

From zine to podcast. Rethinking participatory culture from a comparative analysis of alternative media

Del zine al podcast. Repensar la cultura de la participación desde un análisis comparativo de los medios alternativos



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Abstract:

The advent of Web 2.0 entailed a surge of numerous participatory theories that heralded the advent of citizen communicative empowerment and the decentralization of the media discourse, nowadays potentially led by amateur creators, or “those who were formerly known as the audience”. This essay poses a comparative analysis between the zine and the podcast as alternative media catalysts for media empowerment and the spread of counterculture narratives by studying their defining aspects, such as funding, distribution/circulation, project longevity, their features as media that is personalized, instrumental, and social, in addition to their creative rationale. From this analysis, the present study engages in a theoretical inquiry into the false novelty of participatory culture and the few possibilities of liberation that citizens can find in digital media, urging a discerning approach to utopian visions regarding digital communication.

Keywords:

Podcasting; alternative media; participation; empowerment; zine.

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Resumen:

La llegada de la Web 2.0 trajo consigo la explosión de numerosas teorías de la participación que vislumbraban el empoderamiento comunicacional ciudadano y la descentralización del relato mediático, ahora también potencialmente protagonizado por creadores no profesionales, “los antiguamente conocidos como la audiencia”. Este ensayo plantea un análisis comparativo entre el zine y el podcast como medios alternativos catalizadores del empoderamiento mediático y la distribución de discursos contraculturales, a partir del estudio de sus aspectos definitorios, tales como su financiación, distribución y circulación, la durabilidad de los proyectos, su carácter de medio personal, instrumental y social y sus lógicas creativas. A partir de este análisis, el trabajo teoriza sobre la falsa novedad de la cultura de la participación y las escasas posibilidades emancipatorias reales que los ciudadanos encuentran en los medios digitales, instando a un enfoque crítico hacia las utópicas visiones de la comunicación digital.

Palabras clave:

Podcasting; medios alternativos; participación; empoderamiento; zine.

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1. Introduction

The first approaches to the so-called 'culture of participation' emerged with the arrival of Web 2.0 digital and interactive tools. The different theories of Gillmor (2004), Benkler (2006), Rheingold (2000), Shirky (2010), Castells (2012), Jenkins, Green and Ford (2015) and Jenkins, Ito and Boyd (2016), have emphasized the communicative empowerment acquired by subordinates; at the same time, they defend the decentralization of the media narrative, which is now theoretically in the hands of the public. Within this context, due to its ease of production and distribution of content to a potentially global audience, podcasting is one of the digital media that empowers individuals as potential participants in public discourse alongside the mass media that monopolized information during the 20th century, and with it, the ways of representing reality, which is in line with the ideas of the theorists mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Podcasting emerged in the United States in 2004 as a new means of communication based on the distribution of sound content over the Web through syndication systems that allowed users to subscribe. The pioneers of this medium were Adam Curry, a former video jockey from the MTV television channel, and Dave Winer, one of the developers of the RSS content syndication engine that was already working on websites and blogs. Both were able to build a method of webcasting that makes sound files available to any user for listening at their convenience. The first Spanish podcaster, José Antonio Gelado, came from the world of radio, and his rise to podcasting was based on the search for a way to continue his radio work with a greater amount of freedom by experimenting with subscription audio. Like other pioneers of the medium, Gelado had a blog, and because these online 'log books' were already allowed, his goal was to offer audio content using a syndicated format that would break the rigid structures of radio.

If radio is a media paradigm of the mass media era, the digital 2.0 character of podcasting promotes a way of listening to sound productions using several types of disruptive logic that clearly differentiate both media. The podcasts offer a greater variety of topics that is clearly reflected in amateur podcasting, whose creators protect without reservation the freedom to create content that deal with subjects that are generally outside the mainstream realm. As such, we can find programs with the most diverse topics that place the medium in a constant search for an available niche to fill. From this perspective, we find one of the breakthroughs of podcasting when compared to 'hertzian' radio. If traditional radio is a medium that is closer to the 'hit' consumption model characterised by a limited number of products sent to mass audiences under a one-to-many model, we must consider podcasting as an activity that fragments its audiences through the dissemination of much more specific content. Although it is necessary to emphasise that in certain contexts, such as that of North America, radio has acquired a certain level of content segmentation, thanks in part to the proliferation of radio stations that operate in local areas, as well as to the development of digital radio projects focused on specific subjects, above all within the musical field. These fragmented forms of listening, established in the native sense in podcasting, are linked to long tail logic, a model that distributes less quantity of a greater number of products; in other words, many programs of diverse content for a small, specific audience. Therefore, podcasting diversifies the range of content that can be found in the media ecosystem, offering cultural materials that are difficult to obtain through other channels. Similarly, this medium not only provides alternative content, but also offers differentiated approaches with

regard to topics that are already established in the agenda setting, acting as an extra-cultural, alternative engine to the stories of the hegemonic media.

Flexibility and customisation of listening are also differentiating aspects that distinguish podcasting from radio. The possibility of operating under conditions of content reception thanks to its automation and digitisation features opens up new interactive fields to podcasts that are unknown to radio. Just as every Internet user takes a different route through the Web, podcast listeners enjoy multiple ways of relating to the audio content, ranging from listening to the entire program from beginning to end, continuously interrupting sound playback, skipping back and forth, and even finding the sections of each program that are most interesting to the listener. The possibilities of media consumption in podcasting have increased in comparison to linear, standardised, homogeneous radio listening. The user-media interaction has become flexible, personalised, adapted, and multi-linear.

This model empowers the subject in the process of receiving and consuming content, and it compels us to look at the idea of engagement as opposed to the old logic of a commissioner, which remains anchored to the vertical relationships between programmers and followers of cultural products, the latter of whom are obliged to consume the content on the day and specific time that is set by such programmers through the platforms they impose. This system, which is highly present in traditional media, is the opposite of the emerging model of engagement that breaks down the hierarchical relationships between franchise and fans. Contrasting this engagement model with that of the commissioner figure, Jenkins, Ford and Green (2015) say that wherever there is a medium that encourages participation with its followers, there will be users committed to listening, disseminating, spreading, and recommending content related to that medium over the Internet.

2. Studies on podcasting. Empirical and theoretical background

The doctoral thesis by Sellas (2011) was the first systematic study on podcasting in the Spanish context. His research concluded that this medium has brought about a profound change in sound communication by posing new possibilities in comparison to traditional radio, as well as by bringing together a group of independent, creative people known for their freedom, spontaneity and informality who were not constrained by the routines of radio production and programming, and consequently were able to contribute to renewing the style and language of sound communication. From a marketing perspective, Gallego (2010) focuses on the relationship between radio and podcasting by analysing the impact of the latter on the business model of conventional radio broadcasters and how these broadcasters utilize the variety of possibilities offered by podcasting. García-Marín (2017) approaches the podcast from a narrative perspective, setting it up as a clear example of a transmedia (transpodcast) medium that goes beyond its beginnings as an exclusively sound-based language, similar to Martínez-Costa's (2015) concept of trans radio, and extends its stories to other platforms that complement the content and seek the participation of users. In this way, these users become the protagonists of the 'podcastfera', a community characterised by the creation of a complex ecosystem (García-Marín, 2019) of listeners and creators –mostly non-professionals– where independent podcasts, professional and amateur networks, and a growing number of productions from the professional media, especially from traditional radio

operators, coexist together. (Pérez-Alaejos, Pedrero-Esteban and Leoz Aizpuru, 2018). Likewise, in the Spanish context in recent years much of the research oriented toward the medium has focused on the possibilities of the podcast as an educational tool as well as its effectiveness in learning subjects such as languages (Ortega, 2019), the history of music (García-Peinazo, 2019), and the dissemination of science (De Lara-González and Del Campo-Cañizares, 2018).

The academic scenario in the Anglo-Saxon panorama presents research from very different points of view. Markman (2011) developed an exploratory analysis on the profile of independent podcasters. The profile is one of men between the ages of 34 and 44 years of age with a high level of education, and with professions related to the arts, design, entertainment, media, computer science, technology and education. According to Markman's study (2011), there are two reasons why these creative people started working in podcasting: media and technological reasons (e.g. having had previous experience in other media, especially in the field of radio); content-related reasons (filling a niche that traditional media does not cover); and personal and interpersonal reasons (joining a movement or community).

Sullivan (2018) adds another reason to the list, which is work related to aspirations, or in other words, the hope of starting as an amateur with the expectation of future economic benefit. Millette (2011) also focused her studies on independent podcasters who are able to build a medium that represents a true break compared to conventional radio. Their style is shaped by a unique level of familiarity between users and podcasters with the inclusion of a disruptive lexicon that defies radio conventions. From this perspective, independent podcasting is one of the participatory subcultures that have emerged with the rise of 2.0 practices and tools, set up around a specific use of Internet that serves as a form of expression for the Podcaster and is in conflict with traditional radio culture.

The participatory nature of the medium is capable of offering a performative feature involving the physical interaction of the listener with the space described in the podcast (Wilson, 2018).

Berry (2018) and Spinelli and Dann (2019) stress that podcasting should be perceived as a medium with its own identity, not as an extension of other diverse media practices. In a similar vein, Massarelli and Perrotta (2006), Cordeiro (2012) and Bonini (2015) have approached podcasting as a technology that challenges traditional media by allowing users to create their own content, while at the same time changing conventional radio listening habits. Indgren (2014) believes that podcasting is an ideal way to build first-person narratives, even when applied to the field of journalism. The movement toward this type of narrative would be intrinsically linked to the intimate nature of sound media, which explore this personal way of storytelling by using different genres and styles.

Studies carried out by McHugh (2016) focus on the impact of podcasting on non-fiction sound formats. His works have analysed the changing role assumed by public media, the growth of independent podcast networks, and the perceived differences between radio and podcasting as a means of distributing and receiving sound content. Along the same lines initiated by Millette years earlier, McHugh defends the idea that podcasting promotes a new, more informal genre of sound narrative focusing on strong relationships between broadcasters and listeners with content that is more spontaneous but less elaborate. For this author, one of the greatest challenges of the American podcasting sector is providing more resources without compromising its editorial independence, a problem that remains unsolved.

From another point of view, the connection capacity of podcasting is analysed in Swiatek's studies (2018) by highlighting the relational potential of the medium, which is capable of closing socio-cultural and knowledge-related gaps. Berry (2015) focuses on the first decade of podcasting evolution by examining the case of *Serial*, the most successful podcast in terms of download volume in the short history of the medium. From its inception, a key element of podcasting has been the low level of importance that creators and listeners have given to the technical quality of the programs in comparison to radio. According to Berry, the example of *Serial*, which is a program with a large number of technical resources, may have helped to raise the quality standards of the medium in order to reach new listeners (Hancock and McMurtry, 2018). *Serial*'s success led to a renewed focus on podcasting and was able to attract new consumers (Sellas and Solá, 2019). Wrather (2016) analyses the way in which users of this medium are directed toward online spaces that are different from the main text of the podcast in order to strengthen their relationship, commitment and participation within the programmes. His work provides a type of map of the different interactive strategies between podcasters and listeners by analyzing the activity of both in the sound spaces of the programmes, Internet forums and social networks in a medium considered to be clearly user-centered where the listener must decide how to carry out his or her consumption and interaction, because unlike other media, there is not just one single way to do this in a podcast (Llinares, 2018).

As we can see, in spite of the amount of research and theoretical production related to the medium, there is a clear deficit of views on the counter-culture possibilities of the podcast and its potential for true communicative empowerment of citizens. Therefore, the objective of this theoretical study is to establish connections between alternative analogue media, especially the zines that proliferated at the end of the 20th century, as well as podcasting, in order to establish a map of the elements, which by the process of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) connects the old media with the new on the basis of their participatory, alternative and disruptive features, in line with the theories of participation and citizen empowerment that have arisen in the context of Web 2.0.

3. The alternative media

In his book entitled, *Why study the media?*, Roger Silverstone (1999) defines alternative media as that which is capable of creating new spaces for different voices that put specific community interests at the heart of their activities, as well as subversive aspects with regard to the dominant culture, highlighting the use of mass media techniques to pursue a critical or disruptive agenda from the fringes. However, this definition seems insufficient, since the media that develop counter-culture dynamics or seek to introduce aspects that are not addressed on the commercial circuit do not entirely exhaust the list of candidates to be named as alternative media. The editors of *Alternatives in Print* (1980), which is considered one of the best bibliographic works in the field of alternative communication, set out three basic criteria for the definition of this type of media: projects must necessarily be non-commercial in nature; they must therefore have a fundamental concern for ideas, not profit; and the subject matter of their publication should focus on social responsibility, creative expression, or a combination of both. Again, this definition leads us toward conflicting conceptions. The second issue poses difficulties because of the practical impossibility of demonstrating the prevalence

of ideas over profit, or vice versa. In addition, we can find media with the mission of maintaining the established order, and therefore quite concerned with ideology, which would not fit with an emancipatory vision of the use of communication, but instead would be the opposite. Furthermore, Atton (2002) remarks that if the criterion of “creative expression or a combination of both” is included in the third aspect, this broadens the definition of alternative media too much, so that any kind of artistic publication could be included under such a title.

As mentioned earlier, Chris Atton devoted part of his research to the analysis of zines, which are written publications developed as vehicles for personal expression that maintain horizontal communication between publisher and reader, and they have a format that encourages the latter to become authors. According to Duncombe (1997), emulation (turning readers into writers) is fundamental for the world of zine; culture is better when more consumers are able to become producers, or in other words, when readers or spectators become valuable collaborators. The term zine was introduced in the 1980s to designate a wide range of amateur publications, most notably fanzines, which focused primarily on content such as literature, music, film and other cultural activities, although they did not refer only to consumer behaviour (Atton, 2002).

In fact, Fiske (1991) argues that fanzine creators should be considered culture producers, not consumers of culture: at the heart of zine culture is not only the study of some significant other (the celebrity, the cultural object, or the activity), but the study of the self, personal expression, and building communities with common interests.

These fundamental principles that established the creative rationale and the worldwide media distribution of zines are clearly evident in podcasting, which in this way is a medium that retrieves, or remediates, essential elements of the alternative media of the analogue era. Bolter and Grusin (2000) assert that remediation (the introduction of one medium into another, or the transfer of features of an old media into a new media) did not begin with the advent of digital media. The thesis on which the work of these authors is based defends the idea that no current medium, and possibly no future medium, works in the absence of other media, and that the truly novel aspects of the so-called new media are the various shapes in which the old ones are reshaped to respond to new challenges. Using this approach, the new media that have emerged throughout history would mean the evolution, improvement or sophistication of some of the foundations of previous media. From their point of view, the new media must be viewed as structures that go beyond the limits of technology by involving much more than new technical applications at the service of citizens. The new media arise from specific cultural contexts and represent the combination of new uses and protocols in specific situations and areas, such as advertising, education, or personal expression. From this point of view, the concept of the new media would be a troublesome category when defining this novel media and its practices, in such a way that such practices would not exist as such, but would only be an enhancement of the characteristics of previous media. With this approach, the only truly new aspect of the new media is its unrelenting remediation of other forms of mediation. In this regard, what are the remediations that can be found between zines and current podcasts? Which elements of the former are retrieved by podcasting so it can be defined as an alternative medium? Both media, for which its initial steps are separated by almost half a century, are clearly different in technological terms: the zine has an analogue background whereas the podcast has native digital features. They also differ in terms of their production languages: the zine is based on text and static images, while the podcast is based on audio files. The chronological gap between the two media, as

well as their technological and semiotic differences, justify the analysis of the remediations between the two media. The approach of a study of this type involving similar media may be less relevant, firstly because such remediations are more obvious, and secondly because this type of work is more common, as in the case of studies that relate radio (analogue or digital) to podcasting, one of which is the case of Ramos-Ruiz (2015), Espada (2017), Rodríguez-Pallarés (2017), López-Villafranca (2019), Moreno-Espinosa and Román-San Miguel (2020).

As indicated above, this study aims to demonstrate the existence of continuity in terms of production, scope, objectives, and the role of the user when comparing two clearly differentiated alternative media. We maintain that despite the ontological and semiotic distance of both media, there is a common thread in terms of citizen engagement and communication empowerment that challenges perspectives that state that participation in the media is linked to the digital explosion. The possibilities of communication empowerment of citizens have not arrived with the advent of the digital world. Certain participatory and inter-creative practices between users and media were already in place in the pre-digital alternative media era. This is why participatory media do not exist in themselves. What exist are systems of participation (therefore subject to a multitude of factors) that each media project is able to design, regardless of the media category to which they belong. Therefore, instead of focusing on a single aspect, we approach the analysis of both types of media from a holistic and systemic perspective based on Atton's model (2002) described in *Alternative Media*, a reference work (focused on zines) related to the analysis of alternative media. Following their model, we carried out an analytical observation of both the zine and the podcast by looking at the following aspects: financing and scope, longevity of the projects, the aspect of being a personalised medium, instrumental capacity, and finally, the extent of creative strategies and experimental characteristics (IDIC logic).

4. Zine-podcasting remediations

4.1. *Financing and scope*

Podcasting, as was generally the case in zine culture, is far from monetising its production and making a profit, since the vast majority of projects are clearly amateur, and there is even much less capital investment than what can be found in many other alternative projects. For example, in the case of zines the subscription model was a common method to obtain financing. This influx of capital provided at least some financial security, offering the medium the opportunity to carry out a certain amount of planning. However, in order to support podcasting projects, the acquisition of financial resources is not as crucial as it was in supporting zines, as the zines had to bear higher costs since they did not have a digital platform for the development of their operations. In spite of this, zines represented a relatively cheap form of communication thanks to reprographic technology that played the role of massive newspaper printing presses. During the 1970s and 1980s, the alternative media made extensive use of reprographic equipment, which made them at least independent technically, if not financially.

In podcasting, this lack of capital investment is beneficial due to the fact that there is practically no need for investment when starting a project. The free use of digital services, the progressive decline in the cost of the necessary audio

equipment (microphone and mixing desks), and free Internet for content distribution offer resources previously unknown to producers of alternative analogue media. This ease of production and distribution facilitates the establishment of podcasting as a niche medium: if any citizen can join the community of creators from the fringes of the traditional mainstream media, then the diversity of topics and approaches is practically assured, even if the number of followers of these media projects is not excessively high.

However, the development of some initially amateur podcasting projects toward more commercial positioning has led some creators to implement various strategies to monetise their projects. In addition to the incorporation of advertising and crowdfunding initiatives, there are models of cross-media podcasts in which the sound content is complemented by live programmes as if they were theatrical plays, with pay-per-view access. Another strategy commonly followed in the amateur world is the use of membership platforms for their productions (Patreon users). This model gets its name from the Patreon service, a micro-patronage platform that allows digital content creators to be financially rewarded for their work. Certain podcasts that are able to generate a large volume of content in different platforms and media languages establish subscription plans for their productions in order to allow for a minimum package for those users who do not subscribe, and exclusive content for the audiences who support the project financially. This is the case with certain podcast networks from the amateur world, such as the Spanish network Emilcar FM, created before the arrival in 2016 of the professional podcast networks in the Spanish context with the launch of Podium Podcast. This difference between users is also established according to the level of relevance of their participation: certain projects, such as the independent network known as Nación Podcast, have opened their doors to co-creation for users who have made the best economic contributions by incorporating such followers as guests with an active participation in their recordings.

At this point, we must place ourselves in the debate on the scope and monitoring of these media. The community of creators in podcasting is made up of an enormous multitude of projects with diverse topics, but with a number of followers and users that is not very significant compared to figures from the large national and even regional media. There are conflicting viewpoints on the need to reach a massive number of citizens so that alternative media can be considered truly useful: contrary to the opinion that defends an ecosystem with a few very large alternative media, there are those who advocate diversity, or in other words, a high number of projects even if they do not reach an extraordinary size.

Among those who defend size versus diversity is Aubrey (1981), who affirms that if one is placed in the position of choosing between the high circulation of a handful of media or the small circulation of a diverse or wide range of media, the first situation is preferable. As an argument for his thesis, he states that the narratives of alternative media that have acquired a certain size might be diluted by the arrival of numerous smaller media that deal with an infinite number of topics that fragment and weaken the narrative.

Opposed to this view are the creators of Zine Bypass, who argue that hundreds of low-circulation media not only encourage diversity of information and opinion, but also ensure the survival of the alternate press. Along the same lines, the Oxford Institute of Social Disengineering considers the proliferation of publications as a democratic strong

point, so that “a model of one hundred media that are able to reach 1,000 users will have better results than one single publication that reaches 100,000” (Atton, 1996).

According to Ilich (2002), when a number of specific social institutions reach a certain size and level of importance, they can cause more harm than good. In this regard, he offers an example of schools that are transformed into a system that provides education according to certain rules along with the memorisation of a body of knowledge without the necessary learning or understanding that must take place, and consequently these educational systems are considered ends in themselves, rather than tools for citizens. Therefore, according to Ilich's thesis, the school institution makes people stupid, just as the medical institution makes people sick, and the globalized business system damages the planet (Gauntlett, 2011). To establishing an analogy, from this point of view we can infer that a concentrated system with only a handful of large media (that is, very few media, but each one very large) converts citizens into uninformed individuals who have difficulty understanding the world. In this regard, the model that proposes podcasting as an alternative force enables the creation of its own discourse from citizen-driven media activity that bombards the vertical logic of the massive influence exerted by the big institutions. Thanks to the popularity of the medium, in recent years certain independent podcasts with an amateur aesthetic have become projects with massive followings and have turned into clearly commercial productions, yet in spite of this, podcasting is still a space where the personal and collective creativity of Do-It-Yourself, and above all Do-It-Together, brings into circulation alternative interpretations of reality through processes that encourage the model of wide circulation with a deluge of smaller media. According to Gauntlett (2011), a set of small, specific, and local approaches focusing on the needs of citizens should be developed to the disfavour of large bureaucratic operations. Gauntlett himself proposes the term *conviviality* to designate an important type of communication and engagement among citizens who are actively connected and who maintain a lively attitude toward reality, thus providing a vehicle for shaping their own world. Society would therefore need tools for individual creativity in order to enable citizens to fulfil their own lives by overcoming the institutions that tend to impose models of mass standardisation.

4.2. Longevity

The availability of internet for carrying out media projects that are easy to distribute, along with broad access to simple, low-cost tools for creating messages has opened the doors of online media production to many citizens who have little or nothing to do with professional communication. At the same time, the unpaid amateur aspect of the vast majority of podcasting projects contributes to the limited longevity of such programmes, which are highly dependent on the personal and professional ebb and flow of fortune of their producers. This is a common feature of alternative media, yet despite the apparent disadvantages that might result from trying to establish long-lasting projects with some level of follow-up, it has been considered an advantage in certain situations. Bey (1991) and Labelle (2018) defend the transitory nature of these resources of resistance, arguing that this characteristic helps prevent power from identifying them and counteracting their activities. This argument should be understood in the context of those media that have a truly confrontational nature and are undoubtedly critical of the Establishment. On the other hand, the scant permanence of these projects helps prevent some media from gaining dominance over others, and the resulting lack of continuity

of certain zines was even celebrated by the community in a clear act that favoured the struggle, or the ideas, that such media defended to the detriment of the importance of a specific medium itself.

However, there is no obvious consensus regarding this issue. McKay's vision (1996) includes the idea of transgressive consistency, which emphasises the need for effectiveness and a desire for permanent transformation in order to go beyond the simple desire for transgression, so that the presence of long-lasting alternative media projects would be desirable and necessary.

In the independent podcast, the lack of permanence of the projects is also related to the specific ways in which their creators gain the necessary skills for the development of this type of project. Before venturing into the production of larger endeavours, amateur podcasters launch small-format programs to attain the skills required by this media. An example of these spaces is a podcast related to architecture called, *I was the walrus (La morsa era yo)*, which works as a trial-and-error testing ground, and as a result, they are usually discontinued when their producers decide to venture into more complex productions.

4.3. *A personalised medium*

A large amount of work is necessary in order to carry out a podcasting project. It must be remembered that the medium not only implies work in terms of the creation of sound messages, but also provides the community of followers with a set of narrative extensions in other formats and languages with the consequent work this entails. In spite of this, there are transmedia podcasts that are designed and developed from start to finish by a single person who is involved in all phases of the production and distribution process of the content. Some of the programs with this personal quality usually deal with the daily life of the producer, either related to the experience of the podcaster on a more specific topic, an example of which might be their vision of technology brought to light in their daily relationship with certain devices, applications or software, or to the specific nature of the creator's life path, which might include a situation of a citizen abroad who narrates his or her day-to-day life experiences as a guide for those who intend to travel to such countries. Relevant examples of this type of podcast in the Spanish-speaking world include, *Un minuto en Nueva York (One minute in New York)*, *Madrillano Podcast*, *Carmenia en Dallas (Carmenia in Dallas)*, changed to *Carmenia en casa (Carmenia at home)* during the COVID-19 quarantine, and *Haciendo el sueco (Being Swiss)*.

This self-narrative is also one of the distinctive features of alternative analogue media. Perzines (personal zines) such as *Cometbus* can be considered examples of popular production rooted in the distinctive features of everyday life; media in which the authors project their own personality in addressing cultural practices, and present their own lives as content itself (Lefebvre, 1991). Through this practice, these producers create media with a personality so distinct that it serves them in building identities and social relations.

4.4. *Instrumental and social medium*

Creating identity and building relationships are instrumental consequences of the establishment of self-expression practices that we observe in podcasting, which in this sense is structured as a means not only to communicate with podcasting, but to do so through podcasting, and through the establishment of a vast community of producers and users linked to virtual and face-to-face events, such as National Podcasting Days (JPod) and similar events of lesser geographical range. In 2019, the Podcast Days event promoted by the Madrid podcasting association replaced JPods (held annually in different cities since its inception in 2009 in Murcia) as the main event that brings together producers and media enthusiasts in the Spanish-speaking world. These initiatives have integrated three types of activities that contribute to the maintenance and development of the community itself: training workshops with an essential hands-on component, lectures and round table discussions that are theoretical and reflective regarding the state of the art, and live programs. In order to carry out this activity, the Podcast Association, which was founded in 2010, provides legal support to the organizing team of each edition.

Podcasting, through the development of networks that make up a solid community, is an instrument for achieving goals that go beyond mere objectives of communication, information, culture, identity or transformation. The instrumentality of alternative media, at least in the context of searching for personal contacts, travel possibilities, or the acquisition of goods, is not only limited to 'punk' culture, where it is most developed. Sarah Lorimer (editor of two zines, *Pinto* and *Baby I Dig You*), quoted by Atton (2002), suggests that her reasons for publication include both sharing personal reflections as well as a wide range of instrumental purposes, where community interaction and networking among its members plays a major role.

In the same regard, after one and a half decades of evolution, Spain's La Podcastfera can be considered a community network made up of media creators and users, which is defined by a set of basic principles that allow it to have its own identity. We must understand that this community is a mixture of both online and offline spaces shared by the producers of podcasting projects and the users and fans of such productions, regardless of the number of creations made (in the case of the podcasters), or of the degree of participation and commitment (in the case of the users). The interactions, connections, conversations, debates and joint projects that are developed around this medium help to shape a community defined as a space for Do-It-Yourself creators as an intermediate socialisation tool that links individual production with the social realm as an open source community, and as a place for building knowledge in a participatory, open, horizontal and collective way, as well as a space that is deliberative, interpretative, and that offers cultural and media production based on alternative premises. Among all of these features, the training aspect is especially relevant. The independent podcastfera is a space where producers can learn technological and media competencies from a compendium of strategies that can be grouped into five categories: learning by doing, learning by consulting (interacting with more experienced podcasters), learning by imitation (imitating strategies and techniques of other podcasters), learning by experimenting (through trial and error), and learning by teaching (showing others how to do this kind of work). Therefore, the podcastfera itself works as an informal learning space by providing such knowledge on a peer-to-peer basis, from veterans to amateurs, as well as from the action itself of the official associations

of the medium. Such was the case with the book entitled, *Podcasting, tú tienes la palabra* (Podcasting, it's your turn to speak), published by the Podcast Association in 2010, which aimed to analyse the state of the medium at that time. The book is arranged in three parts and is available for free download. It addresses the importance of the podcast in the dissemination of scientific knowledge, the dynamics of production, the technology associated with these processes, and legal issues related to online production.

Likewise, the same association made a series of video tutorials in 2012 on its YouTube channel to train the new podcasters in the more complex skills to be acquired when it comes to creating productions (making blogs, hosting programs in podcasting services, placing podcast replicators/reproducers on online sites, managing feeds, etc.).

4.5. *IDIC logic*

The variety of narrative strategies, texts and formats that can be found in podcasting lead us to visualize it as a medium, which in the words of Jenkins (2009) has an IDIC dynamic (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations), a characteristic of alternative media in which a wide range of topics, narrative styles and tactics abound. Zines proposed creative models based on a rich combination, even the dissolution of genres, as well as the adoption of new approaches to content, form and production processes, especially in those publications where readers acquired the role of writers. This variety of ways of presenting the content connects with the plethora of structural strategies that we can find in podcasting when it comes to distributing its texts in different formats and expanding its stories using different languages and tactics. Independent and amateur podcasting develops projects characterised by their multiplicity of content and platforms, both in web and offline scenarios. YouTube channels, applications for mobile devices, physical and electronic books, face-to-face events, merchandising items and even web series are all included in the projects of these creators, expanding their stories beyond the spoken word. Far from behaving in an isolated way, this diversity of content and platforms maintain some connections between them, developing a logical thread and a high level narrative complexity, which is present in the following models identified by García-Marín (2017):

- a. Single-topic/multiformat model. From one central program that is the heart of the project, different podcasts are created with the same topic, but with different formats and duration.
- b. Multi-topic network model. If the previous model focuses on the multiplicity of formats and duration, podcast networks are known for their wide variety of topics. These networks are composed of several programs with content that is differentiated, highly diverse, and hosted by different podcasters.
- c. Extension through (audio) visual languages. This model leads listeners from the conventional podcast to the consumption of audiovisual material thanks to the production of web series and other content, such as self-produced illustrations that accompany each new chapter of the podcast and function as covers for these episodes.
- d. Each one of these graphic and audiovisual components works not only as a mere accompaniment or complement to the sound content, but they comprise materials with full meaning.

- e. Multi-platform media group. In this model, an initial podcast develops a complex expansion toward other languages and platforms resulting in a solid agglomeration of media (websites, YouTube channels, mobile device apps, etc.), which address the same subject, offering high quality content that is very close to professional standards.
- f. We perceive spin-off productions in podcasting as programs that arise from previous podcasts and have some type of connection or component in common with the original, either the topic or the presenters.
- g. Bilingual extension model. Its rationale is simple: it involves recording a program with two versions involving two different languages with different content, both included in the same project and made by the same team of podcasters.

This IDIC philosophy reflects the absence of hierarchies in alternative media, both analogue and digital. Following the reasoning of Gauntlett (2011), a significant part of the enjoyment of art and creativity online is that it does not rely on the expert paradigm in order to be validated, nor does it depend on publishers or gatekeepers for its dissemination and distribution. In this regard, Shirky (2010) maintains that even the least ambitious and irrelevant websites reflect a vivid creativity that should be highly valued because it suggests to future creators that they too can undertake this media work without following fiercely strict productive canons or being subjected to creative slavery.

5. Conclusions and discussion. From the culture of participation to the conquest of influence

There are clear analogies between zines and podcasts (two media with development phases four decades apart) with regard to their description as alternative media. Both media maintain social relationships that have been transformed in terms of the role of user and producer, they are collective organisations, and both of them have a lack of professionalisation in communication, printing and publishing activities. With regard to processes, we also find apparent liberation from vertical communication, as well as the endorsement of peer-to-peer networking. In addition, from the point of view of topics, there is evidence that shows that podcasting is clearly in tune with the rationale of alternative media. The need to fill niches not yet covered by traditional media is the most important, fundamental reason why podcasters start working in this media.

Zines have the capability of reducing the cultural distance between creation and reception through personal content that makes up daily life experiences. The strong presence of a kind of “talking diary” among podcasting projects is crucial for encouraging future podcasters to throw themselves into the media arena by displaying one of the great values that are growing in the world of alternative media: its apparently small number of barriers to entry and participation at any level, going from a representative intention to a clearly identity-oriented rationale. Both media promote the establishment of support networks among creators and followers, and if these are sufficiently linked they become broad communities that provide the necessary knowledge to initiate and develop projects in this media. Both in amateur and independent podcasting, as well as in zines, collective intelligence processes take place where the voice of the community prevails over the paradigm of the expert, the logic of formal education, and professionalisation, and is replaced by self-learning methods, collective experimentation, and the rationale of the creator.

The analysis that connects zine culture with the podcast leads us to an obvious conclusion: before the arrival of Web 2.0 there were already spaces for the culture of participation and the development of counter-culture media, processes that have been retrieved and remediated from certain communities and types of digital media. The user of the past did not play an entirely passive role in the relationship with the media. With the necessary willingness of media owners and producers, there was already participation in the mass media era both at the micro level, such as sending letters to newspaper editors or calls from listeners in the case of radio, and at the macro level, where some zines left blank pages to be written on by committed citizens who had to send their proposals to the media's editorial staff, as well as the so-called free community radio stations that proliferated in Spain from the 1980s onward and allowed individuals and groups to have a voice and participate in the public debate.

However, it could be argued that the true novelty of the digital aspect is the greater reach and influence that can be attained by the average citizen by providing not only an unprecedented showcase (due to its global range) for their media work, but also greater ease of production and distribution of the content of the "voiceless", and a higher level of connection among individuals. Nothing could be further from the truth. Neither the culture of participation nor communication empowerment are innovations of digital media in the 21st century, nor do 2.0 technologies empower citizens more than analogue media in achieving more meaningful participation in the media environment. The advent in 2004 of the so-called Web 2.0 brought with it a myriad of technological tools as well as digital and interactive media that apparently gave the user enormous opportunities for creativity and collaboration in order to achieve a greater presence in public debate.

Since then, an excessively jubilatory current of thought about citizen empowerment has surfaced that defines a restructuring of the media model from a unidirectional and functionalist system to one where information flows in multiple directions.

In other words, this would be a transformation from the predominantly hierarchical and unidirectional model of the 20th century mass media to an apparently more multi-directional, horizontal and enhanced democratic system where messages would also move from the audiences to the media and from the citizens to the centres of power. The problem with these theoretical approaches lies in their technology-centred focus, which assumes that the mere inclusion of digital 2.0 technology leads to a significant change in communication models and processes.

Faced with these perspectives, it is urgent to revise the theories of the culture of participation in order to clearly distinguish the simple fact of having a voice from the capacity to significantly influence the discourse that circulates in virtual contexts (Aparici and García-Marín, 2018). The key is to determine which type of content that is generated by Internet users goes unnoticed, which content is simply noise or false participation, and which ends up being truly relevant to their communities, their places of residence, their countries, or to society in general. In short, the key is to find out which content takes a large step from being merely expressive to being truly relevant.

In the second decade of the 21st century, theories regarding the culture of participation have focused on two key aspects: the first is access, and the second is the media and the technological skills of users as barriers to be overcome in achieving such participation. At the beginning of the third decade, new biases and variables are emerging that are

determining participatory processes. In a digital realm where there is an overabundance of information and where a multitude of citizens host their own content, the ability to be visible makes the difference in achieving relevance in public discourse. In short, the ability to be heard is the key. The very architecture of the Web is one of the most important biases. The infrastructure on which it is based refers to a clear hierarchy of access to content, which Hindman (2008) called *googlearchy*, a concept that refers to the importance that search engines have in the visibility and discovery of online information. In this respect, hypertext works as a fundamental component: the number of links pointing to a website is related to the visibility given to it by search engines operating on the Web, so the best known online sites, which therefore receive more links, are likely to be easier to find. This structure benefits media agents, corporations and traditional centres of power that already have a wide presence outside of Internet and are part of the establishment (those already empowered), while making lesser-known citizen voices less visible offline and trying to integrate counter-cultural discourses. This produces an evident popularity bias in the distribution of online attention (Webster, 2014). Internet offers more difficulties than opportunities with regard to the voice of the disadvantaged. As configured today, Internet is not a real break from the predominantly one-way model where a few dominate the narrative and the crowd goes unnoticed. There is evidence that Internet represents a concentration of user attention toward a small number of individuals, media, services and platforms that concentrate consumption at least as intensely as it did in the 20th century. Internet reinforces the power relationships that have always been in place.

In digital media and social networks, the user is placed in the position of playing the game of likes, retweets, remixes and sharing the biased, false content that floods our virtual spaces every day. As Neil Postman (1985) stated, we are players seduced by the promise of false participation in a global game where our voice almost never makes much noise, but where our activities have a political and economic value from which the technological elite profits by using processes of neoconductism, always through the commodification of our data (Lanier, 2018). This is why it is fundamental to rethink the culture of media participation and the theories of communicational empowerment. Participatory means do not exist per se. What really exists are the participation ecosystems that each particular media project activates from the combination of the different variables that make up its specific mode of interaction between creators and users. In this regard, if we visualize media production and distribution as languages that are taken into account from the producer's point of view, we must conceive participation as yet another language in order to build more democratic and empowering communication processes (García-Marín and Aparici, 2020). Meaningful participation must be developed as a cultural strategy that involves the media, individuals and social groups in order to redefine the power of digital citizens, and to overcome the processes of false participation in order to achieve a true democratisation of the public media discourse.

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