In the last decade, the medium of podcasting has exploded. This has been amazing for those of us who love consistent, free access to conversations, immersive storytelling, and new ideas. As cheesy as it may sound, the hosts of podcasts I love feel like my good friends. For politics, I like Intercepted. For a dose of weekly LOLs, I listen to Comedy Bang! Bang!, 2 Dope Queens, and Las Culturistas. When I need my LOLs to interact with my politics, I catch up on Street Fight Radio. I also love podcasts about contemporary art—Bad at Sports is a longtime favorite. While all these podcasts may seem like more than enough to keep me satiated, I regularly found myself wishing I could find a show that talked explicitly about the relationship between contemporary art and comedy. Because I couldn’t find one, I decided to start one myself. It’s called Humor and the Abject, and I’ve now released 50+ episodes over the past 10 months.

Starting a new podcast was intimidating (to say the least), but at this point, I’m hooked on it. People joke constantly that there are too many podcasts, but there’s too much of everything. It’s a unique, evolving medium and there’s plenty of room at the table. So, if you’ve got what you think is a fun idea for a podcast that you wish existed, I hope this how-to guide will prove useful.

— Sean J Patrick Carney
What should your podcast be about?

While answering this question is literally the first thing you need to do, it shouldn’t send you spiraling into an existential crisis. To decide what your podcast should focus on, consider the following key questions:

**Question 1: What’s something that you’re extremely interested in, that you’d like to hear people regularly talk about?**

The majority of my friends are artists or comedians, and the ideas uncovered while grabbing a beer and talking off the cuff with them have been incredibly influential to how I approach my work and life. It occurred to me that other people could find these types of conversations just as useful as I did, and I that I could recreate this vibe in a podcast through intimate interviews. Thus, the idea for Humor and the Abject was born.

**Question 2: Which shows have formats you like, and what ideas can you borrow from them?**

Deciding on a format for your podcast is a crucial early step. Will you be scheduling regular guests and hosting an interview-type show? Should you have a co-host? Will you be reading scripted text, or recording off the cuff? While these are all very important elements to consider, don’t get overwhelmed in thinking that whatever you initially decide will be set in stone. As you start recording episodes, you’ll start getting a feel for what works, and it’s entirely likely that your format will evolve based on how things are going.

As an example: Years ago, I would listen to WTF with Marc Maron while I was drawing. While I don’t listen to that show much anymore, I still think of his long-form, one-on-one interview format—as well as his show’s evolution—as something that helped to inspire Humor and the Abject. Over time, WTF evolved from a format of Maron apologizing to comedy people he’d made angry, into a far more interesting roster of guests from way outside of comedy. Similarly, when I started Humor and the Abject, I primarily wanted to speak with funny artists and comedians whose work verged on performance art. Pretty quickly though, I realized that whether guests considered themselves “funny” was not as important as I thought it would be. As I’ve expanded out to interview writers, filmmakers, musicians, and others, the show has still managed to maintain the vibe I’d initially envisioned for it.

**Question 3: What subject(s) do I already know a lot about, but also want to continue exploring?**
Contemporary art and comedy are two subjects I’ve always approached as an armchair philosopher. I’m also deeply embedded in both scenes here in New York, so I felt like I could speak about both subjects with at least a little bit of authority and confidence. Fortunately, I’d also already written about the intersection of art and comedy for publications like Art in America and VICE, so it felt like I’d demonstrated my ability to cover the topics well before recording my first episode. That’s not to say that you need to be a published writer before starting a podcast, but having some public history of engaging with the ideas you want to cover is definitely advantageous.

Another important thing to note: Even though I can carry on a conversation about contemporary art and comedy, I’m well aware that I don’t know everything about either subject. To be a good podcast host, having a sincere curiosity—and a sense of humility—is absolutely necessary. Personally, I’ve never been fond of podcasts that sound like a Ted Talk. My guests know that I’ll have done my research and I’ll have some prepared questions for them, but I’m the first to admit that I’m inviting them onto my show because I want to soak up their own expertise and experience. Learning is exciting!
Who will my audience be, and how will I reach them?

I remember getting asked the audience question all the time in art school, and it was always frustrating. Still, it’s a really valuable thing to spend some time contemplating. As you’re considering an idea for a podcast, imagine some of the people closest to you who might listen to it. What would they be excited to hear about, from you specifically? Your social media communities are also potential audiences. What types of content are you already putting out that they respond to? If you can identify an area of interest that you share with your IRL and URL circles, you’ll likely have an audience right from the start.

The next big question to consider is how you’ll reach (and sustain) an audience, i.e. listenership, for your podcast. This probably isn’t the answer you want to hear, but it’s the truth: You’ll need to do this through shameless (but measured) self-promotion. Before releasing your first episode, make a thoughtful promotion plan that includes all the ways you can imagine spreading the word. Once your podcast is online and ready to promote, send out an email to your community inviting them to listen and giving them a sincere idea of why the project is important to you. If you have press contacts, send them personalized emails letting them know why you think they’d enjoy the podcast, and asking if they have ideas for ways to get it written about in the press. And, plan a handful of social media posts in advance, so you can schedule them to post at strategic times when you notice your followers tend to be most active.

As you work to keep growing your podcast’s audience over time, be sure to encourage listeners to subscribe, and to rate your episodes. From there, it’s really just about producing consistently good episodes, making sure you share them on social media, and letting your audience grow organically.

How and where am I going to record my podcast?

While it can be quite tempting to just grab whatever recording equipment is available to you and knock out a few episodes, consider your future listeners’ perspective. I’m not saying that you absolutely shouldn’t record your first episode on your phone in an echoey room, but think about it: would you want to listen to a tinny, inconsistent recording for any length of time?

In terms of gear, I have what I would call a “respectable” (but not necessarily “professional”) recording setup. There are scores of blog posts out there that get into the minutiae of microphones, mixers, audio applications, and studio environments. These can get awfully confusing, with some saying that you can outfit your home for around $100, and others
claiming that you’ll need to rent an expensive, soundproof studio lest you end up producing an unlistenable dumpster fire. I spent hours reading through these very posts, and slowly pieced together what I use today based on what I needed, and what I could afford—and I’m happy to share my setup with you.

Where to record

I record at my kitchen table on weekdays when building noise is minimal. Access to a recording studio is obviously a plus, but totally not necessary. If you get comfortable with the space that you have available (like your own kitchen or living room), you can work with that setting just fine.

Also, the great thing about the setup that I’ve put together (which I’ll elaborate on below) is that I can fit it all into a backpack to record off-site if necessary. While there are lots of portable recorders out there, I like having gear that I’m familiar with so there’s no additional stress when I record in unfamiliar locations.

Mixer

I have a Behringer brand Xenyx X1204USB mixing console. These will run you around $150, but they’re really user-friendly and run a signal straight from the board into a computer’s USB drive. It also allows you to make micro-adjustments to the audio in real time while you’re recording. What I like about this board, in addition to its ability to convert the signal straight to digital, is that it has onboard compression. This is extremely useful when you’re doing speaking interviews, because it manages the signals by keeping voices at a consistent volume whether somebody is mumbling or howling with laughter (you don’t want a hilarious moment being ruined by somebody clipping out the audio and making your listeners’ ears bleed).

Microphones

For mics, I use Shure SM58 vocal microphones. For $110 apiece, you can usually get a bundle that includes the mic, a stand, and an XLR cable to feed into the mixer. Lots of podcasters just hold their mics up to their mouths like a vocalist would do, but I like to place the mics on tabletop stands because I find it helps to reduce the “popping P” and “booming B” effects of the human voice. Cheap foam wind guards also come in handy in reducing those (I use bright red ones that look like clown noses because it helps my guests remember to speak right into the mic). The Shure SM58 is designed specifically for vocals, which means that it doesn’t pick up a ton
of room sound. This is helpful for me, because my kitchen doesn’t have any soundproofing. Plus, it keeps the voices warm and central in the mix.

**Headphones**

Both my guest and I wear headphones so that we can hear how our voices sound in the mix. I’m sure there are studio nerds out there who would have an aneurysm hearing me recommend these particular headphones, but for $20 a pair you can get Behringer HPX2000 headphones that do the job fine. I don’t use them when I’m mixing, but for recording, they are perfectly functional.

**Recording and mixing software**

To record the conversation on my laptop, I use the free audio program Audacity. It’s fast and reliable, and has built-in functions like additional compression and volume boost that work great. I’ve also never had a problem with the program crashing or glitching, even when I’m recording something for over an hour. When we’re done recording, I save the Audacity file, apply the basic compression effect to bring quieter parts up and louder parts down, and then export the conversation as an AIFF file.

I’ll probably get teased for this by some people, but I mix my whole show and create all of the sound collages in Garageband. Deal with it. However you decide to mix, keep an eye on the visual elements of your sound waves. It’s natural to have some peaks and valleys, but you want to keep a relatively consistent volume all the way through so you don’t scare the daylights out of some poor listener when the sound suddenly starts blasting (I definitely messed this up in my first few episodes).

**File management**

After I’ve pieced the whole show together, I export to disk (not iTunes) as an mp3 file at medium quality. I open that up in Audacity one more time so I can see a visual of the levels, add another layer of compression to get everything squeezed down, and export that to mp3.

It’s good practice to keep your episodes under 100MB because then people can download them without having to be on wifi, and you won’t be taking up a ton of space on their devices. You’ll notice that most podcasts tend to be about 1MB per minute of the episode.

It’s also good practice to keep backing up what you’re doing on an external hard drive (or service like DropBox) so that you don’t lose your files, but also because hour-long audio files can take up a lot of computer space.
How do I distribute my podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, etc?

The good news: This is actually pretty easy! You’ll need to submit your podcast for review to each of those platforms (also called podcatching or podstreaming apps) individually, but it’s honestly not that hard. In order to submit, you’ll need to have a name for your podcast (of course!), a sentence-long description of your show, square-formatted “cover art” that’s around 1000px by 1000px, and at least one episode already available online that has its own RSS feed identity. Websites like SoundCloud (what I use) or Libsyn let you set up an RSS feed quite easily. When I submitted Humor and the Abj...
How often should I release a new episode? And how should I promote them?

I am a firm advocate for releasing a new episode every week on a consistent day, dropped at a consistent time. As a voracious consumer of podcasts, I look forward to new episodes, and when a favorite podcast posts a day or two later than usual, I often find that I end up missing the episode entirely just because the listening rhythm gets thrown off. For Humor and the Abject, I put up a new episode every Sunday morning, and then I generally start plugging it on Monday morning (a more active time to catch new listeners on social media).

Another great way to grow your podcast’s audience is through your guests’
networks. Because my show features a different guest every week, I have the benefit of reaching a whole new circle of potential listeners when my guests promote their interview to their own networks.

Naturally, social media is the most effective means by which to get the word out, but I’m consistently surprised by how many people tell me that it was a word-of-mouth recommendation from a friend that got them into the show. There’s no single guaranteed recipe to get new listeners, so it’s a good idea to try out anything you can think of. Send tasteful updates to an email list upon milestones like your tenth or fiftieth episode, and experiment with novel formats like live shows, inviting other podcaster on your show, and other types of partnerships.

**In summary...**

Starting a podcast isn’t a surefire way to earn money, and the odds of you having thousands of listeners right off the bat are pretty slim. But, if there’s a topic that’s important enough to you that you’ll go through all the steps of starting a podcast just to generate more conversation about it, then I’d wager there are plenty of other people out there who also think it’s important.

As you get started, don’t flip out if your first episode only gets fifty listens (or fewer). Go back and listen to it yourself, take notes on what parts seemed great, and what parts felt like a lull. Keep evolving your format, and don’t be embarrassed to keep promoting your podcast, for better or worse. You are your own greatest advocate, and you need to let people know why you care about something enough to obsessively make a podcast about it. Also: when you do release that first episode, let me know. I’m constantly on the hunt for something new to learn about, and I’ll bet there’s something you know a lot about that would blow me away.

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Sean J Patrick Carney is a visual artist and writer based in Brooklyn, NY. He hosts the Humor and the Abject podcast and is a regular contributor to outlets including Art in America and VICE. Carney is the founder and director of Social Malpractice Publishing, an independent artist book label that produces unique editions and objects. He is also an art educator, having taught courses at Virginia Commonwealth University, New York University, Pacific Northwest College of Art, the Bruce High Quality Foundation University, Dia Art Foundation, and the Museum of Modern Art. If you want, you can follow him on Twitter.