"Mommy Podcasts": A Feminist Reading of *What to Expect* and *Big Fat Positive*

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For Eddie,

my first "baby"

INTRODUCTION

Since launching in 2004, the podcasting industry has grown to include over 1.5 million podcasts and more than 34 million episodes (Winn). Forbes expects ad revenue to reach more than a billion dollars by 2021 (Adgate). Prominent categories include comedy and true crime, but a quick visit to any podcasting app reveals endless topics: books, food, language learning, religion, astronomy, history. Listener communities spill over into private Facebook groups, subreddits, and real-life venues where hosts record live sessions. Podcasts have become a central component in our media landscape, yet scholarship on the medium remains sparse. True crime and medicine overwhelmingly receive the most attention from scholars, but there are countless other subgenres worthy of exploration. Feminist approaches are especially crucial: the majority of new podcast listeners are women (Adgate), but media enjoyed by women "are often ignored as trivial or uninteresting" (Chen 512).

For the purpose of my study, I decided to look closely at podcasts about motherhood. While I am not yet a mother, I feel strongly that the demographic is underserved in our country and that a serious examination of motherhood content is a feminist undertaking. The first section of my thesis provides significant historical context, particularly in terms of the Industrial Revolution which was a splintering-off point for motherhood advice. This section also includes a summary of contemporary motherhood scholarship which further contextualizes the close readings I perform later in the thesis. Next, I investigate the roles of *peers* and *experts* in the motherhood podcast subgenres that I identified. A *peer* approach represents the preindustrial model, while an *expert* approach represents the postindustrial model.

In the final section of my thesis, I perform a close reading of examples from both models. These readings reveal fascinating insights about the podcasting medium as a whole, including its inherent and mandatory sociality. The close readings illustrate how patriarchal understandings of motherhood are subtly and not-so-subtly reinforced in both models, as are acts of subversion. In the conclusion, I tie the coronavirus pandemic into this discussion. I argue that examining the

media we consume is important, especially for mothers. Media can and does affect mothers' views of themselves, their families, their children, and their lives. Media can critique culture, spread sound and useful medical advice without cost, and advocate for change. But it can also quietly transmit dominant ideologies over and over again. There is nothing "trivial or uninteresting" about these topics—they are issues that influence millions of women's daily lives and impact future generations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When thinking about the "big ticket" items in the history of American mothers, the Industrial Revolution sometimes gets overlooked. Specific moments of progress come to mind first, including advances in infant and maternal health, the Emancipation Proclamation, suffrage, and the civil rights and feminist movements. But industrialization too sparked enormous change—change that was more complicated. It swept through the nation and upturned the traditional role of women and mothers (Rich 46-49). Experts rose up to create their own models of housekeeping and mothering which were vastly different from preindustrial, women-centered, peer-oriented models. As time wore on experts established an ever-greater footing in the lives of women and mothers, and this presence can still be felt today.

In *For Her Own Good,* Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English describe life for preindustrial mothers. Compared to men, women were subordinate and inferior: European patriarchy had been transported in full to the British colonies. But society at that time, mostly agrarian, was actually quite "gynocentric," meaning it depended heavily on women to function. Unless she was very wealthy, a white woman cooked, made and repaired clothing, helped run the farm and household, and cared for animals. Enslaved women were expected to perform domestic labor and field work alongside bearing and raising children (West). Women labored, socialized, and learned from one another in familial networks, and their work was "indispensable to survival" (Ehrenreich 6; 5-8).

But when production shifted out of the home, the gynocentric pillars which had previously upheld society began to crumble. Many women followed their work into factories, but they were no longer

in charge of their labor as they had been before. Those who remained home faced social isolation and financial hardships (Rich 53). But the alternative wasn't great: factory work was also isolating, as well as dangerous and low wage (Ehrenreich 8). The role of women careened into uncertainty, and debates arose about their new place in the world. What did it mean for a deeply patriarchal society if women could earn money in factories just the same as men, sometimes outworking and earning even more than them (Ehrenreich 11-20)?

Public discussion about these issues came to be known as the Woman Question. Romantic ideology was quick to offer up answers—answers that drowned out feminist voices calling for revolutionary equality. Instead, Romanticism latched on to the new chasm between public and private life. Factories were cold, impersonal, and irreligious (everything the home *shouldn't* be). The home needed to be moral and watched over by someone equally moral. Early feminists battled with these ideas, but they couldn't win the fight, not when a powerful ally turned and embraced Romantic ideology. That ally was "science." Americans had faith in science, so when early experts from the fields of biology and medicine legitimized women's relegation to the home, most people got behind it, even many feminists. At that time Americans largely believed science was impartial and trustworthy, and so the Woman Question was seemingly solved (Ehrenreich 20-28).

But new questions materialized: if women belonged in the home, what exactly were their duties? The new role of women was "a late-arrived development in human history," and additional experts rose up to guide the transition (Rich 46). In the nineteenth century, "professional physicians, psychologists, domestic scientists," and "parent educators" found lucrative careers imparting the new role of women *to* women (Ehrenreich 28). This system of learning was an enormous deviation from how women and mothers had previously passed down knowledge.[1] After the Industrial Revolution, expertise and knowledge were commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace, then consumed individually in the isolated, private homes of women (Ehrenreich 28-29).

From the outset, expert advice was biased and scientifically flawed. Early experts were suspicious and apprehensive about women and their physiologies. "Scientific" conclusions about women's

mental and physical inferiority to men went unchallenged for several generations. When Romantic physicians concluded that all female functions were "inherently pathological" (Ehrenreich 110), they passed this wisdom down to the new crop of experts, who forged ahead into the twentieth century assuming all biological events in a woman's life were "physical diseases and intellectual liabilities" (Ehrenreich 140; 105-140).

As the twentieth century progressed, science and medicine maintained the belief that women's bodies were pathological (Rich 180). However, *cultural* ideas about women and mothers shifted. A bustling, energetic paragon of womanhood emerged. She was still bound to the home, but now it was because "she had so much to do there" (Ehrenreich 142). The experts who rose up to greet the American housewife were not just men but fellow women who transformed domesticity and mothering into a science.

This new wave of mothering advice pertained to the majority of American women. Many automatically became mothers in this era, whether they wanted to or not: contraception techniques were underdeveloped and unreliable, and on top of that women faced cultural pressures to procreate. Experts embodied these pressures, assuming all women were married, had children, and stayed at home full time (Rich 52). Beyond those consistencies, their advice changed often. Throughout the twentieth century mothers were told to keep infants and children on precise, exact schedules; then they were told to let children be spontaneous; then they were told they needed to *love* mothering—in an all-consuming, instinctual, "libidinal" way (Ehrenreich 141-196).

Despite the fact that many women did their best to keep up with the changing advice, experts continued to be suspicious and critical of mothers. At the halfway point of the century, Harvard-trained psychiatrist Joseph Rheingold went so far as to assume "every mother was subconsciously trying to *kill* her child" (Ehrenreich 234). This deep distrust of mothers continued until the Cold War, which sent advice veering in new directions yet again. Experts were increasingly worried about the youth's ability to face the "enemy," which meant the home needed to be exciting and dynamic to stimulate children's brains. Unfortunately, the revolutionary social movements of the 1960s and

1970s revealed that "youth *was* the enemy" (Ehrenreich 261). In being too permissive for too many years, mothers—specifically, the housewife mother—had failed (Ehrenreich 234-265).

But the dawning second-wave feminist movement pushed back against experts who looked at mothers and only saw failure. Feminists ripped out the Romantic ideology that had embedded itself like weeds into every corner of society since industrialization. They took issue with the "science" that had relegated women to the home and pathologized their bodies. They fought for and won better contraception, access to abortion, and the ability to pursue higher education and careers. They revitalized public interest in midwifery, which had been pulverized into non-existence by American medicine (Simonds; Rich; Leavitt), and advocated for returns to preindustrial, community-centered models of learning and socializing. They pushed for equal responsibility in maintaining the home and caring for others, including children and the elderly (Ehrenreich 313-317).

Jointly with the civil rights, gay rights, and disability rights movements, the feminist movement encouraged changes in attitudes about race, single parents, homosexual couples, unmarried couples, surrogacy, adoption, reproductive technologies, and gender over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As a result, the public's image of what a mother could look like and who she could be gradually expanded, as did the quality and number of her choices. The Woman Question was reshaped into questions *for* contemporary women: What will you choose? And if you choose motherhood—who will you listen to? Experts, peers, or both?

CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD

In this section I will briefly turn to scholarship on contemporary motherhood to further contextualize the episodes that I examine later in this thesis. How is motherhood today different from previous iterations, and what are the dominant ideologies? While motherhood today is better in many ways than previous generations, scholarship reveals that it is also uniquely challenging.

Topping off decades of advances in infant and maternal health, women today experience unprecedented levels of individual freedom. According to demographic data from Pew Research Center, mothers stay in school longer than ever before, wait until later in life to have children, and don't have as many children as previous generations. The majority continue to work even with very young children at home. Additionally, American mothers increasingly serve as their family's sole or primary breadwinner (Geiger). While these statistics are encouraging, motherhood today does not come without a price. Another defining characteristic—far murkier and more challenging—is negotiating a balance between careers and a highly-involved form of mothering (Hanauer xi-xix).

Second-wave feminists tried to ward off the intrusive and often contradictory demands of experts, but any respite mothers felt was temporary. Demands quickly rematerialized, this time in the ideology of "intensive mothering." Sharon Hays defined intensive mothering in the mid-1990s as the pressure to provide constant nurturing, to stay up to date on expert advice, and to spend vast amounts of time, energy, and money on children. Many scholars believe that in an (outwardly) egalitarian and liberated society, intensive mothering quietly reinforces the gender hierarchy, overburdening women with domestic and childcare responsibilities (Ennis 1-5). As it turns out, the day-to-day workload of American women tends to reflect these burdens: mothers spend more time in the labor force *and* more time caring for children compared to previous generations (Geiger).

In the 2010s and early 2020s, intensive mothering is still the ideal, with an additional component: naturalism. Naturalism encourages mothers to live in a "healthy" manner as defined by our contemporary standards: buying organic foods, following a specific diet (vegetarian, vegan, etc.), and maintaining an exercise regime. Attachment parenting is endorsed by experts as "natural"—and in recent years baby wraps and bedside sleepers have rendered this style of parenting even more literal. Naturalism promotes ecological practices such as limiting plastic use, switching to cloth diapers, and breastfeeding (Badinter). Mothers who (are able to) choose these practices often do so willingly, for personal satisfaction or health and environmental benefits. But each one requires time, ability, effort, and/or funds that further tax mothers' limited energy and resources.

Scholars such as Elisabeth Badinter hypothesize that some women may decide to opt-out of motherhood entirely after observing the enormous demands on their relatives and peers who have children. Badinter's hypothesis corresponds with the falling American birthrate (Stone) and suggests that family-friendly policies *and* more relaxed cultural attitudes about motherhood are both necessary to reverse birthrate trends (Badinter). In an ideal world, these family policies and cultural attitudes would work in tandem to facilitate happier American mothers and families overall. And equally ideally, women who decide to become mothers would have multiple avenues through which to learn about motherhood, get advice and support, and socialize with peers.

For preindustrial women, all of those activities took place exclusively in small communities and generally without the presence of an expert. While the preindustrial model had positive social effects, precarious childbirth, widespread infections, and poor nutrition made life difficult and dangerous. For postindustrial mothers, the typical model of learning and socializing is quite different: mothers receive advice through a hierarchal relationship with experts who historically have viewed women as passive and inferior. Within this model, socialization is different too: childcare (which was previously a community effort) became the sole responsibility of individual mothers after industrialization.

For contemporary American families, heightened mobility has also changed the nature of community and socialization. While frequent moves around the country or even the world for educational and career opportunities certainly has its upsides, it reduces proximity to hometown family who traditionally could help with childcare. Our social technologies have reduced in-person socialization as well. Although we're able to stay connected online, research suggests that we paradoxically don't gather face-to-face with friends or family as often as we used to and that we may be less inclined to join community groups in our area (Turkle). However, in online spaces, motherhood content is flourishing: today's mothers seek out Google, social media, internet communities, and podcasts to learn from experts and peers and to bond with fellow mothers.

In the world of podcasting, creators take advantage of the medium's fluidity and flexibility to craft unique styles. Even so, the two models of advice and socializing outlined thus far—the preindustrial model and the postindustrial model—are central to the motherhood podcasting genre. Peer-oriented podcasts can provide comfort, wisdom, and a pseudo-kinship community. They tell stories, reveal vulnerabilities, and use humor to explore the messy realities of motherhood. They address taboos and create safe spaces to reflect on life behind the closed doors of homes and workplaces. But they often uncritically reflect the demands of intensive mothering and can even perpetuate burdens, expectations, and patriarchal assumptions about motherhood.

Expert-oriented podcasts fall in line with postindustrial systems of learning and often speak in the voice of the expert. They continue to dispense advice, this time in a digital information economy. Most podcasts are currently free, but listenership can be sold to advertisers or used for self-promotion. While expert-oriented podcasts have the potential to disseminate useful, sound advice, they can also perpetuate myths about "good" mothers, this time who are white, young, partnered, environmentally conscious, and working-the-perfect-amount. And in one way or another every motherhood podcast, regardless of orientation, grapples with the Woman Question.

Ehrenreich and English argue that as we forge ahead into the future, the Woman Question follows alongside us. It wasn't answered in the nineteenth century, nor in the tumultuous 1970s, nor has it ever really been answered. But it also isn't just about women and mothers, not entirely. The Woman Question represents the uncertainties about how men, women, children, the elderly, and everyone in between should structure our lives together in an ever-more industrialized, technological world (Ehrenreich 323). I would argue too that the Woman Question encourages us to think deeply and critically about *how* we explain and teach one another about motherhood in today's age; about our current expert-led systems of learning and the ways they can be improved; and about what we prioritize when it comes to the health of mothers, particularly their social health.

This is precisely the terrain in which contemporary podcasts about motherhood are situated. I will now dive into the vibrant world of motherhood podcasts, outlining a few prominent subgenres.

These include the "expert advice" and "companionship" subgenres in which the specific episodes to come can be classified.

MOTHERHOOD PODCAST SUBGENRES

In this section I outline the five prominent categories that I identified in this field. The categories are "expert advice," "midwifery," "companionship," "comedy," and "social critiques." A brief description of each genre and its typical peer- or expert-orientation is given below.

Expert advice. These podcasts are hosted by or predominantly feature interviews with experts. While some experts may begin to feel like peers over time, that role is secondary—the expert role always comes first. Hosts and guests establish their credibility through education, authorship, and/or independent research in the fields of pregnancy, obstetrics, pediatrics, child psychology, sociology, education, and parenting. *All About Pregnancy & Birth,* hosted by obstetrician-gynecologist Nicole Rankins, is one relevant example. Dr. Rankins varies the structure of her episodes, at times providing information on her own, with another expert, or with postpartum women. On the level of production, the podcast is relatively simple: listeners hear mostly uninterrupted informational monologues and one-on-one conversations with guests. *Pregnancy Podcast,* another example in this genre, also features monologues from host Vanessa Merten. Merten's website notes that she began the podcast after facing overwhelming confusion about online sources for pregnancy and birth information ("About Vanessa"). Notably, it does not appear that Merten has higher educational attainment or publications in these fields; *Pregnancy Podcast* serves as a reminder that in the world of podcasting, those who are self-taught, independently educated, or lack traditional credentials can position themselves as experts and establish credibility through podcasting itself.

Midwifery. These podcasts are hosted by midwives, doulas, and other alternative childbirth attendants, or predominantly feature these individuals and the ideology of midwifery. The role of expert and peer varies enormously in this subgenre: some hosts behave as midwifery experts,

whereas others chat about their lives, share personal stories, and offer advice in a more peer-to-peer manner. Podcasts in this genre include *The Birthful Podcast,* hosted by doula and postpartum educator Adriana Lozada, and *Birth Kweens,* hosted by licensed midwife Karly Nuttall and doula Ali Feroah. On the level of production, they follow suit with the expert podcasts cited above; however, they rarely if ever feature informational monologues, pursuing a conversational approach instead. It's important to note that these podcasts are *not* a perfect antithesis to problematic aspects of obstetrics. Midwifery aims to confront the medical model of birth in a productive manner, but overly fervent proponents run the risk of setting *new* standards and expectations that are also not attainable for most mothers.[2] While many podcasts in this genre hope to successfully challenge dominant models, the dogma held by some hosts and guests potentially undercuts the message.

Companionship. These podcasts are rarely created by experts, birth professionals, or educators. Instead, they are hosted by mothers with a penchant for podcasting who take on a peer role almost exclusively. These women are variously stay-at-home moms, mothers who remain in the workforce and podcast as a hobby, or mothers for whom podcasting has become a full-time job. Examples include *Mama Said* by Jamie-Lynn Sigler and Jenna Parris and *The Mom Hour* by Meagan Francis and Sarah Powers. On the level of production, this genre runs the gamut. In some shows extensive editing, sound effects, musical transitions, and clips are routinely used, while others feature a more minimalist style. What all of these podcasts have at their core is personal conversation—about children, parenting, bodies, health, work, sex, relationships, and politics. These women share vulnerabilities, lived experiences, perceived failures, and extensive details about their personal lives. The openness, honesty, and unguardedness that abound in this genre make it feel like a close descendent of the peer-to-peer learning and socializing found in preindustrial traditions.

Comedy. These podcasts are hosted by professional comedians or mothers who have a bent for comedy. Hosts almost exclusively favor a peer role as well. Unlike the professionalism of expert advice or midwifery's mentorship approach, podcasts in the comedy genre are more likely to be highly personal and specific. Companionship podcasts share an interest in the personal, but what constitutes success for the comedy genre is different. While companionship podcasts may

occasionally make mothers laugh, the *success* of comedy podcasts hinges on this achievement. Examples include *One Bad Mother,* hosted by former stand-up comic Biz Ellis and humor writer Theresa Thorn, and *What Fresh Hell,* hosted by former stand-up comic and comedy writer Margaret Ables and former sitcom actor Amy Wilson. Even when hosts interview experts, the underlying core of each episode is humor. For this reason, it's unsurprising that some of the most raunchy, edgy perspectives on children, motherhood, and co-parenting can be found in this genre—but the genre also houses some of the gentlest, most subversive reassurances for mothers.

Social critiques. These podcasts look at systematic issues in America that affect mothers, parents, children, and families. The expert and peer roles vary: hosts who are investigative journalists may share details about their personal lives, but they typically maintain a professional attitude. Additionally, they often feature and interview experts. While this genre certainly can provide comfort and social support, these positive effects are byproducts. At its core, the genre aims to critique patriarchy as it pertains to diverse and contemporary mothers, with an ultimate goal of shifting cultural attitudes and spurring political change. Podcasts in this genre include *The Longest Shortest Time,* hosted by radio producer and author Hillary Frank, *The Double Shift,* hosted by journalist Katherine Goldstein, and *Mom After Hours,* hosted by writer Brandi Wiatrak. On the level of production, shows in this genre are often supported by podcasting companies, radio stations, or media groups and feature more advanced editing and audio storytelling techniques. While other genres seek to teach, comfort, or make mothers laugh, social critique emboldens a new emotion: productive anger. In the season two finale of *The Double Shift,* author Angela Garbles explains how her research led to radical self-acceptance, a bent for activism, and an inversion of the traditional expert-mother dynamic. "When it comes to my own lived experience and *my* life," she calmly proclaims, "I'm the expert" (23:12).

Many podcasts wobble between a few different categories. For example, in *The Birth Hour,* host Bryn Huntpalmer interviews mothers who share a wide variety of birth stories (companionship), including a very high proportion of home births and birth center experiences (midwifery). In *Motherhood Sessions*, host and reproductive psychiatrist Alexandra Sacks invites us to listen in on her

intimate therapy sessions with mothers (companionship and expert advice). A perfect classification of genres is likely impossible, but broad strokes can still tell us a lot about general trends.

First, podcasts about motherhood are fundamentally social. Although only the companionship genre is *defined* by its social qualities, conversation and discussion are central to each—and it is possible for online communities to form among listeners of any of these genres. Second, each genre engages with intensive mothering in its own way. Experts add burdens or give advice about managing them; companionship podcasts commiserate and offer comfort; comedy podcasts cope with humor; social critiques advocate for radical change; and midwifery encourages its own alternatives. Third, genre both generates and represents the desire for choice. As a demographic group, mothers are not homogenous and do seek out the same content. Even individual mothers may crave different kinds of content depending on the day. The multiplicity of genres and the medium's flexibility allow mothers to craft their own unique playlists and listening habits—including whether to tune in to experts, peers, or both.

CLOSE READINGS: WHAT TO EXPECT & BIG FAT POSITIVE

In this section, I examine an episode of the expert-oriented *What to Expect* podcast and an episode of the peer-oriented *Big Fat Positive* podcast. It is my hope that the above historical context, contemporary motherhood scholarship, and description of subgenres have provided insight into the fascinating subtext of these episodes. The content and form of the *What to Expect* and *Big Fat Positive* podcasts reflect unique models of learning which have hundreds of years of history behind them. Additionally, even though the words "intensive mothering" are not spoken in either podcast, the ideology defines motherhood culture today and is evident beneath the surface in both episodes.

The *What to Expect* and *Big Fat Positive* episodes have vastly different approaches to language, style, and advice giving. Additionally, they handle *peer* and *expert* orientations in oppositional ways. As will be explored further, despite their dissimilarities both episodes reflect intensive mothering

practices. Finally, iTunes reviews are noted throughout both close readings—they provide occasional insights about listenership and the strengths and pitfalls of the hosts' methods.

The What to Expect Podcast

In 2020, one of the most famous pregnancy and parenting brands made the leap into podcasting. *What to Expect* launched in 1984 with the first edition of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. In the decades that followed, the advice guide developed a complicated reputation. In 2005 *The New York Times* called it the book pregnant women "love to hate." One point of controversy involves credibility: contemporary readers are quick to point out that Murkoff is not an expert in a traditional sense. Not only does the author lack medical training, but she has admitted that "only late in the process" does she ask doctors to look over manuscripts. This inexperience did not hinder the brand's success in its early years. The guide was considered radical—not only was it one of the first publications in the burgeoning genre of pregnancy self-help, it was also written in an accessible, "just-us-gals" style that drew comparisons to *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Kantor).

But the universal praise was short-lived. In each subsequent edition, *What to Expect* devoted more time to complications, dangers, and rules. Parents became increasingly anxious despite the colloquial writing style that involved a frequent use of puns.[3] In the early 2000s Murkoff revised the "Best Odds Diet," her strict nutrition guidelines which helped the series earn the nickname *What to Expect if You Want to Develop an Eating Disorder*. The brand has generally been responsive to criticism, revising and updating content to reflect evolving times. But one problem with this is that many parents aren't reading the most updated copies. Outdated content lives on in hand-me-downs and secondhand bookstores (Kantor). Despite these issues, Murkoff has cemented herself as an expert whose trademark style is to write conversationally as if she were a peer. In 2020, the *What to Expect* brand consists of advice guides, a website, forums, a mobile app, and now a podcast.

Previous scholars have focused on the brand's print materials, but their insights still provide useful frameworks for examining this episode. In 2006, Indiana University professors Catherine A. Dobris

and Kim White-Mills identified three contradictory thematic pairs in the *What to Expect* book series. "You can do it" and "You can do it with his help" was the first thematic pair; "There is a lot to worry about" and "Don't worry" was the second pair; and "Listen to your instincts" and "Listen to your doctor" was the third pair (29). These inconsistencies and assumptions left parents feeling guilty and disoriented. Dobris and White-Mills found that patriarchal visions of motherhood were largely upheld, as the series suggested to mothers that their voices were "perceived as inauthentic and inadequate in the very process of mothering" (34).

Using Dobris and White-Mills' framework, I identified additional thematic pairs that emerge in this episode. Two are related to content—these include "All us gals are just chatting" and "All us gals are being lectured by the expert," and "Pregnancy's a time of freedom" and "Pregnancy's a time to diet." The third relates to the medium: "Dictation" and "Conversation." Each of these thematic pairs correspond with Murkoff's confusing role of "expert-peer." In preindustrial communities, women were likely to find reassurances, encouragement, and creative advice tailored to their unique situations among their peers (Ehrenreich). Today, an ideal peer-to-peer approach to pregnancy would preserve this creative mindset, recognizing that by choice or necessity lifestyles vary enormously across the country. However, despite Murkoff's numerous attempts at a peer-to-peer approach, the content of the episode is often rigid and assuming, ultimately falling more closely in line with patriarchal, postindustrial experts.

What to Expect: Expert-as-Peer & Dictation-as-Conversation

In "Eating Well When You're Expecting," released on August 19, 2020, Murkoff and her daughter Emma Bing discuss pregnancy nutrition. The first theme, "All us gals are just chatting," is established primarily through language. Murkoff uses the same puny, feminized language developed in the book series. A fetus is the size of "a baby bean… a teeny little lentil" (13:48). Pregnancy is "baking a baby bun" (37:22), a process that creates "your ready-to-snuggle baby" (2:13). Murkoff's language is warm, colorful, and more enthusiastic than that of other experts: a stomach is a "tummy" (7:32), and advice about morning sickness includes becoming "the smoothie

queen" (15:08) and stocking up on "cute little kiwis" (22:57). Language choices point to a lateral expert-listener relationship, one that is personable and welcoming: "All us gals are just chatting."

But Murkoff does not refrain from handing out ample expert advice and expecting listeners to trust it at face value. Dobris and White-Mills point out that "sources are rarely noted" in the sugary landscape of the *What to Expect* books (27), and the same phenomenon occurs in this episode. Murkoff makes a number of substantial claims without citing relevant research. These include trimester calorie counts and taking a "Goldilocks approach" to protein—"not too much, not too little" (36:10). Other significant claims include how slowed digestion (resulting in constipation) actually "allows your body to absorb more nutrients" (22:19), and that nutrition during the first trimester "doesn't matter as much as it's going to matter later on" (13:55). Whether these claims are scientifically valid is outside the scope of this thesis. What matters for this discussion is the way they are presented: citation-free and with certainty.

One possible aesthetic reason for skipping over sources is the concern that they will disrupt the episode's pace and bog down an otherwise light, jargonless tone. Some podcasters who adopt this approach encourage listeners to check out episode web pages where citations and further readings are listed. But Murkoff does not provide citations in real time nor point to any research that can be explored after listening.[4] The language may suggest a lateral dynamic between expert and listener, but the way facts and advice are presented distorts that dynamic—Murkoff expects listeners to trust that she is credible and accept her advice without question. The *What to Expect* brand is careful not to present Murkoff as an authoritarian expert who hands advice down to passive mothers. But beneath the puns and chatty tone, it's difficult not to sense that at times this is the most relevant dynamic at play. Thus: "All us gals are being lectured by the expert."

The second theme, "Pregnancy's a time of freedom," is constructed by a handful of indulgent moments. *The New York Times* notes that Murkoff's nutrition rules have become "far more permissive" over the years (Kantor), and moments of leniency do occur in this episode. Murkoff notes the importance of varied diets but clarifies that she "[doesn't] care about variety if you're

feeling sick" (14:19). She reminds listeners that whole-grain saltines are superior but cautions, "don't push your luck if you're on survival mode" (14:45). Permissiveness corresponds thematically with Murkoff's "just-us-gals" approach: we typically expect gentle encouragement from our friends and community and stricter expectations from experts. But constant references to diet culture, deprivation, and food rules further undermine Murkoff's attempt at a peer-to-peer approach.

In the first segment, Murkoff asks Bing what mothers on Instagram are saying about pregnancy nutrition. Bing responds that people "in this day and age… are just out there living their best life" (7:55).[5] She tells Murkoff that although we don't know what's happening "behind closed doors," the trend on social media is to highlight the "fun aspects" of pregnancy, such as eating a sundae (8:20). A misunderstanding then occurs: it appears Bing meant that only indulgent moments are posted, while more restrictive or balanced eating is not as "fun" and therefore not shared.

But Murkoff interprets the comment to mean that even *more* indulgent eating is happening off social media. She responds in astonishment: "You can only imagine if the brownie sundae is in public what's going on behind closed doors!" Even though Bing is quick to correct her ("I mean, probably behind—at home they're probably eating salads, but no one's gonna post that because that's not like a pregnancy adventure"), the imprint of Murkoff's comment lingers, negating the episode's other permissive moments (8:29). Murkoff's colloquial language seems to imply a tolerant attitude toward pregnant mothers, but moments like this reveal an expert beneath the peer persona who chides, passes judgment, and sets demanding expectations for women.

In the second segment, Murkoff and Bing discuss sugar cravings. Because sugar calories are "empty calories," Murkoff encourages listeners to limit them (28:10).[6] Deprivation, a key component of diet culture, is encouraged further when Murkoff adds a caveat: "that's if you *can* limit them" (28:27). She paints various mental images of mothers binging to help prove her point that cutting out sugar calories completely is sometimes the best solution:

"For some moms it's just, it's really hard to curb the sweet tooth once it's chomping on a single brownie and suddenly the whole tray makes [sic] all gone—and if you can stop at a mini Snickers, that's no big deal, or even two mini Snickers. But if one or two leads to the whole bag, over time that could become a big deal. So, you know your limits and whether you can tempt temptation on a regular basis" (28:35).

Guilt-inducing language is present in other moments of the episode as well. To ward off heartburn, Murkoff encourages avoiding "gut bombs" (21:11) and eating slowly instead of "gobbling up your food, even if you're super hungry" (20:57). Too many antacids are not the solution to heartburn, Murkoff notes, lightly chiding Bing who "popped" Tums and Rolaids "like candy" during her pregnancy (21:37). Murkoff also discourages spicy, greasy foods. Pepperoni pizza is particularly "bad," but Murkoff tells listeners: "'Course if you crave it, have it, you'll just pay later" (20:26).

Throughout the episode, the host undermines the notion that pregnancy can be a freer, more indulgent time for women. When Bing asks Murkoff about "eating for two," Murkoff laughs and then provides specific calorie guidelines that are "not even close" to doubling up (25:15). To soothe any disappointment listeners may feel about these rules, she concedes that a very small portion of dessert is acceptable and defines what that looks like: "Not exactly the all-access pass to Ben & Jerry's you might have been hoping for, though no one's gonna stand between you and a *scoop* of chunky monkey, least of all me" (26:11).[7] Murkoff's disorienting expert-peer role is on full display in this moment: the language seems playful and permissive at first glance, but the actual guidance is rigid and patronizing.

The final oppositional pair emerges in the medium itself. Murkoff and Bing's three segments are structured to be free-flowing, discussion-based interviews ("Conversation"), but in reality the episode more closely resembles a Frankenstein version of the expert monologue ("Dictation"). The lack of spontaneity has led a number of iTunes reviewers to express confusion or complain about scriptedness. There isn't anything inherently wrong with scriptedness or the expert monologue—both formats can have positive effects on listeners. For example, many reviewers consider Dr. Rankins' monologues in *All About Pregnancy & Birth* to be "educational," "comforting," and "affirming" (moll_bc; stellamarie6). The expert monologue can be a conduit for professional,

sensitive, one-on-one conversations with listeners. But monologues are an entirely different technique than Murkoff and Bing's interview format. Listeners tune in to interviews in the hope that the resulting conversation will feel spirited and push important ideas forward.

But this episode at times feels like a peculiar melding of dictation and conversation—as if Murkoff and Bing have attempted to wrangle the expert monologue into the structure of a discussion. For example, Murkoff finishes a lengthy explanation about calorie counts by noting how many calories someone carrying twins should eat. "Double the fun," Bing replies in monotone. "Yes," Murkoff says (28:05). The pair quickly move on to another topic, and the exchange ends up feeling stilted and wooden. Even when more energy is present, some of the exchanges still feel overly planned and unnatural. When Murkoff admits she escaped heartburn and nausea during pregnancy, she employs a sing-songy voice to tell Bing: "Don't be a hater, Emma! Don't be a hater!" Bing replies: "Of course you did! You unicorn!" (19:30). Less than a second later, Murkoff continues dictating information about heartburn.

Numerous attempts are made to present the conversation between Bing and Murkoff as lighthearted, personal, and spontaneous. But an effect similar to the uncanny valley occurs instead. "This is not a podcast for pregnant people who like podcasts," one reviewer notes, likely alluding to how the show's format does not align with podcasting norms. "It's way too scripted," she writes, "yet the content is not interesting" (Rfj122247). Heavy podcast users have come to expect and enjoy particular modes, such as absorbing, engrossing scriptedness and/or spontaneous, electric conversations. Sociality is woven into the fabric of almost all podcasts about motherhood, regardless of subgenre—but the first handful of the *What to Expect* episodes feel *artificially* social. The dissonance suggests significant growing pains as Murkoff's expert-as-peer brand transitions to a highly social and nuanced audio medium.

In 2006, Dobris and White-Mills concluded that within the "fantasy vision" of the *What to Expect* series, patriarchal depictions of motherhood were largely upheld (34). The *What to Expect* episode follows suit, specifically by encouraging intensive mothering. Pregnant women, some only just

beginning the motherhood chapters of their lives, are expected to do it all: cook with variety, make sure fruits and vegetables are fresh, eat balanced meals, keep track of nutrients, limit or cut out sugar, control weight gain, pay attention to trimester calorie requirements, get enough protein, but not too much protein, which is dangerous, and not too little protein, which is also dangerous. As illustrated in this episode, intensive mothering places heavy burdens on women, adds years to the outdated lifespans of patriarchal gender roles, and begins well before children are even born.[8]

But there is another kind of fantasy vision at work here too, one that extends to Murkoff and the *What to Expect* podcasting team. Contemporary parents continue to be critical of the brand's messaging and Murkoff's attempt at a blended expert-peer role. Podcasts provide a platform for a vast range of roles: virtually anyone can start a podcast. Hosts can be historians, doctors, comedians, midwives, investigative journalists, authors, or even just friends, parents, or "regular people." These roles can certainly blend in an organic manner. Comforting experts like Dr. Rankins can begin to *feel* like peers, and at times knowledgeable peers may begin to *feel* like experts. But Murkoff's attempt at a blended role is not organic—it stems from a decades-old writing style that was developed for the specific medium of pregnancy self-help guides.

Mixed reactions to the *What to Expect* podcast demonstrate that listeners expect nuance from podcasts and hosts when it comes to content *and* the audio medium. Podcast listeners, particularly heavy users, are not passive consumers. Motherhood podcasts require sociality and an adherence to genre norms (or at least an acute awareness of these modes, if a host chooses to experiment or break away from them). In print, the *What to Expect* brand has struggled to repackage the "expert-as-peer" role for contemporary parents—and it appears that in podcasting, this difficulty continues.

The *Big Fat Positive* Podcast

After becoming friends and writing partners in graduate school, Laura Birek and Shanna Micko launched the podcast *Big Fat Positive* in August 2018. At that time, Micko had a toddler-aged daughter and was twelve weeks pregnant with her second child; Birek was eight weeks pregnant

with her first child ("About Big Fat Positive"). Each week the friends discussed their lives and pregnancies as their due dates approached. After their children were born, the podcast continued with weekly personal updates and special segments about early parenthood.

The episode structure of *Big Fat Positive* is fairly regular. From time to time Birek and Micko bring on experts and guests, but generally they host episodes alone. The podcast fits squarely into the companionship subgenre: one listener describes turning to podcasts to "keep [her] company" during pregnancy, having no pregnant friends to "laugh/discuss/worry with" in her area (SCgalCal0515). Another reviewer mentions that she specifically sought out this subgenre as opposed to an expert-driven one. "I love hearing from real people on their perspective of pregnancy, not just facts all the time," she writes, noting that "there are plenty of other podcasts and books for that" (emk622).

This sentiment is shared by others who appreciate that *Big Fat Positive* is not "overly stuffed with 'educational information' like many other mom podcasts." Instead, episodes feel like "a coffee date with other moms" (PugLove94). These reviews correspond thematically to the first wave of an *older* digital genre which also used peer-to-peer approaches to discuss motherhood and build online communities—mommy blogging. Although mommy blogging involves a different medium, insights from scholars about the genre still provide useful frameworks for examining this episode.

The peer-oriented, highly social first wave of mommy blogging occurred between 2005 and 2010 and consisted of "confessional, raw accounts… on amateur blogs" (Jezer-Morton). Scholar Rebecca Powell describes this first wave, folding in personal experience. Powell's morning routine in 2010 consisted of waking up before her son and reading headlines on her computer. Then, she would leave behind "the news of the world" for "the domestic, the maternal and the everyday"—her preferred list of mommy blogs:

"The web addresses, familiar as my mother's phone number… belong to mommy bloggers I have read since shortly before my two-year old son's birth. I know the names of their children, the layout of their houses, their favorite drinks and their pet peeves. Like thousands of other readers, I have

read of their depressions, their moves, their children's birthdays, and their marital squabbles. I have read their tales of motherhood as I have negotiated the discourse of the role and constructed my own practice" (37).

Powell describes being invested and immersed in the lives of these first-wave bloggers. A pseudo-kinship tie clearly formed: she "checks in" on them each morning as one might a relative, neighbor, or close friend. Powell notes that mommy bloggers' posts share a number of commonalities, often consisting of "narratives of daily interactions with family" and "reflections on mothering" (40). These reflections are highly fluid in nature. In one moment, motherhood is "isolating," and in the next it is "a community." It is "a favorite place" and also "torture"; both "almost perfect" and "failure" (Powell 46). Within this world, motherhood and identity are complex constructions. Unlike expert genres which provide a steady stream of advice over the lifespan, the peer-to-peer genre of mommy blogging provides "no straight narratives, no fixed positions." Instead, there are "just messy lives" (Powell 47).

The second and third waves of mommy blogging changed these depictions, shifting from vulnerable to aspirational in nature (Jezer-Morton). Additionally, in subsequent years parenting content exploded online. Motherhood is now discussed on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Buzzfeed, YouTube, and in podcasts. No longer limited to the written word of blogs, mothers can be choosy about the mediums and avenues they use to depict their experiences. In an increasingly visual digital world, podcasting feels like a deliberate return to *voice,* to uninterrupted musings on motherhood that unfold entirely in words—to content created by and for mothers and peers.

Big Fat Positive: Peer-as-Friend, Expert Uninterrogated, Conversation as "Coffee Date"

Episode 107, "The Struggles and Snuggles of Toddler Separation Anxiety," was released on July 20, 2020. The episode does not feature guests and follows Birek and Micko's typical three-part structure. During the first segment, the hosts share updates about their children and personal lives. The second segment rotates from week to week; this week Micko and Birek ask the *Big Fat Positive* community for advice about issues they are facing in their own lives in a segment called "It Takes

A Village." In the final segment, both hosts share "BFPs" (big fat positives) and the show comes to an end after 49 minutes.

This episode of *Big Fat Positive* is peer-driven and peer-oriented. Micko and Birek consider each other peers, and they extend that relationship to listeners. On the level of language, this relationship is fostered by choosing not to script segments. The episode's language mirrors informal, conversational speech patterns and points to a live, spontaneous discussion. Filler words such as "like," "so," "um," "yeah," and "right?" make more than a hundred appearances. Quick tangents are explored before circling back to the main topic. The hosts interrupt themselves mid-thought and sometimes interrupt one another. As an example, many of these characteristics are on display when Birek describes her trip to see her mother who lives on the San Joaquin River:

> "So we went up there and I knew that my toddler was gonna love playing—in, in and around the river, 'cause her like back porch just opens right up to the river. So—and it's really, it's a very shallow river right—right at the point where she's at. It then will get deeper and like—I went kayaking on it once with my dad, and like *[laughing]* both Corey and I both capsized and like almost got trapped under like reeds and all—it was, it was like actually harrowing. *[Laughing.]* Yeah. It was a whole thing. But where we're at it's very like—where my mom's house is at it's very calm and just lovely…" (9:22).

The hosts present "real life" conversations in which thoughts rise to the surface, new ideas join and sometimes conflict, humorous moments crop up unplanned, and support is offered at each turn. The hosts "speak like normal people with real thoughts, laughs and struggles," one listener notes (Reviewer-11). Podcasting and blogging both allow creators to edit and revise before publishing content. But just as in the first wave of mommy blogging, the friends do not overly edit themselves or script conversations which wouldn't represent their genuine interactions with one another. Many experts use professional language whether at a patient's bedside or while recording a podcast—but a peer-to-peer approach can be much more forgiving. Among friends, one can ramble, get lost in thought, or even contradict a previous statement. Credibility is not at stake: peers can present less-than-perfect versions of themselves and ideally feel safe doing so.

In addition to unscriptedness, the episode is filled with *things*. The hosts are attentive to the quotidian objects that populate their lives. There are named references to cities, highways, parks, children's books, recipe websites, diaper brands, hair tie brands, and grocery stores. When Birek is discussing children's books, she asks Micko: "Do you guys have *Goodnight Gorilla?"* (12:47). Later, Micko mentions her preferred marinara brand: "I love Rao's, that's amazing, but it's so expensive" (35:29). Just as the discourse matches casual speech, *things* further ground the conversation in everyday life and enhance the peer-to-peer dynamic. When telling one another stories, naming things helps flesh out details; when sharing a parenting trick, it provides specificity so others can try it too. The named places and items and ideas that make appearances in this episode represent the unique chapter of life and parenting the hosts find themselves in.[9] Each week these objects are slightly different, but so too are the children's ages and the hosts' experiences with parenting.

These experiences with parenting are another central element of the episode, and they are inextricably tied up with intensive mothering. Although the episode is created by and for peers, the presence of experts can still be felt pressing in from the outside. Intensive mothering creates enormous pressure within the space of the episode: numerous times Birek and Micko express feeling tired and overwhelmed as mothers. When one shares a burden or frustration (and often an accompanying aspiration), the other will offer support—usually through advice, brainstorming, or verbal sympathy along the lines of, "I hope [this difficult phase]'s short-lived" (4:32).

One example is when Micko describes how meal preparation feels particularly draining for her. "By the end of the day, I've already done like one zillion snacks and two meals," she explains. "I would love to feel more inspired to cook things that are easy and delicious and not so processed, but I—I don't know." She adds with a laugh: "I'm a tired, exhausted, sometimes cranky person" (31:30). Birek validates this feeling, adding that even though she has always loved to cook, "by the time, like, four o'clock rolls around, I'm just like, I don't wanna chop a single thing" (32:30). Later, when Micko sarcastically says her go-to dinner recipe (spaghetti with frozen vegetables and whatever ground meat is on hand) is "homemade" and "from scratch," Birek jumps in again with earnest reassurance: "That *is* homemade from scratch" (34:47). Birek and Micko may not

interrogate intensive mothering or the pressures of patriarchal experts in this episode, but they do offer one another valuable peer-to-peer social support and extend that support to their listeners.

And listeners play an enormous and important role in the podcast. The language, attention to *things* and quotidian life, and a commiserative approach to intensive mothering set this show apart from other subgenres. A final quality—perhaps the most notable—is how often Birek and Micko reference or speak directly to their listeners, cementing the peer-to-peer approach. Upwards of twenty-five times the hosts mention actions such as linking something "in [their] show notes" for listeners (46:40), posting a photo "of the cuteness" on Instagram to share with listeners (43:17), asking listeners who meal prep to share tips (33:10), and filling in details about a local story so "those who don't live here" still feel included (11:16).

Birek and Micko's near-constant references to their community encourage listeners to take on an active role. The show's entire second segment ("It Takes A Village") is devoted to asking the audience for help. Birek and Micko invert the dynamic employed by some traditional experts who seem to always have an answer and avoid revealing uncertainty. Instead, Birek and Micko reveal themselves to be vulnerable and often completely *devoid* of answers. When Birek describes her son's tantrums which leave her feeling frustrated and exhausted, she slows down her speech to address listeners: "Yeah, so. I don't know what to do, guys. I don't know what to do. I need help!" (28:06).

For podcasts in which there are two hosts, the listener is perhaps always the assumed, unspoken "third chair." For Birek and Micko, this third chair is not unspoken or an assumption—the hosts speak directly to the listener and reference her presence constantly. Even though the audience cannot respond in real time, Birek and Micko encourage listeners to pick up the conversation on their social media channels and in their Facebook community. For long-haul listeners who've been in the "third chair" since the podcast's inception, it's unsurprising that over time unique social ties to the hosts may form. The iTunes reviews for *Big Fat Positive* indeed point to strong social ties—a connection between host and listener that appears to be similar to the connection between mommy blogger and reader described by Rebecca Powell in 2010.

At the time of this writing, there are thirty-eight written reviews of the podcast, and seven specifically mention the word "friend." For mothers who are socially isolated, geographically remote, or are experiencing other kinds of social voids in their lives, pseudo-kinship ties are perhaps especially important. One listener who "didn't have any pregnant friends to share [her] experience with" said the podcast was "fun and comforting." She compared the act of listening to "sitting down to a cup of tea and some friends to catch up on new mom life" (jcmaclovespodcasts).

Phrases like "hanging out" and "coffee date" are common in these reviews, and point to a social tie that *feels* active, physical, and equally reciprocated. It appears many listeners interpret the relationship to be mutual, some even seeing themselves as "[growing] along with [the hosts] week by week" (due christmas). Even though on its surface, podcasting appears to be a one-way medium—sounds, stories, and information traveling in one direction, from host to listener—scholars like Eva-Sabine Zehelein argue that this relationship can actually be much more fluid.

Zehelein describes how *listening* is an intimate, social, and highly personal act, particularly for podcasts that are not "professional large-scale corporate funded enterprises" but smaller, more independent projects (145). Zehelein argues that a special intimacy is fostered when listeners "bear witness" to confessions, experience others' "joy and pain," and follow the autobiographical chapters from one episode to the next. In this subgenre, listeners are "active participants," perhaps even the podcast's "co-creators"—and the ubiquity of the medium means that this bonding can happen "wherever and whenever" (Zehelein 145-6). Indeed, *Big Fat Positive* listeners describe themselves engaging and socializing with the podcast as they go about their daily routines. For some listeners, the podcast appears to provide a significant sense of relief from social isolation and loneliness, which can be especially dangerous for new mothers.

In 2017, former surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy identified loneliness as a public health crisis. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, Dr. Murthy wrote extensively about the effect of loneliness on Americans' mental health, physical health, quality of life, and longevity. Although people didn't

often admit directly that they were lonely, Dr. Murthy noticed allusions to loneliness in phrases like, "I feel like I have to shoulder all of these burdens by myself" (Martin).[10] American mothers—dealing with economic hardships, postpartum physical and mental health challenges, isolation from family and community, the demands of working and raising children, and the pressures of experts and intensive mothering—are an obvious demographic who may utter those words.

As noted in the introduction, Gina Chen argues that forms of media enjoyed by women "are often ignored as trivial or uninteresting" (512). Although Chen was writing about mommy blogs, the same sentiment applies to "mommy podcasts." The content of *Big Fat Positive*—toddler tantrums, recipes, the plot of children's books—may not appeal to everyone, but there is nothing trivial or uninteresting about the gratitude expressed in the iTunes reviews. The appreciation illustrates how podcasts can offer profoundly soothing social effects for new mothers, and all mothers, and Americans at large facing unprecedented levels of isolation and loneliness—particularly when a peer-to-peer approach is utilized. As one listener imagines and describes it, Birek and Micko have "been going on walks" with her "all throughout [her] pregnancy." And they continue to accompany her now, when she walks with her baby in the stroller (olyaros).

CONCLUSION

This thesis was researched and written entirely in 2020—the year the coronavirus pandemic put a spotlight on enormous inequities facing mothers. *The New York Times* went so far as to predict that the pandemic "could scar a generation of working mothers" (Cohen). Shouldering the load of domestic chores, childcare, and virtual schooling, mothers of children under twelve have lost work at three times the rate of fathers (Henderson). As is the unfortunate norm in contemporary American society, mothers are expected to pick up the slack almost entirely on their own.

But economists and activists are optimistic, hoping that the pandemic will finally force "structural and cultural changes" that will benefit mothers (Cohen). Early data has also found that despite significant stressors, seventy percent of mothers report a "better appreciation of life," and perhaps

too of face-to-face socialization: seventy-five percent say that in-person contact is what they miss most (Thomason). The painful curbing of social interaction has served to highlight the importance of robust social lives for everyone, perhaps especially for mothers. While the end of the pandemic is not yet in sight, it's safe to assume peer- and expert-oriented models will continue on their unique social trajectories in the motherhood podcasting genre. Peers will seek support when asking one another: *How are we going to do all this, and make it work?* And experts will attempt to give answers.

Both models have something important to learn from the other. Preindustrial approaches underscore the importance of community, social support, and advice tailored to unique situations—and experts can learn from this. Postindustrial approaches work to expand common knowledge about mothers, children, and families in a scientifically rigorous manner. Peers can learn from this as well, encouraging listeners to seek out and trust compassionate experts. The best of both models is absolutely crucial.

And both can and should learn from activist approaches, too. The social critique subgenre includes a number of powerhouse podcasts that harness the medium's unique sociality and fluidity to interrogate policies and cultural attitudes regarding mothers. For hosts of peer- and expert-oriented podcasts, cultural critiques don't need to be constant—even occasional critiques of intensive mothering and the distressing lack of family-friendly policies in America would help soothe mothers' worries, ease expectations, recognize and celebrate diverse situations, and convert any guilt or self-blame into a greater sense of activism. Better family policies *and* a confrontation with the culture of intensive mothering are both necessary to improve the lives of mothers. All motherhood subgenres can encourage this—in times of normalcy and in times of crisis.

Like industrialization, the coronavirus pandemic has upended society for everyone, especially for mothers. But despite the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in, podcasts are a reason to feel hopeful. The medium's explosion of popularity feels like a deliberate return to discussion, to mindful attention, on a mass scale. Podcasts seem to say, in response to the ongoing Woman Question—*there are no easy answers*. But one thing is certain: it is in *discussion* that we will find

solutions, smooth out wrinkles, and understand one another's struggles. The path to a better, more equal society is one we must all forge together by listening, by having important conversations, and by engaging in one another's stories.

On average, podcast users listen to seven different shows a week (Winn). That's a tremendous amount of time spent with podcasts. As the medium continues to grow, feminist critiques will become even more crucial. Listeners of motherhood podcasts are potentially consuming *hours* of content about motherhood per week. Experts and peers alike are in their ears, accompanying them in their cars during rush hour and in their homes while preparing dinner. Podcasts have become an intimate, highly nuanced, endlessly fascinating form of human interaction. And the messages they quietly transmit, day in and day out, continue to be of vital importance for those who listen.

NOTES

[1] In *Of Woman Born,* Adrienne Rich reiterates that for most of human history, women and mothers did not experience widespread loneliness to the extent they have in recent decades. "A woman was rarely if ever alone with nothing but the needs of a child or children to see to," Rich writes. "Women and children were part of an actively busy social cluster" (47). Being in that social cluster involved responsibilities such caring for others' children. "Most women [were] mothers in the sense of tenders and carers for the young, whether as sisters, aunts, nurses, teachers, foster-mothers, stepmothers," she writes. "Tribal life, the village, the extended family, the female networks of some cultures, have included the very young, very old, unmarried, and infertile women in the process of 'mothering'" (12).

[2] For more on this dilemma, see *The Longest Shortest Time* host Hillary Frank's two podcast interviews with Ina May Gaskin, the "mother of midwifery."

[3] This paradoxical style has become so well-known that it is often parodied, including in the 2009 humor book *What to Expect When You're Expected* (written from the point of view of the fetus). In the blurb for the book, the fetus asks: "So far Mommy is spending most of her pregnancy in a state of stress, anxiety, and depression. Which one should she focus on?" The infamous title has also been invoked in scholarly works, such as Jonathan Last's book *What to Expect When No One's Expecting* which examines the falling American birthrate.

[4] At the end of the episode, Murkoff promotes her own newly revised book about nutrition. I do not count this reference as it appears to be mainly self-promotional instead of a genuine attempt to share research.

[5] Thank you to my husband who listened to this episode with me and pointed out that this moment represents a particularly egregious failure to mention the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic is not named, discussed, or alluded to a single time by Murkoff or Bing during this episode.

[6] Anti-diet, intuitive eating scholars take issue with the phrase "empty calories," dismissing it as a diet-culture misnomer. Although other foods may be more nutrient-dense, we do not eat solely for nutrition; we also eat for comfort, pleasure, and many other reasons. Additionally, the "empty calories" Murkoff critiques still provide energy the body needs. A thought experiment to illustrate this point involves imagining a person on a desert island. If they have a choice between eating nothing or a cache of chocolate bars they just found, would we tell them they could ignore the chocolate and just as well eat nothing, because chocolate is "empty" calories?

[7] Weight gain appears to be a central concern for Murkoff. In the 45-minute episode, the word "weight" is uttered eight times, "calories" twelve times, and "diet" fifteen times. She encourages listeners to "keep in mind that gaining too much weight" and "eating a lot of unhealthy foods" during pregnancy can increase the risk of gestational diabetes and "other complications" which are not specified. Notably, she does not mention the risks of gaining too *little*. Restrictive eating that does not allow for sufficient weight gain during pregnancy can lead to low birth weights and dangerous, life-threatening complications for newborns. Research decisively shows that not gaining *enough* weight during pregnancy can result in far more serious outcomes than gaining too much (for more on this see *Expecting Better* by Emily Oster). But often, proponents of diet culture do not even mention problems associated with not gaining *enough* weight, either because they haven't read the relevant research and are relying on cultural biases instead, or because they assume it's more important to supervise and control pregnant mothers' unruly eating habits which they believe will inevitably lead to disastrous weight gain if not monitored by an expert.

[8] For wonderful additional analysis of this, see *The Double Shift* podcast episode "The Revolution Begins with Us," released on Dec. 16, 2019.

[9] In this episode, there are also various mentions of the coronavirus pandemic. One example is when Birek notes that it's difficult for Micko to grocery shop multiple times a week now, "not just because of the quarantine but because like, two kids" (34:17). The pandemic colors their thoughts on separation anxiety, safety precautions while visiting family, grocery shopping, and preparing meals for their households.

[10] For more of Dr. Murthy's insights, see his conversation with *Quiet* author Susan Cain on *The Next Big Idea* podcast. The episode is called "TOGETHER: A Doctor's Prescription for Health and Happiness" and was released on June 30, 2020.

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