

2018

Comedian Hosts and the Demotic Turn

Kathleen Collins
CUNY John Jay College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Broadcast and Video Studies Commons](#), and the [Radio Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Collins, Kathleen. (2018). Comedian Hosts and the Demotic Turn. In Llinares, Dario, Neil Fox, and Richard Berry, eds. *Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*. Palgrave Macmillan.

This Book Chapter or Section is brought to you for free and open access by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

Comedian Hosts and the Demotic Turn

Listen to enough episodes and you begin to consider the wild biographies of writers and artists in relation to your own attempts to pursue your dreams. (Larson 2015)

Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, the digital medium of audio podcasting has become a robust enterprise. According to numbers in the U.S., Edison Research and Triton Digital survey data in 2017 reveal that four-in-ten Americans ages 12 or older have ever listened to a podcast and 24% have listened to a podcast in the past month, up from 9% in 2008 (Edison Research, 2017). The report claims there are 57 million U.S. monthly listeners. *Ear Buds: The Podcasting Documentary* (Elwood and Mancini 2017), estimates some 350,000 podcasts in existence. The surge in the relatively new medium can be attributed to three main factors: a confessional culture, the triumph of experience over expertise, and accessible technology. Over the course of the 20th century, the U.S. experienced a marked trend toward public confessional behavior as well as an embrace of the pro-am (professional-amateur) approach in multiple sectors of society (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004). In the domain of psychology and mental wellness, especially, experience (vs. expertise) has shown marked increased cultural impact, as evidenced by comments to programs and documented in *Ear Buds*. Finally and relatedly, the emergence of a panoply of podcasts extending to a long tail of topics since roughly 2004 exists in large part because of democratization – podcasts are cheap and easy to create – allowed by the form's technology.

The focus here is on “born” or “native” podcasts as differentiated from downloaded radio programs, which conform to effectively different parameters. Nevertheless, it bears acknowledging that podcasting is a descendant of traditional radio and as such shares a number of salient attributes. While many traditional radio programs (music programs being a noted exception) necessitated appointment listening and podcasts are accessed on demand,

the state of intimacy remains a constant characteristic given, in part, the physical aspects of audio, enhanced further by the use of earbuds or headphones and the feeling of a one-to-one relationship with the speaker(s). The intersection of the distinctive intimacy of the podcast form (Berry 2006/2016) the prevalence of comedian-hosted podcasts, and a flattening of the celebrity-layperson hierarchy are characteristics of a sub-genre of the format under consideration here. Podcasting is a showcase for the term that cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner (2010a) coined “the demotic turn,” that is, the increasing visibility of the “ordinary person” in today’s media landscape. These characteristics are interdependent and operational in creating a new form of self-help broadcasting. A historical comparison of the early days of podcasting and of radio is also instructive in placing the newer medium in perspective.

Off-label use

Not surprisingly, given the self-reflexive and independent nature of podcast construction and the intimacy of its format, many self-help oriented podcasts have arisen in this new content creator’s hothouse. Topics range from meditation, language learning, and spirituality to happiness, physical health and financial coaching. Celebrity-hosted and celebrity or artist interview programs have also emerged as a popular podcast category. A phenomenon can be observed here wherein many of the latter have evolved into an oblique form of the former, i.e. the self-help type, adopting what I have come to term an “off-label” use, meaning the use of a program for a purpose other than that for which it is ostensibly intended. In addition to the increased accessibility of podcast creation, this subgenre is an apt illustration of the aforementioned confessional and pro-am evolution in modern media. Comedian Marc Maron’s *WTF* is the best and most widely recognized of this genus which began in 2009 and boasts hundreds of thousands of downloads per episode. *WTF* set the bar for and inspired others to create similar shows. The formula, popularized by Maron, tends toward host monologue followed by guest interview (comedians, actors, musicians, directors, writers, even the president

of the United States) that emphasizes conversation between host and guest replete with intimate, personal subject matter, rather than rote, publicity-style interview banter seen and heard in other broadcast venues. Vincent Meserko describes *WTF* as “the go-to site from which a more authentic self can emerge” (Meserko 2015: 807). Emotions are apt to run high, and the effect for the listener can approximate that of eavesdropping. This style of podcast has grown significantly since 2010, and though not all such programs exhibit the “off-label” characteristics in each episode or with the same intensity, other examples of comedian-hosted programs include *You Made it Weird* hosted by Pete Holmes, *Girl on Guy* hosted by Aisha Tyler and *Nerdist* hosted by Chris Hardwick. For brevity’s sake, this genre will heretofore be referred to as CHIPs (Comedian Hosted Interview Podcasts).

Self-help history

Self-help via broadcasting has a long history, dating back to radio advice shows that made their appearance with the U.S. advent of the medium in the 1920s. Such programs provided and still provide proxy counseling on personal matters for those writing or calling into a show and, vicariously, for listeners. While other early radio genres such as cooking instruction and homemaking tips eventually found a more effective home on television aided as they were by the visual component (Collins 2009; Douglas 2005; Hilmes 1999), with the exception of a few celebrity psychologists like Joyce Brothers and Ruth Westheimer, media psychology has maintained a comfortable niche in the audio realm where intimacy is elemental to the therapeutic mission of the programs. John Langer deconstructed the talk show format in 1981, describing its “carefully orchestrated informality, with its illusion of lounge-room casualness and leisurely pace” (Langer 1981: 360). He exposes the chat between host and guest as an “advertising forum” promoting the guest’s commodities, not – as the format ostensibly offers – an occasion of personal disclosure and rare glimpse of the guests’ “real selves” (quotes in original) (Langer 1981: 360-61). In the pre-podcasting years, some comic talk show hosts, such

as radio's Howard Stern (Kurtz 1997) and television's Steve Allen (Collins 2016) and David Letterman (Schaefer 1993) cultivated a style and environment that occasionally prompted guests to reveal intimate or emotional information. The modern talk show iteration in the form of CHIPs differs in many ways, the least of which include the larger number and variety, the presence of conversation, and personally revealing content, but also in the self-awareness and psychological savvy of the audiences and creators. What notably persists is listeners' ability to benefit from vicarious counsel. In the radio days, learning what other people were experiencing and taking in what the doctor (or psychic or fortuneteller or whoever the host may have been) advised allowed uncertain individuals or their spouses, parents, employees or friends in the listening audience to heed similar counsel. At the very least a listener feels less alone in his situation and, ideally, the indirect advice might spark in an attentive listener a different way of looking at a painful or immobilizing situation.

Because podcasting is free from oversight, unlike U.S. Federal Communications Commission-regulated radio, creators have no need to argue for their existence or defend their content. I will, however, argue for the benefits of podcast listening to bolster the "off-label" theory. In the 1920s, the FRC (Federal Radio Commission, the forerunner to the FCC) regulators felt that one-to-one communication exhibited on programs featuring psychologists and fortunetellers (then grouped into the same eyebrow-raising category) was of no benefit to incidental listeners. They may have come around to seeing that it was entertaining and loosely advantageous as such, but there was little discussion of it being actually helpful and therefore quite literally in the public interest, as mandated by the FRC (Goodman 2012: 196). Historian David Goodman, in his description of the obstacles faced by fortunetellers, psychic and other early radio advisors, observes that the "entertainment" card may have quelled the FRC and the FCC in some cases (Goodman 2012: 198). The entertainment aspect or benefit is undeniable, as much of the appeal of these instruments derives from the innate human desire for eavesdropping. But even at the time listeners, then television viewers, and now podcast

listeners lavishly avow that hearing other people's problems helps them in their own lives. "Banishing the fortune-tellers was an affirmation," writes Goodman, "of what radio should have been—civic, improving, local, encouraging of self-government and of critical self-reflexive listening" (Goodman 2012, p. 201). But to that very point, many television scholars have written about the neoliberal service provided by reality TV (e.g. Ouellette 2009; Turner 2010a; Vered and McConchie 2011). Entertainment, empathy and vicarious counsel co-exist in each of these formats, allowing an à la carte menu of "benefits," convenient and often legitimate for consumer, citizen, regulator, parent or producer.

Solace-seeking for personal problems was no stranger to mass media, and radio was a haven for mental health issues. Several programs in the first two decades of radio offered distance counseling. All had varying degrees of bonafides as well as a heavy reliance on moralizing. Among them, Lee Steiner, a psychologist and marriage counselor hosted *How's Your Mental Health* in 1934 and *Psychologically Speaking* in the 1950s. Steiner, a rare woman on the air, was clear about radio's limited role in personal psychology. She believed that it "should be geared specifically to that part of the population that can utilize a *point of view* [her emphasis] about the solution of personal problems, rather than that part of the listening audience that needs 'therapy'" (Steiner 1954: 205). The *New York Times*' wrote of the *Call Dr. [Joyce] Brothers* show in 1966, "Aside from taking telephone calls from listeners, the psychologist...will answer letters that represent a cross-section of the problems bothering people the most. If you have a problem, try to make it fit in a cross-section" (*Dial Dr Brothers*, 1966). Here is another distinct departure from early radio on through network television, when general advice was favored over specific in order to appeal to the broadest possible audience. Podcasting thrives on specificity and niches because it can, and audiences attest to the fact that no problem or situation is so specific that a listener cannot relate in some way.

In radio broadcasting, the "clients" who called or wrote into shows were regular, non-famous people. This pattern exists today in some podcasting programs whose explicit purpose

is to provide psychological or spiritual guidance. One example of a podcast that conforms to the traditional trappings of an early radio show is the *Dear Sugar Radio* podcast, hosted by well-known, “celebrity”-status writers Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond. It appears to intentionally pay nostalgic homage to the aesthetic and mission of old-school radio advice shows in its name, in its introduction, (as Strayed says, they are there for the “heartsick, lost lonely”) and in their answering letters and addressing correspondents as they signed their letters, such as “Heartbroken.” Its existence galvanizes the idea that even though the technology has advanced beyond imagination since broadcasting’s early days, the simple need of succor for the human spirit remains steadfast. Strayed describes the show as “therapy in the town square” (Strayed 2015). *Sex with Emily* is another well-established and popular podcast hosted by relationship/sex expert, Emily Morse. Likewise, a new generation podcast, *Beautiful Stories from Anonymous People* (aka *Beautiful/Anonymous*) hosted by comedian Chris Gethard, usually features guests who are also laypeople, and, usually, anonymous. Notably, these hosts are not licensed clinical mental health professionals. In the pre-podcasting era, especially in the early radio days, credentials were valuable in gaining audience trust. In the modern era, especially in the podcast realm, a host who is not an authoritative expert and who is more similar to a layperson might be perceived as more approachable by listeners. Experts do not have the strong foothold in the world of podcasting as they do in radio or television or real life. This bolsters the demotic theme and exemplifies a modern trend toward an anti-intellectual, experience-as-authority trend (Collins 2016).

Since the psychic and fortuneteller days, the credentials of broadcasting advisors have been greeted with suspicion due, among other reasons, to a distrust of psychology and “the sin of popularity” (Miller, J.G. 1980: 1). There has always been a mix of purveyors of psychological, emotional or general life advice, only some of whom are professionally credentialed. Broadcasting allows for this flexibility since hosts are not technically providing therapy to their listening audiences. In 1969, as a climate of revolution and change was affecting nearly every

aspect of society, American Psychological Association president George Miller enjoined practitioners to engage in a “public psychology” in the spirit of educating people freely so that psychology and psychotherapy – which was growing in acceptance and popularity but suffering from a shortage of professionals – could theoretically be available to everyone. Though he didn’t specify broadcast psychology in his speech, the practice dovetailed perfectly with his “give it away,” do-it-yourself sentiments. His intention was not directed to media psychologists (a nascent recognized subset at the time), but those who practiced via TV and radio did just that, providing a free service to a populace that might otherwise be unable or unwilling to access traditional and often costly professionals. A passive, indirect, democratically-spirited counseling over the airwaves was a sign of the times (Miller, G.A 1969: 1066).

In his analysis of the function of phone-in radio programs, Andrew Crisell observed three categories that callers might fall into: expressive (sharing opinions), exhibitionist (performing personality), and confessional (sharing a problem) (Crisell 1986). Current podcasts display similar motivations. In addition to the fact that host and guest are usually sitting in the same room together and podcast interview guests have more “air time” than a radio caller, the most significant difference between the two formats is that both host and guest proactively encourage behavior in all three categories.

Tone and content of CHiPs

The informal conversations on podcasts tend to be far less structured or planned and more spontaneous, intimate and confessional than traditional broadcast interviews. Open and honest conversation on the part of host and guest is now almost *de rigeur* for this genre of podcast, so much so that small, superficial talk is not tolerated for long by habitual listeners. Some guests confess, in the interview, to being nervous – this is especially true on Maron’s *WTF* as he has become known for opening people up in ways that surprise all involved. This phenomenon leads to a self-selecting guest cohort who choose or agree to be on such shows.

Those who are willing or eager to talk about personal matters will be more likely to engage, and those who keep a tight rein on their public personas will stay away. As one testament to this expectation of openness, a comment on the *WTF* blog (wtfpod.com) criticized Maron's conversation with comedian Tommy Davidson for being "too certain" in his self-presentation. Quite unlike the time-tested protocol of late night talk shows where celebrities entertain audiences with packaged, publicist-endorsed stories, podcast listeners look forward to celebrities talking candidly about their insecurities. In a tidy summation of these ideas, on *Distraction Pieces*, a podcast similar in tone and format to Maron's *WTF*, host poet/musician Scroobius Pip invited radio presenter Geoff Lloyd for an episode (November 1, 2016, Ep. 122), where Lloyd shared revealing stories of his own mental health issues and discussed the value of sharing personal feelings via radio and podcasts. Lloyd confessed that podcasting seems to be the way of the future and indeed left radio several months later and began a podcast, *Adrift*, described as "A comic tragedy for anyone flailing in the sea of their own inadequacy. [The hosts] steer a life-raft through the choppy waters of being a functional human." (Lloyd and Port, undated)

While CHIPs occasionally feel like mere overhearing on rather a banal conversation, for instance, comedians talking shop, trading comments on a particular club, or annoyances of life on the road, the effect is similar to that of a documentary or reality TV show in their departure from the PR-regulated interviews on TV talk shows. That quality alone renders the conversations compelling. The skilled or unconventional interviewer will elicit something other than the repeated answers and stories that listeners have heard from the same guest in other venues. As in any interview situation, the better listener the interviewer is, the more spontaneous the conversation and the more interesting the product. Classic interview protocol, where hosts ask questions about their current projects, eliciting interesting stories about working on the set or interactions with other actors, allow guests to shine. They – or their agents – may even have fed questions to producers in advance, so the host can ask something seemingly

spontaneously. This style, while it is often part of a CHIP interview, would be too flat and restrained to evoke a more genuine conversation. The seductive power of celebrities revealing information about themselves coupled with the sometimes raw and personal issues themselves makes for a potentially rich and absorbing entertainment format. A listener may become engaged because she feels she is learning “secrets” about famous people or gaining support, commiseration or insight into her own problems (as the issues discussed are inevitably universally shared to some degree), or both. With substantial anecdotal evidence supporting the idea that CHIPs provide access to a host of shared human angst, it is reasonable to wonder why these comedian hosts and their similarly honest guests are willing to reveal these human foibles on behalf of listeners. “Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society,” writes Richard Dyer, “that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the ‘individual...they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it” (Dyer 1986: 8). Likewise, Tolson, who describes celebrities as nowadays often giving interviews in the context of personal problems, such as addictions, says, ““Celebrities personify contemporary beliefs and concerns about the human condition and their talk, in this context, is designed to construct them as representative of this....As representative human beings, celebrities today (when they are not being ironic) are much more likely to reproduce a motivational, even moral, discourse of personal achievement” (Tolson 2006:155).

Horton and Wohl’s pioneering research in the para-social relationship – the false sense of intimacy fostered by someone on the TV screen talking directly to individual viewers – can be applied to the effect of podcasting (Horton & Wohl 1956). Marc Maron recognizes the emotional benefits of his podcast on listeners: “I get a lot of gratitude from people who felt alone, who are depressed, who didn’t understand their creativity, or had a drinking problem. [They tell me:] ‘You know, you really helped me through stuff’” (Campion 2015). Paul F. Tompkins, comedian and host of multiple podcasts (also a guest who discussed his own depression on other CHIPs) says

he gets emails from listeners who say, “You guys help me do my job because I’m stuck at a desk all day and I’m looking at a monitor and without these shows I would go crazy. It’s like you guys are my friends” (Tompkins 2016).

Echoing similar statements by Maron and others, Aisha Tyler, whose guests and callers also share experiences of earnest personal problems, has said, “When I share myself with the world, typically what I get is a positive response with people who’ve gone through something similar and feel more connected with me and maybe by association feel their burden is lighter because of it. So if I can help somebody by sharing my experiences that’s really my goal and that makes all the revelation and the divulgence worthwhile” (Tyler 2015). Comedian Paul Gilmartin provides a succinct description of the effect of listening to other people talk about their problems when he says to a guest on his *Mental Illness Happy Hour* podcast, “I love when somebody else has the exact same fear I do...There’s something so soothing to me when somebody can articulate a fear that is just a grey ball inside me that I’ve never been able to specifically articulate what it is that is scaring me” (Gilmartin 2012). Marc Maron is known for his compulsive confessions in each prologue to his guest interviews. *Dear Sugar* co-host Steve Almond reveals a previous problem with shoplifting. What might constitute “over sharing” on another setting is an advantage for a certain stripe of podcaster. As Meyrowitz writes: “...a revelation that would destroy heroic aura may only deepen the sense of intimate connection with a media friend” (Meyrowitz 2007: 101).

Comedy and psychology

On November 10, 2016, pop culture critic Nathan Rabin wrote a piece for the comedy website *Splitsider*, where he openly lamented the hours-old election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. He wrote, “I decided that doubling down on my obsessive love of podcasts would be among the survival tactics I would employ to help me survive.” In the same piece, he describes the emotional role podcasts play in his life, calling them “cathartic” and “almost a form

of free therapy.” He explains that the therapeutic effect can come from the companionship and solidarity as well as the escape into “pure silliness and joy” (Rabin 2016). This is a role that comedy has long served, in this two-pronged (though the cathartic and entertaining prongs are sometimes difficult to differentiate) fashion.

Melanie Piper discusses the “humour-honesty discourse” (Piper 2015: 54) prevalent in comedy podcasts. Her focus is on the type of program that features comedians being themselves (conversing, monologuing, but not necessarily interviewing) and whose performances “shed light on the cultural position of comedians more generally” (Piper 2015, p. 43). The “off-label” podcasts discussed here consist of conversations between celebrities. Given that CHIP guests discuss their creative work, the exchange often gives rise to issues of self-image and self-doubt, overcoming obstacles, and the impact of early life experiences. *WTF* guests have openly discussed depression, suicide, addiction, relationship issues. One comedian came out as gay on the show and another legendary episode details a suicide attempt. Media and culture critic James Wolcott suggests an “off-label” use when he describes podcasts this way: “They were and remain confessionals, healing exercises, bonding experiences, one-on-one Gestalt therapy sessions, and *WTF* doesn’t so much find an audience as its audience finds something it didn’t know it was looking for” (Wolcott 2016). For social theorist Michel Foucault, confession is a truth-producing technique and is so ingrained in Western culture that if a truth fails to surface it is because “the violence of a power weighs it down...Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence” (Foucault 1980: 60).

On almost every *WTF* episode subjects arise that are appropriate fodder for a licensed therapist’s office. Maron’s monologue might focus on a traditional worried-well psychological topic – for instance, how to avoid being like your parents. Or he might discuss the recent tragic death of a fellow comedian (Garry Shandling, Robin Williams). Topics range from guests talking about early career and rejection and failures to work ethic and procrastination, the meaning of comedy, tormented family relationships and mental health. On his podcast, *You Made It Weird*,

comedian host Pete Holmes gets dark with guests, too. Comedian and writer Harris Wittels talked frankly with Holmes about his addiction in 2014, and sadly died of a heroin overdose at the age of 30 the following year; Aisha Tyler has a substantial collection of heavy and intimate *Girl on Guy* episodes as well. When she interviewed comedian and talk show host Chelsea Handler in 2016, the two women engaged in a candid and spontaneous discussion of their body image issues in Tyler's regular "self-inflicted wounds" segment with Handler revealing facets of her life that she said she had never divulged before.

CHIPs are, in essence, an alternative form of media psychology – the more traditional being a call-in radio show or a program such as *Dr Phil* where guests present their problems in a public forum with the deliberate goal of seeking help from a professional. These podcasts can provide oblique access to the same sort of resolution. It might be that this private form of vicarious listening and relating is effective due to its off-label, unintentional usage. Because it is categorized as entertainment it reaches people when their guard is down – while washing dishes, taking a walk, relaxing on a non-psychiatrists couch. Listeners may encounter self-realization or insight that would be more difficult to access or accept in a formalized setting. While this can be true of radio programs, the greater informality of podcasts is able to provoke even more intimacy and loosening of boundaries. The social world of podcasting, too, as evidenced in the *Ear Buds* documentary and online discussion sections of individual podcasts, engenders a perceived "safe place" where like-minded listeners gather and create a sense of a virtual community. As Berry writes, "The podcast listener relates to the podcast producer on a more intimate level because the listener may feel that the producer is 'one of them,' a member of their community, whether defined by geography, ethnicity, culture, or social group" (Berry 2006, p. 148). Meserko responds to this by saying, "I have argued that this intimate discourse constitutes an audience of mental illness sufferers that are invited to relate to performers in less artificial, less transparently performative ways" (Meserko 2014: 467).

At the start of one *WTF* episode, Maron affirms that his podcast is not about his political opinions (he was a co-host of several Air America Radio programs beginning in 2004 where he regularly railed against conservative politics). “I deal with sadness, existential anger, the frustrations of just being alive, trying to be a compassionate person and know yourself in the world...” (Maron 2016). Likewise, *WTF* was described by one journalist as “the patron saint of those that live in their heads – the emotionally needy, insecure and distraught” (Campion 2015). Maron as host is forthcoming about his own past suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, and insecurities and thereby encourages his guests to talk freely about their inner demons. In his book *Sick in the Head*, writer, producer and comedian Judd Apatow provides a transcript of his own *WTF* interview with a brief introduction wherein he refers to Maron as “an insightful interviewer and empathizer and therapist of sorts, and we connected in a deep way about so many aspects of our journey” (Apatow 2016: 303). In addition to the aforementioned trepidation to which some have confessed about venturing into the garage where Maron records his interviews, he receives volumes of gratitude in emails from listeners as well as directly from guests. Playwright and composer Lin-Manuel Miranda said to Maron, “Thanks for getting so much honesty out of so many people we love. I think of so many of your interviews and I think, I never saw that person in that way before. If the beginning of art is empathy, you give us a master class in it every time you get someone in this crazy garage of yours” (Miranda 2016).

The “crazy garage” referred to by Miranda is not incidental. Maron often refers to the garage as being a special place to him and by extension for his guests, as deep, sometimes difficult but ultimately rewarding conversations take place there. It is filled with numerous personal artifacts that guests often comment on, therefore reflecting a personal side of the interviewer. Maron not only makes his home and his belongings part of the talking space, but he shares a great deal of his own personal experiences, feelings and confessions in every episode, both in the monologue pre-amble and then while conversing with his guest. The garage is viscerally symbolic. It is both the place where Maron confesses to having considered suicide

years earlier and is the place where he saved himself and revived his career by starting the podcast there. The garage and the man are therefore intertwined so that the combination increases the intimacy of the conversations that take place there. Even when Maron does gladly mention a guest's newly released book, album or movie (he is explicit about selectively inviting people back to the show for short segments to help them promote a project), the conversation still lacks a standard PR-driven gloss.

There is already a charged nexus where comedy and psychology meet, but adding that to the demotic trend (Gamson 2011) in the celebrity realm (portraying "real" or "honest" selves in the media), a new connection is formed that deserves attention. In addition to the performative aspect of podcast hosting, there is a link between comedy and the emotional intimacy prevalent in audio formats and podcasting in particular. As truth-telling and personal revelation are basic elements of contemporary CHIPs, it should come as little surprise that so many comedians are taking advantage of the format. Comedians are perpetually creating new material, are well-versed in verbal expression, and, in general, are comfortable speaking extemporaneously and honestly. It is the latter quality that has forged a perhaps unforeseen path in an uncategorized type of program. While many radio interviews and CHIPs – for instance, the venerable *Fresh Air* with host/interviewer Terry Gross – carry out conventional interviews with actors, writers, musicians, and other creative people, it is by and large those podcasts hosted by comedians where this increased emotional intensity is found. Comedian and filmmaker Kevin Smith relates an interaction with a suicidal friend who turned a corner after starting his own podcast, and Smith told him, "As long as you're always candid with them, it's a win-win. The audience will stick by you" (Smith 2015). Both host and guest stand to benefit from such conversations.

The link between comedy and emotional health goes back at least to the 1950s (communications scholar Ethan Thompson writes about the dual postwar American obsessions of mental health and humor, manifest in performers like Shelley Berman and Lenny Bruce (Thompson 2011: 15), and comedians have long been stereotyped as sad clowns. "Comedians

are sensitive instruments,” as comedian Dana Carvey said to Maron on *WTF* (Carvey 2016). In 2015, actor and comedian Kevin Pollak produced a documentary, *Misery Loves Comedy*, wherein a number of contemporary comedians address this assumption. In the film, Maria Bamford, a comedian who has been open in her stand-up about her mental health, describes a show where she revealed that she had accidentally and tragically caused her dog’s death. After the bit, audience members shouted out their own similar experiences, such as “I sat on my rabbit!” Bamford found great comfort in such instances, she says, “so it doesn’t become this private horrible thing.” The oft-quoted humorist Mark Twain has, of course, an appropriate adage for this current off-label phenomenon long before it became one: “The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow” (Zall 1985: 70).

New York Times cultural reporter, Lee Siegel, writes, “...there is a schizoid dimension to comedy now. As fiction merges into autobiography, and movies based on actual events proliferate, the compulsion for comedians to smash through the artifice of comedy and tell the unadorned truth without humor is becoming stronger and stronger...Comedy is becoming an occasion to abandon humor for the exposure of unsoftened truth...” While this characteristic of comedy is not a new development, there is a perfect cultural storm in the early 21st century entertainment and media ecosystem. Siegel identifies it: “Now, when our awareness and self-awareness are reaching meta-levels of intensity, we need to be entertained in new ways. That is why comedy bracingly hovers just at the edge of tragedy” (Siegel 2015).

Several comedians in the Pollak film reference the recognition of common, collective humanity as an element in their work. Actor and comedian Steve Coogan, for instance, comments that comedians “[shine] a light on what it is to be human.” And in response to the notion that perhaps comedians or other performing artists are more miserable than regular folk, comedian and magician Penn Jillette concludes, “People in show business have the same pain, the same suffering, the same angst, the same tortures. They’re just showing the angst of humanity that we all share....If you had a comic that truly had experiences that were outside of

the realm of the general humanity, no one would go see them.” Indeed it can feel to the comedy consumer that comedians are wearing their hearts and guts on the outside, literally baring their souls, and taking risks that most people would be too timid to take or too ashamed to even admit to themselves. But it is the universality and relatability of their material that appeals and a fundamental reason why these types of podcasts are so popular. Comedians are already truth tellers and revealers and are willing to express it. They are attracting a following to what feels like a more private world where listening on earbuds to emotionally vulnerable content is safer even than going to a comedy show and recognizing that you relate to these issues in a public place.

And so, bringing this angst to podcasting in an entertainment shell – while simultaneously broadening a comedian’s recognition and fan base – is a natural progression and an alluring, organic brand of self-help. “Ultimately what we’re all doing is trying to turn our psychological problems into a paycheck,” comedian Bob Odenkirk told a reporter. “You want to be broken in just the right way to make the most amount of money” (Cox 2016). In Pollak’s documentary, Kevin Smith refers to podcasting as “the talking cure” and likewise writer and creator of the TV sitcom *Community*, Dan Harmon, in the documentary *Harmontown* refers to podcasting as “the best kind of therapy I could get” (Harmon 2014). Maron has said that he simply set out to create his own show because his career had stalled and that his first 100 shows consisted of inviting celebrities over to help him with his problems, namely eradicating his professional bitterness. But because of his uncensored style and desire to express and share his true feelings, he creates a fertile space for his guests to share similarly and consequently allows listeners to relate. His interviews often intentionally aim to encourage guests to share experiences that might be of value to himself and his listeners. Terry Gross, in a rare self-revealing interview by Maron at a public event in 2015, admitted she does the same: “You know, people always say they want to find out what makes other people tick. I always feel like, I want

to find out what makes me tick. [I've] learned about a lot about myself and about people in general by having the liberty of asking people very personal things" (Gross 2015).

The timing of a growing alternative comedy scene, an established confessional media culture and the new form of podcasting worked well in Marc Maron's favor. *WTF* set the standard for CHIPs and as a result, the expectations for self-revelation in podcast interview shows are high because of his pioneering. But still, it is the culmination of the three points – confessional, experience and democratization – that made his show so galvanizing in this respect. *WTF*'s popularity spawned imitators thus strengthening these factors and furthering the confessional form and emotional and psychological access via arts and cultural programming rather than through strictly psychological channels hosted by professionals or experts.

The confessional factor

Audio broadcast technology has evolved as a psychological self-help tool, reflecting changing values regarding voyeurism and the ethics and effectiveness of "vicarious therapy." Privacy, stigma and shame about personal problems have largely given way to exhibitionism. On most call-in type programs, callers can maintain anonymity if desired. Despite this evolution, anonymity is still prevalent, as evidenced in part by Chris Gethard's *Beautiful/Anonymous*. Notably, anonymity is reserved for the non-famous for the obvious reasons that voice recognition would obliterate the anonymity of a celebrity, and laypeople have not made the choice to "out" their problems with the world and may simply be actually looking for free emotional help and wish to maintain their privacy. Guests are either desperate enough to voice their problems on a widely available broadcast medium or they are steeped enough in the confessional culture that such a venture does not seem daunting or unusual.

Several other podcasts hosted by comedians that are not of the "off-label" type but that are explicitly intended for discussions of mental health or personal problems illustrate instances of help-seeking in podcasting, for the most part featuring anonymous laypeople rather than

celebrities. Gilmartin's *Mental Illness Happy Hour* is a vehicle for guests talking about their personal issues, and Gilmartin stresses the use of humor as a beneficial coping mechanism. On one episode, for instance, Gilmartin talks with a guest by the pseudonym Noemi, a young woman dealing with chronic disordered eating (November 28, 2014, Ep. 201). *Fixing Joe*, hosted by comedian Joe Matarese wherein he talks on each episode about a specific problem he is dealing with, is likewise explicit in its intention. The *Hilarious World of Depression*, hosted by public radio host John Moe, joined the celebrity confession podcast community in late 2016 where guests talk at length about their experiences with clinical depression (Moe himself has suffered from it and talks about it openly). Maron tells Gilmartin when he is a guest on MIHH: "My podcast sort of functions in the same way [as MIHH] without it being about that [mental illness]. It's just knowing that this is something a lot of people struggle with and at some point, you shouldn't be alone, but you should try to take some responsibility for your disposition ... just knowing that people that have these problems, do ok, and can do ok is important" (Meserko 2014, p. 464). Whereas *WTF* does not present as a self-help podcast, these programs are designed for just the purpose of an individual guest receiving help but also relieving many individual listeners of their feelings of isolation with similar problems. Depression, in particular, has seen an uptick in "popularity," for lack of a more appropriate term, in both published memoirs and on podcasts in the modern confessional environment. Whether or not the increase is perceived or real, there are more outlets for people to share their experiences and more willingness to share and more opportunities for decreasing stigma.¹

Podcast listeners' level of sophistication and preoccupation with self-understanding and awareness in 2017 is in stark contrast to what one learns about listeners of psychology-oriented early radio shows, noting the relatively naïve questions from listeners and the simplistic, jargon-free language used by the hosts (Collins 2016). The contrast reveals the educational and cultural sea change that has occurred over the 20th century, motivated by a popular keen and ever-increasing desire to know oneself – a trend that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s

(Collins 2016; Herman 1995; Pfister & Schnog 1997). Technology has both stimulated and reflected this change in the form as well as the protocol presented in media psychology.

The demotic/democratization factor

Four decades later, broadcast psychology is carrying on APA president George Miller's democratic call to arms, with a few significant addenda. The demotic turn is evidenced by recognizable verbal styles now heard on much of talk radio. A 2015 *New York Times* article describes the "NPR Voice," the casual speaking mannerisms on the airwaves now prevalent which the author attributes to the massive number of people involved in broadcasting and the perception that "amateurs have now taken over the airwaves and Internet" (Wayne 2015). This simultaneously supports the notion of the reign of experience over expertise and highlights the striking approachability of those voices heard on podcasts. The notion of demotic is not as optimistic as it might sound, however, and Turner is keen on it not being equated with democracy. As he writes, "It is important to remember that celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates" (Turner 2006:157). Likewise, an economic digital divide still prevents the availability of even relatively low-cost technology for everyone. The development of the term "podcasting," write a group of communications and art history scholars, "followed the pattern...where new information technologies are uncritically championed as embodying a Jeffersonian democratic ideal" (Sterne, et al., 2008). A moral assessment of "demotic" is therefore subjective – it depends on whether or not the diverse display of people having access to creating or consuming culture is seen as good or bad or somewhere in between.

The increased awareness and openness with which well-known people publicly discuss private tribulations is also a demotic characteristic. In Andrew Solomon's review of writer and cultural critic Daphne Merkin's memoir, *This close to happy: A reckoning with depression* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), he writes, "Famous people use such disclosures to persuade

you that they are just like you, perhaps even more vulnerable; it's a way of compensating for the discomfort attached to their glamour. Indeed, in an increasingly stratified world, people with any modicum of privilege may reveal their depression as an assertion of their common humanity. Clinical misery has taken over from death as the great equalizer. Vanity of vanities, all is depression" (Solomon 2017). For comedians, then, covering such issues is the natural order of things, as their content is almost always focused, albeit with a unique perspective ("point of view" is a key feature of both comedy and psychotherapy [Piper 2015: 43]), on the mundane and the ordinary. To separate themselves from their audiences by exhibiting any privilege would damage their credibility and likeability. Perhaps comedy's current high value provides a new public relations blueprint for other artists to follow.

Similarly, comedy critic Jason Zinoman sums up the climate of a particular moment in the 2010s when the comedy boom seemed at its peak and perhaps not incidentally showcased a number of comedians contending with the darkest of human experiences. As he writes, "[T]he trend toward comedy that confronts personal experiences with death is also a result of a culture that encourages confession and that has cut the distance between artist and audience...We trust stand-up comics in a way that we don't for almost any other artist, and it's part of the reason they have such stature in our culture now. That's why when they joke about death, it can come across like a friend's sharing intimate secrets. And that allows them leeway to express themselves without euphemism" (Zinoman 2016).

The expertise factor

The traditional authority hierarchy has flipped or has at least been flattened in the digital age. A surge of political populism in the 2016 U.S. elections may have seemed to be a peak expression of this, but it had shown itself with as much fanfare on daytime television talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s, with programs such as *Geraldo*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and *The Jenny Jones Show*. The message from each of these sectors was that expertise gained from

experience is valued above that which is gained through traditional academic channels. A peer-to-peer model has usurped a top-down model in many sectors of modern life, including psychological information and counselling. Vincent Meserko observes how Paul Gilmartin's *Mental Illness Happy Hour* (and its ilk) exemplifies such a post-modern version of the original radio advice shows, focusing on the host *consubstantiating* (shared experience or identification) with their fans (Meserko 2014: 457). Gilmartin is a comedian, not a professional psychologist, but the show operates in many ways like a therapy session and, according to listeners' testimonies, is effective in providing emotional relief.

Similarly, Pete Holmes regularly dives into topics of sexuality and spirituality with his guests. When asked about the comedy boom and why comedians seemed so fitting for the media landscape, including podcasting, Holmes responded: "We're looking for insight. We raise some people up and [are] like, 'Louis [C.K.], he talks the truth about parenting and divorce.' And he's become an authority in an authorityless society. We all have maps and Google, and we all have ways to get to fucking Nevada on a Southwest flight, but the thing that we can't all do for ourselves or get from our phones or get from just reading something on the Internet is perspective and authenticity and a direct, soulful communication with somebody" (Fox 2015). Here again, Foucault is invoked, along with one of the long-held claims by many comedians: the comedian is the confessor who speaks truth to power (Gimbel 2017; Jeffries 2017).

When Gilmartin says to a guest, "You want my opinion?" it is valued not because he has professional credentials but because he has been through a similar experience. CHIPs hosts have relatability because they are baring their souls and they have credibility because they are somewhere on the continuum of celebrity, which, given a cultural bestowal of imprecise authority, renders them doubly credible and trustworthy. When writers Cheryl Strayed and Steve Almond – who are open about their own struggles – freely give advice on their *Dear Sugar* podcast, likewise they are seen as legitimate help givers. This reflects both the heightened value of fame as well as that of experience. When Dr Joyce Brothers began giving advice over

the airwaves in the 1950s and 1960s, many APA members roundly criticized her for a lack of ethics in her populist method, despite the fact that she had a doctoral degree in psychology. Such outcries are virtually nonexistent in the 21st century. Put another way, in her book *The Art of Memoir* Mary Karr writes, “[W]hile formerly sacred sources of truth like history and statistics have lost ground, the subjective tale has garnered new territory” (Karr 2015, p. 16). This was written even before the “fake news” fervor took the U.S. into its clutches in 2016, and now evokes an even stronger intensity.

Converse, or perhaps consequential, to the demotic turn, as sociologist Joshua Gamson who also observes “the turn toward the ordinary” writes, “[C]elebrity culture is increasingly populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary” (Gamson 2011:1062). It is the stars being made ordinary that garners less attention in a fame-seeking world. The internet, Gamson argues, has had a large hand in pushing “ordinariness into the cultural forefront” (ibid) and this is true for podcasting as an Internet product. In the early 20th century, the advent of visual media technology triggered the cult of celebrity, but paradoxically, in this flourishing subculture of the relatively simple mechanism of podcasting, we have come back around to audio as the technology that allows us the greatest access to the deepest secrets of our celebrities. In the mid-1990s, Gamson cited the “dissemination of the face” as replacing the “dissemination of ideas” thanks to visual technology (Gamson 1994: 21).² But thirty years earlier sociologist Leo Lowenthal observed that, in the first half of the 20th century, “idols of consumption” gradually replaced “idols of production,” so radio entertainment evidently also played a part. In podcasting, we are seeing not one or the other but an amalgam. The intimacy of audio (versus visual) turns on its head Gamson’s and others’ theories that it was the advent of visual media that engendered the culture of celebrity. We’re finding celebrities’ most intimate details not on TV or in magazine articles, but via image-free podcasts.³

So while there is an unprecedented groundswell of desire for fame among the general population, celebrities are increasingly choosing to exhibit their quotidian selves. CHIPs are, in expression, a rejection of the pedestaled version of stardom. As an example, Chris Gethard says podcasts serve comedy careers by encouraging fans to “opt into your cult.” Ironically, however, he has discovered that one secret to *Beautiful/Anonymous* is keeping his comic personality in check. “For these phone calls to work,” he says, “I need to be the less interesting person in the conversation” (Jurgensen 2016). Gethard is, according to one description, “part interlocutor, therapist and comic commentator” (Jurgensen 2016). This continuum or dichotomy is seen in podcasting overall: hundreds of podcasts are created by relative unknowns hoping for massive, life-altering followings, and more and more famous people are hosting and being interviewed on podcasts with a seeming intention to reveal their authentic selves via unscripted conversation. The idolatry and the demotic are both at work. If everyone is meeting in the middle, as this syllogism set up might suggest, it would theoretically result in a level field and celebrity would lose its luster. But certainly, that is not the case. Just as reality TV has little to do with reality, perhaps we are too easily seduced by the authentic-sounding veneer of interview podcasts. After all, the voices being interviewed are still those of bonafide celebrities, a small percentage of the population who has achieved exceptional status. “The podcast provides,” writes Meserko, referring to WTF, “a vehicle through which these comics exercise a *perceived freedom of control* [emphasis added] over their public identities and where contestations of authenticity are foregrounded through revealing conversation” (Meserko 2015: 782). *New Yorker* writer Sarah Larson refers to this genre (CHIPs) as “the portrait-in-greatness podcast” with its “dual presentation of culture and character, the insight into both art and its creation” (Larson 2015), where the curtain is pulled back on an artist to reveal their humble beginnings, numerous life challenges, and the like, that preceded their current level of success.

Nevertheless, testimonies from listeners make it difficult to deny the emotional benefit of vicarious relating – even Judd Apatow and a procrastinating graduate student have something

in common. As the subjects in Pollak's film emphasize, their comedic craft is about sharing their humanness which is what is being promulgated on these podcasts as well, and one could argue quite convincingly that they are honest and representative of the experiences of people without a voice. Perhaps podcasting is the platonic ideal of the optimistic expression of the demotic turn where a status hierarchy fades into the background. As Meserko writes, "While it may be impossible to determine authentic selves from unauthentic selves, especially given how 'authentic' performances are themselves performative, authenticity nevertheless exists as an aspirational ideal, and these comics are quick to attribute their perceptions of authentic expression and conversation to the podcast medium" (Meserko 2015: 805).

Conclusion

Beyond the implications for the evolution of celebrity theory and the changing culture of comedy, investigation of this phenomenon has potential value for the psychological professions. How effective is this type of ersatz vicarious therapy, for instance, and how does it differ than other types of more conventional call-in radio or advice programs? At the very least, the development of this form sheds light on Western attitudes about personal and group identity and about alternative approaches to mental health issues.

While there is a burgeoning scholarship on the topic of podcasting⁴, observing the historical evolution contributes to the larger discussion of the glories and pitfalls of modern technology. By looking at the antecedents to such a popular medium, our recognition of what has remained and what has been discarded illuminates the static and dynamic values in American culture as reflected in popular culture. The evolution of our first world attitudes toward the reception and treatment of serious psychological content, especially via nontraditional and often nonprofessional methods, can reveal significant clues about a set of human values at this particular moment in time.

About the author:

Kathleen Collins is a librarian and professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

References

Apatow, J. (2016). *Sick in the head: Conversations about life and comedy*. New York: Random House.

Atkinson, K., & Moores, S. (2003). 'We all have bad bad days' attending to face in broadcast troubles-talk. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 1(2), 129-146.

Berry, R. (2016). 'Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio' '. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14(1), 7-22.

Berry, R. (2006). 'Will the iPod kill the radio star? Profiling podcasting as radi'o. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 12(2), 143-162.

Braudy, L. (1986). *The frenzy of renown: Fame & its history*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Campion, C. (2015). 'How comedian Marc Maron got legions of fans muttering WTF'. *The Guardian*, 8 June, theguardian.com.

Carvey, D. (2016). *WTF*, [podcast] episode #765, Dec. 6, wtfpod.com.

Chignell, H. (2009). *Key concepts in radio studies*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Collins, K. (2016). *Dr. Joyce Brothers: The founding mother of TV psychology*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Collins, K. (2009). *Watching what we eat: The evolution of television cooking shows*. New York: Continuum.

Cox, A. M. (2016). 'Bob Odenkirk thinks other comedians are lousy critics'. *The New York Times*, 21 January, nytimes.com

Crisell, A. (1986). *Understanding radio*. London: Methuen.

Dial Dr. Brothers. (1966). *The New York Times*, 4 September.

Douglas, S. J. (2005). *Listening in: Radio and the American imagination*. Minneapolis, Minn: Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Dyer, R. (1986). *Heavenly bodies: Film stars and society*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Edison Research. (2017). The Infinite Dial. <http://www.edisonresearch.com/the-infinite-dial-2016/>

Elwood, G. and Mancini, C. (2016). *Ear buds: The podcasting documentary*. Comedy Film Nerds.

Florini, S. (2015). 'The podcast chitlin' circuit: Black podcasters, alternative media, and audio enclaves'. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 22(2), 209-219.

Fox, J.D. (2015). 'Pete Holmes on how the comedian became the modern-day philosopher', 1 April, *vulture.com*. [internet]

Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality, Volume I: An introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.

Gamson, J. (2011). 'The unwatched life is not worth living: The elevation of the ordinary in celebrity culture'. *PMLA*, 126(4), 1061-1069.

Gamson, J. (1994). *Claims to fame: Celebrity in contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gimbel, S. (2017). *Isn't that clever: A philosophical account of humor and comedy*. New York: Routledge.

Gilmartin, P. (2012). *Mental Illness Happy Hour*, episode #43, 13 January, *mentalpod.com*.

Goodman, D. (2012). 'Making early American broadcasting's public sphere: Radio fortune telling and the demarcation of private and public speech.' *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, 32(2), 187-205.

Gross, T. (2015). 'Terry Gross to Marc Maron: 'Life is harder than radio.' '20 May. Recorded at Brooklyn Academy of Music, available at *npr.org*.

Harmon, D. (2014). *Harmontown*, dir./prod. Neil Berkeley, Future You Pictures.

Herman, E. (1995). *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts, 1940–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hilmes, M. (1999). *Radio voices: American broadcasting, 1922-1952*. Minneapolis: MN.

Horton, D., and R. R. Wohl. "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction." *Psychiatry* 19 (1956): 215–29.

Jeffries, M. P. (2017). *Behind the laughs: Community and inequality in comedy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jurgensen, J. (2016). 'Chris Gethard finds a new form for the comedy podcast'. *Wall Street Journal*, 6 May, blogs.wsj.com.

Karr, M. (2015). *The Art of Memoir*. New York: HarperCollins.

Kurtz, H. (1997). *Hot air: All talk, all the time*. New York: Basic Books.

Langer, J. (1981). 'Television's "Personality system' *Media, Culture & Society* 3(4): 351-365.

Larson, S. (2015). 'Better living through podcasts'. *The New Yorker*, 17 August, newyorker.com

Leadbeater, C., Miller, P. (2004). *The pro-am revolution: How enthusiasts are changing our society and economy*. London: Demos.

Lindgren, M. (2016). 'Personal narrative journalism and podcasting'. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 14(1), 23-41.

Loviglio, J. (2005). *Radio's intimate public: Networking broadcasting and mass-mediated democracy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Maron, M. (2016). *WTF*, episode #689, 14 March, wtfpod.com.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York, McGraw-Hill.

Meserko, V. (2015). 'The pursuit of authenticity on Marc Maron's WTF podcast.' *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 29(6), 769-810.

Meserko, V. (2014). 'Going mental: Podcasting, authenticity, and artist-fan identification on Paul Gilmartin's *Mental Illness Happy Hour*. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 58(3), 456-469.

Miller, G.A. (1969). 'Psychology as a means of promoting human welfare.' *American Psychologist* 24(12), 1063-75.

Miller, J.G. (1980). 'Margaret Mead.' *Behavioral Science* 25(1), 1-8.

Miranda, L. (2016). *WTF*, episode #759, [podcast] 14 November.

Meyrowitz, J. (2007). 'From distant heroes to intimate friends: Media and the metamorphosis of affection for public figures'. In S. J. Drucker (Ed.), *Heroes in a global world* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 100-128.

Ouellette, L. (2009). 'Take responsibility for yourself: Judge Judy and the neoliberal citizen'. In Murray, S., & Ouellette, L. (Eds.). *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. NYU Press, 223-42.

Pfister, J., and Schnog, N. (1997). *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Piper, M. (2015). 'Little big dog pill explanations: Humour, honesty, and the comedian podcast'. *Philament*, 20, 41-60.

Rabin, N. (2016). 'How comedy podcasts can help you get through these nightmarish times', 10 November, *splitsider.com*.

Schaefer, R. J., & Avery, R. K. (1993). 'Audience conceptualizations of late night with david letterman'. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 37(3), 253.

Siegel, L. (2015). 'Welcome to the age of the unfunny joke'. *The New York Times*, 19 September, *nytimes.com*.

Smith, K. (2015). *Misery loves comedy*, dir. Kevin Pollak, prod. Barry Katz Entertainment.

Solomon, A. (2017). 'Diving into hell: A powerful memoir of depression'. *The New York Times*, (30 January) [internet], nytimes.com.

Steiner, L.R. (1954). 'The use of radio as a medium for mental health education'. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 4(2), 204-209.

Sterne, J., Morris, J., Baker, M.B., Freire, A.M. (2008). 'The politics of podcasting'. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 13(87), thirteen.fibreculturejournal.org.

Strayed, C. (2015). *Longform*, episode #144, (3 June) [podcast], longform.org

Thompson, E. (2011). *Parody and taste in postwar American television culture*. New York: Routledge.

Tolson, A. (2006). *Media talk: Spoken discourse on TV and radio*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Tompkins, P.F. (2016). *Sampler*, episode #25. (22 August) [podcast], gimletmedia.com.

Turner, G. (2006). 'The mass production of celebrity: 'Celetoids', reality TV and the 'demotic turn'.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 153-165.

Turner, G. (2010a). *Ordinary people and the media: The demotic turn*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Turner, G. (2010b). *Understanding celebrity*. London: Sage.

Tyler, A. (2015). *Girl on Guy*, episode #209, 29 December, girlonguy.net.

Vered, K.O. and McConchie, J. (2011). 'The politics of third way TV: *Supernanny* and the commercialization of public service TV.' *Camera Obscura* 26(77), 65-90.

Wayne, T. (2015). "NPR voice' has taken over the airwaves.' *The New York Times*, (24 October), [internet] nytimes.com.

Wolcott, J. (2016). 'So, like, why are we so obsessed with podcasts right now?' *Vanity Fair*, 8 January, vanityfair.com.

Zall, P. M. (1985). *Mark Twain laughing: Humorous anecdotes by and about Samuel L. Clemens*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Zinoman, J. (2016). 'A year when death loomed in laughter'. *The New York Times*, (28 December) [internet] nytimes.com.

¹ See for instance Hidaka, B. H. (2012). Depression as a disease of modernity: Explanations for increasing prevalence. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 140, 3, 205-21 and Pratt, L. A., Brody, D. J., & Gu, Q. (2011). Antidepressant use in persons aged 12 and over: United States, 2005-2008. *NCHS Data Brief*, 76, 1-8.

² The “dissemination of the face” in this context perhaps has its origins in Leo Braudy’s *The frenzy of renown: Fame & its history*. (1986). Graeme Turner discusses the evolution of the concept, including Gamson’s reinterpretation, in Turner, G. (2010b, p. 10).

³ For intimacy in radio, see the work of Atkinson, & Moores 2003; Chignell 2009; Loviglio 2005; McLuhan 1964; Meyrowitz 2007; Kirkpatrick 2013; For intimacy in podcasting see Berry 2006, 2016; Florini 2015; Lindgren 2016.

⁴ In addition to the authors cited herein, see for instance the work of Andrew Bottomley, Kris Markman and Jeremy Wade Morris. As an illustration of the scholarship accumulation, as of October 2017, the Communications and Mass Media Complete database, which indexes more than 770 journal titles, contains more than 160 articles (as identified by the term “podcast” included in the abstract or as an author-supplied keyword) with the first appearance in 2005.