

# Podcasting and Journalism in the Spanish-Speaking World

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## Introduction

Podcasting has been called a refashioning of radio, which can be better understood if one contemplates its wide range of formats (Bottomley, 2015). Furthermore, it has been shown that podcasts are changing the audio storytelling genre (McHugh, 2016), and leading to a new genre of narrative journalism, one characterized by the strong personal involvement of podcasters (Lindgren, 2016). In these stories, producers experience the freedom of podcasting (Sellas and Solà, 2019) while exploring the limits of the medium's genres and practices. This chapter aims to contribute to the academic literature on non-fiction podcast production and narratives. Since most of the previous research within this field is focused on productions from the English-speaking world, our purpose is to amplify the knowledge about other podcast cultures.

The study focuses on six of the main award-winning productions that have contributed to the expansion of narrative journalism podcasting in Spain and Latin America in recent years (see Table 1). Through in-depth interviews with the producers, journalists and scriptwriters, we try to understand the perspectives and approaches that inform the way these podcasts are produced. In addition, we use close analytical listening to the episodes to analyse not only text but also how sound creates meanings (Bernstein, 1998). As Spinelli and Dann point out, this practice is based on back-scanning and repeat listening, so that we may pause the playback 'to note what is going on at the level of language (...), how the audio is processed and edited, how the elements are being composed into a narrative and where that narrative turns or suspends', as well as to identify our reactions and mental processes as listeners, and the use of music and sound by the authors to create meaning (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 5).

**Table 1. Non-fiction podcasts analysed.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Producers</b>	<b>Number projects/ episodes</b>	<b>Publication</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Country</b>
<b>Radio Ambulante</b> (Travelling Radio)	Alarcón and Guerrero	150	2012–present From 2016 on NPR-present	<a href="https://radioambulante.org/">https://radioambulante.org/</a> <a href="https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510315/radio-ambulante">https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510315/radio-ambulante</a>	Colombia
<b>Las Raras</b> (The Odd Ones)	May and Cruz	29	2015–present	<a href="https://lasraraspodcast.com/">https://lasraraspodcast.com/</a>	Chile
<b>Le llamaban padre</b> (They called him father)	Porta and Esteban	7	2012–2019	<a href="https://www.podiumpodcast.com/">https://www.podiumpodcast.com/</a>	Spain
<b>Las tres muertes de mi padre</b> (The three deaths of my father)	Romero	5	2018	<a href="https://lastresmuertesdemipadre.com/">https://lastresmuertesdemipadre.com/</a> <a href="https://cuonda.com/las-tres-muertes-de-mi-padre">https://cuonda.com/las-tres-muertes-de-mi-padre</a>	Spain
<b>La desaparición del padre Gallego</b> (The disappearance of Father Gallego)	Serrano	11	2018–2019	<a href="https://lanoficcion.com/">https://lanoficcion.com/</a>	Colombia
<b>En el corredor de la muerte</b> (On death row)	Carretero, Lezcano and Marcos	5	2019	<a href="https://www.podiumpodcast.com/">https://www.podiumpodcast.com/</a>	Spain

Source: own elaboration.

The sample includes podcasts from different countries, which have commonalities concerning the kind of stories and the approach to them. *Le llamaban padre* reviews a case of paedophilia and sexual abuse uncovered in 2013 in Spain and investigates how could it happened without the foster care system detecting it. *Las tres muertes de mi padre* is a story told by the son of a victim of the terrorist organization ETA, who died in a terrorist attack in 1993, in one of its 400 still unresolved cases. *La desaparición del padre Gallego* explores the disappearance of a Colombian priest in Panama in 1971. *En el corredor de la muerte* is an investigation into the judicial process of Pablo Ivar, the Spanish-American who was sentenced to life imprisonment after being found guilty of a triple murder that took place in Florida in 1994. *Las Raras* is a Chilean production that defines itself as *historias de libertad* (stories of freedom), focused on people who challenge the status quo. *Radio Ambulante* tells neglected and under-reported Latin American and Latino stories.

### **Podcasting as the new sphere for non-fictional audio storytelling**

Over the past few years, podcasting has become an increasingly important space for non-fiction narrative. However, long-form audio stories have a history, during which they have been known by different names, such as features, radio documentaries, or even documentary features. Academic research has traced the evolution of the genre from the 1920s-1930s to the present (Biewen and Dilworth, 2010; Hall, 2010; Hendy, 2009; Madsen, 2009, 2013; Madsen and Potts, 2010; McHugh, 2016; Lindgren, 2014; Lindgren and McHugh, 2013). This path reveals how the genre has been conceptualized differently according to the period, location, and cultural context and the distinct approaches of journalism, acoustic art, sound landscaping, and radio drama.

Broadly speaking, there are two main forms. On the one hand, what is considered the 'European' feature, common in several continental European countries, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. These are author-shaped productions that 'combine well-honed narrative structure or dramaturgy, storytelling through sound scenes and melded sounds' (McHugh, 2016, p. 68). On the other hand, there are the radio documentaries, that became more common in the United States from the 1970s onwards. Closely linked to National Public Radio (NPR), these have a storytelling format, which is more factual and involves a greater presence of the narrator. However, the common thread of what Biewen calls 'the big stretchy tent that is radio documentary' is that 'they use sound to tell true stories artfully' (Biewen and Dilworth, 2010, p. 5). Sound narrative is artistically employed to reconstruct reality, while the veracity of the facts remains unaltered, and this is filtered through the writer's personality. It is a genre that 'binds the aesthetic wealth of sound to the emotional strength of storytelling' (Lechuga Olgúin, 2015, p. 66).

The American narrative style sets trends, and its influence is global, 'undermining the popularity of the older "European" or poetic style of crafted audio feature' (McHugh, 2016, p. 78). Storytellers from the United States are frequently referenced by producers of the main non-fiction podcasts in Spanish-speaking countries analysed in this chapter. This may be due to the lack of a radio documentary or feature tradition in Spanish. In

Spain, long-form audio storytelling has had no place in broadcast radio, and sound documentaries have been reduced to the Spanish public service broadcaster's (RNE) *Documentos RNE*, and some individual or organizational initiatives, such as Radioimaginamos or Radio Sures. In Latin America, slightly more progress has been made exploring the genre, whether on private or public stations, as well as in universities and cultural bodies, although production has remained limited (Lechuga Olgún, 2015). Initiatives such as the *Bienal Internacional de Radio de México* (International Radio Biennial of Mexico), or *SONODOC, Foro de Documental Sonoro en Español* (Forum of Documentary Sound in Spanish) have aimed to bolster the format in Spanish-speaking countries. In the meantime, podcasting has opened a door to non-fiction audio storytelling, both in the independent sphere and the radio industry (Sellas and Solà, 2019), 'breaking the dynamics of production of current affairs, all but exclusively condemned to the updating of facts demanded by digital acceleration' (Gutiérrez, Sellas and Esteban, 2019, p. 147).

### **Negotiating journalistic standards through podcasts**

Podcasting opens up new ways of approaching reality. Those podcasts included in the sample follow the trend towards personal narrative journalism, in which journalists often implicate themselves in the story, recounting their own experiences or adopting a highly personal perspective to explain the story (Lindgren, 2016). This approach is similar to the journalistic tradition of the Latin-American *Crónica*, and New Journalism (Dowling and Miller, 2019; Lechuga Olgún, 2015), with which it shares characteristics and methods, such as the use of literary devices to enrich the narration of facts, the author's subjectivity, freedom of subject matter, or a scene-based construction, among others. All of this is achieved using the particularities of sound. As McHugh (2019, p. 2) states, 'when the audio medium is added to the arsenal of narrative journalism, its impact is hugely amplified.' The aural nature of podcasting, the intimacy established with the listener, a listening experience that is often private and through headphones, the freedom regarding radio routines, all enhance the format's journalistic possibilities.

The extensive flexibility of podcasts begins with the choice of subject matter, which is not conditioned by the 'manic Twitter-driven breaking news cycle' (Ellis, 2015, in

Dowling and Miller, 2019, p. 169). The long-form audio journalism podcasts analysed in this chapter narrate stories less focused on newsworthiness, and usually involve anonymous people far from the type of characters that are commonly placed in the forefront of hard news. Some of them also offer a new approach or an in-depth investigation into past events that have lost the attention of mainstream media. As Catalina May and Martín Cruz point out, *Las Raras* focuses on ‘stories of freedom’, featuring people who defy the status quo and the reality of their times. ‘We have a vision: we look for other ways of life, people who take a political stance in the world, because the personal is political; this doesn’t interest commercial media’, state the podcast’s producers Catalina May and Martín Cruz (personal communication, 28 April 2020). Stories, here, are far from both hard news and easy anecdote (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). There’s not a broadcaster’s editorial line that must be toed. And while radio broadcasting plays an important role for the public opinion, podcasting is still far from it, so that it can stay out of the pressures of political and economic powers.

Once the story is chosen, non-fiction podcast producers enjoy a degree of freedom in their investigations, production strategies, and narrative techniques, that are not usual within the radio industry routines. Podcasters have few constraints related to time; they don’t have to fit the content into a broadcast schedule (Berry, 2016). Besides, independent producers, and even those within podcast networks like Podium Podcast, are not limited by industrial structures such as newsrooms or broadcasters’ hierarchies (Sellas and Solà, 2019). And since there’s not yet an established podcast industry in either Spain or in Latin America, podcasts producers still can avoid market pressures that are characteristic of commercial radio.

Producers can go beyond those labels and precepts that regulate standard journalistic practice, such as objectivity, balance, or detachment. Thus, Nacho Carretero (*En el corredor de la muerte*) acknowledges that ‘there are things that I wouldn’t dare do in other media (i.e.g. explaining ethical dilemmas, or using first person narrative voice), which are subject to certain codes, but the podcast is much more flexible, there aren’t so many limits’ (personal communication, 4 May 2020). Jimena Marcos (scriptwriter, *En el corredor de la muerte*) adds that this podcast ‘is a personal story about why a

journalist continues to be interested in that case when it has been forgotten by most people. It's a story about the journalist and his feelings around the case' (personal communication, 2 May 2020).

Narrative journalism podcasts challenge traditional journalistic values, such as impartiality and independence (Lindgren, 2016). In podcasting, journalists can go beyond the mantra of facts, explaining the journalistic process itself and showing their doubts, reflections, and emotions challenging the case they are reporting or investigating. The journalistic narrative approach in podcasting focuses more on human connections than on a set of standardized principle (Spinelly and Dann, 2019). Academic researchers who have analysed some of the most popular non-fiction podcasts, highlight values such as transparency, proximity, and honesty. For McHugh (2019), 'subjectivity is not just possible in podcasting – it is almost essential', since audio storytelling makes the listener empathize with a humanized narrator. Spinelli and Dann (2019) discuss the idea of truth in journalism, seeing it more as a process than a result. In their analysis of *Serial*, they posit that Sarah Koenig achieves a synthesis between relating the facts and recognizing her own impressions, 'while this thread does not have a conventional and reassuring resolution, it does have a conclusion: Koenig has evolved and settled with confidence in what might be called a *new human journalism*' (Spinelli and Dann, 2019, p. 194, original emphasis). Once again, Juan Serrano (*La desaparición del padre Gallego*) references to *Serial* when explaining his approach to audio journalism storytelling: 'Speaking in the first person, telling personal concerns, explaining how I got to the story, reporting my conversations with the characters... I did it in those moments when I felt that the story was asking me to do it. Audio storytelling opens the door to these kinds of licenses' (personal communication, 30 March 2020).

### **Delivering a story using the episodic nature of podcasts**

One of the factors that distinguishes radio journalism production from narrative journalism podcasting is the possibility of covering a subject across a number of episodes. This strategy permits a deeper exploration as well as the incorporation of narrative elements characteristic of fiction. For each individual project, a decision is taken regarding the number of episodes needed to tell the story and bring new voices

that provide the consumer with a new journalistic vision. *La desaparición del padre Gallego*, *Las tres muertes de mi padre*, *Le llamaban padre* and *En el corredor de la muerte* all last more than four episodes. They are available on a range of platforms, and the latter two are part of transmedia projects. Although *Radio Ambulante* and *Las Raras* tend to produce single-subject episodes, some stories have been told over two. Producing a series requires the development of different types of storyline; there is the whole story itself, and that of each episode with its corresponding subplots. The narrative structure is generally constructed according to factual chronology following Field's paradigm – introduction, confrontation and resolution (Field, 1994). While some subplots involve flashbacks, the timeline is fundamental when presenting the results of journalistic research and understanding what makes the story evolve as it does.

In the serialized podcast, each episode has a title and its own substance, even though some creators demand that the listener starts at the beginning 'in order to not get lost' (*Ep.6-La desaparición del padre Gallego*). Each episode becomes a piece of a puzzle that makes sense as the story is told. This is achieved through the construction of a narrative structure incorporating elements characteristic of fiction that stimulate episodic listening and strengthen listener loyalty. According to the parameters of the three-part form, the introduction must outline the conflict; this is widely respected in the first episode in which, apart from explaining what the podcast will be about, the journalist identifies himself as the narrator and interested party in the story. In the remaining episodes, the trend oscillates between reiterated contextualization, moving the main theme forwards and, in some cases, a summary of the previous episode. The latter involves the most complexity, as it generally proceeds from a sound edition of key parts of the previous episode that leads the listener towards a new conflict.

(Journalist) In the previous episode, the Police search a House in Castellldans, a village with a population of 1,000, near Lleida.

(Police Officer) I tell my colleague the same thing. One minute. Or we'll break the door down.

(Journalist) They're looking for child pornography.

(Police Officer) They looked and looked and looked and didn't find a single thing.

(Journalist) Children and young people lived in the house, their guardian was a man called David Donet. One of the boys is Santi, 14, who's been living with him since he was 11. He's the most concerned.

(Santi) They searched folder by folder, and I say, 'David, what's going on?'

(Journalist) Could it have been a bet, a challenge...

(...)

(David Donet) Why not? I give them a bit of a hand. I took them right to the place. (*Ep3-Le llamaban padre*)

Endings are usually inconclusive, with the introduction of a new element carrying the listener on towards the following episode. While the most frequently used formula to achieve this is posing a question, another strategy is a sound clip of the journalist or some of the eyewitnesses recounting moments from the next episode. This is a frequent resource in fiction, designed to increase the listener's interest in following the remaining episodes. Naturally, it is more frequently used in podcasts with a large number of episodes, given the importance of maintaining interest over a longer time.

(Journalist) I'll discuss that in the next episode of *La desaparición del padre Gallego*.

(Monsignor Alejandro Vázquez Pinto) I faced up to Torrijos. I stood up to him. What was the charge? That Héctor had, was importing weapons. I said to Omar 'Let's be serious here, if you've got the weapons, take me to wherever they are. (*Ep.3-La desaparición del padre Gallego*)

Another type of serialization that referred to as the mini-series for example, *Las Raras*, in which a single subject, such as the humanitarian crisis on the US/Mexico border, is covered from a range of perspectives, addressed in independent stand-alone episodes. This is the case of *El viaje de Estrella*, *Cruces en el desierto* and *Borrar la frontera*, (The voyage of Estrella, Crosses in the desert, and Rubbing out the border) three road stories broadcast in the podcast's fourth season (2019-2020).

### **From reality to the audio story: the author's personal shaping**

Non-fiction podcasts provide journalists with the opportunity to take on roles themselves. The aim here is twofold: firstly, to emphasize the desire to convert an event into a narrative; and secondly, to prove that the podcast is the result of research. There is even a third aim: showing the challenges of production and some of the ethical



principles of journalism in the first person. Whether it is because a specific aspect has piqued the journalist's curiosity – 'I wondered what the women of Juárez thought' (*Postal de Ciudad Juarez* [Postcard from Ciudad Juárez], *Radio Ambulante*) – or hooked them – 'everything changed when I called Tania' (*En el corredor de la muerte*) – the podcaster's involvement in the narration constitutes a basic factor in the focus and reconstruction of the sound story (Gutiérrez, Sellas, and Esteban, 2019, p. 139). From this perspective, the journalist's role as narrator is fulfilled in two ways:

- 1) Explanatory: describing people and places
- 2) Evaluative: beyond the descriptive dimension, assessing the events and explaining the circumstances of the research period.

In the former, the journalist can seem to be omniscient, basically describing people, places and moods. For Catalina May, her 'presence is more in the perception' (personal communication, 28 May 2020), and the narrative focus is consequently not neutral. This strategy can be interpreted as an absence of emotional involvement; the journalist's interaction with the subjects is sometimes shown, 'but the stories aren't about us'. Generally speaking, this role defines most of the journalism in *Radio Ambulante* and *Las Raras*, although some episodes do contain short personal comments. These are occasional asides describing actions, and since they add very little information, are dispensable: 'When I heard the case of that woman (...), I wondered what the women of Juárez would think' (*Postal de Juárez* [A post from Juárez], *Radio Ambulante*); 'I am a faithful follower of the writer Gabriela Wiener' (*La cama del poliamor* [The polyamory bed], *Las Raras*); 'Her eight did not impress me (...), but I never asked her anything' (*Un metro dieciséis* [One meter sixteen], *Las Raras*).

Others are professional opinions on the honesty of broadcasting unedited sensitive material, warning the listener of its upsetting nature (*Doctor, ¿esto es normal? -Parte1* [Is this normal, Doctor? – Part 1], *Radio Ambulante*), or on the lack of ethics displayed by journalists who present trash television programmes (*La concursante* [The *Competitor*], *Radio Ambulante*). These are sporadic comments, and the journalist is never more than just a common thread.

The evaluative function is manifested when the journalist also covers professional and ethical vicissitudes and takes a position regarding the conflict addressed in the podcast, thus becoming a subjective narrator. When it is revealed that 'I worked as a correspondent in Caracas (...) and it was almost impossible to get any news of them. They were prohibited from talking to the press' and 'I contacted the Cuban government (...) and they didn't want to give the interview' (*Mais médicos*, [More Doctors] *Radio Ambulante*), the listener is told that the presence of just one of the sides is not the result of slack journalism, but rather problems in producing the podcast. While not questioning the value of the testimony given by the principal characters, one could say that the world is presented from the journalist's perspective.

In 1993, ETA killed my father in a terrorist attack. For 20 years I did nothing to find out the truth. Now, and after a very long investigation, I know that there is much more than what I was told. This is the story. (*Las tres muertes de mi padre*)

Questions and/or reflections that will only find answers through long-term journalistic work will inevitably lead to a serialized narration. The personal involvement of the producer is explicitly clear from introduction to outcome: 'When I began to look for information for this story, (...) after hearing her statement, I felt the need to talk to her' (*La desaparición del padre Gallego*). Such participation in the narration gives the author licence to critically explain his opinion, on, for example, the working of the justice system: 'the person who wins is the one who convinces' (*En el corredor de la muerte*) or 'I suppose there'll be a justice that will execute them, punish them' (*Las tres muertes de mi padre*).

### **Narrative journalism podcasts as crafted audio**

If sound landscape is 'the specific sound that emanates from any real or fictitious scene' (Lechuga Olgúin, 2015, p. 60), the podcasts analysed here present an immersive sound design, accurately constructing the diegesis and creating the illusion of being right next to the protagonists. Sound design is key to produce an immersive journalistic storytelling (Dowling and Miller, 2019). Furthermore, being that podcasts will be listened to through the intimacy of headphones, the producers incorporate music that illustrates the voices

while not distorting the meaning of their words. Undoubtedly, the incorporation of music and sound designers on production teams improves the quality of the atmospheres that envelop the word. These professionals have become fundamental, particularly when the opinion of most press journalists was that ‘sound design was not the central feature’ (Juan Serrano, personal communication, 30 March 2020). Conversely, in *Las Raras* it was a key element, given that one of the directors, Martin Cruz, is a sound designer.

Of all the podcasts analysed, the Spanish one *Le llamaban padre* stands out for a sound design based on leitmotifs that identify people, scenery and actions. It is also the story with the most complex narrative structure, and one can assume that this is largely due to the contribution of radio scriptwriters. The incorporation of sound producers to the scriptwriting of *En el corredor de la muerte* enhanced the podcast. Both form part of several Spanish transmedia projects, and ‘how they should sound’ was therefore vital. ‘There was a question of rhythm, which was an essential element in the scriptwriting and sound design’ (Jimena Marcos, scriptwriter, personal communication, 2 May 2020).

### **Podcasting and journalism in the Spanish-speaking world: final thoughts and prospects**

The last few years have seen rapid growth in Spanish-language non-fiction podcasts. Prior to this, they were pioneered by *Radio Ambulante* in 2012, which was launched through a crowdfunding campaign. Inspired in the precedent of *99% Invisible* by Roman Mars, it aimed to bring the style of the Latin-American *crónica* to sound narrative (Fernández-Sande, 2014). The founders had previous experience in the press and moved into audio storytelling. This is a common factor in the other podcasts analysed here; they are created by journalists who have little radio experience and need the support of scriptwriters and sound engineers in order to think in sound. We believe this fact to be fundamental in understanding a narrative style that – while nuances do exist between podcasts – fails to make the most of the enormous possibilities that sound offers. Catalina May subscribes to this view when she states that ‘there is little risk in non-fiction podcasting in Spanish; there is little experimentation with sound’ (personal communication, 28 April 2020).

Spanish-language features lack both a tradition and a legacy, and this is a vital factor when understanding the narrative characteristics and approach to the facts in journalistic narrative podcasts in Spanish. In fact, all the cases examined that began after 2015 cite *Serial* (2014) as a model. When these authors think about narrative journalism, they have a wide range of references, but their vision shrinks when citing sound precedents. This is a handicap to greater diversity in Spanish-language non-fiction, which is based principally on the narrator's personal story. We only detected a greater creative intention with the sound design of *Le llamaban padre*, in the occasional episode of *Las Raras*, and in the use of fictional fragments in *En el corredor de la muerte*. Comparing these podcasts, the first one is the most creative production, since each narrative element (characters, spaces, times, atmospheres) has its own identity built through sounds, with the aim of going far beyond the spoken word (Gutiérrez and Esteban, 2020).

Despite such limitations, the cases observed show the potential of podcasting to provide authorial journalistic narrative; one that does not merely supply information regarding facts, but, through its vision, gives meaning to a specific reality. Producers are not limited by the constraints of radio programming and production routines, while benefiting from the characteristics inherent in podcasting. At the same time, they have to deal with the productive tension between journalistic rules and ethics and the potential of the most intimate ways of storytelling. In this sense, Latin-American podcasts still show a certain reticence in using the first-person; conversely, Spanish authors value the freedom from those 'corsets' that journalism has self-imposed on itself for decades. In the end, as Nacho Carretero says, 'the public is not obsessed with genres or labels, it just wants to listen to good stories' (personal communication, 4 May 2020). Stories which, explained in a podcast, gain from a sound narrative. 'It could have been written down, but the podcast is far more intimate, hearing a story spoken out loud will never be the same as reading it. It's as if you were telling it to a friend' (Jimena Marcos, personal communication, 2 May 2020). The path of the non-fictional podcast in Spanish is laid out. However, as we have tried to show in this chapter, it is only just beginning. Beyond the intimacy of the voice, and the freedom of production, there is a lot of space in which to generate new creative outcomes as crafted or narrative audio storytelling.

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