



Article

The ‘Confessional’ Voice in Food Journalism: Decentring Narratives in the *Whetstone Radio Collective*

Lucia Vodanovic * and Janani Venkateswaran *

Journalism and Publishing, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, London SE1 6SB, UK

* Correspondence: l.vodanovic@lcc.arts.ac.uk (L.V.); j.venkateswaran0320211@arts.ac.uk (J.V.)

Abstract: This article discusses the use of personal narratives in food media and journalism with a particular focus on podcasting. It situates the research amongst the abundance of lived experiences both in food content and in podcasting, two spaces that have been regarded as providers of the intimacy required to challenge impartiality practices in journalism. Given that the growth of podcasting has arguably failed to include enough non-mainstream voices, our primary research is based on four series of the *Whetstone Radio Collective*, a media organisation that aims to tell the stories of marginalised communities. Using content and thematic analysis, it establishes that the innovative use of first-person narratives of the hosts—who are overwhelming people of colour and embody stories of migration and displacement that mirror the food stories—is accompanied by conventional journalistic sourcing of experts who are already established voices based in the Global North. A recentring agenda is most obvious when it reclaims histories such as that of black farmers in the US, when it situates the consumption of foods as part of the global trade that drove the colonial project, or when it delves into and criticises foodways such as the social architecture of kitchens.

Keywords: food journalism; confessional journalism; podcasting; first-person; whetstone collective



Citation: Vodanovic, Lucia, and Janani Venkateswaran. 2023. The ‘Confessional’ Voice in Food Journalism: Decentring Narratives in the *Whetstone Radio Collective*. *Journalism and Media* 4: 918–930. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia4030059>

Academic Editor: Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 22 July 2023

Revised: 21 August 2023

Accepted: 21 August 2023

Published: 24 August 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Notions of hybridity, liminality, or the crossing of borders are often found in research about podcasting. Bonini (2022), for instance, has famously moved beyond the arguments of both radio scholars and researchers of digital culture to state that this medium re-mediate aspects of radio but also some features of other media, technologies, and listening practices and, as a result, is a new (yet not entirely new) hybrid cultural form. Another example is Llinares (2018), who has written about the medium’s “liminality” or “in-betweenness”, a practice of challenging boundaries and approaches, while also describing podcasting as a mixture of “journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education” (Llinares 2018, p. 5).

Mirroring that understanding of hybridity and border-crossing, food journalism and food media more broadly has also been characterised as bringing together a variety of genres and approaches, from education to entertainment, lifestyle to health. In their recent edited collection, *The Political Relevance of Food Media and Journalism: Beyond Reviews and Recipes*, Fakazis and Fursich (2023) note that they often use food media and food journalism in an almost identical way, not because they are the same but because of the difficulties of establishing boundaries between journalism and other forms of non-fiction media, particularly when the focus is not on news journalism, and the specific challenges of food journalism with its mix of genres and platforms and the cohabitation of those who are professionally trained and those who are not. As a result, their collection brings themes as varied as the environmental issues of food travel journalism, food activism on Instagram, the turn towards ‘domesticity’ in *The New York Times*’s food writing during the COVID pandemic, *Netflix* series, or the genre of Indian “Village Food” videos on YouTube, among others.

This article furthers the authors' interrogation about the opportunities that food media might offer to engage with social and political issues at a local, regional, and international level, by paying specific attention to the personal narratives and stories found in aural food journalism, given that the journalistic dimension is arguably less researched than others in the current scholarship about podcasting (Lindgren 2021). As Fakazis and Fursich (2023) acknowledge, food journalism, being part of lifestyle journalism and media, straddles different conceptions of the self within the social. On one side consumer-oriented—as discussed, for instance, in the work of Tania Lewis (2008)—on the other, engaged in its democratic potential or at least in roles that are not reducible to the political but might have consequences for political life (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018). The confessional voice in podcasting and journalism also straddles two dimensions, that of the intimacy of personal narratives and that of the presentation of the self as an individual brand in the precarious environment of the creative industries, of which journalism is a part (Olausson 2017; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013). This is a tension that will be discussed in the literature review section of this article. This constitutes another liminal zone of what Murray (2019) has termed “collective individualism”, also discussed below, referring to the dynamics of confessional aesthetics delivered in a personal episode that also needs to meet the expectations of producers and the demands of an audience.

Our case study is made of a total of five podcast series from the *Whetstone Radio Collective*, which sits under the umbrella of the *Whetstone Magazine* and media company. Founded in 2016 by the food writer, producer, and entrepreneur Stephen Satterfield—described by Fakazis and Fursich (2023) as one of the contemporary voices bringing a political tone to the contemporary food debate, alongside others such as the *Food and Environment Reporting Network* outlet and *The Racist Sandwich* podcast—it works with creatives in various parts of the world to tell food stories. Each episode of each series features interviews with people in the industry, a linear exploration of ideas, and ambient sounds that complement the storytelling. The host takes up the role of a narrator as opposed to that of a traditional interviewer and peppers the overarching narrative with personal stories and memories. The podcasts hosts are journalists, food writers, and academics who represent diverse cultural communities and identities, like Clarissa Wei, for instance, an American-Taiwanese journalist based in Taipei, who presents the show *Climate cuisine*, an exploration of sustainable crop patterns, and how they are used in similar climate zones across cultures; or Niki Nakazawa, an American currently based in Mexico, who hosts *The nectar run*, an agave-focused journey through distilleries, local businesses, and mezcal history. The personal stories of travel, migration, and diaspora very often emulate the journeys of the various food ingredients and practices that provide the central themes of each episode.

2. Literature Review

The Space of Food Journalism and Media

As Brüggemann et al. (2022) have discussed, food and food practices have continued to be relegated to the margins of both news media journalism research. The authors argue that this should not be the case, given that food is a key dimension of life and culture and that it relates to various political and social issues, which is why it is so central to other areas of research such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural history (Brüggemann et al. 2022). This space has arguably become more important than ever given the pressures around food security (or lack of) because of, among other things, the war on Ukraine, which brought an initial disruption to the trade of grains and oilseeds that people previously took for granted. Indeed, Greene and Cramer (2011) have argued that it is precisely this “taken-for-grantedness” of food practices that has resulted in a certain invisibility of the food space in the front spaces of mainstream news coverage. Additionally, food journalism is often regarded in academic research as a subgenre of lifestyle journalism, a beat that has also existed in the margins of journalism research until the work of authors such as Hanusch (2017) and Vodanovic (2019), among others, which has stated both its neglect and its importance.

This is despite the significant growth of food journalism in the last couple of decades, as the work of [English and Fleischman \(2017\)](#), [Kristensen and From \(2012\)](#), and [Fusté-Forné and Masip \(2019\)](#), among others, has argued. Yet when its importance is asserted, its place within the wider ecology of journalism is approached with caution or through a discussion of how it bleeds into other genres and practices. For instance, [English and Fleischman \(2017\)](#) have interrogated if restaurant reviews should be understood as an extension of marketing and promotional practices, concluding in their study of broadsheets in Australia and the UK that food content remains in ‘the softer side’ of journalism and is more susceptible to commercial influences than others; and Kristensen and From, who have described how news desks might cover food or music as equivalent matters “by articulating them as expressions both of culture, lifestyle and/or consumption” ([Kristensen and From 2012](#), p. 26). The recent study of [Brüggemann et al. \(2022\)](#) establishes that even when food is mentioned in food coverage, topics such as food prices, provenance, or environment are avoided in favour of others such as losing weight, health, and the social practices of taste and ‘tastemaking’. Food coverage is therefore rarely critical, investigative, or political, they conclude. The very recent collection by [Fakazis and Fursich \(2023\)](#) mentioned in the introduction has a direct political focus but is pitched as an interrogation of the political relevance and potential of food media rather than considering this as a given, a question determined, among other things, by its capacity (or lack of) to frame stories as collective issues instead of individual narratives and go beyond—as the subtitle says—the reviews and recipes that for decades have provided the basis of food content.

Food journalism emerged from “women’s pages” ([Voss 2020](#)), and has traditionally been a mixture of recipes, food education, consumer information, and service journalism as defined by [Fursich \(2012\)](#). Jane Nickerson’s career arc as the first *The New York Times* food journalist illustrates this trend. Around the same time existed Jeanne Voltz, the food editor at the *Los Angeles Times*. Both women redefined gender roles in the newsroom and took control of food narratives at their respective publications ([Voss 2013](#)). As a food editor during World War II, Nickerson strived towards chalking a balance between news stories like war rationing and the effects of the great depression, and lifestyle stories like features on the growing restaurant community in New York and profiles on home cooks and celebrated chefs. [Voss \(2020\)](#) has researched Nickerson’s content as diverse and hybrid, ranging from food trends to recipes, technology to health, while also including some societal issues such as the transformation of gender roles and assumptions. During her active years—the 1940s and 1950s—food journalism was already being interrogated because of its perceived or real accommodation of commercial interests and advertisers’ agendas. A similar pattern is seen in the work of Voltz, described as “a mix of hard news, such as food safety and consumer awareness; and soft news, including recipes, and restaurant reviews” ([Voss 2013](#)). This asserts the borderline space that food journalism has traditionally occupied.

This hybridity and the bleeding of food coverage into other genres and in other topics has been intensified by the diversification of culinary content in various forms of media in recent years, ranging from fleeting thirty-second recipes on TikTok or five-minute ‘What I eat in a day’ videos on YouTube, to long documentaries about single ingredients and their importance around the world, like the whole series that the *Whetstone Radio Collective* produced about pepper in 2022. For general audiences, what qualifies as food journalism is arguably a difficult question to answer: “Content creators challenge the status of professionally produced journalism and blur the lines between professional and non-professional content. Growing up in this information landscape, younger generations have developed news-related practices and attitudes that lie in stark contrast to those of previous generations” ([Wunderlich et al. 2022](#)).

Issues of identity are very visible in this mixed ecology of content creation, particularly across social media platforms, where the presentation of the self is constructed and problematized through narratives about food choices such as veganism or the ‘fashionable eater’, ideology, and online activism ([Gordon and Tovares 2020](#)), very often told through stories of personal transformation and discovery.

3. Confessional Writing in Food Media

These personal narratives of discovery and change are expressions of what has been termed “confessional society” (Coward 2010) or the era of “digital narcissism” (Keen 2007). Coward’s work (Coward 2010, 2013), with a focus on what she calls “confessional journalism”, discusses the centrality of intimate stories about lived experiences and personal journeys in journalism. She defines it as a form of “autobiographical writing exposing intimate personal details [which is] part of [a] rapidly growing cultural trend towards the inclusion of ‘real life’ stories in the media and linked to exposure of ever more intimate personal details” (Coward 2010, p. 224) while arguing that it creates a space unlike that of traditional journalism as it privileges subjectivities and lived experiences. It is a format where “the real person (is) telling the real story with the authentic feeling” (Coward 2013, p. 3). It allows writers to share intimate details and personal stories that are indicative of a greater, more socially significant narrative, and for readers to feel heard and informed about socio-political nuances. Contrary to being frivolous and insignificant, the argument is that “personal revelations are part of the zeitgeist” (Coward 2013, p. 10). “The more personal you become, the more universal you are”, she adds (Coward 2013, p. 67). This understanding of personal writing as newsworthy and revelatory of wider societal issues relates to earlier iterations of the confessional voice, expressed, for instance, in this statement by Harrington (1997) about what he calls “intimate journalism”: “The intimate stories of ordinary life—about the behaviour, motives, feelings, faiths, attitudes, grievance, hopes, fears and accomplishment of people as they seek meaning and purpose in their lives, stories that are windows to our universal human struggle—should be at the soul of our journalism” (Harrington 1997, p. 6).

Detailing quotidian labours and everyday lives paves the way for underrepresented stories to emerge. These stories, dismissively swept under the carpet for decades, very often are stories of women and minority ethnic groups (Coward 2013). The ‘other’ (Klages 2007) is given a voice, and through their voices, an insight is gained into greater struggles for equality, rights, freedom, and liberty. In her book *Speaking Personally*, Coward claims that “some of the greatest pieces of journalism and reportage have been those where the personal voice is heard most clearly whether as advocate, confidante or even reporter” (Coward 2013, p. 10). She argues that journalism mirrors the growing preoccupation with subjectivity and emotions in other sections of society and so the prevalence of confessional voices is not an isolated phenomenon. At the same time, the author acknowledges that this has taken a specific shape within journalism related to “the push of feminism and featurisation towards more personal and intimate subjects” (Coward 2013, p. 88).

This confessional voice and its relationship with identity issues, personal stories, and larger narratives is particularly expressed in food writing, according to the baker, newspaper columnist, and author Ruby Tandoh. “When we write about eating, we write about emotion, identity, family, home—questions of time and place and self. When we talk about food, we are talking about ourselves”, she argues (Tandoh 2018), using the foundational example of the book *The Gastronomical Me* by Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher, first published in 1943. An autobiographical text, *The Gastronomical Me* is also, according to Tandoh (2018), the reflection of a certain American idyll, made of ranches, cottonwoods, and wartime men.

Tandoh (2018) adds that Fisher’s tone is echoed in that of many contemporary cooks such as Nigella Lawson and Samin Nosrat, among others, and also in the popularity of ‘foodoirs’ or food memoirs. An example could be that of Indian food writer and author Archana Pidathala, who explores her many identities as a person, and her relationship with other people, to tell insightful stories about food. Her first cookbook *Five Morsels of Love* (Pidathala and Reddy 2018) is a documentation of her grandmother’s recipes from South India. The text is a culinary tribute and a way of dealing with the loss of her grandmother, as she expresses her grief through the many recipes and, in doing so, delves into her identity as a granddaughter (Pidathala and Reddy 2018). Similarly, her second cookbook *Why Cook?* (Pidathala 2022) is an exploration of sisterhood, where she curates the many recipes and

life lessons that are at the heart of her friendships. She says, “It explores why they [her friends] cook and how cooking and food anchor them in their life journeys. In the kitchens of ‘Why Cook’, you will explore questions of identity and the self” (Pidathala 2022). The author uses food as a language to discuss the abstract yet relatable themes of love and grief. A more strictly journalistic example is the work of the English columnist and broadcaster Grace Dent, who writes a weekly restaurant review for *The Guardian* and publishes longer pieces for various newspapers, frequently evoking memories of her childhood in Carlisle as part of a working-class family or her love of budget foods such as Quality Street chocolates and baked beans, while discussing issues such as grief, illnesses and British snobbism with compelling humour. She is also the presenter of the podcast *Comfort Eating*, where she interviews famous people about their life and food choices, emphasising the idea that what we eat tells a story about who we are.

Tandoh uses the term “culinary selfie” to describe this ‘me’ in food writing, “a snapshot which, through food, tells a story about self” (Tandoh 2018). Interestingly, Coward, who is also a practising journalist alongside an academic, has described British food writer Nigel Slater precisely in those terms, “Nigel Slater does not just tell us about cooking but about himself” (Coward 2013, p. 49). On his website, Slater describes himself as “a cook who writes” (Slater 2023), succinctly merging his identity as a cook with his identity as a writer. His colleague Tandoh (2019) adds to this persona with the following comment: “The most bizarre Nigel Slater misconception I encounter is that because he seldom does interviews, he is a ‘private’ man. What could possibly be more personal, more intimate, than the sharing of the food we eat?”.

4. Podcasting and the Personal Voice

Podcasts can provide a new platform for confessional journalism, where serious stories are dealt with through a lens of intimacy and localism. Journalist and academic Kate Williams (2020), for instance, has candidly spoken about the contrast between her own experience of being diagnosed with an extremely rare form of abdominal cancer and remaining silent about it (until she spoke retrospectively about that silence in the context of a journalism education conference), while there is increasing visibility of cancer stories in British media. Arguably the most salient one in the UK is the award-winning BBC podcast *You, Me and the Big C*, originally hosted by Deborah James, Lauren Mahon, and Rachel Bland, who were all living with a terminal cancer diagnosis. The podcast continued to exist after the death of James and Bland until recently, when Mahon announced in March 2023 that she had recorded a final episode five years after the original one. According to Williams (2020), this type of content challenges accepted rules of objectivity and impartiality in journalism, allowing for the creation of online communities through intimate and honest accounts of very personal struggles.

There are over 5 million podcasts, and over 540 million podcast listeners worldwide (Ruby 2022). Some of the features cited as reasons for the consistent popularity of the medium over the last five years include: podcasts are equally accessible for those who wish to create them and for those who wish to consume them; they allow for more freedom of thought and expression than written and video reportage; they require little technical skill to be created and minimal commitment to be consumed (Ruby 2022). As a journalistic medium, several news organisations such as *The Economist* and *The New York Times*, among others, have significantly expanded their audiences and reach through them, fostering brand loyalty and bringing in revenue (Lindgren 2021). The emergent research in this space has highlighted journalistic podcasts’ entertainment value, alongside their capacity to engage in subjects absent from mainstream news with significant depth (Sang et al. 2020), and the fact that they provide a space for experimentation at a time of profound change within the industry (Lindgren 2021). A similar capacity to engage audiences as that of narrative journalism (Lindgren 2016; McCracken 2017) and immersive journalism (Dowling and Miller 2019) has been emphasised too; indeed, McHugh (2019) has described

podcasting as an “extreme form of narrative journalism”. Podcasts have also been discussed in their capacity to provide self-reflection and self-examination (Llinares 2018).

Additionally, one of podcasts’ most significant features is the personability and feeling of closeness that they offer. Already in the 1990s, Kitch (1999) was arguing that this is one of the most compelling things that journalism can deliver, “The greatest and most enduring pieces of journalism are often those where the observer has been recognizable as a personality either through their individual style or through foregrounding their presence including very often their own reactions to events” (Kitch 1999, p. 117). Podcasts fulfil this component through the very nature of their format, “Unlike stories produced for screens where emotions are acted out in visual form, audio stories explore our lives through sounds and spoken words. The personalised listening space created by headphones further accommodates the bond created between voices in the story and the listener” (Lindgren 2016). According to Spinelli and Dann (2019), this unique relationship between the host and the listener in podcasting can be described as “reciprocal”; it is in the space between producers, interviewees, and listeners that intimacy is created (Spinelli and Dann 2019, p. 77). Indeed, there is an established body of research exploring the subject of intimacy in podcasting (Lindgren 2016, 2021; Berry 2016; Copeland 2018; Swiatek 2018; McCracken 2017; Spinelli and Dann 2019; Murray 2019; Adler Berg 2021), arguably one of the most researched notions in the context of contemporary broadcasting. Berry (2016) has even coined the notion of “hyper intimacy” to argue that podcasts go further than radio (already described as an intimate medium) in the creation of a close bond between the presenter and the listener. While intimacy can be conveyed through aural technical features—such as proximity to the microphone, sound effects, recording from domestic spaces, and others—disclosure of personal stories and the use of first-person narratives also play a dominant role (Swiatek 2018). Lindgren (2016) has merged both aspects in the label of “personal radio journalism in podcasting” arguing that the rise in personal narratives in this field is “intrinsically linked to the intimate nature of the radio medium” (Lindgren 2016, p. 24).

Confessional and first-person podcasts were heavily represented in *The Guardian's* top 20 podcasts of 2022 (Duggins et al. 2022), some of them dealing with themes as personal as death, grief, and abuse; the same news organisation used the headline “Deeply moving and very authentic” (Aroesti 2023) in a long feature about the twentieth anniversary of the medium. Such shows and qualities highlight the inclusion of topics that have traditionally appeared too trivial or domestic to be part of journalism, as argued by Coward when exploring the genre of confessional writing, “The inner emotional life (which is) the opposite of subjects considered proper journalism” (Coward 2013, p. 8).

Whetstone’s podcasts aim to tap into this by featuring people from the community who explore stories about that very community. Speaking of his hosts, founder Stephen Satterfield told in an interview, “We actually just believe in these people, and the quality of their ideas, the rigour of their reporting and storytelling, and we’re betting that other people will ultimately value the insight and analysis they bring, too” (Babür-Winter 2021). It could be argued that journalists involved become ‘columnists’ in the traditional sense of talking about themselves but on a new digital medium (Williams 2020), while also aiming to include the voices and stories missing in mainstream media, “Our stories interrogate who is missing from the story, and then insert those narratives. Food is a catalyst for expanding human empathy” (Whetstone Magazine 2021).

This relationship between intimacy and the personal story is not straightforward though, as it happens with other forms of confessional content. Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo, for instance, have highlighted how the neoliberal context that has seen and afforded the contemporary proliferation of podcasting is a space that “prizes above all the attention given by individualized listeners to specific creators willing to put some version of their intimate selves on display” (Sienkiewicz and Jaramillo 2019, pp. 269–70). The implicit critique of the commodification of personal experiences in this comment parallels remarks made in the context of the genre of the ‘personal essay’ in journalism, sensational accounts of private events very often written by young women (Tolentino 2017); this has been

referred to as “the native voice of the Internet” (Vodanovic 2022). Murray (2019) has written about this tension between personal narratives and the commercial success and popularity of media precisely in the context of podcast collectives, which, like Whetstone, bring together diverse hosts invested in shared resources. She uses the terms “intimate soundwork” and “collective individualism” (Murray 2019) to explore this tension, at the crossroads of the intimacy of radio sound, the precarious nature of contemporary media work (Deuze 2011), and the current visibility of personal narratives and self-branding in creative work.

“I argue that intimacy can be a frame for understanding the entrepreneurial labor the collective model fosters *as well as* the sonics of self-in-process. Intimate soundwork draws attention to the kinship undergirding the labor networks of amateur and independent production, the relationship of the self to work, and the requirement of the self *for* work” (Murray 2019).

In the author’s discussion, intimacy spans both the content and the infrastructure required to produce that content; it is both about the sharing of personal narratives and experiences, and the challenges of independent production in the context of precarious media industries that demand entrepreneurial qualities and resilience of the self.

Additionally, it has been argued that the substantial growth of podcasting has not meant a similar growth of the presence of marginalised voices and narratives in mainstream media, which is one of the potential benefits of confessional writing as explored by Coward (2013). Shane (2022), for instance, has proposed the notion of “Third Podcasting” to assert the need for shows that do not prioritise topping the podcast charts and therefore move away from homogenising narratives that cater to the needs of both advertisers and distracted audiences. Similar discussions are taking place in journalism research, emphasising the need to move away from the Western biases that continue to characterise the field (Hanitzsch 2019).

5. Materials and Methods

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

R1: How are elements of confessional and intimate podcasting combined with traditional journalistic elements such as the use of interviews, sourcing, and others in outputs by the Whetstone collective?

R2: Do the themes and frames explored in the series allow for a decentring of narratives, voices, and locations?

To answer those questions, we use a mixed-method approach of content analysis and thematic analysis, bringing together quantitative and qualitative/interpretative approaches to research four podcast series released under the umbrella of the *Whetstone Radio Collective* in 2022, each comprising ten episodes plus a trailer: *Taste of place*, a podcast about memory and nostalgia with the taste of pepper as a thread hosted by Dr. Anna Sulan; its total running time is 361 min. *Bad table manners*, which dives into households, restaurants and streets to explore established notions of South Asian food; it is hosted by the Delhi-based anthropologist Meher Varma and has a running time of 336 min. *Setting the table*, hosted by Deb Freman, who explores the foodways of African American cuisine in a series that lasts 318 min. Lastly, *Fruit love letters*, an exploration of the Anthropocene by telling stories of fruit; it is hosted by the chef Jessamine Starr and runs for a total of 329 min.

For the content analysis, we opted for manual coding and did not use any specialised software. A provisional list of codes was established to run a first cycle of coding guided by disciplinary interests, which was then refined and amended for a second cycle. The coding categories were the following: ‘journalistic genre’ (feature, first-person item, investigative, narrative, immersive); ‘sources’ (experts, growers/producers, consumers, lived experience of host, authorities/politicians, others); ‘voices on record’ (host, mainstream voices and/or voices from the Global North, marginal voices and/or voices from the Global South); ‘disposition’, understood as the broad ‘intent’ of the item (neutral/undetermined, positive, negative, mixed); and finally, main ‘location of the story’ (local/regional, national,

multinational, global). In this last category we used 'multinational' when the story moves between different named countries and 'global' when the remit of a story is more generic and is not bound to a specific territory.

As a second step, we ran a thematic analysis of the topics emerging in the podcast episodes, grouping them by theme. This follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) conception of thematic analysis as both a way of organising, identifying, and reporting themes and a form of interpretation. We also recorded how those themes were framed, understanding that frames work providing a "central organising idea" or "interpretative package" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, p. 3). Here we followed Brüggemann et al.'s argument about frames as the step that follows the identification of a 'theme' in journalism, which the authors describe as "the interpretative act of putting topics in context: interpreting occurrences as part of social problems, evaluating these problems, identifying cases for problems, attributing blame and responsibility to act as well as recommending solution paths" (Brüggemann et al. 2022, p. 3).

The gathered data was reviewed and discussed holistically, in the understanding that coding, when used in combination with qualitative approaches, is a process of indexing data according to categories that can be used to link data fragments to ideas or concepts (Atkinson and Coffey 1996). In this approach, coding brings data together so that it can be reviewed and analysed in relation to topics and themes.

6. Results and Discussion

R1: How are elements of confessional and intimate podcasting combined with traditional journalistic elements such as the use of interviews, sourcing, and others in outputs by the Whetstone collective?

A total of thirty out of the forty episodes that were systematically coded and analysed use the tool of first-person storytelling, among other genres, to study and dissect various food practices and cultures. Arguably the most original example of the use of first-person writing is the podcast *Fruit love letters*, where the host starts each episode with a succinct and heartfelt 'love letter' that works as an ode to the fruit that is to be the central focus of that episode. At the opposite end, *Setting the table* is the least 'confessional' of all the series studied and so is presented as a more conventional audio feature, yet all series provide a mixture of feature reporting and first-person narration (with various degrees of emphasis on the latter), while also including narrative and investigative elements.

Very often these elements of first-person reporting situate the narrator's role and place within the topics discussed, practicing a form of credibility based on their investment in them, something akin to a process of "self-verification" in which the journalist announces their role in reporting and then comments on the nature of that practice (Malone 2014, p. 1). For instance, Meher Varma, the host of *Bad table manners*, grounds the purpose and intent of each episode on her own lived experience as a South Asian woman who interacts with regional and Western food trends. She discusses the global themes of migration, prejudice, climate change, and urbanisation through localised case studies on colonisation and partition, caste and class, mangoes and fisheries, and kitchen design, respectively. Here, she speaks of her caste privilege and the lack thereof as the 'other' in a global context, while expressing her love for mangoes and Mughlai cuisine and describing her experiences in the kitchen, at the dining table, and beyond. As in other examples from the series researched, the first-person experience is used both as a narrative tool and a journalistic genre in which the host is also a trustable source in the episode. This mixture of revealing biographical facts and providing elements of self-awareness has been cited as a key element in the communication of authenticity in journalism (Malone 2014), which demands not only to use the 'I' but also to disclose the role of that 'I' in the text or, in this case, podcast episode.

All episodes of all series include other voices and sources though, often cast as 'experts', which is a conventional practice in journalism. These expert voices include academics (historians and anthropologists feature regularly), chefs, architects, historians, psychologists, horticulturists, scientists, and some restaurant owners. There is a general lack of

producers or growers of food used as sources, with some exceptions, such as the black farmers included in a couple of episodes of *Setting the table*; this is perhaps a result of the podcasts being mostly based in the Global North and delivered in English. There is almost no presence of politicians or people in a position of civic authority in any of the series. A significant number of sources were coded as 'other' and constitute original voices in the food space: for instance, some episodes include artists and curators who have created a body of work around a specific food element—an artist, for example, who uses avocado pits to create textiles—we also found community organisers and even a perfumier.

While arguably anyone has some knowledge of food as we need to eat to survive—a mother cooking the same rice recipe every day for her family is undeniably an expert in that skill—most sources featured have developed their form of food expertise either through formal training and education or through a systematic engagement in the reflection about food practices. It appears that it is not only through the consumption of food itself but also through the consumption of discourse around food, that sources are legitimised and able to provide authority. Overall, the position of the expert in all series appears to be derived from what [Orange and Turner \(2013, p. 2\)](#) call the 'common sense' understanding of the specialist in their introduction to the collection *Specialist Journalism*: expertise is either derived from educational training or first-hand experience. The variety of occupations featured and the blurred line between journalists, writers, and other media professionals confirm the research discussed in our literature review about the varied and peculiar ecology of the food media and journalism space.

R2: Do the themes and frames explored in the series allow for a decentring of narratives, voices, and locations?

The overarching style and format of podcasts by the *Whetstone Radio Collective* is that of non-white hosts, often with diaspora identities, pursuing personal and cultural stories. This holds true for three out of four podcasts in our analysis, where all except the host of *Fruit love letters* come from Asian, South Asian, and African American backgrounds. Our coding shows an overwhelming majority of voices based in the Global North (all hosts in *Taste of place*, for instance, are based in London), yet this is complicated by the fact that most of them are second- or third-generation migrants, have moved around different countries and/or have very mixed backgrounds. As most of the time they are established figures in the food space or knowledge sector, they could not be characterised as 'marginal'. There are no voices speaking in a language other than English, except for the final episode of *Bad table manners*, in which the host interacts with farmers protesting against the newly launched farm laws in 2020 at the Tikri border in India's capital city of Delhi.

Hyper-local narratives of fisheries, school meal programmes, protests, and pepper trading are used in the podcasts to reflect bigger worldly trends of climate change, class privilege, and activism. While the urgent newsworthiness of topics and themes addressed is not that of daily news podcasts, the content is presented as comprehensively researched features for Whetstone's Western audiences. This, however, does not exclude a different form of urgency; both *Bad table manners* and *Setting the table* are openly political, with references to orientalism and slavery throughout. The former strongly draws on themes of colonisation, selective exoticism, and Western commercialisation and misrepresentation of South Asian cultures, while maintaining a negative to mixed disposition across most episodes; this is achieved by telling original stories that embody some overarching frames, for instance, the social architecture of kitchens and 'lunchbox trauma'. This series could be described as incisive and confrontational, unlike *Setting the table*, which has a positive to neutral disposition even when talking about issues like civil rights and revisiting the forgotten stories of black farmers in the U.S. and the role of communities of colour in the barbecue tradition, among others. At the other end, *Taste of place* and *Fruit love letters* take a primarily neutral to positive stance through the anthropological frameworks of evolution, history, and consumption preferences across cultures.

Other themes that feature in almost every series are nostalgia (for food, for places, for childhood, for family), the creation of community through food, the relationship between

identity and food, and journeys (of both ingredients and people). This gives a peculiar, almost film-like temporality to some of the series, that bring together contemporary stories of, for instance, how the pandemic has affected the restaurant business, with older ones about the India/Pakistan partition, Tibetans in exile, and memories about mangoes. Environmental issues are scattered throughout the series yet are not as strong as others such as the reclamation of specific food histories and practices. The latter is a common framing to be found in different episodes of the various series. For instance, the final chapter of *Setting the table* explores the baking legacy of black communities in the U.S. while also talking about family and memory; there is a strong proposition about understanding food histories and traditions as an act of reclaiming history that also allows us to understand who we are. That series explores other aspects of recentring the country's food tradition with stories about the role of African American communities in breweries, farming, and barbecues, in addition to baking. Another series, *Taste of place*, aims to reclaim the history and journeys of pepper while also engaging in a decolonial understanding of plants, farming, and commodities. One episode of the same series, entitled "From farm to Laksa" talks about the place of indigenous knowledge and how it has been appropriated in multicultural settings that often erase or forget people of colour. Given that the whole series is devoted to a single ingredient, the Sarawak variety of pepper, it explores more directly than others the topic of colonialism, discussing how the species' trade was a key dimension of the imperial project. Yet it does so while also engaging in the most immediate themes of family, memory and longing, the individual life stories of migration and movement alongside the macro narratives of capitalism and commodity exchanges.

The location of the stories varies from series to series. Both *Bad table manners* and *Fruit love letters* contain mostly 'local' and 'national' stories, while *Taste of place* and *Setting the table* contain a mixture of 'national', 'global', and 'multinational'. The latter reflects various issues: the various journeys in food production and distribution, the mixed background of several podcast hosts, and the fact that there is almost no inclusion of local growers and farmers. It is also an expression of the character of food media and journalism and, arguably, of one of its most salient limitations.

7. Conclusions

As a collective under the umbrella of *Whetstone Radio*, the podcasts researched vary in their approach and scope while contributing with original stories to the arguably crowded space of both podcasting and food media.

Our research has established that they use conventional journalistic formats, particularly in their sourcing and the way they deploy experts. Most podcasts are presented as narrative-driven features with the greater or lesser presence of the host or main voice, who very often engages in first-person storytelling about food memories peppered with observations about identity, nostalgia, and home. These stories embody the intimacy of the confessional genre as discussed in the existing literature. Issues of migration, diaspora, and exile feature prominently in almost all series, with stories of food journeys mirroring those of people travelling and moving, forcibly or not, between countries. Those first-person stories about lived experiences are used both as the drivers of the narrative and as sources, combined with expert voices (whose expertise is often derived from conventional education) and traditional media figures in the food space. It could be argued that the general lack of visibility of farmers, growers, and producers in favour of academics, historians and food writers and researchers, sits at odds with the general emphasis on discussing the materiality and properties of food and ingredients and their provenance.

As a result, the podcasts are mostly centred on Western-based voices, even though voices from the Global South have a prominent position in *Bad table manners* and *Fruit love letters* (and both of them have more 'local' than 'national', 'international', and 'global' content than others), particularly in the former, given that is hosted by the Delhi-based anthropologist Meher Varma and delves deeply into context-specific topics about social hierarchies, caste inequalities, and racial and gender discrimination in relation to food

practices. However, it is not possible to make a clear distinction between the voices of the Global North and South, as most hosts have multicultural backgrounds, are non-White, and issues of diaspora and migration are significant dimensions of their lived experiences.

The series studied show an abundance of original topics, not regularly present in the space of food media and journalism, and feature practices such as community initiatives or feminist food entrepreneurship, generally absent from food mainstream news. These topics are often framed in an openly political way and using a social justice lens, while maintaining a non-confrontational and constructive tone, at times, and on a few occasions a more challenging one. Themes such as the links between food trade, slavery and the colonial project, and the erasure of minorities from established food histories are directly addressed. Arguably, the recentring agenda and the reclamation of the role of certain communities in food history could be expanded through the inclusion of more minority voices and people closer to food production, in addition to those already established in the food space.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft, L.V. and J.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data findings are contextualised within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Adler Berg, Freja Sorine. 2021. The Value of Authenticity and Intimacy: A Case Study of the Danish independent Podcast Fries before Guys' Utilization of Instagram. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 19: 155–73.
- Aroesti, Rachel. 2023. Deeply Personal and very Authentic: How Podcasts Took over the World in 20 Years. *The Guardian*. June 3. Available online: https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/jun/03/20-years-of-podcasting?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed on 6 July 2023).
- Atkinson, Paul, and Amanda Jane Coffey. 1996. *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary Research Strategies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Babür-Winter, Oset. 2021. A New Radio Network for Food Lovers. *Food & Wine*. December 13. Available online: <https://www.foodandwine.com/fwpro/whetstone-launches-a-new-radio-network> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Berry, Richard. 2016. Part of the Establishment: Reflecting on 10 years of Podcasting as an Audio Medium. *Convergence* 22: 661–71. [CrossRef]
- Bonini, Tiziano. 2022. Podcasting as a Hybrid Cultural Form between Old and New Media. In *The Routledge Companion to Radio and Podcast Studies*. Edited by Mia Lindgren and Jason Loviglio. London: Routledge, pp. 19–29.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101. [CrossRef]
- Brüggemann, Michael, Jessica Kunert, and Louise Sprengelmeyer. 2022. Framing Food in the News: Still Keeping the Politics out of the Broccoli. In *Journalism Practice*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis. [CrossRef]
- Copeland, Stacey. 2018. A Feminist Materialisation of Amplified Voice: Queering Identity and Affect in the Heart. In *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*. Edited by Dario Llinares, Neil Fox and Richard Berry. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 209–25.
- Coward, Rosalind. 2010. Practice Review: Journalism Ethics and Confessional Journalism. *Journalism Practice* 4: 224–33. [CrossRef]
- Coward, Rosalind. 2013. *Speaking Personally: The Rise of Subjective and Confessional Journalism*. Houndmills and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Deuze, Mark. 2011. *Managing Media Work*. London: Sage.
- Dowling, David O., and Kylie J. Miller. 2019. Immersive Audio Storytelling: Podcasting and Serial Documentary in the Digital Publishing Industry. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 26: 167–84.
- Duggins, Alexi, Hollie Richardson, Hannah J. Davies, and Hannah Verdier. 2022. The 20 Best Podcasts of 2022. *The Guardian*. December 23. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/dec/23/the-20-best-podcasts-of-2022> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- English, Peter, and David Fleischman. 2017. Food for Thought in Restaurant Reviews. *Journalism Practice* 13: 90–104. [CrossRef]
- Fakazis, Elizabeth, and Elfriede Fursich, eds. 2023. *The Political Relevance of Food Media and Journalism: Beyond Reviews and Recipes*. London: Routledge.
- Fursich, Elfriede. 2012. Lifestyle Journalism as Popular Journalism. *Journalism Practice* 6: 12–25. [CrossRef]

- Fusté-Forné, Francesc, and Pere Masip. 2019. Food and Journalism: Storytelling about Gastronomy in Newspapers from the U.S. and Spain. In *Lifestyle Journalism: Social Media, Consumption and Experience*. Edited by Lucia Vodanovic. London: Routledge, pp. 129–40.
- Gamson, William, and Andre Modigliani. 1989. Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power. A Constructionist Approach. *The American Journal of Sociology* 95: 1–37. [CrossRef]
- Gordon, Cynthia, and Alla Tovares, eds. 2020. *Identity and Ideology in Digital Food Discourse: Social Media Interactions Across Cultural Contexts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing.
- Greene, Carlinita, and Janet Cramer. 2011. Beyond Mere Sustenance: Food as Communication. In *Food as Communication—Communication as Food*. Edited by Janet Cramer, Carlinita P. Greene and Lynn M. Walters. New York: Lang, pp. IX–XVIII.
- Hanitzsch, Thomas. 2019. Journalism Studies Still Needs to Fix Western Bias. *Journalism* 20: 214–17. [CrossRef]
- Hanitzsch, Thomas, and Tim Vos. 2018. Journalism Beyond Democracy: A New Look into Journalistic Roles in Political and Everyday Life. *Journalism* 19: 146–64. [CrossRef]
- Hanusch, Folker, ed. 2017. *Lifestyle Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- Harrington, Walt. 1997. *Intimate Journalism: The Art and Craft of Reporting Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Hedman, Ulrika, and Monika Djerf-Pierre. 2013. The Social Journalist: Embracing the Social Media Life or Creating a New Digital Divide. *Digital Journalism* 1: 368–85. [CrossRef]
- Keen, Andrew. 2007. *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube and the Rest of Today's User-Generated Media are Killing Our Culture and Economy*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Kitch, Carolyn. 1999. Rethinking Objectivity in Journalism and History. *American Journalism* 16: 113–20. [CrossRef]
- Klages, Mary. 2007. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury Publishing India.
- Kristensen, Nete Norgaard, and Unni From. 2012. Lifestyle Journalism: Blurring Boundaries. *Journalism Practice* 6: 26–41. [CrossRef]
- Lewis, Tania. 2008. *Smart Living: Lifestyle Media and Popular Expertise*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lindgren, Mia. 2016. Personal Narrative Journalism and Podcasting. *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 14: 23–41. [CrossRef]
- Lindgren, Mia. 2021. Intimacy and Emotions in Podcast Journalism: A Study of Award-Winning Australian and British Podcasts. *Journalism Practice* 17: 704–19. [CrossRef]
- Llinares, Dario. 2018. Podcasting as Liminal Praxis: Aural Mediation, Sound Writing and Identity. In *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*. Edited by Dario Linares, Neil Fox and Richard Berry. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 123–45.
- Malone, Tess. 2014. The Authentic 'I': Authenticity and First-Person Narrative Journalism. Master's thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA. Available online: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/62780554.pdf> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- McCracken, Ellen. 2017. Introduction: The Unending Story. In *The Serial Podcast and Storytelling in the Digital Age*. Edited by Ellen McCracken. London: Routledge, pp. 1–6.
- McHugh, Siobhan. 2019. Subjectivity, Hugs and Craft: Podcasting as Extreme Narrative Journalism. *Nieman Storyboard*. October 8. Available online: <https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/subjectivity-hugs-and-craft-podcasting-as-extreme-narrative-journalism/> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Murray, Sarah. 2019. Coming-of-Age in a Coming-of-Age: The Collective Individualism of Podcasting's Intimate Soundwork. *Popular Communication* 17: 301–16. [CrossRef]
- Olausson, Ulrika. 2017. The celebrated journalist. *Journalism Studies* 19: 2379–99. [CrossRef]
- Orange, Richard, and Barry Turner. 2013. Introduction. In *Specialist Journalism*. Edited by Richard Orange and Barry Turner. London: Routledge, pp. 1–11.
- Pidathala, Aarchana. 2022. *The Story of 'Why Cook?'*. Bangalore: Five Morsels Press.
- Pidathala, Archana, and Nirmala Reddy. 2018. *Five Morsels of Love*. Self-published.
- Ruby, Daniel. 2022. 39+ Podcast Statistics 2023 (Latest Trends & Numbers). *Demand Sage*. April 7. Available online: <https://www.demandsage.com/podcast-statistics/> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Sang, Yoonmo, Young Lee, and Sora Park. 2020. *Podcast Trends and Issues in Australia and Beyond: Global Perspectives*. Bruce: News Media Research Centre, University of Canberra.
- Shane, Jess. 2022. Toward a Third Podcasting: Activist Podcasting in an Era of Social Justice Capitalism. *RadioDoc Review* 8: 4.
- Sienkiewicz, Matt, and Deborah L. Jaramillo. 2019. Podcasting, the Intimate Self, and the Public Sphere. *Popular Communication* 17: 268–72. [CrossRef]
- Slater, Nigel. 2023. About/Nigel Slater. Available online: <https://www.nigelslater.com/Nigel> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Spinelli, Martin, and Lance Dann. 2019. *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Swiatek, Lukasz. 2018. The Podcast as an Intimate Bridging Medium. In *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*. Edited by Dario Linares, Neil Fox and Richard Berry. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 173–87.
- Tandoh, Ruby. 2018. M.F.K. Fisher and the Art of the Culinary Selfie. *VICE*. November 5. Available online: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yw7mzg/mfk-fisher-and-the-art-of-the-culinary-selfie> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Tandoh, Ruby. 2019. In Praise of Food Dad, Nigel Slater. *VICE*. May 9. Available online: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5979y8/in-praise-of-food-dad-nigel-slater> (accessed on 15 May 2023).
- Tolentino, Jia. 2017. The Personal-Essay Boom Is over. *The New Yorker*. May 18. Available online: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over> (accessed on 28 April 2023).

- Vodanovic, Lucia. 2022. Confessional Journalism, Authenticity and Lived Experiences: A Case Study of News Stories Published During the Irish Abortion Referendum. *Journalism Practice*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis. [CrossRef]
- Vodanovic, Lucia, ed. 2019. *Lifestyle Journalism: Social Media, Consumption and Experience*. London: Routledge.
- Voss, Kimberley. 2013. Food Journalism or Culinary Anthropology? Re-Evaluating Soft News and the Influence of Jeanne Voltz's Food Section in the Los Angeles Times. *American Journalism* 29: 66–91. [CrossRef]
- Voss, Kimberley. 2020. A Food Journalism Pioneer: The Story behind the First New York Times Food Writer Jane Nickerson and Her Food Section, 1942–1957. *Journalism History* 46: 248–64. [CrossRef]
- Whetstone Magazine. 2021. Whetstone Radio Collective—About. Available online: <https://www.whetstonemagazine.com/radio> (accessed on 16 May 2023).
- Williams, Kate. 2020. Confessional Journalism and Podcasting. *Association for Journalism Education* 9: 66.
- Wunderlich, Leonie, Sascha Hölig, and Uwe Hasebrink. 2022. Does Journalism Still Matter? The Role of Journalistic and Non-Journalistic Sources in Young Peoples' News Related Practices. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 27: 569–88. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.