Podcasting-as-Care, An exercise in diasporic digital media activism

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Abstract

This article draws on my experience of engaging in diasporic digital media activism on the issue of child sexual abuse in Iran, which culminated in the production of the *Price of Secrecy* podcast. I introduce the method of Podcasting-as-Care as a method of activism that brings notions of feminist care, activism and listening in a close conversation framed through podcasting. Without resorting to a top-down vision of activism where a notion of listening, i.e. how the victims should be listened to, is prescribed and exemplified, the *Price of Secrecy* podcast becomes an experience of listening to how victims are failed to be listened to and what failure of listening sounds like.

Keywords

Podcast, activism, care, feminism, listening, sexual abuse, sexual violence

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Introduction

In a non-democratic country like Iran, where the rights to free speech and listening are not guaranteed and where engaging with oppositional views, specifically in the context of human rights activism, are persecuted, the notion of responsibility of "listening out" (Lacey, 2011) for voices that are absent from the public domain of discourse assumes a complex meaning. The focus of this article is the voices of the victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) that are either fully absent from the public domain or are only granted public exposure within the frame of recognisability around this issue in Iran. In recent years, the limited media exposure of cases of CSA have predominantly been cases that resulted in the horrific killing of the young victims by the perpetrator (Dehghan et al., 2023), almost invertedly suggesting that if a case of CSA does not end in the rape and murder of a young child, it is not worthy of media exposure. In these cases, the perpetrator and the victim are also often from socio-economically disadvantaged groups in society. The public acknowledgement and media exposure to the issue of CSA has therefore reduced discussions around the issue to a discourse of "vulnerable groups" (Butler, 2021, 39).

The discourse of "vulnerable groups" (Butler, 2021, 39) is problematic on the grounds that it creates a social hierarchy of 'us' (the invulnerable) versus 'them' (the vulnerable), resulting in paternalistic assumptions that the powerful 'us' is safe from the ordeals of such issues. Taking into account the language that is used by NGOs and charities working with victims of CSA, the powerful 'us' is also called upon to provide financial means for safeguarding the vulnerable group from falling victim to such crimes. Here, I am not suggesting that the vulnerable group should not be cared for. Instead, I am questioning practices and discourses that limit the scope of the recognisability of the issue of CSA and resort to a definition of care that maintains problematic social hierarchies. Such practices predominantly fail to question the shortcomings of the legal system in protecting the victims of CSA, draw attention to the lack of educational provisions that safeguard children from falling victim, and raise concern over the lack of systematic structures of support for victims and their families.

In what follows, I draw on my experience of engaging in diasporic digital media activism on the issue of CSA in Iran, which culminated in the production of the *Price of Secrecy* podcast. I introduce the method of Podcasting-as-Care as a method of activism that brings notions of feminist care and listening in a close

conversation framed through podcasting. Podcasting-as-Care contributes to the emerging practices and discussions that signify the role of podcasting as a medium for feminist activism (Fox and Ebada, 2022; Karathanasopoulou and Williams, 2023).

The *Price of Secrecy* Podcast

Price of Secrecy (*POS*) (Zokaei, 2019) is a five-episode fictionalised podcast series produced in the Persian language and for an Iranian audience. The podcast addresses the issues of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Iran. Without resorting to a top-down vision of activism where a notion of listening, i.e. how the victims should be listened to, is prescribed and exemplified, the *POS* podcast becomes an experience of listening to what failure of listening sounds like and what the consequences of this failure are for CSA victims. Over the course of the five podcast episodes, three stories are recounted as follows:

> Episodes 1 and 2 – *Righteousness* is a dramatised reportage of a case of rape and sexual misconduct between 15-year-old Tannaz and 18-year-old Sina that reveals hidden layers of trauma.

> Episodes 3 and 4 – *The Deep and Old Root* is the story of a young man called Amin, who goes missing on the occasion of his great-uncle's funeral, the person who had sexually abused him as a child.

> Episode 5 – *Lonesome Donya* is the story of Donya, a young woman, who experiences emotional turmoil when she finds out that she is pregnant.

The podcast stories address the different legal, social, cultural and familial barriers that contribute to the silence around the issue of CSA in Iran while rearticulating the silence as society's failure in listening to the victims. The stories first and foremost expose the limitation of the legal system in listening to the victims, while at the same time establishing how the systematic failure prevents individuals from listening to the victims. The podcast is also reflective of the constitutive effects of the process of storytelling on how the victims are listened to. The final episode of the podcast expands the notion of failure of listening in terms of the physically challenging experience of listening to difficult and challenging topics, such as the topic of CSA.

The podcast was released in 2019, over a five-week long social media campaign in collaboration with an NGO called Ghayembashak which focused on

educating the public on methods of preventing CSA and ways of addressing the issue.[1] As well as being available on most international podcast applications, and in order to expand the reach of the podcast, the episodes were and still are accessible on two of the most popular social media platforms, Telegram and Instagram. On the podcast's Telegram channel, the episodes are downloadable and can be shared widely through various messaging applications. As of February 2023, the podcast episodes have been listened to over 80,000 times.[2] Since the initial social media campaign, the main source of attracting an audience to the podcast has been word of mouth. Despite the final episode of the podcast being released in March 2019, and despite the lack of activity on the podcast's social media platforms, there have been 300 to 500 new downloads per month.

As emerging media, podcasts have been gaining popularity in recent years in Iran. The number of podcasts in the Persian language is estimated to be around 10,000 ("Shenoto provides detailed insight into the Persian podcast industry in the Middle East," 2022). The accessibility of podcasts via global podcasting platforms that, unlike audio-visual platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo, are not banned in Iran, adds to their appeal. The Iranian podcast platforms also do not seem to be under the same pressure around their content compared to their audio-visual counterparts.[3] For example, while the *POS* podcast is available on all Iranian podcasting platforms, it was removed and restricted from the most popular YouTube-alternative platform, Aparat. In 2020, in an attempt to reach out to a wider audience, I made several attempts to upload the content to a channel on Aparat's website, but the content was removed each time for being deemed inappropriate for its audience, without much explanation.

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[1] At the time, Ghayembashak was an NGO with legal permission from the authorities to run workshops and events that educated the public about the issue of CSA. In 2021 Ghayembashak abruptly and without any public-facing explanation terminated its activities, and all of Ghayembashak's social media accounts were deleted.

[2] This figure is representative of the number of times the podcast episodes in total have been listened to via the podcasting applications and the podcast's Telegram channel (Zokaei, 2023) and Instagram channel (Zokaei, 2023).

[3] While there is an umbrella ban across some platforms, websites and social media applications, the podcast platforms do not seem to have the same ban. The censorship practices of the Iranian Government towards podcasts have been mainly ad hoc and unpredictable.

Care and Diasporic Activism

Bringing care to activism allowed me to "stay with the trouble[s]" (Haraway, 2016) of engaging in diaspora digital activism on the issue of CSA in Iran; troubles that emerge at the intersection of the politicisation of activism on the issue of CSA in Iran and the geo-politics that govern the sphere of diasporic activism in that part of the world.

The body in an Islamic country like Iran is where the government's efforts in reinforcing "Muslimness" (Hélie and Hoodfar, 2012, 2) meet the embodied sexual revolution of the youth (Mahdavi, 2012). One of the ways the Islamic Republic of Iran reinforces Muslimness is through controlling and regulating the presence of bodies in public and the activities of sexual bodies in private.[4] At the same time, "changes in the discourse around sexuality" and embodied acts of resistance to the government's attempts to reinforce Muslimness have played a significant role in recent social and political uprisings against the regime (Mahdavi, 2012). In this landscape, activism on the issue of CSA is closely tied to social and political movements against Islamic underpinnings of the legal system. For example, in recent years children and women rights activists have been fighting against the legal provision of child marriage in Iran which is closely tied to the Sharia law ("Country policy and information note: women - early and forced marriage, Iran," 2022). The age stratification model in Islamic law that blurs the lines between adulthood and childhood locates activism on the issue of CSA within the wider context of women's and gay rights activism, both areas that are heavily politicised.

When engaging in activism on human rights issues in Iran, the location from which the activism is conducted and its association with international movements of rights-based activism become significant. Concerns around the authenticity of diasporic activism emerge from post-colonial critiques of the operationalisation of human rights discourses as tools of Western (neo)colonial and imperial intervention in countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Rastegar, 2013; Terman, 2016). Concerns around authenticity are further complicated by the provision of funds by Western Europe and North American (WENA) countries for digital activism under the pretext of promoting

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[4] One simple example is how the law governs consensual sexual encounters outside marriage by deeming them as punishable by the death penalty.

democracy in countries from the MENA region.[5] The narratives emerging through these discussions around the authenticity of activism displace the urgency of engaging in activism and building transnational solidarity by labelling and critiquing those involved in activism. To make matters more complicated, in recent years, activists in Iran have faced prosecution with charges that borrow the language of the post-colonial critiques of human rights activism referencing the provision of funds from WENA countries.[6] Activists have faced accusations that directly link their efforts in activism to the provision of the democracy fund and countries involved in such funds. In my own experience of searching for activist collaborators in Iran, my call for collaboration was rejected far too many times by activists who had previously faced severe consequences and punishment for partaking in diaspora activism movements and campaigns.

The politicisation of activism on the issue of CSA risks leaving victims behind in the name of implementing grand strategical social and political change that describes how victims should be listened to, by whom and for what purpose. When activism on the issue of CSA is defined through political strategies it risks exercising domination and control through a set of pre-packaged principles, ideas and ideals. Responding to the problems of politicisation, and staying with the troubles of engaging on diasporic activism on the issue of CSA, the *POS* podcast prioritises care and caring relations in activism. Caring for the issue of CSA does not only mean caring for CSA victims but envisaging an ethico-political and affective commitment to a caring community and society that recognises the interdependencies and relationalities between us. By foregrounding the open-ended question of how victims are failed in terms of listening, through the process of producing the *POS* podcast, I bring together notions of care to podcasting as feminist activism.

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[5] According to a report published by the Federation of American Scientists in July 2021 (Katzman, 2021, p. 31): Successive Administrations and Congresses have sought to promote political evolution in Iran through "democracy promotion" programs and sanctions on Iranian human rights abuses.

[6] Just in 2021, two women's rights activists, Najmeh Vahedi and Hoda Amid, were respectively sentenced to seven years and eight years in prison for holding educational workshops on the terms of marriage, dowry and housework for women in Iran. They were specifically charged with "collaborating with the hostile American Government against the Islamic Republic of Iran on Women and family issues" ("Women human rights defenders Najmeh Vahedi and Hoda Amid convicted," 2021). The language used in this conviction highlights how human rights and women's rights activism in Iran is scrutinised in response to the provision of the democracy funds by countries in the WENA region.

Podcasting-as-Care

The *Price of Secrecy* podcast builds on some of the emerging practices that highlight the significance of podcasting as a medium for feminist activism in Iran. One of the earliest and most significant Persian podcasts produced inside Iran is called *Radio Geek (Jadi, 2015)* and is produced by Jadi (a nickname by which the producer of the podcast Amir-Emad Mirmirani goes). The focus of the podcast is on the latest development, news and controversies in the world of information and communication technologies. After releasing 65 episodes, in August 2016, Radio Geek released a spin-off under the sub-title of *Radio Joorab Shalvari* (Jadi, 2016) which literally translates to 'stockings'. At the beginning of this episode, Jadi explains that:

> We are finally going to be brave and … in a few episodes talk about sexuality and topics that we are surrounded by but have never had any formal education about. In the first subtle episode where you are going to build up the bravery for this radio to release its full six episodes [of the spin-off series], we talk about blue and pink and look at how some of the abstract concepts that we assume as given, as part of our being and nature, are socially constructed and completely independent from biology. (Jadi, 2016)

In these spin-offs, Jadi addresses topics of sex, sexuality, and gender. He starts with the least inflammatory topic, the critique of the gender binary. He then moves on to topics including fetishism, masturbation, sexual preferences, and sexual identities, menstruation, and women's body hair: all topics that are considered taboo in traditional and religious Iranian circles, while some are topics concerning actions that are considered unlawful in Iran.[7]

Before producing a podcast, Jadi ran a popular online blog, with already established high numbers of followers who continued to follow him on his podcast. Episode zero of the podcast (the 30-min test episode he released in February 2015) was downloaded more than 2,500 times from his website alone (Jadi, 2015). With his podcast, Jadi continued to build a trusting relationship with his followers as he stablished the significance of this emerging medium in a closed society like Iran. When he was confident about the fertile grounds he had

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[7] For example, according to the current legal system in Iran, homosexuality is punishable by death ("Equaldex," 2023).

sowed, he pushed his own limits and those of his listeners as well as podcasting to new imaginaries. Jadi's commitment to addressing topics absent from the mainstream and public domain of discourse compelled him to explore how the medium of podcasting can push beyond the cultural, societal and political red lines.

Releasing the *Joorab Shalvari* episodes without prior knowledge of his podcast audience, Jadi risked the reputation and the followership he had been gaining since he started his blog in 2009. Recognising the potential of a captive audience, predominantly but not exclusively of young Iranian men, Jadi decided to have a conversation with them about issues that are difficult for him and for them. He brings his casual "conversational style" (Spinelli, 2019, 24) of podcasting to these episodes while confidently sharing his own vulnerabilities along the way. His style of podcasting allows him to form an intimate relationship with his audience, and the freedom to make the most of this relationship. Jadi admits that he is "going to be brave" (Jadi, 2016), which means he recognises the potential risks, not only because he might lose his audience, but because of the risk of exposing himself to government prosecution for touching topics deemed socially and politically inappropriate. His care for and commitment to educating his audience, to bringing feminist topics to the public domain of discourse, created fertile ground for the production of the *POS* podcast and an articulation of the method of Podcasting-as-Care in the context of activism in Iran.

Podcasting-as-Care is a practice-based method of bringing care to feminist activism through podcasting. It is a method that I arrived at through the process of producing the *POS* podcast and a method that is continually in the making, even through my attempts of writing about it. It responds to the troubles of engaging in digital media activism on the issue of CSA in Iran from the diaspora. By drawing on Kate Lacey's notion of "listening out" (Lacey, 2011), I propose how listening to the *POS* podcast as a podcast about the failure of listening constitutes the act of listening as activism on the issue of CSA. I then move on to explore the different dimensions of feminist care that are enacted through the podcast: care as a commitment to difference; care as intimacy. I draw on examples from the *Price of Secrecy* podcast to demonstrate the case I am making for the method of Podcasting-as-Care.

Listening, Activism & Care

The method of Podcasting-as-Care responds to the complex notion of the rights and responsibilities of listening to the issue of CSA by creating the occasion and possibility for listening to how the failure of listening is enacted at different levels of the society. The first episode of the podcast begins with a phone conversation between Tannaz, a 15-year-old victim of CSA and the police [listen Episode 1: 0' 38"- includes subtitles] After this conversation, Tannaz doesn't appear in the podcast until the end of Episode 2. After the opening scene, Tannaz's mum speaks for Tannaz as her legal guardian [listen Episode 1: 2' 27"] and the story follows the CSA case from her perspective and experience of it as opposed to that of Tannaz's herself. Tannaz at 15 requires her legal guardian to represent her. At the same time, due to the age stratification model of the legal system in Iran, at 15 she can be held responsible and punished for partaking in sexual relations outside marriage, the only permissible ground for sexual activities in Iran, if her legal guardian fails to prove coercion in the sexual act committed against her. The first podcast story in an enactment of how the legal system fails to listen to the victims and how the failure of the legal system disrupts the possibility of individuals listening to the victims.

In the second podcast story, *The Deep and Old Root*, the victim, Amin, goes missing after the very first scene of the story. His disappearance sparks conversations filled with stereotypical assumptions about his disappearance, including suspicion of his suicide [listen Episode 4: 0' 50"], all because Amin is a victim of CSA and his life, in the eyes of others around him, is reduced to this experience. The story focuses on the cultural and familial constraints that contribute to how victims are failed in terms of listening. For example, his father knew that the perpetrator had previously abused another child but had failed to take any action or protect Amin or other children from experiencing abuse [Listen Episode 4: 8' 56"]. The episode ends with a Kafkaesque description of all the family members including Amin coming together for the perpetrator's memorial service without acknowledging the turmoil that they had experienced in the days before this event.

The final story of the podcast, *Lonesome Donya*, explores the internalisation of societal and familiar failures of listening into the psyche of the victim. In addition, and more importantly for my argument here, the final story exposes the constitutive effect of storytelling in how the podcast audience listen to or fail to listen to the victims. *Lonesome Donya* is a reflexive exercise in storytelling where

the storytelling style reflects the very process by which that the story was arrived at. The story of *Lonesome Donya* emerged through a series of conversations between myself and Shahrzad Hashemi, a psychologist I collaborated with on this story, instigated by an anecdote relating a case of CSA that I had brought to the conversation.[8] Mirroring this process, the final podcast story is told through an enactment of this conversation that frames the whole story. In parts, the conversation includes decisions we made in terms of what we thought was appropriate to include in the podcast and what to leave out [Listen Episode 5: 23' 25"].

The podcast stories foreground the importance of listening as an act of care by illustrating how the victims are not cared for when they are failed to be listened to. Presented as a podcast, the experience of listening to instances where victims are failed to be listened to re-emphasises the significance of the act of listening. In addition, podcasts, by the nature of their consumption method in terms of "the active choice the listener has to exercise" (Llinares et al., 2018, p.2) in selecting content tailored to their personal preferences, already invest in the sense of responsibility of the listeners. In other words, listening to a podcast, because of "the very labour implicit in selecting and consuming from an expansive range of possibilities" (Llinares, 2018, 128), is suggestive of a sense of commitment exercised through listening. In the case of the *POS* podcast, this commitment is at the same time making a demand for listening to that which is otherwise absent from the public domain of discourse.

Written in the context of Western-mediated politics, Kate Lacey (2011) introduces the notion of "freedom of listening" as a notion that engages with both the rights and responsibilities of "listening out". Lacey argues that "an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition" is only achieved when both the rights and responsibilities of those listening are attended to (Lacey, 2011, 5). While writing from a democratic country, where freedom of speech, at least theoretically and legally, is recognised as a human right, Lacey's emphasis is on the responsibility of "listening out" in a context where the right to "listening out" is assumed as given. In this context, Lacey signifies the act of "listening out" as "an essential technique of democratic political action" (Lacey, 2023).

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[8] In a future article, I will explore the method of Storytelling-with-Concern, the performative and collaborative method of arriving at the podcast stories.

Writing about the Islamic Republic's approach to media censorship in Iran, Babak Rahimi (2015) argues that censorship in Iranian media is both "reactive" and "proactive". Whilst the common understanding of censorship yields itself to practices that "simply restrict content" in the media, the proactive censorship strategy "generates an environment that establishes pervasive control of what individuals or groups may be able to say or do in a public setting" (Rahimi, 2015, 358). This control is extended to what individuals and groups are free to listen to. Considering this expanded notion of censorship, "the production of ideas, information, images, values and emotions in the public sphere" is regulated and manipulated in line with the wider governmental agendas around maintaining power and control (Rahimi, 2015, 359). This wider definition of censorship suggests that when "the context within which freedom of expression can operate as communication" is not guaranteed, "freedom of listening" cannot be exercised (Lacey, 2011, 13).

When rights to listening are guaranteed, the political power of listening lies in a commitment to "listening out" for those voices that are absent, "unfamiliar" or "uneasy on the ear"(Lacey, 2011, 18). However, when the rights to listening are not guaranteed, and are intentionally restricted, manipulated and controlled, the responsibility for listening is not only a commitment to that which is absent from the public domain of discourse, but also, and importantly for my discussion here, a demand for the right to listening. Not only is the significance of listening as a political act a commitment to finding and listening to that which is absent and silenced, but listening becomes a fight for the right to freedom of listening and speech. In this context, the act of listening to the *POS* podcast brings together notions of listening and activism at the same time as establishing the act of listening as caring for the CSA victims.

Care and Intimacy

The notion of intimacy with regard to podcasting has been explored with relation to what distinguishes the medium of podcasting from radio. An aspect of podcast intimacy has involved the recognition of how headphone listening has defined the experience of podcasting, where producers are intentionally and purposefully producing content that lends itself well to this mode of experiencing audio-only content. From the physical experience that headphones help to induce as they "ground the grain" of voices in the podcast in the physical bodies of the listeners

to the possibility of incorporating "eardrops" as soundbites that "instigate a heightened engagement and attention," podcast producers have expanded the notion of podcast intimacy into new imaginaries (Spinelli, 2019, 85–86).

At the beginning of each of the *POS* podcast episodes, the listeners are encouraged to use headphones. The reason, as I explain in the introductory note to each episode, is because of the inappropriateness of the content for children, and importantly also to ensure a better experience for the listeners. Encouraging headphone listening for me is a commitment to a mode of storytelling that connects the listeners with myself as the storyteller and the subject matter. When encouraging the listeners to listen on headphones, I want them to recognise that in producing the *POS* podcast the experience of the listeners has been an integral part of the process of storytelling. The *POS* podcast stories are not just compelling stories about how CSA victims are failed in terms of listening but also intense listening experiences as practices in committing to CSA victims.

Writing in relation to the *Heart* (2024) podcast, Karathanasopoulou and Williams (2023) put forth an argument for podcasting as the medium for "quiet activism": quiet in the sense that there are no noisy demonstrations, but revolutionary acts of talking, recording and highlighting embodied experiences of "the unfairness and the gendered inequality that remains entrenched in sexual relationships" in today's world (Karathanasopoulou and William, 2023, 38). Expanding on the history of audio intimacy in radio and recent scholarship on intimacy in podcasting (Copeland, 2018; Spinelli, 2019), they elaborate on the potential to create change through "a paradox of unsettling intimacy" (Karathanasopoulou and Williams, 2023, 39); an unsettling sense that is as much about the subject matter as it is about the embodied experience of listening to "difficult realities and thoughts" (Karathanasopoulou and Williams, 2023, 38). This articulation of podcast intimacy, especially as it is explored in the context of feminist activism, speaks with an aspect of intimacy of the *POS* podcast.

In the *POS* podcast, I start by building a trusting relationship with the listener through careful consideration of what it means to bring an absent, taboo and difficult topic out in the open. My consideration is based on acknowledging the culturally determining factors that name "the openness and the type of appreciation necessary to engage intimacy" (Spinelli, 2019, 78) through podcasting. Despite the painful nature of the topic of child sexual abuse, in the *POS* podcast I avoid putting the listener through an experience of listening to excruciating details of cases of CSA. The stories of the podcast offer an

exploration of why and how as a society we are failing to listen to the victims of CSA. The podcast constitutes the complexities and difficulties of listening. Listening to the final podcast episode expands the experience of listening to an embodied experience where listening itself becomes difficult and unsettling.

The difficulty of listening is enacted through the process of listening to the expressionistic sound design depicting the victim's inner turmoil. The experience of listening includes listening to the sounds of Donya, the character of the victim, breathing, panting and crying. It is an experience of listening through rhythm produced from non-verbal and verbal forms of expression. It is listening to difficult and intimate expressions of Donya's darkest and most private fears and anxieties. Listening to Donya's inner turmoil paired with the experience of listening through headphones becomes a re-embodying[9] of the experience of the character of Donya at the same time as it is an embodied and affective exercise in listening to difficult topics. This episode is purposefully "too close for comfort" (Shingler quoted in Karathanasopoulou and Williams, 2023, 37), in terms of both the subject matter and the production techniques. The sense of too close for comfort concerns not just the topics and themes shared in this episode[10] but also extends to a physical closeness through the dramaturgical[11] approach and sound design. To borrow from Farokh Soltani's (2018, 206) articulation of podcast dramaturgy, the last episode of the podcast becomes "the theatre in the body" of the listener. In the expressionistic soundscapes, what the character of the victim says is important but equally and at times even more important is how what she says is experienced by the listener. Qualities and features of sound such as pitch, volume, direction and distance and timbre are manipulated in creating rhythms and repetitions that bring the experience of listening to a physical closeness of what it means to be listening to someone's pain and trauma.

The failure of listening in the final episode is explored in terms of the physically challenging experience of listening to difficult topics and also listening to embodied modes of expression beyond voice. In this respect, the dramaturgical

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[9] Spinelli and Dann (2019, p.84) talk about how "earbuds push intimacy inside a body, they are, in a very real sense, about re-embodying the voice".

[10] This episode includes the topics of abortion and incest.

[11] See Farokh Soltani's (2018, p.192) definition of audio-dramaturgy as the "praxis that turns a fiction into a dramatic presentation in sonic form, to be experienced as the 'here and now' of a world by a listener: the practices and processes that construct and configure the sound structure, the technologies in volved in its creation, aesthetic paradigms, hypotheses about the audience's response, and so on".

approach also responds to the importance of interpreting silence as the failure of listening on the part of the listener, as opposed to assuming silence as the lack of voice on the part of the victims. The dramaturgical approach expands the notion of "listening out" by suggesting the significance of not just listening out "for voices that are unfamiliar or uneasy on the ear" (Lacey, 2011, 18) but listening out as a commitment to modes of embodied expressions and bodily resistance.

Sounding Out Difference and Complexity

The *POS* podcast commits to a speculative exploration of what care sounds like for CSA victims and the issue of CSA in Iran. The podcast brings together the voices of professionals who care for the issue of CSA and CSA victims in Iran with the voices of members of the diasporic community, including myself, who, despite living outside Iran, are committed to doing something about social issues in Iran. These voices are brought together without clear reference as to who is speaking from where, as they are all embedded in the "storyworld" (Ryan and Thon, 2014) of the podcast. By storyworld here I am referring to the world that is constructed through narration, dialogue, sound effects and music for a story to emerge; a world that is extended by the commentary made by professionals in the fields of law, psychology and psychiatry whose contact details are made available through the podcast's social media platforms.

In the first episode of the podcast, the storyworld is introduced through the genre of faux reportage, where I, as the storyteller, embark on an investigation into a case of CSA. The investigation is portrayed through a series of interviews and flashbacks of events referred to in the interviews and commentary made by the professionals. With the intricate constructed soundscape replicating that of a big city in Iran, with use of actual recorded soundscapes from the streets of Tehran, and the strong sense of realism through the dialogue where actual locations, areas and streets of Tehran are referenced, the storyworld introduced through the podcast is one that closely resembles if not directly suggests being set in Tehran/Iran. When voices are brought together in a verisimilar storyworld with a dramatic storyline, what initially draws the attention of the listener is what is happening in the story and why, as opposed to the positionality of the speaker. By positionality I am referring to the different disciplinary frameworks that shapes how one approaches or understands an issue, i.e. the issue of CSA, as well as a territorial positionality which, as I explained earlier, instigates discussions around

the authenticity of diasporic activist campaigns and projects. I am not suggesting that these positionalities or how they contribute to the silence around the issue of CSA are not significant in the process of story development. Rather, as exemplified in the *POS* podcast, before an idea or an opinion is dismissed based on, for example, discussions around authenticity, it is initially explored within the context of the story and how it effects the characters and the storyline.

For example, in the first story of the podcast, when exploring the possibilities of dealing with cases of CSA and the different solutions that a family has, two sets of views, from a psychotherapist and a lawyer, are presented alongside one another. For psychotherapist Dr Shabnam Nohehsara, the process of justice-seeking is separate to the process of therapy, but it could be something that is deemed as required through the process of therapy. For the late Razieh Raessi, lawyer and human rights activist in Fars province in Iran, the process of legal justice-seeking, regardless of its outcome, and as we hear through the story, regardless of the consequences it may have for the victim, is important because it "teaches society to react about such issues and could be a deterring factor" for the perpetrator [Listen Episode 2: 17' 50"]. Both these professionals care for the CSA victim but their care is framed through the disciplinary practices they represent and the sense of responsibility they feel towards individual victims and the society the victims belong to. The lawyer's approach to the necessity of legal action is more aligned with international rights-based activism, where sexual abuse is understood as a violation of an individual's right to safety and fighting for the right of an individual requires lobbying for a change of law and policy. The psychotherapist's approach to legal action can be considered in terms of what is contextually and personally right for an individual CSA victim and their personal journey of recovery. Without necessarily prioritising either of these competing approaches to care for the issue of CSA, the *POS* podcast becomes a place for the complexity of the terrain of care to persist.

In another example, when workshopping the first story of the podcast with the cast, a seemingly insignificant character in the script sparked an unexpected yet very important discussion in the room that resulted in a change in the script and the character. The discussion was instigated by the different reactions that the people in the room had towards the character of the interrogator, as the representative of the legal system. As we were looking to help the actor playing the role of the interrogator understand his role better, the discussion in the room became heated. Some believed that the post-revolution Islamic regime and its

supporters should not be humanised because of the atrocities they have committed and continue to commit since the revolution. Therefore, the role of the interrogator has to be demonised in such a way that the audience does not relate to this character. Others considered the character of the interrogator in more nuanced ways and distinct from the system of which he was a representative. The second group believed that the character should have a sense of agency and intention of care distinguished from the system he represents. In the end, the outcome of the conversation resulted in the portrayal of the interrogator as someone who is initially sympathetic to the plea of the victim by reassuring that the law is there to protect them. However, with the introduction of the third person, who hands over the forensic report (a reminder of the written law), the character of the interrogator develops into an unsympathetic person who accuses the victim and her mother for the crime committed against the victim [Listen Episode 1: 14' 45"].

While all the actors were part of the Iranian diaspora community, their experiences of the diaspora, reasons for leaving Iran, lived experiences in Iran and ideological beliefs varied drastically. The possibility of bringing the tensions emerging from these differences into the plot and character development allowed the process of storytelling to care for and acknowledge the nuances of diaspora community and experiences of diaspora. When activism aims to smooth out these differences, often by taking sides, it fails to capture the complexity of how victims are failed to be cared for and listened to. This example materialises care "as an ethically and politically charged practice" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, 90); care as doing something about often neglected issues in diasporic activism. It is an example of how the urgency of engaging with critiques of diasporic activism as inauthentic is replaced with care for the nuances that this positionality introduces to the process of activism. And of course, to care does not mean to aspire for harmony, but acting together in challenging situations where conflicting opinions meet.

Conclusion

In this article, by drawing on examples from the *Price of Secrecy* podcast, a podcast that addresses the silence around the issue of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Iran, I have illustrated ways in which podcasting can be a method for activism with care. I have argued how listening to a podcast about society's failure of

listening to victims is both enacting the responsibility of "listening out" to voices absent from the public domain of discourse while demanding the right to "freedom of listening" (Lacey, 2011).

The *POS* podcast brings together the voices of activists and individuals in Iran and in the diaspora who care about doing something about the issue of CSA and the CSA victims from Iran. The podcast commits to a notion of care as listening that embraces differences and recognises the complexities and difficulties of caring for the CSA victims without restoring to a top-down notion of how victims should be listened to. The failure of listening in the *POS* podcast is explored in terms of the physically challenging experience of listening to difficult topics and embodied modes of expression beyond voice. The *POS* podcast, as an activist project, removes the responsibility of the silence around the issue of CSA from the victims and reinterprets the silence as the failure of society and the legal system in listening to the victims.

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