Depth and value: content and significance of long-form narration in online audio

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Abstract. In the current era where visual media dominate audiences' daily entertainment and other activities, the "fragmented" pattern of information consumption seems to have become the mainstream. However, long-form narrative programs in online audio, represented by podcasts and audio dramas, have emerged as a non-negligible communication force. This paper analyzes this form from three aspects: content construction, value dimensions, and cultural significance. In terms of content, it explores the diversity of narrative subjects, the cross-border integration of themes, and the innovation of narrative structures; in terms of value, it elaborates on its role in knowledge dissemination, emotional connection, and preservation of cultural memory; in terms of significance, it reveals its impact on the balance of media ecology, the expansion of public discourse space, and the revival of auditory culture. Long-form narrative content in online audio holds significant contemporary significance that deserves attention.

Keywords: online audio, long-form narration, auditory culture, media value, content construction

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

In the current iteration of digital media, visual culture remains dominant. Nevertheless, the aesthetic fatigue caused by short videos has endowed online audio—with sound as its core—with considerable communication advantages, particularly the long-form narrative format, which has attracted widespread attention. Data from iiMedia Research shows that the scale of China's online audio users has maintained continuous growth, reaching 747 million in 2024 and is expected to hit 822 million by 2029. According to the 2024 Podcast Industry Report - The Era of Auditory Time is Now, over 80% of the surveyed users listen to podcasts for more than 3 days a week, and 76.2% of users spend more than 30 minutes listening to podcasts a day—equivalent to scrolling through at least 60 short videos or reading 10 official WeChat articles. Additionally, 40% of users listen to podcasts for more than 1 hour a day, which is equivalent to watching 1 long variety show or 2 TV drama episodes [1].

The emergence and prosperity of long-form narrative content in online audio are the results of technological and content innovation. This format inherits the auditory genes of traditional radio while incorporating the interactivity of the Internet and the personalization of big data. Breakthroughs in audio AI technologies such as Tencent's AudioStory are also providing support for higher-quality content production. These changes and developments lay the foundation and create possibilities for transforming the logic of content production and dissemination as well as audience habits.

1.2. Definition of core concepts

1.2.1. Online audio

In this paper, online audio refers to content forms such as podcasts and audiobooks, which take the Internet as the carrier and rely on digital technology for production, storage, and transmission. Compared with traditional radio, online audio offers more diverse channels, richer content, stronger interactivity, and personalized customization. It breaks the constraints of time and space, forming a pattern where "everyone can listen, and everything can be heard".

1.2.2. Long-form narration in online audio

The author argues that the definition of long-form narration is not solely based on duration; the key lies in its complete narrative structure and logical chain. Long-form narration in online audio usually lasts over 30 minutes per episode or presents a single topic in multiple episodes. Such programs have a clear subject, complete plot, and distinct theme, guiding the audience to an immersive experience through event arrangement and character portrayal. Specific program types, such as Story FM (non-fictional), Black Water Park (critical), and original audio dramas (fictional), constitute a diversified ecological system of programs. Combining these characteristics, this format is essentially different from short audio and casual talk shows.

1.3. Research significance

The discussion on this content format fills the gap in the research on auditory culture. Existing media research mostly focuses on visual culture, with insufficient systematic analysis of audio narrative—especially the lack of in-depth exploration of long-form narration. Analyzing its content characteristics and value dimensions can enrich the theoretical system of digital narratology and media culture research.

Meanwhile, this research can provide references for creators and platforms. Currently, the online audio market faces problems such as a shortage of high-quality content and homogenization. Long-form narration creation encounters challenges like narrative fragmentation and difficulty in sustaining audience attention. Analyzing narrative strategies and value approaches can help creators improve content quality and promote the transformation of the "auditory economy" from traffic-driven to value-driven.

2. Content construction of long-form narration in online audio

2.1. Narrative subjects: from professional monopoly to diversified symbiosis

In the era of traditional radio, narrative subjects were mostly professional institutions, often leading to the phenomenon of elite monopoly. However, the maturity and popularization of online audio technology have broken this situation, forming an ecological pattern where professional and individual creators coexist.

Generally, works produced by professional institutions are of higher quality, with professional teams, sufficient funds, and systematic planning. For example, the audio drama Those Stories of the Ming Dynasty on Himalaya—with its professional dubbing and elaborate sound effects—creates an immersive scenario, which is widely acclaimed and has exceeded 1 billion views in a single season. On the other hand, individual creators bring personalized and diversified content. Due to the low threshold for production and release, especially niche topics have gained broader space for expression.

Currently, there is a growing trend of integration between professional and amateur creators. Through activities such as "creation support programs", platforms provide training and traffic support for individual creators, while individual ideas offer topic selections for professional institutions—aiming to jointly improve content quality.

2.2. Narrative themes: from singularity to cross-border integration

The theme selection of long-form narration in online audio currently presents the characteristic of cross-border integration, breaking the limitations of traditional topic selection, forming a multi-field content matrix, satisfying personalized needs, and demonstrating the advantage of carrying in-depth content.

In knowledge popularization online audio programs, with "audible knowledge" as the core, complex knowledge is simplified. For instance, East Asia Observer transforms academic topics such as the history of the Cold War and cultural comparison into multi-episode long-form narrative content. It not only ensures rigor and listenability but also differs from the fragmented popular science in short videos. As for humanistic documentary online audio programs, they usually take real stories as the core and strive to record the era and individual memories. For example, Story FM presents diversified life experiences and slices of the era through the oral accounts of ordinary people, records the voices of marginalized groups, and realizes the diversified preservation of cultural memory. Entertainment and cultural audio programs create high-quality content through in-depth interpretation of popular culture. For example, Black Water Park focuses on sci-fi culture, analyzes sci-fi elements in literary and artistic works such as films, television, and animations, and adopts a "criticism + narration" model to trace the cultural origins of literary and artistic works, thus forming a stable audience community.

2.3. Narrative strategy: structure and artistic innovation

The appeal of long-form narration in online audio stems from the innovative design of narrative strategies. Through structural design and the application of audio elements, creators build a highly appealing auditory experience and strive to address and avoid issues such as audience auditory fatigue.

Generally, the narrative structure of programs adopts a macro framework of "total-subtotal-total" and a micro design of "event connection". For multi-episode programs on the same theme, they revolve around the core theme, with each episode being independent yet interconnected, and progress in the structure of "introduction-development-climax-conclusion". At the same time, the diversified use of sound symbols helps construct immersive scenarios. Human voices are used to convey emotions—for example, the host's humorous tone creates a relaxed atmosphere; background music is used to render emotions—for example, documentary programs usually use soothing pure music, while suspense programs tend to use tense soundtracks; environmental sound effects enhance authenticity—for example, historical programs include the sound of horse hooves and market bustle. The comprehensive application of these elements makes long-form narrative programs complete auditory artworks.

3. Value dimensions of long-form narration in online audio

3.1. Cognitive value: contextualized communication of in-depth knowledge

In the era of information fragmentation, long-form narration in online audio, with its characteristic of "liberating the senses", has become a carrier for in-depth knowledge dissemination, realizing the contextualized implementation of cognitive value. Audio does not require visual attention, so it can be integrated into scenarios such as commuting and fitness, realizing the "systematic use of fragmented time" and expanding the boundaries of knowledge dissemination. Its advantages in length and structure enable it to carry complex knowledge, while the narrative expression lowers the threshold for acceptance. In addition, auditory stimulation generally imposes a lower cognitive load, and audiences may absorb knowledge more effectively in a relaxed state. The "unconscious learning" model can strengthen memory and form an "auditory cognition" model.

3.2. Affective value: a link in an atomized society

In contemporary society, interpersonal relationships are gradually becoming "atomized", and loneliness and social anxiety are widespread. Long-form narration, with its media characteristics, easily builds emotional connections, alleviates anxiety, and plays a positive role in companionship, empathy, and community construction. The "sense of presence" of audio has a natural companionship attribute. In program content creation, creators capture details and unfold emotions. For example, Story FM allows the audience to deeply engage in others' experiences through real narratives, generating strong empathy. Meanwhile, audio podcast narration gathers a group of audiences with roughly consistent interests, values, and emotional experiences, forming an exclusive emotional community around each audio podcast. On one hand, the audio text triggers the audience's thinking and soothes their emotions; on the other hand, by setting up an interactive speaking mechanism for the audience to express their views to the podcast narrator or other audiences, it achieves the effect of resolving doubts and releasing emotions. Therefore, the podcast's audio text becomes a "co-constructed text" for the community's emotions [2].

3.3. Cultural value: digital preservation of diversified memories

Long-form narration in online audio also undertakes the function of cultural recording and inheritance, contributing to the maintenance of cultural diversity, the preservation of oral history, and the promotion of cultural innovation. Traditional media have already made successful attempts in preserving cultural content through sound. For example, China National Radio's special report Farewell to Our Fading Cultural Markers is a feast of cultural sounds. Through the collaboration of multiple frequencies, the presentation of various genres, and multi-channel dissemination, it gives full play to the advantages of sound, makes full use of audio effects, and pursues cultural markers and presents cultural changes from a humanistic perspective [3].

The communication characteristics of online audio enable programs to break through traffic limitations, providing a platform for niche cultures and marginalized voices, forming a "long-tail effect" and maintaining cultural diversity. As a digital carrier of oral history, long audio provides convenient recording methods and broad communication channels, facilitating the preservation and inheritance of collective memory. Moreover, the topic selection and production forms of many programs combine traditional elements with modern perspectives, endowing traditional culture with new forms and fostering new formats through the collision of different cultural fields.

4. Contemporary significance of long-form narration in online audio

4.1. Auditory revival under visual hegemony

The rise of long-form narration in online audio breaks the hegemony of visual media, promotes the balance of media ecology, and the "auditory revival" holds profound media ethical significance.

Auditory media do not require the audience's continuous visual attention, liberating the eyes and hands, and can be integrated into multiple scenarios. For example, parents are more inclined to use it as a source of knowledge for their children to avoid vision damage and cultivate concentration. At the same time, it also provides a "media break" for those who are overly dependent on visual media. Data shows that podcast listening mostly occurs in scenarios such as exercise (49.5%), waking up (37.9%), and driving (33.9%), and is often not limited to a single scenario [4]. Creators of in-depth long-form narrative content adhere to in-depth creation, and may spend several hours discussing serious topics, demonstrating professional spirit and social responsibility, and promoting the transformation of media from "attention harvesting" to "value transmission". Long-form narrative content can also awaken the audience's auditory perception ability, demonstrate the richness of the auditory world, promote the all-round development of human perception methods, and cultivate aesthetic appreciation and perceptual sensitivity.

4.2. Reconstruction of a rational discourse space

Long-form narration in online audio, relying on its communication characteristics and content advantages, has become a force in reconstructing the public discourse space. Many public issues are usually complex and require sufficient arguments and logic. Long-form narration can achieve a "panoramic" interpretation, presenting multiple perspectives and supporting with multiple arguments to help the audience understand the issues comprehensively. The program format often adopts forms such as interviews and roundtable discussions—for example, inviting guests with different positions and having the host guide neutrally —which breaks the "monologue" pattern, helps the audience improve their cognition, and cultivates critical thinking and tolerance. In the process of revealing multiple dimensions of issues, it can also alleviate the "black-and-white" confrontational emotions on social media.

4.3. Spiritual sanctuary in a fast-paced society

In the current fast-paced society, anxiety and impetuosity are widespread. With its "slow-paced" approach, long-form narration provides individuals with a spiritual sanctuary, which has positive significance for mental health and self-development.

Unlike the way emotions are expressed through visual forms on screens, story-telling in radio and podcasts is very suitable for exploring personal life experiences. Audio stories (usually with subtitles on smartphones) explore our lives through sound and colloquial language. When listening to programs, the audience feels as if they are hearing the intimate whispers of the narrator. Podcasts establish this personalized listening space through headphones and further form a link connecting sound, stories, and the audience [5]. The content of long-form narrative programs usually revolves around relatively complex topics, requiring the audience to follow the logic continuously. While listening, the audience can exercise their logical thinking ability. Long-form audio programs on knowledge and culture can help the audience easily acquire knowledge and broaden their horizons. For example, professionals can understand industry trends through business programs, and students can supplement knowledge through historical programs. This method is more adaptable to the current pace of life.

5. Conclusions and prospects

5.1. Research conclusions

Long-form narration in online audio is an emerging media format in the digital age. It realizes diversified values through the construction of unique content and holds important contemporary significance. It has formed a narrative subject ecology where professionals and individuals coexist, built a cross-border theme matrix, and achieved narrative innovation. Meanwhile, this format serves as a carrier for in-depth knowledge dissemination, an emotional link in an atomized society, and a preserver of diversified cultural memories. It contributes to promoting the balance of media ecology, reconstructing the rational public discourse space, and providing individuals with a spiritual sanctuary. Its rise is the result of the joint action of technological development, social needs, and cultural changes, proving that audio media still possess strong vitality in the visual era.

5.2. Future prospects

The development of long-form narration in online audio still faces challenges such as uneven content quality, difficulty in commercial monetization, and inadequate copyright protection, which require the joint efforts of creators, platforms, and society. Creators should adhere to the principle of "content is king" and improve quality and originality; platforms should improve support and copyright systems; and society should provide attention and support.

Technological innovations such as AI will bring new opportunities to long-form narration in online audio. For example, AudioStory can realize the automatic generation of long audio from text. In the future, an "AI-human collaborative creation model" may be formed, further lowering the threshold, enriching content forms, and expanding the development space of programs.

Furthermore, long-form narration in online audio is expected to become a carrier for cross-cultural communication. Sound symbols have advantages across languages and cultures. Long-form narrative content can realize in-depth cultural exchanges. In the future, through multi-language dubbing and transnational cooperation, it may become a new path for the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

In conclusion, long-form narration in online audio has demonstrated strong vitality and diversified values. With technological progress and creative innovation, it will surely play a more important role in the digital cultural ecology and make greater contributions to the development of individuals, society, and culture.

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