, podcast journalists devote the majority of their time to the creative processes of content production. Unlike legacy media, podcasts thrive on creativity, encouraging storytellers to push the boundaries of format, style, and content. This freedom has given rise to innovative programming and entirely new forms of audio content. Consequently, podcast journalists see themselves not merely as content creators, but as educators and entertainers who engage deeply with their audiences. The medium itself, along with the direct connection to listeners, drives their motivation, fostering an intimate bond that legacy media often struggles to achieve. This personal connection results in high levels of engagement between producers and listeners, setting podcasts apart as an influential platform. Financial gain is rarely the primary driver for podcast journalists. However, when monetization is pursued, podcast journalists have pioneered the development of innovative revenue models. These include direct listener support through donation platforms (e.g., Patreon), as well as targeted advertising and brand partnerships, breaking new ground in how media can be funded. Moreover, podcast journalists set high standards for their work, with a strong emphasis on comprehensibility and accuracy. Their commitment to quality, combined with their pioneering spirit and creative freedom, positions them as pioneers in the ever-evolving media environment. This is consistent with other studies in communication science that assess podcasts as a relevant innovation in the field of journalism (Meier et al., 2022).

However, the findings of this study are limited, particularly in terms of the representativeness of the sample. Since the population of all German-speaking podcast journalists is not known, it is—invariably—a random sample. This means that the results of the study could be biased by the self-selection of the participants. It is very important to reflect the heterogeneity of respondents in the analyzed group. The respondents produce journalistic content in podcasts and are also similar in terms of their journalistic socialization (e.g., journalistic training or traineeship) and their journalistic experience (e.g., previous professional experience in a media company). However, they may differ in terms of their possible affiliation to a media company or their commercial intention. Unfortunately, the data structure does not allow any differentiation for comparisons. Another limitation is the descriptive nature of the study. To date, no research has focused specifically on podcast journalists in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. This explains the exploratory nature of this study and thus the descriptive nature of the findings presented. This approach allows the main characteristics of podcast journalists to be mapped and provides a first and basic understanding that can be used for more detailed research in the future.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a theoretical understanding of podcasting as a distinct and innovative form of journalism. By using API for data access, this study introduces new methods to the field of podcasting research from an empirical perspective and provides a basis for future investigations. On a practical level, media organizations can use the findings from this study to make informed strategic decisions about expanding into podcasting or improving an existing podcast offering. This includes understanding how they can use the attributes of podcasting to differentiate themselves in a crowded media landscape.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.K., J.K. and M.W.; methodology, V.K., J.K. and M.W.; data software, V.K. and J.K.; data analysis, V.K. and J.K.; data interpretation, V.K. and J.K.; writing—original draft preparation, V.K., J.K. and M.W.; writing—review and editing, V.K. and M.W.; funding acquisition, V.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This publication was supported by the Open Access Publishing Fund of Leipzig University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data are not available.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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