

Podcasts in the Digital Media Environment: From Audio Content to Multi-Platform Communication and Its Role in Building Audience Engagement

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Abstract :

The podcast has emerged as a distinctive medium within the digital media landscape, evolving from a niche audio format into a sophisticated multi-platform communication phenomenon. This article examines the trajectory of podcasting as a digital communication medium, analyzing its transition from linear audio content to an interactive, multi-platform ecosystem that fundamentally reshapes audience engagement. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including participatory culture theory, uses and gratifications theory, and digital engagement theory, the article explores how podcasts function as sites of audience interaction, community building, and participatory culture. Through analysis of empirical studies and case examples, including recent research on daily news podcasts and transmedia podcasting, the article investigates the structural factors that facilitate or constrain meaningful audience engagement. The findings reveal a complex landscape where podcasts' participatory potential is often constrained by institutional practices, platform logics, and production limitations, creating a gap between the medium's interactive possibilities and its practical implementation. Nevertheless, the article identifies emerging practices—including multi-platform distribution strategies, interactive content design, and community-centered production approaches—that demonstrate the podcast's capacity to foster significant audience engagement. The article concludes by proposing an integrated framework for understanding podcast engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon shaped by content characteristics, platform affordances, and audience agency.

Keywords: Podcasting, Audience Engagement, Multi-Platform Communication, Participatory Culture, Digital Media, Audio Content, Interaction, Transmedia

1. Introduction :

The podcast has established itself as one of the most significant digital media innovations of the twenty-first century. Emerging from the convergence of accessible audio production technology, portable digital players, and the RSS distribution protocol, podcasting has grown from a modest technological experiment into a global media phenomenon with over 100 million monthly listeners in the United States alone and an industry generating more than \$2 billion in annual advertising revenue (Brodie et al., 2011). Yet the podcast's significance extends far beyond its economic dimensions; it represents a fundamental reconfiguration of audio media's relationship with audiences, challenging the broadcast logic that dominated twentieth-century sound communication.

This article examines the podcast's evolution within the digital media environment, focusing on its transformation from a relatively simple audio distribution mechanism into a complex, multi-platform communication ecosystem. The central argument is that the podcast's capacity to build audience engagement is not inherent to the audio format itself but emerges from the strategic integration of content design, platform choices, and participatory practices. As Berry (2016) observes, podcasting is ontologically and culturally distinct from radio and other audio media: podcasts are produced by podcasters rather than radio producers for listeners seeking on-demand, niche content. This distinction has profound implications for how audience engagement is conceptualized and cultivated. The article is organized into six main sections. Following this introduction, Section Two provides a conceptual framework for understanding podcasting as a digital medium, tracing its historical development and distinguishing it from related audio formats. Section Three examines the relationship between podcasts and audience engagement, drawing on theoretical approaches from media studies and communication research. Section Four analyzes the multi-platform nature of contemporary podcasting, exploring how podcasts extend beyond audio to encompass broader media ecosystems. Section Five considers the constraints and challenges that limit podcast engagement, while Section Six proposes an integrated framework for understanding podcast engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The conclusion summarizes key findings and suggests directions for future research.

2. Podcasting as a Digital Medium: Conceptual Foundations

2.1 Defining the Podcast :

Defining the podcast presents conceptual challenges that reflect the medium's hybrid nature. At its most basic level, a podcast is a digital audio file made available for download or streaming, typically as part of a series that users can subscribe to and receive automatically (Berry, 2016). However, this technical definition captures only the surface of what podcasts have become. As Spinelli and Dann (2019) emphasize, podcasts are not merely audio files but cultural artifacts embedded in specific production practices, consumption patterns, and community dynamics.

Berry (2016) proposes that podcasting should be understood as a practice rather than merely a technology, arguing that the medium's development is not fully linked to technological advancement. Indeed, the tools and technical devices applied to podcasting have evolved relatively little since the medium's origins; what has changed is the implementation and design of better user experiences and the creation of content with increasing sound quality (Berry, 2016). This insight directs attention to the social and cultural dimensions of podcasting, which are as significant as its technical features.

2.2 Historical Development and Evolution :

The podcast's origins can be traced to the early 2000s, when the convergence of broadband internet, portable digital audio players, and RSS technology enabled a new form of audio distribution. The term "podcasting" was coined in 2004 by Ben Hammersley, combining "iPod" with "broadcasting" (Berry, 2016). The medium gained mainstream attention when Apple integrated podcast support into iTunes in 2005, providing a centralized directory that dramatically expanded podcast accessibility (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

The subsequent evolution of podcasting can be understood in three phases. The first phase, from approximately 2004 to 2014, was characterized by the medium's association with amateur and independent production. During this period, podcasting was primarily understood as a democratizing force that enabled individuals without media training to produce and distribute audio content (García-

Marín & Aparici, 2020). The second phase, beginning around 2014 with the success of Serial, saw the professionalization of podcasting as major media organizations recognized the medium's commercial and cultural potential. This phase brought increased production quality and institutional investment but also raised questions about whether podcasting was losing its independent, participatory character (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). The third phase, emerging in the 2020s, has been defined by multi-platform expansion, as podcasts became integrated into broader media ecosystems including social media, video platforms, and interactive digital environments (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026).

2.3 Podcasts and Radio: Continuities and Discontinuities :

Understanding podcasting requires attention to its relationship with radio, the dominant audio medium of the twentieth century. While podcasts share radio's reliance on sound, they differ in ways that shape their communicative possibilities and audience relationships. Radio has traditionally been characterized by live broadcasting, scheduled programming, and a one-to-many communication model that positions listeners as passive recipients. Podcasts, by contrast, are on-demand, portable, and often designed for niche audiences (Berry, 2016).

These differences have implications for audience engagement. The on-demand nature of podcasts enables what could be called "attentive listening," where listeners actively choose content that aligns with their interests. This active selection process may enhance engagement by increasing listeners' investment in the content they consume. Additionally, the absence of live broadcasting constraints allows podcasts to explore narrative depth and complexity that radio, with its scheduling demands and interruption by news bulletins, cannot match (Spinelli & Dann, 2019).

However, it would be a mistake to see podcasting as a simple replacement for radio. As Berry (2016) argues, podcasting challenges the logics and effects of mediation itself, forging its own cultural space. This cultural space has been exploited more deeply by independent and amateur production, capable of developing a powerful ethos of authenticity with renewed connective possibilities between users and producers (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020).

3. Podcasts and Audience Engagement: Theoretical Perspectives

3.1 Conceptualizing Engagement :

Audience engagement has become a central concept in contemporary media studies, reflecting both academic interest in audience activity and industry concern with building loyal, responsive audiences. However, the concept's meaning varies significantly across different analytical contexts. As Brodie et al. (2011) note, engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, requiring attention to both psychological states and observable actions.

For podcasting specifically, engagement can be understood as encompassing multiple levels of audience activity. At the most basic level, engagement manifests through consumption behaviors: subscribing to shows, listening to episodes, and maintaining attention throughout the content (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026). At a deeper level, engagement involves emotional investment: caring about hosts, developing attachments to characters or narratives, and feeling a sense of connection with the podcast community (Mutti, 2026). At the most intensive level, engagement takes the form of active participation: commenting on episodes, sharing content, contacting hosts, co-creating meaning, and contributing to communities (Tandfonline, 2026).

3.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory :

Uses and gratifications theory provides a valuable framework for understanding why audiences choose podcasts and how they engage with them. This perspective holds that audience members are active communicators who select media to fulfill specific needs, which are shaped by their social and psychological circumstances (Rubin, 2009). Applied to podcasting, this perspective directs attention to the diverse motivations that drive podcast consumption.

Research has identified multiple gratifications associated with podcast listening, including learning and information-seeking, entertainment, companionship, and community connection (Hardegree, 2024). The educational value of podcasts has been particularly noted, with studies finding that podcasts can be effective learning resources when topics align with audience interests and needs (Hardegree, 2024; Back et al., 2023). The flexibility of podcast consumption—enabling learning at one's own pace and in various contexts—enhances their educational utility, particularly for learners who benefit from alternative formats (Hardegree, 2024).

The uses and gratifications perspective also highlights the competitive environment in which podcasts operate. As Rubin (2009) notes, media needs must compete with other channels to meet users' evolving preferences, meaning that podcast producers must be attentive to how their content compares with alternative sources of information and entertainment. This has implications for content design and platform strategy: podcasts that fail to address audience needs effectively will be replaced by other media that do so more successfully.

3.3 Participatory Culture Theory :

Participatory culture theory, developed by Henry Jenkins and colleagues, provides an additional framework for understanding podcast engagement. Jenkins et al. (2009) define participatory culture as a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations with others, some type of informal mentorship, members who believe their contributions matter, and members who feel some degree of social connection with one another.

This framework is particularly relevant to podcasting because the medium has, from its origins, been closely associated with participatory practices. As Jenkins et al. (2009) emphasize, interactivity is a property of technology while participation is a property of culture. This distinction is crucial: a podcast may be technically interactive, in the sense that listeners can comment or share, but participation occurs only when listeners feel that their contributions matter and that they belong to a community of fellow listeners.

The participatory potential of podcasting has been central to scholarly accounts of the medium. Löwgren and Reimer (2013) describe podcasting as a collaborative and participatory medium that facilitates entry into the media sphere for individuals without experience in communication, substantiating a form of citizen journalism. The medium's capacity to support meaningful participation has been seen as evidence of broader democratizing trends in digital media, where traditional gatekeepers lose power and ordinary citizens gain voice (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). However, it would be simplistic to equate podcast consumption with participation. As studies of transmedia podcasting have shown, many podcast projects reproduce one-way communication models even while operating within digital platforms that enable interactivity (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). This gap between participatory potential and actual practice reflects both structural constraints and the persistence of broadcast-era communication habits.

4. The Multi-Platform Ecology of Contemporary Podcasting

4.1 Beyond Audio: The Transpodcast Phenomenon :

Contemporary podcasting rarely exists solely as an audio entity; instead, podcasts form broad intertextual ecosystems characterized by legible complexity (Mutti, 2026). This multi-platform dimension has been conceptualized through the concept of "transpodcast" or transmedia podcasting, analogous to the notion of transmedia radio. The transpodcast describes media projects that, presenting podcasting as the central medium, extend their narrative and expand their communicative structure to other media, platforms, and expressive languages beyond audio, acquiring an evident transmedia nature (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020).

The transmedia turn in podcasting reflects broader transformations in media consumption. Audiences no longer encounter media content through single platforms; they move across platforms, devices, and contexts, expecting seamless integration and complementary experiences (Geller, 2024). This has implications for podcast production. As Geller (2024) notes, all media organizations are multi-platform content companies where the message transcends the medium, and success in multi-platform media relies on delivering content that informs, entertains, inspires, and connects.

The practical implementation of multi-platform podcasting varies significantly. Some podcast projects maintain an audio-only presence while using social media to promote episodes and interact with listeners. Others create complementary video content, written materials, or interactive elements that extend the audio narrative. The most ambitious transmedia projects integrate these elements into a coherent ecosystem where each platform serves a distinct function in supporting audience engagement (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020).

4.2 Platform Affordances and Engagement Dynamics :

Different digital platforms offer different affordances for engagement, meaning that the same podcast content may generate different patterns of audience interaction across platforms. This has been demonstrated in research on Spanish daily news podcasts by Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026), which found that the engagement rate on YouTube tripled the number achieved by the audio-specific platform iVoox. This finding suggests that the visual dimension of YouTube—including video thumbnails, comments visible alongside content, and the platform's video-sharing culture—influences how audiences engage with podcast content.

The relationship between platform and engagement is also shaped by content characteristics. Research by Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026) has found that while engagement generation is highly contextual and varies depending on the platform, addressing political topics can be a powerful engagement trigger across platforms. Similarly, episode duration has been found to influence engagement, with shorter episodes (11-18 minutes) being predictive of engagement rates on both iVoox and YouTube (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026). These findings suggest that engagement is not solely determined by platform choice but emerges from the interaction between content, platform, and audience expectations.

The platform dimension of podcast engagement also raises questions about ownership and control. Mutti (2026) notes that mainstream platforms impose constraints that reduce the scope for advanced experimentation, limiting the kind of interactive practices that might redefine listening experiences and the relationship between author and audience. This tension between podcasting as an open, distributed medium and podcasting as a platform-mediated experience reflects broader debates in

digital media studies about platform power and the commodification of participation (Jenkins et al., 2009).

4.3 Multi-Platform Strategies for Engagement :

Research on podcast engagement has identified several strategies that producers can employ to build engagement across platforms. First, content design should attend to platform differences: content intended for audio-only platforms can be optimized differently from content intended for video-enabled platforms where visual elements can enhance engagement (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026). Second, producers should monitor audience feedback and analytics across platforms to refine content and delivery methods, responding to audience preferences and needs (Simbolon, 2026).

Third, multi-platform promotion can expand audience reach and deepen engagement. Regularly updating and promoting podcast episodes across platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube ensures that content remains accessible and competitive (Simbolon, 2026). Fourth, integrating podcasting into broader communication strategies allows institutions to serve audiences better while expanding outreach (Hardegree, 2024). This integration might involve combining podcasts with traditional educational methods, social media, webinars, and newsletters to create complementary engagement experiences.

Fifth, collaboration can enhance engagement. The study of African diaspora-led podcasts by De Gruyter Brill (2026) found that creators leverage podcasting as a "transnational microphone" to record and amplify shared global identity, suggesting that podcasts can build engagement by fostering connections among listeners who share cultural affiliations. Similarly, Simbolon (2026) recommended collaboration with influencers and digital communities to enhance content visibility.

5. Constraints and Challenges in Podcast Engagement

5.1 The Engagement Gap :

Despite the participatory potential of podcasting, empirical research has identified a significant gap between this potential and actual audience engagement. The study of KPU Sergai Podcast by Simbolon (2026) found consistently low audience reach and minimal engagement across all episodes, with fewer than 100 views and very limited likes, comments, and shares. This condition reflects what the study terms a "communication gap" between the interactive potential of digital media and its practical implementation in institutional communication (Simbolon, 2026).

This engagement gap is not simply a matter of insufficient audience interest; it reflects structural problems in production and communication. In the KPU Sergai case, internal constraints such as limited budget, insufficient human resources, lack of technical capacity, and restricted production facilities shaped content characteristics, distribution strategies, and production quality (Simbolon, 2026). These factors collectively led to audience misalignment, low reach, low engagement, and passive audience behavior, indicating that the podcast had not succeeded in expanding its visibility or fostering interactive communication.

The engagement gap also reflects the persistence of one-way communication patterns within digital environments. As García-Marín and Aparici (2020) found, despite the interactive affordances of digital platforms, many podcast projects reproduce old media models based on unidirectional communication processes. This condition reveals a fundamental contradiction between the interactive nature of digital media and its current implementation in institutional communication practices (Simbolon, 2026).

5.2 Production Constraints and Quality Limitations :

Production constraints constitute a significant barrier to podcast engagement. Simbolon (2026) identified a causal pathway in which limited resources shape content characteristics and distribution strategies, resulting in predominantly one-way communication and misalignment with audience preferences. This pathway explains why podcasts, despite being implemented within a digital platform, fail to realize the interactive and participatory potential of digital media.

The quality dimension of production constraints is particularly significant. Hardegree (2024) found that podcast learning can be highly effective, but this effectiveness depends on production quality and topical alignment. Poorly produced podcasts—featuring low audio quality, unstructured content, or topics that fail to address audience interests—will not generate the engagement necessary for learning or community building. Similarly, Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026) suggested that episode duration, topic selection, and production style all influence engagement.

5.3 The Illusion of Participation :

Scholarly research has also problematized the very concept of participation in podcasting, suggesting that much of what passes for audience engagement is actually a form of "domesticated voices" and "false participation." García-Marín and Aparici (2020) use the term "domesticated voices" to refer to audience contributions that are incorporated into podcast content but are managed and contained by producers rather than truly participatory. Similarly, "false participation" describes the limited range of audience actions that are counted as engagement but do not meaningfully shape content or relationships (García-Marín & Aparici, 2020).

This critical perspective challenges optimistic accounts of podcasting as inherently democratic or participatory. As Jenkins et al. (2009) noted, not all forms of participation are equally meaningful or empowering, and several businesses and organizations may seek financial gain from participation. In the podcast context, this could mean that platform metrics such as downloads and likes are presented as evidence of engagement even when they reflect only shallow, passive consumption.

The illusion of participation may also be reinforced by the economic interests of platform companies. As Jenkins et al. (2009) observed, the goal of social media platforms to turn participation into user-generated content means that participation is often commodified. In the podcast context, this commodification might take the form of platforms that encourage interaction but extract value from it through data collection or advertising.

6. Toward an Integrated Framework for Podcast Engagement

6.1 Dimensions of Podcast Engagement :

Drawing on the theoretical perspectives and empirical findings discussed above, this article proposes an integrated framework for understanding podcast engagement as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. The framework identifies three primary dimensions of engagement: consumption engagement, emotional engagement, and participatory engagement.

Consumption engagement refers to the basic behaviors of podcast listening—subscribing, downloading, streaming, and attending to content. This dimension is measured through analytics such as download numbers, completion rates, and listening duration (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026). While consumption engagement is the foundation of audience relationships, it does not, by itself, indicate meaningful audience engagement.

Emotional engagement refers to the affective investments listeners make in podcasts—caring about hosts, developing attachments to narratives, and feeling a sense of connection with the podcast

community (Mutti, 2026). This dimension is less directly measurable but is reflected in qualitative indicators such as reviews, recommendations, and listener narratives. Emotional engagement is significant because it predicts continued listening and deeper forms of participation.

Participatory engagement refers to active audience contributions—commenting, sharing, creating fan content, contacting hosts, and participating in community discussion. This dimension is the most intensive form of engagement and the most closely aligned with participatory culture theory (Tandfonline, 2026). Participatory engagement depends on the perception that contributions matter and that the listener belongs to a community (Jenkins et al., 2009).

6.2 Factors Influencing Engagement :

The integrated framework identifies four categories of factors that influence podcast engagement: content factors, platform factors, producer factors, and audience factors.

Content factors include episode length, topic, narrative structure, and production quality. Research by Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026) has found that shorter episodes (11-18 minutes) predict higher engagement, as do political topics. The narrative form also matters: deep dive podcasts that combine expository, conversational, and narrative genres are considered examples of slow journalism that foster sustained attention and engagement (Mutti, 2026).

Platform factors include the technical affordances of distribution platforms, the social dynamics of platform communities, and the compatibility between platform and content. The finding by Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026) that engagement rates on YouTube tripled those on iVoox demonstrates the significance of platform choice. Platform factors also include the constraints imposed by mainstream platforms, which limit experimentation with interactive practices (Mutti, 2026).

Producer factors include institutional resources, technical capacity, and communication strategy. Simbolon (2026) demonstrated how internal constraints such as limited budget and insufficient human resources limit engagement. Producer factors also include the strategic choices that producers make about content design, distribution, and community management.

Audience factors include listener motivations, preferences, and contexts. Uses and gratifications theory highlights how listeners select podcasts based on diverse needs—learning, entertainment, companionship, and community—that shape their engagement patterns (Rubin, 2009; Hardegree, 2024). Audience factors also include technological access and digital literacy, which vary across demographic groups and regions.

6.3 Practical Implications :

The integrated framework has several practical implications for podcast producers seeking to build engagement. First, producers should recognize that engagement is not guaranteed by the podcast format but must be actively cultivated through content design, platform strategy, and community management. Simbolon (2026) illustrates the consequences of failing to bridge the communication gap between digital media's interactive potential and institutional communication practices.

Second, producers should adopt an audience-centered approach, developing content that aligns with listener preferences and needs (Hardegree, 2024; Simbolon, 2026). This requires monitoring audience feedback, studying analytics, and refining content based on what works. Producers should also consider how their content fits within broader listening practices, recognizing that podcast consumption is often multitasking and that convenient listening must be balanced with engaging content.

Third, producers should implement multi-platform distribution strategies that leverage the strengths of different platforms. The finding by Leoz-Aizpuru and Pedrero-Esteban (2026) that engagement varies significantly across platforms suggests that a single-platform strategy may limit engagement. However, producers must also be attentive to the platform constraints and affordances, recognizing that the same content may perform differently across platforms.

Fourth, producers should invest in production quality and community development. The engagement gap identified by Simbolon (2026) was partly attributable to limited technical capacity and resources. Investment in production quality can enhance both consumption and emotional engagement, while community development—including recognition of listener contributions—can support participatory engagement.

7. Conclusion :

This article has examined the podcast as a digital communication medium, analyzing its evolution from linear audio content to a multi-platform phenomenon and its role in building audience engagement. The central argument has been that podcast engagement is not an inherent property of the audio format but emerges from the strategic integration of content design, platform choices, and participatory practices.

The analysis has revealed a complex and sometimes contradictory landscape. On one hand, podcasting has been celebrated as a participatory medium that democratizes audio production and enables intimate, authentic connections between producers and audiences (Löwgren & Reimer, 2013; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020). On the other hand, empirical research has documented significant engagement gaps, with many podcasts failing to realize their participatory potential due to structural constraints, production limitations, and the persistence of one-way communication patterns (Simbolon, 2026; García-Marín & Aparici, 2020).

The multi-platform dimension of contemporary podcasting further complicates this picture. While platforms offer diverse affordances for audience engagement, they also impose constraints that limit experimentation and risk commodifying participation (Mutti, 2026; Jenkins et al., 2009). The finding that engagement varies significantly across platforms (Leoz-Aizpuru & Pedrero-Esteban, 2026) suggests that platform choice is a strategic decision with significant consequences for audience relationships.

Looking forward, several directions for future research are indicated. First, there is a need for more comparative research examining engagement across different institutional and regional contexts, as Simbolon's (2026) study was limited to a specific institutional setting. Second, longitudinal research would help understand how podcast engagement develops over time and how relationships between producers and audiences evolve. Third, there is a need for more research on the impact of emerging technologies—particularly artificial intelligence—on podcast engagement and user experience (Mutti, 2026).

In conclusion, the podcast represents a significant development in digital communication, offering possibilities for audio content that go beyond broadcast traditions. However, realizing these possibilities requires attention to the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which podcasts operate, as well as to the strategic choices that producers make. The engagement potential of podcasting will only be fully realized when producers move beyond seeing podcasts as simply audio content and embrace them as platforms for building relationships, communities, and meaningful participation (Tandfonline, 2026).

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