



A Comparative Study of Independent Podcast Design Methods (Private Sector) and Radio Program Podcasts

* Mansoureh Ghanbarabadi  ** Mohammad Akhgari 
*** Zahra Safaeyan 

* A M.A. in Radio Production, Tehran, Iran. parand.gh@gmail.com

** Associate Professor, IRIB University, Tehran, Iran. achgari@gmail.com

*** Assistant Professor, IRIB University, Iran. z_safaeyan@yahoo.com

Received: 02.06.2025

Accepted: 01.07.2025

Abstract

Podcasting, as an emerging medium, has transformed the auditory landscape with an independent and creative approach. Independent podcast producers, unconstrained by the organizational and structural limitations that radio producers face, engage in content creation and distribution freely. Despite the higher technical quality of radio program podcasts, independent podcasts on platforms such as Castbox have significantly higher rates of sharing and listenership. This situation raises critical questions: how have podcasts with more limited technical resources managed to attract larger audiences? And what are the key differences in production methods between independent podcasts and those based on radio programming?

This study adopts a qualitative approach using content analysis and semi-structured interviews to explore these differences. The research population includes podcasts published on Castbox, a platform with a significant share of podcast listeners in Iran. A purposive sampling strategy was used, and data were collected through interviews with 22 producers of both types of podcasts. The findings reveal that independent podcasts perform more creatively in topic selection, writing style, narrative form, and establishing a close relationship with the audience. On the other hand, radio-based podcasts demonstrate relatively higher technical quality and more professional use of audio elements.

Keywords: Podcast, Podcatchers , Castbox , Shenoto, Namlik.

Corresponding Author: Mansoureh Ghanbarabadi- Parand.gh@gmail.com



Introduction

In recent decades, significant transformations have occurred in the production, distribution, and consumption of media content, particularly in the audio domain. One of the most notable developments is the emergence of podcasts as an independent, digital, and publicly accessible medium. This article focuses on a comparative analysis between independent (free-form) podcasts and traditional radio programs, aiming to identify the mechanisms that have contributed to the success of independent podcasts in attracting audiences, and to contrast them with formal radio productions.

At the outset, the article emphasizes that creating a successful radio program and building a loyal audience is a time-consuming process. In some cases, programs must be continuously produced for over a year before they can establish a stable and engaged listenership. Moreover, even minor changes in content or tone may result in a substantial loss of audience. Meanwhile, podcasts—delivered as digital audio files via RSS feeds—have gained significant traction due to their simple yet flexible structure. Several features differentiate podcasts from traditional radio programs: they are free, easily accessible, offer thematic diversity, are not tied to official institutions, and allow for freedom in language and format selection.

The research problem of the article is rooted in the idea that, unlike traditional radio programs, podcasts have established two-way and interactive relationships with their audiences. The listener is not merely a passive receiver but an active participant in content production. They can provide feedback, choose preferred content, and even become content creators themselves. Podcast producers, in turn, refine their programs based on audience feedback. Despite such advancements, studies show that official radio podcasts often attract fewer listeners compared to independent ones. This observation leads to the central research question: How have independent podcasts, with relatively limited resources, succeeded in attracting larger audiences?

The significance of this research lies in the fact that the audience is the cornerstone of any media's success. A medium without an audience is ineffective. Therefore, exploring how podcasting's unique capacities can help cultivate a loyal audience is of great importance. Since its emergence in Iran around 2007, podcasting has gradually found a firm place among various segments of society. This study seeks to propose a suitable content production model through a comparative study between independent and radio podcasts.

The theoretical framework of the article is structured in three parts: content-oriented theories, audience-oriented theories, and message distribution theories. In the content domain, reception aesthetics theory argues that the beauty of a radio program lies in the personal perception of the audience. The producer aims to craft a message that resonates with the listener's mind by incorporating sensory, emotional, and symbolic elements. Gestalt theory highlights that the overall impact of a program stems from the harmonious integration of its components—such as music, voice, silence, and narration—into a cohesive whole. The representation theory addresses the role of imagination, emotion, and affective transmission in shaping audio narratives.

In the domain of audience theory, two major schools are discussed: the process-oriented school and the semantic school. The former views communication as message transmission, focusing on encoding and decoding. The latter emphasizes the creation of meaning within cultural and social contexts, asserting that messages are not merely data transmissions but integral to complex interactions among the sender, receiver, and the sociocultural environment. This view accounts for interpretive and contextual differences among individuals.

In terms of distribution theories, the article refers to Granovetter's concept of "strong and weak ties." While strong ties (e.g., close friends) are effective in retaining existing information,

innovation and the dissemination of new knowledge occur more effectively through weak ties (e.g., acquaintances, wide networks). This theory is pivotal in analyzing how podcasts spread, as they often grow through sharing in public spaces, groups, and social media—platforms rooted in weak-tie communication.

Some sections of the article are dedicated to defining key concepts such as podcast, podcatcher, radio podcast, independent podcast, and the process of podcasting. The podcasting process encompasses research, writing, recording, editing, publishing, and promotion. Podcasts are distributed through platforms like mobile applications and websites. Their advantages are manifold: democratizing content creation, challenging elitism, promoting user participation, transforming consumer roles, enabling interactivity, and eliminating spatial and temporal limitations. Podcasts also democratize media broadcasting, transferring production and distribution power from institutional entities to individuals.

In many countries, podcasts have played an essential role in enhancing media pluralism—particularly in societies where state media dominate. Social groups, minorities, ethnic communities, and individuals without formal media experience have used podcasts to make their voices heard. A variety of podcast formats—including monologues, interviews, host-centered programs, narratives, and hybrid formats—have enriched content diversity and engagement.

Other parts of the article delve into issues such as the characteristics of program content, audience analysis, the importance of radio scriptwriting, and audience segmentation based on loyalty, needs, attitudes, and sociocultural background. A successful radio scriptwriter is one who deeply understands the subject matter, masters auditory language, and skillfully employs creativity, storytelling, and structure. Likewise, today's radio audience is no longer a passive listener but rather an active participant, chooser, and collaborator.

In summary, this article adopts a comparative approach to analyze the factors contributing to the success of independent podcasts and to offer recommendations for enhancing audio content production in traditional media. The research suggests that radio organizations should redesign their content strategies by embracing interactivity, creative freedom, and audience-centered approaches, leveraging the potential of podcasts to attract and retain audiences. The study is based on a qualitative methodology, aiming to interpretively explore the meaning of phenomena and social processes involved in podcast production and consumption. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numerical data, the qualitative approach seeks a deep understanding of experiences and meanings within real-life contexts. The researcher relies on techniques such as open coding, textual analysis, and in-depth interviews for data collection, organization, and interpretation.

Methodology

In the data analysis phase, the open coding method was employed. During this phase, raw data—such as interview transcripts and collected documentation—were broken down into smaller, meaningful units and labeled to extract initial concepts. The goal of this process was to create conceptual categories by fragmenting the data into the smallest significant parts, thereby gradually constructing the conceptual framework of the study.

The primary tool for data collection was qualitative interviews. These were conducted in a semi-structured format and focused on understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of podcasters and audio content producers. Data analysis was carried out with consideration for the social and cultural context of the interviewees.

The statistical population of the research included Persian-language podcasts published on popular audio platforms. Among various platforms, Castbox was selected due to its widespread installation and popularity among Iranian users. Installation statistics from Google Play and local app stores



indicate that Castbox significantly surpasses other platforms such as Shenoto and Namlik in terms of user base, making it the most widely used platform by Iranian podcast listeners.

The sampling method used in this study was purposeful sampling. This means that within each thematic category of podcasts, a podcast with the highest number of subscribers on Castbox was selected. If the selected podcaster declined to participate in an interview, the next podcaster with the most followers was chosen as a replacement.

In total, 22 podcast samples were selected for analysis, including 18 independent podcasts and 4 podcasts affiliated with official radio organizations. For the radio podcasts, due to the unwillingness of some producers to be interviewed, feedback was instead gathered from judges, producers, and experts involved in the production of those programs. The proportion of selected samples reflects the broader presence of independent podcasts in the Iranian media landscape.

The unit of analysis in this research was the individual podcast episodes under review. Each episode published on Castbox was treated as a standalone analytical unit. These episodes were examined from structural, content-related, and aesthetic perspectives to identify effective patterns in audience engagement, listener interaction, and compelling content production.

Overall, this section of the research lays the foundation for a more detailed comparison of the structural and content differences between independent and radio-based podcasts, providing the essential groundwork for achieving the study's objectives.

Summary of Research Findings

This study, through a qualitative analysis of 25 in-depth interviews with podcast and radio producers and experts, investigates the formal structures, content formats, and production and distribution processes of podcasts.

The findings indicate that the topical diversity of podcasts—including subjects such as history, economics, psychology, music, art, and storytelling—leads to the use of a variety of formats such as monologue, interview-based, narrative-driven, and hybrid forms, depending on the target audience.

A structural analysis of these programs highlights the importance of coordination among sound elements—including speech, music, sound effects, and silence—in creating an aesthetically pleasing listening experience and maintaining content coherence. Furthermore, the alignment of the narrative structure with the topic and audience needs is key to effective message delivery. The selection of the narrator, background music, and sound effects all play crucial roles in enhancing storytelling and ensuring program cohesion.

Thanks to their freedom of expression and focus on niche audiences, podcasts are able to explore specific themes with greater depth and variety. However, for effective dissemination, these programs must leverage both domestic and international platforms, as well as social media networks, to enhance accessibility and audience engagement.

Audience feedback is recognized as a critical factor in improving content quality and sustaining audience loyalty. The podcast production process—which includes research, scriptwriting, timing, and audio editing—is essential for ensuring final quality and message effectiveness.

Perhaps the most prominent advantage of podcasts, compared to institutional media, is their freedom of speech and the absence of censorship constraints, which allow for the reflection of authentic and multidimensional perspectives.

Research Results

This study was conducted with the aim of analyzing and comparing the formal structure, content, and distribution methods of radio and independent podcasts, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each in various areas.

- **Formal Structure:**

Radio podcasts benefit from professional infrastructure, offering superior audio and technical quality. In contrast, independent podcasts, due to limited resources, tend to present lower production quality.

- **Content:**

Independent podcasts typically dedicate more time to scriptwriting and enjoy greater thematic freedom, resulting in more innovative content. Radio content, however, is restricted by organizational policies and is sometimes subject to censorship.

- **Distribution:**

Radio podcasts are less frequently published on mainstream podcast platforms and are often available only as archived content. In contrast, independent podcasts utilize global platforms and social media for both distribution and marketing.

- **Audience and Interaction:**

Radio remains a mass medium with live interaction, whereas podcasts target niche audiences and their interaction is asynchronous.

- **Theoretical Application:**

Radio producers often apply Gestalt theory to create more cohesive programming. Radio serves multiple media functions, while podcasts primarily focus on education and entertainment.

- **Social Media Networks:**

Podcasts grow through weak-tie connections in social media environments. This clustered communication structure facilitates the expansion of their listener base.

References

1. Azad Armaki, T. (2005). *Hangouts and Iranian Modernity*. Rouh-e-Fekr Publishing.
2. Akhgari, M. (2017). *Radio in the Second Era*. University of IRIB Press.
3. Starkey, G. (2019). (Trans. Qarouni, A.). *Radio: Content and Structure*. University of IRIB Press.
4. Tatar, A. (2007). *The Impact of Interactivity on User Satisfaction in News-Seeking Behavior on News Websites* (Master's thesis). Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran.
5. Khoshjasteh, H. (2017). *What is Radio?* University of IRIB Press.
6. Khoshjasteh, H. (2005). *Radio Scriptwriting and the Principles of Radio Texts: Sociological Reflections on Radio*. IRIB Research Department.
7. Khoshjasteh, H. (2007). *Sociology of Radio*. Radio Research Office.
8. Khezali, A. (1996). *Scriptwriting for Radio and Television*. IRIB Research Center.
9. Centola, D. (2022). (Trans. Zargarian, S.). *How Big Things Spread*. Amoozesh Publishing.
10. Shahbandi, M. (2008). *Podcast and the Future of Radio*. Radio Research Office.
11. Ameli, S. R. (2009). *Virtual Scientific Networks*. Institute for Cultural and Social Studies.
12. Ebadian, M. (2002). *Aesthetics Made Simple*. Center for Art Research and Studies.
13. Aliabadi, M. N. (2018). *The Aesthetics of Sound*. IRIB Research and Opinion Center.
14. Ghahroodi, N., & Golestani, K. (2011). *Podcast and E-Relations*. Media Studies, Vol. 6(13).
15. Kowsari, M. (2008). *Semiotics of Mass Media*. Media Quarterly, 19(73), 31.
16. Kreisel, A. (2008). (Trans. Essam, M.). *Understanding Radio*. Radio Research Office, Future Project.



17. McQuail, D. (2006). (Trans. Montazer Ghaem, M.). *Audience Studies*. Media Studies and Research Center.
18. Wachtel, S. (2007). (Trans. Akhgari, M.). *Writing for the Ear*. University of IRIB Press.
19. Walther-von Laer, B., & Buchholz, A. (2008). (Trans. Akhgari, M.). *Radio Journalism*. University of IRIB Press.
20. Werner, S., & Tankard, J. (2008). (Trans. Dehghan, A.). *Communication Theories*. University of Tehran Press.
21. Nesbitt, A. (2005). *The Podcast Value Chain Report*. Available at: www.digitalpodcast.com/podcastvaluechain.pdf (Accessed: January 20, 2011)
22. Tsagkias, M. (2009). *Predicting Podcast Preference: An Analysis Framework and Its Application*. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*.
1. University of Azarbaijan Press.

