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The listening renaissance: a theoretical exploration of audio-based digital narratives in literature

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This paper examines the burgeoning phenomenon of audio-based digital narratives and their transformative impact on literature consumption, focusing on the evolving role of listening in the digital age. As audiobooks, podcasts, and other audio formats gain prominence, they challenge traditional notions of reading and storytelling, reshaping individual's engagement with literary works. Through a theoretical exploration drawing from cognitive theory, media studies, and literary criticism, this study argues that the rise of audio literature represents not merely a shift in medium, but a fundamental change to process and interact with narrative content. The paper investigates the historical evolution of audio narratives, the cognitive processes involved in auditory literary experiences and the emergence of "literary listening" as a distinct skill. It also considers broader implications, including accessibility issues, the democratization of literature, and potential future directions of storytelling in an increasingly audio-centric digital environment. By synthesizing existing research and theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the listening renaissance in literature. The paper concludes by reflecting on the changing nature of literature consumption and the enduring importance of listening in an individual's engagement with narrative art, suggesting that audio-based digital narratives represent a significant cultural shift associated with literature, rather than just a technological trend.

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Introduction

The landscape of literature has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, marked by a significant shift from traditional print formats to digital platforms. This transition, catalyzed by technological advancements, has reshaped how readers interact with texts and expanded the very definition of “reading” (Birkerts, 2006). The shift began with the advent of e-books and digital reading devices, which challenged the supremacy of printed books and introduced new ways of accessing and consuming written content. The digitization of literature not only changed how individuals read but also where and they engage with texts, making books more portable and accessible than ever before. The emergence of e-books in the late 20th century marked the beginning of this digital revolution in literature, offering readers the convenience of carrying entire libraries in pocket-sized devices (Baron, 2015).

Building upon this digital revolution, the 21st century has witnessed the rapid rise of audio-based literary forms. Audiobooks, once a niche market primarily serving visually impaired readers, have exploded in popularity across diverse demographics. This auditory renaissance has roots in older forms like radio dramas but has been revitalized and expanded by digital technologies. Audiobook sales have seen double-digit growth year over year, with the Audio Publishers Association reporting a 12% increase in 2020 alone (Anderson, 2022). Similarly, literary podcasts have carved out a significant niche, offering everything from serialized fiction to in-depth book discussions (McHugh, 2016).

This surge in audio literature is not merely a change in format but represents a fundamental shift in how individuals engage with narrative content. As Wittkower (2011) argues, audio narratives engage different cognitive processes compared to visual reading, potentially enhancing listening skills and offering new ways to interact with literary works. Moreover, the rise of audio literature is democratizing access to literary content, making it available to those with visual impairments or reading difficulties and allowing for multitasking in their increasingly busy lives (Have and Pedersen, 2015).

This transformation is multifaceted. Firstly, it’s changing the very nature of the reader’s engagement with literary works. Instead of a visual and silent activity, “reading” can now be an auditory and potentially more immersive experience. The human voice, with its nuances of tone, pacing and emotion, adds a new dimension to the text, potentially enhancing readers understanding and enjoyment of the work. Secondly, the rise of audio literature is cultivating and refining listening skills. As society becomes accustomed to consuming complex narratives and ideas through audio, researchers are developing what might be termed “literary listening”—a specialized form of active listening that combines auditory processing with literary comprehension and analysis. Lastly, this shift is challenging the traditional notions of what constitutes ‘reading’. As audio formats become increasingly prevalent, it is forced to reconsider whether reading must necessarily involve the visual processing of text, or if it can encompass the cognitive processing of narrative content, regardless of the sensory input method.

This paper posits that audio-based digital narratives are profoundly transforming the way individuals engage with literature, enhancing listening skills and reshaping the understanding of what it means to “read” in the digital age. An examination of the cognitive, cultural, and technological aspects of this shift provides insight into the future of literature consumption and the evolving relationship between text, sound, and narrative in the digital era.

Conceptual and methodological approaches to audio-based digital narratives

The study of audio-based digital narratives employs an integrated framework that combines conceptual understanding with

methodological rigor across three primary domains: cognitive science, media studies, and literary theory (Hayles, 2012; Jenkins, 2011). At its core, this framework defines audio-based digital narratives as sophisticated forms of digital storytelling that encompass traditional audiobooks, podcasts, and interactive audio stories (Elislah and Irwansyah, 2022), while positioning listening as a complex cognitive process rather than a passive activity (Kuzmičová, 2016). The framework integrates key concepts including active listening (Rodero, 2012), digital literacy (Livingstone, 2004), and auditory processing (Kraus and White-Schwoch, 2015).

The methodological approach employs systematic theoretical analysis based on four key principles: relevance to audio narratives, cross-disciplinary integration, contemporary applicability, and empirical validation (Have and Pedersen, 2015; Singh and Alexander, 2022). This methodology prioritizes frameworks that successfully bridge multiple disciplines while addressing current digital media consumption patterns, particularly those connecting technological and cultural aspects of audio narrative consumption (Berglund, 2024). The framework provides guidelines for analyzing content, platforms, user experience, and cultural impact, while acknowledging both the technological and human dimensions of this emerging form of literary engagement (Alexander, 2017; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Through this integrated approach, the framework establishes a comprehensive foundation for understanding how audio-based digital narratives are transforming literary consumption in the digital age (Smith, 2023).

Defining audio-based digital narratives. Audio-based digital narratives encompass a range of formats that deliver literary content through auditory means in the digital realm. This includes audiobooks, podcasts and interactive audio stories. Elislah and Irwansyah (2022) define these as “digital audio files of spoken words used to tell stories or convey information” (p. 2). Unlike traditional audiobooks on cassettes or CDs, digital audio narratives are characterized by their accessibility, portability, and often enhanced production values. Alexander (2017) further expands this definition, noting that modern audio narratives often incorporate elements such as multiple voice actors, sound effects, and even interactive components, blurring the lines between traditional audiobooks and radio dramas.

The role of listening in literature consumption. Listening, in the context of literature consumption, involves more than the passive reception of auditory information. It engages cognitive processes that differ from those used in visual reading. As Kuzmičová (2016) argues, auditory literary experiences can enhance imagination and emotional engagement with the text. Moreover, Have and Pedersen (2015) posit that listening to literature activates different areas of the brain compared to visual reading, potentially offering complementary benefits to traditional reading practices. They suggest that the act of listening to narratives can improve overall language comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Key concepts: active listening, digital literacy, auditory processing. Active Listening: Unlike passive hearing, active listening in the context of audio literature involves a conscious effort to understand, interpret, and engage with the narrative. Rodero (2012) defines it as “a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding” (pp. 458–479) which, applied to audio narratives, enhances comprehension and enjoyment.

Digital Literacy: In the realm of audio-based digital narratives, digital literacy extends beyond the ability to use digital devices.

Livingstone (2004) defines it as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (pp. 3–14). For audio narratives, this includes navigating digital platforms, understanding different audio formats and critically engaging with digital content.

Auditory Processing: This refers to how the brain recognizes and interprets sound. In the context of audio narratives, Kraus and White-Schwoch (2015) describe it as the cognitive mechanism that allows listeners to comprehend complex narratives delivered aurally, involving skills such as auditory attention, memory, and sequencing.

Historical context

The historical background provides a foundation for understanding the development of audio-based digital narratives, the technological factors that have shaped their evolution, and the cultural shifts that have accompanied their rise. It sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how these changes affect the engagement with literature in the digital age.

The evolution of audio literature. The roots of audio literature can be traced back to the early 20th century, with the advent of radio plays. One of the most famous early examples is Orson Welles’ broadcast of “The War of the Worlds” which demonstrated the power of audio storytelling to captivate audiences (Schwartz, 2015). The concept of recorded books for the blind emerged in the 1930s, with the American Foundation for the Blind creating the “Talking Book” program. This initiative used vinyl records to provide access to literature for visually impaired individuals (Rubery, 2016).

The 1950s and 1960s saw the introduction of audiobooks on vinyl records and cassette tapes, making them more widely available to the general public. Companies like Caedmon Records, founded in 1952, began producing spoken word recordings of authors reading their works, including Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot (Rubery, 2016). The digital revolution of the late 20th century transformed audio literature. The launch of Audible.com in 1995 marked a significant milestone, introducing downloadable digital audiobooks and changing the landscape of audio literature distribution (Have and Pedersen, 2015). The 2000s saw the rise of podcasting, which further expanded the audio narrative landscape. Podcasts offered new formats for storytelling, literary discussion, and serialized fiction. Shows like “Serial” (2014) demonstrated the potential for audio narratives to reach massive audiences and influence popular culture (McHugh, 2016).

Technological advancements and their impact. The progression of audio literature has been closely tied to technological advancements. The transition from analog (vinyl and cassettes) to digital formats (CDs, MP3s, and streaming) dramatically improved sound quality, portability and accessibility. The introduction of portable MP3 players in the late 1990s, epitomized by the iPod in 2001, revolutionized how people consumed audio content, including audiobooks. These devices allowed users to carry entire libraries in their pockets (Sterne, 2012).

Smartphones and dedicated e-readers with audio capabilities further enhanced the convenience of consuming audio literature. The integration of audiobook apps with cloud technology allowed for seamless listening across multiple devices (Singh and Alexander, 2022). Streaming services and AI-driven recommendations have revolutionized how users discover and access audio content. Platforms like Audible, Scribd, and Spotify have invested heavily in audiobook and podcast content, making it easier than ever for users to find and consume audio literature (Geerling, 2023).

Text-to-speech technology has expanded the availability of audio content, though it raises questions about the role of human narration in the listening experience. While this technology has made more texts accessible in audio format, many listeners still prefer human narration for its emotional nuance and interpretive quality (Larson, 2015).

Global market expansion and economic dimensions. The digital audio literature landscape has experienced exponential growth across global markets, transforming not just technological consumption but also the economic infrastructure of publishing. The market expansion reveals a nuanced global narrative of audio-book adoption.

In the United States, the market demonstrates particularly robust growth. The Audio Publishers Association reported a 25% revenue increase in 2021, reaching \$1.6 billion, with digital platforms driving unprecedented expansion. The demographic breakdown is revealing: 53% of audiobook listeners are under 45, with women representing 56% of the market. Critically, the average listener consumes 8.1 books annually, indicating deep engagement beyond mere novelty (Anderson, 2022).

Recent data from Bookwire report (2024) provides additional insights into the Spanish-language segment of this market. The Spanish-language audiobook sector experienced a remarkable 45.7% growth in revenue in 2023, following a 52.81% increase in 2022. The available catalog has expanded significantly, growing from 8,000 titles in 2018 to 20,100 titles in 2023, with projections reaching 24,120 titles by 2024. The United States has emerged as a leader in Spanish-language audiobook growth specifically, showing a 67% increase over the previous year, while Spain follows with 55% growth. Latin America and Mexico show more modest growth at 19% and 2% respectively.

Nordic countries have shown even more dramatic market transformations. Sweden experienced a remarkable 38% increase in audiobook consumption between 2019 and 2022. Denmark followed closely, with a 35% market growth and digital platforms accounting for nearly 60% of audio content consumption. Norway mirrored this trend, with ~40% market expansion and strong integration of audiobooks in educational and professional contexts (Bookwire, 2024).

The market structure varies significantly by region. In the United States, non-fiction audiobooks dominate with 67% of the market share, compared to 33% for fiction. This contrasts with Spain, where fiction leads with 56% of the market. Subscription models have become the primary revenue stream, accounting for 85.93% of total audiobook sales in 2023 (Bookwire, 2024). This trend is further supported by platforms like Spotify, which has launched limited hourly subscription plans in English-speaking countries and secured agreements with major publishers to expand audiobook access.

Emerging markets present equally compelling developments. Mexico has witnessed a 22–25% growth in audiobook consumption, driven by increasing digital literacy and smartphone penetration (Bookwire, 2024). This growth reflects a broader global trend of shifting literary consumption patterns, where audio formats are transitioning from niche to mainstream.

Karl Berglund’s seminal work, “Reading Audio Readers”, provides critical insights into these emerging consumption patterns. Berglund (2024) argues that audiobook platforms are not merely technological innovations but represent a fundamental restructuring of publishing business models. The shift towards streaming-based audio literature consumption challenges traditional publishing hierarchies, democratizing both content creation and distribution.

The economic implications extend beyond direct sales. Streaming platforms like Audible, Scribd, and emerging regional services have developed sophisticated algorithmic recommendation systems, transforming how listeners discover and consume literary content. These platforms are not just distribution channels but active curators of literary experiences, influencing reading (or listening) behaviors on an unprecedented scale.

Cultural shifts in literature consumption. The rise of audio literature reflects broader cultural shifts in how individuals consume media and literature. The increasing pace of modern life has led to a demand for content that can be consumed while multi-tasking. Audiobooks and podcasts allow people to engage with literature while commuting, exercising or doing household chores (Have and Pedersen, 2015). There's been a resurgence of interest in oral storytelling traditions, with audio formats providing a modern avenue for this age-old practice. This trend connects to primal instincts for oral communication and storytelling, giving a new dimension to literary experiences (Wittkower, 2011). The growth of audio literature has intersected with movements towards greater accessibility in media. Audiobooks provide alternative ways to engage with literature for those with visual impairments, reading difficulties like dyslexia or other conditions that make traditional reading challenging (Moyer, 2012).

The digital age has also seen a shift towards more immersive and interactive storytelling experiences. Some audio narratives now include sound effects, multiple voice actors and even interactive elements, blurring the lines between traditional audiobooks, radio dramas, and video games (Alexander, 2017). Lastly, the rise of user-generated content and self-publishing platforms has democratized the creation and distribution of audio literature. This has led to a more diverse range of voices and stories being shared through audio formats, challenging traditional gatekeepers in the publishing industry (Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

Theoretical perspectives on listening and literature

The intersection of listening and literature through various theoretical lenses, providing a framework for understanding the complex relationship between auditory perception, digital media and literary engagement in the context of audio-based narratives.

As illustrated in the theoretical framework (Fig. 1), the three main theoretical areas: Cognitive theory, which helps explain how the brain processes auditory information in narrative contexts, including aspects of attention, memory and mental imagery formation. Media theory, which explores how the digital audio format itself influences the reception and interpretation of literary content, considering concepts like remediation and media convergence. Literary theory, which is being reimagined to account for the unique aspects of audio narratives, including how traditional concepts in narratology, reception theory and critical theories like postcolonialism and feminism apply to or are transformed by audio literature. Together, these perspectives offer a multifaceted approach to understanding how audio-based digital narratives are changing the relationship with literature, impacting both the process i.e., narrative information and conceptualize the act of engaging with literary works in the digital age. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the implications of the shift toward audio literature equally to cultural and cognitive domains.

Cognitive theory and auditory processing. Cognitive theory provides insights into how the brain processes auditory information, particularly in the context of complex narratives. According to Baddeley's (2000) model of working memory,

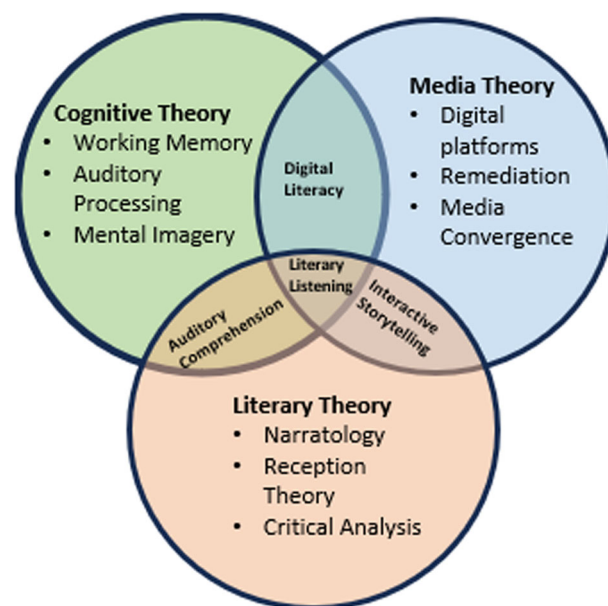


Fig. 1 Integrated theoretical framework.

auditory information is processed in the phonological loop, a component of working memory dedicated to speech-based information. In the context of audio literature, Kuzmičová (2016) argues that listening to narratives engages different cognitive processes compared to visual reading. She suggests that auditory input may enhance mental imagery and emotional engagement with the text, as the brain allocates resources differently when processing spoken words versus written text. Moreover, Kraus and White-Schwoch (2015) discuss how auditory processing in narrative contexts involves skills such as auditory attention, memory, and sequencing. They argue that regular engagement with audio narratives might enhance these cognitive abilities over time.

Media theory and the impact of digital formats. Media theory helps to understand how the medium through which content is delivered impacts its reception and interpretation. McLuhan (1994) famous assertion that “the medium is the message” is particularly relevant when considering the shift from print to digital audio formats. Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of “remediation” is useful in understanding how audio literature adapts and transforms traditional literary forms. They argue that new media forms often incorporate and redefine older media, in how audiobooks and podcasts remediate both print literature and radio dramas. Jenkins' (2011) theory of media convergence is also pertinent, as it explains how digital technologies are blurring the lines between different media forms. In the context of audio literature, it has been seen in the integration of interactive elements, multi-voice performances and even visual components in some digital audio narratives.

Literary theory in the context of audio narratives. Traditional literary theories are being reexamined and adapted in light of audio narratives. For instance, narratology, the study of narrative structures, must consider how auditory elements like voice, tone and pacing contribute to storytelling in ways distinct from written text (Fludernik, 2009). Reception theory, which focuses on how readers interpret texts, takes on new dimensions when applied to listeners. Iser's (1979) concept of the “implied reader” might be reconsidered as the “implied listener” in audio narratives, with different expectations and modes of engagement. Hayles' (2012)

work on electronic literature and posthumanism offers insights into how digital formats are changing the relationship with text. She argues that the materiality of digital media, including audio formats, shapes cognitive engagement with literature in profound ways. Lastly, postcolonial and feminist literary theories are finding new relevance in audio literature. For example, Dreher et al. (2016) discuss how podcasting and audio storytelling can amplify marginalized voices and challenge dominant narratives in ways that traditional publishing might not.

The transformation of listening in the digital age

The Transformation of Listening in the Digital Age represents a profound shift in how individuals engage with auditory content, particularly literary works, in the context of evolving digital technologies and formats. This transformation encompasses several key aspects that have reshaped the relationship with audio narratives. At the forefront of this change is the dramatic shift in listening practices. The ubiquity of smartphones, tablets, and other portable devices has made audio content accessible anytime and anywhere. This unprecedented accessibility has altered when, where, and how people consume literary content, integrating it seamlessly into daily routines like commuting, exercising, or household chores. Simultaneously, digital technologies have facilitated the evolution of audio formats. Modern audiobooks and podcasts have transcended simple narration, often incorporating multiple voice actors, sophisticated sound effects, and even interactive elements. This evolution has expanded the very definition of what constitutes an audio narrative, blurring the lines between traditional audiobooks, radio dramas, and interactive storytelling.

Perhaps most significantly, there's a growing recognition that engaging with digital audio narratives is far from a passive activity. Listeners are increasingly expected to actively engage with the content, critically analyzing it and constructing meaning in ways similar to traditional reading. This shift challenges long-held notions about the cognitive demands of listening versus reading, suggesting that audio engagement can be equally, if not more, intellectually stimulating. The rise of digital audio narratives has also led to the development of new cognitive skills. "Literary listening" is emerging as a distinct ability that combines traditional literary analysis with advanced auditory processing skills. This includes the capacity to analyze narrative structures, character development, and thematic elements solely through auditory input, representing a new form of literacy in the digital age. Moreover, the audio format places a renewed emphasis on imagination. Without visual cues, listeners must rely heavily on their ability to construct mental imagery based on auditory input. Some researchers argue that their ability may enhance imaginative processes and emotional engagement compared to visual reading, offering a unique and immersive narrative experience.

The digital transformation of listening also intersects with broader technological trends. Algorithmic curation on digital platforms is changing how listeners discover and select content, while the democratization of content creation tools has led to a more diverse range of voices in the audio landscape. These developments are expanding the understanding of literacy and narrative engagement in the 21st century. As this transformation continues to unfold, researchers are exploring its neurocognitive impacts, seeking to understand how engagement with digital audio narratives might affect brain function and cognitive processes differently from traditional reading. The full implications of this shift are still emerging, promising to reshape the relationship between individuals and literature, as well as storytelling practices in the digital era.

From passive to active listening. Traditionally, listening has often been perceived as a passive activity, especially when compared to reading. However, the rise of digital audio narratives is challenging this notion. Active listening, as defined by Imhof (1998), involves the conscious effort to hear, understand and retain auditory information. In the context of audio literature, this concept takes on new dimensions. Listeners must engage more deeply with the content, often without visual cues or the ability to easily "skim" or re-read passages. Rodero (2012) argues that audio narratives demand a higher level of attention and cognitive engagement than traditional radio broadcasts. This is due to the complexity of literary narratives and the absence of visual stimuli, which requires listeners to construct mental images and keep track of plot developments solely through auditory input.

The development of "literary listening" as a distinct skill. The concept of "Literary Listening" emerges as a unique skill set required for engaging with audio narratives. This goes beyond general listening comprehension to include the ability to critically analyze literary elements through auditory means. The literary listening involves not just understanding the content, but also appreciating narrative techniques, character development, and thematic elements as conveyed through voice, tone and pacing. This skill set combines traditional literary analysis with auditory processing abilities. Moreover, Have and Pedersen (2015) propose that literary listening involves a form of "dual literacy"—the ability to engage with both the auditory presentation of the text and its underlying written form. This dual engagement can potentially enhance overall comprehension and retention of literary works.

The practice of "literary listening" manifests differently across cultural contexts, reflecting diverse oral traditions and modern adaptations. As Ong (1982) argues, the transition from oral to digital formats maintains important elements of traditional storytelling while creating new forms of engagement. This is particularly evident in how audiobook production incorporates elements of traditional narrative forms, where single narrators perform multiple characters through vocal modulations (Have and Pedersen, 2015). In East Asian contexts, particularly Japan and South Korea, literary listening often emphasizes the musicality of language and tonal patterns. Japanese audiobook production frequently incorporates elements of traditional narrative forms like *rakugo*, where single narrators perform multiple characters through subtle vocal modulations. This approach is termed "acoustic characterization", where listeners develop sophisticated abilities to track character development through vocal cues rather than textual descriptions (Jacobowitz, 2020).

In Arabic-speaking regions, literary listening builds on the tradition of *hakawati* (storytelling), where narrative comprehension involves understanding both the literal meaning and the rhythmic patterns of classical Arabic. Modern Arabic audiobooks often preserve these rhythmic elements, leading listeners to develop what Raven and O'Donnell (2010) call "dual-track comprehension"—simultaneously processing narrative content and linguistic musicality.

African literary traditions offer particularly rich examples of how cultural context shapes literary listening. In West African contexts, listeners often engage with narratives through what Guillory (2024) terms "communal resonance" - the ability to recognize and interpret collective memory markers embedded in vocal performances. This skill becomes especially evident in the adaptation of traditional griot narratives to digital audio formats, where listeners demonstrate sophisticated abilities to track both

personal and historical narratives through vocal cues and traditional rhythmic patterns.

Indigenous American storytelling traditions have also influenced contemporary literary listening practices. In Native American contexts, listeners often develop the ability to connect narrative elements to ecological knowledge through audio cues (Shiri et al., 2021). This skill is particularly evident in contemporary Indigenous audiobook productions that incorporate traditional storytelling techniques, where listeners demonstrate an enhanced ability to process multiple layers of meaning through vocal modulation and pacing.

These cultural variations in literary listening challenge universal models of audio comprehension. As Singh and Alexander (2022) argue, the skills involved in literary listening are deeply culturally embedded, suggesting that effective analysis of this phenomenon must account for diverse traditions of oral storytelling and their modern digital adaptations. This cultural diversity in listening practices also has implications for audiobook production and consumption, suggesting the need for more culturally nuanced approaches to audio narrative design.

The interplay between listening and imagination. The relationship between listening and imagination is a crucial aspect of engaging with audio narratives. Without visual representations, listeners must rely more heavily on their imagination to construct the story world. Kuzmičová (2016) argues that auditory input may enhance mental imagery compared to visual reading. She suggests that because the brain isn't occupied with decoding written text, it can allocate more resources to generating vivid mental images based on the narration.

Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory, originally developed for written narratives, takes on new relevance in audio contexts. They propose that the more a reader (or in this case, listener) is "transported" into a narrative world, the more likely they are to be influenced by the story. Audio narratives, with their immersive nature, may have unique potential for creating this transportation effect. Furthermore, Wittkower (2011) discusses how the intimate nature of listening—often done through headphones in private spaces—can create a more intense and personal engagement with the narrative, potentially enhancing both imagination and emotional connection to the story.

Implications for literature and society

The emergence of audio-based digital narratives is fundamentally altering the conception of literature and its societal role. This transformation challenges conventional definitions of "reading" and "literature", while simultaneously expanding accessibility and fostering innovative storytelling formats. The shift represents a significant evolution in how literary content is created, disseminated and consumed in the contemporary digital landscape.

As Hayles (2012) argues, the materiality of how text is consumed significantly influences cognitive engagement with it. While some scholars, like Birkerts (2006), express concern that audio formats might lead to a more superficial engagement with texts, others suggest that audio narratives might deepen engagement by slowing down the consumption process and emphasizing the musicality of language (Rubery, 2016). Moreover, the emergence of born-audio literature—works created specifically for audio formats—is expanding the boundaries of what is considered 'literature'. This includes experimental forms that blend storytelling with music and sound design, challenging traditional genre classifications (McHugh, 2016).

Audio narratives are playing a crucial role in democratizing literature, both in terms of creation and consumption. For individuals with visual impairments or reading difficulties such as

dyslexia, audiobooks provide a means of engaging with literature that was previously challenging or impossible (Moyer, 2012). The ease of producing and distributing audio content in the digital age has also allowed a diverse range of voices to reach audiences without the need for traditional publishing gatekeepers (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). This democratization extends to consumption as well, with the relatively low cost and high availability of audio content making a wide range of literature accessible to audiences who might not have engaged with it in print form.

Looking to the future, the rise of audio narratives is part of a broader trend towards more immersive and interactive storytelling experiences. Jenkins' (2011) concept of 'transmedia storytelling' is particularly relevant here, as stories increasingly span multiple media formats, including audio. Emerging technologies like virtual and augmented reality could blend audio narratives with visual and tactile elements, creating new forms of immersive storytelling (Alexander, 2017). Artificial Intelligence represents another frontier, with AI-generated voices becoming increasingly sophisticated and raising questions about the future role of human narrators. Moreover, AI could potentially create personalized narratives that adapt in real-time to listener preferences and reactions (Geerling, 2023).

The shift towards audio is also influencing writing styles. Authors may increasingly consider how their work will sound when read aloud, potentially leading to changes in prose style, dialog construction, and narrative pacing (Have and Pedersen, 2015). The implications of this transformation manifest distinctly for both creators and consumers of literature, fundamentally altering established practices and relationships within the literary ecosystem. For creators, the shift towards audio formats has necessitated significant adaptations in the writing process. Authors are increasingly developing specialized techniques for "writing for the ear", incorporating rhythm-conscious prose and sound-oriented descriptive techniques (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). This evolution in writing methodology reflects a growing understanding of the unique demands of audio narrative consumption, where the musicality and flow of language take on heightened importance (Rubery, 2016).

The audio format has also fostered new forms of creative collaboration. Writers now frequently work alongside voice actors and sound designers, creating what Alexander (2017) terms "multilayered narrative experiences". This collaborative approach has transformed the traditionally solitary act of writing into a more dynamic, team-based creative process. Moreover, the audio format has introduced new market dynamics and revenue streams, fundamentally changing how authors approach project development. Have and Pedersen (2015) note that these new opportunities often require authors to consider performance aspects during the writing process, raising important questions about creative control and artistic interpretation when works are translated into audio formats.

For consumers, the impact of audio-based narratives has been equally profound. Listeners are developing new cognitive strategies specific to audio narratives, as documented by Kuzmičová (2016) in her research on auditory literary experiences. The ability to combine literary consumption with other activities has significantly altered reading habits and literature's role in daily life. This shift, as noted by Wittkower (2011), represents a fundamental change in how individuals integrate literary experiences into their routines, potentially expanding both the time available for and accessibility of literary engagement.

The social dimensions of literary consumption have also evolved. McHugh (2016) observes that audio formats facilitate new forms of shared literary experiences through social media and discussion platforms, creating what she terms "networked listening communities". These communities represent a

significant departure from traditional solitary reading practices, fostering new forms of literary discourse and engagement. Additionally, the economic structure of audio content has introduced different cost considerations for consumers. Singh and Alexander (2022) note that subscription-based models and varying price points for audio content have influenced how consumers budget for and access literature, potentially democratizing access while simultaneously creating new barriers.

These transformations suggest a fundamental shift in the relationship between creators, consumers and literary content. As Hayles (2012) argues, these changes are not merely superficial adaptations to new technology but represent a deeper reformation of how literary content is conceived, created and consumed. This evolution has led to the emergence of new genres and formats specifically designed for audio consumption, reflecting what Jenkins (2011) describes as the “convergence culture” of contemporary media landscapes. These implications of audio-based digital narratives extend far beyond simply offering an alternative way to consume literature. They are reshaping the understanding of what literature is, who can create and access it and how stories might be told in the future. These changes have the potential to significantly impact broader societal trends in media consumption, accessibility and creative expression, heralding a new era in the relationship between literature and society.

Challenges and considerations

The rise of audio-based digital narratives, while offering numerous benefits, also presents several challenges and considerations that warrant careful examination. This section explores three key areas of concern: the risk of passive consumption, the evolving role of performance in audio literature and the complex issues surrounding copyright and intellectual property in the digital audio age.

The risk of passive consumption is a significant concern in the realm of audio literature. Unlike traditional reading, which requires active engagement with the text, listening to audiobooks or podcasts can potentially become a more passive activity. Mangen, Van der Weel (2016) argue that the ease of consuming audio content while multitasking may lead to reduced attention and comprehension. They suggest that the cognitive processes involved in listening while performing other tasks differ from those used in focused reading, potentially affecting the depth of engagement with the literary work. However, Kuzmíčová et al. (2018) counter this view, proposing that audio narratives can enhance engagement by freeing cognitive resources typically used for decoding text, allowing for deeper immersion in the story world. This debate highlights the need for further research into the cognitive implications of audio literature consumption.

The role of performance in audio literature is another critical consideration. As Rubery (2016) notes, the narrator’s interpretation can significantly influence the listener’s experience of the work. The narrator’s voice, pacing, and emotional inflections become an integral part of the literary experience, sometimes even overshadowing the author’s original intent. This raises questions about the nature of authorship and interpretation in audio formats. Moreover, the trend toward full-cast audio productions and sound design in podcasts is blurring the lines between traditional audiobooks and radio drama, creating new hybrid forms of audio literature (McHugh, 2016). These developments challenge the familiarity of what constitutes a “book” and how performance elements contribute to literary interpretation.

Copyright and intellectual property issues pose significant challenges in the digital audio age. The ease of creating and distributing audio content has led to complex legal questions.

Aufderheide and Jaszi (2018) discuss how fair use doctrine applies to audio adaptations, particularly in the context of fan-created content and educational uses. The rise of text-to-speech technology further complicates matters, as it becomes easier to generate audio versions of written texts without explicit permission. Additionally, the global nature of digital distribution raises issues of international copyright law and licensing (Hargreaves, 2011). As the audio literature landscape continues to evolve, there is a pressing need for legal frameworks to adapt to these new realities while balancing the rights of creators with the potential for innovation and accessibility.

These challenges and considerations underscore the complex nature of the shift toward audio-based digital narratives. They highlight the need for ongoing research, thoughtful policy development, and a nuanced understanding of how these new forms of literary engagement are shaping the relationship between literature and storytelling.

Future directions

Future developments in audio-based digital narratives will likely continue to evolve along the intersecting paths identified in the Integrated theoretical framework (Fig. 1). Advances in cognitive science may reveal new understanding of how the brain processes audio narratives. Technological innovations will create new media formats for storytelling. Literary theory will need to adapt to account for these emerging forms of narrative engagement. Potential technological advancements in audio literature are likely to revolutionize the listener experience. Virtual and augmented reality technologies hold the potential to create immersive, multi-sensory narrative experiences that blend audio with visual and tactile elements. Alexander (2017) suggests that such advancements could lead to a new form of “embodied listening”, where listeners physically interact with the narrative space. Artificial Intelligence is another frontier that could transform audio literature. As noted by Geerling (2023), AI-generated voices are becoming increasingly sophisticated, potentially leading to personalized narration styles or even adaptive narratives that change based on listener reactions. Moreover, advancements in natural language processing could enable more interactive audio experiences, allowing listeners to engage in dialog with characters or influence the story’s direction.

The integration of audio literature in education presents both opportunities and challenges. Wolfson (2008) argues that audiobooks can be powerful tools for improving literacy, particularly for struggling readers or students learning a second language. The multimodal nature of audio narratives can support different learning styles and enhance comprehension. However, Lemke (2013) cautions that effective integration requires careful consideration of pedagogical approaches and assessment methods. As educational institutions increasingly incorporate digital technologies, there’s potential for audio literature to play a more significant role in curricula, from language arts to history and social studies. This integration could lead to new forms of digital literacy that encompass both textual and auditory comprehension skills.

The evolution of writing for audio formats is already influencing literary creation. Authors are increasingly considering how their work will sound when read aloud, potentially leading to changes in prose style, dialog construction and narrative pacing. Have and Pedersen (2015) note that this shift is giving rise to new literary forms specifically designed for audio consumption. These “born-audio” works might incorporate sound design elements or utilize non-linear narrative structures that take advantage of digital audio platforms’ capabilities. Furthermore, the rise of podcasting has led to a resurgence of serialized storytelling,

echoing 19th-century practices of publishing novels in installments (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). This trend could continue to influence both the form and content of literary works in the coming years.

As these future directions unfold, they are likely to have profound impacts on how to create, consume, and understand literature. The boundaries between different media forms may continue to blur, leading to new hybrid genres and narrative experiences. Moreover, these developments could further democratize literary creation and consumption, potentially giving rise to more diverse voices and stories in the literary landscape.

Conclusion

The rise of audio-based digital narratives represents a significant shift in the landscape of literature and storytelling, with far-reaching implications for how to create, consume, and understand narrative content. This conclusion aims to synthesize the key arguments presented throughout the paper and reflect on the broader significance of this transformation. Throughout this exploration, it has been observed how audio literature is challenging traditional notions of 'reading' and 'literature'. As Hayles (2012) argues, the materiality of engaging with text significantly influences cognitive processes. The shift from visual to auditory consumption of literature is not merely a change in format, but a fundamental alteration in how to process and interact with narrative content. This transformation calls for a re-evaluation of what constitutes literacy in the digital age, expanding the understanding to include auditory comprehension and critical listening skills.

The democratization of literature creation and consumption emerges as a central theme in this shift. Digital audio technologies have lowered barriers to entry for both creators and consumers, allowing for a more diverse range of voices and stories to enter the literary landscape. As Spinelli and Dann (2019) note, platforms like podcasting have enabled new forms of storytelling and audience engagement, challenging traditional publishing models. This democratization has significant implications for representation and inclusivity in literature, potentially amplifying marginalized voices and expanding access to literary experiences. The changing nature of literature consumption is evident in the emergence of new listening practices and skills. The concept of "literary listening", as discussed by Have and Pedersen (2015), represents a unique form of engagement that combines traditional literary analysis with auditory processing abilities. This shift challenges the notion of listening as a passive activity, instead positioning it as an active, critical process that demands specific cognitive skills and attention.

Looking to the future, the integration of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality promises to further transform the landscape of audio literature. As Alexander (2017) suggests, these advancements could lead to more immersive, interactive, and personalized narrative experiences. However, these developments also raise important questions about the nature of authorship, the role of human interpretation in storytelling and the potential for technology to both enhance and potentially limit imaginative engagement with narratives. The enduring importance of listening in the digital age cannot be overstated. As world becomes increasingly visual and text-based, the resurgence of audio narratives serves as a reminder of the power of the spoken word. Ong's (1982) concept of "secondary orality"—the resurgence of oral communication in the age of electronic media—takes on new relevance in this context. Audio literature not only harks back to ancient traditions of oral storytelling but also points towards new forms of narrative engagement that leverage the unique affordances of digital technologies.

The rise of audio-based digital narratives represents not just a shift in how individuals listen to stories, but a fundamental reimagining of what literature can be and how it can function in society. As navigating this transformation, it is crucial to approach it with both excitement for the new possibilities it presents and a critical awareness of its potential implications. The future of literature is likely to be increasingly multimodal, interactive and accessible, with listening playing a central role in how engaging and understanding narrative in the digital age.

Data availability

The research in this article does not involve the analysis or generation of any data. Data used for this study includes books, research articles, and critical review papers are cited in the reference section.

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This research is exempt from ethical approval since it involves little or no risk to human subjects.

Informed consent

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