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Mariann Hardey & Simon J. James

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Digital seriality and narrative branching: the podcast *Serial*, Season One*

Mariann Hardey and Simon J. James

Academics at Durham, University of Durham, Durham, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the characteristics of storytelling in a digital medium through Season One of the podcast *Serial*. We analyse how *Serial*'s digital audience engages with and reacts to the narrative, and how it influences the success and the reach of the show. We draw attention to how the cross-media format of *Serial* enables listeners to participate in the narrative, to argue that storytelling to a digitally networked audience relies on both old and new aesthetic narrative forms.

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Introduction

Serial is a podcast from the producers of *This American Life*, a weekly public radio show that tells themed stories. Hosted by journalist Sarah Koenig, and punning on its own name, *Serial* was broadcast episodically, telling a real-life story in weekly intervals. At the time of writing, there are three seasons, which aired Fall 2014, Winter 2015–2016, and Fall 2018.¹ This paper focuses on the digital-narrative structure of Season One of *Serial*, and what we term “co-consumption,” to characterize the experience of listeners and their relationship to the emerging digital-narrative form. We aim to consider how *Serial* reveals new patterns of digital audience engagement and highlights increasing possibilities for the retelling of a story across social media. We are also interested in how *Serial* exists as a product of digital culture and also resembles more traditional narrative genres: the serialized Victorian novel and the detective story. Finally, we observe the phenomenon of *Serial* as a pre-eminent example of the genre of the true-crime realist narrative within a digital frame.

About Season One: the murder of Hae Min Lee

Season One of *Serial* reported on the case of Adnan Syed, who in 2000 was convicted of the kidnapping and first-degree murder of his former girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. In 1999, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that Lee's strangled body was found buried in a shallow grave in the woods of Baltimore, Maryland.² In her blog post titled “Beautiful” Dead Korean

CONTACT Simon J. James  s.j.james@durham.ac.uk

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Girl? Elisabeth Donnelly emphasized the racial and gendered tone of the reporting surrounding the murder.³

Lee was the daughter of Korean immigrants. In 1999, she was a Woodlawn High School senior in Baltimore, Maryland. After she failed to pick up her young cousin from school on the afternoon of January 13, 1999, Lee's family reported her missing. On February 9, a passer-by found Lee's body. The Baltimore police had already begun to investigate call records from a cell phone belonging to her ex-boyfriend, Syed, a Pakistani American. Syed was eventually arrested and convicted of Lee's murder in the first degree. He was sentenced to life plus 30 years.

The events of Syed's and Lee's lives, the circumstances of Lee's murder, and the subsequent investigation around Syed form the subject of Season One of *Serial*. The podcast—a mix of first-person narration and documentary storytelling—is composed of 12 episodes, narrated by Koenig, that aired at weekly intervals starting October 3, 2014. The original *Serial* reached 10 million downloads in seven weeks; by mid-February 2015, the podcast had been downloaded more than 68 million times, making it the most popular podcast in the short history of the medium.⁴ The attention given to *Serial* generated widespread international interest in Syed's original trial—in particular, in the doubts raised by the podcast's telling of the story over whether he was guilty, and in the question raised from the doubt: *who did kill Lee?* The continued intrigue surrounding the case has given rise to several companion podcasts, including *Crime Writers on Serial*; *The Serial Serial*; the recap podcast-about-a-podcast *Serially Obsessed*; and *Undisclosed: The State vs. Adnan Syed*, produced by Syed's lawyer Rabia Chaudry. Additionally, in 2019, HBO aired a television series, *The Case Against Adnan Syed*.⁵

The serial podcast in context

The medium of the MP3 podcast has provided a worldwide platform for the dissemination of digital audible information.⁶ For Alexander, the podcast unites new patterns of digital consumption with the much longer history of aural performance: "Listening to a voice or voices tell a story without other media is an ancient human experience, harkening back to the oral tradition."⁷ Deuze's work underscores the importance of the shift in practices that might characterize a "digital culture," in which everyday lives are digitized, and new forms of culture, such as podcasts, are made and commercialized.⁸ Several features of *Serial* help to explain why the kind of digital storytelling enabled by podcasts is so effective, and the degree to which the medium's popularity is the result of the interests and capabilities of a highly connected audience. Any listener will be struck by *Serial*'s resemblance to, and possession of, something of the "muckraker quality" of the genre of the "true-crime" story.⁹ At the same time, unlike many literally home-made podcasts, *Serial* is notable for its high production values, successful commercial sponsorship, accompanying website, and other digital content in addition to the episodes of the podcast itself.

In the tradition of many crime genres, the narrative is paced by the podcast drawing the elements out of its plot episodically. The audience, in this tradition, is led to believe—and puts their faith in—the eventual solution of the crime and the punishment of the perpetrator. This narrative form is evident in the conceit of Season One: the possibility of an earlier past miscarriage of justice that *might* yet be put right and the case solved

accurately. Later in the paper, we characterize this form as “co-consumptive practice,” describing how the audience has the opportunity to review the evidence and share viewpoints—in effect, to author a renarrativizing of the story—on social media.

The use of narrative techniques in the retelling of real-life events is a well-established means to attract audiences; indeed, evidence shows that the greater the narrative richness, the deeper the levels of audience engagement.¹⁰ Dissemination of storytelling through networked platforms allows for alternate versions of the core narrative to be produced and to reach their audience as their content in turn is made visible across online forums.¹¹ *Serial*’s digital multiplatform structure was one of the first instances in which storytelling through digital media allowed the narration of past events to intersect with present-day networked commentary. The podcast’s serialization, a “hook” to maintain audience interest, was one reason for its popularity. The intervals between episodes offered listeners the opportunity, while waiting for the next installment, to engage in participatory practices by imagining or even researching new narrative possibilities, thus becoming immersed within digital communities of appreciation. Such practices are beginning to be addressed in recent studies about community fan online interactions in what is now a far more variegated media ecology than that inhabited by earlier serial forms.¹² For Page, “the interactive affordances of social media (...) may help shape the evolution of seriality itself.”¹³ The conversational reach of *Serial* formed from the shared communicative practice across social networks and other online platforms which enabled users to engage in a process what of Highfield et al. describe as “narrative augmentation,” allowing the audience to extend or give greater detail to plotlines.¹⁴ As critics such as Page have argued, such a combination of sharing and storytelling is key to the aesthetic success of artifacts such as *Serial* in the new digital media.¹⁵

First element: serializing digital narrative and extraliterary qualities

In his essay “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Todorov draws upon the Russian Formalist distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*: the plot and the discourse, the pre-existing events of the plot itself and their telling. For Todorov, the detective story is paradigmatic of the relationship between plot and discourse: *the practice of telling the story is that of the narrative discovering the plot*.¹⁶ The pattern is: “The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins;” this second story is “the story of the investigation.”¹⁷ If, therefore, the criminal is the agent of the plot, then the detective acts on behalf of the discourse, ultimately bringing the narrative to a close through solving the crime. In this typology, the plot takes place sequentially, in chronological time; the narrative of the detective’s discovery of the crime is partial, fragmented: it stutters through time, it has an imperfect, fractured relationship with the first component, and it can be told out of sequence and from multiple points of view. In this regard, we can distinguish Todorov’s distinctive pattern in Koenig’s self-conscious presentation of herself as both investigator and narrator. The fragmented telling of *Serial* is emphasized in the retelling of evidence and accounts from the past; early in Episode 1, Koenig speculates about the accuracy of Syed’s own recollection: “He says he’s innocent—though he can’t exactly remember what he was doing on that January afternoon.”¹⁸ Immediately, the solution to the narrative appears under threat; if Syed cannot remember or provide an account

of what happened then, much in the style of a classic whodunit, we rely on our narrator and detective figure in the form of Koenig to protect the story.

The “seriality” of *Serial* as a continuous narration, the accounts of real-life crime, and constancy of Koenig as narrator are revealing of the digital innovation behind the formation of the storytelling, which comes to overflow beyond the confines of the episodes. Listeners can follow each Season’s updates from the website. For example, throughout 2016, Koenig shared updates not broadcast to the original podcast, but added to the podcast’s feed, about Syed’s next trial hearings:

February 2016: Sarah Koenig ducks back into the Adnan Syed case for a few days. There’s a hearing in Baltimore—a court proceeding that’s been nearly sixteen years in the making. Syed’s attorney will introduce new evidence, and present a case for why his conviction should be overturned. Sarah and producer Dana Chivvis will discuss what happens, day by day.¹⁹

Recognizing Koenig’s role as an active ambassador for *Serial*’s brand is part of the formula of success for the complete series. If we reflect on Deuze’s critique of new digital-cultural forms, *Serial*’s popularity marks a significant moment in the form and style of journalistic narrative that has crucial implications for how audiences are reached. Here, we can usefully borrow from literary theory to develop a framework to view the style in which the show’s layers of digital narrative are shaped through engagement with networked audiences. Like a serialized nineteenth-century novel, *Serial*’s narrative is fractured by its weekly “publication.” Whatever the final story might be, listeners can experience an iterative encounter with multiple forms and branches of digital content. For example, *Serial*’s supporting webpage is extensive in its scope, including YouTube videos from Lee’s and Syed’s high school and online forums (such as Facebook pages) for alternative forms of discussion.²⁰ (This content is also remediated into episodes of other podcasts, in which *Serial*’s producers later appear and which in turn offer further branches of content around the core narrative.) More than once, Koenig makes a point of talking about the additional material documenting the case on the website SerialPodcast.org, thus directing the listeners toward further narrative possibilities as they attempt to synthesize these multiple sources into one—their own version of the murder story. Listeners are encouraged to go over the murder story in detail, but not to stray too far from the formal narrative into which they are positioned by the show’s producers; the multiple platforms of *Serial*’s narrative offer additional sources of *fabula*, but the podcast episodes function, Pâquet has suggested, as rhetoric toward a particular *sjuzhet*.²¹

The periodized format of the core narrative means that a crucial part of the experience of *Serial*’s consumption is the anticipation of the next episode. Each episode seeks both internal coherence and connection to adjacent links in the narrative chain; at the same time, the weekly story struggles to contain the myriad possibilities of the real-life plot. Hayles, writing about hypertext, introduces the concept of “narrative sequencing” to contrast the narrative trajectory of the conventional print novel with the branching points and “inexhaustible” number of narratives read through electronic media.²² She argues that while print novels might present a complex narrative with a convoluted timeline, different character voices, and multiple contexts, the reader will still follow a sequence of pages set by the author. On the other hand, the variety of linking structures and

mechanisms of print hypertexts offer a very different narrative experience. While a listener might choose to treat the podcast only as a closed loop for consumption, the core narrative of the podcast does not close off the variegating possibilities of the story, but potentially opens up an ongoing process of consumption and interpretation by listeners.

Such “branching” expands the structure of *Serial*’s sequential narrative, “linking” and “chunking” into multidimensional interactions and connections—some of which were shared in real time by listeners on social media between episodes. New narrative pathways are thus formed, and this is one way in which listeners might themselves take on agency and share in structuring the narrative. In this way, *Serial* exhibits what Sadler observes as a “creative reading process” in his critique of storytelling and research into narrative communication and interpretation.²³ The situational and relational aspects of *Serial* are akin to a *creative listening process* and point toward the creation of a new genre of interactive narrative. Indeed, what is distinctive to *Serial* is the interconnectedness of what Roger Hagedorn conceives as the “serial proper” with the cultural experience of a new genre of digital narrative.²⁴

A comparable genre-changing cultural turn can be observed from the critical reading of Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories by Wiltse, who interprets these as a “a new genre” that enabled readers to “enjoy the memories and prospects of infinite variations on the present theme.”²⁵ Wiltse’s observation of the new genre shows a significant shift from the unique cultural position and medium of the stories to the communal experience of the readers, in much the same way as Deuze observes a shift in the communal experiences of the user in the context of digital culture. The extraliterary quality of *Serial* shares much with this Sherlockian shift in medium and rise of fan culture around the story (which has reached as far as academic study of Doyle in the Norton editions of the Sherlock Holmes canon, which are produced as if from within the world of the texts, in which the name of the author is not Doyle, but John Watson). As in detective fiction, the promise of resolution in the mystery’s solution, threaded throughout the narrative, makes the listener’s role more active. To give an example, close to the end of the season in Episode 12, like the detective trying to gain control of the *sjuzhet*, Koenig wonders aloud:

If there are alternative scenarios, then that means the list of things we know, actually definitively know, facts we can show about the evidence against Adnan, that list just got shorter.²⁶

The constant negotiation of “the facts”—the “what we know”—suggests a close resemblance between the performance of the detective genre, and a narrative of professional journalistic investigation. Subsequently, on social media, the list of evidence for and against Syed and the discussion of “facts” have continued to get longer. A report of Syed’s appeal case by the *Baltimore Sun* that was posted to the *Serial* Podcast Facebook group on March 29, 2018, received 16,000 comments in the first 24 hours of posting. Given *Serial*’s combination of live investigative journalism with narration of past events, the popularity of the podcast demonstrates the success of the digital-narrative structure both in entertaining listeners and empowering them in the digital practices of sharing, engaging with and talking about the narrative.²⁷ At this point in the discussion, our focus needs to shift from the digital

narrative of the show's structure to the much more complex condition and iteration of the *real-life* story.

Second element: doing justice to a true-life crime story or, “Well? Who the fuck did it?”

Sarah Koenig: All these things that look bad for Adnan, everything that's raised my suspicion, even stupid things, I've run every single one of them by him. I've got this thing in my head that I'll catch him in a lie. Maybe just a tiny, meaningless lie, and that's going to be his tell, and he'll be caught.

Adnan is smart, and clever, he knows that's what's going on when we talk, and so every time I call, he's a little on guard. He's not sure what's coming at him. Because what if I ask him something he can't prove, and then I don't believe him? That notion, that people out there in the world, people he went to school with, who knew him, don't believe him, that they can imagine he is capable of killing Hae.

Adnan spent fifteen years thinking about that. And then trying not to think about that.²⁸

Among the boundaries that Koenig's narration straddles are those of the impact of the real-life crime and the lack of resolution concerning the criminal case. For episodic storytelling, part of Koenig's role (like Dr. Watson's) is to withhold critical aspects of the plot artificially.²⁹ In doing so, the narrator repeats the “facts”—foregrounded in each episode's opening—and adds drama to the narrative. Koenig, at some moments, deliberately presents herself as if she is as much in the dark as her listeners. For dramatic effect, in Episode 10, we hear her recollection about researching websites and interacting with online sources, “On that website that lists all the bodies found in Leakin Park [...].”³⁰ Such reflections and thinking aloud meld classic narrative methods with the new cross-media format, and the sources Koenig names remind her audience of the context of the real crime—and how they might investigate it themselves in “detective mode” if they choose to do so. Multiple times listeners are reminded that the events are real, physical, literally mapped onto the places of present-day Baltimore—the high school, Leakin Park, and even the local police station. In Episode 5, “Route Talk,” Koenig and her assistant producer Dana Chivvis test a statement by one of the key witnesses, Jay Wilds, by recreating his driving route from 2000 at the end of the school day. The exposition of factual events reminds the listener of the “realness” of the murder story and criminal investigation. The exposition relies on the way Koenig continually dramatizes the external presentation of her thoughts, re-inscribing her place in the narrative, and speculating about what effect disclosing “the truth” will have on Syed, herself, and the listeners. The excerpt above from Episode 6 dramatizes the anticipated moment of *truth* when Koenig considers, “I've got this thing in my head that I'll catch him in a lie.”³¹ As we've already discussed, part of the method of the serialized podcast is to withhold apparent closure, thus leaving listeners to draw their own conclusions as to the significance of events and truthfulness of accounts narrated by Koenig. At the end of Season One, Koenig, in conversation with Syed, shares her apprehension about the exigencies of her investigation and the course of the “murder story”:

Sarah Koenig

I still want to know what you were doing that afternoon. I want to know who had your phone and I want to know what you were doing that afternoon.

Adnan Syed

I don't remember anything more.

Sarah Koenig

This is from Saturday night, just this past Saturday. I mean we're down to the wire here.

Oh man.

Adnan Syed

So you don't really have if you don't mind me asking, you don't really have no ending? Like it's just ...

Sarah Koenig

I mean, do I have an ending? Um ...

Of course I have an ending. We're going to come to an ending today. Plus, a smattering of new information, a review of old information cast under a different light and an ending. In case you haven't noticed, my thoughts about Adnan's case, about who is lying and why, have not been fixed over the course of this story.³²

Right at the end of this episode, we hear Koenig point the narrative toward what she states is "an ending." Koenig's performance here draws together her roles as a professional journalist who is feeling her way through the narrative, the narrator in control of the narrative, and as a major character involved in the podcast's production, thus making a claim for the intelligibility of her narrative while drawing attention to the contingency.³³ These elements create the impression of greater authenticity within *Serial*'s central narrative where the listener feels they are working *with* Koenig to uncover truthfulness and realness in the version of the story of Lee's murder.³⁴ It is worth mentioning here that the producers of *Serial* have a pre-existing relationship with some of the principal characters; this impacts the way the story of the murder is told and, importantly, emphasizes the realness of the events, the urgency about solving the case and bringing about a resolution. Koenig further heightens the tension dramatizing her finding and reviewing new sources of information even midseries after the show has started broadcasting: "We just need to get the right documents, spend enough time, talk to the right people, find his alibi."³⁵ The investigation within the episodes and its online discussions offer the possibility that, through these new prospects, Lee's killer—if it is not Syed—might be caught. *Serial* not only offers a real-life narrative but also makes its digital-cultural possibilities all the more dramatic for offering the listener the possibility of helping to complete the solution: every one of *Serial*'s listeners can, through digital participation, be a "citizen journalist" or "citizen detective."³⁶ Lewis has recently suggested that the networking of user responses through digital media offers a new model for the practice of journalism: "if the ideology of professionalism is one of expert control, then the ideology of de-professionalized participation may be

one of distributed control, of facilitating and fostering engagement through an open system of communication.”³⁷ For listeners who choose to engage in this way, interpreting what happens within episodes, and what meaning might be derived from the *Serial* story, requires joining together of the sequence of narrative from each podcast episode and recognition of how the plot’s digital and material elements relate to each other. This joining together of the murder story builds up an audience who “convene around precarity.”³⁸ Once the materiality of a bounded physical text is unraveled by digital dissemination, listeners take on a more visible role and can write and add content to a significant degree. The narrative “whole” produced through the sequencing of the podcast is only ever representative of one part of the story and one way of telling it: there is always the possibility, in Morson’s terms, of further “sideshadowing” of, and alongside, the central plot.³⁹

None of the above, of course, seeks to diminish the significance of the fact that a *real murder that has taken place* and that (at the time of writing) a review of the case is ongoing. Syed was convicted in March 2000 and sentenced to life in prison plus 30 years. The ethical considerations of this fact are highlighted by a contribution to the supplementary online material about the case from Lee’s brother, posting online to a subreddit as “brotherofhae.” His post, published three months after the final episode of *Serial* was broadcast, is the most popular *Serial* subreddit thread:

I am Hae’s brother (verified account). Do not AMA (Ask Me Anything)

As title states, I am Hae’s little brother. Do not ask me anything. I probably will read comments/questions but will not reply or answer any questions.

To prove that I am her brother I was thinking putting up Hae’s baby pictures but I don’t want it to be used by the media. So I give you an info that wasn’t in the podcast. Hae’s cousin was in kindergarten at Campfield Early Learning Center. Our cousin is now college student about to graduate. That’s how long it has been.

If you google map it, you kinda get the idea what Hae had to drive everyday right after school. I believe Campfield let out at 3pm. So she didn’t have a lot of time to mess around. Since our grandparents were expecting our cousin few mins after school. It was Hae’s first time failing to pick her cousin up from school ...

Don’t care if you believe me or not. I am just big fan/user of reddit. When I found out there was subreddit for this, I had to do AMA for reddit community. But sorry I won’t be answering any questions because ... **TO ME ITS REAL LIFE. To you listeners, its another murder mystery, crime drama, another episode of CSI.**⁴⁰

The open and public nature of the brotherofhae post emphasizes *Serial*’s interpolative power, compelling brotherofhae to participate in this narrative branch: “When I found out there was subreddit for this, I had to do AMA [Ask Me Anything] for Reddit community.” One aspect of Season One of the importance of *Serial* for digital consumers and show producers is the reflection on the predigital nature of some of the evidence and the consequences for the material of the narrative. From the initial play of the first episode, the listener is exposed to the transformative effect of digital technologies that have altered audiences’ consumption and engagement with content, and at the same time enhanced the true-crime genre as a mode of interactive entertainment.⁴¹ No digital social media documented daily activities when Lee was murdered, and this recollection of a different social context intensifies the uncertainty of the temporality of the narrative:

Sarah Koenig:

I just want to point out something I'd never really thought about before I started working on this story. And that is, it's really hard to account for your time—in a detailed way, I mean.

How'd you get to work last Wednesday, for instance? Drive? Walk? Bike? Was it raining? Are you sure?

Did you go to any stores that day? If so, what did you buy? Who did you talk to? The entire day, name every person you talked to. It's hard.

Now imagine you have to account for a day that happened six weeks back. Because that's the situation in the story I'm working on in which a bunch of teenagers had to recall a day six weeks earlier. And it was 1999, so they had to do it without the benefit of texts or Facebook or Instagram.⁴²

Much of the success of *Serial* also comes from its reflections on the pre- and postdigital nature—beyond the scope of this paper—of subjects such as memory, national identity, masculinity, criminality, religion, and much more. (The vulnerability of Syed as a young man of color from a Muslim community makes the retelling of his story a post-9/11 narrative, as *Serial* is aware.) This reflection is a further way by which the *Serial* listener is made self-conscious in their role as such. We argue that the way in which *Serial* draws on the affordances of the digital narrative to create an exploratory intertextual space, expanding the boundary of the podcast to encompass the consumptive experiences and breadth of engagement enabled by social media.⁴³ The podcast audio acts as a true *medium* to connect the listener with potentially limitless online as well as material content. In this way, *Serial* is firmly dependent upon the technology of the digital age for its production and broadcast, demonstrating Panko's proposition for a new “increasingly variegated media ecology.”⁴⁴ Within this ecology, listeners are expected to decide what to believe, what additional information to base this decision on, and derived from which medium. *Serial* represents a new generation of cocreated narrative production across the limits of the boundaries of text. It is this aspect of *Serial* to which we now turn.

Third element: co-consumption and the communal nature of interpellation

While the effectiveness of *Serial*'s digital-narrative form is significant, it would be naïve not to realize that the success of this podcast relies in part on its marketization as a popular cultural consumer product. The order in which episodes are narrated is crucial, yet the plot is not related in chronological order, and the information-intensive points of explanation added to social media function to keep the audience anticipatory of further information in turn. By way of comparison, Brooks discerns how successful serial writers, the *feuilletonistes*,

not only learned to live exclusively by the products of their pens, they were paid by the line and learned to shape their plots to the exigencies of serialization. Each installment had to fit the space allotted, of course, and to move the story forward to a new moment of suspense and expectation so that the terminal tag, “*la Suite à demain*” (the nineteenth century's “*tune in tomorrow*”), could take its full toll on the reader.⁴⁵

The same patterning is apparent with the form of *Serial*, so that Brooks's "terminal tag" "Next time on *Serial* . . .," repeated at the end of every episode, rounds off the digital aesthetic of the narrative structure. Following this conclusion, the podcast repeats the advertisement and endorsement from the show's sponsors.⁴⁶ The dissemination of *Serial* is stimulated in part by its extensive viral marketing campaign. The targeting of the show's listeners by Mailchimp and Squarespace in each episode has been hugely successful. Advertising from sponsors is promoted on the main website hosted by *This American Life* and also features heavily in the flow of each podcast episode, bookending the narrative with tailored audio content to maintain the listener's engagement. Here, the interplay between *Serial*'s linear format and the networked engagement and digital transmission of narrative can be characterized as "co-consumption." We use *co-* to emphasize the contributions of listeners who actively share their interpretation of events with each other. To characterize this practice, Glebatis and Turners use the term "prosumption," in which interactions between the listeners have a significant marketing impact on the show and on the patterns of podcast consumption.⁴⁷

As with the experience of a serialized Victorian novel for its original readers, interruption is a fundamental part of the experience of the consumption of the narrative of *Serial*. Here, we take inspiration from Hayles's "entwinement," in which temporality of plot and technology align themselves in symbiosis with each other.⁴⁸ The suspension of the resolution of the plot, even beyond the limits of this particular narration of it (if the listener chooses to believe that Syed is not guilty) gives each listener space for the imagination of further and different narrative possibilities.⁴⁹ These spaces, these gaps in understanding, are profoundly important in the listeners' consumption and interpretation of the narrative and their motivation to fill in the gaps between episodes, and the gaps left by the inadequacy of the original criminal investigation, with their own participatory narrative practices.

To take Brooks's interpretation of Barthes's essay, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," what animates readers of narrative is *la passion du sens*, which can translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle.⁵⁰ What animates many listeners to *Serial*'s narrative is their active use of social media to seek new meaning and reconsume the story in other forms. The dynamic process is made particularly evident in the discussion across Internet groups such as Reddit (the self-proclaimed "front page of the internet") and the subreddit (a forum dedicated to a specific topic on Reddit) about *Serial*, which iteratively give accounts of Syed's guilt or innocence, and of evidence not mentioned in the podcasts.⁵¹ A more robust discussion of the form and content of the Reddit threads would be the topic of another paper, yet what these exchanges reveal is a *passion du sens* directed toward the resolution of the narratives, as listeners find value in discovering, and even coproducing, new forms of content to analyse the core narrative collaboratively.⁵²

Brooks uses the concept of a "dilatory space," meaning the "space of suspense," to describe how the reader seeks to reach a resolution of the narrative and the end of the text.⁵³ By reaching through the dilatory space, the reader's experience of the story is shaped by their involvement in a classical narrative, reaching "the revelation of meaning that occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication."⁵⁴ The

equivalent “when” in *Serial*, where the criminal investigation remains ongoing, is more contingent than in Brooks’s classical model.⁵⁵ In this new form of narrative, the recursive digital links prompt the listener to play the podcast episodes again. At the same time, social media threads encourage the listener to discover the different branches of narrative, effectively producing a new set of relationships and contexts that disrupt Brooks’s classical linear sequence. Downloading, listening, and interacting with content heightens what we observe as the “co-consumption of the digital narrative” of *Serial*. Here, the audience inhabits Brooks’s dilatory space; the *co-* allowing the narrative to flow from linear audio set to a predictable pattern of telling into digital spaces, potentially endlessly branching and synchronizing with new content. As a result, the narrative completion of *Serial*’s audio content cannot be separated from the fluid and digital consumptive practices of its community of listeners.⁵⁶ These practices unravel even such narrative completion as *Serial*’s core narrative manages to achieve. Indeed, if we take Brooks’s interpretation of Barthes, “the text is seen as a texture or weaving of codes [...] which the reader organizes and sorts out only in provisional ways, since he can never master it completely.”⁵⁷ Brooks’s “weaving” characterizes the co-consumptive practices of the listeners who interact with the threads of narrative. The serialization of this podcast deliberately retards the consumption of the storytelling discourse, and while the episodic form gives linearity to the narrative, what is new is the way in which the digital format invites the assemblage of new material in the gaps that this choice of form enables. Such innovation could even be seen as modeling a new kind of consumer of digital content. For Sharon and John, the subtext here is how audio storytelling podcasts like *Serial* imagine their listeners: “how they think we should listen to their narratives.”⁵⁸ In this regard, the narrative-driven and detective-style of presentation of *Serial*’s Season One murder story amplifies the consumptive properties of pace, tension and immersion.⁵⁹ Barnwell observes that such stylized storytelling, “while often genuinely drawing attention to injustice, sometimes adhere[s] to rote formulas, or ‘metrics of authenticity,’ that are then marketed to audiences who desire such narratives.” Such an observation offers a compelling argument to consider *Serial*’s murder stories as a thing to be consumed (and marketed), rather than the authentic retelling of real events designed to discover the truth. A tension is created here between acknowledging the reality of the murder story narrative of *Serial* and the listeners’ desire to consume these accounts. The consumptive practices bring to attention whether the bounds of core narrative from the true crime are exploited in the pursuit of a “commodity fetishism.”⁶⁰

Serial’s audience acts as both a consumer and, in some cases, a producer of content in its interactions with the core audio narrative. The experience of consuming the narrative is intensified as a result of broader engagement with new and emerging content that helps to uncover the plot and, ultimately, potentially to resolve the case. The form of the podcast places particular emphasis on the networked character of this narrative—the way that it links into other content and interacts with multiple forms of social media. Sociologist David Beer observes, of the culture of social media, that “we are encouraged to be visible, to narrate, and to be counted.”⁶¹ In enacting the *co-* in “co-consumption,” the active listener, by making their intertextual connections, is empowered to consider multiple possible readings of the core narrative. This kind of behavior is at the heart of the circulations of contemporary digital culture and digital media formats.

Co-consumption, then, is one mode in which *Serial*'s narrative interacts and interrelates with the audience. In the classic whodunit, the desire of the reader for narrative closure *wills* the discourse toward its end. The detective story in its middle period becomes more "writerly" than "readerly," as the reader does not merely passively consume the meaning of the text, but actively collaborates in producing it by trying to guess the identity of the murderer before the detective confirms it.⁶² The fragmentary nature of the evidence for the plot that *Serial* is narrating, the flaws in the original investigation, and the serialization of *Serial*'s first broadcasts open up the possibilities of the narrative beyond the boundaries of the podcast, allowing for the possibility of multiple accounts of the investigation. This transformation of narrative extends beyond the telling of the story through the specificities of the medium, as the podcast and emerging digital content produce new and powerful forms of representation. We interpret the mediation of *Serial*'s broadcast and audience consumption within a new set of narrative relations. We see its extraordinary success as resulting from a distinctively *digital* aesthetic that for Dowling and Miller, writing about immersive audio storytelling, is "well suited to the noir mode" of criminal justice.⁶³ Digital distribution allows for the weekly publication of a serialized audio podcast whose periodized form and indeterminately completed content encourage a greater degree of hermeneutic activity from the listener. At the same time, the freedom allowed by the digital sphere for the production and distribution of further context allows the text's subject and the subject's possible interpretations to branch far beyond the boundaries of the discrete episode. The nature of digital affords *Serial* to be first a serialized weekly broadcast, then a digital archive in the "clearinghouse of longform true crime," an aesthetic that together is both novelistic and interactive.⁶⁴

Discussion: aesthetic of a digital artifact

There are two important points concerning the aesthetic of a digital artifact such as *Serial*. The first is the way listeners take pleasure from the narrative of the original audio alongside the emerging branching narratives in separate digital spaces such as Reddit. The weekly broadcast of *Serial* is a narrative strategy that cuts against the instantaneousness of information distribution in our time (such as the "binge-watching" of a digital "box set" TV show), a strategy more closely associated with older aesthetic forms such as the weekly serial of analog TV, the soap opera, or the serialized weekly or monthly parts of the Victorian novel. Usefully here, Page distinguishes between

the open-ended narrative patterns found in the shared story as *familiar* replications of earlier genres, and *reconfigured* forms which alter a previous genre in the light of its online environment and *emergent* forms which have no predecessor and are innovative developments found solely in online environments.⁶⁵

Pressman makes a similar point writing about the aesthetic of bookishness in twenty-first century literature. She notes the significance of an "aesthetic form whose power has been purposefully employed [...] and will continue to be far into the digital age."⁶⁶ Our second point, closely related to the first, is the extent to which listeners become intimately involved with the narrative outside of the audio into the text and images of freer online space. The listener who chooses to co-consume *Serial* in this explorative and

active way is a dedicated and perceptive public critic, sharing content in a highly visible way. The rediscovery of serializing content through the medium of the digital podcast enlarges the scope of the consumers attention from solely the audio-bound object to interact with a new aesthetic practice. The regeneration of audio for the digital age is not a new thing (for example, Beer's work on the podcast and music downloads; also Tadjewski and Denegri-Knott on the marketing of MP3s), yet the digital aesthetic of *Serial* offers a unique combination: the basis of the narrative in real life; the predigital culture and historical context; and its fluid co-consumption and renarration through social media.⁶⁷ The success of the American documentary series *Making a Murderer* and its further imitators produced by streaming service Netflix is a further example of digital-narrative form retelling real-life events. This entanglement of the aesthetics of narrative, digital culture, and co-consumption is much too fluid to be resolved here; and the argument is the basis of a much more in-depth (and longer) critical project that is only beginning to be charted.

Conclusion

Brooks allows us to think about *Serial*'s structure, its temporality (including space), and the resolution of enigma. The enigma in this context, is, of course:

*Well then who the fuck did it, like, why would ... it doesn't make sense. Why would ... (stuttering) Hae was ... I can't ... I'm probably just as confused as you are.*⁶⁸

The way in which *Serial* turns the audio narrative into an exploratory intertextual space redefines both the material boundaries of the podcast and the depth of the experience of social media by its users. The transformation of narrative here echoes Hayles's observation on the powerful change to form made by Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*: "As if learning about omnivorous appetite from the computer [...] in a frenzy of remediation, attempts to eat all other media. This bridging, however, leaves traces on the text's body, resulting in a transformed physical and narrative corpus."⁶⁹ Wurth also offers a post-textual reading. Along with Hayles, she cites the "transformative impact of modern communication and recording technologies" and "signals not a technologically mediated after-stage of the human" but a concentration on the "space in between humans and machines" to act as an incursion of selfhood.⁷⁰ To return to Brooks, we can work through the idea of narrative as the overcoding of the event—the "proairetic"—that endows events with significance: "The hermeneutic code concerns rather the questions and answers that structure a story, their suspense, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution."⁷¹ As a result, the narrative then proliferates as if the *fabula* of Lee's murder is too complex to be contained to a single *sjuzhet*, its "distributed linearities" branching through digital space.⁷² The narrative construction of reality—the verisimilitude—is created and sustained through the possibilities for transmission afforded by the digital aesthetic. Even as *Serial*'s proliferation across present-day digital media challenges the traditional boundaries of narrative, it uses linear and time-bounded audio as the preferred method of telling, storage, and replaying; its success is thus a consequence of the effectiveness of very old and very new technologies of storytelling.⁷³ *Serial*'s digital representation of Lee's murder and of the investigation reveals how future social reality may be narrated, and how the audience of that

mimesis may be placed into a new and different relationship with information distribution in the digital age, as well as with narrative ownership itself.

Notes

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It is one of those instances where the reasoner can produce an effect which seems remarkable to his neighbour, because the latter has missed the one little point which is the basis of the deduction. The same may be said, my dear fellow, for the effect of some of these little sketches of yours, which is entirely meretricious, depending as it does upon your retaining in your own hands some factors in the problem which are never imparted to the reader.

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