

# Podcast – Commentary journalism in a digital public

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## Abstract

The internet and digital platforms provide commentary- and opinion-based journalism with new opportunities to develop into new digital formats, such as podcasts. This article is based on the case studies of four Norwegian podcasts in 2020 and 2021. The findings show that commentary journalism in the form of podcasts has an obvious dual purpose: as publicity and as a commercial. The podcast facilitates a societal mission for the public while creating branded goods for the companies involved. Based on the material and the categories we had constructed, we developed a set of binaries that, understood as typologies, capture important dimensions of the differences between the podcasts. These binaries are monologue vs. dialogue, factual vs. personal, reflexive vs. assertive, and intellectual discussants vs. experts. In the article, we discuss how podcasts draw commentary journalism in a dialogical direction. We also discuss what impact this has on public reasoning and the democratic role of commentary journalism.

## KEYWORDS

podcast, commentary journalism, columnist, digital public, dialogue

## Introduction

Commentary- and opinion-based journalism is growing worldwide (Knapskog et al., 2018; Esser & Umbricht, 2014; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012) and is often characterised as an interpretative moment in the news cycle (McNair, 2000). This growth is explained, among other reasons, by a growing need to make the complex and rapid information flow in society understandable (Neveu, 2016; Le Masurier, 2015). Furthermore, profiled columnists are valued as branded goods for media companies, drawing digital readers (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016).

This commentary- or opinion-based journalism constitutes a traditional genre. However, the internet and digital platforms provide new opportunities, and the genre is developing into innovative new formats, such as dialogue-based debate arenas and podcasts (Thyrum, 2018; Berry, 2016; Lindgren, 2016; Menduni, 2007). Journalists and editors in Norway argue that the dialogical part of commentary journalism makes it more suitable for development online than news journalism. There is also an editorial willingness to experiment online, even if some experiments end in failure (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2016). Such experience corresponds with findings in the Spanish media: “The adage ‘fail early, fail often’ is a principle that some media outlets have adopted in their innovation strategies with some success” (García-Avilés et al., 2019, p. 13).

A range of studies focuses on the commentary genre and its development. Scholars also examine the podcast format. However, few studies elaborate on the commentary genre in the podcast format. We aim to fill this research gap, discussing the evolution of commentary journalism by focusing on podcasts and using genre theory as the starting point. The research question in this paper is: What characterises the podcast as a format of commentary journalism, and where do podcasts take the commentary genre? Later in the text, we discuss the theoretical foundations before a literature review that sheds light on both the commentary genre and podcasts. Then we elaborate on the data and methods used before discussing the findings. Finally, we collect the threads into a concluding discussion.

## Theory

Genres are based on interactions between conventions and expectations and are understood as a relationship between media and the audience (Lüders et al., 2010; Lindgren, 2016). Style,

functions, and rhetoric vary from genre to genre. The commentary genre is described as the interpretative moment of news production (McNair, 2000, p. 61) and serves a societal mission of enlightening, opinion-making, and critique (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). Opinion-based journalism seeks to go beyond the mere reporting of news in the interest of context, explanation, analysis, and interpretation (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2018).

Esser and Umbricht (2014) describe growth in commentary and a change in the news and in columns from observation to interpretation. The shift from “news” to “views” is explained by the level of education and the status of the profession of journalists (p. 245). Furthermore, the societal need for explanation and background analysis of an ever-increasing information flow in society is put forward (Neveu, 2016). The news media fulfil distinct needs in society: circulating information, enabling public debate, and organising the public sphere (McNair, 2008). As Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) state, there is a rather wide consensus that an important democratic function of journalism is to provide people with the kind of information they need to be free and self-governing, and that interpretative journalism makes it easier for people to make sense of facts and understand what is happening (p. 156).

However, the genre is not a static form but develops and innovates. Rapid changes in infrastructure and material platforms fostered by digitisation are constantly exposing and challenging the concepts of genres (Liestøl & Morrison, 2016). Digital platforms convey new possibilities for developing the old genres of journalism. Print-based commentary journalism constitutes a traditional genre, and over the last few years, it has moved online. Social media increasingly impacts the distribution of columns and newsrooms attempting new commentary formats and new ways of communicating with audiences (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2020).

Genre development and newsroom innovation also imply autonomy and creativity for the professionals involved. In a previous study, we elaborated on how regional newsrooms in Norway use genre innovation in opinion-based journalism. We found an adaptive attitude in the newsrooms, where innovating contextual genres was perceived to strengthen the institutional values of journalism. We also found that marketing goals and societal purpose were closely intertwined. Consequently, the columnist becomes increasingly important as a brand (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2016). Deuze (2010) also talks about these integrated and convergent “multimedia journalism units, where competitor-colleagues are now expected to collaborate in order to produce news across different media channels (print, broadcast, online), formats

(information, opinion), and genres (breaking news, feature reporting, blogging, podcasting, and so on)” (p. 268).

## Literature review

### Commentary journalism

Studies of commentary journalism address and discuss its societal role and democratic function. Both in scholarly and political debate, there is increasing critique of the rising commentariat, both in relation to how it affects the societal role of journalism and whether it displaces fact-based, investigative journalism and reporting from the field. The critique has been concerned with a lack of relevance and analytical depth and suggestions that columnists assume a self-proclaimed and cynical expert role in the public sphere (Allern, 2010; McNair, 2008). An essential discussion is whether the commentators are becoming too powerful and are just reproducing the elites’ perspectives (Raabe, 2018, p. 9). Meltzer (2019) talks about the increase in *talk* in news, “also known as opinion and commentary in news” (p. 29). In addition, journalists have to be present on multiple platforms, expand their brand and be part of the financial incentives of the media business. In the Scandinavian political debate, young politicians in both Norway and Denmark have fronted some of the critiques through essays entitled “The dictatorship of the punditocracy” (Lysbakken & Isaksen, 2008) and “Mute the pundits” (Bengtsson, 2015).

However, the argumentative role of journalists in commenting on or analysing political developments has been widely acknowledged as a basic professional function and a necessary complement to objective reporting (Nord, Enli & Stur, 2015, p. 88). Ward (2009) claims that the liberal idea that a free press should inform citizens is tied to the tradition of interpretive journalism, which seeks to explain the significance of events (p. 299). In times of fragmentation, the commentary genre might be one of the keys for professional journalism to a renewed contract with the increasingly demanding and fragmented audience and to defend its autonomy (Knapskog, 2016).

Usher (2020) argues that the digital sphere has transformed “political and social commentary into a performance of self-as-brand and as journalist” (p. 2; see also Olausson, 2018). She talks about columnists as “celebrified” journalists, a combination of social media influencer, columnist, celebrity and political activist roles. Social media, where the commentaries are constantly

negotiated by the audiences (comments, likes and shares), strengthens columnists as influencers and even contributes to their becoming famous. Such personalised social media performance and self-branding strengthen the columnists' political authority and authenticity. Usher (2020) reflects on how celebrityisation among columnists has transformed journalistic and political spheres "from representation to self-presentation" (p. 15) and whether such journalistic practice is good or bad for deliberative democracies. Steensen (2015) uses the concept *den profesjonlige journalisten* (*the professional journalist*) to describe a double journalistic identity on social media: the personal but still professional journalist, which is also a valuable concept for the personalised behaviour of columnists in podcasts.

### Podcasts

This article analyses commentary journalism in a specific format, the podcast. Boczkowski and Ferris (2005) argue that digitalisation eliminates the boundaries between press, television, radio and online technologies (p. 3). Podcasts developed by traditional newspaper companies might stand as an example. The podcast as a digital medium was first introduced in 2004 and was "considered as converged media that bring together audio, web-based infrastructure and portable media devices" (Bonini, 2014, p. 21; Deuze, 2010). Bonini (2014) argues that ten years later, in 2014, a "second age" of podcasting occurred, not least because of the enormous success of the American public radio program "Serial" – 12 episodes were distributed as podcasts in 2014 with well over 20 million downloads in just a few months (p. 26). Over these ten years, the podcast has become increasingly professionalised and commercialised, a "transformation from a do-it-yourself, amateur niche medium to a commercial mass medium: from narrowcasting to broadcasting" (p. 27). The podcast goes beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries that affect radio (Menduni, 2007, p. 8). Today, podcast is produced not only by media companies but also by artists and public and private institutions. Sterne et al. (2008) argue that podcasting has opened "cultural production to a whole group of people who might otherwise have great difficulty being heard" (p. 12). In other words, podcasting has a democratic function. Bonini (2014), on the other hand, disagrees that podcasting is broadcasting in a broader democratic sense, but states that "podcasting is becoming (commercial) broadcasting" (p. 28).


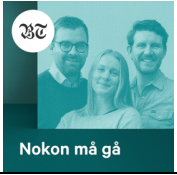


Podcasts also constitute a new format for the commentary genre, paving the way for a more dialogical communication between columnists and their audiences (see also Singer et al., 2011; Barnes,

2011). Oral podcasts have even facilitated a more personalised and intimate type of journalism, not least because the personalised listening space created by smartphones and headphones accommodates a bond created between voices and listeners (Coward, 2013; Lindgren 2016; Lüders, 2008). Menduni (2007) suggests a role for podcasting as a niche prosumer activity, not as random listening or passive feed. He also states that the audience does not see podcasters as institutions but as peers.

Podcasts are also suitable for media criticism and contribute to transparency into how columnists and editors think, strengthening their accountability and authority (Von Krogh & Svensson, 2015). Some scholars argue that analysis of a Swedish podcast showed that “adding transparency to their news organizations and to themselves is stated as one of the main motives for the podcast” (p. 62).

## Method

This article is based on case studies of four podcasts in Norway in 2020 and 2021, operating on three levels of the public sphere. Two of them belong to regional media companies, are published once a week, and operate in the regional public sphere: *Omadressert*, produced by Adresseavisen in Trondheim, and *Nokon må gå*, produced by Bergens Tidende in Bergen. The third, *Giæver og gjengen*, is a daily published podcast in the national tabloid *Verdens Gang* published in Oslo, the capital of Norway and operates in the national public sphere. The fourth podcast, *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, is produced for a Scandinavian public body and is broadcast once a week by the national broadcasting companies in Norway (NRK), Sweden (SR) and Denmark (DR). This latter podcast is different from the others, as it is innovative and produced by an independent, self-employed journalist/columnist. The specific podcasts were chosen in order to embrace both the regional and national public spheres.

<b>Podcast</b>				
<b>Public sphere</b>	Regional	Regional	National	Scandinavian
<b>Frequency</b>	Every Friday	Every Thursday	Daily	Every Sunday
<b>Length</b>	About 40 minutes	About 40 minutes	About 20 minutes	About 60 minutes
<b>Participants</b>	Three (two columnists and the political editor) and occasionally a guest	Three political columnists	One permanent columnist and one columnist from another editorial area in the newsroom	Three: two columnists/journalists and one author/artist/radio host
<b>Topic</b>	Three political and/or cultural topics; cultural recommendations for the weekend	Three political topics: at least one local and one national	Two political topics: international and national	Three political topics
<b>Number of listeners (week 1, 2021)</b>	54 unique devices, 38 downloaded/streamed	3,310 unique devices, 4,498 downloaded/streamed	31,317 unique devices, 115,306 downloaded/streamed	5,058 unique devices, 6,323 downloaded/streamed
<b>Number of listeners (week 20, 2021)</b>	814 unique devices, 1,681 downloaded/streamed	3,354 unique devices, 4,785 downloaded/streamed	24,800 unique devices, 75,086 downloaded/streamed	12,611 unique devices, 17,229 downloaded/streamed
<b>Analysed episodes (2020)</b>	30.4. Drømmen om kohort, 1. Mai og helten som ble svindler	1.5. Høiehyllest, Høgre og høgtid	30.4. Tangens talenter og hemmelighets-kremmeri.	3.5. Om sex-symbolet Anders Tegnell, den drapssiktede norske milliardæren og shariasjeiken som lurte den danske stat
	12.6. Podcast-stjerna Tete Lidbom om forskjells-behandling, rasisme og fotball	11.06. Rasismedebatt, nedlegging av bokbåt og Stad skipstunnel	11.6. Norges Bank, Norges Helter.	14.6. Korona og identitetspolitikk
	28.8. Giske-krise	27.8. Sian-bråket, Frp-krise og Giske	27.8. Jonas uten kontroll i Ap.	30.8. Skandaler

<b>Analysed episodes (2021)</b>	28.1. Om gretne gubber, Vita og Wanda og AUFs vervemetoder	28.1. Grensa stenger, kaos i FNB og alle skal til Vestland	28.1. Portforbud i Norge, steile fronter før riksrett i USA	31.1. Lars Norèn, polkøer og vaksine
	18.2. Om raseri på tynt grunnlag, velferdsstatens fremtid, Clubhouse og Woody Allen	18.2. Ferjekrig, klimakamp i Sp og kven skal du stemme på i grand prix-finalen?	18.2. Jensens exit	7.2. Make bygda great again
	26.2. Anmelderslakt, gondolentusiasme og medlemsras fra Ap	25.2. Erna Solberg jubilerer, fødeopprør og NMG hjelper deg	25.2. Likvidering i konsulatet, gubbene på balkongen	28.2. Melodifestival-mobbing, nekrofilii og Sylvi Listhaug

Table 1: The podcasts.

According to the number of listeners, we can see that, for *Omadressert* and *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, the numbers increased in the first half of 2021. *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, the most recent podcast, has more than doubled its number of listeners in the first half of 2021. *Omadressert* started in 2016 and hit the market in 2021. *Nokon må gå* seems to have stabilised its position among listeners, and *Giæver og gjengen* is the only podcast whose position has decreased<sup>1</sup>.

The article relies on text analyses of three podcast episodes from 2020 and three from 2021 (see Table 1). In addition, we have been listening to these podcasts more or less systematically for the past two years, and thus we will refer to more than these six episodes during the analysis. The selected podcasts have been transcribed and coded in relation to the way the columnists appear in the programs, what topics they introduce, how they present and discuss the different topics, how discussions between the columnists are practised, and the tone in the dialogue.

The analysis also benefits from semi-structured interviews with six columnists related to these four podcasts<sup>2</sup>. They have backgrounds as political journalists, cultural journalists or foreign correspondents and were, for the most part, experienced journalists before entering the commentary genre. Our initial plan was to interview two columnists from each podcast; however, due to the columnists' availability, we managed to recruit only one interviewee each for two of the podcasts. Three interviews were conducted face to face, one by the first author and two by the second author. Due to



the Covid-19 pandemic, the two authors conducted the remaining three interviews using Teams. Even if the interviewees are identified, we do not use their names in relation to the quotations. The interviews were transcribed and coded in relation to the questions in the interview guide, which focus mainly on four topics: 1) the (changed) role of the columnists, 2) the (changed) role of commentary journalism, 3) the podcasts (implementation, research, genre, etc.) and 4) the target group(s) of audiences/listeners.

In this article, the podcasts themselves and the (changed) role of the commentary genre are of greatest interest. The analysis is supplied by additional “in vivo” codes (Manning, 2017). Based on the material and the categories constructed, we developed a set of binaries that, understood as typologies, capture important dimensions of the differences between the podcasts. Each binary should be understood as extremes in a continuum, with no absolute distinctions between them. These binaries are monologue vs. dialogue, factual vs. personal, reflexive vs. assertive, and intellectual discussants vs. experts. In the following, we explain the contextual background and aim of the podcasts based on the columnists’ perceptions. Then we discuss our further findings in relation to the binary categories we have developed, and, finally, we summarise with a concluding discussion.

## **Contextual background and aim of the podcasts**

The podcasts are all solidly anchored in a publicist tradition. In accordance with Newman and Gallo (2019), all can be characterised as the talk/debate/conversation type of podcasts (p. 13). The podcasts we have studied mainly analyse, comment on, and discuss political news in the public sphere, characterising Newman and Gallo’s daily news type of podcasts, even if only one has daily episodes.

Both *Omadressert* and *Nokon må gå* have a regional public as their main catchment area. The columnists express the importance of being active commentators in their local and regional public, and it is vital to “influence what happens”. One of the columnists in *Omadressert* argues: “It is our mission to be fact-oriented because it is a lot of people just expressing themselves at all possible platforms... [...] It abounds of all sorts of weirdness”. The role of being a serious and fact-oriented regional debate arena among media outlets is vital. “It is important to interpret and explain the meaning of the news and guide our readers”, another columnist at

*Omadressert* asserted. The most important topics to comment on in *Omadressert* are the political and cultural fields.

Simultaneously, it is also important for the regional columnists to be visible voices in the national public sphere by delivering regional and alternative perspectives on national issues. One of the columnists for *Nokon må gå* argues: “If something happens in Bergen that attracts attention from people elsewhere in the country – then we are at our best”. As for *Omadressert*, they mostly discuss political issues and, to a large extent, the same political events, understandably because both podcasts are published at the end of the week.

The national podcast *Giæver og gjengen* emphasises commentary on international and national issues. This is especially true with Donald Trump and his political activity being a recurring theme in their podcasts over the last two years. The head of the podcast was previously a foreign correspondent in the United States. During the presidential election in the autumn of 2020, several columnists travelled to the United States to cover the political process. Simultaneously, the columnists underlined the importance of discussing “a national issue in every program”. In addition, their daily podcasts always have one participant from another part of the editorial staff who takes on the role of discussion partner in relation to issues close to the person’s own work or competence. It is “often a topic from the cultural section”, stated the leading columnist of the podcast. For instance, in one episode, they discussed the practice of tearing down statues and destroying pictures of national and international heroes. The host turned their attention to a news story close to the current participants’ fields of work (namely culture, 11 June 2020). This linkage to actual news is important for all podcasts. The columnists expressed in the interviews that the criterion of actuality is a guideline when setting the agenda for the episodes. This corresponds with the practice of columnists who write (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016).

*Norsken, svensken og dansken* aims to reach the Scandinavian public and put national political issues from the three countries on their agenda. A typical statement and a question from the Norwegian participant in this podcast, when discussing “the controversial hiring of the head of the oil fund in Norway”, was: “Why does this [news] not cross the borders?” The Swedish participant replied: “We hate your oil in Sweden. We hate it. We do not want to talk about it, so we don’t care” (30 August 2020). Even if this specific issue does not resonate with the Swedish public, the host of the podcast emphasises in the interviews that “the ‘art’ is to make the unknown interesting in a way that the audiences

experience it as relevant". This podcast also seeks "to create their own news". "Good commentary journalism simply puts things into play", the host of the podcast argues. A fixture of their program is to pick up reactions and comments on their discussions since last week – a way to focus on the news they have created.

These podcasts are all important for the columnists, not least to advance their oral skills as well as live performances and arrangements. Except for *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, which actually started as an offline live arrangement, all informants communicate the ambition to have live arrangements. The political editor of *Omadressert* states: "An important role is to create debate arenas and meeting places for people in the community, facilitate relevant and good debates, and bring the debates out where the people are". The practice of oral conversation and debate in the podcast is, as we can see, preparation for dialogue in an offline arena.

These live arrangements have a clear publicist purpose – to create meeting places, facilitate public debate, and help the audience make sense of facts (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012). Simultaneously, we can also observe a commercial purpose connected to the live arrangements. The columnist in *Giæver og gjengen* put it this way: "[Live arrangements] are both promo for the actual podcast and for other income opportunities". We can argue that this dual purpose might blur the borders between journalism's editorial and commercial parts. In the interviews, the columnists talk about this dual mission in the same breath, which we have experienced in former studies as well (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). The columnists still do not see this as a challenge, but rather an advantage, and underline that this duality has always been present in the press. The columnist in *Giæver og gjengen* argues: "They [the management of the newspaper] will make this podcast work, which has always been a claim in the press" and adds that this kind of dual work practice "has been my life for 35 years". From this perspective, this dual mission has perhaps always been part of the consciousness of a columnist.

Prominent columnists are important for the branding of the podcast and the newspaper. One example is how informants describe the work with podcasts as a preparation for participation in *Dagsnytt* 18<sup>3</sup>, where they are visible in the national public sphere. For the media companies, it becomes vital that their columnists are invited to participate in prestigious debate programs, contributing to both branding and authority. As one of the participants in *Omadressert* puts it: "We, the columnists, should preferably be heard and shown in other media, so that Adresseavisen can be relevant in a national context". Several scholars have discussed this

type of journalistic self-promotion and branding (Raabe, 2018; Rogstad, 2016). Some call the columnists “celebrified journalists” (Usher, 2020; Olausson, 2018), which indicates that the columnists become influencers, and even celebrities, with the power to impact commercial and political processes.

## Variety of dimensions

In the next part of the article, we will use the introduced categories/typologies to illuminate differences between the podcasts and will discuss these differences in relation to the changing role of the commentary journalism genre.

### Monologue vs. dialogue

We can argue that the podcast format is more dialogical than monological, not least because there is always more than one person present in a podcast program, communicating and discussing the topic(s). All interviewees agree on the concept of dialogue rather than monologue as the first and foremost characteristic of a podcast (in comparison to written commentary). The host of *Norsken, svensken og dansken*, who came from a position as a writing columnist, phrases it this way: “I got tired of the monologue-based comment that tells the world what I think [...] I need the conversation more than the monologue”.

A discussion on *Omadressert* (30 April 2020) can be used to illustrate the dialogical climate of conversation typical of the podcast when the participants discussed the cancellation of the national in-person May 1<sup>st</sup> celebration due to the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the participants argues “May 1<sup>st</sup> is more actual than ever, related to class, unemployment and so on”. Another agrees, adding, “We have more than 400,000 unemployed now (...) highest unemployment rates since the 1930s”. The third participant brings in the concept of “elites” and argues that “the workers on the front line have a salary level far below [that of] more privileged working groups”. The first participant followed up by commenting that the tribute to the health workers (applauding from balconies) “is not what they want, but higher wages”.

In addition, the columnists on the podcasts generally use social media to actively promote and distribute their columns and to communicate both with sources and with audiences. In our study, all participants are more or less active users of Facebook. Some participants use Twitter to introduce and advertise their specific podcasts and often preview some of the upcoming discussions. The podcast *Nokon må gå* undoubtedly has the most active community

on Facebook. Still, all the columnists from these four podcasts communicate with listeners, though admit that such communication is not as active as it could be. To conclude, we can argue that the dialogical aspect is a feature characteristic of the podcasts' content as well as of the participants' communication with audiences. Despite this, the dialogue is quite different in the different podcasts being studied, a topic we will return to.

The dialogue structure permits less authoritative rhetoric than the style of written commentaries does and might illustrate how the genre's development makes columnists climb down from their ivory towers. The tone is casual, free, and playful. One of the columnists of *Nokon må gå* terms their podcast a "Fredagspils" (Friday afternoon beer), which indicates that the dialogue will take place in a relaxed, comfortable, and calm environment. *Nokon må gå* is the most "relaxed" podcast of the four, with the most frequent use of humour, laughter and teasing amongst the participants, and we can ask whether the dialogue is real in all of the discussions. *Omadressert* and *Giæver og gjengen* are the most "serious" podcasts, which focus on the discussed issues without the columnists teasing each other, and *Norsken, svensken og dansken* is somewhere in between. We will examine this further below.

### **Factual vs. personal**

In relation to this more casual, free, and humorous style, the podcasts are more personalised than written commentaries are. Several scholars focus on the fact that podcasts invite a much more personalised style of journalism because podcast is a radio-like medium in which the human voice always has intimated the intended messages to a greater extent than printed media can (Lindgren, 2016; Berry, 2016; Thyrum, 2018), not least because the audiences also use their private smartphones, often with headphones, to listen. At the same time, we find a wide range of personalisation, from podcasts that are highly person-oriented to podcasts that are more topic-oriented, even if they are rare. To distinguish the podcasts, we describe them as *confessional and personal* (Coward, 2013, p. 12) on one side, where columnists offer their opinions in more personalised and intimate ways, and *factual and analytical* on the other, where columnists more seriously focus on the facts and the background information concerning the issues under discussion. These two aspects can also be seen as the duality of the journalist's role, expressed by Steensen (2015) as "the professional journalist": personal, but still professional.

We observe this personalised style in the podcasts under study. In *Nokon må gå* and *Norsken, svensken og dansken* the participants

reveal personal information during the programs. One example is when the host of one of these podcasts asks her Swedish colleague, “Åsa, what kind of ‘cemetery-belonging’ do you have?” The colleague answers that she does not know where she wants to be buried because her roots are not in the capital where she lives: “I feel completely lost in my present time, and even lost when thinking of my cemetery” (3 May 2021). During several episodes, we learn that the Swedish participant belongs to the political left and had a father who was an alcoholic. The Norwegian participant grew up on a farm and suffered from an eating disorder as a young woman. The Dane is about to become a father and is nervous and constantly irritated by his prime minister, Mette Frederiksen. Moreover, the participants from *Nokon må gå* get personal. One example is when one of the male participants says about a female participant: “and you are soon giving birth to a little child”. In the same episode, the political affiliation of one of the participants is discussed: “You have converted from FrP (The Progress Party) to Høyre (the Conservative Party)” (27 August 2020). During one program, the audience is also informed that one of the participants is homosexual. In the discussions and dialogue, the participants actively refer to these political and personal positions. The participants for *Omadressert* and *Gjæver og gjengen* reveal less personal information. Their discussions and reflections do not address personal aspects in the same way, and we can argue that they are more distant than personally oriented in their discussions when compared to the others.

### **Reflexive vs. assertive**

We find that all four podcasts studied here reflect both personal and professional features, albeit to varying degrees. All discuss current political issues and events, often related to the news. Everyone is open-minded and sharing; they laugh and try to create a relaxed atmosphere. However, we did find some differences between the programs. As already highlighted, *Norsken, svensken og dansken* and *Nokon må gå* have a more personal style. For *Norsken, svensken og dansken* the conversation is more reflexive and open. To a greater extent, participants can change their minds than on *Nokon må gå*, where the arguments are more established. *Norsken, svensken og dansken* is also more exploratory; for example, someone might ask, “what do you think the answer to this question would be in Denmark, Hassan?” (30 August 2020) or “what do you think, Hilde... when you read this, what are your thoughts?” (03 May 2020), the latter relating to Covid-19 prevention practices in Sweden. In addition, we find examples where the participants of *Norsken,*

*svensken og dansken* even allow themselves to change their opinions during the program or between two programs or to distinguish between their public and personal opinions. For instance, in relation to a discussion of the #MeToo movement focused on the fact that Cecilia Wallin had publicly accused a named Swedish person of rape, Åsa Linderborg thinks this is wrong, but still, she argues:

I just have to admit, though, that I constantly alternate between thinking that if something like this happened to me and I got the feeling that nobody believed me, then I may at some point think: I'll tell it anyway (30 August 2020).

The participants in *Nokon må gå* can also be generous to each other—in one episode on 11 June 2021, one participant says to another, “Gerd, what do you think?”—but we also noticed that they are confrontational. For instance, this conversation on 18 February 2021 between the two of them:

A: Imagine life with free ferries!  
 B: No, it [free ferries] is too much...  
 A: Why is it too much?  
 B: Because the roads are not free of charge...  
 A: Some of the roads are free of charge...  
 B: No, they're not...

It is not easy to represent the impression that the podcast creates in written form, but in *Nokon må gå*, participants often interrupt each other, generally with a humorous touch, and protest each other's utterances. These interruptions and harsh tones seem intentional, and we feel as though the participants enjoy provoking and confronting each other during the podcasts. This makes sense when we recall they nicknamed their podcast “Fredagspils” (Friday afternoon beer). Such interruption and provocation are not characteristic of *Norsken*, *svensken og dansken*, where participants have a more polite tone. They invite each other to reflect, as we can see when one of them says, “Åsa, you have also read the article in *Politiken*, what do you think?” (03 May 2020).

In contrast, we have *Giæver og gjengen* and *Omadressert*, which are closer to a factual and distant genre of commentary. Participants discuss various topics with a more serious tone, and each person speaks one at a time. Commentators stick to these cases under discussion in a more “serious” manner by presenting facts and arguments covering the topics. One of the participants in *Omadressert* is a cultural columnist who ends each program by

presenting a cultural recommendation for the weekend, such as a film, a book, or a computer game. For instance, in the episode aired 30 April 2020 the columnist recommended the film *Bad Education*.

These different features of the podcasts allow for a model consisting of two intersecting dimensions (as shown in Figure 1): a vertical axis that spans the personal and the factual, and a horizontal axis spanning reflexiveness on one end and assertiveness on the other. This provides a range of possible podcast profiles. Podcasts with a personal style can be more reflexive or more assertive, and the same goes for podcasts with a more factual style.

Podcasts located in the upper left side, with a personal and reflexive style, can be characterised by a relaxed and homely atmosphere where participants can draw on personal experiences while reflecting openly about the topic(s) at hand. Participants trust each other, and the aim is to collaboratively explore the topics being discussed, not to win the discussion. In the podcasts belonging to the upper right side, the atmosphere is tenser, the voices are louder, and the utterances are in danger of being cut off by other participants. Also, participants know each other well, so they interrupt each other and engage personally in the discussion. We will place *Norsken, svensken og dansken* and *Nokon må gå* in the upper part of the model—*Norsken, svensken og dansken* more to the left, and *Nokon må gå* more to the right.

Podcasts in the lower part of the model have a more serious style, with participants being stricter about sticking to the topic and not interrupting each other. Here, the atmosphere is more like a disciplined discussion in which individuals are given the floor to present their arguments one by one. However, while the podcasts on the lower left side have a more reflective tone, allowing more open-ended reasoning, podcasts on the lower right side are characterised by participants defending their own opinions. We will argue that *Giæver og gjengen* and *Omadressert* can be placed in the lower part of the model.

### **Intellectual discussants vs. experts**

To separate *Giæver og gjengen* and *Omadressert*, we turn to another dimension, namely the contrast between intellectual discussants and experts, which can also be placed on the horizontal axis in the Figure. This dimension is more related to the observed roles participants are given or those they assume in the podcasts. One distinction is between the podcasts containing participants communicating equally and podcasts with a host who leads the discussion. In *Giæver og gjengen*, it is indisputable who is leading and in charge of the plan of each program. Anders Giæver is the



host; he asks questions in every program and is the one who changes the topic of discussion. In that regard, we might argue that the placement of *Giæver og gjengen* should be more to the lower right than to the left. In *Giæver og gjengen*, other participants also often appear to be experts. For instance, when the host of the program asks a political columnist, “How close is it to the barrier limit now for [the political party] Venstre [to become represented in parliament]?” (25 March 2021), the columnist is given an *expert* role. Also, *Omadressert* has a host, but it is not easy to identify the hierarchy during the discussion and the turn-taking is less monitored. All participants appear as intellectual discussants reflecting on the actual problem under discussion. This would place *Omadressert* more to the lower left in the figure. Then, the model would be like this:

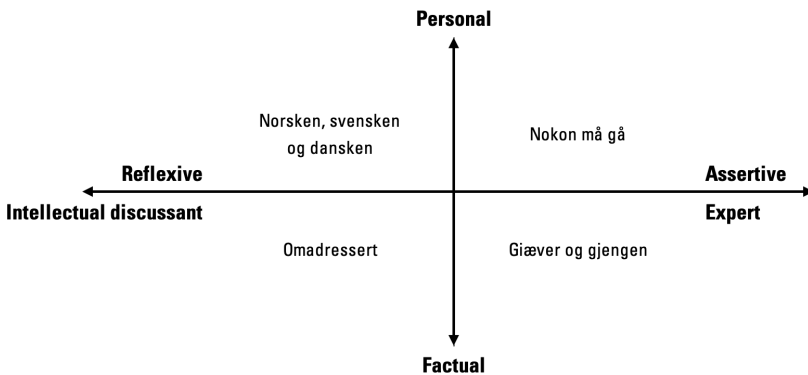


Figure 1: Dimensions of podcasts

Scholars have also identified commentary journalists’ frequent practice of *meta-communication* in podcasts (Lindgren, 2016; Knapskog, 2016; Thyrum, 2018). Knapskog (2016) argues: “The commentary genre is a vehicle for self-reflexivity and examination with a critical lens” [on behalf of the journalistic profession] (p. 175). Some columnists critique the media as their main activity on a regular basis. However, it seems easier to discuss their own journalistic practice more freely (see also von Krogh & Svensson, 2017). We find such self-critique or media critique in some of the podcasts along both the upper and lower axis of the model.

*Norsken, svensken og dansken* often discusses media practice. For instance, in an episode aired on 14 June 2020, the commentators discuss mass media’s coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement. The Norwegian participant argues:

I think it is exciting to see how Western liberal media so actively support Black Lives Matter, at the same time as they had such a problem with the Yellow Vests in France – it was just scum, they were primitive, they were violent. It was no problem to put in the National Guard and shot at their eyes [the protesters] with rubber bullets, made people blind, it was no problem. But this [Black Lives Matter], this is the big hallelujah.

We find something similar in the *Giæver og gjengen* episode from 30 April 2020, in which commentators discuss whether news coverage contributed to public prejudice against a man whose wife had disappeared. The columnist present, who commented on this case in the newspaper, says: “It is strange how many people went from being epidemiologists [Covid-19] to becoming experts in investigation [...] I understand that this criticism affects myself as well”. The host of this podcast even informs us in the interview that: “One goal [of the podcast] was exactly that we should give an insight into the journalistic processes – show the cards [...] it could be a way to greater transparency”. Such transparency could even strengthen media accountability (von Krogh & Svensson, 2017).

## Concluding discussion

This article aimed to discuss the characteristics of podcasts as a commentary activity and to reflect on where the podcast has taken the genre. Commentary journalism is part of a critical tradition, given its societal mission to facilitate public debate and reasoning. As we have discussed, it has also drawn criticism. A vital question is whether commentary in the podcast format improves the public’s reasoning skills and makes it easier for citizens to make sense of what happens in society (Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012; Neveu, 2016). Or, is the podcast a place where columnists can finally gain exposure and become “celebrified” journalists and branded goods for their companies (Usher, 2020; Steensen, 2015), and thus support the critique that their commentary is superficial? Are podcasts a sort of democratic broadcasting tool, as Sterne et al. (2008) claim, or are they, as Bonini (2014) contends, merely a commercial activity?

On the one hand, we can argue that oral podcasts, a more intimate and personalised media format (Lüders, 2008; Lindgren, 2016), bring audiences closer to the discussions presented and may perhaps make reflections and explanations in the episodes more understandable, and thus serve a democratic function. Arguably, the dialogical form of podcasts could also contribute to listeners’ reflections and thus create greater audience engagement. The general rise in podcasts’ popularity (Newman & Gallo, 2019) could

also be said to add to democratisation. The dialogical form is also less authoritative, where columnists step down from their ivory towers through the invitation to dialogue, resulting in more genuine participation (Barnes, 2011; Singer et al., 2011; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2020). Listening to the columnists' own reflections and opinions may inspire other citizens to become interested in politics, beyond those who already are. The reflexive and dialogical style of the podcast might better stimulate the reflections and opinion-making of the audience than one-way bombastic utterances do. In that way, we can claim that podcasts produced by columnists on one side strengthen the public debate and, thus, the democratic process in society.

On the other hand, we can argue that the columnists in the podcasts have increased their power by personalising communication and combining podcasts and social media to become visible, famous, and celebrated, rather than facilitating public debate. Such cross-platform persona construction (Usher, 2020, p. 14) transforms opinion-based journalism from an analytical, reflective act to a channel for an authoritative political influencer's focus on their own opinions. Thus, it might confirm the critique of the columnist as an analytically shallow self-proclaimed cynical expert. This can be further reinforced by an increased focus on the commercial side of columnists' work, exposing the blurred line between the societal missions of journalism and columnists as branded goods for the media companies. We may also use Meltzer's (2019) "From news to talk" to illustrate how the relationship between journalists and technology has transformed journalistic practice. She argues that the expansion of opinion and commentary in television has engendered a new discursive practice in the media, one more related to talk: both a movement towards entertainment (as in talk *shows*) and towards leading people/citizens to talk "in all sorts of ways" (p. 209), made possible by emphasising the dynamic of social media.

To conclude, we can argue that the dual mission (of church and state) always has been present in media companies and still is. Columnists have always been important as brands for media companies, even in the pre-digital print era. However, we argue that columnists as branded goods on a podcast may have strengthened market orientation towards commentary journalism, not least because of their personalised and celebrated position on podcasts as opposed to the profiles they maintain through writing.

Our contribution sheds light on how the podcast format innovates the genre by moving it in a dialogical direction and, further, how this development is grounded in both commercial and societal considerations. However, our study analyses only four

podcasts. The genre of commentary podcasts thus requires further research that will scrutinise the podcast format and employ methods that include audiences. If we understand the societal mission of podcasts to be part of the commentary genre and its use and perception by citizens, we must also give voice to the listeners.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.podrapporten.no/>

<sup>2</sup> *Omadressert*: Kari Hovde and Kato Nykvist; *Nokon må gå*: Gerd Tjeldflåt and Jens Kihl, *Giæver og Gjengen*: Anders Giæver; *Norsken, Svensken og Dansken*: Hilde Sandvik.

<sup>3</sup> Daily debate program on weekdays on the national broadcast company NRK's radio (P2) and television (NRK2) stations in collaboration.

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