

The narrative non-fiction podcast in Spain and its evolution over time

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Abstract

The podcast has become an ally of traditional radio. Many of its most acclaimed figures are the evolution of radio formats that have lost their niche on the radio waves. An example of this is the narrative non-fiction podcast, also known as the documentary podcast, which could be considered as the evolution of radio reporting. In this paper we count the main narrative resources of the formats published in Spain up to and including the year 2020, and we compare them with a current format in order to analyse the evolution of these variables. Through this quantitative analysis, we can conclude that it is a format divided into half-hour episodes, with a narrator and three interviews per episode, and that it usually also contains archival documents, musical backgrounds and sound effects. As it has evolved over time, the interventions have become shorter and we find more dynamism.

Keywords

Podcast, narrative, non-fiction, Spain, evolution, journalism.

Resum

El pòdcast ha esdevingut un aliat de la ràdio tradicional. Molts dels seus exponents més reclamats són l'evolució de formats radiofònics que van perdre el seu lloc a les graelles hercianes. N'és un exemple el pòdcast narratiu de no ficció, també conegut com a pòdcast documental, que podria considerar-se l'evolució del reportatge radiofònic. En aquest treball comptabilitzem els principals recursos narratius dels formats que es van publicar a Espanya fins a l'any 2020 inclòs, i en fem una comparativa amb un format actual per analitzar l'evolució d'aquestes variables. Gràcies a aquesta anàlisi quantitativa podem concloure que és un format dividit en episodis de mitja hora, que compta amb un narrador i tres entrevistes per episodi, i que sol contenir, a més a més, documents d'arxiu, fons musicals i efectes de so. A mesura que ha evolucionat en el temps, les intervencions són més breus i hi trobem més dinamisme.

Paraules clau

Pòdcast, narratiu, no-ficció, Espanya, evolució, periodisme.

1. Introduction

In the last 20 years, the way we interact with audio has changed completely. 2004 is the year in which podcasting was born at the hands of Adam Curry and Dave Winner, emerging in an interconnected, technology-focused society. The first podcast was launched in Spain that same year, with our country showing a clear interest in this new form of communication. Without the technological explosion that began years before its birth, a network as robust as the one that sustains it would not have emerged. Moreover, it came into being at a time when society was tired of conventional media. With technologies on the rise, the speed of information began to gain ground in online newspapers and on radio and television programmes.

It is then that a new medium sought its niche by focusing on thought-provoking content dedicated to subjects that have no place in the traditional media. What started as a niche tool has established itself as a thriving communications industry in many countries around the world.

There are many podcast formats, but one closely tied to journalism is the narrative non-fiction podcast. This type of format is based on investigative journalism and cross-checking with primary sources. Although the term is widespread among members of the podcasting industry, and often also referred to as documentary podcasting, the variables that define it have not yet been defined. This paper seeks to specify the basic characteristics of the format by also carrying out a temporal comparison that explores the evolution of its main variables over

time. Through a quantitative analysis in which we will measure a series of variables, we will unravel the narrative resources used by narrative non-fiction podcasts.

2. Reference framework

First, we will draw on Ruiz and Salgado's (2022) definition of narrative non-fiction podcasts:

"A web-based audio format that stands out mainly for the presence of a narrator who is part of the story, who gets involved and moves away from objectivity, is longer than other formats, is often divided into different episodes and usually includes documentary sources that have been compiled in an initial research process. It is not limited to certain themes, but there is a remarkable variety of subjects and a notable presence of narrative resources, with the way the story is told occupying a substantial place" (p. 323).

We can divide the history of podcasting in Spain into different stages. The first of these begins with the arrival of the first formats. This includes the creation of the first podcast associations in 2010 and the proliferation of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. The second stage, backed by authors such as Bonini, 2015 and López and Homssi, 2021, and the one that concerns us most, began in 2016, when the first narrative non-fiction podcast arrived in Spain. This second stage is characterised by an improvement in the production system, with the creation of production companies exclusively for the creation of these formats, with professional podcasts becoming more and more prominent than amateur ones. In fact, many of the most prominent amateur podcasters go on to become part of platforms or production companies. The third stage begins in 2021 with the massification of the industry thanks to the positioning of large audio platforms in the market such as Audible, Spotify or Podimo. This research analyses all the narrative non-fiction formats that were published in the second stage of podcasting in Spain and compare them with a recent format to see how they have evolved over time.

2.1 Journalists switch to podcasting

The second stage is the beginning of the professionalisation of the podcasting sector with the arrival of the media and journalists. The podcast is beginning to position itself as an entity in its own right, increasingly separate from radio, and is even beginning to be defined as a reviver of forgotten formats, as Markman (2015) argues. It is a rediscovery of various types of genres and a renewal of sound content, departing from what has been exploited until now. A new way of telling stories by redefining what has already been done on paper and even in audiovisuals, but now in a sound medium. It also changes the way the listener listens, for while other podcasts require

a level of attention similar to radio, this listening is now active and attentive. Another characteristic of narrative non-fiction podcasts is serialisation (Gutiérrez, Esteban and Núñez, 2019), which can be plot-based (formats in which several chapters are required to understand the story in its entirety, in such a way that the information is reported between episodes) or they can be resolved chapter formats (although the substance of the discourse is similar, each chapter is independent in itself, and the story ends and concludes in the chapter). Serialisation is a differentiating element of the format, which constructs new needs for the audio listener, but on closer analysis, they are not so new, but rather revive old formats such as radio dramas. This way, the listener creates a special bond with the content.

The narrative non-fiction podcast is a format that uses environmental resources, voices (often appealing to the listener), music and, above all, testimonies, all to create immersive atmospheres. It often coincides with the elements of radio itself, but it also has its new variables, as we will discuss. Moreover, it uses everyday, simple language, and there are regular interactions with the audience (Azurin, Náupas and Rodríguez, 2015). It is based on the sound documentary, defined in the Spanish Sound Documentary Forum (SONODOC) as 'telling real stories with sounds' (de Beauvoir, 2018, p. 23).

The narrative podcast is usually a format created by journalists. The evolution of journalistic investigation is, therefore, part of the story, which sometimes creates two plots: the one told by the interviewees and the one explained by the journalist about the process of the investigation (García, Esteban and Núñez, 2019). At present, the content we are beginning to encounter is increasingly narrative (Lindgren, 2016), and sound is being harnessed to enhance narratives by immersing the listener and thus evolving the narrative level in an increasingly sophisticated way (Dowling and Miller, 2019). Podcasting is therefore beginning to opt for long-form journalism, investing time and resources, bringing back the chronicles that hardly have a place in the other media, which are evolving towards immediacy and saturation. There are limited appearances of chronicles and extensive reports on general radio, so the possibilities of narrative genre creation may be one of the reasons behind the expansion of the podcasting universe, which, moreover, is beginning to incorporate many fiction elements and sometimes even dramatisations within the non-fiction formats themselves (Legorburu, Edo, and García González, 2021).

For all these reasons, podcasting is beginning to stand out as an ideal platform for more elaborate productions, such as documentary narratives (Beauvoir, 2015). Specifically, Podium Podcast is presented as a content portal with infinite possibilities, such as the loyalty of audiences thanks to subscription and the publication of episodes at specific times and, moreover, the option for each user to choose an individual line-up, in terms of content and schedules. This resulted in Podium Podcast obtaining 208,000 unique users in its first six months. Half a year later, from June 2017 to February 2018, there had been

five million downloads (Moreno Cazalla, 2017); nine million on its first anniversary, and 40 million on its third (Legorburu, Edo and García González, 2021).

2.2 Podium Podcast and other driving platforms

Although prior to Podium Podcast there were platforms such as Cuonda, Sonoro Global Media Corp or DIXO, the first Spanish-speaking (Mexican) platform promoted by a media corporation, different authors (López-Villafranca, 2024; Legorburu, Edo and García González, 2021; Pérez-Alaejos, Pedrero and Leoz, 2018) consider Podium Podcast to be the source of the professionalisation of the sector.

The Prisa Group's platform has a wide variety of formats: there are major productions, but also programmes led by content creators in social networks, journalistic investigations, archive recovery, etc. When it was created, it divided its catalogue into four blocks: entertainment, essentials (sound library), fiction and journalism, and five years later, although other categories have been created, podcasts included in the 'journalism' block account for 31.49% of its total content, which shows its commitment to this type of format (Legorburu, Edo and García González, 2021). Its former director, María Jesús Espinosa de los Monteros, says:

"This platform focuses on issues of latent and not immediate current affairs, with two main contents standing out: events, linked to news related to gender violence, child abuse, scams or accidents; and biographies of personalities, mostly from the world of culture" (Legorburu, Edo and García González, 2021, p. 523).

Furthermore, several platforms emerge in 2020 that continue to reshape the landscape. We are talking about Spotify, Audible and Podimo. Spotify begins its narrative non-fiction journey with the great success of *XREY*, by journalist Álvaro de Cózar, followed by other titles such as *El Rey del Cachopo*, *Los papeles* and *Misterio en la Moraleja*. Audible launched its platform with non-fiction titles such as *El Móvil de Mendes* and then added others such as *Hierba* or *El Desafío ETA* (López-Villafranca, 2024). Podimo, although currently dedicated to conversational content, also includes narrative non-fiction titles such as *GAL: El Triángulo* and *Tú no me conoces*. Given a much more diversified offer, the enrichment of the sector is indisputable and the amateurism with which podcasting was born is consigned to the sidelines. With the sector at its peak, we should highlight the birth of Sonora, the audio platform of the Atresmedia group, which closed after just two years of operation, leaving its catalogue of more than 50 narrative non-fiction podcasts in the hands of Ondacero Podcast. Nor should we forget iVoox, one of the pioneering platforms in the world of podcasting which, nevertheless, has chosen to occupy the amateur niche over large-scale professional productions. As a result, the audio industry and the professionals working in it have undergone a major transformation, bringing about the

creation of a podcasting identity (Martín-León, Díaz-Lucena, 2024).

3. Methodology

This paper presents a quantitative methodology based on the compilation of variables from the titles relevant to the analysis. Once the information had been compiled, a previously structured template was completed in order to obtain concrete data that could be extrapolated to the group as a whole.

The main objective of this study is to define the format of the narrative non-fiction podcast in Spain by observing and classifying its most important narrative sound variables. As a secondary objective, we add the temporal verification of these variables with respect to recently published titles.

Before starting, it is necessary to define the object of study in different areas.

In terms of spatial delimitation, we will focus on the Spanish scene given the vast number of podcasts that can be found worldwide, as well as the many differences that can be observed between them. A global analysis would certainly taint the results. Therefore, we will take into account those podcasts published on Spanish platforms or their versions in Spain and which are also in Spanish. Nevertheless, we do have relevant information on other countries to understand trends in there and for comparison purposes.

In addition, only Spanish podcasts that are carefully produced, in other words, those that have production companies, platforms or media outlets behind them, will be included in the study. Intensive research has been carried out on the following platforms: Cuonda, Podium Podcast, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Spotify, iVoox, Audible, Podimo, Storytell or traditional media such as *El País*, *eldiario.es*, *COPE* or *Radio Nacional de España*, looking for narrative non-fiction formats. Therefore, we will analyse those podcasts that are not amateur, i.e., those that are supported by a professional production or broadcasting, and thus we will be able to properly analyse how the podcast has entered the journalistic profession.

With regard to the titles to be studied, this paper focuses on those made for distribution only on the internet, leaving aside those formats that were first broadcast over the radio waves and then transferred to the internet, but including those made by conventional broadcasters for online distribution.

We will also not analyse branded podcasts, i.e., podcasts that have been promoted by a commercial brand and serve as advertising or sponsorship for that brand.

In order to carry out the corresponding classification, an analysis will be made of the quantitative variables of the classification of cybermedia proposed by Salaverría, Martínez-Costa and Breiner (2018, p. 1038). To these we also add the main narrative resources of the format to be analysed: the number of episodes and the length of each one; the narrative resources, i.e. the narrator and his/her presence; the use or

not of audio¹ and sound effects²; the voice or interview clips; the ambience³; the archive documents⁴; the possible sound re-enactments⁵; the sound layers presented⁶; the music used, both neutral backgrounds and recorded songs; the use of musical sweepers⁷ and silences⁸, and the use or not of an intro⁹ and its analysis. These sound elements are extremely important, as Moreno-Espinosa and Román-San Miguel argue:

"They are of great importance to emphasise the information: the call sign (composed of spoken and musical elements that allow the listener to be reminded of the station or programme he/she is tuning in to. It is usually broadcast after the time signals), the jingle (musical effect that allows to identify a station and a specific program), the intro theme (more elaborate jingle or theme tune, which includes the fixed credits: name of the program, the name of the announcer, name of the sections, theme, etc.), the bed (musical background used for reading, to underline the content of the information, draw attention to it or intensify the rhythm of the speech. It is also called a musical cushion), the sweeper (a brief burst of continuous sound used to separate news or information from advertising), the bumper (a sweeper used to separate sections) or musical cues (musical effects used to give strength and drama to a text). Music is the radio's sound resource par excellence" (2020, pp. 244-245).

Therefore, the units of classification are the following: number of episodes; duration; narrative resources (narrator, interview clips, archival documents, re-enactments, musical backgrounds and songs, sweepers, sound effects, audio effects and silences), and intro theme. It should be clarified that in the case of variables such as sound effects or audio effects, only those that are obvious and clearly identifiable will be analysed. Possible processing that is not identifiable by the average user does not

fall within the scope of the study.

A total of 38 different formats were analysed, which are listed below in order of publication: *Le llamaban padre*; *Diario de un naufrago*; *Charles Manson: vuelve la bestia*; *El año de Podium*; *Miguel de Unamuno: el intelectual que agitó a una generación*; *Borges según Borges*; *Camarón*; *Miguel Hernández: viento del pueblo*; *Gloria Fuertes: poeta entre los musos*; *Fórum*; *Un viaje a la final imposible*; *V: las cloacas del estado*; *Valencia Destroy*; *Lo conocí en un Corpus*; *Donde quiera que estés*; *Los sonidos de Dudamel*; *El día que Abdul dijo adiós a Siria*; *Olafo*; *Regreso a las Ramblas*; *La mitad del mundo*; *Venezuela: huir o morir*; *Las tres muertes de mi padre*; *Máster*; *Invisibles*; *Volver: cinco historias de la crisis catalana*; *En el corredor de la muerte*; *Un bonito cadáver*; *Crónicas Jondas*; *Igor el ruso*; *La línea invisible*; *XREY*; *Buscando una luz*; *24424: lo que nos jugamos en Bankia*; *El móvil de Mendes*; *IN-visibles*; *El desafío: ETA*; *Laífe* and *De eso no se habla*.

In addition, we analysed five titles published between 2021 and 2024 (*Misterio en la Moraleja*, *Los Papeles*, *¿Por qué Matamos?* *T3*, *GAL: El Triángulo* and *Gowex*) to make a comparison of the format and analyse its evolution over time. Each of these titles corresponds to a platform in the podcasting sector in Spain.

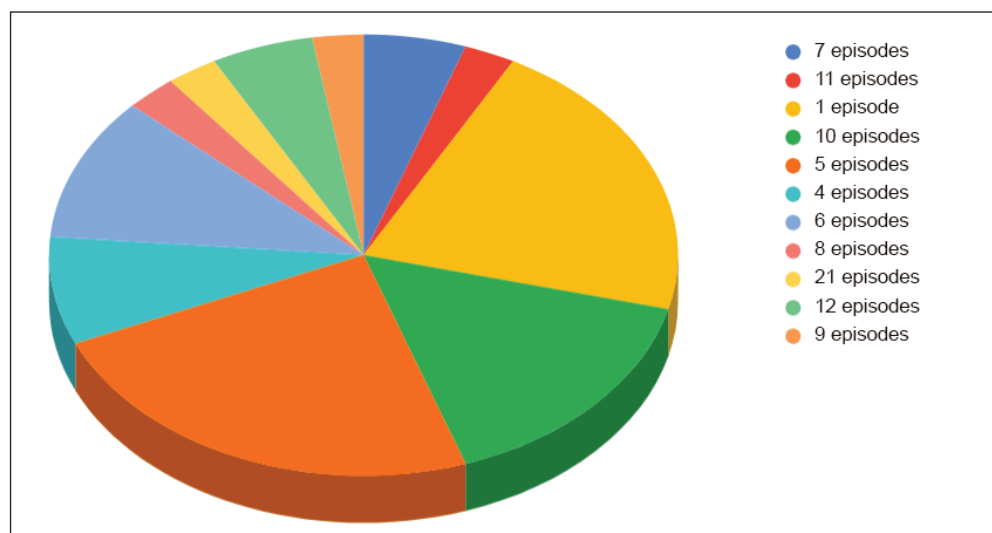
An exhaustive reading and reflection of a bibliographical compilation of reference authors on the subject was carried out to complete the qualitative analysis.

4. Analysis of the results

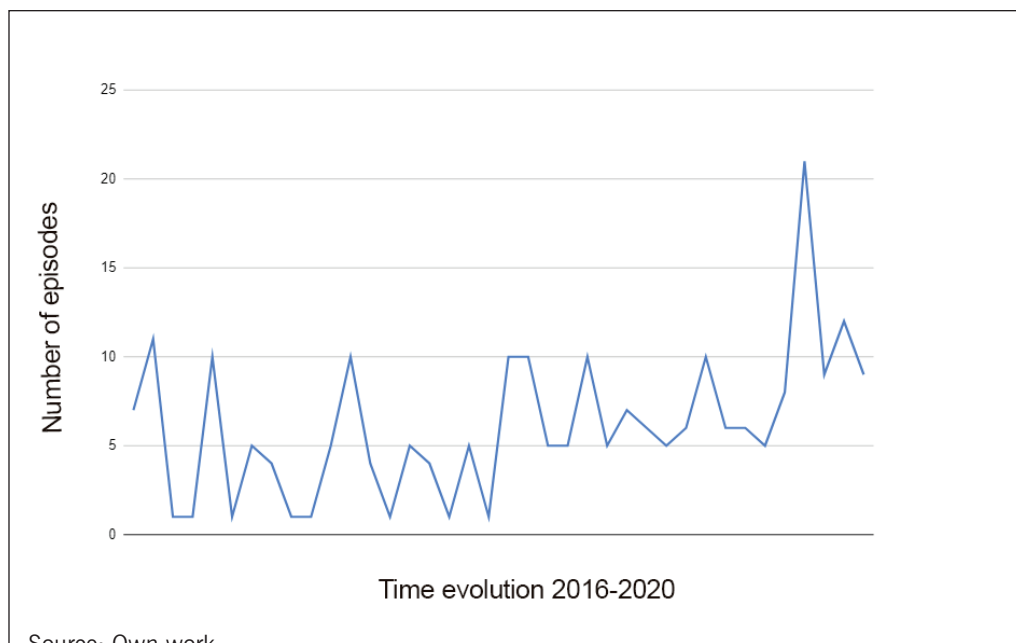
Following the empirical study carried out, we can define the narrative non-fiction podcast through its format variables.

With regard to the number of episodes, these formats have an average of six episodes per series. Five episodes is the most widespread formula (Figure 1), accounting for 26.3% of the titles.

Figure 1. Number of podcast episodes analysed

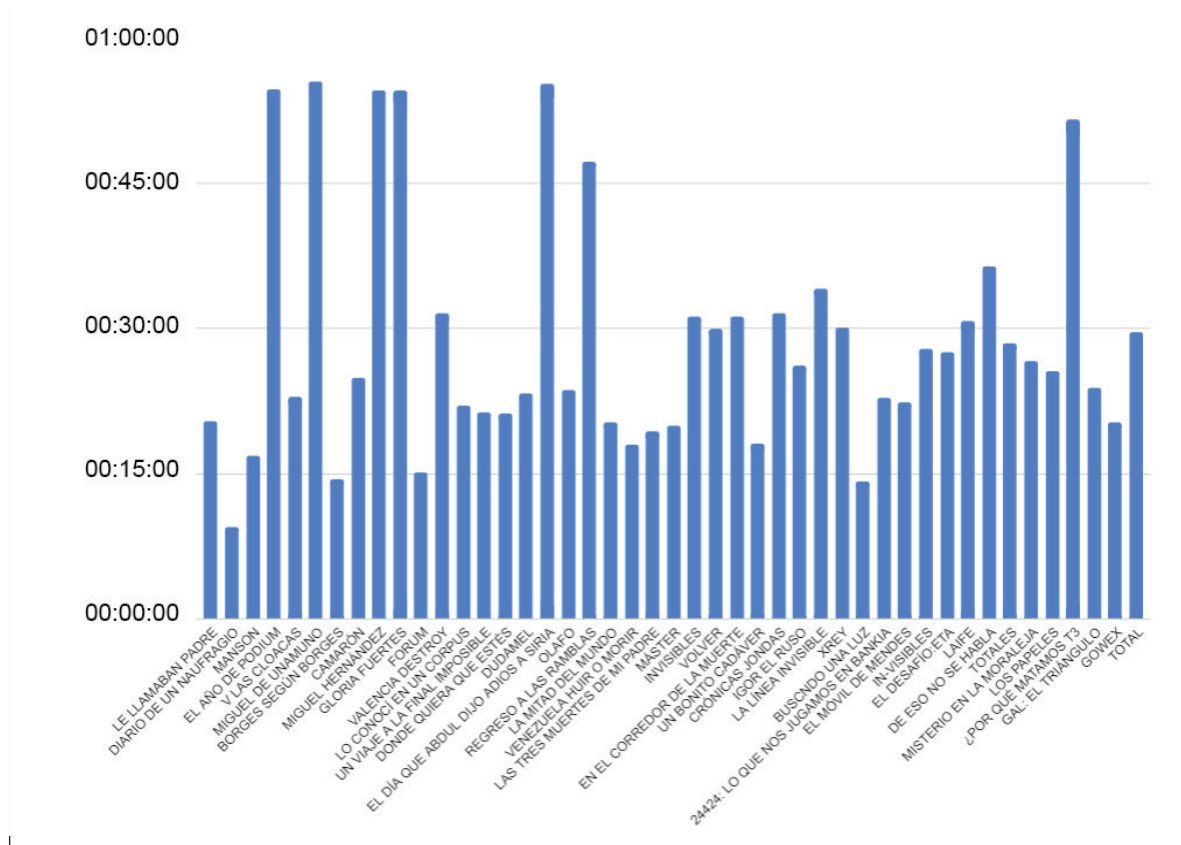


Source: Own work



Source: Own work

Figure 3. Average length of the podcast episodes analysed



Source: Own work

In the early years of the narrative non-fiction podcast, we find quite a few single-episode titles (Figure 2), although as the format progresses, the one-episode titles are gradually disappearing. It should also be noted that some of these formats are included in Podium Podcast's Micro podcast. Titles with 10 chapters also stand out, accounting for 15.8% of the total. It is worth noting

that after the 12-episodes we jump to the 21-episode option.

The average running time of the episodes is 28 minutes and 42 seconds. We find titles that are far from this length (Figure 3): they are those with a single chapter that have a longer duration. Besides, the average total duration is 2 hours and 33 minutes.

Of all the podcasts analysed, 74% feature a single narrator, 21% feature two narrators and only two formats include three narrators. The narrator appears on average 27 times, i.e., almost once per minute on average, and the appearances last 29 seconds on average. It should be noted that 65.7% of these narratives are in the first person.

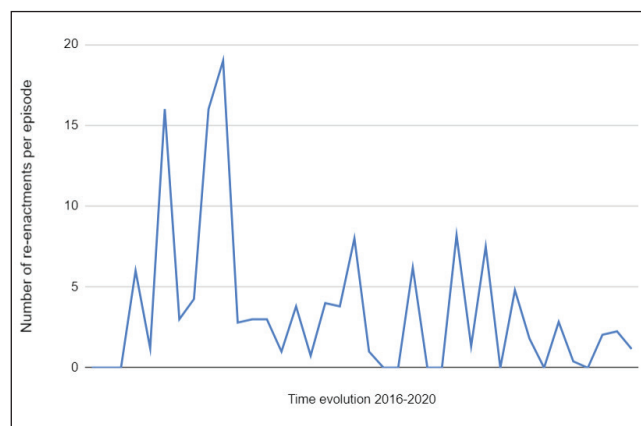
The average number of interviews conducted is 15 per format, or 3 per episode. Interview clips are mostly from people involved, experts in the field and journalists with a knowledge of the case. They have an average of 27 clips per episode, each clip has an average duration of 39 seconds, and they appear an average of 0.9 times per minute.

On average, there are seven archive documents per episode with an average length of 20 seconds.

Re-enactments are less common. Looking at the average across all titles, we see four per episode with an average length of 16 seconds. Moreover, the trend in their use is declining (Figure 4).

As the format progresses over time, voice clips (Figure 5) and archival documents (Figure 6) become shorter.

Figure 4. Trend in the average number of re-enactments of the podcasts analysed



Source: Own work.

We find different types of intro themes (Figure 7). The longer ones include archival documents and/or interview clips, as well as a narrator's voice and identifying music. Other simpler ones simply give the relevant titles through the voice of a narrator or announcer, sometimes over silence and sometimes over a neutral musical background. They last 20 seconds on average.

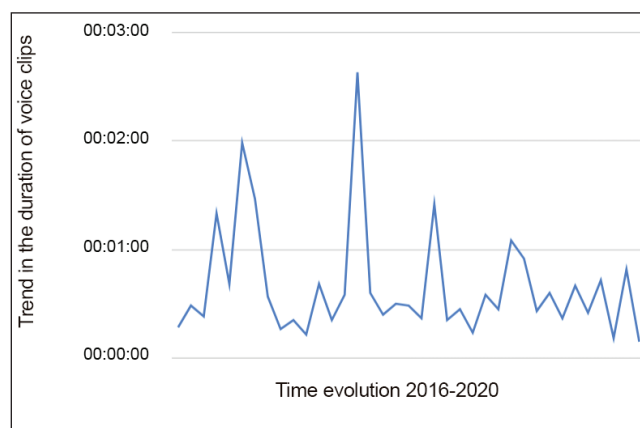
In each episode, we find an average of 12 musical backgrounds that appear and disappear in sweepers, and an average of 15 sweepers per episode with a maximum duration of 54 seconds. The longest sweepers are found in recorded songs and not in background music.

We observed an average of two silences per episode and it should be noted that 42.1% of the formats do not use silence as a narrative device.

55.3% of the formats include some form of audio effect. The most commonly observed are reverberations and audio modification to simulate situations such as a phone call.

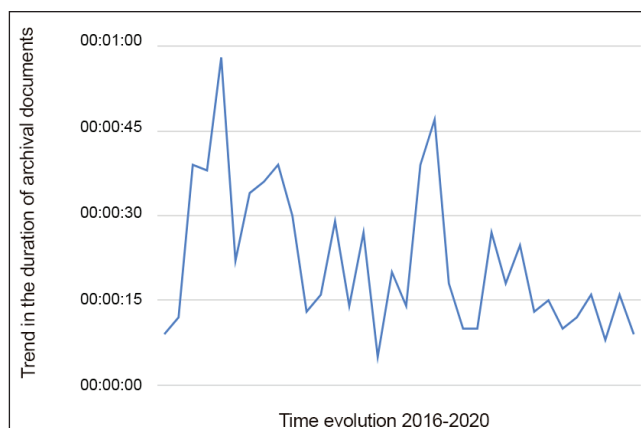
Regarding sound effects, 86.8% of the formats include them. They are used especially to recreate scenes, situations and atmospheres described by the narrator. In many cases, they

Figure 5. Trend in the duration of voice clips



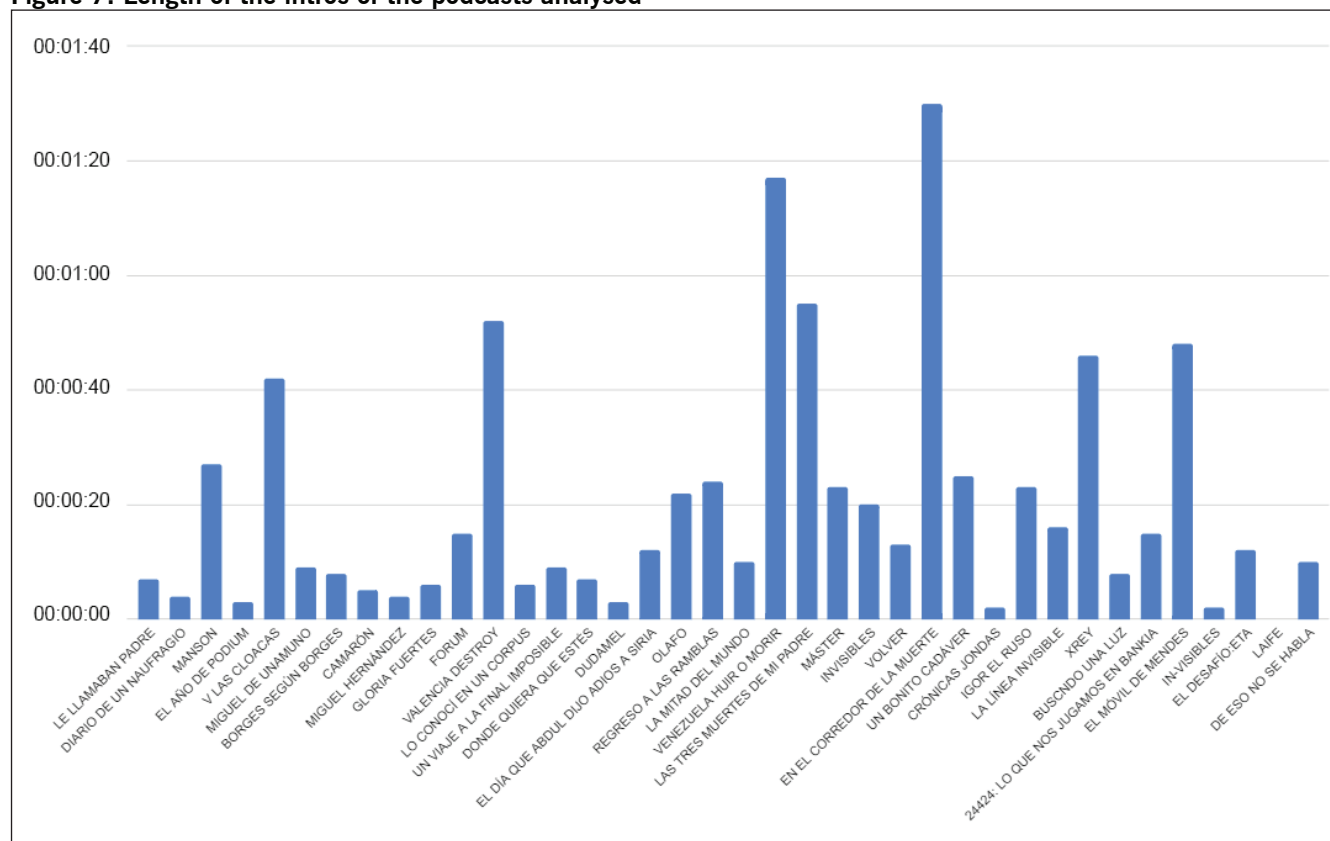
Source: Own work.

Figure 6. Trend in the duration of archival documents



Source: Own work.

Figure 7. Length of the intros of the podcasts analysed



Source: Own work.

also appear underneath an interview clip, which makes the listening experience more immersive and allows us to imagine the event in a more direct way. Some of these sound effects are recorded in real life, many others are recorded using objects that can simulate the same sound, and others are recreated technologically.

Since this study ends in December 2020, we decided to carry out a comparison with several more recent titles to check the evolution that the variables indicated have had over time. In this way, we can check whether the foundations of the above-mentioned format are still in place or whether, on the contrary, developments over time have created new foundations. Based on different authors (Martín et al., 2024; López, 2024; Martín-León, Díaz-Lucena, 2024), we decided to extract the formats of the main platforms that are gaining strength from 2020 onwards: Spotify, Audible, Podimo and Sonora. We selected the following titles for our analysis: *Misterio en la Moraleja* (2022); *¿Por qué Matamos?* Temporada 3 (2023); *GAL: El Triángulo* (2021) and *Gowex* (2024) of each of the platforms respectively. We have also selected a title from a traditional media because the immersion in audio by newspapers and radio stations is becoming more and more prominent (Martínez, León, Pedrero, 2022). Specifically, we have chosen the podcast *Los Papeles* (2021), produced by the newspaper El País and True Story.

From the analysis of titles published from 2021 onwards, we conclude that the most common number of episodes is

still five, with three of the titles meeting this standard. The average duration is 29.5 minutes, less than one minute longer than the total average between 2016 and 2020. The total length increases because the title *¿Por qué Matamos?*, with 20 episodes, skews the results. 80% of the titles have a single narrator, in line with our previous analysis, which concluded that 74% of the podcasts analysed had one narrator. Moreover, all of them are journalists, confirming that it is a format used by journalism professionals. On average, the narrator appears 29 times in 29-second appearances. Surprisingly, the exact average length of the narrator's appearances remains the same as in our study framework, and their number increases from 27 to 29. With regard to interview clips, the average of three interviews per episode remains unchanged, with 25 20-second clips. Regarding archival documents, they appear an average of 17 times per episode, with clips averaging 11 seconds. We therefore confirm what we argued in our analysis with regard to the tendency to make clips and archival documents increasingly shorter and more fragmented. Re-enactments are trending downwards, with 2 per episode with an average of 12 seconds. The average intro time also drops to 12 seconds. The 12 backgrounds per episode remain the same and the number of sweepers per episode does not change much, dropping from 15 to 12. We also confirm the downward trend of silences and audio effects, as well as the increasing presence of sound effects.

5. Discussion

Having analysed the variables of the formats published in Spain since the birth of the narrative non-fiction podcast in the country up to and including the year 2020, and making a comparison with several recent titles, we can conclude the following variables of the format.

This is a format that has a narrator who directs the plot of the story and appears once a minute in interventions of around 30 seconds. It is a long format that is usually divided into episodes (usually five or six) and these episodes are on average 25 minutes long. In total, we find around two hours of content if we add all the episodes together. There are about three interviews per episode, and the clips taken from them also appear once per minute in interventions of between 20 and 40 seconds. We also observed around ten archival documents per episode with an average length of 15 seconds.

It is a format that usually has musical backgrounds that help us to better situate the story told by both the narrator and the interviewees. On average, there are 12 musical backgrounds, which usually play for about 2.5 minutes. We also observed quite a few musical sweepers, with an average of one every two minutes. We hear numerous sound effects that help us to imagine the story better. Furthermore, the audio effects barely stand out. Re-enactments are not so frequent either, with an average of four per episode, although we must point out that many of the titles analysed do not have any. Silences do not play an important role in the titles analysed either. Most formats feature a simple intro of less than 20 seconds with a musical element and a narrator.

We also observe that the modification of these variables shows an evolution over time towards more dynamic formats with a greater number of cuts and clips either from narrators, interviews or from archives, but of shorter duration.

Based on the above, we conclude that the narrative non-fiction podcast has its own characteristics that set it apart.

For future papers, it would be interesting to pool the different definitions of podcasting, as well as classifying all the formats that currently exist. It would also be of great value to carry out this same narrative analysis on some different formats that are on the rise, such as conversational or interview podcasts, as well as to carry out an extensive analysis of the themes presented through podcasting. One of the major dilemmas of podcasting is also its main source of funding, which is why it would be of great interest to conduct a study analysing the future of funding for the podcasting industry.

Notes

1. Audio processing by means of a computer programme normally carried out in the post-production process.
2. Audio file recorded in a real or recreated way that serves to set the mood of the spoken word. Known in the audiovisual world as foley, i.e., effects that seek to recreate sounds that were not picked up at the time of recording.
3. Actual sounds recorded on site where an event takes place.
4. Sound files taken from previous broadcasts such as news from other media or parts of films.
5. Readings or sound fictions for which it has not been possible to find the sound archive and which are performed by one or more announcers and actors.
6. The foreground is what we hear most clearly in a sound file; below this layer we can find other complementary sounds, such as musical backgrounds.
7. A musical pause in which we do not find any other type of sound document beyond the backgrounds or the songs.
8. A silence shall be considered to be 1 second or longer in which no sound can be identified.
9. Initial montage identifying each series, which may include a voice-over with the name of the series and the title of each episode. It usually has its own identity and sometimes features narrative devices such as musical backgrounds, sound or audio effects and interview clips.

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