Transhumanism, transmedia and the *serial* podcast: Redefining storytelling in times of enhancement

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ABSTRACT
The digital age has facilitated the creation of fluid, open stories that are subject to change as they unfold across different media platforms, each contributing to the story as a whole. Transmedia storytelling is also linked to transhumanism, a philosophy based on the idea that human limitations can be overcome through reason, science and technology to finally free us from the limitations of our bodies and minds. The concept of the literary has changed because the concept of the human has also evolved, as technology has been used to enhance both human capacities and storytelling through active participation, group work, and collective intelligence. This double enhancement that transmedia and transhuman storytelling entail is explored in this article through a textual and paratextual analysis of *Serial*, the world's most popular podcast, which can help us redefine the present blurring of disciplinary boundaries and the new territory of the literary.

KEYWORDS: *Serial* podcast, transhumanism, posthumanism, transmedia storytelling, collective intelligence, multimedia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Transmedia storytelling and transhumanism are two concepts that have been widely discussed independently, mainly in the fields of media studies and philosophy, but that are not often connected despite the fact that their shared concerns hold the key to understanding how storytelling has changed in the last few decades. Although for many the experience of

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storytelling is still an isolated activity connected to the printed book, the new media environment, also known as "cosmopedia" (Lévy, 1997: 214-20) or network society (Castells, [1996] 2010), facilitates digital, many-to-many communication and the active participation of viewers, listeners or readers in exchanging knowledge, discussing the narrative world, producing new content and even influencing the original storytelling or canon. In this sense, transmedia storytelling unfolds across multiple media platforms and each medium contributes in the understanding of the story as a whole. Content travels through social media and fans are involved in its circulation in a more participatory model of culture. They are not simple consumers but shape, share and reframe content (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 2). Transmedia storytelling has already been explored at length ever since Henry Jenkins introduced the concept in 2003 and further developed it in his seminal book *Convergence Culture* (2006a). However, it is the idea of transmedia as a means to enhance the experience of telling and receiving stories by using multiple, dynamic media that transmedia and transhumanism share.

Enhancement is also a key term to understand transhuman philosophy. However, transhumanism aims at enhancing not storytelling but human capacities. It is based on the idea that human limitations can be overcome through reason, science and technology and is often seen as a way to free us from the limitations of our bodies and minds (Young, 2006: 20). In the field of literature, technological enhancement has been mainly studied as a subject often present in science fiction and, more specifically, in the cyberpunk genre. Utopian and dystopian societies have been imagined by exploring the theoretical precepts of both transhumanist and posthumanist thought, sometimes even before both movements actually emerged (see, for example, Asimov's *I, Robot* [1950] or Clarke's *Childhood's End* [1954]). This paper does not deal with transhumanism as a subject for storytelling[1] but with the way in which storytelling has changed through the technological enhancement of human capacity, which turns media into prosthetic devices of the body, and through the way storytelling invites collective participation. Both collective intelligence, which is often discussed by transhumanists, and transmedia storytelling are participatory and collaborative as they free "individual members from the limitations of their memory" and enable "the group to act upon a broader range of expertise" (Jenkins, 2006b: 139).

Transmedia storytelling and transhumanism will be explored through an analysis of *Serial*, the world's most popular podcast with over 170 million downloads since 2014. *Serial* goes beyond the limitations of one medium and in its blurring of fiction and non-fiction, text and paratext, audience and author, it becomes a perfect example of both transmedia and transhuman storytelling. It also reflects how the idea of enhancement has led to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries in our definition of both the human and the literary.

2. FROM THE GUTENBERG GALAXY TO THE NETWORK SOCIETY: TRANSMEDIA AND TRANSHUMANISM

Literature has traditionally been associated with the printed book and the *Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan's term ([1962] 2011) for the era of print's supremacy as a medium of communication and storage. According to McLuhan, the medium, or the channel of communication, is even more important than the message itself and has effects that shape and control our relations to one another and to ourselves ([1964] 1994: 9). Every era has been shaped by the dominance of a leading medium: the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and electricity (with its applications in the form of the telegraph, telephone, television, computers, etc.). McLuhan wrote in the 1960s and in the context of the mass media electronic communication system. However, in the last few decades, numerous other changes have taken place which have affected the role of the written text and the nature of the media. In his seminal *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells claims that, in the 1980s, the newly introduced technologies affected the world of media, its diversification and the possibility of targeting the audience. The information and communication technology revolution led in the mid-1990s to *multimedia* as a new system, the result of "the merger of globalized, customized mass media and computer-mediated communication…[extending] the realm of electronic communication into the whole domain of life, from home to work, from schools to hospitals, from entertainment to travel" ([1996] 2010: 394). McLuhan had mentioned the "cross-fertilization" of systems as was the case of the print with the steam press ([1964] 1994: 39), but for Castells this technological convergence and diversity, its potential diversity of contents and the possibility of targeting the audience go even further and reverse McLuhan's famous statement "the medium is the message" into "the message is the medium" (Castells [1996] 2010: 368), which means that the content and the characteristics of the message and its target audience organize and shape the process of communication. Transmedia obviously affects the nature of the message but since we are moving towards the integration of all kinds of media and communications, it is not the individual medium that matters, but the message that will be designed to be conveyed through different media platforms.

In this sense, boundaries have been erased and this has resulted in distributed mediation so that it does not make sense to consider specific media in formal, cultural, or technical isolation (Grusin, 2010: 90). Therefore, the concept of the literary needs to be liberated from the specificity of print, or any other single medium.[2] In a network society and in a time of technological convergence and multimedia, it is more useful to talk about storyworlds, a concept that Ryan defines as the shared universe that encompasses characters, objects, settings, physical laws, social rules, values and events (2014: 31-37). Storyworlds are created and distributed across multiple media forms, which makes them fluid and constantly evolving.

What transmedia storytelling and transhumanism share are the concepts of fluidity and enhancement. In convergence culture storyworlds are flexible and subject to sampling, mixing, and change, while transhumanism sees the human as non-fixed and mutable, subject to constant enhancement. Hughes defines transhumanism as the idea that "humans can use reason to transcend the limitations of the human condition" (2004: 156). Similarly, Young defines the concept as "the belief in overcoming human limitations through reason, science and technology" (2006: 15). This is an optimistic movement that rejects postmodern nihilism and relativism and defends human progress as a way to free humans from the limitations of their bodies and minds. A Transhumanist Declaration was originally crafted in 1998, partly influenced by Natasha Vita-Moore's "Transhumanist Arts Statement" (1982), and modified over the years to be finally adopted in 2009 by Humanity+ (formerly known as the World Transhumanist Association), an international organization that defends the ethical use of technology to expand human capacities. According to this manifesto, progress and transcendence entail redesigning the human condition and "broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth". It also invites the use of "techniques that may be developed to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies" (Humanity+, 2009). Therefore, the transhuman is an enhanced human in constant development towards the posthuman, a being whose capacities would radically exceed those of present humans (More, 2003).[3] Radical transhumanism elevates consciousness over embodiment, for example by aiming at leaving the frail body behind to create an interface between brains and computers and believing that the organic body is replaceable. This has been contested by critics like Hayles who has famously argued for an "[embodied] version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (1999: 5). A less radical approach is to see the human as a biological organism enhanced with different prosthesis, extensions or wearable devices.

Transmedia can also be understood as a form of enhancement of both body and mind beyond the limitations of the human condition. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan deals with technology as an extension of the nervous system and accounts for the connection between the development of some media and people's fascination with "any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves" ([1964] 1994: 41). The main aim of these extensions is to increase human power and speed as for example the wheel extends the power of the feet, the telephone extends that of the ear and voice, television extends our eyes and ears, the computer enhances our brain and in the future our consciousness. Each medium is related to others and our bodies need to find a new equilibrium with each new medium since it affects our whole psychic and social complex. The media and technology which extend the body

become prosthetic devices that alter who we are and the society we live in. What McLuhan describes without using the word is a form of transhumanism, the capacities of human beings are enhanced through the different media that they create and develop despite the numbness these media cause and the enslavement or "autoamputation" ([(1964) 1994: 42]) they may also entail. In the same way that humans have seen their senses enhanced through media, each medium has also been enhanced by other media, to the extent that the digital world has rendered the boundaries between media less and less relevant: this has become one of the objects of study for the Digital Humanities or Posthumanities.

Therefore, if according to McLuhan the capacity of the ear was extended through the radio, the digital age has extended the capacity of the radio through podcasts. In fact, podcasting is becoming increasingly popular and many media analysts consider we are entering its golden age (Roose, 2014; Berry, 2015; Bristow-Bovey, 2017).[4] Unlike radio, podcasts are free from time constraints and unregulated by the Federal Communications Commission or any other agency. They are recorded and delivered via RSS so that listeners can subscribe and listen to them whenever they want: podcasts give listeners more freedom to choose what they listen to, where and when. Therefore, podcasts are conceived as on-demand, self-contained, small, easily distributed microcontent which enhances the capacity of our ears and allows for multi-platform integrated-media listening. Microcontent—one of the essential features of Web 2.0 projects together with social media—refers to small forms and items of self-contained content. As Alexander explains, they are easy to produce and consume and can be reused in multiple ways and places (2011: 30). Examples of microcontent would be blog posts, podcasts, wiki edits, YouTube comments, images. The "spreadability" of microcontent in social media allows for conversation to occur across multiple sites and facilitates user-generated content that may even affect the meaning of the original storytelling (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). In this sense, podcasts can easily participate in transmedia storytelling as either core or auxiliary texts since they are easily downloaded digital audio files, usually part of a series, which can be listened to on demand on multiple platforms, usually laptops, smartphones and tablets. As microcontent podcasts can be reused and adapt to other media, making its content more accessible to the audience that, through collective intelligence and social media, can contribute to and build on the story, in a way enhancing both body and mind beyond the limitations of the human condition. As a podcast, *Serial* was conceived in these terms and its success can partly be explained by the way it made use of both transmedia storytelling and a transhuman approach to the telling of its story.

3. TRANSMEDIA AND TRANSHUMAN ENHANCEMENT: THE *SERIAL* PODCAST

Serial (Season One) was produced by This American Life and WBEZ Chicago, and consisted of 12 episodes released weekly from October to December 2014. However, the

instalments are still available for download so it is possible to binge listen to all of them, as many people still do. In the podcast, reporter Sarah Koenig tells the non-fiction story of Adnan Syed, who has been serving a life sentence since 1999, when at the age of 17 he was convicted of the murder of Hae Min Lee, his high-school ex-girlfriend. Koenig investigates the case and tells the story using narrative techniques characteristic of fiction as she invites listeners to join in the research process and decide if Syed was wrongly convicted. When the first instalments were released Koenig and her team were still preparing the next ones, so the narrative was unfinished and subject to a certain postmodern indeterminacy. In fact, as critics like DeMair have pointed out, *Serial* is the story not only of Adnan Syed but also of Sarah Koenig's research process into the case (2017: 26). The episodes included interviews with witnesses and independent experts and extensive conversations with Syed, who tries to address and explain all the inconsistencies and gaps that emerge in the narrative.

Even though it is nonfiction, critics like McMurtry have pointed out that it shares a great deal with fictional drama productions (2016: 307). *Serial* has also been connected with crime fiction (DeMair, 2017: 33-35) and true crime documentaries like *The Thin Blue Line* (O'Meara, 2015: 21; Ora, 2018) since it embraces digital technology but still uses traditional storytelling strategies and has the ingredients of suspense fiction and drama. As Koenig herself notices: "on paper, the case was like a Shakespearean mashup: young lovers from different worlds thwarting their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion, and honor besmirched, the villain not a Moor exactly, but a Muslim all the same, and a final act of murderous revenge. And the main stage? A regular old high school across the street from a 7-Eleven" (Episode 1). From the very beginning, she presents the content of the podcast as a whodunit, a sort of investigation in which listeners will have a chance to listen to Koenig's own process of deduction and gather all the clues that may help them decide if Syed is guilty or not. She even presents one of the most damning pieces of evidence against Syed, the Nisha call, as the 'smoking gun' call (Episode 6). She builds suspense by foreshadowing later parts of the story and links the weekly *Serial* episodes by starting each new episode with assorted sentences from the previous ones, which recap what has happened before, and often ends with some kind of cliffhanger or by teasing some future information. For example, episode 3 ends with: "Mr. S wasn't the detective's only lead in this case. We know they were also looking at the boyfriends. And while I don't exactly know why their suspicions about Adnan start to percolate, I have an educated guess. Next week, on *Serial*" (Episode 3).

Koenig turns the nonfiction story into a whodunit and initially presents the case in simple terms: "So either it's Jay or it's Adnan. But someone is lying. And I really wanted to figure out who" (Episode 1). However, by episode 12 she has reached a more nuanced conclusion: "My original question going into this whole endeavor, this whole story was either Jay's lying or Adnan's lying. But what if it's not either or, what if it's *both and*?" She claims that she is not a detective, a private investigator or a crime reporter but a journalist,

but she acknowledges that her account is subjective and is very open about the steps she takes in her research process and the doubts she harbours. By episode 6 she acknowledges: "I see many problems with the state's case. But then, I see many problems with Adnan's story too. And so I start to doubt him, I talk to him and talk to him, and I start to doubt my doubts. And then I worry that I'm a sucker that I don't know. That's the cycle" (Episode 6). These doubts and changing opinions that Koenig presents invite the doubts and questions of her audience. In this sense, one of the main differences between a whodunit and *Serial* is that *Serial* refuses to give easy answers as there is no final discovery or satisfactory ending. In spite of the expectations, in the final episode Koenig could not say who did it or provide closure. The undecidability of the narrative, the fact that it is nonfiction, and Koenig's open approach and hesitation when judging Syed and the people involved invite the participation of the audience and the conversation in social media with listeners often questioning Koenig's position or the path her investigation takes. This undecidability is key to understand how the story was enhanced both through collective intelligence, a form of transhumanism, and through the paratexts that the podcast offered on its website and which turned *Serial* into a multi-sensory transmedia experience that could be better accessed through multiple platforms.

3.1. Intimacy, Indeterminacy and Seriality

Participation through digital media distinguishes *Serial* from traditional radio broadcasts. It is not just that users can choose how to consume the podcast (binge-listen to it if they wish to) but that they can change its narrative and through collective intelligence reach beyond it. Traditional audio drama tries to immerse the audience in the story by hiding the creative process that would be outside the diegetic world. By contrast, *Serial* underlines the journalist process as much as the story itself. Besides, the boundaries of the narrative are not fixed by the medium or the author, the traditional realms of authority in storytelling. Digitalization has rearticulated the role of the author who has moved from the center of the text to the margin (Poster, 2001: 91). A multimedia production like *Serial* includes scripts, audio, images, music and web pages so authorship is obviously not Koenig's alone. However, the podcast is a medium that has the capacity of creating intimacy, as it is often listened to with headphones. As Berry underlines podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting and using an intimate form of communication as they combine "active decision making and highly privatized listening [which] gives reasonable grounds to consider audio podcasting as a highly personal and intimate medium —one which is similar to but not the same as radio" (2016: 666). This "hyper-intimacy" is reinforced by the single-host format that provides strong audience recognition for the host who takes central stage because of the sense of intimacy she builds up. McCracken points out how Koenig is not just the author of the written text she performs but also a character in the audio narrative, becoming "author,

narrator, interviewer, and character" (2017b: 62). The way Koenig constantly addresses listeners and the way she makes sure they are following her line of reasoning to gain their trust also reinforces the sense of intimacy: "If you want to figure out this case with me, now is the time to start paying close attention because we have arrived, along with the detectives, at the heart of the thing" (Episode 4).

This intimacy also works because the text was fluid and subject to change when it was first serially released, the consequence of Koenig reporting the story as she produced it. Poster discusses the different space/time configuration of analogue and digital author/text. The printed text is set firmly on the page and, even though the reader may respond to it, this does not alter the printed page itself. By contrast, digital texts are mobile and changeable and have the stability of liquid (2001: 92). That Koenig tells her audience about her process of investigation and that, in later episodes, she even admits mistakes she has made in previous ones (like putting into question that there was a pay phone at a Best Buy in Baltimore in 1999) is important because it creates the impression that further research can change the narrative. The fact that the research was not finished when the reporting started made it possible for new evidence and new information to be introduced weekly, evidence often suggested or pointed out by listeners of previous episodes.

Serialised fiction, which became especially popular during Britain's Victorian era, also allowed authors and periodicals to respond to audience reaction. However, an important difference is the fact that *Serial* is nonfiction and that the feedback that the audience provides is not limited to whether they like or dislike the narrative. The audience actively questions the evidence (not just the way Koenig narrates the story), and what they discover can have an effect in real life and even overturn Syed's sentence. People involved and witnesses who initially could not be reached decided to talk as a result of the podcast's success while rumours that circulated among listeners were also investigated, creating a very rich narrative that listeners felt could go in any direction. Episode 9, for example, starts with new information that Koenig has learnt in the previous week thanks to people who have contacted her. Episode 11 is also interesting because Koenig directly addresses some of the comments she receives and how she does research on some of the rumours she has learnt. In the final episode she also explains that she has finally talked to Don, Hae Min Lee's boyfriend when she died, who eight months before had refused to talk to her, and she gives a detailed account of the interview. The indeterminacy and the unfinished nature of the text could also be seen more than a year after the official ending of the podcast when Syed's post-conviction relief proceedings were re-opened to determine if he deserved a new trial. Update episodes were uploaded to keep listeners informed of Syed's future.

3.2. The *Serial* Paratexts and the Multimedia Platform

It is the combination of Koenig's acknowledgement of her research process, the indeterminacy of the text and the way she shares it with the audience in a very intimate atmosphere, that invites the participation of the audience. However, this participation would be impossible without multimedia paratexts and without digital tools for the audience to communicate. As was established before, intimacy is a characteristic that podcasts have inherited from radio. As radio programmer Rick Sklar underlined, "radio reaches people through only one of their senses –hearing. It was this singularity that gave radio the unique ability to entertain, inform, sell, and motivate. Sound, imaginatively used, stimulated the listener to create in his or her mind a picture of the ideal face, the ideal scene, and the ideal product" (1984: xv). However, unlike radio, podcasts do not reach their audience only though one sense. As microcontent, they are part of transmedia storytelling, which enhances other senses as well. In fact, the active participation of the audience was also made possible because the narrative Koenig provides is not limited to the aural medium of podcasts, it is enhanced by a series of paratexts, both peritextual and epitextual, that intensify the experience of storytelling and invite audience participation. As Genette explains in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, paratexts are liminal devices that mediate between the book and the reader; the world of the text and the world of publishing. Genette deals mainly with written narratives and makes reference to covers, titles and subtitles, names, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces and notes, among others. They may be within the text (peritexts) or outside it (epitextual). In *Serial* both types of paratexts are used to enhance the narrative. Every episode starts with "This is a Global Tel-Link prepaid call from Adnan Syed, an inmate at a Maryland correction facility" and the main theme song "Bad Dream" composed by Nick Thorburn. The ads of the show's sponsors also provide "comfort and stability" week after week (McCracken, 2017b: 59).

Then we have the epitexts, such as the visual material available on the *Serial* website that expands and enhances the storyworld: pictures of the people involved, maps, scanned letters, cell-phone records, an affidavit. These are the epitexts that invite audience participation since listeners have direct access to the evidence. The storytelling becomes transmedial with the visual and written material that supplements the audio content enhancing the storytelling experience as a result, and encouraging active engagement with the narrative. For example, Episode 1 is accompanied by the letter that Asia wrote to Adnan Syed claiming that she talked to him in the library on the afternoon that Lee disappeared, the affidavit she wrote a year later, the Best Buy architectural plans—Syed supposedly phoned Jay from a Best Buy payphone after the murder—and Jay's Best Buy Map which he drew for the detectives in one of his interviews. These documents make reference to specific issues that are discussed in this and subsequent episodes like the credibility of Asia as alibi witness for Syed or the existence of a phone booth in the Best Buy parking lot that Jay alleges Syed

called from after killing Lee. There are also other documents created by the *Serial* team to guide listeners through the story like a People Map, where the relationships between some of the main people in the story are visually established, a timeline of the case from the day of the murder to Syed's sentencing and a document with five somewhat contradictory timelines for the day of the murder according to Syed's call log, Syed's story, Jay's first interview, Jay's second interview and Jay's testimony in the second trial. In Genette's definition, the paratext constitutes "a *threshold* …that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" ([1987] 1997: 2). These documents make it easier to follow the podcast but also allow the audience to explore the case the way a detective would. For example, Syed's cell phone records have been especially useful for many listeners who have set to compare them with Jay's statements to try to find holes in his story. Hancock and McMurtry believe that *Serial* has to be understood as an audiovisual experience "with Koenig's spoken narrative being intertwined throughout with various visual elements" (2018: 92). Therefore, the combination of Koenig as an author who only offers one of many possible approaches to the story, the flexibility of the unfinished nature of the narrative and its enhancement with a series of paratexts, both peritextual and epitextual, allow for audience participation and collaboration.

3.3. The Audience and Collective Intelligence

In transmedia storytelling enhancement is not limited to the telling itself but to the capacity of the audience, which often responds to the narrative in a collective way. As is to be expected in our digital age, online communities were also formed to discuss the case. As Herbrechter points out, building on Mark Poster, the Internet has created new forms of individual identity as well as new forms of collectivities which "emphasize the increasing interconnection between humans, media and technologies and threaten to render the traditional liberal humanist subject and its autonomy obsolete" (2013: 183). Herbrechter considers this to be a kind of media-based "cyborgization" as it abolishes the difference between human and nonhuman, autonomous and heteronomous forms of agency. Prensky does not use the word "cyborgization" but also believes that we have become Homo Sapiens Digital in that we accept digital enhancement as an integral part of human existence and as a way to complement innate abilities and facilitate wiser decision making (2011: 20). Memory has already been enhanced by digital technology, judgment is enhanced by digital data-gathering and decision-making tools, and we also have tools for digital cognitive enhancement: "laptop computers, online databases, three-dimensional virtual simulations, online collaboration tools, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and a range of other, context-specific tools" (19). *Serial* listeners incorporated this technology, which enhanced their capacity to respond to the story, and through social media and online forums provided new

materials, shared rumours and new information and reworked arguments that were further used in the show's subsequent episodes. They did not move in the static space of places but in the space of flows, which according to Castells is becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies ([1996] 2010: 409) and which allows for geographical distance to disappear and knowledge to be distributed in the virtual space.

The Reddit site hosts a subreddit, which is a specific area of interest, on *Serial* (http://www.reddit.com/r/Serialpodcast) with thousands of discussions and comments that mainly consider the ambiguous aspects of the case: the alibi that Asia McClain provides, the Nisha call, Cristina Gutierrez's questionable job as Syed's lawyer, Jay's testimony. There is user-generated content that can also be considered paratextual to *Serial*, the core text, such as a Wiki page, an episode guide, an FAQ section, new approaches to the evidence and different ways to present it. There is a collection of maps that different redditors (users of Reddit's message boards) put together and that Serial producer Julie Snyder found helpful, impressive and time-consuming (Maerz, 2017). They include video maps tracking Jay's Testimony with cellphone records and an assortment of charts, diagrams and graphic organisers. There are also tour videos uploaded on YouTube recreating the drive that Syed supposedly took from Woodlawn High School to Best Buy, which mirror episode 5 in which Sara Koenig and producer Dana Chivis took Syed's challenge and tried to test the state's timeline of the murder by driving from Woodlawn High School to Best Buy in 21 minutes. Since the experience of listening to *Serial* became intertwined with reading or contributing to the crowdsourced research posted on Reddit, some *Serial* fans even complained that after listening to the final episode they did not learn anything new since all the new information was already available on Reddit. For example, that there was another serial killer targeting Asian women in the Baltimore area or that Syed's mosque youth leader could provide a new alibi. This was the result of the effort of participants all over the world who engaged with the podcast content in a collaborative way, showing the power of collective intelligence as they went beyond the capacity of their individual selves.

Lévy has famously defined collective intelligence as "a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (1997: 13). Knowledge is not possessed by one person and everybody knows something since intelligence is dispersed across the world. Transmedia storytelling is also about distribution, as the content expands through different media platforms and the full story is not to be found in one medium alone. Collective intelligence is a form of transhuman enhancement since the capacity of each individual is expanded thanks to both the broader range of expertise that the group provides and the technology that makes such communication possible. In the same way as transmedia storytelling is not designed for one medium, when dealing with collective intelligence content is not designed just for individual readers but for a collectivity of users, changing the individual role of the receiver.

Transhumanists have taken this concept further with the idea of the "global brain" (see Heylighen & Lenartowicz, 2017). To a lesser extent, technology has allowed for *Serial* web sleuths to work together, have an active participation and be part of the storytelling by creating paratexts and influencing both *Serial*, the core text, and other related texts. It is both transmedia and transhumanism that have turned *Serial* into a phenomenon.

However, the role played by web sleuths has not always been positive, and Koenig herself has expressed her discomfort and her refusal to actively incorporate redditors and their information into her narrative. She feels that she has a responsibility to fact-check what she says and the Reddit community is not concerned with that (Koenig in Dockterman, 2015). This is the danger of grassroots creativity and participatory culture without control: at best, it may be an example of collective intelligence and "smart mobs" (Rheingold, 2002), "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2004) or the "power of organizing without organizations" (Shirky, 2008), at worst it can be information without control and even the cause of accidental defamation when there is doxing and personal information about private individuals is leaked as was the case with both Don (Lee's boyfriend) and Jay (Buozis, 2017). Collective intelligence is not without dangers when it is out of control and it can even be a source of "fake news" in the era of post-truth. Koenig's unwillingness to let redditors affect the *Serial* podcast can also be read as an attempt to protect the podcast's authority as the core of the story, its mother ship. However, *Serial* is what it is because it has been paradoxically enhanced by a collective intelligence and its paratexts, which have put into question what is central and what is ancillary in the *Serial* storyworld. The collective intelligence emerging form web sleuths has also turned the intimate experience of listening to a podcast into a collective one.

User-generated content was not just amateur but also professional with the creation of other narratives that extended the initial narrative content of *Serial* across multiple media platforms. Ryan calls this the "snowball effect"—something that takes place when "a certain story enjoys so much popularity or becomes so prominent culturally that it spontaneously generates a variety of either same-medium or cross-media prequels, sequels, fan fiction, and adaptations" (2013: 363). Besides, we have to take into account that, as we have seen so far, the combination of Web 2.0 microcontent and social media offers a new environment for storytelling since the story boundaries are unclear and even the roles of author and reader become blurred and open to new forms of collaboration (Alexander & Levine, 2008: 42). The reader becomes user and the storytelling experience is shared with others in a knowledge space that promotes collaboration and conversation and whose borders are difficult to establish as digital thresholds are crossed. The central text that worked as common field of reference for all the other texts was the *Serial* podcast, which expanded into other podcasts but also to other media such as books, documentaries, blogs, forums, and TV programmes. The podcast medium was the most active and several metapodcasts were created, even before

Serial came to an end, to discuss each weekly episode of the podcast, such as Slate's *Serial Spoiler Specials*, *The Serial Serial* of the A.V. Club, *Crime Writers on Serial* and *Serially Obsessed*, among others. Once *Serial* came to an end other podcasts emerged, such as *The Serial Dynasty*, where interviews with key people like Kristy, "neighbour boy" or Laura were offered. *Undisclosed: The State vs. Adnan Syed* has also been very influential since it found new evidence, such as the unreliability of incoming calls, that had gone unnoticed and that contributed to the initial overturning of Syed's life sentence since he was granted a new trial on June 30, 2016. However, Maryland's highest court decided in March 2019 to uphold his conviction and deny him a new trial. Syed continues serving a life sentence in prison.

Books by people involved have also been published, such as Rabia Chaudry's *Adnan's Story: The Search for Truth and Justice* and Asia McClain's *Confessions of a Serial Alibi*. A documentary about the case, called *Adnan Syed: Innocent or Guilty?* was released by Investigation Discovery on June 14, 2016 and Sky and HBO released in March 2019 a four-part documentary series directed by Amy Berg that follows events up to the present. *Serial* has also inspired copycat podcast fiction. Hancock and McMurtry have studied at length some of these post-*Serial* podcast fictions such as *Limetown*, *The Black Tapes Podcast*, *TANIS*, *Rabbits*, *The Message* and *Archive 81*, and concluded that they represent a crucial evolutionary step in audio fiction as they show the "new understanding of podcasting's unique properties of narrative pace, tension and immersion" (2018: 100). Nonfiction true-crime podcasts have also gained popularity such as *Dr. Death*, *Dirty John*, *Over My Dead Body*, *In the Dark* or *The Teacher's Pet*. There were also plenty of parodies, memes and sketches featuring the show. In our digital age, in which information expands exponentially, stories also grow around microcontent on the internet—blogs, wikis, social media, forum posts—and other more traditional media like books and films. Stories are in a constant state of expansion and enhancement, new layers of meaning are added and content is shared in social media sites and dedicated applications, making community-based input easy to access and provide. At present, the paratext is becoming more and more important as the original boundaries of stories stretch to the point that a core text is less central than it was in the printed world. Both in print and mass media there is a clear distinction between text and paratexts, but, as Lughi points out, in digital media the edges of born-digital texts are weakened and their relation with paratexts becomes more complex (2016: 46). That is why the storyworld of *Serial* has extended way beyond the podcast medium since its 2014 release and is still in constant expansion as the 2019 HBO documentary shows.

4. CONCLUSION

In our network society, *Serial* is not only an example of a successful podcast but also an example of a successful way of integrating storytelling in the digital world. It illustrates how transmedia and transhumanism are closely linked and how enhancement is a key concept to

understand storytelling today. The hyper-intimacy that *Serial* creates though the podcast medium combines with a text which is open, unfinished, fluid and which is presented in a serial way. The aural medium becomes multi-sensory with its use of both visual and aural paratexts available on the *Serial* webpage and discussed in its episodes. The indeterminacy of the text, the widespread availability of documentation and the audiovisual experience that the paratexts provide invite the active participation of the audience. The present interconnection between humans, media and technology and our media-based "cyborgization" turn the audience into a global online community that makes use of digital technologies to enhance its physical reach and free individuals from the limitations of their minds and senses. The digital cognitive enhancement and the data-gathering results that these technologies provide lead to a collective intelligence that comes up with new evidence and new approaches to the case. Transmedia storytelling and transhumanism become inextricably linked when that information is reincorporated into the original storytelling, altering it and reinforcing the multi-platform narrative. The new narrative that emerges grows beyond the original medium, the Serial podcast, and spreads through other podcasts, TV documentaries, films, books and even memes.

In the digital age, storytelling has been liberated from the constraints and the specificity of one medium and has now become transmedia, an enhancement that has to be understood both in the context of the technological and social changes that have taken place and in the context of the conceptions of the human, which have changed since the Enlightenment. The media revolution is part of that same technological enhancement that allows people to increase the range of what they can see, tell, listen to or write. If the age of the Enlightenment gave way to both the traditional conception of the human and the literary, the digital age has given way, in turn, to the transhuman through the use of different forms of enhancement technologies. The time of transhumanism is also the time of transmedia storytelling, which enhances the storyworld and allows for participation, group work and collective intelligence, making knowledge available to all members of the community. If transhumanism liberates us from the limitations of our bodies and minds, transmedia frees stories from the limitations of medium-specific fixed narration. There are those who fear that human enhancement will destroy the essence of what makes us human. Fukuyama has famously defined transhumanism as the world's most dangerous idea (2004). In the same way, technological enhancement of storytelling may end up destroying our concept of how a story should be told. We will have to wait and see but it is certain that a podcast like Serial can help us redefine a new territory. It proves that technology has led not just to human enhancement but to storytelling enhancement, along the way decentring fixed entities of the past such as author, medium-specific text and passive reader. Serial's successful use of the tools that transmedia and transhumanism provide may well mark the future of storytelling in the digital age.

NOTES

1 For a summary of how literature and art in general have popularised transhumanism and have illustrated the ideas of the movement, see Istvan (2014) and Rockoff (2014). For art that does not just transmit transhuman content but incorporates it into its aesthetics see Pilsch (2017: 139-173).

2 These changes have directly affected the traditional print-based humanities, which as they move into the digital era see how the "media framework" becomes especially relevant in emerging disciplines such as Comparative Textual Media (Hayles & Pressman, 2013: xiii), there is more reliance on interdisciplinarity and boundary displacement when studying literature (Herbrechter, 2013: 175-176) and even the traditional conception of literature itself "as the humanist enterprise par excellence" is put into question (Clarke & Rossini, 2017: xvii-xviii).

3 The very concept of the posthuman is ambiguous and difficult to define. The ways advocates of transhumanism define it differs from the way posthumanist philosophers, or critical posthumanists understand the concept. Both transhumanism and critical posthumanism see the human as non-fixed and mutable but Haraway (1991), Hayles (1999) and Badmington (2000), the main philosophers of posthumanism, reject the way transhumanists like Nick Bostrom —co-founder of the World Transhumanist Association in 1998— see enhancement as a positive tool to intensify the Enlightenment concept of the human and the autonomous liberal subject capable of free will (2005: 2). In the Enlightenment, reason, the scientific method and empirical observation were encouraged. Man was the measure of all things but, as Braidotti suggests, this is also a creature that marginalizes the racial, sexual and social order (2013: 2), thus critical posthumanism favours instead a post-dualistic approach and the decentering of the human. Wolfe underlines this difference by claiming that whereas transhumanism "should be seen as an intensification of humanism," critical posthumanism opposes it and aims at deprivileging the status of the humanist subject" (2010: xv).

4 The year 2014 marked a new phase of expansion since media circles were deeply impacted by both the release of the Serial podcast in October 2014 and the launching of a native podcast app by Apple that made downloading podcasts an easier task (McHugh, 2016: 65). Berry also marks the release of the podcast as a turning point for podcasting, which moved from niche activity to mainstream media platform (2015: 171). Six weeks after its release, Serial had been downloaded five million times, becoming the fastest podcast to reach that figure in iTunes; by 2016 it had reached 170 million downloads (McCracken, 2017a: 1). Podcasting adapts very well to our digital age and its golden age can also be explained by its on-demand audio that can be consumed while doing other activities, the improved quality of the podcasts, the low cost of production (as compared to TV or radio shows), the high advertising rates that amply exceed the costs in the case of successful podcasts, and the new developments in technology, especially internet-connected cars (50 percent of them in 2015, 100 percent by 2025) (Roose, 2014).

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