

‘Listening closely’ to mediated intimacies and podcast intimacies in *Song Exploder*

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Abstract

Intimacy is an important and growing concept in both media studies and podcast studies. But research regarding intimacies in both disciplines has yet to fully account for the connection between sound and normativity, which is essential to podcasting and important to mediated intimacies more broadly. In this article, we mobilise scholarship from these two fields to analyse the award-winning music podcast *Song Exploder*. Our study highlights that attending to intimacies in podcasting involves both analysing how the story structure aligns with social norms and listening critically to the ways the sound design and audio editing complements and complicates these intimate stories. We contend that identifying the intersection of sound and normativity in this podcast contributes to understanding the cultural work of podcasting and underscores the key role of sound in mediated intimacies.

Keywords

Public intimacy, happy object, audio intimacy, sonic intimacy, affect in podcasting, emotional intimacy in sound, normativity and feelings, podcast studies

Introduction

I've been thinking about grief a lot recently, because my mom passed away a few months ago.

Spoken haltingly by host Hrishikesh Hirway, the above words open ‘Episode 203: Sasha Sloan’ of *Song Exploder*, an award-winning music podcast with a global audience.¹ Launched during the 2014 podcast boom and now a part of the Radiotopia network of podcasts, *Song Exploder* interviews popular musicians about their process of creating music. Hirway’s opening words to this

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episode are striking not only because of the emotion they represent but also because Hirway rarely shares his own experiences on the podcast. In fact, listeners seldom hear Hirway's voice again after he introduces the musical guest for each episode. Unlike many music podcasts where the host plays a central role (e.g. *Questlove Supreme*, *Broken Record*), Hirway edits himself out of the interview and shapes the narrative arch of each episode around the musicians and their music. He remains, for the most part, a silent presence. But in 'Episode 203', Hirway goes on to say, with a partially cracked voice, that his mother was still alive when he conducted the interview with Sasha Sloan and that she died before the release of this episode. The song that Sloan discusses on this podcast is, he explains, about 'the distance between those who have lost someone and those who haven't'. He continues, 'When we did the interview, I was in the second category, but now I'm in the first one, and for me making this episode has been an interesting way for me to retrace my steps as I crossed from one side of the divide to the other'. With these words, Hirway draws attention to the often-observed role of the editor in both experiencing and communicating intimacies through podcasting. And although the 'personality driven' (Hirway and Jokiranta, 2016) medium of podcasting often leads researchers to locate intimacies in the work of narrators and hosts (Copeland, 2018; Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021; Lindgren 2021; McHugh, 2017; Spinelli and Dann, 2019), Hirway's opening words suggest that there is value in attending to the less obvious but no less essential work of podcast editors in shaping intimacies through their use of stories, sound design and audio editing.

At the same time, however, Hirway's opening words elide – like much podcasting scholarship also does – the central role that social norms play in structuring mediated intimacies like this. In neighbouring disciplines, researchers have long acknowledged that intimacy is more than just the demarcation of public and private; intimacy is instead, as Dobson and colleagues argue, 'very much socially sanctioned, defined by institutions, laws, and normative social pressures' (2018: 3). Indeed, Berlant's (2008) writing regarding 'intimate publics' has been significant for emphasising the role of mass mediated popular culture in the reproduction of normative and normalising narratives. Berlant insists that 'What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (viii). Podcasts like *Song Exploder* are created – consciously or not – with this knowledge that listeners share, to some extent, an overlapping worldview, positionality and knowledge of some of these musicians and their music. In this way, the intimate publics that congregate around podcasts like *Song Exploder* thrive 'as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live as an *x*' (Berlant, 2008: viii). Such belonging, however, is not open to all. As Berlant explains, this belonging is only possible 'for those who can pass as conventional within its limited terms' (13). Seen through this lens, podcasts like *Song Exploder* have the opportunity to both perpetuate and disrupt the normative conventions associated with communicating intimacy. In the ensuing analysis, we argue that intimacies on *Song Exploder* are limited by normative assumptions about the disclosures and feelings that are 'acceptable' to share with others, but we also underscore how the podcast makes possible some non-normative intimacies that unsettle these normative tendencies. Our study extends existing research about intimacies by listening closely to the ways that intimacies are generated through sound in the podcast, from the words spoken and stories edited, to the diegetic and non-diegetic music that plays throughout the podcast. Ultimately, we contend that identifying how sound and normativity intersect in this podcast contributes to understanding the cultural work of podcasting more broadly and also indicates the key role of sound in mediated intimacies, a concept that has often privileged visual and written media.

To craft this argument, we begin by charting two threads of intimacies research, one in media studies and the other in podcast studies, to explore what these two fields offer to each other for understanding intimacy. We follow this with a description of *Song Exploder* that demonstrates how the podcast lends itself to such an integrated analysis and showcases an array of mediated intimacies made possible through the podcast medium, with a special emphasis on the shape of its stories, its technical and emotional disclosures, and its sound design. Next, we examine ‘Episode 197: Billie Eilish’ and show how these mediated intimacies are nonetheless constrained by normative notions of intimacy that limit the scope and shape of podcasting intimacies. Finally, we return to the episode with which we began this article, ‘Episode 203: Sasha Sloan’, and consider how its production techniques question the borders of these normative intimacies through the framing and audio editing. Through verbal descriptions, story structure and audio editing, *Song Exploder* illustrates the constraining reach of normative intimacies in podcasting as well as sonic modes of questioning those limited understandings of intimacies.

Mediated intimacies, podcasting intimacies and *Song Exploder*

Song Exploder presents an opportunity to synthesise distinct but related approaches to studying intimacy in media. One such thread of research investigates the emergence and evolution of ‘mediated intimacies’ across a variety of visual and social media. This scholarship tends to focus on the role of language, stories, images and networks in facilitating different degrees and types of intimacy across a variety of media genres (Barker et al., 2018; Berryman and Kavka, 2018; Chambers, 2017; Dobson et al., 2018). Another thread of intimacies research mobilises notions of intimacy that emerge from radio studies and attends to the ways that speech, sound, noise and aural practices contribute to sonic intimacies in podcasting (Copeland, 2018; Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021; McHugh, 2017; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Although both bodies of research often draw on the work of scholars of affect and emotion such as Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed, mediated intimacies research and podcasting intimacies research are rarely placed in conversation with each other. But given their imbricated intellectual histories and complementary strengths, we contend that both threads of scholarship have much to gain from engaging in more explicit dialogue. Linking these twin threads of intimacies research, as we will show, both elucidates the unique combination of mechanisms that give rise to intimacy in *Song Exploder* and highlights the benefits of conjoining these related approaches. This meshing of scholarly discourses is particularly relevant in a contemporary mediascape in which intimacies increasingly arise in complex digital environments that blur traditional boundaries between different media and their genres.

Mediated intimacies research theorises the integration of media, including digital media and technologies, into our everyday lives and intimate moments. Some mediated intimacies researchers focus on our increasing tendency to look towards the media to ‘learn about sex’ and, concomitantly, on the growing trend for sex and relationship advice to be provided in such media (Barker et al., 2018: 1). Others attend to the connections enabled by media and digital technology (Attwood et al., 2017; Chambers, 2017; Petersen et al., 2018). While distinctions have often been made between such strands of mediated intimacy research, such ‘divisions’ are ‘to some extent artificial’ and an emphasis on connection demonstrates the possibilities of intimacy despite ‘distance and anonymity’ (Petersen et al., 2018: 6). Moreover, as Petersen and colleagues point out, the terminology of ‘mediation’ can illustrate ‘the process of co-constitution – or the mutual shaping of humans and media technologies – which implies that humans are always already performed through technologies’ (2018: 3). Podcasting – with its digital interfaces, technological assemblages, listening practices and online communities – aligns with both the idea of mediation as a process of

technological co-constitution and the concept of intimacy as a sense of social connection facilitated by communication technologies. Key within such understandings of mediated intimacies are notions of ‘digital intimacies’, defined by Byron (2021) as helping us understand ‘everyday and intimate uses of digital and social media’ and the ways ‘media themselves – platforms, tools, interfaces, and their affordances – are intimate’ (6–7; see also Paasonen, 2018). Attending to the intimacy in everyday media use and in media platforms themselves proves essential for recognising the structural and cultural dimensions of intimacies: it is not only podcast content that is intimate but also how we listen to podcasts and the ‘networked environments’ within which this listening occurs (Paasonen, 2018: 103). Furthermore, although our listening practices, such as starting, stopping or rewinding an episode, might seem private, such research demonstrates that these are indeed public practices, ‘visible to the services used, through the massive user data archives they compile, store and mine’ (Paasonen, 2018: 111; see also Dobson et al., 2018). *Song Exploder* listeners may have few social connections to creators or musicians interviewed, but the digital infrastructures – or what Morris and Patterson call the ‘podcatching app interfaces’ (2015: 220) – that shape how listeners engage with *Song Exploder* create the sense that this podcast is a personal experience for listeners through the sharing of technical details, personal anecdotes and musical stems. That is, while musicians make personal and intimate disclosures on the podcast, these intimate revelations are embedded within broader media institutions and cultural practices in context, form, reception and access. What the literature discussing mediated intimacies and digital intimacies establishes most firmly is the importance of recognising the power and significance of institutions and technologies, not just individuals, in shaping intimacies.

Related conceptions of intimacy are also important to podcasting research. In line with the form and focus of podcasts, scholarly discourses about podcasting intimacies tend to draw on notions of intimacy that foreground speech and aurality. Spinelli and Dann (2019: 77), for instance, connect podcast intimacy to the cultural practice of listening to radio (Douglas, 2004), tensions between intimate and public discourse in radio (Loviglio, 2005), and the ‘pseudo-intimacy’ of mediated spoken discourse (O’Keeffe, 2006). Close-mic’ing, too, has long been employed by radio broadcasters as a directional microphone technique for creating a sense of intimacy, which audio documentarian Sara Brooke Curtis describes as someone ‘whispering secrets inside of your skull’ (2022). Similarly, Copeland frames her understanding of podcasting as an ‘intimate aural medium’ (2019: 210) in terms of the materiality of the human voice (Cavarero, 2005) and the intersection of voice and gender (Karpf, 2011; Schlichter, 2011). Berry suggests that the ‘hyper-intimacy’ of podcasting is at least partly social – a claim that echoes mediated intimacies research – and derives from relationships developed on social media as well as producers’ connections with ‘a listener’s own community’ (2016: 666). And Copeland links this social sense of podcasting intimacy with discourses of power to argue that podcast intimacy is intertwined with normative assumptions about gender and sexuality while also challenging ‘visual-philic heteronormative and gendered expectations’ (2019: 210). After all, as podcasting researcher Euritt succinctly explains, ‘[t]o study intimacy is to study power’ (2021: 27). Scholarly understandings of podcast intimacies thus have points of convergence and divergence with mediated intimacies research.

While podcasting studies emphasises the role of sound in intimacies and mediated intimacies research foregrounds the politics of normativity across a variety of media genres, these parallel scholarly discourses share a commitment to understanding intimacy as deeply social, imbued with competing ideologies and expressed through mediated experiences. In this respect, integrating research about podcast intimacy and mediated intimacies calls attention to the role of sound in perpetuating and potentially undermining normative emotional intimacies. Sound, after all, is not neutral; it is deeply intertwined with culture. Like any medium for expression, sound plays a role in

maintaining the social status quo; and conversely, sound can be a tool for subverting cultural norms. As sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne contends, 'to think sonically is to think conjuncturally about sound and culture' (2012: 3). Building on this work, Robin James considers 'how sound and resonance contribute to the gendered, sexualised, and racial project at the heart of biopolitics' (2019: 16–17). And Amanda Nell Edgar highlights how feelings of 'vocal intimacy' (2019: 24) emerge from the power, or lack thereof, that the cultural apparatus ascribes unequally to different voices and vocal patterns. Given this politics of sound, podcasting researchers cannot assess the intimate potential of podcasting without also examining the normative tendencies of the cultural infrastructures involved in podcast production. Concomitantly, media scholars cannot fully account for the normative power of mediated intimacies without also attending thoroughly to the sonic elements of their mediation.

A podcast such as *Song Exploder* presents a prime example of the value of placing mediated intimacies and podcast intimacies research in dialogue. Linking these scholarly discourses can illuminate the complexities of intimacies in a podcast with an unusual narrative structure. Many podcasts, regardless of genre, have hosts that function as central figures who guide listeners experiences. On *Song Exploder*, however, Hirway almost entirely erases his voice (as both interviewer and podcast host). With each episode, Hirway interviews a new musical guest and asks them about the process of writing and recording a single song in their oeuvre. But out of more than two hundred episodes, Hirway's voice appears in the body of only a handful of episodes, usually to quickly explain a technical term or to ask a short question. Beyond Hirway's brief introductory and concluding remarks, many episodes feature only the voices of his musical guests and the sounds of their music. This editorial choice is intentional: Hirway states in an interview about the podcast and his editing strategies that the absence of his voice is designed to better create 'an intimacy' that 'really feels like the artist sort of revealing something...directly to the audience' (Hirway and Jokiranta, 2016). But the conspicuous omission of Hirway's voice from the podcast prompts closer inquiry. As musical guest Finneas explains, when producing music, 'the best way to get someone to pay attention to something is to take it out' ('Episode 197: Billie Eilish'). Attending to Hirway's audio editing strategy of erasing the podcast host therefore presents an opportunity to extend podcast intimacies research, which tends to focus primarily on the role of hosts and narrators in communicating podcast intimacies (Copeland, 2018; Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021; McHugh, 2017; Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Analysis of *Song Exploder* can also augment mediated intimacies scholarship that interrogates normative intimacies in visual and social media (Andreassen et al., 2018; Attwood et al., 2017; Dobson et al., 2018) by attending specifically to the sonic construction of intimacies in the musicians' voices and their music. In the next section we outline *Song Exploder* and key elements of the stories and sound design that help us understand the complexities of intimacies in the podcast.

Producing intimate stories in *Song Exploder*

On *Song Exploder*, the deliberate elision of Hirway's voice constructs a media environment in which listeners experience intimacy with the guest musicians through two parallel stories: one *technical* and one *emotional*.² The technical story reveals the 'secrets' (Hirway and Jokiranta, 2016) behind the instruments, sounds, techniques and ideas that come together to create a song. Many music podcasts employ technical narratives like this, including *Switched on Pop*, *Diary of a Song*, and *Dissect*. At the same time, however, *Song Exploder* also has an emotional story that articulates the deep, sometimes conflicting, feelings that shape and are shaped by the process of music-making. Overt emotional narratives like this are much less common in music podcasts. Although music

podcasts like *Switched on Pop* and *Diary of a Song* may occasionally have emotional content, they do not structure their episodes with a consistent emotional arc. But for *Song Exploder*, these intertwined technical and emotional stories construct the backbone of the mediated intimacies made possible by the podcast.

The intimate technical story arises through the overt structure of each episode, which involves the musician discussing, one by one, the instruments and sounds involved in the production of the song. ‘Episode 206: Lianne La Havas’, for example, begins with La Havas discussing her main guitar riff, followed by the vocal melody, the lyrics, the bass line, the drums, the backup vocals and finally the strings. Each episode of *Song Exploder* follows a similar structure: with each sound that musicians discuss, listeners hear that ‘stem’ (the isolated collection of tracks and effects that create a specific sound) played alongside the musician’s personal description of why they chose, and how they created, that sound. In this way, the musical stems function as diegetic sounds; listeners hear the sounds when the musical guests talk about them. This structure creates intimacy insofar as musicians publicly reveal to listeners the personal details, idiosyncratic ideas and individual techniques that together comprise their process of writing a popular song. These technical disclosures construct a kind of intimacy that blurs distinctions between public and private in ways that echo both mediated intimacies (Bartlett et al., 2019; Dobson et al., 2018) and podcast intimacies research (Euritt and Korfmacher, 2021). After all, making music is, as producer-musician Finneas states, ‘a very vulnerable process’ (‘Episode 197: Billie Eilish’). And the public sharing of that vulnerable music-making experience through a podcast that simulates a private conversation between the musician and the listener becomes a central part of the intimate appeal of *Song Exploder*.

These intimate disclosures in *Song Exploder* are sonically reinforced by hearing each of the stems played in isolation. As Hirway notes in an interview, music listeners typically only hear all of the stems played together in the final mixed and mastered version of the song (Hirway and Jokiranta, 2016). But on *Song Exploder*, musicians openly share the individual sounds alone and exposed. Indeed, a vocal track played solo is perhaps one of the most vulnerable sounds that musicians can share with listeners. For singer Janelle Monáe, the experience of listening to her voice is so deeply intimate that she records and engineers her voice by herself, a process that she describes as ‘a private conversation that I need to have with myself’ (‘Episode 146: Janelle Monáe’). In this sense, the playing of musical stems individually on the podcast invites listeners into a private conversation with musicians and constitutes a sonic mediated intimacy through which listeners ‘connect, relate, and become close’ (Petersen et al., 2018: 14) to the podcast’s musical guests. Mediated intimacy is thus developed through this sonic intimacy. Sharing private techniques and sounds complements the intimate disclosures established in the personal stories that the musicians share and marks another way that podcasting constructs mediated intimacies.

The intimate experience of listening to *Song Exploder* is further amplified by its often emotional content. ‘Emotions are not’, as theorist Ahmed argues, ‘simply something “I” or “we” have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made’ (2014: 10). This sense of emotions as responsive and relational is central in *Song Exploder*, a podcast that produces emotions in multiple ways and makes space for layers of responses that connect listeners, musicians and Hirway. The emotional elements of *Song Exploder* both emerge from and augment the intimate relationship established through the listeners’ responses to the musicians’ sharing of personal details about their music-making practices. The rapper Common opens by discussing the anger he and other protesters felt at the killing of George Floyd (‘Episode 199: Common’); Billie Eilish discusses the depression she experienced while writing her first album (‘Episode 197: Billie Eilish’); Sasha Sloan recounts a story of grief following the death of a friend’s family member (‘Episode 203: Sasha Sloan’); and Dua Lipa describes with nostalgia the joy of

dancing with friends while listening to dance music from the 80s and 90s ('Episode 194: Dua Lipa'). The centrality of emotions like these to *Song Exploder* episodes echoes the ways that 'personal emotionalism' on social media has become a crucial part of establishing 'relationship[s] between strangers' (Gibson and Talaie, 2018: 283). And just as emotional intimacy is afforded by social media platforms, *Song Exploder* leans on emotions to create an intimate listening experience for listeners.

But emotion in *Song Exploder* is not only established through the stories told and heard; these intimate discussions of emotion are augmented through the intermittent but deliberate use of musical stems as non-diegetic sound. Most of the sound on *Song Exploder* is diegetic in the sense that listeners hear the exact instruments and musical sounds as the guest musicians discuss them, and when the musicians stop talking about those specific sounds, those tracks fade away. At other times, however, particularly when musicians move from discussing specific sounds to sharing emotion-laden stories about their personal experiences, Hirway scores musicians' brief but affecting monologues with either silence or specific musical stems that amplify the emotional disclosures. In 'Episode 206: Lianne La Havas', for example, Lianne La Havas explains that her song 'Can't Fight' originates from a toxic former relationship that left her feeling at various points a wide array of emotions, including anxiety, elation, rage, despair and contentment. Many of her explanations of emotional trauma remain unaccompanied by music, a feature that draws attention to the embodied affect expressed in her vocal delivery, or what Barthes calls 'the grain of the voice' (1978: 185). By contrast, Lianne La Havas's summaries of uplifting emotional experiences are often supported by the upbeat opening guitar riff of her song, which she describes in embodied and unabashedly positive terms: 'it just feels nice under the fingers'. This dance-like guitar riff appears throughout the episode when Lianne La Havas recounts seeking moments of joy in otherwise difficult times. In one telling moment at the midpoint of the episode, she describes repeatedly listening to a demo of her song as 'extremely uplifting because maybe the optimism in the music helped it to be easier to express difficult feelings'. Although listeners might expect to hear the full demo of her song (including its anxious and unsettled lyrics) played behind this emotional description, Hirway instead scores this section with only the upbeat guitar riff that 'feels nice' to Lianne La Havas. The implicit joy of this guitar riff therefore reinforces her uplifting interpretation of an otherwise emotionally conflicting song. In these ways, non-diegetic sound is central to the communication of embodied emotional intimacies in *Song Exploder*.

The ending of 'Episode 206: Lianne La Havas' further amplifies these emotional intimacies through its unmistakable emotional uplift and feeling of positivity, a recurring feature of *Song Exploder* episodes. In the final interview clip, La Havas comments that this song emerged from a 'abusive' relationship, but she also insists that without that relationship, 'that song wouldn't exist, and I wouldn't have had all the pleasure I got from making it, none of that would exist either. This [song] was my way of making it beautiful'. Here, La Havas reframes a relationship that constituted 'almost certainly the darkest time in [her] entire life' as a joyful process of music writing that also paradoxically marked 'one of the happiest times of [her] life'. Hirway's decision to conclude this episode with this quotation from La Havas is emblematic of the uplifting structure of *Song Exploder* episodes. Common, for instance, concludes the discussion of his song 'Riot in My Mind' by stating, 'As much as the riot is going on in my mind, I kind of overcome that riot. I'm just acknowledging that it's there, and that I can overcome it with peace' ('Episode 199: Common'). Similarly, although singer-songwriter FKA twigs explicitly states on the podcast that the process of writing 'Mirrored Heart' was 'absolutely not' healing, the episode nonetheless concludes with her saying, 'But it was a great time of self-discovery, genuine, real, like gut wrenching self-discovery' ('Episode 182: FKA twigs'). Even 'Episode 214: Cheap Trick', which has less pronounced emotional content,

overtly ends with songwriter Rick Nielsen providing a joyful summary of the song's success: 'I think [my parents] were just happy I had a job [as a musician] and happy that I was happy doing what I was doing'. Such positive stories reinforce a particular way of thinking about the world that can reflect neoliberal values like 'logics of self-belief, positive thinking, and the pursuit of happiness' (Dobson and Kanai, 2019: 772) that can hold 'monetary' value for media makers and celebrities alike (Berryman and Kavka, 2018: 86). Indeed, this tendency to conclude episodes with feelings of happiness and comfort unmistakably structures the emotional intimacies involved in *Song Exploder* around positive emotions.

In this way, the host-less structure of *Song Exploder* implies a kind of individualised intimacy between musicians and listeners; moreover, the sonic elements of the podcast draw on culturally-situated understandings of particular emotions, illustrating that this intimacy is thoroughly social and constructed in ways that reinforce such neoliberal ideals. Writing about the sociality of emotions, Ahmed explains that '[h]appy objects accumulate positive affective value as social goods through being passed around' (2008: 11). Seen through this lens, the circulation of *Song Exploder* episodes that offer uplifting narratives about musicians enjoying writing and producing songs (regardless of the emotional trauma that is sometimes involved) reifies a normative social environment in which both music production and music consumption are collectively viewed as 'happy objects' that bring joy. Furthermore, the podcast itself becomes a happy object through this circulation of emotionally uplifting episodes, as a kind of intimate emotional listening experience that proffers happiness to audiences. But, as Ahmed points out, this social orientation of emotions around certain happy objects also contributes to an emotional normativity that ostracises those 'affect aliens' (2008: 11) who do not feel the same emotional connection to those happy objects. When *Song Exploder* and popular music are both positioned as happy objects, it becomes difficult to tell wholly unhappy stories on the podcast, limiting *Song Exploder* to producing intimacies that are primarily constructed as uplifting. This storytelling structure on *Song Exploder* also underscores the fact that, as Euritt and Korfmacher assert, 'intimacy in podcasting is not a stable immutable part of the medium' but rather a 'continual cultural negotiation of what it means to be intimate' (2021: 14). In the next section, we further examine how normative understandings constrain the expression and experience of intimacies on podcasts like *Song Exploder*.

Billie Eilish, 'uncomfortable' confessions and normative conclusions

'Episode 197: Billie Eilish' of *Song Exploder* exemplifies how podcasting can make space for speakers to articulate uncomfortable intimacies while at the same time bending those intimacies into a more normative and uplifting intimate experience for listeners. In this episode, singer-songwriter Billie Eilish tells the story of composing the song 'Everything I Wanted' with her brother and producer, Finneas, who she describes as her 'best friend'. She explains that this song emerged from a period of depression during which she had a dream about jumping off a building and getting what she wanted: death. On the podcast, Billie Eilish describes telling Finneas about the dream as 'weird', and he describes listening to her disclosure as 'an upsetting experience'. Both siblings, in other words, recall her sharing of the dream in terms of discomfort. This representation of depression, disclosure and discomfort might also be unsettling for listeners drawn to *Song Exploder* as a happy object that typically provides an uplifting intimate listening experience. Indeed, the content warning at the start of this episode not only alerts listeners to potentially triggering material but also signals to all audience members that this episode provides a more difficult intimate listening experience. Together, these early moments of the episode draw attention to uncomfortable intimacies that involve bearing witness to feelings of pain and struggle. At least initially, then, *Song Exploder*

highlights the important role that uncomfortable intimacies can play in relationships, song writing and podcast-listening.

As the episode continues, however, these uncomfortable intimacies become constrained by normative cultural expectations for intimate experiences. After articulating the ‘dark’ and ‘bleak’ aspects of the dream – explaining that she was experiencing depression and ‘had been suicidal in the past’ – Billie Eilish recounts that ‘Finneas got mad because he didn’t want to write about it. He didn’t like to think of me as in this head space’. The podcast cuts to Finneas explaining that this experience ‘was really scary to me...to hear her articulate her depression, in a way that was sort of more obvious than I think she was making it on a day-to-day basis’. Faced with the discomfiting experience of listening to Billie Eilish discussing her intimate feelings and dreams alongside the song writing process, Finneas explains that he ‘got pretty flipped out and told her so’. Indeed, Billie Eilish comments that her mother became involved as mediator, and it became a ‘family argument’. She explains, ‘I couldn’t believe that they were telling me that like I shouldn’t be writing about this’ and ‘they just didn’t understand that it was actually how I felt’. Her family’s failure to acknowledge her emotional experience and rejection of her desire to write about these feelings positions her as an ‘affect alien’ (Ahmed, 2008: 11). This failure to acknowledge Billie Eilish’s experience at the level of the family is also reflected in the editing of the episode: Billie Eilish’s comment on the intensity of this moment and a ‘half a year’ break from writing it is not dwelt on in the edit. Rather than require listeners to sit with the uncomfortable weight of this emotional experience, Hirway, as editor, quickly moves the episode along. After a split-second pause, Billie Eilish continues, ‘We were really stuck for like a second. We didn’t really know where to go with it. Because it was such a downer of a song’. The importance of Billie Eilish’s expression of the intensity of this dream and the argument with her family is undercut by juxtaposing it with the description of the song as ‘such a downer’. In ending the first half of the episode in this way, listeners do not have to sit and be present with these deeply uncomfortable emotions and intimacies. Although Billie Eilish expresses a desire to talk about her feelings with her brother, her mother, Hirway and the public through this song, her desire is foreclosed by both their behaviour and the editing of the episode. Given Billie Eilish’s strong initial wish to co-write a song about her experience of this distressing dream with her brother, her description of the song as a ‘downer’ simplifies an otherwise complex experience and expression of feelings and underscores the power of normative conceptualisations of intimacy and their constricting nature. Not only do normative ideas restrict the kinds of intimacies available to Billie Eilish at the level of her family relationships, but the editing of the episode also highlights that those normative ideas impact the public justification of decisions not to pursue unsettling intimacies.

Crucially, this public retelling of challenging familial intimacies is, at least at the start, not accompanied by background music. In presenting highly sensitive discussions of musicians’ emotions without music, Hirway’s editing draws attention to the musicians’ embodied feelings – beyond their representation in the song – as expressed in their vocal delivery. For example, when Billie Eilish summarises the dream at the start of the episode, she says, ‘the whole dream was...’ and quickly intakes breath in a way that sounds like a smile or a suggestion of amusement before continuing, ‘...me watching how everything went after I died?’ She goes on to describe her dream as ‘like everything you’ve been thinking put into a horrible, horrible reality [laughter]’. Here her voice has an upward inflection as she says ‘reality’, the word posed as a question; and the laughter is short, breathy and suppressed. In this way, it seems self-reflective, directed at herself. In a podcast where most vocal stutters seem to be removed in the edit, such intonation and laughter exist alongside Billie Eilish’s highly confident presentation and suggest both hesitancy and self-deprecation. This suppressed laughter undermines the sincerity of her words in a similar manner to the memes produced by young women that ‘poke fun’ at their failures to perform an ‘ideal femininity’ (Kanai, 2019: 17). Without musical accompaniment, listeners hear the unveiled quality of Billie Eilish’s

voice and delivery, an intimate act that gestures towards a sense of connection with Billie Eilish. Listeners also hear Billie Eilish tell a story about a moment that obviously held great significance for her, and yet her hesitant laughter suggests she is aware this is not normative intimate practice. As such, listening closely for when statements are, and are not, accompanied by music can bring awareness to the emotional importance of the speech, the subtleties of what is unspoken, and what is, or is not, understood to be normal.

As the episode progresses, Billie Eilish's and Finneas' retelling of this 'family argument' is accompanied by stems from the song itself, which transforms the diegetic sounds of individual tracks into non-diegetic musical scoring that amplifies intimate moments. After Finneas explains he got 'flipped out', a collection of rhythmic stems from the song play underneath their words. Similarly, Billie Eilish's retelling of the 'family argument' is accompanied by the 'tonal snare' sound that Finneas earlier described as 'an ice pick hitting a...gold mine'. As she comments that she started yelling, noting her disbelief at the suggestion they not write about her feelings, a kick drum sounds. Then, when she explains that 'they just didn't understand', the kick drum and the tonal snare mostly drop out, subtly drawing more attention to her words and her family's inability to understand her. In considering this moment, Ahmed's comments about the 'stickiness' of anxiety and its tendency 'to pick up whatever comes near' (2008: 11) are pertinent. Billie Eilish is depressed, and her expression of this experience, amplified by the non-diegetic sound, as discussed in the podcast, produces distress for those around her. Although Billie Eilish's unsettling emotions position her as the affect alien in this moment, those same discomfiting feelings are nevertheless given voice through the non-diegetic use of musical stems. The changes in musical accompaniment to Billie Eilish's words accentuate the different stages of feeling she experiences in her reaction to their words here. That is, while her family won't listen to her, podcast listeners can. And yet, Billie Eilish's final description of the song as 'such a downer' remains unaccompanied, reiterating this as a particularly 'bleak' state from which she has recovered. This story becomes central to the episode, and although such uncomfortable intimate feelings might be given voice, they are nonetheless in contrast with the uplifting emotional arc of the episode.

The podcast episode does not, of course, end with the failure of an unwritten song and a scene of domestic conflict. Like all episodes of *Song Exploder*, this episode bends this story of uncomfortable intimacy toward an uplifting resolution. Nearly halfway through the episode, Billie Eilish recalls how her mental health began to improve over time and how she and Finneas tried to figure out how to take a song with such dark origins and 'make that better'. Together, they transform this song about depression into a song about sibling love. While they leave the melancholy verses intact, Billie Eilish explains that 'we were gonna make the chorus about us...and how we've both pulled each other out of dark places in our lives'. Finneas agrees and recalls that 'the song essentially became a song about our own relationship with each other, which was that, you know, we'd ride or die'. This 'ride or die' metaphor indicates that the siblings share an intimate relationship, even as Finneas' earlier refusal to write a song about his sister's dream of dying suggests that he is primarily invested in the more cheerful 'ride' side of the metaphor. Billie Eilish explains the 'fun' of writing the rest of the song and how it reminds her that 'I'm gonna have times where I go back into a dark place, but it is important to remember that you do get out of that...and you're gonna be okay again'. Finneas echoes this sentiment when he recounts how interesting it is for the song 'to start in a place of like this hopelessness and to arrive at this sort of destination of like companionship and love'. This heartening description of the song could equally apply to this episode of the podcast itself. Like podcasts in other genres that use an uplifting story arc to repackage challenging emotional material for listener consumption (e.g. *Conversations with My Immigrant Parents*; *He Kākano Ahau*), this formerly dark episode of *Song Exploder* concludes with an unmistakable air of positivity and

success. Thus, while this episode draws attention to some difficult emotional intimacies, the narrative shape of the episode suggests that those intimacies need to be overcome and transformed into positive emotional intimacies.

The uplifting emotional story of *Song Exploder* underscores the ways that normative ‘feeling rules’ (Kanai, 2019: 7) structure the kinds of intimacies made possible on podcasts like this. There are, as Dobson and Kanai observe, ‘broad cultural conditions that visibly connect mediated feminism to “upbeat” and “confident” modes of subjectivity well-suited to navigating neoliberal structures, dynamics, and “feeling rules”’ (2019: 772). Although Billie Eilish initially voices her depression, social demands require that contemporary media such as *Song Exploder* present ‘a confident, upbeat, pleasing, and happy affective state from young women’ (Dobson and Kanai, 2019: 775–776). This episode therefore, like the other episodes discussed earlier, morphs those distressing displays of emotional intimacy into a story that reinforces notions of positive thinking. Even Billie Eilish’s negative displays of emotional intimacy on *Song Exploder* fit into this neoliberal paradigm insofar as strategic confessions – especially by already successful white women – can ‘increase social capital’ (Balley and Coll, 2017: 886). Like so-called ‘crying vlogs’, such intimate revelations on the podcast ‘may be negative and yet productive, in the sense that they cement authenticity, offer (self-)therapy and strengthen ties of intimacy’ (Berryman and Kavka, 2018: 87). Both the song ‘Everything I Wanted’ and this episode of *Song Exploder* reflect this tension between the desire to publicly share distressing emotions and the pressure to repackage those intimate emotional disclosures into a happy object for consumption in a larger commercialised media ecosphere. *Song Exploder*, after all, only tells the stories of popular musicians who have successfully written and sold songs; incomplete songs and unknown artists have no place on the podcast. Given this context, it is no surprise that, even when the podcast makes space for uncomfortable intimacies, it consistently structures those intimate exchanges into a larger emotional narrative that provides audiences with an uplifting listening experience and reifies normative understandings of intimacy as an enriching, desirable and valuable activity.

Intimate editing, absence and grief in Sasha Sloan

Despite the constraining reach of normative intimacies, ‘Episode 203: Sasha Sloan’ showcases how editing and non-diegetic sound are central to developing non-normative intimacies. As noted in the introduction to this article, this episode begins, unusually, with Hirway sharing a deeply personal experience, unadorned with background music. By starting with an acknowledgment of his own experiences of grief, Hirway disrupts the intimate experience he seeks to create between listeners and musicians and instead draws attention to the less obvious, though no less significant, potential for intimacy between listener and podcast editor. Indeed, by framing the episode in this way, Hirway spotlights the affective labour involved in editing the podcast and prompts audiences to listen for that affect by engaging in what Spinelli and Dann call ‘intimate podcast listening’ (2019: 81). While historical podcasts (e.g. *Untold Killing*) and true crime podcasts (e.g. *Missing and Murdered*) might sometimes foreground the difficult affective labour of producing certain episodes, such focus on the producer’s emotions is unusual in music podcasts like *Song Exploder*. Furthermore, in centring grief, this episode – like the bereavement videos discussed by Gibson and Talaie – seems to contrast western cultural practices where a funeral often signifies ‘the last public marker of grief and remembrance, even though grief and memory work continues afterwards as a constant companion for bereaved’ (2018: 286). Unlike this normative western approach to grief, this episode can be read as an expression that ‘supports continuing grief within a public register or mode of community’ (Gibson and Talaie, 2018: 285) and makes it present. Indeed, the framing story encourages listeners

to hear Sloan's discussion of grief in this song through the lens of, and in contrast with, Hirway's own grief.

In a podcast where Hirway typically omits his voice, it is surprising that Hirway appears twice more in 'Episode 203' after the initial framing. Hirway next interjects just over halfway through the episode. At this point, Sloan's producer, King Henry, is discussing his use of a granulator to create a specific sound, and Hirway interrupts to explain, in a simple yet technical way, how a granulator works. Importantly though, Hirway only shares technical information in this moment, a significant departure from his earlier discussion of bereavement. While the opening may indicate that this episode makes space for discussion of bereavement with strangers and the creation of 'a shared body of grief', the technical nature of this interjection suggests that Hirway's grief has been superseded, an act that arguably reflects western society's discomfort with grief (Gibson and Talaie, 2018: 293). For some listeners, then, this technical discussion might be a welcome departure, and for others the technicalities can draw attention to Hirway's grief through its absence, with intimacy developed between the listener and the speaker based on what is not said. Hirway's intervention as a narrator to explain this very technical information also disrupts the intimate experience between musician and listener that Hirway implies his podcast creates and, in so doing, reminds listeners that the experience of intimacy afforded by the podcast is in part curated by the editor. And yet, for those listening closely, the story of Hirway's grief remains incomplete, challenging the typical happy orientation of *Song Exploder* episodes.

Hirway's voice appears for the third time near the very end of the episode. Following Sloan's discussion of the various instrumentations and inspirations for this song, there is a silence before the shift to the tin-can quality of compressed sound, with a crackled quality, which indicates that this audio comes not from Hirway's narration but rather from his original interview with Sloan prior to his mother's death. Hirway asks, 'Do you think that by having written this song, that you're now somehow better prepared for some inevitable moment of loss in the future?' Sloan then confidently responds, 'I do'. Sloan's optimistic affirmation here can be read as comforting to both Hirway and listeners: it is possible to insulate yourself from future grief. And yet, this statement, along with Hirway's question, clearly emerges from the period before his mother's death, and when combined with the framing narrative, its inclusion in the podcast suggests that, despite Sloan's positive answer, this question continues to haunt Hirway. As the final aspect of the interview that listeners hear, moreover, this moment undermines the traditional emotional uplift of *Song Exploder* episodes and casts a long shadow of doubt over Sloan's final words: 'I think it's my own way of saying, hey it's part of life, and you're gonna have to grieve, but it's gonna be alright'. While those words sound uplifting, Hirway's unspoken, unresolved grief remains a palpable undercurrent that unsettles such a rosy resolution of a podcast that typically functions as a happy object and can 'counteract...socially convenient ideas that grief, sadness, and longing come to an end' (Gibson and Talaie, 2018: 293). Indeed, Hirway's interjections in this episode challenge the conventional uplifting structure of *Song Exploder* episodes and undermine the podcast's typical framing of both music-making and podcast-listening as an enjoyable intimate experience where excessive negative emotions have no place.

In addition to Hirway's vocal appearances, the sound design in the Sasha Sloan episode further complicates the traditional uplifting structure that positions *Song Exploder* as a happy object and music-making as a joyfully intimate experience. Although many episodes of *Song Exploder* occasionally employ musical stems in a non-diegetic manner to emphasise emotional moments, Hirway's use of non-diegetic sound to amplify emotional content in this episode is prolific. For example, musical elements appear before they are explicitly discussed by Sloan and linger well after her description of them. This audio editing strategy makes the sound feel more melodramatic than a podcast about how to write songs might sound. Indeed, the overstated use of sound in this episode

echoes *Disgraceland*, a music podcast that, in the true crime style, uses suspenseful non-diegetic sounds in a heavy-handed effort to shape listeners' emotional journey. This emphasis on composition is especially apparent as the episode approaches its climactic end. After describing the orchestral strings, Sasha Sloan explains that she wanted 'Until It Happens to You' to build sonically so that it feels as if 'you're holding back tears, you're holding back tears and then you finally let go'. At this moment in the episode, no one speaks and the other stems from the song – vocals, synth, bass, drum set, percussion – join the strings and rhythmically build, as they do in the song, until the vocalist completes the line, 'Somebody loses their somebody every day'. The episode then immediately cuts to silence, followed by interview audio of Hirway's question (noted above) and Sloan's confident affirmative 'I do' spoken without accompaniment. However, Sloan follows this with a less certain 'um' and pause. The lack of musical scoring behind this moment underscores her nonverbal vocalisation and hesitation in a way that contrasts her swift affirmation. As she begins to explain her answer in more detail, a piano softly plays a series of major chords and a keyboard, a few octaves higher, responds to each chord with a couple of moving notes and partial chords. Sloan has not discussed these musical stems in the episode, and it is not clear where they appear in the final version of the song. But the reassuring sound of these major chords played at a steady pace and with increasing volume creates a comforting acoustic environment that mirrors Sloan's consoling response in this moment. Like other *Song Exploder* episodes, this use of non-diegetic sound amplifies the emotional content that musicians discuss and drives the emotional arc of the episode toward a normative intimate experience that replaces unsettling emotional moments with hopeful ones.

At the same time, however, the musical scoring happens so consistently throughout an already emotional episode that it seems clichéd. In a podcast informed by normative intimacies, this clichéd feeling makes sense because clichés are publicly accepted and repeatedly circulated understandings of social relations (Berlant, 2008). Clichés, in short, represent normativity. But while other *Song Exploder* episodes sparingly use non-diegetic sound to create the uplifting emotional arc that marks the podcast's style, both Sloan's song and interview already put a remarkably positive spin on a song about grief, which positions inspiring background music in this episode as excessive. For example, near the end, Sloan articulates the clichéd emotional premise behind the song: 'Pain and loss and grief are so universal, everyone goes through it in one way or another. So I think [this song is] my own way of saying, hey it's part of life, and you're gonna have to grieve, but it's gonna be alright'. Despite Sloan's overtly hopeful take on bereavement, Hirway supports these concluding words with the aforementioned uplifting piano and keyboard. In scoring these words this way, their emotional positivity seems exaggerated, paradoxically calling them into question. When seen through the lens of Hirway's own personal loss articulated at the beginning of the episode, this overstated use of non-diegetic sound throughout the episode undermines the depiction of grief in Sloan's song and interview and positions it as oversimplified. Put differently: this musical scoring suggests that, despite the powerful reach of normative expectations of positivity in spite of loss, the complexity of grieving a loved one cannot be sufficiently represented in a reassuring pop song or adequately resolved by adding some uplifting piano chords to a podcast interview. Indeed, as Sloan speaks her final words in this episode, a synth steadily strikes a two-note chord until it fades out. Despite these upbeat words and orchestration, the sustained note coupled with the absence of a conclusion to Hirway's own narrative leaves a sense of unease. Hirway's unrestrained musical scoring in moments like these therefore highlights, through exaggeration, the disjuncture between normative social assumptions about acceptable displays of emotional intimacy and the inability of those same normative notions of intimacy to account for the emotional complexity of grieving, as Hirway is, the death of loved one. At the same time, however, these audio editing techniques do not fully pry the podcast from the grip of normative intimacies. The episode, after all, still proffers an uplifting

emotional ending, even if it is an exaggerated one. Indeed, a tension exists between the universal and clichéd experience of grief that Sasha Sloan articulates and Hirway's personal and individual story of bereavement with which the episode begins. And although Hirway's audio editing questions, through exaggerated amplification, Sloan's normative depiction of grief as something to be overcome, his editing does not fully displace this sentiment and, as such, reinforces the idea that bereavement, music-making, and *Song Exploder* itself are – despite their often disquieting origins – ultimately happy objects.

Conclusion

In October 2021, eight months after the release of 'Episode 203: Sasha Sloan', Hirway shared his TED Talk, 'What You Learn When You Listen Closely' as a Bonus Episode on *Song Exploder*. In framing this TED talk for the *Song Exploder* audience, Hirway explains that the talk is about 'what you discover when you really listen, and...how making Song Exploder has changed the way that I think about conversations and connecting with people'. For Hirway, listening to music and listening to conversations are opportunities for connection and intimacy. In this talk, he explores the intimate possibilities of listening by returning to the death of his mother. Relating the joy he felt when his mother would hum the tune of his songs, Hirway explains that his mother's voice is represented in a recent composition through the cello that plays the main vocal melody in the bridge of the song, with this different 'voicing' of the melody a creative remediation of his mother's voice. This example succinctly depicts the rich layers of mediated intimacies enabled by this podcast: music illustrates multiple levels of Hirway's relationship with his mother, podcasting enables intimacy between audiences and Hirway, and in sharing this 'Bonus Episode', Hirway returns listeners to the grief expressed in 'Episode 203' that has continued over time, unresolved. In imploring us to 'listen closely', Hirway therefore urges listeners to attune themselves to the many kinds of mediated intimacies made possible through podcasting.

Together, the episodes of *Song Exploder* we have discussed in this article illustrate some of the complexities of intimacies in podcasting. Specifically, *Song Exploder* highlights how podcast intimacies are always deeply social and – in line with mediated intimacies research – informed by normative cultural assumptions about the acceptable personal details and emotional revelations that subjects should disclose. The shape of audio stories, including their discursive, sonic and emotional components, can play a central role in reifying normative intimacies, especially when the story structure across many episodes has a consistent affective shape. At the same time, the intimacies of the status quo can be amplified or disrupted by subtle uses of audio editing and the integration of music and (non-)diegetic sounds into the podcast. Attending to intimacies in podcasting thus requires more than simply identifying disclosures of personal information and emotional experiences; it also involves analysing how the story structure of each episode aligns with those social norms and listening critically to the ways the sound design complements and complicates those intimate stories.

This analysis of *Song Exploder* also draws attention to the benefits of drawing together scholarship about mediated intimacies with podcast intimacies. Mediated intimacies research has developed a rich tradition of evaluating the role of normative social structures in shaping how content creators and audiences negotiate intimacies across a variety of media. And scholarship about podcast intimacies emphasises the significance of attending to sound – including voice, delivery, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds – when analysing intimacies on digital media. Both threads of scholarship, we contend, could benefit from drawing on the other's strengths. We wonder, for example, what might podcasting scholarship find when more explicitly contextualising intimacies

within hegemonic cultural structures that often constrain podcast intimacies according to normative social codes? And conversely, what might research about mediated intimacies find when attending more closely to the ways that sound interacts with the visual and discursive elements of digital media? Indeed, the connections between sound and mediated intimacies can be extended to a wide range of media, especially given the significance of the ‘aural turn’ in spaces such as TikTok where sound is essential to audiovisual memes (Abidin and Kaye 2021). In the context of this contemporary mediascape, our article aims to spur more dialogue between these neighbouring disciplines that have much to offer each other. After all, the two of us authors – one in media studies and the other in podcast studies – have learned much from regularly dialoguing with each other about how our imbricated fields understand intimacy. To return to Hirway’s TED Talk, insofar as ‘connecting with people’ refers to a kind of intimacy, we suggest that *Song Exploder* might shift the way academics ‘listen closely’ to reflect on intimacies in both media studies and podcast studies.

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Notes

1. To be clear, these are opening words after the advertisements and Hirway’s stock standard introduction to every episode: ‘You’re listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway’.
2. Our choice of the word ‘story’ here deliberately draws on the way that Hirway frames his podcast in the tagline that is repeated at the start of every episode: ‘a podcast where musicians take apart their songs, and piece by piece, tell the story of how they were made’.

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‘Listening closely’ to mediated intimacies and podcast intimacies in Song Exploder

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