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Jing Meng & Haiyan Wang

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Podcasting as Alternative Media: Navigating Politics, Platform Power, and Journalistic Professionalism in China

Jing Meng[a] and Haiyan Wang[b]

[a]School of Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, China; [b]Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau, Macao SAR, China

ABSTRACT

This study explores how journalist podcasters and their podcasts function as alternative news media within the Chinese media landscape. It argues that journalist podcasters do not explicitly assert their alternativeness, instead, they adopt non-confrontational approaches to create alternative spaces for public discussion and deliberation. They reinvent journalistic professionalism as a counterstrategy, negotiate between professionalization and personalization, and resist the dictates of algorithms and platforms. This research contributes to the current understanding of alternative media by framing the concept as contextual and relational, particularly highlighting how alternatives are constructed and practiced in relation to platform power and data technology. Thus, alternativeness, much like mainstream media, remains a contested concept. This constrained sense of alternativeness, while offering some liberation, also imposes limitations.

KEYWORDS

Alternative media; China; journalist podcaster; personalization; platform; professionalism

Podcasts first debuted in 2001 as digital audio files which were able to be streamed or downloaded *via* MP3 players and computers (K.S.C., 2016). Since then, podcasting has been a growing media phenomenon popularized around the world (Berry 2016). By offering diversified audio content to listeners on demand, it constitutes a vital alternative to the traditional linear broadcast which is often constrained by time and space in terms of consumption (Berry 2016; Spinelli and Dann 2019). Podcasts afford the possibility for bloggers, amateur radio enthusiasts and grassroots creators outside the traditional broadcasting industry to find ways to enter the audio media ecosystem, thus challenging the top-down media structure and democratizing media production (Llinares, Fox and Berry 2018; Bonini 2015; Lindgren and Loviglio 2022; Rime, Pike, and Collins 2022). Moreover, podcasting enables alternative publishing routines and connections to audiences which may bypass mega technology platforms. Unlike the centralized design of platforms, podcasting emerged as a technology featuring a decentralized architecture, whereby podcasts were stored across the Internet and connected *via* RSS ("Really Simple Syndication"), an open technical standard allowing listeners to access and subscribe to audio content *via* "podcatcher" and apps without

CONTACT Haiyan Wang haiyanwang@um.edu.mo Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau, E21B-2045, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macao SAR, China

having to visit a storage platform or website (Bottomley 2015; Sullivan 2019). This allows podcasters to distribute *via* free hosting sites or by managing their own audio channels, where they can have better control of their content and maintain direct interaction with their listeners (Berry 2016). However, like other medium formats, podcasting today is increasingly reshaped by platformization (Aufderheide et al. 2020; Sullivan 2019), and faces challenges such as traffic-chasing, intellectual property disputes, subscriber loss, and inconsistent operations.

Like its counterparts in the West, podcasting in China has also witnessed rapid growth in recent years. Many popular podcasts were founded by journalists and media professionals (Wang, Yan, and Meng 2025; Yuan and Wang 2025). For example, Yang Yi and Xu Tao, both of whom have prior experience as journalists in traditional media, are notable podcasters who have respectively founded the prominent podcasting startups JustPod and ShengFM. On one hand, these journalist podcasters have experimented with innovative practices outside the traditional journalistic field. On the other hand, they also draw on and translate their experiences, skills and values from traditional journalism to the field of podcasting.

Journalist podcasters may not produce journalism in the traditional sense, but they occupy a peripheral yet significant role in the news ecosystem, offering alternative approaches to journalism and creating alternative spaces for public discussion. In recent decades, alternative media have garnered attention for their exploration of non-traditional and radical practices that operate outside of the dominant media system. This focus on alternative media highlights the diversity of voices and methods that challenge conventional journalism and promote more inclusive public discourse (Frischlich et al. 2023; Ihlebæk et al. 2022). However, alternative media display diverse forms and meanings in different cultural and sociopolitical contexts, and are relational and contextual in nature (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Waisbord 2022; Wu 2023). This research explores how journalist podcasters and their podcasts function as alternatives in China. It contributes to the understanding of alternative media by contextualizing the concept within the Chinese media landscape.

Alternative Media

Digital technology and social media platforms have given rise to new actors on the fringes of the journalistic field, such as bloggers (Carlson 2007; Nielsen 2012), social media (Hermida 2010), citizen journalists (Allan and Thorsen 2009; Wall 2015), WikiLeaks (Coddington 2012; Eldridge 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2014), and journalistic start-ups (Carlson and Usher 2016). These new entrants have been framed as "interlopers" or "intralopers" (Eldridge 2014), pioneer journalists (Hepp and Loosen 2021), or peripheral journalism (Hanusch and Löhmann 2023). Often viewed as challengers to mainstream media, they have been examined through alternative media framework (Maares and Hanusch 2023).

The countering role of alternative media manifests in various ways, including challenging dominant media structure and regulations, distancing themselves from professionalization and established distribution channels, and offering alternative interpretations of political and social issues, along with producing radical content and exploring alternative aesthetics and forms (Atton 2002; Couldry and Curran 2003;

Downing 2001; Fuchs 2010; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Meanwhile, audience groups engaged with alternative media often express dissatisfaction with legacy news outlets (Frischlich et al. 2023; Thorbjørnsrud and Figenschou 2022). Alternative media is thus frequently viewed as a force for emancipation and social change (Rauch 2016), embodying the communicative politics of contestation (Waisbord 2022), and affording counter-public spheres to highlight marginalized issues and perspectives (Harcup 2005).

However, the concept of alternative media also faces challenges. Scholars question the dichotomy between alternative and mainstream media, suggesting instead that these media exist along a continuous spectrum that can cross over and converge (Atton 2002; Harcup 2005; Kenix 2011; Rauch 2016). This binary distinction is particularly tenuous in the digital age, as the boundaries between mainstream and alternative news media continue to blur (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Rauch 2016). Additionally, the recent rise of manipulative, right-wing, or hyper-partisan news media has further undermined traditional notions of alternative media. An increasing number of far-right and populist online news outlets have adopted similar counter-hegemonic discourses to criticize and resist established media and mainstream hegemony for failing to represent a sufficient diversity of viewpoints (Haller and Holt 2019; Holt 2020; Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019). This has led scholars to adopt a non-ideological position for theorizing alternative media in the digital age, framing it from the perspectives of self-perception, audience perception, or a third party (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Alternativeness is thus understood as being expressed through editorial agendas or statements and/or perceived by audiences and others (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). This stated alternativeness is situated along the mainstream-alternative continuum and involves negotiations at different levels (Aslan Ozgul and Veneti 2022; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Ihlebæk et al. 2022).

Apart from legacy media, platforms, as digital infrastructures "offering diverse kinds of information and communication, as well as opportunities to produce, publish and engage with content" (Ekström and Westlund 2019), represent the new mainstream power in the news industry. Both legacy and peripheral news actors engage with these platforms, negotiate their autonomy, and explore alternatives (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2023). News outlets increasingly integrate platform logics into news production (Haim et al. 2021; Lamot 2022; Lischka 2021), giving rise to what scholars refer to as the platformization of news (Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow 2023; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018) and the "dislocation of news journalism" (Ekström and Westlund 2019). The growing reliance on artificial intelligence in journalism has further intensified the industry's dependence on platforms (Simon 2024; Sjøvaag, Ferrer-Conill, and Olsen 2025) for distribution and data management. Media organizations and publishers have become wary of losing control over their data, audiences, and revenues (Nielsen and Ganter 2022). In response, they have adopted new practices, such as developing proprietary channels, to counterbalance platforms and reduce their reliance on social media for news distribution and digital advertising revenue (Chua 2023; Chua and Westlund 2019). In practice, news media both embrace and leverage platforms while simultaneously working to maintain their independence from them (Chua 2023). This dynamic renders platforms as spaces of negotiation, with platform

power being relational in the ongoing transformation of the news landscape (Poell et al. 2022). Relationships with platforms, the adoption of technology, and business models are important aspects of studying alternative media in the digital age (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019).

The relationality of alternativeness is not only reflected in the overlapping boundaries, but also varies across contexts. Definitions and perceptions of "alternative" and "mainstream" media differ across systems, shaped by cultural and sociopolitical conditions, and are subject to change (Heft et al. 2020; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Waisbord 2022; Wu 2023). Users and researchers may hold differing views on what constitutes alternativeness (Frischlich et al. 2023), and in fragmented and polarized media environments, citizens increasingly identify mass media outlets as alternative news sources (Steppat et al. 2023). There is no single, homogeneous definition of alternative media, as its characteristics and meanings shift across socio-political contexts and among users. Thus, it is crucial to examine alternative media through diverse contextual lenses to fully understand its nuances and implications.

Alternative and Mainstream Media in China

Like "alternative", the term "mainstream" is a contested concept, varying across contexts and open to debate (Steensen, Figenschou, and Ihlebæk 2023). In China, a single-party state, mainstream media typically refer to state-owned or state-subsidized outlets that have been politically legitimized. Private media without news service licenses are prohibited from conducting traditional "hard news" reporting on political, economic, military, diplomatic, and other public affairs (Deng and Yan 2022). Thus, non-state-owned news startups are classified as alternative media from the perspective of regulation. While these technology-driven companies, aggregators, and content-focused digital startups are not legally recognized as news media, they play an important informal and peripheral role in the news ecosystem (Yin, Fu, and Zheng 2024).

From an ideological perspective, the ideals of journalism are more complex. Throughout the modern history of Chinese journalism, various strands of thought have emerged. The party-press discourse views news media as a propaganda organization aimed at promoting party policies, while Confucian intellectual discourse posits that journalism should enlighten the public and serve the nation's interests (Svensson et al. 2013). Additionally, the reforms and development of the market economy in the 1990s created opportunities for the rise of Western-style professionalism that emphasized values such as objectivity, autonomy, and rationality, and encouraged the emergence of critical investigative reporting in China (Hassid 2015; Pan and Lu 2003). While journalistic professionalism has never fully mainstreamed, being seen as an imported ideal, its legacy continues to influence Chinese journalism, albeit with nuanced interpretations and practices (Tong 2006).

However, Chinese media face significant challenges in the digital era. Legacy media have experienced growing pressure from declining revenues and are eager to implement market-oriented reforms by embracing online strategies (Song and Chang 2017) and converging with social media platforms to re-engage audiences, particularly younger demographics (Deng and Yan 2022). In the context of media convergence,

platforms and the news industry are deeply intertwined. After initial friction over copyright issues, both state-owned and commercial media have flocked to news aggregators and social media platform, competing for online visibility (Kuai et al. 2023; Yin, Fu, and Zheng 2024).

While the platformization in China parallels developments in the U.S. and Europe, it differs significantly due to the central involvement of the state (de Kloet et al. 2019). To curb the rising power of platforms, the Chinese government and state media have advocated for greater algorithmic governance, implementing policies to ensure that content platforms adhere to mainstream values and promote positive messaging (Kuai et al. 2023). Moreover, with direct or indirect government subsidies, state-owned media have obtained abundant resources for digital transition and innovation (Fang and Repnikova 2022; Wang and Sparks 2019). To "hold the ground of the ideological battlefield" in the digital space, they embraced soft-news-centered journalistic paradigms, resulting in an increase in infotainment and soft propaganda (Zhu and Fu 2024).

On the other hand, the private digital news organization typically lack official licenses for news production and operate as peripheral actors, relying on state-owned and mainstream media for their sources, and are fully integrated into the platform ecosystem. Additionally, these digital news outlets are often funded by venture capital and platform companies, which compels them to prioritize advertising revenue and focus on maximizing user size and engagement (Yin, Fu, and Zheng 2024). As a result, most digital news organizations regard it a norm to adhere to the capital-driven rules and traffic logic that govern news production and distribution.

Akin to privately-owned digital news organizations, journalist podcasters and their podcasts can be viewed as peripheral actors. However, unlike peripheral online news productions that often rely on tabloidization, personalization, and emotionalization for traffic (Yin, Fu, and Zheng 2024), many podcasts deliberately distance themselves from platform mechanisms in content creation and distribution. They seek to establish an alternative business model and foster different relationships with audiences, while revitalizing community life and contributing to a public sphere for meaningful deliberation (Qin 2019). Since not all peripheral actors qualify as alternative, this paper examines how journalist podcasters negotiate their alternativeness in practice, with a focus on their business models and relationships with mainstream media and digital platforms.

Research Uestion and Ethod

Building on these discussions and applying Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019)'s multilevel framework (micro, meso, and macro) for understanding alternative media, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do journalist podcasters position themselves in relation to politics and mainstream media in China (macro level)?

RQ2: How do journalist podcasters organize and operate in relation to platform power (meso level)?

RQ3: How do journalist podcasters practice alternativeness in relation to professional news and platform content (micro level)?

To explore these questions, we identified 37 podcasters who were formerly journalists employed at institutional media organizations. These journalist podcasters were selected from the participant list of PodFest China, the largest annual event for Chinese podcasters initiated by JustPod, a leading Chinese podcast startup. PodFest China has been held approximately once a year since 2019, and our research team attended its conventions. The organizers of PodFest China assisted in identifying these individuals, and we further verified their identities through background research. All 37 selected podcasters host podcasts focused on current affairs, covering topic such as technology, business, culture, education, social issues and feature stories. This group includes founders or core members of some of the most well-known podcasting programs in China, such as *ETW Studio*, *Left-Right*, *Story FM*, and others.

To collect research data, we adopted in-depth interviews and document research. We reached out to each journalist podcaster on the list for interviews, and 21 agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted between November 2023 and October 2024, primarily face-to-face, with eight conducted *via* video or voice calls. The shortest interview was 30 min, and the longest lasted for 153 min, with an average duration of 53.9 min. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and the questions included their media career, the reasons for them to start podcasting, their experiences of doing podcasting, the way they perceive the uniqueness of podcast and compare podcasting and other forms of journalism, etc. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed into Chinese for analysis.

In addition to the interviews, we gathered media reports, podcast episodes, blogs and public talks by these journalist podcasters. Our goal was to collect first-person accounts on their experiences in podcasting. Using a combination of keywords such as "podcast" and their names, we searched multiple platforms, including search engines (Baidu and Google), social media sites (Weibo and WeChat) and podcasting apps (Little Universe, Himalaya and Apple Podcasts). The search covered the period from January 2018 to May 2024, resulting in 35 documents, including 12 media reports, 20 podcast talks, and three public lectures. These materials involved 15 journalist podcasters from our list, seven of whom were also interviewed by us.

In total, our study involved 29 journalist podcasters, all of whom had prior experience in traditional media, including on television, in news magazines, and on radio. They have at least two years of experience in the podcasting industry, with the most experienced individual having 11 years of podcast production experience. The average years of podcasting experience among the participants was 4.69 years. For anonymity reasons, we used "I" (Informant) and numbers 1–29 to present them.

For the analytical method, we employed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to code interview and document data. This process involved identifying recurring themes, topics, concerns, viewpoints, and concepts, which were then grouped into specific "clusters of ideas" and "clusters of knowledge patterns" (Barker 1999). Applying Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich (2019)'s framework, we structured coding across three levels: micro (producer, content, and style), meso (publishing routines and media organization), and macro (media regulation and function) (Figure 1). Our analysis examines how journalist podcasters position themselves within the media system, articulating their work routine, business models, and organizational structures. Findings are presented below.

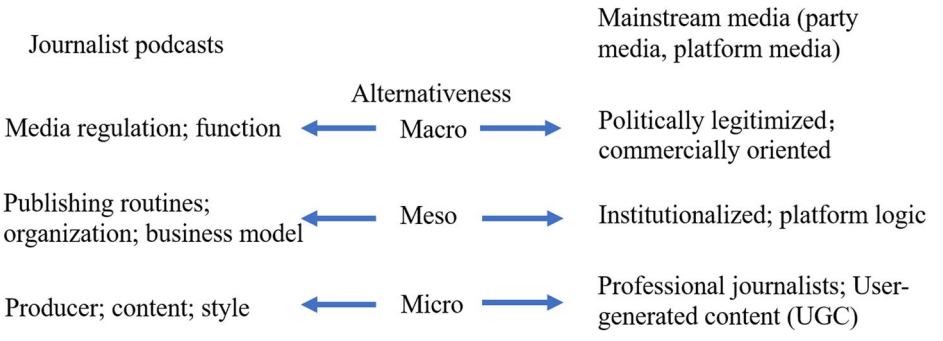

Figure 1. Alternative journalist podcasts in relation to mainstream media.

Macro Level: Nonconfrontational Alternativeness

The macro-level of alternativeness pertains to the role and position of alternative media within the societal system, as well as their relationship with established professional institutions, regulatory systems and national media policies (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). In the Chinese context, privately owned podcasts are not legally recognized as news media, which forces journalist podcasters to find innovative ways to report and discuss public and social issues, positioning themselves peripherally outside the mainstream media system. Furthermore, these podcasters often distance themselves from platforms, framing their podcasts as alternatives to the platform-centric, traffic-driven model and its associated logic. While they may not explicitly state their alternative status and often employ non-confrontational strategies, journalist podcasters effectively create an alternative space for their work.

Coming from a traditional journalism background, these journalist podcasters regard podcasting as "a new venue for the sunset industry (of journalism)" (I4; I10; I28). In this emerging space, they innovate and reinvent rules and values, going beyond traditional concepts and professional procedures of news-making. "For me, a podcast serves as a personal channel… I'm not assigned specific topics to cover, but now I have the freedom to pursue what truly interests me and fully express my ideas." (I29). "You have greater freedom in this space [outside the traditional media system]" (I24). According to these journalist podcasters, podcasts afford alternative spaces and channels for news coverage that traditional media cannot accommodate:

> A podcast runs for an hour and a half, which translates to about 26,000 words—typically ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 words. How can a newspaper or magazine publish such a lengthy piece? In contrast, a similar topic in a magazine might only cover around 2,000 words. The density of information is totally different (I10).

The alternative status of news-related podcasts can also be attributed to the fact that mainstream radio news media in China still employs the traditional news anchor style for broadcasting (I3; I6; I20). While most Chinese mainstream media have embraced the digital shift and actively incorporated short videos into their reporting, few have innovated with audio and radio narratives. This gap has created an alternative space for podcasts outside the mainstream media system. Therefore, journalist podcasters use the podcasting format to "cover important issues and topics which are scarcely discussed in other media" (I25) and express their opinions on these public issues (I7; I8; I21).

Early successful podcasts in China were produced by journalist podcasters who, lacking full legitimacy in news production, relied on scholars and experts to discuss social and public issues. This focus on intellectual content has garnered popularity among a niche community of elite audience (I7; I9; I26). As a form of niche media, podcasts have a "smaller impact", making them a relatively safer space. "Some online content was censored because it was reported by the audience; however, the podcasting audience has reached a consensus with their hosts and is less prone to reporting our content" (I1). "We do have to censor our content, but it is much better compared to traditional media" (I4). Although the limited reach of the medium does not exempt podcasts from regulation and censorship (I6; I10; I29), news podcasts still manage to provide alternative content and perspectives that extend beyond what is typically offered by traditional and mainstream media.

Apart from distancing from the mainstream newsrooms, journalist podcasters are also critical of the platform-dominated media ecosystem.

> I view podcasts as a counter-platform. While Little Universe [a podcast app] is moving toward platformization, it still relies on RSS output. In theory, you can use any tool to access podcasts, unlike Weibo or WeChat, where content is only available on their platforms. I'm more critical of platforms in general, and I believe podcasts better align with the spirit of counter-platform (I7).

In other words, journalist podcasters view podcasts as less traffic-driven and more resilient to platform power. While platforms like Red (Xiaohongshu,) and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) generate significant traffic, podcasts operate differently. With their lower commercial value, podcasts maintain a relatively "pure" space that is not overrun by marketing accounts and internet influencers (I7; I27). Journalist podcasters view podcasts as channels for "telling stories" and "discussing issues" rather than selling products (I10). They believe that platform media have made content overly fragmented and superficial, whereas podcasts provide opportunities for in-depth expression and exploration (I24; I28). In this regard, journalist podcasters navigate various platforms and seek alternative channels to connect with listeners and explore diverse revenue streams beyond the platform ecosystem.

Meso Level: Negotiating Alternativeness

The counter-platform alternativeness of journalist podcasters is also evident at the meso-level, encompassing work routines, organizational structures, business models, and technology use.

Workflow and Structure

Most podcasts are produced by individuals or small teams of one or two creators. On one hand, limited budgets compel podcasters startups or individuals to minimize production costs by maintaining small, non-hierarchical teams (I2; I25). On the other hand, this results in a non-hierarchical and non-institutional production approach (I6; I28). Furthermore, unlike standardized news production, podcasts incorporate more artistic and personalized contributions from the podcasters (I2; I7). The emphasis on personal style and the crafted nature of conversation in podcasts makes their production primarily reliant on individual creators to produce their entire work (I3; I28).

However, some leading podcast startups are professionalizing their workflows and organizational structures in an effort to standardize their production processes. For example, some podcasts are experimenting with retaining elements of traditional news broadcasting formats that adhere to established newsroom routines. A morning news podcast may have a production team consisting of a podcaster, a producer, post-production staff, and interns to ensure a consistent daily output.

> A veteran BBC reporter once shared that their junior reporters often begin with short news slots for practice before taking on more significant reporting tasks. However, training new staff can be challenging for us, as there are fewer short slots available for practice. In contrast, junior podcasters must dive into long interviews and continuous conversation from the outset. To address this, we have conducted workshops using our news podcasts to train our junior podcasters (I2).

Podcasts utilize a more personalized narrative style, which contrasts with the traditional radio news training typically found in most Chinese journalism schools. As a result, podcast startups often need to create their own training workshops and establish standardized production lines (I1; I2; I10). Standardized production also facilitates advertisement placement, albeit on a minimal scale (I2; I10). However, standardization is still relatively limited among leading podcast startups, with most podcasters continuing to operate as individuals or as passion projects. The drive to standardize or professionalize podcast production stems from the need to secure audiences and generate revenue.

Business Model

As a relatively new medium, podcasts in China remain a niche market without an established business model (I2; I3; I13; I15), relying on traditional commercialization methods such as advertising while also exploring alternative revenue streams. Some podcasts serve as a means to drive traffic to other paid content or apps (I1; I24; I26). Many podcasters create content out of passion and enthusiasm for sharing stories and perspectives, and they often struggle to monetize their efforts (I4; I25; I29). In contrast, some leading podcasters and startups are exploring various income streams, including offering podcasting services for brands, traditional advertising, paid content, donations, and subscriptions or memberships. In addition to the revenue streams mentioned above, podcasters also look to generate income through offline shows and training seminars (I3; I20; I28). This indicates that podcasters are still exploring various ways to make ends meet.

Providing contracted "B2B" services for brands, companies, and organizations generates steady income when major brands or large companies collaborate with podcasters to create a season or series of customized podcasts (I2; I10). The relatively elite audience community makes podcasts an ideal channel for branding (I14; I15). However, the challenge with contracted podcasting services is that they require significant human resources, which can be exhausting for podcasters and startups with limited staff trying to manage both customized programs and their own podcasts (I2; I6).

Leading podcasts also generate regular advertising revenue. Podcast advertising resembles advertorials, accommodating advertisers' requirement in content production (I1; I24;

I28). However, it is more challenging because high-quality content must be produced to ensure that the audience doesn't feel frustrated if they find they have spent 15 min on an advertisement (I10; I12). In this regard, podcasts are similar to many entrepreneurial journalism startups that blur the lines between editorial and commercial interests (Rafter 2016). However, not all podcasts can secure advertisements; "I bet 99% of general podcasts do not receive any business orders" (I7). Only top podcasts with high traffic volumes are able to attract advertisements, particularly during economic downturns.

> My podcast has over 50,000 to 60,000 followers, but I don't receive many advertisements. If podcasters reach this scale in categories like lifestyle and entertainment, they're likely to attract ads. But my focus is on news. Many advertisers may think news is sensitive. And because of my style, my followers tend to be critical. So, advertising isn't a viable option for my podcasts (I7).

While advertisers have acknowledged the commercial value of podcasts and their elite audience community, podcasters remain wary of the advertising model, which relies on large traffic volumes (I10). Consequently, rather than chasing traffic, many podcasters prefer to focus on paid content. Particularly, audio publishing has gained popularity among publishers, writers, and intellectuals, many of whom choose to collaborate with podcasts. The subscription and paid content model emerged only after audio platforms integrated payment and donation features into their design (I2; I10; I28). In other words, the paid content model depends on the technical capabilities of these platforms, prompting many podcasts to seek direct connections with their audiences through alternative subscription channels like newsletters.

Subscribing to newsletters or memberships is common in the West but not that popular in China, where people tend to subscribe to platforms rather than specific programs (I2; I7). To the podcasters, newsletters serve as decentralized channels that allow them to stay connected with their audience beyond platforms, helping to counterbalance platform power (I2; I3; I7). Some journalist podcasters also use newsletters to avoid being controlled by platforms. They argue that platforms control the relationship between content creators and audiences by limiting or boosting traffic *via* the use of algorithms, and the audience indeed does not truly belong to the content creators (I2; I7). Therefore, these podcasters upload their content to RSS feeds and distribute their podcasts across various platforms. In addition, they also use newsletters to establish direct contact with audiences and own audience data, even though the subscription fees may not fully cover production costs. This platform counterbalancing strategy is similar to media organizations' development of their proprietary platforms (Chua and Westlund 2019). To some extent, podcasters must rely on platforms for recommendations and audience connection. However, they also seek alternative channels to reduce their dependence on these platforms, viewing podcasts (distributed *via* RSS feeds) and newsletters as counter-platform and efforts to decouple from mainstream platforms.

Adoption of Technology

Platform counterbalancing is also reflected in podcasters' attitudes toward the appropriation and use of platform technologies such as algorithms and data metrics. The technical logic of algorithms and the mechanisms of data have dominated current

cultural production and distribution (Nieborg and Poell 2018). As a podcaster contends, "the tech people are gaining increasing power in the media industry, but they may not fully understand media logic" (I1). He believes that content creation is essentially not "a technical issue", but rather "an issue of attitude" (I1).

While algorithms can now effectively identify and recommend short videos and language content, they are not that effective in identifying lengthy audio content that contains many various topics and themes (I7; I9; I26). Compared with algorithm-driven short videos, podcasts feature "slow" and "long" content, as one has to spend at least 15–20 min with a podcast to decide if they like it or not, which renders podcasting a "counter-algorithm" format and establishes "a wall between podcasting and algorithms" (I1). By resisting algorithms, Chinese journalist podcasters have defined podcasting as a unique media format that is immune to fast-consumption and the data-mechanism of platforms.

At the same time, they are also skeptical about the penetrating power of data metrics: "the Internet people often promote the idea that algorithms and big data can accurately identify target audiences, this notion is, in fact, misleading and not entirely true" (I2). For podcasters, audience data metrics often provide mere numbers to attract advertisements without offering meaningful engagement. In some instances, podcasters intentionally aim to cultivate a smaller community of audience who are willing to pay for content (I1; I10). Traffic and data can pressure podcasters to chase numbers, leading to self-doubt and a loss of their initial enthusiasm (I6; I7). Some podcasters assert that they don't pay attention to data and traffic, recognizing that they cannot influence the data mechanisms. Instead, they focus on covering news stories they consider important and valuable, although they also acknowledge that such a disregard for traffic and data metrics is rare in the field (I3; I26; I27).

Despite their critical views on platforms and data technologies, podcasters still rely on these platforms to acquire and access their audience. Platforms hold significant power due to their discovery mechanisms, which facilitate audience growth, while counter-platform channels like newsletters struggle to reach as wide an audience (I2; I7). Some podcast platforms, such as Little Universe (which previously employed less aggressive algorithmic recommendations), are now enhancing their recommendation systems by using AI technologies to convert podcasts into short video clips for sharing on short-video platforms. Additionally, social media platforms and internet influencers help direct traffic to podcasts, prompting some podcasters to utilize traffic-driven platforms to promote their content (I2; I24). Some leading podcasters and startups collaborate with audio platforms to co-produce programs, enabling them to appear in banner recommendation lists and attract more traffic (I3; I24).

While most podcasters claim that data metrics do not influence their content production, as they adhere to their professional values and criteria, some do express concerns and anxieties regarding their podcasts' data performance.

> I check the data every day. It's definitely important, and I experience serious data anxiety. In the early trial stages, data wasn't as crucial—you just wanted to get the podcasts online. Now, it may be more significant. Gradually, I've gained some insights, but many of them aren't completely accurate and shouldn't be considered golden rules (I24).

On one hand, podcasters are counterbalancing platforms and seeking alternative channels for connecting with their audience and generating revenue outside platform ecosystems. On the other hand, they strategically use and rely on platforms and data technology for audience growth. The podcasters' alternativeness lies in their negotiation with platforms to enhance commercialization capacity while maintaining their autonomy and avoiding constraints imposed by the traffic-driven business model.

Micro Level: Reinventing Professionalism

The micro-level dimension of alternativeness relates to media content, style, and producers (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Decoupled from traditional news media, Chinese journalist podcasters adopt a personalized mode of reporting that fosters a sense of authenticity and intimacy. However, they also exercise restraint in excessive personalization, strategically balancing a personalized style with professional reporting. This strategy serves as a means of positioning their alternativeness. On one hand, journalist podcasters reinvent professionalism by incorporating a personal touch while adopting values such as balanced reporting, impartiality, and detachment to distinguish themselves from mainstream party media. This distinction is particularly relevant given the marginalization of Western-style professionalism in China. On the other hand, they also differentiate themselves from the user-generated content (UGC) on digital platforms by emphasizing professional values and quality. In this regard, the reinvention of professionalism is strategically employed to assert alternativeness both in discourse and practice, positioning journalist podcasters and their podcasts as distinct from both traditional media and platform-driven content.

Professionalism with Personal Styles

Podcasts are inherently more personalized, reflecting the creators' individual interests and styles (I3; I10; I28). In contrast to traditional news reporting, where interviews are conducted primarily to collect information and material, podcasting transforms the interview into the entire piece of work, which conveys not only facts and views but also emotions and interactions among discussants, and the development of arguments through dialogue (I2; I6). The emotions, tones of the podcasters, the "chatting atmosphere", and the flow of thoughts form an integral part of the dialogical content (I1; I10). Consequently, the aim of podcasting "is not to draw a final conclusion but to showcase the complete process of discussion and how we finally reach there" (I5). Podcasting has thus transcended the confines of traditional newsrooms, giving rise to a hybrid format of more personalized reporting and storytelling characterized by "spontaneity", "warmth", "intimacy", and "interactivity" (I4; I8; I9; I28). In this sense, journalist podcasters experiment with more personalized reporting styles as an alternative to traditional news.

However, this alternative approach to personalization is balanced with a touch of professionalism, serving as a strategy to distinguish journalist podcasts from both mainstream propaganda and UGC on digital platforms. Journalist podcasters have applied their experience from institutional media to podcasting, particularly in selecting

newsworthy topics, conducting research and investigations, framing stories and final editing. Although these podcasts are produced by individuals, the production process is similar to that of writing up a professional investigative news report as it often takes a month or even longer time to select topics, do interviews, write up the manuscripts, edit and record (I3; I6). As a podcaster said, "to choose a newsworthy story for news podcasts, the principles and criteria remain the same [as in professional journalism]" (I2). These principles and criteria include covering social issues, humanistic care, fact checking and neutrality (I3; I6; I7; I10).

While embracing a more personalized style and production approach, journalist podcasters still prioritize factual accuracy and are mindful of not expressing solely personal opinions or judgments.

> Having transitioned from [traditional] journalism, I believe that providing accurate information and conducting fact-checking is crucial for my podcasts. Otherwise, the audience may become skeptical (I7).

> I don't like excessive emotional expressions… I prefer to discuss things objectively… I present the materials without making judgments and allow experts, witnesses, and people with different perspectives to share their views more (I10).

Neutrality, also known as impartiality, has been valued as a norm of journalistic professionalism especially in the Western world (Hanitzsch et al. 2011). However, journalists from non-Western environments, including China (Wang and Li 2024), tend to be more interventionist in their reporting and often hold moral perspectives. In contrast, Chinese journalist podcasters, wary of interventionism, strive to adopt a neutral stance and avoid biased expressions.

> If you tell a story that already conveys the truth, that is the most effective way. So usually when I'm recording a podcast, I don't end with a summary, saying what kind of values this story illustrates, because the story itself already explains everything (I6).

Journalist podcasters exercise restraint in excessive personalization and radical expressions, instead reinventing professionalism to promote deliberation on social issues. Striking a balance between professionalism and personalization becomes a strategic approach for journalist podcasters to differentiate themselves from both party media and traffic-driven media on digital platforms.

Professionalization of Podcasting

Apart from reinventing professionalism, journalist podcasters are striving to standardize and professionalize their production lines to ensure consistent content output and secure revenue. Moreover, the professionalization of podcasting serves as a means of constructing journalist podcasters as "alternative producers." Journalist podcasters differentiate themselves from amateur creators and Internet influencers through both their motivations and professional capacities.

Social media and algorithm-powered recommendation platforms have facilitated the rise of UGC and Internet influencers, who operate according to platform logics and prioritize traffic generation. Initially, podcasts were created by amateur and grassroots producers (Berry, et al. 2018). However, podcasting today is increasingly

shaped by platformization (Aufderheide et al. 2020; Sullivan 2019), with many podcasts also seeking traffic for monetization. In contrast, journalist podcasters position themselves as an alternative by emphasizing that their podcasts are "mission-driven" rather than "monetization-driven" (I1). They place greater emphasis on producing professional content rather than "influencer-style content".

> Of course, the audience may be attracted to our podcasts because they love our podcasters' voices and personalities, but our main focus is to provide valuable information, and we do it in a serious media manner. If we stray from this and start discussing all sorts of trendy or messy topics, I don't think the audience will appreciate us (I2).

Moreover, journalist podcasters believe that while producing audio content is generally easier than creating video content, podcasting is not an amateur-friendly medium, as conducting a one-hour interview still presents significant challenges (I1; I4). While there have been a plethora of applications and software that enable quick and easy ways of video editing and production, which makes it less difficult to shoot a 10-second short video, there are fewer tools to assist audio production, and creators have to rely on their own skills to construct the story by deploying music, archival recording and narration. In this sense, the threshold for audio UGC production is relatively high and demanding. By leveraging their professional values and expertise, journalist podcasters discursively distinguish themselves from platform-driven UGC production, asserting their alternativeness within the platform-dominated media ecosystem.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through an analysis of the discourses of 29 Chinese journalist podcasters, it becomes evident that they do not explicitly assert their alternativeness. Instead, their podcasts primarily adopt non-confrontational approaches to create alternative spaces for public discussion and deliberation. Rather than focusing on radical content, these podcasters reinvent journalistic professionalism as a counterstrategy to reclaim the public sphere from mainstream propaganda and traffic-driven content. They navigate the balance between professionalization and personalization, as well as politics, platform power and data technologies, to cultivate an alternative space for addressing social issues through their negotiation at macro, meso, and micro levels. They also explore alternative or multiple business models beyond traditional and platform-dominated ecosystems. Overall, this research contributes to the current understanding of alternative media by framing the concept as contextual and relational, particularly highlighting how alternativeness is constructed and practiced in relation to platform power and data technologies.

In the Chinese context, journalist podcasters and their podcasts are restricted from reporting traditional "hard news" due to license control. As a result, they must seek alternative ways to cover and discuss public issues such as society, culture, gender, technology and everyday life. Moreover, these podcasters counterbalance platform power by negotiating autonomy and fostering alternative relationships with digital technologies. Podcasters critique platforms, traffic-driven short-video platforms in particular, and the data mechanisms and algorithms that drive the platformization of

content production. While Chinese mainstream media have vigorously integrated and collaborated with digital platforms and adapted to the data-driven production mechanism in the recent decade, journalist podcasters reinvent professionalism in content production to distinguish themselves from traffic-driven model prevalent on platforms. These podcasters also deploy alternative ways to directly connect with audience through newsletters, offline talks, and seminars, refiguring a form of community journalism while reducing their dependence of platforms for audience. In addition to traditional traffic-based advertising, journalist podcasters seek diverse revenue streams, such as providing audio publishing, paid content, and offline activities. This approach aligns with some of the platform counterbalancing strategies adopted by legacy media in other countries (Chua 2023; Chua and Westlund 2019). In this sense, the alternativeness of these Chinese journalist podcasters is distinctly marked by a counter-platform inclination.

The alternativeness of Chinese journalist podcasters and their podcasts is also relational, as they continually negotiate the balance between professionalization and personalization, commercial values and autonomy, as well as platform power and proprietary distribution channels. These podcasters agree that podcasts are an intimate medium, a quality that sets them apart from their previous media experiences. At the micro level, while they acknowledge the importance of intimacy and personal input in podcasting, the legacy of journalistic professionalism prompts them to avoid excessive self-expression in storytelling. As a result, these podcasters strive to strike a balance between intimacy and professionalization. At the meso level, these podcasters adopt personalized workflows while also standardizing their production processes to enhance commercialization. Although they critique the emphasis on traffic and data technologies, they still pursue market success. Podcasts, distributed *via* RSS feeds, provide alternative distribution channels, yet podcasters still rely on platforms for audience growth and access. Some podcasters and startups collaborate closely with audio platforms to secure spots on recommendation banners. This means that these podcasters must continuously balance platform power and autonomy in their production and distribution practices, making their alternativeness relational and the result of ongoing negotiations. These findings highlight that the distinctions between mainstream and alternative news media are increasingly blurring in the digital age (Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Rauch 2016). Professional journalists transitioning to alternative media often embody a hybrid identity, while some alternative outlets professionalize their production, resembling traditional media (Ihlebæk et al. 2022). Thus, alternativeness, much like mainstream media, involves negotiation and remains a contested concept.

Nevertheless, many of these individuals, who entered the field in its early years, represent only the top tier podcasters of the podcasting market. This group remains relatively small, making them "alternative" even within the podcasting landscape. Hence, the alternative perspective only applies to this small group of pioneering journalists' podcasts in contemporary China, while podcasting as a medium doesn't inherently equate to being alternative, despite its technological features—such as decentralized distribution *via* RSS feeds—that suggest potential for such a role. Instead, it is through the discourses and practices surrounding podcasting that notions of alternativeness are negotiated and shaped. This constrained sense of alternativeness, while offering some

liberation, also imposes limitations. Moreover, according to an industry survey, the majority of the Chinese podcast listeners are relatively young, with an average age of 30.2, well educated, with relatively high incomes and living in top-tier or coastal cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (JustPod 2022). In other words, the podcasting community is an elitist group. The formation of an elite-oriented community and an alternative public sphere to the mainstream media and platforms are also ramifications of the increasingly fragmented public sphere in the digital age (Dahlberg 2007; Harper 2017; Papacharissi 2002). Studies have found that niche media and news startups are orienting their services towards closed communities of relatively educated and high-income elites who are engaged and capable of paying for quality content and knowledge (Robinson and Wang 2018; Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi 2021). While the alternativeness and innovation of media startups help to secure a niche market, such closed and interest-based communities point to increasingly fragmented publics. The alternative and elitist nature of these media startups also bring questions of the extent to which these elite publics can bridge the "recognition gaps" between groups in a society and truly contribute to public discussion and consensus (Kreiss 2019; Lamont 2018). Future research can therefore explore how alternative media contribute to or mitigate the fragmentation of the public sphere across various sociopolitical contexts. Such investigations could shed light on the role of alternative media in fostering cohesive public discourse or, conversely, in exacerbating divisions within society.

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