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## **Podcasting as Para-social Activity Pre & Post Pandemic: How Three Degenerates Can Fill the Void in Your Life**

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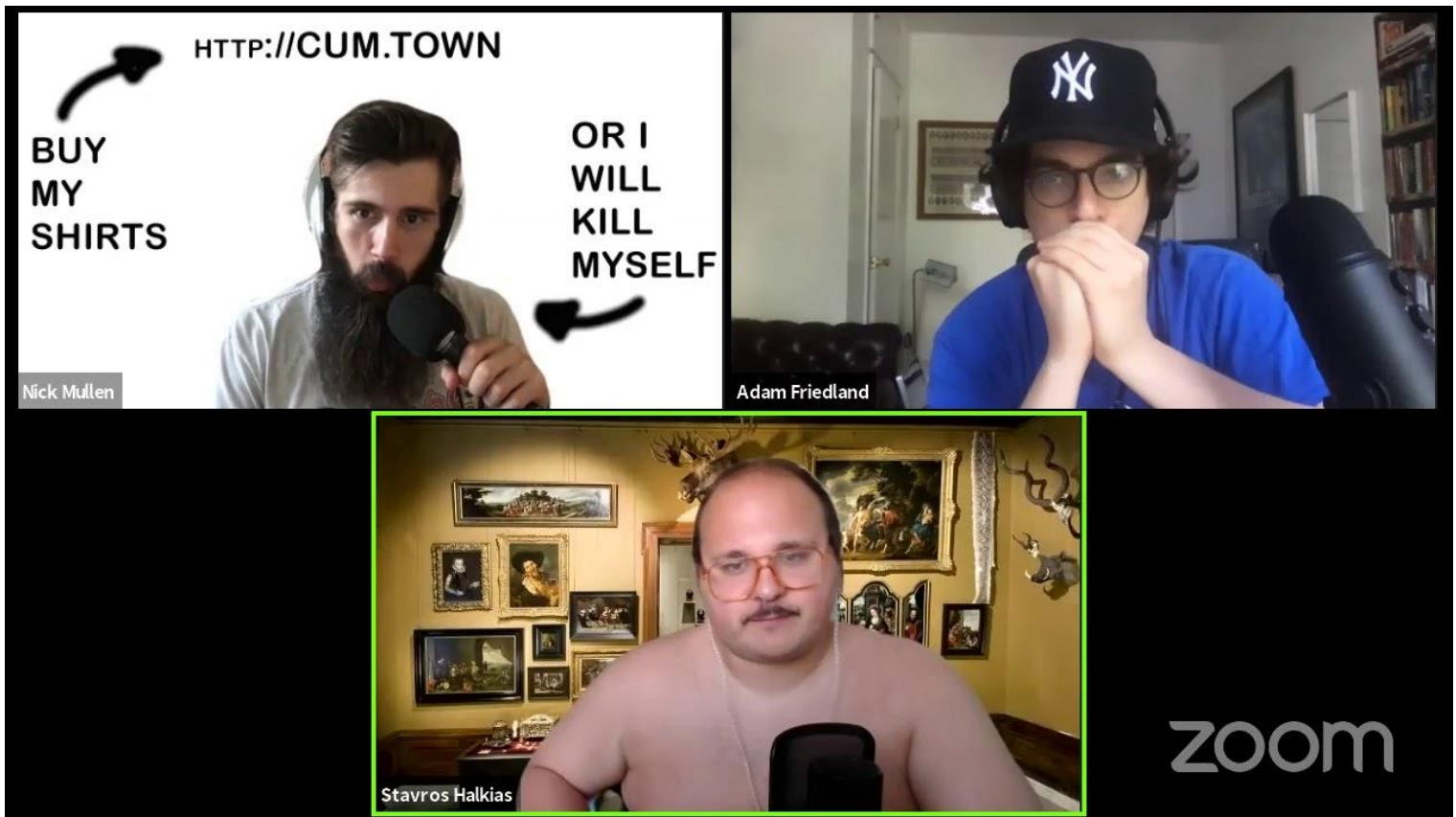
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Podcasting as Para-social Activity Pre & Post Pandemic  
How Three Degenerates Can Fill the Void in Your Life

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1: The Para-social Potential of the Podcast.....	4
1.1. Horton and Wohl.....	5
1.2. Podcasting, but Para-socially.....	6
1.3. The Case Study.....	9
1.4. Podcast Ethnography.....	11
1.5. Digital Bubbles and Netnography.....	13
Chapter 2: From Clip-Industrial Complex to Deep Fandom.....	15
2.1. Media Cumvergence.....	16
2.2. YouTube Content Farms and the 24/7 Friendship Simulator.....	16
2.3. Online Fora for the <i>Cum Town</i> Community.....	18
2.4. The Fan Milieu.....	20
2.5. Reactionary Fans vs. Cum Town Stans.....	21
2.6. To Perform Fandom.....	24
Chapter 3: The Pandemic of Loneliness.....	28
3.1. The Informality of Viral Disease.....	29
3.2. Connected in Abstract Terms.....	30
3.3. Para-social Compensation Hypothesis.....	31
Conclusion.....	33
Bibliography.....	37

## Introduction

In late 2019, a viral outbreak occurred in the Wuhan region of China. After subsequent failure to contain the virus also known as COVID-19 or the coronavirus, it spread worldwide leading the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a global pandemic (which as of now is technically not over yet). This declaration was followed by global lockdowns, quarantining and social and economic disruption exacerbated by worldwide supply shortages. All institutions of labor, education and administration had to find a work-around to remain afloat, which frequently meant most forms of social contact occurred over Zoom or similar services. Most people (young adults especially) found themselves cut off from their loved ones and became stuck to their households and their nearest supermarket. It was an entirely isolating experience, literally and figuratively speaking since it severely limited physical and social mobility. During this time, media was kind of a bridge between people and the rest of the world, or more than it would be otherwise at least. Not only did media consumption increase over this time, but habits changed also. A Spanish-based study specifically highlighted an increase of media consumption in several European countries, particularly digital (social) media, which also concluded that this increased media consumption was not beneficial to well-being. Not so much because media consumption is bad on its face, but because quality and frequency of use are determinative in all forms of human consumption.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the lockdowns, newer formats such as podcasts, livestreams and vlogs were already steadily growing media. Given however that the pandemic led to a trend of changing habits in consumption, the nature of this consumption can be said to change with it. In particular the podcast medium has experienced significant audience growth. While intensive podcast listeners have somewhat decreased their consumption, new audiences have boosted podcast listenership over the course of the pandemic, according to a Nielsen study.<sup>2</sup> This implies that many people have picked up on podcasts for the first time during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> One podcast that has experienced exponential growth in listenership over the pandemic is a vulgar comedy podcast by the name of *Cum Town*.<sup>4</sup> It and similar late web 2.0-era based media that the podcast is associated with are often said to facilitate ‘para-social relationships’ with their audiences,

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<sup>1</sup> Muñoz-Velázquez, J. et al. “Exploratory Study of the Relationship Between Happiness and the Rise of Media Consumption during the COVID-19 Confinement” in, *Frontiers in Psychology* vol. 12. April 2021: 8

<sup>2</sup> “Lighter podcast listeners are fueling audience growth,” Nielsen, September 16, 2021.

<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2021/lighter-podcast-listeners-are-fueling-audience-growth/>

<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind all the while, that this survey appears to be specific to consumers from the United States. Unfortunately the data on global listenership appears limited.

<sup>4</sup> “The Cum Boys,” Graphtron. <https://graphtron.com/creator/cumtown>

such an interaction is best described as a one-sided interaction between performer and individual audience member. These occurrences are not a new phenomenon by any means, most people have para-social interactions with celebrities or fictional characters on some level. The nature of a para-social relationship takes on a different meaning however under circumstances of loneliness and isolation, where they become a prevalent and radically important relationship, something that two years of regular quarantining can cast a wide net for.

Whilst understanding the pandemic, the podcast medium and para-social interaction as this thesis' parameters, which all function both unilaterally and in conjunction with one another, the aim is to give answer to one question; Has the nature of para-social interaction between podcasts and their audiences changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and what does that change signify? The *Cum Town* podcast will be the primary case study for the purpose of this thesis, as it provides unique and unmistakable intersections of para-social interaction. The general framework behind this thesis will be an intersection of a series of observations coming from different directions, observations that relate specifically to the nature of para-social interaction, the podcast medium (with *Cum Town* as primary case study) and the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Chapter 1: The Para-social Potential of the Podcast

This first chapter will discuss the theoretical background of para-social interactions, as well as the phenomenon's intersection with the podcast medium. The podcast originated in the year 2000 and was meant as a new format of broadcasting specific to the Apple iPod. This format started to be regarded independently of its ideological father, rooted in radio culture but with a breath of new life unknown to its predecessor. The podcast became part of the cultural mainstream in the year 2015 when Apple integrated podcasts into a corresponding app (Apple Podcasts) and the show *Serial* broke existing audience records for the medium.<sup>5</sup> That goes to show how brief the history of the medium is, as it had a slow start characterized by the lack of groundwork from its conception. The *Cum Town* podcast started merely a year after the medium caught on and has since gained a large following. Given the short history of the medium, podcasts have far from undergone the scrutiny of the full scope methodologies, theories and analysis that the field of media studies has to offer. The framework and theories around the phenomenon of para-social interaction is one of specific interest in regard to this medium

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<sup>5</sup> Schlütz, D. & Hedder, I. "Aural Parasocial Relations: Host–Listener Relationships in Podcasts" in, *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* (Ahead-of-print), 2021: 1

because the nature of the medium invokes a lot of imagination from the listener who is not (necessarily) visually driven. The assumption, as a researcher, could be that the distance between podcast host(s) and listener is particularly small for that reason.

### **1.1. Horton and Wohl**

The origin of academic research and literature pertaining to para-social interaction (PSI) dates back to 1956, when sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl laid the groundwork in an article called *Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction*. The premise of this article infers that mass media pretend themselves to offer interaction with performers as “a simulacrum of conventional give and take”, not an actual connection to another individual but rather a mimicry of a relationship that can be navigated with no impending sense of obligation, effort or responsibility from the spectator’s side of this dynamic. They are “illusional relationships” as they are entirely one-sided in their nature and predominantly shaped by the media persona with no means for effective reciprocity and therefore unsusceptible to any form of mutual development.<sup>6</sup> It describes a scenario where one deems a media figure to have an important presence in their life, even though this person is not truly present, nor do they know them on an interpersonal level.

The paper itself is made up of a series of observations relating to how PSI form and mostly serve as suggestions for further research, as they cannot help but point out that some of their assertions enjoy the status of accredited hypothesis, not meant to be taken literally or uncritically as that may divert from what is actually happening within an audience. That is why they conclude by withholding their imminent value judgements on this phenomenon entirely. From their observations came the need for more research to help determine the effects of PSI between persona and audience, as Horton and Wohl merely recognized their presence and gave it a name.<sup>7</sup> The most important takeaway in their understanding of PSI is that the function of mass media is also an exemplification of patterns of conduct for audiences to see and understand in others, as well as apply them to themselves. Audiences are instructed in the behaviors of the opposite sex, people of different status or people in particular professions.<sup>8</sup> More candidly, the mass media instructs their worldview, not unlike arguments made by Michel Foucault on discipline or Judith Butler on performativity. Another way to interpret this form of interaction however could be; if one were to spend enough time listening to someone else, they may end

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<sup>6</sup> Horton, D. & Wohl, R. “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance” in, *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1956: 215

<sup>7</sup> Horton & Wohl (1956): 229

<sup>8</sup> Horton & Wohl (1956): 222

up thinking alike. While the general assertions Horton and Wohl pose are easily transferable to the field this thesis aims to address, it is important to consider how much the nature of mass media has changed since this paper was published. The closest medium they knew to the podcast was radio, which is not only a similar medium but also where the former's roots lie.

The mass media arguably made more aesthetic changes rather than formal ones for the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and whether the discourse around PSI had evolved much until the advent of the internet is not necessarily material to this paper, considering that podcasting as a medium had not come up until much later. Fast-forward to 2002, David Giles wrote an article called *Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research*. This article preceded what is frequently designated as the web 2.0 era (2004-present) where the web started shifting more towards social media which now hold the majority of all online traffic. What sets Giles article apart is that he distinguishes between PSI and PSR, which are generally used interchangeably, where a PSI implies a momentary, self-contained experience and the PSR as the long-term consequence of such interactions. To him, para-social encounters are various and distinct and really exist on a spectrum which he illustrates with a model.<sup>9</sup> Given that the next article takes this distinction into account, so will I for the purpose of this thesis.

## **1.2. Podcasting, but Para-socially**

Daniela Schlütz, (professor of Theory and Empiricism of Digital Media at the Babelsberg Film University in Potsdam) and Imke Hedder (a graduate media scholar and avid podcast-listener) wrote an article in 2021 on podcasting host-listener relationships in which they argue that podcasting is a medium particularly apt for cultivating para-social relationships, using the results of a survey to bolster their argument. The article provides a comprehensive overview of the discourse on PSI starting with Horton and Wohl's initial 1956 article and chronologically describe how the discourse changed as mass media itself did.<sup>10</sup> Podcasting was not an established format when Giles wrote his prior article, so Schlütz and Hedder apply their understanding of the medium to his model to assign it as a first-order encounter (distant with a chance of contact).<sup>11</sup> They argue the relevance of their topic by stating that listenership and revenue in the podcasting field have increased in recent years despite scholars having

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<sup>9</sup> Giles, D. "Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research" in, *Media Psychology*, no. 4(2002): 295

<sup>10</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 5

<sup>11</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 5

traditionally scrutinized the medium.<sup>12</sup>

While that is a fair argument on the surface, one would be remiss not to consider that this article was published in the middle of a two-year pandemic that frequently put severe limitations on one's ability to participate in outward-facing social activity. It at first seems somewhat inconceivable that there is not so much of a mention of the pandemic anywhere in their article, until it occurs that the data procured for this article was recorded in 2018.<sup>13</sup> This means either that the growth they refer to occurred prior to 2018 and then stopped, or that they are referring to a constant growth that somehow was never affected by a global pandemic that gave everyone considerably more screen-time in absence of other activities, or perhaps that the authors simply never considered if the pandemic could severely impact the outcome of the survey if it were conducted sometime within that window. Given that this is the most recent available literature dedicated to measuring para-social relationships relevant to podcasting this can obfuscate the nature in which the data should be interpreted somewhat.

In their defense, their research was only meant to indicate the presence of PSR as they occur in the podcast format as well as the nature of some of these relationships, and not so much to measure any kind of quantitative increase of listener consumption. Given that the podcast has been a growing medium for some time, proving that PSI have occurred in higher frequency and/or intensity than usual during the pandemic can be somewhat tricky even if it is a reliable hypothesis. For one thing, one would have to argue incessantly that the growth in listenership is in fact a result of the pandemic and not merely the result of rapid convergence within mass media, on top of which there is no available (reliable) survey data that can necessarily answer the specifics of these questions as the proposed markers (PSI, Podcasting and Pandemic) form airtight boundaries for how any of the data collected is approached. So from the offset this results in an increased margin-of-error for whatever arguments would be derived directly from this hypothesis, at least while the immediately indicative empirical evidence remains limited.

For the remainder of this section, let us take the hypothesis for granted that the pandemic did indeed have an effect on the relationship between the para-social engagement and the podcast medium, while we consider some of the particulars of how PSI emerge, and how Schlütz and Hedder applied this to the podcast medium. According to Horton and Wohl, the manner in which PSR are cultivated rests largely on something they describe as 'designed informality' which is achieved, usually by a series of manipulations. For instance, on a television when the camera pans down on a performer and they enhance the feeling of intimacy

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<sup>12</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 1

<sup>13</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 7-8



literally by stepping closer.<sup>14</sup> Any manner a mediatized persona acts that results in making the dynamic between the audience and themselves less formal can ostensibly be considered to be causal toward the manifestation of a PSI. Schlütz and Hedder took to summarizing possible manipulations in which podcasting engages, but for the sake of brevity I will condense and rephrase somewhat since they intended to apply it to specific genres of podcasting, this is only meant to give an indication for how PSI emerge in the podcasting medium, and therefore reductive out of necessity.<sup>15</sup>

- (1) Grass-roots character: Podcasts as a cultural force thrived in a relatively flat hierarchy without gatekeeping institutions preventing anyone from making them. Being institutionally independent, hosts are often engaging in a hands-on DIY approach in order to reach an audience, minimizing relative distance.<sup>16</sup>
- (2) The serial approach: Through narrative arcs, overlapping subject matter, recurrent hosts and guests, listeners are inclined to keep listening in for further development as a means of ‘subscribing’ themselves to a podcast almost as a self-binding contract that builds loyal audiences.
- (3) Listener involvement: Podcasts lend themselves to narrative absorption, with an emphasis on spoken word that transports the listener into an involved and intimate reception situation.
- (4) Active participation: The aforementioned reception situation keeps the listener active in their consumption of the podcast. Listeners tend to give their undivided attention to what is being said even while doing mundane activities such as housecleaning, often enforced through the use of earphones.
- (5) Modular experience: Due to the technical properties of the podcast, the medium lends itself to self-scheduling, more often than not while performing the aforementioned mundane activities, attaching to the listener’s intimate routines.<sup>17</sup>
- (6) Niche-communities: Popular podcasts often address global but fragmented audiences with a durable supply of content, giving space to niche content that has no (or little) space in traditional media.

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<sup>14</sup> Horton & Wohl (1956): 216

<sup>15</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 3-4

<sup>16</sup> I can attest to the relative ease in regards to navigating the establishing of a podcast from first-hand experience, as I am making one with a dear friend and we are also not constricted by any gatekeeping institutions.

<sup>17</sup> I personally prefer to listen to podcasts during my commute.

These are a few candid examples that help illustrate the para-social potential of the podcast medium, although these are obviously not clear-cut lines that all podcasts walk, as Giles illustrated that all PSI exist in a continuum rather than merely having a binary presence or non-presence. These six characteristics of podcasting form a helpful guideline for analyzing the perceived ‘para-sociability’ of a podcast, so bare these in mind as one reestablishes the central case study of this paper once more.

### **1.3. The Case Study**

As previously stated, para-social relationships often occur through (designed) informality, the notion that someone is being more authentic by minimizing distance between themselves and their audience. These are usually styles of speech, body language, or in a general sense a willingness to break out of what is otherwise a professional façade. In podcasting, ‘being yourself’ is something an audience has come to expect from the host, so that in itself is a low bar for the medium, the relevant case study needs to be unobtrusively para-social for this thesis. An immediate go-to case study for any podcast-oriented paper would likely aim for something such as the *Joe Rogan Experience*, and while one can certainly argue that Joe Rogan himself appears authentic in his mannerisms, there is still some form of distance between himself and his audience that has more to do with the format of his podcast. In spite of his bravado, there remains a veneer of professional courtesy to his audience, where he continues on bringing his audience the show they expect. I believe the best possible case study might as well be about a podcast where the hosts could not be bothered with even the slightest hint of formality, such as the *Cum Town* podcast. This podcast is so vulgar, so low-brow, scum of the earth, such good-for-nothing levels of informal that I genuinely had doubts on whether I could ‘get away with’ writing this thesis, but as I will argue throughout this section this podcast is incredibly true to the medium or at least it is the most popular one to do so in this capacity and is therefore the ‘most podcast-like’ podcast, therefore this podcast simply needs to be this work’s central case study. Its informality is simply its primary selling point and its hosts are the most informal ones in the field, often to a fault. It also helps that it is a long running podcast and therefore its para-social aspects have been thoroughly established over time.

The podcast is hosted by Nick Mullen, Stavros Halkias and Adam Friedland, who are either failed comedians or truly great ones depending on where one stands. Their collective sense of humor is not typically suited for traditional media which is also good indicator that it would be highly regarded by fractured audiences (making also for great conditions for PSI to

occur). The podcast generally reads as a ‘three guy-friends hanging out’ situation and is for the most part unscripted, the dynamic between the three hosts is the largest attraction of the show where they each bring something to the table.

Nick Mullen is the primary showrunner of the podcast and his sense of humor sets the tone of the program, his delivery is usually deadpan or monotone, signaling a lack of interest on his part without the formality to cover it up. He has a dark sense of humor at times and often flirts with politically insensitive ideas in his comedic riffs, which is far from uncommon in the field of comedy, the explanation as to why Mullen’s career in stand-up comedy did not work out is owed particularly to the niche nature of his sense of humor that does not do him any favors in traditional media settings. Audiences tend to imagine him as deranged (likely supplemented by his appearance, with a long wizard-like beard), in particular niche-online communities that insist on psycho-analyzing people they never met, but that is rather easily said about someone who does not filter his speech well and is not adaptable towards other people.

Stavros Halkias’ career in comedy is most likely the steadiest between the three hosts, especially as of late. The humor is sometimes self-deprecating in reference to his appearance (he is bald, overweight and missing a tooth, a somewhat goofy culmination that adds to his material), yet this does not appear to stand in the way of his confidence. The most defining characteristic he displays during the podcast is his laugh, or ‘cackle’ which is rather contagious both for the other hosts and the listeners, more often than not the podcast is a contest on who can make him laugh the hardest. On top of his seat at the *Cum Town* table Halkias is also known for two other podcasts, namely a basketball podcast called *Pod Don’t Lie* (with Sam Morril) and a caller-based advice program called *Stavvy Solves Your Problems*.

Which leaves Adam Friedland, another comedian who acts as the punching bag of the show most of the time, likely for his meek attitude and appearance. Friedland can usually take this quite well and seems rather disaffected whenever it occurs. Being a former Vox Media employee (he was fired) who used to be engaged with actress Dasha Nekrasova (from the political *Red Scare* podcast), Friedland is somewhat of a New York ‘insider’. While his contribution to the podcast is not immediately clear, it is rather obvious that his presence is important for the dynamic of the program as Friedland did not join the show until later. Comparing the first episode of *Cum Town* to the latest ones, the dynamic between the hosts was not entirely formulated yet.<sup>18</sup>

What stands out is that Mullen and Halkias had not fully discussed the nature of Halkias’

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<sup>18</sup> Cum Town: Ep. 1 – The Original Cum Boys (Youtube): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5EaBTsPasTU>

involvement with the show, indicating the so-called ‘pregnant phase’ of their podcast. While Halkias and Friedland are both not consistently present on the program they at least remain present through the acknowledgement of their absence. Friedland joins in the second episode of the podcast, and it is only when the trinity is complete that the content of their conversations becomes more versatile and spontaneous. They were still ways off from establishing their presence behind the microphone, which is typical for the early phase of a podcast. The only way to establish a functioning, potentially successful podcast is to keep making it, as it is mainly dependent on an established and consistent presence that audiences make para-social connections with.<sup>19</sup> The reason I devoted attention to their appearance at all previously (mainly prompted by Schlütz and Hedder who included this aspect in their survey) is because the *Cum Town* crew (also called the Cum Boys if one is willing to adopt their terminology) have what one could describe as a reverse-cheerleader effect where putting the three of them together amplifies their characteristics, making them seem more eccentric than they really are. In an odd way, it is as if the formula of the show is dictated by the friendship of these three individuals, so long as they remain close friends, the audience remains invested.

#### **1.4. Podcast Ethnography**

As in so far, these are mostly personal observations on the inner workings of what makes *Cum Town* a successful podcast in both listenership and their potential for para-social interactivity. In order to better understand the *Cum Town* podcast from a content perspective, it seems pertinent to adopt additional methodology outlined by Markus Lundström and Tomas Poletti Lundström, aptly named podcast ethnography.<sup>20</sup> They argue this methodology to be beneficial due to its spatial and temporal flexibility owed to the ability to observe a podcast universe on the move or parallel with other tasks, which relates to the point 4 and 5 of Schlütz and Hedder’s aforementioned para-social manipulations in podcasting. For the Lundströms, this aspect of the podcasting format gives them a much-needed breathing room from so-called ‘vehement’<sup>21</sup> milieus which podcasting is absolutely not a stranger to. Their case study revolves around the milieu of white nationalism and a podcast called Motgift.<sup>22</sup>

While that would be an incredibly loaded comparison to make towards *Cum Town*, the

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<sup>19</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 4

<sup>20</sup> Relationship unclear, not related as far as one can tell.

<sup>21</sup> Unless the only passionate milieu the authors could imagine was that of actual neo-nazis, it would appear that the term ‘vehement’ is being used as a form of ironic understatement.

<sup>22</sup> Lundström, M. & Lundström, T. “Podcast Ethnography” in, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* vol. 24, no. no. 3 (2021): 289

controversial and outrageous nature of some of their bits at worst supply vehement milieus. In *Cum Town*'s case, a whole series of digital spaces such as subreddits, Discord channels, entire Youtube channels and streams are frequently coming and going as they wind up being censored and deleted. The podcast itself, however, is openly accessible on several platforms including Apple Podcasts, Spotify and several podcast specific platforms. Naturally the audiences would reproduce certain aspects of the show in their communication, which amounts to a lot of vulgar discourse and flirting with racial slurs or misogyny under a specific context.

Podcast ethnography is a methodology in three steps, namely to (1) *explore* the podcast openly and inductively, (2) *engage* with the podcast by reflecting upon its consultation and (3) *examine* the podcast through applicable analytical and/or theoretical tools.<sup>23</sup> Prior to undertaking step one, one is tasked to consider how a podcast functions as a field site. I am herein reminded that *Cum Town* does not exist in a vacuum, it is frequently associated with the dirtbag left, which refers to a style of left-wing politics that rejects civility in order to convey a left-wing populist message with subversive vulgarity, closely associated with a number of left-wing media that emerged in the mid-2010s (likely a reaction to the emergence of the alt-right as a result of Donald Trump's candidacy for the 2016 presidential election). Most well-known for popularizing this style of politics are *Chapo Trap House*, a podcast that is also closely associated with *Cum Town* (often times, hosts from either platform will attend as guests at the other podcast, since they are friends), the *Red Scare* podcast which is kind of a 'Cum Town for women' alternative that is often described as 'being at war with *Cum Town*' and Hasan Piker who is a rather popular Twitch-streamer and also a friend of Stavros Halkias. What these other platforms have in common is that they explicitly self-identify as political media, which is what sets *Cum Town* apart within this field, if it even truly belongs there at all as they have always publicly rejected that label.<sup>24</sup> Even within a field of its most similar media *Cum Town* appears to stand out, but arguably it is a 'guilt-by-association' scenario from their position. Given their relationship with all of these media and that they occasionally display a semblance of political literacy they at least exist in a dirtbag left bubble which diminishes credible deniability on their part. The dirtbag left is a digital bubble that can be construed as a vehement milieu in its own right, being that PSR are triggered by informal styles of speech it is also worth observing that the vulgar nature of this digital bubble is highly conducive of PSI/PSR, and while that vulgar language is a feature for most of the aforementioned media, for *Cum Town* it is the content.

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<sup>23</sup> Lundström & Lundström (2021): 290

<sup>24</sup> Friedland, Adam. Twitter Post, May 5, 2017, 9:27 PM:  
<https://twitter.com/adamfriedland/status/860576794524749824?lang=en>

Having already explored the podcast superficially in earlier sections and now understanding the bubble that *Cum Town* exists in, the Lundströms offer continuing means to ‘explore’ the podcast openly and inductively, in particular by applying scrutiny towards the metadata, specifically the age of the podcast (approximately six years as of the submission of this thesis), the total collective length of all episodes ( $\pm$  three-hundred hours), and so on. Mostly as an exercise to determine whether a podcast can be sufficiently covered, ensuring all (or at least the main body of) episodes are readily available, which allows the ‘netnographer’ (an online ethnographer dedicated specifically to digital spaces) the opportunity to visualize the so-called podcast universe in question. So, while one can on the one hand contextualize *Cum Town* as a site specific podcast that exists within the dirtbag left, it is also worth analyzing as a self-contained podcast universe, a form of documentation that allows for the illumination of ingroup and outgroup constructions.<sup>25</sup>

Considering the podcast’s formal aspects, such as its visual online presence or the podcast’s presentation (music, sound effects, segments or style of speech) is a good start in this process of podcast ethnography. One formal aspect of the podcast presentation is apparent in how Nick Mullen titles episodes and what he puts into description, for one because the title is almost always unrelated to the content of the episodes with some minor exceptions. Commonly, Mullen does not typically bother with capitalizing any letters or punctuation. As an example, episode 289 is titled *o brother paul blart thou* with the description saying: “damn blew what could be a good riff on the title here. I should save write it down for when I get back into stand up as a cash grab” almost as if Mullen is using the title and descriptor as a notepad for his immediate impulse thoughts, also indicative of a supposed ‘lack of interest’ given the apparent grammatical error, an informality of Mullen’s that is also directly related to decreasing distance with his audience and therefore increasing the likelihood of PSI with his audience, whether that informality is genuine or ‘designed’ (as Horton and Wohl had illustrated the functioning of PSI/PSR) is a whole different Pandora’s box, but it is worth noting how the informal presentation of *Cum Town* is an all-encompassing endeavor rather than just a style of speech characteristic of the internal machinations of the podcast.

### **1.5. Digital Bubbles and Netnography**

Having just discussed the interconnected nature of the dirtbag left, an influential Data & Society report by Rebecca Lewis comes to mind. In her report she discusses the surge of fringe

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<sup>25</sup> Lundström & Lundström (2021): 291

reactionary media following the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the rise of the alt-right through YouTube. Particularly, YouTube recommendations that will gradually get users deeper down an ideological rabbit hole. Consider when a user starts with a video compilation of “hysterical feminists” or “social justice warriors”, maybe this came recommended after watching a relevant news segment. Should the user leave YouTube’s Autoplay feature on, as they watch YouTube passively for background noise, they could gradually wind up watching a video about the “great replacement theory” or sometimes called “white genocide”.<sup>26</sup> This is based on YouTube’s algorithm which determines that because a lot of users who viewed video A also end up watching video B, if one watches video A, they would also like to see video B.

This is not even a design flaw on YouTube’s end, it is actively finding content it knows its users will enjoy. A consequence of this design philosophy, however, is that this inevitably leads to content bubbles. In my experience, I have first come across *Cum Town* thanks to a YouTube recommendation, likely stemming from my viewing of Hasan Piker clips and have since come across all the other dirtbag left content creators on this platform. It is not just the viewing behavior that supplements this outcome. Rebecca Lewis identifies what she refers to as the Alternative Influence Network AIN as a spiderweb of the influencers from the intellectual dark web, fringe white nationalists and reactionary pundits. What people in this network consistently do is feature in one another’s content consistently, not just so they can plug their own content but also because the algorithm recognizes that they feature in the content of other personalities. They basically create a self-supporting ecosystem that increases their presence while also legitimizing themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, there is another structure that could be identified. The dirtbag left also exists as part of a larger structure of leftist content creators and is often paired with a collection of leftist video essayists (sometimes referred to as Breadtube), Marxist philosophers and a number of political talk-shows. As mentioned earlier, *Cum Town* is no stranger to guest appearances in other podcasts and other content. Fans of the podcast might end up viewing other appearances the hosts make on other platforms and become interested in different content from there. It is a springboard-type of machination and interestingly enough both of these separate content networks originated with Donald Trump’s election.<sup>28</sup> Trump gained a lot of support based on the fact that he was “not a politician” and “says what he thinks”, his style of

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis, R. *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on Youtube*. Data & Society Research Institute, September 18, 2018: 36

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, R (2018): 1

<sup>28</sup> The Data & Society report lists mainly personalities that found an audience during the 2016 election year, or the years following.

politics rested on his informal presentation, beyond his rhetoric his politics is in part based on a cult of personality. Trump primarily used Twitter to foster para-social engagement with his base, and cast himself as an anti-establishment mouthpiece, recalcitrant to the political elite and the mainstream media.<sup>29</sup> That is to say that Trump started a trend of sorts, as he realized an informal approach towards his audience results in more engagement. *Cum Town* is notably a podcast that came up during the 2016 election year and grew their audience over the following years. Given the rhetoric Trump espoused from the highest office of the world's most influential nation, it was incredibly difficult not to have a strong opinion of him. The result of this is that a large amount of media personalities got on board with his rhetoric and amplified it, and a lot of others spent an immeasurable amount of time responding to all of it, those that emerged later eventually had to pick a side in a new phase of culture wars.

This media landscape that is now formed by bubbles and echo chambers is the digital environment the world inherited going into the pandemic.<sup>30</sup> Algorithms like the one described earlier ensure that audiences find content they enjoy, then find similar content that they enjoy until they find content that exists on the fringes of ideology. There is some freedom in the idea that users curate their own media to a degree, these kinds of algorithms do not just apply to YouTube after all. This was the inevitable outcome of its design, and to a degree there is not so much wrong with it as there is with power structures beyond its control. The debate this evokes, where one either prefers an oversaturated media landscape where we currently exist in, or an undersaturated landscape where everyone gets similar content and acquires similar worldviews.<sup>31</sup>

## Chapter 2: From Clip-Industrial Complex to Deep Fandom

Whereas the previous chapter has been about the manner in which *Cum Town* functions as a podcast, how the podcast medium functions as a conductor to PSI as well as *Cum Town*'s position in a broader network, this chapter covers the audience's engagement with the entity of *Cum Town* not just as listeners of a podcast but also as fans who engage with one another through digital bubbles as illustrated in the previous chapter. After all, the nature of a para-social

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<sup>29</sup> McDonnell, A. & Wheeler, M. "@realDonaldTrump: political celebrity, authenticity and para-social engagement on Twitter" in, *Celebrity Studies* vol. 10, no. 3 (2019): 428

<sup>30</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, we understand that Donald Trump was a person of interest to audiences all over the world, because of the precedent he was setting. It was not just American media consumers affected by his election, since his style of fringe politics caught on to the rest of the world.

<sup>31</sup> Personally, I find the algorithm to be perfectly reflective of the world and its flawed structures. Retooling the algorithm would seem more like hiding the problem than it does fixing it.



relationship is that it is one-sided, that side being that of being an individual from a larger audience, if this thesis means to understand the para-social dynamic between the “Cum Boys” and their fans one should approach this from the audience perspective as well. Throughout this chapter I explore the digital bubbles of the *Cum Town* fandom from a first-hand experience, having gone the extra mile to interact with some of the fans along the way. Rebecca Lewis’ report already illustrated to a degree how these bubbles insist upon the reciprocation of content through the cooperation of media personalities and the functions of YouTube’s algorithm, that is one example of media convergence in action.

## **2.1. Media Cumvergence**

Henry Jenkins III is an American media scholar and credited with coining the term “Convergence culture” as he wrote about the phenomenon in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide*. The book is about the relationship between three concepts – media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence.<sup>32</sup> His book delves into the flow of content guided by intersections of new media as well as their respective industries and audiences, painting a picture of how as the media changes, so does the control and distribution of content. For the purpose of his argument, Jenkins uses several case studies such as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *The Matrix*, *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* to illustrate his three key concepts and ways in which they can intersect throughout various media and their engagement with their respective audiences. Central to his book is the emergence of media that possess more than one functionality, the cellular phone at one point was a device that received and transmitted phone calls, until it started introducing text-chatting, gaming, music players and general internet browsing and application functionality. To be more concise, devices from recent years i.e., smartphones, laptops, tablets, game consoles, have all grown closer in their functionality and became increasingly intersectional throughout the web 2.0 era, changing both the way media is produced and consumed.<sup>33</sup>

## **2.2. YouTube Content Farms and the 24/7 Friendship Simulator**

As stated in the previous chapter, podcasting as a medium is not exclusive to any specific platform. Any of the aforementioned devices are capable of streaming podcasts from a wide number of platforms such as Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, Podimo or any number of media hosting services and the main consequence of that practice is that its audiences are frequently

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<sup>32</sup> Jenkins, H. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, 2006: 2

<sup>33</sup> Jenkins, H. *Convergence Culture* (2006): 16

migrating. As a listener of the *Cum Town* podcast, my introduction to the show started with YouTube's recommendations algorithm, likely informed by Hasan Piker clips I have previously consumed, the platform started forwarding clips from the *Cum Town* podcast from there. These clips are not at all content uploaded by any of the primary beneficiaries of the podcast, but rather clips curated and edited by fans of the show. The accumulation of these clips by fans (not just of *Cum Town* but any similar media) is something that is sometimes called the "clip-industrial complex" on YouTube.<sup>34</sup> The curated segments of the show are edited and frequently accompanied by relevant montage or animation, adding something new to pre-existing content and reproducing it. As discussed in the last chapter, YouTube's algorithms ensure the circulation of similar content through recommendations. *Cum Town* (and most other entities discussed in this thesis so far) do not have their own YouTube channel, or even if they do it would not be their primary platform. The fans proliferate the brand, much like how Rebecca Lewis' describes the function of the alternative influence network, *Cum Town* fans form a network of their own which will inevitably also lead to content featuring associated niche micro-celebrities.

One specific YouTube channel named ClangersTV<sup>35</sup> specializes in taking bits (a bit being a longer lasting comedic riff that snowballs into a more nuanced scenario) from *Cum Town* episodes and cutting and editing it to fit with specific scenes from media the podcast is referencing. One specific example would be their video depicting *Cum Town*'s "Getting Your Dick Sucked Before Christmas" bit, their take on Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) where they imagine that rather than discovering a doorway to the Christmas World in the forest that fills his heart with joy, Jack Skellington discovers a glory hole that everyone in the Halloween World has to hear about.<sup>36</sup> The cast of *Cum Town* is typically well-versed in the media they discuss, which is usually expressed through obscure trivia or remembering minor details of films accompanied by considerably accurate imitation, so typically when they perform a bit like this they capture the feel and flow of the original media they are referencing quite accurately, so when ClangersTV appropriates audio from the *Cum Town* podcast they will not have a difficult time to lip sync the audio to the footage of whatever piece of media that *Cum Town* is making a parody of, either speeding the footage up slightly or

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<sup>34</sup> This term was popularized by Hasan Piker but has yet to catch on beyond his community. It refers to the constant coming and going of clip channels on Youtube that cut and distribute highlights of long-duration content forms i.e. podcasts, livestreams, tv-shows, etc.

<sup>35</sup> Channel emerged July 22nd, 2022. Currently at 165.000+ subscribers. Prior to *Cum Town* clips this channel mostly produced Simpsons memes.

<sup>36</sup> ClangersTV, 2021. "Cum Town – The Nightmare Before Christmas" (3:05)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8sv496mxCY&ab\\_channel=ClangersTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8sv496mxCY&ab_channel=ClangersTV)

slowing it down, applying a type of rhythmic montage seemingly in accordance to montage theory of Sergei Eisenstein (which is to say, cut and edited to compliment the content of the dialogue), leading to the illusion that the podcast's rendition of certain bits of dialogue are nearly authentic to the film.

Given the nature of the *Cum Town* podcast, many channels dedicated to the *Cum Town* clip-industrial complex find their videos removed or their channel deleted at some point. A YouTube channel named FFBO Entertainment partners with several animators and (as of this paper) acts as a central hub for a genre of videos that can simply be called "*Cum Town Animated*", on top of uploading these videos FFBO is currently the host of what is called the *24/7 Friendship Simulator*, an indefinite YouTube livestream that is constantly playing episodes of *Cum Town* accompanied by an active chat box.<sup>37</sup> Entering this stream is equivalent to having a digital space to listen to *Cum Town* episodes in a broadcast type of fashion, while also having a community to discuss and engage with. As the stream's title suggests, it aims to provide an experience akin to being surrounded by a group of friends cracking jokes with one another. It is mostly meant to serve as constant background noise to negate the silence with, but its chat feature here provides a direct line of communication with *Cum Town* fans. As a fan of this podcast, options for fan spaces are incredibly limited. For one because a YouTube live chat lacks the option to post photos or videos, making it difficult to maintain topical threads and inevitably discussion will be steered by whatever the podcast is discussing at that moment. More candidly, as a community space it lacks oversight of membership and compartmentalization of discussions, content and resources. Certainly, one will find likeminded *Cum Town* enthusiasts in the live chat, but it is not exactly a communal hub with guaranteed activity and frequently recurring visitors.

### **2.3. Online Fora for the *Cum Town* Community**

Reddit, a social media platform dedicated to providing community spaces in the form of 'subreddits' (which are user-generated forums dedicated to niche interests) used to be a service *Cum Town* fans could use to engage with one another. The subreddit "r/CumTown" wound up being deleted, searching through Reddit for an explanation as to why this page no longer exists, I wound up finding several comments like these:

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<sup>37</sup> FFBO Entertainment. "24/7 Friendship Simulator" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrJC-9P-qnc&ab\\_channel=FFBOEntertainment](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrJC-9P-qnc&ab_channel=FFBOEntertainment)

Ironic offensive comedy usually attracts actual psychopaths. I looked up this podcast because I'd never heard of it and clearly its fanbase is.. absolutely horrible. I don't understand how it can be associated with the so-called "dirtbag left" when at least one user dropped the "clown world" white supremacist dog whistle. Staying far, far, far away from it.

- "Metridium\_Fields", Reddit user, March 2022

All openly labeled *Cum Town* Discord servers have been deleted as well, which means that the (active) formal spaces to communicate with this fanbase do not exist anymore. The *24/7 Friendship Simulator* (which was already previously run on a different YouTube channel that does not exist anymore) functions as the best possible road into this community, so as a form of research I utilized the live chat and inquired if there was any obscure *Cum Town* fan Discord I could join, I was then forwarded to a small gaming channel named "TyBayagaGaming2" and instructed to click a link featured in any of its video descriptions, from there I wound joining a server called "TyBayaga's Cum Cult." This server, beyond functioning as a single meeting ground for *Cum Town*'s audience is also a kind of black market for *Cum Town* content. *Cum Town* makes most of its money through Patreon, where audiences subscribe to content producers by supporting them financially with a monthly fee in exchange for premium content. What the server administrators of the Cum Cult Discord did is subscribe to the Patreon and record and distribute access to the podcast's premium episodes to *Cum Town* fans who are not patrons themselves. This makes engagement with this server rewarding for *Cum Town* fans, particularly those well-initiated who wound up finding this server by digging deep enough.

Getting into this server helps contextualize the earlier quoted reddit comment, whereas the hosts of the *Cum Town* podcast will often flirt with controversial language, its audience crosses the boundary of being full-on offensive, almost as if it is solely for the purpose of being offensive. For context, the "clown world" dog whistle that the earlier Reddit comment was referring to alludes to the notion that we live in a world that is foolish for even considering that gender can go beyond a simple binary, or that people are crazy for suggesting they want to live in a world that does not need policing or for wanting an alternative for capitalism. In an article by Marc Tutters and Sal Hagen, they venture deeply into another vehement online milieu, namely 4chan's /pol/ board, a highly reactionary message board. They venture particular into a dog whistle known as the 'triple parentheses', an anti-Semitic meme that insists on a conspiracy that a Jewish cabal pulls all the strings.<sup>38</sup> To be frank, in public spaces (be it online or in person)

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<sup>38</sup> Tutters, M & Hagen, S. "(((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan" in, *New Media & Society*. Vol. 22, no. 12, 2020: 2218-2219

reactionaries rely on subtly-coded messages to communicate with like-minded individuals while others are also paying attention. There is a likeness between this Discord server and these types of message boards such as their commonality for acting as a safe space for reactionary thought, a morbid curiosity for shock-content and a chaotic internal hierarchy.

#### **2.4. The Fan Milieu**

To delve back into the Cum Cult Discord; given the obscure nature of this server these fans do not feel the need to use dog whistles in (relatively) private digital spaces. Whereas users of the now deleted subreddit relied on these types of coded messages, in this Discord space they can express themselves freely. With the limited fan spaces available for this fandom, the less-than public online spaces that remain are filled with violently offensive content and derogatory slurs. Given the ‘degenerate’ reputation of *Cum Town* (and per extension its fans), it is not all that surprising that they have a separate porn channel on their server, filled with countless variations of incredibly niche or non-traditional porn genres including intersex or transvestite porn, urination, defecation, cock-and-ball torture (also known as CBT), (male) assplay, sounding, foot fetishism, flashing, self-fellatio and some users have even posted their own genitalia.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not these users actually intimately enjoy the pornography they share and consume is hard to tell, it would appear as if this is played for vulgarity, yet also indicates that they have this media readily available to them, which signals that these two conclusions do not have to be mutually exclusive. It is either chaotically sex-positive or vulgar shock-humor engagement depending on who one asks.

These elements of vulgarity and reactionary posturing are either reflective of *Cum Town* as a podcast or of its fandom. Henry Jenkins’ book *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers* contains a transcript of an interview Matt Hills conducted with him in which Hills quotes Janet Staiger, professor emeritus of the University of Texas at Austin. She exclaimed that most studies of fandom have a tendency to emphasize positive features and exchanges deriving from shared interests, arguing that scholars need to keep their presumptions in check. To her, certain fans or fan communities could probably benefit from reading up more on critical social theory, but fandom by itself cannot be easily divvied up into good or bad objects, it is up to the scholar to represent fandom adequately and evaluate it thoughtfully.<sup>40</sup>

That is to say, none of the analysis pertaining to this particular facet of *Cum Town*’s fan

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<sup>39</sup> These are generally men, in case the reader is wondering.

<sup>40</sup> Jenkins, H. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York University Press, 2006: 10

community insists that *Cum Town* fandom is objectively ‘bad’ or inherently reactionary, it is not even necessarily a reflection of *Cum Town* itself, that is a difficult value judgement to make especially based on Reddit comments and a single Discord server. Pointing out the vehement elements of the *Cum Town* fan community mainly serves to provide a complete representation of its fandom; it is perfectly possible to listen to and engage with *Cum Town* in a non-reactionary manner. Jenkins’ reply to Hills affirms this stance, he adds that while fandom can be both progressive and reactionary, as an author it is difficult to uphold that kind of critical distance as in the back of one’s mind, we find it to be important to declare ourselves ideologically especially when writing from a discipline such as cultural studies, which came up from political resistance and has been shaped in part by Marxist discourse. That discourse is as much a moral discourse as it is a political or economic one.<sup>41</sup> Ergo, it is important both to represent the full scope of fandom and extrapolate all of its elements, as it is to be honest about what one could consider its worst elements.

Even within the Cum Cult Discord, where one can find users with names such as “Azov Minority Crusher”, “Andy Semitic”, “N-Word Scissorhands” and “Buck Breaking Nigger Hating”, one will always find users that reject the rhetoric typically associated with this type of reactionary language, not from an academic standpoint which reactionaries do not tend to respond to anyway, but in a passive manner where they simply dismiss these users as ‘edgy’ and move on, if anything every single member of this server appears to be recalcitrant to one another, almost insisting on a dynamic where everyone despises each other either playfully or for the purpose of mischief. This environment resembles the most juvenile and misanthropic elements of 4chan and 8chan, rather than attempt to have thoughtful conversations about their content, the users of these digital spaces appear to be in a constant Olympic contest to upset as many people as possible.

## **2.5. Reactionary Fans vs. *Cum Town* Stans**

The *Cum Town* community is not a monolith, owed for one by the gatekeeping institutions (Youtube, Reddit, Twitter) that police their shared public digital spaces as well as the chaotic nature in which the remaining spaces are organized in. It is because of these reasons that every type of *Cum Town* listener is lumped together into one space, listeners clearly do not enjoy the podcast in the same way. This gets at the heart of this chapter, a broader issue as to whether or not *Cum Town* fans are engaging with their material in a para-social manner or not. In the

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<sup>41</sup> Jenkins, H. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006): 10

previous chapter, David Giles addressed that PSI/PSR exist on a spectrum, unique from person to person. This tracks when considering there is such a variety of people who consume this podcast but having listened to *Cum Town* it seems somewhat important to seriously consider whether the reactionary fans are genuine engaging with this podcast para-socially, or just conveniently appropriating a popular niche media environment for the purpose of legitimizing a reactionary agenda.

Reactionary fans often operate from the notion that media they consume is tailored exclusively for them, something that also clearly occurred during Gamergate in 2014, a month-long harassment campaign that insisted on white men being the central audience in the field of gaming.<sup>42</sup> Those that aligned with that campaign believed in the false dichotomy that heterosexual white men are the majority consumers of video games, which makes a lot of sense if one grew up in a world where LGBTQ+, women or non-white people were often dismissed as set-dressing, often an afterthought in all forms of representation.<sup>43</sup> Anecdotally, I can confirm that I know people who meet all three of those categories (often all at once) that take plenty of enjoyment out of the juvenile humor of Nick Mullen, Stavros Halkias and Adam Friedland. The appeal of the show is entirely intersectional, it is not made purely for disenfranchised white men as the target audience, this podcast does not openly aspire to reflect exclusionary values at all. The simple tendency shared by the listeners of this podcast is that they are self-identified degenerates who engage in foul-mouthed language and toilet humor.

This dichotomy of fans of both a ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ nature provides a different insight based on the function of PSI. For one, the para-social relationships as Horton and Wohl described them are completely illusory, a relationship between an audience and a curated persona (the designed informality between a performer and their fans.)<sup>44</sup> An inevitable consequence of such an unclear point of interaction may very well be the amount of projection required to manifest such a persona from the spectator’s point of view. By which I mean to say; the fan completes their own image of the subject, which might suggest that the spectator as an individual has the primary leverage on how they perceive the persona they engage with. When Horton and Wohl described a PSR as being ‘one-sided’ they did not just mean that in terms of how the relationship is established in form of who engages who, but also in who perceives who and through what lens, if anything the spectator has more control in how they engage with their

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<sup>42</sup> Stanfill, M. “Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary” in, *Television and New Media*. Vol. 21, no. 2, 2020: 130-131

<sup>43</sup> Rebecca Lewis’ 2018 Data & Society report also credited Gamergate as being the grassroots of several reactionary content creators and new media personalities.

<sup>44</sup> Horton & Wohl (1956): 215

subject. An individual spectator of a community that especially does not belong on traditional media and will not have a lot of digital spaces dedicated to bringing these individuals together, cannot form a collectively curated notion of who their subjects (the three podcast hosts) are. For each individual user they will form their own idea of why their role model in question expresses themselves the way they do, and from there the difference between whether the podcast is about hedonism and juvenile quips or reactionary pandering becomes a matter of interpretation.

That does not mean that having a reactionary interpretation of the podcast or any other material that experiments with difficult boundaries is completely valid, if anything because there is no convincing indication that *Cum Town* subscribes to a reactionary political agenda, but also because it would defeat the purpose of their own comedy in a way. A particular example that comes to mind is when the Cum Boys (accompanied by *Chapo Trap House*'s Felix Biederman) review a New Jersey based television program for Jewish children known as *Fiveish*, characterized by an anthropomorphic five-dollar bill who plays a didactic role for a group of four young Jewish children and teaches them about Judaism. This show appears almost like an antisemitic skit based on Sesame Street but getting deeper into it the program the viewer starts to realize it is genuine.<sup>45</sup> The real-time reaction had by Stavros Halkias as he is exposed to this piece of media is one of absolute disbelief, it becomes quite clear as they get deeper into the program that the hosts are well aware where the boundaries are and do not make value judgements at the expense of Jewish people, even Friedland and Biederman who are Jewish themselves take amusement out of the idea that Nick Mullen is having whiplash because he did not come up with the idea of the program himself. It is quite apparent that they take pleasure in these themes not because they believe in them, but exactly because they understand where the boundaries are. Whether the fans do on the other hand is an entirely different matter.

Earlier this chapter discussed so-called dog whistles, a subtler type of hate speech where the immediate bigotry is not immediately apparent. If the *Cum Town* cast is not directly communicating these ideas, what about indirectly? Diana Rieger et al laid out the intricacies of more implicit forms of hate speech (in order to identify the true magnitude of hate speech on Reddit, 4chan and 8chan) that the *Cum Town* podcast would be guilty of is spreading negative stereotypes. So far this reads as a semantic trap, when is one 'spreading' negative stereotypes? When *Cum Town* discusses *Fiveish*, are they spreading antisemitic stereotypes by addressing a pre-existing property? Is talking about said stereotypes enough to qualify it as 'spreading' said

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<sup>45</sup> ClangersTV, 2019. "Fiveish" [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i-QKWvMWKA&ab\\_channel=ClangersTV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i-QKWvMWKA&ab_channel=ClangersTV)



stereotypes or is it simply because they have a platform? Fortunately Rieger et al elaborate a little bit further, adding that a characteristic that is shared throughout implicit hate speech involves ‘fear speech’, meaning that the speech is aimed at instilling anxiety about a target demographic mainly by highlighting harmful actions said demographic allegedly engages in while speculating about their goal to ‘take over’.<sup>46</sup>

These things are clearly true for those spreading the earlier mentioned ‘clown world’ dog whistle, as well as other inflammatory screen names previously discussed from the fan Discord, all of which performed by people who are part of *Cum Town*’s fan community. Whether one can earnestly say the same for the podcast itself appears like reaching; even when the show’s hosts address negative stereotypes, they never bridge it into some political end goal where they promote eugenics. Reactionaries detest degeneracy, especially by other races. Somehow it seems doubtful that this New York trio of depressed alcoholic, hedonistic overweight Greek and Jewish man were going to be poster boys for fascism especially given their association with leftist content creators. Once again, we must reiterate that *Cum Town* does not exist in a vacuum.

## **2.6. To Perform Fandom**

With all of this in mind, a glaring dichotomy has been painted between *Cum Town* and elements within its fanbase, namely that their likenesses are so superficial that it is not apparent if these specific fans have any meaningful para-social connection with this podcast at all. This calls for a myriad of questions, namely: Is there a ‘wrong’ way to engage in PSI? The moment a PSI is achieved through fallacy, does it cease to be a PSI? Is a PSI something one can really reduce to how an individual interprets and projects onto a distant celebrity figure, or is there a utilitarian balance one can find within fandom? And finally, how much overlap is there necessarily between para-social interaction and the concept of fandom? *Cum Town* certainly travels some murky waters in regard to these questions. For one their fan communities are reduced to such hard-to-find digital bubbles that they act as safe spaces for reactionaries, and those who listen to this podcast without context risk getting the wrong idea entirely. These are problems generally shared by those under the umbrella of the so-called dirtbag left as producers with this label attached often do not express themselves in a thoughtful or careful manner.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rieger, D. et al. “Assessing the Extent and Types of Hate Speech in Fringe Communities: A Case Study of Alt-Right Communities on 8chan, 4chan and Reddit” in, *Social Media + Society*. October-December 2021: 2-3

<sup>47</sup> Hasan Piker notably got in hot water for saying that America deserved 9/11, Dasha Nekrasova is anorexic and keeps a separate Twitter dedicated to her diet which gets frequent accusations of glamourizing eating disorders.

In the previous chapter, I cited the Lundströms' article where they proposed the methodology of "podcast ethnography." They named the primary benefit of this methodology to be the spatial temporal flexibility of the podcast medium. The podcast can be casually consumed over a timeframe of the researcher's choosing and that is beneficial when considering the 'emotional labor' of navigating disagreeable, fringe milieus such as in their case the white-nationalist podcast *Motgift*.<sup>48</sup> Again I will reiterate that comparing *Cum Town* to actual white nationalists is somewhat unfair; however, it seems pertinent to add that while listening to *Cum Town* is casual engagement with a chaotic dynamic between three friends, the fandom is nothing if not 'emotional labor' not because it is frequently reactionary, but also because one understands these instances to be outliers and therefore not directly representative of *Cum Town*'s podcast universe, or even its fanbase. What it comes down to is that having listened to many episodes of this podcast and to find such a dichotomy between the podcast and some of its listeners can be somewhat confusing because the immediate instinct I have as an author is to make excuses for this show, and this podcast is anything but flawless. If anything, while it is not reasonable for listeners to have such a strange interpretation of *Cum Town*, it is not exactly illogical. After all, just because they do not promote white nationalism, avoid certain slurs or make fun of reactionaries from time to time, none of this means that they are not being incredibly racist on several occasions.

Nick Mullen often has a tendency to push the boundaries in terms of his ethnic impressions, a particular example of a bit that is absolutely questionable would be the "Chinese Voice for the White Guy" bit featured in premium episode 72.<sup>49</sup> This bit is a parody on the hit show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003, rebooted as *Queer Eye* in 2018) which is subverted by Mullen into a show where a Chinese man teaches a random white man how to speak in his accent, an accent that Mullen does not hesitate to provide. While the humor behind this bizarre scenario rests on the fact that a Chinese accent can stand-in for what would originally be a full-on makeover, Mullen's impression of a Chinese accent is not a kind one as it is purposefully loud and brash. There are many examples of particularly Mullen crossing a certain line, these instances certainly lend credence to the idea that this is an explicit or implicitly racist podcast.

I am reminded of Dave Chapelle and his position on gender, and how reasonable he would make himself sound as he consistently paints a picture where he implies that he understands gender better than trans and non-binary people. Dave Chapelle might not mean

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<sup>48</sup> Lundström & Lundström (2021): 296

<sup>49</sup> Nut City, 2018. "Cum Town - Chinese Voice for the White Guy"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1uurHwTlGI&ab\\_channel=NutCity](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1uurHwTlGI&ab_channel=NutCity)

harm, but that does not make him harmless. *Cum Town* is not exactly a profound podcast that seeks to make greater points about politics or culture, Adam Friedland described better than anyone what *Cum Town* is truly about: *Cum Town* is a podcast about “being gay with your dad.”<sup>50</sup> Both a meaningless yet simultaneously accurate description of this podcast because it speaks to the careless, hedonic nature of the comedy that is exercised in *Cum Town*. Their comedy is meaningless in its essence, not that it is entirely apolitical, but the politics are never the point behind the comedy. The words they espouse are entirely meant to exist in an echo chamber of sorts, entirely absurdist and bizarre word-salads which they continue to construct until they find something that sticks, which will inevitably be clipped and shared by their fans. It is an incredibly low-stakes formula, yet at the same time the absence of a formula, given that it aims to have very little substance.

*Cum Town* does have a tendency to address specific political nuances, as made clear in their “Liberal Elmo” bit.<sup>51</sup> In this bit, Sesame Street becomes gentrified, pricing Gordon, a black man, out of his home. Elmo’s support toward Gordon is purely performative and conditional, while clearly failing to understand how he is actively making Gordon’s conditions worse. While Gordon gets arrested for being loud on the phone, Elmo seems more fixated on electoral politics and insists things are better now because Donald Trump is no longer president. Elmo eventually blames Gordon for stealing his bicycle, then after realizing he was being casually racist Elmo’s excuse is that he got out of a toxic relationship and was traumatized by it. This is meant to be a poor excuse for being racist according to the type of person Elmo is intended to represent in this scenario (a white New York liberal from a trendy upscale neighborhood, entirely lacking in self-awareness). *Cum Town* addresses an ideological inconsistency that stems from a certain amount of privilege, it would appear that they have an adept understanding of complex realities and political nuances. Admittedly, they do not stop and ponder this reality because they are mostly subverting known media for the purpose of illustrating a comedic scenario.

*Cum Town* has at the very least a careless aesthetic, but it cares a lot about that image. When Nick Mullen delivers a racially charged impression, it is probably not because he is advocating for free speech or for the sake of some white supremacist agenda. Whether his carelessness is at all commendable is a different question entirely, that question being what is the right way here to perform racism for the purpose of comedy? Given the community’s

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<sup>50</sup> Friedland, A. Twitter Post, May 5, 2017, 9:27 PM:

<https://twitter.com/adamfriedland/status/860576794524749824?lang=en>

<sup>51</sup> Saul, 2022. “Liberal Elmo – CUMTOWN ANIMATED” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=467Vz6l-3uw&ab\\_channel=saul](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=467Vz6l-3uw&ab_channel=saul)

proclivity for using racial slurs, we can eliminate their approach from the equation. In an article dedicated to understanding the rhetoric and logic racist humor on the internet, Simon Weaver addresses a connection between humor and rhetoric while outlining scenarios of when a joke becomes “more than a joke” with a couple of examples. Humor that affirms racist, essentialist logic is primarily cited as problematic as well as humor that depicts inferiorization and exploitation while supplying stereotypes that correspond to that logic.<sup>52</sup> For instance, representing a black person in the context of slavery as an obedient servant rather than a victim of an oppressive system, or worse a victim that deserves that oppression is racist with a capital R. Humor that addresses racist attitudes while affirming the conditions of the marginalized people affected by those conditions is relatively harmless. While *Cum Town* frequently engages in the latter behavior, by supplying negative stereotypes Nick Mullen (the usual suspect in these types of scenarios) specifically crosses a line and makes “more than a joke”, which the fanbase emulates. Even if they are merely on occasion, the reactionary fans are not entirely wrong to assume this show is also for them.

Which gives some context for as to how *Cum Town* fans para-socially emulate their favorite aspects of the podcast. These instances (which are relatively few, in the grand scheme of the podcast) have such a lasting impact on the shows’ fans that these are the moments they enjoy emulating the most. There is a dichotomy between the laissez faire hedonic fans who are almost too permissive, and the casual racists in need of a platform to engage in racial bigotry. The best way to describe it is that fans enjoy different aspects of *Cum Town*’s podcast universe to varying degrees and emulate those aspects to reflect that. It goes to show how multifaceted both the podcast is (as it seeks to be subversive in every direction,) as well as the variety to which individual fans engage para-socially with the same entity. Giles’ assertion on the multiplicity of PSI/PSR was accurate and *Cum Town* as a case study has demonstrated exactly how far this multiplicity can go within a fan community. This does raise a series of more questions, namely, how can people who are so fundamentally different enjoy the same content in such different manners, and what does that indicate? One assertion would be that an individual within a larger audience projects a lot onto the performer within the PSI, which speaks to the illusory nature of the relationship as Horton and Wohl initially founded in their theory, the nature of para-social engagement is not so cut-and-dry.

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<sup>52</sup> Weaver, S. “Jokes, rhetoric and embodied racism: a rhetorical discourse analysis of the logics of racist jokes on the internet” in, *Ethnicities*. Vol. 11, no. 4, 2011: 421-422

As of June 25, 2022, Stavros Halkias announced he was no longer part of *Cum Town*.<sup>53</sup> He passively mentions how they frequently joked about disliking their fans but expressed gratitude for his involvement of the podcast.<sup>54</sup> Halkias' growing career as a stand-up comedian ensured that he would eventually outgrow the podcast which has now manifested into reality. This puts the future of the podcast in dispute, as fans insist this is the beginning of the end. It seems that Mullen and Friedland will carry on the show either by adapting the formula or by eventually bringing on a new third-mic to fill Halkias' shoes. It seems that even to this day, *Cum Town* (if it carries on for much longer) is still subject to change and the fans will likely change to reflect that as well.

### Chapter 3: The Pandemic of Loneliness

Literature concerned with the nature of media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic is unfortunately scarce. The introduction of this thesis featured a particular study from Spain concerned with the effects of increased media consumption during the pandemic. That study's conclusion founded that this increased consumption was detrimental to emotional happiness and well-being, naturally because 'too-much' consumption of any nature is potentially harmful. The study is mostly concerned with television<sup>55</sup>, following the news, using social media and listening to the radio. The survey was conducted with 249 Spanish adults ranging from 18 to 75 years old, all of which engage with media in unique ways already based on those parameters.<sup>56</sup> The study refers also to a separate study that addressed a growing trend of media consumption during the pandemic in other western-European countries (France, Germany, United Kingdom) which also speaks to the lack of research that there has been concerning this topic, given that this scarcity favors western countries specifically. There is also no clear indication concerning whether any of their parameters include the podcast medium, or if that medium would be included under their measurements of radio or social media consumption, etc. But whether or not it precludes the medium is not pertinent to the bigger picture of what this study addresses. The grander takeaway of this study is that our changing behavior as media consumers during a global health crisis has affected well-being, and it seems quite straight-

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<sup>53</sup> Halkias, S. Twitter Post, June 25, 2022, 6:52 PM:

<https://twitter.com/stavvybaby/status/1540740091005517824>

<sup>54</sup> As they say, at the core of every joke is a grain of truth.

<sup>55</sup> Under television, the study distinguishes between TV-shows, films and general television, which suggests the data for increased Netflix/Disney+/Amazon Prime is included in these numbers.

<sup>56</sup> Muñoz-Velázquez, J. et al (2021): 1, 6

forward to assume why that would be. One assertion would be that most people have a desire for self-actualization, another that an individual has a variety of needs of social, recreational or productive nature. Obviously, all of these things are difficult to acquire when confined to limited space with no possibility of general human proximity beyond a small handful of people. In order to placate boredom, people had to find creative avenues to fulfill their personal needs and maintain the production cycles of our economy. Some of these avenues will be explored further, as there is some overlap between previously discussed para-social media engagement and the manner in which a majority of people had been forced to engage with the outside world for prolonged periods of time. With incredibly limited means, people had to maintain some semblance of society or at least the idea that they are still participating in said society. This chapter will discuss how PSI were manifested as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.1. The Informality of Viral Disease**

The first and foremost assertion as to the conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic was a largescale reorganization of all institutions. In academia, lectures were typically conducted through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts or similar video-teleconference applications, social contacts were maintained with friends and family through FaceTime, food and grocery delivery services such as Gorillas would replace physical trips to the supermarket during mandatory quarantine periods, media convergence has facilitated a digital landscape that could quickly accommodate the lack of mobility. The formal qualities of institutions as they used to be became inconvenient, needing quick solutions to the fact that we cannot put the economy on pause while having our most basic needs met so informal approaches to labor, education and administration became favored. One analogy that could be made for this situation is that every household became an island, and one could only leave if they properly prepared their ship; say for instance that two friends from neighboring cities wanted to connect socially, following this appointment they would both need to maintain a thorough checklist concerning with whom they have recently been in close-proximity contact with and if any of those people contact them to say that they test positive for COVID-19 then that precludes this appointment. From that perspective, it would almost not matter whether someone lives nearby or far away as there is an unusual number of formalities, gatekeeping two individuals from meeting up for any reason.

Effectively, people had to find ways to bridge the disconnect between the active lifestyle they may have been used to and the dire necessity to seclude themselves from the outside world as much as possible. In order to make this transition as accommodating as possible, social

interactions of all kinds were now being simulated over these aforementioned video-conference apps and other social media to facilitate an imitation of physical presence. The announcement of Mark Zuckerberg's Metaverse is also indicative of tech companies' desire to provide seemingly physical social spaces that one can access from the comfort of their own home.<sup>57</sup> It is this absence of true presence and the imitation of a two-way social interaction that Horton and Wohl dubbed "designed informality," that evoke the pseudo-social dilemma that the pandemic and the tech industry's response bring up. While these solutions definitely offer some type of answer to this problem, it supplies new ones.

### 3.2. Connected in Abstract Terms

This previous consideration is an important one, as there are commonalities between the dysfunctional social landscape under COVID-19 and several aspects of PSI/PSR, namely a type of distance that becomes nearly unbridgeable not just with a niche micro-celebrity for example, but also with one's friends, family and other basic forms of contact with the outside world. The notion that one could properly maintain relationships outside of the household became 'illusory' in its own right, not so much impossible but rather incredibly difficult. While different media and technologies had to adapt to the general inability to meet one another socially, some features of our current media landscape even became placeholders for this level of social interaction. For example, last chapter's *24/7 Friendship Simulator* that could be construed as a type of ASMR for lonely people even though it is just *Cum Town* episodes on an infinite loop.

A German study on loneliness during the pandemic made several comments on how the computer-mediated communication compared to face-to-face interaction comes with several drawback, such as the delayed development of trust. What the study by psychologists Helen Landmann and Anette Rohmann argues is that even when people feel emotionally and socially connected (what those communication technologies supply to a degree), people will experience a deficit of trust with a lack of physical contact.<sup>58</sup> In its conclusion, the study addresses how scholars frequently remark that it is equally possible to feel alone in a crowd as it is to feel connected while physically alone. Landmann & Rohmann argue that this thesis merits extension, as they find it is equally possible to feel connected socially while longing for the physical presence of others, a so-called physical loneliness as opposed to emotional or social

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<sup>57</sup> This transition would effectively advance the state of public online communications toward web 3.0

<sup>58</sup> Landman, H. & Rohmann, A. "When loneliness dimensions drift apart: Emotional, social and physical loneliness during the COVID-19 lockdown and its associations with age, personality, stress and well-being" in, *International Journal of Psychology* vol. 57, no. 1 (2022): 64

loneliness. This physical loneliness was arguably the most commonly experienced form of psychological deficit during the pandemic, understanding the well-being of people in isolation starts with understanding that concept.<sup>59</sup> So the study is somewhat indicative for how placeholders such as, for instance an indefinitely occurring livestream or an active Discord community, are insufficient. Additionally, it affirms Horton and Wohl's assessment of para-social relationships as being illusory. If one cannot measure any meaningful presence of the people one seeks to interact with, then that relationship does little to meet the emotional needs that one is attempting to fulfill. That is of course not to say that PSR are meant to fill a type of void in every context, as Giles assessed how diverse the phenomenon is. It simply means that a PSI cannot stand-in for physical interactions. Or at least, not sufficiently according to Landmann & Rohmann's findings, but since they never actually mention PSI at all that conclusion is mostly implicit.

### **3.3. Para-social Compensation Hypothesis**

Media psychologist Bradley Bond conducted another study, where he does actually argue for PSR as functional social alternatives during the social distancing policies of the pandemic. He conducted a four-panel survey over a data-collection period of six weeks, where he found that decreases in face-to-face interactions led to an increased intensity of PSR, supporting his so-called "para-social compensation hypothesis."<sup>60</sup> Without making any outright value judgements about what this development signifies for society at large, Bond concludes his study with a disruption of scholarly assumptions of PSR.<sup>61</sup> He provides some arguments for that outcome, but emphasizes one in particular, namely that individuals who experienced an increased usage of screens during the pandemic (including to maintain connected with their friends) were more readily able to process media personalities as authentic, real individuals that exhibit personhood. Basically, face-to-face interactions started to gain para-social qualities.<sup>62</sup> It is a blurred lines argument, giving credence to the metaphor I provided earlier this chapter. That metaphor arguing that distance ceases to be a factor in these circumstances where almost anyone appears to be distant.

To Bond, the objective of the study was to investigate the compensation function of PSR during a "global pandemic unparalleled in modern history", which is fine as a blanket statement

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<sup>59</sup> Landman & Rohmann (2022): 70-71

<sup>60</sup> Bond, B. "Parasocial Relationships as Functional Social Alternatives During Pandemic-Induced Social Distancing" in, *Psychology of Popular Media*, September 30, 2021: 2-3

<sup>61</sup> Bond, B. (2021): 7

<sup>62</sup> Bond, B. (2021): 3



of fact. After all it has been approximately a century since an outbreak of this scale has occurred (in the west), but it is not so much the notion of viral outbreaks and quarantining that is unparalleled, but rather its occurrence coinciding with the contemporary mediatized landscape characterized as late web 2.0 and the pattern of digital bubbles and segregated social media environments that occurred following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, as discussed in the previous chapter. This shift in the media environment also saw the inclusion of the podcast medium in the mainstream, and as Schlütz and Hedder characterized in the first chapter about the podcast medium and its potential to convey PSI; popular podcasts often address global but fragmented audiences with a durable supply of content, giving space to niche content that has no (or little) space in traditional media.<sup>63</sup> These niches both support the circulation of these digital bubbles, as well as provide more informal media engagement leading to more PSI. A particular consequence of this media package, as featured in Rebecca Lewis' discussion of the Alternative Influence Network, is that this structure results in gradually exposing audiences to reactionary worldviews. During the pandemic, these media personalities were involved in spreading vaccine and lockdown skepticism. One podcast that was famously responsible for spreading skepticism towards COVID-19 measures was the *Joe Rogan Experience*, which Lewis cited as being part of the so-called intellectual dark web.<sup>64</sup> Famously, his skepticism went so far that he bought into the use of ivermectin as a viable cure for COVID-19.<sup>65</sup> Spotify happens to own his podcast, providing the show with a veil of legitimacy.

This spells a vicious cycle; from necessitated isolation, leading to increased consumption of media which means more intense PSR dynamics and the subsequent reciprocation of certain aspects of that media. This circles back to Giles' assertion once again, that all PSI are unique and that it is ultimately the projection and input of the audience that determines the nature of this form of engagement. *Cum Town* as was discussed thoroughly in the last chapter is an example of a podcast that has clearly problematic aspects to it which are then exaggerated to extremes by some of their fans. Even if Joe Rogan assesses that he is not actually anti-vaccine and expresses to his audience that he even recommends getting vaccinated, it does not matter if he is just going to introduce more skepticism afterwards, he has already given credence to these attitudes. Similarly, it does not matter if Nick Mullen expresses support for progressive candidates in between racist impressions, audiences pick and choose

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<sup>63</sup> Schlütz & Hedder (2021): 3-4

<sup>64</sup> Lewis, R (2018): 47

<sup>65</sup> BBC Reality Check Team. "Joe Rogan: Four claims from his Spotify podcast fact-checked" on, *BBC News*, January 31, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/60199614>

and sometimes they choose poorly. An argument could be made for Spotify to regulate these podcasts more, just as Netflix should consider the message that is being sent by platforming Dave Chappelle despite Netflix providing otherwise pro-LGBTQ content. The negative connotations will stand out. This was already a consequence of 2016 culture war politics changing the world of media, and the echo chambers that ensued that ensured audiences would absorb increasingly rigid worldviews. When considering how either Joe Rogan or Nick Mullen are criticized for how they use their platform, this criticism stems from the awareness that these figures have large audiences listening to them. Horton and Wohl argued mass media as an instructive tool that shapes the behaviors and worldviews of those who consume it, and Giles argued the varying degrees to which the PSI phenomenon can play out. For those podcast personalities, the criticism does not stem solely from the individual acts themselves, but the behavior they exemplify to their audience. It is not just the danger of these audiences mimicking those acts, but rather the type of behavior and attitudes that permit these acts. In a nature vs. nurture type of argument, one could consider that people are heavily influenced by their environment. If a type of behavior is normalized within a social bubble it becomes easier for audiences to reciprocate such behavior from outside of that bubble.

The “designed informalities” which are characteristic of PSI are used to draw their audiences in, but into what? Into the media landscape? Into their bubble? Whichever approach one would go with, arguably the most impressive function of PSI is that they can turn mediatized concepts such as celebrity personalities or fictional spaces into tangible ideas to engage with and digital bubbles and niche communities into physical places. They actively give these concepts meaning, something personal to an audience which does not have an immediate impact in most people’s day to day lives. This could be grounds to an elaborate discussion, did the mass media garner importance through the audience reciprocation of their designed informalities? Or was there always something intrinsically valuable about media that mass audiences consumed and engaged with together? Currently it is not important, what matters is that this is the state of mass media, which if left unchecked could have behavioral consequences for large audiences, a risk that would be exacerbated by increased consumption.

## Conclusion

This thesis has so far been made up of several moving parts, a collection of separate facts that help illustrate a larger issue. Mass media has for a longer time been a conduit for para-social forms of engagement, a phenomenon first discussed by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl. This

type of interaction an audience has with mass media is not inherently a negative outcome of media consumption, although it certainly has the potential to be. Ever since the 2016 presidential election of the United States, the media landscape had become more segregated, leading a litany of smaller content producers to garner large but fragmented audiences. Donald Trump's election campaign also coincided with the podcast medium entering the mainstream, this format of audio-based audience interaction has highly informal qualities, qualities which are highly conducive of para-social interactions. It is also no coincidence that the COVID-19 pandemic saw a lot of audiences newly introduced to the podcast medium as new listeners led to the growth of several podcasts, including *Cum Town*. While David Giles had expanded on Horton and Wohl's theorizations of the phenomenon, he addresses the multifaceted nature of how an audience can interpret and express PSI/PSR. *Cum Town*, generally a vulgar podcast that expresses little interest in wider politics or debate, has a dichotomy in its fanbase that presents Giles' case quite well. While the majority of the podcast is a constant sequence of juvenile comedic riffs, bits and anecdotes, the dark humor that often subverts or exploits racial stereotypes leave the window open for a fan community that sees these bits as an open invitation to engage in reactionary bigotry. This is aided by the fact that audiences are constantly projecting their assumptions onto the media personae they are interacting with, which is also compounded by the (alleged) 'network' of whatever persona is the subject of interest. Rebecca Lewis painted a picture of smaller entities growing one another's platforms through collaboration, for *Cum Town* this network is frequently labeled as the dirtbag left.

The measured growth in new podcast listeners (a medium that scores high in designed informality) during a global pandemic that saw many people deal with prolonged periods of social isolation is important. An increase in media consumption already indicates a quantitative increase of PSI/PSR, but the nature of the podcast medium that insists upon its informal characteristics supplementing para-social engagement also suggests a qualitative one. While studies generally indicate that the increased media consumption during the pandemic was mostly detrimental to emotional well-being and people certainly experience physical loneliness, Bradley Bond argues that the lines between social and para-social interactions blur, as one replaces face-to-face social interactions with mediated ones, real friendships start to imitate PSI. His "para-social compensation hypothesis" lays the groundwork for something this thesis implicitly argues, namely the changing nature of PSR in times of crisis which blurred the lines between mediated social interactions and PSI. Bond makes no value judgement about his findings, and mostly argues for an academic reframing of how the nature of PSR are understood as is exemplified by the social conditions of a global health crisis and equally how such a crisis

can change the nature of the phenomenon of PSI/PSR.

A wider argument could be made that during the pandemic, para-social interaction became almost more common than regular social interaction. Not just because media consumption became more common, but also as Bond argued because the increased usage of screens for every type of interaction masked the implicit difference between interacting with close friends and distant media figures. The growth of the podcast medium insists almost on an increased desire of such interactions, so a greater desire to supplement the lack of face-to-face interactions with para-social ones. Has the nature of para-social interaction between podcasts and their audiences changed over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic? Definitely. A portion of these audiences are obviously new, since the pandemic came with changing behaviors of media consumption. Media consumption increased over the course of the pandemic, which also means the intensity of PSI increased. This is likely especially true for podcast listeners given the characteristics of the medium, which are also indicative of how PSI/PSR are more easily mediated through informal approach. But what does this development signify?

What could be worrisome about this trend is that the function of mass media (as Horton and Wohl described) is an exemplification of patterns of conduct for audiences to see and understand in others, as well as apply to oneself. In essence, they help inform the worldview of their audiences, this observation is central to their interest in PSI/PSR. The more time one spends with someone else, the more they think alike. In a one-sided para-social dynamic that analogy still holds water, but disproportionately in favor of the media persona. More often than not the conduct that media figures present to their audiences is harmless, these types of interactions between audience and media have been common for a long time after all. However, the late web 2.0 media sphere as Rebecca Lewis pointed out is specialized into pushing audiences towards increasingly fringe worldviews, in the worst cases that of reactionary thought. *Cum Town* fans for instance, while fragmented and generally consistent on their juvenile demeanor, can at their most dire be complicit in the spread of hate speech even if the podcast's hosts do not claim to align with those ideals, even while its hosts generally exemplify behavior that may suggest otherwise.

The pandemic lockdowns set a stage for more listeners to become introduced to niche content such as *Cum Town* and by extent their online fan communities. The changing behaviors of media consumption by audiences during the pandemic are indicative of how a global health crisis (or more accurately, prolonged periods of collective social isolation) can bring media closer to their audiences who need an alternative for otherwise common social interaction. Particularly new audiences, who have been engaging with mediums and content they previously

never took the time to engage with, are subject to interact para-socially with content they newly discovered. This can lead to exposure to different, incredibly specific types of behavior, it could be something entirely innocent like for instance a podcast about fishing, it could also be the vulgar riffs of three friends at a kitchen table, pseudo-intellectual skepticism of vaccines and at worst outright hate speech. The pandemic set the stage for many people to change fundamentally as they seek a new world (or podcast universe) to become a part of. They may be seeking some kind of remedy for the fact that the pandemic has made their otherwise larger world seem so small, they may be looking for an appeal to their personhood and therefore favor content with more informal qualities. The state of this late web 2.0 media landscape has been given an almost larger than life status in these circumstances, blurring the lines between social and para-social interactions which has significant impact on audiences.

This consideration might cede an undue legitimacy to media which would otherwise be an afterthought in the grand scheme of one's daily life, otherwise one could approach it as the media facilitating the desire for a larger world through convergence with all of the consequences that this brings. No one would argue that spending too much time online or consuming media can possibly be a good thing, people crave variety after all. Suspending the possibility that these types of crises will recur in the future and possibly become more common, media will change in order to reflect the needs of those who consume. The question is what the endgame of this process is, and whether one should conform to it willingly. Perhaps when another global event of this nature occurs (or the one we experience currently persists), this phenomenon could be studied more closely. While this period of time (2020-2022) illustrates how times of crisis are affected by rapid media convergence and that should be taken into account by those who study media within this window, the pandemic also highlights an oversaturation within the media that needs to be addressed by further research. Ideally before web 3.0 is realized and new media truly becomes larger than life.

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