

## Research Paper

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# Between microphone and audience

Experiences of women radio presenters in digitally connected interactions

**Abstract:** Interaction with the audience is fundamental in journalism, especially in radio, where it contributes significantly to the success of programs. In the age of social media and digital platforms, the interaction between presenters and recipients is crucial for the listening experience and the relevance of the content. Prior research has focused primarily on the audience's perception of interactions, while the perspective of radio presenters has been largely ignored. In light of increasing hate attacks, especially against women journalists, this qualitative study addresses the experiences of women radio presenters in their interaction with their audience in Germany. The results show how structural factors and the use of digital communication tools influence the dynamics of interaction and the emotional experience of presenters. The latter tend to find contact with the audience enriching, both professionally and personally. However, they also mention negative experiences, which vary depending on the type of station and the channels of interaction used.

**Keywords:** journalism, radio presenting, interaction, social media, gender studies

Despite digital change, radio remains an integral part of the media landscape in Germany: over 40 million people use it every day, a sign of how strongly the medium has established itself in everyday life (cf. Mavrogiannis, 2024). The role of presenters is central to this consistency. They shape content, engage in direct communication with the audience, and therefore create closeness and a sense of community. It is precisely this interaction that is becoming increasingly important in the digital age.

Digital platforms open up new forms of communication between journalists and recipients – and with them, new risks. Studies show that journalists and media professionals, especially women, are increasingly exposed to digital attacks, such as hate comments or targeted intimidation (cf. Papendick et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020). Like journalistic practice in general, this cannot be viewed isolated from social power relations. Media content and its production reflect cultural gender orders and contribute to their reproduction or change. The catchphrase »doing gender while doing journalism« (Lünenborg & Maier, 2013, p. 87) underlines how much journalistic activity is also charged with gender politics.

Against this backdrop, the following article focuses on the experiences of *women radio presenters* – in particular, their digital interaction with their audience. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the opportunities and challenges they perceive in the digital space. The central question is how parasocial relationships are formed on the radio and how they change when digital violence comes into play.

## 1. Parasocial interactions on the radio

The increasing intertwining of radio broadcasts with digital formats, especially social media, is fundamentally changing the interaction between presenters and audiences. While previous radio formats were predominantly characterized by one-way communication processes, platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or X (formerly Twitter) now enable immediate, two-way forms of communication. These real-time interactions create new forms of audience participation and intensify the bond between listeners and presenters (cf. Hillmoth, 2017, p. 595).

Social media not only promote the speed and visibility of responses, but also create greater proximity through targeted communication, interaction, and algorithmically measurable feedback (likes, comments, reach). In the process, the traditional roles of sender and recipient are becoming increasingly blurred. The openness of social media in terms of access and design offers the opportunity to involve listeners in the communication processes – leading to a more active form of participation. Following the dynamics described above, this supports the potential for reciprocal communication and a more responsive orientation of media content – a development that opens up new opportunities for participation, but also harbors risks.

Radio presenters have a special role to play in the context of these media dynamics: as recurring points of reference, they help to shape identity (cf. Lindner-Braun, 1998) and act as key identifying features of a program. This creates a so-called parasocial interaction (cf. Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), in which recipients perceive the

presenters as familiar communication partners – even though the communication remains asymmetrical in fact. The illusion of closeness can trigger reactions that resemble real social interactions, but without any social consequences for the recipients (cf. Ayaß, 2005; Godulla, 2022; Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215f.).

This social absence of consequences becomes a problem, especially in digital spaces. Studies show that journalists and media professionals are increasingly targeted by hate speech and digital attacks – especially women (see Papendick et al., 2020; Duggan, 2017; Dhrodia, 2017). Interaction via social media can therefore lead to emotional stress and professional limitations. In response, those affected develop different coping strategies, ranging from active confrontation to withdrawal and self-censorship (cf. Preuß, 2022, pp. 187-192). In addition to the audience and the presenters themselves, the structural conditions of the broadcasters also influence the forms and types of communication.

Against the backdrop of the increasing digital permeation of radio broadcasts and changing communication relationships, the question arises how women radio presenters experience and evaluate interaction with their audience, especially in the area of tension between closeness, participation, and potential hostility. This question forms the starting point for the following study.

## 2. »It's like a friend calling«

For the study, a total of nine qualitative online interviews with women radio presenters were conducted between May and June 2021. The interviewees were selected using the snowball principle and combined targeted recruitment calls. Four of the interviewees work in private broadcasting and for various stations with national coverage in the Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg area. In addition, five presenters from public radio stations were recruited, whose broadcasting areas are primarily regional and located in the Bremen, Hamburg, and Schleswig-Holstein area.

The presenters interviewed have varying lengths of professional experience in radio and are between their late twenties and fifties. Their fields of activity mainly cover presenting in daytime programming, especially morning shows and mid-morning programs, both in private and public broadcasting. Two of the interviewees have 15 years of experience in morning shows and mid-morning programs on private stations. Shorter careers are also represented, including presenters with two and five years of experience in daytime programming. One interviewee has around 20 years of professional experience in radio, previously held a senior editorial position, and has been presenting a public morning show for a year. The sample is supplemented by presenters from the afternoon and night programs of public broadcasting. The variation of professional

backgrounds allows for a differentiated view of the realities of work and professional development in the field of radio presenting.

The interviews were designed to capture how presenters assess the importance of interactions with the audience in their everyday working lives. They were evaluated using Kuckartz's (2018) content-structuring analysis. It should be noted that the small sample size of nine interviews does not allow generalized statements, but rather aims at an exploratory approach to the research topic.

Despite the exploratory nature of the study, clear thematic focal points can be derived from the interviews. The presenters emphasize the central role of interaction in their professional practice. As feedback in »the lonely medium« of radio, they represent an important feedback for them: »This gives you feedback that there are people who like you or who listen to what you broadcast. That's the important thing.« Regardless of differences in station affiliation or professional experience, all women radio presenters describe interaction with listeners as enriching and valuable. Overall, the presenters view this opportunity for contact positively, which is surprising given the currently increasing attacks on journalists.

On the one hand, this positive perception stems from the benefits for the program, as the feedback is inclusive and contributes to generating topics. On the other hand, the interactions also have personal value: the presenters appreciate being able to capture different realities of life and integrate them into their programs. Personal contact provides insights into different areas of life and, in some cases, promotes exchanges that go beyond the professional sphere. One presenter describes the joy of the interactions as follows: »It's like a friend calling. You're friendly and happy when they get in touch. That's how contact with listeners feels.« Many emphasize respectful interaction and closeness to listeners. This closeness is evident in the fact that feedback often relates to the presenters themselves, for example with personal concerns. They also receive requests from listeners on their private social media channels. Surprisingly, some presenters maintain friendly relationships with individual listeners via social media: »I'm friends on Facebook with some listeners from the past whom I met at events. Some of them still wish me a happy birthday years later, which I think is really nice.« The presenters experience this closeness as a friendly relationship and view it positively.

The available communication channels are crucial for interactive exchange. Most presenters use telephone, email, and social media. They do not always have direct access to incoming messages, as some stations have an online editorial team or listener assistance that filters messages. This influences the communication dynamics: on the one hand, presenters can concentrate on relevant interactions, but on the other hand, direct exchange is restricted. This can lead to a bias in perception among listeners, which reduces the authenticity and diversity of interactions and affects the relationship between presenters and their audience.

There are differences in the channels of communication: Contact via telephone, email, letters, or social media mainly relates to presenters and content. The experiences are partly positive and partly negative. Many presenters appreciate the rapid exchange on social media, as they can generate momentum during the program and receive immediate responses: »You ask a question on air and two seconds later you get countless WhatsApp messages.« Social media particularly promotes reciprocity in communication. Presenters actively control communication, respond immediately to inquiries, and also take on the role of the audience. This role reversal is seen as an essential prerequisite for positive interactions and stronger bonds: »It's best to be like someone next door, so that people know they can come to us, talk to us, and ask questions. They are relaxed, friendly conversations; we are on equal footing.« In addition to the role reversal, social media enables rapid exchange and the expression of objective criticism, which helps moderators identify mistakes and make improvements.

However, the presenters also report negative interactions, both on social media and other communication channels. These take the form of unfair criticism, harassment, and an overall unfriendly tone. Some listeners cross boundaries by sending personal information or making advances: »If someone wants to become a pen pal, you have to set clear boundaries.« The presenters often criticize the listeners' subjective communication style. Negative feedback accompanied by harassment, complaints, unfriendly behavior, stalking, and shitstorms is particularly prevalent on social media. »On Facebook, one person kept writing malicious and defamatory messages. At some point, I got fed up because it was no longer about content, but only about personal attacks.«

Overall, negative interactions are primarily characterized by irrelevance, complaints, and inappropriate advances. Targeted digital hostility, for example based on gender, is only mentioned in isolated cases. Compared to the current state of research on digital violence against journalists and media professionals, this result is remarkable, as a greater impact would have been expected. This could be due to the exceptionally close relationship between presenters and their audience: their voices, regular presence, and personal presentation styles create familiarity, which promotes a baseline attitude of respect. This parasocial relationship can have a protective function, as presenters are perceived less as abstract media figures and more as familiar companions in everyday life.

Nevertheless, the presenters are aware of the risks social media poses. Some attribute the negative interactions to anonymity: »A culture has developed in which the lack of real names leads to a lot of unproductive and unobjective criticism.« Social media is viewed ambivalently: it enables quick, direct exchange, but also carries the risk of problematic feedback. The challenges that arise from this can affect the moderators' job satisfaction and the quality of the programs.

Nevertheless, the women presenters have a positive attitude toward their work: »Despite a few troublemakers, the atmosphere is very polite and appreciative, which motivates us to keep going.« The positive experiences of interaction outweigh the rarer negative experiences. At the same time, the presenters know how to draw the line when interaction is no longer beneficial to the program due to its irrelevance.

### 3. Influence of station types on interaction dynamics

In addition to the various communication channels, the interviews also revealed a difference between the types of broadcasters. The different framework conditions also have an impact on the interactions between radio presenters and their audience. This reveals varying evaluation standards and different levels of listener engagement, which are strongly influenced by the type of broadcaster (public or private). This finding was not clearly foreseeable in the run-up to the study.

Radio presenters from public broadcasters describe a strong sense of responsibility towards their audience. Due to the mandate of these stations to support the free formation of opinion, the presenters see themselves as professional communicators of information. Against this backdrop, a clear division of roles between presenters and audience is established: »I sell a product, and ultimately we are the waitresses and waiters who present the topics, so to speak.«

These structural conditions tend to lead to a distanced attitude toward listeners. Interactions are seen as part of everyday working life that can enrich the program with personal concerns or content. However, the focus is not on the relationship with the audience, but on the practical benefits for the program.

Negative interactions are usually met with indifference and are not taken personally: »Relatively unproductive, unfocused criticism [...] is not something we discuss on air.« Interaction is seen more as a professional necessity than as personal enrichment. It is striking, however, that negative experiences such as harassment or stalking are reported primarily by public broadcasters. One possible explanation lies in the regional nature of these stations: in smaller broadcasting areas, there is greater proximity to the audience, which blurs the boundaries between private and professional life. In addition, interaction is actively encouraged by the stations, for example through images and videos on social media, which may also contribute to negative experiences.

In contrast, presenters on private stations describe a more intimate connection with their audience. They report positive emotions and, in some cases, friendly relationships with their listeners. Aspects such as closeness, communication on an equal footing, and active involvement of listeners characterize the interaction. Some presenters maintain contact with their audience for years – even

beyond their broadcasting time. This intrinsic motivation is fueled by the joy of personal connection and direct positive feedback. In contrast, the motivation of public broadcast presenters appears to be more strongly determined by their social mission.

However, emotional closeness can also lead to stress. Unobjective or offensive feedback is more stressful: »There are some things I don't even read anymore because it always upsets me so much how stupid people are.« Personal closeness makes it difficult for some presenters to deal with negative interactions – an aspect that was discussed more intensively by public broadcasters.

The interviews show that public broadcasters tend to maintain more distant, professional relationships, while private broadcasters describe closer emotional ties and greater commitment. The structural differences are reflected in the nature and quality of the interactions. Hochschild (1983) points out that emotional labor can be associated with identity-related stress. Against this background, the emotional stress described by radio presenters on private stations can be interpreted as a possible consequence of their intense emotional commitment and close bond with their listeners.

Since there has been little research to date on the differences between public and private radio presenters, the findings obtained here suggest that further intensive research is needed, particularly on how women radio presenters deal with stressful or transgressive experiences. The interviews provide an initial insight into various coping strategies that play a central role in professional self-image and psychological well-being.

#### 4. Coping strategies

The experiences of the presenters interviewed reveal different ways of dealing with negative interactions. Depending on the emotional closeness, they use distancing mechanisms, but also confrontational ones. Table 1 provides an overview of the coping strategies identified in the interviews.

Only some of the coping mechanisms identified relate to analog or face-to-face interactions, which suggests that the digital space is perceived as particularly challenging – whether due to the lower inhibition threshold of anonymous users, the high reach, or the constant availability of communication. Although the majority of interactions are described by the women radio presenters surveyed as positive, stimulating, and enriching, and negative interactions occur less frequently in quantitative terms, presenters from both public and private broadcasters discuss the latter in much greater detail and with greater nuance. This suggests that the psychological impact of negative digital communication experiences is more profound and has a longer-lasting effect. The coping

strategies identified are particularly problem-focused and avoidance-oriented. This indicates that those affected not only actively try to resolve specific conflicts, but also want to protect themselves from further stressful experiences. The combination of confrontation and withdrawal illustrates the ambivalent nature of digital interactions: on the one hand, they offer visibility and reach, but on the other hand, they require increased self-regulation and boundaries.

Table 1  
Coping strategies

Strategy	Type of interaction
Engaging in dialogue/ confrontation	Face-to-face meeting, telephone, letter, email, social media
Ignoring of the approach	Phone, letter, email, social media
Submission of response	Phone, letter, email, social media
Self-censorship	Social Media
Social devaluation	Social Media

## 5. Conclusion and significance for media practice

The results of this study highlight the complex nature of interactions between women radio presenters and their audience in the digital age. Despite the increase in negative interactions, particularly gender-specific hate and harassment, many presenters find the exchange with their audience enriching. In particular, the integration of social media is perceived as beneficial for interaction – in contrast to studies that emphasize primarily the negative aspects of digital communication. The opportunity to incorporate the different realities of listeners' lives into program design promotes a better understanding of audience needs and contributes to program optimization.

At the same time, clear differences between public and private broadcasters are becoming apparent. Women presenters at public broadcasters in particular report an increase in negative interactions, especially on social media. They demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility towards their audience and pursue a professional, emotionally detached approach. In this context, negative feedback is understood as part of everyday working life and emotionally distanced.

Presenters on private stations, on the other hand, describe a more intense emotional connection to their listeners. This closeness promotes constructive handling of feedback, but also leads to greater susceptibility to emotional stress when negative feedback is received. The respective framework conditions

therefore shape not only interaction styles, but also how stress is handled. Many presenters report individual coping strategies in this context.

These findings underscore the importance of structural and digital factors for the dynamics of interaction on the radio. At the same time, the different coping strategies highlight the importance of emotional detachment and support in dealing with digital hostility. Despite the positive aspects, the challenges posed by digital violence and harassment should not be trivialized. The use of coping strategies in the digital context points to a need for protection and regulation mechanisms. In particular, the specific stress levels to which women journalists are exposed require critical examination and appropriate support measures. Institutions and broadcasters are called upon to create conditions that protect and empower these journalists and media professionals.

With regard to radio as a medium, the question remains as to whether the changed forms of communication resulting from digital interaction possibilities are subject to radio-specific characteristics and thus to a specific audience structure. The study presented here has revealed initial differences between different types of broadcasters. For future research, it would be important to conduct a more in-depth comparison between different types of broadcasters and other journalistic professions and the associated effects on interaction and the underlying mechanisms. In addition, the influence of gender dynamics on interaction and the effectiveness of specific coping strategies could be examined in a larger sample. Overall, the study shows that the digital transformation in the medium of radio presents both opportunities and risks that need to be addressed in order to ensure the quality and integrity of journalistic communication in the long term.

## About the author

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