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Podcasting, VR, AI, the Metaverse and the Evolution of Intimacy: From “phantasmic radio” to phantasmic podcasting.

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Abstract

This article proposes a hauntology of the podcast. Using radio and podcast studies it looks to understand the technological potential of podcasting in a future where the Metaverse, Virtual Reality and AI may become common in its creative and listening practices. Eventually, it proposes a type of place-based intimacy which such a future may include for audiences and podcast creators.

Keywords: Virtual Reality, AI, Metaverse, Podcasting, Intimacy, Hauntology

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

In this article I use radio and podcast studies in combination with hauntology, in order to imagine potential futures of podcasting and to propose a draft of a future ontology of the podcast medium.

Davis writes that,

The attraction of hauntology for deconstructive-minded critics arises from the link between a theme (haunting, ghosts, the supernatural) and the processes of literature and textuality in general. In consequence, much of the most committed work in this area combines close reading with daring speculation (2005: 377).

This article will use some of radio studies’ past and some of podcast studies’ present to speculate about the ways in which technology may affect how we create and listen to podcasts in the future, and what intimacy might mean in that context. Intimacy is central to this hauntology of the podcast, not least because the case study examined, the *First Interview in the Metaverse* (Fridman, 2023), centres around ideas of closeness, presence and connection to others – alive and dead. This work aims to survey a still emerging terrain and to function as a reference point for those developing work - technologies, content, policy, ethics - in this space now. It also aims to become a historical document of this current moment for the future researcher, podcast creator, technology innovator. It will ask how technologies may create a future where podcasts exist as intimate phantasms within the Metaverse.

In parts of this article I briefly revisit my doctoral work (Karathanasopoulou, 2015), written and completed at a time when podcasting was just breaking through. In doing this, I consider podcasting’s immersive qualities and attempt a philosophy of podcasting inspired by what radio artists/philosophers were proposing back in the 1980s and 1990s about radio. Having categorised radio theory into two strands: mainstream, non-mainstream or avant-garde¹, I bring non-mainstream writing about radio into conversation with mainstream theory. Discussions of intimacy within the two strands of theory - which do not often speak to each

¹ Some of the core theorists in non-mainstream radio theory I consider to be important are, Allen S. Weiss, Gregory Whitehead, Douglas Khan and Dan Lander. The mainstream is represented by many scholars, such as David Hendy, Andrew Crisell, Hugh Chignell, Guy Starkey and others (Karathanasopoulou, 2015).

other - share common ground which helped me arrive at some new understandings of radio as an intimate medium. In particular, non-mainstream writers, are really useful in their approach to radio's uncanniness and paradoxes (ex. the illusion of closeness and privacy in a mass medium). I suggest that bringing this method into the study of podcasting can offer new avenues to explore. One of the intricacies in the work of the non-mainstream radio authors, such as Allen S. Weiss and Gregory Whitehead, is an understanding of radio through its ghostly, disembodied qualities as well as through embodied experiences of listening. This makes their work particularly relevant here, as this article attempts to understand a future of podcasting through radio and podcasting's pasts and present.

Non-mainstream radio theory helps us consider what radio is or should be, rather than what radio does; the latter mostly done in 'mainstream' theory, looking at radio's genres, audiences, industry structures and so on. Importantly, however, radio technologies are part of the discussion in both strands. As podcast studies is settling into its status as a scholarly field, this article combines its principles with radio theory -mainstream and non-mainstream- to look at the constantly evolving technologies associated to podcasting. These technologies will be central here in theorising what podcasting is and does.

This work departs from long-established themes, or approaches them from a different perspective. While retaining a certain level of scepticism about what the inclusion of the visual in podcasting means for our understanding of audio media and their future, this article functions outside of an audio purist comfort zone -which the author of this piece somewhat identifies with, having long resisted the idea that visual media may be a real part of radio and podcasting. The latter was easier to do when the visual was a novelty in the web-radio days.

Retaining an even more sceptical position about the use of AI in podcasting – which is already a, limited, reality - in this article I attempt to approach the question by looking at a podcast creator's and audience's reactions to one specific podcast within and about the Metaverse, where VR and AI technologies are used and/or discussed. It is still early to conclude on the balance between the pitfalls and any potential benefits of AI in podcasting, but this work is an informed thought experiment which aims to help theorists, practitioners, policy makers and audiences consider current advances and trajectories and where these technologies may lead in the future. In this context, I will consider intimacy and tackle the question of spuriousness.

Inspired by the recent work of seminal podcast studies scholar Richard Berry (2016 & 2023), this article is looking towards a theory of podcasting where technology remains central. It also surveys a potential future terrain where the medium may become untethered from preconceptions of what this technology must be or can do or will do. Crucially, the medium's intimacy will be seen here as an evolving concept but still directly linked to conceptions of immersion, imagination and connection (perhaps different iterations of these). Eventually, this work will look to the future. Here I will argue that a re-mystification for podcast audiences may be starting to take place with the potential of the addition of Virtual Reality immersion and advanced AI technologies to podcasting.

EARLY RADIO: UNCANNY TECHNOLOGY & INTIMACY

Part of radio's early appeal to audiences is understood to be the intangible uncanny notion of disembodied voices traveling through the ether and into the listener's ears. Radio scholar and poet Sean Street talks of Reginald Fessenden's early broadcasts and how any listeners that

had not been given advance warning to anticipate these programmes², which included music and readings from the Bible, may have thought these sounds were coming from the heavens (2006). A deeper dive into this, reveals a serendipitous mystery around whether Fessenden's famous Christmas 1906 broadcasts actually took place or whether they took place at that time, and how other, even earlier broadcasts he actually made, are not as widely remembered or mythologised (Halper & Sterling, 2006). What I propose is relevant here is that, whether collective memory of these historical broadcasts is accurate or not³, it is perhaps the religious, spiritual aspect of a Christmas broadcast bringing music and bible verses through the ether that makes this memory persist. The potential metaphysical wonderment of experiencing those broadcasts, plays right into radio's inherent *magic*⁴, or what we most often call *intimacy*. A stranger's voice talking to the listener through invisible airwaves.

PODCAST STUDIES

Some recent work on podcasting and intimacy, while useful in many areas, I propose is often confused about the inherent intimacy of audio media technologies. That work suggests that "podcasting [...] cannot, in itself, be intimate", while at the same time rehashing well-established observations about intimate listening technologies used in radio and podcasting, and eventually creating some contradictions in its findings (Berg, 2023/ Euritt, 2023). Berg, for example, while recognising similarities in radio and podcasting as intimate media, eventually misses the chance to meaningfully connect to radio theory in order to theoretically ground arguments to do with intimacy and technology.

Here I take a different stance and argue that the technology cannot be simply separated from the medium or its intimacy. This article operates within the scholarly and historical context of radio studies, and aims to not only remain grounded onto that work, but to connect it back to podcast studies meaningfully and accurately (this work is not alone in doing this). Some work within podcast studies can fall victim of presenting itself as novel when forgetting to properly connect back to radio studies. As an antipode, here I look back to radio theory in order to attempt to reconnect podcasting to the awe and wonder associated with early radio and its audiences; an awe and wonder shared and canonized by the radio philosophers of the more recent past. I will use that work in order to examine contemporary understandings of podcasting as intimate but I will not spend too long on long-established and accepted themes (such as headphone listening), as my goal is to arrive to potential futures.

HAUNTOLOGY IN PODCASTING

In 2023, when first presenting a very early draft of this idea to colleagues at the *7th ECREA Radio and Sound Section Conference* in Barcelona, the work was mainly inspired by podcasts such as Jim Harold's *Campfire* (Harold, 2005), *Spooked* (Washington, 2010) and others, which present stories of people who have experienced ghosts, hauntings and the paranormal.

² Fessenden is considered to have created the first radio programme as we understand it today. "On Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve of 1906, the first broadcasting occurred. Three days in advance Reg [inald Fessenden] (sic) had his operators notify the ships of the U.S. Navy and of the United Fruit Co. that were equipped with the Fessenden apparatus [a wireless signal detector] that it was the intention of the Brant Rock Station to broadcast speech, music and singing on those two evenings" (Halper & Sterling, 2006: 119).

³ Radio scientist, John S. Belrose disputes Halper & Sterling, who question whether these broadcasts happened or whether they happened at a different time, and provides evidence for his belief that the broadcasts did indeed happen on Christmas of 1906 (Belrose, 2006).

⁴ I have interrogated the notion of magic and its relation to intimacy in my previous work on radio and architecture (Karathanasopoulou, 2019).

Interestingly, many of these podcasts retain the, traditionally radiophonic, format of the phone-in, which took me back to those notions of intimacy more traditionally linked to broadcast radio. In this format I found theoretical links to the work of Whitehead and Weiss whose conceptualisations of radio contained strong notions of unseen, ghostly realms, and connections. At the end of my paper presentation, Professor Kate Lacey suggested that the scholarly area of hauntology may be useful in developing the work further. It was this intervention that prompted me to rethink this work as a hauntology. Davis suggests that,

“in literary critical circles, Derrida’s rehabilitation of ghosts as a respectable subject of enquiry has proved to be extraordinarily fertile. Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (2005: 373).

The concept itself while (perhaps appropriately) somewhat elusive, has served scholars in the analysis of fictional personae in works of literature (Rashkin, 1992); electronic music (Fisher 2013); cinema (Fisher, 2012); experimental audio work (Ghallagher, 2015); and in other scholarly areas belonging or adjacent to the wider fields of media and cultural studies. Thus, while its use here is not entirely novel, this article proposes it as one method for the interrogation of podcasting. Not only does the metaphor of ghostly hauntings neatly fit the original inspiration of this work (podcasts about ghosts and the paranormal), but it goes deeper as it proposes that the potential futures of podcasting can be contemplated upon today by looking at radio’s past and podcasting’s present. In the Fessenden Christmas broadcasts for example, we - people of the future - are fascinated not by a certainty, but by an idea of something that may have existed at a time when most people would have thought it to be impossibly bewildering. I argue that podcast studies can benefit from looking back at radio studies in order to regain some of its missing futuristic wonderment. Here we can borrow from Mark Fisher’s work on electronic music, who writes that this kind of music,

had been synonymous with a sense of the future, so much so that film and television would habitually turn to electronic music when it wanted to invoke the future. But by 2005, electronica was no longer capable of evoking a future that felt strange or dissonant. If electronic music was “futuristic,” (sic) it was in the same sense that fonts are “gothic”—the futuristic now connoted a settled set of concepts, affects, and associations (2012: 16).

Podcasting, compared to radio’s mythology, can sometimes seem demystified. Radio came to the scene at a time when there was a lot of scope for its technology to allow fantasy and imagination to permeate. Its audiences were still relatively technologically innocent. In contrast, the podcast, a daughter of the internet and later of the mobile phone, finds us in a very different state. Cynical to technologies such as broadcasting and telephony, we live with the internet every day, it is omnipresent in all that we do. Perhaps podcasting was born demystified. That is not to mean that it is not loved by audiences and creators. It is not to diminish it in any way - podcasting is an extremely important, affective, intimate medium. But it is to say, that compared to radio, our love for it is not quite connected to technological wonderment. But why is this notion of any value? I argue that it is worth at least noticing the technology, going beyond typical modes of listening, and to consider how it contributes to the podcast canon. Current podcast technologies and platforms are ubiquitous - the internet, the mobile phone, Spotify, YouTube and so on. By looking back to the awe-inspiring disembodiment of radio, we can view podcasting in a new light, which brings forth an element of creative technological bewilderment. The technologically saturated audiences,

audio creatives and audio scholars of today would benefit from such a proposition. Providing a textual analysis of Fridman's *First Interview in the Metaverse* (2023), and analysing some of the comments under the video version of the podcast, here I examine the potential for Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and metaverse technologies to change podcasting both in how it is crafted and in how audiences consume podcasts.

The word Metaverse is a closed compound word with two components: Meta (Greek prefix meaning post, after or beyond) and universe. In other words, the Metaverse is a post-reality universe, a perpetual and persistent multiuser environment merging physical reality with digital virtuality. (Mystakidis, 2022: 486).

The parallels to ideas of the metaphysical, the realm of ghosts, the 'meta' of the after-life are perhaps obvious, yet compelling, in this context; as is an allusion to the merging of this world and its beings with the ghostly realm in the form of a haunting. We will contemplate here what may happen when a podcast, its listeners, creators and participants, enter the Metaverse.

PHANTASMIC RADIO

The term 'phantasmic radio' belongs to Allen S. Weiss who in 1995 wrote the book with the same title as a polemical manifesto for radiophony and radiophonic art, proposing a new reading of what radio is/was and what it can/could be by investigating "the effects of what Marinetti termed the "wireless imagination"" (Weiss, 1995: 7). Phantasm, meaning ghost in Greek, is a useful term in this hauntology of the podcast. We follow Weiss's path here, as he mused that "There is no single entity that constitutes "radio"; rather, there exists a multitude of radios. Radiophony is a heterogenous domain, on the levels of its apparatus, its practice, its forms and its utopias" (Weiss, 1995: 1-2). In this context, considering *phantasmic podcasting* means to creatively and theoretically, embrace heterogeneity, in the medium's technologies, content and ways of connecting audiences and creators.

Comparisons between radio and podcasting have often, rightly and understandably, been at the centre of our scholarship when trying to define podcasting. Important here, however, is 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).

A non-static definition of podcasting allows us to also consider the intimacies it engenders as heterogenous and evolving. It opens up possibilities for a new set of interlinking intimacies as they emerge within audio and other media. Berry's recent assertion that "the very notion of podcast-ness is open for debate" (2023) is also important here. Both Bonini and Berry are echoing Weiss's "multitude of radios" (Weiss, 1995: 1-2) as the road opens for new imaginings of what podcasting can be.

TIME

Gregory Whitehead, when considering mainstream radio broadcasting, saw the clock as an enemy to radiophonic intimacy.

Once attached to the clock, radio came to crystallize the acceleration of time that was to characterize the whole of twentieth century. [...] Speed: here was the essence of good warfare, good business, good politics and - suddenly - good radio. [...] The magical power of the Word carried through the air, the deep powers of oracles and talking winds, were compacted in Reality Radio as the supremely modern power of anything can go faster, farther... (1984: 3)

One of the differences between radio and podcasting that is useful to examine in this hauntology is, indeed, time. The idea of temporality, or lack thereof, is key. Podcasting is on-demand. Radio, we may argue, despite its on-demand features, is married to time. Its disembodied voices are the kind of phantasms that are only fleeting, only existing in the moment of transmission and then lost to time and ether. But, by design, the listener can hold and keep a podcast. Like a ghost existing outside of time “neither dead nor alive” (Davis, 2005: 373) the podcast is a timeless object. Existing in various online and offline locales, and often downloaded onto listeners’ personal devices such as phones, tablets and computers, the podcast then also becomes a potential archaeological object of the future. If unearthed it may reveal truths not only about the time it was created and the people who made it. It will not only help us understand audiences, but perhaps we will also learn something about the individual listener. As radio waves travel through the ether and ‘on-air’, the podcast resides not only in the online cloud but also stored in personal memory cards. The podcast exists beyond the data centres of big organisations and within personal devices and *memory*.

IMAGE

Similar to Whitehead’s polemic of the clock, one may argue that in podcasting the image is an enemy of intimacy and imagination. If we put to one side Bonini’s intervention for a moment, and we perceive podcasting as a remediation of radio, and if then we try to consider podcasts that also exist in video form, we lose one of the cornerstones of intimacy. Radiophonic intimacy is understood, at least in part, as deriving from radio’s blindness (Crisell, 1994). An inherent part of radio technology is that the sound leaks into the listener’s space through speakers, or into her head through headphones. A defining characteristic of radiophonic intimacy is also the way it engages the listener’s imagination. Crisell noted that “...the distinctiveness of radio is not that it involves the imagination while the other media do not, but that it involves it to a different *extent*” (1994: 9). When we interrogate video podcasts, where voices are no longer disembodied and the message no longer leaks into the listener’s 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. We lose doubly by defining the borders of the bodies from which the voices are coming and by trapping those voices within the frame of a video. The voice is captured and demystified. McHugh, in her apt concept of the “pillars of podcasting”, positions audio/voice at the centre of a schema in which intimacy is one of the “twin pillars of podcasting”, along with empathy; both of which she notes are rooted in radio (2022: pp. 9&27). Both remain key in our consideration of potential futures in podcasting.

It is important here to make an important distinction. Watching podcasts, means watching ‘chatcasts’ (Berry, 2023). When it comes to any other podcast genre, the primacy of audio remains unchallenged. Audiences who say they *watch*⁵ podcasts, tend to equate the term podcast with conversational podcasts (McGregor, 2022). In this case then, within the confines of a video frame, is the podcast medium itself and its technology demystified by these audiences or even, was it ever mystified? Were these (or any) audiences ever captured by the very idea of sounds through the online *cloud* – a version of ‘on the air’? Can audiences imagine the podcast presenter and sketch them privately in their minds as they like, if they are watching them on a screen? Could we re-capture audiences’ imaginations through the technologies of the podcast medium itself, which include visual components? Combining Weiss’s refusal to pin radio down as being only one thing, and Bonini’s and Berry’s ideas of the podcast as a non-static hybrid form, there is still space to imagine. If we accept that podcasting is not a singular thing, then we are required to accept that we cannot confine it to a singular medium or technology either.

IMMERSION

Posted on September 28 2023, episode 398 of the Lex Fridman Podcast 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 appearing as an avatar within the Metaverse 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”.

PODCAST AS PLACE

Those five words signal 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. Intimacy, this defining characteristic of “sound-based digital media” (Hilmes, 2013:44) persists and evolves, through new conceptualizations of space and place, imagined and actual. The podcast here is a place. Disembodiment obtains new meanings, while remaining a generator of intimacy. Going well beyond just the aural, or indeed beyond the combination of the visual and the aural, here we can speculate what intimacy can mean when podcasting moves into the virtual reality immersive space.

As discussed earlier, the intimacies ascribed to both radio and podcasting are intrinsically linked to the technologies that make them possible and these media cannot be understood as

⁵ In the classroom, audio educators often feel the need to correct students when they say they “watched” a podcast (Berry, 2023).

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). Fridman, as a podcast creator is saying here that he cares about intimacy and he connects this to doing his podcast interviews in person. He is alluding to the fact that until now, intimacy for him as a podcast interviewer, is place-based. When watching his podcast, audiences know he is in the same room as his interviewees. So that place-based intimacy also transfers to the audience. The potential of the Metaverse becoming the common locale for all three - interviewer, interviewee and listener - is one that fascinates, not only Fridman, but the people watching his conversation with Zuckerberg on YouTube – as evident from comments under the video. The imagination of the contemporary audience watching this, 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). As this notion shares common ground with previous and current radiophonic and podcast intimacies, I situate this intimacy as place-based affect.

I argued earlier that the visual element in podcasting is defined by the rigidity of the video frame, removing thus some of the cornerstones of podcasting as we understand it, including some of the intimacies that podcasting shares with radio (McHugh, 2022). Berry, discussing McHugh’s definition of podcasting in the context of visual podcasts, is also concerned about the removal of audio as primary, while also acknowledging some other characteristics, unique to podcasting which may be generators of intimacy, such as authenticity and informality (McHugh 2022 & Berry 2023). 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 and be closer to it than a video podcast might be.

Let us examine this antithesis: On the one hand, radiophonic intimacy is based on the listener filling in the visual gaps through imagination by using their private and personal noumenal imagery - both in order to arrive at a *place* as well as to construct a *face* (we may respectively connect these to McHugh’s two pillars: intimacy and empathy). On the other hand, a new type of intimacy in podcasting on the VR space would be based on a. transporting the listener to a virtual space and b. to depictions of the speakers that are as close to reality as possible – as showcased in the case study examined here, where Fridman, as well as many of the commentators under the YouTube video, are blown away by how real the avatars look and feel. 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’s imagination. Within those gaps is where intimacy can grow. Like Fridman, a listener sitting on that third chair will ask, “Where am I? Where are you? Where are we?”, as the space the listener knows 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 the listener’s space, the listener leaks into another place; the familiar, intimate space of their favourite podcast. Sitting across from the listener, an avatar, a phantasm: the uncanny podcaster. Weiss’s radiophonic manifesto in 1995 seems strangely fitting to this premise: “There exists a point, unlocalizable and mysterious, where listener and

radio are indistinguishable. We therefore seek that realm where the voice reaches beyond its body, beyond the shadow of its corporeal origins, to become a radically original sonic object” (Weiss, 1995: 7). No matter how real it looks, the phantasm is immaterial and timeless (like the recorded voice, it does not age). The avatar is merely a representation, an add-on to the voice. It sits in place of the imagined facial and bodily features a radio listener may have attached to a voice coming out of their transistor. The face itself may no longer be entirely imagined, but the situation is; and this time the same may be happening to the podcaster and their participants too. Both the audience and Fridman himself are suspending disbelief. Fridman imagines he is in the same place as Zuckerberg, his interviewee. The audience imagines sitting next to them within the metaverse.

In the listener comments to the YouTube video we see some of that retro technological awe, wonder and expectation linked to early radiophony. While a video podcast removes a layer of imagination, and thus perhaps a layer of intimacy, the addition of the VR immersive space, adds it back in. It is fascinating to consider that the frame of the YouTube video, perhaps for the first time, becomes a restraint for visually-centred audiences. Here they notice the frame, as it becomes a sort of hindrance, a barrier to their connection with the podcast. They want to be able to imagine outside of this frame. It is captivating to read a number of comments on the same theme: “I wish they would release a version of this as a VR video. I would definitely throw on my Quest to watch it that way” writes one user (WesTheWizard, 2023), as others wonder why this was not indeed released in VR format. This of course also reveals the current limitations of the technology. We are not there yet, but we could be soon.

AI

A little later, Fridman and Zuckerberg discuss the ability to meet far away loved ones in the Metaverse, and the closeness and intimacy this can engender. Fridman then quickly makes the leap into the phantasmic. He says, “And the next question I have is I would love to talk to people who are no longer here that are loved ones. [...] People who pass away, but they could still exist in the metaverse. [...] The power of that experience is one of the first things my mind jumped to 'cause it's like, this is so real” (2023). In the context of a hauntology, it is interesting that this is the space where Fridman’s thinking jumped to. The experience he is having is one that makes him acutely aware of the intimate possibilities this medium can have. The blending of one’s physical space with that of the metaverse, and the embodiment of (otherwise disembodied) voices in avatars, seem to very quickly lead to a superposition between the realm of the living and the ghostly realm. Zuckerberg, responds with a brief discussion of ethics and grieving, asking questions about when such a metaverse practice might be acceptable and when not; but he quickly brings the conversation back to the here and now and considers how AI can be used by a podcaster in order to interact with their audience. He says,

at some point, I think making it so that you could build an AI version of yourself that could interact with people, you know, not after you die, but while you're here to, you know, help people kind of fulfil this desire to interact with you and your desire to build a community. And there's a lot of interesting questions around that. And, you know, that's obviously, it's not just in the metaverse (in Fridman, 2023).

We have to ask what such an interaction would feel like for the immersed listener. To what extent would this “desire” for connection be fulfilled and how could this desire be manipulated by producers/companies. We can expect that a deceptive sense of connection

can become a great generator of listenership which would translate into revenue. We must consider here the kinds of intimacies these technologies and practices might generate, including intimacies that may be considered spurious. The latter has been a concern in radio scholarship (Barnard, 2000: 181) well before podcasting, VR, AI, or the metaverse entered the scene. This has been discussed in particular in relation to the radio phone-in genre (tying us back in to the inspiration for this article: paranormal podcasts in the style of a phone-in). The phone-in has been hailed as, “the exception to one-way communication” (Shingler & Wieringa, 1998: 113) and “the most personal form of radio” (Hayes in *ibid*, 1998: 113). Shingler and Wieringa position this argument in the context of a duality that is similar to McHugh’s twin pillars of podcasting (2022); they write that “the twin concerns of intimacy and reciprocity lie at the heart of successful radio broadcasting” (1998: 115). Barnard’s concerns relate to the possibility that to achieve success, an illusion of intimacy and reciprocity may be present in the phone-in. He notes that “[...] one of the main characteristics of phone-in culture is the way it plays on an assumed intimacy, in both the subject matter it touches upon and the manner in which it is explored (2000: 163-164). Questions of power imbalance arise here in terms of the relationship between caller and presenter/ listener and radio station. I argue that in Zuckerberg’s idea of AI generated host-listener interaction in podcasting, the power imbalance between listener and host persists, as does the illusion of an equal two-way conversation, all within the larger financial structures that may sit behind a successful podcast. Additionally, we have the concern of a conversation that is not truly two-way – which is the bare minimum that we can expect in a caller-host interaction currently. The performance of intimacy by a presenter might have included some element of illusion but the performance of intimacy by an AI seems to be crossing a line between a technology being a surrogate for intimate (even if illusory) connection, and a technology potentially faking intimacy. Zuckerberg here qualifies that in that scenario the audience would be a knowing participant in the illusion:

maybe that AI, even if they know it's an AI, is the next best thing because they're probably not gonna, you know, necessarily all get to interact with you directly. I think that that could be a really compelling experience. There's a lot of things that we need to get right about it that, you know, we're not ready to release the version that a creator can kind of build a version of themselves yet, but we're starting to experiment with it... (in Fridman, 2023)

But we have to ask whether it will be the case that audience members can always tell the difference or, even if they can tell the difference, what kind of power-imbalances such a relationship can create. While Zuckerberg, in the podcast, reminds us that the technology is not able to go to those lengths yet, we know that AI is already being used in podcasting. The *Smart 7 Podcast* (Daft Doris, 2020) for example, a daily news podcast that gives listeners the daily news in under 7 minutes, has cloned the voice of one of its presenters by training AI which can read a script directly fed into it as if it was that presenter. One of its creators, in an online article about how and why they do this, defends the practice, using a similar argument about perceived limitations of the current technology: “Well, we’ve already seen a few rows kicking off over the perception that we’re replacing real life humans with robots, but it’s not really the case here. [...] I can definitely hear the potential for an AI overnight presenter, but it’s not something I can hear working on a shift that has any form of content” (Thompson, 2023). Perhaps there is a level of naivety in that statement. Zuckerberg’s prediction, is likely a very well-educated one, in terms of where the technology is actually going. If so, the technology will go well beyond listening, and into interacting. So, in a future where a listener can discuss with a voice-cloned AI machine of their favourite podcast host, what can we

make of intimacy? How can we define it? Will it be a one-to-one conversation *as if* it was a podcast? An imagined chatcast just for the one user to experience? Or will it be listened to by other listeners too? And putting aside the illusion of the listener, what does this mean for the podcast host?

McDonald, writing about the phone-in, challenges the idea of spuriousness, and argues that there is something to be gained for the host too from the one-to-one conversation with the listener. She uses the example of phone-in pioneer Anna Raeburn, feeling a sense of loss when her programme was taken off air and she was not allowed to say goodbye to her listeners (2014: 125-26). McDonald writes:

The relationship that listeners have with presenters and particularly those with problem phone-in presenters (due to the intimacy and emotional subject matter) is often only revealed when the dynamic is broken or breached. The hosts themselves can also feel a sense of loss –indicating instead that this is not simply a one-sided, manufactured and artificial relationship (2014: 125).

Though McDonald is talking about a specific genre of phone-in programme, her argument can be extended to a wider notion of host-audience relationship. In this context, we can include Fridman's excitement about the Metaverse and its potential for intimate conversation with guests. At the same time, Zuckerberg's projected future of using AI to maximise the number of listeners a host can interact with, may be a direct antithesis. In that future, the host has no part in those interactions – other than having trained the AI, or having fed information to it. In the comments under Fridman's podcast, one audience member writes: "The only real criticism I can level at it is that in a virtual room full of people, an AI would still be just that. No matter eerily [sic] human like it could get, it would still be fake" (MattHunX, 2023).

AFFORDANCES

Interestingly, fewer comments under the video discuss AI, while most discuss the Metaverse and VR elements of the podcast and the conversation within it. A large number of comments are different versions of the sentiment that this podcast had been the best demonstration of what the Metaverse can do, with many saying that while they did not see its value before, they now clearly see its potential (in Fridman, 2023). This, I argue, is for a reason. Podcasting is such a great candidate to demonstrate the Metaverse, because podcasting (in many ways similar to radio) possesses intimate affordances that are similar to those the Metaverse is looking to amplify – immersion, embodiment, presence, co-presence & identity construction (Mystakidis, 2022:491-494). Immersion is a key characteristic in audio media due to messages being unframed and leaking into the listener's space (using speakers) or head (using headphones). Embodiment (and disembodiment) relate to the way in which voices intimately connect to audiences in audio media and the level of imagination involved in these connections. Presence and co-presence are core concepts in how we understand the connection that audiences build with presenters and other recorded or live voices in radio and podcasting, as well as the connection with other audience members listening. Identity construction – largely referring to avatars and connecting to notions of the uncanny – will be part of podcasting in the potential future discussed here.

All of the above aiming to achieve a real or imagined connection with a distant other – alive or dead – through time and space.

CONCLUSION

This article has shed light on some of the ways in which the uncanny seems to be re-entering the conversation as we move through broadcast radio technology and into a future where podcast technologies include VR, AI and the Metaverse. We have seen that podcast creatives and listeners alike still seem to strive for connection and intimacy – these thankfully, persist in our imaginings of the future. In writing this piece, I discussed this future with Richard Berry who mused about the potential of listeners going inside the metaverse and walking into the studio of their favourite podcast; or into a live podcast recording event, like the ones we can physically attend in a theatre, and meet the host and other listeners too. The possibilities are many. Through this hauntology, and having pointed to affordances and pitfalls, the podcast is proposed as a re-emerging, re-mystified intimate medium of the future. Place-based intimacy will be a defining strength of the medium in this future. The attention, or lack thereof, to the ethics of connection between audiences and the medium will define whether this is an intimacy to be gained or avoided.

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