PODCASTING, VR, AI AND THE EVOLUTION OF INTIMACY

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This paper's case study is episode 398 of the Lex Fridman Podcast. Posted on September 28 2023 this episode is an interview with Facebook and Meta's co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. The episode, titled *First Interview in the Metaverse,* is available as a YouTube video (as well as an audio-only version). The video version is going to be the one interrogated here. In the video Fridman and Zuckerberg use Meta's new technology to virtually meet and conduct the podcast interview. Fridman prefaces the conversation with the following introduction "…we appear to each other as photorealistic codec avatars in 3D with spatial audio. This technology is incredible, and I think it's the future of how human beings connect to each other in a deeply meaningful way on the internet" (2023). Next, in a directorial move that accentuates the transition, we see Friedman, in physical space, wearing a virtual reality headset and moving his head around in wonderment, before we see him again meeting Zuckerberg in the Metaverse, both as avatars. While in obvious awe and wonder from the experience, one of the first things that Fridman says is, "The realism here is just incredible. Where am I? Where are you, Mark? Where are we?" Zuckerberg replies, "You're in Austin, right?". Fridman quickly responds, "No, I mean this place".

Using radio and podcast studies as its main scholarship areas, this paper examines the potential for Virtual Reality (VR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies to change podcasting both in how it is crafted and in how audiences consume podcasts. Focusing on the idea of intimacy this paper interrogates how this defining characteristic of "sound-based digital media" (Hilmes, 2013:44) may persist and evolve, particularly through conceptualizations of space and place, imagined and actual. In a landscape where podcasting is increasingly perceived by (mostly younger) audiences and creators to be a visual medium (Berry, 2023), I explore how intimacy may continue to be a defining characteristic of podcasting. In particular, and going well beyond just the aural or indeed beyond the combination of the visual and the aural, I want to understand what intimacy can mean when podcasting moves into the virtual reality immersive space.

This paper takes the stance the intimacy ascribed to both radio and podcasting is intrinsically linked to the technologies that make them possible and that these media cannot be understood as separate from those technologies, nor can the intimacies they generate. In the case of podcasting, which belongs in the platform age (Sullivan, 2019), these technologies may indeed include virtual reality, and to some extent, artificial intelligence. Towards the beginning of the podcast examined here, Fridman is starting to envision what this technology may come to mean for him as a podcaster. He says: "Like, my heart is actually beating fast now. This is super interesting, like, that such intimacy of conversation could be achieved remotely. […] I don't do remote podcast for this reason and this is like, breaks all of that" (2023). Zuckerberg, later during the interview, imagines an AI addition to a podcast that may allow individual listeners to interact with Fridman. This paper will examine the potential for these technologies to become part of podcasting, and the intimacies they might generate, including ones that may be considered as spurious. The latter, interestingly, has been a concern in radio scholarship (Barnard, 2000: 181) well before podcasting, VR or AI entered the scene.

Important to this paper will be Tiziano Bonini's breakthrough intervention into the debate about the nature of podcasting and whether it is a remediation of radio or something completely other. Bonini argues that both can be true. He writes that,

> "podcasting is first of all a hybrid cultural form emerged from the remediation of different media and it should be better understood as an evolving medium, sometimes more like radio, sometimes closer to something new, but that any static definition risks crystallizing its evolution and capturing only a precise moment of its history" (Bonini, 2022: 22-23).

In this context, this paper is not proposing a static definition of intimacy either. Rather, it is looking to add to a set of interlinking intimacies as they emerge within audio and other media.

Acknowledging the limitations of its research method, this work positions itself as a speculative step into this space and proposes that further qualitative research into audience reception in the future might provide closer insight. The research method used in this paper is a close-reading of the video episode of this case study, along with the comments to it by a contemporary audience whose imagination immediately jumps to a future podcast "where you, the listener, are the third seat at the table and you can convincingly be in the same room as the two people talking" (brandonsmith8235, 2023). This paper then, will situate intimacy as place-based affect and will look to find common ground with previous radiophonic and podcast intimacies as well as to reveal where there may be new intimacies if/when podcasting enters the Virtual Reality media space.

Radiophonic intimacy is understood, at least in part, as deriving from radio's blindness (Crisell, 1994). When we interrogate video podcasts, where voices are no longer disembodied and the message no longer leaks into the listeners' space, or indeed into their head, we may argue that some of this intimacy is stripped off as the freedom to imagine is removed and the message is framed and constrained. Yet, when the immersion of a virtual reality space is added, the frame is once again removed. We return then, a step closer to the imagined space of radiophony. Unframed and still requiring a level of suspension of disbelief, it is perhaps a paradox within a paradox that broadcast radiophony can share intimacies with the VR space. I examine this antithesis: On the one hand, radiophonic intimacy is based on the listener filling in the visual gaps through imagination and by using their private and personal noumenal imagery. On the other hand, a new type of intimacy in podcasting on the VR space would be based on depictions of the speakers that are as close to reality as possible – as showcased in the case study examined here. This paper argues that the addition of virtual immersion, may initially be seen to be creating a fuller picture, but instead we may find that it creates different gaps that will be asking to be filled by the audience, and this time by the podcaster and their participants too. Within those gaps is where intimacy can grow. "Where am I? Where are you? Where are we?" a listener will ask sitting on that third chair, as the space they know they physically inhabit blends with the virtual space of the podcast table. A paradox again, another leak, this time the other way around, instead of the message leaking into your space, you leak into another place; perhaps, the very familiar, intimate space of your favourite podcast.

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