Podcasts as the New Radio: Shaping the Future of Storytelling

Mbai Alfred Mombo
St. Paul's University

Abstract

The rise of podcasts has transformed the audio-visual landscape, positioning it as a modern equivalent of the traditional radio and reshaping the art of storytelling. The purpose of this study was to explore how podcasts are redefining narrative structures and engaging listeners in innovative ways. This research aimed to analyze the shift in audience consumption patterns from radio to podcasts and examine the ways podcasts have expanded creative possibilities for storytellers. It also sought to investigate the cultural, technological, and economic factors driving the popularity of podcasts as a storytelling medium. The study adopts a mixed-method approach, collecting quantitative data from 100 podcast listeners and qualitative data from 10 podcast creators. The findings are organized according to gender, age, academic qualifications, and work experience. The findings reveal that podcasts have created room for greater interactivity between podcast creators and listeners and widened the room for creativity in content production and storytelling, in turn fostering deeper connections with the audience. Podcasts are also more accessible in urban areas compared to rural areas due to the digital divide, hence ensuring that radio continues to be the preferred source for news and audio entertainment. This study offers insights for creators, communication practitioners, and marketers on leveraging podcasting as a tool for brand storytelling and community building. For policymakers, the study underscores the need for updated frameworks that address media regulation in the context of digital audio-visual platforms. Universally, this study contributes to the world of knowledge by advancing the understanding of podcasting as a distinct and evolving form of digital storytelling.

Key Words: Podcasts, Storytelling, Radio, Digital Media, Content Creation, Audio Engagement, Media Transformation.

1.0 Introduction

In Kenya, just as in many parts of the world, the rise of podcasts has redefined the landscape of audio-visual entertainment and storytelling. The first public usage of the word 'podcasting' came from a hastily created portmanteau word by a Guardian journalist in early 2004. While reporting on 'a new boom in amateur radio' (2004), Ben Hammersley notes that this new form was 'Liberating the listeners from time and place, and allowing them to talk back to the program-makers'. Hammersley notes that while audio podcasting can be packaged as a radio program, its low cost of production and ability to include video provides an upgrade to audio-visual entertainment, opening the door to a pool where multiple interesting things can be done (Mbeke, 2010). The shift from traditional radio to podcasts reflects broader changes in media consumption habits, where digital technology and mobile internet access have empowered

audiences to engage with content on demand. With the growing penetration of smartphones and internet usage, podcasts have emerged as a popular medium, offering diverse content ranging from politics and social issues to comedy and education. This study investigates how podcasts have become the modern equivalent of traditional radio, transforming storytelling and listener engagement in Kenya.

Historically, radio has been a dominant medium of communication in Kenya, serving as a vital tool for news dissemination, education, and entertainment. Since the colonial era, radio has played a crucial role in informing the public, particularly in rural areas where other forms of media may not be accessible. According to the Communications Authority of Kenya, radio remains one of the most consumed media formats in the country, with 75% of the population tuning in regularly (CAK, 2021). The rise of digital technologies through recent years has, however, disrupted this traditional media consumption pattern, especially in urban areas.

Unlike traditional radio, podcasts offer on-demand listening, allowing audiences to choose when and what to listen to. Platforms like YouTube and Spotify have continuously increased in popularity in Kenya, enabling content creators the opportunity to diversify their creativity. Kenyan podcasts such as Legally Clueless, The Mic Cheque, Mics are Open, and Surviving Nairobi cover a range of topics, reflecting the growing demand for diverse and relatable content that is often unavailable on traditional radio. These podcasts are reshaping the way Kenyans consume audio-visual content by introducing long-form storytelling and personalized narratives that address contemporary social issues.

The study therefore explores the ways podcasts are redefining storytelling in Kenya, highlighting their role in shifting audience consumption from traditional radio to more flexible and interactive formats. This analyzes the economic, cultural and technological factors that have contributed to the rapid rise of podcasts in Kenya.

Radio is still a dominant medium in Kenya, with over 100 radio stations serving diverse demographic and linguistic groups. Radio accessibility, due to its low cost in urban and rural areas, makes it indispensable for news, politics, and cultural expression (Mbeke, 2010). While the rise of podcasts has opened up new avenues for content creators, its sustainability model in Kenya is still undocumented. Most podcasts rely on advertising revenue or sponsorships, which can be challenging to secure, especially for independent creators. Unlike radio, which is typically free to air, podcasts rely on the availability of the internet, meaning that the digital divide is at the core of podcasting (Nyabola, 2018).

To justify this study, however, there is a need to understand the role podcasts are playing in reshaping media consumption in Kenya. While several studies have examined the impact of digital media in the Global North, there is a significant gap in research focusing on how these trends are unfolding in African contexts, particularly in telling African stories. This study, therefore, contributes to the broader academic discourse on digital media by filling this gap.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how podcasts in Kenya have transformed traditional narrative structures and storytelling techniques
2. To investigate the shift in audience consumption patterns from radio to podcasts, with a focus on urban and rural divides
3. To examine the cultural, technological, and economic factors contributing to the popularity of podcasts in Kenya
4. To evaluate how the rise of podcasts is influencing content creation policies and media regulation in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

Globally, radio emerged as a revolutionary technology in the early 20th century, offering a means of mass communication that transcended geographic boundaries. The first commercial radio broadcast occurred in the United States in 1920, and by the 1930s, radio had become a dominant form of entertainment and news dissemination (Himes, 2007). The rise of podcasting can be seen as part of a broader shift toward digital media, where traditional forms of content consumption are increasingly being replaced by more flexible and personalized options (Gikandi, 2022).

Marshal McLuhan's (1964) concept of 'the medium is the message' suggests that the way content is delivered significantly influences how it is perceived. Like teaching, storytelling methods are contextually relevant and incorporate local cultural references. Leaners are more likely to engage with the material (Niyikiza, 2014). Traditional radio programs and lecture-based approaches, while still common, are increasingly supplemented by interactive and technology-driven methods, which foster great understanding and critical thinking. Employing podcasts and other digital platforms not only widens access to educational resources but also

allows for more flexible, student-centered learning, enhancing the overall learning experience through storytelling (Lau & Yuen, 2014).

Podcasts represent a new form of audio content delivery that changes not only how stories are told but also how they are consumed. Unlike radio, which is often constrained by time slots and commercial breaks, podcasts offer creators greater freedom to experiment with narrative structures (Miller, 2020). According to Barthes (1975), podcasts are built using codes and conventions that influence how audiences interpret stories. In podcasting, narrative techniques such as serialized storytelling, conversational formats, and immersive audio-visual experiences allow for a more intimate and emerging form of storytelling compared to traditional radio (Gikandi, 2022).

Audiences actively seek out media that meets their needs, whether for entertainment, information, or social interaction (Katz et al., 1974). Podcasts cater to a wide range of audience preferences by providing niche content that traditional radio often cannot accommodate. The personalized nature of podcasts aligns with the changing media consumption habits of Nairobi's population, particularly among younger listeners who prefer content that fits their specific interests and schedules (Podio, 2019).

Research shows that podcasts enable creators to explore new forms of storytelling that would be difficult to implement in traditional radio formats. For instance, Miller (2020) found that podcasts often utilize serialized formats where stories unfold over multiple episodes, allowing for deeper narrative development. Similarly, Kearney (2015) highlights the use of immersive soundscapes in podcasts, creating a more engaging listening experience compared to the linear programming typical of radio.

In Kenya, Chepkoech (2021) observed that the growing accessibility of smartphones and affordable internet has facilitated the rise of podcasting, particularly among Nairobi's urban population. While this technological shift has created opportunities for content creators to reach a wider audience, it presents challenges in terms of monetization and content distribution.

Without a doubt, radio has a long and storied history as a tool for mass communication, particularly in developing countries like Kenya. Podcasts, however, present the future of on-demand audio-visual content. Globally, both mediums continue to coexist, but the shift to digital platforms for podcasting signifies broader changes in media consumption habits, driven by technological advancements and the demand for more personalized content. As the global

podcasting industry grows, there is increasing demand for locally relevant content. In Kenya, podcasts offer an opportunity to share culturally specific stories, document oral histories, and explore indigenous knowledge systems in ways that radio may not fully accommodate. Research into this area helps highlight the role podcasts can play in preserving and promoting Kenyan culture and languages (Njoroge, 2020).

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with podcast creators and quantitative surveys of podcast listeners. The mixed-methods design provided a comprehensive understanding of how podcasts are transforming storytelling in Nairobi from both the creators' and listeners' perspectives. The population for this study included podcast creators and listeners in Nairobi. A sample size of 100 podcast listeners was selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic background. Additionally, 10 podcast creators were purposively selected for in-depth interviews based on their experience and influence in Nairobi's podcasting platforms. The surveys captured data on gender and age groups, listening habits, experience and content preferences, and levels of audience engagement. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with podcast creators, focusing on narrative techniques, audience interaction, and the challenges and opportunities presented by the podcasting medium. While quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify trends in podcast listening and engagement, qualitative data from the interviews underwent thematic analysis where key themes and patterns related to storytelling techniques and audience engagement were identified and discussed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of the study's purpose and that they could withdraw their participation at will. Anonymity was ensured at all stages of data collection to protect participant privacy as required by the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The results indicate that podcasts are becoming an increasingly popular medium for storytelling in Nairobi, particularly among younger listeners. The findings indicate that organized according to gender, age, academic level, and work experience, 55% of the 100 podcast listeners sampled were female, while 45% were male. Male respondents exhibited slightly higher engagement with podcasts, particularly in topics like technology, entrepreneurship, and politics. Eight Female listeners showed a preference for podcasts focusing on social issues,

health, and policy change. In the qualitative interviews, 6 of the 10 podcast creators were female, while 4 were male.

Gender	Percentage of podcast listeners
Male	55%
Female	45%

Table 1: gender of podcast listeners

The quantitative data revealed that the majority of podcast listeners, 70%, were aged between 18 and 35 years, with 18–25-year-olds making up 40% of the sample and 26-35-year-olds accounting for 30%. This demographic is drawn to the flexibility of podcasts, which can be consumed at their convenience via mobile devices. Older respondents, especially those aged 45 and above, made up only 10% of listeners, reinforcing the perception that older generations in Nairobi still prefer traditional radio. Podcast creators similarly noted that their primary target audience was young urban professionals.

Age Group	Percentage of Podcast Listenership
18-25	40%
26-35	30%
36-45	20%
46 and above	10%

Table 2: Age groups' level of podcast listeners

On the academic level, the findings showed that podcast listenership increases with higher academic qualifications. Among the listeners, 60% held at least a bachelor's degree or were in the process of acquiring one, while 25% had a master's degree or higher. This suggests that podcasts are appealing to an educated audience, many of whom listen to educational or professionally relevant content. Only 15% of listeners had a high school diploma or less, indicating that podcasts may still be inaccessible or unfamiliar to less educated demographics. This also explains the crucial role played by the internet and access. Among the creators, all had a university education, further highlighting the academic leanings of podcast content in Nairobi.

Academic Level	Percentage of Podcast Listeners
High school and below	15%
Bachelor's degree	60%
Master's degree and above	25%

Table 3: Academic level of podcast listeners

Listeners with 1-5 years of work experience made up the largest segment of podcast consumers (50%). These young professionals reported using podcasts as a source of information and personal development during commutes or while performing other tasks. Listeners with over 10 years of work experience constituted only 15% of the audience, possibly due to time constraints or a preference for more traditional forms of media. Among the creators, 70% had more than 5 years of experience in media or related fields, indicating that podcast creation is often pursued by those with a background in media production.

Work experience	Percentage of Podcast Listeners
1-5 years	50%
6-10 years	35%
11+ years	15%

Table 3: Work experience of podcast listeners

Qualitative interviews with podcast creators reveal that the flexibility of the podcasting medium allows for more creative storytelling approaches. Creators frequently use serialized storytelling, where episodes build on one another to develop more complex narratives. Many creators also emphasize the importance of interactive features, such as listener feedback and social media engagement, in fostering a sense of community around their podcasts.

Discussion

The findings suggest that podcasts have significantly reshaped the way stories are told and consumed in Nairobi. Unlike traditional radio, which is often constrained by time slots and commercial imperatives, podcasts offer a more flexible and creative platform for storytelling. This has led to the development of new narrative forms that engage listeners in deeper and more meaningful ways (Miller, 2020).

Furthermore, the rise of podcasts in Nairobi can be linked to broader global trends in media consumption, where audiences are increasingly seeking out personalized and on-demand content (Chepkoech, 2021). The ability to listen to podcasts at any time, coupled with the wide range of content available, makes podcasts an attractive alternative to traditional radio, particularly for younger listeners.

Podcasters recognize the different listening experiences in their delivery style. In this regard, we could consider that podcasts engender a sense of hyper-intimacy, where listeners feel deeply engaged with both the process of listening and the material to which they listen. Podcaster Roman Mars notes of this relationship, 'I love the closeness that people feel to me and my show… Podcast listeners are so, so dedicated… personal connection is major' (Steuer 2015). He also recognizes the nature of the experience, noting that People typically listen to podcasts by themselves, often with earbuds. It's right there in their ears. It's not playing over speakers at the bar. And even more important, it's the multitasking medium. We're in a world now where you have something to do at all times, and podcasts are available for you all the time, on demand. (Steuer 2015)

However, the study also identifies challenges for podcast creators in Nairobi, particularly in terms of monetization. While podcasts offer new opportunities for storytelling, creators often struggle to generate revenue from their content, as advertising and subscription models are still in their infancy in Kenya (Gikandi, 2022).

Comparison with Previous Studies

This study's findings align with previous research by Nyabola (2018), which emphasized that urban, educated, and younger populations in Kenya are more inclined to adopt digital media like podcasts. Similar to Mugambi & Ndonye's (2015) research on the dominance of traditional media, this study shows that while radio remains a primary source of information for older generations, podcasts are more popular among younger listeners. Furthermore, like Njoroge (2020), this study confirms the growing trend of podcasts as a medium for niche content, appealing to specific interests such as entrepreneurship, wellness, and social activism. However, the gender distribution of podcast creators remains uneven, with men more likely to dominate podcast production, a point that contrasts with the growing female participation in digital spaces.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study

This research capitalized on the mixed-method approach, which allowed for a more holistic understanding of podcast consumption and production in Nairobi. Quantitative data provided clear demographic insights, while qualitative interviews with podcast creators offered deeper perspectives on content creation, challenges, and audience engagement.

However, the study had notable limitations. The sample size of 100 listeners, while informative, may not be representative of the entire podcast audience in Nairobi, especially considering the diversity of Nairobi estates where preference and response shifts from one town to another and the willingness of the youthful generations to prefer privacy in their likes and wants. Additionally, the study's focus on urban listeners may have overlooked broader patterns in media consumption among less digitally connected populations. The qualitative sample of 10 podcast creators, while offering valuable insights, could have been expanded to include a wider variety of creators with different content focuses.

Unexpected Findings

An unexpected finding of the study was the high level of engagement from early-career professionals with 1-5 years of work experience. While it was anticipated that younger, unemployed, or freelance individuals would dominate podcast consumption, it was found that early-career professionals also actively consume podcasts for professional development, news, and entertainment during their daily routines. This suggests that podcasts are increasingly becoming a medium for multitasking and self-improvement rather than just a leisure activity. Additionally, while podcasts are often considered a "new" form of media, many of the creators interviewed mentioned they were inspired by traditional radio formats, integrating both old and new storytelling techniques into their shows.

Hypothesis or Models

The study hypothesized that younger, more educated individuals would be more likely to listen to podcasts, a hypothesis that was confirmed by the data. As predicted, the majority of podcast listeners were between 18 and 35 years old and held higher academic qualifications. This finding aligns with Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations model, which posits that early adopters of new technologies, such as podcasts, are often younger and more educated. The data supports the notion that podcasts are still an emerging medium in Nairobi, with listeners primarily drawn from the urban, educated elite. Future research could refine this model by

examining how internet access, income levels, and cultural factors shape podcast adoption in less urbanized or lower-income areas.

5.0 Conclusion

This study explored how podcasts are redefining storytelling in Kenya, especially with traditional radio. Through both quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research revealed that podcasts are transforming narrative structures by offering more flexible, personalized, and on-demand content. This shift is particularly evident among younger, urban audiences who seek out niche content, demonstrating podcasts' potential to offer more diverse and interactive storytelling compared to radio. A significant takeaway for readers is the identification of podcasts as a key player in media transformation, offering a unique platform for creators to engage with a global audience in ways traditional media cannot.

The study highlights the significance of podcasts in reshaping audience engagement, particularly among educated young professionals who view podcasts as tools for multitasking, self-improvement, and entertainment. This insight has broader implications for content creators, marketers, and policymakers. Creators are provided with innovative opportunities for experimenting with storytelling formats, while policymakers are challenged to adapt media regulations to address the evolving digital audio landscape.

Despite its contributions, the research uncovered gaps in podcasting literature, especially in the African context. Key areas such as the digital divide between urban and rural populations, as well as the monetization challenges faced by independent creators in Kenya, remain underexplored. Moreover, the study leaves unanswered questions about the long-term sustainability of podcasting in regions where internet access is limited.

Future research could focus on the role of podcasts in rural areas, the economic viability of podcast production in Kenya, and the impact of podcasting on local culture and languages. Expanding the scope to include diverse demographic groups would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital storytelling is reshaping media consumption beyond Nairobi.

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