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## FEELING MYSELF: THE RISE OF INTIMACY AS AUTHENTICITY IN ADDRESSING IMAGINED PODCAST LISTENERS

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This study aims to theorize the parasocial relationships between podcast creators and listeners, but with a unique focus on the perspective of the creators themselves. While parasocial relationships are typically studied from the perspective of the audience, understanding the creator's viewpoint can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of these relationships and the modes of addressivity they evoke, particularly with the emergence of intimacy as a keyword in podcast studies (Swiatek, 2018; Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Euritt, 2020, 2023). Through in-depth interviews with prominent podcasters in the Israeli podcast scene, we ask: How do podcast creators imagine their listeners? How are these imagined listeners shaped by the creators' personal dispositions, their own experiences as podcast listeners, their assumptions about podcasting as a medium, and their actual interactions with their listeners? We propose a typology of different kinds of imagined relationships with perceived listeners, arguing that the starting point for the postulated intimacy between podcasters and listeners is an imagined addressee whom the podcaster conceives as similar to themselves.

Parasocial relationships are one-sided, quasi-social relationships that individuals form with media figures, creating an "illusion of intimacy" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). While the concept was first introduced in the context of television in the 1950s, it has since been applied to other forms of media as well (Abidin, 2015; Moores, 2000; Savage & Spence, 2014; Tolson, 2005), as the audience's access to media figures has grown through call-in shows, live audiences in talk shows, and direct communication with politicians and celebrities via social media. Paddy Scannell's argument (2000) complements this idea, arguing that broadcast media speak to audiences in ways they want to be spoken to, creating what he calls a "to-anyone-as-someone" communicative structure. In this regard, "radio talk" had been long considered distinctively intimate (Douglas, 1999; Wilby, 2002; Kuffert, 2009; McHugh, 2015). In podcasts, the intimate unseen voice of the host speaking into the listener's ears became even more constitutive, to the point

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that some see it as part of the medium's identity and as fitting with certain consumption habits: individuals choosing to listen to certain shows, through earbuds, using personal devices, at their convenience (Spinelli & Dann, 2019; Euritt, 2023). Indeed, podcast scholarship and popular media have highlighted the strong engagement, loyalty and trust podcast listeners express toward their favorite podcast personalities (Marx et al., 2021; Schlütz & Hedder, 2021; Soto-Vásquez et al., 2022). However, an often-overlooked angle is the construction of the podcaster's addressee throughout their creative process, beyond the dry defining of a target audience.

Literary critic Terry Eagleton argued that "every literary text [...] encodes within itself an 'implied reader', intimates in its every gesture the kind of 'addressee' it anticipates" (Eagleton, 1983; see also Magnifico, 2010; Ong, 1975). This study tackles the characteristics of the implied, or imagined, listeners who emerge from the reflexive thoughts of podcast creators about their creative audio work. We suggest that the podcast audience is born before an actual audience listens, and that it is essential to trace the threads of these implied audiences in order to understand the values and ideas that precede podcast listening as a cultural practice.

To address these issues, we conducted in-depth interviews with 12 leading podcasters in the Israeli podcasting scene. The interviews were conducted with both amateur creators and podcasters with professional media backgrounds, including those who podcast as a hobby and those who make a living from it. Their podcasts ranged from long-form history storytelling to carefully crafted narratives, expert parenting advice delivered as couples' talk, true crime chit-chat, and fully scripted "politics for dummies" monologues. All interviews were transcribed and then coded using qualitative analysis software.

The findings yielded eight types of imagined listeners, implying different kinds of relationships between the creators and their audiences: listener as someone; like-minded listener; listener as friend; listener as fan; listener as customer; listener as part of a private members club; segmented audience (marketing perception of the audience); and the notion of "speaking to myself", whereby the podcaster addresses themselves, and not an external audience.

These types of listeners emerged intermittently throughout interviews with multiple interviewees, often within the same interview. For instance, a parenting expert hosting an advisory podcast with her husband described a good episode as one that captures *her own* interest and curiosity ("[I prefer] hearing the wheels turning in my head and not necessarily looking at the page I prepared because it's important to me that people know x or y"), while her husband emphasized the business-like nature of the relationship between them and their listener: "the contract you have as a podcast producer with the listener says: you'll give me your ear now for the next 50 minutes, and I will enter your brain in a real direct injection, so I have to be very precise and give [you] a lot of value as if during this time". In another example, a successful amateur podcaster who co-hosts a comedy history podcast noted that their listeners perceive them as friends, even though they have never met in person. However, he also clarified that this relationship is unidirectional and that they are not truly friends with their listeners: "But like, there's this 'oh, I can tell him anything' kind of vibe. It sucks. [...] bro,

we're not friends." Later in the interview, he revealed that he met his girlfriend via social media as she was a fan of the show.

Despite demonstrating high reflexivity and even self-criticism, the interviewees did not perceive the ambivalent notions of their assumed-listeners as conflicting. Interestingly, almost all interviewees initially envisioned their listeners as someone similar to themselves or a younger version of themselves. Yet, as their podcasts grew in popularity, interviewees started to think about their listeners more as unknown strangers, to whom they are obliged to provide their expertise, to meet their assumed standards, and balance between exclusivity and inclusivity. These are achieved mainly by remaining true to the premise that, "there is no buffer between the presenter and his listeners", as the veteran podcaster amongst the interviewees stated.

In creating this illusion of unmediated communication, interviewees talked about the intimacy of the medium. For them, intimacy was inextricably linked with authenticity. This includes asking the podcast guests "questions that I myself find interesting", to imagine the listener consumes the podcast in similar private conditions as the creators recorded them (like wearing pajamas when recording/listening), to represent for the listener certain angles in her personality through the podcaster's persona, but also to provide an email address that the podcaster can be reached at (although not necessarily responding to listeners emails).

Consequentially, intimacy is put forward by podcasts not only because they encourage "engagement with the self" among their listeners (Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2012), but also by reflecting the podcasters' own self-engagement. Our findings show that for the podcasters we interview, being authentic, being true to oneself, means being close to the listener. However, when podcasters construct their ideal listener based on their own desires and characteristics, the concept of intimacy takes on a different meaning. Rather than a two-way relationship, it can become a one-sided connection, more about projecting the self onto an imagined listener than about genuine engagement.

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