EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF PODCASTING AT THE MALAYSIA NATIONAL NEWS AGENCY (BERNAMA)

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Abstract: This research explores the challenges and adaptation strategies of podcasting at Malaysia's national news agency (BERNAMA), amid a changing digital media environment. Qualitative methods were used to gather data via in-depth, semi-structured interviews with media professionals engaged in podcast production. This was supported by an analysis of podcast episodes and relevant organizational documents. The data were systematically analysed in NVivo to identify themes and patterns. The research explores Bernama's podcasting efforts, particularly *Hidup Ini Keras*, and examines how podcasting differs from traditional hard-news formats by incorporating personal stories, motivational narratives, and genuine experiences to emotionally engage digitally savvy, mobile audiences. Findings show that Bernama's podcasts demonstrate adaptive innovation in digital audio journalism; however, several challenges remain. The podcast market is increasingly crowded, making it harder to discover new shows; audience engagement varies; monetization options are limited; and producers must still adhere to ethical standards despite a more casual, conversational tone. These challenges are not unique to Bernama; they are common among many traditional media outlets worldwide as they adapt to modern content delivery. The analysis suggests that Bernama's podcasting efforts constitute a strategic move to remain relevant and uphold its public service role beyond news. The podcasts reintroduce a human element to journalism, highlighting themes of resilience and personal experience that resonate with audiences. The study concludes that, for Bernama's podcasting to succeed in the long term, it requires stronger institutional support, improved marketing, cross-platform integration, data-driven insights into audience preferences, and partnerships with other entities.

Keywords: Digital Media, Mass Communication, Podcasting,

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital journalism has fundamentally changed how news organizations connect with audiences, with podcasting emerging as a vital medium for storytelling and an alternative to traditional news. Developed in the early 2000s through RSS feeds and portable audio devices (Minooka, 2024), podcasts offer a unique blend of convenience, authenticity, and emotional appeal (Lindgren, 2021).Unlike traditional broadcasts, this on-demand format aligns with the trend toward media personalization, especially among younger generations who prefer conversational and meaningful content (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024).

Watson (2024) noting that as of the 2023–2024 period, the medium has expanded to approximately 3 million podcasts reaching 460 million global listeners, driven by its shift from a niche format to a mainstream, on-demand media pillar. In Malaysia, this trend is reflected by a growing audience of over three million listeners, prompting established outlets such as BFM 89.9, Astro Awani, and The Star to incorporate audio content into their digital transformation efforts. A significant milestone is the 2024 launch of *Hidup Ini Keras by* the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA). While this initiative aims to humanize journalism and attract younger audiences, it also faces major challenges related to discoverability, monetization, and navigating Malaysia's regulatory environment, especially when covering sensitive socio-political issues.

Additionally, podcasting is a way to build an audience, particularly for traditional media companies trying to stay relevant in the digital era (Alonso-Fernández, Rodríguez-Luque, & Legorburu-Hortelano, 2022). Without being constrained by conventional news cycles, it allows them to experiment with content formats, tone and delivery. Other than that, podcasting can help national

news organizations and public service broadcasters close the gap between official news and first-person narrative (Nee & Santana, 2021). Podcasts have the potential to humanize journalists, boost public trust in media companies, and enhance relationships between organizations and the communities they serve. Given this additional feature, podcasting is now a relationship-building tool that complements existing news services rather than just a content strategy.
This study investigates the expanding existence of podcasts at Bernama, how audiences are engaged by these platforms, the challenges of maintaining journalistic integrity in audio format, and whether podcasts present a viable future for journalism in Malaysia. By analyzing industry trends and existing literature, this study intends to shed insight into the relationship between digital innovation and traditional news reporting. This paper explores Bernama's expansion into podcasting, focusing on audience engagement strategies, maintaining journalistic integrity in audio formats, and the medium's long-term sustainability within Malaysia's media landscape. By analyzing industry trends and current research, this study aims to clarify how digital innovation intersects with traditional news reporting.

2. Problem Statement

The main challenge for journalistic podcasts is balancing discoverability and keeping the audience engaged. Discoverability, how easily a podcast can be located among millions on platforms like Spotify and YouTube, is vital for news organizations to inform the public and remain relevant (Katzenberger et al. , 2025) . Meanwhile, Metzler and García (2023) argue that this process relies on how content is promoted via algorithms, trending charts, and curated lists. Unlike traditional radio, podcasts require active engagement, as listeners can quickly unsubscribe or skip if dissatisfied. Katzenberger et al. (2025) note that maintaining listener loyalty is further complicated by the need for consistent publishing and high technical standards, as any disruption or weak storytelling may lead listeners to switch to more dependable sources.

Financially, news podcasts face major hurdles, including high production costs, typically between RM3,000 and RM5,000 per episode, and a revenue market that favors large corporations over niche journalistic content (Patrick, 2025). Although global advertising revenues reached US$4.46 billion in 2025, many news podcasts struggle to monetize because audiences expect news to be free (Statista, 2025). Furthermore, Malaysia's regulatory landscape requires podcasters to comply with the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Patrick, 2025). The informal, unscripted style of podcasts heightens the risk of legal issues and defamation, especially when discussing sensitive political topics, making it challenging for journalists to maintain editorial independence while adhering to legal standards.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the challenges encountered by podcasting at Malaysia's National News Agency (Bernama). Qualitative methods are chosen because they allow for an in-depth analysis of complex issues and a better understanding of how media practitioners shape podcast development (Ogutu, Malakwen, & Tallam, 2025). This approach focuses on gaining contextual insights, detailed experiences, and understanding rather than relying on quantitative data, which is crucial for examining how a news organization adapts to digital innovation.

Data collection consisted of a single, in-depth semi-structured interview with a key individual at Bernama, specifically the producer of the "Hidup Ini Keras" podcast. As the primary gatekeeper and creative leader, this producer provided expert perspectives on the strategic vision, technical challenges of production, and the institutional changes needed to sustain a weekly digital series. The interview questions were carefully designed to draw out these professional insights, addressing topics such as the development of the podcast's "umbrella brand," managing diverse weekly subjects, and the difficulties of producing digital-first content in a traditional state-owned news organization.

These approximately 45-minute interviews were conducted with approval and carefully transcribed. Additional contextual data, such as public view counts from Facebook and YouTube, was also examined. Although this extra data offers insights into online viewing patterns, it lacks detailed content analysis. Integrating this information with interview findings provides a comprehensive understanding of Bernama's podcast, enabling exploration of internal factors and online performance assessment. The data analysis used thematic coding and NVivo software to systematically identify key themes in the development of Bernama's podcasting initiatives.

Choosing Bernama as the focus of this study is suitable because it is the only government-owned news agency in the country and faces distinctive operational hurdles compared to private media. As a statutory body under the Ministry of Communications, Bernama must balance its traditional role of delivering official, high-quality government news with the adoption of modern digital formats, such as podcasts. This shift provides valuable insights into how institutional journalistic standards and bureaucratic structures adapt to the informal, conversational, and rapidly evolving nature of podcasts.

The emphasis on the “Hidup Ini Keras” podcast is justified since it serves as Bernama’s main digital audio initiative under a unique "umbrella brand" model. Unlike other agencies that might produce multiple niche shows, Bernama focuses on this single, recurring series. While retaining the same name to enhance brand recognition and value, the podcast is released weekly, with each episode addressing different themes, from social survival and mental health to economic resilience. Studying “Hidup Ini Keras” reveals how a national agency manages content diversity and audience engagement under one brand, highlighting Bernama's sustainability and production challenges in the digital era.

4. Result

4.1 *The shift toward digital storytelling*

Bernama's main challenge in podcasting is ensuring its content is easily discoverable amid a crowded digital landscape. Recently, numerous news outlets, both local and global, have incorporated podcasting into their digital plans, increasing industry competition. Bernama's podcast, launched in March 2024, is still relatively new. The participant noted that standing out is difficult with so many options available to podcast listeners.

> *“…While news podcasts rarely focus on sharing life stories, there are other podcasts that do. Additionally, there are millions of podcasts not just in Malaysia but also abroad that people can listen to. Hidup Ini Keras is relatively new and was only recently launched compared to long-established podcasts. Thus, it is a challenge for our podcast to stand out. However, compared to typical news podcasts, I believe Hidup Ini Keras is different. To ensure the podcast reaches a wider audience, we post teasers and episodes across multiple platforms, not just on a single page or account. This includes Bernama’s social media, Bernama TV, and Bernama Radio platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter)…”*

The study shows the "Hidup Ini Keras" podcast addresses market saturation by emphasizing personal stories instead of traditional hard news. Mbai (2025) supports this, calling podcasts the "New Radio" influencing future storytelling. By focusing on human-interest stories, Bernama shifts from just reporting facts to creating engaging narratives, using the medium's intimacy to compete globally. The participant tactic of distributing content across multiple platforms, like teasers and episodes on social media, TV, and radio, illustrates digital seriality discussed by Hardey and James (2022). They argue modern podcasts must "branch" stories into digital spaces to boost visibility. This cross-promotion helps Bernama leverage its institutional presence to promote the podcast and engage diverse audiences, even as a newer industry player.

4.2 *Audience Retention*

With the millions of pieces of content available across various platforms, it remains a challenge to keep the audience engaged in the digital world. Listeners have access to a wide array of entertainment and information options, which can make it hard for the podcast to build a loyal, steady audience. Even though they regularly release teasers and full episodes and maintain high production and storytelling quality, the participant admits that the podcast still experiences fluctuations in viewership.

> *"...We always post teasers and full episodes consistently while maintaining the quality of the podcast. We invite great guests with inspiring stories, yet there are times when an episode doesn't even reach 200 views on certain platforms. The viewership for each episode remains inconsistent..."*

The fact that view counts stay inconsistent even with high-quality production highlights a major challenge in keeping the audience engaged. According to Chen and Keng (2023), success in the digital domain relies on "dual identification," whereby listeners must establish a connection with both the specific content and the overarching brand. For "Hidup Ini Keras,' fluctuations in viewership signify difficulties in translating guest interest into brand loyalty. This issue is further compounded by the necessity for auditory parasocial bonds, as highlighted by Schlütz and Hedder (2021). Their research indicates that consistent viewership often stems from the listener's perceived relationship with the host. When a podcast relies heavily on the "inspiring" nature of rotating guests, it may struggle to establish the stable host-listener relationship essential for sustaining high engagement across episodes, regardless of the subject matter.

4.3 *Monetization Challenges in Podcasting*

Podcasting offers new opportunities for creative expression and audience engagement, but making money from this content remains challenging. While podcasts can earn revenue through sponsorships and advertising, turning content into profit is often difficult. Although Hidup Ini Keras has the potential to build a dedicated audience and tell a meaningful story, it still needs a solid commercial plan. Even with quality content and an eager audience, the participant mentioned that the program still requires more promotional efforts.

> *"...I believe this podcast has the potential to be commercialized, but so far, it just stops there. After an episode is aired, there is no comprehensive follow-up or large-scale promotion. For now, we are doing everything ourselves without any sponsors..."*

Results show a gap between content creation and success, with no lasting momentum after broadcast, causing quick stagnation. Kruglova and Mamedov (2021) found that lack of support and weak business models trap creators in a cycle that limits growth. Without external funding, commercial potential remains untapped. Pérez-Alaejos et al. (2022) add that quality alone isn't enough in a crowded market; strategic marketing on specific platforms is essential for visibility. Without it, even promising podcasts struggle to attract large audiences. Overall, the experience highlights industry issues with inadequate marketing and financial support hindering creative projects.

4.4 *Upholding Journalistic Integrity*

Beyond issues such as discoverability and monetization, maintaining journalistic integrity is not a major concern for the Bernama podcast. The participant are committed to ethical storytelling and have taken proactive steps to ensure that the content and guests meet responsible communication standards. The participant explained that the team upholds professional values throughout the production process.

> *"...We always ensure that ethical communication is maintained in this podcast by avoiding discussions on sensitive issues. Before every recording, we brief our invited guests and provide guidelines that must be followed...."*

The findings highlight a dedicated effort to maintain editorial standards and protect the brand through pre-recorded briefings and rigorous ethical guidelines. This structured content management approach aligns with the research of Katzenberger, Keil, and Wild (2025), which demonstrates that contemporary podcast hosts, extending beyond traditional media, are increasingly adopting stringent "gatekeeping" techniques to bolster their credibility. By explicitly establishing boundaries for guests and avoiding sensitive topics, creators cultivate a controlled environment that safeguards their reputation. Such ethical self-regulation appears to be a strategic measure aimed at promoting long-term growth and establishing trust within the digital domain, where adherence to professional standards is vital to differentiate oneself from less formal competitors.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that Bernama's podcast marks a notable shift in addressing the challenges of podcasting at Malaysia's National News Agency. Transitioning from traditional hard news to a narrative and emotionally engaging format, Bernama demonstrates adaptive innovation aimed at a digital-savvy, mobile audience. This change underscores a strategic move to humanize journalism, showing that public service broadcasters can remain influential by emphasizing personal resilience and storytelling instead of solely focusing on quick news reporting.

The transition is characterized by notable organizational and market challenges. According to the study, BERNAMA operates in a saturated digital environment, facing discoverability challenges, inconsistent audience engagement, and limited monetization options, all of which threaten its long-term viability. These pressures mirror global media trends, where traditional agencies find it hard to balance strict journalistic standards with the informal, conversational style that podcasts demand. To overcome these issues, there must be a shift from viewing podcasts as experimental projects to recognizing them as vital components of the agency’s journalistic strategy.

The future success of BERNAMA's podcasting efforts relies on robust institutional backing, such as investing in audience analytics, cross-platform promotion, and forming collaborations with external partners. The study emphasizes the importance of revising journalism education and adopting forward-thinking policies to foster future journalists and protect media innovation. Ultimately, the podcast exemplifies how Malaysian audio journalism can flourish by emphasizing a deeply human and reflective approach, provided the agency invests in the right digital tools and strategic funding to succeed in a hybrid media landscape.

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