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AUDIO SEGREGATION OF CLOSED GLOBAL AUDIO PLATFORMS AS A CHALLENGE TO PODCASTING CULTURE IN UKRAINE

The research aims *to provide a comprehensive conceptualization of the transformations within the audiosphere in the era of cultural platformization. Furthermore, it substantiates the concept of «audio segregation» – a new form of audience fragmentation driven by the transition from the open RSS ecosystem of podcasting to closed platforms such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and YouTube.*

Research methodology. *The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates media and cultural analysis with a comparative study of global and local practices.*

The results*. Drawing on international studies and Ukrainian cases, the research examines how algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, exclusive content policies, listener data control, and payment models redistribute access to cultural products, thereby creating barriers for both creators and consumers. The study concludes that a strategy of openness can mitigate the effects of segregation, enhance the visibility of Ukrainian audio content, and strengthen cultural resilience in the digital age.*

The novelty*. It is demonstrated that closed ecosystems generate at least four types of inequality: algorithmic (the narrowing of the information horizon due to personalized feeds), infrastructural (geographic and technical barriers to access), creator-based (the privileging of content amplified by platform promotion), and commercial (the stratification of user experience based on purchasing power). Particular emphasis is placed on privacy: platforms aggregate granular data on listener behavior but fail to provide creators with relevant analytics, thereby weakening feedback loops and complicating monetization. Within the Ukrainian market, these processes intersect with low format penetration and competition from dominant foreign-language products bolstered by algorithms, which threatens the visibility of Ukrainian-language content and cultural representation.*

Practical meaning. *The research findings help identify priority effective strategies for content distribution in the environment of algorithmic segregation. The conclusions can be used to develop national communication strategies aimed at strengthening cultural resilience and promoting Ukrainian-language content on global platforms.*

Key words*: algorithmic segregation, audio platforms, content visibility, exclusivity, closed ecosystems, data privacy, media literacy, platformization of culture, podcasting, Ukrainian cultural space.*

I. Introduction

The digital revolution in media has led to profound changes in the ways audio content is created and consumed. Podcasting, which was originally based on the open RSS standard and enabled decentralized content distribution without intermediaries, is now becoming increasingly dependent on major platforms. This development occurs against the backdrop of the «platformization of culture» – the process of integrating digital platforms into all spheres of cultural production. At the same time, in the audio sector – particularly podcasting and streaming audio – a new division of audiences is evident, driven by the shift from open ecosystems to closed platforms (such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Amazon Music), which form closed ecosystems where a significant portion of audio content is accessible only through their own applications or web services. As a result, «audio segregation» arises – the stratification of audiences according to the platforms they use – which potentially limits public access to cultural products and exacerbates digital inequality.

In recent years, the Ukrainian cultural sphere has been actively adopting the formats of podcasts and online radio; however, global trends increasingly shape local practices. While at the global level the closed nature of platforms has already become the subject of critical analysis (particularly following high-profile exclusive deals, such as «Spotify's exclusive shows – from *Joe Rogan* to *Gemischtes Hack*, from *Dick and Doof* to *Vad?* and *La Poudre* – those are only available on the Spotify application» [9]), in Ukraine these processes are only beginning to gain momentum. It is therefore important to examine

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how the influence of closed audio platforms affects the development of Ukrainian podcasting, the availability of Ukrainian-language content, and the preservation of national identity in the digital age.

Western scholars have extensively studied the platformization of culture and the impact of digital platforms on the media landscape. In their collective monograph *Platforms and Cultural Production*, T. Poell, Professor of Data, Culture and Institutions at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands); D. Nieborg, Associate Professor in the Department of Media Studies at the University of Toronto (Canada), and B. E. Duffy, Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University (USA), argue that the growing penetration of platforms (such as Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify) into the sphere of cultural production transforms open digital platforms into an environment where algorithms and corporate interests determine what exactly the audience will consume [13]. Extending this line of inquiry, a study by T. Poell, B. E. Duffy, and D. Nieborg raises the issue of creators' unequal access to their potential audiences due to algorithmic constraints on content recommendation and promotion [12, p. 3–20]. T. Bonini, a PhD in Media, Communication and the Public Sphere at the University of Siena (Italy), characterizes contemporary podcasting as a «second era» or a hybrid mass medium in which, alongside the open distribution of content via RSS feeds, elements of exclusivity and integration into platforms are emerging [7, p. 19–29]. F. McKelvey and R. Hunt, Associate Professors in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University (Canada), develop the concept of «discoverability» of content as a key to understanding why some podcasts gain popularity more easily, while others remain on the periphery of digital platforms [11]. Platform policies regarding exclusive content have been analyzed by T. Gillespie, a Principal Researcher at Microsoft (USA) [10]. The author argues that major actors seek to control the ecosystem not only through algorithms but also through direct exclusivity and the monopolization of user attention [10]. Issues of privacy and monetization are highlighted by communications specialist, content creator, and event producer S. Resler, who notes that many podcast platforms track listeners' IP addresses and behavioral data for the purposes of targeted advertising [14]. At the same time, creators within closed ecosystems often lack access to data about their own audiences, which complicates feedback processes and limits their ability to understand listeners' needs. Contemporary Ukrainian academic discourse also contributes to the scholarly context of this field. In particular, a study by T. Bulakh, O. Kulykova, K. Martiukhyna, O. Karpenko, and I. Putsiata examines Ukrainian and international experiences with the main types of podcast advertising [8, p. 162–172]. In previous research, the author has examined podcasting as a means of engaging young people in European integration activities [3, p. 99–101], as well as podcasts within the structure of cross-media packages on platforms focused on economic topics [2, p. 36–46]. Thus, both international and Ukrainian research indicate the emergence of new barriers to the distribution of audio content – from algorithmic constraints to a lack of financial instruments. Together, these factors form a phenomenon that this study defines as "audio segregation" – a new form of digital inequality in the cultural sphere.

II. Research objectives and methods

The aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the impact of closed audio platforms on the Ukrainian cultural space, particularly in the field of podcasting, and to critically examine the phenomenon of «audio segregation» – a new form of audience division based on the platforms they use.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining methods of media analysis, cultural analysis, and elements of empirical research, including the analysis of statistical data and case studies. The theoretical framework draws on T. Poell, D. Nieborg, and B. E. Duffy's concept of platformization [12] and T. Gillespie's theory of media platforms as new gatekeepers of culture [10]. A comparative analysis was conducted, comparing Ukrainian cases with international practices to identify commonalities and differences. The methodology also incorporates critical discourse analysis of publications and statements by leading industry experts to uncover dominant narratives concerning open and closed podcasting. This approach allows for an examination of the phenomenon of audio segregation across technological, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions and supports the formulation of well-grounded conclusions.

III. Results

As J. Cridland – an expert on radio and podcasts – notes, the practice of closed or «sealed» platforms is reminiscent of the historical example of «sealed» radio receivers from the 1920s, which could receive signals from only a single station. On 23 November 1923, the first commercial radio station in Australia, *2SB*, began broadcasting. To listen to the station, listeners had to purchase a special radio receiver, known as a sealed set, and the proceeds from its sale directed toward funding the programs. Consequently, when another station, *2FC*, began broadcasting a month later, a separate receiver had to be obtained. Fewer than 1,500 such devices were sold during the first six months, after which the radio industry completely abandoned the concept [9].

Modern podcasts emerged as part of an open internet culture, in which creators published audio content freely accessible to the public, and listeners could access it through any application supporting the RSS protocol. This decentralized model fueled the rapid growth of podcasting in the 2000s. The commercial potential of audio prompted major technology companies to compete for audiences: they

sought to «lock in» users within their own ecosystems, secure their loyalty, and collect as much data as possible about user preferences. Today, several major platforms dominate the market: Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, Google Podcasts (until its closure in 2024), Pocket Casts, Overcast, and YouTube. According to the podcast measurement service Edison Podcast Metric, «31% of weekly podcast listeners aged 13 and older choose YouTube as the service they use most often to listen to podcasts, surpassing Spotify (27%) and Apple Podcasts (15%)» [15].

Exclusivity has become a growing trend, and research indicates that since mid-2019, the number of podcasts available exclusively on a single platform – either via subscription or for free, but without an RSS feed – has increased significantly [9]. This phenomenon has been termed the «podcast wars», in which each platform competes for a share of listeners' attention and time.

Open podcasting relied on listener choice or simple popularity rankings. In **CLOSED ECOSYSTEMS, RECOMMENDATION ALGORITHMS PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE. FOR INSTANCE,** Spotify uses algorithmic feeds (e.g., For You and Similar to What You're Listening To), which offer new podcasts based on user behavior, music and podcast preferences, demographic data, and other factors. On the one hand, this enhances user convenience, making the discovery of new content easier. On the other hand, it produces a filter bubble effect: the algorithm may repeatedly promote similar content, thereby narrowing the scope of consumption. Another barrier is access to audience data. In traditional open podcasting, creators could monitor episode downloads and, occasionally, the countries in which episodes were listened to via RSS statistics. Platforms, however, collect far more detailed data: minutes listened, skipped segments, drop-off points, search queries, and so forth. Yet they rarely share this information with content creators. Consequently, creators lose insight into their audience and become dependent on impersonal metrics provided by the platform (e.g., the number of subscribers on Spotify). Advertisers also face a dilemma: they must rely on platforms for targeting, as only these platforms have the requisite data.

As a result, the advantage of an open audio ecosystem – the ability it affords listeners to choose any application for any podcast – is gradually eroding. J. Cridland rightly observes that, whereas a traditional radio receiver could pick up all FM stations without restriction, the modern «audio receiver» – the smartphone – requires users to install separate «receivers» for each set of «stations» [9]. This undermines the very spirit of the open internet, where compatibility and accessibility were fundamental principles.

In Ukraine, 2020–2021 marked a breakthrough period for the development of podcasting, with the emergence of a wide range of Ukrainian-language podcasts covering various topics from news and politics to storytelling, science, and humor. According to surveys, the share of Ukrainians who listen to podcasts increased: whereas in 2018–2019 it was less than 5%, by 2023 approximately 24% of media users listened to podcasts weekly, with another 7% doing so several times per month [6]. Nevertheless, 69% of the population still never listen to podcasts [6], indicating both substantial growth potential and ongoing challenges in popularizing the format.

One of the first hubs of this development was the independent community Radio Podil. It is a production studio and podcasters' collective that emerged in Kyiv in 2019 with the aim of creating a horizontal community where creators support one another with production and promotion. The studio's podcasts were distributed through open channels – its own website, RSS – and were also available on all major platforms such as Apple, Google, Spotify. Thus, the strategy was as open as possible: to reach listeners regardless of the application they used. The community even planned to transition from a «podcast-centric» to a «community-centric» organization, in which podcasts would constitute only one of several offerings alongside offline events, educational programs, and other activities. The full-scale war, however, stood in the way; with its outbreak, the studio space was repurposed as a volunteer hub [4].

Another path of development has been the integration of podcasts into traditional media content. For example, the health podcast *Temperatura – normalna* (*Temperature – Normal*) from Ukrainska Pravda illustrates how major media outlets use podcasts to reach new audiences. This podcast is distributed via the Ukrainska Pravda website but is also available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and even YouTube. The podcast's content remains accessible across all platforms, but the audience is likely fragmented: some listen via Apple, others watch on YouTube, and these audiences may not overlap [1]. Since 2020, Suspilne Movlennia (The National Public Broadcasting Company of Ukraine) has followed a similar path, actively experimenting with podcasts: the UA:Podkasty platform was launched, series based on radio content (*Radio Kultura*, *Ukrainske radio*) were produced, and new formats were introduced [5].

The Ukrainian experience reveals two trends: on the one hand, the market strives for openness (podcasts are widely available, and creators aim to be present on all platforms simultaneously); on the other hand, there is a dependence on external ecosystems that dictate their own terms. This dependence is particularly pronounced during times of crisis: when the war began, Ukrainian radio stations and podcasts turned en masse to online audiences, but realized they had no direct channels to reach them – they had to go through Facebook, YouTube, Spotify, and similar platforms, which independently determine what content to show users. Thus, the potential for «audio segregation» in Ukraine is real,

although it currently manifests more as a slowdown in development (due to limited monetization and audience) and the risk of losing audience share to foreign content.

Based on the data and examples presented, the phenomenon of «audio segregation» can be described in greater detail. By this term, we mean the division of audiences and content in the audio sphere under the influence of platforms – where a user's choice (whether conscious or unconscious) in favor of a particular ecosystem constrains their cultural consumption. This segregation has several dimensions:

– algorithmic segregation, in which platforms use their algorithms to determine what users will listen to. T. Gillespie noted that algorithmic content curation can create a distorted picture of reality for the user – a filter bubble [10];

– infrastructural segregation (accessibility) – a situation in which access to content depends on the platform's infrastructure. If a show is exclusive to Amazon Music, a listener without an Amazon subscription (or in a country where the service is unavailable) simply has no technical means to access it. Thus, content «locked» to a platform becomes geographically restricted, and its audience is cut off based on users' ability to pay;

– creator segregation – those who receive support from the platform (in-app promotions, contracts, or placement in the top rankings) gain a competitive advantage in attracting audience attention. Independent creators, by contrast, operate under unequal conditions: even with high-quality content, it is difficult for them to gain traction without an advertising budget or mentions on other resources;

– commercial segregation – the audience is also stratified according to purchasing power: the emergence of paid subscriptions for exclusive episodes (Apple, Patreon, Spotify Subscriptions) means that those who can pay have access to a fuller experience than those who consume only free content.

Algorithmic and infrastructural isolation threatens the presence of the Ukrainian voice in the global information landscape. If major platforms decide that the Ukrainian language is not a priority and choose not to promote it, Ukrainian creators will have to resort to other languages, remain in an informational ghetto, or adopt other platforms.

IV. Conclusions

The study found that the shift from open audio ecosystems to closed platforms is profoundly transforming the media landscape and giving rise to a new phenomenon: «audio segregation». Major platforms (Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and similar services) concentrate a substantial portion of the audience within their own applications, using algorithms and exclusive content to retain it. This results in the segmentation of listeners by platform and creates barriers to the free distribution of content. Academic literature and industry studies (T. Poell, D. Nieborg, T. Bonini, T. Gillespie, J. Cridland, and others) confirm that the platformization of culture is accompanied by a concentration of control over access to audience and can limit cultural diversity. Our study complements these findings by focusing on the audio sphere and demonstrating that the closed nature of ecosystems manifests not only globally but also at the *level of national markets*.

For the Ukrainian cultural landscape, the impact of closed audio platforms is already noticeable, even at this early stage of podcasting development in the country. On the one hand, Ukrainian listeners' access to global audio content has been greatly facilitated by the arrival of international services; on the other hand, the availability of Ukrainian podcasts to a broad audience remains limited. Ukrainian podcasters surveyed report a lack of listeners and difficulties with monetization. This is partly because Ukrainian content competes for attention on platforms dominated by English- and Russian-language products, which are amplified by algorithms. Closed ecosystems hinder the expansion of Ukrainian audio into foreign markets, while also constricting the domestic market due to the absence of direct channels of communication with the audience.

The research of audio content reveals its own dynamics of segregation, stemming from the historical openness of RSS and the current trend toward exclusivity. To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to support and promote open podcast applications and directories that do not lock listeners into one ecosystem. In Ukraine, it would be advisable to develop or strengthen national open-access podcast platforms (possibly based on Suspilne Movlennia company or through a public-private partnership) that aggregate Ukrainian-language content and are accessible globally. The use of open standards (RSS, OP3 standard for metrics, and other relevant standards) will ensure compatibility with the international ecosystem and preserve content independence. Support programs for audio content creators should be implemented, including grants, training, and brand collaborations. This will help podcasters improve the quality and competitiveness of their content, as well as learn to promote it in an algorithmic environment. Ukrainian media professionals and diplomats should support international initiatives for open podcasting.

The concept of media literacy is gaining new significance, as users, alongside practicing information hygiene, need to understand algorithms and consciously shape their media diet. It is important to explain to audiences how recommendations work and why it is sometimes worth stepping outside a single application to discover information, content, and podcasts on other platforms. This expands and

enriches the boundaries of the algorithmically created information bubble. If listeners insist on content being universally accessible, platforms will have to respond.

The prospects for further research stem from the fact that the Ukrainian cultural sphere faces the challenge of preserving its own voice in the digital age. Audio podcasts have emerged as a significant new segment of this sphere, and Ukraine's cultural resilience and its presence in the global dialogue depend on how this segment develops. Closed ecosystems are not only a threat but also an opportunity to rethink strategies. Ukraine can seize the chance to become an active player in shaping a more open, inclusive audio landscape – and this article highlights areas where the efforts of scholars, media professionals, and government officials should converge for the common good.

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Гиріна Т. С. Звукова сегрегація закритих глобальних аудіоплатформ як виклик культурі подкастингу в Україні

Мета дослідження *– комплексне осмислення трансформацій аудіосфери в добу платформізації культури та обґрунтування поняття звукової сегрегації як нового поділу аудиторії, спричиненого переходом від відкритого RSS-екосередовища подкастингу до закритих платформ типу Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music та YouTube.*

Методологічно *робота поєднує міждисциплінарний підхід: медіа- та культурологічний аналіз, порівняння глобальних і локальних практик.*

Результати дослідження. *На матеріалі міжнародних досліджень і українських кейсів простежено, як алгоритмічні механізми рекомендацій, політика ексклюзивного контенту, контроль даних про слухачів і платіжні моделі перерозподіляють доступ до культурного продукту, формуючи бар'єри для творців і споживачів. Зроблено висновок, що стратегія відкритості здатна пом'якшити ефекти сегрегації, підвищити видимість українського аудіо та зміцнити культурну стійкість у цифрову добу.*

Новизна. *Показано, що закриті екосистеми генерують щонайменше чотири типи нерівностей: алгоритмічну (звуження інформаційного горизонту через персоналізовані стрічки), інфраструктурну (географічні й технічні обмеження доступу), авторську (привілейованість контенту, підсиленого промоцією платформи) та комерційну (стратифікація досвіду за платоспроможністю). Окремо акцентовано на конфіденційності: платформи накопичують детальні дані про поведінку слухачів, але не повертають авторам релевантної аналітики, що послаблює зворотний зв'язок і ускладнює монетизацію. На українському ринку ці процеси поєднуються з невисокою проникненістю формату та конкуренцією з домінантними іншомовними продуктами, посиленими алгоритмами, що загрожує видимості україномовного контенту й культурній репрезентації.*

Практичне значення. *Результати допомагають визначитися з пріоритетними ефективними стратегіями дистрибуції контенту в умовах алгоритмічної сегрегації. Висновки можуть бути задіяні для розробки національних комунікаційних стратегій, спрямованих на зміцнення культурної стійкості та просування україномовного продукту на глобальних платформах.*

Ключові слова: *алгоритмічна сегрегація, аудіоплатформи, видимість контенту, ексклюзивність, закриті екосистеми, конфіденційність даних, медіаграмотність, платформізація культури, подкастинг, український культурний простір.*

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